

The role of media in gender equity: perceptions of female expert sources

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how Chilean women researchers perceive and experience their visibility as expert sources in news media. Drawing on Social Representations Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, the research explores the meanings participants attribute to media visibility, expertise, and public authority. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 doctoral academics from diverse disciplines and regions of Chile. Findings reveal that media visibility is shaped by institutional structures, journalistic routines, and gendered expectations regarding expertise. Participants identified multiple barriers, including academic workload, limited institutional support, bureaucratic communication processes, and persistent gender biases in source selection. The study also reveals tensions between scientific and media representations of expertise: while researchers associate expertise with specialization and epistemic responsibility, they perceive media environments as rewarding visibility, availability, and confidence. The findings contribute to scholarships on gender, media, and science communication by demonstrating how expert authority is socially constructed and gendered within contemporary media systems.

Keywords

press, expert sources, perceptions, gender, science communication

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women as expert sources in news media constitutes a persistent global phenomenon that has been documented across countries, media systems, and cultural contexts (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2025; Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2018). Despite significant

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advances in women's participation in higher education, research, and professional fields, men continue to dominate as voices of authority in news coverage, particularly in areas such as science, politics, business, and sports, where expertise and specialized knowledge are highly valued (Cann and Mohr, 2001; Price and Payne, 2019; Yun et al., 2007). This gender disparity not only reflects broader structural inequalities but also contributes to their reproduction by shaping public perceptions of who is considered a legitimate authority and whose knowledge is deemed worthy of public attention.

Quantitative research has provided compelling evidence of this imbalance. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project (2025), women represent only 24% of people heard, read, or seen in press, television, and radio news worldwide. Similar patterns have been identified in science communication. In Latin America, Mena Youn's (2018) content analysis found that only 21% of 155 analyzed science news reports featured women scientists as sources. Likewise, the first quantitative study examining the visibility of women experts in the Chilean press during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that women accounted for only 30.2% of the 1069 expert sources analyzed (Vernal-Vilicic and Reyes-Betanzo, 2024). This disparity appeared consistently across academic, professional, and political domains, suggesting the existence of systematic rather than isolated patterns of exclusion.

This unequal landscape is also associated with broader structural inequalities within academia and scientific institutions. Women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions, research management roles, and decision-making bodies in many countries. For example, in Spain, only 20% of female researchers occupy management positions in research centers and 35% are project leaders (Women and Science Commission of CSIC, 2020). Since journalists frequently rely on institutional visibility, professional reputation, and existing network when identifying expert sources, such disparities may contribute to unequal media representation. In turn, the limited visibility of women expert can reinforce public perceptions that expertise and authority are predominantly male attributes.

Quantitative studies, as reflected in publications and reports, generally yield percentage figures that identify these gaps. From a qualitative perspective, however, the underrepresentation of women as expert sources has been consistently documented, although a smaller and still emerging body of qualitative research has begun to explore how women scientists themselves experience interactions with journalists and media institutions. Existing studies have identified barriers related to professional recognition, credibility, self-promotion, media engagement, and gendered expectations surrounding expertise (Doyle and Howard, 2024; Niemi and Pitkänen, 2016; Shine, 2021). These findings suggest that gender inequalities in media representation cannot be fully understood through content analysis alone, but also require attention to the experiences, perceptions, and meaning that women researchers themselves attribute to their relationship with media.

Despite the growing body of research on gender and media representation, important gaps remain. Much of the existing literature has focused on measuring women's presence in news content, examining journalistic routines, or analyzing patterns of source selection (Aladro Vico et al., 2014; Bezunartea et al., 2012; Ramalho et al., 2012). Comparative little attention has been devoted to understanding how women researchers interpret, negotiate, and make sense of their visibility as expert sources. This limitation is particularly evident in Latin America, where qualitative studies examining women scientists' experiences in relation to media visibility remain scarce.

To address this gap, this study explores how Chilean women researchers perceive and experience their visibility as expert sources in the media. Drawing on Social Representation Theory (Jodelet, 2011; Moscovici, 2005), the study examines the meanings that Chilean women scientists attribute to media visibility, their interactions with journalists and institutional communication structures, and their perceptions of gender equity in expert. Source representation. By centering

the voices of women researchers, themselves, the study contributes to ongoing debates on gender, expertise, and science communication while providing evidence from Latin American context that remains underrepresented in international scholarship.

The study is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the main challenges that Chilean women researchers face in making their academic work visible through media?

RQ2: How do women researchers perceive their relationship with institutional communications departments and traditional media outlets?

RQ3: What role do they attribute to journalistic practices and professional training in shaping gender equity among expert sources?

RQ4: What opportunities and limitations do they identify in social media as a tool for autonomous science communications and public engagement?

Literature review

Women as expert sources in news media

Research conducted over the last three decades has consistently demonstrated that women remain underrepresented in news media, particularly in roles associated with expertise, authority, and decision-making. Feminist media scholars have long argued that news organizations function as gendered institutions in which professional routines, editorial practices, and source selection processes tend to privilege male voices while marginalizing women's contributions to public debate (Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2018). As a result, women are more frequently represented as witnesses, consumers, family members, or victims, whereas men are more likely to appear as experts, officials, analysts, and spokespersons.

Longitudinal evidence from the Global Media Monitoring Project (2025) confirms the persistence of these patterns across diverse media systems. Although women's overall visibility in news content has improved gradually over time, substantial disparities remain in relation to expert-source representation. Women continue to be less frequently consulted as authoritative voices, particularly in areas traditionally associated with power, technical expertise, and scientific knowledge.

This tendency is also evident in science communication. Studies conducted in Spain, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile have documented the limited presence of women scientists as sources in science journalism, despite the growing participation of women in research and higher education (Mena Young, 2018; Vernal-Vilicic and Reyes-Betanzo, 2024). These findings suggest that increasing women's participation in scientific careers does not automatically translate into greater visibility in media coverage.

More recently, researchers have begun to explore how women experts themselves experience interactions with journalists and media institutions. Rather than focusing exclusively on media content, these studies examine the perceptions, motivations, and barriers that shape women's willingness and ability to engage with public communication. Niemi and Pitkänen (2016) found that women experts frequently encounter challenges related to visibility, credibility, and the gendered expectations associated with public expertise. Similarly, Shine (2021), through interviews with Australian women experts, identified tensions between the desire to contribute to public debate and concerns about professional exposure, media treatment, and reputational risks. Doyle and Howard (2024) reported comparable findings among Irish economists, highlighting the influence of confidence, institutional support, and perceptions of expertise on media participation.

While studies such as Hudson et al. (2022), who examined the gender gap among political sources in the Chilean press, open up the discussion around the need for a more gender-conscious journalism committed to narrowing this gap. Niemi and Pitkänen (2016), Shine (2021), and Doyle and Howard (2024) also suggest that the underrepresentation of women as expert sources cannot be explained solely by journalistic practices or newsroom routines. It is also shaped by how women experts themselves perceive media visibility, negotiate professional identities, and respond to institutional and cultural expectations surrounding expertise. Understanding these experiences is therefore essential for developing a more comprehensive account of gender inequality in media representation.

Gender and science communication

Science communication occupies a strategic position at the intersection of knowledge production and public engagement. Through news media, scientific knowledge reaches audiences beyond academic communities, contributing to public understanding of science, informing policy debates, and shaping perceptions of social problems and potential solutions (Massarani et al., 2016). Within this process, journalists play a crucial gatekeeping role by deciding which topics deserve attention, which scientific findings are considered newsworthy, and which experts are invited to interpret complex issues for the public.

The selection of expert sources is therefore not a neutral journalistic practice but a process through which authority, credibility, and legitimacy are publicly constructed. Research has shown that journalists frequently rely on established professional networks, institutional reputation, and source availability when identifying experts, often privileging individuals who are already visible in public discourse (Martin-Neira, 2022; Vernal-Vilicic and Reyes-Betanzo, 2024). While such practices may facilitate efficient news production, they can also contribute to the repeated consultation of a relatively small group of highly visible experts, limiting the diversity of perspectives represented in media coverage.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in science journalism, where journalists must often navigate highly specialized fields of knowledge under significant time constraints (Martin-Neira et al., 2024). Previous research has identified several challenges associated with science reporting, including difficulties in identifying appropriate specialists, evaluating scientific credentials, and translating complex information into accessible language (Massarani et al., 2016; Moreno and Gómez, 2002). Limited familiarity with specific scientific fields may increase journalists' dependence on institutional recommendations, preexisting source networks, or highly visible experts, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities in media representation.

The relationship between journalism and science is further shaped by the communication structures of universities and research institutions. Communications departments increasingly act as intermediaries between researchers and media organizations by identifying newsworthy findings, preparing press materials, and facilitating contact with journalists (Acevedo, 2025). However, previous studies suggest that institutional communication practices may also influence which researchers receive visibility opportunities and how expertise is presented to the public (Vernal-Vilicic et al., 2025). As a result, media visibility is often shaped not only by journalistic decisions but also by organizational resources, communication strategies, and institutional priorities.

Recognizing the persistence of gender disparities in expert-source representation, several organizations have developed initiatives aimed at increasing the visibility of women experts in media. Examples include the BBC's 50:50 Project (Hobbins and Prior, 2019), which monitors gender balance in source selection, and Bloomberg's New Voices Initiative (Bloomberg, 2020), which

provides media training for women professionals and academics. These initiatives demonstrate that organizational commitment and systematic monitoring can contribute to diversifying expert voices in public discourse. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that gender inequalities remain deeply embedded within broader institutional and cultural structures, indicating that increasing women's visibility requires more than individual-level interventions.

Taken together, this body of literature suggests that gender disparities in science communication emerge from the interaction of multiple factors, including journalistic routines, institutional communication practices, professional cultures, and broader social understandings of expertise and authority. Examining how women researchers themselves perceive these dynamics can therefore provide valuable insights into the mechanisms that facilitate or constrain their participation in public communication.

Theoretical framework

Social representations theory

This study draws on Social Representations Theory, originally developed by Moscovici (1961) and subsequently expanded by Jodelet (2011), to examine how women researchers construct shared understandings of media visibility, expertise, and gender inequality. Social representations are systems of socially produced knowledge that enable individuals and groups to interpret reality, communicate meanings, and orient their actions within everyday social contexts.

According to Moscovici (2005), social representations transform complex or unfamiliar phenomena into understandable categories that become part of common-sense knowledge. Rather than reflecting reality objectively, they constitute collective interpretations that emerge through communication, social interaction, and shared experiences. In this sense, representations play a central role in shaping how social groups understand themselves and their position within broader social structures.

Jodelet (2011) further argues that social representations function both as a framework for interpreting reality and as a guide for practical action. They influence how individuals evaluate opportunities, identify obstacles, and make decisions in their daily lives. Importantly, these representations are not produced in a social vacuum but are embedded within broader systems of power and inequality. Consequently, gender, professional status, institutional hierarchies, and cultural norms all contribute to the construction and circulation of social representations (Urbina and Ovalles, 2018).

Critical discourse analysis

To complement Social Representations Theory, this study incorporates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly the work of Van Dijk (1996, 2009), as an analytical perspective for examining how representations are articulated through discourse. CDA views language not simply as a vehicle for communication but as a social practice through which power relations, inequalities, and ideological assumptions are reproduced or challenged.

Van Dijk (2009) argues that discourse plays a central role in the production and maintenance of social power because it shapes how social actors, institutions, and events are represented and understood. Through discourse, dominant groups may legitimize forms of knowledge, authority, and expertise while marginalizing alternative perspectives. Consequently, discourse analysis provides a useful framework for identifying how broader structures of inequality become embedded in everyday narratives and communicative practices.

In relation to gender and media representation, CDA enables the examination of how women researchers describe their interactions with journalists, communication departments, and media institutions, as well as how they construct meanings around authority, credibility, expertise, and recognition. Attention is paid to recurring discursive patterns that reveal how participants interpret the gendered dynamics of expert-source selection and media visibility.

This approach is especially relevant for understanding how inequalities are experienced and narrated, allowing the analysis to move beyond individual experiences and connect participants' accounts to wider institutional and cultural structures that shape public communication (Lakoff, 1987).

The combination of Social Representations Theory and CDA provides a complementary framework for understanding women researchers' experiences as expert sources in the media. While Social Representations Theory offers a conceptual lens for examining how participants collectively construct meanings around expertise, media visibility, journalism, and gender relations, CDA enables the identification of how these meanings are expressed through discourse and connected to broader relations of power (Segovia Lacoste et al., 2018).

Together, these approaches allow the study to explore both the content of participants' representations and the discursive mechanisms through which they are produced, reproduced, and contested. This analytical integration is particularly valuable for investigating gender inequalities in science communication, as it facilitates an examination of how individual experiences are linked to institutional practices, professional cultures, and socially shared understandings of expertise and authority.

Accordingly, the analysis focuses not only on what women researchers say about their media experiences but also on how their narratives reveal broader social representations regarding who is recognized as an expert, whose voices are considered legitimate in public discourse, and how gender continues to shape access to media visibility (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 2003).

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how Chilean women researchers perceive and experience their visibility as expert sources in news media. Given the study's interest in understanding meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences, a qualitative approach was considered particularly appropriate. Rather than measuring the frequency of media appearances, the research seeks to examine how women researchers make sense of their interactions with journalists, institutional communication structures, and broader gendered dynamics of media representation.

The study is informed by Social Representations Theory (Jodelet, 2011; Moscovici, 2005), which provides a framework for examining collectively shared meanings, and CDA (Van Dijk, 1996, 2009), which enables attention to how these meanings are articulated through discourse and connected to broader relations of power and inequality.

Participants and sampling

Purposive, nonprobabilistic sampling was employed to identify information-rich cases capable of providing insight into women researchers' experiences as expert sources in media. The study focused exclusively on women because its objective was not to compare male and female researchers but rather to understand how women researchers themselves interpret and experience media visibility within contexts where gender inequalities in expert-source representation have been consistently documented.

Table 1. Expert sources profile.

	Macrozones	City	Area of knowledge	Media experience
1	North	Antofagasta	Biological sciences	More than 10 appearances
2	Center	La Serena	Health sciences	More than 10 appearances
3	Center	Valparaíso	Biological sciences	6–10 appearances
4	South-Center	Concepción	Astrophysics	More than 10 appearances
5	South-Center	Concepción	Computer engineering	3–5 appearances
6	South-Center	Valdivia	Humanities/law	6–10 appearances
7	South	Puerto Montt	Biological sciences	6–10 appearances
8	Austral	Punta Arenas	Health sciences	More than 20 appearances
9	Metropolitan Region	Santiago	Arts and humanities	More than 10 appearances
10	Metropolitan Region	Santiago	Social sciences	More than 10 appearances
11	Metropolitan Region	Santiago	Health sciences	More than 20 appearances
12	Metropolitan Region	Santiago	Health sciences	More than 10 appearances

Source: Own elaboration.

Participants were identified through a two-stage selection process. First, women researchers with doctoral degrees and active research trajectories were identified across Chilean universities and research institutions. Second, a review of national and regional news media was conducted to verify their previous participation as expert sources. This procedure ensured that all participants had direct experience interacting with journalists and media organizations.

To be included in the study, participants were required to: (a) hold a doctoral degree; (b) be actively engaged in research activities; (c) work at a Chilean university or research institution; and (d) have participated as expert sources in at least three media consultations during the previous 2 years. The final sample comprised 12 women researchers representing six macroregions of Chile and a wide range of disciplinary areas (see Table 1).

Data collection

Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted between December 2024 and May 2025 using both face-to-face and online formats. The interview guide consisted of 25 open-ended questions organized around three thematic areas: (1) scientific productivity and knowledge dissemination; (2) academic visibility in media; and (3) gender perspectives in media representation.

Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 min and were digitally recorded with participants' informed consent approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the sponsoring institution. All participants received information regarding the objectives of the study, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. To preserve anonymity, participants were assigned identification codes ranging from E1 to E12 (see Table 2).

Data analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through an iterative thematic analysis informed by Social Representations Theory and CDA (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Van Dijk, 2009). The analytical process combined inductive and interpretive strategies. Initial codes emerged through repeated readings of the transcripts, while the theoretical framework guided attention to representations of expertise, media visibility, journalism, and gender relations (see Table 3).

Table 2. Guiding questions.

Analytical dimension	Guiding question
1. Scientific productivity and knowledge dissemination	How do women researchers disseminate their work and interact with institutional communication structures?
2. Media visibility	How do women researchers experience their interactions with media organizations and journalists?
3. Gender and expert representation	How do participants interpret gender equity in expert-source representation?

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Research questions and analytical focus.

Research question	Analytical focus
RQ1	Barriers to media visibility.
RQ2	Relationship with communication departments and journalists.
RQ3	Perceptions of journalism and gender equity.
RQ4	Social media as an alternative communication channel.

Source: Own elaboration.

Coding was conducted independently by both researchers. Following the initial coding stage, the authors compared, discussed, and refined emerging categories through a process of collaborative interpretation. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached regarding category definitions and thematic organization.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through independent coding by both researchers, collaborative category development, iterative comparison of interpretations, and ongoing engagement with the empirical material. These procedures contributed to the credibility, consistency, and transparency of the analytical process.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, shared meanings, and discursive patterns across participants’ narratives. Attention was paid to how women researchers described their interactions with journalists and institutional communication structures, how they understood the visibility of women experts in media, and how gendered power relations were reflected in their accounts (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Results

The analysis of interviews with 12 Chilean women researchers revealed complex experiences regarding their media visibility. Results are organized into three major thematic areas: (1) institutional visibility and the burden of academic labor; (2) navigating media relationships; and (3) gendered constructions of expertise.

Institutional visibility and the burden of academic labor

Participants described academic work as characterized by the simultaneous performance of multiple responsibilities, including research, teaching, administrative management, and community engagement. Across interviews, media visibility was not represented as an isolated professional activity

but rather as one additional demand competing for time within already overloaded academic careers.

A recurring theme was the disproportionate administrative and service burden assumed by women researchers. Several participants occupied leadership positions such as research center directors, graduate program coordinators, or heads of academic units. While these roles were recognized as important contributions to institutional functioning, participants frequently associated them with increased workload and reduced opportunities to focus on research activities.

As one participant explained:

I'm the director of a research center, so I have administrative responsibilities, manage the budget, supervise graduate students, coordinate with other institutions, and then still have my own research projects and teach two courses. It's a lot, honestly. (E4)

These accounts reveal a shared representation of academic labor in which women researchers perceive themselves as carrying responsibilities that extend beyond the activities most highly valued in academic evaluation systems. Several participants explicitly linked this phenomenon to gendered expectations regarding institutional service, suggesting that women are more frequently expected to assume administrative and organizational tasks that remain largely invisible within traditional measures of academic success.

This perception was particularly evident in narratives describing unequal distributions of academic labor:

I look around and I see that the women in my faculty are always on multiple committees, directing programs, organizing events, and the men are publishing more because they have more time to focus on their research. (E10)

Within this context, media engagement was frequently perceived as both valuable and difficult to sustain. Participants recognized the importance of communicating research beyond academic audiences while simultaneously describing media participation as another activity competing for limited time and institutional recognition.

Competing understandings of academic visibility. Participants described highly variable mechanisms for disseminating research achievements within their institutions. In most cases, communication processes were perceived as informal, fragmented, and dependent on personal initiative rather than systematic institutional strategies. Research findings were commonly shared through departmental meetings, email exchanges, or informal conversations, limiting the visibility of academic achievements beyond immediate professional circles.

However, participants did not share a uniform understanding of visibility itself. While some researchers expressed frustration regarding the lack of institutional recognition of their work, others questioned the value of actively promoting research achievements. These contrasting positions suggest that media and institutional visibility are interpreted through different professional and personal frameworks. Despite this, for the interviewed researchers, one of the most salient aspects was the accurate representation of their institutional affiliation in media coverage. That is, commitment to the academic institution was regarded as highly significant.

One participant explained:

I'm really not very interested in putting it in a showcase. For me, what's important is generating knowledge, publishing, winning the grant. Those who need to know what I'm doing, know. (E3)

Such accounts reveal tensions between competing representations of academic legitimacy. For some participants, recognition was associated primarily with scientific productivity and peer evaluation, whereas public visibility was considered secondary or even irrelevant. Others viewed dissemination and public engagement as integral components of academic work. These differences indicate that women researchers do not constitute a homogeneous group regarding their attitudes toward visibility, but rather negotiate diverse understandings shaped by disciplinary cultures, institutional contexts, and individual trajectories.

External recognition and internal invisibility. One of the most striking themes emerging from the interviews was the perceived disconnect between external recognition and internal institutional validation. Several participants described receiving significant public recognition through media appearances, conference invitations, research awards, and professional networks while simultaneously experiencing limited visibility or appreciation within their own universities.

As one participant noted:

It's really strange, you know? I'm consulted by national media, I'm invited to give talks around the country, my research is cited, but in my own university I feel invisible. (E10)

For these participants, visibility operated as a multidimensional concept in which recognition from external audiences did not necessarily translate into institutional prestige. The narratives reveal a representation of academia as a space where public communication and societal impact often occupy a secondary position compared to conventional performance indicators such as publications, grants, and journal rankings.

This perception was reinforced by another participant:

In the faculty the only thing that matters are Q1 and Q2 journal rankings. If you go on TV to talk about your research, that doesn't matter for anything. Some people see it as a waste of time or self-promotion. (E12)

Participants frequently described this situation as contradictory. On the one hand, universities, funding agencies, and public institutions increasingly encourage researchers to communicate their findings beyond academic audiences.

Institutional cultures and communication structures. Participants also highlighted how institutional cultures shape opportunities for visibility. Several described organizational environments where self-promotion was viewed negatively and where explicit efforts to publicize academic achievements were often interpreted as signs of arrogance rather than professional accomplishment.

As one researcher explained:

There's a culture here of not highlighting your own work. You're supposed to be humble, let others recognize your contributions. If you talk too much about what you've accomplished, people think you're arrogant. (E5)

In addition, participants identified structural limitations associated with institutional communication departments. Communications units were often described as understaffed and responsible for

multiple organizational functions, reducing their capacity to support research dissemination effectively.

As one participant explained:

The volume of dissemination that a single person has to carry out makes the relationship with us not so fluid. She's overworked, dealing with a million things. (E6)

Participants also reported uncertainty regarding the criteria used to select research projects for dissemination, suggesting that the absence of transparent editorial guidelines could contribute to unequal visibility opportunities. Excessive bureaucratic procedures further complicated interactions with media organizations by slowing institutional responses to journalistic requests.

As one participant described:

Here there's an atrocious bureaucracy. When you want to do something, you must talk to the Pope and down. It's super slow because emails keep adding up and you end up in an email with 35 human beings you don't even know. By the time you get approval, the moment has passed, the journalist has moved on. (E9)

Collectively, these accounts reveal that media visibility is not perceived solely as an outcome of journalistic interest or individual initiative. Rather, participants construct visibility as a process shaped by institutional cultures, organizational resources, evaluation systems, and gendered expectations that simultaneously facilitate and constrain public recognition.

Navigating media relationships

Participants described their interactions with journalists and media organizations as increasingly frequent and accessible, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews, media visibility was generally perceived as an important mechanism for disseminating scientific knowledge and contributing to public debate. At the same time, participants described multiple tensions associated with media engagement, including concerns about accuracy, professional credibility, emotional exposure, and the quality of journalistic practices.

A notable finding was the transformation of communication dynamics between researchers and journalists. Nearly all participants identified WhatsApp as the dominant communication channel through which media requests are currently initiated and managed.

As one participant explained:

It's almost always through WhatsApp now. A journalist messages me, asks if I can answer some questions, and often I just record an audio response right there. It's very immediate, very informal. (E5)

Participants generally valued the accessibility and speed offered by these communication practices. The possibility of responding quickly to journalists facilitated participation in media coverage and reduced many of the logistical barriers traditionally associated with interviews. However, this immediacy was also perceived as potentially problematic because it limited opportunities for reflection, contextualization, and careful explanation of scientific findings.

As one researcher noted:

Sometimes I worry about giving quotes through WhatsApp. You say something quickly, maybe you're not as precise as you would be if you had time to think and write it out. (E11)

Media visibility as recognition and exposure. Participants expressed diverse emotional responses to seeing themselves represented in news media. For some, media visibility generated discomfort, embarrassment, and self-consciousness. Media exposure was experienced as a form of public scrutiny that required careful management and generated anxiety regarding how their contributions would be interpreted.

One participant explained:

It happens to me that I feel very embarrassed to see myself everywhere. I read the news, but first I sent it to my family for them to give their opinion and I'm the last one to read it. (E1)

Others described media participation as personally and professionally rewarding. In these accounts, visibility functioned as a form of recognition that validated years of academic work and reinforced professional identity.

As one participant stated:

I like reading myself because I think I've built a good part of my identity through my way of expressing my ideas. Seeing my thoughts in print, my words quoted, that feels validating. (E8)

Social media and the limits of self-promotion. Participants recognized the growing importance of social media as a tool for disseminating scientific knowledge independently of traditional media organizations. However, enthusiasm for these platforms was accompanied by significant reservations.

The most frequently cited barrier was lack of time. Maintaining a visible social media presence was perceived as requiring continuous investment of effort that competed with existing academic responsibilities.

As one participant explained:

I've been told many times that I should be on social media, that it would be good for making my work visible. But what limits me a lot is time. (E1)

Privacy concerns also emerged as an important obstacle. Several participants expressed discomfort with the personal exposure associated with digital platforms and described a preference for maintaining clear boundaries between professional and private life:

I'm a person who is very reserved and who cares a lot about my privacy. I'm not comfortable putting myself out there on social media. (E2)

Others questioned whether social media visibility aligned with their understanding of academic work and scientific authority:

I don't see it necessary to make my academic work known through social media. What interests me is the construction of knowledge, advancing my field. (E3)

These accounts reveal tensions between emerging expectations that researchers should actively cultivate public visibility and more traditional representations of academic legitimacy centered on research production and disciplinary recognition. Although participants acknowledged the

communicative potential of social media, many remained reluctant to embrace practices associated with personal branding and continuous self-promotion.

Taken together, the findings suggest that women researchers construct media visibility as a complex and often ambivalent experience. While public communication is valued as a mechanism for disseminating knowledge and contributing to society, it is simultaneously associated with emotional exposure, professional risks, and ongoing negotiations regarding expertise, legitimacy, and recognition.

Gendered constructions of expertise

When participants were asked directly about gender equity in the representation of expert sources in Chilean media, there was broad agreement that men continue to appear more frequently than women in news coverage. However, the explanations offered for this imbalance varied considerably, reflecting different interpretations of the mechanisms that shape public visibility and recognition.

Participants consistently associated media presence with legitimacy and professional authority. Being invited to comment on news stories was not perceived merely as a communication opportunity but as a symbolic recognition of expertise and credibility.

As one participant explained:

Appearing in the media is a sort of legitimization, of recognizing your expertise. (E2)

This perception highlights the central role that media play in the public construction of scientific authority. Visibility was frequently described as a mechanism through which expertise becomes socially recognized, extending academic reputation beyond universities and research institutions.

Competing explanations for gender inequality. Although participants agreed that women remain underrepresented as expert sources, they differed in how they explained this disparity. Some adopted what might be described as structural interpretations, emphasizing the unequal distribution of women in senior academic and leadership positions. According to this perspective, lower media visibility reflects broader inequalities within scientific and academic institutions.

Others emphasized workload and time constraints as key barriers. The disproportionate administrative, teaching, and service responsibilities described earlier in the interviews were viewed as reducing opportunities for public engagement and media participation.

However, a third group of participants offered more explicitly gender-conscious explanations, focusing on journalistic routines, cultural expectations, and implicit biases operating within media organizations. These participants argued that expertise itself is often socially associated with masculine characteristics and that journalists may unconsciously reproduce these assumptions when selecting sources.

As one participant explained:

I think the problem is really in how journalists are trained and how they think about expertise. They have these mental shortcuts where they associate expertise and authority with men, particularly with certain kinds of men—older, from prestigious institutions, willing to speak confidently about anything. Women don't fit that template as readily. (E10)

These narratives reveal competing social representations of inequality. While some participants interpreted gender disparities as the consequence of institutional structures, others located the problem within media cultures and the symbolic processes through which authority and expertise are recognized.

Journalism, visibility, and gender equity. Participants identified journalism as a key actor capable of either reproducing or challenging existing gender inequalities in expert-source representation. Many argued that greater gender equity requires changes in journalistic practices, particularly in relation to source selection routines.

Several participants suggested that journalists should move beyond familiar networks of experts and actively seek greater diversity in their sources. Others emphasized the need for improved training in science communication and greater awareness of implicit biases affecting perceptions of authority and credibility.

Underlying these recommendations was a shared belief that gender inequality in media representation is not inevitable but socially produced and therefore open to transformation.

As one participant argued:

The problem isn't that there aren't qualified women. The problem is that journalists often don't know where to look, or they keep calling the same people over and over again. (E9)

From this perspective, improving gender equity requires more than increasing the number of women available to speak in media. It also requires questioning the assumptions, routines, and professional practices through which expertise is identified and legitimized.

Taken together, these findings suggest that participants understand media visibility as a site where broader gender relations are negotiated and reproduced. Their narratives reveal that the underrepresentation of women experts cannot be explained solely by individual choices or institutional hierarchies.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the underrepresentation of women as expert sources in news media remains a persistent issue while also providing new insights into how women researchers themselves understand and experience this phenomenon. Consistent with previous quantitative studies conducted internationally and in Chile (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2025; Mena Young, 2018; Vernal-Vilicic and Reyes-Betanzo, 2024), participants recognized that men continue to dominate media representations of expertise. However, rather than merely confirming numerical disparities, the present study contributes to understanding the social meanings and institutional processes through which such inequalities are produced and sustained.

From the perspective of Social Representations Theory (Jodelet, 2011; Moscovici, 2005), participants' accounts reveal relatively coherent representations regarding expertise, visibility, and media authority. These representations emerge through repeated interactions with academic institutions, journalists, communication professionals, and media organizations. Importantly, the findings suggest that media visibility is not perceived simply as a communication outcome but as a socially negotiated process involving legitimacy, recognition, and power.

A central finding concerns the ambivalent nature of visibility. Participants simultaneously described media exposure as recognition, opportunity, responsibility, vulnerability, and additional

labor. This ambivalence challenges simplified assumptions that greater visibility is universally desired or beneficial for women researchers.

While participants valued media engagement as an opportunity to disseminate knowledge and contribute to public debate, they also associated visibility with emotional exposure, reputational risks, and increased professional demands. Similar tensions have been identified in previous studies examining women experts' relationships with media visibility, particularly in contexts where public exposure subjects women to heightened scrutiny and gendered evaluations (Ross et al., 2018; Shine, 2021).

The findings suggest that visibility functions as a form of symbolic capital, conferring legitimacy and authority within public discourse while simultaneously exposing individuals to forms of evaluation that are often unevenly distributed along gendered lines. Participants' narratives indicate that becoming visible as an expert is not merely a matter of media access but involves navigating competing expectations regarding professionalism, credibility, modesty, and authority.

The study also highlights the importance of institutional contexts in shaping media visibility. Participants consistently described academic careers as characterized by the simultaneous performance of teaching, research, administrative management, and community engagement responsibilities. Within this context, media participation was frequently perceived as an additional demand competing for limited time and institutional recognition.

Participants further described a paradoxical situation in which they achieved substantial external recognition through media appearances, public engagement, and professional networks while experiencing limited visibility within their own institutions. This finding suggests that universities continue to prioritize traditional indicators of academic productivity, such as publications and grants, while assigning comparatively little value to science communication and public engagement activities.

These results support previous studies suggesting that organizational structures significantly influence whose knowledge becomes visible and whose expertise remains marginalized (Hebbani and Van Vuuren, 2015). Visibility, therefore, cannot be understood solely as the result of individual initiative but must be situated within broader institutional arrangements that facilitate or constrain public recognition.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study concerns participants' reflections on expertise itself. The interviews revealed a clear tension between how women researchers understand expertise and how they perceive expertise to be recognized within media environments.

Participants consistently associate expertise with specialization, methodological rigor, disciplinary knowledge, and awareness of professional boundaries. Many reported declining interview requests when topics fell outside their specific areas of competence, framing such decisions as expressions of scientific responsibility rather than lack of confidence.

In contrast, participants perceived media organizations as frequently rewarding visibility, accessibility, confidence, and communicative performance. The recurring criticism of highly visible "generalist experts" who comment across multiple topics illustrates this tension. Similar dynamics have been identified in studies examining media source selection practices, where journalists often rely on familiar, readily available commentators rather than seeking specialized expertise (Nölleke et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2008).

The distinction is important because it reveals competing representations of authority. Whereas participants grounded authority in scientific specialization, they perceived media systems as partly constructing authority through visibility itself. In other words, media exposure contributes not only to the dissemination of expertise but also to the production of expertise as a publicly recognized social status.

This finding contributes to recent discussions regarding the mediatization of expertise and the growing importance of communication skills in establishing public authority (Doyle and Howard, 2024). The results suggest that scientific legitimacy and media legitimacy do not always coincide, creating tensions for researchers whose professional norms emphasize caution, precision, and specialization.

Participants' accounts further indicate that representations of expertise remain strongly gendered. Although interviewees offered different explanations for women's underrepresentation in media, many identified implicit assumptions linking authority, credibility, and expertise to masculine characteristics.

These perceptions align with extensive feminist media scholarship, demonstrating that men continue to be more readily recognized as authoritative voices in public discourse (Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2018). Participants frequently described media environments in which confidence and assertiveness were rewarded while women's expertise was more likely to be questioned, overlooked, or subjected to higher standards of validation.

Importantly, the findings suggest that gender inequality operates not only through numerical underrepresentation but also through symbolic processes that shape who is perceived as a legitimate expert. From a CDA perspective (Van Dijk, 2009), these narratives reveal how dominant representations of authority continue to privilege particular forms of expertise and particular types of speakers.

The prominence of male "generalist experts" described by participants illustrates this phenomenon. Interviewees frequently contrasted their own reluctance to speak beyond their specialization with media visibility granted to men perceived as willing to comment on a wide range of issues. Rather than interpreting women's caution as a deficit, participants framed it as an expression of epistemic responsibility. This reframing challenges narratives that position women as insufficiently confident, shifting attention instead towards the criteria through which expertise is recognized and legitimized in media environments.

Conclusions

This study examined how Chilean women researchers perceive and experience their visibility as expert sources in news media, how the participants attribute to media visibility, and the factors they perceive as facilitating or constraining their participation in public discourse.

The findings confirm that women researchers recognize a persistent gender imbalance in media representation, consistent with previous quantitative studies. However, the study moves beyond documenting disparities in numbers by revealing how media visibility is experienced as a contradictory process shaped by institutional structures, journalistic routines, professional cultures, and gendered expectations regarding expertise and authority.

Drawing on Social Representations Theory, the study demonstrates that participants share coherent representations of visibility, expertise, and legitimacy. Media visibility is understood simultaneously as recognition, responsibility, opportunity, and vulnerability. While participants value public communication as a means of disseminating knowledge and contributing to social debate, they also identify structural barriers related to academic workloads, institutional support, media practices, and persistent gender stereotypes that influence who is recognized as a legitimate expert voice.

As a qualitative study based on a purposive sample of Chilean women researchers, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Future research could incorporate the perspectives of journalists, organizational communication in universities, communication professionals, and

male researchers, as well as comparative analyses across different national contexts and media systems. Such approaches would deepen understanding of how expertise is negotiated and legitimized within contemporary media environments.

Ultimately, this study argues that the question of who appears as an expert source in the media is also a question of whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate. Expanding the visibility of women researchers is therefore a matter of representation and of strengthening the diversity, quality, and democratic value of public debate.

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Andrés Bello (approval number: 003/2022). All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation.

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