

Where are all the woke kids? lived experience first: re-sequencing media literacy practice to explore gender performativity and media with 17- to 18-year-olds

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Abstract

Media literacy education – typically embedded within secondary school Media Studies classes – routinely begins by analysing popular culture texts to reveal how gender identity is represented. By contrast, this study starts with the day-to-day experiences and opinions of young people, asking them who they admire, and the values associated with those people before turning to media texts. Foregrounding lived experience, I argue, better informs media literacy practices and advances scholarship on gender identity. This also addresses gaps in how young people's perspectives are integrated into media literacy research. This shift matters because young people's direct encounters are typically treated as secondary or anecdotal. The study was conducted with two senior secondary school media-studies cohorts (ages 17–18) over 2 weeks in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. I centre learners' personal and social contexts within classroom practice. This, in turn, creates richer opportunities for reflection and provides a more fruitful starting point for analysing media texts and negotiating gendered identities. The findings show that older adolescents can identify gendered behaviours and aspects of gender performativity in figures they admire; however, their willingness to critically interrogate socially embedded gender norms varies considerably. Dominant misogynistic and anti-feminist discourses remained prominent in participants' responses – more so than anticipated – despite New Zealand's reputation as a progressive liberal democracy. This tension informs the framing of the article's title, 'Where Are All the Woke Kids?'

Keywords

media literacy, teens, gender identity, representation, media power, lived experience, social justice

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Introduction

Despite widespread popular discourse that younger generations in Western societies hold increasingly progressive views about gender – often characterised as being ‘woke’ – many older teenagers continue to negotiate identity through restrictive gender stereotypes (Arnold and Fox, 2025; Bragg et al., 2018). Media literacy practices help young people interrogate these assumptions by examining how media representations shape personal identity and social life. In plain terms, “we have only three ways of understanding the world: we learn from direct experience; we learn from listening and observing others; and we learn from media representations” (Hobbs, 2021:19). Media literacy therefore functions as a bridge between everyday life and mediated experience. However, media literacy education traditionally starts with analysis of media texts before inviting students to reflect on their own experiences. This paper argues that reversing this sequence – by surfacing students’ lived experiences before introducing media – provides a richer foundation for understanding how young people make meaning about gender identity. Rather than positioning lived experience as background context, this work treats it as the starting point.

Drawing on a participatory classroom ethnography, I designed and taught a Year 13 (17–18-year-olds) Media Studies 2-week programme in New Zealand as both teacher and researcher. Classroom activities invited students to discuss their own experiences before engaging with media texts. Rather than introducing theoretical concepts of gender or prompting students towards particular gender identities, I facilitated open classroom discussions that allowed students to articulate their ideas about gender, emerging through their own language and everyday encounters. Therefore, analysis remains grounded in the examples that surfaced through classroom discussion. This participant-led approach prioritised young people’s voices while enabling a combination of theoretical approaches to guide my interpretation of the findings. In doing so, the paper makes more visible the relationship between everyday experiences, media representations and gendered identities.

Media literacy research recognises that media texts are interpreted through audiences’ existing experiences, relationships and social contexts and understood as a socially situated process (Buckingham and Burn, 2007; Hobbs, 2021). While media literacy is not explicitly prescribed within the New Zealand Media Studies curriculum, many of its core practices – including analysing representations, interpreting meaning and producing media – are integral to Media Studies teaching (NZQA, 2026). Rather than proposing a new model of media literacy, this study offers a methodological re-sequencing of established practice by positioning students’ lived experiences ahead of textual analysis.

The theoretical foundation of this work lies at the intersection of Judith Butler’s (1990, 2005) theory of gender performativity and media literacy practices. I argue that bringing these perspectives together prioritises lived experience not simply as context for interpreting media, but as a logical place to begin. Butler conceptualises gender not as a fixed biological characteristic, but as something continually produced, negotiated and reinforced through everyday social practices such as how we speak, dress, behave, work, create or play. While Butler’s work has since acquired the moniker ‘queer theory’ – a label applied by later scholars rather than Butler herself (Brady and Schirato, 2011) – this study draws specifically on their concept of gender performativity as an analytical framework for understanding how students constructed meaning about gender, rather than as a body of knowledge taught to participants. Therefore, reference to boys, girls, male and female reflects the language participants used to describe themselves and others, rather than binary categories adopted by the researcher.

Inequality and the gendered aspirations of young people

For teenagers in New Zealand, it may appear that progressive gender norms prevail; however, many young people still shape their aspirations around restrictive binary stereotypes. Pomeroy’s (2021)

study of 400 thirteen-year-olds at New Zealand high schools found that girls' career choices 'had gender-dependent aspirations, citing preferences for service jobs such as beautician or air hostess' (para. 8). By contrast, boys aspired to both academic achievement and sporting prowess, often due to the hero-worship of 'manly' sports stars (Pomeroy, 2021). These patterns illustrate that socially constructed gender norms sustain conditions in which inequalities persist, with detrimental effects extending into adulthood (Charles, 2010). This study is located at the intersection of attitudes, performance and aspiration by investigating the extent to which older adolescents recognise and critique gender performativity in media in relation to their lived experiences. It also explores gendered differences in this engagement and considers the explanatory value of Butler's gender performativity theory for understanding how young people embody and renegotiate gendered identities in school and social contexts.

Prejudicial beliefs about gendered identities are evident in the disconnect between attitudes to equality and everyday practices (Manninen, 2013). A 2025 survey of New Zealand adults found that 79% agreed gender equality is a human right, yet 21% believed it has gone too far (National Council of Women New Zealand, 2025). Structural inequalities persist: in 2023 women undertook twice as much unpaid labour as men, and the gender pay gap remained at 8.2% (Ministry for Women, 2024). Although New Zealand ranked fifth in the *Global Gender Gap Report* (World Economic Forum, 2025) – which more comprehensively considers health, economic participation, educational attainment and political empowerment as meaningful measures of gender equity – progress remains uneven. As Scarborough et al. (2019: 173) argue, gender equality is 'lopsided'. Opposition to workplace equality has faded, but ambivalence about gender roles in the private sphere persists. These tensions form the cultural terrain where young people encounter, interpret and negotiate gender through both lived experience and media.

Young people are confronted by gender inequality across multiple sociocultural contexts, including peer relations, education, family life and media (Buckingham, 2019; Francis, 2010; Gainer, 2010). The gendered actions of significant others – parents, teachers, community leaders and peers – shape how teenagers perceive and inhabit gendered identities. Admiration – a form of esteem or respect for others – acts as a bridge, mediating this process, linking observed examples to young people's developing sense of self. In this study, admiration served as an entry point for eliciting students' own understanding of the general performance of identity, before introducing media texts or a gendered framework. Althusser's concept of interpellation – being 'hailed' into recognisable subject positions (Kang, 2018; Robinson, 2005) – illuminates how admired figures can invite young people to recognise and inhabit gendered identities. Gender identity is therefore not fixed but enacted through repeated social practices (Davies, 2006; Youdell, 2004), underscoring the need to examine lived experience and attitudes together rather than in isolation.

Gender imbalances embedded in 'culturally intelligible' discourses (Phoenix et al., 2013: 414) carry significant psychological consequences for young people. These biases affect 'life chances, emotional wellbeing' (Phoenix et al., 2013: 414) and issues relating to low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction (in both boys and girls) (Botta, 2003), and in some cases escalating to body dysmorphia, eating disorders, depression and anxiety (Ahuja et al., 2025; Kudlová et al., 2024; Malloy et al., 2024; McLean et al., 2013; Ni Shuilleabhain et al., 2023). In New Zealand, despite progress in gender equity, performances and discourses associated with 'doing gender' remain closely tied to persistent inequalities (Farvid, 2017; Graham et al., 2022; King, 2017; Vogels, 2020b).

For most young people, school dominates their daily routine, making it an important site for research (Kelly and Currie, 2021; Youdell, 2004). Despite sustained efforts to address gender inequalities through changes in classroom practice, critical media literacy and educational policy, progress is limited (Farvid, 2017; Phoenix et al., 2013), difficult to measure or prone to over-

promising and under-delivering (Buckingham, 2019; Hobbs and Jensen, 2009; Livingstone, 2011). It is therefore imperative that research into gendered identities, practices and power continues (Currie and Kelly, 2022; Farvid, 2017). This study seeks to clarify how young people construct meaning through the iterative practices of gender performativity. By directly engaging with young people about whom they admire and the values attached to them, this study contributes new knowledge of how teenagers ‘do gender’ through action and subjectification – the social construction of their own and others’ identities (Davies, 2006; Nayak and Kehily, 2006; Shevtsova and Sheekudova, 2023; Youdell, 2006).

Literature review: media literacy as social practice

Research into how young people understand gender identity often turns to media – not only as a dominant cultural force, but as a discursive site that makes gender legible. This literature review explores how existing work has navigated the relationship between gender, media, and youth identity, and situates my own research within the intersection of media literacy education and relational contexts. Three interconnected strands of research are reviewed: (1) the use of media as a proxy for conversations about gender, (2) studies positioning media literacy as a pedagogical and research method for gender identity formation and (3) calls to centre young people’s lived experiences in these discussions.

Influential research in gender and media studies uses legacy media texts – films, television or magazines – as a starting point for exploring young people’s views on gender, particularly the impact on girls and young women (McRobbie, 1991; Walkerdine, 1997). Studies often foreground semiotic analysis, representation theory or critical discourse approaches with young people engaged primarily as respondents to media stimuli (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Batti, 2023; Krijnen and Van Bauwel, 2022). In some cases, media analysis eclipses the participants themselves (Batti, 2023); in others, the focus shifts towards audience interpretation (Leavy and Trier-Bieniek, 2014; Vogels, 2017). While this work has generated important insights into how gender norms circulate through media, it tends to position young people as interpreters rather than producers of meaning. My own study reverses this frame: instead of using media solely as an entry point, it leverages media literacy to prompt critical reflection and dialogue, making gender identity an emergent topic rather than a predefined object of study.

Research in media education explores how media literacy can engage with gendered identities (Currie and Kelly, 2022; Gladkowski, 2020; Huang, 2019; Kelly and Currie, 2021; Meehan, 2025; Ni Shuilleabhain et al., 2023; Pinkleton et al., 2012). Such studies frame young people not just as consumers, but as active, critical learners, capable of interrogating the assumptions embedded in dominant narratives (Buckingham, 2019; Gauntlett, 2018; Hobbs, 2021). One notable contribution of this literature is the emphasis on counter-narratives – media that disrupt heteronormative or binary representations – as a strategy to widen young people’s conceptualisations of gender (Boldrini and Bracchini, 2023; Chung, 2007; Currie and Kelly, 2022; Gauntlett, 2008, 2018; Gladkowski, 2020; Gutiérrez et al., 2025; Huang, 2019; Kelly and Currie, 2021). However, research also argues that revealing dominant ideologies in media representations is insufficient in aiding students to fully explore or create their own counter-narrative media texts. Students are often able to identify stereotypes or problematic representations of gender, but struggle to counter them in their own work (Charteris et al., 2018; Chung, 2007; Kelly and Currie, 2021).

This work makes the key contribution of using counter-narrative media and conversations in the research design – for example, examining a provocative equal-pay campaign suggesting men should be charged more for everyday goods because of the gender pay gap (DDB Worldwide, 2013). These provocations deliberately disrupt normative gender scripts. Here, media literacy functions not as an end, but as a method of connection, enabling personal and cultural reflection.

Across both strands of literature, the role of lived experience is inconsistently addressed, which is understandable given the layers of complexity required to balance explorations of the social constructions of gendered identities, meaning made from media and direct experience. While many studies illuminate how gender is represented or challenged in the media, few begin with young people's own narratives of everyday life prior to participation in fieldwork. Identity formation is grounded not only in cultural discourse but also in interpersonal relationships, admiration, aspiration and performance (Currie and Kelly, 2022; Gee, 2011; Kang, 2018; Kelly and Currie, 2021). Scholarship highlights the need to capture participants' reflections on their social realities before formal research begins (Arnold and Fox, 2025; Brown, 2000; Currie and Kelly, 2022; Edwards et al., 2024; Fastrez and Landry, 2024; Kelly and Currie, 2021; Robinson, 2005; Van Leent and Mills, 2018). My study foregrounds this by inviting participants to discuss what they admire in people around them – a method that encourages reflection by participants on their embodied and relational understandings of gender. This helps bridge the gap between critique and experience, offering a situated view of how gender identity is navigated in a media-saturated world.

By weaving together these literatures – media literacy pedagogy, gender studies and lived experience – this study contributes a novel methodological and conceptual lens. It builds on the media literacy tradition but centres youth voice and subjectivity beyond textual analysis. This approach repositions media not only as a site of critique, but as a platform for co-constructing gendered meanings, anchored in the realities of young people's lives.

Methodology: the co-construction of meaning

Drawing on media-literacy research, gender studies and participatory classroom ethnography, the research adopts a qualitative, feminist social constructivist approach within a classroom context (Kelly and Currie, 2021). The feminist orientation privileged students' own voices and experiences while critically examining how gendered assumptions were produced and negotiated through classroom interaction (Arnold and Fox, 2025; Chung, 2007; Francis, 2010). A social constructivist perspective views understanding of gender as socially constructed through lived experience, personal relationships and media rather than as fixed characteristics (Nayak and Kehily, 2014). Participatory classroom ethnography enabled students to shape classroom discussions through collaborative activities and reflection (Usmar, 2025), allowing perspectives on gender to emerge inductively rather than through researcher-led questioning. This framework is especially relevant in classrooms to encourage young people to express internalised cultural scripts about gender (Hey, 2006; Nayak, 2020; Nayak and Kehily, 2006; Youdell, 2004, 2005). Working in concert with media literacy research practices, Butler's concepts of performativity are integrated within this participatory approach, emphasising the fluid, socially constructed nature of identity. By actively designing the course materials and teaching the class myself, this work examines how critical conversations intersect with participants' own values and contexts.

Methods and study design

To test my central proposition, every media-text task was deliberately preceded by discussion of students' lived experiences and everyday reflections on the topic. This sequencing positioned personal experience as the foundation of analysis – the testing ground for my hypothesis that media literacy is most meaningful when anchored in lived social realities. This design also enabled observation of how students translate personal encounters into interpretive frameworks, revealing the dynamic movement between lived and mediated experience that underpins their media-literacy

practices. This approach provides a reproducible framework for examining how personal and social knowledge inform students' critical engagement with media representation and gendered identities.

The research was conducted in two media-studies classrooms at a high school in Auckland, New Zealand. Participants comprised two cohorts of 17- to 18-year-old students ($n = 45$). These classes were selected for their curricular focus on popular culture and the accessibility of media as discussion prompts. This provided an ideal environment for integrating discussions about gender identity, grounded in students' personal accounts and media representations. I obtained ethics approval from AUTECH (AUT Ethics Committee reference 24/73) on 15 May 2024, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality for all participants. Given my dual role as guest teacher and researcher, reflexivity was central to mitigating power imbalances and supporting authentic data collection. As an active participant in the co-construction of knowledge, I sought to foster trust and openness in the classroom. Reflexive journaling documented and interrogated my influence on classroom dynamics and data interpretation, supplemented by daily debriefs with senior academics in line with feminist methodological commitments to transparency and the ethical complexities of researcher-participant relationships (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Data collection and analysis

The study employed qualitative methods, including participant observation, classroom discussion and thematic analysis of discourse. Over 2 weeks, I facilitated activities exploring gender identity while leading structured discussions. This dialogic approach aligns with feminist epistemologies that understand meaning as co-constructed between researcher and participants (Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019). Data comprised field notes, worksheets, whiteboard work and audio and video recordings. These materials were triangulated to strengthen analysis, with written and visual artefacts supplementing moments of limited verbal participation. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns and tensions in students' discourse about gender.

Findings and discussion

This analysis explores how young people engage with gender identity through lived experience and media literacy practices. Media literacy tasks included reflection on popular culture, advertising, memes, and social media. Discussions provided real-time exchanges; whiteboard notes reflected collaborative meaning-making; private conversations revealed more personal insights and worksheets allowed students to articulate ideas with reduced peer pressure. Together, these sources enabled a rich, multifaceted analysis of student engagement.

Initial coding traced recurring patterns of admiration before examining students' reflections on gender roles and performativity. Guided by an understanding of gender as iterative, fluid, and enacted, two key recurring themes emerged: embodiment (physical performativity of gender) and links the students made to power structures (such as institutional and societal norms) (Anderson, 2010; Butler, 1990, 2005; Charles, 2010; Davies, 2006; Nayak and Kehily, 2006; Phoenix et al., 2013; Ringrose and Rawlings, 2015; Youdell, 2004). Selected quotes are used to best illustrate these themes, where participants are identified as FS (female student) or FSS (female students), MS (male student) or MSS (male students), with overlapping responses coded as STS (students).

Admiration exercise

To explore students' views of gender identity – before introducing media texts – I asked them to think about someone they personally respected and admired, and list that person's characteristics.

All students, with one exception, chose someone they identified as the same gender as them. FSS most often chose their mother, aunt, older sister or in some cases, an older friend or teacher. MSS mostly chose their father, uncle, cousin or older brother. To guide their thinking, I provided headings – physical appearance, character/personality, activity/hobby, domestic work and job – and prompts such as ‘How do they speak? How do they act? How do they dress?’ This framework and associated examples were based on Butler’s (1990, 2005) gender performativity theory. By eliciting students’ ideas about the social construction of identity – behaviours, traits, dress, talk, division of labour – I could explore how they might, ‘represent[] gender as encountered in everyday life’ (Kelly and Currie, 2021: 681). These questions were designed to allow the students to answer freely, on the principle of the ‘relevance, commitment, urgency’ (Kress, 2005: 51) to them, with some guardrails around how they might approach the task (how to think, not what to think).

To encourage openness, I asked them about a third party rather than themselves, reducing the self-consciousness that often accompanies personal disclosure. I also used humour and playful interactions to ‘negotiate the researcher’s role and made the project a fun and enjoyable experience for research and participants alike’ (Korpela, 2024: 351). Importantly, I did not explicitly mention gender identity at this stage. All I presented were questions about someone they admired, with minimal conditions. This gave them space to reflect without foregrounding gender or directing them to gendered expectations shaped by family, peers or dominant ideologies (Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Kelly and Currie, 2021). After this first stage, I introduced more explicit questions: were the admired characteristics expected or unexpected for that person? This produced rich discussions on how societal expectations, personal attitudes, and media pressures shaped views of gender performativity and personal attributes.

A striking theme was that students consistently prioritised pro-social actions when describing those they admired. In class discussions, and supported by data from the written work, admiration and respect were closely tied to caring for others, including themselves. Common traits included kindness, caring, friendliness, good listening and warmth. Students also valued hard work and willingness to do chores, regardless of the gender of the subject. In contrast to pro-social traits, there was consensus that being loud or ‘brash’ (FS) was held in high esteem and valued as a performance of confidence. They further re-signified traits not traditionally classed as pro-social – humour, swearing, slang – as part of a fun and engaging identity. They admired people who acted this way and considered this aspirational. To show a little rebellion could therefore be a virtue.

Emphasis on care and sociability sits awkwardly beside the admiration many MSS expressed for aggression, self-preservation, risk-taking, fast driving and earning more money than women. This raises a contradiction in students’ interpretation of identity: can admiration of kindness and aggression coexist? Whether or not such coexistence is possible, the tension exposes inconsistencies in the social construction of masculinity and the freedom afforded by the MSS for men to be both caring and anti-social.

This suggests that – for these young people – respect and admiration were earned through actions and behaviours, rather than assumed through physically ascribed gendered identities. Before introducing a gendered framework, the students were largely unanimous in their admiration of characteristics centred on positive social interactions, humour and work ethic. They emphasised the performative nature of identity, without reference to conventional gender expectations. In general, respect and admiration were earned (and performed), rather than ascribed or embodied.

Moreover, physical appearance was rarely emphasised, with only a few noting attractiveness or trendiness. This is notable given young adults’ wider preoccupation with appearance, sexuality and the commodification of the body in media and consumer culture (Brown, 2000; Charteris et al., 2018; Currie and Kelly, 2022; Kapidzic and Herring, 2011). Despite being immersed in an environment

that often reinforces narrow standards of beauty and links identity to conspicuous consumption (the use of consumer goods and services to establish social status and to display wealth), these students largely prioritised personality traits and pro-social characteristics over physical appearance.

Expected or unexpected: gender performativity

I then asked students whether the traits they admired were expected, unexpected or neutral for their chosen person, given the gender identity associated with that person. This disrupted earlier claims that gender was irrelevant to admiration. Two patterns emerged: many students reverted to traditional gender roles, and MSS were more likely to treat these roles as ‘natural’, whereas FSS framed them as contradictions open to challenge.

For example, humour was one of the most sought-after traits in a role model; almost without exception, the FSS, and for that matter the MSS, admired someone who was funny, loud and swore. In fact, FSS were just as likely to aspire to be funny as to be hardworking, confident or mentally strong. However, despite their frequency in the students’ personal encounters, these aspects of personality – especially humour and swearing – were deemed to be unexpected for women by both FSS and MSS. Notably, this was something that FSS agreed on but felt it could, or should, be contested. The MSS largely talked as if expectations were the natural order.

MSS frequently described traits as ‘neutral’, not as a sign of equality, but because gendered expectations remained unexamined. This selective neutrality obscures masculine privilege and grants men greater behavioural latitude. FSS, by contrast, used neutrality aspirationally – to describe what women should be free to do. Discriminatory normativity, therefore, continues to operate precisely through its invisibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Fotopoulou, 2012; Robinson, 2005; Youdell, 2005).

Furthermore, this form of selective neutrality frames gender inequality as resolved – ‘women can do any job now’ – while structural inequality persists (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Currie and Kelly, 2022). Such views overlook persistent inequities like unequal pay, gendered violence or discrimination. By failing to recognise these, MSS reinforced the idea that men act freely with fewer consequences, while women’s freedoms remain constrained. Indeed, admired men enjoyed wider behavioural license: they could perform traditionally masculine *and* feminine traits without repercussion (Vogels, 2020a). Traits normatively coded negatively – risk-taking, violence, indifference – were re-signified as masculine virtues. By contrast – despite evidence of the repeated and seemingly normalised presence of these unexpected traits among women in their own lives – women who defied gender norms by being loud or assertive were occasionally dismissed as ‘weird’ or at least, different.

Clear contradictions exist in the gap between students’ critical awareness of identity, their attitudes and the ‘idea’ of someone, with notions based on bodily defined sex identity in contrast with how they see identity performed. For example, MSS frequently cited biological explanations for social characteristics such as intelligence, which were later contested by female peers. FSS’s greater ability to express ideas derived from critical thinking and objectivity was more evident. For example, when discussing whether men were smarter than women:

Researcher: Are women as smart as men?

FS: Men are *believed* to be the smartest [emphasis added]

By signalling awareness that such claims reflect broader social discourse than objective truth, this FS identified beliefs outside of subjectivity that may impact people’s views of intelligence

(Nayak and Kehily, 2014). FSS were more likely to acknowledge contradictions between lived experience and media representation, to separate subjective opinion from structural argument and to frame inequality as systemic rather than personal. MSS, by contrast, tended to talk in absolutes, regardless of how gender performativity was encountered in real life. They expressed views based primarily on personal subjectivity, for example:

MS: Males are more expected to be smart, because they are, it's a true statement because I said it was.

This remark did not appear to come from genuine self-confidence so much as a performative retreat – a way of defending a familiar, gendered position when pressed. Rather than asserting real belief in male intellectual superiority, the student seemed to fall back on a well-worn trope to hold his ground and deflect further challenge. Most MSS made statements throughout the fieldwork that naturalised – or offered tacit approval of – this kind of privileging or primacy of men's abilities and characteristics over women's (Gainer, 2010). This was regardless of whether they were presented with facts that contradicted these views, irrespective of the fairness of these ideas to their female classmates. Despite multiple opportunities, they appeared less able, or willing, to articulate others' perspectives, whereas many of the FSS were more readily able to do so.

FSS were better able to express – or at least admit the possibility – that there are contradictions between the everyday experience of gender identity (either in others, what they see and hear from peers, family, others in their social sphere) and what is portrayed in the media. The FSS – more often than the MSS – demonstrated some ability to ask further questions, identify different possibilities and perspectives about how gender performativity might be enacted and coded. Furthermore, they were able to make some connections between popular discourse and their observations from life outside school.

FSS were also more attuned to issues of sexism and inequality. They generally highlighted desirable traits in terms that did not exclude or privilege one gender over another, as the MSS tended to do when they talked about men just being 'smarter' or better at, for example, most types of work. The FSS demonstrated awareness of social contexts, as in this example when talking about the workplace:

FS1: Men *were* seen as the breadwinner [emphasis added].

FS2: People *think* men are more hardworking [emphasis added].

FS3: [Her mum] wears the pants in the house, usually it should be the man.

FS1: Men are *seen* as securing the household [emphasis added].

FS2: ...associate calm with men, stereotypically, but I think women are actually more calm.

While FSS described desirable traits inclusively, MSS upheld traditional, sometimes overtly misogynistic views. For instance, MSS who admired humour and intelligence in women often reverted to claiming men are smarter or funnier:

MS: Men are smart because they make stuff.

This double standard was stark: MSS both acknowledged and dismissed women's capabilities. Normatively anti-social behaviours like swearing were reframed as assets for men, but women were judged more harshly. Conversely, FSS often located their commentary in wider contexts and highlighted resilience in admired women:

FS: She can be quite brash sometimes. It doesn't fit with her character.

FS: She's strong, mentally and physically, she's been discriminated against but still pulled through, has a good job, after a lot of drama she resigned because she worked in a male dominated workplace then they asked her to come back (describing her older sister, writing down that responsibility and toughness were unexpected).

FS: I want to be as resilient as she is, but sometimes it can be challenging.

These discussions reveal a key tension. In the absence of explicit attention to gender, students admired diverse traits. Once gender was introduced as an analytical framework, entrenched hierarchies surfaced: MSS frequently naturalised male privilege, while FSS demonstrated greater capacity to interrogate and renegotiate performative norms.

Attitudes to the gender pay gap in New Zealand

Consistent with the study's lived-experience-first approach, I then introduced a more structured media literacy exercise focused on the gender pay gap. Few students could define it, and several appeared reluctant to engage. In a climate where 'gender' is perceived as politically charged and where social media frames opinion in binary terms, young people may fear being labelled too 'woke' or simply wrong (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2024; Swart, 2021). In this context, however, discussing concrete topics like 'jobs' and the skills required proved far more inviting, allowing students to share ideas without the baggage of overtly political language.

In both classes, teachers stepped in to explain the basics. After discussion, we watched the Young Womens Christian Association advertising case study *Demand Equal Pay* (DDB Worldwide, 2013), which profiles a New Zealand campaign offering a potent counter-narrative about the pay gap. The advertisement asks: 'what if men paid more for everyday things because they earn more?' and includes the provocation: 'If you pay peanuts, you'll get women' (DDB Worldwide, 2013). Before the video, I opened the floor for general conversation. When asked whether men and women should receive equal pay for equal work, almost all FSS agreed. In one class, three of four MSS hesitated or declined to raise their hands while one gestured uncertainly.

A familiar pattern emerged. FSS framed pay equity as self-evident; MSS invoked efficiency, dominance or speed as justification for higher male pay. When asked why men might be paid more for identical work, MSS responses included 'they can do things better', 'more efficient' and 'they move faster'. Their female peers shook their heads, directly challenging these claims and exposing a gendered divide over what traits should determine pay. Physicality and risk-taking were repeatedly cited as natural male advantages, extending beyond manual labour to professional fields. One MS suggested that men would make better lawyers because they 'think more violently' and could therefore handle courtroom confrontation more effectively. Here, 'risk' extended beyond physical danger to intellectual risk-taking.

Redirecting the discussion towards the actual requirements of legal practice – study, analysis, persistence – prompted most students to reconsider these assumptions. Students initially imagined lawyers as aggressive courtroom figures, reflecting media stereotypes. When prompted to consider other legal specialisations – property, tax, divorce – they recognised that success depends on careful study, not aggression. Collectively, FSS concluded that good lawyering had little to do with gendered traits, while MSS grew quieter as the conversation deepened. FSS also quickly separated professional competence from gendered stereotypes. Asked whether men were better at studying, FSS responded in unison: ‘No!’

In a more heated exchange, an MS argued that men might ‘leave for other jobs’ if paid equally, appealing to market logic to justify disparity. This reasoning overlooks both the existing pay gap and the structural constraints that limit women’s mobility. When challenged – ‘So why should there be a gender pay gap?’ – the MS retreated, insisting he was ‘just trying to stay neutral’ and later protested, ‘You’re always thinking I’m a bigot’. The FS countered: ‘You’re acting like I’m trying to fucking argue, bro, I’m just trying to prove you wrong. There’s a difference’. Here, debate was reframed by FSS as dialogue, while MSS positioned critique as personal attack.

This interaction illustrates a recurring pattern. FSS positioned inequality as systemic and sustained debate as dialogue; MSS, meanwhile, clung to the idea that male advantage was natural, privileging personal gain over equity. Confronting privilege is rarely straightforward; the young man in this instance may have needed more time and support to work through the contradictions in his reasoning.

Through these discussions, a familiar paradox emerged between students’ attitudes towards gender performativity and their individual experiences. Students’ comments reflect Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity, where behaviours are enacted and reinforced by social expectations (Nayak and Kehily, 2006). This tension surfaced in both everyday and occupational contexts, echoing earlier debates about people they admired (Batti, 2023; Ward and Schneider, 2009). Claims that men are ‘naturally’ better suited to certain jobs exemplify social constructions of masculinity sustained by repetition and stereotype. While some MSS tentatively reconsidered their claims, FSS openly expressed resistance by questioning and debunking these claims (Öhrn, 2009).

Discussion

Embodiment and power

This study found that many of the older teenagers relied on embodied traits, particularly physicality, and dispositional qualities such as psychological resilience, as stable markers of gender identity. MSS often articulated gender through essentialist views, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and exclusionary performances, echoing earlier research in this field (Barnes, 2012; Dalley-Trim, 2007; Davies, 2006; Hickey and Mooney, 2018; Vogels, 2020a). FSS sometimes began with similar assumptions (Manninen, 2013), but with time, many reflected and challenged these narratives. Male discourse framed masculinity as biologically grounded and policed appropriate performances (Wardman, 2017), perpetuating dominance through repetitive discursive cues (Ringrose and Rawlings, 2015). Phrases such as ‘because I said so’ or ‘they are just better’ reinforced the false narrative that embodiment overrides performativity. These findings support the notion that privilege is maintained through unconscious enactments of power that appear ‘natural’ rather than constructed.

The data underscores how subjective assumptions about embodiment consolidate power. MSS attributed male dominance to assumed natural competencies, reinforcing hierarchical gender norms across domains of home, school and social life (Charles, 2010; Renold, 2001; Vogels, 2020a; Ward and

Schneider, 2009). These assumptions allow broader behavioural repertoires for men while narrowing those available to women. This gendered permissiveness reflects systemic inequality, making it more difficult for FSS to renegotiate acceptable forms of gender expression or resist normative expectations.

Media literacy and meaning-making

Media literacy practices were embedded in these class activities – not limited to analysing and evaluating media texts – where STS’ own interpretations functioned as both pedagogy and reflection. Students interrogated media portrayals of gender identity and how these resonated – or clashed – with individual perspectives. For FSS, this framing opened opportunities to critique expectations, especially when admired traits conflicted with stereotypes. MSS often used humour to maintain hierarchies, obscure inequalities or deflect critique, consistent with research studies of adolescent masculinities (Allen, 2014; Barnes, 2012; Huuki et al., 2010; Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Nevertheless, this intervention demonstrated media literacy’s potential to activate gender-critical conversations, especially among students willing to interrogate norms rather than reproduce them.

Paradoxes

Despite clear patterns, paradoxes emerged. Both MSS and FSS largely rejected physical appearance as a primary basis for admiration, despite widespread cultural emphasis on body image – particularly for young women (Banet-Weiser, 2015, 2018; Charteris et al., 2018; Clay et al., 2005; Kapidzic and Herring, 2011). This divergence may reflect a disconnect between personal narratives and broader discursive practices. Although FSS identified competencies in women that exceeded those of men, MSS often maintained male privilege unquestioned. This suggests cultural identity templates override individual experience (Kelly and Currie, 2021), especially when reinforced by media representations (Youdell, 2004).

Conclusions

The media literacy tools used in this work provided space for student reflection and revealed clear expressions of ideological resistance, both to feminist principles about equity, and dominant ideas about masculinity. This raises the broader question: if identity and media are co-constructed, then what happens when one domain evolves (e.g. social recognition of fluid gendered identities), but the other (e.g. dominant media tropes) remains regressive? This tension may explain the contradictory findings observed in the field. Thus, this research makes two contributions: methodological re-sequencing that positions lived experience as the starting point for future research on media, and a pedagogical innovation that fuses abstract theoretical principles (e.g. gender performativity, social construction of meaning) with practical, embodied classroom methods.

This study demonstrates that older teenagers can recognise gendered behaviours and performativity in those they admire, but their willingness to critique socially embedded gender scripts is highly variable. I was surprised by the persistence of dominant, overtly misogynistic and anti-feminist discourse – far more common than I had anticipated – particularly given New Zealand’s reputation as a progressive Western liberal society. This led to my decision to title the article *Where Are All the Woke Kids?*, a provocation that frames the tension between public discourse and private belief. MSS tended to reinforce dominant ideologies through embodied discourse, while FSS were more open to alternative narratives and more capable of integrating media analysis with lived experience. Such a pattern is less surprising if we accept that current

ideological and material conditions continue to advantage cis-heterosexual men while constraining and, at times, endangering women.

Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a useful framework for analysing how students understand, embody and contest identity within social contexts and relate this to media representations (Butler, 2012). Here, media literacy offers a promising avenue for fostering critical reflection and unsettling normative assumptions. Consistent with Butler's view that gender is reproduced through repeated social performances, the findings suggest that recognising gender performativity in the media does not necessarily translate into questioning deeply embedded beliefs and practices, particularly when these views reinforce existing power hierarchies.

What distinguishes this study, however, is the decision to foreground lived experience before introducing media texts. By starting with personal narratives, the well-worn tropes of gender hierarchy became more visible to students themselves, and the fractures between everyday encounters, expressed attitudes and media representations surfaced more sharply on the whiteboard and in discussion. These moments do not provide a definitive solution but mark the initial stages of dialogue through which hegemonic expectations can be questioned and gradually disrupted.

If media literacy practices are to challenge assumptions in everyday life and catalyse social-justice action towards gender equity, they must be underpinned by an exploration and prioritisation of young people's experiences prior to – and integrated into – media literacy interventions. Unlike conventional text-first approaches, this study demonstrates that beginning with lived experience brings into sharper focus the contradictions between students' everyday gender practices and their later interpretations of media. In doing so, it advances media literacy research by showing how methodological re-sequencing can deepen students' critical engagement with gender and media.

Furthermore, if the boundaries between media life and real life are increasingly blurred, then our frameworks for interpreting adolescent identity must evolve accordingly, and most urgently, by taking greater account of young people's lived experiences. The contradictions, discomforts, and flashes of insight observed in this research underscore the importance of centring young people's voices in media literacy and gender education—and of building curriculum that meets them where they are, while challenging them to go further.

Further research

Further research should widen this inquiry to include intersectional dimensions of identity across (e.g.) class, race, religion and sexuality. While acknowledging the many complex intersections between bias and prejudice on the one hand, and dimensions of intersectionality such as class and race on the other, I made the deliberate choice to focus on gender, largely because of the profoundly destructive nature of pervasive gender inequality. On one level, this decision was made because of the significantly increasing rate of disparity between cis-gender people. In many senses, gender equity has stalled (Farvid, 2017; Ministry for Women, 2024; Pomeroy, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2025) and the promises made about contemporary gender equality have been broken (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Yarrow, 2018).

Future studies could extend this work beyond the classroom, exploring how teenagers negotiate gender identity in everyday, informal and digital settings. Ethnographic approaches could offer richer insight into how gendered norms are enacted or resisted outside structured environments. Additionally, more research is needed into how media literacy can function not just as critique, but as praxis – more carefully linking theory with teaching practices. Studies might examine how co-creating media with students based on their lived experiences can prompt deeper engagement with gender representation and identity formation. It would also be valuable to investigate

how male students regulate or reshape their responses in mixed-gender settings compared with single-sex or more masculinised peer spaces, and how these shifts reveal the pressures and privileges that shape their ‘authentic’ views on gender. As media remains a dominant force in shaping youth subjectivity, participatory media literacy interventions may prove especially valuable for elevating young people’s agency and disrupting entrenched gendered narratives.

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Ethical considerations

The study was approved by AUTECH (AUT Ethics Committee reference 24/73) on 15 May 2024.

Informed consent

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating in the study.

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Data availability statement

The original (anonymised) contributions presented in the study are included in the article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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