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Prolegomena for any Future Narrative Literaturemetrics

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This paper introduces the concept of *narrative literaturemetrics*, a novel mixed-methods approach that applies the quantitative metrics traditionally used in bibliometrics to the field of literature. Utilising an extended version of Bourdieu's field theory, this study draws parallels between academia and literature, emphasising the applicability of concepts such as capital, field, and agents to literary analysis. Despite the evident similarities, there has been a surprising lack of field-theoretical studies employing bibliometric methodologies within literary studies. This paper addresses that gap by outlining the theoretical foundations and methodological considerations of *narrative literaturemetrics*. It discusses adapting bibliometric indicators to literary analysis and highlights the distinctions necessary to respect the unique norms governing literature and academia. Furthermore, the paper explores the emerging qualitative turn in bibliometrics, particularly the development of narrative bibliometrics, and its relevance to the proposed approach. By detailing the conceptual framework and potential applications of *narrative literaturemetrics*, this study aims to establish a comprehensive model for future empirical research in literary studies.

Keywords: scientometrics, narrative bibliometrics, narrative literaturemetrics, field theory

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Introduction

Social scientists quite commonly use Bourdieu's field theory to analyse and interpret various societal realities. Still, there is a specific field of research with quantitative methodologies that can be adapted to the study of the field of literature, that is, analysis of the field of academia (Bourdieu, 1988; Demeter, 2020). Indeed, the similarities between academia and literature as social fields are clear, so it is rather surprising that, as far as we know, *informetrics* or *bibliometrics* are not applied in field-theoretical studies in the realm of fictional literature to the analysis of authors or other agents. In the following paragraphs, we introduce the most important similarities between the above-mentioned two fields to justify the scientific legitimacy of a mixed-methods analysis that we call *narrative literaturemetrics.* First, we delineate the most important considerations behind using quantitative metrics to analyse academia, and we show how past research has used field theory to interpret empirical data. Then, we show how the most relevant Bourdieusian concepts used by researchers in their bibliometric analysis – namely, capital, field, and agents – can be similarly used for literature research to those used in the analysis of academia. In this part, we will also discuss the differences between the two fields that have significant theoretical importance, as distinctions should be made to emphasise that the two fields – literature and academia – are autonomous fields with specific norms that characterise their operation (Labinger, 2023). We then discuss the latest, newly-developing tendency in bibliometrics and research assessment known in general terms as a *qualitative turn* (Aguillo, 2022). Specifically, we will introduce the main considerations behind *narrative bibliometrics* (Torres-Salinas et al., 2024) and its basic methodologies through which it is used to interpret large-scale quantitative data. Finally, we briefly introduce and describe the justification and methodology of a narrative literaturemetrics approach. We then discuss why this approach is unique in its analysis of the field of literature, and why it is important and necessary. Then, we introduce some conceptualisation and details of measurements.

We emphasise that we should clearly differentiate between the introduction, justification, and presentation of a model or approach and its application. Accordingly, it is normal for individual scholars not to use all the Bourdieusian concepts applied in field theory. Similarly, literature researchers do not have to use all the scientometric indicators that we present in the methodology part when analysing a given writer's reception in terms of narrative literaturemetrics. We argue that the presentation and implementation of scientific models or approaches always differ in the same way, that is, the latter is always much narrower. Of course, in most papers, and even in books, authors only introduce concepts that will be used in their analysis, but this is something that can be done only when the model or theory is well-known and, in Bourdieusian terms, already part of the academic *doxa* or Kuhnian *normal science.* However, in our case, this does not apply to our innovative approach (narrative literaturemetrics) alone, nor even to its corresponding scientometric counterpart *(narrative bibliometrics)* as that is a relatively new innovation in itself. Thus, it is absolutely necessary to introduce narrative literaturemetrics in its developed form, even if individual scholars will not (and cannot) utilise all the opportunities it offers for analysis in their particular research projects. We have to emphasise again that the same thing always happens for all theories and more complex methodological approaches, as it does in our case of field theory and narrative bibliometrics.

Considering the former, there are several works that summarise Bourdieu's main concepts (Heilbron et al., 2018), and it is obvious that individual analyses – even very detailed and complex ones – use only a fraction of that which Bourdieu offers as analytical tools. For instance, Bajnok et al. (2022) focus mainly on *habitus* formation, Rothenberger et al. (2017) on *norms,* while the centre of Hunter's (2004) analysis is *doxa*. While these authors use many other concepts from field theory, they evidently do not use all of them, and the number of concepts they do use more extensively is limited to two or three, or just one. To mention another theory from the Hungarian context, we can name the Participation Theory of Communication (PTC), where authors typically use only one or two concepts of the theory when applying it to their fields of analysis, maintaining that what they are doing is implementing a more broad and complex theory (Horányi, 2007).

The same can be said in view of the latter, narrative bibliometrics. Torres-Salinas introduced the theory in several papers (Torres-Salinas et al., 2023; 2024) without applying all the concepts and measurements to the analysis of any specific case. In fact, the author provides some descriptive analyses in one of his papers (Torres-Salinas et al., 2024) as an illustration of the model he explains there, but the presented cases do not entail all the concepts of the model. This corresponds to the complex nature of narrative bibliometrics, because to understand the conception of this approach, readers should be familiar with the totality of the model since the concepts it uses are interconnected. However, when illustrating or implementing the model, the application of all the concepts is no longer necessary.

On the basis of the above, we have constructed the introduction to our approach in a manner intended to cover all the possible areas in which the model could be applied. This is the first time that *narrative literaturemetrics* will be used, and so the more detailed introduction and presentation is related to field theory and narrative bibliometrics because in the case of these approaches, and field theory in particular, we have illustrations of applied research, as well as theoretical introductions. We argue that all the concepts and measurements that are used in field theory and narrative bibliometrics can be used – *mutatis mutandis* – in our presented narrative literaturemetrics, but that what is then actualised is dependent on the field in which the methodology is applied. In our view, this is where the difference between presenting a model and applying it lies. Given that this current theoretical paper is the first to present narrative literaturemetrics, our aim here is to discuss the dimensions and variables the model offers, and not to present a particular empirical analysis, that should be the task of future endeavours.

Bibliometrics: A quantitative turn is the analysis of academia

Considerations in using quantitative metrics for the assessment of scientific work are manifold. It was the early 1980s when different measurements were developed to assess the performance of various agents in higher education and research, such as universities, research institutions and departments. In the 2000s, assessments of researchers through a variety of means with bibliometric analysis became mainstream in the Western world (Larivière & Costas, 2016). Alongside the neo-liberalisation of academia (Demeter, 2020), the funding of scientific research has become contingent upon the productivity and impact of research projects because both funding agencies and society want to see that public money is spent effectively (Savage, 2000). Moreover, the expansion of higher education and scientific research has brought about an almost exponential growth in the number of researchers operating worldwide, making it impossible to assess their work without statistical procedures (Sedighi, 2020). Furthermore, the infamous *publish or perish* paradigm (Parchomovsky, 2000) made scientific publications the most important component in measuring academic excellence for research institutions and individual researchers, generating a significant growth in the number of publications and citations (Bornmann & Mutz, 2015). In short, the two interrelated phenomena urged on the introduction of quantitative measurements in research assessment. First, it appeared evident that there was a legitimate public need to see the effectiveness of public investment in scientific research, so the fact that academic work should be measured became clear (Tóth et al., 2024). Second, the measurements could no longer be fully qualitative, as in the case of peer review, because that system was unable to handle the enormous number of authors and papers. Moreover, some scholars even argued that peer review might include severe bias with no guarantee of transparency (Goyanes & Demeter, 2021). Accordingly, the classic peer review in which research panels and anonymous peers evaluated research performance *in the backroom* became the subject of harsh criticism, and the usage of bibliometrics became one of the possible tools for making research evaluation more transparent, more objective, and more effective (Assimakis & Adam, 2010).

The growing need for the internationalisation of higher education and scientific research gave new fuel to the popularity of scientometrics because it goes hand in hand with the need for building international databases and research assessment systems that can be applied internationally, unlike national or regional measurements (Deardorff & van Gaalen, 2023). Moreover, the introduction of international university rankings such as Times Higher Education (THE), the QS Ranking, or the Shanghai Ranking (ARWU) has made universities around the world adopt the metrics that are used by such rankings (Schmitt, 2012; Tomlinson & Freeman, 2018). For example, international rankings use Scopus or Web of Science to calculate research excellence when ranking universities on the general and the by-subject lists (Burris, 2004; Pietrucha, 2018). Evidently, the widespread use of bibliometrics became possible for both scientometrists and institutions with the development of digital databases such as the Web of Science (now owned by the Clarivate™ analytics company) and Elsevier's Scopus, which offer a huge amount of data for bibliometric analysis (Assimakis & Adam, 2010).

In the last two decades, there has been a growing interest in the development of robust scientometric tools that work with quantitative data gathered by Scopus or the Web of Science that are appropriate for measuring and evaluating the most important aspects of scientific excellence: productivity, impact, usage, and social contribution *(altmetrics)*. In the following paragraphs, without going into technical details (for more see, e.g. Blasco et al., 2024), we introduce the most important considerations behind conceptualising and measuring scientometric indicators in assessing scholarly publications.

Production

The productivity of different agents, such as research institutions and individual scholars, can be measured both qualitatively and quantitatively, and there is broad and sometimes harsh debate about the correct methodology to appropriately relate publications and excellence. For instance, production could simply be measured by the number of published works without reference to genre or outlet. However, there is no justification for this method, as both scholars and research assessment agencies are aware of the fact that there are significant differences between different types of publications (Bihari et al., 2023). For instance, some scholars might aim to publish as many papers as possible without referencing genre and publication outlets. In contrast, others might publish fewer papers but in more prestigious outlets (Larivière & Costas, 2016).

However, while there are different approaches to measuring scientific output, no one thinks that quantitative information alone is able to frame scholarly excellence; thus, qualitative aspects, typically genre and journal prestige, play an important part in assessing research production (Blasco et al., 2024). Regarding genre, there are very important differences between disciplines and continuous changes over time in the manner in which qualitative values for different genres in different disciplines are rendered. For instance, books, especially longer monographs, were favoured in arts and humanities for a long time, but nowadays, both national and international agencies have begun to emphasise peer-reviewed journal articles (Kwiek, 2012). Notwithstanding the emerging importance of journal articles, publishing monographs – ideally at prestigious publishers – is still much appreciated in the humanities. However, in social sciences it is papers published in top-ranked international journals that may add more prestige to authors than book chapters, conference proceedings, or even monographs. Finally, in natural sciences, life sciences, engineering, and related disciplines such as computer science, almost the only outlets for researchers to publish their works are peer-reviewed journal articles, and monographs are typically used in higher education, and not in research in the narrower sense.

Beyond genre, the venue for publication is also a significant factor in research assessment as, for instance, a single paper in a well-known, prestigious journal might be worth more than a legion of papers in unknown or obscure outlets (Callaham et al., 2002). Accordingly, most established scientific databases have used measurements to evaluate journal prestige, such as Scimago's SJR or the Web of Science's Journal Impact Factor (JIF). However, SJR and JIF alone cannot describe the overall value of the journals because there are significant differences in citation and publication trends across disciplines thus, for instance, impact factors in philosophy and computer science cannot be compared in a meaningful way (Kaur et al., 2012). Accordingly, beyond JIF and SJR values, scholars began to use journal quartiles that make it possible to compare journals within the same discipline (Miranda & Garcia-Carpintero, 2019). Thus, while there are different measurements to compare journal prestige, one point is clear: the venue of publication should be considered when assessing the publishing activity of scholars, and measurements based on mere quantitative calculations are not adequate tools in evaluating productivity.

It is necessary to add a few words on another important component of productivity: co-authorship. Research has shown that the number of co-authors per paper has significantly risen over the past few decades, and this raises several questions about the meaning of *authorship* and the added value of different researchers to a published paper (Hagen, 2010). Significant differences exist across disciplines, for instance in collaboration and, accordingly, in the number of co-authors. For example, single-authored papers are still mainstream in arts and humanities, but in social sciences, and in hard sciences in particular, papers are typically written by many authors (Goyanes et al., 2023). While a lot of effort has been made to develop research assessment systems that can deal with the manifold factors of publishing (Blasco et al., 2024), we still don't have scholarly agreement on the exact calculations by which the contribution of different co-authors can be demonstrated.

Finally, in relation to research collaboration and co-authorship, we must briefly discuss internationalisation, which is one of the most important trends in research and higher education in the past few decades. While there are instances where the co-authors of a given article do work in the same institution, it is more common for co-authors to work in different countries. Hence, collaboration and co-author networks are the most important bases of internationalisation (Newman, 2001). Accordingly, when assessing publishing excellence, we need to consider the co-authorship network in which different scholars participate since, beyond productivity, it is that which shows the international embeddedness and reputation of scholars (Pan et al., 2012).

Impact

Beyond prolificacy or research productivity – these terms relate to the same factor, namely, the number of publications – the most frequently analysed aspect of academic publishing is impact, typically measured by the number of citations (Tahamtan et al., 2016). The number of citations, or academic mentions, is considered an adequate measurement of importance or impact because the fact that a given research paper is mentioned in another academic text emphasises its relevance (Baird & Oppenheim, 1994). Moreover, it is often thought that the most cited papers can shape the development of their disciplines as they become *classics* that are read by the majority of the disciplinary community. Thus top cited papers significantly impact their related fields, while the impact of publications that are not cited can be questioned. In other words, while prolificacy and productivity can be considered to be the result of the authors' efforts, impact and the number of citations are external and so reflect the work's reception in the peer group. Impact can also be related to academic trends since *hot topics* are always associated with *trending papers,* which means the most cited papers. Top cited papers provide a snapshot of a given discipline, showing which subfields, theories, and methodologies the academic community acknowledges. In contrast, more peripheral topics and theories are typically associated with less cited publications (He et al., 2009). Thus, while the citation counts of researchers show their impact as individuals, top cited papers show prestige hierarchies within a discipline or specific research field. Here, we can distinguish between self-citations, where an author cites his or her own works, and independent citations, where other scholars refer to a given author's work. While self-citations can be useful and relevant, there is a general agreement that because science is a societal enterprise, the real impact of research projects and individual scholars' true impact can be measured by the number of independent, external citations (Glänzel & Thijs, 2004).

Another aspect of the academic publishing system in which citations play a crucial role is the assessment of journals because some of their most important values – for example, their impact factor and their H-index – are calculated by the number of citations (Bornmann & Daniel, 2007). Top cited journals have better positions on different international rankings such as Scopus or the Web of Science, which makes them increasingly prestigious. Accordingly, they receive ever more submissions, and they can be – in some cases, extremely – selective. It is common for the most prestigious journals to have an acceptance ratio of less than five percent. If a journal rejects 95 percent of the papers submitted to it then the thought that the papers it does publish will be of a higher quality than for the journals that accept the vast majority of submissions is actually plausible (Stephen, 2011). Beyond journals, citations are also considered in the case of international university rankings, where the scientific impact of universities or departments is calculated by the number of citations for the works of the staff members of the analysed universities and departments (Johnes, 2018). These measurements are restricted to citations in Scopus and Web of Science so, as we have seen in the case of publications, the publication outlet is of great significance, and there are stark differences between citations because a specific kind of citation – namely, those from peer-reviewed, indexed journals – carry much more weight in calculating impact than other kinds of citations.

Usage

As laid out above, citations are the *medium* for measuring scientific impact, as citations in academic journals are considered a good proxy for evaluating the scholarly impact of a research project (He et al., 2009). However, it is not obvious that once a research paper has been read it will also be cited. There has been an enduring scholarly debate on how citations represent accord with the results or interpretation of a given piece of research. For example, imagine that a research group publishes a paper in an academic journal that found a particular interaction between variables A and B. Other researchers, having tested this interaction then find no association between the two variables. What can they do? They can obviously cite the first paper stating that their research has produced results that do not confirm past research findings. They can shed light on methodological frauds or weak points in the interpretation of the original findings. One might then reasonably wonder if the citation has signified the impact of the original study in a positive sense or has perhaps even weakened the significance or plausibility of the initial study. One can argue that a *negative citation* of this kind may falsify former studies or at least question them. In contrast, others might think that negative citations are as important as positive ones because they show the importance of the research topics and papers. Thus, while a new study might challenge previous research results, citations show the most important studies that should be cited, even when the results are questionable.

In relation to this topic, international bibliometric databases have begun to use usage counts that are considered meaningful counterparts to citation counts. In case of Scopus and SciVal, there is now an option to see the usage of papers, which may differ from citations. According to SciVal, there are two main salient rationales in explaining the relevance of view numbers. First, they are more immediate than citation activity. Citations are relatively slow in coming because they appear in research papers which scholars have to write and then publish, a process that can last for several years. Usage metrics, however, are the sum of abstract viewings and clicks on the link to see the full text at the publisher's website (SciVal, 2021), so an interest in a research paper appears much earlier in usage counts than in citation counts. Second, "usage counts represent the interest of the whole research community, including undergraduate and graduate students, and researchers operating in the corporate sector, who tend not to publish and cite" (Rajkó et al., 2023). Finally, usage counts could help to show the significance of research projects that are published with the expectation of being read or widely used rather than being extensively referred to in other scholarly works (SciVal, 2021).

Altmetrics: The social impact of scholarly work

The above-mentioned metrics are suggested as measures of different aspects of research excellence. However, there is a general feature that applies to all of them, that is, they measure importance but in a narrower academic context (Demeter, 2020). Scientists, however, do not work in a societal vacuum, and academia is embedded in a wider social context. For example, in most cases, academia is not financially independent, as universities and research institutions are either state-funded or private institutions, which are accountable to their maintainers. Moreover, in the era of the neoliberal university (Rustin, 2016), higher education institutions should serve a great variety of interests beyond the scholarly community: they have to consider the expectations of the market in education and training, the requirements and policies of research funding agencies, the interests of the general public, and they should even take state regulations and priorities into account (Muñoz-García, 2019). Thus, measuring the social impact of research projects is now an important part of science assessment at local, national, and international levels. Showing how a given researcher's work contributes to society is part of their qualification, and most of the prestigious international grants, for instance the majority of European Research Committee grants, make discussion of social impact in research proposals mandatory.

The wider social impact of research work is measured by various tools that are related to social media. The summative name for research metrics of this kind is *Altmetrics,* which goes back to 2010 and *Altmetrics: A Manifesto* (Priem et al., 2010).

Among others, Altmetric research is related to understanding how science is disseminated and discussed across various communication channels, the way in which social media can cover the most important scientific topics, or an audience engages with science (Fang et al., 2021). Altmetrics might use softer indicators than standard scientometric research and, on many occasions, it focuses more on rhetoric, communication, language, and persuasion than the precise scientific content. Accordingly, it is easy to see that Altmetrics grabs a different aspect of the publishing system than scientometrics, laying more emphasis on the reception of the general public, or, in other words, on the reception of the wider audience rather than that of *the profession* alone.

As we have seen above, bibliometric research deals with two interrelated issues: the production of researchers and the reception of their work amongst professionals and the wider audience. As we will argue later, applying bibliometrics to analyse academia can be useful –*mutatis mutandis* – in empirical analysis of the literary field. However, in order to do it in a meaningful way, first, we have to justify how theoretical tools relate to empirical data. In the next part, we briefly introduce how past research used field theory to interpret bibliometric data. We then argue that field theory can describe the similarities and differences between the field of academia and the field of literature. Bourdieu and his followers have already analysed the differences and distinctions between different social fields, such as literature and academia. So here we describe only those aspects related to our empirical measurements because, as far as we are aware, no studies have been dedicated to applying scientometric tools to an empirical field-theoretical description of the literary field.

Field theory in bibliometric research

As mentioned earlier, field-theoretical concepts are widely used to analyse different societal realms, such as literature or academia. However, the empirical tools used to justify field-theoretic descriptions are manifold, and there is no general agreement on which methodologies are the most appropriate for field analysis (Sapiro et al., 2020). For many researchers, Bourdieusian analysis can be conducted mainly by deep qualitative data, typically through narrative interviews (Bourdieu, 1999a; Hadas, 2021); others use case studies (Havas & Fáber, 2020), focus groups (Ferrare & Apple, 2015) or historical evidence (Crossley, 2004). From the perspective of *narrative literaturemetrics,* the most related approach is that in which empirical, quantitative data is interpreted theoretically, as was the case in the field-theoretical interpretation of bibliometric data in the analysis of academia. Given that our invention, *narrative literaturemetrics,* will creatively and critically use bibliometric measurements to analyse literature, first we need to introduce the main field-theoretical concepts with their corresponding measurements.

The field

The field is the main concept of the Bourdieusian description of literature as a social phenomenon. The field is the symbolic (and in many ways, physical) place where different agencies strive for position in order to gain control, power, and appreciation (Bourdieu, 1988). Bourdieu made it crystal clear that field, agents, and capital are interrelated concepts that cannot be understood without reference to each other: the field is “the space of the relations of force between the different kinds of capital or, more precisely, between the agents who possess a sufficient amount of one of the different kinds of capital to be in a position to dominate the corresponding field” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 34). This conceptualisation proved to be useful for the description of many aspects of academic life, as it is reflected in a legion of studies dedicated to the Bourdieusian analysis of academia (Sapiro et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2018; Bauder et al., 2017; Thatcher et al., 2016; Wiedemann & Meyen, 2016; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015; Grenfell, 2014; Leung, 2013; Rothenberger et al., 2017; Recke, 2011).

When the empirical data for the field description consists of quantitative bibliometric information, as it often does when the subject is academia, researchers try to apply scientometric indicators to the corresponding field-theoretical concepts. For instance, scholars talk about the academic publishing field (Demeter, 2020) that is shaped by many agencies, including individuals, institutions and symbolic agencies such as language or rhetoric. It is well known, for instance, that English, the academic lingua franca of recent decades, has characterised the academic publication industry to a very significant extent (Canagarajah, 2002). Being the sole, internationally accepted language for academic use, academic English has become an unavoidable factor in the field, one which significantly impacts the position of all the participating agents. Those who have academic English as part of their education – typically native English speakers – have a significant advantage over those agents who have to learn English as a second language. The disadvantage of non-native English speakers can be systematically evinced at all levels of the academic field, but the most striking inequalities that are caused by the international hegemony of academic English can be found in publishing. In the realm of science, the vast majority of books and journal articles are written in English, and in the case of the most prestigious journals, the rate of English-only papers can reach 100 percent (Sugiharto, 2021). But that is not all because the same holds true for the majority of international research proposals that should be written in English, without reference to the origin of the scholar who applies. Moreover, the official language of international academic conferences is, in the vast majority of cases, English. Peer review is in English, editorial board meetings are held in English, and selection committees and research agencies evaluate proposals written in English, so English dominance can be found at all levels of the field. When researchers talk about the *price of entry* (Bourdieu, 2004) in field theory, they refer to the fact that mastering a specific set of knowledge, and collecting an appropriate quantity of capital, is essential in gaining entry to a given field. From the above-mentioned considerations, it is evident that mastering academic English is one of the most important parts of the *price of entry* into the field of academia.

However, language is only one of the most important aspects of the Anglo-Saxon dominance of today's international academia. Another characteristic of the field is the dominance of Anglo-Saxon academic writing, which is far more than a mere question of language. Of course, a crucial part of Anglo-Saxon academic writing is that its language is almost exclusively English; and beyond that it entails a specific logic, a specific style, and a specific, culturally defined understanding of how to do and then publish science. The academic prose or the style of the academic essay is defined in various handbooks, and its basics should be learned during education in countries with native English. The standards of so-called international academic writing – which is, in fact, Anglo-Saxon academic writing – consist of a specific order in which the writing should be developed, starting from the *introduction,* followed by the *description* of Methodologies, reporting the *results,* providing a *discussion* of the results, offering a *summary* and then, finally, stating the *limitations* of the study (Oshima & Hogue, 2007).

However, in several cultural contexts, this is not the mainstream way in which academic writing is formulated. In world regions beyond the Western world – such as Asia, Latin America, Africa, or Eastern Europe – there are different traditions regarding how to do research, and on how to build scholarly texts (Canagarajah, 2002; Demeter, 2020). However, since the field of international academia is, beyond question, defined by Anglo-Saxon standards, it is legitimate to talk about the Western colonisation of international academia by not just economic means but also symbolic, cultural, and other soft power hegemonies (Canagarajah, 2002). In other words, as several researchers have concluded, international scholarly discussions are almost exclusively open only to those scholars who present their writings in English. There may be some exceptions, but scholars speaking or writing in other than English (usually termed *national*) languages can expect significantly less international recognition (Lauf, 2005; Liu et al., 2018).

Beyond the above-mentioned two determinants, namely language and rhetoric, there are a lot of vectors that shape the relations of the field through power positions, norms, legitimisation mechanisms and, most importantly, through defining the types of capital that should be accumulated in the field. In the following paragraphs, we delineate the most important kinds of capital that characterise the behaviour of agents in academia.

Capital

Bourdieu's concept of capital can be understood as an expansion of the traditional economic interpretation, as his aim was to broaden the understanding of *capital* by applying it within a broader framework of exchanges in which various assets are transformed and traded within intricate networks across different domains (Demeter, 2018). He seeks to shift the focus from the limited scope of commercial economic transactions to a broader exploration of cultural exchanges and valuations within an anthropological context, wherein economics represents just one aspect, albeit a fundamental one. It is noteworthy, however, that other types of capital, such as cultural and social capital, can be viewed as forms of economic capital that have undergone a transformation process (Grenfell, 2014).

Capital accumulation in academia may be the most investigated topic amongst Bourdieusian scholars focusing on research and higher education. Bajnok et al. (2022), for instance, specified many kinds of capital necessary for reaching power positions in the academic field such as that researchers with more academic capital have more positive academic role models, more international experience (even in their childhood), are more familiar with international academic norms, and generally have a more critical attitude, which is an elementary aspect of scholarly work. Beyond symbolic and cultural capital that can be acquired through formal education, scholars talk about supervision or supervisory capital related to the role of informal education. Supervisors can be important sources of academic capital beyond formal education: they can teach international standards even in a national context, they can share their professional networks, providing a huge amount of social capital, and they can serve as appropriate role models for learning academic habitus (Bajnok et al, 2022).

Agents

The description of agents in any given field is of crucial importance, as it is they who shape the field through their activities, their positions and their habitus, and they are the subjects that accumulate capital (Bourdieu, 1988; Grenfell, 2014). In relation to the field, agents can be either *orthodox* or *heterodox.* Orthodox scholars have already established figures – individual, collective, or institutional – in the field of forces with considerable capital, who possess power positions. It is they who shape and maintain the field's norms and in this aspect they are part of *normal science* in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1997). In most cases, orthodox and heterodox agents represent different actions that can be characterised as push and pull activities (Demeter, 2018). In academia, orthodox scholars strive to maintain their hegemony, including the hegemony of their norms and accumulated capital. For instance, in international science, top positions are maintained by the elite agents of the Western world, whether individual, collective, or institutional. Typical examples of individual agents are scientists who strive to attain power positions in academia. If an agent's operation is successful in the field, it can be said that they have and use the field-specific, appropriate habitus. They receive tenure, promotions and, with that, opportunities to emerge as scholars. They can become leading figures in a field and, in many cases, internationalise their activities through cooperation and mobility.

Just as individual agents collect individual capital in various forms, collective and institutional agents can save collective or institutional capital (Demeter, 2018), as in the example of research groups and teams, laboratories and institutions, departments, and formal and informal communities with limited – but extant – autonomy. Universities, disciplines, countries, and world regions – and in the context of society as a whole, even science itself is an institutional agent when we analyse its position in a historical context, connected with religion, political ideology, and other societal agencies – these can all be characterised as institutional agents who strive for better positions in a wider context.

As Demeter (2019) has previously presented, differences in capital accumulation for the agents of international science, as a field, can be interpreted in a world-systemic framework while also retaining the Bourdieusian terminology. Based on this categorisation, we offer a modified scheme with which to interpret the positions of agents as they operate in the field of struggle (Bourdieu, 1988), focusing on *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy* as the main concepts in our categorisation (Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics and measurements for orthodox and heterodox agents in academia

Agents	**Orthodox**	**Heterodox**	**Measurements**	**Variable**
Individual				
Scholars	Working at elite universities	Working at the periphery	University position on prestige rankings	Ordinal
	Educated at elite universities	Educated at the periphery	University position on prestige rankings	Ordinal
	Senior scholars	Junior scholars	Academic seniority, expressed in position	Ordinal
	Highly productive	Less productive	Publication count	Continuous
	Prestigious publication	Publication in less visible outlets	Quartiles, deciles SJR, IF	Ordinal Continuous (normalised)
	Highly cited	Rarely cited	Citation count	Continuous
	Occupy gatekeeping positions	Lack gatekeeping positions	Positions with prestige hierarchies	Nominal
	Over-represented in committees, associations, editorial boards	Under-represented in committees, associations, editorial boards	Positions with prestige hierarchies	Nominal
	Star positions in collaboration networks	Peripheral positions or distracted from the network	Central network positions	Continuous (network properties)
Collective				
Research groups	Overfunded	Underfunded	Received fund	Continuous
	Affiliated in elite institutions	Affiliated in peripheral institutions	University positions	Ordinal
	Collaboration networks with elite institutions	Loose collaboration networks		
	Highly productive	Less productive	Publication count	Continuous
	Prestigious publication	Publication in less visible outlets	Quartiles, deciles SJR, IF	Ordinal Continuous (normalised)
	Highly cited	Rarely cited	Citation count	Continuous
Committees	Over-represented	Under-represented		
Departments	Highly productive	Less productive	Publication count	Continuous
	Prestigious publication	Publication in less visible outlets	Quartiles, deciles SJR, IF	Ordinal Continuous (normalised)
	Highly cited	Rarely cited	Citation count	Continuous
	High positions on international rankings	Lower positions or not listed on international rankings	Ranking positions	Ordinal
Institutional				
Language	Academic English	Language other than English	Interlingua position English International Regional National	Nominal
Rhetoric	Anglo-Saxon rhetoric	Different writing style	Structure of paper	Nominal

Agents	Orthodox	Heterodox	Measurements	Variable
Genre	Research paper	Other genre	Genre	Nominal
Associations	Established in the West	National character	National diversity	Nominal Continuous (Simpson)
	Has Western leadership	National leadership	National diversity	Nominal Continuous (Simpson)
	Organises conferences in English	Organises national conferences	National diversity	Nominal Continuous (Simpson)
Universities	Occupy top positions on international rankings	Lower positions on international rankings or not ranked	Ranking positions	Ordinal
	Has international students and staff members Staff members typically educated in the West	Low national diversity in students and staff members Staff members are typically educated in the same country	National diversity of students and staff members Education trajectories of staff members	Nominal Continuous (Simpson) Network properties
Publishers	Publishes in English	Publishes in other languages than English	Interlingua position – English – International – Regional – National	Nominal
	International distribution	National distribution	National diversity and network of the distribution	Nominal Continuous (Simpson) Network properties
	Extensive marketing strategies	Weak marketing strategies	Publishing activity	Continuous Nominal
	Located in the West	Located at the periphery	Location (world-systemic)	Nominal
Nations	Western/Central countries of the Global North	Countries of the Global South and the Semi-Periphery	World-systemic positions	Nominal
World Regions	North America, Western Europe, Developed Asia	Developing Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin-America	World-systemic positions	Nominal
The Academia	Life sciences, engineering, computer science	Humanities, social sciences	Public spending on the sector	Continuous (normalised)

Source: Compiled by the author.

As stated earlier in this section, scholars who analyse a given segment of the academic field never use all the concepts presented in the table above, because their analyses implement and do not encompass the model. Accordingly, literature scholars who sympathise with our approach can select from a great variety of the variables presented above, such as the measurements related to: language, genre, country, world regions, scientific associations in which writers participated, publishers, the academic reception, and educational trajectories. All form possible spaces in which to collect social capital, and, evidently, the analysis can cover the majority of the corresponding individual agents, typically the writers, editors, academics, and translators that shape the literary field.

Narrative bibliometrics

The development of narrative bibliometrics is relatively recent, although its foundations were laid as early as the 1980s, and some researchers even assert that the main considerations behind narrative bibliometrics have always been part of bibliometric research (Moed et al., 1985). As mentioned above, using bibliometrics in research assessment partially resulted from recognising the shortcomings of the ever subjective peer review. For instance, while it uses more detailed qualitative data and is more personalised than bibliometrics, peer review does contain the elements of subjectivity, discrepancies can appear in the evaluations, its review process is not transparent, and impartiality is not always present (Torres-Salinas et al., 2023).

In the last decade, however, we have been experiencing a new trend in research assessment that has attempted to marginalise or eliminate bibliometric analysis from research assessment. According to this trend – expressed in various manifestos such as the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) in 2012, the Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics in 2015, or the Coalition for Advancing Assessment (CoARA) in 2023 – the use of metrics in research assessment might distort the real contribution of researchers and research projects, so it should be substituted by qualitative peer review (Pérez Esparrells et al., 2022). While there are slight differences between what these manifestos claim, they typically contest three aspects of scientometrics. First, they argue that journal-level indicators (e.g. JIF) cannot be used in the assessments of research papers because the evaluation should be related to the papers, not the journals in which they are published. Second, they strive for a more diverse evaluation of research production that does not focus on journal papers alone but on other forms of publications, such as reports, databases, policy papers, etc. Third, they call for more open science, which usually refers to the application of the open access publication model (Torres-Salinas et al., 2023).

We need to mention that so-called bibliometric denialism (Torres-Salinas et al., 2023) works as a *straw man argument* because scientometric literature already addresses the majority of the problems spotted by denialists. Regarding the topics of the above-mentioned manifestos, first, we must emphasise that disciplinary differences between the publication and citation trends have been considered throughout the history of bibliometrics (Moed et al., 1985), and most of the extant research assessment systems are well aware of these disciplinary differences. For instance, both the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Hungarian Accreditation Committee use a variety of metrics to assess various academic fields and, in some cases, even subfields. Second, the same holds true for the publication genre: while research papers hold more prestige in the natural sciences than book chapters, monographs are still the most appreciated forms of publication in the humanities. Finally, open science models are business models with nothing to do with scientometrics or bibliometric indicators. These considerations had already been clarified in *Evaluative Bibliometrics,* which promoted a fair, rational, and limited use of bibliometric indicators (Torres-Salinas et al., 2024).

However, that a qualitative turn in research assessment continuously develops in many parts of the Western world remains true. The question is how the scientific community can agree on the forms and methods of appropriate research assessment that retain the strengths of scientometric analysis while also taking advantage of qualitative assessments (Bordignon et al., 2023). One possible solution is the method known as *narrative bibliometrics,* which was recently developed by Spanish scholars (Torres-Salinas et al., 2024). In the words of its developers, narrative bibliometrics can be defined as "the use of bibliometric indicators to generate stories and narratives that allow for the defense and exposition of a scientific curriculum and/or its individual contributions within the framework of a scientific evaluation process" (Torres-Salinas, 2023). This method aims to combine the strongest parts of both quantitative and qualitative assessments: the transparency, objectivity, reliability, and verifiable nature of bibliometric calculations and the multidimensionality, personality, contextuality, and variability of qualitative assessment. In other words, with narrative bibliometrics, a deep, critical, historical, and socially contextualised individual narrative on a given scholar's operations in the analysed field can be developed based on theoretical and historical knowledge and large-scale, scientifically collected, and analysed empirical evidence.

There are five interrelated pillars for any narrative bibliometric analysis from which the first, *replicability,* relates to the transparency and correctness of the methods. Data sources and methodologies should be reported as clearly as possible so that other researchers can replicate the analysis. The second pillar, *uniqueness,* refers to the need to highlight the most important contributions of scholars because the same quantitative values can represent various contributions for different individuals. For instance, a given scholar might emphasise the translations of their work or the number of citations in a given language, which might for others be unimportant. It depends on many issues, such as the field of research, the position and the career trajectory of scholars, their attitudes toward diversity, their policy aims, and so on. In other words, the pillar of uniqueness demands individualising quantitative data. The third pillar, *adaptability,* holds that the definition of *scientometric* varies across different disciplines and research fields, so there is no general way to interpret quantitative bibliometric data. The fourth pillar, *comparability,* argues that comparisons with other colleagues in the field are not necessary because one's merits can be assessed without creating an environment of undue competition. This pillar obviously resonates with the pillar of uniqueness by which scientometric indicators should be interpreted individually. Finally, the fifth pillar of narrative bibliometrics is *contextuality* by which the qualitative and quantitative data should be interpreted in a social and historical context. While, as we will illustrate below, there are significant differences between the field of academia and literature, the most fundamental pillar of narrative bibliometrics – the use of empirical data in an individualised qualitative context – can be applied well to the analysis of the literature field to provide a scientific evidence-based qualitative portrait of various literary figures.

Narrative literaturemetrics: A theory-based qualitative interpretation of quantitative bibliometric data

As stated above, the theoretical model of the *field* maintains a conceptual and methodological structure that allows for the analysis of any social space, which leads to the fact that literary and academic fields can be understood and represented under structurally homologous schema. Moreover, the theorisation includes the analysis of the habitus of the agents in the academic field, the norms that govern that field, and the kinds of capital that the agents typically need to accumulate to acquire power positions. The description of the academic field entails, in many cases, an analysis of the struggle between orthodox norms and scholarship (field of power) and revolutionary approaches (field of struggle). The progression of science occurs in this *battle for power positions:* what was once part of the scientific revolution later becomes a part of normal science. In his remarkable book *State Nobility* Bourdieu (1996b) analysed in detail how labour (and production) is related to capital accumulation in academia and how habitus can govern the paths that agents can walk to reach power positions in their field. As briefly mentioned above, the field-theoretical description of academia can be extended by global perspectives such as decolonisation theories, dependency theories, or world-systemic analysis, and empirical data, typically scientometrics, can also be added to the interpretation, offering quantitative empirical evidence to the structural qualitative description (Demeter, 2020). We argue that beyond the general consideration by which all societal realities can be interpreted in the field-theoretical framework based on structural isomorphs, the similarities between the field of literature and academia are especially significant.

For example, in its historical process, in which it has achieved relative levels of autonomy and dependence, the literary field has been in constant tension with the fields of power that, to a certain extent, condition its operation. “According to Bourdieu’s analysis, the emergence of the literary field results from a historical process by which the literary activity became autonomous from different types of external constraints related to the conditions of production” (Sapiro, 2003, p. 441). There are fundamentally two external constraints: the State and the market. However, to understand the historical development of a field (literary or academic) and to gain relative levels of autonomy as a social space, one must consider “the influence of interrelations with other social fields, in particular, the political field, the field of power, the economic field” (Deer, 2014, p. 120). Then, both in the literary and scientific fields, the configuration of the positions of the agents (scholars or publishers, writers or thinkers, translators, or schools of thought) always takes place in the dialectical relationship of dominants and dominated. “The political struggle determines the antagonism between the *heretical* dissidents and the *orthodox* dominant agents (Sapiro, 2003: 446). Thus, we can see position-making according to political or economic constraints in cultural or intellectual production. As Foucault (1978: 95) says: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”

While both the struggle for autonomy (as a struggle with external entities) and the struggle for field-specific power positions (as an internal struggle) are characteristic of all societal fields, the type of agents, capital, and habitus are the most similar in the case of literature and science. For instance, as mentioned before, the main agents are the authors and the publishers in both the academic and literary fields. More drastically speaking, from a field-theoretic point of view, neither in academia nor in literature is it possible to be an author without being published; thus, publishers have almost infinite power in the field. Being published is the price of entry in both fields, publications are the currency of the authors who cannot be analysed or interpreted without their publications. Another similarity lies in the role of the market and politics, as publications need to be financed in both fields, so authors require the support of either the state or the market without sacrificing their autonomy. However, when the publishing activity is driven by pure economic interest, the constraints towards both academic and literary fields are explicit. Scholars and writers either subscribe, resist, or escape that power relationship, and indeed, the outputs suffer changes, and publishers can use translators for those purposes when the exchange is international. With reference to capital, education and language are crucial in both fields, and we must emphasise that, despite the growing significance of multimedia platforms, written publications are still the most important currencies in both academia and literature.

While the field-specific similarities between the two fields are striking, there are obvious differences between them. The most important difference is that science, according to its self-definition, is somehow independent of scientists in the sense that the scientist, as a person, is of less significance (or is even totally unimportant). This is reflected in its most dramatic form in the double-blind peer review, where reviewers do not know the author's name and focus solely on the text. The impersonality of academic work is also manifested in the fact that scientists should always reflect on the work of other scientists; thus, they should justify their contribution with the findings of other scientists. This is far from the norms of the literary field where, generally, creativity and authenticity are of crucial importance. Moreover, continuous reflection on reality, empirics, and objectivity are amongst the most crucial norms in science; literature is quite different from this point of view, too. Finally, in their writings scientists typically address other scientists in their field, and so-called science communication, that is, writing for a general audience, is less important than publications targeting the academic community. By contrast, authors in the field of literature do not usually write for other authors, but for an audience that, of course, can vary from one author to another, but is in any case not identical with the community of other authors. To be popular, authors in the literary field need as many readers as possible, which is not characteristic in academia – one can become a scientific Nobel Prize winner without being known beyond a specific and sometimes extremely narrow academic community.

Based on the aforementioned issues, the similarities and differences between the two fields should be taken into account in the implementation. Thus, there will be differences between narrative bibliometrics and narrative literaturemetrics. However, through the fundamental considerations of narrative bibliometrics, our narrative literaturemetrics aims to provide an analysis supported by huge empirical data and transparent methodology but one that still reflects our subject's social and historical reality. This approach contains qualitative and quantitative elements, which differ from them in many senses. First, our approach is mixed since we apply large-scale quantitative data, historical evidence, and analysis of preceding studies. This is more than standard quantitative analyses usually provides, as, for instance, the interpretation of the data differs across the analysed periods, locations, and genres. As discussed earlier, and this is one of the most important considerations behind narrative bibliometrics, the same type of data should be interpreted differently in different cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts that produce the field through different agencies and power relations. In other words, we use data for theorisation. However, qualitative data and quantitative, mostly descriptive statistical analyses are the only sources contributing to the development of our theoretical interpretation.

Regarding the distinction between our literaturemetrics and standard qualitative analyses, in qualitative content analysis, in the case of narrative bibliometrics, researchers aim to build their interpretation on the unique database they have developed from different sources. For instance, they can provide statistics for publication records, language and geographical distribution, genre distribution, and reception metrics. These are all variables beyond the usual content analysis that focuses mainly on the produced texts. One might wonder why we call it literaturemetrics instead of statistical or mixed-method analysis. Our answer is straightforward because in order to justify it, it is enough to refer to a related approach, namely scientometrics. Scientometrics analyses various forms of science production using specific, science-related variables. It is a kind of statistical analysis, but its scope is specifically scientific, and accordingly, the measurements and variables are interpreted in the field of science. The same holds for literaturemetrics since – in Bourdieusian terms – its measurements relate to the field of literature with its specific objects of production, agencies and power relations that can be measured by various, literature-related metrics, as the field of science can be measured by specific, science-related metrics.

Conclusion: A tentative categorisation scheme for narrative literaturemetrics

In this paper, we have provided a prolegomena for any research that aims to apply the basics of *narrative literaturemetrics*. We have argued that scientometric research and the field-theoretic analysis of academia have been developing for a long time and with fierce scholarly debate. We have demonstrated that the most nuanced contemporary method seems to be narrative bibliometrics, which is aware of both the shortcomings and the advantages of qualitative/quantitative approaches and aims to combine their most beneficial parts. Our *narrative literaturemetrics* makes a further step forward by arguing that, while *narrative literaturemetrics* should be conducted as an empirically underpinned qualitative analysis that interprets empirical data in the particular context of the analysed field, it also requires firm theorisation in which the interpretation takes place. Our position is to use a wide variety of empirical data within a theoretical framework considering field-theoretic and world-systemic attributes (as shown in Table 1). Beyond improving the methodology of narrative bibliometrics, this approach can be the foundation of *narrative literaturemetrics,* a unique technique for analysing the field of literature. At the end of this prolegomena, we provide some possible variables for analysing the literature field that are borrowed from the analysis of academia (Table 2). However, future researchers should remember that the most important thing is the approach and not the precise variables as, on the one hand, it is impossible to use all of them in any single analysis and, on the other hand, new variables can always occur with technical, cultural and other systemic development of the literature field, and also with the theoretical development of our *narrative literaturemetrics* itself.

Table 2: Characteristics and measurements for orthodox and heterodox agents in literature

Agents	Orthodox	Heterodox	Measurements	Variable
Individual				
Writers	Working with elite publishers	Working with peripheral publishers	Publisher position in the field	Ordinal
	Educated at elite universities	Educated at the periphery	University position on prestige rankings	Ordinal
	Senior writers (already famous)	Junior writers (relatively unknown)	Artistic seniority, expressed in position on different rankings (both marketing and professional)	Ordinal
	Highly productive	Less productive	Publication count	Continuous
	Prestigious publication	Publication in less visible outlets	Publisher prestige	Ordinal Continuous (normalised)
	Highly cited (altmetrics)	Rarely cited (altmetrics)	Citation count (altmetrics)	Continuous, weighted, normalised
	Occupy gatekeeping positions	Lack gatekeeping positions	Positions with prestige hierarchies in the literary field	Nominal
	Over-represented in committees, associations, boards	Under-represented in committees, associations, boards	Positions with prestige hierarchies	Nominal
	Star positions in literature networks	Peripheral positions or distracted from literature networks	Central network positions	Continuous (network properties)
	Translated into many languages	Publishing in their own language	Translation network	Continuous (network properties)
	Published many times	Published limited times	Number of editions	Continuous
	Excellent sale	Limited sale	Sales (number of copies)	Continuous
	High fame	Low fame	Media representation	Nominal
Collective				
Committees, Associations, Boards	Over-represented	Under-represented	Membership, power position	Nominal
Literature schools	Highly productive	Less productive	Publication count	Continuous
	Prestigious publication	Publication in less visible outlets	Publisher prestige	Ordinal Continuous (normalised)
	Highly cited	Rarely cited	Citation count (altmetrics)	Continuous
	High positions on different rankings	Lower positions or not listed on different rankings	Ranking positions on different rankings (marketing and professional)	Ordinal

Agents	Orthodox	Heterodox	Measurements	Variable
Institutional				
Language	Academic English	Language other than English	Interlingua position English International Regional National	Nominal
Genre	Book	Other genre	Genre	Nominal
Associations	Established at the West	National character	National diversity	Nominal Continuous (Simpson)
	Having mainstream Western leadership	National leadership	National diversity	Nominal Continuous (Simpson)
	Organising conferences in English	Organising national conferences	National diversity	Nominal Continuous (Simpson)
Publishers	Publish in English	Publish in other than English languages	Interlingua position – English – International – Regional – National	Nominal
	International distribution	National distribution	National diversity and network of the distribution	Nominal Continuous (Simpson) Network properties
	Extensive marketing strategies	Weak marketing strategies	Publishing activity	Continuous Nominal
	Located in the West	Located at the periphery	Location (world-systemic)	Nominal
Nations	Western/Central countries of the Global North	Countries of the Global South and the Semi-Periphery	World-systemic positions	Nominal
World Regions	North America, Western Europe, Developed Asia	Developing Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America	World-systemic positions	Nominal

Source: Compiled by the author.

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OPINION

Cancel Culture or the Realpolitik of the Participatory Turn

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My argument is that the participatory ethos has contributed to cancel culture. I analyse various framings of cancel culture, as it is a complex phenomenon, one aspect of which concerns myth and ritual. I connect this to criticism of the participatory turn in contemporary art, which claims that participation is a public ritual that has been politically co-opted for different ends, such as producing fake consensus or the illusion of democratic engagement. To test my argument, I analyse my own cancellation, whilst being involved in Hungarian feminism, which in my experience has been a backwater in political parties and lobbies. I claim that the participatory turn has indeed been co-opted, either to represent participation, or as formats for politically instrumentalised subjectivation rituals. Cancellations take place when rituals of subjectivation and representation become sacrificial rituals, since sacrificing someone imbues participation with affect.

Keywords: participatory arts, cancel culture, culture wars, tactical media, art and politics

Introduction

The cornerstone of the participatory ethos is that *everyone is an artist*. Participatory projects not only blur the boundary between author and audience, and dissolve

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hierarchies, they are often open-ended, without clear spatial and temporal boundaries. Such art can be either based on interaction with the social, built, or natural environment, or on dialogue or other forms of engagement with a community. I personally experienced the consequence of the political utilisation of such formats. My initial fear was of bland and boring art, but I ended up being the target of *cancel culture*. I realised the phenomenon is very much enabled by masking differences and hierarchies under the guise of participation. I am aware of the limitations of the autoethnographic method (e.g. Ellis & Bochner, 2000), so this paper is written from a theoretical perspective, and I reflect on my own experiences through the lens of arguments drawn from theory.

I did not set out with the intention of writing an autoethnography, and I was a participant and not a participant observer (although sometimes what I saw shocked me to the extent that I protected myself by assuming the position of an emotionally and relationally detached observer). I was not what Adler and Adler (1987) call a *complete member researcher* ("the convert researcher becomes the phenomenon"). I might have been a convert on the social level, but that was a compromise. Deep down I had my doubts about large parts of both the milieu and the ideology. If anything, I became what John Latham termed an *incidental person,* someone with an artistic background getting involved in non-art contexts.

In 2014, when I first started producing feminist tactical media, there would be calls (to some extent there still is) for artists to get involved with political movements. It was a trend, ranging from big exhibitions through the broader Occupy movement to other protest movements. I thought of feminism as a movement with political aims, such as the demand for equality of the sexes and institutional reforms, and I was mostly interested in feminist epistemology. However, the *feminism* I encountered in Hungary turned out to be a backwater of political parties and lobbies.

In the beginning, I was uncertain about how roles and professional distinctions were defined. Collaborations and projects operated without clear roles, blurring the lines between responsibilities, and the whole milieu seemed like one loosely organised collective. Often working under collective group names or engaging in unpaid and uncredited background research or creative consultancy, at one point, I found myself relinquishing my identity as an autonomous creator.

The setup might have seemed communal, but the transaction was not equal: usually, others (under random project names) at best provided me with skilled work, and at worst unskilled work or just distraction and burden; while I provided them with original ideas and access to art institutions and credibility. Yet I was naive enough to think it was a win–win deal – the network around me did not interfere with my creative visions, in fact sometimes they helped me with practical matters, and I provided them both with novel tools for visual communication, credibility, representation and opportunities. Based on such a transactional logic, when my *cancellation* started, I assumed the rational interest of my presumed *friends* and *collaborators* would want to protect me (if for no other reason than to exploit me further). I was, however, shocked when some of them joined the mob, which forced me to realise that I had fundamentally misconstrued what participation in the arts had really entailed. It was never just co-opting, but a fundamental misunderstanding.

Many argue, as I shall discuss below, that arts-based participation has been co-opted politically, but I argue that such co-optation stems from both internal and external dynamics, and has contributed to *cancel culture.* I stress that cancel culture is a complex phenomenon, and I do not claim that the participatory ethos is a deterministic aspect.

Cancellation: Possible theoretical framings, concepts and data

Cancel culture is defined by the writer Africa Brooke as "crowd-sourced abuse", and can be likened to pack hunting, where a group collaborates to pursue a solitary target, akin to fox hunting with a pack of dogs. It extends beyond English-speaking regions, with documented cases from Nigeria (Okoliko, 2021) to the Philippines (Velasco, 2020) and Hungary (Bajusz & Feró, 2021). The escalation of this phenomenon prompted over 150 American writers and scholars to voice their concerns about it through an open letter published in Harper's Bazaar during the summer of 2020. When Bari Weiss, a former editor and columnist at the New York Times, publicly resigned from her position, she stated in her resignation letter: "Twitter [currently known as X] is not on the masthead of *The New York Times*. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor" (Weiss, 2020).

The term *cancel culture* encompasses both a specific cultural phenomenon (the culture of cancellation) and the social and cultural milieu that emerges as a consequence. One aspect of cancel culture is *boycott,* where deliberate exclusion and the severing of ties are used to apply pressure to a target. Another aspect is *violence:* employing force as a means of coercion. Comparable forms of violence, such as bullying, a well-known type of group aggression often seen in school settings and commonly affecting children, is frequently handled as a juvenile issue within legal frameworks and educational resources. *Mobbing* is the adult version of bullying and is addressed by organisational research and anthropology (e.g. Harper, 2013). In instances of cancellation, a mob collectively targets a specific entity, whether an individual, an institution, or a cultural product, often coordinated through social media platforms. Hence, the digital sphere is significant as an analytical dimension of cancellation.

Building on my previous work (Bajusz, 2022), I will review the various discourses through which this phenomenon has been interpreted so far. Simkhovich and Naumov (2022) sketch out two main interpretive frameworks: a conflictological interpretation of cancellation, a form of either illegal or non-legal struggle for material and non-material resources, and a political-discursive perspective that interprets cancelling as a tool of cultural resistance to structural violence. Clark (2020), agreeing to such an interpretation, originates cancelling in the milieu of black and queer Twitterers. Some see this phenomenon (Velasco, 2020; Mueller, 2021) as a concomitant of a new kind of inherently networked collectivity linked to a self-perpetuating kind of online hate speech phenomenon. Many argue that public bullying is not a new phenomenon, it just happens digitally nowadays and therefore more rapidly (Velasco, 2020; Nicotra, 2016; Luu, 2019; Saint-Louis, 2021). Additionally, some contend that cancelling functions as both a domain and as a method of social control (Laidlaw, 2017; Posner, 2015).

There is a kind of religious, ritualistic interpretation (Beiner, 2020; Limberg & Arsov, 2020; Tiplady, 2019): cancelling as a ritual of *scapegoating* that Facebook generates (Kriss, 2020), a process through which a community is strengthened. Interpretations that focus on psychological dynamics (e.g. Henderson, 2019; Jussim, 2020; Mueller, 2021) emphasise the need for and potential gains in self-aggrandisement of the cancellers, the invocation of a moral framework and the role of social contagion. Supporting this argument, a growing body of research claims that trolls, those who seek to gain power online, are sociopaths and sadists (e.g. Buckels et al., 2014; March & Steele, 2020). Drawing on the research of Ng (2022), who claims that within the context of fandoms cancel culture is about controlling or influencing narratives, Lofton (2023) also frames cancel culture as a myth – a superhuman force, which controls the imagination.

There is also data available on the impact of cancellations, aiming to ascertain whether media coverage of cancellations represents isolated occurrences or if cancel culture indeed influences social reality. *The Arts Professional*'s survey (Freedom of Expression Survey, 2020), polling over five hundred individuals in the cultural sector in the U.K., indicates that eight out of ten respondents censor dissenting views that challenge *left-wing* orthodoxy. Whipple (2023), based on extensive interviews with 66 arts and culture journalists in the U.S., argues that while cancel culture serves as a form of gatekeeping, it also restricts freedom of expression. In a study conducted by Norris (2020, 2021), policy researchers (2,446 respondents from 102 countries) were surveyed, revealing a higher incidence of silencing and censorship of dissenting opinions among researchers whose views diverge from the prevailing ideologies of their respective societies. Norris argues that in affluent, politically progressive nations, individuals with right-leaning perspectives experience the impacts of cancellation, whereas in less affluent countries, it is those with left-leaning views who perceive these effects. Phelan (2023) argues the right may have been relatively successful in hegemonising the meaning of the term, using it to critique the left, yet it is also used by leftists to critique other leftists.

There is also data about similar phenomena. The best-known is probably the Milgram Experiment, which exposed how authoritarians lack an inner moral compass. Less well-known is the afterlife of the experiment: many participants were traumatised and sought compensation (Perry, 2013). There are publicised court cases (for example Nina Power and Daniel Miller, and Jon Rafman) that to some extent describe the networks and relations between cancellers and cancelled. There is research on the severity of the psychological consequences. As research psychologist Christine Marie (2023) describes it: "a brush with death". Personal accounts (e.g. the *fuckingcancelled* podcast) also describe severe trauma and shock. In my personal conversations with other cancelled individuals, they echoed my own sentiment: it was somehow incomprehensible and inconceivable. The most shocking thing about it was that it could have happened at all.

As Limberg and Arsov (2020) say: "It feels like the world has been turned upside-down. People are acting like they have no God but this is not true, because a God has been summoned: the Cancel God." There is an emerging discourse about mob mentality and cancellations (and connected to them the woke-identitarian milieu) as fundamentally non-secular (Beiner, 2020; Limberg & Arsov, 2020; Murphy 2019; Power, 2019; Eisenstein, 2021; Lovink, 2020; Tiplady, 2019). I share this view. In my case, what culminated in a *sacrifice ritual* (a string of cancellations) was self-sacrifice rationalised and disguised through the rhetoric of participation and group-based working.

When describing the evaluation of socially engaged art, Claire Bishop (2006) also draws on a religious framework: "The discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian 'good soul'." In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: "The artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. This self-sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the 'useless' domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis." In case of cancellations, such a sacrifice culminates in the total sacrifice of a person.

Limits on participation

To begin, I will briefly survey the literature critical of participatory art's political entanglements. I do not make a distinction between participatory art, socially engaged art, or relational practice, but refer to them collectively as products of the *participatory turn*. At a glance, engaging the audience in the creative process may not sound overtly political. It is about artists producing a social environment in which people come together to be part of a shared creative project. This collaboration is public and it involves the representation or re-imagination of social relations and their political dimensions. I do not claim to be making a systematic survey of this emerging discourse within the scope of this paper. I will merely provide a brief characterisation of its most vocal representatives.

A broader critique claims that the participatory turn has been co-opted into neo-liberal agendas and used as a means of soft social engineering (Rodigari, 2017, references Claire Bishop, Shannon Jackson, Bojana Kunst and Gregory Sholette). This critique is not directed at the idea of the direct involvement of artists in politics itself. The most seminal critique may be by Claire Bishop (2006) who defined the participatory turn as an *ethical turn*. As artists engage with social concerns, critics (and sponsors) move from the register of aesthetics to the register of ethics and judge, for example, the quality of the artist's moral engagement. Art of this sort, according to Bishop, is not to be criticised, but to be judged on whether it is morally good or bad.

Bishop is a supporter of such art that can be very close to politics, creating an arena for raising socio-political issues without the burden (and reality) of actual politics. This is how co-optation takes place: such art can be used to substitute real civic participation and provide the illusion of *social inclusion* (Bishop, 2012). For a similar but more positive argument, see Art History Professor Grant Kester (2011). The American art critic Hal Foster (2015, p. 250) formulates a similar critique:

> "Sometimes politics is ascribed to such practices based on a shaky analogy between an open artwork and an inclusive society, as though a desultory arrangement of material might evoke a democratic community of people, a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian society or a deskilled artwork prefigure an anybody-can-be-an-artist world.

> The problem is that collaboration is encouraged for its own sake, and it's a way to sneak in exploitative labor practices."

The architect and theorist Marcus Miessen (2017) has a practical approach, identifying the pitfalls of participation, and then suggesting some solutions to the arising dubious situations. Participation has become a "problem-solving ideology" (2017, p. 154), an end in itself: "Certain spatial and artistic practices have hijacked the notion of participation as a positive, unquestionable means of engagement" (2017, p. 111).

Chantal Mouffe's theory of *agonism* (2008) offers a framework in which the role of art is to provide a space for dissensus and lends it social visibility:

> "According to the agonistic approach, critical art is an art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming to give a voice to all who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (Mouffe, 2008, p. 12).

In her 2010 article in *Artforum,* she uses the example of participatory artworks like the interventions at the Barcelona Contemporary Art Museum, which presented alternative models of decision-making in local political issues and framed them as counter-hegemonic interventions. Mouffe also posits (2008, 2010) that art should be used to foster such forms of democratic dissensus.

A Marxist-turned-libertarian sociologist, Frank Furedi, voices the opposite view. He not only critiques but refutes such a mode of participation and insists that the public does not participate in the arts, and the concept of participatory art obscures the fact that art is made by artists. Being an actual artist is "beyond the capacity" of most people. Thus, his argument is similar to that of Bishop: participatory art is a public ritual that creates the illusion of participation (Furedi, 2004, p. 131). This public ritual hurts art and politics: knowledge and culture become mere means of achieving economic and political objectives.

While I agree that such participation is a public ritual that can be, and often was, politically co-opted for a variety of purposes, such as producing fake consensus or the illusion of democratic engagement, I argue that this co-optation stems from internal dynamics – different aims and habitus of different fields. Cancellations are the step in exploiting people further.

An autoethnographical case study: How the participatory ethos feeds into cancellation

I had no idea about the realities of a political movement, and it would have never crossed my mind to join one. I sought to make tactical media art, inspired by feminist literature. Together with a friend and other collaborators, through NGO funding, my first project was abortourism.com, a tactical media site showcasing the differences between reproductive healthcare policies and providing fictional travel packages for women in need of such healthcare. My co-author (a friend from art school, who nowadays runs a sustainable urban mushroom farm) quit as soon as we started to get involved with the media and NGO networks. As she told me, reflecting on that social milieu: “I thought I was getting into feminism, but that was hell.” It should have been a wake-up call. I did not quit but got involved ever deeper within this entangled network of lobbyists, journalists, politicians and academics.

As expected, both myself and my work were attacked, but that was all manageable – until I drew the ire of a local *intersectional* community. Then it was a standard and predictable case of *cancellation,* a string of disproportionate and sadistic personal attacks. What happened on the level of stories was absurd and petty, but the dynamic was psychopathological: scapegoating, with aggressors posing as victims, made-up legal threats, gaslighting, stalking, lies and slander. Some of my so-called collaborators were worse than the mob – they wanted me to bear this like a saint (or rather a doormat). I was expected to cease to be myself, but instead to think of myself as a representative of the local feminist movement, whose interests were supposed to supersede my own sense of self-preservation and basic moral compass. In hindsight, I realised if *the left* means anything, it means a modus operandi, a networked mode of collectivity that surpasses individual autonomy and free will. When I first encountered leftists and leftism, they did not bother me because I thought the whole concept of the left was so vague that it did not mean anything. The concept might indeed have been vague, but the network-building activity behind it was real and top-down. In the lead-up to the 2014 Hungarian election and beyond, broadly unpopular left-liberal opposition politicians formed a coalition (*Összefogás,* literally meaning ‘coalition’) entangled with the largely transnationally supported and left-liberal NGO – *civic* network, strategically centred around female politicians. To compensate for their lack of popular support, they sought symbolic legitimacy by aligning with progressive causes such as feminism through collaboration with NGOs. Both my so-called collaborators and cancellers were part of this network, or at least the network tried to assimilate them, so that when I attempted to establish boundaries and defend myself, I only added to my list of supposed offenses.

At some point in 2018, I reported one of my cancellers for plagiarism. This was not a simple case of plagiarism but involved a reading of a 20-minute conference speech straight out of Google Books (translated from English into Hungarian), and running a column based on unreferenced Jacobin article translations. Bringing this to attention would have meant disturbing the network-building efforts and tarnishing the image of the *feminist–leftist* activist network. So instead, I was castigated and not the plagiarist. At that point, I realised that only representations of moral superiority or acceptable positions mattered. A researcher was not expected to produce knowledge, they only had to be a representation of a researcher and, above all, an obedient node in the network. I was bullied out of a so-called research group, whose members organised the conference where the plagiarist gave a speech. I was accused of being “unsafe” and “threatening” and, as a consequence, a fellow member of this organisation (who sat on stage next to the plagiarist whilst she read her speech from Google Books) wrote a letter about me, besmirching my character, yet failing to mention the cause of the conflict, that is, the plagiarism. The letter contained a paragraph about how I was allegedly asked not to participate at events (to quote verbatim) “in the art field”, as if that were an objectively existing entity and not an analytical tool. I have never heard of this ever happening before. It would never have occurred to me to ask this of anyone, and I had facilitated, visited and taken part in many art events before, unlike my self-appointed prosecutor (who is a macrosociologist of world system theory and an aspiring leftist movement leader). I realised then that he was projecting his own modus operandi onto the aforementioned art field. As if, from a ceramics workshop to the Budapest branch of the Ludwig Museum, cultural workers were consciously investing in the art field in the same way aspiring leftist politicians build their network, as emerging politicians forge platforms out of local grassroots movements.

At this point, I realised that the structuring axiom of this whole milieu is not shared belief, but shared interest. Through their donors and networks, they construct a parallel reality, an *alternative* to alternative, grassroots cultural infrastructures. Then through constructing and embodying identities, people become personally invested in a false consensus and protect this consensus to be able to maintain their identities and their aggrandised conceptions of self (see also Bajusz, 2019). Participatory arts projects are a means to recruit new people, subjectify them into this consensus (through assuming group identities) and also to spatially and temporarily extend the milieu. These are political, and not artistic goals.[1]

Leftism in my experience has meant the group subject, or the platform, the brand so to speak, through which individuals could acquire the power of the collective. To quote Daniel Miller (2020), another cancel culture target, who is currently (as of 2023) suing his own cancellers:

> “Imagine a mobile army of metaphors, rhetorical concepts, symbols and stratagems (invocations of privilege, assertions of victimhood, smears, etc.) available to legitimate grudges, channel private resentments, initiate conflicts or pursue private agendas. In flat, or insecure social ecologies, like social media or college campuses, it thrives, whereas in strictly differentiated systems, it is practically unknown. As conflict proliferates, its power increases, which generates further conflict, until there is nothing but conflict, at which point it devours itself. This is the Left, a distinct occult entity, or egregore invoked to focus and camouflage

[1] Participation did not make these events and social milieus more accessible. For example, speeches at demonstrations were written and held by people with ties to political networks, so the modes of participation open for the activist network entailed things like protesting in costumes, painting slogans, or renovating community buildings. I cannot recall participants who did not have some interest or investment in the networks that were offering participatory events and opportunities. In a way, participation was like paying tribute. It followed a hierarchical and petty logic. Most of the participation I encountered entailed being a supporting cast for political agendas and actors. The support of the cultural scene offered symbolic legitimacy to ideas and organisations lacking a popular base. People were offered cheap or free spaces, or organisers were directly contacted by lobbyists who offered their resources. Agents of lobbies controlled grassroots organisations through such ostensible support. Also, under the guise of community engagement and supposed participatory *opportunities,* people were pooled into network hubs and were openly treated as free labour or bio-props. Encouraged participation meant being part of this network.

> an individual's desire for power, or status, or sex, but whose own power is augmented the more frequently it is summoned. Ultimately it is the Left which wields power, not individual Leftists: they summon the Left to feel powerful, but this power remains with the Left."

This reflects how mobbing survivor and anthropologist Janice Harper (2013) emphasised the role of masking differences and hierarchies, for which the illusion of inclusion and participation was a tool in my case. I argue with Pippa Norris (2020, 2021) that ideology does play a role, as the political instrumentalisation (either capture or support) of participation is deeply ideological (i.e. collectivist, and the collective is the *actant*). I observed (and suffered) constructivist ideology in action – "everything is politics" meant assuming that life is based on power politics and extending power games. The collective actant *(left, feminism)* was supposed to have power over individual members. Through *politics,* I encountered the *critical* constructivists as described by Bruno Latour (2003, 2005): a social milieu with a consensus that all social relations are structured by power, and the *social* is nothing but the interplay of domination, legitimisation, fetishisation, reification. I was constantly lectured to that everything is politics. I naively thought it was supposed to mean everything has an ideological underpinning. But instead, it meant that everything was a power struggle. According to a social constructivist worldview, and the *all-is-politics* dogma, all value came from other people, so more and more was taken. Rituals of subjectivation and representation became sacrificial rituals, just as there is an emerging discourse recognising cancel culture as human sacrifice.

Again stressing the limitation of my autoethnographical observation, I would argue with the Girardian notion of the community's role in the sacrifice ritual that public cancellation is. In my case, most people did not join the mob, and I also observed that the same accounts became active during different cancellations of different people. I cannot provide precise figures, precisely because of the open-ended nature of participatory arts.

There is research on left-wing authoritarianism (Costello et al., 2022), and Robert Altemeyer (2008), one of the most prominent researchers of authoritarianism, argues that mob violence is authoritarian aggression. There is also research on how internet trolls are sadists, narcissists and sociopaths (March & Steele, 2020; Thomas & Egan, 2022), and also research linking extreme leftism to narcissism and sociopathy (Krispenz & Bertrams, 2024).

My cancellers had not been cancellers for years. I would say they were mostly just frustrated and annoying. For years, (some of them for over ten years) had been assuming a non-authoritarian character, from the resources (ideas, connections, enthusiasm) of many. Initially, I was unable to comprehend why they had turned on me. I reasoned with myself that they had got a bigger share of resources than they merited, so it could not have been envy. I had never hurt them. In fact, the illusion of real collaboration and co-creation was so perfect that once, when I dared utter "not everyone is an artist", my friend and actual collaborator (to whom I referred to in the beginning of this section) gave my lunch to a dog. This was at the core of participatory formats, an end-of-history ethos. As someone expressed it at that time "we should just party on until the end of times". It failed, as it assumed human nature is constructivist and performative. Finally, I realised why my cancellers took revenge – I contributed to them getting into roles in life they were unable to really adapt to. I also elicited their envy, since I actually had that (autonomy and creativity), which they supposedly possessed, but actually lacked. Cancellations happen in the gap between opportunities and abilities. If we connect cancellations (mob behaviour) to authoritarianism (at the core of the authoritarian personality lies the lack of autonomy), and read it like an extended Milgram Experiment, we could argue that social media activated dormant authoritarian tendencies. In the same manner, arts-based participation and establishing an identity as creatives and thinkers failed to establish a really autonomous self in people who turned into cancellers. I emphasise again that most people did not become cancellers, and again stressing the limitations of autoethnography, I described these cases because they reveal the underlying logic connecting participatory arts formats to cancellations.

Conclusion

My assertion is that cancel culture is indeed tied to ideology, and that the participatory turn's flattening of difference, collectivism and constructionism feeds into that. In my particular case, having to pretend we were equal partners, equally capable of being autonomous and creative engendered envy and resentment, as people were put into positions that made them constantly prove themselves and their abilities. The easiest way to prove their worth was through belittling others, just as the easiest way to claim power is through sadism. Politics is about consensus, and creativity is not consensual. It is not evenly distributed among people, and the most creative ideas are not the ones on which everyone would reach a consensus. Not everyone has what it takes to be an artist. In this gap between reality and expectations and ideology is where cancellations happen.

Through my observation, I saw that participatory formats were at large empty (politically captured) rituals, but sacrificing someone imbued the participants with excitement (for those open to such excitement, such as authoritarians, sadists and sociopaths) and community bonding took place through scapegoating. I used to think that I was participating in a politically engaged network, as the boundaries between life and art shift and dissolve, but it turned into participation in a mystery play culminating in my total sacrifice. At this point, my narrative ties back to one of the roots of art: ritualism–ritual. Whether as cults (a sect with a set of rules governing life) or cultus (where members gather to participate in a given rite), both had a high entry threshold, similar to the elitist neo-avant-gardes that later became what is now known as contemporary art. There had been no open-ended, open-to-all *participation* in secretive cults, and not everyone could join and be an avant-garde artist, albeit for a few hours only. Similarly to the dissolution of the private–public boundary, the boundary between art and politics, the sacred and the profane has also dissolved. Yet, a lot of what happened in *workshops* and *gatherings* would previously not have been designated as profane representational activity in any way connected to *reasoned dialogue* or either consensus or dissensus.

Cancel culture revealed to me how far co-optation has gone. Art has ceased to be art. It has become discourse, *cultural capital,* or symbolic legitimacy (i.e. a tool in power games). The next level of what Romanian theorist Octavian Eşanu termed the "managed avant-garde" (2008), is a captured avant-garde. Not only controlling, to reference Mouffe again, "the fomentation of dissensus" (2008), but producing a make-believe version of it. It could happen, because it served existing needs, certain individual's insatiable need for power, and lack of capacity to truly engage with art.

A critical claim is that participation was hijacked for political purposes, such as representing participation. If the participants never really participated (as Furedi claims, 2004), using these formats itself was a political hijacking of art. My assertion is that the participants participated in something that was neither art-making, nor political engagement as dissensus (Mouffe, 2008). It was a subjectivation ritual that had been politically instrumentalised. The *politics* network I encountered generally considered art a means to political ends, such as gaining symbolic legitimacy, or at most a set of strategies for moral posturing, yet it generated much more than discourse and effects on the discursive register; performances, festivals, workshops and other participatory formats channelled affects and subjectified their subjects. The focus on discourse and *reasoned dialogue* hid the register where these events exerted effects.

Again, I would like to stress the limitations of autoethnography, but other data is likely to be biased as well. The Milgram Experiment is very well known, but a not-so-well-known fact is that many research subjects were traumatised, and sought compensation (Perry, 2013). Both practitioners and scholars should recognise that arts-based participation has the potential to extend into unpredictability and mysteries, and to the cruelty and depravity that is cancellation. I would conclude that the real hijacking was channelling art through participation to the register of politics, and where participation really has led was just where art began: cultus and ritual.

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The Effect of Rhetorical Styles on Metadiscourse Choices of Culturally Diverse Authors

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There is a perception that the influence of culture-specific rhetorical styles means that academic writing can include a great deal of variety. This study aims to test this hypothesis by exploring the role of rhetorical styles in the choice of interactional metadiscourse by academic writers with different cultural backgrounds. Linguistics research article abstracts by L2 writers from Asian and Slavic countries were used in this contrastive study based on Hyland's (2005a) model of metadiscourse. Using quantitative and qualitative analysis methods, the study revealed that English-language academic discourse by Slavic writers contained a larger number of hedges and attitude markers and a smaller number of boosters. In contrast to Slavic writers, Asian scholars left far fewer traces of themselves and took more explicitly involved positions. The paper contributes to intercultural pragmatics and may have some implications for English as a lingua franca in academic settings.

Keywords: rhetorical style, metadiscourse, research article abstract, academic discourse, cultural context

Introduction

The increasing role of English as a lingua franca in global academia has forced scholars from different cultures to publish their findings in English in order to become an integral

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part of international academia. This has given rise to intensive research into prevailing discursive structures and caused writers with different cultural backgrounds to make pragmatic choices. Whilst the use of metadiscourse patterns in L2 academic writing has been explored from a variety of perspectives (Al-Khasawneh, 2017; Alonso Almeida, 2014; Belyakova, 2017; Boginskaya, 2023; Bondi, 2014; Gessesse, 2016; Hu & Cao, 2011; Ji, 2015; Işık-Taş, 2018; Khajavy et al., 2012; Kozubíková Šandová, 2021; Maamuujav et al., 2021; Perales-Escudero & Swales, 2011; Stotesbury, 2003; Van Bonn & Swales, 2007), little empirical research appears to have been carried out on metadiscourse in academic texts by culturally varied authors in terms of their rhetorical styles. The comparative analysis presented here aims to shed light on how writers from different cultures who have been exposed to two different rhetorical styles interact with readers and make their claims persuasive or tentative.

Proceeding from previous studies of Asian and Slavic-authored academic writing (Belyakova, 2017; Boginskaya, 2022b; Čmejrková, 2007; Dawang, 2006; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2013; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Gu, 2008; Kim & Lim, 2013; Lu, 2000; Mur-Dueñas & Šinkūnienė, 2016; Pisanski Peterlin, 2005; Vassileva, 2001; Walková, 2018), I assumed that research article (RA) abstracts written by Asian and Slavic authors would differ in terms of metadiscourse patterns such as boosters, hedges, attitude markers and self-mentions due to the influence of the rhetorical styles the writers had been exposed to. While Asian-authored writing would feature more indirect and vague claims and fewer personal statements, academic texts produced by Slavic writers would use more certainty devices and self-mentions in order to create an authorial presence predominantly with the use of the authorial *we*. To confirm this assumption, metadiscourse seems to be a valuable tool that offers a broad perspective on how writers from different cultural contexts engage their readers, mark their presence and negotiate knowledge claims.

The present study, therefore, aims to explore rhetorical style-dependent differences in the employment of interactional metadiscourse seeking to answer the following questions:

1. What categories of metadiscourse do Asian and Slavic writers opt for in their RA abstracts?
2. What is the frequency of different metadiscourse features in the two sub-corpora?
3. Are the differences, if any, determined by the impact of rhetorical styles to which the writers have been exposed or by any other factors?

Literature review

Comparative studies on metadiscourse

Comparative studies on metadiscourse in academic writing have revealed significant differences in various cultural groups (Alonso-Almeida, 2014; Belyakova, 2017; Hryniuk, 2018; Hu & Cao, 2011; Işık-Taş, 2018; Lee & Casal, 2014; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Mikolaychik, 2019; Pisanski Peterlin, 2005; Vassileva, 2001; Walková, 2018). Hu and Cao (2011), for example, explored the use of hedging and boosting devices in RA abstracts collected from Chinese- and English-medium applied linguistics journals and found that English RA abstracts contained more hedges than Chinese ones. Khajavy et al. (2012) examined the metadiscoursal features in English and Persian sociological research articles and revealed that English research articles used more overall interactive features. The cross-cultural approach was also adopted in the study by Alonso-Almeida (2014), who compared metadiscourse patterns in RA abstracts written in English and Spanish engineering and humanities journals and revealed that the latter contained more metadiscourse features. Işık-Taş (2018) explored how academic writers create an authorial presence through the first-person pronouns in sociology research articles in Turkish and English journals. The results obtained indicate that the frequencies and metadiscourse functions of the first-person pronouns did not differ significantly. Belyakova (2017) carried out a cross-cultural comparison of RA abstracts by L2 Slavic and L1 academic writers in geoscience to investigate their metadiscourse choices and found that writers from East European academia usually disguise themselves to a greater extent.

The linguistic features of RA abstracts written by L1 and L2 Slavic writers have also been explored in some studies (e.g. Pisanski Peterlin, 2005; Vassilieva, 2001; Walková, 2018). Vassileva's (2001) study of commitment and detachment patterns in English and Bulgarian linguistics RAs revealed, for example, differences in hedging and boosting tools that were explained by different rhetorical traditions. Pisanski Peterlin (2005) conducted a contrastive analysis focusing on variation in the use of metadiscourse in English and Slovene research articles and found that metadiscourse devices were more restricted in Slovene academic writing than in English academic prose. Another study of metadiscourse in research articles was conducted by Hryniuk (2018) who explored how British and Polish writers represent themselves in academic discourse and investigated differences in frequencies and functions of the first-person pronouns in applied linguistics RAs. The results showed that Polish scholars employed fewer first-person pronouns and did not assume responsibility for what they stated. According to Walková (2018, p. 101), who explored how English and Slovak writers position themselves in research papers, "Anglophone academic culture is rather individualistic, as indicated by predominance of the reader-inclusive perspective in the collective plural perspective and of the reader-exclusive perspective overall, the use of the first-person singular by single authors, and the use of the third person for unique identification of one of multiple authors".

The same results were obtained by Bogdanović and Mirović (2018), who compared Serbian and English-medium RAs written by Serbian authors.

In the Asian context, the same conclusions were drawn by Li and Xu (2020) who analysed metadiscourse in research articles by English and Chinese writers in the field of sociology. They revealed that English sociologists used metadiscourse markers far more than their Chinese counterparts. The contrastive analysis of metadiscourse in English and Chinese academic writing has been conducted in a large number of works (e.g. Li & Wharton, 2012; Liu, 2007; Wu, 2007; Xiong, 2007). Academic texts produced by representatives of other national communities have been explored to a lesser extent. Kobayashi (2016) explored L2 writings by six L1 groups (Chinese, Malaysian, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and Thai) and revealed a substantial difference in the use of metadiscourse markers between East Asian groups (Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese) and Southeast Asian groups (Malaysian and Thai). Kustyasari et al. (2021) compared metadiscourse functions in English-language research articles by L1 and L2 Malaysian writers. Their study revealed that in academic prose written by Indonesian writers, interactional and interactive metadiscourse markers performed similar functions, that is, they were used to indicate a relation between sentences, involve readers in a dialogue, limit commitment to propositions, emphasise certainty, signal their attitudes towards claims and readers. Azar et al. (2022) made an attempt to compare stance features in English and Malaysian research articles, focusing on the *Introduction* sections. They revealed notable differences in the use of stance features which prevailed in the discourse of L1 writers.

The above-mentioned studies have offered some interesting insights into cultural differences in academic writing. However, taking prior research altogether, it seems that English academic texts produced by L2 writers have been mainly analysed only in terms of their distinction from academic discourse by L1 writers, and little attention has been paid to differences in metadiscourse patterns used by writers exposed to different rhetorical styles. It is therefore worthwhile conducting further research into cross-cultural variation in the use of metadiscourse.

Research on culture-specific rhetorical styles

A great number of studies have shown that “academic discursive traditions are molded by the sociocultural environment, which either creates or removes incentives for a writer to become involved in a dialog with the reader” (Khoutyz, 2015, p. 135). One more contrastive rhetoric study, which fuelled research into this area, was conducted by Kaplan (1966), who attempted to explain differences in academic writing in terms of differences in the cultures and argued that rhetoric is not universal as it varies “from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 2). Kaplan distinguished between several types of paragraph writing including linear development in English, a series of parallel constructions in Arabic, cyclic development in Oriental languages, or digression in French and Russian. He claimed that the rhetorical conventions of L1 often interfere with L2 writing and L1 transfer manifests itself in the deviated L2 writing patterns. In his later work, Kaplan (1972) claimed that it is apparent that paragraph organisation written in English by a L2 writer “will carry the dominant imprint of that individual’s culturally-coded orientation to the phenomenological world in which he lives and which is bound to interpret largely through the avenues available to him in his native language” (Kaplan, 1972, p. 1).

Another study dealing with the impact of culture on the rhetoric was Galtung’s (1981) research on intellectual styles. Galtung distinguished between four types of intellectual style – Gallic (prototype: the French), Teutonic (prototype: the Germans), Saxonic (prototype: the English and the Americans) and the Nipponic (prototype: the Japanese and Far East Asians). According to Galtung, while the Saxonic style fosters and encourages debate and discourse, the dispersion or diversity of opinion in Gallic and Teuton cultures is likely to be smaller; and in the Nipponic setting, people are not very skilful at debating. Saxons prefer to look for facts and evidence, resulting in an abundance of factual accuracy; for the Teutonic and Gallic cultures, however, data and facts used are to illustrate what is said rather than to demonstrate it. In contrast to the other three cultures, in the Saxonic one "to have thoroughly scrutinized all sources, to have put all the data together, concealing nothing, is a key criterion of scholarship" (Galtung, 1981, p. 827). While in the Teutonic culture the aim is for rigour at the expense of elegance, in Gallic culture the goal is elegance, perhaps at the expense of rigour. In the Nipponic culture, absolute, categorical statements are rare; vagueness is favoured. Clear statements are considered immodest. While representatives of the occidental cultures have a fear of inconsistency and ambiguity, in the oriental setting people strive for the opposite, being under the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism, which militate against deductive rigidity. Contrary to the three occidental cultures, Nipponic culture is marked by respect for authority, a sense of collectivism and organic solidarity. When Galtung compares these four cultures, he notices that Eastern Europe found itself under the influence of the Teutonic style, "partly because of general cultural influence through centuries, partly because of the influence of a key Teutonic thinker: Karl Marx" (Galtung, 1981, p. 820). Following the Teutonic style, the academic writing practice in Eastern Europe advises writers to state their claims clearly, without allowing for any possible contradictory ideas, which means that the degree of commitment to authorial claims is rather high among Eastern European writers (Vassileva, 2001), and vagueness is not favoured. In the same vein, Bloor (1991) claimed that Slavic languages appear to be direct in academic contexts. Regarding the Asian countries, they are considered to be under the influence of the Nipponic style and are affected by Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist philosophical precepts, with Japan seen as a centre of this type of culture. The Asian rhetorical traditions based on these philosophical precepts operate, as Hinkel (1997) put it, within different paradigms to those accepted in the Anglo-American writing tradition, which is structured around Aristotelian notions of directness, justification and proof.

One more classification of rhetorical styles was suggested by Hinds (1987). He distinguished between reader- and writer-responsible cultures: the former being marked by an inductive, indirect form of argumentation with a less-assertive conclusion that requires a great deal more inferential work on the part of the reader. In contrast, in the latter, typically for Anglophone rhetoric, the failure of a reader to understand what a writer is trying to say is the writer's fault. Socio-cultural, historical and situational constraints are considered to be the main source of rhetorical differences across languages. Hinds (1987) argues that in English, for example, it is the writer who is primarily responsible for effective communication, while in other cultures, such as Japanese or German, it is the responsibility of the reader to understand what the writer had intended to say as they place the burden on the reader to discern a meaning.

Based on these theories, a number of contrastive rhetoric studies were conducted with the aim of identifying the effects of culture-specific rhetorical styles on academic writing patterns. Duszak (1994), for example, sought to reveal differences in metadiscourse patterns used in academic prose by L1 and L2 Polish writers and explained the way they rely on Galtung's (1981) model of intellectual styles. Kim and Lim (2013, p. 140) conducted a study based on Hinds's (1987) theory and demonstrated that Asian writing traditions favour the reader-responsible attitude when "the writer controls the level of personality in a text to establish a more distant relationship between author, text and reader". Lu (2000) revealed that in Chinese culture, reader responsibility might have been affected by a fundamental principle of Confucius's teaching – *Ren* (humanity, love) – in which the presence of others (i.e. readers) should be accepted by establishing relationships with them and giving them room to interpret the text according to their personal knowledge. This implies a lower level of the writer's personality in a text. In the same vein, Qi and Liu (2007, p. 148) argue that "compared to apparent formal links adopted in English, Chinese, in most cases, may have covert structural clues in the author's mind, requiring the reader to explore cohesion in the discourse". Similarly, Gu (2008) claims that Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism strongly affected the heritage of Asian rhetoric, which is a puzzle for Western readers, and Asian scholars feel alien to the Western rhetorical tradition that is rooted in the doctrine of Aristotle. Similarly, Park and Kim (2008), who explored the communication styles of Asian and American communities, revealed that Asian speakers prefer a less open communication style due to their higher level of emotional self-control and tend to suppress emotions by avoiding personal opinions or attitudes.

Thus, despite the relative uniformity of academic papers imposed by the generic requirements in particular disciplines, previous studies have identified a significant intercultural variation in the rhetorical preferences of academic writers, indicating that writing is a cultural object that is very much shaped by culture and the educational system in which the writer has been socialised (Mauranen, 1993). As Hyland & Tse (2004) put it, the rhetorical style and the degree of rhetorical assertiveness or uncertainty of the writer are closely associated with their cultural conventions.

Metadiscourse and metadiscourse markers

One definition of metadiscourse dates back to Harris (1959), who first coined the term, which refers to the writer's attempts to influence the reader's interpretation of a text. Twenty years later, Schiffrin (1980) defined metadiscourse as the authorial rhetorical manifestation in the text to support the discourse organisation and implications of what is being said. Viewing metadiscourse as an explicit set of language items, Hyland (2005a) described metadiscourse elements from a different perspective – as facets of the text that signify writer–reader interactions.

Hyland (2005a) classified metadiscourse as interactive and interactional. While interactive markers serve to organise information in coherent and convincing ways, interactional devices help build a relationship with the reader by expressing doubt or certainty or various other attitudes towards the proposition. Since the current study focuses only on interactional metadiscourse, Table 1 presents the main types in Hyland's model.

Table 1:
Model of interactional metadiscourse

Type	**Function**
Hedges	acknowledge alternative viewpoints, withhold commitment
Boosters	suppress alternatives, emphasise certainty
Attitude markers	express attitudes, provide assessment
Self-mentions	manifests the explicitness of authorial presence
Engagement markers	explicitly address readers by focusing their attention or including them as discourse participants

Source: Compiled by the author.

Hyland and Zou's (2021) typology of boosting markers was adopted as the initial model for revealing boosters. Hedging devices found in the corpus were analysed using the model from the same authors (Hyland & Zou, 2021) in which they identified three ways of conveying respect for colleagues' views. The taxonomies adopted in the current study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2:
Types of hedging and boosting

Categories	**Types**	**Function**
Hedges	Plausibility hedges	signal that a claim is based on assumptions
	Downtoners	mitigate the intensity of a statement
	Rounders	indicate an approximation
Boosters	Certainty markers	indicate the writer's epistemic conviction
	Extremity markers	emphasise the upper edge of a continuum
	Intensity markers	amplify the emotive strength of a statement

Source: Compiled by the author.

In an attempt to analyse attitudinal stance, the model proposed by Mur-Dueñas (2010) was used (Table 3). This model is a simplified version of Swales and Burke's (2003) taxonomy that includes seven categories of evaluative adjectives: acuity, aesthetic appeal, assessment, deviance, relevance, size and strength.

Table 3:
Types of attitudinal stance

Types	Function
Assessment markers	signal the writer's evaluation of the study (novelty, usefulness, validity)
Significance markers	signal the relevance or importance of the study
Emotion markers	refer to the writer's affective position and generate the same sentiment in readers

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The types of engagement were analysed using Hyland's (2005b) taxonomy, which includes five ways of involving the reader in a dialogue: reader mentions, directives, knowledge appeals, questions and personal asides (Table 4).

Table 4:
Types of engagement markers

Types	Function
Reader mentions	signal of the writers' awareness of the reader
Directives	instruct the reader to perform an action or view things in a way determined by the writer
Knowledge appeals	to recognise shared knowledge
Questions	to invite the reader to participate in the arguments
Personal asides	to provide the reader with additional information for interpretation

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The types of self-mention markers were analysed using Hyland's (2002b) taxonomy, which includes two ways of expressing authorial presence in academic discourse (Table 5).

Table 5:
Types of self-mention markers

Types	Function
First-person singular pronouns	to indicate personal responsibility for the claim to indicate subjectivity and assertiveness
First-person plural pronouns	to signal the collective nature of the study to indicate the belonging to the scientific community to avoid personal responsibility

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Current study

Corpus design

The present study was conducted on a corpus of RA abstracts derived from 12 journals which are under the same focus studies ranging from language teaching to linguistics (see Table 6).

Table 6:
The size of the corpus

Academic journals	Number of RA abstracts	Number of words
Sub-corpus 1		
Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics (Indonesia)	34	6,669
3L: Language, Linguistics, Literacy (Malaysia)	34	9,201
SiSal Journal (Japan)	34	6,715
Studies in Chinese Linguistics (China)	34	6,785
Linguistic Research (South Korea)	34	6,180
Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics (China)	34	6,340
Total	204	36,900
Sub-corpus 2	34	6,023
Časopis pro moderní filologii (Czech Republic)	34	6,970
Slovenski Jezik (Slovenia)	34	6,675
Poradnik Jezykowy (Poland)	34	6,538
Jazykovedný časopis (Slovakia)	34	6,112
Russian Journal of Linguistics (Russia)	34	5,651
Elope: English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries	204	38,149
Total		

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Humanities RA abstracts were chosen for the current study because it was assumed that culture-specific features are more likely to be present in texts produced in humanities than in hard or natural sciences. This assumption relies on Gnutzmann's (1989) theory which says that the deeper the discipline is rooted in primary culture and the more socially oriented it is, the more likely it is that the transfer of scientific content will create culture-specific patterns of discourse.

The motivation behind the selection of RA abstracts by Asian and Slavic scholars for a contrastive analysis was the fact that they are under the influence of different rhetorical styles, which may determine differences in rhetorical traditions. Despite these differences, however, due to the process of globalisation of education, English has been gaining influence in Asian and Slavic countries, which is confirmed by a growing number of English-medium publications by scholars from these regions. Analysing the differences, if any, in the ways writers exposed to different intellectual styles use rhetorical devices such as metadiscourse resources is therefore of interest. Additionally, the literature review has revealed that the use of metadiscourse markers in Asian and Slavic academic prose has never been investigated from a contrastive perspective.

Having identified the target journals based on criteria such as the origin of the publisher (Asian or Slavic countries), discipline (language teaching and linguistics) and Scimago impact factor (Q1/Q2), 408 RA abstracts (N = 408) were randomly selected to ensure a good degree of objectivity and comparability of texts. To eliminate the impact of publication period, only the RA abstracts from the most recent issues of each journal, published between 2018 and 2023 were selected in order to exhibit the linguistic characteristics of present-day academic discourse. Only one RA abstract from every author was selected in order to control the influence of an individual writing style.

One important consideration in the current study was the identification of the authors' L1 status. For while many researchers have an international educational background, I wanted to reduce the influence of other cultures on the two groups of academic writers. For this reason, names connoting Asian or Slavic origin were first identified, and then affiliations were thoroughly studied for their biodata as available on their institutional websites. All the Asian-authored RA abstracts chosen for the present study had been written by academics who had studied for their PhDs in Asian countries and who were working in Asia, according to the institutional website information. Having selected Asian-authored RA abstracts, I searched for Slavic RA abstracts following the same procedure, examining the authors' backgrounds to confirm that they had studied for their PhDs in East European countries and were working there. RA abstracts written by authors who had ever been affiliated with universities outside East Europe or Asia were not included in the corpus. RA abstracts written by authors whose names or affiliations appeared to be vague in determining L1 status were also excluded from the corpus. Although this procedure may seem imperfect, I was confident about the distinction established between the two sub-corpora of RA abstracts. The corpus was thus built so as to ensure comparability in terms of genre (RA abstracts), authors' origin (Asian and Slavic nations), field (linguistics and language teaching) and currency (2018–2023).

Methods

Since the study aims to compare the use of metadiscourse markers in English-medium RA abstracts written by writers exposed to two different rhetorical styles, the methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis were applied. The RA abstracts were downloaded from the journals' websites, converted to the Microsoft DOCS format and analysed to calculate the number of metadiscourse devices in each abstract. All the abstracts were divided into two sub-corpora – SC1 for Asian-writers' RA abstracts and SC2 for Slavic writers' texts. Hyland's (2005a) list of metadiscourse devices was used in the search. The quantitative analysis followed two stages. First, the texts were scrutinised for metadiscourse markers using Wordsmith Tools (version 5). Every occurrence of a metadiscourse feature was manually double checked in context to verify that it was serving the metadiscourse function. This was done by comparing every occurrence with the definition of metadiscourse provided by Hyland (2005b). Examples that did not match the definition were excluded from the count. Each type of metadiscourse (boosting, hedging, attitude and self-mention) was then analysed to determine its frequency for each corpus. As far as the raw frequencies can be misleading when comparing two corpora of different sizes, normalised frequencies, which allow for a more accurate comparison between the two corpora, were calculated to facilitate a comparison. The frequencies were calculated per 1,000 words. In addition, the shares of each marker in the total number of metadiscourse features found in each sub-corpus were calculated. The results of the quantitative analysis were summarised in a table format. The quantitative analysis was thus combined with a manual qualitative analysis of the examples which was conducted to interpret the findings of the quantitative analysis. To ensure in-depth exploration into the use of metadiscourse, examples were taken from the corpus being studied and explanations were provided to describe the rhetorical functions of metadiscourse markers found in the two sub-corpora.

Results

The outcome of the quantitative analysis shows differences in the use of metadiscourse by Asian and Slavic writers in terms of categories and frequencies. In absolute terms, the differences between the total number of metadiscourse markers were quite significant, with hedging markers representing the majority of features in the Slavic sub-corpus and boosters in the Asian one. The details are shown in Table 7, where SC1 stands for Asian-authored texts and SC2 for Slavic-authored abstracts.

Table 7:
Interactional metadiscourse in the two sub-corpora
(per 1,000 words and in % of the total number per sub-corpus)

Interactional metadiscourse markers	**SC1**	**SC2**
Hedges	33.7 (30.6)	112.1 (49.4)
Boosters	48.1 (43.7)	33.8 (14.9)
Attitude markers	27.1 (24.6)	71 (31.3)
Self-mention	0 (0)	8.9 (3.9)
Engagement markers	1.29 (1.17)	1.2 (0.5)
Total	110.19 (100)	227 (100)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Overall, I found 22,647 metadiscourse markers in the two sub-corpora. Hedges were the most frequent metadiscourse resources in the Slavic writers' texts. Their share in the total number of occurrences in this sub-corpus was 49.4%. In the Asian sub-corpus, their share was significantly smaller (30.6%). The frequency of occurrence of hedges per 1,000 words also differed significantly. The smaller rate of hedges (33.7% per

1,000 words) was observed in the Asian sub-corpus. Boosters also exhibited differences in the two sub-corpora: in the Asian-authored texts, they were more frequent than other metadiscourse features (43.7% of the total number). Attitude markers ranked second in the Slavic sub-corpus with 31.3%. When normalised to frequencies per 1,000 words, the difference in the use of attitude markers was more striking: 27.1 in SC1 and 71 in SC2. Engagement markers were less apparent in both sub-corpora. Self-mention markers were found only in SC2 and their share was rather small (3.9%).

In the following section, the functions of interactional metadiscourse features in the two sub-corpora will be explained.

Hedges

In both sub-corpora, hedges were used to downplay writers' commitments to propositional content, modifying its relevance or certainty and helping to acknowledge alternative viewpoints. They helped the writers withhold commitment to the presented proposition and to steer the reader to the conclusion or reasoning of the writer's choice.

The analysis revealed that both Asian and Slavic writers employed three types of hedging such as plausibility markers, downtoners and rounders but to a different extent. Plausibility hedges that protect the author from having to take full responsibility for the propositional content prevailed in both sub-corpora, but were more frequently employed by the Slavic authors (20.4 vs. 64% per 1,000 words in SC1 and SC2 respectively) predominantly to recognise the limitations of the claims. Figure 1 shows the use of hedges by the Asian and Slavic authors.

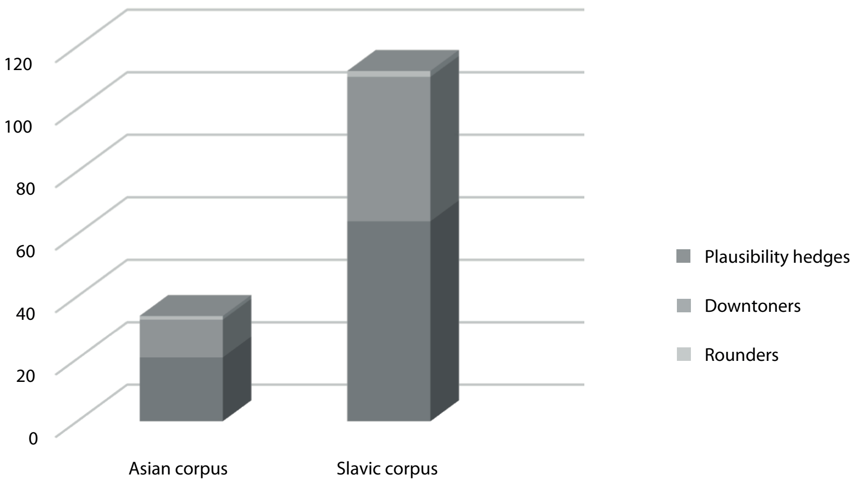

Figure 1:
Comparative use of hedging markers
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Here is an example of the plausibility hedge from the Slavic corpus that indicates that the statement is based on an assumption rather than facts and implicates that the author is uncertain about the proposition.

1. *Similarities of languages as calculated based on the typological database of WALS* ***can*** *provide information on the history of languages both in terms of genealogical descent and contact with other languages.* (SC2)

Downtoners ranked second in both sub-corpora. However, like the plausibility hedges, they were also employed to a different extent – 12.1 downtoners per 1,000 words in SC1 and 46.2 downtoners per 1,000 words in SC2 – which indicates that the Slavic authors tended to show much more modesty and soften their claims to sound polite. In 2, the downtowner used by the Slavic author protects the writer against inaccuracy of research results and thus helps in saving face.

2. *Additionally, it explores the* ***possible*** *interference effects of L1. 88 English L2 learners and 9 native speakers heard sentences in which a new activity was described with a novel word.* (SC2)

Rounders indicating an approximation – were rather scarce in both sub-corpora (1.2 vs. 1.9 in SC1 and SC2 respectively), which can be explained by the nature of social sciences, which deal with numbers less frequently than hard sciences. Here is a rare example from SC1:

3. *The material for the present study comes from* ***approximately*** *80 articles published in Magyar Orvosi Nyelv.* (SC1)

By making the number a little fuzzy, the adverb employed by the Asian author as a rounder expresses approximation, thereby making the claim less persuasive.

Boosters

Boosters were used by the authors to present “the proposition with conviction while marking involvement, solidarity and engagement with readers” (Hyland, 2005a, p. 145). An analysis revealed the higher frequency of these devices in SC1, which indicates that the Asian writers tended to occupy a stronger stance and were keener to express their conviction and highlight the significance of their work, which is not typical of the Oriental indirection and vagueness emphasised by Galtung (1981). Instead of presenting their claims in an affirmative manner, the Asian writers preferred to hedge them to make them sound more tentative.

4. *Across all universities, it is* ***evident*** *the use of writing as a tool to evaluate students' knowledge, but the opportunity is missed to use feedback to learn writing itself.* [sic!] (SC1)

The booster used in the above example from the Asian corpus helps remove any doubts about the claim closing down potential opposition, which indicates the author's desire to enhance the degree of commitment to the claim rather than to appear indirect.

In the two sub-corpora, boosters differed both numerically and functionally. While certainty boosters were used more frequently by Asian writers (26.2% per 1,000 words), in the Slavic sub-corpus intensity boosters prevailed (19.2% per 1,000 words). Extremity boosters were rarely employed by both groups (2.9% vs. 1.1% in SC1 and SC2 respectively). Figure 2 shows the use of boosters by the Asian and Slavic authors.

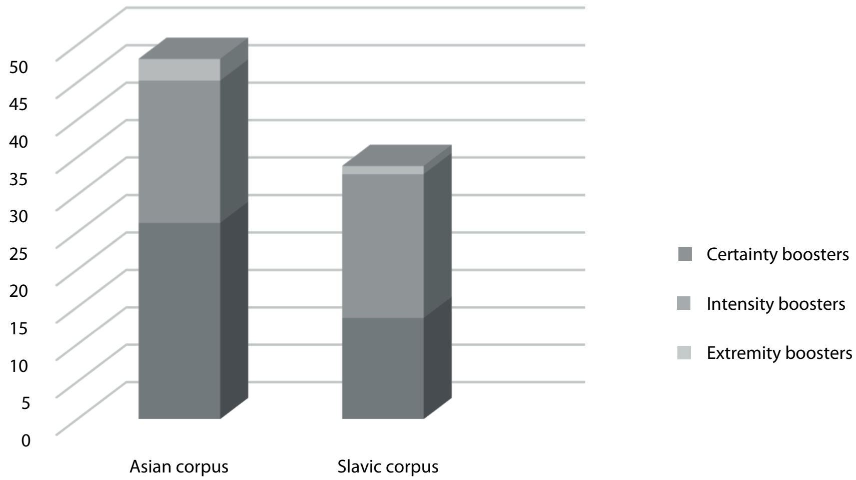

Figure 2:
Comparative use of boosters
Source: Compiled by the authors.

In both sub-corpora, certainty markers were the most frequent type of boosting devices used to indicate the writer's epistemic conviction, to claim the accuracy of research results, to emphasise the importance of the study, and to exclude alternative views from readers as follows. Here are two examples from SC1 and SC2:

5. ***Findings show*** *that there were broadly eight types of obstacles reported by the participants, with language difficulties, affect and motivation most frequently mentioned.* (SC1)

6. *This* ***demonstrates****, firstly, the significance of diplomatic documents created in tsar's and khan's chanceries for the history of translation of Russian and Oriental official written documents*. [sic!] (SC2)

In the above examples, the authors anticipate possible responses from the reader but choose to prevent them. The boosting verbs *to show* and *to demonstrate* and the boosting noun *findings* are used to express the authors' certainty in research results obtained or claims presented.

Intensity boosters ranked second in both sub-corpora and were used to amplify the emotive strength of statements. In contrast to certainty boosters, they helped the writers add affective colour to claims rather than concerned epistemic assurance (Hyland & Zou, 2021).

7. *Owing to their versatile nature, borrowings are* ***mostly used*** *in colloquial speech and slang*. (SC1)
8. *We* a*pplied this verticalization theory in a* ***very interesting*** *area*. (SC2)

These two intensity boosters function by enhancing persuasion through an involved attitude.

Regarding the extremity boosters, they were more commonly used in SC1 to emphasise the upper edge of a continuum (Hyland & Zou, 2021, p. 8), as here:

9. *The study also revealed that the teachers' understandings of technical skills and language pedagogy were among* ***the highest*** *compared to their knowledge of theories and principles on language assessments*. (SC1)

By upgrading the proposition, the writer emphasises the level of teachers' understandings of technical skills (10) without the need for elaboration.

Attitude markers

Attitude markers were used to express the writers' attitudes to what they are discussing and the influence on the information presented. They also signalled that the writer shares disciplinary values. The findings show that the Asian and Slavic writers used attitude markers differently in terms of frequencies and types. The Asian writers used attitude markers with half the frequency of their Slavic peers, who established their claims and evaluated the novelty, importance and usefulness of their research findings more explicitly, which indicates their orientation to the writer-responsible style of writing.

With regard to the types of attitude, the analysis revealed the preponderance of assessment over significance in the Slavic sub-corpus (49.2% per 1,000 words), and significance over assessment in the Asian one (17.2% per 1,000 words) with emotion markers absent from both sub-corpora (see Figure 3).

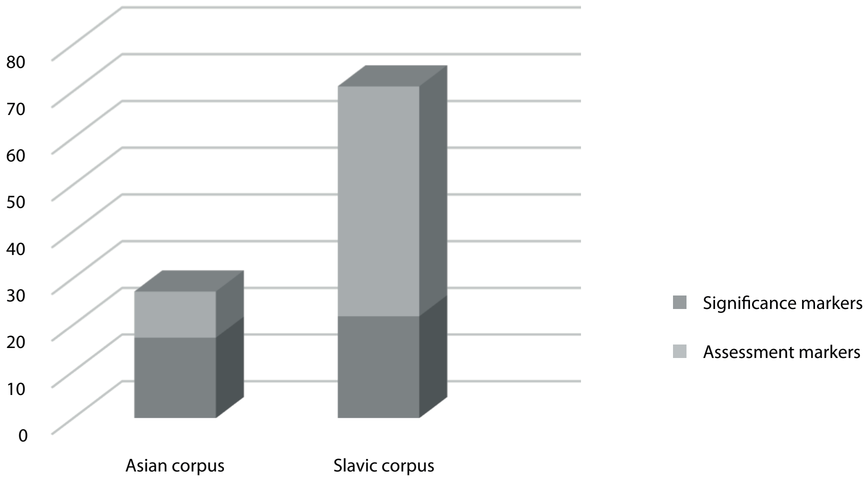

Figure 3:
Comparative use of attitude markers
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Here are two examples that demonstrate the use of assessment markers in SC1 and SC2.

10. *Although the success of information rendition in simultaneous interpreting (SI) is susceptible to many factors, the speed of the source speech (SS) is perceived as one of the* ***most challenging*** *problem triggers.* (SC1)
11. *The article addresses the* ***urgent*** *need of semantic-motivational reconstruction of folk toponym.* [sic!] (SC2)

In SC1, the assessment marker *the most challenging* signals the writer's evaluation of the study emphasising some debatable findings. This rhetorical strategy helps promote and evaluate research. In 11, the Slavic author uses the assessment marker *urgent* to emphasise the need to explore the issue.

In both sub-corpora, significance markers were used to show the role of research results and present a valid argument, as in the examples below.

12. *This study presents the* ***significance*** *of performing needs analysis and suggests that language teachers should consider it for their professional development and growth in higher education.* (SC1)
13. *The article is a* ***contribution*** *to theoretical research into contemporary directions in the development of translation lexicography.* (SC2)

The *significance* type of attitude is used here to evaluate the research results. The authors highlight the importance of their studies for the body of disciplinary knowledge. It can be said that this type of attitude was predominant in SC1: the Asian authors referred to the significance of the study, research results, or methods applied in the study more than twice as frequently as the Slavic writers.

Emotion markers were not found in either sub-corpora, which can be explained by the generic characteristics of the texts rather than the authors belonging to reader-responsible cultures.

Self-mention markers

Self-mention indicates the perspective from which the statement should be interpreted by the reader and "contributes to manifesting author stance in the texts and to projecting a positive image, which can affect the authors' persuasiveness in their argumentation and presentation of research results" (Mur-Dueñas & Šinkūnienė, 2016). Interestingly, these markers were found only in the Slavic sub-corpus. The Asian sub-corpus featured impersonal constructions such as inanimate subject structures, which are helpful in attempts to avoid personal responsibility for any claims and in concealing an authorial self.

Here are two examples from SC2, in which the first-person pronouns were found.

14. *In this text, **we** seek to discuss issues on a topic a little debated in Applied Linguistics – the emotions of black English teachers*. (SC2)
15. ***We** take a different tack from Kim's, proposing that the preference for demonstratives rather than bare NPs as a continuing topic is attributed to the fact that NUN as a topic marker increases the discourse salience of the NP with it.* (SC2)

In 14, the pronoun *we* helps the authors outline the aim of the study, that is, affect the rhetorical function of explaining why the research was conducted. In 15, *we* helps the writers express their position which differs from one proposed by another researcher. The pronouns used in these examples seem to be exclusive rather than inclusive, that is, the authors speak on their own behalf. It is worth noting that example 14 was taken from the single-authored RA abstract, while example 15 was derived from an article written by two authors. The analysis also revealed that *we* pronouns were predominantly used to organise the abstract and create a path for the reader. I pronouns were not found in the corpus.

Engagement markers

Engagement markers were used to explicitly bring readers into dialogue with the writer, to focus the readers' attention and to guide them to a particular interpretation. 17 engagement features were found in the whole corpus (10 items in SC1 and 7 items in SC2). When normed for text length, the Asian sub-corpus showed the slightly greater number of engagement markers. The proportion of the types of engagement was different across the sub-corpora. Shared knowledge markers were dominant in both sub-corpora. They were followed by directives in SC2 and reader-mention markers in SC1. Figure 4 shows the use of engagement markers by the Asian and Slavic authors.

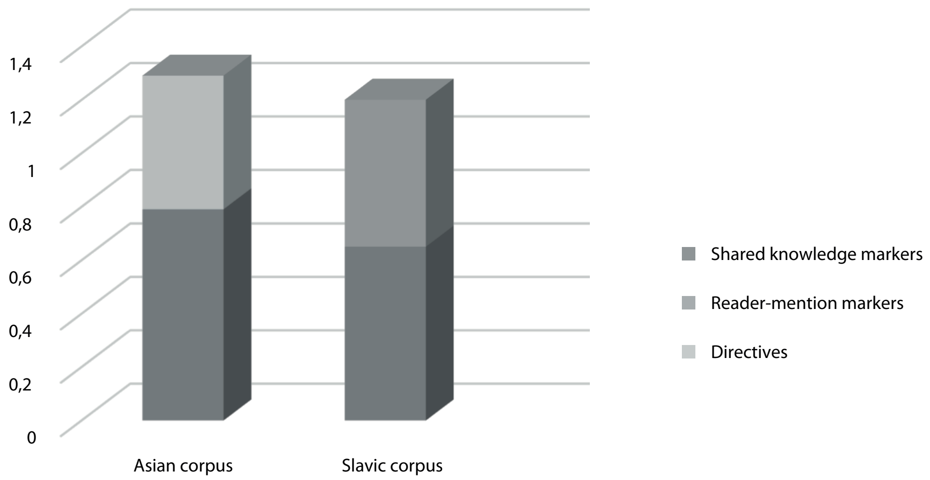

Figure 4:
Comparative use of engagement markers
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Reader mention markers, the most explicit ways of bringing readers into a discourse, were found only in SC1 to directly refer to the reader.

16. *When **we** are looking at the books displayed in the window of a bookshop, what first catches the eye is the title.* (SC2)

We is used as a reader pronoun rather than to express the writer's self. The authors use these to tell readers to interpret the text in a particular way. In contrast to the self-mentions described above, the first-person plural pronoun in this example is inclusive, the function of which is to enhance dialogicity. While exclusive *we* refers only to the authors, inclusive *we* – both to the author and the reader, giving the latter a sense of membership with similar understandings as the writer.

Directives, another engagement tool, were extremely rare in the corpus. I found only two occurrences of this type of engagement in SC2 alone, encourage readers to see things in a certain way, thus managing the readers' understanding and modifying writer–reader relations (Hyland, 2002a). Here is one of the two examples from the corpus where the author uses *should* to require readers to see the theory in the way determined by the writer.

17. *The author proposes a new East European term (laická jazykověda) and suggests that the theory **should** be seen as dynamic (e.g. changing over time and during speakers' lives) and structured (e.g. consisting of a centre and peripheries and containing several "layers" of shared sub-theories).* (SC2)

Shared knowledge markers were the most frequent type of engagement in both sub-corpora (six occurrences in SC1 and five occurrences in SC2). They were used "to position readers within the boundaries of disciplinary understandings" (Zou & Hyland, 2020, p. 276). Here are two examples from the corpus:

18. *On the one hand, there was an **obvious** bias towards NES norms and accents and a strong bias against Chinese-accented English and other NNES accents. (SC1)*
19. *Finally, the paper argues against the **widely accepted** view that absolutives represent structurally case-marked DPs and provides evidence for their case-less DP status*. (SC2)

The above appeals to shared knowledge refer to an awareness of discourse community views. In these examples, writers use these markers to support their claims by emphasising the take-for-granted facts or to bring the readers into agreement with themselves.

Other types of engagement such as questions and personal asides were not found in the corpus.

Discussion

The intent of the present study was to contribute to a better understanding of cultural aspects of academic writing and to provide an answer to the question of whether rhetorical styles manifest themselves in metadiscourse preferences. Conducted from a contrastive perspective, the study aimed to explore a variation in the employment of metadiscourse markers in a corpus of English-language RA abstracts by L2 Slavic and Asian writers, which previously had not attracted much attention from linguists. The study was based on the assumption that the deployment of metadiscourse markers is considerably affected by the rhetorical styles the writers are exposed to. This assumption relied on previous studies of rhetorical traditions by Kaplan (1966), Galtung (1981), Hinds (1987), and some recent studies in the field of contrastive rhetoric (Alonso-Almeida, 2014; Belyakova, 2017; Boginskaya, 2022a; Dawang, 2006; Hryniuk, 2018; Hu & Cao, 2011; Işık-Taş, 2018; Lee & Casal, 2014; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Mikolaychik, 2019; Vassileva, 2001; Walková, 2018; Wu & Zhu, 2015, etc.).

The corpus-based study has shown that the rhetorical patterns in RA abstracts written by Asian and Slavic authors were slightly different from those expected based on previous studies and significantly different in the two sub-corpora. Slavic writers left more traces of themselves and took far less explicitly involved positions. Slavic-authored RA abstracts contained twice as many interactional metadiscourse elements in 1,000 words than those written by their Asian counterparts. The finding that Asian writers are reserved in the use of metadiscourse markers in academic writing has confirmed Hinds's (1987) assumption about the reader-responsible nature of Asian academic discourse. However, this finding does not corroborate the view presented in previous studies about the nature of Slavic academic discourse, which is also regarded as reader-responsible, and Slavic writers, who are considered to be reluctant to use metadiscourse devices in presenting their contributions to the academic field (Paradiž, 2020; Walková, 2019). The present study showed that Slavic writers seem to have mastered a more active way of interacting with readers than their Asian peers.

The Asian- and Slavic-authored texts also differed in terms of the frequencies of some metadiscourse categories. While hedges were the most frequent metadiscourse resource in the Slavic-authored texts (33.7% vs. 112.1% per 1,000 words), boosters were more common in the Asian sub-corpus (48.1% vs. 33.8% per 1,000 words). This finding contradicts the view about uncertainty, indirectness and vagueness of claims in Asian-authored texts and the high degree of commitment to authorial claims in Slavic writing. In an effort to be more confident and direct, the Asian writers chose to suppress alternative views and left little room to other interpretations, thus creating an impression of certainty and assurance that instils confidence in the reader. This finding challenges Galtung's (1981) suggestion about an Asian preference for rhetorical strategies of indirectness. The Slavic writers took a more tentative approach, seemed to be much more careful in making claims and presenting findings, thus securing their academic credibility.

Attitude markers ranked second in the Slavic sub-corpus, while in the Asian-authored texts they followed boosters and hedges. The low frequency of this metadiscourse category in the Asian sub-corpus (27.1% per 1,000 words) has confirmed Hinds's (1987) assumption about the reader-responsible nature of Asian discourse as the use of attitude markers indicates the writer's level of involvement in the text. The low frequency of attitude markers in SC1 showed that Asian writers exhibited a distant rhetorical style of interaction with the reader. Regarding Slavic academic discourse, also regarded as reader-responsible, unexpectedly frequent signals of affect might indicate the orientation towards stepping into the discussion with the reader.

Engagement markers were, however, rarely used in both sub-corpora and the reasons for this infrequency are twofold. First, both Slavic and Asian writing proved to be reproductive, focusing on the content rather than interaction with the reader. As Yakhontova (1997) put it, this type of writing style tends to *tell* rather than to *sell,* which implies that the reader is expected to invest effort in following the writer's line of argumentation. The fact that readers were expected to make an effort to draw themselves into the dialogue may indicate that both Asian and Slavic authors were prone to producing a reader-responsible type of discourse. Second, in the context of the present study, the low frequency of engagement markers in both sub-corpora can be explained by the generic features of the abstract, which aims at providing concise information about the study presented in the article.

Self-mention markers were found only in the Slavic sub-corpus (3.2% per 1,000 words) and represented by exclusive first-person plural pronouns. The analysis revealed that the Asian writers tended to disguise their voice in discourse and avoided emphasising their role in research, which confirmed the assumption made in the previous research about Asian writers' preference for an objective and impersonal style to downplay their presence (Dawang, 2006; Wu & Zhu, 2015). Avoiding self-mention, the

Asian writers hedged their commitment to the claims and prevented possible objections from the reader. In contrast, Slavic researchers tended to intrude into their discourse predominantly as text organisers projecting their persona through the use of the exclusive 'we', which can be explained with Clyne's (1987) concept of collective cultural orientation. Based on Clyne's theory, Vassileva (1998) suggested that Slavic cultures follow the collective approach that resulted from communist ideology, which aims to suppress the individual in favour of the community. In the Slavic academic context, the use of the *we* pronoun, even in single-authored articles, is considered to be a sign of the author's membership in a disciplinary community, a manifestation of collectivism or authorial modesty (Boginskaya, 2022a; Čmejrková, 2007; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2013; Vassileva, 2001; Walková, 2018). Dontcheva-Navratilova (2013), for example, found that Czech authors tend to use authorial *we* when writing in English. Walková (2018) found that Slovak single authors often use the authorial *we* due to the collectivist nature of Slovak academic culture, which is a remnant of the communist past of the Slavic countries. Similarly, due to the influence of the communist regime that deprived scholars of any incentive to express personal involvement, Russian academic discourse abounds with the authorial *we* that creates an authorial presence in the text (Khoutyz, 2015).

Therefore, the study only partly confirmed the assumptions made in previous studies and revealed that:

1. Slavic discourse contained far fewer features of the reader-responsible style of writing, demonstrating authorial attempts to interact with the reader predominantly through the use of attitude markers; Asian RA abstracts also featured some markers of the writer-responsible culture such as attitude and engagement markers, but their share was significantly lower.
2. Asian authors demonstrated a high degree of commitment to authorial claims seeking to suppress alternative views and creating an impression of certainty and Slavic authors seemed to be more careful in presenting findings.
3. While the Asian authors tended to disguise their presence in the texts, the Slavic ones left traces of themselves through the use of first-person plural pronouns.

Conclusions

The present study aimed to verify assumptions about the role of rhetorical styles in choosing interactional metadiscourse markers by academic writers with Asian and Slavic cultural backgrounds. Using the methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study revealed significant differences in the use of metadiscourse: English-language academic discourse by Slavic writers contained a larger number of hedges and attitude markers and a smaller number of boosters. In contrast to Slavic writers, Asian scholars left far fewer traces of themselves and took more explicitly involved positions.

A comparison of the RA abstracts by L2 writers has shown that the Asian and Slavic academic communities manifest different metadiscourse preferences, but they do not always reflect the writing patterns of the rhetorical style they are exposed to.

In general, the rhetorical styles appeared not to be the only determinants of academic writers' rhetorical behaviour, affecting the ways they express the commitment to their claims and interact with the reader. Due to the stronger influence of the international academic writing traditions, Slavic authors seemed to be much more involved in the discussion, building a relationship with readers through the use of hedges and attitude markers. The research results thus suggest that a great deal of attention needs to be paid to the discipline- or genre-specific rhetoric, rather than to broad generalisations about culture-bound rhetorical styles.

It should be admitted here that in order to confirm the findings presented here, a larger corpus of RA abstracts and more support from other cultural contexts are required. Conducted on a corpus of 408 RA abstracts written by representatives from a limited number of cultural communities, the research might not fully reflect the effects of the rhetorical styles on metadiscourse preferences of L2 writers. Additionally, I acknowledge that the grouping of academic writings by Asian or Slavic authors from different countries is rough, and there may be some differences in the rhetorical patterns among related languages such as Czech and Polish or Korean and Chinese. One more limitation that should be mentioned here is the choice of genre for the analysis. The study analyses RA abstracts, which might have impacted the results. For instance, due to its generic nature, the abstract has fewer engagement markers than RAs.

As for venues for further studies, it would be of interest to continue this research using data from other disciplines. Diachronic variation in the employment of metadiscourse patterns in RA abstracts by culturally diverse academic writers could also be of interest. It might be interesting to study how expert academic writers with different cultural backgrounds know when to use metadiscourse devices in their English-medium texts or how metadiscourse in L2 writers' prose affects editors and reviewers of international journals. Further empirical research could look into other types of metadiscourse features in academic prose. Yet despite the above-mentioned limitations, this research could be taken as a starting point for future studies of metadiscourse in L2 academic writing in terms of the rhetorical styles.

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Perceptions of Journalism in a Cross-National Perspective

An Assessment of News Users in Three European Countries

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This study compares news users' perceptions of journalism in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom. Two cross-national surveys were conducted, each with over 2,000 participants in the respective countries. The surveys examined users' evaluations of journalism's relevance to society and its fulfilment of three key functions: holding the powerful to account, rapidly disseminating information to the public and providing analysis of current affairs. The findings highlight a gap between the social importance attributed to journalism and satisfaction with media performance. Information dissemination is perceived as the most effectively achieved function, while functions requiring more watchdog or analytical efforts receive less recognition in media activity. Age and education level are influential socio-demographic variables in news users' perceptions. Older respondents and those with higher education levels view journalism as more relevant. Finally, Germany places a higher importance on journalism compared to Spain, with the United Kingdom occupying an intermediate position.

Keywords: journalism, media performance, professional roles, news users, comparative analysis

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Introduction

The responsibility of rigorously informing society has made the media a key agent in the development of democracy, and their efforts have traditionally contributed to the generation of an educated and informed citizenry. In other words, the paths of journalism and democracy are closely linked (McNair, 2008) since from a normative perspective, the democratic epitome is that the choices made by citizens are reasoned and rational (Chambers & Costain, 2001), something to which the outputs of the media are pivotal contributors. However, the changes brought about by digital technology to the way in which information is produced, distributed and consumed, together with the emergence of other actors in the public sphere, raise the question of whether this paradigm is still commonly accepted.

In that sense, there are numerous studies that focus either on analysing the profiles of news consumers (Artero et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Virgili et al., 2022) or on how structural factors shape said media use (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017a; Majó-Vázquez et al., 2018; Steppat et al., 2020). The news repertoire approach has been very fruitful in shedding light on media consumption in this new media ecosystem (Peters & Schrøder, 2018; Swart et al., 2018). However, there is little research that examines the characteristics of individuals who are more supportive of news media and of journalistic work, and it tends to be national in scope (Vos et al., 2019; Willnat et al., 2019). The present study distinguishes itself by focusing on individual conditions that may influence perceptions of journalism's relevance to society and satisfaction with the performance of some journalistic tasks through a comparative lens that considers different media environments. In particular, this study analyses *news users'* perceptions of journalism in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom. The aim of the research is to analyse how these users assess the performance of three journalistic functions: holding the powerful to account (the *adversarial role*), disseminating information quickly to the public (the *disseminator role*), and providing analysis of current affairs (the *interpreter role*).

The correspondence between perceived social relevance of journalism and the citizens' assessment of the actual performance of the media is significant because it can, in turn, affect the level of trust placed in the media (Moran & Nechushtai, 2023). Therefore, when the public perceives that journalism is fulfilling its social role effectively, they are more likely to trust the media and its reporting. Conversely, when the public views the media as falling short of its social responsibilities, their trust in the media may be eroded. In sum, given the fragile and relational nature of media trust and its susceptibility to social, cultural and technological shifts, the exploration of public perceptions of journalism (Serrano-Puche et al., 2023) is of paramount importance. The findings from such explorations can serve as valuable starting points for both media practitioners and policymakers seeking to navigate the ever-evolving media landscape and foster a society with a well-informed, engaged and trustful citizenry.

The societal role of journalism

According to Lasswell (1948), the press has three functions in relation to the social system: 1. *monitoring* the environment; 2. *correlating* the parts of society in their response to the environment; 3. *transmitting* the social heritage from one generation to the next. While all three are important, the first refers more directly to journalistic activity and constitutes what other authors call the *watchdog role* (Christians et al., 2009; McQuail, 2013). This task consists of discovering and reporting relevant information about current events, personalities, trends or risks to a democratic society. In the words of Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, p. 12), “the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing”. This includes a commitment to truth (coupled with the discipline of verification), loyalty to citizens, independence from those it covers, providing understandable and appropriate news, and serving as an “independent check on power” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 112).

The watchdog role stems from the classical liberal conception of the power relationship between government and society as a mechanism to strengthen accountability (Norris, 2014). This mission to scrutinise institutions and elites to expose irregularities (Schultz, 1998; Waisbord, 2000) goes hand in hand with the characterisation of the press as the *fourth estate.* According to this metaphor – historically attributed to Edmund Burke (Donohue et al., 1995) – the media, although not formally recognised in any constitution, constitutes a source of power similar to that of other branches of government. From this perspective, reporting demands a response from public authorities, for “by publicizing corruption, scandal in high places, or the government’s simple inattention to the needs of the people, the press could ensure that a nominally democratic government met its obligations to its constituents” (Hampton, 2009, p. 10). The idea of journalism as a watchdog is therefore based on three premises:

> “First, the news media are essentially autonomous; second, journalism acts in the public interest, looking after the welfare of the general public rather than that of society’s dominant groups; and third, that the power of the news media is such that they are able to influence dominant social groups to the benefit of the public” (Franklin et al., 2005, p. 274).

This notion has permeated the profession of journalism worldwide. Among journalists, the watchdog or adversarial role is perceived as a central function to be performed, as shown in the academic literature on professional roles (Canel et al., 2000; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver, 1999; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). However, as journalism is a social practice in which socio-political, cultural and organisational contexts converge, this normative standard and journalistic ideal is determined by multiple factors in daily practice. There is a gap between how journalists understand their role and how they behave (Mellado, 2019), particularly influenced by the external and internal pressures journalists have to face (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020).

These tensions also manifest themselves in another basic function that can be ascribed to the media: keeping citizens abreast of events, the *disseminator role,* in which journalists act simply as rapid disseminators of information who avoid unverifiable facts

(Cassidy, 2005; Prager & Hameleers, 2021). In the words of Johnstone et al. (1976, p. 114), some journalists see themselves as “an impartial conduit of information to the public” and feel that they can do their job better by maintaining a neutral position, adhering to the norms of objectivity and reporting accurate, factual and verifiable content.

However, technological advances and changes in the way information is produced, distributed and consumed as a result of digitalisation have led to a reconsideration of the validity of this paradigm (Peters & Broersma, 2013, 2017). Digital platforms are transforming information, creating a new hybrid environment in which two concepts associated with digital media on the one hand and with the mainstream media system on the other, sometimes coexist harmoniously, generating cooperation and synergy, and at other times clash, creating conflict and tension (Chadwick, 2017). Journalists are forced to adopt new techniques not only in the production and distribution of information, but also in the management of their relationship with their audience. With the rise of the digital age, news information traverses the vast landscape of the internet with ease. Following Kristensen and Bro (2024), there are three platform types through which legacy media news *meets* its audience: *intra-media* (news site), *inter-media* (social media profiles) and *extra-media* platforms (aggregation and search). Thus, audiences increasingly turn to digital platforms to satisfy their news consumption needs (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018). Moreover, the digital environment encourages the proliferation of new actors across borders and themes that have traditionally been the focus of journalism studies. These include the new digital opinion leaders or influencers, who are able to accumulate a high symbolic capital that allows them to effectively influence the flow of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). All this leads to a questioning, or at least a rethinking of the legitimacy of journalistic authority in this new media environment (Carlson, 2017; Tong, 2018).

Perhaps the most influential changes in the social relevance that citizens ascribe to journalism are related to new ways of consuming information. First and foremost, access to information is rapid and uninterrupted, occurring at any time and in any place (Boczkowski et al., 2018). This creates an endless cycle of information consumption in which periodicity has been definitively overcome (Martín Algarra et al., 2010). Moreover, a key practice that the digital environment has imposed on access to political information is that of incidental consumption (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017b; Serrano-Puche et al., 2018). Second, the perception that ‘the information is out there’ has taken hold in the digital environment (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Furthermore, in a context of information abundance, social media introduces the perception that news seeks out users. This is the “news finds me” perception (Gil de Zúñiga & Zicheng, 2021). The implications of these shifts in information consumption patterns can create ambivalence in journalism’s perceived social value. On the one hand, the rise of digitalisation and constant user connectivity could dilute journalism’s unique role amidst a relentless stream of other media content. This content is often of uneven quality, with *soft news* and entertainment increasingly dominating (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Hanusch, 2012). Despite that the digital age also presents opportunities for journalism to reaffirm its importance and relevance, the overabundance of information highlights the need for reliable, trustworthy sources that can provide accurate, fact-checked reporting and in-depth analysis of complex issues, especially in the face of events of social, political, or health impact (Ariel et al., 2023; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

Along with the work of policing the powerful and informing citizens about what is happening, journalism has traditionally been regarded as "the primary sense-making practice of modernity" (Hartley, 1996, p. 12). Its institutional status is linked to its social function of satisfying the citizenry's need to understand current events. It can, therefore, be said that it also plays a role in interpreting reality. It must provide "a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the events of the day in a context which gives them meaning" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 21), as proposed by the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press in the late 1940s.

The media thus becomes a marketplace of ideas, representing all relevant issues and voices within a society (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014). This analytical task is meaningless if it is not accompanied by the informative function itself, but it goes beyond the mere transmission of current events and is linked to a ritualistic vision of communication (Carey, 1989). It frames journalism in a dimension of social responsibility (Peterson, 1956), the fulfilment of which is related to what McQuail (1992) defines as media performance, that is, an indicator of how well the media serve the public interest.

The idea that journalistic work is of paramount importance for a healthy democracy is widely accepted among scholars at the normative level (Schudson, 2008). However, with all the changes mentioned above, the question remains of whether journalistic work is still present in the everyday lives of citizens or whether the new digital environment has rather eroded its traditional societal role of informing the public, providing analysis of current affairs and holding those in power to account.

The exercise of journalistic functions is largely influenced by the professional roles of journalists. The idea of the journalist's role is not static, as it is sensitive to both the professional and technological context of journalism (Mellado, 2019; Mellado et al., 2017; Novoa Jaso et al., 2019). Therefore, it is understandable that, when comparing the roles attributed to and performed by journalists from different times and places, some ideas about journalistic work may have changed. There are different concepts that influence the conception of these roles, from the assumption of certain functions by journalists as their own, to the limitations of the context, to the perceptions of the public (Mellado et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, there is a common ideal, albeit mutable over time and context, which underpins the understanding of journalists' roles and has much to do with their news mission. As Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) point out, the identification of the journalist as a purveyor of information (disseminator role) and a check on authority (adversarial role) remained largely unchanged in the 1980s and 1990s, a sign of stability. At the same time, Starck and Soloski (1977) and Kepplinger et al. (1991) found that the perception of these journalistic roles, as well as the identification of journalists with them, showed a predisposition of professionals that influenced their reporting. In this sense, studies such as Deuze (2002) have shown that journalists' perceptions of their own roles are not one-dimensional, but tend to be composed of several roles at once, and indeed "many journalists see themselves as a combination of informer, interpreter and advocate" (Ward 2009, p. 299).

Media environments and perceptions of news media performance

Typologies have proved to be a powerful comparative tool for finding possible commonalities between different countries (Blumler et al., 1992). These models are based on the existence of national journalistic cultures, press circulation, political parallelisms and social relevance. Among the various existing models that relate politics and the media, Hallin and Mancini's has become a prominent reference in the international sphere (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Strömbäck et al., 2008; Strömbäck & Luengo, 2008).

The relevance of adopting this comparative framework is also justified by the influence that the media system can have on the social view of journalistic institutions. According to Steppat et al. (2020, p. 321), "'news users' perceptions of news media performance are shaped by their individual media choices as well as by the composition of the news media environment that surrounds them".

For example, the more the structure of a country's media system parallels that of its political parties, the more the population of that country is dominated by exposure to like-minded views through mass media (Goldman & Muntz, 2011). Steppat et al. (2021) take this idea further, emphasising the importance of the political information environment when analysing news exposure. According to these authors, both media market fragmentation and polarisation have a relevant effect on like-minded news consumption. In another study conducted in five countries, they also found that the higher the level of fragmentation and polarisation, the worse the perceived news performance was, particularly in terms of journalistic independence and objectivity (Steppat et al., 2020). This is important because what people think of and expect from their country's media has an impact on patterns of media use (Wolling, 2009) and thus on the media's ability to contribute to an informed public and engaged citizenship in that country (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

With this in mind, the aim of this study is to explore and compare the perceptions of journalism among news users in three countries: Germany, Spain and the U.K. Each of these countries corresponds to different media systems categorised by Hallin and Mancini (2004): the *North/Central European* or *democratic corporatist model* (Germany), *the Mediterranean* or *polarised pluralist model* (Spain) and the *North Atlantic* or *liberal model* (the U.K.).

Germany is classified within the democratic corporatist model, a system also found in Austria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Nations typically associated with this model are demonstrably characterised by a rich cultural tradition, as evidenced by the press's historically high print runs. Moreover, the model also entails a strong development of journalistic professionalism and an active, albeit limited, role for the state.

Spain exhibits most of the features Hallin and Mancini ascribe to the polarised pluralist model. This system corresponds to countries located in the Mediterranean region, such as Greece, Italy, France and Portugal, the defining features of this model are high political parallelism between media and politics, strong state intervention in the media system, a historical focus of commercial media on the ruling elite, small print runs and a low level of professionalisation of journalism.

The United Kingdom fits the liberal model, predominant in Ireland, the USA and Canada, characterised by the relative prevalence of market mechanisms, the hegemony of commercial media companies and consolidated professionalism. There is little state intervention in the media system and a limited political parallelism. However, the U.K. is different from the liberal model in two dimensions, as Hallin and Mancini point out (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). Firstly, while there is a clear tendency for political parallelism to decrease in the British quality press, it remains strong in the tabloid press. Secondly, the strong presence and influence of the BBC tempers the hegemony of commercial media companies.

Given the above, the following questions arise:

RQ1: How do news consumers in Germany, Spain and the U.K. perceive the relevance of journalism to the proper functioning of society?
RQ2: How do news users' perceptions of journalistic relevance and journalistic roles vary according to socio-demographic factors?
RQ3: How do news users rate journalists' fulfilment of the roles of *adversary, interpreter* and *disseminator?*
RQ4: Are there notable differences between the three countries studied in terms of perceptions of the social function of journalism and assessments of media performance, given that they have different media environments?

Method

Design and procedure

This study is based on the survey conducted by YouGov for the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR), an international study on the consumption of digital information promoted in 2012 by the University of Oxford, which has been published in Spain since 2014 by the University of Navarra.

The fieldwork was carried out between the end of January and the beginning of February 2019 and 2020. The YouGov organisation selected around 2,000 users in each country to compose national panels to survey digital news consumption. DNR participants are adult internet users who have consumed news in the last month and are representative of the online population according to socio-demographic and geographic criteria. The data were weighted according to official census and industry-accepted majority data for age, gender, region, news reading and education level, in order to reflect the population of the countries analysed.

Sample

For this research, the 2019 and 2020 surveys were consulted in order to cover all questions related to the object of study, as the questionnaire has some variations from one year to the next. Specifically, samples of Internet users from Germany

(2019: n = 2,022; 2020: n = 2,011), Spain (2019: n = 2,005; 2020: n = 2,006) and the United Kingdom (2019: n = 2,023; 2020: n = 2,011) were used.

First, we identified the DNR questions related to the two aspects we wanted to measure: the social relevance of journalism and the satisfaction with the roles fulfilled by journalists. As the DNR is a more general study than the one presented in this article, we selected some DNR variables in order to limit the responses to the specificity of our research. However, it is worth noting that the Digital News Report seeks to understand how news is consumed in different countries and meets a number of requirements to ensure a representative sample. Specifically, the samples from Germany, Spain and the U.K. were subject to several conditions to ensure their representativeness. For example, in addition to appropriate representation in terms of age, gender and origin, the users surveyed in the three countries met quotas to ensure that the educational and political diversity of the three countries was represented. The responses to these variables were subjected to various statistical tests in order to test the relationship between the variables analysed (Table 1) and the socio-demographic variables.

Questionnaire and variables

The online questionnaire covers a wide range of questions about news consumption. In particular, this research has conducted a fine-grained descriptive analysis of the main characteristics of individuals who are more or less supportive of journalism and their perceived journalistic roles in different countries. In particular, the following survey questions were analysed in relation to the socio-demographic variables of age, gender and level of education:

Table 1:
Main Variables An

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Journalism relevance[1]	1.93	0.96
Adversarial role[2]	3.21	0.97
Disseminator role[3]	3.75	0.93
Interpretative role[4]	3.47	0.93

[1] How important, if at all, do you think independent journalism is for the proper functioning of society (to be answered according to a Likert rating scale: Extremely important (1) / Very important / Somewhat important / Not very important / Not at all important (5).
[2] Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: The news media monitors and scrutinises powerful people and businesses.
[3] Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: The news media keeps me up to date with what's going on.
[4] Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: The news media helps me understand the news of the day.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Results

This section is structured as follows: first, citizens' perceptions of the social relevance of journalism is presented, both at a general level and in the performance of some of its main functions (RQ1 & RQ3). Both questions are examined from a comparative perspective, across the three countries, to see whether membership of different media systems is significant for the issues observed (RQ4) or if they are influenced by socio-demographic variables (RQ2).

As one would expect, although digital users in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom agreed on the importance of journalism for the proper functioning of society, national differences do exist. Overall, about 72% of the digital users who answered the survey identified journalism as relevant. National figures range from 83% in Germany who think that journalism is either extremely or very important for society to 59% in Spain. Respondents under the age of 45 accord journalism less public relevance, with only 34% identifying journalism as extremely important for society. Broadly speaking, the typical supporter of journalism would be over 45 years old, with tertiary education. However, a closer look shows national differences.

Table 2:
Journalism relevance and socio-demographic variables correlation

	Journalism relevance[a]				
	Extremely important	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important
Age[b]					
Under 45	34%	29.9%	27.2%	6.7%	2.2%
Over 45	46.6%	30.6%	19.5%	2.3%	1%
Gender[c]					
Male	45.2%	29.1%	20.2%	3.8%	1.8%
Female	38.3%	31.5%	24.8%	4.2%	1.2%
Education[d]					
Low	26.2%	23.4%	35.5%	8.9%	6%
Middle	38.8%	30.8%	24.1%	4.7%	1.7%
High	49.3%	30.5%	17.7%	2.1%	0.4%
Country[e]					
Germany	53.9%	30%	12%	3.3%	0.7%
Spain	32.1%	27.8%	32%	5.8%	2.4%
United Kingdom	38.9%	33.2%	23.7%	2.9%	1.3%

[a] Question: How important, if at all, do you think independent journalism is for the proper functioning of society? (To be answered according to a Likert rating scale.)
[b] Cramer's V: 0.17, p-value < .000
[c] Cramer's V: 0.08, p-value < .000
[d] Cramer's V: 0.13, p-value < .000
[e] Cramer's V: 0.17, p-value < .000

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Perceptions of the social function of journalism

According to the 2020 DNR data, a majority of news users in the three countries state that independent journalism is relevant to ensure the proper functioning of society. Of the three countries, the social relevance of journalism seems to be more established in Germany, where 83.9% say they are in favour and 4% against. The situation is very different from Spain, where 59.9% recognise it as extremely or very relevant, while 8.2% of the surveyed do not, with the United Kingdom being at an intermediate level (72.1% of support, 4.2% against).

When analysing the influence of socio-demographic factors such as age, gender or level of education, there are differences between countries. In Germany, the correlation between age and the importance given to journalism is statistically significant ($p < .001$). The same is true for age and level of education in Spain, or for the level of education in the U.K., so some patterns are evident in the responses. In all three countries, young people aged 18–24 disagree with the need for independent journalism to ensure the proper functioning of society, but with large differences. In case of Spain, more than half of respondents in this age group consider the work of journalism to be not very relevant, 20 percentage points more than in Germany (30.4%) or the United Kingdom (32.8%). Spain is the only country where a majority of respondents aged 18–44 disagree with the need for independent journalism.

Respondents' level of education also plays a role. Respondents with lower levels of education most frequently do not attribute a relevant role to independent journalism (44.4% in Germany, 45.4% in Spain and 29.4% in the U.K.).

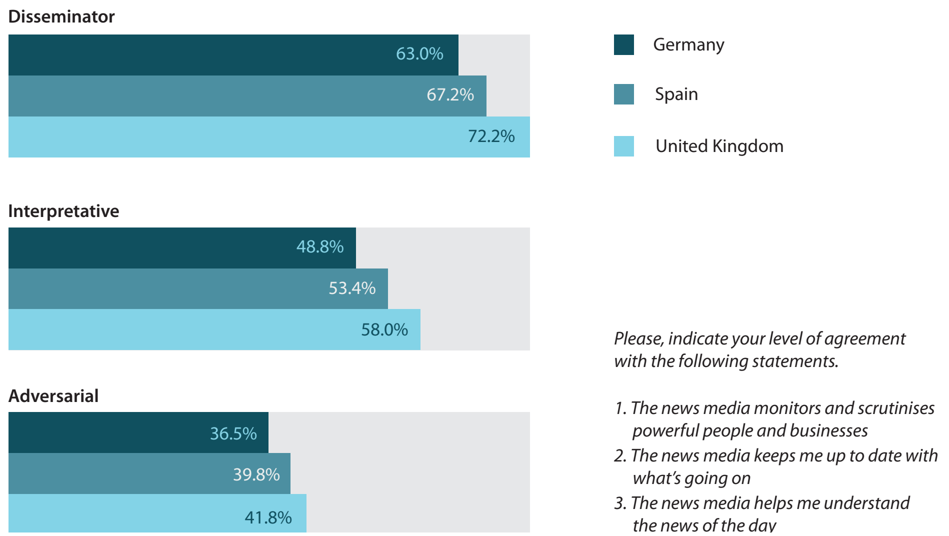

Figure 1:
News users' evaluation of journalistic roles by country
Source: Adapted from the Reuters Institute DNR survey 2020, conducted by YouGov.

There are significant differences in how news users rate the fulfilment of the three journalistic roles analysed in the survey. The role of disseminator is the one that generates the most consensus: 63% of Germans, 67.2% of Spaniards and 73.2% of British respondents think that journalists fulfil this role correctly. In other words, the vast majority of those surveyed believe that journalists and the media keep them informed about what's going on. In case of the interpretative role, a slight majority of Spaniards (53.4%) and Britons (58%) believe that journalists and the media help them to understand the reality around them. This is not the case for German respondents, among whom a minority (48.8%) are of the opinion that journalism is an aid to their understanding of reality. In all three countries, respondents ranked fulfilling the confrontational function last. In all three countries, only a minority are satisfied with the way the media monitor and scrutinise powerful individuals and companies (36.5% in Germany, 39.8% in Spain and 41.8% in the U.K.).

When correlated with socio-demographic variables, some changes emerge. In terms of age (Table 3), in both Germany and the U.K., the older the user, the higher the level of agreement with fulfilment of the adversarial role. Of the three countries analysed, in Spain alone is the p-value greater than 0.5 and therefore not statistically significant. When analysing the change in support for the adversarial role, age does not seem to affect Spanish respondents. When it comes to the disseminator role, Germany and Spain are the only two countries where the results are statistically significant. Whoever it is, in the Spanish case, age seems to have the greatest impact when analysing the evaluation of this particular journalistic role. The older they get, the more Spaniards recognise this function in media performance. Finally, the perception of the role of interpreter does not seem to change much with age. In all three countries analysed, the support received is always around 50%, whether or not the correlation is statistically significant.

Table 3:
Functions of journalism by age

	Germany						Spain						United Kingdom					
	18–24 N = 161	25–34 N = 289	35–44 N = 295	45–54 N = 414	55+ N = 863	* p	18–24 N = 181	25–34 N = 303	35–44 N = 411	45–54 N = 421	55+ N = 689	* p	18–24 N = 135	25–34 N = 278	35–44 N = 304	45–54 N = 323	55+ N = 983	* p
The news media monitors and scrutinises powerful people and businesses *Adversarial role*	26.1%	31.5%	31.9%	35.5%	41.6%	< .001	40.9%	38.9%	39.9%	41.3%	40.8%	0.688	34.8%	36.7%	39.5%	39.0%	47%	< .001
The news media keeps me up to date with what's going on *Disseminator role*	62.7%	60.9%	56.6%	61.4%	66.3%	0.015	53.6%	62.7%	64.2%	69.8%	72.9%	< .001	73.3%	70.1%	76.6%	69.0%	72.7%	0.939
The news media helps me understand the news of the day *Interpretative role*	51.6%	41.5%	47.8%	47.6%	51.2%	0.052	48.1%	52.5%	49.9%	53.9%	56.6%	0.017	57%	54.3%	58.9%	52.6%	58.4%	0.328

Note: Question "We are now going to ask you whether you think the news media in your country is doing a good job or not. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:" * p-value of the Spearman correlation between each type of concern and age (within each country).

Source: Adapted from the Reuters Institute DNR survey 2019, conducted by YouGov.

The respondents' level of education does not seem to have much impact on their answers when asked about the functions of journalism (Table 4). The U.K. is the only one of the countries in which the correlation is statistically significant ($p < .001$), but only for two of the three questions. It is also here that a clearer correlation can be observed, whereby the higher the level of education, the greater the support for the functions of dissemination and understanding.

Table 4:
Functions of journalism by education level

	Germany				Spain				United Kingdom			
	Low N = 46	Middle N = 1334	High N = 642	p*	Low N = 273	Middle N = 1002	High N = 730	p*	Low N = 77	Middle N = 1107	High N = 839	p*
The news media monitors and scrutinises powerful people and businesses *Adversarial role*	30.4%	37.4%	34.3%	0.303	33%	41.1%	42.3%	0.031	37.7%	41.5%	44%	0.176
The news media keeps me up to date with what's going on *Disseminator role*	47.8%	62.1%	65.3%	0.052	58.6%	67.9%	69.5%	0.008	57.1%	68.9%	78.4%	< .001
The news media helps me to understand the news of the day *Interpretative role*	39.1%	48.7%	49.2%	0.527	49.8%	53.2%	54.7%	0.208	40.3%	54.4%	61.7%	< .001

Note: Question "We are now going to ask you whether you think the news media in your country is doing a good job or not. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:" * p-value of the Spearman correlation between each type of concern and education (within each country).

Source: Adapted from the Reuters Institute DNR survey 2019, conducted by YouGov.

The situation is similar with regard to gender (Table 5). There are no relevant gender differences in satisfaction with fulfilling journalistic roles. Thus, the fulfilment of the three roles analysed in this article receives similar support among men and women. The only statistically insignificant correlation between gender and satisfaction with performance in the role of disseminator is found in the U.K. Elsewhere, the relationship is statistically significant, albeit to varying degrees.

Table 5:
Functions of journalism by gender

	Germany			Spain			United Kingdom		
	Male	Female	* p	Male	Female	* p	Male	Female	* p
The news media monitors and scrutinises powerful people and businesses *Adversarial role*	75.4%	77.8%	0.003	81.1%	85.8%	0.008	78.2%	83.4%	< .001
The news media keeps me up to date with what's going on *Disseminator role*	88.5%	90.8%	0.01	88.4%	91.6%	0.02	92.8%	93.9%	0.29
The news media helps me understand the news of the day *Interpretative role*	84.3%	87.4%	0.001	84.1%	89.5%	0.001	87.5%	90.7%	0.05

Note: Question "We are now going to ask you whether you think the news media in your country is doing a good job or not. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:" * p-value of the Spearman correlation between each type of concern and gender (within each country).

Source: Adapted from the Reuters Institute DNR survey 2019, conducted by YouGov.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we examined perceptions of the journalistic functions of holding the powerful to account (adversarial role), disseminating information quickly to the public (disseminator role), and providing analysis of current events (interpretative role) among news users in three different media systems.

Although the importance attached to the role of journalism is high (RQ1), there are differences between the three countries analysed. The Germans are similarly supportive of the roles of adversary, interpreter and disseminator, but their assessment of the social relevance of journalism is quite a lot higher than their satisfaction with the fulfilment of their basic functions. This gap between the normative conception and the realistic description of journalistic work is in line with Broersma and Peters (2017, p. 5), who point out that "when we look at many intended functions or desirable social outcomes of journalism, the construction of these seems to be centered on cultural expectations rather than everyday consequences". Therefore, it is important to look at citizens' evaluations of news media performance, as this research has done, because "an audience-centered, or at least audience-inclusive, perspective on the (democratic and societal) functions of journalism is crucial if we want a theory that is not only internally consistent, but also in line with, and testable against, people's lived experiences" (Peters & Witschge, 2015, p. 20).

As noted in the introduction, these findings can also shed light on the state of media trust in each of the analysed countries. For instance, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, in Spain (where, as we have seen, 6 out of 10 users consider journalism to be extremely or very important for society) only 33% say they trust most news most of the time (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023). The United Kingdom exhibits a level of trust similar to that of Spain. Conversely, in Germany – where 8 out of 10 users think that journalism is either extremely or very important for society – the percentage of trust rises to 43%. A potential explanation for this observation lies in Germany's adherence to the corporate democratic model, which fosters a higher degree of professionalisation within the journalistic field. While definitive conclusions cannot be drawn nor a causal relationship established between these two trends, we can surmise that individuals who perceive journalism to be fulfilling a societal function tend to place greater trust in the media. Viewed from another angle, the pursuit of regaining public trust – fundamental to the editorial and economic sustainability of media outlets – also entails reclaiming its relevance in citizens' daily lives.

Age and education emerge as the two primary socio-demographic variables that significantly influence news users' perceptions of journalistic relevance (RQ2). In both cases, respondents' age and level of education showed notable shifts in the attributed importance of journalism for societal functioning. Specifically, older respondents tended to perceive journalism as more relevant, a finding that differs from the findings of Vos et al. (2019), who observed the opposite correlation, indicating a higher importance attributed to journalistic roles among younger respondents. However, it is understandable that younger generations, with a prevalent consumption of news on social networks (Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Martínez-Costa et al., 2019), may have a less established belief in the societal importance of journalism, despite tending to show lower levels of trust in news, as they are more aware of the challenges of digital information environments (Sierra et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the mode of access, whether digital or traditional, significantly influences the perceived relevance of journalism for societal functioning (Sierra et al., 2023), with age playing a clear role in this regard.

The same was true of the respondents' level of education. As the level of education increased, so did the perceived relevance of journalism. However, this does not apply to the analysis of journalistic roles. The correlation between education and journalistic role satisfaction is only statistically significant for British respondents, but not for German and Spanish respondents. Again, these results differ from some previous research that found that higher levels of formal education are negatively associated with the perceived importance of journalistic functions (Willnat et al., 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to continue investigating the socio-demographic factors in their relationship with the expectations and evaluation of journalism.

In all three countries, the role of disseminator is much more recognised than that of either adversarial or interpreter (RQ3). The primacy of the disseminator role at the expense of analytical or watchdog functions calls for a reflection on the practical implications of these findings for media practitioners. This perception of the neglect of some of the functions of journalism could indicate that the media are, in the words of James W. Carey (1989), in fact operating from a vision of "communication as transmission" rather than "communication as ritual". However, it would be a misguided strategy to prioritise the achievement of the logistical aspects of communication, since in the current technological context other actors can equally fulfil this function of moving information quickly from one place to another. Rather, the epistemological authority of the journalist (Torregrosa & Gutiérrez, 2009) is based on a mediation that fulfils a deeper social and cultural function than the mere transmission of messages, and that leads to community building through the endowment of meaning and the control of power from a vision of the common good. In a communicative landscape teeming with actors capable of disseminating information in the public sphere, the distinguishing value of journalism lies precisely in its commitment to those more difficult-to-replace functions of power monitoring and interpretative insight into current affairs. By prioritising the fulfilment of these roles, media outlets can lay the groundwork for regaining public trust and ultimately securing social recognition of journalism as a cornerstone of democracy (Scheuer, 2008).

Although the role of disseminator is the one that best fits the perceptions of users in the three countries, a closer look at the data reveals some peculiarities (RQ4). The assessment of the fulfilment of each of the three roles may be due to the fact that these national contexts are governed by particular journalistic cultures, understood as "a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously or unconsciously, legitimize their role in society and make their work meaningful to themselves and others" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 369). Even if the general framework of the journalistic ideology of Western democratic societies applies in all three countries, i.e. neutral and factual reporting, critical distance to power and adherence to professional ethical rules (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2011), the journalistic cultures of the U.K., Germany and Spain have their own nuances, as they emphasise the functions examined here in different ways. The journalistic cultures of the U.K. and Germany have been analysed comparatively in previous studies (Esser, 1999, 2008; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). Henkel et al. (2019) found that British journalists see their professional role as more confrontational with those in power than their German counterparts, while they see it as more important to provide context and analysis. Other studies have also shown that British journalists define the information function as their primary professional task (Donsbach, 1983).

Assuming that role conceptions influence the work of journalists, that is, that what journalists consider to be the principles of their profession can have an impact on what they produce (Albæk et al., 2014), it is to be expected that this journalistic culture will ultimately also shape the public's expectations. This is shown by the results of this research, where the evaluation of the roles of adversary, disseminator and interpreter have different weights in each of the countries analysed. From the prism of media systems, the data show that the country that most closely matches the models described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) is Spain. In their seminal work, Hallin and Mancini argued that journalism in countries belonging to the polarised pluralist system is characterised by a more literary and elite approach. This has traditionally resulted in journalism whose sophistication has contributed to a more distant perception by the general population. In our case, some of the data seem to be in line with this thesis.

Limitations and future lines of research

All academic research is inherently subject to limitations, and this study is no exception. In this case, it is worth noting the limitations of the research set out in the samples used. It should be remembered that the Digital News Report is an online sample, so as Newman et al. (2021, p. 6) state: It "will tend to under-represent the news consumption habits of people who are older and less affluent, meaning that online use will typically be over-represented and traditional offline use under-represented".

Another limitation of this study is the potential influence of confounding variables, particularly given the use of cross-sectional data. While our analysis provides valuable insights into the relationships between demographics and the variables of interest, it is important to recognise that cross-sectional designs inherently limit our ability to establish causality or fully account for confounding factors. Therefore, caution should be exercised in interpreting observed associations between demographics and outcomes of interest, as these relationships may be confounded by unmeasured or incompletely controlled variables.

In short, this paper has explored citizens' perceptions of the social relevance of journalism in Germany, Spain and the U.K. and their evaluation of media performance around three basic functions. The perceived predominance of the disseminating function of journalism over those that require a more analytical or interpretative work raises new questions about the possible threats that this situation could generate. It seems relevant to continue researching along these lines and to introduce new variables such as, for example, whether there is a difference in the phenomena analysed here between citizens who prefer to consume information through digital media and those who get their information through traditional media. Employing longitudinal designs or experimental methods could provide a more robust understanding of the causal mechanisms underlying these associations.

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#Feminazis on Instagram:

Hate Speech and Misinformation, the Ongoing Discourse for Enlarging the Manosphere

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Social media platforms have become spaces for the viralisation of hate speech and misinformation. Paradoxically, tools that were once used for activism and conversation on behalf of vulnerable communities, nowadays work to gather and reproduce analogous worldviews on polarising issues. This research analyses the behaviour of the protagonists of the conversation around #feminazis on Instagram, as well as the characteristics of the content and the degree of interaction they generate. For this purpose, computational and qualitative social science methods have been applied to a sample of 9,300 posts published between 2021 and 2023. The results show disorderly participation by anonymous accounts, women and self-described feminists, social organisations, and pseudo-media. Content opposed to elective termination of pregnancy, and misogynistic messages lead the conversation, but there are also publications that attack other progressive ideologies. Disinformative content is linked to decontextualisation and manipulation of information to go viral, transnationalising hate speech towards

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feminism and their supporters, framed as a homogeneous group. It is concluded that this space, created by the platform itself, contributes to the enlargement and institutionalisation of the manosphere.

Keywords: misogyny, hate speech, manosphere, feminazis disinformation, Instagram

Introduction: From an enlarged public space to the growth of the manosphere

In the early days of the Internet, the possibility of expanding public space seemed a viable issue. Then, well into this century, hope shifted to social networks: environments that would allow the agora of public communication to be widened by offering themselves as settings in which to exchange opinions, share comments, deliberate, and converse on issues of general interest. However, these ideas, with which the Internet and social networks were originally promoted, did not come to pass. After the initial fervour, those original beliefs began to be questioned in light of the goals pursued in developing these technologies, coupled with an intricate complexification of society. Numerous studies have shown that, rather than the democratic encounter of diverse worldviews and horizontal dialogue of voices, social networks facilitate the creation of homophilic conversation communities (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2018), which result in filter bubbles (Pariser, 2017) and echo chambers (Sunstein, 2003). In these, hate speech is intertwined with misinformation (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022), promoting spaces of affective polarisation (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016).

In this environment – in which the interplay between algorithms and digital practices of Internet users favours and promotes encounters between equals (Santos et al., 2021) – the activism of the feminist movement has managed to make a place for itself to amplify and extend its struggles (Sued, 2023), while at the same time activating a process of democratisation of feminism (García-Mingo & Diaz-Fernandez, 2023). So much so that various research has not only demonstrated the relevance of platforms in feminist digital activism (Tarullo & García, 2020) but also how, in addition, specific and contextualised demands and complaints have managed to be known and extended beyond borders, creating transnational networks of activism and militancy against gender-based violence (Laudano, 2018).

However, in recent years, the digital space has been disrupted by counter-activisms that, at best, seek to discredit the feminist movement with misogynistic and antifeminist discourses (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Ging & Siapera, 2018). Thanks to digital platforms, these movements have achieved a broadening of their narratives as never before (Lopes Miranda, 2023). Such counter-activisms are usually led by men who, protected by the anonymity that the platforms allow, transfer to the digital environment the same chauvinist behaviours that occur offline. In doing so, they collaborate in making the same sexist and antifeminist discourses attention-grabbing (Mantilla, 2013), reproducing and amplifying with digital technologies the same gender inequalities that take place outside of them (Zafra, 2015). In this sense, technologically mediated practices not only perpetuate established hierarchies and privileges but also drive new phenomena such as male movements and toxic masculinities (Lopes Miranda, 2023). Furthermore, just as digital tools have facilitated the transnationalisation of the historical demands and claims of the feminist movement, thereby creating a network of solidarity and sisterhood among women (Laudano, 2018), the same has occurred with counter-movements: with the use of bots, they have managed to spread slogans, hate speech, and disinformation and misinformation about the feminist movement and its demands (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2017).

These communities of hate speech are promoted by posts, and participation by digital users through comments is crucial in disseminating insults and abusive language (Bajo Pérez & Gutiérrez San Miguel, 2022; Lopes Miranda, 2023; Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022).

Another crucial tool for activists and counter-activists are the hashtags that digital platforms provide to enable a conversation to take place and reproduce. They can be used for mobilisation and activism, a practice known as *hashtivism* (Yang, 2016), and concentrate the discussion on a particular theme (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016). As microhistories, these tags can be advocated by non-institutionalised political actors, successfully incorporating new voices into the public discourse on agenda issues (Giaxoglou, 2018), and uniting similar stances on topics that are frequently polarising (Gamir-Ríos et al., 2021).

The feminist movement was among the first to take to the Internet to express itself and its demands (Sued, 2023), and several studies have shown that hashtivism used to be more closely linked to the activism of groups defending the rights of vulnerable communities (Freelon et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in recent years, evidence has indicated that counter-movements also employ this digital strategy (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022). Engaging in hashtivism, these counter-movements agglutinate worldviews to the conversation that resemble those expressed in the hashtag (Giaxoglou, 2018), and at the same time, they run other practices such as *gendertrolling* (Mantilla, 2013), viralising messages to harass and disseminate hate speech (Soares & Recuero, 2021), and even conveying disinformative discourse (AA, 2022) with a low degree of technological complexity (Gamir-Ríos & Tarullo, 2022).

The content that drives counter-activism labels contributes to and fuels sexist communities that appear in the many and varied digital spaces (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016), giving rise to what has been termed the *manosphere:* an interconnected and digital spectrum of misogyny (McCarthy & Taylor, 2024), where heterogeneous voices converse and share the perspectives, needs, grievances, frustrations, desires, and perceived rights of white western men (Farrell et al., 2019). These websites and social media communities target women and feminism as the cause of their "aggrieved manhood" (Ging, 2019) and militate against them through disinformation campaigns, dominated by cheapfakes (Gamir–Ríos & Tarullo, 2022) and hate speech (García-Mingo & Diaz-Fernandez, 2023). "Even though the manosphere has existed since the early 2000s, its activities have been arguably influenced and increased by the perceived need for counterbalancing the growth of online feminist discourses" (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023, p. 1393), one of the characteristics of the fourth wave of feminism.

Among the various groups that make up the manosphere, *Incels* (involuntary celibates), *Men Going Their Own Way* (MGTOW), *Pick-up artist* (PUA) community, *Red Pill Theory* and *Men's Rights Activists* (MRAs) have received the most attention from a linguistic perspective (Heritage, 2023; Krendel, 2020). All of these show a strong belief that there are two "clearly delineated and diametrically opposed genders" (Krendel et al., 2022, p. 22). In particular, they portray women as "a homogenous group with many negative traits" (Krendel et al., 2022, p. 22). However, these studies have not examined the use of deliberation strategies and framing mechanisms, nor have they explored the representation of feminism and feminists" (Krendel et al., 2022).

Although it is not a confined network with a single ideology, the manosphere seems to be deeply connected to neo-Nazi, alt-right, and white supremacist groups. The storytelling strategy of victimhood dominates their counter-narratives (Blommaert, 2018), as well as the idea of a supposed awakening of men in the face of the reality that, in their opinion, feminism imposes. This awareness is referred to as *taking the red pill*. The concept takes its name from a scene in the film *The Matrix* in which the protagonist has to decide whether to accept the truth (red pill) or to continue living in unreality (blue pill) (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999, 29:38; Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019).

Their view is heteronormative and androcentric (Halpin, 2022) with a belief that women should be subordinate to men. On gender-based violence, members argue that women have "sexual-economic capital" (Heritage, 2023, p. 15), and hold the view that "sexual violence is a gender-neutral problem; in this regard, they assert that "rape culture is a fictional concept made up by feminists" and that "false rape allegations against men are a widespread issue" (Gottel & Dutton, 2016, p. 609).

Han & Yin (2023) have identified various communities in the manosphere, which merge into two discursive strategies: a critical narrative against the postulates of feminism aimed at obtaining influence in the public sphere and personal masculinist discourses based on the cultivation of a personal lifestyle and the total rejection of inclusive masculinity. The manosphere is usually described "as a set of communities with porous boundaries" (Han & Yin, 2023, p. 1936); one of them could be the conversation around the #feminazis, on Instagram, a social media platform that has been used traditionally for women and feminist activism in recent years (Acosta, 2020; Simancas et al., 2023).

Feminazi, the same insult at different moments

Feminazi is a portmanteau term combining the words *feminism* and *Nazi* and refers to women who seek to silence their opponents by using authoritarian means and strategies (Williams, 2015). The expression was coined in 1992 by the American political analyst and writer, Rush Limbaugh, who defined abortion as the modern holocaust and the defenders of this right as Nazis (Aragón, 2017).

Nowadays, the term feminazi has achieved a high media impact because it is used to attack and insult women rights activists (Engler, 2017): it is the term used by anti-feminists to discursively represent feminism in social networks (Bonet-Martí, 2020). Counter-activisms (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012) have increased in recent years and have gained more space in the transnational public sphere, favoured by the growth of populist leaders, far-right parties (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and conservative groupings (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020). Feminazi, together with *feminazismo,* are locutions that have become established among antifeminist activists as primary labels (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2017, Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Núñez Puente et al., 2019; Villar-Aguilés & Pecourt Gracia, 2020). To this extent, they have been associated with radical right anti-feminism (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Villar-Aguilés & Percourt Gracia, 2020; Varela-Guinot, 2021) linked to the manosphere (Han & Yin, 2023). In the Sigma Dos Report (2021), which studies sexist hate speech in the digital environment, feminazi is one of the keywords with the highest number of mentions (Sigma Dos, 2021, cited in Rodríguez Ponce, 2022) and has emerged as a leading hashtag in trolling campaigns (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2017; Núñez Puente et al., 2021; Williams, 2015), especially at crucial moments for the feminist agenda such as the #8M march or the Women's Strike (Núñez Puente et al., 2019), the parliamentary debates on the Law on Termination of Pregnancy in Argentina (Amnistía Internacional, 2020) and the feminist demands for the legalisation of abortion in Chile (Vacarezza, 2023). It is a term used in Spanish-speaking contexts, but also in other places, where other languages prevail, such as Portuguese, German, and English, to name but a few (Plath et al., 2022; Williams, 2015; Mushaben, 2007).

Most of these studies have examined the behaviour of conversation revolving around #feminazis on the Twitter platform (today X), but little is known about what happens on Instagram concerning this hashtag, despite the network gaining space to channel practices of political participation and activism (Acosta, 2020; Chávez et al., 2021; Murumaa-Mengel & Muuli, 2021) and counter-activism (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022; Lopes Miranda, 2023). For this reason, the present research aims to contribute to knowledge of the particularities of the digital conversation generated around #feminazis on Instagram, to understand the voices and formats, as well as to identify the type of messages conveyed under this hashtag.

Methodology

This research examines the conversation around #feminazis on Instagram to understand better the particularities of the space in which the messages that spread this hashtag on the platform are concentrated. We have chosen the plural form of the word because it is intended to bring together all defenders of feminism as a group. It is not an individual critique of a person or a woman, but rather a critique of the collective.

To this end, three specific objectives are pursued: 1. to determine the relevance of the social actors in the conversation under study; 2. to examine extent to which the presence of hate speech and disinformative content in the messages published are significant; and 3. to investigate the degree of participation of the community of Internet users who follow this conversation.

Therefore, the research questions guiding this research are:

RQ1. What are the characteristics of the protagonists in the conversation that revolves around #feminazis on Instagram?

RQ2. What are the characteristics of the content that spreads #feminazis on Instagram?

RQ3. What are the characteristics of the messages that generate the most engagement in the conversation studied?

Different methodological actions were carried out to achieve these objectives, using quantitative and qualitative techniques. Traditional communication research methods have been combined with computational methods for social studies. The use of a variety of techniques is a response to the increasing complexity that characterises the study of digital circulations, particularly in a social network on which publishing images is ubiquitous and plays a relevant role in dialogue accompanied by text, thus attaining diverse meanings (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022).

The phases that we went through were:

1. For the digital-quantitative actions the PhantomBuster and R programs were used. The former made it possible to extract the publications grouped under #feminazis on Instagram. This digital resource allowed us to obtain data based on the text published over a three year period (2021–2023). Data collection was conducted during the week of 8 March 2023. A total of 25,334 posts were collected. In the second step, R software was used to process the data that had been garnered by PhantomBuster. The following sub-phases can be distinguished:
   1a) the collected content was filtered, and repeated content was discarded. The final sample consisted of 9,360 posts.
   1b) the data on the general characteristics of the conversation were systematised per account: languages, location, the format of the publication, dates of publication, number of likes and number of comments.
   1c) from this extant online data sample, four sub-samples were obtained within #feminazis conversation:
      - Subsample 1: formed by Instagram accounts that have published the most number of content using #feminazis (n = 25)
      - Subsample 2: set up by Instagram accounts with the most prominence (it is, with the highest number of followers) (n = 25)
      - Subsample 3: shaped by the posts that received the most number of likes (n = 25)
      - Subsample 4: formed by the posts that received the greatest number of comments (n = 25)
2. For the qualitative approach, netnographic research (Krendel, 2020; Krendel et al., 2022) was applied to the four subsamples. To achieve it, we use qualitative discourse analysis focused not only on the protagonist of the conversation (subsample 1 and 2), but also on the frames of the 50 posts with most likes and

comments (subsample 3 and 4) and of the comments expressed in these posts. Moreover, through this method, we observe verbal and nonverbal strategies that maintain prejudices in these 50 posts. Recent studies, such as those Fairclough (2015) and Wodak (2021) have demonstrated the effectiveness of in discourse analysis to delve deeply into the nuances of communication, uncovering underlying meanings, ideologies, and societal norms embedded in texts and interactions. In these cases, our aim is to detect how ideologies are discursively constructed and interlinked between #feminazis' users (Heritage, 2023). In particular, the following variables are analysed:

2a) supported and refuted viewpoints (frames) of the most relevant social actors and their commentators (Krendel, 2020)
2b) the 'feminazis' portrayed by the most relevant social actors and their commentators
2c) the presence of hate speech formula: dehumanisation, stereotype promotion, insults or offensive terms and irony (Noriega & Iribarren, 2013; Tortajada et al., 2014) used by the most relevant social actors and their commentators

Results

The exposition of the results follows the following structure: first, the data obtained from digital-quantitative actions (accounts, languages, location, the format and dates of publication) are presented, and then the variables observed in the qualitative discourse analysis (frames, portrayal of feminazis, and the presence of hate speech) of the most successful posts and their comments.

Users of the #feminazis hashtag

The most active users who employ the hashtag #feminazis do not fit into a specific profile (Table 1). In other words, they cannot be considered users from the same organisation or political party using the hashtag for coordinated and effective political activities. We have observed that #feminazis in Spanish is widely used and serves different accounts that apparently have no connection with each other. However, we can highlight certain users who consistently engage with this hashtag and generate conversation around it.

One of the accounts that extensively uses this hashtag belongs to the Chilean anti-abortion movement. This is the case for@provida.chile, one of the most active accounts using the #feminazis hashtag on Instagram. With 237 posts in the conversation, this account has managed to gather an audience of more than 11,000 followers for its profile, which is one of the most popular accounts in this study. Its activity and followers indicate a significant commitment to the subject, as its posts in #feminazis' conversation on Instagram have accumulated 89,127 likes and 7,181 comments. Additionally, there is the less active@providas.chile, which works as a replica of the former, with a similar number of posts in the conversation (225) but with significantly lower activity, reflected in its smaller number of followers (less than 100).

The@provida.chile account is the only collective account that has achieved a significant impact with its posts. However, it is not the only case in which accounts related to the anti-abortion movement use #feminazis, although they do so from more individual and less organised positions. Two accounts that partially concentrate the conversation are opposed to the pro-choice movement and accuse feminists of being Nazis:@zorroantiaborto account, whose messages refer especially to the Argentine context, use this hashtag in 107 posts. The second one – which concentrates on a relevant number of comments (1,086) – is@corazonesprovida, which presents itself as a radio program based in Miami, USA. It uses social media platforms to spread content about "God, Life, Family and Gender Ideology states in its profile".[1] The account is in Spanish, suggesting a link to Latino diaspora in Miami.

In general, it is common to find anonymous users occupying positions of high activity to convey messages contrary to feminist principles. Here, we find@meninist_humanist, an anonymous account that collects the second-highest number of likes (109,791) and many comments (3,795). The account's name is based on the term feminist but is used satirically to promote men's rights. The posts from@policia.de.cristalitos are active in the conversation, not only because of the number of posts (103) but also because it has concentrated a relevant number of interactions (5,633 likes and 2,303 comments). It is an account managed by five anonymous users dedicated to posting memes that ridicule feminists and other vulnerable groups, such as transgender people. Most of the comments received followed these lines of mockery. They link feminists and transgender people with mental health problems, as well as parodying the inclusion of 'e' as a linguistically neutral gender.

Other highly active users present themselves as real individuals with some influence who also focus part of their activity on opposing feminism; for example,@biadescobre, with 26,472 likes and 2,173 comments, defines herself as an "ex-feminist" in her profile. On the other hand,@alejalagrande, who uses Instagram as a replica of her TikTok account, has made 111 posts. In these two last cases, the accounts are run by women, but we find both men and women among the followers.

There is also a group of anonymous accounts with various activity levels and influence amplifying their ideological framework. These accounts position themselves against feminism but also against anything related to progressive views to defend conservative positions in social matters and liberal ones in the economy. One of the accounts that most extensively use #feminazis is@la__peste__roja. It has fewer than 1,000 followers but has posted 3,880 messages with this tag, accumulating 75,973 likes and 3,407 comments. It is located in Spain and spreads content against progressive ideologies and left-wing parties. The account@vamana_tattoo, which defends the authoritarian government in Chile, has more than 6,500 followers and uses the hashtag on 117 occasions. In their posts,@thewlass, from Venezuela, occasionally uses the tag but generates a lot of activity, with 121,404 likes (the highest number of likes recorded in the analysis) and 5,053 comments.

[1] From now on, all post contents will be translated by authors into English from Spanish or Portuguese.

Finally, it is worth noting the presence of accounts that define themselves as media outlets and use #feminazis when disseminating gender-related content. This is the case of@mediterraneo_digital, based in Spain, with over 2,500 followers, using the hashtag 84 times. In Chile, the media outlet@meganoticiascl has accumulated 47,052 likes and 5,455 comments with only one post. This so-called media outlet is the most popular account in the studied conversation: it has more than three million followers.

Table 1: Most active users around #feminazis' conversations

Protagonist users of the conversation		Users with more likes in the conversation		Users with more comments in the conversation	
User	Posts	User	Likes	User	Comments
la__peste__roja	3,880	thewlass	121,404	provida.chile	7,181
provida.chile	237	meninist_humanist	109,791	meganoticiascl	5,455
providas.chile	225	provida.chile	89,127	thewlass	5,053
meninist_humanist	167	la__peste__roja	75,973	meninist_humanist	3,795
vamana_tattoo	117	policia.de.cristalitos	55,633	la__peste__roja	3,407
alejalagrande	111	meganoticiascl	47,052	policia.de.cristalitos	2,303
zorroantiaborto	107	stalin_aliado_2	34,765	biadescobre	2,173
policia.de.cristalitos	103	biadescobre	26,472	corazonesprovida	1,086
a_antifeminista	92	chalequeo_venezuela	22,039	jamilywenceslau	1,075
mediterraneo_digital	84	_poder.feminismo_	18,918	cakeminuesa	1,018

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Characteristics of the conversation content

Instagram is a social media platform that inherently relies on a visual format. Consequently, hashtags on Instagram are always associated with multimedia content. In fact, 5,169 posts contained no textual content but only hashtags (see www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/). This implies that #feminazis is sometimes used to organise a conversation that is not text-based but rather multimedia in nature. Out of the 9,360 posts analysed, the majority (81.85%) are presented in a photo format, followed by videos (11.16%) and carousel-type posts (6.99%).

The image with the highest number of likes (120,310) pretends to be a news item about the trial between the actor Johnny Deep and the actress Amber Heard, which points to her alleged physical assault: "Johnny Deep is innocent. Amber Head admitted to being the one who hit him" is the title of the post that simulates to be a piece of news (see www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/). However, the verification by the Spanish fact checker platform *Maldito Bulo* at the bottom of this post indicates that it is partially false information.

Among the videos with the greatest number of likes, the most popular are clips or montages of women politicians using inclusive language; popular figures such as the tennis player Rafael Nadal questioning the gender gap in sport or a homemade video of a young woman pretending to be assaulted by a man (see www.instagram.com/p/CbeMz5xgC4n/). This post was uploaded by@aquilescorrea1, an actor from the Dominican Republic, and is popular on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook.

Another interesting piece of data pertains to the language of publication. The user base is predominantly Spanish-speaking, with 78% of the posts in Spanish. However, it is worth noting that the term has transcended language boundaries, partly due to its proximity to Spanish in some countries and its origin as a Romance language. Approximately 14% of the posts are in English. Other languages include French (4%), Portuguese (2%), and Italian (1%). This linguistic diversity is also reflected in the geographical dispersion of the spaces where messages with the hashtag #feminazis are shared. However, the low rate of these hashtags in other countries shows that it is primarily an established expression in Spanish-speaking countries. In other cases, the usage is leveraged by the malleability of Latin languages. Among all the posts that included location data (this information is unknown in 8,825 instances), some posts came from non-Spanish-speaking countries such as Brazil (8.22%), the United States (2.43%), and France (1.31%). These three countries are geographically and culturally close to Spanish-speaking countries.

However, the Spanish-speaking countries dominate the conversation around #feminazis. Spain (7.85%), Argentina (8.78%), and Chile (6.73%) concentrate a significant portion of the conversation. These three countries have experienced processes where feminism has become a central topic in the public sphere due to its presence in various political processes. In Spain, the massive 8M protests since 2018 and the involvement of a left-wing political coalition, *Unidas Podemos,* in the Ministry of Equality have reinvigorated this debate. In Argentina, the *Marea Verde* and the approval of legislation supporting elective abortion have been highly disseminated in recent years. In Chile, the constitutional process initiated by street protests has also generated extensive debate on gender-related issues. Other countries that participated less in the conversation included Mexico (2.06%) and Uruguay (1.12%). Moreover, some posts (1.50%) are in an imaged country: "Peronistán, República De La Garcha", which refers to the Argentinean Peronist Party in a highly derogatory manner.

Despite the predominance of Spanish in the conversation, the Portuguese-speaking account@jamilywenceslau, located in Brazil, receives many comments. The account user introduces herself as a men's and family law lawyer. With several followers well above average for those involved in the conversation (around 90,000), she has podcasts and channels on YouTube and on TikTok where she disseminates content on "the rights of men who are the most harmed" (see www.instagram.com/p/C1URXVJubER/).

The publication dates confirm that the hashtag is not a recent phenomenon but has remained prevalent over the years. Of the recorded posts, 5,486 belong to the year 2021, 3,373 to 2022, and 498 to 2023. This decline may be due to a variety of reasons: some are discursive, such as in the prioritisation of other hashtags, and others may be related to the platform's logic, as in the drop in the number of posts compared to other formats, such as reels, which were integrated into Instagram in 2020 (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). Furthermore, there is no notable increase in posts during March of each year to coincide with International Women's Day commemoration. Therefore, it can be inferred that posts with #feminazis are not aimed at setting the agenda at specific moments but rather constitute an ongoing discourse on social media without a defined posting strategy.

Engaging messages in conversations

The number of interactions with the posts analysed, such as likes and comments, varies widely.

Table 2: The most popular #feminazis posts on Instagram

Post URL	Profile	Number of comments	Number of likes
www.instagram.com/p/CjWfSXAD_c8/	www.instagram.com/meganoticiascl	5,455	47,052
www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/	www.instagram.com/thewlass	4,744	120,310
www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/	www.instagram.com/cakeminuesa	714	3,915
www.instagram.com/p/CLEgQ1_rqJK/	www.instagram.com/brunoenglerdm	498	2,255
www.instagram.com/p/CnQTJohtXwp/	www.instagram.com/provida.chile	388	244
www.instagram.com/p/Cm98Qk5vaYy/	www.instagram.com/trini_a_sekas	338	184
www.instagram.com/p/CoJQmzqtFOn/	www.instagram.com/provida.chile	322	1,025
www.instagram.com/p/Caj0X88lgKN/	www.instagram.com/cakeminuesa	304	2,868
www.instagram.com/p/CRyZsb2HlM6/	www.instagram.com/biadescobre	291	9,815

Source: Compiled by the authors.

On average, posts receive around 103 likes. However, it is essential to note that this figure has a relatively high standard deviation of approximately 1,376 likes, indicating a significant dispersion in the number of likes that posts can accumulate. Regarding likes, this variation ranges from 0 to a maximum of 120,310 likes per post.

The post with the most likes (47,052), published by@meganoticiascl (see www.instagram.com/p/CjWfSXAD_c8/), includes a video of Chilean MP Emilia Schneider demanding an anti-discrimination law against the transphobic and antifeminist discourse of republican and far-right parliamentarians. Although this post is not necessarily against feminism, it underlines the insult #feminazis and opens the debate to its followers. Reading the comments reveals a certain polarisation in participation. Various types of hate speech against Schneider are detected: dehumanisation ("Better go to the racecourse"), stereotyping ("I think all they want is impunity to kill through abortion"), offensive terms ("You are a man disguised as a woman with serious mental problems"), and irony ("Discriminates against a man... being a trans man"). Most of them express transphobic messages ("But if it's true ...... you will never menstruate 💧 😂😂😂😂") or downplay this type of violence against women ("Why don't you worry about crime, inflation, and Araucania. Clowns").

For the whole sample, the average per post is approximately seven comments. However, once again, the dispersion is considerable, with a standard deviation of around 77.2 comments. This suggests that while some posts can generate numerous comments (15 posts exceed 100 comments), others may have very few. The range of variation goes from 0 comments up to a maximum of 5,455 comments on a single post. In addition, we found that users who authored posts with the most likes and messages vary in their overall influence. Some accounts, such as@brunoenglerdm and@cakeminuesa, have many followers. In other cases, however, the number of followers is smaller, as seen with@thewlass. Therefore, while overall influence facilitates activity on these accounts, engagement on this topic is likely generated independently.

It is worth noting that of those with more interactions many tend to be generating more conversation using open-ended questions: "¿feminism or dumbing-down?" (see www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/; 714 comments); "See how easy it is to get arrested in Brazil as a MAN?" (see www.instagram.com/p/CNbVaROlV7-/; 251 comments); "¿Where are the women's movements that do not speak out?" (see www.instagram.com/p/CRp9o1-AhaR/; 129 comments). The post shared by@meganoticiascl (see www.instagram.com/meganoticiascl) is also an example, and the most commented post (5,455).

The posts from the Spanish journalist@cakeminuesa, a contributor to right-wing media, are repeated in both rankings – more likes and comments. Followed by over 75,000 accounts, his predominantly videos content gives voice to extreme right-wing positions in Spain. Among other issues, this ideological stance runs counter to the efforts of feminists to include the gender perspective in Spanish. This language has two grammatical genders, although the masculine has always been used as the generic. Intending to discredit feminism and the inclusive language it advocates, the journalist edited a compilation of speeches in which generally left-wing female politicians have made grammatical errors in Spanish (e.g. *dereches, jóvenas, autoridadas*) in their attempts to be inclusive in their public speeches (see www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/). The video repeatedly uses the image of the Minister for Equality as a curtain-raiser, saying 'it may sound strange'.

This kind of content, which aims to ridicule the feminist movement, is common in the conversation, making it particularly polarising, as is evident in the comments in which the commentators express amusement or approval. They may also contain aggressive messages of insult or further ridicule of the people appearing in the videos ("The absurdity of the outdated left destroying the Spanish language with gender inventions and suffixes"; "MY GOD, IF THEY WERE GIVEN AN INTELLIGENCE TEST, THEY WOULD SCORE THE MINIMUM 🤣🤣🤣🤣🤣🤣🤣🤣").

The fourth most commented-on post (498) is from the Brazilian right-wing politician Bruno Engler, a member of the Liberal Party, who points out his support for President Jair Bolsonaro in his biography (see www.instagram.com/p/CLEgQ1_rqJK/). The politician, with nearly 493,000 followers, adds the alleged screenshot to the account of a woman who says that "the destiny of men is in the gutter" and that the legalisation of abortion will allow women to "abort male fetuses". Although the person making this statement is not identified, and the eyes of her photograph are covered, the politician gives it the status of discourse and plays with the resource of insinuation. He calls for the term men to be changed to Jews "and watch the magic happen". On this occasion, the hashtag #feminazis, together with the derivative femicide – the gender-based murder of a woman by a man – coexist with a dozen tags that appeal to the president of Brazil.

Like@brunoenglerdm's, some of the posts with the most comments focus on promoting anti-abortion views. This is consistent with the messages from organisations and other users who use this hashtag, although their main advocacy pertains to elective abortion (see www.instagram.com/p/Cmc1tm-t8u_/). There is a diverse range of posts, including protest images, carousels featuring specific cases, and excerpts from media interventions from figures supporting or opposing abortion activists. This content is often accompanied by insults towards pro-choice women, such as *murderers* and *nefarious,* and may point to the neglect of parental opinion in these cases. The anti-abortionist account@provida.chile published eight of the most comments.

Other posts place a greater emphasis on argumentation. These posts involve Instagram influencers sharing their views on gender-related issues (see www.instagram.com/p/CRyZsb2HlM6/). These are videos and texts where the content is intended to explain specific gender-related topics. In this case, the comments primarily express approval of the tenets expressed in the message, although in a more composed manner. There is also space for other comments that attempt to counter the primary message ("I never understood why some women undress as a form of protest. And some dance funk that humiliates them, but they don't question the sexism and humiliations in the lyrics of the songs").

Another issue detected in the most popular posts is the questioning of gender-based violence. Accounts such as@direitofeministabr collect alleged false reports of assaults; others edit montages with fragments of news stories in which women have assaulted or murdered their children to portray women as the main perpetrators of violence. In this line, a third type of content, manifested through homemade and decontextualised videos or pre-existing files, promotes the stereotype of women as manipulative, lying, dramatic, and violent when it comes to harassment and assault. We also found another mass of engaging content in which the participants in feminist demonstrations, such as 8M, are portrayed as crazy women whose actions in the physical world are ridiculous and meaningless. In content posted by@cakeminuesa (see www.instagram.com/p/Caj0X88lgKN/), women boycott an act in homage to the writer, Emilio Pardo Bazán or exclaim proclamations against the leader of the Spanish far-right VOX party, such as "a vaginal cup in Abascal's mouth").

It is also common for the #feminazis hashtag to be *hashjacking* as well, that is, many feminist activists use it in their posts where they explain feminist goals, proclaim their support for the collective organisation, and convey messages in favour of specific feminist demands, including the right to abortion, for instance,@trini_a_sekas,@_poder.feminismo_, and@brujamixteca. This first account makes a post in which it explained precisely the conservative reaction as a response to the empowerment that feminsimo implies for women (see: www.instagram.com/p/Cm98Qk5vaYy/).

In this way, they seek to influence a conversation that is assumed to be negative to them due to the terminological choice of the hashtag. This means that many of the messages polarise people who end up on them looking for different types of comments. Consequently, they receive both supportive messages ("Let's aim for development and equity!") and others that are negative towards their messages and speeches ("Unfortunately, I live in Argentina, but I love my country even though it's poor and plagued by abortionist killers."). This hashtag can also be self-referential and claimed by feminism, but its use and impact are more limited.

Finally, some posts include misleading or straightforwardly false messages. These posts often feature images and videos without context, aiming to undermine the feminist movement by portraying it as aggressive. Some may also highlight perceived inconsistencies, accusing feminism of critiquing Western lifestyles while ignoring human rights violations in Arab countries. This category also includes montages that attempt to simulate news from traditional media outlets. Many of these types of content have been debunked by the platform's fact-checkers.

Discussion and conclusions

This investigation aims to contribute to the research on hashtags in social networks. Using tags for civic purposes has been well-studied in literature on activism (Yang, 2016). This study shows that the investigation of hashtags by counter-movement communities is also relevant. Research on feminism has highlighted its capacity to amplify narratives, set agendas, and create transnational networks (Laudano, 2018; Santos et al., 2021). Instead, some studies have warned about a significant counter-movement on social networks (Lopes Miranda, 2023). In this sense, research on *hashtivism* should recognise that hashtags are not solely for civic purposes. On the contrary, because of their capacity to concentrate attention on topics (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016) it is natural that they also serve to strengthen polarisation on social networks, especially when the debate on digital platforms is characterised by homophily (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2018).

This study investigates the discourse surrounding the hashtag #feminazis on Instagram, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics within this online space, where all messages associated with the hashtag are centralised. Concerning RQ1, users do not present a specific profile, nor can they be categorised as part of the same organisation or political party using the hashtag for coordinated political activities. Conversely, they have diverse backgrounds that use hashtags for different purposes, so users seem to have no direct connections. While this may be considered a weakness, it may not be so when looking at the tools that platforms, in this case, Instagram, provide: concentrating all voices, the powerful and organised ones and those not institutionalised in a concrete digital space. For this, the use of the hashtag is essential. Giaxoglou (2018) mentions that hashtags empower non-institutional and non-organised voices. Still, in this study, we could see that they nurture a conversation that, except when *hashjacking* occurs (Darius & Stephany, 2022), forms a community of ideologically cohesive voices, enlarging the manosphere with the voices of white Western men (Farrell et al., 2019), but also women who favour traditional and patriarchal society and express their disagreement with the ethos of gender equality.

Certain users engage with the #feminazis hashtag and drive polarised discussions around three central topics framed as the supposed irrationality of feminist demands: the questioning of gender-based violence; the loss of men's rights; and, foremost what are perceived as the dangerous consequences of the right abortion. Specifically,@provida.chile stands out as a very active and much followed account among the anti-abortion voices. However, from more individual and less organised positions, other actors, such as@ zorroantiaborto (mainly focused on the Argentine context) and@corazonesprovida (from the Latino diaspora in Miami) can publish a remarkable number of posts with #feminazis and mobilise hundreds of comments on their content. The original notion that led to the coining of the term *feminazi* is present in much of the anti-abortion conversation, that is, that women who have abortions are Nazis (Hunt, 1996). For this reason, it is common to find the linked term *feticide* next to the hashtag under study. This label, which contains an insult in its narrative, facilitates the dissemination of hate speech.

Some accounts utilising the hashtag express views contrary to feminist principles and left-wing views. Both influencers and anonymous accounts actively oppose progressive visions in social and economic realms. This research shows that hashtivism, previously concretely related to left-wing activism, has become a tool of counter-movements, circulating and concentrating voices that defend proposals linked to the right and the extreme right (Mantilla, 2013; Soares & Recuero, 2021), the same ideological voices that amplify the manosphere.

Some profiles identifying as media outlets are very active in the conversation we studied. This can be explained as an attempt to present themselves as platforms linked to serious journalism. However, the use of the label #feminazis acts as a rallying cry for homophilic worldviews that agree with their partisan content on the basis of alternative facts and are interested in attacking the feminist movement and gender-related policies (Palau Sampio & Carratalá, 2022).

With regard to RQ2, Instagram is a platform whose content is mainly visual, so #feminazis posts primarily consist of multimedia content. Indeed, many posts rely solely on hashtags as a beacon by which to be found. That means that on Instagram, there is a multimedia-oriented conversation (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022) supported mainly by photographs. Posts are mainly in Spanish; however, there are other languages in the conversation which give evidence of the transnational use of the tag #feminazis, which seeks to bring voices from different contexts into a space of peer-to-peer conversation. In this case, the accompanying text may need to be translated. Still, the presence of #feminazis enters into a multimodal dialogue with the visual content, allowing for a reading that transcends the language used.

The countries dominating the #feminazis conversation on Instagram (Spain, Argentina, and Chile) have experienced high-intensity social turmoil and significant discussions around feminism in the public sphere due to various political processes in recent years. When these publications were collected, the governments of these countries were linked to the centre-left. They proposed legal reforms to guarantee the right to elective termination of pregnancy. This explains the presence of content that seeks to discredit feminism, with violent discourse against progressive ideas – abortion rights in particular – and various measures implemented by these governments. In addition, posts in Portuguese that come from Brazil are linked to extreme-right ideas and are disseminated by institutional voices and female influencers.

The publication dates reveal that the #feminazis hashtag has maintained its presence throughout the year. Importantly, there was no significant increase in posts in March. This suggests that #feminazis posts are not intended to set the agenda at specific moments but rather represent an ongoing discourse on social media without a defined posting strategy, while still being linked to the populist and extreme right-wing political currents that have been gaining strength in various European and Latin American parliaments. Moreover, this finding also encourages the idea that Internet conversations do not initiate other violence or hate speech that occurs outside the digital space (Schmitz

& Kazyak, 2016). Still, the online environment allows for its amplification and to appeal to similar worldviews that distribute and add content and expand existing stereotypes and insults. However, a decrease in the use of hashtags in recent years suggests studying other frequently used terms or tagged content, such as reels, might be worthwhile.

Concerning RQ3, we found that likes and comments vary significantly across the posts analyzed. Posts generating more interactions drive more active conversations based on a suggestion, personal opinion, or an open question to the public. These posts receive approving comments, although they allow discussion that counters the main message. However, it is striking that it is precisely in the comments that the greatest variety of hate speech against women and feminists is observed. The posts act as a fuse that ignites the verbal aggression of the participants in the conversation. In this sense, it would be worth investigating to what extent the application selects the audience for this content and the criteria on which that is based.

Consistent with the term "feminazis", some posts go beyond critiquing feminism and instead equate it with National Socialism, using photomontages to suggest similarities between feminist and Nazi symbols. Feminist activists often use #feminazis with the aim of influencing a conversation by carrying out what is known as *hashtag-hacking*, a strategy hitherto used by movements linked to right-wing ideologies (Darius & Stephany, 2022).

Moreover, there are some misleading messages, often with images, and videos lacking context, which are aimed at undermining the feminist movement. When the text misinforms, platform fact-checkers have debunked some of these posts. Despite that, we found that when the disinformation is part of the image, the social network takes no action to disclose that there are errors in the content. Moreover, misleading content is carried by an interaction of images, text, and hashtags, and it could observe a low tech use of digital tools for manipulating images for spreading debunks and hate speech (Gamir-Ríos & Tarullo, 2022).

The accounts with the most followers are not necessarily the most popular in the conversation. This implies that users forming community conversations in the space created around #feminazis are linked by the discourses and not by the people who publish them, whom they may not even follow. In addition, it has been detected that the most successful content is published by precarious accounts and movements, which are short-lived: some of the accounts whose posts were part of the data collection ceased to exist when the analysis of the information collected was carried out: that is the case of@la__peste__roja and@vamana_tattoo. This has been one of the limitations of the research, as it was impossible to delve deeper into the characteristics of some popular accounts because they had been removed from Instagram.

Despite the broad period selected, this research is another limitation of analysing a single social network. In this sense, it would be convenient to carry out a multiplatform study where hashtag use in other platforms, such as Twitter and TikTok, could be observed. In this way, it would be possible to check whether the most active actors and the most popular content are also present on these channels. Moreover, the use of other digital method tools – and not only the free version we used in this research – could contribute to analysing a greater number of posts without the limitations we had to resolve during the investigation process. This investigation has thus far underscored the significance of hashtags in fostering cohesion among a diverse community spanning various locations and languages yet sharing a common ideology. Therefore, the study shows one way in which the manosphere can be mainstreamed, which is an issue of concern. The contents exhibit many perspectives and garner varying levels of participation, yet they effortlessly coalesce within an intricate web facilitated by terms that resonate deeply within the counter-feminism discourse.

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What Motivates University Students to Counter Fake News?

Examining Situational Perceptions, Referent Criterion, and New Media Literacy

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Fake news identification has been widely studied in the past, but research on motivating individuals, particularly university students, to fact-check news and disseminate corrective information to counter fake news is lacking. Grounded on the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS), this study aims to examine the situational perceptions and referent criterion that motivate university students to counter fake news through communicative action and examine the influence of new media literacy on the situational perceptions and referent criterion. Based on 528 responses from an online survey, new media literacy is related to all STOPS factors in countering fake news. Situational perceptions are significantly related to situational motivation in countering fake news, while situational motivation and referent criterion significantly influence communicative action. The findings extend the existing literature on countering fake news and are expected to contribute to strategic planning in future anti-fake news intervention campaigns.

Keywords: fake news, new media literacy, situational perceptions, referent criterion, situational theory of problem solving (STOPS)

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Introduction

Efforts to combat fake news are essential. Among the approaches initiated by governments in different countries are law enforcement, fact-checking mechanisms, Internet shutdowns, media literacy initiatives, and government task forces (Funke & Flamini, 2021; Haciyakupoglu et al., 2018). Nonetheless, fake news is still prevalent, and the issue has not been adequately resolved, especially in Malaysia. For instance, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) saw a drastic increase in the number of complaints about fake news in 2016 (Zainal, 2017). Even with the introduction of the sebenarnya.my information verification portal (Shahar, 2017), the challenge of combating fake news remains if people do not spread the truth to others or correct misinformation shared by others after verification. Chin and Zanuddin (2022) found that 61% of Malaysians believe fake news seen on Facebook and 14% do not; but fewer than 20% of those who do not believe in fake news actually determine for themselves that the news is fake. MCMC also discovered that Malaysians disseminate news that had already been identified as fake when that fact made known to the public via the fact-checking portal (Hassan, 2017). This could possibly result in a situation in which Vosoughi et al. (2018) describe the spread of fake news outpacing that of true news.

University students could be an important segment of the public in countering fake news. However, social media serves as a breeding ground for fake news, causing concerns among experts regarding its impact on university students, who are frequent users of such platforms and often exposed to information from unreliable sources such as fake news (Chin, 2022). Despite the ability of university students to accurately distinguish between factual news and fake news (Khairunissa, 2020), and their efforts to verify news stories on social media by checking with mainstream media (Chandra et al., 2017), previous studies have revealed challenges in their information evaluation skills, particularly in the context of social media. Wineburg et al. (2016) found that students can be easily misled, with over half of them believing partisan site content to be more credible than it is. Leeder (2019) argued that the willingness to share news stories is not related to the accurate identification and evaluation of news credibility. Chen et al. (2015) discovered that over 60% of university students had shared misinformation. This is possibly due to overconfidence in their ability to evaluate information credibility (Wang, 2007). Despite being highly educated and expected to counter fake news by correcting fake news shared by others, previous literature raises concerns about the role of university students in countering fake news.

Fake news identification via cues has been studied in the past (Hinsley & Holton, 2021), but countering fake news does not stop at simply recognising it; it also involves effort from the public to seek information from reliable sources for news verification and to communicate with others about fake news correction. This has drawn attention to information acquisition, transmission, and selection, collectively known as *communicative action,* among the public. Past studies show that communicative actions such as information seeking and forwarding can be part of problem-solving efforts in different contexts, such as gun violence (Hipple et al., 2017) and health communication (Chon & Park, 2021). However, there is limited research on the issue of fake news, particularly the factors that drive the public to counter it through communicative action. The current study, therefore, applies the *situational theory of problem solving* (STOPS) because the theory suggests situational perceptions and referent criterion that motivate communicative action in problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Media literacy has also been studied in association with fake news. Among the topics studied are the relationship between media literacy and the intention to share fake news (González-Cabrera et al., 2019), how media literacy curbs fake news (Simmons, 2018), and the association between new media literacy and fake news detection (Veeriah, 2021). Since media literacy – especially *new media literacy* in which individuals not only understand but also consume and create media content critically – is an essential skill that people should have in this digital age (Chen et al., 2011; Raj, 2019), it is worth uncovering the association between new media literacy and the factors in countering fake news. With that said, the current study aims (a) to examine the situational perceptions and referent criterion that motivate university students in countering fake news through communicative action and (b) to examine the influence of new media literacy on the situational perceptions and referent criterion.

Literature review

Fake news

According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), fake news can be interpreted as deliberately and verifiably false news articles that can deceive audiences. Tandoc et al. (2018) agree that fake news involves intentional deception. They identify different operationalisation types for fake news, including news satire and news parody, but each differs in terms of the factuality of fake news and the intention of fake news creators to mislead audiences. Finneman and Thomas (2018) add that fake news is different from *media hoaxes,* which are created by professional media actors such as journalists and entertainers, the falsehood of hoaxes will eventually be disclosed as the ultimate motive is to entertain or educate. The researchers further explain that fake news creators are non-media actors who design sensational, but apparently real, communication in order to mislead the public without having had the intention of either revealing their identity or the falsehood. The manipulation can be achieved by distorting the true facts of an issue in favour of a particular party or by providing inaccurate facts that subsequently influence readers' opinions or views on the given topics (Gu et al., 2017).

Unlike the previous definitions that claim fake news is an intentional falsehood, Al-Zaman (2021) attempts to understand the terms *fake* and *news* separately before defining them together. The researcher interprets *fake* as *pseudo* or *camouflaged,* which means emerging as authentic or original but could be either true or false, and *news* is perceived as any information that consists of a narrative body with a context, with considerable value among the public. Hence, he defines fake news as information that intentionally or unintentionally misleads people; this includes *disinformation, misinformation,* and *rumour.* Disinformation is purposely false, while misinformation is inadvertently incorrect (Jack, 2017). Rumour is mostly defined as information that has not been verified and could be true or false (Difonzo & Bordia, 2007). Likewise, Wardle and Derakhshan (2018), as well as Buschman (2019), also argue that fake news can be spread without realising its falsehood; the debate on fake news often conflates misinformation and disinformation. On the other hand, Zhang and Ghorbani (2020) propose a definition of fake news as “all kinds of false stories or news that are mainly published and distributed on the Internet, in order to purposely mislead, befool or lure readers for financial, political or other gains” (p. 4). After reviewing the past literature, *fake news* in this study includes any incorrect information or distorted fact that is created and spread with or without the intention to mislead.

Situational theory of problem solving (STOPS)

STOPS, a theory extended from Grunig’s (1997) situational theory of publics (STP), is used to understand why and how the public is motivated to solve a problematic situation using communicative action (Kim & Grunig, 2011). STOPS has been applied by many researchers in a variety of situations, such as organ donation issues (Kim et al., 2011), health issues (Krishna, 2018), organisational crises (Lee, 2020), and disasters (Liu et al., 2019).

STOPS suggests three perceptual factors or situational perceptions that contribute to situational motivation in problem solving: *problem recognition, constraint recognition,* and *involvement recognition* (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Problem recognition refers to the perception of the gap between what is expected and experienced; the wider the gap, the more problematic the situation is perceived to be; however, there is no instant solution to narrow the perceived gap (Kim & Grunig, 2011). The higher the problem recognition, the more likely people are to take communicative action in problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011). In the context of this study, problem recognition can be understood as when people perceive fake news to be detrimental to the harmony of society and country, express their concern about the problems caused by fake news, and think that actions, especially from the authorities, must be taken to overcome them. Those who show greater concern over fake news problems are more determined to communicate with others about fake news, fact-check dubious news, and share the truth with others.

Constraint recognition refers to the perceived barriers that restrict individuals from doing something about a given problem (Grunig, 1997). Individuals are less likely to communicate about a problem when they perceive that there is nothing they can do about it (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In this study, constraint recognition can be interpreted as when people think that they are unable to change or improve the problematic situation of fake news. Although they do sometimes have ideas and opinions (e.g. suggested ways to stop others from sharing fake news) to improve a given problematic situation, they perceive that there is an obstacle that hinders them from taking action to resolve the fake news issue. The more obstacles the public recognises, the less motivated they are to resolve a problem (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Hence, individuals are less likely to communicate with others about fake news problems when they realise the difficulty of doing something about it.

Involvement recognition refers to the perceived association between individuals and a problem (Grunig, 1997). When individuals have high involvement recognition, they have high problem recognition and low constraint recognition (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In the context of this study, involvement recognition is triggered when individuals perceive that fake news affects themselves and their loved ones. STOPS suggests that people who think that they are highly involved in a problem are more motivated to take communicative action in problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011). With that said, individuals who perceive that they are affected by fake news will have a greater motivation to communicate about the problem.

Other than perceptual factors, the theory proposes the referent criterion as a cognitive factor that influences communicative action in problem solving. It is interpreted as a solution used in past situations being applied in the current problematic situation (Grunig, 1997) and "any knowledge or subjective judgmental system that influences the way in which one approaches problem solving" (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 131). When a problem is identified, people will first go for an internal and cognitive search for information based on past experience, which is known as *knowledge activation;* otherwise, they will look for external sources for a solution, also known as *knowledge action* (Kim & Grunig, 2011). When people have more referent criterion, they are more likely to take communicative action in problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011). In this study, referent criterion can be understood as follows: when people are confident in their opinion about fake news, have prior knowledge to deal with fake news, and have a clear stance on how fake news should be addressed based on what they have learned from past experience, they are more likely to counter fake news by seeking information to verify news and share the truth about fake news with others.

Situational motivation in problem solving is defined as "a state of situation-specific cognitive and epistemic readiness to make problem-solving efforts–that is, to decrease the perceived discrepancy between the expected and experiential states" (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 132). This motivational concept helps the public identify something to be done instead of thinking about what to do (Kim & Grunig, 2011). When the public is highly motivated to solve problems, they are curious about the problem and want to develop a deeper understanding of it (Kim & Grunig, 2011). This motivation variable is usually measured by how frequently people invest cognitive effort into a problem, how interested they are in solving a problem, and how willing they are to learn more about a problem. In the context of fake news, situational motivation is shown when people have curiosity about fake news and would like to have a better understanding of the veracity of the news. When they are motivated to contribute to countering fake news, they often think about the problem and show determination in problem solving.

Communicative action in problem solving explains that when people perceive a situation to be problematic, they tend to solve the problem using communicative behaviour, this includes information acquisition (information seeking and attending), transmission (information forwarding and sharing), and selection (information forefending and permitting) (Kim & Grunig, 2011). STOPS proposes that all situational perceptions influence situational motivation in problem solving, and the motivation affects communicative action, whereas referent criterion is directly related to communicative action. Below are the hypotheses developed in the fake news context:

> **H1:** Problem recognition has a positive relationship with situational motivation in countering fake news among university students.
> **H2:** Constraint recognition has a negative relationship with situational motivation in countering fake news among university students.
> **H3:** Involvement recognition has a positive relationship with situational motivation in countering fake news among university students.
> **H4:** Referent criterion has a positive relationship with communicative action in countering fake news among university students.
> **H5:** Situational motivation in problem solving has a positive relationship with communicative action in countering fake news among university students.

New media literacy

In general, *media literacy* refers to the "ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes" (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 6). Buckingham et al. (2005) define the term as the capability to access, comprehend, and produce communications in different contexts. These competencies enhance critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Varis, 2010). Media literacy is not an independent or isolated skill; it also entails other forms of literacy such as reading and writing skills, audiovisual literacy, digital literacy, and information literacy (Varis, 2010). Literat (2014) asserts that media literacy is applicable regardless of whether it is in new or traditional media.

The media landscape alters when new media technology emerges. New media refers to "all technology-based socio-cultural platforms in which any messages are digitally coded and distributed by any users" (Koc & Barut, 2016, p. 835). Lister et al. (2009) describe that digital interactivity, virtuality, and networkability are the features of new media. Hence, the competencies that a media-literate individual should master are redefined; they should be equipped with the skills to analyse messages and produce contents in various forms, such as texts, visuals, videos and audios and, critically, in multi-dimensional and multi-directional information and communication channels (Eristi & Erdem, 2017).

Web 2.0 tools such as social networking sites and photo sharing sites enable and encourage the creation of user-generated content and promote participation in this new media environment (Oberhelman, 2007; Selwyn, 2007). Unfortunately, new media not only appears as a convenient platform for users to obtain updated information, but also becomes one of the main sources of fake news (Rohman et al., 2018). Thus, individuals require new media literacy to navigate the new media environment. Chen et al. (2011) reveal four dimensions of new media literacy: *functional consumption* (FC), *critical consumption* (CC), *functional prosumption* (FP), and *critical prosumption* (CP). FC refers to the competency in the use of the new media and understanding of the media content, whereas CC looks at the ability to analyse, synthesise, and evaluate media content. FP is another dimension that considers the ability to produce and disseminate media content, while CP focuses on the ability to create media content and to participate critically in a new media environment. The notion of *new media literacy* proposed by Chen et al. (2011) is adopted in the current study.

Media literacy has been associated with efforts to combat fake news. Past studies explain that high media literacy enables people to discern fake news (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Simmons, 2018). McDougall (2019) suggests adopting media literacy in education to prepare the younger generation to cope with fake news. Media literacy is also found to influence one's perceptions, such as the perception of biased reporting in media (Vraga et al., 2009) and the perception of media credibility (Vraga et al., 2012). Varis (2010) adds that media literacy can enhance critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities. Past studies support the relationship between media literacy and fake news identification. However, the connection between new media literacy and the perception of fake news as a problem remains unclear, which leads to the following research question:

> **RQ1(a):** What is the relationship between new media literacy and problem recognition in the context of countering fake news among university students?

Self-efficacy, a concept close to constraint recognition (Kim & Grunig, 2011), is an evaluation reflecting the belief of oneself in performing something with the skills they have (Bandura, 1977). It is also defined as people's perception of their ability to distinguish fake news through verification and to avoid spreading disinformation (Chen & Cheng, 2020). There are limited studies associating constraint recognition with new media literacy, but literature on self-efficacy and media literacy was found. For instance, Hofstetter et al. (2001) suggest that media literacy can enhance self-efficacy among media consumers. Prior et al. (2016) found that digital literacy boosts self-efficacy to carry out and assess digital actions in resolving problems in daily tasks. Past studies have also found that self-efficacy is positively related to problem solving (Kohen et al., 2019; Parto, 2011). Hence, the following research question was formulated:

> **RQ1(b):** What is the relationship between new media literacy and constraint recognition in the context of countering fake news among university students?

Consuming media content can induce and shape one's perception of risk or possible harm (Früh, 2017). In the context of fake news, individuals perceive that fake news exerts negative impacts on society including themselves (Lee, 2021), reflecting their recognition of their involvement in the fake news problem. Risk perception does not always imply the actual risk of encountering fake news, but educated people, particularly those with media literacy skills, are more concerned about false information and feel vulnerable to the risk of being fake news victims (Knuutila et al., 2022). When people believe or perceive that media messages could influence both themselves and others (Baek et al., 2019), they tend to develop a shared interest in and potentially support censorship (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002) and fake news regulation (Baek et al., 2019). The support for the connection between new media literacy and involvement recognition in fake news contexts is still scarce in existing literature, which prompts the formulation of the following research question:

> **RQ1(c):** What is the relationship between new media literacy and involvement recognition in the context of countering fake news among university students?

Maksl et al. (2015) assert that media-literate teens are more knowledgeable about current events. Kean et al. (2012) claim that people who have a high level of media literacy do not easily accept or believe in the media content they see; instead, they compare the content they meet with their existing knowledge to form an opinion on the accuracy and relevancy of that content. Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) add that people rely on experience and knowledge accumulated to determine the truthfulness of news. The following research question is developed to understand the connection between new media literacy and the use of past experiences and knowledge in the fake news context.

> **RQ1(d):** What is the relationship between new media literacy and referent criterion in the context of countering fake news among university students?

Methodology

Sampling

This study adopted an online survey by distributing questionnaires in Google Forms to target respondents. The sample size was determined using G*Power analysis, as it is recommended for research that employs structural equation modelling for analysis (Hair et al., 2017). To obtain a medium effect size, i.e. 0.15 and a power of 0.95, at least 119 samples are required for three predictors. According to Comrey and Lee (1992), multivariate studies require large samples, and they suggest that 500 samples are very good. With all the considerations on the sample size, this study aimed for a minimum of 500 responses to achieve a sample size deemed very good, as recommended, while also meeting the minimum sample size suggested by G*Power analysis.

University students can be an important part of the public who evaluate the credibility of information and contribute to countering fake news (Seo et al., 2021). Nonetheless, past studies have found that they also share false information with others (Chen et al., 2015). This study targeted university students to test the relationships in the theoretical model. Three public universities located in the Klang Valley area, the urban conglomeration in Malaysia where most of the public universities are situated (StudyMalaysia.com, 2020), were randomly selected, namely the University of Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, and The National University of Malaysia. Volunteer sampling was employed in which all students in the selected universities received an email containing a link to the online questionnaire in Google Forms and were invited to participate in the survey. The participation was voluntary; the entire data collection process took approximately six months from July 2020 to December 2020 until the desired number of samples was reached. A total of 528 usable questionnaires were collected for analysis.

Measurement

The survey had five sections. The first section was demographic information, including gender, age, ethnic group, and program studied. Age was measured with an open-ended question, while others were measured using a closed-ended question.

The second section was about new media literacy. The 35 items from Koc and Barut (2016) were chosen and adapted because they measure the four dimensions of new media literacy, aligning with the focus of the current study. Firstly, items that measure Functional Consumption included "I know how to use search tools to get information needed in the media" and "It is easy for me to use various media to access information". Secondly, Critical Consumption was measured using items such as "I can compare news and information across different media" and "It is easy for me to determine the accuracy of media messages". Thirdly, the Functional Prosumption section comprised items such as "I can give comments on media content shared by others" and "I am good at sharing digital content and messages on the Internet". Lastly, items like "I manage to influence others' opinions through social media" and "I can produce media content containing my own reviews on current matters from different perspectives (e.g. social, economic, ideological, etc.)" were to measure Critical Prosumption.

The third section was situational perceptions and referent criterion. The authors employed five items for each factor: problem recognition (e.g. "The government should take action to combat fake news"), constraint recognition (e.g. reverse-coded item, "I can make a difference in the problematic situation of fake news"), involvement recognition (e.g. "I can see how fake news affects me"), and referent criterion (e.g. "Past experience has provided me with guidelines for dealing with fake news"). All items were adapted from the original STOPS scale (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

The fourth section measured situational motivation in countering fake news. Similarly to the previous section, this was measured using five items adapted from Kim and Grunig (2011). One of the items was "I am willing to expend any amount of effort to stop others from spreading fake news". A 5-point Likert scale where "1 = strongly disagree" and "5 = strongly agree" was utilised from the second to the fourth section.

The last section measured communicative action in countering fake news. A total of 30 items adapted from Kim and Grunig (2011) were used. All three domains of communicative action, such as information acquisition, transmission, and selection, were covered in this section. Respondents were required to rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "7 = strongly agree". Examples of items included "I search for information about fake news from any source that is available to me", "I share the truth about fake news with others", and "I know where to go when I need updated information regarding fake news".

The bilingual questionnaire (English and Malay) was given to experts in the communication field for validation. After that, it was sent to a Malay language expert to be proofread, and revisions were made to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

According to Table 1, of the total of 528 university students, females (73.9%) were more willing to take part in the survey than their counterparts. People aged 18 to 25 (65.5%) predominated the respondents in this survey, and Malay (69.7%) appeared to be the most common ethnic group compared to the others. Lastly, undergraduate respondents (55.9%) outnumbered postgraduates.

Table 1:
Demographic information of respondents

Demographic information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	138	26.1
Female	390	73.9
Age		
18 to 25	346	65.5
26 to 30	80	15.2
31 to 35	51	9.7
36 to 40	19	3.6
41 to 45	20	3.8
46 and above	12	2.3
Ethnic Group		
Malay	368	69.7
Chinese	99	18.8
Indian	26	4.9
Sabah and Sarawak Natives	13	2.5
Other	22	4.2
Program		
Undergraduate	295	55.9
Postgraduate	233	44.1

Source: Authors' original research findings.

Model estimation

This study adopted SmartPLS to analyse the data using structural equation modelling (SEM). There were two model analyses conducted, i.e. measurement model assessment and structural model assessment (Hair et al., 2017). Measurement model assessment analyses the internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the items, whereas structural model assessment examines the relationships between the constructs and the model's predictive capabilities (Hair et al., 2017).

Measurement model assessment

Reflective measurement model

This section reports the indicator loading, average variance extracted (AVE), Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR). Indicators with a loading of 0.708 or above were accepted (Hair et al., 2019). Most of the indicator loadings were above the threshold value except for five indicators: two in problem recognition (0.678 and 0.693), one in constraint recognition (0.661), referent criterion (0.652), and situational motivation (0.663). However, indicators with loadings below 0.708 can still be retained as long as AVE achieves 0.5 (Ramayah et al., 2018). As shown in Table 2, all AVEs were above the threshold value. In addition, Cronbach's Alpha and CR for all constructs also achieved the minimum threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2:
Reflective measurement model

	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Problem Recognition (PR)	0.800	0.861	0.555
Constraint Recognition (CR)	0.842	0.889	0.616
Involvement Recognition (IR)	0.865	0.902	0.648
Referent Criterion (RC)	0.799	0.861	0.555
Situational Motivation (MO)	0.816	0.871	0.576
Communicative Action (CA)	0.853	0.891	0.580

Source: Authors' original research findings.

Discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed through Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. Table 3 shows the output of the Fornell–Larcker criterion in which the square root of AVE on the diagonal is higher than the correlation on the off-diagonal for all reflective constructs, indicating sufficient discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As for HTMT, all values shown in Table 4 were less than 0.85 (Kline, 2015) and 0.90 (Gold et al., 2001), indicating that discriminant validity is established.

Table 3:
Discriminant validity using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion

	CA	CR	IR	MO	PR	RC
CA	**0.762**					
CR	−0.450	**0.785**				
IR	0.424	−0.288	**0.805**			
MO	0.635	−0.437	0.398	**0.759**		
PR	0.251	−0.252	0.244	0.355	**0.745**	
RC	0.500	−0.541	0.309	0.457	0.415	**0.745**

Source: Authors' original research findings.

Table 4:
Discriminant validity using heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations

	CA	CR	IR	MO	PR	RC
CA						
CR	0.528					
IR	0.486	0.330				
MO	0.753	0.504	0.469			
PR	0.289	0.298	0.285	0.417		
RC	0.596	0.647	0.361	0.555	0.532	

Source: Authors' original research findings.

Formative measurement model

Multidimensional new media literacy can be treated as a single construct when examining its overall effect (Yildiz Durak & Saritepeci, 2019). This study aims to examine the influence of new media literacy as a whole, rather than its individual dimensions, on situational perceptions and referent criterion. Thus, new media literacy is a formative second-order construct containing four dimensions: functional consumption (FC), critical consumption (CC), functional prosumption (FP), and critical prosumption (CP). In a two-stage approach, the four dimensions became the indicators of new media literacy. Formative construct was assessed using the indicators' weights and variance inflation factor (VIF). As shown in Table 5, the weights of all formative indicators ranged from 0.218 to 0.473 and were statistically significant at t-value greater than 1.96, and all VIF values showed acceptable values, i.e. below 3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006), indicating that there was no multicollinearity problem among the indicators.

Table 5:
Measurement properties for formative construct

Construct	Indicators	Weights	VIF	t-value weights	Sig
New Media Literacy	FC	0.221	2.258	2.462	0.007
	CC	0.473	2.269	5.195	0.000
	FP	0.218	1.822	2.645	0.004
	CP	0.302	1.596	3.280	0.001

Note: 5000 bootstrapping procedure used.

Source: Authors' original research findings.

Structural model assessment

Structural model involves examining the collinearity issues, path coefficient (β), coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) (Hair et al., 2017). The study chose a 5000 resample bootstrapping procedure with a one-tailed test option to test the hypotheses and find answers to the research questions. The results were illustrated in Figure 1 and reported in Tables 6 and 7.

First, no collinearity issue was detected, as all VIF values were less than 3.3. Second, problem recognition (β = 0.215, t = 6.036, $p < 0.001$) and involvement recognition (β = 0.256, t = 5.382, $p < 0.001$) were positively related to situational motivation in problem solving, whereas constraint recognition (β = −0.309, t = 6.625, $p < 0.001$) was negatively related to situational motivation, indicating that H1 to H3 were supported. The analysis also yielded significant results for positive relationships between referent criterion (β = 0.265, t = 6.375, $p < 0.001$) and situational motivation (β = 0.514, t = 13.616, $p < 0.001$) with communicative action, supporting H4 and H5.

Third, evaluate the predictive accuracy of the model using R^2. Table 6 shows that both R^2 scores had substantial explanatory power as the scores are above 0.26 (Cohen, 1988), exhibiting that problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement explained 31.3% of variance in situational motivation, while referent criterion and situational motivation explained 45.9% of variance in communicative action. Despite the significant relationships, the fourth step examining f^2 showed that only situational motivation reported a substantial effect size on communicative action, while others reported a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). Lastly, Q^2 assessment is to measure the model's predictive power or predictive relevance. Both Q^2 scores obtained (0.174 and 0.260) were above 0, indicating predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2017).

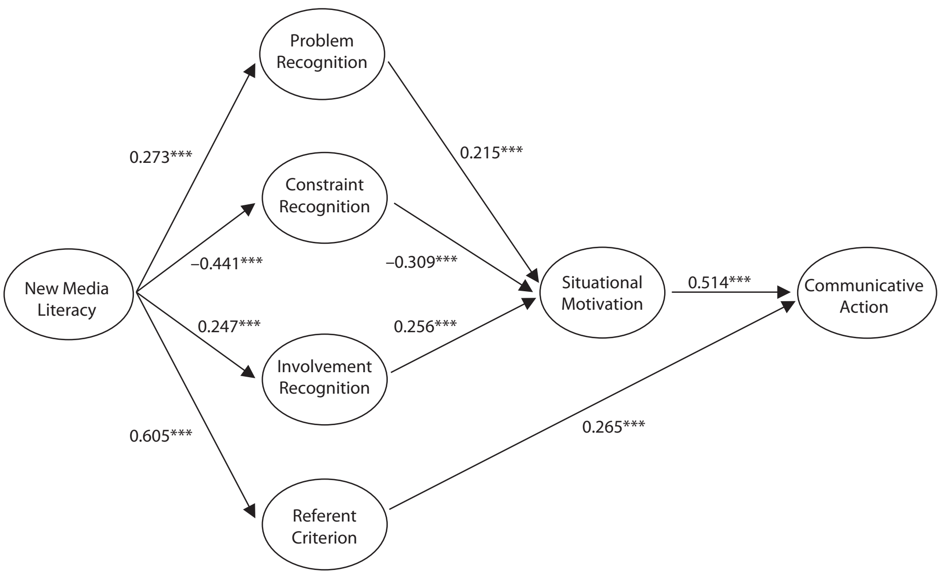

Figure 1:
Results of the proposed model
Source: Authors' original research findings.

Table 6:
The structural model's outcome for hypotheses

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t	f^2	VIF	Result
H1	Problem Recognition → Situational Motivation	0.215***	6.036	0.061	1.106	Supported
H2	Constraint Recognition → Situational Motivation	−0.309***	6.625	0.123	1.134	Supported
H3	Involvement Recognition → Situational Motivation	0.256***	5.382	0.085	1.129	Supported
		R^2 = 0.313, Q^2 = 0.174				
H4	Referent Criterion → Communicative Action	0.265***	6.375	0.103	1.265	Supported
H5	Situational Motivation → Communicative Action	0.514***	13.616	0.385	1.265	Supported
		R^2 = 0.459, Q^2 = 0.260				

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' original research findings.

As for RQ1(a) to RQ1(d), the path analysis shown in Table 7 without collinearity issue reported that new media literacy was significantly and positively related to problem recognition (β = 0.273, t = 10.387, $p < 0.001$), involvement recognition (β = 0.247, t = 5.608, $p < 0.001$), and referent criterion (β = 0.605, t = 21.021, $p < 0.001$), while negatively related to constraint recognition (β = −0.441, t = 5.573, $p < 0.001$). New media literacy explained the variance in all the situational perceptions and referent criterion to different extents: weak (problem recognition and involvement recognition), moderate (constraint recognition), and substantial (referent criterion). Likewise, effect size was small for problem recognition and involvement recognition, medium for constraint recognition, and substantial for referent criterion. Finally, new media literacy has been reported to have good predictive relevance for all situational perceptions and referent criterion.

Table 7:
The outcome of the structural model for the research questions

RQ	Relationship	β	t	R^2	Q^2	f^2	VIF
1(a)	New media literacy → Problem Recognition	0.273***	10.387	0.075	0.038	0.081	1.000
1(b)	New media literacy → Constraint Recognition	−0.441***	5.573	0.195	0.117	0.242	1.000
1(c)	New media literacy → Involvement Recognition	0.247***	5.608	0.061	0.037	0.065	1.000
1(d)	New media literacy → Referent Criterion	0.605***	21.021	0.366	0.198	0.578	1.000

Source: Authors' original research findings.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to examine the situational perceptions and referent criterion that motivate university students to counter fake news and to examine the influence of new media literacy on the situational perceptions and referent criterion. A model based on STOPS with the inclusion of new media literacy was formed to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions.

In line with the assumptions of STOPS, all three situational perceptions were significantly related to situational motivation in countering fake news. Problem recognition and involvement recognition were positively related to situational motivation, whereas constraint recognition was negatively related to situational motivation, consistent with the findings of past studies (Jiang et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019). Motivation in countering fake news is triggered when university students are worried about the impacts of fake news on society. It would be more effective if they were to relate the problem of fake news to themselves or their loved ones. However, the findings showed that constraint recognition is the best predictor of situational motivation in countering fake news because students who are defeated by their perceived obstacles in dealing with a problem will then have a low or no tendency to contribute to problem-solving efforts. Hence, being empowered in problem solving is crucial in tackling fake news. When students can reduce their perceived barriers, they are more likely to expend effort in stopping others from spreading fake news.

Situational motivation was positively related to communicative action in countering fake news. Motivated problem solvers tend to engage in information behaviors such as searching for information to fact-check dubious news to reduce their uncertainty about the truthfulness of the news. Besides, they stop people from circulating fake news by sharing the truth of the news with others. This is supported by past studies (Chon & Park, 2021; Krishna, 2018; Shin & Han, 2016). Similarly, referent criterion was found to be positively related to communicative action. This is consistent with the studies by Ouyang et al. (2020) and Chen et al. (2017), who demonstrated that people with prior knowledge or experiences related to an issue tend to forward and share information with others.

As for the research questions of this study, new media literacy was significantly related to problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, and referent criterion. The result showed that new media literacy appeared to be the greatest predictor of referent criterion. A possible explanation for this is that new media literacy involves critical thinking, which can be a way to activate an individual's existing knowledge through reflective thinking (Aloqaili, 2012; Norris & Phillips, 1987). In the current context, when university students are capable of understanding and evaluating media content, they can refer to and compare it with their prior knowledge and experience if they come across dubious news. On the other hand, new media literacy had a negative relationship with constraint recognition, suggesting that students with high new media literacy are more likely to have low constraint recognition. Consistent with Prior et al. (2016), who discovered the positive relationship between digital literacy and self-efficacy, the findings of the current study could be explained that media-literate students can always access media for information and solution, they believe in their capability in dealing with fake news; hence, the perceived barriers that hinder them from overcoming fake news are reduced or minimized.

This study discovered that new media literacy was positively related to both problem recognition and involvement recognition, suggesting that students with new media literacy can detect fake news as a problem and believe that fake news can affect themselves and those they care about. Critical thinking in new media literacy enables individuals to comprehend information thoroughly. Likewise, students with this competency tend to identify fake news as a problem because they recognize the possible impacts of fake news on society. This is supported by Garrison et al. (2001), who explain that problem identification is part of the critical thinking process. Without the capability to understand fake news from different perspectives, individuals might not be able to relate to a problem themselves. Since critical thinking plays a key role in new media literacy, people do not stop at a general understanding of an issue but analyze the extent to which the problem could affect them.

This study adds to the present knowledge by offering a number of contributions. In terms of theoretical implications, the current study contributes to STOPS by testing its theoretical power and applicability to fake news issues in Malaysia. The inclusion of new media literacy in the STOPS theoretical framework as an antecedent to situational perceptions and referent criterion in problem solving brings novelty and an important contribution to the theory advancement. Additionally, the findings also add new knowledge to the existing literature on fake news studies, particularly on fake news identification.

As for practical implications, this study sheds valuable insights on developing strategic communicative interventions or campaigns to combat fake news. The government, especially the MCMC, and higher institutions, can adopt the current research findings in planning a strategic anti-fake news campaign, particularly in campaign message formulation. Instead of urging students not to believe and share fake news, the government and higher institutions can consider highlighting the prevalence of fake news and its possible consequences for the public (increase problem recognition) and relating the problem to students' loved ones (increase involvement recognition). If students rarely fact-check and correct fake news, the government should review the user friendliness of the fact-checking portal, simplify the fact-checking steps, and always convey the message to the public, especially students, that fact-checking and fake news correction are simple moves that everyone can contribute to countering fake news (reduce constraint recognition). This study suggests the government should constantly update the fact-checking portal since it has become an essential information verification source for the public, especially those who have referred to it before. They will refer to the portal again if they find it useful and informative (referent criterion). The importance of new media literacy has been proven, and this implies that initiatives to improve the public's new media literacy need to be planned so that their situational perceptions and referent criterion for countering fake news can be triggered.

There are some limitations in this study. First, the relationships between variables in the theoretical framework can be influenced or moderated by other possible factors, which are not included in the current study. Rampersad and Althiyabi (2020) found that culture has an impact on the dissemination of fake news in Saudi Arabia. Malaysia is a multiethnic and multicultural country. In future studies, the moderation effect of culture on the relationships between STOPS variables in a fake news context is worth examining. Second, the different dimensions of new media literacy are not further studied in the current research. Future studies can examine the relationships between each dimension and communicative action in countering fake news to determine the dimension that best predicts communicative action. Finally, the sample in this study is limited to university students. A non-student sample can be considered in future research to examine if the proposed theoretical framework applies to the general population.

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"Social Workers Should Be Required to Watch this Episode"

Social Media Perceptions of Television Portrayals of Fictional CPS Workers

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Child Protective Services (CPS) workers appear in television plotlines across every fiction genre, and these depictions are often quite unfavourable. Customer engagement behaviours (CEBs), or what viewers say in online forums or on social media influence how other viewers perceive CPS workers. This interconnectivity is examined here through the framework of CEBs and Social TV using case studies from four popular programs: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*, *Shameless*, *Law and Order: SVU (SVU)*, *and The Sandman*. These case studies were compared for accuracy against observations given by a former Child Protective Investigator, whose feedback indicated that the realistic programs (SVU and Shameless), while being overly dramatised, had more authentic and balanced CPS portrayals than the fantasy programs (*BtVS* and *The Sandman*). Common themes from the audience in the CEBs are: CPS workers are overworked, underpaid, and too bureaucratic; greed motivates some families to foster or adopt children; and that the system of protective services is broken.

Keywords: CPS worker, social media, television, social TV, CEBs, TV portrayals

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Introduction

The primary role of CPS workers in the USA is often seen as taking or removing children. Some parents believe that CPS workers are “bad because they snatch the kids” (Survey interviews as cited in Hicks, 2016, p. 22). Apart from the UK series *Disarmed* (2016) and the US cartoon *Ugly Americans* (2010–2012), there are not many recent fictional series in the USA that deliver positive associations of CPS workers; in contrast to police officers (*The Rookie* 2018 – present), teachers (*Abbot Elementary* 2021 – present), and first responders (*9-1-1* 2018 – present). Due to the absence of positive or even realistic on-screen representation, the perception of CPS workers in social media spaces may reflect poorly. Describing it as *Social TV,* Teurlings (2018) notes how the convergence of social media and television has evolved in such a way that amateur critiques of television are increasingly common, and are sometimes taken seriously by other fans and TV creatives. Viswanathan et al. (2018) explain how such *customer engagement behaviours* (CEBs), or what viewers choose to say in public online forums, may influence how other viewers see and perceive the brand, in this case, a TV series. When viewers see a negative (or inaccurate) portrayal of a CPS worker on TV, they may then criticise the CPS profession based on that limited portrayal. Their posts may impact other users’ perception of CPS workers, possibly leading to a cyclical situation in which CPS characters are typecast. Thus, the interconnectivity between fictional TV portrayals and social media is of interest to the researchers of this article, through the theoretical framework of CEBs and Social TV. To further assess the perception of TV CPS workers in the context of social media posts, this paper will review case studies from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS), Shameless*, *Law & Order: SVU (SVU),* and *The Sandman.* To assess the accuracy of the portrayal, each case study will conclude with brief observations of the CPS television portrayal from a former Child Protective Investigator (CPI).

Literature review

This thematic literature review will examine CPS terminology, then explore the CPS worker media perceptions and theoretical basis for this work.

Social worker and CPS worker

Although the public may consider the terms *social worker, case worker* and *CPS worker* to be interchangeable, they are not. There are different types of social workers who may work in mental health facilities, non-profit organisations, and county or municipal organisations. In fact, “about one out of five of the 642,000 social workers in the United States in 2008 worked in the medical and public health field” (Wright, 2010), some of whom work variously with children, the elderly, women or other groups. It is not always true that social workers interact on behalf of child welfare (due to the varied nature of their profession), so this article will refer to Child Protective Services (CPS) workers in reference to perceptions and case studies throughout. CPS workers are designated to work directly with families with children. Schreiber et al. (2013) clarify the way in which CPS workers collaborate with caregivers to find the best solution for child welfare.

Cause of perceptions

Certain factors may determine the public perception of CPS workers. Frank Wang (2008) explains how being a social worker is to “be positioned at the margins” (p. 497). CPS workers are most often characterised as female, as *workers* (as opposed to *career professionals*), who lack education and are invasive (Olin, 2013; Tirado, 2006; Schreiber, 2013). It is perhaps for this reason certain US state or county CPS organisations prefer to designate their workers as Child Protective Investigators (CPI), side-stepping the connotations around *worker*. Another major factor behind public opinion is based on the CPS client group. CPS workers are not called into action because of *caretaker requests,* instead CPS workers receive tip-offs through a hotline network about a supposed lack of caregiving for children in particular households, which then triggers formal investigations. This leads to the idea that CPS workers deal with *bad* caregivers or *lowly* clients, producing a perception of *guilt-by-association* (Hicks, 2016; Tirado, 2006).

While attitudes towards CPS workers began to improve after 2004, many members of the public will still never encounter a CPS worker in their lifetime. For this reason, “the mass media became a major means of shaping the public’s impressions of social work” (Reid & Misener, 2001, p. 194). Thus, news and other media may influence audience impressions of CPS roles.

Social media campaigns from organisations

In an effort to cultivate the CPS image, national and local social media campaigns have taken place, such as the ongoing public education campaign launched by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in early 2005 (Zugazaga et al., 2006, p. 634). On the NASW website, a National Survey by Ipsos (2023) found that “80 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of Social Workers” and that “81 percent of those who have interacted with a social worker say a member of the profession improved their situation or that of a family member”. Much of the promotion from NASW, however, focuses on *social work* rather than *CPS workers.*

The Child Welfare Information Gateway (s. a.) provides resources pertinent to child safety, such as the guide *Using Social Media to Engage Families,* which offers national and local programs suggestions on the development of social media plans. In 2018, the statistics in this guide did not take TikTok or Reddit into account.

Social media perceptions

On TikTok, users engage with families using ideas similar to those suggested in *Using Social Media to Engage Families* (2018). Individual posts and accounts dubbed as *CPS workers* on TikTok gain millions of views. For instance, user Destrieo (2021), shares "Things I don't care about as a CPS SW," e.g. dirty dishes in the sink, or kids sharing a bedroom. As with X (formerly Twitter) and Reddit, TikTok posts about CPS workers being *inappropriate* or *creating false reports* do circulate. Still, TikTok may also provide space for CPS workers to showcase humour, perhaps humanising their profession. However, when sharing details on social media about clients, CPS workers should be aware of privacy concerns and not divulge too much, as was the case in 2017 when a CPI was fired after posting client details on Reddit (Varn, 2019).

Theoretical approach to research

The interplay between television and social media is of interest to this study, particularly as some viewers use both simultaneously. If Americans spend at least 2.9 hours a day and over half their leisure time consuming television, as Nancy Scanlan and Shannon Hanshaw (2022) conclude, viewers could establish connections between their realities and the stories told on television. Wohn and Na (2011) believe that, even as television or any kind of technology has been categorised as *alienating* or *isolating* in past studies, social media has created a way for users to create a new type of community when watching television (para. 14). The researchers collected more than 1,000 tweets during live airing of TV events, ultimately determining that many users did not respond to one another. Wohn and Na (2011) stated that "social media is recreating a pseudo 'group viewing' experience of television" (para. 60). These findings support the notion that social media in response to television creates a false sense of community.

Auverset and Billings (2016) described simultaneous tweeting and TV viewing as *Social TV,* in which social media platforms like X "enable viewers to participate in a shared, collective experience" (p. 3). Such interactive measures were taken by the producers of *The Walking Dead* (*TWD)* to engage the audience in new ways during the airing of each episode (Auverset & Billings, 2016). In contrast to parasocial relationships, the promotional moves for *TWD* could constitute *technoprosociality,* which Pasztor and Korn (2015) describe as "the integration of social media technology to maximize audience engagement and interpersonal relationship development between celebrities and fans" (p. 186). Viewers may wish to interpret scenes or express personal opinions, but to a more abstract audience. Some viewers seemed interested in "like-minded *The Walking Dead* fans who might also be engaged in Social TV during an episode premiere" (Auverset & Billings, 2016, p. 10). The technoprosociality of *TWD* viewers illustrates a new mode of TV and social media interaction.

With these modes, Teurlings (2018) writes about the new types of TV critics that have emerged through social media, especially concerning recaps. Before social media, Teurlings contends, TV critics were not as influential, with TV criticism most commonly occurring through word of mouth. Social media created a one-way interactive discourse because "this is a space in which media-based critics, the public and academic critics can engage equally" (Rixon, 2013, pp. 397–398). Critics can react in different ways: before or after an episode airs, following a recap, or with cultural critiques of themes and characters. Teurlings (2018) believes:

> "the user comments under these recaps offer scholars an insight into how viewers with a specific interest in TV (characterizing them as fans might be an overstatement) react to, reflect upon, and discuss TV" (p. 210).

Teurlings (2018) highlights Graeme Turner's use of the *demotic turn,* which positions media as a space for dynamic audience participation rather than its former status as passively consumed by its viewers. Mostly, Teurlings analyses the way in which the media has been democratised, creating a new space for amateur critics. By this, he explains, "contemporary television criticism is a form of shared knowledge that functions like language, that is, as a socially-produced commons" (Teurlings, 2018, p. 212). In building online language, customers are creating new ways to interpret content.

Viswanathan et al. (2018) conducted a study of the interrelationships between cable TV and X, using CEBs as a theoretical underpinning to determine how customer engagement via TV and social media may be connected. If the CEB is negative, it will most likely generate a negative reaction and vice versa. Viswanathan et al. (2018) shares how their "framework acknowledges that actors engaging in CEBs can, in turn, be co-creators of other customers' engagement" (p. 382). Things like word of mouth and trust are impacted by CEBs.

Research questions

RQ 1: How are TV CPS workers portrayed?
- **RQ** 1.1: In what ways were the portrayals negative, neutral, or positive?
- **RQ** 1.2: How did the CPS worker interact with other characters?
- **RQ** 1.2: How did the CPS worker treat children and families?

RQ 2: What types of media posts did viewers share about the portrayal of the TV CPS worker?
RQ 3: What connections can be drawn between the case studies and social media posts?
RQ 4: What does it mean that several popular TV portrayals are by women?

The first two questions will be answered through the review of each case study, while the last two will be answered in the discussion section of this article.

Research methods

To review interconnectivity of CPS worker perceptions, different forms of media were reviewed. The research focus includes a three-fold approach: 1. four case studies of CPS worker television depictions were analysed; 2. impressions of the portrayals were analysed by a former, professional social worker; and 3. audience feedback from web forums and social media sites were gathered and coded. The purpose of this research is to review inaccuracies in the TV depictions, while also identifying interconnectivity between the points of focus listed above.

The research is significant because the wider public may never encounter a CPS worker, and limited media *encounters* with the CPS may engender real-world consequences. In Norway, a study from Vis et al. (2022) found that when children or parents do not trust the CPS, they may defer much-needed services. Carmona (2011) examines how

> "the recruitment and retention of workers, as well as funding granted to the field of social work, have been shown to be directly influenced by the mass media and its portrayal of the social work profession" (p. 24).

The possibility of low morale among workers and low confidence from the public could also be problematic.

As previously discussed, media depictions of CPS workers may impact perceptions. These perceptions can change over time, and that is why the four case studies will be reviewed chronologically. Tirado (2006) cites "by the mid-1920s the media, in the form of advertising, radio, and the movies, formalized unflattering characterizations of social workers" (p. 5). In television shows, such as *Norm* (1999–2001), social workers can be mischaracterised as lazy or incompetent, leading to protests from some viewers (Tirado, 2006). Other shows, like *Judging Amy* (1995–2005), depict social workers as hardworking and compassionate. TV series like *Judging Amy* and *Norm* contain images that viewers may conflate with actual CPS workers and their duties.

The list in Table 1 was compiled by researching IMDb lists, Reddit threads, and discussion posts about social workers and TV. Then, the perception of the social worker was cross-referenced with critical articles and Reddit or X mentions about the character. This thematic assessment helped categorise each fictional CPS or Social Worker into three possible viewer perceptions: "Neutral", "Mostly Positive", and "Mostly Negative".

Most portrayals were identified on IMDb.com with the moniker "Social Worker", except for a few mentions of "Caseworker". Many of these TV social workers dealt with children's welfare directly, despite there being many types of social workers (as noted in the literature review). So, in the case of TV portrayals, the title *social worker* may correlate with the role of CPS worker; however, due to the public's lack of knowledge of the different roles and definitions of social workers, it may have been easier for TV creatives to label all types of social workers, caseworkers, and CPS workers simply as social workers. This type of labelling may be indicative of the fact that not all series that feature a social worker (or similar) consult with real social workers (Wright, 2010).

Table 1 displays a variety of perceptions of CPS worker portrayals on TV. From the medical drama, *ER* (1994–2009), several social workers made appearances over the years it aired, and many of those portrayals were positive or neutral. Other positive portrayals include characters like Maxine Gray of *Judging Amy* (1995–2005) and Linda from *This Is Us* (2016–2022). Some portrayals on the list did not necessarily interact directly with children but the character was considered by viewers to be likable, such as Ducasse from *Jessica Jones* (2015–2019). Overall, Table 1 displays: 6 Mostly Negative Portrayals, 7 Mostly Positive Portrayals, and 4 Neutral Portrayals.

In part due to discrepancies in perceptions of characters across several media formats, the case studies conclude with observations from Jason Anderson, a former CPI Supervisor. Anderson was a CPI in 2015, then a CPI Supervisor (2021–2023) for the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office. As a former professional earning CPS-related awards and teaching CPS training seminars, he is well-positioned to provide *expert judgement assessment* of the case studies. Almenara and Cejudo (2013) believe expert judgement assessment involves a group of experts relaying their opinion or evaluation and can "be particularly useful for determining knowledge about difficult, complex, novel, or understudied topics" (p. 14). Although the assessment for this research only involves one expert, Anderson compares his knowledge of Florida CPI policies in contrast with the TV portrayals of the CPS.

Altogether, the quantitative methods include the sampling of CEBs on social media sites, Table 1 analysis, compiled with varied CPS worker TV representations. All of these points allowed the researchers of this article to position the TV portrayals of CPS workers as well-used tropes and therefore worthy of study.

Rationale

The theoretical basis of this research is connected to CEBs and Social TV, as outlined in the literature review. This article categorises CEBs as online viewer comments, which are reviewed with a corresponding brand (episode), and interrelate with Social TV. As in the Auverset and Billings (2016) study, viewers may respond on social media platforms having watched TV episodes, creating a sense of community and engagement about CPS portrayals. If, as Klein (2011) posits, entertainment programming on television "does not function as mere amusement for viewers but [as] a site through which contemporary social issues may be considered and negotiated" after which social workers themselves are left to correct perceptions and manage the resultant public relations problems (p. 905). To examine the interplay between CEBs and Social TV, episodes from four TV series were assessed as case studies:

- *BtVS (2002)*
- *Shameless (2013)*
- *SVU (2015)*
- *The Sandman (2022)*

The four case studies were popular shows in different ways, encompass different points in time in US culture, and are accessible via different mediums (network, premium paid services or streaming). Thus, they may sustain varied portrayals of CPS workers. Moreover, their popularity meant that cross-referencing the portrayals with social media posts was easier than for other potential case studies. For example, *Norm* and *Ugly Americans* were two series starring social workers; however, both series had short runs (two or three seasons) due to cancellations or not being picked up for additional seasons. Their lack of popularity probably explains why finding social media posts about their portrayals of CPS workers in these two series was less productive. As of May 2024, the *Ugly Americans* page on Reddit features 115 members and the *Norm* Reddit page features 812 members. In contrast, the *BtVS* and *Shameless* Reddit pages each feature over 130,000 members. Reddit allows for discussion of several topics (e.g. particular episodes), an abundance of information that helped in assessing perspectives on CPS workers as reflected in popular TV series.

Two fantasy series (*BtVS* and *The Sandman*) and two drama series (*Shameless* and *SVU*) were evaluated. Despite the differences in genre, each series pays specific attention to family dynamics as a central part of storylines in the chosen episodes. While some of the storylines in *BtVS* and *The Sandman* are fantastical, the family dynamics are presented realistically and are therefore useful units for analysis. The depiction of the family, as noted by Messina (2019),

> "not only plays a significant role in predicting [viewer] identification, but it is an aspect that should be considered as important when evaluating efforts to educate and persuade audiences through entertainment programming" (p. 100).

Similarly, Piotrowska (2018) analysed music in TV series of different genres because the primary objective was the motif of music and patterns across certain episodes. This research similarly focused on a motif across particular episodes, that is, portrayals of CPS workers as part of the main storyline. Specific episodes from each case study were chosen because the characters deal directly with children's welfare, correlating with the type of CPS workers of interest to this research. If the CPS worker was featured across two episodes (as was the case for *Shameless* and *The Sandman*), both episodes and corresponding social media posts were assessed. The researchers observed the selected episodes several times, taking detailed notes, to answer RQ 1. Once these observations were recorded, online searches across several search engines were conducted for social media and fan forum posts using relevant keyword pairings (i.e. program titles, episode titles, actor names, CPS, DCFS, DCS, social workers).

The researchers then gathered online sentiment through social media posts about the particular episodes, with a focus on mentions of the CPS worker portrayals. Data collection continued until saturation or information redundancy occurred and no new themes emerged from the data (Alam, 2021). The researchers digitally compiled relevant posts to answer RQ 2 about viewer sentiment towards the CPS worker in the episode, and exemplars were chosen for inclusion that represented the general trends in viewer opinion. The language of the commenters was prioritised, and no changes were made to any of the quoted material. More specifically, to avoid any loss or change of meaning in the language of our online posts, we have elected not to edit the original posts for grammar, spelling, or structure. While each program section lists the sources of the social media user comments, authors of specific comments were anonymised and separated from the sites on which they were posted to maintain privacy. This also neutralises any bias or judgment formed while reading a user's screen name (Pal & Counts, 2011). The last step in gathering research was observation of each CPS worker portrayal (four workers portrayed across 6 episodes from different series) by a former CPI to compare them with realistic practices and relevant guidelines governing the procedures within their state of practice, Florida. Each author was the primary researcher for a particular program, with one author evaluating two programs. However, the other authors read and commented on each section adding feedback and helping to organise and assess the data. Due to this division of labour, formal interrater reliability was not calculated, but all data and findings were evaluated by all of the researchers.

Case studies

The following case studies reviewed portrayals of CPS workers on US television shows (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer [BtVS]*, *Shameless*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit [SVU]*, and *The Sandman*), and CEBs from online viewer comments. Public perceptions change over time, so the case studies are reviewed chronologically. Additionally, the case studies will conclude with observations from former CPI, Jason Anderson.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)

BtVS (Whedon, 1997–2003) is a fantasy-themed drama from the WB and later UPN. The series focuses on vampire-slayer Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar). In "Buffy vs. Dracula" (S5E1), Buffy's sister Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg) is introduced by magical forces. After their mother's death, Buffy becomes Dawn's caregiver. Dawn struggles with many issues, including abandonment and kleptomania.

In "Gone" (S6E11), Social Services worker Doris Kroeger (Susan Ruttan) arrives. The house seems chaotic, and Buffy mixes up the appointment day, appearing irresponsible. Dawn sports an arm sling after the car accident in "Wrecked" (S6E10). Doris is bright and friendly, despite the mix-up about days. Dawn leaves for school, prompting Doris to comment, "A little bit on the tardy side, isn't she?" (Fury, 2002, 0:08:10). Buffy apologises for the messy house, seeming surprised to see Spike (James Marsters), her current paramour. Buffy asks Spike to leave, and Doris refers to him as her boyfriend, which Buffy denies. Spike tells Doris, "Buffy's a great mom. She takes good care of her little sis. Like, um, when Dawn was hanging out too much in my crypt, Buffy put a right stop to it" (0:08:58). Buffy tells Doris he had used the slang term "crib". Spike leaves, with Buffy confirming that she and Dawn live alone. Then her roommate, Willow (Allyson Hannigan) can be heard calling. Doris asks if she lives with another woman to which Buffy stammers that it is "not a gay thing", although Willow is her lesbian roommate (0:10:05).

Doris notices Willow's dried herbs, which resemble marijuana. Buffy assures her: "It's 'magic' weed. It's not mine" (0:10:17). Doris says she has seen enough. When Buffy says it has been a bad time lately, Doris replies:

> "Your sister's grades have fallen sharply in the last year, due in large part to her frequent absences and lateness. But my interest is in Dawn's welfare and the stability of her home life, something I'm just not convinced an unemployed young woman like yourself can provide" (0:10:36).

Doris leaves, informing Buffy she will recommend immediate probation, potentially stripping Buffy of guardianship if things do not improve.

Later, Buffy is hit by an invisibility ray gun and visits DCFS to play pranks on Doris. Buffy repeatedly moves Doris' coffee mug while whispering "Kill, Doris, kill everyone" (0:21:16). Doris thinks she is hearing voices. Her boss offers her the day off and takes her off Buffy's case. He promises a new interview will be conducted by a new CPS worker the following day. There are no new scenes with the replacement CPS worker, but it can be assumed, the meeting was satisfactory.

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in BtVS

Although this program aired over 20 years ago, active users still comment on characters and plotlines via social media and forums. This demonstrates the longevity of the program and the depth of the fandom. Comments were gathered from Reddit, Buffy-Boards.com, and The A.V. Club. Audience feedback centres around three themes: 1. criticism of Buffy; 2. criticism of the CPS worker; and 3. commentary about social work/the CPS.

Comments critical of Buffy Summers

This episode seemed to be polarising for viewers. One social media poster called Buffy's actions "disgraceful" (*BtVS* Viewer 1, 2021), while on another platform one wrote: "Like the narrative shouldn't have demonized the social worker as much as it did, but Buffy's actions are supposed to be uncomfortable. Dawn and Spike both call her out on it" (*BtVS* Viewer 2, 2021). Several viewers commented that Buffy's actions in making Doris seem mentally unstable were extreme. Another comment (*BtVS* Viewer 3, 2016) added: "Dawn is almost taken away by CPS, so Buffy drives an innocent woman insane (seriously the real villain here is Buffy)." Another poster on social media agreed: "i find it twisted and disturbing; Buffy invisible, she gaslights that social worker into making her look insane just because she was right about Buffy being an unfit parent who was neglectful of Dawn" (*BtVS* Viewer 4, 2021).

During Season 6, there is a recurring story line about Buffy’s depression. Many users referred to Buffy’s emotional state when discussing the CPS worker. For instance, as one viewer wrote online: “Wrong what Buffy did to the social worker [...], but she did not know Dawns [sic] guardian needed psychological help” (*BtVS* Viewer 5, 2017).

Comments critical of the social worker

Many viewers criticised Doris. One social media user commented:

> “the social worker barely went into the house and talked to Buffy [...] I think dawn needed therapy more than being taken away from her family. A good social worker would have set that up and actually talked to Dawn in this situation” (*BtVS* Viewer 6, 2021).

In some cases, viewers referenced their expertise of the system. Someone who indicated that they worked in social services posted:

> “Doris is a terrible social worker, she’s very damaging to what people believe social workers are all about – she is why people don’t ask for help as they assume it will mean their children get taken away” (*BtVS* Viewer 7, 2021).

They added Doris’ behaviour is inconsistent with home-visit conduct:

> “You can’t just say ‘I’ve seen enough’ without giving the parent any chance to discuss their situation and how they may possibly need your support...BAD social work practice!”

Another commenter, who identified themselves as a social worker, said Doris’ visit was “Definitely not a trauma-informed or family systems-centered approach” (*BtVS* Viewer 8, 2022). One forum comment referred to Doris as too focused on the bureaucracy of social work, “we saw Doris in the office: not resolving important issues in the field but being a bureaucrat” (*BtVS* Viewer 9, 2017). Yet, another user replied to defend Doris:

> “Doris wasn’t being a bureaucrat. She would’ve had to go back to the office to write up her notes... was also consulting with a colleague over the case eg making sure the right outcome was reached without bias” (*BtVS* Viewer 10, 2017).

These comments indicate a lack of consensus about what a CPS worker’s job entails.

Comments about social work/CPS workers

The online comments support how CPS stereotypes may be reinforced through media exposure. One user wrote

> "isn't that sometimes the way actual social workers are in the system we have here in America? Not judging but have heard or read stories that teenagers do not always get listened to sometimes in the child welfare system" (*BtVS* Viewer 11, 2022).

BtVS Viewer 8 (2022) agreed: "unfortunately that character was such a trope and that just keeps getting perpetuated in the media".

Comparing this episode's plotline to reality, one commenter stated: "In real life they want kids to stay with their families as much as possible, and from what I've heard it's hard to get kids taken away even in pretty bad situations" (*BtVS* Viewer 12, 2022). Buffy receiving a home visit the next day was also considered unrealistic: "Considering the backlog of cases they probably have in Sunnydale, it may be safe to assume that Buffy doesn't get another visit until over a year later" (*BtVS* Viewer 13, 2011). This comment supports the perception of social workers as being overburdened with heavy caseloads.

Altogether, these comments illustrate the variety of perceptions held by the public about social workers. In some cases, viewers elected to take sides on the issue, while others acknowledged the complexity. There was consensus about CPS workers and the system being broken, even in the fictional town of Sunnydale.

Observations from a former CPI

A departure from CPI standards is how this would be a truancy issue rather than a CPS complaint. Likewise, Dawn is perhaps too old to be held liable for truancy. The initial reason for the ongoing investigation (why the social worker was scheduled in the first place) was not made clear, and the social worker did not indicate why she was at the Summers' home. The interview between the caregiver and CPS lasted minutes and wasn't substantive and would not have ceased due to the discovery of drugs. Also, the CPS worker would have asked everyone present to stay (which did not happen), and then would've interviewed the child (Dawn) separately first. The need for an investigation seemed tenuous, but it was accurate that the investigation would move to another CPS worker (after Doris was discredited).

Shameless

An American adaptation of a British dramedy, Showtime's series *Shameless* (2011–2021) presents a gritty narrative about the Gallagher family from Chicago's South Side. This analysis will focus on the portrayal of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) caseworkers in the third season.

In "The Sins of My Caretaker" (S3E5), the chaos leading to the DCFS visit is plentiful. After receiving instructions not to sit on "cushions, carpets, anything foam or porous", and not to scream if "you feel something crawling on you", DCFS caseworker Brittany Sturgess (Keiko Agena) enters the Gallagher household.

In the following episode, "Cascading Failures" (S5E6), Brittany leads the Gallagher children out of the house while eldest sister Fiona (Emmy Rossum) requests their placements. Based on a pep talk from another DCFS worker just before entering the household, Brittany is new to her position. Brittany also seems adamant about the responsibility of ensuring that the Gallagher clan is securely placed. This time, however, sons Philip aka "Lip" (Jeremy Allen White) and Ian (Cameron Monaghan) are placed in a group home due to their age. In contrast, Carl (Ethan Cutkosky) and Liam (Blake Alexander Johnson, Brenden Sims, and Christian Isaiah), are placed together. This leaves Debbie (Emma Kenney) alone in the custody of Mama Kamala (Juanita Jennings), who is already fostering several children. Visiting the DCFS office, Fiona listens as Brittany explains the "turnover rate in our field is quite high" (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:11:08). Brittany is still reluctant to give up the children's information, commenting about the previous caseworker's (Marilyn), "clear violation" (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:11:18). Fiona makes her final attempt:

> "I know you think you're helping but as someone who has been in and out of the system their whole life, I can tell you it's a nightmare. These kids have a big sister who loves them and I just want to make sure they're okay. So give me something, Brittany. I mean, break a goddamn rule" (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:11:34).

Relenting, Brittany reveals information about Ian and Lip. Before leaving, Fiona pitches an idea about finding a family willing to take all the kids so they could be placed together, a thought Brittany agrees would work in theory.

However, Fiona's plan for best friend Veronica "Vee" Fisher (Shanola Hampton) to temporarily adopt the Gallagher clan leads nowhere, as shown in a flashback with CPS worker Andrea (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013). Andrea's (Chris Burns) contrasting personality grants a different social worker dynamic. Mimicking air quotes around the word *supervision,* Andrea explains to Vee how the quality of their care is still pending investigation. A far cry from Brittany (slender and timid), Andrea, a large, white woman who speaks with what one viewer on X deems a "crazy blaccent", boldly towers over Vee, even when Vee pushes back about the quality of her care (*Shameless* Viewer 9, 2023).

Later, Fiona again visits Brittany to ensure their father, Frank (William H. Macy) has filed the necessary paperwork. Brittany compliments Fiona's capabilities as big sister before revealing an anonymous phone call to DCFS. Fiona questions the fairness of someone remaining anonymous after essentially ruining their lives (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:52:21). Then Brittany breaks another rule, allowing Fiona to discover that the anonymous tipster is Frank.

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in Shameless

Despite the series finale in 2021, online discussions for *Shameless* continue. According to Reddit, "Sins of My Caretaker" ranks as one of the top 10 episodes of the entire series (Norman, 2022). Similar to the previous case study, viewer comments were gathered from Reddit, X, and TikTok. The audience feedback about these two episodes focused on primary themes: 1. viewer experiences with DCFS; and 2. comments about the DCFS workers.

Viewer experiences with CPS

Those identifying as social workers or who have experience of social work feel a connection with the series, as this post from one viewer exemplified: "Yesterday a visit with a social worker was like entering an episode of *Shameless.* Three generations & eight people in a small council house. Each with needs as huge as the next – and such strength" (*Shameless* Viewer 1, 2022).

One viewer noted online: "[w]atching the social worker talk to the kids about where they're being placed in #Shameless is like my real life nightmare for my kiddos..." (*Shameless* Viewer 2, 2013). Another viewer warned, "[i]f anyone watches #Shameless I recommend you not watch it with family. Especially parents and the 'Cascading Failures' episode" (*Shameless* Viewer 3, 2013). These two posts demonstrate *Shameless* presents a challenging image of the CPS, and a challenging narrative for parents to watch.

Viewers debate Frank wanting to be a father and how the children could return home. As *Shameless* Viewer 4 (2022) illustrated:

> *"Lip and Ian make it very clear that they have been through this before* [...] *Which is *common** [...] *The implication in season three is that they have always been able to get the kids back –* [...] *Also, there's absolutely no guarantee they'd have been taken away – remember what the DFS worker walks in on. There's plenty of evidence in dialogue that they've gotten home visits before and the Gallaghers are little con artists in the early seasons..."*

Some watching the series struggle to separate work from fiction, as one comment attested: "can't turn of[f] the #socialwork brain on my off time [...] I want to be Frank's (from Shameless) case coordinator. Or his kids" (*Shameless* Viewer 5, 2022). Still, others might learn more about the challenges both those in the system and those working on behalf of the system face daily. While not everyone who watches a show like *Shameless* has encountered social work directly, the story offers opportunities for empathy.

Comments about the social workers

The commentary surrounding Brittany and Andrea differs in appreciation. For Brittany, comments on social media range from commending character development to simple reactions such as "That social worker" with a heart emoji (*Shameless* Viewers 6 & 7, 2022). Another comment acknowledged Brittany helping Fiona: "...as much as she could knowing she could lose her job" (*Shameless* Viewer 8, 2023). This may be in reference to her divulging placement information or allowing Fiona access to the anonymous call.

As the viewer posts indicate, the CPS worker Brittany came over as sympathetic. Scanlan and Hanshaw (2022) are quick to remind us how “media carries messages about social interactions and about the nature and values of groups in the society that can influence attitudes, values, and actions among its viewers” (p. 6). The show’s ability to present likable characters, despite their flaws, demonstrates the power of constructing figures with whom the audience can identify.

Observations from a former CPI

Contrary to what is depicted in this episode, it is against protocol for a CPS worker to enter a home without adult permission due to liability issues. Later, the CPS worker discusses a “petition to reinstate custody”, but in Florida, a client would not file because the State would file for them. The CPS worker discussed placement ideas with Fiona so the kids would be placed together – but this would be happening anyway. It was inaccurate for Fiona to sneak kids’ items in foster care – this would have happened before the kids were placed so they would be less ill at ease. When Fiona inquired about the paperwork filed by Frank, a CPS worker would not handle it because a case management worker would follow up. Altogether, other depictions of this particular CPS worker are plausible, such as the comment about high turnover rates, the older kids being placed in group homes, trying to place all the children together, and interacting with a case supervisor before an interview.

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)

SVU is an NBC television show that has been on air since 1999 and is still ongoing. Much like the original *Law & Order* (1990–present), *SVU* purports to depict situations based on actual events. In *SVU,* special cases are reviewed when a sexual crime is involved. In a slight departure (not the first or last), “Institutional Fail” (S17E4) features crimes of child neglect. For this section, two CPS workers will be analysed: caseworker Keith Musio (John Magaro) and supervisor Janette Grayson (Whoopi Goldberg).

Bruno Ozuna (Issam Mkaiki) wanders NYC after being left alone. Sergeant Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) and her team interview Bruno and neighbours about the mother’s (Jessica Pimental) whereabouts. Ozuna’s DCFS caseworker, Musio, is unresponsive to the SVU’s requests for Ozuna case details.

At the DCFS office, Benson’s team witnesses an irate parent cursing at a social worker. Grayson motions to a nearby officer to escort the parent out. To Benson, Grayson remarks: “Welcome to the jungle” (Mitchell, 2015, 8:07). Musio retrieves the Ozuna family case file, asking if Bruno’s okay. Benson’s partner suggests Musio watch the news to which he replies: “With this job, I barely have time to take a piss” (8:57). He had also sworn when he visited the Ozuna’s a few weeks previously, Bruno and older sister, Keisha Houston, were fine.

Later, Keisha is found unconscious locked in a dog cage. Although she is rushed to the hospital, she does not survive. A detective inquires how Keisha has seemed a few weeks previously to which Musio claims it is hard to remember because there are at least nine visits a day.

After reviewing Musio's files, the detectives discuss his caseload increase from 30 to 47. His quality of work had declined in what the detectives call "a losing battle" (Mitchell, 2015, 10:15). Several of his later reports were scanned in after Keisha's death, conflicting with court dates or other family visits. Musio is seen placing flowers at a marker for Keisha. He is then arrested for manslaughter due to a lack of family visits to the Ozuna's. Grayson and Deputy Commissioner Matt Sheridan (Josh Mercantel) are also arrested. Musio confesses to falsifying reports for himself and other staff under the supervision of Grayson and Sheridan. He alleges Grayson had warned him to stop offering so many services to clients because "this is casework, not social work" (27:32). Musio laments how Keisha's death will haunt him.

On the stand, Musio testifies that he had been put on a probationary period until he started falsifying reports. Later, Grayson is on the stand and initially appears calm, declaring that Musio authored the reports on his own. The DA details how Grayson received two promotions and one raise related to caseload productivity in her unit. He also questions her about false reports with conflicting information in which children had been hurt. Finally, Grayson quietly states: "I didn''t want any of this to happen" (37:23). She further describes the conflicts of her job:

> "God himself could not do this job [...] You wanna judge me? You wouldn't last an hour in my world. And if I go, who is gonna be on the front lines? You? [...] You dump the most hapless cases in the world on us everyday. [...] We get the dregs of humanity! [...] Did you ever stop to think 'Gee, what happened before that?' [...] Now, you wanna put me in jail for this? Look in the mirror." (Mitchell, 2015, 37:35–39:22)

Grayson is committed to Bellevue and pleads guilty to manslaughter. Sheridan admits no wrongdoing and is sentenced to a year in prison. The DCS commissioner steps down and the city appoints an outside administrative board intent on revising DCS. Musio scoffs at all of this, deciding these superficial changes will revert once public scrutiny ends. He voices regret that when he is released, he will not be able to work with children.

Overall, this episode shows two versions of CPS workers: Musio seems regretful of his actions and cares for children, while Grayson is glib, at times an unsympathetic character, later revealing a stark outlook on the child welfare system aligning with Musio's cynicism and regret.

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in SVU

When "Institutional Fail" aired in 2015, viewers left comments on X and Reddit during or after the episode's release date. Due to syndication, the episode is still discussed online by viewers. This section will review audience feedback from sources like X, Reddit, and viewer comments left on a website for those employed in the field. The feedback is themed to discuss 1. the CPS portrayals; and 2. the perception of CPS work.

The CPS portrayals

Viewer posts analysed the realism of the episode in relation to CPS workers. Some lauded it as emblematic of what social workers experience: "This episode of SVU with Whoopi Goldberg was one of the best I've ever seen. So real and true about the child services being overworked and underpaid" (*SVU* Viewer 1, 2017). A similar sentiment came from a self-identified CPS worker: "I think every one of us social workers should be required to watch this episode. Probably my most memorable SVU episode" (*SVU* Viewer 2, 2023). One viewer described Musio maintaining a caring attitude with his workload:

> "The direct care worker was shown to have done everything in his power to achieve impossible expectations for performance, given his caseload [...] I believe the show could be a wake-up call for people who believe that child care workers are at fault when a child in their care suffers." (SVU Viewer 3, 2015)

The posts above seem to convey empathy for the CPS workers, which was a common sentiment among viewers of this episode.

Perceptions of CPS work

Viewers discussed perceptions of CPS work in relation to the episode. On a social media site, *SVU* Viewer 4 (2022) wrote: "#SVU wrestles with kids who slip through the cracks of a poorly funded system – while ignoring the unnecessary largesse of the NYPD's budget, obvs –." The post identifies funding for child welfare and the NYPD, and how the show could have examined this difference.

One post featured comments about the possible negative portrayals and impacts on public perception. *SVU* Viewer 5 (2015) expressed how: "I feel like the last thing our profession needs right now is giving the general public the feeling that, indeed, social workers are all too burnt out to give a f***." Another poster agreed that the episode depicted the overworked nature of CPS workers, but that: "the agency/social workers were painted as bad people. So, yeah... Disappointing and only helping to fuel the bizarre 'social workers are corrupt monsters'" (*SVU* Viewer 6, 2015).

Making a distinction between qualifications and experience, this commenter noted: "they did throw in the line 'it's case work, not social work' and not all DCFs require that caseworkers are social workers, or even hold a BSW" (*SVU* Viewer 7, 2015). *SVU* Viewer 8 (2015) wrote:

> "The episode implies that we social workers need the police to teach us compassion and ethics [...on SVU, the social workers...] are always either abusing their clients in some way, or they are just completely incompetent."

Another poster added: "Seriously guys, it's law and order, the writers are older than my clients and research for their stories are probably done entirely through Wikipedia articles" (*SVU* Viewer 9, 2015).

Overall, social media opinions about this *SVU* episode suggest audience members disagree over the characters and perceptions. Several posts mention Grayson's character, with scant mention of Musio. The responses suggest several factors contribute to the character depictions and state of CPS work.

Observations from a former CPI

The SVU initially being assigned the child welfare case due to a patrol sergeant decision is not outside the realm of possibility. Musio being slow to provide the file on Ozuna is not uncommon (though it could have been intentional in this case). In Florida, DCFS files would not be released publicly or to another agency necessarily without a subpoena. The irate parent escorted from the office has occurred in real life settings. Grayson and Musio's workload and sentiments regarding their job are accurate, if not over-dramatised.

The Sandman

In the Netflix series *The Sandman* (2022–present), Morpheus (Tom Sturridge) is a cosmic being who oversees humanity's dreams. The series is based on Neil Gaiman's graphic novel series from DC Comics. Rose Walker (Kyo Ra) is a supporting character and her interactions with a CPS worker are the focus of this case study. Rose's parents have divorced, but she strives to keep her little brother, Jed (Eddie Karanja), happy. After their parents' deaths, Rose wishes to obtain custody of Jed. CPS worker Eleanor Rubio (Shelley Williams) denies Rose custody, citing how Jed is in the care of friends of the father.

The CPS plot line cuts across two episodes of Season 1, "The Doll's House" and "Playing House". In the former, Eleanor is introduced as the Floridian *social worker* in charge of Jed Walker's case. She informs Rose: "I cannot, by law, give out your brother's information" (Baiz, 2022, 32:12). Eleanor characterises Jed's caretakers as his parents, despite Rose identifying them as non-family members. When Rose points out she is Jed's sister, Eleanor states "as such, you have no legal claim to him" (33:10). Rose takes the news poorly, asking Eleanor: "Could you just be a fucking human being for one second?" (33:17). Rose then calms somewhat and asks to get in touch with her brother. Eleanor denies this request because then Jed might ask to live with Rose, who is young and does not have a job or healthcare. According to Eleanor, the friends of Jed's father applied to become Jed's foster parents. Now, they receive 800 dollars per month and Jed is "doing just fine" (33:50).

In "Playing House", Rose's friend visits Eleanor's office again, pleading with her to check on Jed. For one moment, the camera passes over a tumbler on Eleanor's desk (presumably liquor). Eleanor calls Jed's foster parents to alert them to her visit. The foster father, Barnaby (Sam Hazeldine), threatens violence against Jed if he misbehaves. The family and Eleanor are seen at the house, discussing Jed. When he is dismissed by Barnaby, Jed slips a note into Eleanor's purse. Noticing this, Barnaby removes the note and locks Jed in the basement. Back in her office, Eleanor checks her purse, but the note is gone. She is then killed by one of Morpheus' antagonists, the Corinthian (Boyd Holbrook).

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in The Sandman

As *The Sandman* is relatively new in comparison to the other case studies, there are fewer social media posts reflecting on the CPS worker portrayal in Season 1. However, this section will review Reddit posts associated with Jed and the foster parents and realism.

Jed

Viewers speculate on why Jed was in foster care versus being placed with a living relative. One social media user (*Sandman* Viewer 1, 2022) writes:

> "Shouldn't he have been sent to live with his STILL LIVING mother after his dad died? Wtf kind of system puts a kid in foster care when the kid still has a perfectly decent, alive, and functional parent known to be living just a few states away?"

Viewers also note how Eleanor seemed concerned that Rose did not have a job, yet the foster parents received $800 a month for taking care of Jed. Per *Sandman* Viewer 2:

> "Rose should have said, 'Wait. You could pay me $800 a month to take care of Jed.' Or: 'Jed and I have a rich great-grandmother. She could adopt him and save the state $800 a month.'"

Some viewers perceive the CPS situation as a plot hole. As one viewer posted:

> "Due to the fact that the uncle sees the note Jed left for the social worker, it seems to be some sort of foster fraud scheme where she was getting kickbacks for helping the dead dad 'sell' his son into foster care" (Sandman Viewer 3, 2022).

Other online commenters fault the foster care system that loses or forgets children.

Foster parents and realism

Another social media post reflected on Jed's foster parents, stating:

> "having been a foster parent five times, I always get super annoyed when fostering situations are presented in such an unrealistic manner [...] The idea that horrible people can just stroll up to foster agencies and have a kid placed with them just to start raking in the dough is frankly complete and utter horse shit" (Sandman Viewer 4, 2022).

Jed's foster parents, Clarise (Lisa O'Hare) and Barney are portrayed in a stereotypical manner: as an abusive father and a submissive mother. Based on Sandman Viewer 4's (2022) post: "Clarise may have been able to pass a background check, but there is no way in hell that an asshole like Barnaby would be able to."

Other users disagreed about the unrealistic portrayal, citing personal experiences as foster care children. *Sandman* Viewer 5 (2022) shared: "[Abusive foster parents are] a trope. It's a fact. There are monsters out there. And sometimes they are human. The fact that you pretend they don't exist is sickening. It diminishes the reality of the situation." Replies to the post contrasted with this view: "I don't know anything about foster parents or the foster system but the whole story felt so weird. There are so many problems with it that it felt cartoonish horror story with everyone being incompetent" (*Sandman* Viewer 6, 2022).

Some replies were neutral or gave a possible storytelling reason as to how Jed ended up with such foster parents: "I think they try to deal with this a little by indicating that Clarice and Barnaby had a connection to Jed's dad, maybe they had been named in his will or something" (*Sandman* Viewer 7, 2022). Some replies implied both foster parents were only taking care of Jed for the extra monthly income. *Sandman* Viewer 8 (2022) wrote: "some will be okay, maybe they're controlling or something, and some will be abusive/doing it for the money".

Overall, the Redditors interpreted *The Sandman* CPS portrayal and subsequent interactions in different ways. Some posts suggest that foster parents have different motivations, while others debate the realism of the episode.

Observations from a former CPI

In terms of realism, Eleanor withholds caregiver information from Rose, but relative or non-relative information is not confidential. Most importantly, siblings (like Rose and Jed) are entitled to visitation (whether in or out of care). Rose has a claim and would have been evaluated for guardianship. Rose also would not have been "on her own" in taking care of Jed – she would have received assistance such as: relative caregiver funds, EBT, Medicaid, and more. Common practice dictates the CPS worker conduct a mix of unannounced and announced visits (yet, the non-relative caregivers seem surprised about the visit in the episode "Playing House"). She also should have interviewed the family members separately, especially Jed. The abuse from the non-relative caregivers (incorrectly attributed as “foster parents”) and their need to “hang on to benefits” at any cost seems tenable in rare cases.

Discussion

As mentioned in the *Research methods* section, certain questions helped guide the analysis of television portrayals. These questions will be reviewed below, beginning with connections between the case studies and media posts.

What connections can be drawn between the case studies and social media posts?

Two of the case studies are dramas, while the other two fit the fantasy genre. It is perhaps not surprising that the portrayals of CPS workers in the latter were the most unrealistic. As Klein (2011) notes, television series “offer viewers material that they could take with them to other encounters with the issue. Drama is thus regarded as a legitimate additional resource from which to draw in the larger discussions of social issues” (p. 917). Through fantasy-tropes, Buffy of *BtVS* enacts revenge on Doris, perhaps metering out viewer-approved punishment. Aligning with other fantasy-horror tropes, Eleanor is killed off by a series antagonist (i.e. the Corinthian), providing viewer catharsis (or punishment) for her treatment of Jed. The trend of punishing a CPS worker is similar to what happens to Musio and Grayson in *SVU*. Even though there are two fantasy shows and two drama shows, the social media responses do not seem to differentiate between the portrayals. For instance, the social media debates about the CPS responses for all four series are similar in different ways. Additionally, because the fantasy shows depict CPS workers more negatively, possibly due to the nature of the fantasy shows being less based on realism anyway, it seems to reinforce any potential negative misconceptions the social media commenters may have held prior to watching the episode.

Of the case studies reviewed, the CPS workers were more empathetic after disregarding regulations or going *above and beyond* in their duties (as Andrea and Musio did). In *SVU,* CPS workers were portrayed as overworked, leading to child neglect and even death. This may stem from a belief that CPS workers do the bare minimum and are bogged down in regulation. As Zugazaga et al. (2006) suggest: “Images of the media [portrayal] of social workers serve to formulate the perception of those who have no direct contact with the profession” (p. 633). This also aligns with the perception of CPS being underfunded, leading to another perception of removing children rather than offering services. The *SVU* dramatisation had real world implications, as seen in two *Tampa Bay Times* stories when CPIs confessed to falsifying reports (Solomon, 2019; Verschoor, 2019).

Concerning the social media posts in relation to each case study, some of the viewers seem to dislike CPS workers, while others note realistic details of the job. These connections could mean that when CPS workers are portrayed on screen, their roles are simplified and polarised (they are portrayed as either good or bad) due to a lack of public knowledge about the function of a CPS worker. Freeman and Valentine (2004) take this thought further by stating:

> "The ways in which social work is portrayed in popular culture contribute to the shaping of the public's image of social workers, of social problems with which social workers are involved, and of clients as the consumers of social work services" (p. 151).

Additionally, series creators need to create dramatic tension and plot points. With their limited CPS knowledge, they could write these scenes with drama in mind. In addition, while main characters in TV shows are often nuanced, deep and evolving, these brief supporting roles may be written in a superficial way due to time constraints and to simplify details for viewers.

What does it mean that several popular TV portrayals are by women?

Three of the portrayals from the case studies are by women. Unlike the other three case studies, the *SVU* episode features a man (Musio) as a CPS worker, even though his supervisor is a woman (Grayson). This is consistent with the Bureau of Labor Statistics data from 2023 (BLS, 2024), which indicates that 88% of social workers in the child, family, and school subsectors are female.

As Freeman and Valentine (2004) stated:

> "If people believe what they see in the movies, social workers are mostly women, mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual; they mostly work in child welfare, are likely to be incompetent, have a tendency to engage in sexual relationships with clients, mostly work with people living in poverty, and mostly function to maintain the societal status quo" (p. 159).

This could denote how the profession is to a great extent dominated by women, or it could be due to this type of work being seen as caregiving.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study reviewed aspects of media for CPS workers, using TV portrayals as case studies. Although the case studies depicted various portrayals of the CPS workers, the realism of their roles did not always align with common practice. As noted, the two fantasy genre portrayals were the most unrealistic of the four case studies.

Although the two drama genre portrayals were more realistic, there were inconsistencies. Such anomalies may contribute to misinformed public perceptions, along with the fact that most people have not had and will never have any direct interaction with a CPS worker. More research is needed about television portrayals of CPS workers, public perceptions, and TV script writers’ decisions. This might include a focus group with audiences to determine more about their perceived bias before and after viewing an episode with CPS portrayals, and/or a focus group with television creators. Such studies could clarify why the characters are written in certain lights or why viewers post about certain topics.

Other suggestions for achieving a better representation of CPS workers in US television shows include adding a disclaimer of sorts. Such a disclaimer (similar to banners like *Based on a true story*) for CPS portrayals could further acknowledge how the characters do not (always) reflect real-world practice. This would also inform viewers that they are viewing a dramatisation. If television writers and showrunners consulted with professionals in the field, they would also gain insights into CPS characters and motivations. Another option would be to have scripts vetted by former or current CPS workers. It is the belief of these researchers that television creators have a responsibility (when adding CPS workers to storylines) to dramatise such roles with integrity, especially as these portrayals can become a spotlight for CPS practice.

Additionally, social service departments should actively engage with social media and their local community in positive ways to deter fear and allay misconceptions. Though it is not possible to release specifics about CPS cases due to privacy and confidentiality concerns for minors, there are ways in which individual CPS workers can impact social media narratives, such as the efforts on TikTok noted in the literature review. Leveraging technology and social aspects in positive ways may constitute the technoprosociality that is needed in the CPS profession.

It is of note that the case studies underwhelmingly represented or even excluded the children’s perspective in relation to home life and a CPS presence. With the exception of *Shameless,* the case studies (at times) used the children as plot devices. There were not many scenes including dialogue (or extended dialogue) between the children and CPS workers. If there were scenes, the contact between children and CPS workers was fleeting. The role of children in CPS plotlines could be characterised as absent in terms of power dynamics, dialogue, and consequential actions. Although children may not fit the narrative as a protagonist in some of the case studies, whether the CPS are involved or not, they are the protagonists of their own stories. Focus groups involving children and their perspectives on CPS and CPS narratives in television could also be an area of future study. Throughout much of this research, what became clear was the scarcity of public knowledge of CPS workers and an abundance of stereotypes. Social TV and Customer Engagement Behaviors have perhaps influenced television creatives, who may believe they understand the role of CPS workers and so write the characters with little to no research or consultation. With more research from TV creatives, future portrayals of CPS workers could add more substance to storylines, generating more understanding from audiences regarding CPS work.

Appendix

Table 1:
TV shows, CPS or Social Worker Characters, and Perception of Portrayal

TV Show Name (Year)	Name of CPS or Social Worker	Portrayal
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Adele Newman (Erica Gimpel) Seasons 3, 4, 6–9	Mostly positive
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Ken Sung (Daniel Dae Kim) Season 10	Neutral (not negative/positive)
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Wendall Meade (Mädchen Amick) Season 11	Neutral (not negative/positive)
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Liz Dade (Tara Karsian) Season 12, 13, 15	Neutral (not negative/positive)
Judging Amy (1995–2005)	Social Worker Maxine Gray (Tyne Daly)	Mostly positive
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1996–2002)	Social Worker Doris Kroeger (Susan Ruttan)	Mostly negative
Norm (1999–2001)	Social worker Norm Henderson (Norm Macdonald)	Neutral (not negative/positive)
SVU (1999–present)	DCS Caseworker Keith Musio (John Magaro)	Mostly positive
SVU (1999–present)	DCS Supervisor Janette Grayson (Whoopi Goldberg)	Mostly negative
Mercy (2009–2010)	Social Worker Lorraine (Monica DeBonis)	Mostly negative
Ugly Americans (2010–2012)	Social Worker Mark Lilly (Matt Oberg)	Mostly positive
Shameless (2011–2021)	DCFS caseworker Brittany Sturgess (Keiko Agena)	Mostly positive
The Bridge (2013–2014)	Social Worker Linder (Thomas M. Wright)	Mostly negative
Jessica Jones (2015–019)	Social Worker Malcolm Ducasse (Eka Darville)	Mostly positive
This Is Us (2016–2022)	Social Worker Linda (Debra Jo Rupp)	Mostly positive
Homecoming (2018–2020)	Caseworker Heidi Bergman (Julia Roberts)	Mostly negative
The Sandman (2022–)	Social Worker Eleanor Rubio (Shelley Williams)	Mostly negative

Source: Compiled by the authors.

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