

# The Multifaceted Seafarer: An Explorative Discourse Analysis of Seafarers' Portrayals in Swedish Maritime Magazines

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## Abstract

Seafaring is a highly male-dominated occupation. Within the industry, there is an ambition to increase the proportion of women working in maritime professions. In this endeavor, it is relevant to examine how seafarers are portrayed in various contexts. This study aimed to explore the image of seafarers as presented in Swedish maritime magazines: How are seafarers described, and can these descriptions be seen as performative in shaping a professional identity? To meet this aim, a discourse analysis was performed, based on 20 texts from two maritime magazines, representing both rating and officer seafarers. Overall, six subject positions inhabited by seafarers were identified, with several overlapping characteristics. For example, traits of the traditional seafarer were also found in the masculine seafarer and the flexible seafarer. Furthermore, it is argued that several of the subject positions are difficult to combine with what is referred to as the gender-equal seafarer, mainly due to challenges in balancing family life with extended periods at sea. The study shows that today's seafarers, according to how they are depicted in Swedish maritime magazines, have considerable agency in shaping their own professional identity without being forced to conform to a hegemonic masculinity. Finally, it is suggested that the term “seafarer” be used instead of “seaman” in both print and everyday conversations, for increased inclusiveness and representation.

## Keywords

equality; gender; hegemonic masculinity; performativity; seafarer; seaman

## 1. Introduction

The global shipping industry suffers from a shortage of skilled personnel, and by 2026, there is a projected shortfall of 89,510 seafarers (International Chamber of Shipping & Baltic and International Maritime Council,

2021). Working at sea is a profession that differs from many others; the most significant difference is that the vessel functions as both a workplace and a home, where seafarers live and socialize for periods that can range from a few weeks to several months. Being away from home, far away from one's home environment, can be challenging and poses difficulties in recruiting individuals for onboard positions.

Seafaring is a highly male-dominated occupation. From a global perspective, women seafarers constitute only 1.2% of the workforce (International Chamber of Shipping & Baltic and International Maritime Council, 2021). In Sweden, the figure is significantly higher, partly due to the large number of ferries. However, it should be noted that the onboard occupational roles are segregated, with a large share of women seafarers holding positions within the service department, while relatively few are involved in vessel operations (Eldh, 2005). Since the service department is considerably larger on ferries and cruise ships compared to other commercial ships, having a high proportion of ferries increases the percentage of women seafarers in Sweden. In a time when the shipping industry is facing a shortage of skilled seafarers, the first step should be to not limit the recruitment base to just half of the population. Everyone, regardless of sex or gender, must feel welcome within the maritime industry. However, to feel welcome in a profession, individuals must be able to identify with the professional community. Equally important is that already employed maritime professionals can see themselves fit within the overall portrayal of the profession.

Creating a professional identity is a dynamic and complex process in which a person's knowledge and skills are interwoven with individual personal traits. A challenge for underrepresented groups in this process is the lack of role models with similar backgrounds. Trevino and Poitevien (2021, p. 4) state that "without the representation of others with shared personal identity features...trainees may struggle in the process as that path is less travelled." In other words, the absence of role models can make it more difficult to integrate professional identity with personal identity. Representation is also important for those who are already employed in their respective professions. Dixon et al. (2019) highlight the significance of the visible representation of individuals with similar backgrounds. In a profession with gender imbalance, role models and mentors of the underrepresented sex become crucial for career advancement. In other words, if women seafarers are to see themselves entering and advancing in the male-dominated seafaring occupation, they need to see representations of other women in various positions.

Since the present study explores portrayals of seafarers, an understanding of how meaning and representations are formed is important. Hall (2013, p. 5) argues that meaning is not something given or natural, but rather something created through communication and social interaction: "Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language." People attribute meaning to various phenomena and experiences by using symbols and language which are largely arbitrary. These symbols and languages are shaped and transformed over time in an ongoing process (Hall, 2013). One way to explain how representation works is through a constructionist perspective. Central to this explanatory model is the understanding that even though we can acknowledge the existence of something, it is through everyday action that meaning is constructed. Hall (2013) uses the example of traffic lights, where the colors themselves have no inherent meaning. However, people have constructed a system in which the sequence and color of the lights have been given a meaning that regulates traffic. A similar example can be drawn from seafaring. Uniforms and epaulets signal rank among crew members. While the stripes themselves have no inherent meaning, in their social context they denote hierarchy and tell us something about onboard life.

Representation and belonging within a professional community thus become important factors in feeling welcome. Even though the International Maritime Organization has introduced gender-neutral titles, for example, seafarer instead of seaman, one of the most common Swedish terms used to describe a person working at sea is still *sjöman* (seaman), a word that carries a clear masculine connotation. In other areas of society, there is an ambition to strive for gender-neutral terminology, such as using “chair” or “chairperson” instead of “chairman” (Peck et al., 2020) or norm-critical alternatives instead of “man” (Milles, 2019). However, such efforts have not been made within the Swedish maritime industry, where the term seaman is used as a general description regardless of gender. Nevertheless, it is worth considering how this seemingly male-oriented term may affect the sense of recognition for individuals who do not identify as men, especially when the number of women and non-binary individuals in the industry is very low. There is a risk that this terminology reinforces an existing feeling of exclusion.

The purpose of this study is to explore the portrayal of seafarers as presented in two Swedish maritime magazines: *Sjöbefälen* and *Sjömannen*. More specifically, the following research questions will be examined: How are seafarers described in Swedish maritime magazines in terms of gender, stereotypical gender roles, and gender equality? How can descriptions of seafarers be understood in performatively shaping individuals' roles within a professional community?

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Masculine-Coded Occupations

Seafaring is a male-dominated profession in terms of the highly uneven gender distribution, both globally and in Sweden. However, the profession is also masculine-coded, as both work and life at sea are characterized by masculine values and norms (Kitada, 2013). The maritime industry has traditionally been characterized by strong professionalism and a hierarchical culture that values practical experience: onboard socialization through hard work, verbal and physical reprimands, and sometimes even outright bullying have been common (Kennerley, 2002). Some of the masculine-coded traits of the past are still valued today. According to Eldh (2005, p. 131), there is an informal yet clear hierarchy on passenger vessels, where men who work with the operation of the ship are seen as “the normal seamen,” while men working in service roles and all women, regardless of their position, are seen as deviants. The male-dominated culture has also led to behaviors that would generally be perceived as harassment ashore being dismissed, contributing to the image of the “rough seaman” (Eldh, 2005, p. 133). However, the maritime profession is far from the only one being distinctly masculine-coded; the rescue services and forestry industries are two other examples.

The Swedish Rescue Services share many similarities with the maritime industry, especially in terms of the proportion of women. Grip (2015) conducted a large-scale survey to examine the conditions for gender equality within the fire and rescue services. Regarding professional identity, the traditional image of a firefighter creates ambivalence concerning the factors perceived as crucial for the profession. Physical capacity is often emphasized as the primary attribute of a firefighter. However, while this is an important ability, knowledge, empathy, and the ability to take initiative are generally ranked higher (Grip, 2015). Consequently, it can be concluded that the fire and rescue services can be regarded as masculine-coded, similar to the maritime industry, but that there is a discrepancy between this image and the actual qualities required. Grip (2015) also notes that when it comes to issues related to inadequate physical fitness, the

declining physical abilities of older firefighters are of greater concern, rather than the inadequacy of women. This suggests that age may need to be problematized rather than gender.

In the forestry industry, men dominate as well, with only 11.6% of the workforce consisting of women (Lidestav & Sjölander, 2007). Through discourse analysis, Lidestav and Sjölander (2007) demonstrate that the image of the ideal forest worker is a hardworking man who masters nature. This hegemonic masculinity is embodied through a male rural ideal and a strong interest in hunting and the wilderness.

## ***2.2. Women Within a Male-Dominated Industry***

Gender equality is crucial within any industry wanting to address issues of recruitment and supply of competence since companies and organizations simply cannot afford to exclude half of the potential workforce. However, research shows that being a woman in a male-dominated profession poses challenges and risks affecting one's professional identity as well as the profession's discourse.

Globally, female seafarers and maritime students often must adapt to their environment. In their minority position, they often have to sacrifice their identity and conform to prevailing male norms. Guo and Liang (2012, p. 200) express this as a process in which they "undo" their gender to gain acceptance from male colleagues. In the forestry industry, a recurring claim is that "gender does not matter." This is repeated by both men and women representatives in interviews and magazine articles and is often used to emphasize everyone's equal opportunities within the profession. Lidestav and Sjölander (2007) interpret this reluctance to address differences as a mechanism to avoid a feminist stigma. However, this principle of equality is contradicted by the fact that women foresters often gain legitimacy through a man, such as a father or husband. The following quote illustrates this ambivalence:

[Female name] is another forestry professional whose position is considered "rather logical, in spite of gender." She has the right provenance, as her father works at the County Board of Forestry and her mother at a forest plant nursery. (Lidestav & Sjölander, 2007, p. 359)

In this case, the parents, who are already established in the industry, legitimize the woman's professional identity.

As minorities, women are often forced to shoulder a dual responsibility: They are expected to take responsibility for their situation, but also expected to pave the way for future generations of women. Striving for equal gender distribution is often desirable, but solely focusing on numbers without reflection might lead to unexpected consequences. For example, if the lack of women in rescue services is seen as a problem, focusing on women currently not working in the industry and how to encourage them might be a logical remedy. Grip et al. (2016) argue that these women, indirectly through their absence, may be blamed for the existing gender inequality. Furthermore, these women are also expected to complement the organization through their femininity. Thus, they are perceived both as the problem and the solution, and female employees in the rescue services bear a significant responsibility not only for their situation but also for the opportunities of future colleagues. This can be compared to Guo and Liang (2012) who also argue that the prospects for future female seafarers to enter maritime professions depend on how today's women succeed in changing the industry. However, to achieve this, the women need to compromise their identity to

some extent, such as adapting to the prevailing masculine work environment on board. In conclusion, it can be stated that women in male-dominated professions find themselves in a paradoxical position with high expectations:

Women are expected to be similar, but not too similar, to men, different but not too different, and are expected to work on the same terms as men, at the same time as they are expected to add something new to the organization which men cannot contribute. (Grip et al., 2016, p. 105)

The previous quote highlights that women sometimes face unreasonable expectations in male-dominated occupations when they are expected to provide a specific female perspective while still conforming to the male norm.

As this section has shown, women face a complex set of challenges in having to conform to male norms, while simultaneously providing an added value based on their gender. At the same time, their actions today might affect future generations of women seafarers. With a large array of conflicting demands, it is relevant to study how women are portrayed in images and writing: Are similarities or differences highlighted? And what effect does this have on an individual's identity?

### **2.3. Inclusive Language**

Even though Sweden has no formal gender-based restrictions for work life and all occupations are open to everyone regardless of gender, many occupations are gender segregated. In essence, there are factors that affect our choice of occupation. Language is a factor that can limit our options. However, language can also be used to facilitate discursive change, and within an industry with a shortage of personnel, an awareness of gendered and inclusive language could have an impact on how seafarers are portrayed. In short, using language to one's advantage could increase the available talent pool by attracting women and other minorities.

Already at a young age, children perceive what is considered masculine and feminine. Studies have shown how children's perceptions of the suitability of occupations for girls and boys reflect gender stereotypes in society. For example, Liben et al. (2002) examined how children aged 6–11 perceive job titles and whether they can be used by both men and women. The titles presented were either linguistically unmarked for gender (e.g., doctor), weakly marked (e.g., postmaster), or strongly marked (e.g., policeman/policewoman). When asked if a job title can be used by both men and women, strongly marked masculine titles received the lowest responses, indicating that children saw it as unlikely for a woman to fit into a male job title. However, a weakly marked masculine title was considered acceptable for both genders to a much greater extent. Regarding female job titles, the same difference between strongly and weakly marked titles was not observed. Overall, the results show that children are influenced by whether a job title is gender-coded, and this influence increases with age (Liben et al., 2002). This could decrease the likelihood of a girl considering a masculine-coded profession.

Milles (2019) describes how norm-critical language can be seen as a form of feminist discursive work: conscious attempts to change a discourse. This work takes place simultaneously on several levels: First, the linguistic change itself enables increased inclusiveness; second, discussions about the choice of words themselves contribute to additional change (Milles, 2019). However, language can also contribute to the

creation of a social identity, such as a feminist subject position, for example by using inclusive pronouns. This operates at both the individual and organizational levels. The use of a particular pronoun can be seen as an individual stance, but on a larger scale, an organization can position itself as progressive (Milles, 2019). An example of this could be the use of the term seafarer instead of seaman, which includes more individuals but also functions as a progressive signal. Such a stance might attract not necessarily more, but at least a different target audience.

### 3. Theoretical Concepts: Poststructuralism, Performativity, and Masculinity

In this section, three theoretical concepts are described which are deemed central for this study. Adopting a poststructuralist perspective becomes natural in this study due to the use of discourse analysis. Similarly, performativity plays an important role, where the discursive function of language is crucial. What is more, since the study is situated within a strongly male-dominated domain, masculinity also constitutes a key concept.

Within poststructuralism, language plays an important role in understanding the way society is socially and culturally constructed. Language functions as a “meaning-making system” and serves a performative function; our understanding of categories depends on language, and power is created through language (Scott, 1988, p. 34). Furthermore, deconstruction is useful in the analysis of language, for example by questioning normative and social understandings of concepts, text, and narratives (Leavy, 2007; Scott, 1988). Through reversal and displacement of binary oppositions, power structures can be made visible and changed (Scott, 1988). For instance, the word “seaman” could be deconstructed to reveal underlying assumptions that form the basis of the word: who has been included or excluded, and how are hierarchies and power relations formed. Furthermore, a deliberate use of the term “seafarer” could be seen as a shift in power, challenging traditional norms and creating new social and cultural constructions.

Questions of gender and sexuality are central within feminist poststructuralism. The heterosexual matrix imposes a coherence between sex, gender, and sexuality. Through heteronormativity, normative sexuality reinforces gender norms (Butler, 2006), while also prescribing a “right” way of being. Butler (2006) argues that identities and categories are not predetermined but performatively created and reproduced through repeated practices and language use. To illustrate, performativity can be applied to domestic housework as a mechanism that reproduces gender. While men as a group have increased their relative contribution to household chores, women still perform significantly more cleaning. Unlike other household tasks such as renovation or cooking, which can be seen as linear activities resulting in something concrete, cleaning is a repetitive and unproductive task that only restores something to its original state (Ambjörnsson, 2018). Cleaning thus becomes an ongoing activity, and since it is often perceived as feminine, it contributes to the performative creation of a feminine gender. As will be shown in the analysis, both women and men on board perform tasks that resemble household chores, not only those in the service department. However, there is a distinction between two sets of tasks: some are easily observable, like painting a wall, while others often go unnoticed, like cleaning common areas on board, and these tasks contribute to forming various subject positions.

Hegemonic masculinity represents the most accepted and desirable form of masculinity in society and sets the norm for male behavior. These norms are often linked to social status and power and can be used to exclude or marginalize individuals who do not meet them, such as non-heterosexual men, men with disabilities, men

from non-Western cultures, or women, and allow men as a group to maintain power over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Furthermore, occupations are often associated with a specific gender, known as gender labeling. While caring and nurturing tasks are seen as feminine, technical and physical tasks are often seen as masculine. However, there is also a risk that women are assigned jobs that are considered easier, thus maintaining the gendered divide (Ericson, 2011). According to Ericson (2011), certain attributes, such as being technical, proactive, or worldly, are more often associated with male-dominated professions; thus, masculinity can be said to contribute to the formation of one's professional identity. In a maritime context, female seafarers are sometimes known to adjust their behavior in relation to their male colleagues (Guo & Liang, 2012). In pursuit of a professional identity, hegemonic masculinity is likely favored over other forms of masculinity.

## 4. Material and Method

In this section, the material is presented, along with a rationale for its suitability. The discourse analysis is then described, both the theoretical basis for the analysis and the procedure for conducting the analysis.

### 4.1. Material

The data consists of articles from two Swedish shipping magazines: *Sjöbefälen* and *Sjömannen*. The magazines represent union members working in different hierarchical positions on commercial vessels. In each issue of the respective magazine, there is a longer feature article that in some way describes individuals working within the maritime industry. The feature depicts daily life on board, and the reader gets to follow one or more seafarers. The article might describe a specific vessel, or a crew category, or showcase innovative or clever solutions to challenging issues. The feature articles are abundantly illustrated with color photographs. The 10 most recent features from each magazine were analyzed, which means that the material is from the period 2021–2023 and thus reflects a portrayal of contemporary seafarers. Both magazines are similar in terms of content and edition size. Even though the magazines are primarily distributed to the respective union members, they reach a broader readership as they are also distributed to union clubs as well as ships and their crews.

To explore the portrayal of seafarers, the material was deemed suitable for several reasons. First, since the magazines focus on the daily lives and experiences of individuals working in the maritime industry, the material provides rich, detailed, and diverse narratives about seafarers. Feature articles, by their nature, provide in-depth stories and detailed accounts, which are ideal for discourse analysis. Furthermore, by using recently published texts, the study is grounded in contemporary issues and trends within the maritime sector. Finally, the articles are freely available, which enabled swift data collection, as well as provides interested parties an opportunity to study the material themselves.

### 4.2. Discourse Analysis

A discourse analysis was used to examine the portrayal of seafarers in maritime magazines and to observe how identities are constructed, defined, negotiated, and transformed through language and discourse in society. A discourse revolves around language but beyond the mere structure of meaning (Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2002). A discourse can be seen as a coherent structure of linguistic expressions, ideas, concepts, and norms

used to create meaning, understanding, and interpretation of the world. Moreover, discourses can be viewed as both representative and constitutive, meaning that they both reveal our understanding of a phenomenon and shape it (Hall, 2013; Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2002).

By employing discourse analysis, language is understood as something that creates individual agency, which in turn makes gender multifaceted and subject to linguistic change. Portraying gender as something variable reflects a poststructuralist perspective, where both social and individual influences play a crucial role (Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2002). Thus, a central task in this study was to describe the subject positions of the discourses, i.e., the positions or roles that individuals can occupy within a discourse (Baker & Ellece, 2011; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). These positions are influenced or controlled by language use and other practices, creating certain expectations for individuals within the different subject positions. Similarly, exclusions are also relevant, and an awareness of what lies outside of a discourse can be as revealing as what is included. By excluding certain perspectives or aspects, one can influence how something is perceived and understood.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of discourse analysis. One significant limitation is its interpretative nature, which can lead to subjective conclusions. There is also the challenge of generalizing findings across different contexts.

Initially, the selected texts were read in their entirety. Subsequently, various subject positions were identified through a close reading guided by the research questions. The questions aimed to identify the categories of people that are figured in the texts, how they are portrayed, and how the relationships between people are categorized. The identified subject positions were then compared to see if any patterns or differences relating to gender or different forms of masculinity and femininity could be identified, and whether any differences between the two magazines could be discerned. During the discourse analysis, it was crucial to regularly take a step back to ensure that the texts were interpreted within their societal context, i.e., to consider the broader social and cultural context in which the texts are produced and used. In a maritime context, this includes historical considerations, for example, how norms and values at sea have changed over time, as well as political and societal circumstances, such as the direction in which the maritime industry aims to progress.

## 5. Analysis

In this section, the results of the discourse analysis are presented and discussed, with illustrative descriptions and quotes from the analyzed texts. To reduce the risk of individuals being identified, pseudonyms are used and quotes have been slightly rephrased.

### 5.1. *The Multifaceted Seafarer*

Six subject positions were identified through the discourse analysis of two maritime magazines. To some degree, these subject positions overlap, hence it is difficult to state where one position ends, and another begins. It is also important to note that on an individual level, a person can embody multiple subject positions, depending on the context in which the person is situated.



### 5.1.1. The Traditional Seafarer

The data offers numerous examples of what can be termed as “the traditional seafarer.” This is a person seeking adventure and excitement, who has turned to seafaring to “see the world.” Living a traditional seafarer’s life appears carefree at first glance. Here, carefree should be understood as being free of worries or responsibilities; the traditional seafarer chooses jobs that appeal at the moment and may settle down in exotic places. Being away from home for extended periods, sometimes for several months, is not a problem but rather an opportunity. One seafarer describes it: “You become like a family on board. You have like two families, two worlds.” However, within this discourse, there is also a presence of the unspoken. The carefree seafarer’s life also assumes a detachment from other people. Therefore, it is not uncommon for the traditional seafarer to be represented either by a younger person or by an older person reminiscing a long and varied career.

The traditional seafarer has often felt a yearning for the sea and the maritime profession from a young age. Magnus, who is a seafarer, remembers his childhood trips to the archipelago:

Back then, I thought to myself that I wanted to work on these boats. I’ve always wanted to do this. I remember thinking it looked exciting, they seemed to have fun at work. Quite a few people working here today spent their childhood in the archipelago. My dad was a marine police officer, and he was at sea when he was younger, and sometimes I accompanied him to work. It probably could have influenced me.

Here, family ties and kinship are used to create legitimacy for the profession, something that can be related to the forestry industry. But, what is observed by Lidestav and Sjölander (2007) is that kinship legitimizes the individual in question, rather than the profession itself. However, that women seafarers would need to gain legitimacy through a man or a family member cannot be observed in the studied material.

Despite the seemingly carefree attitude, there are problematic aspects of traditional seafaring life in the form of initialization and bullying, similar to what is described by Kennerley (2002). Sture, who is retired but still takes jobs for enjoyment, remembers his early seafaring days as being tough. As a novice, he had to do a lot of cleaning, and the rest of the crew often teased him: “Once, they got me to hoist the gangway because the tide was coming. I didn’t realize that the boat, of course, would rise with the water.” The article does not indicate how Sture views the situation in hindsight, and the journalist does not address the incident critically, potentially contributing to the normalization of such behavior.

### 5.1.2. The Masculine Seafarer

Even though the overall safety at sea is described as high, certain tasks are portrayed as risky, something “the masculine seafarer” does not shy away from. One seafarer remarks that the ship’s gym is frequently used because “to endure the work we do, one must work out.” Even when the work is not dangerous, it is often heavy. The texts depict work as physically demanding and concrete, cleaning, painting, and disposing of waste ashore, and during meals, the seafarer eats “like a real man.” Another seafarer testifies that he often visits a physiotherapist and sometimes is on sick leave due to numerous and heavy lifts. He bluntly states, “This isn’t a job you can handle throughout a whole career.” This association between physical labor and masculinity is a clear example of gendered job tasks (Ericson, 2011).

The masculine seafarer does not necessarily appear as a carrier of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and is neither portrayed as an ideal; it rather acknowledges that some of the seafarer's tasks are physical and characterized by masculine traits. Nowhere is it implied that female seafarers are less suited for these physical tasks. Compared to the fire department where physical strength is considered one of the firefighter's primary attributes (Grip, 2015) there is no equivalent attitude within the analyzed texts. Still, it is predominantly men who are presented as masculine seafarers in the texts.

### 5.1.3. The Feminine Seafarer

"The feminine seafarer" has nothing to do with the sex of the seafarer; it relates to the tasks performed on board and how these tasks are talked about. Philip is a seafarer on a small vessel. Due to the small crew, he has also taken on the role of cook and messman and is the one who cleans, fixes, and takes care of things. To him this is natural: "The boat is our home half the time. Of course, it should be neat and tidy." Compared to the concrete tasks performed by the masculine seafarer, these chores can be seen as restoring or "taking care of the deteriorated" (Ambjörnsson, 2018, p. 206).

There are more examples of a caring touch, both from men and women. Both Chief Engineer Anton and Captain Kajsa take pride in their sparkling clean engine rooms. However, the way they express this differs. Kajsa takes pride in keeping an older vessel in good condition. For Anton, the main reason is that it makes it easier to detect oil leaks in a clean engine room. This latter attitude towards cleanliness borders the pragmatic attitude of the masculine seafarer, in contrast to Kajsa's nurturing approach. But even the way Anton's care for the ship is described shows elements of femininity: "He carries a cloth and polishes here and there while showing the engine room, almost a bit affectionately," writes the journalist. As noted earlier, it is possible to personify several subject positions.

### 5.1.4. The Gender-Equal Seafarer

"The gender-equal seafarer" stands in stark contrast to the carefree attitude of the traditional seafarer. The texts reveal that many seafarers appreciate working on vessels that allow them to be close to their families. However, this proximity is relative. In the archipelago, some return home every evening, while for others, a short work period away from their families might last for "only" two weeks. There are several examples of seafarers who have shifted from ships that undertake long journeys to shorter ones, especially after becoming parents, to take on a greater parenting role. This transition can be seen as individuals moving from one subject position to another. Despite this, it is still worth considering how gender-equal such families are. Magnus acknowledges that absolute gender equality can never be achieved with one parent working at sea:

The worst thing about this profession is probably being away, you can't help out at home. Everything that comes with having children, you can't contribute. You would have to be at home more. But that doesn't really work, does it?

Those expressing these thoughts of inadequacy are predominantly men. The opposite can be observed in female seafarers. Johanna also wanted more time with her family but solved this by having her partner make a change instead: "I got my boyfriend ashore, who also worked at sea, so that we could spend more time

together. He likes his new job, and we've gotten more time together." When it comes to gender equality for women seafarers, there is another aspect that differs from men. Captain Linnéa wishes her partner, who works ashore, could be pregnant in her place to reduce the worries that come with working on board during pregnancy. Both examples could be seen as expressions of gender equality, where women are allowed the same professional roles as men. However, it could also be understood as a situation where a woman has embodied the image of the traditional seafarer who is able to spend time away from home. Consequently, there are two ways to interpret these couples, either as being highly gender-equal or as representations of the traditional seafarer's need for freedom and adventure.

#### 5.1.5. The Flexible Seafarer

The material shows several examples of "the flexible seafarer." This is not necessarily a seafarer without a regular contract. Instead, the flexibility might stem from a frequent restructuring of a company, like the sale and acquisition of vessels. A seafarer working in the archipelago describes the situation as particularly challenging when employers and company procedures can change quickly, which requires adaptability. Despite this anxiety, it is comforting that the onboard operations only can be carried out in certain ways: "We have a specific task, which makes this job so good." This statement about specific tasks, for example operating a small boat on a regular route, can be seen as an expression of a traditional division of labor, where men often engage in linear tasks while women take responsibility for repetitive and restorative work (Ambjörnsson, 2018). This subject position thus borders the masculine seafarer.

But there are also examples of flexibility resulting from temporary employment, manifested as an obligation to cater to the needs of employers and colleagues. On short notice, seafarers must change their plans, quickly pack their bags, and go on board. This is problematic for those who share parental responsibilities or are single parents. Furthermore, there is a risk that flexibility, combined with part-time employment, has economic consequences. An example is seafarer Lotta, who cannot get a full-time position and therefore sometimes must find extra work ashore. Since this chiefly affects those working in service positions, it primarily affects women seafarers. In conclusion, the flexible seafarer can be seen to clash with the gender-equal seafarer.

#### 5.1.6. The Romantic Seafarer

In one text, the term "occupational romanticism" is used to describe the sense of freedom expressed by "the romantic seafarer." It involves being one with nature, something that can be likened to wilderness life in the forest, but not with the same distinct masculinity (Lidestav & Sjölander, 2007). For Janne, it all comes down to an affection for the sea. He believes there are few other professions where you can watch the sun's path across the sky and all the changes in the weather. When asked if there is anything else he could imagine doing, his answer is no: "I've thought about what else I could do but come to the conclusion that nothing can compare to having the sea as my workplace." This subject position borders on the traditional seafarer's view of adventure and freedom.

#### 5.1.7. Beyond the Magazines' Portrayals

As the account of the six subject positions shows, there is not one, but multiple, portrayals of seafarers in the studied magazines. If seafaring is to be viewed as either a lifestyle or a profession, the traditional seafarer can

be seen as a representation of the former, while the gender-equal seafarer represents the latter. Yet, other subject positions capture additional and sometimes overlapping characteristics of seafaring.

However, two important points must be stressed. First, the production of these portrayals is influenced by Swedish life and culture. The fact that Sweden ranks high on the gender equality index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024) is a reflection of Swedish society, which affects the portrayed seafarers, reporters, and researchers alike. A similar study using non-Swedish magazines would likely yield additional or contrasting results. For example, albeit not a comparable study, common representations of Filipino seafarers include heroic seafarers and seafarers as breadwinners who provide for their families (McKay, 2007; McKay & Lucero-Prisno, 2011), images that could not be found in this material. Second, since a magazine article can be regarded as a somewhat arranged picture, other types of ethnographic methods, such as interviews or onboard observations, might produce other results that depict everyday life differently. However, if the aim is to attract more women and other minorities to a male-dominated occupation, studying seafarers' portrayals in magazines is useful.

## 5.2. *Heading Towards Equality*

The gender-equal seafarer is an example of how a subject position can be negotiated in relation to a normative society. However, the analysis shows that the equality discourse is more than just words; it transforms into collective actions, for example, the union's struggle for improved economic conditions for pregnant workers and parents. Despite this, there is a clear conflict between work and family. This conflict is barely mentioned, yet it is omnipresent. The unspoken implication, however, is that combining traditional seafaring life with family life is challenging.

Salary and other financial compensations are aspects of the maritime gender equality discourse, and the absence of additional parental benefits is a matter engaging both women and men. However, different views can be sensed in terms of underlying motivation. In one of the analyzed articles, the discourse centers around salary, benefits, and pensions. Concern is expressed that such compensations are at risk during organizational restructuring, but also that the economic compensation is too low compared to the responsibilities of the profession. The unspoken implication is that the seafarer is underpaid and deserves higher wages. In the texts, it is predominantly men who express these viewpoints, which could mirror the traditional image of a male breadwinner.

Some of the women seafarers have a different view on salary and benefits. A pregnant employee with physically demanding work or exposure to other risks can be sent home with pregnancy benefits if there is no possibility of reassignment. However, this results in a significant loss of income. During her pregnancy, Linnéa found this highly stressful, even if everything worked out in the end. She gives voice to the injustice of possibly having to choose between the fetus's health and keeping her home. If she were to become pregnant again, she believes she would change jobs just to avoid this stress. Thus, salary is important for both men and women but the attitude towards other benefits, such as parental pay, varies. Therese, who is a captain on a smaller vessel, wisely notes that "the other benefits you might not think about until you need them." So, while many seafarers consider the issue of parental pay central in contract negotiations, men argue that the financial supplement is justified by their responsibility and competence, while women see it as a safeguard for their right to their bodies.

Another aspect of gender equality is sexual harassment, a discourse that does not appear much in the data but when it does, it has a clear female focus. A young woman seafarer describes problems on board a ferry. When she used to patrol the ship during nighttime, she would sometimes be followed by persistent truck drivers. When she brought this to the attention of the company, she received good support, and the solution was a changed schedule so that she now only works during the day. This solved the issue of harassment but highlights an attitude where symptoms are addressed rather than the underlying causes. In the same text, the woman notes that her male colleagues never experience the same behavior from the drivers. Here, it becomes clear that the discourse on harassment is linked to women seafarers and their obligations towards future generations of seafarers (Guo & Liang, 2012). It also affects the image of women seafarers and the space they are given in the magazines.

In conclusion, although the data show no difference in how women and men are expected to perform different tasks, there is a distinct hierarchy on board. However, this hierarchy is linked to position rather than gender. The hierarchy is subtle, but noticeable for instance when the deckhand makes coffee for the captain, or in the description of the “deckhand’s *small* office adjacent to the passenger areas” (emphasis added). While the emphasis on the size of the office might not be intentional, it can influence the perception of the task and its performer. But there are also more direct signs of hierarchies, in the difference between those who work with the operation of the ship and those who work with passenger service:

I used to work in the hotel section on board, but soon I felt that I wanted to be on deck. It feels more like real maritime life in a way. In the cleaning department, it’s the same all the time, here it’s more varied. I like it.

Here, a hierarchy between different tasks and professions on board is visible, where some seafarers’ duties are seen as more desirable and linked to status, something resembling what has been described by Eldh (2005). This can be interpreted as the hierarchy on board being primarily linked to onboard position rather than gender. However, the absence of gender differences could also stem from the low number of women on board.

### 5.3. *Performativity and Professional Identity*

The analysis shows a wide array of subject positions that seafarers can inhabit. However, the idea that the seafarer would be a “seafaring rascal” who is allowed to behave in ways that would not be accepted ashore (Eldh, 2005, p. 133) cannot be confirmed by the material. Seafarers rather appear as helpful and cooperative, as individuals with a strong work ethic who support both colleagues and employers, even if this might negatively affect relationships ashore.

Based on previous descriptions of what can be considered male and female tasks (Ambjörnsson, 2018; Ericson, 2011), it can be concluded that the examined discourses do not dictate a strict gender marking of various tasks at sea. There are examples of women captains and seafarers who carry significant responsibilities and perform concrete and sometimes physical tasks. At the same time, there are plenty of examples of male seafarers who clean, create a homely environment, and provide services. In terms of numbers, men performing traditionally female tasks are considerably more numerous than the opposite, likely reflecting the fact that the industry is largely male-dominated. Even though individuals’ sexualities are unknown, there are many examples where the alignment between sex and gender roles does not adhere to societal norms and expectations. According to

Butler (2006), the actions of these individuals could be seen as subversive and deviating from the heterosexual matrix. Maybe they could even be viewed as norm-breaking “queer seafarers.”

Ambjörnsson (2018) discusses how those who deviate from norms can be perceived. As an example, she mentions how a heterosexual woman is expected to do a “moderate” amount of cleaning, while a woman in a same-sex relationship may be seen as progressive if she does not want to clean. In Ambjörnsson’s case, it is the non-conforming sexuality that creates acceptance for the norm-breaking behavior. Regarding seafarers, one can argue that it is rather the non-conforming gender that legitimizes cross-gender tasks—it is simply “allowed” for men to engage in caregiving. Since seafaring historically always has been male-dominated, it is reasonable to assume that the image of what in this study is referred to as the feminine seafarer has always existed, and this position has often been held by men. Over time, this position has been maintained through repeated performative actions. Thus, men populating this subject position have been considered natural. When it comes to women choosing to work at sea, the image is not as unproblematic. Especially mothers who deviate from normative notions of motherhood challenge the heterosexual matrix. There are no indications in the material that this would be seen as deviant by the maritime industry; however, the discourse around pregnant women and mothers at sea highlights issues that male seafarers do not have to endure, such as concerns about the child’s health or their own.

In the analyzed material, there also does not seem to be any desirable hegemonic masculinity that is valued higher than other forms of masculinity or femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). If this perception was to be shared by seafarers themselves, it can be concluded that they are granted significant agency in shaping their own professional identity.

The fact that maritime magazines present a diversity of different types of seafarers is a good first step towards broadening the maritime industry’s recruitment base by showcasing several distinct subject positions (Trevino & Poitevien, 2021). For those already active in the field, it is encouraging that seafarers are also visible in positions that do not adhere to traditional gender patterns (Dixon et al., 2019). But even though visible representation is positive, work is likely needed on multiple fronts to break the performative power of language, as meaning and understanding are formed through communication and interaction (Hall, 2013). At the same time, there is a gendered language within the maritime industry. Except for the use of specific occupational titles, such as *befälhavare* (captain) or *kockstuart* (chief cook), the term seaman is commonly used to describe a person working at sea. Although the term today encompasses all individuals regardless of gender, historically, seaman has almost exclusively referred to a person of male sex. The fact that the word is formed by the noun “man” makes it difficult to disregard the masculine connotation, regardless of the speaker’s intention. This is problematic because Liben et al. (2002) show that a strongly gendered job title decreases the likelihood that someone of a different sex would see themselves fitting within the profession. But there is hope. According to Milles (2019), a gender-neutral and norm-critical language can serve several functions: It can be ideological, inclusive, and identity-forming. If shipping companies and magazines alike aim to reinforce their commitment to increased gender equality, inclusive language usage could be one step towards greater equality. The introduction of the term seafarer signals a modern maritime discourse with progressive and forward-thinking attitudes. It also promotes the normalization of diverse gender identities within the industry, potentially diversifying the recruitment base. Seeing and meeting a more diverse set of seafarers affects representation both on board and in maritime magazines, thus changing the discourse itself. Both Butler (2006) and Scott (1988) mention the performative

power of language and the importance of deconstruction for creating change. But before change can occur, an awareness of the problem is necessary. Therefore, it is crucial to make visible how language and representation actually appear, a goal to which this study contributes.

## 6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to explore the image of seafarers as presented in two Swedish maritime magazines. The study has examined how seafarers are described and whether these descriptions can be seen as a performative creation of a professional identity. The rationale for conducting the study has been the maritime industry's uneven gender distribution. Both nationally and globally, there is an ambition to increase the proportion of women entering and working in the maritime profession. In this context, it is relevant to examine how the seafarer is portrayed to facilitate the creation of a professional identity.

A total of six subject positions were identified. Among the observed subject positions, several intersect with each other. This primarily involves a cluster around the traditional seafarer, where similar characteristics are found in the masculine seafarer and the flexible seafarer. However, at the same time, several of the mentioned subject positions are difficult to reconcile with the notion of the gender-equal seafarer. This is simply due to the challenge of combining a gender-equal family life with extended periods away from home.

Concerning the presented subject positions, the study reveals that today's seafarers are provided considerable freedom to shape their own professional identity. A clear hegemonic masculinity has not been observed, as both women and men are offered the opportunity to occupy various subject positions. This means that men can embody the role that, in this article, has been termed the feminine seafarer, something that has been made possible as men have occupied that role in the past. Likewise, even though mainly men seem to be representatives of the masculine seafarer, there is nothing to indicate that women seafarers are discouraged from filling that subject position as well. Equally important is that both women and men are allowed to be visible in magazines—with broad representation and gender-neutral terms for seafarers, a discursive change is possible. This, in turn, could increase the recruitment base, mitigating the shortage of skilled seafarers.

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## Conflict of Interests

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