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Contents

How Do Social Media Machines Affect Self-Concept Research?

Systematic Literature Review of the Latest Trends

Katalin Fehér[*], Attila Katona I.[**]

[*]   University of Public Service, Associate Professor, e-mail: feher.katalin@uni-nke.hu
[**]   University of Pannonia, Senior Research Fellow, e-mail: katona.attila@gtk.uni-pannon.hu

Advanced digital technologies broadly penetrate self-activities, such as algorithms, machine learning, or artificial intelligence. This trend is most evident on social media, where contents, attitudes and evaluative judgments meet on technology-driven platforms. Moreover, human networks also started communicating with social bots or conversational interfaces. All these challenges can trigger a redesign of self-concept via technology. Therefore, the paper investigates how social media machines affect self-concept-related academic research. First, pioneers of the field are presented. Second, the self-concept research in digital technology and social media is summarised. Topic networks illustrate critical research fields with the latest trends and future implications. Last but not least, we also investigate how emerging media phenomena affect academic trends in the case of social bots or fake news. The study aims to support the connected research in psychology, business, management, education, political science, medicine and media studies with an understanding of the latest trends. The additional goal is to highlight the potential of market-based research cooperation with academia supporting significant developments and funding.

Keywords: self-concept, social media machine, social media, information technology, systematic review, SMM, online identity, networked self

Introduction

Digital technology and social media are increasingly networking the individual. While there are available discussions about platforms and applications simply for years, a new

face of social media has appeared with advanced digital technologies from machine learning (ML) to artificial intelligence (AI) (Alhajj, 2018). This movement results in constant user engagement with black-box machines (Rassameeroj and Wu, 2019), influencing and defining the selves intensively and in various ways (Feher, 2019). Thus, social media machines (SMM) (Newland, 2016) and the powers of data companies are also in the spotlight with privacy issues or bias problems in the increasingly invisible system operation (Tsesis, 2018). It is no coincidence that the Netflix-produced docudrama entitled "Social Dilemma" created a public and academic discourse with AI-driven future selves (Preston et al., 2021). In parallel, social bots and conversational media have started to communicate with human selves (Rheault and Musulan, 2021; Georgakopoulou et al., 2020) to influence them via technology-determined perceptions, beliefs and behaviour, especially on social media platforms (Kušen and Strembeck, 2019). These phenomena result in a specific machine-transmitted human experience which must be studied and understood, along with its consequences.

These changes confirm the necessity of the first summary of self-concept research in the context of social media machines (SMM). Since academic research has moved into a rapidly changing terrain with a relatively short history, only snapshot research is relevant with an exploratory goal. However, the time has come to investigate how academic research reflects social media technology regarding the self. Confirming this statement, a short historical overview of this field is also presented in this study as well as some projected future scenarios. According to this investigation, the related research is rapidly growing. Therefore, one can study which research topics and disciplines of self-concept have become fundamental in social media machines.

Consequently, the goal is to reveal and interpret the latest academic trends in self-concept research in relation to SMM through the first systematic review. It also aims to support research in psychology, medicine, education, business and their relevant interdisciplines with projected future directions.

Accordingly, the rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section *Background of the study* outlines theoretical considerations with a short historical overview and timeline, while Section *Methods* presents the research goal and methods in detail. Then, Section *Results* shows findings with implications, Sections *Discussion* and *Conclusions* offer a conclusion and projections for the future, and finally Section *Research limits* lists the inevitable barriers to research and assesses their negligible impact on the systematic review.

Background of the study

The number of scientific publications on self-concept has grown dynamically over the last fifty years. According to the leading academic databases such as Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), scientific interest in the topic has grown even more intensively in parallel with the first three decades of digital platforms and the first decade of the social media revolution. Previously, the leading subject areas were medicine, psychology and education. Although medicine and psychology have kept their dominant role in self-concept research, two displacements can be seen. While social science, nursing, business and

management, art and humanities, or environmental studies focus more on self-concept than ever, education, sport and rehabilitation science have been even less interested in this field than previous trends. These results do not highlight the specific role of communication and media studies, computer science, or engineering. Nevertheless, they can be assumed with emerging social media developments. However, Scopus and WoS analytics point out that social sciences already contain these emerging disciplines in self-concept research. All these results confirm the changing trends in self-concept research and the relevance of the research goal.

Moving forward with these results, social media and technology-related publications were filtered resulting in noticeable milestones of self-concept research on a timeline (Figure 1).
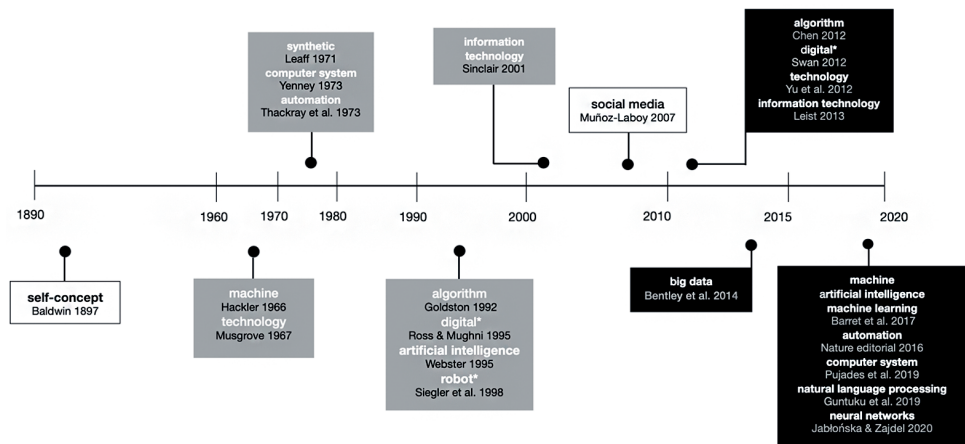
1) White rectangle=self-concept & social media topics started to be published in academia
2) Grey rectangle=self-concept AND the type of the technology
3) Black rectangle=self-concept AND social media AND the type of the technology

Figure 1: Self-concept research on the timeline with technology and social media
Source: Compiled by the author.

The first academic publication on self-concept appeared more than a century ago, as Baldwin (1897) wrote on the topic of organisational behaviour. However, technology was not relevant to the early studies. Research in self-concept started to explore technology and machines in the 1960s, followed by automation and computer systems in the 1970s. The initial studies presented mostly psychometric and self-perception testing along with ergonomics and teaching machines (Hackler, 1966), (Musgrove, 1967; Thackray et al., 1973; Yenney, 1973). The adjective "synthetic" was also first mentioned at this stage as a synonym of "artificial" to study technology-related ego development (Leaff, 1971). These first milestones represent how digital technology began to be incorporated into the research of the self.

In the 1990s, digital systems, algorithms, AI, and robotics presented the next noticeable milestone in self-concept research (Ross and Mughni, 1995; Goldston et al., 1992;

Webster, 1995; Siegler et al., 1998). The initial publications focused on social perception, self-esteem and adaptive behaviour. Therefore, individuals, social aspects and emerging technologies were also relevant for academic research. The perception of self-motion and the use of digital displays were also studied at this stage, assuming the growth and deepening of human–machine interrelations. These directions led to the emergence of an umbrella term, "information technology", highlighting the first medical informatics for self-concepts (Sinclair, 2001). This initial perspective represented the options for the research of digital health services. In a broader sense, it was a signal of the changing trends in self-research with emerging (inter-)disciplines.

After this first era, social media developments introduced a new technological approach from network science to big data analysis (Tinati et al., 2014). The introductory journal paper was published in 2007, highlighting cultural, generational and ethnic issues in digital networks (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2007). Through the exploration of this topic, social media entered the stage of academic publications on self-concept. The technological background was even less pronounced in this case, and remained so for some time. Since 2012, digital and information technology (Leist, 2013; Catherine et al., 2012; Swan, 2012), algorithms and big data were highlighted technologies in social media and self-concept research (Chen, 2012; Bentley et al., 2014), with discussion mostly focusing on human–machine interactions, personalisation and health communication. Over the past few years, advanced digital technologies have simultaneously been explored for self-concept research with computer systems, machine learning, artificial intelligence, automation, natural language processing, or neural networks (Pujades et al., 2019; Barrett et al., 2017; Editorial, 2016; Guntuku et al., 2019; Jabłońska and Zajdel, 2020). The initial publications discussed body image, mental health, online communities, social comparison, web-based self-management and self-reflection. These trends describe not only widespread applications of advanced digital technologies, but also even more diverse approaches to self-concept. Thus, this milestone highlights the relevance of the concept of "social media machines" to interpret future selves.

To sum up, the introductory fields of SMM, academic research in self-concept has begun to explore the technological operation behind social media for even more fields and disciplines. Psychology is key in this field regarding well-being and social needs (Thomas et al., 2021). Although specific topics are not yet on the timeline without relevant records, such as "robot" or "deep learning", we also expect these topics to come up in the near future. The summarised milestones point out that the changing digital transformation (Vial, 2019) has started to affect topics and research.

According to this timeline-based summary, the greatest change has been in the last few years with several emerging technologies, and the densest period is between 2016 and 2020. With the mean of this period, our research focused on the last three years to find the latest trends.

There are probably two reasons for these trends. On the one hand, more than fifty percent of the total population already has access to social media platforms (Hootsuite, 2021), facilitating self-related studies in numerous ways. On the other hand, social media technology has changed dramatically over the last few years. For example, the change is obvious with Facebook AI or Twitter Sentiment Analysis through machine learning.

They face noticeable challenges currently, such as using biased datasets (Houser, 2019) or privacy issues. With another example, the human–chatbot relationships are spreading, but little knowledge exists on how these connectivities influence the social context of the users and their emotional and social values. Even if a specific study has already reported positive and mixed impacts and suggested an initial model. These all affect academic research in self (Skjuve et al., 2021).

What is the outlook for self-concept research with these changes? First, if even more people join social media applications and the social media machines drive human perception and activities, social and psychological constructions will be significantly designed by technology. Second, this is especially critical for the phenomena of misinformation technology that can shape individuals' attitudes (Colliander, 2019) or allow fake accounts to result in inauthentic behaviour (Mazza et al., 2022). This field still appears in a small proportion in the case of self-concept research. However, self-expression or self-efficacy are already affected by them (Hilliard et al., 2015; Gesser-Edelsburg et al., 2018). Third, social bots, non-social interactions, or conversational media (Ferrara et al., 2016; Rheault and Musulan, 2021) also have a great potential to influence the technology-driven self. Fourth, quantified self or self-tracking allows the development of the profiles of the users (Puntoni et al., 2021; Druga et al., 2017; Neff and Nafus, 2016; Sadowski, 2019) for personalisation and predictive analysis. All these options augment the self, resulting in a broader spectrum for self-concept research.

Last but not least, what is the meaning of "self-concept" in this context? If cognitive structures started to be translated for AI, neural networks, machines, or deep learning, the suitable definition of self-concept is "cognitive structures with content, attitudes or evaluative judgments to make sense of the world" (Oyserman and Markus, 1998). However, this connected but older definition should be rethought using the research history summarised above, the possible future scenarios, and also, the interpreted results below.

Following all these considerations, a systematic literature review of self-concept research is presented in the context of social media machines with the latest trends.

Methods

The above-presented background (Section *Background of the study*) implies that self-concept research started to emerge in the last few years in SMM with diverse fields in SMM. Accordingly, the goal is to discover and interpret these diverse academic research topics over the last five years. Therefore, four research questions were formulated as follows.

- RQ1. What are the key topics of self-concept research?
- RQ2. What are the key research topics of self-concept research in the case of social media?
- RQ3. How is self-concept studied along with social media machines?
- RQ4. What are the latest trends of self-concept research in the context of social media machines?
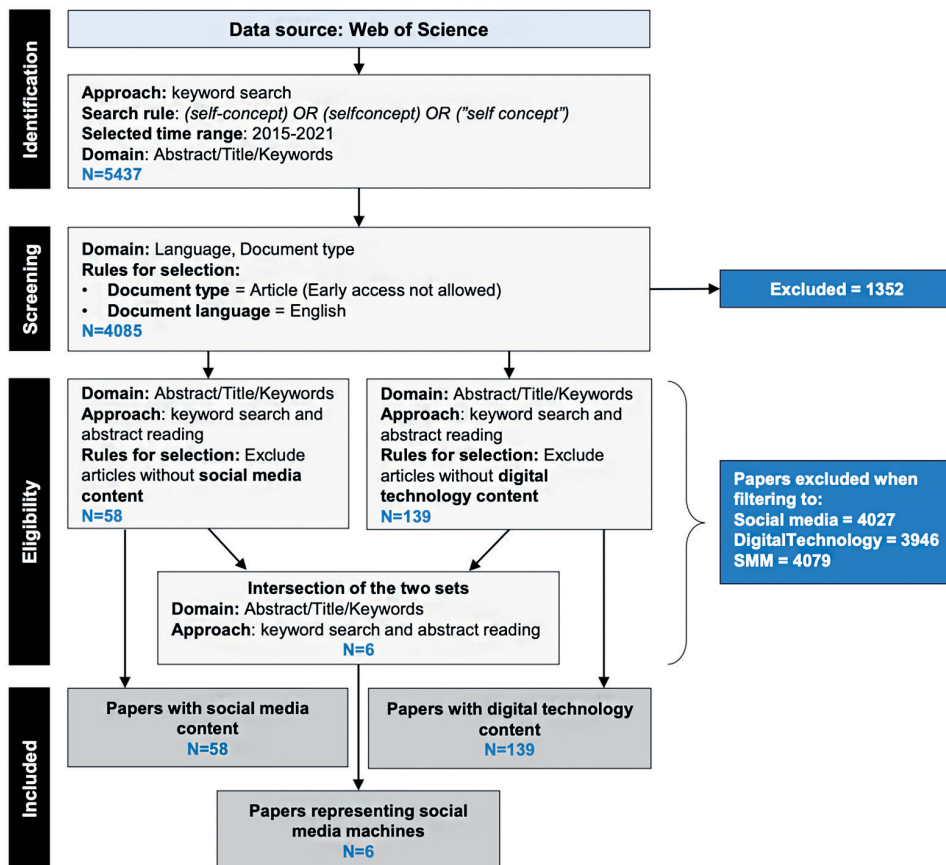
Figure 2: Data collection based on the PRISMA methodology
Source: Compiled by the author.

To answer these research questions, this study applied the PRISMA methodology. It supports a literature review with a systematic method using four categories as: 1. "identification"; 2. "screening"; 3. "eligibility"; and 4. "included". PRISMA was proposed by Moher and his colleagues (Moher et al., 2009) for the careful analysis of selected sources in one corpus.

PRISMA methodology

In this paper, several steps were applied from data collection to synthesising research findings. Figure 2 shows the flowchart as a structure of data collection and analysis.

1. *Identification.* As the first step of the identification, the three key academic databases were tested: Scopus, Dimensions and WoS. Selecting the database for this study, two primary considerations were taken into account. On the first hand, the research

aimed not to compare academic databases, as this would require a separate study. On the other hand, the selection was based on which database could provide the most relevant results. Testing all available options, three arguments were considered in favour of using the Web of Science (WoS) database. First, we had to test how many download options could be performed simultaneously, as the volume of hits and records for the same time range can change due to items added afterward. Our database tests indicated that WoS allows the download of the most significant data sets, and a one-time snapshot filter resulted in the most accurate data. Second, WoS datasets are known to support basic research (Stahlschmidt and Stephen, 2020), which is helpful in the case of research utilising secondary data for a literature review (Johnston, 2014). Third, WoS is a valuable tool for conducting a comprehensive and rigorous literature review, particularly in the case of citation searches in social sciences and humanities (Zahedi and Haustein, 2018).

According to Section *Background of the study,* it was obvious to investigate a five-year time interval. To conduct the search, a keyword search was applied considering the abstract, keywords and title of the papers with the search rule: (self-concept) or (selfconcept) or ("self concept"). This step resulted in 5,437 records. As a comparison, Scopus and Dimensions.ai were also tested with the same searching parameters but they gave nearly the same results as Web of Science.

2. *Screening.* To further screen the result set, the data was filtered to keep only refereed journal articles as "the gold standard" (?). Only English as the language of the papers was allowed during the screening. The world language results in the highest number of sources without translation and abbreviation anomalies. It must be noted that the specified language criteria only applied to the language of the abstract, title and keywords. Thus, papers were allowed where full text was written in another language. This decision supports the minimisation of data loss. To perform the screening step, the filtering options provided by the Web of Science online platform were applied.

3. *Eligibility.* Our research questions refer to social media, digital technology and social media machines. Therefore, during the "Eligibility" phase, our aim is to generate three subsets of data to allow us to analyse these fields separately to answer the research questions. Filtering (keyword search) was thus applied first to find papers associated with the research fields mentioned above, as follows:

Within the screened dataset:
1. find the set of papers with respect to social media research
2. find the set of papers with technology-related content
3. identify the intersection of the two sets

First (step 1), a keyword search was applied across all the records and kept only those papers where the string "social media" was an existing substring of the abstract, title, or keywords. The filtering was also refined by manually reading these three data fields (abstract, title, keywords). In case of this subset, 4,027 papers were excluded from the original dataset and included only 58 articles associated with the field of social media.

As per step 2, to identify the subset of papers representing the digital technology research field, another keyword search (and refinement via reading) was performed. In the context of the process described, "digital technology content" was a designated category used to manually refine keywords in order to filter the intersection between social media and technology-related content. It was applied independently from the exclusion criteria, and its purpose was solely to improve the precision of the keyword search. In this case, the terms "technology", "information technology", "big data", "algorithm", "artificial intelligence", "AI", "machine learning", "automation" and "neural network" were used as keywords, and 139 papers were found with technological content.

Finally, the intersection of the two sets was determined. Here keyword search was applied to include only papers containing both social media and digital technology-related keywords. The keyword search results were refined by reading the title, abstract and keywords of the papers. After the refinement, six papers were identified as the third subset, i.e. the papers regarding social media machines.

4. *Included.* In the analysis, we include three subsets of papers mentioned above. Due to their sizes, social media and digital technology-related subsets were analysed by quantitative analysis, while papers on social media machines had qualitative analysis performed.

Methods applied in the quantitative analysis

Text cleaning

In this paper, text analysis was conducted, and therefore, the cleaning and preprocessing of the textual data is the precondition of further analysis. During the text cleaning first, basic text cleaning was applied such as lowercase transformation, removal of punctuation marks, removal of special characters and tokenisation. English stopwords are also removed with the extension of a self-defined custom stopword list to avoid the strong impact of commonly used terms within the abstracts like "research", "study", "result", "analysis", etc. As a next step, POS (part of speech) tagger is used to eliminate words that correspond to a specific part of speech, such as verbs or adjectives. Finally, lemmatisation was also applied to reduce inflectional forms of words to the base form. The R software was used to perform the lowercase transformation, punctuation mark removal, tokenisation and stopword removal. To perform the aforementioned transformations, the "tm" (Feinerer et al., 2008), "tidytext" (Silge and Robinson, 2016), "dplyr" (Wickham et al., 2021) packages were used. POS tagging and lemmatisation were conducted in Python, using the "spacy" (Honnibal and Montani, 2017) and "nltk" (Bird et al., 2009) libraries.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)

To reveal the latent structure of the abstracts, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) approach was applied (Papadimitriou et al., 1998; Chen et al., 2017; Maier et al., 2018; Jeong et al., 2019).

Before describing the process of LDA, its principal concepts, such as corpus, documents and terms need to be discussed. Corpus denotes the collected set of text data, specifically the concatenated string of title, keywords and abstract in the current case. A document represents a given element of the corpus, which is the concatenated string of titles, keywords and abstracts related to a given paper. Finally, terms refer to the words of the documents.

LDA considers two types of distributions during the process: 1. the distribution of documents over the hidden topics; and 2. the distribution of words within each topic. If the number of documents within the corpus is denoted by D, the number of desired topics is denoted by K, and V is the dictionary of the terms across the corpus, the LDA process can be described with the following steps (Jelodar et al., 2019):

1. For each topic $k(k \in \{1, ..., K\})$ choose a word distribution $\vec{\varphi}_t \sim Dir(\beta)$
2. For each document $d(d \in \{1, ..., D\})$ choose a topic distribution $\vec{\theta}_d \sim Dir(\alpha)$
3. For each word $w(w \in \{1, ..., N_d\})$ in each document d:

   i. Select a topic z_n from $Multinomial(\vec{\theta}_d)$
   ii. Select a word w_n from $Multinomial(\vec{\varphi}_{zn})$

Where N_d denotes the number of terms within d^{th} document, $Dir(\alpha)$ and $Dir(\beta)$ are Dirichlet distributions with α and β distribution parameters, respectively. θ distributions with α and β distribution parameters, respectively. θ and φ are multinomial distributions from Dirichlet distributions. The hyperparameters are T, α and β which need to be selected by the researcher (Hou-Liu, 2018).

To select the optimal number of topics (K^*), three widely used metrics were applied:
1. Griffiths and Steyvers (2004) propose to select K^* where the harmonic mean of sampled log-likelihood values is maximal. The samples are retrieved by Gibbs-sampling in this approach.
2. Another approach proposed by Cao et al. (2009) aims to minimise the average cosine similarity of topic distributions.
3. The method developed by Arun et al. (2010) minimises the symmetric Kullback-Liebler divergence between θ and φ.

t-Distributed Stochastic Neighbor Embedding

t-Distributed Stochastic Neighbor Embedding, or t-SNE for short aims to preserve the local neighborhood structure from a high dimensional space. It is a widely-used technique to visualise multidimensional data (Cao and Wang, 2017). Let $\{x_i\}_{i=1}^{n}$ represent the high dimensional data points and $\{y_i\}_{i=1}^{n}$ the low dimensional points. First, it defines the probability of choosing a pair of points (p_{ij}) in the high dimensional space that can be described as the symmetrized conditional probabilities $p_{i|j}$ and $p_{j|i}$ (Kruiger et al., 2017; Cao and Wang, 2017):

$$p_{ij} = p_{ji} = \frac{p_{i|j} + p_{j|i}}{2n} \tag{1}$$

where $p_{i|j}$ is given by normelized Gaussian distribution as follows:

$$p_{i|j} = \frac{exp(-\frac{d_{ij}^2}{2\sigma_i^2})}{\sum_{k \neq j} exp(-\frac{d_{jk}^2}{2\sigma_i^2})}, p_{i|i} = 0 \tag{2}$$

Furthermore, the probability of choosing a point-pair in the low dimensional space (given by normalized Student's t-distribution) is determined as follows:

$$q_{ij} = q_{ji} = \frac{(1 + ||y_i - y_j||^2)^{-1}}{\sum_{k \neq l}(1 + ||y_k - y_l||^2)^{-1}} \tag{3}$$

Finally, the position of data points can be found in the low dimensional (output) space by minimizing the Kullback-Leibler divergence between q_{ij} and p_{ij} probabilities:

$$C_{KL} = \sum_{i \neq j} p_{ij} log \frac{p_{ij}}{q_{ij}} \tag{4}$$

In this paper, t-SNE was used to visualise the topic modelling result by transforming the multidimensional output of topic probabilities into a two-dimensional space.

Hierarchical clustering

In this paper, hierarchical cluster analysis was also used to characterise the structure of the extracted topics with respect to self-concept studies having social media context. Hierarchical clustering algorithms aim to search for nested clusters within the population following either an agglomerative or a divisive approach. The steps of the method can be described as follows (Govender and Sivakumar, 2020):

1. Each data point is considered a single cluster.
2. Cluster distances are computed.
3. A pair of clusters having minimum distance based on a given measure are combined and replaced by a single cluster. The distance matrix is recomputed afterward.
4. Steps 2 and 3 are iterated until every data point is contained by one cluster.

$$H(p, q) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{N_v} (\sqrt{p_i} - \sqrt{q_i})} \tag{5}$$

where N_v denotes the number of terms in vocabulary V, p and q represents the probability distributions of two extracted topics.

Results

The latest trends of self-concept research

The LDA method was applied to find the key topics of self-concept research. As the first step, simulation was conducted to identify a starting point for the of topics). The number of topics was increased iteratively, and the metrics described by subsection *Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)* were calculated in each iteration. Figure 3 shows the simulation results.
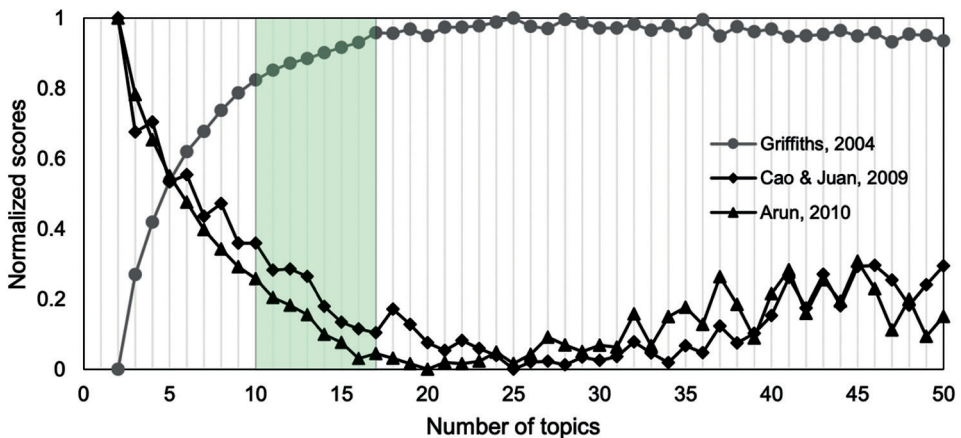
Figure 3: Optimal topic number selection (simulation)
Source: Compiled by the author.

As the results suggest, K^* should be selected within the 9–17 interval as a start. After a manual investigation of the topic detection results found that the most interpretable topic structure is provided when $K^* = 9$.

Answering RQ1, this study has discovered a total of nine extracted topics with issues for individual level from childhood to gender identity, and also, with social issues from education to moral questions. Although the method generated an optimal topic number and the extracted topics are mostly congruent, the resultant keywords present cross-cutting themes in a few cases, such as research in schooling and social or identity. Thus, we manually studied the papers behind these results to define nine congruent topic labels

for the keyword selection. These topic labels confirm a broadly investigated self-concept research from the physical image to mental health, from social-moral identity to brand-related consumers, and from educational challenges to cognitive skills. The nine topic labels in Table 1 represent the latest trends in academic self-concept research.

Table 1: Extracted topics regarding self-concept

| No.	Keywords	Topic label	No. of papers
1	patients, health, treatment, depression, life	mental health	368
2	children, adolescents, social, school, family	children and adolescents	440
3	social, cognitive, memory, task, feedback	cognition and recall	374
4	physical, body, activity, children, intervention	body image	342
5	learning, education, career, social, teachers	education	543
6	identity, leadership, moral, social, role	social identity	395
7	sexual, personality, clarity, identity, women	gender and sexuality	402
8	academic, achievement, school, mathematics, reading	academic self-concept	879
9	brand, consumers, social, consumer, consumption	consumption and brands	342

Source: Compiled by the author.

Interpreting the records, two main categories were found. First, social roles are presented for who is the self in a given context, be they a patient, a child, an adolescent, a teacher, an academic person, a leader, or a consumer. From this list, patients, children, or adolescents are traditional categories for self-concept research. "Academic" topic is obvious if research projects have been sampled with peers or students in higher education research. Additionally, a specific research field was also found manually, focusing on an academic career with motivation, achievements and self-efficacy. We can also see that "leader" and "consumer" are emerging research fields, mainly in the context of online social networks and digital platforms. This trend is expected to grow in the future. Second, the identity, gender, personality, sexuality, body, or health of individuals are also presented along with their goals, skills, achievements, interventions, treatments, or moral issues. As can be seen, none of these keywords highlight the elements of the self or specific emotional themes, such as self-consciousness, shyness, guilt, shame, or self-disclosure (Buss, 2001). Instead, self-concept is broadly researched in diverse fields, primarily in psychology, clinical psychology, medicine, educational studies, marketing and management. These results assume inter- and multidisciplinary approaches, which is significantly represented by the most cited paper from the 4,085 records with a social, cultural and cognitive mindfulness program (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Considering this broad landscape of self-concept research, our next goal was to identify the interconnected topic areas of the nine extracted topics to reveal their position

to each other and interpret their more or less connected fields. To visualise the structure of the nine extracted topics, we applied the t-SNE dimension reduction approach as described in subsection *t-Distributed Stochastic Neighbor Embedding*. Figure 4 shows the results.
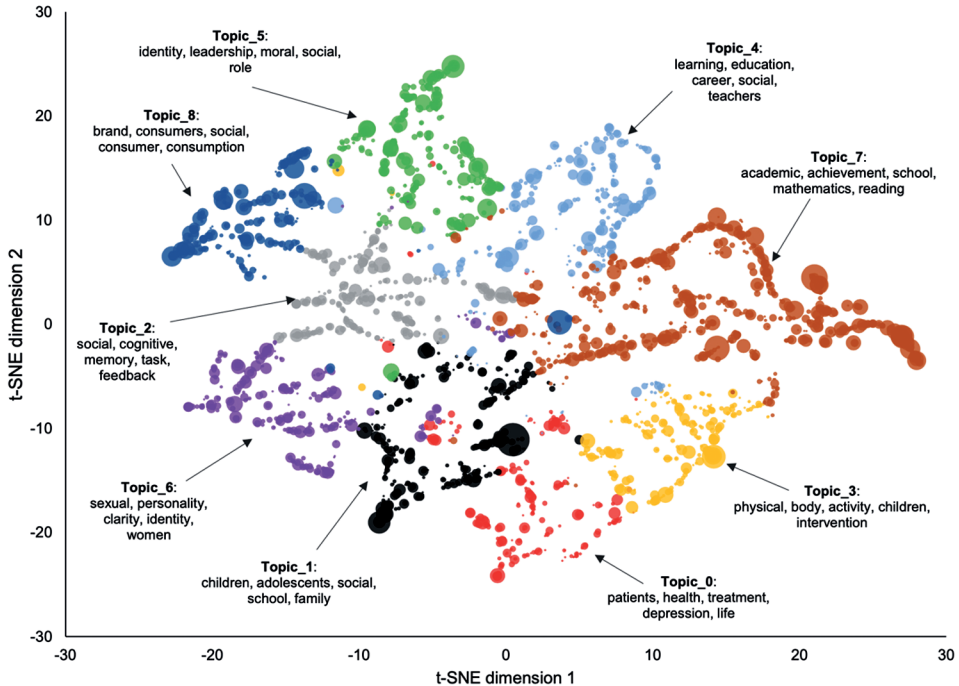
Figure 4: Distribution of papers in the two-dimensional space based on t-SNE
Source: Compiled by the author.

In Figure 4, the axes represent the reduced two output dimensions given by t-SNE. Each circle represents a paper, and the size of the circles reflects the total number of citing articles by each paper.

The most interconnected and cross-linked fields are "mental health", "children and adolescents" and "gender and sexuality". Investigating the papers behind these results, primarily self-perception issues and various treatments are discussed. For example, traumatic brain injury, emotion regulation, or sexual well-being are highlighted. The physically perceptible body and the human mind along with emotions are studied together in this way. Several interdisciplines explore these topics, primarily medical humanities or social psychology. In the figure, larger circles indicate topics with a higher number of citations. By far, the most cited article is about cognitive and social-emotional development through a mindfulness-based program (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015) representing interdisciplinary research in applied social science and psychology with funding behind it. This article is the most referenced record from all extracted topics and also from the whole database with 213 citations. This result suggests that the authors are already

well-known in their field with a high citation index. Also, they worked with an interdisciplinary and trending topic to cultivate wellbeing. The further articles are less cited, and they present diverse research topics from victimisation to pathological gambling.

The broadest interconnected fields are "cognition and recall", "academic self-concept" and "consumption and brands" with direct connections to "children and adolescents" or "gender and sexuality". The key topics in the papers are "belonging" and "performance", as the general dynamics of the self-concept. The manual scanning revealed diverse research fields from sexual minorities to luxury consumption. The related emotions or motivations are studied on an actual or symbolic level. Numerous interdisciplines are affected in this way, resulting in a focus on a measurable or quantified self. Even the most referenced topic label of the extracted topics with "academic self-concept" is in the direction of measurability, focusing on the issues of performance, intelligence and gender (Pekrun et al., 2017; Roth et al., 2015; Gaspard et al., 2015).

The most integrated field is "consumption and brands" with topics of organisational communication or consumer society. "Body image" for younger generations is also discussed partly in the consumer context reading the abstracts in detail. Specific fields are discussed in this field with a significant role of the "organisational psychology" interdiscipline. However, the most cited record presents adoption behaviour and consumer preference in mobile healthcare service systems (Dwivedi et al., 2016). The multidisciplinary article represents social and behavioural psychology, marketing, ICT and medicine, as well as epistemological and ontological paradigms for policymakers. The multidimensional approach and the research using technology point out the presumable future strategies of the authors to find the broadest possible audience with an innovative topic. Considering the result, further intensive expansion of business, management and marketing studies is expected in self-concept research, primarily recognised in the case of inter- and multidisciplines.

In conclusion, mostly congruent and partly interconnected topics are detected with broadly defined self-concept research. The traditional areas have kept their key topics with social or gender identity and younger generations and cognitive studies, consumer psychology and academic self-concept. Emotional topics are less presented in topic labels but more visible in line with diverse research fields. According to recent trends, self-concept research will be expanded mostly in the business and management sciences. However, psychology or medicine will still be the leading disciplines with their interdisciplines. As the most cited records, mindfulness, academic performance, or body image-related consumption can also emerge, especially in multidisciplines.

The latest trends of self-concept research in social media machines

After recognising current trends in self-concept studies, answer RQ2 and RQ3 were at the forefront, namely, to reveal the related and latest research trends in social media and SMM. Since a significant number of social media research on self-concept was found but just small data on the topic of social media machines, we interpreted the results in three steps. First, "social media" and "self-concept" research are summarised with 58 records.

Second, small data of SMM are revealed with six records. Third, "digital technology" and "self-concept" research are outlined together.

In the first step, specific extracted topics of "social media" and "self-concept" research were revealed by LDA for the 58 papers. Similarly to Figure 3, a simulation was conducted where we found that five topics can describe this subset well. Table 2 shows the top terms and labels related to the extracted topics.

Table 2: Extracted topics regarding self-concept and social media

No.	Keywords	Topic label	No. of papers
1	online, content, presentation, identity, people	online identity	10
2	online, satisfaction, relationship, individual, networking	networked self	10
3	sexual, adolescent, selfie, FOMO, behaviour	online behaviour	11
4	brand, consumer, fashion, brand love, love	brand engagement	13
5	political, role, activity, company, place	political issues	14

Source: Compiled by the author.

Answering RQ2, five topic labels were revealed with networked self and identity, online behaviour, as well as studies in brands and political communication (Table 2). The number of extracted topics was definitely narrowed from self-concept research in itself. This result may be evident, but numerous keywords just disappeared from the core keyword list, and new ones appeared. In detail, issues of individuals are not presented with topics of "children", "gender" or "patient", as well as social roles in education. Thus, most of the traditional key topics on self-concept research vanished from the extracted topics. Only three key fields of individuals remained with online behaviour and identity, and networked self. Scanning the records behind the data manually, these are studied mostly with issues in online congruent self, self-construction, or self-esteem. The topic of "body image" was also narrowed to sexuality and fashion. Primarily positive emotions are highlighted with these extracted topics, such as satisfaction, brand love, or brand engagement in relation to corporate brands and politicised behaviour. FOMO ("fear of missing out") is the only emotion without a positive meaning in this summarisation.

Interpreting the results briefly, the compact topic labels represent less traditional topics of self-concept research. The focus is on the online identity and networked self in the latest research trends. The connected emotions are more available than presented in the general self-concept research above. Further research fields are expected in consumption, while online political behaviour is also an emerging research field. The categories of "presentation", "networking", "selfie" and "FOMO" describe the social media-related fields, highlighting the challenges of the self on social platforms. These self-reflective

aspects are also confirmed by the record with the highest citation number in online self-presentation and self-development (Yang and Brown, 2016).

Considering all these results, the directly connected disciplines are psychology, marketing and management, political science, organisational studies, network science, media and communication and their inter-disciplines.

Interpreting the results with topic hierarchy, we applied agglomerative hierarchical clustering as described by subsection *Hierarchical clustering*. Figure 5 shows the resultant cluster dendrogram.

Cluster Dendrogram
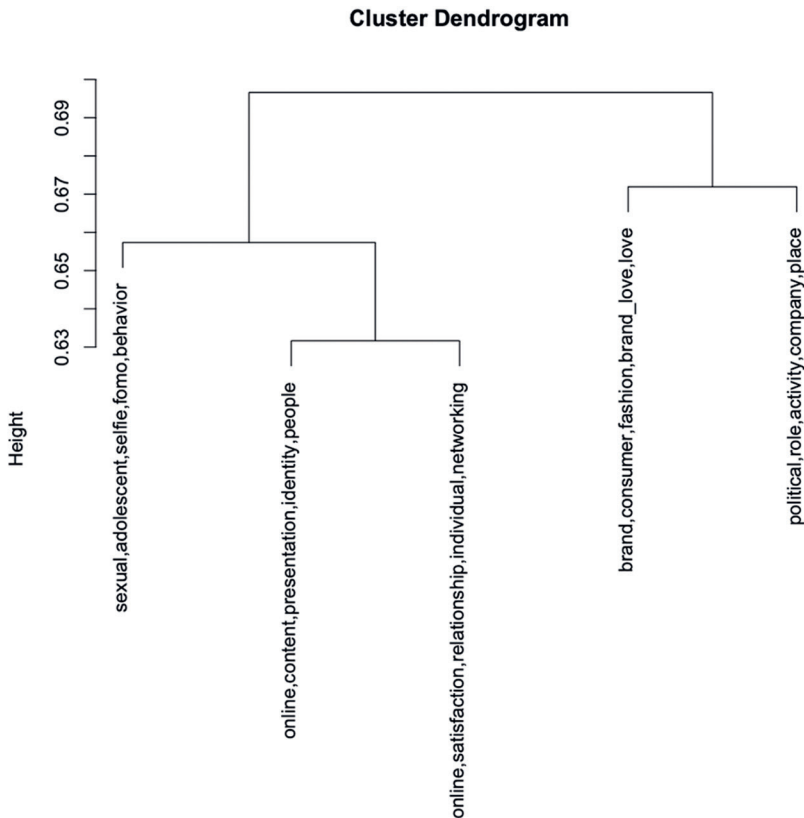
Figure 5: Hierarchy of self-concept research in the context of social media
Source: Compiled by the author.

The dendrogram visualises and clusters taxonomic relationships of the extracted topics. According to the results, marketing and political science are strongly correlated fields, presenting directly connected subtopics in the papers, such as self-expression, microtargeting to citizens, preferences and emotional engagement. The other part of the dendrogram on the left confirms the key dimensions summarised above for individuals with their representative and networked online self or identity. Thus, the dendrogram

confirms the five topic labels of this study in social media and self-concept with their distribution.

Moving forward to RQ3 and its answer, only six papers represent social media machines, namely topics both with social media and technology in self-concept research. This result was unexpected but understandable. Only the last five years were studied, and significant change has just recently started for social media services. During this short time, academic research did not have enough time for multiple reflections in terms of research and publication. However, the number of related papers is expected to grow and technology-focused research is also assumed. The first papers of pioneers are available in Table 3.

Table 3: Self-concept research in social media machines: The pioneers

No.	Article	Digital technology	Social media	Disciplines	Funding	Citations
1	(Zarouali et al., 2020)	profiling algorithm	social media marketplace	political and behavioural science, new media studies	no	6
2	(Chen, 2019)	big data, machine learning	social network analysis	information and behavioural science, marketing	ministerial funding	1
3	(Thomas et al., 2019)	big data	social media content	psychology and cultural studies	no	1
4	(Tseng and Hsieh, 2019)	emoticon driven technology	mobile instant messaging	psychology, information and behavioural science	no	11
5	(Choi and Behm-Morawitz, 2018)	smart devices	networking sites	psychology and digital literacy	N/A	15
6	(Claffey and Brady, 2017)	artificial intelligence bots	firm-hosted virtual communities	psychology and marketing	no	30

Source: Compiled by the author.

The six academic papers represented are not valid for far-reaching conclusions. However, the first relevant articles reveal two perspectives with small data. First, research on individual or social self-concept has become available to consumers, political voters, and virtual or brand communities. This result confirms the expectation of emerging research in psychology and marketing or behavioural, information and political sciences.

Second, social media technology supports research in political microtargeting, personality profiling, smart devices and emotionally charged ads. This direction allows the discovery of the quantified selves with their behaviour and identity via platforms and applications. Additionally, the most cited work (Claffey and Brady, 2017) presents artificial intelligence bots for firm-hosted virtual communities. This result confirms the relevance of the research in conversational media with personal assistants and chatbots, as was assumed in the introduction.

Further details behind these records should also be considered with information about funding or citations. An average of eight citations per article was found, and only one of the records presents a granted research. Both results confirm a preliminary stage of self-concept research in SMM, albeit without serious support or attention. As the concept of SMM is being introduced in parallel, there was a decision to investigate the digital technology-connected research separately as well.

To extend the interpretation of small data and answer RQ3 with more detail, the social media topics (58) and the digital technology topics (139) are projected onto the original nine extracted topics of self-concept. Figure 6 shows the results.
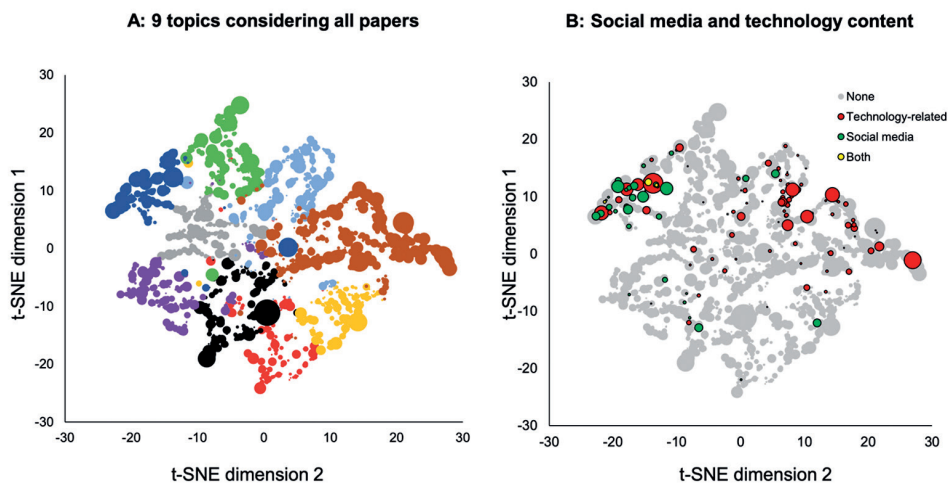
Figure 6: Embedding of technology and social media-related papers
Source: Compiled by the author.

Figure 6A shows the original pattern as a reference, while Figure 6B highlights the location of the referred subsets of papers. Red circles represent the technology-related papers (139), green circles denote the papers with social media content (58), and yellow circles show the intersection of the two sets (6).

According to the results, self-concept research with a social media focus is well connected to consumption, brand love, or organisational communication, mostly in business and management studies. The topics of body image, social identity, children and adolescents are also clearly affected fields. This result confirms the five topic labels

of social media research with behaviour-based online identity and networked self. This result is also consistent with the review article of Hollenbaugh about research in self-presentation (Hollenbaugh, 2021).

However, the number of articles focusing on digital technology is more than twice compared to records of social media research. Therefore, digital technology is a more spreading field for the extracted topics, confirming "machine design" for social media and the "user" category for the self. In digital technology, the most connected topics are also consumption, brand love or organisational communication and social media research. Therefore, these fields are expected to be the most investigated in the context of social media machines.

Additionally, technology-related research in the self-concept is also demanding in education and learning performance in different studies. This could even be due to methodological changes supported by technology, but after scanning the 139 articles manually, this assumption is not confirmed. Instead, the records in education and learning performance mostly discuss topics in human–machine relations, recalling the timeline details in section *Background of the study* with ergonomics, teaching machines and digital displays. Nevertheless, an exploration of SMM-based methodology developments is expected.

Considering these results and the original background (section *Background of the study*) of this paper, a research responsibility is detected in self-concept research for trustworthy technologies. This implication is particularly valid if research of misinformation and fake media finds its place in the investigation of self. Only one record is available about fake media or misinformation in the whole database of 4,085 records (Colliander, 2019). Even if the verification of multimedia content has become a crucial issue, mostly in the case of user-generated content (Varshney and Vishwakarma, 2022). However, it could be a notification of an unexplored but critical research field. The research responsibility is more valid if "personalisation" also appears in the database with influences on human behaviour. These topics certainly play a key role in the research of data companies. However, this result has found an almost missing area for academic research.

Assuming the non-human participation in self-related interactions, the topics of social bots, human–bot communication, AI bots, chatbots, personal assistants, or other conversational media were manually filtered out. A few records already represent this research field (Nathanson, 2017; Claffey and Brady, 2017; Anshar and Williams, 2016). Despite the widespread adoption of these technologies, only pioneers have found a connection to self-concept research so far. It is important to highlight that these technologies started to imitate the self, and synthetic selves have started to influence human existence. This unexplored but fundamental field defines the human self-concept even more intensely. Therefore, the relevant research should be expanded reasonably quickly.

Accordingly, two implications have become available in line with the results of digital technology. First, traditional and also emerging self-concept topics should be explored with digital technologies and their consequences. Second, if scientific research and data companies collaborate in research of self-concept influence, it is a responsible way to develop trustworthy SMM.

Discussion

Although the applied database does not comprehensively cover the self-concept research, the latest trends with the background give us a comprehensive summary. Thus, the self was summarised as a concept with the most represented topics and the most cited records (Table 4).

Table 4: The latest trends of self-concept research in social media machines

Category	The self as a concept	Key topics	Most cited records
Digital Technology (139)	user and consumer	brand engagement, organizational communication, education, learning performance, human–bot interaction	Dwivedi et al. (2016) (127)
Social Media (58)	online identity and networked self	online behaviour, brand engagement, organizational communication, political influence	Yang and Brown (2016) (52)
Social Media Machine (6)	user, citizen, consumer	personalization, profiling, micro-tagging, emotionally charged ads, AI bots	Claffey and Brady (2017) (6)

Source: Compiled by the author.

This summary clearly reveals the current concepts of the selves in relation to SMM with user-based identity, networked self, consumer, or citizen. Interpreting the detailed results with interconnected research fields, organisational communication, political microtargeting and learning performance are trending. The most cited records highlight only the consumption and marketing research with keywords of customer engagement, consumer adoption, planned behaviour, user acceptance, or identity development.

Considering all these results, the highest potential of the latest trends is also available for research in business and politics with interdisciplines of the leading field of psychology. Applied sciences suggest exploring this potential with business collaborations and consulting. The previously mentioned research responsibility in influenced self-concept and human behaviour should also be highlighted if the self is multidimensional for SMM with online identity or networked self as a user, customer and citizen combined. Medicine has a low representation, but this position could be changed with digitalised health services.

Conclusions

In terms of academic contribution, first, this study is different from other systematic reviews of self-concept, focusing only on the latest trends in relation to social media machines. Thus, this paper has explored the key research topics and highlighted the

outlook for the future, and has outlined the potential of non-academic joint research ventures for trustworthy social media technology. An unexpected result was that medicine, nursing and health care had a low representation in the results. However, their technologies are widespread, and medicine still has a key role in self-concept research in general. The emerging role of consumption and brand research is more obvious if the self is available and measurable in SMM. Further emerging trends are expected in both areas, especially if conversational or fake media are more connected to academic research.

In line with this, a great potential is for proactive research to explore the effectiveness and negative side effects of SMM. However, the reflective research approach also has the option to avoid the negative effects of digital technology and interpret the changes. Hence, this study went beyond the previous literature by supporting the researchers and practitioners to explore the responsibility of this domain.

Last but not least, this study implies the question: Are we, academic researchers, ready for social media machines with technology-driven selves? From the perspective of this systematic literature review, we are not yet ready. However, the first signs of future trends already indicate an expected change point. In the meantime, researchers have a clear responsibility to seek to understand how self-concept is influenced by social media machines.

Research limits

The present research has basic limitations, as conference papers were excluded from the studied databases. The latter would be relevant, as their results appear faster compared to the publication process of journal articles. However, this study focused only on high-ranked academic outputs with carefully considered and well-designed articles for a more focused and less diverse output. Despite these limits, this study presents the latest research topic trends in the SMM-driven self-concept with future opportunities for research and development.

Funds

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Corpus Linguistics on the Impression Management Strategy of Indonesian Public Officials after Covid-19 Denial Statements

Miftha Pratiwi[*], Rindang Senja Andarini[**],
Rini Setiyowati[***], Anang Dwi Santoso[****]

[*]   Universitas Sriwijaya, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Communication Science,
e-mail: mifthapratiwi@fisip.unsri.ac.id

[**]   Universitas Sriwijaya, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Communication Science,
e-mail: rindangsenjaandarini@fisip.unsri.ac.id

[***]   Universitas Sriwijaya, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Department of Civic Education,
e-mail: rinisetiyowati@fkip.unsri.ac.id

[****] Universitas Sriwijaya, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Public Administration,
e-mail: anangdwi@fisip.unsri.ac.id, Corresponding author

With the Covid-19 pandemic, public officials in Indonesia were prone to making inaccurate claims and to enacting policies that the public might have overlooked due to a lack of understanding of complex situations. However, after making these mistakes, public officials needed to restore their reputation and create a positive impression. This study aimed to investigate the impression management strategies employed by Indonesian public officials following such incidents. The researchers analysed a dataset of 2,000 Instagram captions from seven public officials over the course of a year, totalling 13,725 words and 196,154 tokens, using corpus linguistic techniques such as frequent words and keyword lists. The findings revealed that officials used different strategies such as ingratiation, self-promotion and supplication to manage their impression, and that positive attitudes and hard work were the main tools used by officials to improve their public image.

Keywords: impression management, public officials, Indonesia, Covid-19, corpus linguistics

Introduction

When Covid-19 first emerged, the Indonesian public witnessed their government, through its public official representatives, claiming they are able to properly manage the Covid-19 pandemic (Mietzner, 2020; Djalante et al., 2020b). Up until early March of 2020, the Minister of Health announced that Indonesia was free from positive cases and associated this with prayers (Lindsey and Smith, 2020). Other public officials urged people to continue living a healthy life by consuming vegetables as well as traditional herbal drinks (Olivia, Gibson and Nasrudin, 2020). Other public officials also claimed that the absence of cases was due to Indonesia's tropical climate (Lindsey and Smith, 2020). While the Indonesian public were witnessing these various denials, there were concerns over the impact that the virus might have on trade, investment and tourism (Gandasari and Dwidienawati, 2020). Accordingly, the government made a rather substantial investment to boost tourist visits, particularly foreign tourists. Meanwhile, other countries were imposing strict restrictions on foreign travel (Djalante et al., 2020a; Sevindik, Tosun and Yilmaz, 2021).

Ultimately, on 2 March 2020, the government announced its first Covid-19 positive case and gradually began to prohibit mass gatherings, advising the public to obey health protocols (Olivia, Gibson and Nasrudin, 2020; Ssenyonga, 2021; Temenggung et al., 2021). This policy was also followed by an instruction to apply a large-scale social restriction policy and prohibit international travellers from entering Indonesia (Sparrow, Dartanto and Hartwig, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia was exacerbated by a policy direction that arguably prioritised economic considerations over public health. The government of Indonesia, in this case, was seen as having bungled the situation, mostly due to its policy choices (Lutfi et al., 2020; Asmorowati, Schubert and Ningrum, 2021; Riadi and Erdiyansyah, 2021). Eventually, the government had to pay dearly for the denials made by public officials. Furthermore, they also had to immediately restore their image as these mistakes posed a danger to their public image.

There were several public accusations relating to the Covid-19 denials in Indonesia. First, there are those who believed that the government concealed Covid-19 cases for particular purposes (Gandasari and Dwidienawati, 2020; Mietzner, 2020; Nurhayati and Purnama, 2021). Additionally, at the start of the pandemic, hate speech against China and communism became more pronounced (Ikhwan, Yulianto and Parahita, 2019; Parahita and Yulianto, 2020). This mainly consisted of accusations directed at the Chinese for having introduced the virus in Indonesia, and that the virus was a Chinese conspiracy. All in all, these matters undoubtedly showed the decline in the public's trust towards public officials.

For politicians, reputation is a major concern because they hold their positions as a result of the public having at least a passably favourable opinion of them (Talbot and Boiral, 2021; Pollach, Ravazzani and Maier, 2022; Wu et al., 2022). Once they became aware of the risk of losing the public's trust, public officials attempted to create positive impressions by addressing these accusations, defending themselves, and ensuring that they maintain a good impression before the public. Losing public trust would be

dangerous, not only because they would lose the public's trust to mobilise their behaviour, but their political career as well. They subsequently, tried to prevent such threats or at least attempted to alleviate the consequences of threats against their good reputation (Bhaskar, Flower and Sellers, 2021; Talbot and Boiral, 2021). Hence, giving good impressions and building a good reputation are important assets for public officials as well as governments in general.

Accordingly, selecting appropriate content and captions for public officials to share on social media is a key element in creating impressions (Matejek and Gössling, 2014; DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; Tække, 2017; Tung, Tse and Chan, 2021). A body of literature has discussed how companies, including CEOs, develop their impression management on social media in the cases of pharmaceutical companies, airline companies and the hospitality industry (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; Tække, 2017; Zheng et al., 2020; Al-Shatti and Ohana, 2021; Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Tung, Tse and Chan, 2021). Generally speaking, impression management has become a crucial part of their activities, and they specifically design strategies in their annual reports, social media content and CEO letters for such matters (Lappas et al., 2017; Tække, 2017; Zheng et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Altahmazi, 2022). However, there has not been much literature to date discussing public organisations and officials, particularly using the impression management theory. The differences between public and business or private organisations may lead to diverging results, as both seek different interests and have different values.

The public might have forgotten the denials and claims that public officials made in response to Covid-19 at the start of the pandemic, but public officials do have a political responsibility for these matters and these efforts may lead to positive responses (Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Ou and Wong, 2021; Wong, Ou and Wilson, 2021; Carnevale and Gangloff, 2022). In doing so, there will surely be suspicions from the public, particularly among those who have lost their trust in public officials. It is crucial to identify which actions public officials have taken to establish positive impressions through their communication channels. By developing well-designed strategies, public officials can strategically re-communicate their commitments on issues related to Covid-19 and create a positive impression that conveys trust.

Public officials are responsible for effective communication with the public during a state of crisis, including the Covid-19 pandemic (Sobral et al., 2020; Hartanto, Agussani and Dalle, 2021; Power and Crosthwaite, 2022). It is interesting to see how public officials got the public to believe in their narrative of Covid-19: how they strengthened the public's trust that the government was capable of handling the crisis, and how they encouraged behaviours aligned with policies enacted only a short time after public officials had denied the presence and hazards of the virus (You, 2020; Massarani and Neves, 2021; Wodak, 2021; Alnizar and Manshur, 2022). There is a collection of literature that has discussed this matter which found that opposing claims made by public officials affect different handling of Covid-19 and ultimately have implications on different results in handling (Sobral et al., 2020; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Nasr, 2021; Talbot and Boiral, 2021; Wodak, 2021).

In this study, by adhering to the theory of impression management (Goffman, 1956), the main argument to corroborate in the research is that the impressions shown by public officials create a collective meaning because, essentially, impression management requires reciprocity by comprehending public responses and also giving cues in responding to certain social incidences (Beelitz and Merkl-Davies, 2012; Le and Bartlett, 2014; Blum, Smith and Sanford, 2021; Ono, 2022). By analysing the language public officials used, fundamental engagement with social norms and values along with the process of restructuring public responses and understanding would be reflected accordingly (Craig and Brennan, 2012; D'Northwood, 2017; Bu, Connor-Linton and Wang, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Altahmazi, 2022). To achieve this, we carried out our research by using corpus linguistics techniques, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to find unique and common patterns in the Instagram posts of public officials who denied the existence of Covid-19.

Impression management theory

Impression management is "the construct used to articulate how individuals or organizations manage their legitimacy, reputation or image through communicating their activities and goals" (Perkiss et al. 2021). Impression management theory began with the concept proposed by Erving Goffman (1956), which was called self-presentation theory. In the theory of self-presentation, Goffman made an analogy of a performance where a person plays two roles in their life. The first is a front-stage role relating to their profession, class, position, or other social attributes that expresses a standard which is, deliberately or unconsciously, applied by the individual when assuming this role and conducting social interactions, while the second is a back-stage role in which the true self is more likely presented.

The theory of self-presentation, or more frequently called impression management theory, was initially developed in socio-psychological studies, but has been much implemented in research about organisation. Impression management theory serves as a conceptual framework that explains how organisations manage crisis communication through corporate narrative strategies carried out via CEO letters, bank president statement, annual reports, CSR and sustainability reporting, also including social media posts (Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Perkiss et al. 2021). Jones and Pittman (1982) prefer to use the term self-presentation strategy to refer to efforts made by individuals or organisations as actors to create a desired impression on certain individuals or groups (stakeholders).

Jones and Pittman (1982) proposed the taxonomy of five classes of self-presentational strategies: ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification and supplication (Jones and Pittman, 1982), as summarised in Table 1.

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Table 1: Impression management strategies, definitions and key characteristics

Impression management strategies	Definitions	Key characteristics
Ingratiation	Ingratiation is a self-presentational approach in which individuals and organisations form social behaviours based on features that other people or parties like, and associate themselves with them through characteristics like humour, warmth, reliability, attention and physical attraction. It strives to promote likability.	To demonstrate warmth, wit, dependability and charm.
Intimidation	Intimidation refers to actors trying to convince a target that they are in power, intimidators strive to be trusted and feared.	To create harm, peril, anxiety and distress.
Self-promotion	Self-promotion is a self-presentational strategy in which actors put more efforts in seeking attribution of competence instead of likability.	To seek proficiency.
Exemplification	Exemplification is a self-presentational strategy used by actors to accentuate their integrity and moral worthiness.	To be trustworthy, self-controlled, altruistic and self-sacrificing.
Supplication	Supplication is a self-presentational strategy employed by those lacking resources. An actor using this strategy will emphasise their disadvantages, inabilities and dependence on others.	To ask for help.

Source: Jones and Pittman, 1982.

Most organisations rely on the accounts tactic to maintain their image and reputation when facing opinion attacks by key constituents (Ginzel, Kramer and Sutton, 2004). There are four types of accounting tactics: denials or defences of innocence, excuses, justifications and apologies (Mohamed, Gardner and Paolillo, 1999). When choosing an accounts tactic, an organisation must consider the level of responsibility that will be claimed as part of their responsibility for the consequences or disruptive actions that have occurred. The denials or defences of innocence tactic implies that organisations reject all forms of responsibility for any problematic situation. The excuses tactic is used when organisations admit to something wrong but the information presented emphasises that the negatives were caused by external conditions or by the environment. When using the justification tactic, organisations will, at a certain level, admit responsibility for the disruptive action(s) that occurred, but explain that the disruptive action(s) or condition were unavoidable for certain reasons. Organisations employ the apologies tactic when they fully acknowledge their responsibility for any undesirable impacts and convey their apology to the disadvantaged party. The disclaimers tactic is used to prevent negative reactions from a targeted population by giving cues before any undesirable incidents

occur. The organisational handicapping tactic is a tactic applied when organisations feel that their efforts at fulfilling a task seem to be unsuccessful, which forces the organisation to try to help the target audience to adjust their expectations to the organisation's performance (Mohamed, Gardner and Paolillo, 1999). Other impression management tactics that organisations use include restitution (offering compensation to the affected party for damage caused by the fault of the organisation) and the prosocial behaviour tactic (participating in social or community care movements or initiatives).

Leadership and impression management during the Covid-19 pandemic

In a state of crisis, leadership plays a significant role in helping their organisations to endure and survive the situation in one piece (Grint, 2020; Wilson, 2020; Halley et al., 2021; Larsson and Sjöqvist, 2021; Ou and Wong, 2021; Whelehan, Algeo and Brown, 2021). Leaders, under such conditions, have to communicate effectively and efficiently in order to organise their followers to achieve their goal (Comfort et al., 2020; Sobral et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Wodak, 2021). As a consequence of such practices, there is a collection of articles investigating leaders' communication and how they bring their followers along within the context of global crises (Sobral et al., 2020; Al-Shatti and Ohana, 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Ling et al., 2021). In this case, what leaders express to the public is a political statement that reflects their leadership.

The collaborative handling carried out throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has brought discussions on leadership, which initially focused on leaders, to shift to a more relational perspective between leaders and their followers (Densten and Sarro, 2012; Indrayanto, Burgess and Dayaram, 2014; Sørensen and Villadsen, 2018; Sobral et al., 2020). In this case, leaders, using their political statements, established a particular social identity and tried to direct their followers to create a particular response because of the language use and word choices they made (Sobral et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Power and Crosthwaite, 2022). In this matter, the reconstruction of collective identity, encouraging collaborative action, lessening disintegration and prioritising universal humanitarian values are forms of impression management that can drive behavioural changes that align with their advice (Comfort et al., 2020; Haeng-Mi, Hye-Ryun and Bohyun, 2021; Vergara, Sarmiento and Lagman, 2021). Other findings also indicate that built collectivity, reflection over ownership of collective identity and a common sentiment strengthen social identity and encourage sustainable actions and behaviours, as well as prepare the public for mobilisation (Rainey et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021; Alnizar and Manshur, 2022).

An outcome of shifting the analytical focus from the centric leader is an increased attention to the leader's use of language. Analysing the language used by leaders can reveal strategies for cultivating followers' sympathy and facilitating a desired understanding of the crisis (Sobral et al., 2020; Montiel, Uyheng and Dela Paz, 2021; Rainey et al., 2021; Wodak, 2021). This may occur due to the amalgamation of the meaning or definition of crisis, which is considered an objective issue that still maintains subjective

space to facilitate the legitimacy of other interests. Furthermore, defining crisis as a threat indicates efforts to normalise a significant number of victims and losses (Sobral et al., 2020; Sidi, Glikson and Cheshin, 2021; Lanza et al., 2022).

The literature asserts the significance of impression management for managing crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic (Ou and Wong, 2021; Sidi, Glikson and Cheshin, 2021; Talbot and Boiral, 2021; Carnevale and Gangloff, 2022; Ono, 2022). Therefore, it is important to investigate the process in which collective meaning is created from impression management because creating meaning is at the heart of leadership in a crisis. This also includes questions relating to how leaders demonstrate their leadership style, how leaders develop a relationship with their followers, and how leaders objectively and subjectively define the crisis to gain the public's attention in order to carry out the mobilisation process. By focusing on the language that leaders use and the word choices they make, the political and psychological potential of the words they present to the public is instilled in the collective arrangement where they operate (Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Sidi, Glikson and Cheshin, 2021). Language, including the word choices made by leaders, is also a reflection of their followers, particularly concerning how they understand and interpret the world (Craig and Brennan, 2012; Cruz, 2016; Vaičekauskienė, 2018).

Research methodology

The current research employed corpus linguistics techniques, which has been widely used to analyse impression management strategies of companies and leaders in crisis situations (D'Northwood, 2017; Yan, Aerts and Thewissen, 2019; Bu, Connor-Linton and Wang, 2020; Lee, 2020; Ou and Wong, 2021; Ou, Wong and Huang, 2021; Wong, Ou and Wilson, 2021; Altahmazi, 2022). Corpus linguistics techniques are part of linguistics and one of the techniques used to understand language in various media (Nesselhauf, 2005; Partington, Duguid and Taylor, 2013). A corpus is a large collection of machine-readable texts used to provide an as accurate illustration as possible about the tendency of particular words used including their quantity (McEnery and Wilson, 2001; O'Keeffe and McCarthy, 2010; Partington, Duguid and Taylor, 2013). Out of the various analyses that can be produced by this research, two corpus-based analytical methods were selected, namely: frequent words and keyword list (Partington, 2012; Ou and Wong, 2021; Power and Crosthwaite, 2022).

In order to improve the public's opinions of them, public officials continually engage in impression management. Research on social media sites such as Instagram have demonstrated that the Internet can give public officials a forum to display their best selves, manage a variety of impressions and market themselves. To gain a deeper understanding of how public officials currently use Instagram, we applied corpus linguistics techniques (a list of frequently occurring words and keywords) to the public statements of seven Indonesian public officials. Although Instagram is primarily a visual tool, we noticed that captions provided context for the images and allowed public officials to add their personal voice.

Since this study examines public officials' impression management, we focused our analyses on seven public officials who made claims denying Covid-19 or who issued erroneous policies for handling Covid-19 in Indonesia. Initially, we searched for their official Instagram account by using Instagram's search feature, and when we did not find their account, we tried searching via the official website of the government organisation they lead. The data collection process was done by querying captions of Instagram posts within the period of a year after they made a false claim. Essentially, we wanted to examine what they were doing during that year to improve their image. The rationale for selecting a one-year period for the present study stems from the governmental budgeting process, which typically requires the identification and resolution of problems over a minimum of one fiscal year. Table 2 presents information of the accounts that were part of our investigation.

Table 2: Research samples

No.	Name of public official	Position	Blunder statement	Date of statement	Instagram account	Number of collected posts
1	Ma'ruf Amin	Vice President	Many kyai and ulama always recite *qunut* prayer, and I also recite the *qunut* prayer. That is why corona stays away from Indonesia.	29 February 2020	@kyai_maru-famin	395
2	Mahfud MD	Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs	Because [getting a] permit is complicated in Indonesia, the coronavirus cannot enter. But the omnibus law on employment permit keeps on going.	15 February 2020	@mohmah-fudmd	136 Done
3	Budi Karya	Minister of Transportation	But (this) is a joke with the President ya, God willing ya, Covid-19 (virus) does not enter Indonesia because every day we eat *nasi kucing* [fist-sized portion rice dish with toppings], so we are immune.	17 February 2020	@budikaryas	300 Done

4	Syahrul Yasin Limpo	Minister of Agriculture	The Eucalyptus Corona Antivirus made by the Indonesian Agency for Agricultural Research and Development (IAARD) of the Ministry of Agriculture can kill the coronavirus through [direct] contact. 15 minutes of contact can kill 42% of Covid-19, and the longer [the contact] the more are eliminated.	3 July 2020	@syasinlimpo	185 Done
5	Luhut Pandjaitan	Coordinating Minister for Maritime and Investment Affairs	Based on our modelling results, Indonesia's weather, the equator is hot and that's also why Covid-19 cannot survive. Given the hot weather, the virus in the throat would die.	3 April 2020	@luhut.pandjaitan	52
6	Ridho Yahya	Mayor of Prabumulih	I asked, by closing the schools, research says that closing schools would mean corona disease won't come? No [research indicates so], right?	16 March 2020	@ridhoyahya.id	111 Done
7	Edy Rahmayadi	Governor of North Sumatera	I, from the start, was not discussing lockdown. You can't be like that. Don't be *latah* (compulsive imitation of others' actions). Just because [other] people are on lockdown does not mean that North Sumatera should be on lockdown as well.	22 July 2020	@edy_rahmayadi	821

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Once captions were collected, we subsequently transformed them into plain text format (.txt) to be entered in the AntConc application (Anthony, 2019). We have a corpus file for each public official examined in the study. The seven files were then entered into the AntConc application to analyse frequent words. Table 3 presents the results of the corpus analysis for each Instagram account, including data on word types and word tokens, as well as the total corpora.

Table 3: Word types and word tokens

Corpora	Word types	Word tokens
Ma'ruf Amin	6,025	50,526
Mahfud MD	2,449	7,825
Budi Karya	5,862	47,220
Syahrul Yasin Limpo	2,233	10,624
Luhut Pandjaitan	2,904	14,223
Ridho Yahya	1,257	4,097
Edy Rahmayadi	6,384	61,637
Total corpora	13,725	196,154

Source: Compiled by the authors.

We read the keywords one by one to produce certain themes and accommodate similar words. With regards to reliability, the first and second authors separately categorised the words. The results of categorisation were then submitted to the third author to be adjusted (Bellström et al., 2016). Word categorisation into different themes was finalised by conducting discussions. Keyword lists were made of certain frequent words that have significant frequency in each theme.

This study employed frequent word and keyword analysis. Frequent word analysis involves identifying and examining words that occur with high frequency in a corpus of text, providing insight into the most common or significant words used in a particular context. Frequent words are lexical items with unusual frequencies, whether higher or lower (Partington, 2004; O'Keeffe and McCarthy, 2010; Partington, Duguid and Taylor, 2013; Mahlberg and Brookes, 2021). Frequent words can help identify textual and language styles. First, we identified certain themes inductively to categorise words that contain at least 50 tokens. Based on the inductive analysis results, we found five key themes comprising collaborative action, religiosity, government assistance, public health, and hope and optimism. Each theme consists of words representing it.

In the field of corpus linguistics, "frequent words" pertains to the number of words, morphemes, or keywords present in a given corpus (Oakes, 2019). These words serve as a valuable starting point for analysing the corpus, as they reveal patterns of usage that may point to important themes or topics. For the purposes of this study, the frequency of each word was calculated in terms of absolute and relative frequencies, with the latter

expressed as words per thousand (Sheng, 2021). This was done in recognition of the fact that the size of the corpus portions varied, making the direct comparison of frequency counts problematic (Sheng, 2021). To address this issue, we used a normalisation process, wherein each frequency count was transformed into a value per thousand words (Han, 2020). This value was selected for its ability to provide a common denominator for both corpora while remaining in proximity to their overall sizes. It is worth noting that the choice of a normalising number must be made with care, as using values that are either too low or too high may produce misleading differences. As such, fixed factors such as per thousand or per million words, as recommended by Shirazizadeh (2019) should be utilised judiciously.

The second is keyword list analysis, which allows researchers to obtain keywords that are more significant than others (Baker et al., 2008; D'Northwood, 2017; Joharry and Turiman, 2020). A keyword is a term that appears more frequently than normal in one corpus when compared to a separate, typically larger reference corpus (Brezina, 2018). A crucial aspect of keyword analysis in corpus linguistics involves ascertaining the value of a given word using a statistical significance test, such as log-likelihood (Han, 2020). Unlike frequent words, which furnish absolute or raw frequency data, a keyword list provides information on relative frequencies and can be instrumental in identifying the primary themes present in a corpus (Han, 2020).

In this study, the statistical measure employed to gauge keyword strength is based on Keynes values. The determination of a cut-off point for identifying significant keywords was informed by a statistical threshold, while the ranking of keywords was accomplished via an effect size metric (Han, 2020). Finally, the effect size threshold was utilised to identify the cut-off point for determining the strength of association between a given keyword and the target phenomenon (Han, 2020).

The keyword list was identified by comparing one corpus with another. The first corpus was that of a public official, while the second was a combination of corpora from other public officials who were not included in the former. The primary objective of conducting a comparison between corpora is to ensure that the presence of certain lexemes, which are likely to be associated with impression management, can be attributed to a particular public official. By utilising a keyword list, we were able to successfully identify salient words, employing a statistical threshold of $p < 0.05$ (Han, 2020). In presenting our findings, we report the frequency, Keynes, and effect size of each word. The ranking of words is determined by the effect size, as it is widely considered to be a more accurate indicator of the strength of association between the word and the target official (Han, 2020). It should be noted that the Keynes value may be accompanied by a plus or minus sign, indicating whether the word is used more or less frequently than in the comparative corpora.

Findings and discussion

This section presents the research findings. We used two analyses of corpus linguistics, namely: frequent words and keyword list.

Frequent words

Collaborative action

Collaborative action is a theme constituting calls from leaders to promote collaborations among stakeholders, particularly between public officials and their followers. Collaborative action refers to efforts in appealing to the public to jointly prevent, combat and lessen the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The words we collected were pronouns and/or nouns such as *kita* (we/us), *warga* (resident), *rakyat* (the people), *saudara* (brothers/ sisters), *bantuan* (assistance), *kerjasama* (collaboration), *penerapan* (implementation), *pertemuan* (meeting, momentum), *penyebaran* (dissemination) and *prestasi* (achievement). Verbs that we found included *menjaga* (to guard/to maintain), *mewujudkan* (to realise/to achieve), and *membuat* (to make); along with the adverb *bersama* (together).

Table 4: Frequent words under the Collaborative Action theme

Collaborative Action	Frequency	Word frequency/1,000 words
kita (we/us) (2,224)	2,224	11.34
bersama (together) (738)	738	3.76
seluruh (entire) (386)	386	1.97
menjaga (to guard/to maintain) (285)	285	1.45
mari (let's) (187)	187	0.95
warga (resident) (170)	170	0.87
rakyat (the people) (157)	157	0.80
saudara (brother/sister) (136)	136	0.69
kerjasama (collaboration) (105)	105	0.54
mewujudkan (to achieve/to realise) (105)	105	0.54
penerapan (implementation) (102)	102	0.52
pertemuan (meeting) (94)	94	0.48
momentum (84)	84	0.43
penyebaran (dissemination) (81)	81	0.41
prestasi (achievement) (50)	50	0.25

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The word *kita* in our findings shows that the effort in handling Covid-19 is a joint effort. The word *kita* represents "you and I", and thus qualifies endeavours to counter the impact of Covid-19 as efforts that must be done together. This elaboration is also used to explain the occurrence of the words *bersama, seluruh* (entire/all) and *kerjasama.* The occurrence of the word *mari* (let's) is a call to jointly perform certain actions relating to the prevention of Covid-19 and its impacts. Subsequently, the words *warga, rakyat*

and *saudara* indicate an appeal to residents and the people and referring to the public as brothers and sisters. Mentioning the word *saudara* in Indonesian suggests a close relationship similar to that between family members.

Hope and optimism

Hope and optimism were also themes which public officials accentuated in their posts about Covid-19 pandemic policies and situation. Emphasis on these themes was used to maintain the public's trust in the government's performance in handling the pandemic. The pandemic had various deleterious effects not only on health, but also on the economy and public welfare, which could in turn generate negative reactions from the public. In such circumstances, public officials tried to calm people down with positive narratives representing hope or optimism.

The types of words emphasising hope and optimism often occurred in the form of conjunctions such as *untuk* (for), *menjadi* (to become), *akan* (will), *semoga* (hopefully) and *agar* (so that). The word *semoga* bears the meaning of hope amidst the difficult situation faced throughout the pandemic. The word *akan* was used to emphasise that real actions conducted by the government in the form of activity plans and policies to address the Covid-19 pandemic would certainly be able to get the pandemic situation under control. Other words with the theme of hope and optimism occurred in verb forms with positive meanings like *berjuang* (to fight/to struggle), *meningkatkan* (to improve/to enhance), *membangun* (to develop), *mendukung* (to support), *mendorong* (to encourage), and *mengapresiasi* (to appreciate). These words, aside from implying the government's real actions, also emphasise the government's reliability and competence in overcoming the pandemic.

Emphasis on the theme of hope and optimism also occurred in noun form like *pemulihan* (recovery), *peningkatan* (improvement/enhancement), *dukungan* (support), *percepatan* (acceleration), *perkembangan* (development), *kemajuan* (progress), and *pertumbuhan* (growth), *prioritas* (priority), and *kesejahteraan* (prosperity). These words indicated that the government cares about the problems that the public is facing in connection with the pandemic and that the government is giving its full attention to handling the pandemic.

Table 5: Frequent words under the Hope and Optimism theme

Hope and Optimism	Frequency	Frequency/tokens
untuk (for) (2,550)	2,550	13.00
menjadi (to become) (917)	917	4.67
akan (will) (915)	915	4.66
semoga (hopefully) (700)	700	3.57
agar (so that) (671)	671	3.42

Hope and Optimism	Frequency	Frequency/tokens
dapat (can) (636)	636	3.24
lebih (more) (529)	529	2.70
terus (continue) (355)	355	1.81
pembangunan (development) (355)	355	1.81
upaya (effort) (322)	322	1.64
semangat (zeal) (297)	297	1.51
berharap (hopeful) (292)	292	1.49
meningkatkan (to improve/to enhance) (244)	244	1.24
pengembangan (development) (240)	240	1.22
membangun (to build/to develop) (213)	213	1.09
demi (for the sake of) (212)	212	1.08
mendukung (to support) (190)	190	0.97
kondisi (condition) (183)	183	0.93
langkah (step/measure) (151)	151	0.77
mampu (able) (150)	150	0.76
maju (move forward) (146)	146	0.74
pemulihan (recovery) (145)	145	0.74
mendorong (to encourage) (141)	141	0.72
semakin (the more) (139)	139	0.71
peningkatan (improvement/enhancement) (124)	124	0.63
terbaik (the best) (115)	115	0.59
proses (process) (113)	113	0.58
dukungan (support) (111)	111	0.57
sukses (success) (110)	110	0.56
aman (safe) (106)	106	0.54
kesempatan (opportunity) (103)	103	0.53
kesejahteraan (prosperity) (98)	98	0.50
tenaga (power/strength) (97)	97	0.49
mengapresiasi (to appreciate) (95)	95	0.48
prioritas (priority) (95)	95	0.48
tingkat (level) (92)	92	0.47
potensi (potential) (92)	92	0.47
percepatan (acceleration) (91)	91	0.46
perkembangan (development) (87)	87	0.44
harapan (hope) (84)	84	0.43
kemajuan (progress) (77)	77	0.39
berhasil (to be successful) (63)	63	0.32
berjuang (to struggle/to fight) (63)	63	0.32
pertumbuhan (growth) (63)	63	0.32

In the frequent word analysis, we found various words that we combined under the themes of collaborative action and hope and optimism. This is part of the *supplication* self-presentational strategy used by those lacking resources, in which the speaker tries to emphasise their disadvantages, inability and dependency on others (Jones and Pittman, 1982). This type of impression management strategy was found in Ridho Yahya's corpus text, as presented in the keyword list analysis. The strategic use of emotion is also part of the efforts to influence the public in order to gain a similar sentiment (Westphal et al., 2012; Sobral et al., 2020; Müller, 2021). In this case, articulating feelings will draw a fully passionate reaction from their followers (Wang et al., 2019; Yan, Aerts and Thewissen, 2019; Lee, 2020). Consequently, the public would follow the emotion of their leader, or in other words, the message disseminated via social media would echo the feelings expressed by their leader.

Religiosity

Religion is an integral element of Indonesian society. Accordingly, religiosity is a theme that public officials utilise to approach their followers. A religious leader is a leader who is highly revered and respected in Indonesian society, and this helped break the chain of Covid-19 transmission. The words we found relating to religiosity included nouns like mui (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* – Indonesian Ulama Council), *umat* (Muslim community), *agama* (religion), *amanah* (trust), ulama, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), masjid, *santri* (students at Islamic boarding schools), *natal* (Christmas) and *amal* (charity). While some verbs we identified include *doa* (prayer), *ibadah* (worship) and *raya* (grand), *merayakan* (celebrate). There are also the words *husnul* (good) and *idul* (re-become – from *Idul Fitri,* i.e. becoming holy again).

In our findings, the word/acronym "mui" explains that efforts in handling Covid-19 should strictly be done for the benefit of the Muslim community. This explanation is represented by the words *syariah* (sharia), *umat,* Islam, ulama and halal. This suggests that the Covid-19 vaccine in Indonesia is halal, clean and free from *najis* (ritually unclean) elements in accordance with MUI's halal ruling (fatwa) as an effort to convince Indonesians/their followers to be rid of any doubt in taking the vaccine shot.

Table 6: Frequent words under the Religiosity theme

Religiosity	Frequency	Frequency/tokens
mui (Indonesian Ulama Council) (680)	680	3.47
Allah (390)	390	1.99
syariah (sharia) (275)	275	1.40
umat (Muslim community) (194)	194	0.99

Religiosity	Frequency	Frequency/tokens
Islam (185)	185	0.94
agama (religion) (135)	135	0.69
ulama (115)	115	0.59
pesantren (Islamic boarding school) (113)	113	0.58
masjid (mosque) (111)	111	0.57
halal (90)	90	0.46
amanah (trust) (79)	79	0.40
doa (prayer) (79)	79	0.40
ibadah (worship) (78)	78	0.40
santri (students at Islamic boarding schools) (65)	65	0.33
natal (Christmas) (56)	56	0.29
husnul (good) (51)	51	0.26
idul (re-become) (51)	51	0.26
raya (grand) (51)	51	0.26
amal (charity) (51)	51	0.26

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Our study found that public officials tried to manage their images as religious leaders. Furthermore, we found that the word Allah was used in all the corpora in varying numbers. This proves again that religion was one of the ways used to produce meaning in terms of people's interpretation of various disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Numerous studies have shown that the level of a person's religiosity helps them to maintain faith during a state of emergency and also supports the psychological aspects of recovery (Adisaputri, 2017; Gianisa and Le De, 2018; Suyadi, Nuryana and Fauzi, 2020). Thus, it is crucial for religious public officials to encourage their followers to keep their spirits up and enhance their religious activities (Hirono and Blake, 2017; Hartanto, Agussani and Dalle, 2021; Nurhayati and Purnama, 2021). This is in line with prior studies which found that messages containing religious elements are more easily received if they establish a theological framework that is already embedded in the community (Adisaputri, 2017; Bentzen, 2019; Suyadi, Nuryana and Fauzi, 2020). This strategy is a part of *ingratiation,* which is the self-presentational phenomenon most frequently found in this study. Most individuals and organisations shape social behaviours by noticing that people or others like them and associate themselves with them through certain characteristics (Goffman, 1956), which in this study is indicated by the religious leader characteristic found in the frequent word and keyword list analysis.

Government assistance

Government assistance is a theme that describes various forms of government interventions as part of impression management during the Covid-19 pandemic. Various types of government assistance were part of the strategy of public officials to lessen economic and social impacts during the Covid-19 pandemic. We grouped the frequent words findings into several categories such as the sectors that received assistance, the actors and the forms of government intervention.

The first category refers to the sectors that received assistance. The occurrence of the word *ekonomi* (economy) represents one of the government programs to assist people's economic conditions through social assistance and the development of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSME) as a form of government assistance to restore the economy. This word also represents the occurrence of the words *program nasional* (national program), program, *penanganan* (handling), *keuangan* (finance), *perekonomian* (economic affairs), UMKM (MSME) and *bantuan* (assistance) which were also found in the frequent word analysis. Furthermore, we also found the words *sektor transportasi* (transportation sector), *perhubungan* (transportation), *keuangan* (finance), *pendidikan* (education), *pelabuhan* (harbor/port), *jalan* (road), *bandara* (airport), *pangan* (food), *industri* (industry), *lingkungan* (environment), *infrastruktur* (infrastructure) and *pariwisata* (tourism).

The second category refers to actors who played a role in handling the Covid-19 pandemic. The word *kementerian* (ministry) constitutes the government apparatus that assists the president in managing the affairs of certain sectors, while the word *presiden* (president) refers to the highest position in the country. Both words represent the policy of Indonesian leaders who were responsible for assisting and protecting the Indonesian state and nation from the dangers of Covid-19 and for leading its people to prosper by providing assistance in various sectors. We also found other actors such as *daerah* (region), *sektor* (sector), *menteri* (minister), *provinsi* (province), *kabupaten* (regency), *gubernur* (governor), *dinas* (regional office), TNI (Indonesian National Armed Forces), *badan* (body/agency), Jokowi, *kemenhub* (Ministry of Transportation), bank, *polri* (Indonesian National Police), *menkopolhukam* (Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs).

In the third category, we found words like *program, kebijakan* (policy), *anggaran* (budget), *inovasi* (innovation), *pelayanan* (service/provision), *layanan* (service), *birokrasi* (bureaucracy) and *bantuan* (assistance), which refer to forms of government interventions in handling Covid-19. *Kebijakan* and *program* both suggest the presence of the government through the programs and policies carried out to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. The next word is *anggaran,* indicating that there is a set of financial resources allocated to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. Then, the word *inovasi* suggests that there is a particular, out of the ordinary method for carrying out policies, programs, or activities. The words *birokrasi, pelayanan* and *layanan* indicates that interventions were done through the provision of services.

Table 7: Frequent words under the Government Assistance theme

Government Assistance	Frequency	Frequency/tokens
ekonomi (economy) (614)	614	2.80
nasional (national) (550)	550	2.66
negara (state/country) (521)	521	2.41
program (472)	472	2.33
bangsa (nation) (457)	457	2.17
transportasi (transportation) (425)	425	2.10
daerah (region) (411)	411	1.93
kementerian (ministry) (378)	378	1.71
presiden (president) (336)	336	1.68
memberikan (provide) (330)	330	1.68
kerja (work) (330)	330	1.58
perhubungan (transportation) (310)	310	1.24
sektor (sector) (244)	244	1.11
menteri (minister) (217)	217	1.07
penanganan (handling) (209)	209	1.03
provinsi (province) (202)	202	1.02
keuangan (finance) (200)	200	0.98
kabupaten (regency) (192)	192	0.94
gubernur (governor) (185)	185	0.94
pendidikan (education) (184)	184	0.92
dinas (regional office) (181)	181	0.88
jakarta (173)	173	0.83
pelabuhan (harbor/port) (163)	163	0.82
jalan (road) (160)	160	0.81
bandara (airport) (158)	158	0.80
TNI (Indonesian National Armed Forces) (156)	156	0.76
pangan (food) (149)	149	0.72
industri (industry) (142)	142	0.72
teknologi (technology) (142)	142	0.72
perekonomian (economic affairs) (141)	141	0.68
kunjungan (visit) (134)	134	0.67
kebijakan (policy) (132)	132	0.65
membantu (help/assist) (128)	128	0.63
badan (body/agency) (123)	123	0.63
jokowi[*](123)	123	0.62

Government Assistance	Frequency	Frequency/tokens
anggaran (budget) (121)	121	0.61
inovasi (innovation) (120)	120	0.60
kemenhub (Ministry of Transportation) (118)	118	0.59
lembaga (institution) (116)	116	0.59
lingkungan (environment) (116)	116	0.59
umkm (MSME) (115)	115	0.57
infrastruktur (infrastructure) (112)	112	0.57
pelayanan (service/provision) (112)	112	0.56
republik (republic) (109)	109	0.49
pariwisata (tourism) (96)	96	0.48
layanan (service) (94)	94	0.47
internasional (international) (92)	92	0.43
wisata (tour) (85)	85	0.43
pemerintahan (government/administration) (85)	85	0.41
bank (81)	81	0.37
sdm (human resource) (73)	73	0.36
organisasi (organisation) (71)	71	0.34
korupsi (corruption) (66)	66	0.34
pers (press) (66)	66	0.33
birokrasi (bureaucracy) (65)	65	0.33
ekspor (export) (64)	64	0.32
polri (Indonesian National Police) (62)	62	0.26
keamanan (security) (51)	51	0.26
kemerdekaan (independence) (51)	51	0.26
media (51)	51	0.26
pilkada (regional election) (51)	51	0.26
menkopolhukam (Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs) (51)	51	0.26
penghubungindonesia (Indonesian liaison) (51)	51	0.26
perlindungan (protection) (51)	51	0.26
kuasa (power/authority) (50)	50	0.61
bantuan (assistance) (120)	120	0.41
membuat (make) (81)	81	2.80

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Jokowi: Jokowidodo, the president of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, is commonly called Jokowi

Public health

Public health is a theme that describes the efforts made by the government in assuming its role to maintain and protect the health of its people. The main focus of public health is an effort to enhance human resources.

In connection with Covid-19, the government was forced to carry out various efforts for the sake of public health, and in this respect we found the occurrence of the words *pandemi* (pandemic), *kesehatan* (health), *virus* and *corona*. The word *protokol* (protocol) describes the governmental regulations made to manage security during the pandemic. The word *keselamatan* (safety) illustrates the government's priority to reduce the number of Covid-19 victims. This description is also used to explain the words *vaksin* (vaccine), *korban* (victim), *vaksinasi* (vaccination), *pencegahan* (prevention) and *pasien* (patient). Vaccine and health protocol are two things that complement each other as forms of resilience and self-protection.

Table 8: Frequent words under the Public Health theme

Public Health	Frequency	Frequency/tokens
Covid (943)	943	5.00
bisa (can) (806)	806	4.00
pandemi (pandemic) (642)	642	3.00
kesehatan (health) (626)	626	3.00
selamat (safe) (401)	401	2.00
protokol (protocol) (316)	316	2.00
sehat (healthy) (156)	156	0.80
keselamatan (safety) (110)	110	0.60
ibu (mother) (110)	110	0.60
masker (face mask) (109)	109	0.60
udara (air) (107)	107	0.50
informasi (information) (106)	106	0.50
fasilitas (facility) (92)	92	0.50
vaksin (vaccine) (88)	88	0.40
publik (public) (88)	88	0.40
korban (victim) (80)	80	0.40
vaksinasi (vaccination) (75)	75	0.40
virus (71)	71	0.40
pencegahan (prevention) (62)	62	0.30
pasien (patient) (55)	55	0.30
corona (55)	55	0.30
ketahanan (resilience) (54)	54	0.30

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Based on the frequent word analysis, we found the themes of government assistance and public health. This is part of *self-promotion,* a self-presentational strategy which focuses on attributes of competence rather than likeability (Goffman, 1956). In this case, public officials attempted to build positivity and trust in order to reduce panic about public health and welfare (Goffman, 1956). These public officials tried to step forward to give the impression that they are credible officials capable of leading the Indonesian people through this challenging situation. This research found that, unlike the strategies implemented by business organisations undergoing a crisis and that publish information about the negative effects on their business, disruptions to their services and about their organisation's struggle to survive, public organisations try to show their credibility and their ability to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts (Patelli and Pedrini, 2014; Benthaus, Risius and Beck, 2016; Yang and Liu, 2017; Carnevale and Gangloff, 2022). This study also confirmed similar strategies applied by companies during the Covid-19 pandemic (Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Ou, Wong and Huang, 2021; Nosrati and Detlor, 2022).

Keyword list

This section presents the keyword list analysis to find significant differences in each corpus. To do so, we made two corpora. The first constitutes a particular public official while the second constitutes a collection of corpora from all the other public officials in the study. As an example, to analyse the keyword list of Budi Karya, the first corpus refers to that of Budi Karya while the six remaining public officials were combined to form the second collection of corpora. We sorted them based on the number of words that had the most significant differences. The following tables showcase frequency, keyness, effect and keywords.

We found that Budi Karya and Yasin Limpo, after making claims denying the Covid-19 pandemic or showing mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic, tried to promote the impression that they work hard on the sector they are leading. Budi Karya is the Minister of Transportation and the statements he made were mostly relevant to his sector. Accordingly, words like *lingkungan* (environment), *moda* (mode), *sistem* (system), *kendaraan* (vehicle), *proyek* (project), *air* (water), bus, *penerbangan* (flight) and *terminal* were found more frequently than others. In line with this finding, Yasin Limpo (Minister of Agriculture) similarly made every effort to convey the impression that they were successfully conducting activities in the agricultural sector. Accordingly, we found the words *bulog* (bureau of logistics), *holtikultura* (horticulture), *daging* (meat), *varietas* (variety), *ternak* (livestock), *budidaya* (cultivation), *kedelai* (soybean), *produktivitas* (productivity), *padi* (paddy) and *pasar* (market) in his corpus text.

Meanwhile, given their wider scope of duties, Edi as a Governor and Ma'ruf Amin as a Vice President, used several approaches as part of their impression management strategies. The word *olahraga* (sports) in Edi's corpus indicates a call to engage in sports as a way to combat Covid-19. Subsequently, the words *amanah* (trust), *silaturahmi* (bond of friendship) and *masjid* (mosque) reflected an effort to establish Edi's image as a religious

figure. Such efforts were also observed in Ma'ruf Amin's corpus, where we found the word *wakaf* (endowment) as a strategy to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic by endowing one's right to an object to others in greater need. We also found the words bank, dna and *mikro* (micro) in Ma'ruf Amin's corpus text, which significantly differ with the other's corpus texts, indicating that he focused on economic policy to maintain national stability. Ma'ruf presents these two aspects as constituting the most reliable strategy to survive the Covid-19 pandemic. The word global indicates that the Covid-19 pandemic is a global disaster, which may indicate some form of distancing from the problem, by stating that what is currently happening is also being experienced by communities and governments all over the world.

Table 9: Keyword list of Budi Karya's corpus

Frequency	Keyness		Effect	Keyword
50	+	20.18	0.0021	*lingkungan* (environment)
51	+	145.3	0.0022	*moda* (mode)
57	+	20.91	0.0024	*sistem* (system)
56	+	82.95	0.0024	*kendaraan* (vehicle)
58	+	61.33	0.0025	*proyek* (project)
58	+	35.53	0.0025	*air* (water)
62	+	127.61	0.0026	bus
65	+	61.12	0.0027	*keselamatan* (safety)
63	+	151.39	0.0027	*penerbangan* (flight)
68	+	143.15	0.0029	terminal

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 10: Keyword list of Edy's corpus

Frequency	Keyness		Effect	Keyword
50	+	26	0.0016	*olahraga* (sports)
56	+	51.73	0.0018	*amanah* (trust)
59	+	81.17	0.0019	*silaturahmi* (bond of friendship)
59	+	27.37	0.0019	*kerjasama* (collaboration)
61	+	47.07	0.002	*lancar* (smooth)
65	+	34.61	0.0021	*masjid* (mosque)
64	+	116.11	0.0021	*amiin* (amen)
76	+	20.17	0.0025	tni (Indonesian national armed forces)
81	+	27.41	0.0026	*rakyat* (the people)
87	+	46.91	0.0028	*desa* (village)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 11: Keyword list of Maaruf Amin's corpus

Frequency		Keyness	Effect	Keyword
50	+	47.68	0.002	bank
54	+	20.67	0.0021	*bantuan* (assistance)
52	+	48.51	0.0021	normal
57	+	101.03	0.0023	*istana* ([presidential] palace)
57	+	101.03	0.0023	*mikro* (micro)
61	+	40.55	0.0024	*Jokowi**
60	+	111.36	0.0024	*wakaf* (endowment)
60	+	69.4	0.0024	digital
66	+	46.09	0.0026	*inovasi* (innovation)
72	+	97.48	0.0028	global

*Jokowi: Jokowidodo, the president of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, is commonly called Jokowi

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 12: Keyword list of Luhut's corpus

Frequency		Keyness	Effect	Keyword
53	+	47.06	0.0073	*sehingga* (so that)
86	+	55.03	0.0117	*karena* (because)
93	+	19.01	0.0124	*bisa* (can)
110	+	26.35	0.0145	*akan* (will)
208	+	101.66	0.0267	Indonesia
461	+	194.48	0.0529	*saya* (I)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 13: Keyword list of Mahfud MD's corpus

Frequency		Keyness	Effect	Keyword
10	+	57.82	0.0026	*kemenko* (Coordination Ministry)
12	+	54.91	0.0031	*becak* (pedicab)
13	+	32.28	0.0033	*sholat* (salat prayers)
13	+	25.3	0.0033	*hukum* (law)
13	+	22.96	0.0033	*santri* (Islamic boarding school student)
16	+	23.12	0.004	video
18	+	92.34	0.0046	*mendagri* (Minister of Home Affairs)
20	+	25.72	0.005	*masing* (each)
22	+	141.81	0.0056	Madura
26	+	97.63	0.0066	*pilkada* (regional election)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 14: Keyword list of Ridho Yahya's corpus

Frequency	Keyness		Effect	Keyword
10	+	26.09	0.0048	*musibah* (disaster)
14	+	108.37	0.0068	*almh* (the deceased)
16	+	81.55	0.0078	*innalillahi* ("we belong to Allah")
19	+	126.01	0.0092	*aamiin* (amen)
20	+	85.98	0.0096	*berduka* (to mourn)
21	+	109.51	0.0102	*wafatnya* (the death)
23	+	55.47	0.0108	*turut* (take part)
26	+	25.57	0.0116	Allah
27	+	138.12	0.013	*husnul* (good)
27	+	136.72	0.013	*ketabahan* (fortitude)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 15: Keyword list of Yasin Limpo's corpus

Frequency	Keyness		Effect	Keyword
10	+	58.32	0.0019	*bulog* (bureau of logistics)
10	+	58.32	0.0019	*holtikultura* (horticulture)
10	+	37.82	0.0019	*daging* (meat)
12	+	63.05	0.0023	*varietas* (variety)
12	+	55.31	0.0023	*ternak* (livestock)
13	+	75.83	0.0024	*budidaya* (cultivation)
13	+	75.83	0.0024	*kedelai* (soybean)
16	+	56.42	0.003	*produktivitas* (productivity)
17	+	82.59	0.0032	*padi* (paddy)
18	+	28.24	0.0034	*pasar* (market)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Luhut and Mahfud MD are Coordinating Ministers who oversee technical ministries. The use of the word *saya* (I/me) is a form of egotism indicating individual efforts in handling the Covid-19 pandemic. The word *bisa* (can) is part of creating the impression that the Indonesian people can overcome this disaster by showing optimism. The words *sholat* (salat prayers) and *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) found in Mahfud MD's corpus suggest efforts to establish the impression of a religious leader who is part of *santri* (those who pursue Islamic education in *pesantren* – Islamic boarding schools) and a member of Nahdatul Ulama. The words *hukum* (law) and *pilkada* (regional election) constitute two areas that are under his jurisdiction.

Based on Ridho Yahya's corpus text, we found that as a mayor, Ridho Yahya conveyed numerous condolences, which was a sort of final contribution he was able to do during the Covid-19 pandemic. The words we found included *almh* (*almarhum/ah* – the

deceased), *berduka* (to mourn), *wafatnya* (the death) and *husnul* (good). The words *musibah* (disaster) and *ketabahan* (fortitude) give the impression that this pandemic is a disaster and that people need to muster fortitude to survive. This impression also suggests that the pandemic is beyond his control. Furthermore, Ridho Yahya also established an impression as a religious leader.

We also found that public officials manage their impressions by not responding to criticisms relating to statements of Covid-19 pandemic denials or erroneous policies. Instead of discussing the two matters, most of them promoted the good work they had done by working as best as they could in their respective scopes of authority, such as the economy and public health. Specifically, the Minister of Transportation and the Minister of Agriculture showed efforts referring to these categories. The impression they wanted to establish is that they are public officials who are committed and dedicated leaders (Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Tung, Tse and Chan, 2021; Nosrati and Detlor, 2022).

Responses by calling for collaborations, government interventions and their presence in addressing issues of public health are forms of symbolic approach applied by public officials (Hart, 1993) as reflected in their posts on social media. This is an effort to regain the public's trust and provide a lens to decipher the strategies used by public officials in handling the Covid-19 pandemic. The current study, similar to studies on business organisations, found that public officials aggressively employed impression management strategy to showcase themselves as credible and responsible officials (Im, Kim and Miao, 2021; Tung, Tse and Chan, 2021; Nosrati and Detlor, 2022). The impression management strategy public officials applied has some similarities to business organisations, which significantly show positive attributes.

Conclusion

Theoretical contributions

The present study posits that public officials who have made erroneous claims or implemented inaccurate policies in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic have collectively shaped public perception through impression management. This interactive process allowed officials to adjust their communication strategies in response to occurrences such as problematic policies. Our analysis of the Instagram accounts of public officials in Indonesia revealed the use of various impression management strategies, including ingratiation, self-promotion and supplication.

While the impression management theory was introduced by Goffman in 1956, our study offers a novel contribution by applying this theory specifically to crisis communication carried out by public officials in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, our use of corpus linguistics techniques, including frequent words and keyword lists, distinguishes our study from prior research that has primarily employed social media content analysis. Our method is valuable as it can inductively demonstrate how specific word choices are used to manage social media account impressions in order to shape public perceptions.

Overall, our findings confirm the use of common impression management strategies, namely ingratiation, self-promotion and supplication. However, our analysis reveals that ingratiation in this context differs from prior studies conducted in Western contexts, where characteristics such as humour, warmth, reliability and attention were developed. In the case of public officials in Indonesia, our study found that they tend to emphasise their religious affiliation to shape their public image.

Furthermore, our study also confirms that self-promotion was used by public officials to project themselves as credible individuals who are responsible for the tasks within their purview. Additionally, supplication was observed through themes of hope and optimism, where public officials made future-oriented statements regarding unresolved issues, and collaborative action, which stressed the need for joint efforts to tackle pandemic-related challenges.

Practical contributions

The present study reveals that all public officials, including those analysed in this study, tend to focus exclusively on positive aspects while avoiding any negative themes related to the erroneous claims or policies they made. While this strategy may result in a positive image, it is not without risk, as some members of the public may expect an apology for officials' mistakes at the onset of the pandemic. Failing to address this issue could undermine the reputation they have worked to establish. Conversely, a careful presentation of the negative risks associated with their job may foster public understanding and acceptance of the complex and challenging circumstances that officials faced.

In addition, our study found that these public officials generally neglected the use of scientific methods in decision-making, which would have bolstered their credibility and trustworthiness as public officials. Their disregard for science created confusion and contributed to further erosion of public trust. In light of these findings, a scientific approach to impression management in a crisis situation could improve the public's perception of their capabilities. Interestingly, our analysis found that public officials in Indonesia tended to emphasise their religious affiliation as a means of shaping their public image, perhaps reflecting the cultural context of the country.

Research limitation and future direction

This study has a number of limitations. First, this study did not make a quantitative or a qualitative examination of the impact that public officials' impression management has on the public to mitigate erroneous claims and policies. Thus, this research could not ascertain whether a particular type of strategy can successfully rebuild public trust. In this regard, future studies could, for instance, examine the effect that certain types of impression management strategy have on public trust. Additionally, conducting a sentiment analysis on comments found on Instagram and calculating the number of comments as well as likes could also serve as a proxy indicator to measure this.

The next limitation refers to the manual coding that relied on the subjective interpretation of the coder. We tried to use the strategy of three round coding for the sake of intersubjectivity. Future research can employ quantitative analysis to measure the reliability of codes occurring in the research. This is essential so that the research results become more objective. Another drawback to the study was the limited number of public officials' social media accounts (i.e. seven officials), and that the study was only conducted in one country. Future studies should analyse similar strategies by comparing them in different contexts to develop the theory of impression management.

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Depiction of the Balkans on Internet Memes from 9GAG[1]

Zoltán Veczán[*]

*   independent researcher

Contrary to all the techno-optimistic expectations regarding the liberating and equalising impacts of online communication – especially of web 2.0 and the emerging social media – stereotypes and oppressive practices are still widespread in discourses on online platforms in many online genres, including Internet memes or meme-aggregating platforms. Researchers have studied many aspects of emergence of stereotypes regarding skin colour, sexual orientation, or gender, but there is a notable research gap in analysing stereotypes towards a special region of Europe: the Balkan Peninsula and its nations. What is more, no research can be found that examines Balkan stereotypes in Internet memes, especially not in a quantitative way on a larger sample. Working with 595 meme specimens from the popular 9GAG portal, this research seeks to learn more about this phenomenon: to find signs of the asymmetric relationship between the Western centrum and the periphery or semi-periphery, as represented by the Balkan states. This study seeks to identify the critical elements of how these stereotypes are displayed, and to compare these elements and their correlations. Another dimension of this research is a review of audience reactions as gauged by "likes", comments and relative popularity.

Keywords: memes, social media, stereotypes, audience research

Introduction

Internet penetration is growing worldwide, so social media is used by billions of users every day regardless of their culture, geographical location, or – thanks to mobile technology – actual location, even if they move in the meantime, and, day by day, even

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a person's financial situation also affects this matter less and less, and the level of digital literacy (Jenkins, 2009) has also been increasing, e.g. in Europe (Eurostat, 2022).

In this highly diverse online environment, Internet memes have also shown up on several platforms that are not planned particularly for this kind of content, (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.). However, many venues were designed for a significant or even exclusive internet meme-based discourse: Reddit belongs to the former, with 430 million visitors a month; the latter refers to 9GAG, which has 150 million unique visitors and generates 3.5 billion page views per month. People as so-called prosumers – consumers who also produce (described first by Alvin Toffler [1980], applied to today's conditions by, among others, George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson [2010]), which is basically the spirit of web 2.0. So they do the same on 9GAG as content creators, sharers and recipients.

Globalisation and Western Centralism

The fact that internet memes have gone global over the last 15 years – is called "user-generated globalization" by Limor Shifman (2014: 151). However, English is still wide-spread (Börzsei, 2013: 9), which connects people easily through cultures, irrespective of their English skills. For this reason, Milner (2013: 2) called memes "the lingua franca of the Internet". This term describes some aspects of this phenomenon: the phrase "lingua franca" implies some inequality as it is as a pidgin language, has its superstrate and substrate. Milner insisted that the former is the popular culture, and the latter is the others, the marginalised ones. But its superstrate, in a global sense, and following the analogy of Milner (2013) and Börzsei (2013), is consequently the English language, and – what is more – another bunch of non-textual elements, including predominantly Western cultural codes that, according to one of this paper's hypothesis, dominates even the meme of typical non-western people, too.

But this is only a symptom: a symptom of what has been called multiple times "constructed centrality" by Ryan Milner (2013, 2016), who borrowed this term from Ronald Jackson, Chang Shin and Keith Wilson (2000), and called later "the hegemony of the implicit reader"; as Eviatar Zerubavel in his book *Taken for Granted. The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable* (2018). All of them mean that the default member of a group is a Western, white, heterosexual (probably: middle-class) man, as underlined by the results of Lori Kendall's research (2002).

Humour and hierarchy

9GAG has another characteristic or feature: albeit many social media platforms intro-duced some moderation in the last decade, there are almost no signs of this practice. The lack of moderation favours the texts with discriminating discourses and stereotypes. These phenomena have been researched since the 2010s: stereotypes towards women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, etc. Negative stereotypes as less, and positive ones as more favourable beliefs about social groups (e.g. Glick and Fiske, 1996; Madon et

al., 2001); and even added so-called neutral ones (Bergsieker et al., 2012; León et al., 2013). A mixture of positive, negative, or neutral stereotypes is common. For example, the research of Czopp et al. (2006) revealed that White individuals who believed African Americans have better musical rhythm also believed they were lazy.

As the critical role of humour in 1. easily spreading this type of content (see more in the "Related works" section), and 2. in maintaining and reinforcing the hierarchy between the representations of privileged people, nations, countries, sex, and cultures, and of the looked downs.

Regarding the first aspect, it is a widely researched topic from Jenkins et al. (2009) to Milner (2016): to reveal the relationship between humour and virality (or in the case of Jenkins et al.: spreadability (2009: 3), who associated the logic of the gift economy with spreading internet memes (Jenkins et al., 2009: 43–62), and that gift, inferred from this, the laughter itself.

But how could humour displayed by internet memes maintain and even reinforce the differences in power? The answer is probably easily explainable along Shifman's often-cited dimensions of memes: content, form and stance (2014: 41), although this division is to be understood here as support for the conceptualisation.

As for the content and form, power asymmetry could be maintained via a new requirement that, according to Shifman (2014: 101–118) and Milner (2016: 30), could be called "meme literacy" and completed the former competence (digital literacy) as an additional one. Meme literacy means understanding and applying plenty of subcultural knowledge about ideas and cultural texts and how they should be used in the online space: norms and (sub)cultural contexts as parts of the content, genres, characters, etc., as parts of the form. And these elements of knowledge, based on common (sub)cultural knowledge (2009: 4), determine the right and wrong interpretation of these ideas and right and wrong usage of the cultural texts (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017: 484–486). Improper usage can suggest the lack of expected knowledge; with the lack of knowledge, a user can easily be seen as an illiterate, so an outsider, in the model of classical literacy. Creating and sharing internet memes – in a proper way, of course – prove that the user speaks that certain "lingua franca" mentioned before and – holding this analogy – knows its "vocabulary" or the also mentioned codex, which is, as Nissenbaum and Shifman called it, based on Pierre Bourdieu's logic, "the canon of good and bad taste" (2017: 484). Part of this meme literacy is the knowledge about humour, and, according to Henry Jenkins, knowing this, also helps make a difference between insiders and outsiders. As Anne Leiser put it, understanding humour and employed this way does exclude those who do not know its language, but strengthens the in-group (Leiser, 2019: 108).

Stereotypes often serve as the basis of humour: as Shifman listed the topics that usually emerge as a theme of a joke, we can see that most of them rely on differences; therefore, on the potential of making positive–negative or superior–inferior relations among mentioned categories. These topics are: language, sex, politics, ethnicity, religion and age (Shifman, 2007: 189), so the meme creator can get inspiration from stereotypes easily. But not all of the stereotypes, to be more precise, not everyone's. It is also a crucial part of creating proper internet memes to learn and internalise that so-called subcultural codex, edited by users who take part in that discourse. But not all the users

and not equally edited by them but predominantly by those who are, most probably unconsciously, part of the "constructed central" (Milner, 2013, 2016). This feature implies maintaining power differences via different opportunities for accessing the codex. To cite Nissenbaum and Shifman, "these are designated by those who enjoy high regard in the group and thus wield the symbolic power to curate" the mentioned "canon of good and bad taste": composing the proper memes, referring to the proper cultural context, carrying out in a proper way with proper elements, an internet meme considered to be humorous.

Continuing with Shifman's dimensions, in this explanation, stance also plays an important role. Among others, it also refers to the power unbalance between the represented groups, people, or their cultural elements, and humour has a particularly outstanding feature to convey it. Both Shifman and Leiser identified different attributes and elements of humour amongst internet memes; the former researcher analysed the role of playfulness, incongruity and superiority, while Leiser changed playfulness to relief, emphasising its tension-relieving function relieving tensions and came to that conclusion regarding superior humour that common laughter on out-group members can also unite people within a group (2019: 39). The situation is a little bit different when the target of the laughter is also a member of the in-group, but somehow not part of the "curator" group of the codex aforementioned, nor the "constructed central". E.g. a user related to the target, for instance, a black man and a meme, joking about the character of a "successful black man" or Afro-American symbols, etc.

In these cases, the type of humour can also maintain and reinforce this power unbalance and problematic stereotypes (Drakett et al., 2018: 32), and those, who, as participants, feel their identical references in the crosshairs, should face harsh conditions too: there is an expectation towards them to not simply deny the stereotypical representation: the group threatens with degrading humour or even exclusion those, who "do not get the joke" (Drakett et al., 2018: 32), or criticise soft and feminine "emotionalism" – according to the so-called "logic of lulz" (Milner, 2016: 136–137) or "Exclusionary Laughter" (Phillips, 2019: 1).

Strategies and possibilities for the "Others"

In this asymmetric relationship, humour maintains hierarchy; but users who are not part of the "constructed central" can choose their own strategy. The position is more or less in connection with the applied type of humour: according to Michael Billig (2005) and based on the research of Holmes (2000), participants who are part of the dominant group, use "superior" (Shifman, 2014: 79–81), disciplinary – or repressive – humour, "quirky", as others call it, (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 206–207) – using, e.g. stereotypes mocking those who are outside social norms. Those who are outside "whilst conversely rebellious humor mocks and subverts established rules and conventions" (Drakett et al., 2018: 6). And there is a third and fourth strategy of the second group: joining the "superior" narrative and humour type honestly. This is what Marion Young described as internalising the central-determined stereotypes, making them autostereotypes, basically offering

the same narrative as the "constructed central" – or doing this but ironically – thus denying them. The last one is called rebellious humour by Billig or "reverse" humour by Weaver (2010: 30–31), which is (critically) enjoyed by the target group that mocks the stereotypes and users who recite them.

"Balkan memes" can be examined from many perspectives, as mentioned above. What is more, we can observe the process of generalising in its finest form. The Balkans include at least ten different countries (Crampton et al., 2023): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia, altogether some 60 million people.

As we will see in the following section, there is almost no research on the Balkans from the perspective of internet memes. While the representation of the Balkans in Western public discourse could fill an entire paper on its own, here my more modest aim is only to briefly summarise the most relevant thoughts that connect internet memes through power asymmetry and stereotypes to theories about Balkan representation.

Related works

As for theory, we could begin by referring to some very essential studies and research from 1. the areas of orientalism and post-colonialism regarding the Balkans; and 2. internet meme-related. The two approaches can be combined in an interdisciplinary approach, linking both to stereotypes, but we can also examine them separately.

The foundations of the power asymmetry approach came from, on the one hand, József Böröcz's (2001) study and, on the other, Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* who studied the historical background of the eastern/western dichotomy. Böröcz's theory is based on a very economical approach, whilst Wolff concluded that the world's western part has a strong cultural need for the eastern one, particularly as an antithesis that supports their own self-definition. After that, based on Edward Said's classic work, *Orientalism,* Milica Bakić-Hayden, in her work "Nesting Orientalism. The Case of Former Yugoslavia" (1995), pointed out that Eastern Europeans are the opposite of what Western Europeans thought about themselves: the civilised and civilising ones; that "barbaric" side of this representation of Balkan people, citing Rebecca West, who only remembers one thing about the Balkans: "violence" (Bakić-Hayden, 1995: 917–918). A remarkable attempt is by Marija Todorova in her book *Imaging the Balkans* (1997), based on Said's *Orientalism,* in which she developed the concept of "Balkanism" and emphasised the existence of the phenomenon of generalisation. Later she published *Balkanism and Postcolonialism, or On the Beauty of the Airplane View* (2010), Vesna Goldsworth (1998) in *Inventing Ruritania* studied how the Balkan "otherness" was structured from the Renaissance myths to contemporary British literature, containing the symbolic distinction between West and East. From the viewpoint of postcolonialism, among others, David Chioni Moore wrote a great essay (2006), revealing that although the countries of the former Eastern Bloc were under Soviet rule, local postcolonialism does not target them but the West, which is both envied and, due to its exclusion, hated in the post-Soviet regions. Dubravka Juraga's study (1996) attempted to draw a parallel

between Africa and the Balkans, while Ihar Babkou's "A modern/posztkoloniális a kelet-európai határvidéken" [The Modern/Postcolonial at the Eastern European Borderland] (2012) gave a comprehensive picture of this research field. Finally, Alexander Kiossev's study (1995) emphasised the recipients' self-colonising processes under the banner of modernisation in arts, including the uncriticised internalisation of all that is Western being equated with "civilisation".

From the side of internet meme-related studies, some of the most important books and studies were mentioned in the previous chapter: Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Jenkins (2009), Jenkins et al. (2009). From the very beginning of the internet meme conception, Shifman (2014), Milner (2013, 2016), and Börzsei (2013) as researchers who further developed the scientific discourse about internet memes, Drakett et al. (2018) and Leiser (2019), who focused their research more on stereotypes, however, Shifman and Milner also touched on the issue for a few chapters. At the same time, in addition to the above, researching stereotypes among internet memes is not a no-man's land: there are plenty of (mostly qualitative) studies regarding people of colour (e.g. Yoon, 2016; Williams et al., 2016, Drakett et al., 2018, Matamoros-Fernández, 2020), women (e.g. Phillips, 2015) and sexual minorities (Noam Gal et al., 2015).

Internet memes on a non-western topic have been examined less frequently, and if at all, then generally with a strong political communication approach. One work is Anastasia Denisova's *Internet Memes and Society* (2019), which is also a summary, but the ambiance and the corpus examined are memes on Russian Twitter, mostly opposition creators. The same is true for the Chinese memes studied by Wand et al. (2016), the Singapore memes in the analysis of Sreekumar and Vadrevu (2013), or Büsra Kilic's paper (2017) on so-called "caps" culture in Turkey. This culture is rooted in the avant-garde and was reborn via internet memes in Turkey, making it a great example of cultural idiosyncrasy combined with global patterns and elements (Denisova, 2019: 46).

In addition to the aforementioned aspects, most research examining internet memes is qualitative. Quantitative or hybrid research with a large sample – over 100–200 elements – is especially rare. There are of course a few examples, like Nissenbaum et al. – including Shifman (2015) – who carried out network research on 1,013 internet memes creating the "meme family" and the "quiddity" concept (i.e. certain key elements that link internet memes, see below). Another, relatively large, sample of humorous memes was examined by Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), who did qualitative research on the type of humour in 651 internet memes, but quantified the results.

In sum, the research gap is Balkan memes examined from a post-colonialist view-point, with logics of critical discourse analysis, on a convincingly sized pattern to reveal stereotypes and their characteristics that convey power asymmetry.

Proposed methods

The following three main research questions were selected:
- – Q1: What kind of stereotypes appear in the memes examined?
- – Q2: What are the visual or textual elements used to convey these stereotypes?

- Q3: What is the connection between the stereotypes, the visual or textual elements, and the recipients' reactions?

As mentioned above, the research takes a clearly critical point of view; the starting point is given by Norman Fairclough's text-based critical discourse analysis, which seeks to identify signs of inequality in the text. The basic unit of analysis is the internet meme, based on Michael Foucault's (1980) *énoncé* (a meaningful "statement" that could serve an interest or rebel against it), as Lankshare and Knobel analysed internet memes with discourse analysis (2007).

In this research, I took a hybrid approach, mixing qualitative and quantitative methods (triangulation), which examined the Balkan internet memes themselves, as well as recipients' reactions. The latter could be deduced to some extent by counting "likes" (or "points", as it is called on 9gag.com). The framework could be interpreted via a simplified adaptation of David Berlo's SMCR model (see Figure 1 below).
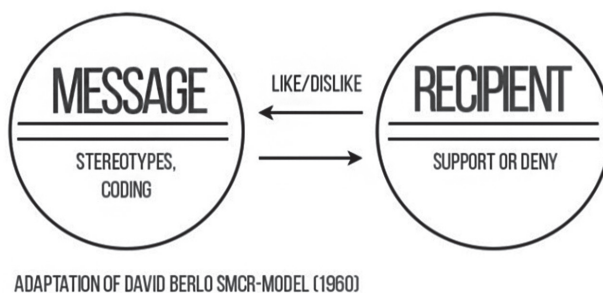
Figure 1: Adaptation of Davie Berlo's SMCR model
Source: Compiled by the author (based on Berlo, 1960).

The first part – the sender – is missing, as it could not be examined due to the semi-hidden appearance (near-anonymity) of the original posters, and the available means (personal interviews) for analysing how these are communicated could only provide very little quantifiable results and are therefore not sufficiently representative.

As far as the messages – the memes – are concerned: the dimensions of the analysis along which the coding took place were classified into three main groups, inspired by Shifman's content–form–stance system and by the quiddity concept of Nissenbaum et al.

In the figure below, "content" contains the stereotype appearing in the meme. The appearance of the stereotype (and its subdimensions) and the genre of the internet meme falls under "form", while the attitude towards to the stereotype constitutes the "stance" category. The three subdimensions – character, action or behaviour and textual parts known as "phrase" according to Nissenbaum et al. – can be connected to the mysterious quiddity that "unites instances into one family and the generic attributes defining the mainstream culture of the memetic sphere" (Nissenbaum et al., 2015: 422).

Figure 2: Synthesis of the useful elements of the most important theories
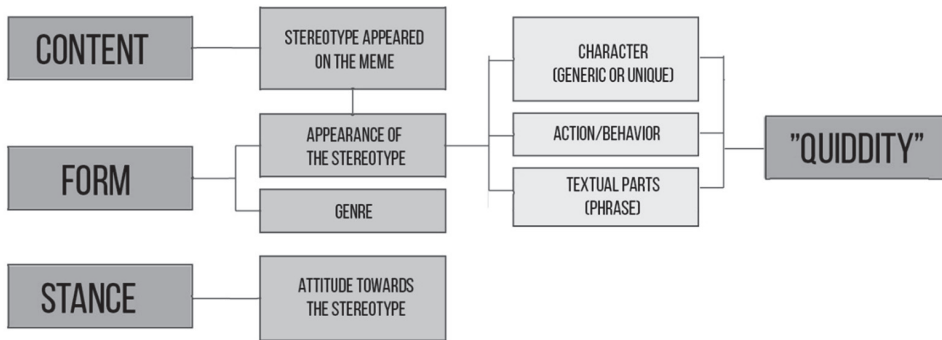*Source: Compiled by the author.*

The codebook itself was compiled using inductive and deductive methods, thus partly based on the dimensions and approaches of former research, and partly on the findings of the precoding, which were carried out on 10% of the entire sample and checked by a secondary coder. I coded the whole corpus manually, and then 10% of the sample was checked by the secondary coder as well.

Let us see the details of the dimensions. To specify the stereotypes (Q1) that appeared in the internet memes of the corpus, there should be some initial set of categories. As stereotypes on the Balkans is a barely researched topic, not only in the field of online communication, but in general as well, the stereotype categories of Elza Ibroscheva from her Russian-related survey (Ibroscheva, 2002) was the strongest deductive pillar, and the precoding of 10% of the sample led us to a reliable set of stereotypes.

As we will see, there were certain basically different types of stereotypes that could be identified: stereotypes with more positive connotations, as *family-oriented, pretty women* or *hospitable;* others that were more neutral (though this depends on recipients' attitudes) connotations as *cunning/tricky, tough, macho, impetuous, religious* or *hairy.* There were others that were connected to what can be described as "self-destructive" or "decadent" lifestyle: *glutton, carnivorous, heavy drinker, heavy smoker;* there were some that were related to underdeveloped economics: as *bad infrastructure, poor, old/ tuned vehicles* or *speaking broken English;* and, finally, there were some that could be called negative stereotypes, mostly related to peoples projected "bad" nature: *aggressive, barbarian, criminal* or *lazy.*

As for the form, there are several dimensions and sub-dimensions (Q2). Conceptualising the genre of a meme was simple and easy to define, relying on the typology of Ryan Milner, who synthesised and categorised 13 genres of internet memes (2016: 84–86) depending on their composition and style specifics. The more complicated dimension was the appearance of the stereotypes. This had three sub-dimensions, borrowed from Nissenbaum et al. (2015) who actually found five, but their first category, the object category, melted in the action/behaviour category. This was because the precoding proved that objects could embody any stereotypes and connect to actions or behaviour:

e.g. a heavily laden table connects to the practice of the feast, not to an object (e.g. the table), or, in the case of some grey panel houses on the meme, the action – living in them – is inseparable from the object. What is more, there were plenty of elements that added nothing to the meaning of the meme, so coding them automatically seemed to be completely unnecessary and distracting, because the aim of the research was finding *differentia specificas.* As well, the focus was on striking elements: e.g. if a meme contained roads, traffic signs, houses, and some mountains in the background, but the meaning – conveyed by, for instance, the title "Balkan road repair. Ohrid, Macedonia" – brought viewers' attention to the road, then the other elements were not coded. So, in this dimension we listed different elements (squatting, beating children, over-sexualisation, corruption, autocratic moves, etc.), clothing of people, the infrastructure (buildings, roads, playgrounds, markets, etc.) that play a role in the meaning of the meme and reinforcing or challenging the appeared stereotype, as well as vehicles used, and – because it seemed to be extremely important – gastronomy.

The same effect of melting into the category of simple *character* happened with specific or unique characters and generic characters. The former means a certain character like Tom, the cat from the cartoon movie, while the generic character means its category, in this case: "cat". In this sample, however, precoding showed that there were very blurry border areas. Although creating new memes from a character makes it unique or specific, using communication for a certain way brings it closer to a generic, or generic but unnamed, character became specific via usage, etc. Thus, analysing them in a way that Nissenbaum et al. (2015) did would have resulted in some duplications (e.g. Tom and "cat") distorting the figures. What is more, the typology of Nissenbaum et al. was built upon focusing *image macros,* but they are only one genre from the 12 conceptualised by Milner. Moreover, as the sample showed, this is not as common as it was six years ago. Thus, in the typology adapted to the theme, the decisive factor was whether a displayed character was more generic or more specific/unique, and, e.g. Tom is more a well-known, specific cartoon character than a "cat".

Another sub-dimension was added to them: in many cases not only the area but certain countries are marked on the meme, showing to the recipients that, however, many can see the Balkans as a homogenous unit, there is a lot of diversity – but attention was paid to them only when some conflict occurred.

Textual parts, or, according to Nissenbaum et al. (2015), "phrase" should be applied also in a differentiated way. Because the emphasis was on stereotypes instead of on classic text analysis, the focus was on two things: one that we called "textual difference marker": any textual manifestation in the title or on the meme itself that refers to differences from the "norm" (a.k.a. "constructed centrality"). In this approach, we distinguished 15 categories of textual difference markers inductively from the analysed texts. The other aspect is the sharers' possible involvement: any indication that the user who shared or made the meme is connected somehow to the Balkans. This could help to distinguish auto-and hetero-stereotypes. What is more, these phrases were completely the sharers' products (they had to type them in before sharing the image format meme), so these can be taken to definitely represent their own thinking.

This is the main reason that this dimension was, in this case, connected more to the attitude towards the stereotype in question. Therefore in this research, this dimension was mostly analysed from the perspective of the *stance*. Pragmatically, as visual parts, too, also relying on the humour strategies mentioned in the Introduction section. These strategies were leading to a methodologically interpretable direction, with their relation to the represented stereotypes on an internet meme, as a meme can agree with and challenge that stereotype, formally. But, in addition to this, the pragmatic approach revealed to us that if a meme agreed with the stereotype, but did so ironically, that was a stereotype-challenging relation. If on the other hand a meme's stance challenged the stereotype, but ironically, that meant that the meme pragmatically represented an agreeing opinion.

After identifying all the stereotypes and elements, the second phase was about searching for the connections between them: what stereotypes correlate with each other and what connections emerge. It was challenging to find a useful method to reveal these correlations because of the composition of the dataset extracted from findings. Most of the data was binary coded, except for the number of points (see below), so we used a hybrid method: a simple correlation analysis, which strengthened the assumed connections, and weighted this by the amount of the concomitance of the elements – the latter method was helpful to filter those correlations that were strong only because of the low number of items.

However, there was no opportunity to measure recipients' reactions to the Balkan memes in a detailed way. To answer Q2 and Q3 in a cumulative manner, an additional dimension should be added: the number of points given by recipients on the 9gag website, which made this data quantifiable. In this manner, it was possible to learn what stereotypes, or attitude towards certain stereotypes, or visual or textual elements were popular, rewarded by actual consumers of this digital content.

Data collection

The sample was also collected manually from the aforementioned popular meme-aggregator site called 9gag.com, relying on its search engine, searching key words: *Balkan, Balkans, Balkanic.* The result of the search: 556 memes listed – every copy of a meme counts as a separate one, even if it has only a tiny difference.

There were also some other principles: only still images were included in the sample because video memes would have necessitated a very different approach and would have jeopardised comparability. Although individual national discourses would also have been interesting, the research focused on communication in the larger, international public, so only content in English was examined. For the sake of representativity, only popular memes were examined that gained at least some degree of popularity: at least 20 points (this is a minimum for the "trending" section, which makes the meme more visible) or 5 comments from users (which presupposes that it was a discussion starter meme).

After applying these filters, the amount of the sample decreased to 493 memes.

Limitation: unfortunately, there was no opportunity to carrying out a huge text analysis on 20,035 comments because only a small part of comments can be seen or copied, so this attempt failed in the phase of planning data mining.

Results

Stereotypes

The findings showed that 652 stereotypes appeared on the 493 Balkan memes – an average of slightly more than one (1.3) each. The most common stereotypes can be seen on the following table.

Table 1: Stereotypes

stereotype	appea-rance	% of the appeared stereotypes	% of memes
glutton	99	15.2%	20%
cunning/trickv	68	10.4%	13.8%
tough	63	9.7%	12.8%
carn1vorous	57	8.7%	11.5%
aggress1ve	55	8.4%	11.1%
inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	52	8%	10.5%
heavy drinker	51	7.8%	10.3%
bad infrastructure	40	6.1%	8.1%
barba rian	36	5.5%	7.3%
poor	23	3.5%	4.7%
old/tuned vehicle	23	3.5%	4.7%
fa mily-oriented	22	3.4%	4.5%
macho	21	3.2%	4.3%
criminal	19	2.9%	3.8%
dumb	19	2.9%	3.8%
impetuous	17	2.6%	3.4%
pretty women	11	1.7%	2.2%
relig·ious	8	1.2%	1.6%
lazv	6	0.9%	1.2%
hair	6	0.9%	1.2%
heavy smoker	6	0.9%	1.2%
hospitable	5	0.8%	1.0%
spea k broken English	0	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Characters

Characters, generic and unique/specific ones – were also widespread among Balkan memes. It was not an easy task to differentiate between them. We can see that intertextuality, as Milner (2016) pointed out, was highly remarkable: there were many characters from Western popular culture (movies, series, cartoons, comics, etc., e.g. *Peter Parker* as Spiderman, *Tom,* the cat from the Tom&Jerry cartoon), from well-known Western based meme characters as Orange Jacket Guy – as we can see, borders are not so strict, as the meme named "Tom calls" belongs to both of them; and there were Balkan-related characters as well. As we can see, Balkan memes are rich in characters applied to the topic, 194 characters were found connected to the sample.

Below we can see the results:

Table 2: Popular characters and their frequency

Characters	Appearance	% of the appeared characters	% of memes
Countryballs	25	12.9%	5.1%
Babushkas	21	10.8%	4.3%
(Pretty) women	14	7.2%	2.8%
Living animals in meaningful roles	14	7.2%	2.8%
Orange Jacket Guy babushka version	10	5.2%	2.0%
Balkan politicians	8	4.1%	1.6%
Daddies	8	4.1%	1.6%
Orange Jacket Guy	8	4.1%	1.6%
Gopniks	4	2.1%	0.8%
Tom	4	2.1%	0.8%
Peter park	4	2.1%	0.8%
Simpsons	4	2.1%	0.8%
Nat from Sponge Bob	4	2.1%	0.8%
E.T.	4	2.1%	0.8%
"Increasing"	3	1.5%	0.6%
Monkey puppet	3	1.5%	0.6%
"Baby yoda"	3	1.5%	0.6%
Matthew McConaughey	3	1.5%	0.6%
Gangsters	2	1.0%	0.4%

Characters	Appearance	% of the appeared characters	% of memes
"Starter pack"	2	1.0%	0.4%
Duct-Tape Guy	2	1.0%	0.4%
Futurama character	2	1.0%	0.4%
Roll safe meme	2	1.0%	0.4%
Waiting family with knives meme	2	1.0%	0.4%
Manga	1	0.5%	0.2%
C3PO	1	0.5%	0.2%
Bear Grylls "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome"	1	0.5%	0.2%
Others	35	18.5%	7.1%
Total	194	100.0%	39.3%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Actions/behaviours/habits

The dimensions aforementioned mixing some aspects could be another strong marker of the Balkan meme family, with sub-dimensions: clothing, behaviour, infrastructure, vehicles and gastronomy. As these were not discrete categories, total amount of "% of memes" could not be shown.

Table 3: Behaviour and appearance

	Actions/behaviours/habits	Appearance	% of the appeared ones	% of memes
Outdated or tasteless clothing	Retro/tastelessness/outdated clothes	24	31.6%	4.9%
	Folk clothes	12	15.8%	2.4%
	Crocheted textiles	12	15.8%	2.4%
	"Adidas"	11	14.5%	2.2%
	Others	17	22.4%	3.4%
	Total	76	100.0%	15.4%

	Actions/behaviours/habits	Appear-ance	% of the appeared ones	% of memes
Behaviour/ phenomena	International tensions in the Balkans	71	24.7%	14.4%
	Botchery	53	18.4%	10.8%
	Corruption/autocracy	23	8.0%	4.7%
	Nationalism	18	6.3%	3.7%
	Die hard	16	5.6%	3.2%
	To be a "true" Balkanic	12	4.2%	2.4%
	Science	10	3.5%	2.0%
	Parental abuse	8	2.8%	1.6%
	Language specifics	8	2.8%	1.6%
	Nostalgia	8	2.8%	1.6%
	Explicit expression meaning "this is a shitty place!"	7	2.4%	1.4%
	Jerk driving	7	2.4%	1.4%
	Pride	4	1.4%	0.8%
	Tooth loss	4	1.4%	0.8%
	Circumventing the rules	4	1.4%	0.8%
	Sexuality	3	1.0%	0.6%
	Others	33	11.5%	6.7%
	Total	288	100.0%	58.4%
Infrastructure	Panel house	15	31.9%	3.0%
	Poor rural landscape	10	21.3%	2.0%
	Road in poor condition	7	14.9%	1.4%
	House (ramshackle/tasteless)	4	8.5%	0.8%
	Playground	2	4.3%	0.4%
	Beauty of natural landscape	2	4.3%	0.4%
	Bedroom/restroom	2	4.3%	0.4%
	Beauty of buildings	1	2.1%	0.2%
	Others	4	8.5%	0.8%
	Total	47	100.0%	9.5%
Vehicles	Western car brands	17	54.8%	3.4%
	Eastern car brands	4	12.9%	0.8%
	Special vehicles	10	32.3%	2.0%
	Total	31	100.0%	6.3%

	Actions/behaviours/habits	Appear-ance	% of the appeared ones	% of memes
Gastronomy	Meats	57	30.2%	11.6%
	Grilled food/grilling as a process	24	12.7%	4.9%
	National dishes	50	26.5%	10.1%
	Alcoholic drinks	42	22.2%	8.5%
	Others	16	8.5%	3.2%
	Total	189	100.0%	38.3%

Source: Compiled by the author.

There was an added sub-dimension about countries in the memes; however, particular national tendencies were not examined in this research.

Table 4: Countries and their representation in numbers

Former Yugoslavian states or entities (Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, (North)Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia)	226
Balkans outside of the former Yugoslavia (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania)	99
Other Eastern European countries (Belarus, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine)	24
Turkey	13
Western European countries	15
Other first-world countries	8
Former countries (Austria–Hungary, Byzantine, Yugoslavia, Roman Empire, Soviet Union)	13
Total	398

Source: Compiled by the author.

Genres

The only discrete category was the genres; using Milner's typology, the results were the following:

Table 5: Genres and their appearance

Genres	Appearance	% of memes
Stacked stills	165	33.5%
Photos	153	31.0%
Annotated stills	52	10.5%
Shops	34	6.9%
Graphs	25	5.1%
Macros	21	4.3%
Screenshots	13	2.6%
Texts	12	2.4%
Drawings	10	2.0%
Rage comics	4	0.8%
Demotivationals	2	0.4%
Memes "IRL"	2	0.4%
Quotes	0	0.0%
Total	493	100.0%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Textual parts and the attitude

As for the first part – textual difference markers – the results showed the amount of them with a few examples:

Table 6: "Language difference markers" and their forms

"Language difference marker"	Appearance	Example
Meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	33	*"Slavic childhood memories"*
Summary	3	*"Balkan in a nutshell"*
Explicit expression of "it's bad to live here"	4	*"My country is no longer European"*
Achievement/speciality	2	*"Golden section Slav"*
Comparison	20	*"Only in Bosnia"*
(Insider) knowledge	20	*"Balkans will relate"*
Presentation ("look how things are going here")	21	*"Balkans be like..."*
Emotional expression	5	*"I love Balkans"*
Normative expression	10	*"It couldn't be more Slavic than this"*
Exaggeration	1	*"Slav power!"*

"Language difference marker"	Appearance	Example
Hidden, inner self	1	*"Modern house but you are from the Balkans"*
Strangeness of a foreign language	7	*"Nazdravlje"*
Resist	3	*"My culture is not your goddamn prom dress"*
Total	130	–

Source: Compiled by the author.

The other part was about the sharers' connection to the Balkans: there was the expression of connection on 56 memes, or 11.4% of the sample.

Concerning attitudes: agreement was overwhelmingly more common than challenging attitudes:

Table 7: Attitudes and their distribution

	Attitude	No. of appearances	% of memes*
Agreeing	Agreeing straightforward	386	78.3%
	Denying/challenging ironic	70	14.2%
Denying/challenging	Agreeing ironic	21	4.3%
	Denying/challenging straightforward	14	2.8%

*Only one meme did not refer to any stereotype.
Source: Compiled by the author.

Meaningful correlations

As for Q3, there was not an easy task to find correlations between the stereotypes due to the low average value on one meme (1.36), particularly not when weighted with the number of common appearance and all appearance. Nine of them stood out:

Table 8: Stereotypes and their correlations

Stereotype #1		Stereotype #2	P	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of S#1	% of all the appearances of S#2
Glutton	&	carnivorous	0.67	54	54.5%	94.7%
Aggressive	&	tough	0.17	16	29.1%	25.4%
Cunning/tricky	&	bad infrastructure	0.14	12	17.6%	30.0%
Macho	&	tough	0.25	11	52.4%	17.5%

Stereotype #1		Stereotype #2	P	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of S#1	% of all the appearances of S#2
Impetuous	&	aggressive	0.22	8	47.1%	14.5%
Cunning/tricky	&	old/tuned vehicles	0.11	7	10.3%	30.4%
Poor	&	inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	0.14	7	30.4%	13.5%
Impetuous	&	tough	0.13	6	35.3%	9.5%
Poor	&	old/tuned vehicles	0.18	5	21.7%	21.7%
Aggressive	&	religious	0.21	5	9.1%	62.5%

Source: Compiled by the author.

There were also correlations between the other dimensions; e.g. stereotypes and main characters (10+ of total appearances):

Table 9: Stereotypes and main characters

Stereotype	Characters	No. of common appearance	% of the appearances of stereotypes	% of the character's appearances
Aggressive	Countryballs	15	27.30%	60%
Pretty women	Pretty women	10	90.90%	71.40%
Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	Babushkas	10	19.20%	47.60%
	OJG-Babushka	6	11.50%	60%
Family-oriented	Babushkas	6	27.30%	33%
Barbarian	Countryballs	5	13.90%	25%
Glutton	Babushkas	5	5.10%	23.80%
	OJG-Babushka	5	5.10%	50%
	Living animals	4	4%	28.60%
Tough	Living animals	5	7.90%	35.70%

Source: Compiled by the author.

These are worth examining from the characters' viewpoint. E.g. *countryballs* were connected to *aggressivity* (15 occurrences, 60% of *countryballs,* 27.3% of appearance of aggressive stereotype), to *barbarism* (5 occurrences, 25%/13.9%), *babushkas* to *family-orientation* (6 occurrences, 33%/27.3%), to *gluttony* (5 occurrences, 23.8%/5.1%), *inappropriate clothes* (10 occurrences, 47.6%/19.2%), *pretty women* (10 occurrences,

71.4%/90.9%), *living animals* to *toughness* (5 occurrences, 35.7%/7.9%), *gluttony* (4 occurrences, 28.6%/4%), *Orange Jacket Guy (OJG) Babushka Version* to *gluttony* (5 occurrences, 50%/5.1%) and *inappropriate clothes* (6 occurrences, 60%/11.5%).

Stereotypes and actions/behaviours/habits had more complex interrelations:

Table 10: Relations of stereotypes and popular elements

Stereotype	Actions/behaviours/ habits	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of actions
Glutton	Meats	54	54.50%	94.70%
	National dishes	42	42.40%	84%
	Alcohol	10	10.10%	23.80%
	To be a "true" Balkanic	7	7.10%	58.30%
	Botchery	5	5.10%	9.40%
Carnivorous	Meats	57	100%	100%
	Grilled food/grilling	17	29.80%	70.80%
	National dishes	15	26.30%	30%
	Alcohol	7	12.30%	16.70%
	Botchery	5	8.80%	9.40%
Cunning/tricky	Botchery	34	50%	64.20%
	Alcohol	8	11.80%	19%
	National dishes	6	8.80%	12%
	Retro/tasteless/ outdated clothes	6	8.80%	0.25%
	Panel houses	5	7.40%	33.30%
	Meats	5	7.40%	8.80%
Heavy drinker	Alcohol	35	68.60%	83.30%
	Meat	8	15.70%	15.10%
	Botchery	7	13.70%	13.20%
	Die hard	5	9.80%	31.30%
	Retro/tasteless/ outdated clothes	5	9.80%	20.80%
Inappropriate clothes	Retro/tasteless/ outdated clothes	16	30.80%	66.70%
	Folk clothes	9	17.30%	75%
	Crocheted textiles	9	17.30%	75%
	"Adidas"	8	15.40%	72.70%
	Alcohol	6	11.50%	14.30%
	Botchery	5	9.60%	9.40%
	Meat	5	9.50%	8.80%

Bad infrastruc-ture	Botchery	16	40%	30.20%
	Panel houses	14	35%	93.30%
	Poor rural landscape	7	15.70%	70%
	Die hard	4	10%	25%
	Alcohol	4	10%	9.50%
Aggressive	International tensions in the Balkans	42	76.40%	59.20%
Tough	International tensions in the Balkans	14	22.20%	19.70%
	Alcohol	11	17.50%	26.20%
	Die hard	7	11.10%	43.80%
	Botchery	5	7.90%	9.40%
Old/tuned vehicle	Botchery	10	43.50%	18.90%
	Special vehicles	8	34.80%	80%
	Western car brand	7	40.50%	41.20%
	Die hard	4	17.40%	25%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 11: Stereotypes and genres
Stereotypes and genres too:

Stereotype	Genres	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of genres
Glutton	photo	42	42.40%	27.5%
	stacked stills	35	35.40%	21.2%
	shops	9	9.10%	26.5%
	annotated stills	7	7.10%	13.5%
Cunning/tricky	photo	36	52.90%	23.5%
	stacked stills	14	20.60%	8.5%
	annotated stills	5	7.40%	9.6%
	macro	5	7.40%	23.8%
Tough	stacked stills	22	34.90%	13.3%
	photo	16	25.40%	10.5%
	shops	8	12.70%	23.5%

Stereotype	Genres	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of genres
Carnivorous	stacked stills	23	40.40%	13.9%
	photo	26	45.60%	17.0%
Aggressive	stacked stills	23	41.80%	13.9%
	graphs	8	14.50%	32%
	drawing	5	9.10%	50%
Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	stacked stills	20	38.50%	12.1%
	photo	18	34.60%	11.8%
	annotated stills	7	13.50%	13.5%
	shops	6	11.50%	17.6%
Heavy drinker	stacked stills	19	37.30%	11.5%
	photo	12	23.50%	7.8%
	annotated stills	6	11.80%	11.5%
Bad infrastructure	photo	22	55.00%	14.4%
	stacked stills	9	22.50%	5.5%
	shops	5	12.50%	14.7%
Barbarian	shops	7	19.40%	20.6%
	stacked stills	11	30.60%	6.7%
	photo	12	33.30%	7.8%
Poor	stacked stills	7	30.40%	4.2%
	photo	6	26.10%	3.9%
	annotated stills	6	26.10%	11.5%
Old/tuned vehicle	photo	13	56.50%	8.5%
Family-oriented	photo	8	36.40%	5.2%
Macho	stacked stills	10	47.60%	6.1%
	photo	9	42.90%	5.9%
Criminal	stacked stills	10	52.60%	6.1%

Stereotype	Genres	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of genres
Dumb	stacked stills	6	31.60%	3.6%
Impetuous	stacked stills	8	47%	4.8%
Pretty women	stacked stills	5	45.50%	3.0%
Religious	stacked stills	5	62.50%	3.0%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 12: Stereotypes and textual parts

Stereotype	"Language difference makers"	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of LDMs
Glutton	(insider) knowledge	7	7.07%	35.0%
	presentation ("look how things are going here")	6	6.06%	28.6%
Cunning/tricky	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	7.35%	15.2%
	presentation ("look, how things are going here")	5	7.35%	23.8%
Tough	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	6	9.52%	18.2%
	comparison	5	7.94%	25.0%
Aggressive	comparison	6	10.91%	30.0%
Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	9.62%	15.2%
Bad infrastructure	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	12.50%	15.2%
Barbarian	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	13.89%	15.2%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Stereotypes and attitude of sharers:

Table 13: Attitudes and the most popular stereotypes

Stereotype	Agreeing straightforward		Denying/challenging ironic		Agreeing ironic		Denying/ challenging straightforward	
	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average
Glutton	72	0.93	20	1.42	5	1.18	2	0.71
Cunning/tricky	45	0.84	18	1.86	4	1.38	1	0.52
Tough	45	0.91	13	1.45	4	1.49	1	0.56
Carnivorous	41	0.92	11	1.36	4	1.64	1	0.62
Aggressive	46	1.07	7	0.89	1	0.43	1	0.64
Inappropriate (…) clothes	38	0.93	9	1.22	4	1.80	1	0.68
Heavy drinker	42	1.05	6	0.83	3	1.38	0	–
Bad infrastructure	24	0.76	13	2.28	3	1.76	0	–
Barbarian	25	0.89	8	1.56	2	1.30	1	0.98
Poor	19	1.05	4	1.22	0	–	0	–
Old/tuned vehicle	12	0.67	10	3.06	1	1.02	0	–
Family-oriented	19	1.10	1	0.32	2	2.13	0	–
Macho	16	0.97	5	1.67	0	–	0	–
Criminal	17	1.14	1	0.37	1	1.23	0	–
Dumb	15	1.01	1	0.37	3	3.70	0	–
Impetuous	13	0.97	3	1.24	1	1.38	0	–
Pretty women	8	0.93	2	1.28	1	2.13	0	–
Religious	6	0.96	0	–	1	2.93	1	4.39
Lazy	6	1.27	0	–	0	–	0	–
Hairy	4	0.85	1	1.17	1	3.90	0	–
Heavy smoker	4	0.85	2	2.34	0	–	0	–
Hospitable	4	1.02	1	1.41	0	–	0	–

Source: Compiled by the author.

and a measure was conveyed on those *attitudes,* who marked their relations to the Balkans.

Table 14: Attitudes of those who are explicitly involved in the Balkans

	Attitude	No. of appearances	% of memes*	Compared to the whole sample
Agreeing	agreeing straightforward	43	76.79%	0.98
	denying/challenging ironic	5	8.93%	0.63
Denying/ challenging	agreeing ironic	4	7.14%	1.66
	denying/challenging straight-forward	4	7.14%	2.55

Source: Compiled by the author.

Recipients

Finally, there are the findings regarding the recipients' preferences (Q3): the share of the dimensions of the total 290,893 likes, and their rates.

Table 15: Audience feedback

	Element	No. of likes	Likes compared to the average
Stereotypes	Glutton	84,321	1.44
	Carnivorous	69,769	2.07
	Tough	39,219	1.06
	Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	38,946	1.27
	Heavy drinker	35,677	1.19
	Aggressive	26,779	0.83
	Cunning/tricky	22,482	0.56
	Barbarian	16,781	0.79
	Poor	16,258	1.20
	Old/tuned vehicle	16,096	1.19
	Family-oriented	15,469	1.19
	Bad infrastructure	8,798	0.37
	Hospitable	8,679	2.94
	Criminal	8,059	0.72
	Pretty women	4,772	0.74
	Dumb	4,704	0.42
	Macho	3,035	0.24
	Heavy smoker	2,108	0.60
	Impetuous	1,587	0.16
	Lazy	980	0.28
	Religious	660	0.14
	Hairy	446	0.13

	Element	No. of likes	Likes compared to the average
Characters	Countryballs	9,918	0.67
	Babushkas	6,316	0.51
	(Pretty) women	7,695	0.93
	Living animals in meaningful roles	10,543	1.28
	Orange Jacket Guy babushka version	15,756	2.67
	Balkan politicians	7,695	1.63
	Daddies	862	0.18
	Orange Jacket Guy	676	0.14
	Gopniks	213	0.09
	Tom	221	0.09
	Peter park	208	0.09
	Simpsons	842	0.36
	Nat from Sponge Bob	3,272	1.39
	E.T.	1,052	0.45
	"Increasing"	612	0.35
	Monkey puppet	4,523	2.56
	"Baby Yoda"	93	0.05
	Matthew McConaughey	8,581	4.85
	Gangsters	122	0.10
	"Starter pack"	671	0.57
	Duct-tape guy	6,858	5.81
	Futurama character	670	0.57

Source: Compiled by the author.

Discussion

The findings revealed some well-identified patterns regarding *stereotypes, characters* and other dimensions and also how they interrelate.

The most common stereotypes describe the basic features of the Balkan meme family; and the answer to Q1 was therefore clear: the leading stereotype-categories were not the malicious ones: *decadent* stereotypes play the most important role. The first and fourth most common ones (*glutton* and *carnivorous*) belong to that; as stereotype category, *decadence* won with 213 appearances; so-called neutral ones are the second (183 appearances), *cunning/tricky* and *tough* were remarkable. *Bad nature* category was only the third, with slightly less appearances (116), however, e.g. *aggressive* was amongst the top ones. Results of the commonly underdeveloped economics (86) are visible in the *bad infrastructure* (40 apps), *poverty* and *old/tuned vehicles* follows it. Obviously positive stereotypes underperformed with only 38 appearances – and, as we will see, the most popular one, *family-oriented* was attached sometimes to a not so positive practice: about one-third of them (8) were connected to the behaviour of *parental abuse*. So, all in all, we can say that

the majority of the Balkan stereotypes appeared were neither the most malicious nor the most positive. They show Balkan people as having self-destructive behaviours like drinking, smoking, eating too much (especially meat) that make them more dangerous to themselves than to others, although, they are *tough* people, *aggressive,* etc. but are also a product of their circumstances, e.g. *poverty* or *bad infrastructure.*

There was also a clear pattern of correlations between the stereotypes themselves. The leading correlation did not need a detailed explanation – glutton and carnivorous, almost all the memes that represented the latter correlated with the former, and *carnivorous* appeared on the majority of the memes where *glutton* showed up as well. *Impetuous* and *aggressive* had also some correlation; *aggressive* and *tough,* or *impetuous* and *tough,* or *macho* and *tough,* too – their meanings were not so far from each other, so that was to some extent an expected correlation. More notable was the relation between *poor* and *inappropriate clothes* – showing that clothing not only depended on personal choices, but also on opportunities and economic status. The correlation between *cunning/tricky* and *bad infrastructure,* or *cunning/tricky* and *old/tuned vehicles* also underlined the assumption that opportunity- and environment-related stereotypes were connected to the way of solving these challenges: being cunning or tricky. Another exciting correlation was between *aggressive* and *religious:* occurred e.g. as mocking stereotypes with the reverse humour aforementioned, or as tool as an expression of criticism.

As for Q2 and Q3: characters were not as popular as, e.g. the research of Nissenbaum et al. had suggested. With regards to the image of the Balkans, it spoke for itself that the most popular one (with appearances on 25 memes) was a ball that represented a nation, and, as we will notice, not for showing their great neighbouring skills. Female characters in the sample showed two main characteristics: a concept for the old, conservative but caring granny, the *babushka,* and another one for *pretty women.* It was remarkable – and it showed that Denisova's statement about melting global and local elements (2019: 44, 53) in memes – how the well-known *Orange Jacket Guy* meme served as a frame for babushkas. Western impacts were also visible, many of which were connected to Western popular culture as cartoon or movie figures like *Tom, E.T.* or *Peter Parker.*

The characters' correlations with stereotypes were also remarkable, and worth examining from the perspective of the characters' viewpoint. E.g. *countryballs* – representing nations – had strong connections to *aggressivity,* most of the *countryballs*-depicting memes were attached to that stereotype. *Countryballs* had a remarkable share of memes that portray *aggressivity,* and there was also a noticeable connection with *barbarism,* too. As far as the correlations were concerned, there was a strong connection between *aggressive* and *tough* to the *international tensions in the Balkans* phenomenon – which should not need any more explanation, as only a few decades have elapsed after the war. *Babushkas,* even *OJG*-ones, were connected to *family-orientation, gluttony*, and *inappropriate clothes* – housecoat-wearing *babushkas* who disciplined you as a child and made you eat more than you wanted; some prediction we could get about eating habits as living animals were connected to *toughness* and *gluttony.*

Just to summarise the main consequences of *actions/behaviours/habits,* regarding the clothing, we could see those old-fashioned clothes, and *crocheted* or *knitted textiles* accounted for up to half of the findings, so "backwardness" could be the key concept.

However, it is interesting that it was not only *inappropriate clothes* that correlated to these categories, but also *cunning/tricky* and *heavy drinker.*

As the behaviour/phenomena dimension was concerned in general, three of the first four were somehow connected to (Balkan) politics: *international tensions in the Balkans, corruption/autocracy* and *nationalism.* Adding them the rest that were in a loose connection with them (language specifics, nostalgia, telling this is a *shitty place* and *pride*) made up almost half of the category (48.3%). From the perspective of correlations, as mentioned before, the first correlated to *aggressive* and *tough.*

Another big bunch was somehow about the special acceptation of norms and rules: *botchery, die hard* (being unnecessarily brave, risking life for nothing), the expected competence on this (being a true Balkanic) and *jerk driving* made 25.6%. From the perspective of the stereotypes, *cunning/tricky* correlated many of them: *botchery,* as a solution to problems made remarkable figures with 34 common presences that meant a majority on both sides(!). Correlating with botchery was also noticeable in case of eight stereotypes of the nine highlighted (in the sense of correlations), emphasising its role in the core of Balkan stereotypes: solving problems with creative, cheap and/or even tasteless or unpretentious – but in a working – manner.

Gastronomy had also non-discrete categories, but these spoke for themselves anyway: meats, grilling, national dishes and alcoholic drinks with more than 90% of the appearances. From the point of view of the stereotypes, consumption-related correlations were also interesting. *Glutton* and *carnivorous* had some common features as meats and national dishes appeared commonly with both of them. Meanwhile, *to be a true Balkanic* correlation with *gluttony* showed that stereotype to be crucial, according to the sharers. On the other hand, *carnivorous* often meant roasting meat on an open flame. One of the solutions is *E.T.* roasting on a spit, suggesting to the recipients that Balkan people roast and eat every meat, regardless of its kind or its origins.
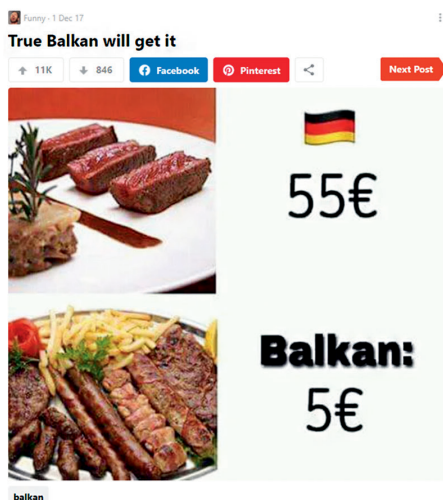
If you belong to us, you will understand
(https://9gag.com/gag/a3Mro43)
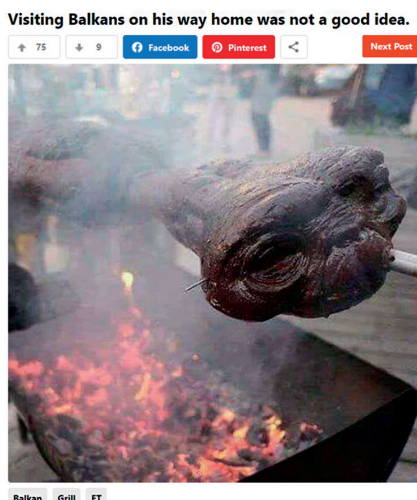
Eating everything, like a barbarian
(https://9gag.com/gag/aL8zLev)

The stereotype *heavy drinker*'s correlation with alcoholic beverages was not a surprise, as was *die hard* – unnecessary bravery was sometimes based on the consumed alcohol – and eating meat could also be connected to big (family) occasions where drinking was a common habit as well. However, from the perspective of alcohol, correlations were very diverse: *booze* appeared with the aforementioned *carnivorous,* at the stereotype of *cunning/tricky* (was the second numerous category), *inappropriate clothes, tough* and *bad infrastructure,* too.

Bad infrastructure was not as highly represented, but there was a remarkable lack of balance between poor environment and beauty, with a rate of 3 to 40. As well, as was mentioned, *botchery* – as a manner to fixing problems regarding the infrastructure – was the leading one. *Panel houses* or *poor rural landscape* was directly referred to this stereotype.

Vehicles also appeared in the sample; on first sight, *Western cars* made the over-whelming majority, but later we will notice that usually they were not "normal" cars, either, but almost half of them (7 of 17) belonged to the stereotype of *old/tuned vehicles.* And there was also a noticeable amount of *special vehicles* – this category contained extraordinarily tuned vehicles, e.g. a supermarket cart rigged up to an old motorbike or tractor attached to a cart (https://9gag.com/gag/argez6B) – that explained the correla-tions with *botchery,* too.

The Orange Jacket Guy (OJG)   (https://9gag.com/gag/argez6B)
(https://9gag.com/gag/azq0YBq)
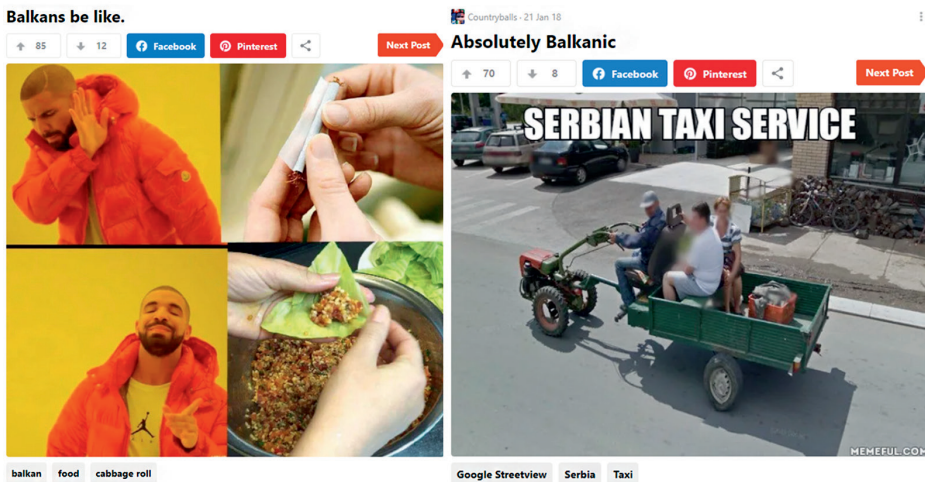
Genres were an exception in sense of discrete categories; the most striking perception was that so-called classic genres, e.g. *demotivationals* or *rage comics* were quite rare, below 1%; *image macros,* too, made up only 4.3% of the sample, however, they were truly widespread on the 9gag website. The most popular genres were *stacked stills* – *OJG, OJG-Babushka,* etc. belonged to this category as well as *countryballs.* This was also the case for photos showing some "extraordinary thing" – those two genres covered

almost two-thirds (64.5%) of the sample, and therefore made the most correlations with stereotypes. Figures showed that the aforementioned "extraordinary things" could be mostly food *(glutton), (cunning/tricky)* solution for something, huge amount of meat *(carnivorous), inappropriate clothing, old/tuned vehicle, bad infrastructure,* etc. *Stacked stills* were often composed of several photos, therefore the patterns were similar on many occasions, although sometimes (e.g. in case of *aggressivity,* which was strongly connected to *international tensions in the Balkans* and *characters of countryballs*) there were other preferences – others tended to correlate with *stacked stills,* and a few of them preferred to collate with *shops.* The relation between *drawings* and *aggressive* was also tendentious: it mostly covered maps with some political references regarding *international tensions in the Balkans* – contemporary or historical ones.

The dimension of language difference markers was quite diverse: pretending, ironically or not, that some – not common – things were common in the Balkans was the most popular category. The same was true of *presentation* (meaning: *"how things are going on here"*), *comparison* (mostly with the West) and pretending to have some *insider knowledge* (mostly on Balkan topics, knowing things that the aforementioned "implicit reader" who should be a Westerner, would not know. This coding process is especially noticeable in the *strangeness of a foreign language*). Their main points are differentiation, identifying themselves as belonging to the Balkans, and – albeit with blurred borders – playing the role of some kind of outsider who "translates" the Balkans for the "implicit reader" unifying with them in an assumed common laugh, or of a Balkan insider, who speaking through the cultural codes of natives to send a message, even if this is only "I am one of you". In terms of correlations with stereotypes, only these few made measurable figures, the *no comment* approach from texts to *bad infrastructure, barbarian, inappropriate clothes, tough, cunning/tricky,* as presenting them as part of the Balkan norms; *presentation* could join it in cases of two stereotypes (*glutton* and *cunning/tricky*), *comparison* as a common counterpart of *aggressive* and *tough,* comparing Western nations, usually with Balkan nations.

It was also interesting that the pattern of the attitudes demonstrated that an attitude of agreement with the stereotypes in question was overwhelmingly in the majority with 92.5% (compared to attitudes of challenging the stereotypes). It was also remarkable that irony had almost the same rates amongst formal agreeing or formal challenging attitudes: 82.6%. It revealed that sharers who identified themselves with marking their obvious connections with the Balkans, drew a somehow different pattern: agreeing attitude lost some 7% while denying/challenging won, and irony also doubled its rates (from 7.1% to 16.1%). The most significant difference emerged in rates of *denying/ challenging ironic* attitude that lost one third and *denying/challenging straightforward* that more than doubled its share. That could lead us to the consequence that the average sharer tended to agree more with stereotypes than with those who had some connection to the Balkans.

As we could see, the same was true for the recipients, too, in fact, much more than the affected sharers: the appearance of the *decadent* stereotype gained the highest number of likes: 1.53 times higher than the average. So-called positive stereotypes were rewarded, too, getting more likes with 1.29. All the rest were less popular,

underdeveloped economics-related stereotype appearances got 0.81, related to people's projected "bad" nature 0.719 and finally, the neutral point of view got only 0.625 times less likes than the average. It was particularly true (with more than double the like shares) for *hospitable* and *carnivorous,* moderately true (ranging from 1.44 to 1.06) for *glutton, inappropriate clothes, poor, heavy drinker, old/tuned vehicle, family-oriented* and *tough.* All the rest were below the average, the most unpopular with below 0.3 like share being *lazy, macho, impetuous, religious, hairy.* These figures might underline the assumption that those who were involved were more generous towards the Balkan concept in terms of stereotypes, softened the edge of the more negative ones, strengthened the positive ones, and also felt some pride for those who supported the image of their so called "decadent" lifestyle (and, as we could see, neutral stereotypes were not affected).

There were a lot of other correlations between visual and textual elements and the number of likes given by recipients to memes that contained those elements. As far as the characters were concerned, those memes where they appeared were basically less popular (0.94) than the average. It is meaningful from the perspective of the lingua franca's superstratum aforementioned that over the average like rate, there were almost only Western-based (meme) characters (*duct-tape guy, Matthew McConaughey,* etc.) in total, and there were only 3 exceptions: a bricolage of the *OJG* Guy (remaking with *Babushka's* character) as a third most popular one, *Balkan politicians'* character, and *living animals* (without nationality), while less popular ones also contained Western characters. An interesting phenomenon is that, too, that the most frequently used characters amongst meme sharers *(countryballs, babushkas, pretty women)* were less popular amongst recipients according to the number of their likes given to those memes that contained that characters.

food-centrism (https://9gag.com/gag/ayxL3py)

OJG Babushka version (https://9gag.com/gag/a9AwmzW)
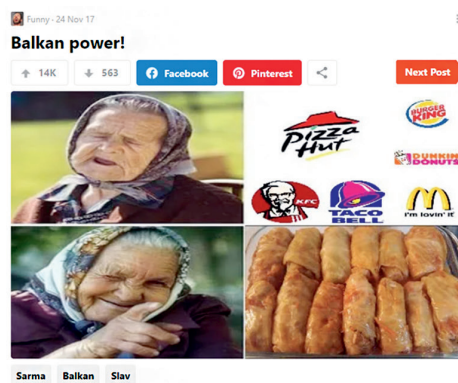
Clothing: according to the recipients, two favourite categories were the most and less numerous ones, *retro/tastelessness/outdated* clothes, and *Adidas* – folk clothes and knitted ones were less popular amongst them.

Behaviours/phenomena category was very diverse in sense of recipients' reactions: the most popular were *corruption/autocracy, sexuality, explicit expression meaning "this is a shitty place!" circumventing the rules, science* and *international tensions in the Balkans.* Meanwhile, *parental abuse* did not gain many likes (0.09), nor did *jerk driving* – probably because of personal involvements. At least, in this category, Balkan-related topics emerged and were popular as well.

Infrastructural characteristics were unpopular in general (0.444 to the average like amount), and only *bathrooms/restrooms* could reach above 1.00. Interestingly, playgrounds and *beauty of natural landscape* got less likes (0.09 and 0.05), while the most common ones *(panel houses, poor rural landscape)* were about the average.

After all the former figures, it was not striking that in the *gastronomy* category (which was generally above average), every specified element got their like-surpluses, particularly *meats* and *grilled food/grilling.* Genres also had their patterns in terms of popularity, showing some predictions regarding the older meme genres: *texts, macros* and *shops* remained popular, while *rage comics, memes IRL* and *demotivationals* were almost forgotten on the part of both sharers and recipients.

Let us take a look at *textual parts* and strong messages, as some obvious expressions cannot be ignored by the audience (figures showed that the average number of likes was 1.21 times of the average). Atypically, the most numerous *no comment* reached the third highest figure (1.49); however, it was very noticeable that the most popular one was the *resist* (textually challenging the interpreted stereotype within the meme) with more than six times more than the average. It was also interesting that a complicit wink with Balkans people did not work as communicating the *hidden, inner self* (accounting for 0.05 of the average).

Attitude was concerned with the last part of the analysis, and it truly strengthens the assumption that recipients reinforced denying/challenging attitudes twice(!) more than agreeing ones. The former could get around the average (1.03) while the latter got 2.03 times of the average. As we could see, agreeing ironically was the most popular attitude (3.25), which could easily relate to the reverse or rebellious humour mentioned in the introduction. Meanwhile, a straightforward denying/challenging attitude was the least popular (0.36), and irony seemed to be overwhelmingly more popular than straightforwardness: an ironic attitude, and humour, won.

Conclusions

Examining this sample of a convincing size, all the questions were answered. First of all, stereotypes were widespread in the sample (Q1) and appeared through well-outlined patterns of visual and textual elements (Q2). These drew the main lines: the strongest stereotypes and their markers: the forever fighting, impetuous, sometimes aggressive Balkan nations; botchery, as the cunning or even tricky (but working) solutions to everyday problems; risk-seeking behaviour, related to toughness, like "die hard"; the excessive consumption of (often grilled) meat, tobacco product and alcohol; signs of economic underdevelopment were also clear through the worn-out built environment;

outdated or tasteless clothing from the viewpoint of the Western centrum; and vehicles, represented by dilapidated, unusually modified or DIY refurbished cars.

The aforementioned signs were also supported by textual parts positioning the sharer as a wannabe Westerner but unsuccessful moderniser of their own community, or a humble interpreter of the Balkans for the implicit – Western – readers, sometimes with the clear marking of their own involvement. However, in these cases, they tended to be more generous regarding the types of stereotypes, favouring self-destructing and positive ones over negative ones. The same could be seen on recipients' reactions: they generally rewarded with more likes reverse humour against stereotypes than simple agreeing or ironically denying (i.e. agreeing) with them (Q3).

Ultimately, this research empirically confirmed the phenomenon of portraying the Balkans as a single unit, with the characteristics of individual nations shown mostly when they are involved a conflict with each other. It also demonstrated the asymmetrical relations with the Western centrum from the perspective of the semi-periphery – another nail in the coffin of the dream of democratic communication through the internet – and revealed the strategies and preferences of recipients and those involved.

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Low Civility and High Incivility in Russian Online Deliberation

A Case of Political Talk in Vkontakte Social Network[1]

Daniil Volkovskii[*], Olga Filatova[**]

[*] HSE University, Moscow, Russia; Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia; ITMO University, Saint Petersburg, Russia

[**] Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia; ITMO University, Saint Petersburg, Russia

One of the most studied fields in deliberative research is (in)civility in Internet-based political discussions on issues of common concern. Uncivil behaviour demonstrated by participants in online communication has various forms and negative effects on the process and outcomes of e-deliberation as well as on deliberators' reactions and attitudes, which have been predominantly investigated in Western democracies. However, this issue has been poorly covered in the countries with less stable democratic traditions and values. This paper explores speech culture with a focus on civility and incivility in Russian political conversations conducted on Russian social media. The authors analyse mass-scale web political discussions on a polarising issue of the court sentence of the politician Alexei Navalny (2021), taking one of the most popular Russian social networks VKontakte. For this study, scholars use discourse analysis based on the works on deliberative democracy proposed by J. Habermas (1996). They conclude that Russian political speech regarding Navalny's sentence and conducted on the VKontakte social media platform can be characterised by a great extent of uncivil speech unbalanced by a low extent of civil speech. The conversations are not oriented towards mutual recognition or reaching a consensus, as participants are often distracted from the main issue being discussed, and turn to interpersonal topics instead.

Introduction

Democratic deliberation stands for the multiplicity and availability of views and interests which are extremely significant, especially in complex and pluralistic societies marked by deep differences and disagreements (Scudder, 2020). Despite some conflicts that can appear unsolvable among citizens, much attention should be given to the respectful and polite attitude of participants, their opinions and the way they express them, including equal opportunities for its expression as well. Nowadays, e-deliberation which may be defined as "an online deliberation process that uses the Internet to sense public opinion on one or more specific issues, to enable and enhance discussion among citizens, and to shape consent among citizens" (Fitsilis, 2022) is one of the most discussed forms of political Internet communication studied by scholars from all over the world. Apparently, online political discussions may contain constructive ideas, deeply reasoned positions of citizens, convincing examples from practice, expert's references and combinations of opposing points of view (Coleman, 2018); however, there may be some problems regarding (in)civility and hate speech.

The deliberative theory argues that political conversations should be civil, polite and respectful towards deliberators and their positions (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2007). However, some empirical studies refute this normative claim pointing out that not all online comments of participants contribute to achieving this ideal (Bodrunova et al. 2021; Filatova & Volkovskii, 2021b; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2022). Moreover, exogenous shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic may disrupt politeness norms and lead to real negative consequences both for participants and observers of the Internet-based deliberative process.

Considering the ambivalence of the (in)civility issue in theory and practice as well as the destructive impact of Covid-19 on civility norms, it has become more relevant to address the research of (un)civil speech patterns in political online discussions on acute societal issues. In this paper, we analyse civility and incivility in Russian public deliberation conducted on Russian social media. To this end, we refer to Internet-based conversations on the issue of the politician Alexei Navalny's court sentence (2021). While this verdict has received little scholarly attention in Russia, it has been one of the most actively debated and certainly polarised topics in the Russian public sphere. Our sampling is represented by four discussions on the VKontakte social network on the pages of four politically polarised Russian media outlets. For our research, we employ the methodology of discourse analysis developed by Yuri Misnikov (2011) based on the works of Jürgen Habermas concerning deliberative democracy.

Research question: How can Russian political discussions on the VKontakte pages of Russian media outlets regarding the court sentence of Navalny be characterised in terms of (un)civil criteria?

Hypothesis: Russian political discussions about Navalny's court sentence conducted on the VKontakte pages of Russian media outlets can be described as having a high level of incivility unbalanced by a low extent of civility.

Research on online deliberation

Over the last two decades, the body of literature on e-deliberation has grown rapidly. Nevertheless, there are still many open questions regarding the relation between such relevant components of online deliberation as design, the communication processes and the outcomes that need to be clarified in normative (finding an ideal), descriptive (investigating empirical nature) and prescriptive ways (how things can be altered in order to achieve progress) (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009). D. Friess and C. Eliders (2015) distinguished three main directions on online deliberation research which we briefly outline.

a) Institutional input ("design") – the institutional design that sheds light on the preconditions of deliberation, enables and fosters it. For example, it may include institutional arrangements (e.g. participatory budgeting), platforms (e.g. government-run platform) and socio-political elements (e.g. internet access rate and social strata).

b) Productive outcome ("results") – the expected results of deliberation, their internal (e.g. new knowledge and experience, change of positions and preferences) and external effects (e.g. policy metamorphoses).

c) Communicative throughput ("process") – the communication processes through which individuals participate and its quality, ways how consensus can be built and reached democratically.

From the literature, it can be observed that a plethora of political investigations is devoted to studying places, forums and institutions where citizens can consciously come together to participate in political decision-making, design of deliberation, its format, quality and potential in the joint development of public policy by citizens and authorities, all of which comprise various modes of communicating online (Filatova et al. 2019; Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Santana, 2014; Stiegler & De Jong, 2015; Zhang et al., 2013), deliberative quality of civil political talk in social networks, features of social media and their impact on online deliberative process between citizens (Bodrunova, 2021; Choi, 2014; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Savin, 2019; Stroud et al., 2015).

Research on (in)civility in deliberative studies

One of the most studied fields in deliberative research, which refers to the research direction of communicative throughput, is (in)civility in online political conversations on issues of common concern. Civility presupposes a respect for and affirmation of all individuals and viewpoints, even in the face of differences and contention (Stroud et al., 2015; Stryker et al., 2016). However, this term still lacks conceptual clarity and a clear

definition across disciplines, as it has been investigated by scholars from political theory, philosophy, communication, sociology and other fields. Some scholars link civility to politeness, etiquette, or good manners (Laden, 2019), some compare it to forgiveness (Stuckey & O'Rourke, 2014), others to respect (Reiheld, 2013; Rood, 2014). One point on which the literature agrees is that politeness or mutual respect is a necessary, and for some, sufficient part of any definition of civility (Mutz, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Ng & Detenber, 2005; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). However, the meaning of mutual respect and politeness may vary depending on cultural and social norms and contexts, which makes it more complicated to define civility. In addition, norms of politeness may vary in their degree of formality as well (Bonotti & Zech, 2021). There are also concerns that an overemphasis on politeness might inhibit the free flow of ideas in political conversation, resulting in a very polite, restrained and barely human discourse (Papacharissi, 2004).

The fast dissemination and impact of incivility has become a significant concern for both scholars and citizens (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Coe et al., 2011). The definition of incivility has the same problem with conceptualisation as civility does. Although there is a plethora of considerable variations among investigators, determining incivility is still questionable. Incivility can be defined as a set of behaviours that threaten democracy, public discourse (Papacharissi, 2004; Vollhardt et al., 2007), and that frequently includes intimidation, disrespectful speech, hostility and hate speech. Indeed, these days, uncivil behaviour is commonly perceived as a threat to the democratic quality of public discourse (Miller & Vaccari, 2020), including to the integrity and rationality of online discussions (Badjatiya et al., 2017). Additionally, incivility can be simply considered as lacking respect for others and their ideas.

Bonotti and Zech (2021) detected three main manifestations of incivility: a) a failure to comply with norms of politeness; b) moral incivility involving speech or behaviour that fails to respect other citizens, their personal freedom, individual rights and equality opportunities; and c) justificatory incivility which fails to comply with the Rawlsian duty of civility. Bonotti and Zech (2021) have identified four main concerns caused by the pandemic of Covid-19 to people's ability to behave politely: a) it has become complicated for people to determine norms of politeness and behave appropriately in more problematic circumstances; b) the function of civility has been eroded by Covid-19; c) achieving social cooperation or mitigating conflicts has become more difficult as acts of politeness could seem unclear or misunderstood; d) the collapse of politeness norms has been exploited by both citizens and politicians in a negative way that has made communication more impolite and uncivil.

Online deliberation scholars have examined the implications of civil and uncivil online political discourse. Much research concentrates on incivility and its negative influence. For example, previous research has shown that exposure to online incivility increases a release of negative emotions (Gervais, 2017; Masullo et al. 2021), hostile cognitions (Rösner et al. 2016) and perceptions of polarisation (Kim & Park, 2019). It also fosters the likelihood of expressing further uncivil reactions (Chen & Lu, 2017; Rösner & Krämer, 2016), discourages users from taking part in networked discussions (Han & Brazeal, 2015; Ordoñez & Nekmat, 2019), and becomes a key marker of strong

opinion polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014; Bodrunova & Blekanov, 2021), which intensifies political hostility among citizens. Incivility may be perceived as a source of moral panic anxieties (Critcher, 2008). As a result, individuals try to find and use different strategies to regulate and prevent the negative effects of toxic speech because they take responsibility for their digital choices (Syvertsen, 2020). Although uncivil comments that unnecessarily disrespect, label and attack others derail the focus of a discussion and undermine citizen engagement (McClurg, 2006), differences are inherent in politics and are not necessarily harmful to the democratic process. To the extent that citizens exchange views in a civil, reasoned manner, online political comments may promote a sense of civility and motivate political participation (Bodrunova et al. 2021). Research, indeed, suggests that reason-based opinion exchanges online can facilitate deliberation and active political engagement (Han & Brazeal, 2015; Hwang, 2014).

We may observe that the concepts of civility and incivility are elusive and hard to define, thus, there are problems with the conceptualisation and operationalisation of these terms for empirical research and for the analysis of forms of communicative behaviour in online discussions on polarising issues. In our paper, civility characterises the qualitative nature of political discourse. It is understood as demonstrating a tolerant attitude towards other participants in a discussion, their positions, and/or the subject of discussion. Consequently, incivility means an intolerant attitude towards participants, their positions, and/or the subject of discussion.

Research data: A case of the court verdict to Alexei Navalny

On 2 February 2021, hearings on the case of Alexei Navalny were held in the Simonovsky Court of Moscow. During the meeting, the issue of replacing the suspended sentence with a real one was considered. As a result, the accused must spend 2 years and 8 months in a general regime colony. That news gave rise to many discussions on social media about justice and injustice of the decision, critical statements in the direction of both Navalny and Russian authorities. As the figure of Navalny is very controversial in Russian socio-political discourse, it is no surprise to encounter plenty of toxic and hate speech in online discussions about his case.

For analysis, we selected online discussions on the topic of the court verdict of Navalny on VKontakte social network pages of leading Russian media, dividing them by political affiliation: independent (Rain, or *Dozhd,* and *Meduza,* both recognised as foreign agent entities by the Russian authorities by September 2022), pro-state *(Channel One, Komsomolskaya Pravda [KP.RU]).* The posts with news about the court decision and user comments were released from 2 February to 4 February 2021. A total of 1,065 comments were analysed. Table 1 presents online discussions on four selected online platforms in terms of their source, its political affiliation, article title, material, date and time of the post, number of likes, reposts, comments. All data was collected between 10 March and 15 March 2021. Only comments left in the period from 2 February to 4 February 2021 were taken into account.

Online discussions were chosen based on three factors. Firstly, the discussions corresponded to the topic stated – the court verdict of Navalny. Secondly, discussions were conducted by ordinary citizens on various media platforms. The discussions were moderated, and comments were deleted by administrators of online media groups whose loyalty to government structures varied, but the discussions were in no way initiated or led by the authorities. Two discussions were taken from each media outlet, for a total number of eight discussions. The quantity was limited, since not all media groups contained discussions of 100 comments on the verdict in Navalny's case. Therefore, each media source was represented by an equal number of discussions, and all selected online discussions contained at least 100 comments. At the preliminary study stage, such a threshold was set for data collection, since it allowed us to calculate parameters based on the aggregate of 100% (1 comment – 1%).

The discussion's materials were collected using parsing and uploaded to Excel spreadsheets. When encoding discussions, the following data was entered into the Excel spreadsheet: author ID, link to the author, author's first and last name, author's gender, link to the author's image, link to the comment, date and time of the comment, comment text and number of likes to the comment.

Table 1: List of online discussions on VKontakte media pages

Sources	Rain (Dozhd)	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU
Media type	Independent		Pro-state	
Article title, material	The suspended sentence was replaced with a real one for Navalny. Taking into account the time spent under house arrest, Navalny will spend two years and eight months in the colony.	Will Navalny's sentence be replaced with a real one? We follow what is happening in the court and around it.	The Moscow City Court sentenced Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison and a fine of 500,000 rubles.	The court sentenced Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison in a general regime colony.
Post time	02.02.2021 (20:46)	02.02.2021 (18:34)	04.02.2021 (14:03)	02.02.2021 (21:24)
No. of likes	499	154	116	177
No. of reposts	152	71	33	41
No. of comments	602	155	160	148

Source: Compiled by the author.

Research method

There is a great variety of methods and approaches used in deliberative studies. Four main groups of research methods in deliberative democracy are distinguished (Ercan et al., 2022): theorising (formal models, grounded normative theory, etc.), measuring (discourse quality index, online deliberation matrix, social network analysis, experimental and survey methods, etc.), exploring (ethnography, frame analysis, case study, etc.), and enacting (deliberative policy analysis, deliberative camp, etc.). In our research, we employ a method of discourse analysis developed by Yu. Misnikov and described in his PhD thesis (2011) and other works (Misnikov, 2010; 2012). We refer to the "Deliberative Standard to Assess Discourse Quality", which introduces seven thematically different discursive parameters corresponding to specific research issues to guide the process of encoding Internet discussion messages: a) participatory equality and posting activism; b) civility; c) validity claim-making and consensual practices; d) intent of speech acts; e) discursive interactivity and dialogism; f) argumentation; g) thematic diversity.

Analysing and understanding the content of Internet-based discussions is an extremely difficult technical and substantive task. A considerable aspect of selected methodological approach is that it allows us to analyse online discourse and the quality of discussions from the perspective of political communications and media studies, not only linguistics. Unlike linguistic methods of text processing and analysis (Natural Language Processing), discourse analysis is aimed at the semantic understanding of discourse and its parts, and not only analysis at the level of words, or their combinations into sentences. It helps identify specific discursive features of public opinion formation through conversations, which is primarily socio-political and communication practice, not linguistic. Understanding the process of emergence and change of people's opinions cannot be achieved by only using linguistically oriented methods of text analysis.

The current method of discourse analysis has been already empirically tested in our previous research (Filatova & Volkovskii, 2020; Filatova & Volkovskii, 2021a) dedicated to studying such parameters of deliberative quality in online conversations as participatory equality, posting activism, civility, argumentation, interactivity and dialogism. We appeal to Misnikov's methodological vision as he managed to translate the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (specifically his theory of discourse ethics) into a workable empirical framework which allows to study real-life online discourse in Russia. The scholar emphasises the relevance of analysing discussion threads in their entirety, not random message samples, which aids to comprehend the discourse's internal logic and event-sensitivity (Misnikov, 2011: 88). For instance, critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodologically emphasises individually produced media messages. It is less suited to addressing multi-message discourse. One more critical point regarding CDA is its strong ideological orientation, since it aims at showing socio-political inequalities and power domination (Van Dijk, 1997: 22) which is not appropriate for investigating digital citizens' communications, where a traditional notion of power is much less significant and needs more conceptualising efforts. Unlike CDA, this investigation is not a linguistic study in the traditional sense of mass media communications, and therefore it does not employ the full range of research instruments available with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

for receiving and interpreting empirical data. Due to the large number of messages, it is difficult in practice to apply SLF to the analysis of the semantic and grammatical relations between sentences and clauses on the discussion threads (Misnikov, 2011: 88).

In our study, we concentrate on such a deliberative parameter as civility. Misnikov presents an easy vision of how (un)civil patterns tracked in political discussions can be discovered and interpreted in the Russian context, which helps researchers identify the particularities of Russian civil discourse. Misnikov unites all these characteristics and calls it civility, however, there are some traits of speech culture which refer to incivility. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish civil positions from uncivil ones. In addition, Misnikov includes on/off-topic analysis in the category of civility because it behaves as a specific characteristic of Russian discussions in terms of communication culture. There is also evidence that some investigators analyse this as a separate aspect (Stromer-Galley, 2007). In our opinion, civility, incivility and on/off-topic refer to speech culture, but it is worth differentiating their analyses for a better understanding and interpretation of discussion's characteristics.

We analysed civility, incivility and off-topic patterns in political online talks on the subject of Navalny's court sentence, according to the following positions:

a) posts are directly addressed to other participants with a mention of name or personal appeal, but at the same time they do not relate to the topic or issues, i.e. they are personalised (this category includes only phrases or sentences indicating interpersonal characteristics and any other communication [including neutral])

b) posts mentioning the name of a participant, but rude and offensive in relation to him/her, his/her nationality, religion, ideology, etc. (including sarcasm)

c) posts mentioning the name of a participant, but in a rude and offensive manner in relation to the subject of discussion

d) polite and respectful posts in relation to a person with a mention of his/her name (may contain irony, humour, sarcasm in a positive way)

e) posts that do not mention the name of a participant, but rude and offensive in relation to him/her, his/her nationality, religion, ideology, etc. (including gross sarcasm)

f) posts that do not mention the name of a participant, but rude and offensive in relation to the subject of discussion

g) polite and respectful posts towards a person without mentioning his/her name (may contain irony, humour, sarcasm in a positive way)

Results

The overall percentage of civil, uncivil and off-topic patterns was 49.1% (see Table 2), but some comments could contain several positions, most often only one position or none at all. According to general figures, an obvious tendency characterising Russian speech culture was the predominance of off-topic comments that were personal in nature or that addressed a topic other than the main issue to discuss (39.25%). Impolite and rude attitudes both towards participants and the subject of discussion strongly prevailed over polite ones, especially an insensitive attitude towards other participants in the discussion.

This pattern indicated substantial obstacles to conducting a constructive dialogue, as a deliberative criterion of respect towards deliberators and their views was violated. The total percentage of uncivil attitude towards participants was 5.58%. This was calculated by adding the percentage of posts with and without mentioning a name, on topic, but rude in relation to the participant (9.4%, 6.4%, 3.8%, 2.7%,) and dividing by four (as we analysed the comments of four discussions). The general percentage of uncivil attitude towards the subject of discussion was 4.1%. It was calculated in a similar way: posts with and without a name, on topic, but rude in relation to the subject of discussion (2.5%, 2.6%, 4.4%, 6.7%) were taken. Such patterns characterised the Russian culture of communication in networked discussions as low, immature, intolerant and focused on off-topic conversation.

Referring to the specific discussions and media outlets, it can be seen that the highest percentage of posts of a personal and abstract nature (50%) as well as those taking a rude, offensive attitude towards participants (9.4%) were posted in the discussion on Rain's page. The highest percentage of coarse communicative culture in relation to the topic or subject of discussion was explored in the discussion on Komsomolskaya Pravda page (6.7%). Comparing discussions conducted on the pages of independent and pro-state media in terms of on/off-topic and (in)civility, we pointed out the highest rates of posts of personal and abstract character in the discussions on pages of independent media (45.95% versus 32.55% for pro-state media). As for the coarse culture of communication in relation to participants, the pattern was the same, ranking 7.9% for independent media versus 3.25% in pro-state sites. Meanwhile, the largest indicator of rude communication culture in relation to the subject of discussion was demonstrated in the discussions of pro-state media webpages (5.55 % versus 2.55% at independent media). Despite an increase in media studies covering the issues of (in)civility in networked discussions, there is not much known on how the political stance of media affects the quality of deliberation, comprising (un)civil user behaviour. Most research in this field focuses on Western deliberative practices, while there is a lack of such studies for countries with less democratic values.

Table 2: Analysis of speech culture in Russian online discussions (results in percentage)

| | Independent | | Pro-state | | |
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU	Overall data
Thematically empty posts that mention a participant name's, only interpersonal communication	50	41.9	42.8	22.3	39.25
Posts that mention a participant's name, discussion on topic, but rude towards a participant	9.1	4.5	2.5	2	4.53

	Independent		Pro-state		
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU	Overall data
Posts that mention a participant's name, discussion on topic, but rude towards the subject of discussion	0.7	0.7	3.1	2	1.63
Posts that mention a participant's name, discussion on topic in a polite way	0	0	0	0.7	0.18
Posts that do not mention a participant's name, with discussion on topic, but rude towards a participant	0.3	1.9	1.3	0.7	1.1
Posts that do not mention a participant's name, with discussion on topic, but rude towards the subject of discussion	1.8	1.9	1.3	4.7	2.43
Posts that do not mention a participant's name, with discussion on topic in a polite way	0	0	0	0	0
Total % of incivility towards a participant	9.4	6.4	3.8	2.7	5.58
Total % of incivility towards the subject of discussion	2.5	2.6	4.4	6.7	4.1
Total % of speech culture patterns	61.9	50.9	51	32.4	49.1

Source: Compiled by the author.

Conclusions and further venues for studies of (in)civility

Our analysis allowed us to obtain an answer for our research question and confirm our hypothesis. Russian political conversations on Navalny's sentence conducted on the VKontakte pages of Russian media outlets of various political nature can be characterised by a high level of incivility which is unbalanced by a low level of civility. The prevalence of rude and uncivil posts in relation to participants and the subject of discussion over polite ones, especially in relation to a participant, negatively affected the overall picture of civil dialogue and its deliberative quality. In addition, most of the posts in web discussions on the topic of Alexei Navalny's court sentence were not on the topic of discussion. Instead, they were full of interpersonal motives and abstractions not correlating with the main issue of discussion. This pattern impedes achieving mutual recognition and social cooperation in the process of public deliberation.

While analysing the comments of discussions in terms of civil and uncivil features of political speech, we could observe some devastating effects caused by the impolite and intolerant communicative behaviour of citizens. The issue of online hate speech is currently one of the most relevant in research agendas (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021;

Gagliardone, 2014; Zhang & Luo, 2018), especially if it is studied in the crisis conditions like the Covid-19 pandemic (Bonotti & Zech, 2021). In correlation with this issue, it becomes significant to study potential solutions offered by governmental bodies or citizenry that can mitigate the negative effects of incivility.

In our analysis, we observed that incivility fuelled commenting activity among citizens in Russian online discussions, especially when their opinions were strongly polarised and could not be expressed in a rational way due to the ideological disagreement. The correlation between affective political polarisation and hate speech should be researched in Russian deliberative practices more attentively (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Boxell et al. 2020; Druckman et al. 2019; Mason, 2013). One more direction is research on the quality of argumentation in (un)civil comments. In our study, uncivil comments seem to be less persuasive as many of them contained an emotional aspect that lowered their level of rationality. This finding motivates us to pursue a new research project in which we can investigate the correlation between (in)civility and justification or (dis) agreement (Rossini & Maia, 2020).

Due to various interpretations of (in)civility, there can be complexities relating to the methodological approach. For example, the methodology employed in our research does not provide an understanding of differences between incivility and impoliteness, however, some researchers differentiate between these concepts (Stromer–Galley, 2007; Savin, 2019; Bodrunova, 2021). Misnikov did not develop an approach for analysing impoliteness. Therefore, his methodology can be improved in the future as we will study the field of (in)civility in a broader perspective by considering different methodological approaches and how to conceptualise and operationalise it.

Over the last two years, Russian political science has been enriched with solid theoretical overviews on deliberative democracy theory and its problems. The conceptual and normative questions regarding deliberative democracy and political deliberation have been raised from positions of political philosophy (Linde, 2022; Savin, 2023). However, more empirical evidence is required as it will help ensure that the normative analysis and proposals for policy making or decision taking obtained from it are not grounded in empirically flawed assumptions. This aspect also refers to (in)civility studies. Otherwise, it will be almost impossible to solve the issues of conceptual nuance and flawed measurements.

The basis of deliberation is a civil society. In order to raise the level of civil and respectful speech culture in Russian political discussions, we need to explore the impact of such potential factors as the institutional settings of platforms, specifics of deliberative process, personal characteristics of citizenry and their behaviours in online environments. In our view, citizens' education, literacy, ability to navigate in media space and to keep themselves informed as well as follow the norms of morality and ethics are core criteria which strongly influence civility. By increasing the levels of competence and education of people, there will be more opportunities for genuine civil dialogue based on respect and tolerance towards participants, their opinions and arguments.

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The Role of Visual Identity in Music Perception

A Talk with Specialists on Song Likability, Perceived Quality and Emotional Reactions

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Adrian Chețan[*], Ioana Iancu[**]

[*]   Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising, Babeș-Bolyai University
[**]   Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising, Babeș-Bolyai University, e-mail: iancu@fspac.ro

Since the music industry is oversaturated, the role of branding becomes of great importance. Although of a paramount value for success, the influence of visual identity on contemporary music perception is still poorly discussed. The present paper aims to exploratory assess the role of visual elements on the way music is perceived. Sixteen semi-structured interviews with music specialist are conducted. The primary topic approached refers to the role of visual identity in terms of song likability, perceived music quality and emotional reactions. The results suggest that branding may help in the differentiation process by creating memorability and clarity on the market. However, for a valuable creative product, there must be a balance between shaping the brand identity and maintaining the artist's authenticity.

Keywords: music industry, brand communication, visual identity, perceived music quality, specialists' interview

Introduction

The commercial music industry is often seen as being full of emerging artists. Due to the increasingly easy access to music distribution and advertising tools supported by the development of technology and the Internet, some might even say that the market is oversaturated (Meler & Škoro, 2013; Lieb, 2018; Haynes & Marshall, 2018). In today's society, an artist has access to many more or less free and easy-to-use tools that can be used to reach a target audience. Thus, to differentiate themselves from others, they must

build a more effective presence (Hughes et al., 2013; Hutchison, 2013; Allen, 2018). Such a presence can be achieved through branding and brand communication. In branding, the image represents the way the consumer perceives a product, a service, a company or a person, and specialists can try to direct the way this image is born by building an efficient and solid brand identity (Morris, 2005; Schroeder, 2005; Allen, 2018). In the case of the music industry, one can talk about a combination of personal branding and brand communication. An artist, seen as a personal brand, is almost always accompanied by brand extensions such as music, merchandise, paid concerts and other revenue vessels that are subject to classic branding and brand communication processes (Baker, 2005; Taylor, 2013; Khedher, 2014).

Considering that people spend a lot of time on social media connecting with and following artists' pages, and that these platforms are a simple and inexpensive way to advertise, today's brand identity may be efficiently shaped and promoted using visual elements (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012). More specifically, video performances, emotionally evaluated imagery, movements, gestures, photos, videos, show elements or physical attractiveness can sometimes increase the perception of the quality, emotional intensity or general appreciation of the music (Gillespie, 1997; Finnäs, 2001; Juchniewicz, 2008; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Ellis, 2013; Waddell & Williamon, 2017).

If we connect these findings to the modern music industry, the implications might be substantial. We can speculate that successful music is sometimes judged not only on the basis of its musical merits, but also on the basis of listeners' past or concurrent interactions with the visual elements surrounding the performer (Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009). The relevance of this approach is of high value since it is still poorly covered by the literature. If in previous experiences one discusses the influence of videos, gestures, physical appearance and live shows, in the context of branding and the online environment different but modern aspects are brought into discussion. The visual elements of a brand identity, sometimes called visual branding touchpoints in the music industry, can be the artist or band logos, event posters, promotional photos, visual styles of web and social network pages, color palettes or merchandise (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Allen, 2018). While the aforementioned literature suggests that dynamic stimuli, such as video and live performance, may influence the perception on music, there is research needed to determine if such an influence takes place in the context of more static stimuli, such as the ones of a conventional brand identity applied to the modern music industry.

From a more practical perspective, the relevance of the paper is materialised at the business level as well. The main implication consists of offering music, branding and communication specialists the concepts, the tools and the strategies useful in efficiently designing nowadays artists' identities and overcome the challenges of making it in the modern music industry.

Thus, aiming to fill in a gap in the literature, to prepare a fertile ground for further experimental research, and to help the music industry in improving images and perceptions, the present paper aims to exploratory discuss the role of visual elements on the music perception. Moreover, this work also aims to contextualise concepts related to the music industry, in the view of some specialists from the industry itself, so as to provide

a concise framework for future experimental research. More specifically, the main objective of this paper is to find out how visual brand may influence music appreciation, its quality and emotional reactions, in the view of some people active in the industry. Additionally, the paper seeks to offer some essential explanations for industry success and the branding phenomenon in order to better comprehend the information about influence for future experimental endeavours.

A semi-structured interview is conducted with sixteen specialists. The vision of specialists in media, music performance, music management, music consulting or music advertising is vital to get a complete and synchronised image with what is actually happening in the industry at the moment, and to bridge literature gaps in terms of operationalisation of visual influence processes in the contemporary music industry.

Branding and the visual aspect of promotion in the music industry

Music, like any other product or service with a financial incentive, is subject to marketing and communication tactics and practices (Meler & Škoro, 2013; Lieb, 2018). Within the music industry, besides the music itself being marketed for direct income, through records, tickets, merchandise, etc., the artists themselves are promoted through a communication-oriented strategy.

Selling and promoting the music itself is often not enough. Today, a brand image, which is a result of a well-communicated brand identity, can make a notable contribution to achieving success, according to Frith (2007). He offers Robbie Williams as an example, emphasising the fact that his live performances and brand image provide value as much as his music catalogue itself. Nowadays, due to the development of technology and the explosion of social media, the creation of a "package", a brand identity and targeted marketing actions can be useful in the case of artists. Thus, the idea that an artist can be subjected to branding processes and brand communication is often encountered (Allen, 2018).

The application of strategies related to communication and branding of a person can have valid advantages in the music industry. Outlining an effective brand identity, and subsequently a consistent communication of that identity can direct the way people will form their perception of the artists and interact with them and their music. Through sustained communication efforts, the artist will reach the target audience more efficiently, will generate loyalty among them, will encourage people to listen to the music and will make them empathise and relate better with the performer (Baker, 2005; Beeching, 2010; Hutchison, 2013; Lieb, 2018).

Godin (2009) suggests that a general public is difficult to please and attract, especially in the context of a saturated market. Thus, achieving success is often accidental. However, the author suggests that focusing on current fans, a specific target audience that can be reached through branding and brand communication, could contribute to success. This group of people can then further promote the brand through word-of-mouth (Godin, 2009).

Through the branding process, an artist's public identity is shaped and solidified, highlighting unique values, personality and characteristics. In addition to shaping and solidifying a visual identity, personality, style and a discourse that respects the values, promises and characteristics of the artist, the brand must be communicated through various advertising and public relations actions (Meler & Škoro, 2013; Rowles, 2018). Since the artist in search of success is, or tends to become, a public figure, some visual elements become practically mandatory even if only logistically. Such elements can be event posters, artwork for CDs or streaming platforms or even the actual physical appearance of the artist. Thus, in case of the music industry, the artist's brand, strong or weak, is present whether they want it or not, and the artist's actions practically constitute a form of brand communication (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012).

There are often multiple views on brand identity. On the one hand, the brand identity embodies all the values and characteristics that the brand conveys through the many channels of communication to build positioning in the minds of consumers and a brand image (De Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace; 2010; Wheeler, 2017). On the other hand, brand identity is often emphasised from a predominantly visual point of view, and it is stated by experts and academics (Sicard, 2012; Aaker, 2012; Wheeler, 2017) to include logos, typefaces, images, colours, styles, symbols and visual shapes, as well as other visual identity elements like commercials, packaging, and so on. Such aesthetic elements must mix effectively with the artist and their music for a brand to be considered authentic (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Borg, 2020). It is suggested that a few distinct graphic components are often sufficient to provide an overview of the basic message and spirit of the brand without the requirement to first listen to the artist's music.

Visual brands of artists are noticeable all around us, and especially in the case of commercial music artists, we can find many examples of memorable identities. At the logo level, names like Kiss, Abba, Nirvana, Metallica, David Guetta or Elton John are relevant examples (Jackson, 2012; Carter, 2017; Dobric, 2020). Visual brands of artists are also easily and effectively expressed on social media and on the website. Logos, promotional materials, colour palettes, pictures or videos, all are found in one form or another on the pages of artists (Hutchison, 2013). These visual brands, completed by potential merchandise and the online presence of artists, are also a good way for communicating visual identity (Hutchison, 2013; Johnson, 2019), and this identity communication consists of activities that both the artist and music professionals or specialists engage in.

A music professional, in the understanding of this work, is a person who is knowledgeable about such industry communication processes and can either use them or recognise them. Finding enough persons with a very particular position is a challenging task that does not accurately reflect the reality and diversity of what it means to work in the industry (Britten, 2009; Rutter, 2016; Young, 2018). Therefore, in this paper, when referring to professionals in the music industry, the roles they perform are to manage, mentor, counsel, analyse, study, or promote musicians through different means. In other words, we are talking about a person with experience in the music field, who actively engages in the communication part of the music industry, rather than simply being a listener or fan.

The influence of visual cues on music perception

Since music can induce affective responses, subjective quality evaluations and a particular intentional behaviour, the incorporation of visual stimuli opens a varied spectrum of communication possibilities. Platz and Kopiez (2012) suggest that in addition to influencing how a song's qualities are perceived, visual features can aid in conveying and communicating meaning, possible through branding and communication. Artists can use visual expression to help others recognise them. With a distinctive graphic identity, they could likely stand out in the already-competitive music business (Schroeder, 2005).

There are several angles from which to examine how individuals experience music in the presence of visual cues. While some studies (Iwamiya, 1994; Adams, 1994; Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005) examine how the emotional valence of a song is altered, others (Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Gillespie, 1997; Juchniewicz, 2008) also examine general attitudes toward specific elements like rhythm, melody, loudness, or song quality, and some of them examine the phenomenon of intentional behaviour affected by context (Brown & Sellen, 2006; Lee, Pritchard & Hubbles, 2019). Since branding strategies usually incorporate and express feelings, the affective dimension is considered a significant element (Borg, 2020). These investigations show that, regardless of whether they concentrate on the emotional content, the expressiveness of the song, or the overall impression, music may be perceived differently when other visual stimuli are utilised.

It is important to highlight that the research under consideration focuses exclusively on the evaluation of the music piece under specific stimuli, and not on the evaluation of the artist as a whole package, the latter already being acknowledged as one of the key outcomes of effective branding and brand communication (Chertkow & Feehan, 2012; Hutchison, 2013; Meier, 2017; Borg, 2020).

The literature offers several experiments that emphasise the important role of visual elements on the music perception. Although they do not assess contemporary music or visual brand identity, they can provide research perspectives. For instance, regarding the level of appreciation of songs or their characteristics, Gillespie (1997) suggests that musical characteristics, such as speed, musical vibrato or the speed of some instrumental performances can obtain more positive evaluations when visual stimuli are used, videos in this case. The research also suggests that the degree of musical specialisation of the evaluator does not affect the potency of this influence.

Furthermore, Iwamiya (1994) conducts a study where audio quality is intentionally reduced, but visual stimuli are attached to it. This situation is compared with the situation in which the audio quality is normal, but no visual stimuli are present. The results suggest that the visual factor manages to compensate, the quality being rated approximately the same in both situations (Iwamiya, 1994). In addition to video stimuli, physical presence has also been analysed in terms of presentation, facial expressions, body movements or even gender. Although the direction and intensity of the influence is not always clear, it is indeed present in some variables, such as general perception, assessment of quality, rhythm, experientiality, or musical ability (Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005; Juchniewicz, 2008; Wapnick et al. 2009; Waddell & Williamon, 2017).

On top of quality and general song appreciation, the influence of visual stimuli on the emotion music transmits is also analysed. An attempt by Boltz, Ebendorf & Field (2009), using a set of images and videos as stimuli, suggests that visual materials rated with negative or positive emotions manage to congruently influence the cognition of neutral musical pieces. This research solidifies what other studies have revealed in the past (Moore, 2010), suggesting that videos in particular may influence the emotional response. However, both analysis of previous studies and some that have failed to repli-cate the same outcomes (Trevor & Plazak, 2016) argue that the type of stimuli used, as well as the congruence between visual stimuli and music, both emotionally and contextu-ally, may affect the results.

The emotional influence that visual stimuli can have on musical cognition, along with the influence on quality, movement and gestures, expressiveness, or likeability (Iwamiya, 1994; Juchniewicz, 2008; Ellis, 2013; Platz & Kopiez, 2012; Waddell & Williamon, 2017) raises a curiosity in the context of branding and the contemporary music industry. As previously mentioned, within a visual identity of an artist, the main elements are song artwork, posters, websites and pictures. Videos, conversely, although analysed in most of the above-mentioned studies, represent rather a brand communication channel, sporadic (with the release of new songs), and which does not respect the permanent, or at least long-term, character of the elements with which the identity is initially built.

The review of these findings raises a logical interest to further investigate the impact of visual stimuli in the music domain. Thus, as it is scarcely analysed in the literature, it becomes intriguing to explore if the mechanisms of visual influence on music perception also operate in a modern and more communication-oriented context, such as the brand identity associated with an artist.

Methodology

Analysing the influence of visual stimuli on the aural elements requires a stronger operationalisation than that found in the literature so far. The influence of branding and visual identity in the case of the music perception is still barely studied in the literature. As qualitative methods are meant to gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge, opinions and experiences of participants (Kvale, 1994; Moriarty, 2011), the present study, through a semi-structured interview, aims to comprehensively approach music and communication specialists in order to better understand the role of branding in conceptualising and influencing music perception.

The semi-structured methodology is ideal in our case because it allows us to use information and concepts solidified in the literature, while maintaining the open character of the conversation. Moreover, it offers the possibility to re-address topics for clarification and slide naturally to follow-up questions regarding secondary branches of the main themes (Galletta, 2013). In this scenario, the follow-up questions are addressed by revisiting themes where the responses seemed insufficient, or on the contrary, aroused a real interest of the respondent, this leading to a useful additional elaboration of the

topics addressed or increasing the specificity of some more general answers (Kvale, 1994; Qu & Dumay, 2011).

The interpretation of the answers is mainly based on coding, grouping, and connecting ideas and concepts in the themes imposed by the questions inspired by literature. At the same time, sub-topics are developed inside the large themes later when new concepts and themes are highlighted by multiple respondents, in order not to exclude relevant and valuable information from outside the main topics. In addition, the narrative presentation is also crystallised in a scheme (Figure 1) to concisely illustrate the information obtained and its ramifications.

This endeavour helps in gaining information on the promotion process and on the influence and benefits branding and branding communication bring to artists. More specifically, the research questions are the following:

- RQ1: How can music industry success and music branding usefulness in the contemporary context be operationalised?
- RQ2: How can a visual brand identity influence the music appreciation?
- RQ3: How can a visual brand identity influence the perceived quality of a song?
- RQ4: How can a visual brand identity influence the type and strength of the music emotional reactions?

Sample

The sample is composed of 16 respondents working in the music industry, aged between 23 and 42, with different professional positions, such as music producer, performer, music marketing specialist, artist manager, advertising specialist in the music industry, or music industry coach (see Table 1). From a socio-demographic point of view, the respondents were asked for name, age, title, or occupation and received the option of anonymity. Out of 16 respondents, 10 chose the anonymity option, so it has been decided that all the respondents are going to be coded for privacy and consistency reasons (from R1 to R16).

There is no clear pattern among the respondents with reference to particular jobs they perform in the industry. In the music industry, most jobs are unique, flexible, or even free-lance (Rutter, 2016). Exceptions to this would be the notable global record labels where employee confidentiality agreements make access to interviewees either impossible or limited.

The industry's unpredictable nature of job duties makes this profession one where many work only part-time (Rutter, 2016), where each position is automatically linked to others, and where there is no single job description. However, the responsibilities can be related to various branches, such as PR, management, coaching, concert and tour promotion, or journalism (Britten, 2009). This diversity is also expressed in the list of the respondents of the present research, a sample of professionals that hold multiple or different positions (Table 1). This diversity is controlled by the experience that the respondents have in the field, starting from at least 4 years in the case of younger

respondents (R5 – Musician and Event Planner), up to 10 years or more (R12 – Artist Advertising and Management Executive).

Additionally, the Internet has enabled change and diversity in terms of work opportunities in the music industry. It is suggested that workers in the nowadays music sector are to be more knowledgeable and versatile across disciplines (Young, 2018). Given that the promotion of the artist is carried out by a variety of music professionals using a variety of strategies, the interdisciplinarity among the current respondents is beneficial for identifying common points and themes and eventually help formulate new hypotheses that are more anchored in the reality of the contemporary music industry.

Table 1: List of the respondents and their professional positions

Respondent code	Country	Respondent occupation
R1	Romania	Musician, Vocal Coach and Sociologist
R2	Romania	Music Producer
R3	Romania	National Radio Program Director
R4	Netherlands	Producer and Music Journalist
R5	Romania	Musician and Event Planner
R6	Romania	Musician and Professional Video Producer
R7	Romania	Music Composer and Producer
R8	Romania	Radio Presenter and Social Media Executive
R9	Romania	Communication and Influencer Marketing Specialist, Streaming Manager
R10	Romania	Musician and Advertising Teaching Assistant
R11	Denmark	Musician and Digital Concept Development Specialist
R12	United States of America	Artist Advertising and Management Executive
R13	United States of America	Founder and CEO of Music Business and Coaching Platform, Author, Podcast Host, Content Marketer, Musician
R14	United Kingdom	Head of Promotions at a Record Label
R15	United Kingdom	Music Industry Consultant
R16	United States of America	Web and Graphic Designer

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Due to the limited availability of potential interviewees, a convenience sampling method has been used. The interviewees have been selected by using three strategies: 1. searching the web pages of specialists in the music industry to obtain their public contact info in order to message them by email; 2. approaching specialists from music industry groups on Facebook and LinkedIn; and 3. contacting people in the music industry from our own professional network. The geographical distribution of the respondents is explained by the convenience sampling and limited to the interviewees' availability. However, as the

purpose of this work is to find common ground among specialists within the process of designing a conceptual basis for more advanced analyses, this shortcoming becomes an advantage. Working beyond a national framework, some of the interviewed specialists collaborate with artists from different geographical areas than theirs. In this case, the physical proximity becomes irrelevant. Consequently, when designing the interview guide, all mentions regarding local or national industries have been avoided.

Some of the interviews were conducted orally, on Zoom or Skype platforms, depending on the respondents' preference, and some of them were conducted by email, supported by the Google Forms platform. This was necessary due to time zone discrepancies among certain responders, three of whom were from the United States of America. In addition, some of them directly expressed their desire to answer the questions in a written form.

This form of written interview retains its validity if specific criteria are met (Hunt & McHale, 2007). First, in this case, the face-to-face social cues do not provide additional information in the current case, and the e-mail method offered the possibility to access a larger pool of specialised people. Second, from a scheduling point of view, a written approach, in comparison with an oral conversation, is not influenced by time zone or live availability. Finally, considering the interviewees' expertise in fields such as advertising, journalism or coaching, their written communication skills are guaranteed (Opdenakker, 2006). In addition, in both oral and written interviews, respondents received follow-up questions, either live or through email, mainly in the case of incomplete answers or clarification requests.

The interviews were conducted over five months' timeline, from May to September 2021. Depending on the respondent and the supplementary questions addressed, the oral interviews lasted between 30 to 50 minutes. Responses to written interviews were received within 3–7 days from the request and took, on average, another two days if follow-up questions were required. The respondents have been informed that the completion of the interview is voluntary and anonymously and the data is used exclusively for the research purpose. No questions about particular artists under their professional or legal tuition have been asked, neither questions about any internal procedures that would violate any confidentiality agreements. The research has obtained the ethics approval from the Scientific Council under the reference number 44TT/1.03.2022.

Measurements

The questions from the interview guide are theory-based and have been grouped into three categories: success, branding and visual stimuli. The interview questions are generated by transposing the concepts from the research questions obtained from a review of the specialised literature into discussion topics. Music (Beeching, 2010; Morris, 2015; Meier, 2017), branding (Morris, 2005; Lieb, 2018; Johnson, 2019), and visual influence (Gillespie, 1997; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Platz & Kopiez, 2012; Waddell & Williamon, 2017) literature represents the basis of these questions. Regarding the first category, the main emphasis is on the definition of success in the music industry and

the challenges faced in achieving it. The second dimension relies on the importance of branding and visual brand identity in the music field, on the brand communication tools, and on the emotions an artist transmits. Finally, the largest importance has been given to the role of visual stimuli, assessing opinions on how song likability, the perceived quality of the song, and the emotional reaction may be influenced.

Results

Operationalising the contemporary music industry success and music branding usefulness

To better operationalise and contextualise the understanding of the present music industry, explanations about what success means in the music business as well as branding and its relevance for artists were collected from the music professionals.

Regarding success, the respondents suggest that success is many-sided, and is characterised by quantitative increases in money, listeners and distinctions, by public appreciation, achieving a professional image, the possibility of making a living from music, as well as personal or creative success, defined by personal satisfaction, creating an effective relationship with fans, and achieving a high level of originality and authenticity. The professionals emphasise the fact that success also depends on how good the music is and how pleasant the artist is, both of which are defined by them through a high degree of emotional connection between them and the audience. Success also comes with overcoming challenges. On the one hand, the challenges are financial, from the point of view of creating, distributing and promoting music, challenges regarding the market oversaturation, as well as personal challenges, when artists do not realise the importance of communication and advertising activities when they want to achieve success.

"A successful music artist is one who is able to connect with their audience, consistently puts out good music and is able to do it as a career without supplementing income from other sources" (R12 – Artist Advertising and Management Executive).

Regarding the second aspect, that of branding, the professionals believe that branding is important because it offers differentiation capacity, memorability and clarity on the market. It is pointed out that all public artists have brands whether they want it or not, but they have the freedom to choose how they interact with the public and how they choose their directions and tone in terms of promotion and communication. Likewise, there must be a balance between contouring the brand identity and preserving the artist's authenticity, so that the promotional processes do not alter the creative product, in this case the music. The professionals mention elements such as the internet, social media, streaming platforms, live performances and media appearances as brand communication tools, and they believe that consistency is vital in achieving the objectives.

"Branding is essential, whether it's a logo, styling and appearance (outfits, hairstyle, makeup and so on), a consistent style of videos etc., it improves awareness of the "brand" (the artist) and makes them more recognizable" (R11 – Musician and Digital Concept Development Specialist).

These explanations regarding success in the industry and the usefulness of branding make it more apparent how essential is that the shaping and promotion of the artist through branding and visual identity are analysed, as it is done in the following sections. The way in which these visual elements contribute to success through effective branding can provide valuable experimental research suggestions and hypotheses regarding today's music listening and appreciation behaviour.

The visual influence on music perception

Song likability

First and foremost, some of the specialists suggest that the artist's appearance might contribute to people's knowledge of their music and their desire to learn more about it. It might lead to people being fascinated or interested in discovering that artist's music if they see a consistent visual presence, especially in the internet environment, as well as a pleasing classical visual identity, where a high degree of authenticity is notable. This authenticity, in terms of visual cues, is useful in the respondents' view, because as an artist, "if you present yourself as you are in front of the public, the public understands you, they are more lenient with the way they perceive your music, even if they may not particularly like it" (R6).

Regarding the influence itself, it is suggested that visual stimuli should be able to positively affect the way music is perceived, when they coincide in terms of tone. If the audience first comes in contact with the visual elements of the artist, appreciates their tone and message, later on, when they discover the music and if it conveys the same messages, it is suggested that the chances are that it will be equally appreciated. For example, it is stated that, as an artist, when "a potential new fan sees your profile before hearing the music, it's vital that your image is the way you want to be remembered" (R14). The respondents point out the implications of the lack of consonance between the tone of visual identity and that of music, suggesting that it can lead to confusion but is generally counteracted when the music itself compensates by a high degree of likability, regardless of the visual side. It is also suggested that sometimes, if the image and communication are efficient and consistent, people might be more indulgent with the music: "No matter how hard we try to separate the person from the music, if we find something irresistible or repulsive about the artist, the music will be perceived in the same way" (R10).

Specialists also refer to the attention that artists should pay to visual elements, because "the image must reflect the artist's work" (R9), and if it is of poor quality or not liked by the public, it can influence the song likability when the audience listens to the artist's music. A repulsive identity or lack of a visual identity might block music from reaching the audience at all, which practically prevents the analysis of visual influence since the music is not even listened to.

Perceived quality

In the case of quality, almost all specialists suggest that the visual can have an influence on aural, sometimes because "people are often driven by prejudice and music is no exception" (R10). For example, as it is suggested by an interviewee's personal experience with band management, the audience may not want to listen to a song, or challenge its quality simply because the artist or band's pictures are very amateurish: "The public did not listen to the music in order to have a proper opinion, or even if they listened to it, they did not take it seriously, because the pictures were amateurish" (R1). Further analysing this, it suggested that in the case of a lacking visual identity, the audience might not be able to mentally associate this visual identity with that of some great artists or bands whose music they consider to be of high quality and whose visual identity is well defined.

In respect to positive influence, it is suggested that beautifully packaged music can be perceived as having a higher quality in some cases. It is pointed that visual can play an important role and, in some cases, people tend to be guided by prejudices or to transfer attributes from the visual dimension to the musical one. Listeners might tend to project opinions regarding an artist's personality, which can be transmitted visually, to the music and its quality: "A part of it has to do with projection, because people are projecting their feelings towards the artist as a person into the art they make. Thus, the artist's general image can greatly influence the quality perception, be it positively or negatively" (R16).

However, specialists believe that some people later manage to transcend this visual stimulus influence, and on the long run, once the visual part is no longer of interest to them or is no longer consistent with the artist's current personality, they can revise their assessments in terms of music quality. This mention seems notable and motivated, as both market trends and listener cognitions can change. The quality perception shift does not have just a visual motivation (people can simply get bored of music or change their preferences) since "music is always perceived differently in retrospect" (R13) and the artist's image might change over time.

Emotions

Considering the influence of the image and the visual elements on the emotions felt when listening to music, the opinions of the specialists are more complex. On the one hand, experts suggest that the image and the visual can potentiate the emotions transmitted through music, especially when the emotional attachment to the artist and relatability are already high. Sometimes, "people tend to get drawn towards artists that reflect either who they are or who they want to be; and having someone reflect that in their image can help connect with the music's emotions more" (R14) or to feel them stronger in general. On the other hand, some believe that visuals can influence the intensity of emotions rather in the case of videos and live performances, than in the case of listening to music on smart devices or on the radio, thus when one actually sees the artist or interact with a visual stimulus: "They are useful in conveying the artist's message; colours of music

videos help convey moods for example, same when performing – stage setup, outfits, etc." (R11). What the respondents suggest is that if what the artist depicts physically or through visually exposed narrative does not coincide with musical emotions, people may lose confidence that the emotions the artist conveys through music are authentic.

As in the case of the influence on other variables, the specialists claim that the emotions transmitted through branding and brand communication, implicitly also through visual materials, should be synchronised with those transmitted by music. Accordingly, some artists already "turn to specialists in order to combine and synchronise all these elements harmoniously" (R7). Pictures, vlogs, music videos, social media pages, physical appearance and live appearances are some of the elements and channels suggested by the professionals where emotions might be most effectively expressed visually: "Clearly, the role of the visuals, videos, and storytelling, is to enhance the music. They enhance the message of music and yes, you can get a complete experience of that art, that music. It's one thing when you just listen to the song and another thing when you also see the video or the pictures. They show you the vision of the artist and take you in the right direction to understand the intended emotion and message" (R6).

Figure 1 presents, in a summarised manner, the potential role of visual stimuli in the music industry, the way the experts have mapped it. Overall, it is emphasised and suggested that visual elements can consistently impact the song likability, the perceived quality of music and the emotional reactions.
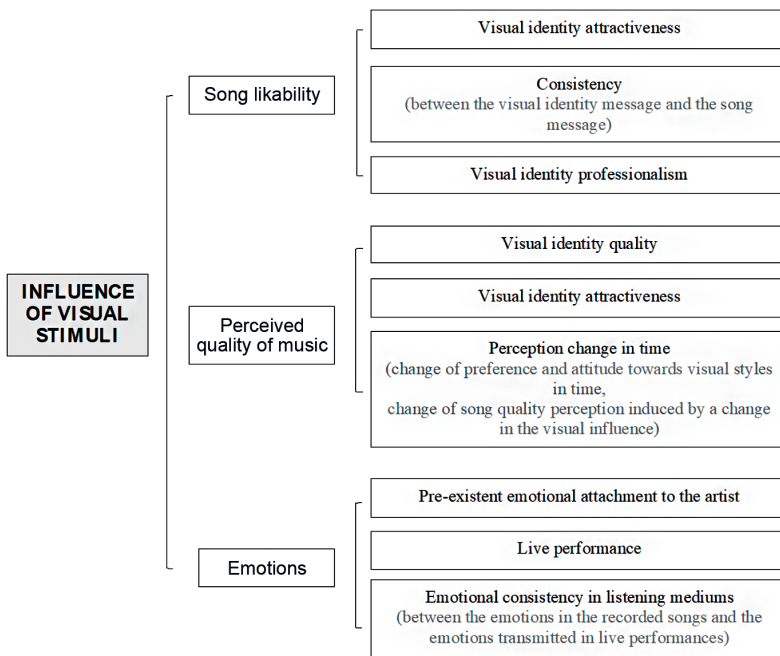

Figure 1: A conceptual schema on the role of visual stimuli in the music industry
Source: Compiled by the author.

Discussions and conclusion

The purpose of the current study is to thoroughly investigate how music industry professionals view the usefulness and influence of visual components in the music business. The results of the semi-structured interview validate that appreciation of music and success are both subjective concepts that are susceptible to a variety of internal and external influences, and that visual elements, specific to a conventional brand identity, might influence how music is perceived, which in turn, can influence the artist's success.

The first research question (RQ1) aims to provide a better understanding of what success means in the industry, as well as how branding is useful for an artist today. Regarding success, the music professionals summarise the fact that it can represent the achievement of some indicators in terms of popularity and money earned, but it can also be a personal one, which refers to personal satisfaction related to maintaining the creative spirit, authenticity and of a strong relationship with fans. In addition, it is suggested that an agreeable personality and good music are also part of success and can be characterised by a strong emotional impact and originality. Finally, a factor in achieving success is overcoming some challenges, and these are mainly related to money and the oversaturation of the market. The results are in line with the existing literature (Landa, 2006; Beeching, 2010; Aaker, 2014), meaning that the claims that success has different meanings and "making it" in the music industry is many-sided, still apply to this day.

In terms of branding, music industry professionals view it as crucial since it provides market differentiating capability, memorability, and clarity regarding the brand's values and characteristics. To prevent the promotional activities from changing the creative product, in this case the music, a balance must also be maintained between developing the brand identity and maintaining the authenticity of the artist. Among the most useful brand communication tools, intended to help the efficient transmission of brand identity today, the respondents mention the Internet, social media, streaming platforms, as well as live performances. The obtained data on the characteristics and processes of branding and communication in the music industry offer valuable insight from the music industry and are supported by the literature as well (Morris, 2015; Meier, 2017, Lieb, 2018), with the general conclusion that communication processes and brand identity communication are often responsible for at least part of the success achieved by artists. The interviewees assert that visual cues might have an impact on song appreciation, perceived music quality and emotions, which were all noted as indicators of success, but also a general influence on the overall image, as branding can aid in market distinction and help authenticity in standing out.

The second research question (RQ2) addresses the role of visual identity on the way music is perceived, in terms of song likability. It is suggested that if the tone and personality transmitted through the visual materials are congruent with the music, they might manage to enhance the latter and increase the appreciation of the listeners. However, due to the complexity of humans and the artistic domain, this cannot always be ensured. The way the artist is displayed from an emotional or personality point of view can sometimes differ quite a lot from what the artist's music conveys, a situation that is often balanced

out when the music already has a very high level of public appreciation. Although this information cannot be generalised to all cases due to the complexity of the industry and the individual and subjective experiences of the interviewed professionals, it can offer useful suggestions, provide help in operationalisation and serve as a starting point for experimental research or a content analysis on a large number of cases in the music industry. While the data from the current research offers particularities specific to branding in the music industry, the influence of visuals on song likability in some particular contexts is supported by experimental efforts as well. Studies such as ones of Boltz, Ebendorf & Field (2009) and Ellis (2013) suggest that visual stimuli might indeed influence the general likability of a song, but it is important to mention that these experiments have mainly used videos as stimuli. This fact can offer a useful suggestion in terms of choosing the type of stimuli that could be used for experimental research, in order to see if this influence would rather occur with a video stimulus, and not with a somewhat more static visual one, which is specific to a conventional brand identity.

The third research question (RQ3) addresses the influence that the visual could have on the perceived quality of the music. The specialists suggest that low quality visual materials may discourage the audience from wanting to discover the artist's music, or even influence the perceived quality of the music. Contrary, if the music and the artist are beautifully packaged, people may tend to attach to music a higher degree of quality. This might be due to the fact that they sometimes tend to be guided by prejudice and project the positive qualities of promotion and communication on how they perceive the music. This phenomenon is also supported by the Halo Effect Theory (Thorndike, 1920; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), which suggests that the perception, of a brand in this case, can be influenced by a pre-existent perception of other characteristics of the same brand. At the same time, it is suggested that the perception on the quality of music might be influenced by other variables, sometimes longitudinally, and that the visual impact on the perception of quality may change over time due to evolutions or psychological changes of listeners. Iwamiyia (1994) conducts an experiment with a more literal approach of the concept of quality, more specifically sound quality, and it suggests that visual stimuli can compensate for a lower degree of quality. Moreover, the work of Gillespie (1997) further emphasises that the quality of some musical characteristics can be improved when there is a visual stimulus, while Waddell & Williamon (2017) suggest that the assessed performance quality might get a higher score in the presence of such visual cues. However, it is very important to mention that even in these cases, the visual stimulus in the experiments is a dynamic one, more precisely video, stage presence, mimics, or gestures. Only future experimental efforts can provide specificity to the information suggested by the interviewees, more precisely to find if this influence happens only with video stimuli, or it is notable as well in the context of a visual brand identity characterised by static elements, such as a website, a logo, or pictures, devoid of visual contact with the artist via video or live.

Finally, the fourth research question (RQ4) addresses how visual stimuli could influence the perception of the emotion conveyed by music. Emotions and emotional attachment, according to experts, can be influenced by visual elements. However,

additional conditions are being emphasised. The elements and visual exposures related to brand communication can influence the emotions felt when listening to music, but primary when there is already a strong emotional attachment to the artist. In line with the literature on video stimuli influence (Moore, 2010), it is also considered that such emotional influence happens mainly in the cases where the public sees the artist, such as videos, and especially, live performances. It is also suggested that if the artist is personally present when the listening process happens, physically or virtually, communication, personality and behaviour must be congruent with what the artist transmits through lyrics or what the song conveys emotionally. Otherwise, the perception on the artists' authenticity and sincerity may be affected. This effect of congruence is also supported theoretically and empirically by the literature, suggesting that emotions, particular characteristics or values used in branding and brand communication, should be convergent with those expected or with personal characteristics (De Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace, 2010; Boltz, Ebendorf & Field, 2009; Turri, Smith & Kemp, 2013; Trevor & Plazak, 2016). In this particular aspect, our interviewed professionals have successfully emphasised the dynamic visual aspect, such as music videos, vlogs, stage presence and performance. These suggestions are in line with what the literature says about stimuli effectively influencing the perception of music (Adams, 1994; Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005; Moore; 2010). Even though compatible, these suggestions deviate from what a brand identity means in a typical way, therefore it is something that should further be analysed through an experimental investigation.

Besides filling a literature gap by approaching the topic of visual identity and visual brand communication importance and symbiosis in the contemporary music field, the present study has profound implications at the business level. The interview-based data offers a concise but comprehensive summary on the main elements the music specialists should consider when building a consistent and long-lasting artist's image. The weight of the paper comes from the industry-realistic variety of specialists approached in the analysis, professionals covering a wide number of music industry subfields: music producer, artist advertising executive, artist manager, music web designer, radio director, music journalist, music consultant, music career coach or music video producer. Additionally, this paper offers updated directions, information and understandings on the role of visuals on music perception to both communication specialists and artists. The data can serve to build communication strategies that are both effective and that do justice to the music product.

Applying a qualitative method, the main limit of the paper is that of subjectivism. However, by consistently relying on variables already approached by the theory and on permanent validation of the results with the existing literature, an objective perspective has been offered. Moreover, due to time and location obstacles, contacting the respondents was performed considering their availability, and not being able to fully respect a clear direction in terms of their occupations in the music industry. However, an advantage of this situation is materialised through a high level of answers' diversity, in line with the interviewees' previous distinct experiences. By increasing the number of interviews, the results could present an even stronger argument and add perspectives that have not yet been covered.

The present paper is built on specialised literature, enriched and adapted through the interviews with specialists who actually work in the contemporary music industry. Thus, from the point of view of future research endeavours, the acquired exploratory information can serve as a baseline for future variables' operationalisation in the field of music branding and brand communication. Likewise, the concepts discussed can help in building experimental designs that verify causality, either in natural or controlled environments, between the use of branding specific visual stimuli and music perception, in a practical and commercial music industry context, a relationship that has not been researched in depth so far.

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