

THE DEFLOWERING OF THE MAIDEN AND OTHER STORIES: CONSTRUCTING GENDER IN THE LANGUAGE OF VIRGINITY LOSS IN AMERICAN AND POLISH HEALTH-RELATED DISCOURSE

Much of the academic discussion surrounding the social construction of virginity has taken place in sociological study (Blank 2007; Carpenter 2011), leaving a gap in the linguistic investigation of discourse on the subject. Although feminist schools of thought have highlighted virginity as a social construct (Eriksson & Humphreys 2014; Tuthill 2014), little research has been conducted on the discursive construction of such and its reflection of social beliefs. This study looks at articles from American and Polish online health-related websites on what to expect when first having sex and investigates whether gender stereotypes are present in discourses about virginity and how they are reflective of socio-cultural norms. The articles analyzed were published between 2022 and 2023 on health-related websites (such as the American sites Planned Parenthood, Healthline, and Polish sites ABC Zdrowie, Poradnik Zdrowie) and belong to the broad genre of computer-mediated communication. The qualitative analysis of ten articles from each linguistic context is done within the framework of critical discourse analysis to investigate whether and to what extent discourses on virginity loss are gendered and how the American discourses differ from the Polish discourses on the subject (van Leeuwen 2009).

In both American and Polish discourses, not only does such discourse place women as the mantlepiece or bearer of virginity, but it also reflects and perpetuates heteronormative views of the world. This can be seen in the use of gendered forms in Polish and language targeted mostly at a female audience, concerning the woman as the receiver of penetration. The American discourse, however demonstrating a greater tendency towards gender inclusivity, also tends to focus on women as the main experiencers of virginity loss. Additionally, euphemistic terms for sex in a person's first experience of intercourse reflect social ideologies about virginity and its gender ties, implying that not only is virginity a delicate subject but sex overall. The comparison between American English and Polish will hopefully shed light on representations of virginity and how discursive representations of virginity keep the subject in its gendered (feminized) and virginity loss as a predominantly heteronormative construct.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, social construction, gender, sexuality, health discourse

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