

mediální studia

media
studies

JOURNAL FOR CRITICAL MEDIA INQUIRY

2026
Special
Issue

mediální studia / media studies

EDITORIAL TEAM

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Ing. et Mgr. Kateřina Turková, Ph.D. (Charles University)

EDITORS

Ing. et Mgr. Kateřina Turková, Ph.D. (Charles University)

Mgr. Lukáš Slavík (Masaryk University)

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

Ib T. Gulbrandsen (Roskilde University)

Andra Siibak (University of Tartu)

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (Malmö University)

EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

PhDr. Natálie Švarcová, Ph.D. (Charles University)

GRAPHIC DESIGN, PAGE LAYOUT

Mgr. František Géla, Ph.D.

Periodicity: twice a year

Place of publishing: Prague

Registration number: E 19821

Online ISSN: 2464-4846

Publisher: Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Smetanovo nábřeží 6, 110 00 Praha 1

Company ID: 00216208

VAT No.: CZ00216208

E-mail: medialnistudia@fsv.cuni.cz

Volume 20, Special Issue, March 2026

For more information and the magazine content,
please visit our website at <https://medialnistudia.fsv.cuni.cz/>



MINISTRY OF CULTURE
CZECH REPUBLIC

Mediální studia / Media studies 2026 / Special Issue was
financially supported by Ministry of Culture Czech Re-
public and Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

CONTENTS

- 7-13 Introduction
Ib T. Gulbrandsen, Andra Siibak & Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

STUDIES

- 14-35 Distributing Instructive and Legitimate Crisis Communication: COVID-19 Press Conferences in Scandinavia
Anna Elisabeth Hasselström
- 36-59 Journalism and Well-Being: A Systematic Review of Mental Health Research in News Work (2000–2024)
Gabriela Ferreira & Dora Santos-Silva
- 60-80 Silenced Voices at the Border: How Croatian Online Media Reported on the Ukrainian Refugees
Barbara Ravbar
- 82-100 “It has snuck into all parts of our life” - A phenomenological account of a Swedish single mother’s experiences with screen time in everyday family life
Magnus Johansson
- 102-123 ‘Real Bulgarian men’ under threat: hegemonic masculinity and misogyny in online discussions on gender antagonism in Bulgaria
Jullietta Stoencheva
- 124-150 Ex-Muslims’ Digital Dissent: A Case for Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Enunciative Pragmatics
Deborah Phares
- 152-173 Long Comment Branch Sampling for Social Media Research
Amalie Scheel

INTRODUCTION

IB T. GULBRANDSEN (Roskilde University, Denmark)

ANDRA SIIBAK (University of Tartu, Estonia)

PILLE PRUULMANN-VENGERFELDT (Malmö University, Sweden)

What is your academic spirit animal? We asked that of the young scholars gathered in Roskilde University's auditorium on a warm summer afternoon in 2023. And we asked them to draw it. And as senior scholars responsible for running the ECREA Summer School, we joined the discussion and drawing. Pille's spirit animal was a hermit crab, because she likes to gather ideas, thoughts and methods and make her own home out of a mishmash of things. Andra's spirit animal was an elephant as similar to elephants who are dedicated to taking care of their calves, Andra believes it is important to teach important academic life-skills and hacks to one's doctoral students. Ib's spirit animal was a peacock, because... well, no further explanation necessary. The summer school students' spirit animals were dogs, dolphins, deers, dragons, and an abundance of other creatures. Some offered profound explanations for their animal of choice; others justified their choice based on what animal they knew how to draw.

In the end, the choice did not really matter. What mattered was the spirit of things. In particular, the spirit we found in the playful exercise of drawing our academic selves as animals. It offered a different kind of conversation about the challenges scholars engaged in doctoral education face. Where shyness meets overconfidence, self-deprecation meets self-worth, and imposter syndrome meets the realisation that you actually know something. Talking through a spirit animal afforded a wonderful way of recognising each other for who we are, and where we come from; to speak about the oft unspoken challenges of academic life.

The European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Since November 25, 2005, when two European communication associations merged, the organisation has grown significantly. And since its early inception, bringing together scholars across languages, research interests and disciplinary backgrounds has remained its *raison d'être*. To offer and foster an inclusive spirit for scholars across the broad field of media and communication studies. More than a decade before ECREA was established, scholars from different European universities saw value in bringing together PhD students so they could meet, learn from one another, and become better academics through critique and knowledge sharing. The idea of bringing

together PhD students and giving them an opportunity to meet and engage with one another is at the core of the summer school. Though its location changes, its students change, its teachers change, the spirit of the summer school remains the same.

This special issue draws on two groups of summer school students. In 2023 and 2024, Roskilde University hosted the ECREA summer school at the Department of Communication and Arts. In 2023 we received 102 applications, of which 50 were offered a spot, representing approx. 40 different universities across Europe, as well as Chile, China, and India. Respective numbers for 2024 were 132 and 50, representing more than 35 different universities across Europe, as well as Canada, India, and Israel. The summer schools were made possible due to the research project Strategizing Communication and Artificial Intelligence (SCAI) and the generous support of the VELUX FOUNDATION.

A combined number of 31 lecturers participated in 2023 and 2024. And we owe them a big thanks: Andreas Birkebæk, Anne Kaun, Billy Tsagkroni, Cathrin Bengesser, Chris Peters, Christoph Raetzsch, Dan Jackson, David Mathieu, David Ongenaert, David Selva Ruiz, Delia Dumitricia, Fredrik Stiernstedt, Giuliana Sorce, Ib T. Gulbrandsen, Jairo Faria Guedes Coelho, Jannie Møller Hartley, John Downey, Julie Uldam, Kim C. Schrøder, Louise Yung Nielsen, Maria Brock, Maria Schreiber, Mariana Scalabrin Müller, Mark Ørsten, Nina Springer, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Rasmus Rex Pedersen, Roman Horbyk, Sine N. Just, Tina Askanius, and Tobias Raun. Without these people, and without the expert help of Roskilde University's and ECREA's administrative staff, the summer school would not have been possible.

In each summer school, in addition to the feedback sessions, which constitute the core of the Summer School, the participants enjoy an extensive seven-day schedule engagements, including hands-on workshops, field visits, round tables, fish bowls, and a social programme. To capture some elements from these intense and fulfilling days, all participants were invited to submit an abstract for the summer school special issue in *Mediální Studia*. And for some, submitting an abstract for a special issue and then putting together a full journal manuscript, marked their first foray into the fraught world of international, peer-reviewed publication.

The papers selected for the present special issue explore important topics in the present-day mediated and digitalised society through different theoretical, empirical, and methodological approaches. Each of the contributions introduces original insights into thematic areas that have triggered considerable scholarly attention through the last few years. Below we will provide a brief outline of the content of each paper published in this special issue.

ANNA ELISABETH HASSELSTRÖM - DISTRIBUTING INSTRUCTIVE AND LEGITIMATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION: COVID-19 PRESS CONFERENCES IN SCANDINAVIA

In the first article of this special issue, Elisabeth Hasselström presents a thematic analysis of press conferences conducted by public health authorities in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hasselström examines how pandemic-related Scandinavian press conferences framed instructive messages to resonate with the public, provide explanatory information, and offer actionable guidance in accordance with the IDEA model. In the article, the author expands the IDEA model to include legitimacy of crisis leaders. The presented point to how the three Scandinavian countries implemented all dimensions of the IDEA model, though with differences. Norway prioritized internalization, explanation, and legitimacy; Denmark similarly prioritized internalization and legitimacy, but action over explanation; whereas Sweden prioritized explanation, emphasizing data transparency and scientific information.

DORA SANTOS-SILVA AND GABRIELA MATOS FERREIRA - JOURNALISM AND WELL-BEING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH IN NEWS WORK (2000-2024)

The second paper in the special issue is a collaboration between summer school student Gabriela Matos-Ferreira and her supervisor Dora Santos Silva, who conducted a systematic literature review at the intersection of journalism, mental health and wellbeing. Systematic literature reviews following the PRISMA structure are not common in media and communication studies, but this paper provides an overview of all English-language papers published between 2000-2024. Identifying relevant papers from Scopus and Web of Science-indexed journals, the final study summarises key issues and findings from sixty research papers. Their analysis shows that the focus of these inquiries has shifted: during 2000-2015, only a few papers focused on trauma responses. The next period, 2016-2019, shows small growth and recognition that mental health is a relevant aspect of journalism studies. The real catalyst for the field is COVID-19, not only inspiring many more articles directly related to the pandemic but, more generally, making journalism studies as a field more aware and understanding of the working conditions and mental health burdens of journalistic work. Their analysis reveals three dominant thematic clusters: trauma reporting and its psychological impact; occupational insecurity related to digital disruption; and a focus on crisis reaction, which marks a more holistic, workplace-centred approach to mental health and wellbeing in journalism. Their paper also outlines several important gaps, including conceptual ambiguity,

a limited geographical scope, a lack of attention to structural and organisational dimensions, and a lack of longitudinal and comparative studies and solution-oriented approaches. The systematic literature review identifies many issues that need to be addressed and studied further and can hopefully inspire follow-up studies that investigate them in more detail.

BARBARA RAVBAR: SILENCED VOICES AT THE BORDER: HOW CROATIAN ONLINE MEDIA REPORTED ON THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

The third special issue paper by Barbara Ravbar addresses the Silenced voices at the Border and investigates how two Croatian online media reported on the Ukrainian refugees across 491 articles. The quantitative data analysis looks at the article structure, topics in the articles and sources used in reporting. The analysis covers two most popular Croatian media outlets *index.hr* and *24sata.hr*, which both enjoy significant readership and support, but also have a significant group of society that distrusts their news. Focusing only on the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Feb 24 - March 24) the paper captures the peculiar information chaos of the unprecedented attack. The results show a stark difference in both the visuals used to illustrate the stories as well as the voices that get heard in the reporting. The study shows that news outlets tried to capitalise on surging interest in Ukrainian refugees and tagged articles for search engine optimisation, even if the articles did not address the refugees at all. Significantly, the news outlets relied on the news agency (Hina), showcasing that online news outlets struggle for resources may mean that they end up being less diverse than is perhaps desirable for journalistic quality.

MAGNUS JOHANSSON: “IT HAS SNUCK INTO ALL PARTS OF OUR LIFE” - A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF A SWEDISH SINGLE MOTHER’S EXPERIENCES WITH SCREEN TIME IN EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE

In the fourth paper for the special issue, Magnus Johansson applied a social phenomenological perspective to explore the everyday expectations and negotiations a single mother from Sweden experiences related to the phenomenon of screen time. Even though the phenomenon of screen time has been capturing the interests of many scholars and policy makers during the last few years, qualitative empirical studies that would dwell into the actual experiences of parents and children on the topic have been scarce. Thus, Johansson’s paper offers interesting and necessary first-hand insights. In his analysis, Johansson suggests that screen time has become “a ‘naturalized’ part of the life-worlds of present-day

parents; serving as an indication of the experiences, ideals and struggles parents are going through daily. In his analysis of the experiences of a single mother living with her eight-year-old girl, Johansson eloquently describes the complex nature of the screen time phenomenon illustrating the constant process of negotiations the mother is engaging in, depending on the modes of attention (e.g. negotiations related to rules, notions of trust) and inattention due to its ‘naturalized’ and routinized nature within the domestic space.

JULLIETTA STOENCHEVA: ‘REAL BULGARIAN MEN’ UNDER THREAT: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND MISOGYNY IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS ON GENDER ANTAGONISM IN BULGARIA

In the fifth paper of the special issue, Jullietta Stoencheva explores another issue which has triggered considerable academic interest over the past few years – the topic of growing misogyny and anti-feminism in online communities. Most of the empirical research on the topic, however, has been focused on analysing the developments within the Western countries, while Stoencheva introduces the manifestations of the phenomenon amongst the “ordinary” users of an anonymous Bulgarian Q&A platform Spodeli. Stoencheva’s critical discourse analysis of posts in Spodeli convincingly illustrates how platform affordances such as anonymity, lack of moderation, accessibility, and visibility facilitate the proliferation of misogynistic discourse. Furthermore, her findings indicate that although the discussions in Spodeli have similarities with Western misogynist/anti-feminist discourses, post-communist anxieties around economy and national sovereignty tend to dominate.

DEBORAH PHARES - EX-MUSLIMS’ DIGITAL DISSENT A CASE FOR MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ENUNCIATIVE PRAGMATICS

In the sixth paper of the special issue Deborah Phares recommends using multimodal critical discourse analysis for studying tweets, enabling to reveal how meaning is produced, critique staged and power claimed in the digital public sphere. When combined with enunciative pragmatics, Phares argues, the suggested approach „reveals apostates’ strategic communicative choices and ideological complexity”. A case study about how ex-Muslims articulate critiques of Islam/isms on platform X is used as an example to illustrate how such methodological choices would help to explore how meaning is shaped by the interplay of text, image, hashtags, emojis, and layout in digital platforms such as X.

AMALIE SCHEEL: LONG COMMENT BRANCH SMPLING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

In the final article, Amalie Scheel introduces Long Comment Branch Sampling (LCBS) as a novel strategy for enhancing qualitative research of social media discussions. Addressing the challenge of purposive and systematic data sampling, particularly from large datasets from social media, Scheel introduces LCBS as a way to build upon and combine established digital methods and ethnographic approaches. Focused on discussions in comment sections, the article offers a structured, iterative process of selecting, sorting, and synthesizing data, aiming to provide a practical tool for researchers grappling with substantial datasets. The LCBS strategy is demonstrated through an examination of meat reduction discussions on Danish Facebook pages, showing its applicability to various contested issues. By introducing the concept Scheel navigates the non-chronological data format of comment sections, facilitating a systematic, qualitative approach. Underlining the importance of a multi-cycle and iterative process of selecting, locating, sorting, and batching, the author offers LCBS as a tool for studying user engagements in comment sections.

Does the summer school itself have a spirit animal? Is it an octopus? Or a spider creating a web? Or perhaps a beehive collaborating to make some sweet honey? It is something that describes the coming together of doctoral students wanting to engage, senior scholars dedicating and volunteering their time, organising university devoting resources and expertise, everyone's families making it possible for us to dedicate ourselves to academia. In making the special issue possible, the anonymous reviewers and the journal editorial team have also made generous contributions. Thank you.

To conclude, this special issue is a honeycomb, the result of the hive's work; sweet, ephemeral, and good for you. We hope you enjoy it.

Ib T. Gulbrandsen (ibtunby@ruc.dk) is Chair of Technology and Publics at Roskilde University. He researched and teaches at the interdisciplinary nexus of communication, organization and artificial intelligence. Within this context, he focuses on strategic management as a communicative activity, thoroughly entangled with technology. He is principal investigator of the research project Strategizing Communication and Artificial Intelligence (SCAI), and project leader of the 10-year research project Algorithms, Data and Democracy (ADD).

Andra Siibak (andra.siibak@ut.ee) is a Professor of Media Studies and a Deputy Head of Research and Development at the Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Estonia. Her research focuses on opportunities and risks surrounding internet use, datafication of childhood, dataveillance in education, and privacy. Together with Giovanna Mascheroni she co-authored a monograph “Datafied Childhoods: Data Practices and Imaginaries in Children’s Lives” (2021), published by Peter Lang. She is a member of Academia Europaea and currently serves as the Vice President of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and International Director of the ECREA Doctoral Summer School.

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (pille.pruulmann.vengerfeldt@mau.se), a member of Academia Europaea, is Professor of Media and Communication at Malmö University. Her work takes a critical and creative approach towards issues of digitalisation, datafication, heritage and infrastructures. She likes working together with people rather than writing about people. Her research examines how digital technologies and their impact on our everyday lives are co-created through cultural, professional, and interpersonal contexts. She also has ongoing research projects on the societal relevance of digital heritage and critical impact frameworks for cultural and creative industries. Pille is the president of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

DISTRIBUTING INSTRUCTIVE AND LEGITIMATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION: COVID-19 PRESS CONFERENCES IN SCANDINAVIA

ANNA ELISABETH HASSELSTRÖM
Kristiania University College, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

This study presents a thematic analysis of press conferences conducted by public health authorities in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines how pandemic-related Scandinavian press conferences framed instructive messages to resonate with the public, provide explanatory information, and offer actionable guidance in accordance with the IDEA model. In addition, this study expands on the IDEA model to include legitimacy of crisis leaders. Overall, the three Scandinavian countries implemented all dimension of the IDEA model and legitimacy. However, differences emerged between the countries, with Norway prioritizing internalization, explanation, and legitimacy and Denmark similarly prioritizing internalization and legitimacy, but action instead of explanation. Meanwhile, Sweden prioritized explanation, emphasizing data transparency and scientific information.

KEYWORDS

Public Health Authorities • Crisis Communication • COVID-19 Pandemic • IDEA model • Legitimacy • Press Conferences

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges by threatening public health, straining healthcare systems, and disrupting economic and educational sectors (Coombs, 2023), yet public trust remained high in Scandinavia where a “rally-around-the-flag” came into effect during the beginning of the pandemic (Johansson et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024). This trust largely remained relatively high throughout the pandemic, despite Sweden experiencing varied levels of polarization (Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021).

Early on, press conferences became a vital means of communication for public health authorities (PHAs) and government officials to share recommendations, regulations, and updates about the evolving situation. These briefings helped establish a sense of urgency, validate government measures, and build public trust (Esaiasson et al., 2021). Swedish PHAs held daily briefings to explain their mitigation-focused approach (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021). In Norway, PHAs collaborated with government officials to conduct daily press conferences during the initial phase of the pandemic. Similarly, in Denmark, PHAs, government officials, and Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, used a press conference to announce major policy decisions in March 2020 (Kjeldsen, 2023), after which, PHAs held briefings via live updates on social media.

Press conferences have long played a pivotal role in crisis communication, serving as direct channels through which authorities can inform the public, explain decisions, and manage uncertainty (Hayek, 2024; Hernández, 2024; Scacco & Wiemer, 2019). Indeed, press conferences can accurately be described as a venue where the dynamics of political power intersect with media authority, often leading to a contestation of roles between these two influential entities (Nord, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of press conferences intensified as governments relied on this mode of communication not only to disseminate evolving public health information but also to convey a sense of control and competence (He et al., 2023; Wodak, 2021), thus setting the tone for the crisis management. Indeed, figures such as Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland (Higgins et al., 2024), and Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand (McGuire et al., 2020), exemplified how effective press conference performances helped shape public perceptions of crisis leadership. In contrast, contradictory or inconsistent messaging from leaders like President Donald Trump in the USA (Just et al., 2022) and Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the UK (McVittie, 2023) undermined public trust and diminished the credibility of government responses. As such, press conferences during crises serve a dual function: they are vehicles for instructional communication and instruments for reinforcing the legitimacy of governmental action. This dual role highlights the need to un-

derstand press conferences as a mode of instructional communication that addresses stakeholders' informational needs, as well as a means to address broader factors, such as legitimizing state authority and crisis management, both of which are crucial in high-stakes, high-uncertainty situations like pandemics.

The current study examines the communication strategies employed during press conferences, focusing on how spokespersons balance instructions with the need to maintain public trust and legitimacy. It utilizes the IDEA model (Sellnow et al., 2023) as a primary framework, which offers a structured approach to analyzing instructional communication by addressing stakeholders' informational needs. Specifically, through a thematic analysis of key press conferences conducted by PHAs in Scandinavia, this research provides a deeper understanding of how crisis messages were crafted to encourage public compliance and clarify risks. Moreover, since Scandinavia has relatively high levels of institutional trust, transparent governance, and public reliance on expert-driven communication (Dahlen & Skirbekk, 2021), this research also demonstrates how PHAs justified national crisis management during the pandemic to maintain institutional trust and credibility (Badu et al., 2023; Breslin et al., 2022; Esaiasson et al., 2021; Kjeldsen, 2023; Kjeldsen et al., 2022).

Notable differences were observed between the countries. Norway focused on internalization, offering explanations, and ensuring legitimacy. Denmark emphasized internalization, actionable guidance, and maintaining legitimacy. Meanwhile, Sweden prioritized providing explanations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Scandinavia and COVID-19

The Scandinavian countries are notable for their similarities and high levels of institutional trust. However, the pandemic management of each country highlighted distinct country differences, as the measures adopted and the framing and justification for the measures taken corresponded to the cultural differences between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Bjørkdahl et al., 2021).

Denmark adopted a strategy characterized by strict mandates and rapid governmental interventions, strongly influenced by cultural norms of respecting personal boundaries and upholding collective accountability (Mens et al., 2021; Olagnier & Mogensen, 2020). Norway similarly implemented stringent responses but shaped its approach through its cultural values of voluntary participation and a deep trust in the government as a protector of individual autonomy, i.e., a belief that the common good aligns with indi-

vidual interests (Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2022). At the onset of the pandemic, Kjeldsen (2023) observed that Danish and Norwegian press conferences were used to put government officials in the forefront while projecting a unified front with PHAs, showcasing a collaborative yet hierarchical crisis management structure. According to Bjørkdahl et al. (2021), this strategy involved political leaders taking charge while public health experts provided support and legitimacy for government decision-making.

Sweden, unlike its Scandinavian neighbors, did not implement strict lockdowns during the pandemic. Instead, the country relied on individuals to take responsibility under non-binding recommendations (Johansson & Vigsø, 2024). The objective was to impose restrictions without overly shutting down society. However, as Sweden's pandemic death toll surpassed that of the other Nordic countries, it was seen as an indication of a failing strategy (Johansson & Vigsø, 2024). Despite this, support for the government and its agencies remained high (Johansson & Vigsø, 2024), and according to Abdelzadeh and Sedelius (2024), satisfaction with government communication and the management of COVID-19 in Sweden increased over time, even though trust in institutions slightly declined, which has been attributed to growing politicization (Soto, 2022).

According to a study conducted by Rasmussen et al. (2023) on communicative leadership by political leaders and public health officials in Scandinavia during March and April 2020, press conferences were used to justify expert knowledge and authority. Furthermore, the study found that Sweden emphasized evidence-based justifications for measures, highlighted the economic fallout from lockdowns, and downplayed the virus threat. In contrast, Denmark and Norway acted swiftly, applying precautionary principles and prioritizing the minimization of deaths without pursuing herd immunity as Denmark implemented limited restrictions and Norway focused on resilience and fostering solidarity.

2.2. Press Conference as Crisis Management

During outbreaks, government officials and PHAs aim to build public trust and solidarity while balancing public health concerns with individual rights (Nihlén Fahlquist, 2021). Press conferences serve as an effective means of communication, functioning as a tool for behavioral “nudge” interventions, i.e., techniques such as invoking fear or peer pressure to encourage compliance with public health measures (Dodsworth, 2021; Gill & Lennon, 2022).

Press conferences are a cost- and time-effective format that allows for the dissemination of vital information to various stakeholders, including the media, regulators, and different community groups (Badu et al., 2023; Kjeldsen, 2023; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Press conferences combine speech,

visuals, and symbols to convey information that is adaptable for various formats, including shorter videos, audio clips, and written transcriptions, which allows for outreach to diverse segments of the population (Kjeldsen, 2023; Scacco & Wiemer, 2019).

Press conferences serve two primary purposes: to inform the public and to shape news coverage by providing visual elements for news stories (Allen et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, press conferences in Scandinavia became especially important for delivering announcements, addressing media inquiries, clarifying government actions, resolving uncertainties, and fostering a sense of urgency among the public (Kjeldsen, 2023). Indeed, Byrman and Westum (2024) argue that the Swedish Public Health Agency effectively built trust through press conferences by featuring a consistent structure and multimodal interaction despite discussing two main sensitive topics: death tolls and face masks.

Studies of the UK and the World Health Organization (WHO) briefings similarly underscore how press conferences mediate uncertainty and reinforce official narratives. Visual data presentations, for instance, provided a sense of control during the UK's early pandemic response (Allen et al., 2024), while the WHO maintained a stable, formal tone aimed at fostering trust, hope, and resilience despite shifting emotional currents (He et al., 2023). Meanwhile, trust-restoring strategies in televised briefings often sought to deflect blame and reframe failures, sometimes at the expense of long-term public health goals (Bunnag & Chaemsaitong, 2024).

2.3. IDEA Model

A central challenge with utilizing press conferences during epidemics and pandemics is translating complex, technical, and scientific information into messages that are accessible and actionable for diverse audiences (Borchelt & Nielsen, 2014; Sellnow et al., 2023). Public health and crisis communication scholars emphasize the importance of tailoring information so that laypeople and non-experts can understand what is happening, why it matters, and what they should do in response (Frisby et al., 2013; Sellnow et al., 2023). This approach—often referred to as instructive crisis communication—is designed not only to inform but to increase stakeholder self-efficacy and prompt protective behaviors (Coombes, 2023; Mileti & Peek, 2000; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Seeger, 2006). Instructive crisis messages, particularly in high-uncertainty situations such as pandemics, should achieve three outcomes: affective engagement, cognitive understanding, and behavioral change (Johansson et al., 2021). These learning outcomes serve as benchmarks for effective crisis communication. A common misstep during public health crises, therefore, relates to public health spokespersons focusing on

abstract scientific data (e.g., statistics and long-term projections) and failing to offer actionable steps, as this imbalance risks inducing fear or apathy rather than informed action (Sellnow et al., 2023; Slovic & Västfjäll, 2015; Wickline & Sellnow, 2013).

To evaluate whether the Scandinavian PHAs' pandemic messages aimed to foster public understanding and action, this study employs the IDEA model as an analytical framework. The model conceptualizes instructive risk and crisis communication through four interrelated components (Johansson et al., 2021; Sellnow et al., 2023):

Internalization (I): Capturing attention by demonstrating how the crisis personally affects the audience, highlighting relevance, proximity, and urgency to foster engagement.

Distribution (D): Spread the message across diverse platforms to ensure reach and accessibility for varied audiences.

Explanation (E): Offering clear, credible, and understandable information about the crisis, its causes, and consequences using non-technical language.

Action (A): Providing specific and feasible instructions for self-protection and behavior change.

The IDEA model has proven effective in various contexts, ranging from foodborne illness outbreaks to pandemic communication, and has been validated within Scandinavian cultures (Frisby et al., 2013; Johansson et al., 2021; Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2018; Sellnow et al., 2019; Sellnow et al., 2015). By analyzing how Scandinavian authorities utilized press conferences to communicate the risks to public health, explain the situation, and inform the public of actionable guidance, this study assesses the instructive strategic measures employed by Scandinavian PHAs in their press conferences in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.4. Maintaining Legitimate Crisis Authority

While the IDEA model provides a framework for analyzing message content and structure, message impact is mediated by the credibility, reputation, and perceived transparency of the sender (Badu et al., 2023; Berg et al., 2021; Coombs, 2023; Sturges, 1994). In other words, instructive messages may fail to produce the desired outcomes if the public does not trust the institutions or spokespersons delivering them (Badu et al., 2023; Balog-Way et al., 2020; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014) nor except the authority or logic of the official crisis management recommendations (e.g., vaccination) over other nonofficial recommendation from competing sources (e.g., using hydroxychloroquine) (Islam et al., 2021). Thus, in formatting instructive messages, PHAs also benefit from considering the concept of legitimacy, which serves as a foundation that addresses the normative and cognitive

forces influencing, shaping, and empowering organizational actors (Suchman, 1995). For this study, legitimacy refers the creditability and competency of PHAs, along with ability to act in the public's best interest (Diers-Lawson, 2019; Györfy, 2018).

Public health crisis leaders operate within complex sociopolitical environments, where public trust in formal institutions can significantly affect the success of crisis management efforts (Abraham, 2009; Ndlela, 2019; Ullmann-Margalit, 2004). A high level of institutional legitimacy can enhance message reception, extend audience reach, minimize confusion, and facilitate coordinated public responses (Badu et al., 2023; Seeger, 2006; van Dijk & Alinejad, 2020). While such legitimacy, in the form of credibility and trustworthiness, of crisis leadership and crisis management can be assumed through studies employing the IDEA model via the concept of internalization (Sellnow et al., 2020), it is often overlooked in empirical studies.

Legitimacy is not static; it must be continuously communicated and reinforced, especially during crises. Indeed, through communicative strategies, crisis leaders can promote legitimacy by emphasizing transparency, consistency, professional competence, and respect for public concerns (Coombs, 2023; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Ihlen & Vranic, 2024; Sellnow et al., 2023). For example, PHAs who adhere to a bureaucratic-scientific ethos can clearly articulate their expertise which can bolster public confidence (Maslowska et al., 2025). Likewise, messaging that is transparent, empathetic, and coordinated across agencies contributes to a coherent and credible crisis narrative (Liu, 2015; Skogerbø et al., 2024; Veil & Ojeda, 2010).

This study, therefore, integrates legitimacy as an additional dimension of IDEA-based instructive communication. While the IDEA model focuses on the *what* and *how* of crisis messaging, legitimacy concerns the *who* behind the message. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing as legitimacy enables instructive messages to be received, while clear and instructive messaging can help sustain legitimacy. Examining these dimensions is particularly relevant in the Scandinavian context, where public trust and institutional credibility are traditionally high but were tested during the pandemic (Abdelzadeh & Sedelius, 2024; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Power et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024). The integration of IDEA and legitimacy hence offers a more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes *effective* crisis communication in high-trust democracies in the context of a prolonged health crisis.

2.5. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to examine the public health crisis communication strategies of PHAs in Scandinavia as distributed via press conferences.

Considering the varying approaches to crisis management between Sweden, Norway, and Denmark and the differences in expectations of their citizens (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021), it stands to reason that the Scandinavian PHAs adopted distinct strategies in terms of instructive crisis communication. For instance, the collaboration between Danish and Norwegian PHAs and political leadership likely resulted in spokespersons prioritizing the establishment of government legitimacy and fostering a sense of communal responsibility through internalization while providing clear and actionable guidance. However, according to an analysis by Kjeldsen (2023) of press conferences, Norwegian spokespersons likely also favored disseminating explanations. In contrast, Sweden's reliance on voluntary guidelines and the independence of PHAs during press conferences suggests a lesser focus on governmental legitimacy and a communication strategy that centers on offering comprehensive explanations and actionable guidance to encourage citizens to adhere to recommendations.

Based on the above, this study poses the following research questions:

- *RQ1: How did Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish PHAs adopt elements of the IDEA model?*
- *RQ2: How did Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish PHAs adopt elements of legitimacy?*

These research questions will guide the subsequent analysis of Scandinavian press conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, to explore the country differences, this study asks:

- *RQ3: How did the communication strategies reflect existing cultural norms?*

3. METHOD AND DATA

This study examined press conferences conducted by PHAs across various media formats, including official websites and social media clips. Full recordings of these media briefings were selected as they represent the most direct form of communication, unfiltered by the media into sound bites or condensed formats. This approach allowed for an analysis of both prepared statements and responses to media inquiries.

The press conference served as the unit of analysis in this study. The included video material, sourced from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, consisted of 22 conferences. The conferences included are those that feature the national PHAs, either independently, as seen with Sweden and later Denmark, or in collaboration with government officials, as with Norway

and initially Denmark. In total, these briefings comprised just over 15 hours of content.

The selected briefings were organized around four distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, corresponding to key moments following announcements by the WHO regarding new developments in the spread of the coronavirus or updates about it (see Table 1). Each chosen event had an equal impact on all three countries, facilitating a comparative analysis of their potential responses. The study defined these events as week-long periods following each WHO statement, providing a timeframe deemed sufficient for PHAs and government officials to respond and update the public on important pandemic milestones.

Table 1: Dates and Events during COVID-19

Date	Event	Denmark – Press Conferences & Combined Video Length	Norway – Press Conferences & Combined Video Length	Sweden – Press Conferences & Combined Video Length
20-03-11	WHO Director-General declared COVID-19 a pandemic	1 Press Conferences / 59:03 Min:Sek	5 Press Conferences / 193:27 Min:Sek	5 Press Conferences / 172:76 Min:Sek
20-12-21	The European Union approved the first COVID-19 vaccine	1 Press Conferences / 25:18 Min:Sek	1 Press Conferences / 63:38 Min:Sek	2 Press Conferences / 111:68 Min:Sek
21-02-02	A mutation of the coronavirus that may reduce vaccine effectiveness has emerged in the United Kingdom.	2 Press Conferences / 46:96 Min:Sek	0 Press Conferences	2 Press Conferences / 117:46 Min:Sek
21-05-31	WHO has assigned labels for key variants of SARS-CoV-2 using letters of the Greek alphabet.	1 Press Conferences / 13:12 Min:Sek	1 Press Conferences / 48:06 Min:Sek	1 Press Conferences / 52:30 Min:Sek
		Total: 5 Press Conferences	Total: 7 Press Conferences	Total: 10 Press Conferences

3.1. Analytical Method

This analysis followed an iterative process based on a six-step approach by Naeem et al. (2023) to thematic analysis. Utilizing transcriptions from the press conferences, the analysis began by familiarizing oneself with the transcribed data and identifying preliminary themes and representative quotes that reflect diverse perspectives relevant to the research questions. The second step involved a thorough examination of the data to identify recurring patterns and key terms through open coding. The third step included segmenting the data into short phrases or words into codes that encapsulate core themes and elements. The fourth step involved developing themes by grouping these elements into meaningful categories to uncover patterns and relationships related to the research questions via

axial coding. The fifth step focused on conceptualizing and defining emerging concepts from the data, refining them based on themes established by Frandsen et al. (2016), Sellnow-Richmond et al. (2018), Sellnow and Sellnow (2019), and Skogerbø et al. (2024). The final step involved developing a conceptual model that represents the data (see Tables 2-5).

Final thematic categories were organized as follows: *Internalization* (identified people, specific places, time, degree of negative impact, additional negative impact, and empathy), *Explanation* (similar events, other countries, government responses, credible sources, and scientific information) including the level of intelligibility, *Action* (guidance, preparation, and examples) and *Legitimacy* (ability to act, inter-organizational cooperation, expertise, resources, known/unknown facts, and accountability).

While the IDEA model includes Distribution, the empirical material is limited to recorded press conferences. These briefings represent a single communication channel in this study. Thus, the distribution component, which concerns multi-platform dissemination strategies, lies outside the scope of this analysis.

Table 2. Internalization

Theme	Example Quote
Identified people	<i>"The age distribution shows that the majority of cases are between the ages of 40 and 60..."¹</i>
Specific places	<i>"Where many people are gathered - daycare centers, schools, educational institutions, activities, events, public transport."²</i>
Time	<i>"...that is, by spreading the infection over time, spreading the disease over time, can we get a manageable situation in the health service"³</i>
Degree of negative impact	<i>"Today there are 514 Danes infected."⁴</i>
Additional negative impact	<i>"Businesses will suffer losses."⁵</i>
Empathy	<i>"We must not panic, but we must help each other, show energy, thinking of others, especially those who are vulnerable."⁶</i>

- 1 The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020, March 11). *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus)* March 11, 2020. <https://share.mediaflow.com/se/?SDFE907K30>
- 2 Norwegian Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health and Welfare. (2020, March 12) *The corona situation: Press conference on new measures to combat the coronavirus* <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/pressemeldinger/2020/pressekonferanse-om-nye-tiltak-for-a-bekjempe-koronaviruset/id2693286/>
- 3 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus)* March 11, 2020.
- 4 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus)* March 11, 2020.
- 5 The Danish Prime Minister's Office . (2020, March 11) *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoeede-om-covid-19-den-11-marts-2020/>
- 6 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

Table 3. Explanation

Theme	Example Quote
Similar events	"We've managed to get through tough times before, and I'm absolutely sure we'll be able to do it now too." ⁷
Other countries	"Italy is in lockdown. In the hospitals, there is a shortage of ventilators and staff." ⁸
Government responses	"We will no longer focus on testing travelers from specific risk areas, as these have become increasingly diffuse." ⁹
Credible sources	"WHO says that we need to increase the production of this type of equipment in the world by 40 percent..." ¹⁰
Scientific information	"The graph here shows how the cases have been reported. Note that the latest bars may contain some lag, but they still give an indication of the trend." ¹¹

Table 4. Action

Theme	Example Quote
Guidance	"Avoid contact with the elderly if you have symptoms" ¹²
Preparation	"Restrictions on visits may become relevant if the spread of infection increases" ¹³
Examples	"...to make sure that we all understand what was and what one can do - both as individuals and collectively, for example at workplaces." ¹⁴

Table 5. Legitimacy

Theme	Example Quote
Ability to act	"It is not the individual citizen's responsibility to ensure that they have what they need. We make sure of that; the authorities make sure of that through the state's crisis management preparedness." ¹⁵
Interorganizational cooperation	"Money that we will collaborate on, together with the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Public Health Agency..." ¹⁶
Expertise	"The Public Health Agency - which stands for expert knowledge about the infection and healthcare..." ¹⁷

7 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

8 Norwegian Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health and Welfare. *The corona situation: Press conference on new measures to combat the coronavirus*

9 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

10 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

11 Norwegian Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health and Welfare. *The corona situation: Press conference on new measures to combat the coronavirus*

12 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

13 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

14 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

15 The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020, March 16). *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 16, 2020* <https://share.mediaflow.com/se/?SDFE907K30>

16 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

17 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 16, 2020*

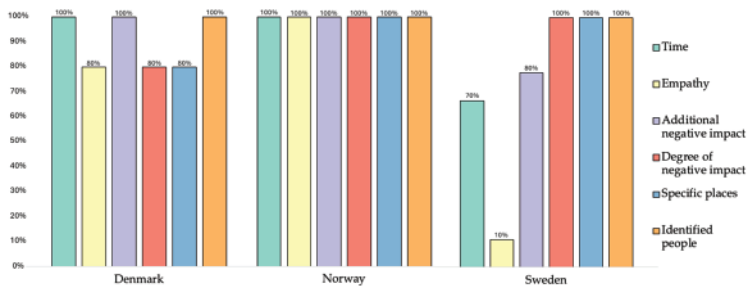
Resources	"... The biggest challenge right now is access to protective equipment." ¹⁸
Known/Unknown facts	"We know too little. In the near future, knowledge will also be generated from Norway" ¹⁹
Accountability	"...we may have learned to be more aware of our health and the world around us in a way we didn't before" ²⁰

The findings are presented as patterns of themes that emerged per press conference. The Swedish Public Health Institute conducted daily press conferences, while their Norwegian and Danish counterparts held press conferences less frequently. As a result, findings are presented as percentages relative to their respective totals—for instance, Sweden held ten press conferences compared to Denmark's five (see Table 1)—to ensure a comparable analysis of thematic elements across the three countries. Specifically, the frequency analysis account for the average number of elements per theme relative to the total number of press conferences conducted by each country.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Internalization

Figure 1. Comparative frequency analysis of elements of Internalization



The thematic analysis, as shown in Figure 1, revealed that Norway consistently prioritized all elements of internalization across all press confer-

18 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus)* March 16, 2020

19 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus)* March 11, 2020

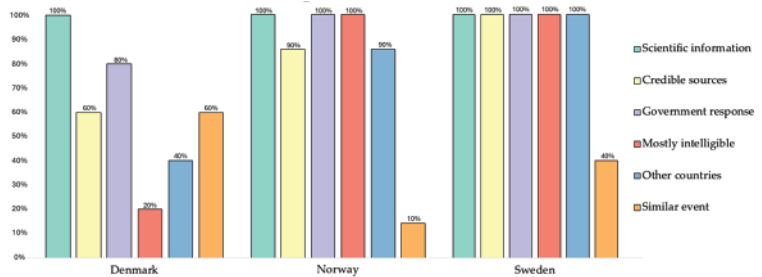
20 The Danish National Board of Health (2021, Februari 4). *ASK ABOUT THE COVID VACCINES* Thomas Senderowitz, director of the Danish Medicines Agency, and Søren Brostrøm, director of the Danish Health Authority. <https://www.facebook.com/sundhedsstyrelsenDK/videos/sp%C3%B8rg-om-covid-vaccinernethomas-senderowitz-direkt%C3%B8r-i-l%C3%A6gemiddelstyrelsen-og-s%C3%B8/736158977012226/>

ences, more so than Denmark and Sweden. In Denmark, every press conference identified people affected by COVID-19, addressed issues related to time, and discussed additional negative impact of the pandemic. In 80% of these appearances, spokespersons expressed empathy for those impacted by the pandemic, acknowledged the extent of the degree of negative impact caused by COVID-19, and identified specific places that were affected.

In contrast, the patterns for Sweden were different. In all appearances, spokespersons referenced identified people and specific places affected by the pandemic, and they included information on the degree of negative impact. However, mentions of additional negative impact appeared in only 80% of the press conferences, while time was addressed in 60% of appearances. Empathy was expressed in just 10% of the Swedish press conferences.

4.2. Explanation

Figure 2. Comparative frequency analysis of elements of Explanation

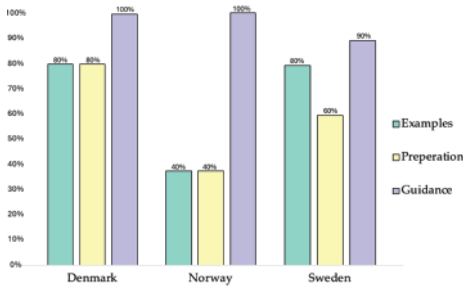


As illustrated in Figure 2, the findings indicate that Sweden is the country that prioritized providing explanations most consistently. Their spokespersons included all elements of explanation except for mentions of similar events which occurred in 40% of press conferences. Norway shows a similar trend, with all appearances incorporating scientific information and details about specific government responses, and credible sources and references to other countries in 90% and to similar events in only 10%. All press conferences adhered to mostly intelligible communication.

In contrast, Denmark, despite including scientific information in all appearances, provided explanations to a lesser degree. In Denmark, specific government responses are mentioned in 80% of press conferences, while mentions of credible sources and comparisons to similar events are included in 60% of the appearances. Contrasts with other countries' COVID-19 responses are included in only 40% of the appearances. Furthermore, only 20% of Denmark's briefings featured mostly intelligible information.

4.3. Action

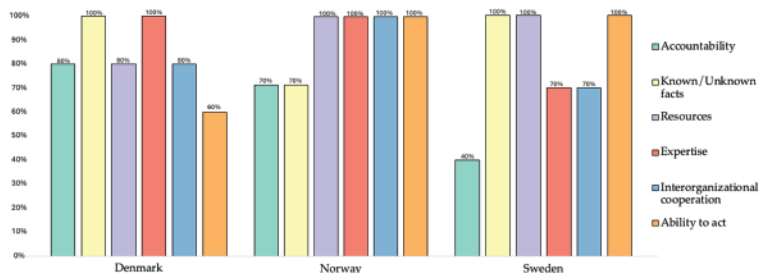
Figure 3. Comparative frequency analysis of elements of Action



In the comparison of the theme of action, as shown in Figure 3, both Norway and Denmark consistently provided guidance to the public in all cases. Sweden on the other hand, included guidance in 90% of their appearances. Regarding providing examples, Sweden and Denmark incorporate examples of action in 80% of their press conferences, while Norway does so in only 40% of cases. Additionally, Denmark offered recommended actions for preparation in 80% of appearances, compared to Sweden, which preparation in 60% of appearances, and Norway, which included actionable preparation recommendations in only 40% of their presentations.

4.4. Legitimacy

Figure 4. Comparison of elements of Legitimacy



In examining the use of legitimacy, as illustrated in Figure 4, Norway consistently incorporated references to expertise, inter-organizational cooperation, ability to act, and information about resources in all their appearances. In 70% of the instances, spokespersons expressed appreciation for their accountability and referenced known and unknown facts regarding COVID-19 and related issues.

For Denmark, language regarding expertise and known and unknown facts of COVID-19 was present in all press conferences. In 80% of their appearances, spokespersons acknowledged their accountability, resources, and inter-organizational cooperation. Additionally, their ability to act was mentioned in 60% of the press conferences and briefings.

Meanwhile, Swedish spokespersons prioritized sharing information about their ability to act, resources, and known and unknown facts about the COVID-19 pandemic in all their appearances. References to expertise and inter-organizational cooperation were included in 70% of their press conferences, while the acknowledgment of their accountability appeared in 40% of their press conferences.

5. DISCUSSION

Building on previous research regarding the IDEA model and effective crisis communication (Badu et al., 2023; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Ihlen et al., 2024; Sellnow et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024; van Dijk & Alinejad, 2020), this study examined how PHAs in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden utilized press conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver instructive crisis communication and establish authoritative legitimacy.

Norway stood out as the most consistent proponent of internalization strategies in its press conferences, showing empathy, recognizing affected peoples, discussing time-related aspects, and acknowledging further adverse effects in all appearances. This comprehensive incorporation of internalization highlights a significant effort to create messages with emotional and prosocial appeals as well as public assurance (Sellnow et al., 2023). Denmark similarly exhibited a strong dedication to internalization. Each appearance acknowledged the affected groups, included spatial details, and addressed the pandemic's effects. Additionally, empathy was conveyed in most presentations, showcasing an attempt to include emotional appeals, albeit not as consistently as in Norway.

Conversely, Sweden adopted a more informational approach. While Swedish representatives consistently mentioned the impacted individuals and locations, and discussed the severity of the effects, expressions of empathy were infrequent. Additionally, references to time were limited in just over half of the appearances, suggesting that Swedish spokespersons did not prioritize reassuring the public of the duration of the crisis or recommendation, nor did they prioritize emotional appeals. Instead, Sweden consistently prioritized providing explanations, scientific data, information about government actions, and references to reliable sources, indicating a preference for a cognitive rather than an affective approach (Sellnow et al., 2023). For Norway, the theme of explanation

showed a similar pattern emerging, with a prioritization of all elements of explanations except for references to similar events. Denmark, while sometimes including scientific information, provided fewer comparisons and was less consistent in using clear language, which may have hindered public comprehension.

Both Norway and Denmark provided actionable guidance in all their appearances. Sweden offered similar advice, but not in every instance. Interestingly, the decision to rely on mostly voluntary recommendation did not encourage the Swedish PHAs to promote actionable guidance consistently. However, both Sweden and Denmark were more consistent than Norway in providing actionable examples, which indicates a cognitive appeal. Additionally, Denmark, more than Norway and Sweden, offered preparatory advice, and the overall prioritization of the theme of action suggest that Danish spokespersons focused on promoting and improving the audience's self-efficacy.

For legitimacy, Norway consistently emphasized its expertise, resources, inter-agency collaboration, and ability to act. Furthermore, Norwegian officials often emphasized their accountability and transparency regarding both known and unknown facts—factors that Ihlen et al. (2024) argue fostered Norway's high institutional trust and public support.

Denmark likewise placed importance on legitimacy, with expertise and acknowledgment of factual uncertainties being included in all speeches, indicating a strategy to legitimize government decision-making. However, Danish spokespersons did not prioritize emphasizing their ability to act, again suggesting that Denmark's communication focused on the public's self-efficacy in managing the situation. Sweden, on the other hand, emphasized its ability to act, transparency regarding both known and unknown facts, and resource availability in all press releases, but placed less emphasis on its expertise, inter-organizational cooperation, and accountability, in line with an overarching prioritization of factual information related to COVID-19.

In terms of reflecting existing cultural norms, the patterns in which the themes were utilized are alignment with previous research (Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Ihlen & Vranic, 2024; Kjeldsen, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2023). Indeed, Norwegian PHAs, standing on stage with government officials, showed a preference for transparency, prosocial and emotional appeals, and collaborative leadership. Meanwhile, Denmark's emphasis on identifying the public, promoting actionable guidance and preparations, transparency, and expertise is reflected in the country's structured yet compassionate leadership, demonstrating Denmark's crisis management strategy of political hierarchy while also pro-

moting collective accountability by emphasizing messages that resonate with the public and increase self-protective actions (Mens et al., 2021; Olgarnier & Mogensen, 2020). Finally, the rational-technical approach observed in Sweden mirrors both institutional and national preferences for providing cognitive understanding of the public health situation (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Kjeldsen, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2023).

This study makes two contributions to crisis communication research. First, it delivers empirical validation of the IDEA model's effectiveness as distributed via press conferences during a pandemic in high trust societies (Abdelzadeh & Sedelius, 2024; Johansson et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024). Second, it broadens the understanding of effective crisis leadership by demonstrating that fostering legitimacy can enhance instructive crisis communication when aligned with cultural and institutional contexts. As governments prepare for future public health emergencies, these insights underscore the importance of tailoring instructional communication strategies that align with national values and communicative norms, which may enhance message effectiveness and foster public compliance.

5.1. Limitations and Suggestion for Future Research

The primary focus of this study was to identify overall thematic differences in the use of instructive messaging during press conferences across the Scandinavian countries, as well as to assess elements of legitimacy. Therefore, a limitation of this study was that it did not include a more granular analysis of the frequency of each element per press conference.

A further limitation was the inclusion of press conferences held in Norway and initially in Denmark which included government officials, entailing that the findings from Norway and Denmark may reflect the inclusion of politicians in the press conferences rather than merely cultural contexts. However, since these appearances were part of the PHAs' strategy for press conferences, they were included in the study.

The limited timeframe selected for this study resulted in a dataset consisting of 22 press conferences. Moreover, this study excluded briefings that were held exclusively by government officials. While this allowed for a focused analysis of PHAs' communication during a critical phase of the pandemic, future research should consider extending the time period to facilitate an analysis of a larger data set for more detailed and comparative analysis.

Finally, achieving affective, cognitive, and behavioral change, as well as legitimacy, requires a shift in perception among stakeholders. Therefore, future research would benefit from analyzing public perceptions of legitimacy alongside messaging that aligns with the IDEA model.

Anna Elisabeth Hasselström is a PhD student in the Department of Communication at Kristiania University College in Oslo, Norway. Her research focuses on risk and crisis communication, particularly in contexts that affect the public sector and health communication. Her research interests pertain to how public perception and stakeholder relationships evolve during crises, how politics and culture influence crisis communication, and platformization of risk and crisis communication.

ORCID: 0009-0006-1896-5777

e-mail: elisabeth.hasselstrom@kristiania.no

Funding

No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Conflict of interest statement

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

REFERENCES

- Abdelzadeh, A., & Sedelius, T. (2024). Building trust in times of crisis: A panel study of the influence of satisfaction with COVID-19 communication and management. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 32(1), e12531. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12531>
- Abraham, T. (2009). Risk and outbreak communication: lessons from alternative paradigms. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 87, 604-607. <https://doi.org/10.2471/blt.08.058149>
- Allen, W. L., Justyna, B.-G., & Grek, S. (2024). Next slide please: the politics of visualization during COVID-19 press briefings. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(3), 729-755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2160784>
- Badu, J., Kruke, B. I., & Saetren, G. B. (2023). Crisis communication and trustworthiness among crisis actors: towards a typology of crisis management difficulties. *Safety in Extreme Environments*, 5(2), 119-130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42797-023-00074-8>
- Baekkeskov, E., Olivier, R., & Öberg, P. (2021). Monotonous or pluralistic public discourse? Reason-giving and dissent in Denmark's and Sweden's early 2020 COVID-19 responses. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(8), 1321-1343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942158>
- Balog-Way, D., McComas, K., & Besley, J. (2020). The Evolving Field of Risk Communication. *Risk Analysis*, 40(S1), 2240-2262. <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.13615>
- Berg, S. H., O'Hara, J. K., Shortt, M. T., Thune, H., Brønnick, K. K., Lungu, D. A., Røislien, J., & Wiig, S. (2021). Health authorities' health risk communication with the public during pandemics: a rapid scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 1401. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11468-3>
- Bjørkdahl, K., Kjeldsen, J. E., Villadsen, L., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Argumentum ad solidaritatem: Rhetorical Leadership Strategies in Scandinavia During COVID-19. In M. Lewis, E. Govender, & K. Holland (Eds.), *Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 163-184). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_9
- Borchelt, R. E., & Nielsen, K. H. (2014). Public relations in science: Managing the trust portfolio. In M. Bucchi & B. Trench (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of public communication of science and technology* (pp. 74-85). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203483794>
- Breslin, S., Blok, A., Enggaard, T., Gårdhus, T., & Pedersen, M. (2022). "Affective Publics": Performing Trust on Danish Twitter during the COVID-19 Lockdown. *Current Anthropology*, 63(2), 211-218. <https://doi.org/10.1086/719645>
- Bunnag, O., & Chaemsaitong, K. (2024). Negotiating trust through COVID-19 press briefings: A multimodal analysis. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.23090.bun>

- Byrman, G., & Westum, A. (2024). Trustworthiness in the Swedish Strategies for Covid-19 in Recorded Press Conferences from the Public Health Agency of Sweden. In B. Schirrmacher & N. Mousavi (Eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media* (pp. 71-97). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_4
- Christensen, T., & Læg Reid, P. (2020). Balancing Governance Capacity and Legitimacy: How the Norwegian Government Handled the COVID-19 Crisis as a High Performer. *Public Administration Review*, 80(5), 774-779. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13241>
- Coombs, W. T. (2023). *Ongoing crisis communication : planning, managing, and responding*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Dahlen, Ø. P., & Skirbekk, H. (2021). How trust was maintained in Scandinavia through the first crisis of modernity. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 26(1), 23-39. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-01-2020-0036>
- Diers-Lawson, A. (2019). *Crisis communication : managing stakeholder relationships*. Routledge.
- Dodsworth, L. (2021). *A state of fear : how the UK government weaponised fear during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Pinter & Martin.
- Esaiasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2021). How the coronavirus crisis affects citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from 'the Swedish experiment'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748-760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- Frandsen, F., Johansen, W., & Houlberg Salomonsen, H. (2016). Responding to institutional complexity:: Reputation and crisis management in Danish municipalities. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 20(2), 7-38. <https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.v20i2.14953>
- Frisby, B. N., Sellnow, D. D., Lane, D. R., Veil, S. R., & Sellnow, T. L. (2013). Instruction in crisis situations: Targeting learning preferences and self-efficacy. *Risk Management*, 15, 250-271. <https://doi.org/10.1057/rm.20137>
- Gill, K. A., & Lennon, H. (2022). Conformity Through Fear: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of COVID-19 Information Adverts. *CADAAD Journal*, 14(1), 22-44. <https://doi.org/10.21827/cadaad.14.1.41603>
- Györfy, D. (2018). *Trust and crisis management in the European Union* (Vol. 244). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hayek, L. (2024). Media framing of government crisis communication during Covid-19. *Media and Communication*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7774>
- He, S., Li, D., Liu, C. H., Xiong, Y., Liu, D., Feng, J., & Wen, J. (2023). Crisis communication in the WHO COVID-19 press conferences: A retrospective analysis. *Plos one*, 18(3), e0282855. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0282855>
- Hernández, A. (2024). Journalists' questions during crisis. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 13(1), 74-105. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jaic.00024.her>
- Higgins, M., Smith, A., & McKay, F. (2024). Emotional Authority in Presenting the Later COVID-19 Strategy: The Speeches and Statements of Scotland's Nicola Sturgeon. In F. León-Solís (Ed.), *The Nation in the Time of the Pandemic: Media and Political Discourse across Countries during the COVID-19 Crisis* (pp. 177-196). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-56662-2_9
- Ihlen, Ø., Nørholm Just, S., Kjeldsen, J. E., Mølster, R., Strand Offerdal, T., Rasmussen, J., & Skogerbo, E. (2024). *Navigating Pandemic Phases: Public Health Authority Communication during COVID-19 in Norway*. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Ihlen, Ø., & Vranic, A. (2024). Dealing with dissent from the medical ranks: Public health authorities and COVID-19 communication. *Public Understanding of Science*, 33(4), 414-429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625231204563>
- Islam, M. S., Kamal, A. M., Kabir, A., Southern, D. L., Khan, S. H., Hasan, S. M. M., Sarkar, T., Sharmin, S., Das, S., Roy, T., Harun, M. G. D., Chughtai, A. A., Homaira, N., & Seale, H. (2021). COVID-19 vaccine rumors and conspiracy theories: The need for cognitive inoculation against misinformation to improve vaccine adherence. *Plos one*, 16(5), e0251605. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0251605>
- Johansson, B., R., L. D., D., S. D., & Sellnow, T. L. (2021). No heat, no electricity, no water, oh no!: an

- IDEA model experiment in instructional risk communication. *Journal of Risk Research*, 24(12), 1576-1588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2021.1894468>
- Johansson, B., Sohlberg, J., & Esaiasson, P. (2023). Institutional trust and crisis management in high-trust societies : Rallies around the Nordic flags during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Ø. I. J. L. B. Johansson & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic : Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 285-301). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Johansson, B., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Sweden: Lone hero or stubborn outlier? In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political Communication and COVID-19* (pp. 155-164). Routledge.
- Johansson, B., & Vigsø, O. (2024). Sweden: The Quiet consensus. In I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & D. Lilleker (Eds.), *Risk Communication and COVID-19* (pp. 131-144). Routledge.
- Just, M. R., Saraceno, J., & Crigler, A. N. (2022). Trump Confronts COVID in Press Briefings and on Twitter. In P. J. Maarek (Ed.), *Manufacturing Government Communication on Covid-19 : A Comparative Perspective* (pp. 215-230). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09230-5_11
- Kjeldsen, J. E. (2023). Crafting a crisis : How the genre of the justifying press conference constituted the Covid-19 pandemic as an emergency and legitimised the power of authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In Ø. I. J. L. B. Johansson & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic : Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 97-120). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-5>
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Mølster, R., & Ihlen, Ø. (2022). Expert Uncertainty: Arguments Bolstering the Ethos of Expertise in Situations of Uncertainty. In S. Oswald, M. Lewiński, S. Greco, & S. Villata (Eds.), *The Pandemic of Argumentation* (pp. 85-103). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4_5
- Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images [Elektronisk resurs] the grammar of visual design*. Routledge.
- Liu, H. (2015). Constructing the GFC: Australian banking leaders during the financial 'crisis'. *Leadership*, 11(4), 424-450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015584537>
- Maslowska, E., Guo, Z., Oh, S.-H., & Smit, E. (2025). Exploring Public Health Agencies' Communication on Social Media in the Early Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic: An International Perspective. *European Journal of Health Communication*, 6(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.47368/ejhc.2025.101>
- McGuire, D., Cunningham, J., Reynolds, K., & Matthews-Smith, G. (2020). Beating the virus: an examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(4), 361-379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1779543>
- McVittie, C. (2023). Shaping the UK Government's public communications on COVID-19: general, follower, other? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 24(1), 23-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2021.2017333>
- Mens, H., Koch, A., Chaine, M., & Bengaard Andersen, A. (2021). The Hammer vs Mitigation-A comparative retrospective register study of the Swedish and Danish national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. *Apmis*, 129(7), 384-392. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apm.13133>
- Mileti, D. S., & Peek, L. (2000). The social psychology of public response to warnings of a nuclear power plant accident. *Journal of Hazardous Materials*, 75(2), 181-194. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-3894\(00\)00179-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-3894(00)00179-5)
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231205789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- Ndlela, M. N. (2019). A Stakeholder Approach to Risk Management. In M. N. Ndlela (Ed.), *Crisis Communication: A Stakeholder Approach* (pp. 53-75). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97256-5_4
- Nielsen, J. H., & Lindvall, J. (2021). Trust in government in Sweden and Denmark during the COVID-19 epidemic. *West European Politics*, 44(5-6), 1180-1204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1909964>

- Nihlén Fahlquist, J. (2021). The moral responsibility of governments and individuals in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 49(7), 815-820. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494821990250>
- Nilsen, A. C. E., & Skarpenes, O. (2022). Coping with COVID-19. Dugnad: a case of the moral premise of the Norwegian welfare state. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 42(3/4), 262-275. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-07-2020-0263>
- Nord, L. (2021). Och så en fråga till Anders Tegnell ...: Journalistisk kritik vid de myndighetsgemensamma presskonferenserna med anledning av covid-19. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 123(5), 521-544. <https://doi.org/journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/23311>
- Olagnier, D., & Mogensen, T. H. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic in Denmark: Big lessons from a small country. *Cytokine Growth Factor Rev*, 53, 10-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cytogfr.2020.05.005>
- Power, S. A., Schaeffer, M., Heisig, J. P., Udsen, R., & Morton, T. (2023). Why trust? A mixed-method investigation of the origins and meaning of trust during the COVID-19 lockdown in Denmark. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 62(3), 1376-1394. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12637>
- Rasmussen, J., Ihlen, Ø., & E. Kjeldsen, J. (2023). Strategic Covid-19 management in communicational practice : At the crossroads to remain open or not in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In Ø. I. J. L. B. Johansson & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic : Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 73-95). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Reynolds, B., & Seeger, M. W. (2005). Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication as an Integrative Model. *Journal of Health Communication*, 10(1), 43-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730590904571>
- Scacco, J. M., & Wiemer, E. C. (2019). Press Conferences. In T. P. Vos, F. Hanusch, D. Dimitrakopoulou, M. Geertsema-Sligh, & A. Sehl (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies* (pp. 1-7). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. . <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0264>
- Seeger, M. W. (2006). Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(3), 232-244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880600769944>
- Sellnow-Richmond, D., Sellnow, D., & George, A. (2018). An IDEA Model Analysis of Instructional Risk Communication in the Time of Ebola. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 1, 135-166. <https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.1.1.7>
- Sellnow, D. D., Johansson, B., Sellnow, T. L., & Lane, D. R. (2019). Toward a global understanding of the effects of the IDEA model for designing instructional risk and crisis messages: A food contamination experiment in Sweden. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 27(2), 102-115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12234>
- Sellnow, D. D., Lane, D., Littlefield, R. S., Sellnow, T. L., Wilson, B., Beauchamp, K., & Venette, S. (2015). A Receiver-Based Approach to Effective Instructional Crisis Communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 23(3), 149-158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12066>
- Sellnow, D. D., & Sellnow, T. L. (2019). The IDEA model for effective instructional risk and crisis communication by emergency managers and other key spokespersons. *J Emerg Manag*, 17(1), 67-78. <https://doi.org/10.5055/jem.2019.0399>
- Sellnow, T. L., Sellnow, D. D., Johansson, B., Lane, D. R., Seeger, M. W., Botan, C. H., & Sommerfeldt, E. J. (2023). The IDEA Model Theoretical Framework: An Explication of Risk Communication as Engaged Public Relations. In C. Botan & E. Sommerfeldt (Eds.), *Public Relations Theory III: In the Age of Publics* (1 ed., pp. 228-246). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003141396-16>
- Sellnow, T. L., Sellnow, D. D., & Reis, C. D. (2020). Calming giants in the earth: The internalization, distribution, explanation, and action (IDEA) model as strategic communication in crises with competing narratives. In *Advancing Crisis Communication Effectiveness* (pp. 198-213). Routledge.
- Siegrist, M., & Zingg, A. (2014). The Role of Public Trust During Pandemics. *European Psychologist*, 19(1), 23-32. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000169>
- Skogerbø, E., Ihlen, Ø., Kjeldsen, J. E., & Vranic, A. (2024). Trustworthiness: Public reactions to COVID-19 crisis communication. *Communications*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2023-0132>
- Slovic, P., & Västfjäll, D. (2015). The More Who Die, the Less We Care: Psychic Numbing and Geno-

- cide. In S. Kaul & D. Kim (Eds.), *Imagining Human Rights* (pp. 55-68). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9783110376616-005>
- Soto, C. O. (2022). Swedish 'cultures of rejection' and decreasing trust in authority during the COVID pandemic. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 56(4-5), 237-257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2023.2223408>
- Sturges, D. L. (1994). Communicating through Crisis: A Strategy for Organizational Survival. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7(3), 297-316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318994007003004>
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571-610. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258788>
- Ullmann-Margalit, E. (2004). Trust, Distrust, and In Between. In R. Hardin (Ed.), *Distrust*. (pp. 60-82). Russell Sage Foundation.
- van Dijck, J., & Alinejad, D. (2020). Social Media and Trust in Scientific Expertise: Debating the Covid-19 Pandemic in The Netherlands. *Social Media + Society*, 6(4), 2056305120981057. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120981057>
- Veil, S. R., & Ojeda, F. (2010). Establishing Media Partnerships in Crisis Response. *Communication Studies*, 61(4), 412-429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2010.491336>
- Wickline, M., & Sellnow, T. L. (2013). Expanding the concept of significant choice through consideration of health literacy during crises. *Health Promot Pract*, 14(6), 809-815. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839913498752>
- Wodak, R. (2021). Crisis communication and crisis management during COVID-19. *Global Discourse*, 11(3), 329-353. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378921x16100431230102>

JOURNALISM AND WELL-BEING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH IN NEWS WORK (2000–2024)

GABRIELA FERREIRA
DORA SANTOS-SILVA

ICNOVA / NOVA University of Lisbon – NOVA FCSH, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Journalists operate in increasingly connected and digitally saturated workplaces, where reporting often involves navigating significant emotional challenges (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Šimunjak, 2022). However, the psychological toll of journalism work has historically been overshadowed by objectivity as a strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1972). Recent scholarly attention has begun to address these tensions and their impact on journalists' well-being (Hopper & Huxford, 2015). This article presents a systematic literature review of academic studies examining the intersections between journalism, mental health, and well-being. Using PRISMA guidelines, we analysed 60 peer-reviewed English-language articles (2000-2024), retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science. We address two research questions: (RQ1) How have academic studies defined and conceptualized “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” within journalism? (RQ2) What dominant debates, emerging trends and persistent gaps characterize this literature? Findings indicate a post-pandemic shift in research priorities from trauma-centered frameworks to broader concerns with occupational health, emotional regulation and support mechanisms.

KEYWORDS

Journalism • Well-being • Mental Health • Mental Illness • Systematic Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

Journalists have long been stereotyped in popular culture, frequently portrayed as resilient, hard-nosed truth-seekers or cynical opportunists, representations that have shaped public imaginaries about journalism and journalists' roles (Ehrlich, 2006; Saltzman, 2003; McNair, 2010). These recurring portrayals, from Hollywood films to news-centric television dramas, have cemented the notion that journalists must persist in their mission despite chaos, deadlines, or personal cost. However, these representations rarely acknowledge the psychological toll of the profession. Research increasingly shows that emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout remain hidden behind normative ideals of objectivity and professional stoicism (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Deuze, 2023, 2025). Journalism, often compared to care work, requires deep emotional investment while simultaneously normalizing precarious labor conditions: long hours, low pay, job insecurity, and constant connectivity (Deuze, 2023).

This emotional management aligns with what Arlie Hochschild defined as "emotional labor" in the book "Imagined Heart - Commercialization of Human Feeling", first published in 1983: "this labour requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produce the proper state of mind in others" (1983/2003, p. 7). For this American sociologist, employees perform emotional labour when they manage them (including silencing) to meet work requirements. Later, Pantti & Wahl-Worgensen (2021) use the term "emotional work" (for Hochschild it meant dealing with other people's emotions) to encompass a range of emotion related-practices "which have largely been invisible in both practice and scholarship about journalism" (p. 1567).

The complexity of this issue is reflected in at least three interconnected dynamics that shape journalists' daily experiences: first, journalists face a high emotional burden in their daily routines, often covering traumatic events while meeting tight deadlines and managing unpredictable sources (Deuze, 2021; Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Beckett, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019); second, the nature of emotional labor is intensified by journalism's normative commitment to objectivity (Tuchman, 1972), which encourages emotional detachment even in the face of human tragedy, leaving professionals to process these emotions alone, often without institutional support (Šimunjak, 2022; Hopper & Huxford, 2015); third, the structural precariousness of the media industry, exacerbated by technological innovation and austerity, has restructured newsrooms into leaner, multi-tasking environments marked by instability and constant adaptation (Ornebring, 2010; Cohen, 2017; Fenton, 2010; Hindman, 2018; Deuze, 2017). Besides these three dimensions, Covid-19 was another extraordinary event

that had an impact on the psychological well-being of journalists (Backholm & Idås, 2022; Banerjee, & Kumar, 2024).

This review seeks to provide a systematic synthesis of how the fields of journalism, mental health, and well-being intersect through the XXI century.

Guided by this aim, the article explores two main research questions:

- *RQ1: How have academic studies approached the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism?*
- *RQ2: What are the dominant debates, emerging trends and persistent gaps across this literature?*

To answer these questions, we conducted a systematic literature review using PRISMA guidelines, focusing on 60 peer-reviewed English-language articles published between 2000 and 2024 in Scopus and Web of Science. Articles were selected based on the presence of the terms “journalis*,” “well-being,” “mental health,” or “mental illness” in titles or abstracts.

Our analysis reveals a clear shift in focus: early studies often centred on trauma and post-traumatic stress (Feinstein et al., 2002; Greenberg et al., 2009), while more recent research examines broader dimensions of working conditions, emotional labour, and institutional responsibility (Deuze, 2023; Šimunjak & Menke, 2022; Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

Scholars have increasingly explored how mental health challenges intersect with job precarity, digital acceleration, and weak support systems. Notably, some studies document journalists’ emerging coping strategies, such as disconnecting from news during off-hours or blocking social media comments (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023).

Still, conceptual clarity remains limited. Only one article in the corpus defines “well-being” explicitly — underscoring the need for clearer theoretical frameworks. Moreover, although mental health is now acknowledged as central to journalistic practice, few studies offer concrete proposals for structural or institutional change.

This review contributes by consolidating existing knowledge and proposing directions for future inquiry, with the aim of reframing journalists’ well-being not as a private burden, but as a shared, systemic, and professional responsibility.

2. KEY CONCEPTS

Well-being, mental health and mental illness: definitions and agenda

This systematic literature review examines three core concepts central to understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of journalistic

work: well-being, mental health, and mental illness. Although these terms are often used interchangeably in both academic literature and media discourse, they carry distinct meanings with significant implications for research.

Since the constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948 that the term “well-being” is a premise of health: “Health is defined, not negatively or narrowly, but positively and broadly as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being’ (International Health Conference, 1948, p.16). More recently, in the Health Promotion Glossary of Terms 2021, WHO defines well-being as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions (p. 10). Adapting the extended definition provided by WHO applied to the society to the journalistic class, we may say that journalists’ well-being “can be observed by the extent to which they are resilient, build capacity for action, and are prepared to transcend challenges” (p.19).

Similarly, mental health, as defined by WHO, is “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their communities” (2022, p.8). This framing emphasizes mental health as a positive capacity to function, connect, and adapt, rather than merely the absence of mental disorder.

In contrast, mental illnesses are “health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behaviour (or a combination of these” (American Psychiatric Association, n/d). WHO use the term “mental disorders” (as defined by the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision) as a “a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes that underlie mental and behavioural functioning” (2022, p.8).

A brief look at reports and programs shows how these topics entered the agenda of media and academic organizations, signalling a growing concern with mental health and well-being related to journalism, either focusing on the practices of reporting mental health topics or on specific dimensions of journalists’ mental health and well-being. For instance, The International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) has developed pioneering initiatives addressing the impact of online harassment and abuse on women journalists, advocating for safer digital practices and institutional accountability such as in the guide “A mental health guide for journalists facing online violence” (Pérez & Pérez, 2022). “The Journalism Resource Guide on Mental Health Reporting” (2024), created by The Carter Center, not only provides ethical guidance for reporting on mental health but also acknowledges the

emotional toll such coverage may have on reporters. On the other hand, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University launched in 2021 the Journalist Trauma Support Network, designed to equip trauma clinicians with a deep understanding of emotional demands of journalists.

Emotions and emotional labour: how are they linked to journalists' mental health and well-being?

Understanding this emotional dimension is crucial for any analysis of mental health and well-being in the field of journalism. As defined by the American Psychological Association, emotion is “a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural, and physiological elements, by which an individual attempts to deal with a personally significant matter or event” (2018, para. 1). Emotions lie at the heart of journalism, not only in the stories being told, but in the psychological toll exacted on those who tell them. As Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) argue in the introduction to the special issue of Journalism Studies entitled “Journalism and emotional work”, “it is important to understand journalism as a profession and practice which is profoundly shaped by multifaceted emotional work” (p. 1568).

The objectivity as a strategic ritual, as stated by Tuchman (1972), meaning strategies that journalists use to protect themselves of the risks of their trade, has long served as a cornerstone of journalistic professionalism, reinforcing the idea that personal emotions must be suppressed in the name of neutrality. However, with an “emotional turn” in media studies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), this dichotomy between objectivity and emotionality is being re-evaluated. Scholars now argue that emotions are not inherently antithetical to journalistic integrity; rather, they are embedded in the way stories are produced and interpreted, particularly in digital environments where emotional engagement is often seen as a tool to build trust with audiences (Santos-Silva, 2022).

In the journalism field, the social, political and economic dimensions are crucial to explore the role of emotions. Besides Wahl-Jorgensen work, Pajnik (2023), for instance, finds that journalists do not perceive emotions as contradictory to rationality, but as complementary to decision-making in professional practice. Conversely, Lukan and Zajc (2023) trace how emotional attachments to journalism (such as love for the profession) can evolve into disillusionment or burnout, as they developed cynicism, leading to career shifts and emotional detachment. These studies illustrate that emotionality in journalism is not merely personal; it is shaped by broader social, political, economic, and organizational forces, as emphasized by Kotisova (2019) and has impact on journalist's mental health and well-being.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This systematic literature review aims to critically map and analyse how academic research has addressed the emotional and psychological dimensions of journalistic work, particularly through the concepts of mental health, well-being, and mental illness.

It is guided by two research questions:

- *RQ1: How have academic studies approached the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism?*
- *RQ2: What are the dominant debates, emerging trends and persistent gaps across this literature?*

To ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor, the review follows the **PRISMA** framework (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*), which is widely adopted for conducting structured literature reviews in interdisciplinary fields.

PRISMA provides a structured and replicable method for conducting literature reviews, particularly useful in synthesizing complex and multidisciplinary fields such as journalism and mental health. The process unfolds across four key stages: (1) Identification, in which initial records are gathered through comprehensive database searches; (2) Screening, where duplicates and irrelevant titles are removed; (3) Eligibility, involving a more detailed review of abstracts and full texts to assess inclusion criteria; and (4) Inclusion, the final selection of studies that meet all parameters for analysis.

The objective was to understand how peer-reviewed academic literature has addressed mental health and well-being among journalists between 2000 and 2024. The literature search was conducted in January 2025, using the Scopus and Web of Science databases—both recognized for their reliability and comprehensive indexing of international scholarly output.

Search strategy and term selection

A preliminary exploratory search in Scopus and Web of Science databases helped refine the key terms, as it showed that the most common words involving well-being issues in newsrooms were: “well-being”; “mental health”, and “mental illness”. Also, words that would encompass the journalism concept were also added to the search due to proximity to the theme, like “journalistic” and “media”. After some preliminary research, we decided to exclude the term “media”, as it was very often linked to “social media”, which took us away from focusing on journalism. Also, a term that could be

related to the topic was “wellness”, but as we just found the term linked to other subject areas, it was also excluded.

The final search query included combinations of the following terms in titles or abstracts:

- (“well-being” AND “journalis*”)
- (“mental health” AND “journalis*”)
- (“mental illness” AND “journalis*”)

Only journal articles written in English, published between 2000 and 2024, were considered.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The eligibility of articles was assessed using a clearly defined protocol, presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Study’s inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Databases: Scopus and Web of Science In keywords or abstracts: (“Well-being” and “journalism”); (“mental health” and “journalism”); (“wellness” and “journalism”); (“mental illness and journalism”); (“Well-being” and “journalistic”); (“mental health” and “journalistic”); (“wellness” and “journalistic”); (“mental illness” and “journalistic”) Language: English Type: Articles Period: between 2000 and 2024 All fields of research Related to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journalists’ perceptions of their well-being and mental health • How work affects journalists’ well-being and mental health
Exclusion criteria	Book chapters; other languages than English; duplicated. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Related to well-being and mental health of audiences. • Not directly on mental illness among journalists. • Not related to journalists. • Related to social media.

Selection and Screening Process

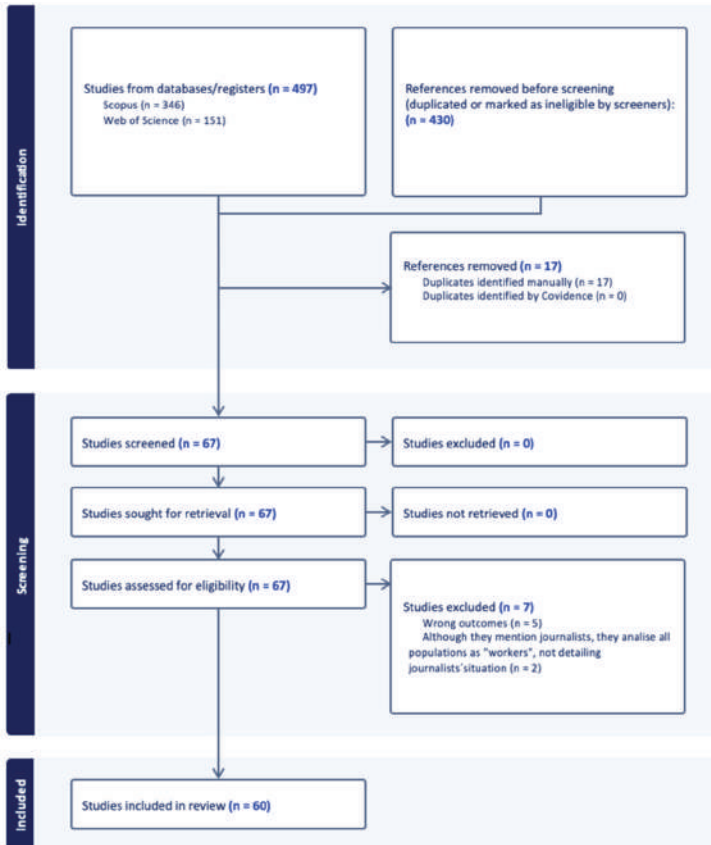
An initial search yielded 497 articles: 346 from Scopus, 151 from Web of Science. The first reviewer screened all records, removing duplicates and titles clearly unrelated to the research topic. The second reviewer independently reviewed the remaining abstracts according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. No disagreements emerged between reviewers. Articles that merely examined news content or audience reactions were excluded unless they explicitly addressed journalists’ own experiences of mental health or well-being.

A total of 67 articles were deemed potentially eligible and were read in full by both reviewers. The Covidence software was used to facilitate full-text screening and data extraction. After full review, seven articles were excluded: five for focusing on irrelevant outcomes (e.g., coverage of mental illness, not journalists themselves); two for targeting the wrong population (e.g., articles where journalism was mentioned but not central).

The final sample included 60 peer-reviewed articles, published in English between 2000 and 2024. A customized data extraction template was developed to capture key variables for analysis, aligned with the research questions.

Figure 1 (PRISMA flow diagram) provides a visual summary of the review process.

Figure 1: Prisma flow diagram



4. FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings of the systematic literature review, based on a final corpus of 60 peer-reviewed English-language articles published between 2000 and 2024. While the selection process followed PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the dataset. The review focused on articles explicitly referencing the terms “journalism” and either “well-being,” “mental health,” or “mental illness” in their titles, abstracts, or keywords, which may have excluded studies approaching these issues through different conceptual frameworks or terminologies. Furthermore, by relying exclusively on Scopus and Web of Science, the analysis privileges scholarship indexed in major international databases, with an inherent bias toward Global North academic production and publications in English. As such, this review does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of all existing research on journalists’ mental health and well-being. Instead, it offers a thematically organized synthesis of a representative but partial body of literature—one that allows for the identification of recurring patterns, key debates, and persistent blind spots in how these issues have been studied over the past two decades.

4.1. Mapping the Corpus: temporal and geographical profiles

Findings reveal a clear evolution in the academic engagement with the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism between 2000 and 2024, marked by three distinct phases. The early years (2000–2015) were characterized by sparse output, with only 1 to 2 publications per year and no studies identified in 2000 or 2001. The first relevant contribution (Feinstein et al., 2002) examined the psychological impact of war reporting, demonstrating that war correspondents exhibited higher levels of PTSD and other psychopathologies compared to their peers.

A moderate increase occurred between 2016 and 2020, with a growing number of publications (2–3 per year) reflecting the gradual recognition of mental health as a relevant issue within journalism studies. However, a dramatic shift is observed in the pandemic and post-pandemic period (2020–2024): while only 12 publications were identified before 2020, that number grew to 48 articles between 2020 and 2024: six in 2020, six in 2021, nine in 2022, 14 in 2023 and 13 in 2024. This surge cannot be attributed solely to the pandemic but rather suggests that COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for a lasting expansion of interest in journalists’ mental health and well-being. Notably, many articles published after 2020, even if not directly addressing COVID-19, reflect a heightened awareness of mental health in the profession.

The geographical distribution of researchers (considering the affiliations of first authors and not their nationalities) shows the Anglo-American sphere's clear dominance, with the United States leading (15 contributions), followed by the United Kingdom (7 contributions), Canada (6 contributions), and Australia (5 contributions). However, the research landscape is not monolithic, as contributions also emerge from other geographical locations: Austria, Finland, Netherlands, Norway and Malta (2 contributions each) and Germany, Greece, Portugal, Belgium, Estonia, Lithuania, Macedonia and Sweden (1 each) in Europe; Ecuador, Colombia and Mexico (1 each) in South-America; India and Pakistan (2 each), Malaysia and Philippines (1 each) in South-Pacific. The author with the most articles published is Anthony Feinstein, professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto and a neuropsychiatrist, with work published in 2002 (the first article of this corpus), 2012 and 2013.

In terms of publication venues, UK-based journals dominate the field, accounting for 39 of the 60 publications analysed, followed by journals based in the United States (7), Australia (3), Portugal (2), and Switzerland (2). This distribution reflects not only academic leadership from the UK but also a structural bias toward English-language publishing, which limits visibility for scholarship produced in other languages.

4.2. Overall use of well-being, mental health and mental illness as key concepts

Overall use of concepts

Findings show that the concept of well-being is mentioned in only five of the 60 articles. It is generally treated as an umbrella term that encompasses multiple life dimensions, including both personal and professional spheres, in line with the definition from the World Health Organization. Instead of being explicitly defined, the term is often operationalized indirectly through its association with related variables, such as job satisfaction, resilience, and emotional distress, within the research. Among the five definitions found, the first appears in the study by Simunjak & Menke (2022), where the authors adopt the notion of “workplace well-being.” Drawing from prior literature, they define it as encompassing “physical, psychological and social elements, referring to physical and mental health combined with satisfaction with social networks, processes and practices in the workplace” (p. 2477).

From a psychological perspective, Idås & Backholm (2023) introduce a distinction between “hedonic” and “eudaimonic” well-being: the former relates to pleasure, comfort, and enjoyment in life, while the latter refers to

self-realization, autonomy, and personal growth. This dual framework reflects a broader trend in well-being studies, distinguishing between short-term positive affect and long-term fulfilment. A similar conceptualization appears in Lees (2024), who, in her study on cooperativism in journalism, describes workers' well-being as a state of being "healthy and self-fulfilled, with time and resources to enjoy a private life"—again grounding her approach in prior research.

Deuze (2023) is the only author to define either well-being and mental health and also bring the term mental illness to discussion. Explaining they are quite different concepts, he argues: "Whereas a mental health problem is quite specific and involves affect, frustration and anxiety as much as physiological indicators such as blood pressure, heart condition and general physical health, well-being is an all-encompassing concept including non-work elements, life satisfaction, the feeling that what you do is worthwhile, happiness and (social) safety" (p.18). Deuze also elaborates it, indicating that the absence of mental illness does not mean good mental health or well-being and arguing the opposite: a person diagnosed with a mental health problem can still have a feeling of well-being. In other words, the author argues that having a reduced sense of well-being typically paves the way for stress and various adverse consequences.

The concept of mental health appears in 49 of the 60 studies, increasingly being framed as an essential component of overall health, with coverage evolving from purely clinical or medical perspectives to more nuanced discussions incorporating social, cultural, and environmental factors. This shift reflects a growing understanding of mental health as something that affects everyone, not just those diagnosed with specific conditions, the starting point to change a taboo that is still present in some cultures. Shah et al. (2020) described this constraint in her article about trauma exposure among regional Pakistan journalists: "Mental health is not considered a serious health issue" (p.402). According to the authors, the professionals might not even know they experience PTSD problems and refuse to express it to avoid shaming in their communities.

The concept of mental illness appears in nine articles and is defined in Pearson (2011) using as source the Queensland's law (Australia). It is used in these articles within broader social and structural contexts. Other terms related to these are also used in the papers, like "psychological well-being", "mental well-being", "occupational well-being" in many studies. The expressions are increasingly being discussed in a broader conversation about psychological and social welfare. As we can conclude from the temporal analysis, earlier studies in the dataset tend to treat them as separate domains. At the same time, more recent research shows a trend toward more

integrated understanding, though the geographical aspect also matters in how the concepts are discussed, as we mentioned before.

4.3. *Dominant themes and thematic gaps*

Although the first article relating to journalism and well-being or mental health identified in this review dates to 2011 (Pearson, 2011), it does not directly address journalists' psychological conditions. Instead, the focus lies on developing resources for investigative journalists to understand regulatory frameworks and mental health policies—thus highlighting how the concern with journalists' own well-being remained peripheral until the late 2010s. The first article to explicitly address mental health in journalism within a communication studies framework only appeared in 2019 (McCaffrey, 2019), signalling how recently this topic entered the media research agenda.

Between 2000 and 2018, the dominant framing of mental health was largely clinical, drawing from medical or psychological perspectives. Studies from this period often focused on pathologies or diagnostic risks, including the mental health of war correspondents (Feinstein et al., 2002), the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (Greenberg et al., 2009), and the impact of covering traumatic beats such as drug-related stories (Feinstein, 2012, 2013). Even when located in communication journals, these works tended to borrow heavily from health sciences, emphasizing exposure to trauma over structural or occupational factors.

Starting in 2019, a clearer research agenda begins to emerge within journalism and communication studies. Our analysis reveals three dominant thematic clusters.

- Trauma reporting and its psychological impact: Several studies focus on the consequences of covering traumatic events or crises, often drawing from psychological frameworks. These include both long-term exposure (such as war or conflict reporting) and acute incidents (mass shootings, natural disasters, etc.), with emphasis on PTSD symptoms, emotional exhaustion, or moral injury (Seely, 2019; Petersen & Soundarajan, 2020; Martin & Murrell, 2020).
- Occupational insecurity and digital disruption: A second cluster addresses how media industry transformations—particularly job losses, precarious employment, and the erosion of editorial autonomy—negatively affect journalists' well-being. Studies in this category also explore the pressures of adapting to digital environments, including multitasking, metrics-driven performance, and diminished social support within shrinking newsrooms (Ricketson, 2020; Malcorps et al., 2022). These structural conditions are increasing-

ly understood as key drivers of emotional fatigue and professional burnout.

- COVID-19 as an accelerant and turning point: The pandemic functions as a watershed moment in the literature. Not only did it intensify pre-existing pressures (remote work, job instability, online harassment), but it also expanded the scope of inquiry. Studies published after 2020 explore how journalists adapted emotionally and professionally to the crisis, shedding light on coping mechanisms, institutional responses, and emerging discourses of care (Bernadas, 2020; Hoak, 2021; Espinel-Rubio, 2021; Miller & Kocan, 2022; Backholm & Idås, 2022; Reyna, 2023). The pandemic thus marks a shift toward more holistic, workplace-centred approaches to mental health and well-being in journalism.

This thematic evolution suggests a maturing research field, moving from clinically oriented case studies toward broader, interdisciplinary analyses that link emotional experiences to structural and cultural contexts. Yet, as further discussed below, significant gaps remain in addressing institutional responses, systemic change, and the development of practical tools for newsroom support.

Table 2: Research goals and fields (main trends) N= 60

Research Approach	Research field 1: Medical (Psychiatry, Public Health)	Research field 2: Business, Economics and Career Development)	Research field 3: Media and Journalism (and Social Sciences)	Periods			Total of articles
				2000-2010	2011-2019	2020-2024	
Nature of journalist's work and ethos and impact on their mental health and well-being	8	2	12	3	7	12	22
Media crisis, digital evolution or organizational culture and its impact on journalists' mental health and well-being	1	1	13		1	14	15
Impact of Covid-19	1	0	10	0	0	11	11
Strategies to safeguard journalists' well-being and other issues*	0	0	12	0	1	11	12

Alongside these core clusters, several studies have explored adjacent but underexamined themes. These include journalism students' preparedness for hostile environments and harassment (Mesmer, 2023), journalists' trauma literacy and emotional readiness (Shilpa et al., 2023), and the availability of resources to support journalists covering mental health issues (Pearson, 2011). Such topics suggest an emerging concern with how emotional challenges are taught, anticipated, and mediated across the professional lifecycle.

Despite this growing awareness, studies offering concrete strategies to foster mental resilience or well-being among journalists remain rare. Only five articles in the corpus propose or evaluate interventions. Pearson (2021) examines how mindfulness-based practices can support resilience and emotional regulation. Ivask et al. (2023) analyse coping strategies in hostile reporting environments, while Martin & Murrell (2020) assess journalists' attitudes toward resilience training. Shah & Shah (2024) offer a set of recommendations for well-being safeguards, and Šimunjak & Menke (2022) evaluate organizational support systems in newsrooms. Although these contributions mark an important shift from diagnosis to response, they remain isolated efforts within a still-fragmented field.

Taken together, the dominant themes in this body of literature reflect a gradual reorientation—from trauma-centred analysis to broader investigations of institutional, pedagogical, and emotional dimensions of journalistic work. However, as discussed next, significant conceptual and structural gaps persist.

Corpus dimensions and profile

Academic research has focused so far in a variety of population, but it is possible to identify certain patterns: journalists from specific territories, such as Scandinavian (Burke & Fiksenbaum, 2008; Backholm & Idås, 2022; Englund et al., 2023), Indian (Banerjee & Kumar, 2024), Latin-American (Espinell-Rubio, 2021; Feinstein, 2012) and American (Holton et al., 2023; Mesmer, 2023; Perreault, 2024); a focus on journalists covering trauma-related events, like war journalists (Feinstein et al., 2002; Feinstein, 2013) or media professionals who covered Covid-19. Some studies address women journalists specifically in the context of work-life balance (Hamid et al., 2024). Cross-countries corpus are residual.

Methods

The most used methods are the interviews (23 in 60) and the surveys or self-reported questionnaires (22 in 60) or a combination of the two, consistent with the most frequent research goals.

4.4. Conceptual, geographical, and structural gaps

Despite a visible expansion in research on journalism and mental health since 2020, our systematic review highlights several persistent and significant gaps that limit the consolidation of the field.

First, conceptual ambiguity continues to hinder theoretical coherence. As shown in Section 4.2, only a small fraction of the studies offers explicit definitions of “well-being,” “mental health,” or “mental illness.” Most employ these terms implicitly, without clarifying their scope, dimensions, or interrelations. This lack of conceptual clarity weakens comparative analysis and hampers the development of shared frameworks across studies.

Second, the geographical scope of the literature remains highly skewed. Anglo-American countries—particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia—dominate both authorship and publication venues. While there are encouraging signs of diversification, such as emerging studies from Latin America and Southeast Asia, systematic regional perspectives remain rare. Little is known about how structural conditions, cultural taboos, or labour regimes shape journalists’ well-being in non-Western contexts.

Third, structural and organizational dimensions are under-theorized. Most research remains focused on individual symptoms, experiences, or coping strategies, often drawing on psychological or trauma frameworks. Far fewer studies explore institutional interventions, newsroom policies, or professional cultures that might reduce emotional distress or prevent mental health problems. Issues such as union advocacy, editorial leadership, and human resources practices are notably absent from the conversation.

Fourth, the field lacks longitudinal and comparative designs. Most studies offer snapshot analyses or isolated case studies. There is a need for cross-national comparisons, sectoral differences (e.g., freelancers vs. salaried journalists), and longitudinal research that tracks mental health outcomes over time and in relation to workplace change or global crises such as COVID-19.

Finally, there is limited engagement with solutions-oriented approaches. As seen in Section 4.3, only a handful of studies propose or evaluate interventions, and few assess their impact. This leaves a gap between diagnosis and action—a gap that must be addressed if research is to inform policies that meaningfully support journalists’ well-being.

Taken together, these gaps suggest a field in urgent need of greater conceptual precision, geographic diversification, structural analysis, and practical application. The next section discusses how future research might address these shortcomings and contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive journalism culture.

5. KEY FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This systematic literature review sought to map and critically assess how the academic field has approached the relationship between journalism, mental health, and well-being over the past two decades, in response to two guiding questions: (RQ1) How have academic studies defined and explored the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism? (RQ2) What are the dominant themes, findings, and persistent gaps in this body of research?

The findings confirm a strong correlation between the specific nature of journalistic routines and elevated risks of mental health issues. For instance, Aoki et al. (2013) demonstrate that journalists exhibit a higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to the general population, especially those frequently exposed to traumatic reporting (Seely, 2019). During the pandemic, negative emotional states such as anxiety, burnout, and loneliness were widely reported among journalists (Backholm & Idås, 2022), reinforcing the view that journalism places unique and compounding psychological pressures on its practitioners.

A major contribution of this review is the identification of a post-pandemic discursive shift. While early studies (2000–2015) primarily adopted a clinical or trauma-oriented lens, focusing on war correspondents or crisis reporters (e.g., Feinstein, 2002; Greenberg, 2009), more recent scholarship has taken a broader and more holistic perspective on occupational health, incorporating structural and organizational dimensions. Research now increasingly acknowledges that mental health risks are not limited to high-stress events but are embedded in everyday working conditions, such as 24/7 news cycles, job precarity, digital pressures, and online harassment (Šimunjak & Menke, 2022; Osmann et al., 2021). This evolution in focus reflects a wider cultural and academic awareness that journalists’ well-being is a systemic and ethical concern.

Another key finding relates to the lack of structural responses from media organizations, a topic consistently under-addressed in the literature. Studies show that journalists often lack institutional mechanisms for emotional support, especially in smaller newsrooms or freelance contexts. For example, De Jong & Kotišová (2024) document that investigative journalists frequently operate under unsafe and unsupported conditions, leading to burnout and sleep disorders. Similarly, Holton et al. (2021) report that organizational interventions to prevent or address harassment are rare, while Shah et al. (2024) emphasize how economic fragility in small-market media exacerbates emotional distress.

Despite the growing visibility of the topic, few articles propose actionable interventions. Only a handful of studies explore resilience-building strategies or workplace innovations, such as mindfulness practices (Pearson, 2021), coping mechanisms for harassment (Ivask et al., 2023), or leadership support models (Simunjak & Menke, 2022). This reinforces the finding that the field remains largely diagnostic rather than solution-oriented, with limited attention to preventive frameworks or long-term policy change.

The review also clarifies the conceptual terrain, revealing how “well-being” is often used as an umbrella term without precise definitions. Only a few authors (e.g., Deuze, 2023; Lees, 2024) explicitly distinguish well-being from mental health or mental illness, and even fewer consider eudaimonic dimensions such as purpose, autonomy, and professional fulfillment. Similarly, the term “mental illness” is often implied rather than defined, leaving critical gaps in understanding how stigma or clinical realities are addressed within journalistic contexts.

In sum, this review contributes to the field by systematizing a fragmented research agenda, highlighting both the conceptual ambiguities and empirical blind spots that hinder a comprehensive understanding of journalists' mental health. It affirms that emotions and emotional labor are not marginal, but central to understanding professional sustainability in journalism, especially when viewed through the lens of well-being.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH PATHWAYS

This systematic literature review examined how academic research has approached the relationship between journalism, well-being, mental health, and mental illness between 2000 and 2024. Guided by two research questions, concerning the conceptual framing and thematic priorities of this scholarship, the analysis revealed that, although the field has grown significantly in recent years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains marked by conceptual fragmentation and a limited focus on structural change.

The findings show a notable shift from early studies centred on trauma—such as post-traumatic stress among war correspondents—to broader concerns with burnout, emotional labour, job insecurity, and the chronic strain of digital acceleration. Despite this progress, the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” are still rarely defined explicitly, and often treated as interchangeable. Furthermore, only a small portion of the literature offers actionable strategies or institutional responses to support journalists' mental health, revealing a significant gap in solution-oriented research.

This review contributes to the field by providing a structured synthesis of 60 peer-reviewed articles, mapping dominant research clusters, surfacing conceptual tensions, and highlighting key omissions. It identifies four major thematic axes—trauma and stress, media crises and job precarity, COVID-19 impact, and organizational support—while pointing to the underrepresentation of studies that take a preventive, interdisciplinary, or systems-based approach.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The review was restricted to English-language articles, potentially excluding valuable perspectives from other linguistic and cultural contexts.

Looking ahead, future research should move beyond problem identification toward intervention and innovation. There is a pressing need for empirical studies that assess the effectiveness of support mechanisms—such as peer networks, training programs, and organizational safeguards—in promoting resilience and well-being. Comparative, cross-national research could further illuminate how cultural, economic, and institutional differences shape journalists' mental health. Finally, integrating perspectives from psychology, sociology, media studies, and labor studies may foster a more holistic and transformative research agenda.

Gabriela Ferreira is a journalist and PhD candidate in Communication Sciences at NOVA University of Lisbon (NOVA FCH). She holds a master's degree in social communication from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), a postgraduate degree in Communication and Image and a degree in Journalism from the same university. For twelve years, she has been a reporter and presenter in six of the main Brazilian newsrooms, including Rede Globo de Comunicação, and has dedicated her research to issues of innovation and journalistic work.

E-mail: gabriela.matos.ferreira@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-9210-2714

Dora Santos-Silva is an associate professor at NOVA University of Lisbon (NOVA FCSH) and a researcher at ICNOVA – NOVA Communication Institute. She coordinates a postgraduation in Culture Communication and Creative Industries, a master's degree in journalism, and Obi.Media – Observatory for Media Innovation. Her research focuses on media innovation, societal impact, and cultural journalism. She had a LEDE Fellowship 2022 from Solutions Journalism Network to leverage solutions journalism in Portuguese-spoken countries.

E-mail: dorasantossilva@fcs.unl.pt

ORCID: 0000-0003-1611-8858

Funding

This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., in the scope of the projects UID/5021/2025 and 2022.10162.BD.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the reviewers and editors for the constructive feedback. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., in the scope of the projects UID/5021/2025 and 2022.10162.BD.

Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

REFERENCES

- Aleksynska, M., Berg, J., Foden, D., Johnston, H., Parent-Thirion, A., & Vanderleyden, J. (2019b). International Labour Office. *Working conditions in a global perspective*. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/working-conditions-global-perspective>
- American Psychiatric Association. (n.d.). *What is mental illness?* <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>
- American Psychological Association. (2018). Emotion. In *APA dictionary of psychology*. Retrieved August 31, 2025, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/emotion>
- Aoki, Y., Malcolm, E., Yamaguchi, S., Thornicroft, G., & Henderson, C. (2012). Mental illness among journalists: A systematic review. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 59(4), 377–390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764012437676>
- Araújo, R., Lopes, F., Santos, C. A., Peixinho, A. T., & Sá, A. (2023). Journalists during COVID-19: Perceptions of Negative Impacts on Portuguese Journalism. *Journalism Practice*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2023.2239210>
- Backholm, K., & Idås, T. (2022). Journalists and the coronavirus. How changes in work environment affected psychological health during the pandemic. *Journalism Practice*, 18(6), 1560–1576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2098522>
- Banerjee, S., & Kumar, A. (2024). The unseen strains: mental health battles of Indian journalists amid Covid-19-induced economic uncertainty. *Media Practice and Education*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2024.2347044>
- Beckett, C. (2019). Why emotions are central to the future of journalism. *Medium*. <https://charliebeckett.medium.com/why-emotions-are-central-to-the-future-of-journalism-507472f15319>
- Beckett, C. (2015, 10 de setembro). How Journalism is Turning Emotional and What That Might Mean for News. *Polis Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2015/09/10/how-journalism-is-turning-emotional-and-what-that-might-mean-for-news/>
- Bélaïr-Gagnon, V., Holton, A. E., Deuze, M., & Mellado, C. (2023). *Happiness in journalism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003364597>
- Bélaïr-Gagnon, V., Bossio, D., Holton, A. E., & Molyneux, L. (2022). Disconnection: How measured separations from journalistic norms and labor can help sustain journalism. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221077217>
- Bélaïr-Gagnon, V., & Holton, A. E. (2022). Comentário: Quem toma conta dos jornalistas. *Media & Jornalismo*, 22(41), 75–81. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_41_4
- Bernadas, J. M. a. C., & Ilagan, K. (2020). Journalism, public health, and COVID-19: some preliminary insights from the Philippines. *Media International Australia*, 177(1), 132–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x20953854>

- Burke, R. J., & Fiksenbaum, L. (2008b). Work Motivations, work Outcomes, and Health: Passion versus Addiction. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84(S2), 257–263. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9697-0>
- Bustamante-Granda, B. F., Rodríguez-Hidalgo, C., Cisneros-Vidal, M. A., Rivera-Rogel, D., & Torres-Montesinos, C. (2021). Ecuadorian Journalists Mental Health Influence on Changing job Desire: A cross sectional study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(19), 10139. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph181910139>
- Chen, C. P., & Javid-Yazdi, M. (2019). Career counselling strategies to enhance the vocational wellness of journalists. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 28(1), 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416218790239>
- Cohen, N. S. (2017). Venture Labor| Freelancing as the Good Life? *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 3. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4554/2024>
- De Jong, B., & Kotišová, J. (2024). “The goal is to make you weaker”: Mental well-being and risks among European cross-border investigative journalists. *Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241272270>
- DeTienne, Kristen Bell, Bradley R. Agle, James C. Phillips, and Marc-Charles Ingerson. 2012. “The Impact of Moral Stress Compared to Other Stressors on Employee Fatigue, Job Satisfaction, and Turnover: An Empirical Investigation.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 110 (3): 377–391. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-1197-y>
- Deuze, M. (2023). Considering mental health and well-being in media work. *Australian Journalism Review*, 45(1), 15–26. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00115_7
- Deuze, M., & Witschge, T. (2018). Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism. *Journalism*, 19(2), 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916688550>
- Deuze, M. (2011). Media life. *Media, Culture and Society*, 33(1), 137–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710386518>
- Englund, L., Johannesson, K. B., & Arnberg, F. K. (2023). Reporting under extreme conditions: journalists’ experience of disaster coverage. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1060169>
- Espinel-Rubio, G. A., Prada-Núñez, R., Balcázar, K. G. M., & Suárez, C. a. H. (2021). With the Newsroom At Home: Routines and tensions of women journalists in times of COVID-19. *Comunicação e Sociedade*, 40, 71–90. [https://doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.40\(2021\).3207](https://doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.40(2021).3207)
- Feinstein, A. (2013). Mexican journalists and journalists covering war: a comparison of psychological wellbeing. *Journal of Aggression Conflict and Peace Research*, 5(2), 77–85. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17596591311313672>
- Feinstein, A. (2012). Mexican journalists: An investigation of their emotional health. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25(4), 480–483. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21715>
- Feinstein, A., Owen, J., & Blair, N. (2002). A hazardous profession: war, journalists, and psychopathology. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 159(9), 1570–1575. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.159.9.1570>
- Fenton, N. (2010). “News in the Digital Age”. In A. Stuart (Ed.) *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism* (pp. 557–567). UK: Routledge.
- Gollmitzer, M. (2014). Precariously Employed Watchdogs? *Journalism Practice*, 8(6). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.882061>
- Greenberg, N., Gould, M., Langston, V., & Brayne, M. (2009). Journalists’ and media professionals’ attitudes to PTSD and help-seeking: A descriptive study. *Journal of Mental Health*, 18(6), 543–548. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638230903191231>
- Hamid, N. A., Azi, K. K., Yazam, S. S. N. M., Rashid, S. M., & Ishak, M. S. (2024). Navigating the Media Maze: Perceived Work-Life Balance among Women Journalists. *Jurnal Komunikasi Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 40(1), 120–137. <https://doi.org/10.17576/jkmjc-2024-4001-07>
- Hindman, M. (2018). The Internet trap: How the digital economy builds monopolies and undermines democracy. *Princeton University Press*.
- Hoak, G. (2021). Covering COVID: journalists’ stress and perceived organizational support while reporting on the pandemic. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 98(3), 854–874. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990211015105>
- Hochschild, A. R. (2003). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. *University*

- of California Press. [Original work published in 1983]
- Holton, A. E., Bélair-Gagnon, V., Bossio, D., & Molyneux, L. (2021). "Not their fault, but their problem": organizational responses to the online harassment of journalists. *Journalism Practice*, 17(4), 859–874. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1946417>
- Hopper, K. M., & Huxford, J. E. (2015a). Gathering emotion: Examining newspaper journalists' engagement in emotional labor. *Journal of Media Practice*, 16(1), 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2015.1015799>
- Idås, T., & Backholm, K. (2023). Anniversary reactions among journalists covering terror: stress reactions and well-being 10 years after the terror in Norway. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008066.2023.2220632>
- International Health Conference, (New York, June-July 1946) . (1948) . Summary report on proceedings, minutes and final acts of the International Health Conference held in New York from 19 June to 22 July 1946. United Nations, World Health Organization, Interim Commission. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/85573>
- Ivask, S., Čísařová, L. W., & Lon, A. (2023). "When can I get angry?" Journalists' coping strategies and emotional management in hostile situations. *Journalism*, 25(10), 2099–2116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231199895>
- Jastramskis, D., Plepytė-Davidavičienė, G., & Gečienė-Janulionė, I. (2023). Professional Threats and Self-Censorship in Lithuanian journalism. *Filosofija Sociologija*, 34(4). <https://doi.org/10.6001/fil-soc.2023.34.4.8>
- Kocan, S., & Miller, K. (2023). "Anything for the Shot": Organizational support, gender, and their effects on journalists covering U.S. protests. *Journalism Practice*, 18(10), 2608–2626. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2157314>
- Koivula, M., Saari, T., & Villi, M. (2023). "I love learning new things": An institutional logics perspective on learning in professional journalism. *Journalism*, 25(4), 881–899. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231167786>
- Kotiso, J. (2019). The elephant in the newsroom: Current research on journalism and emotion. *Sociology Compass*, 13(5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12677>
- Lees, E. (2024). Opting for cooperative self-management: The ethical and job quality motives of service-sector professionals and technicians in Barcelona. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x241245001>
- Li, L., & Deuze, M. (2024). "Can I just write news stories?" Chinese journalists' experiences and wellbeing when working online. *Journalism Practice*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2446253>
- Löhmman, K., & Hanusch, F. (2024). Emotional Dimensions of the Adoption of Audience Analytics: Results from a Survey of Austrian Journalists. *Journalism Practice*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2340520>
- Lukan, T., & Čehovin Zajc, J. (2024). Love, cynicism, wanderlust: the role of emotions in the career trajectories of precarious journalists. *Emotions and Society*, 6(1), 44–59. <https://doi.org/10.1332/263169021X16717182753840>
- Malcorps, S., Libert, M., & Cam, F. L. (2022). A matter of organisational silence: media managers struggling to make sense of the online harassment of journalists as a collective issue in journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 11(10), 1868–1885. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2140301>
- Malik, S. F., & Malik, J. A. (2022). Gender as a Risk Factor in Relationship between Trauma Exposure and Mental Health Symptoms among Journalists. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.54615/2231-7805.47250>
- Martin, F. R., & Murrell, C. (2020). You need a thick skin in this game: Journalists' attitudes to resilience training as a strategy for combatting online violence. *Australian Journalism Review*, 42(1), 93–111. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00021_1
- McCaffrey, R. (2019). Stoicism and courage as journalistic values: What early journalism textbooks taught about newsroom ethos. *American Journalism*, 36(2), 220–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2019.1602443>
- McCarthy, T. (Director). (2015). *Spotlight*.
- Mesmer, K. R. (2023). Unprepared for reality: Early-Career journalists Ill-Equipped for hos-

- tility in the field. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 78(3), 301–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776958231180658>
- Meyer, R. (2024). The threat within: Power dynamics impeding cross-border journalism practice-perspectives from African investigators. *Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241305068>
- Miller, K. C., Morris, D. L., & Dahmen, N. S. (2024). “Being there”: How Photojournalists Navigate Making Images During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journalism Practice*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2310717>
- Miller, K. C., & Kocan, S. (2022). Taking to the streets: The effects of in-the-field harassment against journalists covering protests. *Journalism*, 25(2), 275–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221138429>
- Monteiro, S., Marques Pinto, A., & Roberto, M. S. (2016). Job demands, coping, and impacts of occupational stress among journalists: A systematic review. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 25, 751–772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2015.1114470>
- Monteiro, S., & Marques-Pinto, A. (2017). Journalists’ Occupational Stress: A Comparative Study between Reporting Critical Events and Domestic News. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sjp.2017.33>
- Ninaus, K., Diehl, S., Terlutter, R., Chan, K., & Huang, A. (2015). Benefits and stressors – Perceived effects of ICT use on employee health and work stress: An exploratory study from Austria and Hong Kong. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 10(1), 28838. <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhwv10.28838>
- Nölleke, D., Hanusch, F., & Maeres, P. (2022). The ambivalence of recognition: How awarded journalists assess the value of journalism prizes. *Journalism*, 24(7), 1406–1423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221109657>
- Obermaier, Magdalena, Michaela Hofbauer, and Carsten Reinemann. 2018. “Journalists as Targets of Hate Speech. How German Journalists Perceive the Consequences for Themselves and How They Cope With It.” *Studies in Communication and Media* 7 (4): 499–524. <https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2018-4-499>
- Ornebring, H. (2010). “Reassessing Journalism as a profession”. In A. Suart (Ed). *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism* (pp. 568–577). London and New York: Routledge.
- Osmann, J., Selva, M., & Feinstein, A. (2021). How have journalists been affected psychologically by their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic? A descriptive study of two international news organisations. *BMJ Open*, 11(7), e045675. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-045675>
- Pajnik, M. (2023). Professionalizing emotions as reflective engagement in emerging forms of journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 25(2), 181–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2023.2289920>
- Pantti, M., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2021). Journalism and emotional work. *Journalism Studies*, 22(12), 1567–1573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2021.1977168>
- Parks, P. (2021). Joy is a News Value. *Journalism Studies*, 22(6), 820–838. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2020.1807395>
- Pearson, M., & Seglins, D. (2022). *Taking care: A report on mental health, well-being & trauma among Canadian media workers*. Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma. <https://www.journalismforum.ca/taking-care-report>
- Pearson, M., McMahon, C., O’Donovan, A., & O’Shannessy, D. (2019). Building journalists’ resilience through mindfulness strategies. *Journalism*, 22(7), 1647–1664. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919833253>
- Pearson, M. (2011). Mental illness, journalism investigation and the law in Australia and New Zealand. *Pacific Journalism Review - Te Koako*, 17(1), 90–101. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v17i1.373>
- Pérez, A., & Pérez, J. (2022). A mental health guide for journalists facing online violence. In *International Women’s Media Foundation*. International Women’s media foundation. Retrieved August 20, 2025, from <https://www.iwmf.org/mental-health-guide/>
- Perreault, G. P., & Tham, S. M. (2023). Effective leadership in journalism: Field theory in how journalists evaluate newsroom leadership. *Journalism*, 25(11), 2283–2300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231222694>

- Petersen, T., & Soundararajan, S. (2020). Covering Pulse: Understanding the lived experience of journalists who covered a mass shooting. *The Qualitative Report*. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4018>
- Pilger, J. (1992). *Distant voices*. Random House (UK).
- Plotner, K., & Ferrucci, P. (2024). The Harming and the Helping: Perceived organizational effects on mental health in the newsroom. *Digital Journalism*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2024.2404605>
- Posetti, J., Simon, F., & Shabbir, N. (2019). *Lessons in Innovation: How International News Organizations Combat Disinformation through Mission-Driven Journalism*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-mpg4-r547>
- Ragsdale, Jennifer M., and Elana Newman. 2024. "What Psychology Can Offer in Understanding Journalists' Well-Being." In *Happiness in Journalism*, edited by Valérie Bélaïr-Gagnon, Avery E. Holton, Mark Deuze, and Claudia Mellado, 33-46. London and New York: Routledge.
- Reinardy, S. (2009). Beyond Satisfaction: Journalists Doubt Career Intentions as Organizational Support Diminishes and Job Satisfaction Declines. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 17(3), 126-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870902873192>
- Reyna, V. H. (2023). Mobilities, immobilities and news Work: the new normal of Award-Winning journalists. *Digital Journalism*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2195116>
- Ricketson, M., Dodd, A., Zion, L., & Winarnita, M. (2019). "Like being shot in the face" or "I'm glad I'm out": Journalists' experiences of job loss in the Australian media industry 2012-2014. *Journalism Studies*, 21(1), 54-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2019.1627899>
- Rodrigues, F., Morouço, P., & Santos, T. (2023). Testing the Associations between Coping, Mental Health, and Satisfaction with Life in Portuguese Workers. *European Journal of Investigation in Health Psychology and Education*, 13(7), 1245-1256. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13070092>
- Sammur, F., Bezzina, M., & Scerri, J. (2023). Under Attack in the Cyber Battlefield: A scoping review of journalists' experiences of cyberharassment. *Journalism Practice*, 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2023.2294290>
- Santos, T., De Sousa Uva, A., Rodrigues, J. F., Ferreira, R., Monteiro, D., Hernández-Mendo, A., & Rodrigues, F. (2022). The future looks good: examining the associations between coping, psychological distress, and optimism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.838835>
- Santos-Silva, D. (2022). Picture a Pandemic through Journalism: Innovating Visually to Regain Trust and Achieve Empathy. *The International Journal of the Image*, 13(2), 13-24. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8560/cgp/v13i02/13-24>
- Sarridis, I., Spangenberg, J., Papadopoulou, O., & Papadopoulos, S. (2024). Mitigating viewer impact from disturbing imagery using AI Filters: a User-Study. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2024.2313890>
- Schwartz, M. (2020). *Confessions of an investigative reporter*. Koehler Books.
- Seely, N. (2019). Journalists and mental health: The psychological toll of covering everyday trauma. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 40(2), 239-259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532919835612>
- Serafimovska, E., Markovikj, M., & Koneska-Vasilevska, T. (2021). The challenges of journalism in the republic of macedonia during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Balkan Social Science Review*, 18, 345-367. <https://doi.org/10.46763/bssr2118345s>
- Shah, S. F. A., Murphy, B. E., Joyce, T. A., & Cunningham, B. (2024). "I don't get sick leave": Small-market newspaper journalists' perceptions of the impact of occupational stressors and organizational support on their mental well-being. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 45(4), 472-491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07395329241267030>
- Shah, S. M. H., & Shah, B. H. (2024). Unveiling journalistic resilience: A blueprint for future crises. *Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241272163>
- Shah, S. F. A., Jan, F., Ginossar, T., McGrail, J. P., Baber, D., & Ullah, R. (2020). Trauma exposure and post-traumatic stress disorder among regional journalists in Pakistan. *Journalism*, 23(2), 391-408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920965783>
- Shilpa, K., Kumari, A., Das, M. M., Sharma, T., & Biswal, S. K. (2023). Exploring Trauma Literacy quotient among Indian journalists and a Way Forward in Post-Pandemic Era: a case

- study of India. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 78(2), 267–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776958231161889>
- Šimunjak, M. (2023). “You have to do that for your own sanity”: Digital Disconnection as Journalists’ coping and Preventive Strategy in Managing Work and Well-Being. *Digital Journalism*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2153711>
- Šimunjak, M., & Menke, M. (2022). Workplace well-being and support systems in journalism: Comparative analysis of Germany and the United Kingdom. *Journalism*, 24(11), 2474–2492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221115205>
- Šimunjak, M. (2021). Pride and anxiety: British journalists’ emotional labour in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 23(3), 320–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2021.2021106>
- Springer, N., & Rick, J. 2025. “Coping with Precarity: Journalists’ Strategies to Find Ease in a Professionally Vulnerable Situation”. *Digital Journalism*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2025.2475179>
- The Carter Center. (2024). The Journalism Resource Guide on Mental Health Reporting”. In *The Carter Center*. Retrieved August 31, 2025, from https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/health/mental_health/carter-center-journalism-resource-guide-on-mental-health-reporting.pdf
- Thomas, R. J., & Thomson, T. J. (2023b). What Does a Journalist Look like? Visualizing Journalistic Roles through AI. *Digital Journalism*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2229883>
- Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen’s notions of objectivity. *American Journal of sociology*, 4 (77), 660–679.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2024). Survival in the Passion Economy: Mental Health and Well-Being of Local Journalism Entrepreneurs. *Digital Journalism*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2024.2429623>
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2020). An emotional turn in journalism studies? *Digital Journalism*, 8(2), 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1697626>
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). An emotional turn in journalism studies? *Digital Journalism*, 8(2), 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1697626>
- Walters, E., Warren, C., & Dobbie, M. (2006). The Changing Nature of Work, A Global Survey and Case Study of Atypical Work in the Media Industry. *International Federation of Journalists*. <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/the-changing-nature-of-work-a-global-survey-and-case-study-of-atypical-work-in-the-media-industry-a/category/labour-rights.html>
- World Health Organization. (2022). *World mental health report: transforming mental health for all*. World Health Organization.
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Health promotion glossary of terms 2021*.
- Zelizer, B., & et al. (2021). *The Journalism Manifesto*. Polity Press.

SILENCED VOICES AT THE BORDER: HOW CROATIAN ONLINE MEDIA REPORTED ON THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

BARBARA RAVBAR

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Czechia

ABSTRACT

This study examines how leading Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees during the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By conducting a quantitative content analysis of 491 articles, this paper contributes to the existing body of research on depictions of refugees (Dobrić Basanež & Ostojić, 2021; Matulić & Škokić, 2024), with a particular focus on the national media context. Findings confirm prior research (Čepo et al., 2020; Popović et al., 2022) suggesting that refugees are often marginalised as sources. Official government and political sources dominate media coverage, reinforcing a top-down narrative of refugee issues. Moreover, the study also shows that the analysed news outlets focused on refugees as victims fleeing occupied territories, as well as narratives of integration, resettlement, and gratitude. Additional findings revealed heavy reliance on agency reporting, raising questions about diversity in Croatian online journalism. This observation suggests a potential avenue for future research on content production strategies in the digital news environment.

KEYWORDS

Ukrainian Refugees • Croatia • Online Media • Quantitative Content Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration and refugee issues have become defining challenges of our time, shaping political, social, and cultural landscapes across the globe. With over 280 million displaced individuals worldwide (Migration Data Portal, n.d.), migration has significantly impacted the European Union and is closely tied to broader economic, social, political, and technological transformations (International Organisation for Migration, 2021). These intense shifts have amplified societal debates and fueled polarisation, with far-right political parties gaining parliamentary representation in seven EU member states in 2024 by capitalising on economic uncertainties, cultural insecurities, and nationalist rhetoric to gain influence across Europe.

Since the onset of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, over six million Ukrainian refugees have had to leave their homes and search for safety in Europe. The invasion caused civilian casualties, destruction of property and infrastructure, and obstructed lives in the whole country. Almost a million Ukrainians fled to Poland, followed by the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, Germany recorded more than a million Ukrainian refugees who applied for asylum or other national protection schemes. Croatia, a country with a population of fewer than four million, has accepted more than 26,000 refugees through various assistance and integration programs (UNHCR, 2025).

Furthermore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as one of the greatest security crises in Europe since the Second World War, has raised questions of European security. It challenged the EU's self-perception and pushed the Union towards the role of protector and security provider (Friedrichs & Sommer, 2025), while also prompting support for Ukraine's accession to the EU among Western European countries (Panchuk, 2024). NATO called the aggression the "gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades" (NATO, n.d.), urging the reinforcement of its collective defence, including doubling the number of multinational battlegroups, exercising land forces, additional combat-ready forces, approving a new model of air defence systems and plans, acquiring new equipment and integrating Finland and Sweden into the Alliance's plans (NATO, n.d.).

Amid this complex geopolitical backdrop, the media plays a key role in shaping public perceptions of migrants and refugees. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was extensively covered by European and worldwide media, reporting from multiple Ukrainian battlegrounds with a strong emphasis on Ukrainian refugees and their circumstances. Studies analysing Croatian media reveal that news outlets frequently rely on official sources, thereby reinforcing dominant government narratives and portraying refugees

in a negative light through sensationalist and discriminatory language (Dobrić Basanež & Ostojić, 2021; Popović et al., 2022). However, particular studies focusing on the reporting of the Croatian online media on the Ukrainian refugees are scarce, leaving a research gap that this study aims to fill. Building on previous research, this study aims to identify how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees while reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

2. ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN THE CROATIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Hutter & Kriesi (2021) argue that the disputes over immigration are part of a “new structuring divide in European societies and politics” (p. 341). This divide became more pronounced in 2024, a super-election year in which 3.7 billion voters participated across 72 countries (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). The European political landscape witnessed a conservative shift with far-right parties gaining parliamentary representation in seven EU member states, including Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and Slovakia (Green, 2024).

For Croatia, a pro-European country standing at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe, the turbulence experienced over the past three decades has strongly influenced its current political and media landscape. Since the 1990s, Croatia has undergone a process of independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, war, and transformation from a socialist to a democratic political system with a market-focused economy (Peruško, 2013). Kumpes (2018) identifies three historical factors that have profoundly influenced Croatia’s complex relationship with migration: the legacy of diverse multiethnic and multicultural states on its territory, the war and national homogenisation of the 1990s, and its accession to the European Union in 2013, which made Croatia more susceptible towards emigration and immigration waves. Moreover, in 2015 and 2016, Croatia became a prominent transit country on the so-called Balkan route, which impacted and pushed the public discourse towards political parties that emphasised stronger border security. In their research, Bell et al. (2021) noted intensified anti-Muslim and anti-migrant sentiments between 2008 and 2017, with a third of Eastern European respondents expressing negative attitudes toward these groups (Bell et al., 2021). In Croatia, a study on X and Facebook users found that respondents with more positive attitudes towards refugees were more likely to help them, and that a stronger national identity correlated with a lower willingness to assist refugees (Medlobi & Čepo, 2018). A strong national identity and anti-immigration attitudes were key components of the Homeland Movement’s political program. This

right-wing political party gained a seat in the Croatian Parliament following the 2024 elections. In Croatia, this conservative shift has been intensified by multiple uncertainties in the COVID-19 aftermath, such as market changes, a series of earthquakes that caused severe damage to the capital and surrounding areas, geopolitical insecurities because of the war in Ukraine, rising inflation, and the transition to the Euro currency at the beginning of 2024, which caused significant economic changes. Right-wing parties have capitalised on rising socio-economic anxieties in recent years, offering narratives centred on traditional values and national interests as solutions to voters' concerns. In May 2024, Croatia's centre-right ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union, agreed to form a coalition with a right-wing Homeland Movement, which won 14 seats, to form a majority in the Croatian parliament. According to their political program (Domovinski pokret, 2024), the Homeland Movement claims that secret transports are being organised to deport migrants to Zagreb and that mass migrations are a "risk to European and Croatian security" (p. 24). According to them, some of those security threats include smuggling, violent border crossings, and terrorism, despite a lack of supporting evidence. Their discourse specifically targets non-European migrants, reflecting broader European trends favouring intra-European migration over immigration from other regions.

While the Homeland Movement aligns with right-wing ideology, it has adopted strategies commonly associated with far-right parties, such as politicising migration and refugee issues and spreading xenophobic nationalism. By redirecting intolerance from biological differences to issues such as job competition and welfare access (Vochocová, 2020), anti-migrant attitudes often use perceived threats to economic, cultural, and social stability to fuel intolerance towards others (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018). The "perceived notion of threat" (Bell et al., 2021, p. 3) observes migrants and refugees through the lenses of symbolic and realistic threats. While the symbolic threat is usually associated with the "in-group's religion, beliefs, values or ideologies" (Bell et al., 2021, p. 3), the realistic threat is connected to "economic and security concerns" (*ibid*). Bloom et al. (2015) argue that symbolic and realistic threats coexist and vary from person to person. According to their research, materially threatened individuals prefer migrants who are different from them and who will not "compete for the same resources" (p. 1760), whereas individuals who feel that immigration threatens their culture prefer migrants akin to themselves. Survey experiments reveal that Europeans feel less threatened by migrants from European countries than from non-European countries (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018; De Coninck, 2020) because migrants from European countries possess

similar “beliefs, traditions, religious roots, language, and a shared history” (De Coninck, 2020, p. 1680; Iordache & Blanchard, 2024).

Research in the Croatian context shows that migrants are more often perceived as a cultural threat by highly religious people, and that those whose identity intertwines religious and nationalist beliefs will express social distance towards migrants (Kumpes, 2018). A correlation between religious attitudes and negative views on migration was confirmed on a sample of 603 Croatian students (Stipšić, 2022), where religiosity had the most significant influence on negative attitudes toward migrants. It is worth noting that Croatia is a predominantly Roman Catholic country, with more than 78% of its citizens declaring their affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church during the last population census. Religious affiliation, together with lower educational attainment, rural background, right-wing political orientation, lower socio-economic status, and nationalistic sentiments, was identified as a predictor of attitudes towards migrants (Čačić-Kumpes et al., 2024). The same authors have also found that attitudes towards immigration become more negative after an increase in the number of migrants, especially pronounced in the indicator of immigration as a cultural threat. The most recent research on attitudes toward migrants, refugees, and minorities in Croatia, conducted by the Centre for Peace Studies in Zagreb, situates growing prejudice, xenophobia, perceived threats, and negative evaluations of immigration within the context of an influx of foreign workers. Compared to data from 2013 and 2017, these attitudes have intensified by 2024, particularly towards specific groups such as Arabs and Muslims (Župarić-Iljić & Lalić, 2024).

3. SPECIFICITIES OF THE CROATIAN MEDIA MARKET AND REPORTING ON SENSITIVE GROUPS

Like other Central and Eastern European countries, Croatia has a relatively recent history of governance under a non-democratic political system, and it continues to deal with its legacy to this day (Ravbar, 2026). For countries with a recent non-democratic past, media trust poses a special challenge, as trust in the media as a social institution is closely linked to trust in the political system, politicians, and journalists. As a partial sentiment from the previous regime, the belief that journalists cannot be trusted because they only write what their owners tell them to (Urbániková, 2023) fuels scepticism towards journalists and their profession. A comparison of Reuters data on trust in the news before and after the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that times of insecurity amplified the spread of disinformation, which had already been present in some media spaces (Ravbar, 2026). The so-called ‘alternative’ media, which had begun

building audiences through disinformation prior to the pandemic, expanded their content primarily through social media accounts and channels (Birchall & Knight, 2022). SEE Check, a network of fact-checking organisations from South-Eastern Europe, analysed social media posts and media texts posted in the first 150 days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They have flagged over 1,396 social media posts and media texts as manipulative or false, published in various media outlets in Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Croatia. Most of the narratives present in the media space were pro-Russian disinformation discourse, which spread the narrative of Ukraine as a pro-Nazi country, blamed NATO and the United States of America for the war in Ukraine, and accused some European countries of developing biochemical weapons in laboratories in Ukraine (Murić et al., 2022). Furthermore, a study focused on the use of disinformation by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation about the invasion of Ukraine in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro showed that, while Russia tried to inflict the narrative that foreign mercenaries are fighting in Ukraine, it did not achieve its goals - polarisation and change in attitudes among targeted countries (Mandić & Klarić, 2023).

The spread of disinformation and misinformation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with socio-historical circumstances that make people more susceptible to mistrusting the media, is clearly reflected in the overall low trust in news in Croatia, at 32% (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). Low trust is further exacerbated by some Croatian officials who deliberately evade media questions while accusing journalists of bias, harming the reputation of professionals and newsrooms. In combination with an attack on journalistic credibility, defamation lawsuits, which are used to put “pressure on journalists and their freedom to report on sensitive topics” (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024, p. 30), are on the rise. Furthermore, the so-called “Anti-Leaks” legislation proposed in 2023 dealt another blow to the journalistic profession. While the Croatian government praised the legislation, stating that it will “criminalise unauthorised disclosure of the content of investigative or evidentiary action” (Prtoric, 2023), the Croatian Journalistic Association asserted that it will undermine journalistic freedoms and access to information. The overall climate, including SLAPP procedures initiated by politicians and business figures to intimidate investigative journalists, as well as threats, harassment, online violence, and declining salaries since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.), resulted in Croatia dropping to 48th place on the 2024 World Press Freedom Index.

However, the Croatian media market is still diverse. When reporting

on the “phenomena, actors, and processes that people do not have direct experience of” (Popović et al., 2022, p. 6), the media has an irreplaceable role. The sources given a platform are especially important when reporting on refugee issues because they can influence public opinion either positively or negatively (Čepo et al., 2020). Multiple studies developed in the aftermath of the large influx of migrants and refugees to Europe in 2015 show “the predominance of stereotyped interpretations of refugee and asylum issues” (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017, p. 1749). Refugees were often depicted as “silent actors and victims” (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 17), with their voices overshadowed by those of politicians and experts (Sumuvuori et al., 2017). Such portrayals risk further victimisation and reinforce perceptions of refugees as passive and voiceless rather than as individuals with agency.

Contrastingly, media coverage of Ukrainian refugees during the early stages of the Russian invasion reflects a more inclusive approach. Matulić and Škokić’s findings (2024) show that BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera employed respectful language, avoided stereotyping, and highlighted the educational achievements and humanitarian needs of Ukrainians, while English-language media outlets emphasised forced displacement and vulnerability of Ukrainians (Sambaraju & Shrikant, 2023). Finnish media also presented Ukrainian refugees in a positive light, portraying them as vulnerable individuals eager to integrate into society, while simultaneously capturing the complexity of their experiences through diverse emotional narratives (Martikainen & Sakki, 2023).

There are still significant research gaps in media coverage of Ukrainian refugees in Croatia. The most comprehensive study to date, conducted by Popović et al. (2022), analysed 3,044 articles on migration and found that Croatian media predominantly relied on official sources, often uncritically reflecting government policies. The study also uncovered that refugees were predominantly reported negatively, which is mainly attributed to sensationalism, excessive dramatisation, and gender stereotyping. Furthermore, Dobrić Basanež and Ostojić (2021) studied Croatian migration discourse through corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Their findings revealed discriminatory language in news pieces, portraying refugees as threats and degrading them with inaccurate terminology. The authors emphasised that, in that way, refugees are “discriminated against not only when they are physically pushed back at the borders but also in the words the media use” (p. 22).

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to understand how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees while reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Based on a literature review showing that news media primarily use official statements as sources when reporting on refugee issues (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Popović et al., 2022; Sumuvuori et al., 2017), it is anticipated that Croatian online media will focus on official sources when reporting on refugee issues (H1). Accordingly, the first research question is:

- *RQ1: What sources did journalists use when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine?*

In times where pressure on media production is exacerbated by the demands of a 24/7 news cycle and competition with other online news outlets, online media utilise search engine optimisation (SEO) strategies to boost their content and increase their digital visibility. In the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when the topic garnered significant engagement, news outlets attempted to optimise their content by using hashtags that would draw the most traction. Because this study focuses on analysing articles marked with the hashtags “Ukraine” and “refugees,” it can be assumed that all the published articles will tackle only the chosen topic. However, due to the optimisation of journalistic content with multiple hashtags, it is anticipated that a significant number of articles will not write about refugees at all (H2), despite the use of the hashtag. The second research question tries to answer that.

- *RQ2: What is the main topic of the article?*

The last research question builds on the previous one and attempts to identify which aspect of the refugee experiences was showcased in the stories. This research question aims to explore:

- *RQ3: If the article mentioned Ukrainian refugees, what part of the refugee experience did the article talk about?*

4.2. DATA SELECTION AND SAMPLING

This study aims to identify how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees during the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For more than five years, online media has been the primary source of news for the majority of the Croatian population, with the weekly reach of the most popular online news website (Index.hr) outgrowing the weekly reach of the most popular television channel in Croatia (Nova TV) (Peruško, 2024). Index.hr and 24sata.hr were chosen for this analysis primarily due to their popularity and audience reach, as well as their distinct approaches to reporting. Index.hr has been active on the Croatian media scene since 2002. It is a commercial, privately owned news media outlet established by Croatian journalist Matija Babić. It is a tabloid-style outlet with independent reporting and a liberal leaning (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021). They are often critical of the Croatian government, and their investigative journalists have a history of uncovering corruption stories. However, the audiences are divided. While 46% of Croatian citizens trust Index as a brand, almost 30% distrust it, which shows a significant discrepancy in overall trust in this media brand. The second online news outlet in this analysis, 24sata.hr, has the same level of trust as Index, at 46%, but the level of distrust among the population is lower, at 26% (Peruško, 2024). 24sata.hr is an online version of the first Croatian tabloid newspaper, 24sata, a centrist media outlet. They gained popularity with their paper format, its smaller size, and affordability. They first entered the Croatian media market in 2005 and became the most-read daily newspaper in Croatia within a year. In the early 2010s, they launched the phone app for their news outlet and adjusted their news platform to be compatible with mobile browsers, setting a trend in the Croatian media scene. Today, they are the second most-read online news outlet, trailing only Index.hr, and the two often compete for readers. However, 24sata is owned by the Austrian Styria Media Group, which also owns other prominent media outlets in Croatia.

The timeframe for this research was the first month of the invasion of Ukraine. This research considered all articles published on the two news outlets from February 24th to March 24th, 2022. Since the full-scale invasion is an unprecedented attack on another European country in recent European history, this timeframe was purposefully chosen to see how the Croatian media reported on the Russian invasion of Ukraine as soon as the invasion started. However, this timeframe has its limitations. The first month of the invasion was marked by a peculiar informational chaos characteristic of a new, unprecedented war situation. Social media has become an important source of information, but that also means that more

misinformation and disinformation are present online. There was a need to establish quality communication channels in the new situation, so Croatian media outlets focused on news agencies as credible sources of information. After the initial informational shock, some newsrooms sent their journalists to Ukraine, credible communication channels were established, and the flow of information stabilised. However, the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine remains an important and interesting analytical timeframe.

As the unit of analysis in this research, a journalistic piece was taken, which includes the text and associated equipment. Analysed articles were filtered by the hashtags under which they were published. Due to the sheer volume of articles published about the invasion of Ukraine and the particular interest in reporting on refugees, this research included all articles tagged with hashtags #Ukraine (Croatian: #Ukrajina) and #refugees (Croatian: #izbjeglice). The search was conducted using the news outlets' website search engines. Under these hashtags and in the chosen timeframe, Index.hr published 272 articles in total and 24sata.hr 235. It is essential to acknowledge that 24sata.hr has a subscription on their website for more 'exclusive' content, so some articles were not available for analysis because they were behind a paywall. This research focused solely on publicly available, free online news articles, as only 9% of the Croatian population pays for online news, and therefore, this content would not be accessible to the general public. When excluding these articles, the total number of analysed articles from 24sata.hr was 219. The total number of articles analysed from both online news outlets was 491.

4.3. METHOD

A quantitative content analysis of the two most-read Croatian online news outlets was conducted to answer the research questions. Quantitative content analysis was employed as a well-established research method that systematically analyses media texts (Blumell et al., 2019), having been previously used in researching similar and relevant topics (Blumell et al., 2019; Rehejeh, 2020; Rothenberger & Schmitt, 2024). The main advantages of this method are the ability to generalise and process a large number of units and "systematic observation and quantification of patterns in texts" (Coe & Scacco, 2017, p. 1).

4.4. CODE DEVELOPMENT

The data were analysed manually in Excel using quantitative content analysis. Before the coding process began, a codebook was developed, defining variables and their corresponding coding. An extensive set of codes was used to observe

larger patterns on a larger scale. The codebook consisted of 18 different parameters of analysis separated into three main parts: article structure, topics of the articles and sources used, and a part concerning reporting on refugees.

The first category consisted of naming the online news outlet, the type of published article, the placement of the article in its respective section on the website, the author's signature, the article's length, the content of the photograph, and the type of headline. The second category focused on the article's main topic, the prevalence of different sources in the story and identifying them. While it would be expected that all articles under the hashtag 'refugees' would have them as the main topic of the reporting, other reporting topics were considered when coding. Other proposed coding categories included international relations between various European countries, the political and economic consequences for Ukraine, Russia, Croatia, and Europe in general, the chronological events of the invasion, the destruction and loss suffered by the Russians, and the destruction and loss suffered by the Ukrainians. The category 'other' was also included. This category was used as a code in all other stories that did not fit this category, such as volunteering at the border, saving animals and pets from destroyed parts of Ukrainian territory, and Croatians organising the transport of non-perishable goods to Ukraine. The last category examined whether Ukrainian refugees were mentioned in the article and what their story was about.

5. RESULTS

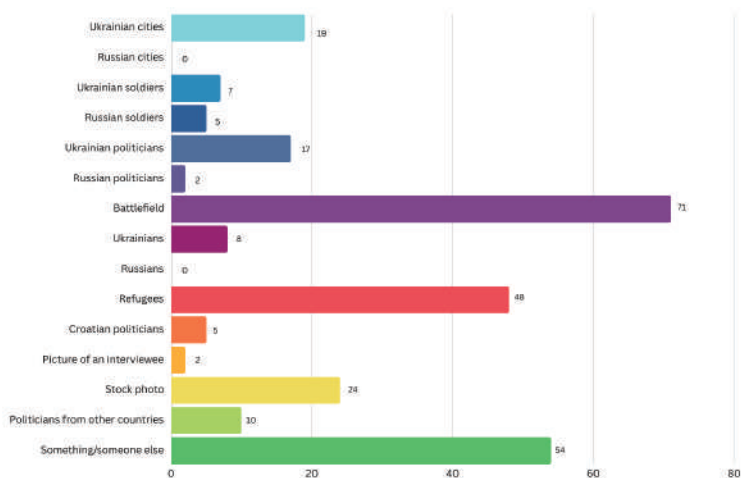
5.1. INDEX.HR

When reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine from February 24th to March 24th 2022, Index.hr published 272 online articles, of which 94% (N=257) were news articles. Other published articles concerning refugees were commentaries and reports, and were placed in their respective online columns accordingly. All published articles disclosed authorship, but the most significant number of articles (60%, N=163) was signed only by the newsroom signature. The analysis notes that 39% (N=105) of articles were signed by the news agency Hina, meaning that the entire content of the article was sourced from the news agency. Only the commentary articles were signed by the journalist's full name and last name. Over half of all published articles (64%, N=173) were short news articles. This study defined a short article as a text up to 1500 characters, including spaces. A significantly smaller percentage of articles, 31% (N=83), were medium length, defined as a text between 1,500 and 3,000 characters, including spaces. Almost 6% (N=15) of articles exceeded 3000 characters and were therefore

considered long articles according to this analysis. Most of the headlines (74%, N=200) published by Index.hr when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine were informative. Only a few headlines, 26% (N=71), were sensationalist. A sensationalist headline, for the purpose of this study, was defined as a headline that presents information in a shocking or exciting way, triggering recipients' reactions, such as attention and emotions (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2016).

All published articles featured a large headline photograph, which was used to capture the reader's attention. Most often, in 26% (N=71) of published articles, the Index.hr used cover photos that showed wartime scenes, such as photographs from the frontlines depicting battles, arms, tanks, or combat aircraft.

Graph 1: What was on the cover photograph of Index.hr when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (N=272)

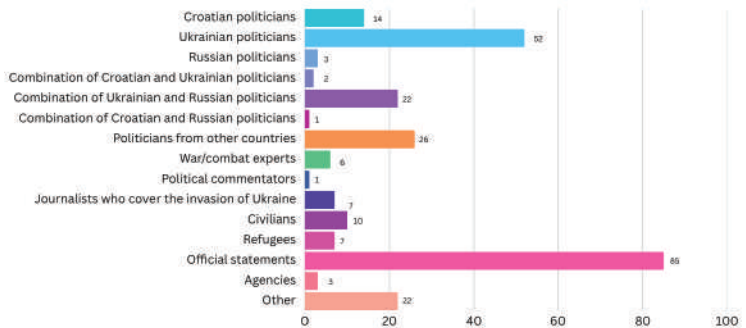


The second largest category in the photo analysis is “Something/someone else”. This category contained all the other potential cover photographs not part of the initial coding list. The photographs coded as “Something/someone else” were predominantly depicting volunteers, refugee centres, animals saved from the war zone and photographs from the Ukrainian borders. While the articles were purposefully filtered with the hashtag refugees, refugees made the headline photographs in almost 18% (N=48) of cases. One reason might be that journalists from this online news outlet did not go to Ukraine to build their pictures and/or video database, so their access to photographs was limited.

During reporting on the invasion of Ukraine, Index.hr also produced the montaged logo titled 'War in Ukraine.' The logo consisted of Vladimir Putin's head in black and white on a red background, with Hitler's moustache edited onto his face, which is still on their news site. This logo was often included in the corner of headline photos of stories that covered the Russian invasion of Ukraine and showed the newsroom's support towards Ukrainians with a caricature of the Russian president.

In the analysed timeframe, Index.hr dedicated the most extensive number of articles to Ukrainian refugees (22%, N=59), which was to be expected due to the purposeful filtering. The stories covering refugees as their main topic mainly focused on their struggles to run from the occupied territories and on refugees as victims of the war. However, because of boosting their content and increasing their digital visibility, Index.hr used various hashtags per story. Categories that follow reporting on refugees include the chronological happenings of the invasion (14%, N=37), the destruction of Ukraine (13%, N=36), international relations between Ukraine and Russia (13%, N=36), and the destruction and losses on the Russian side (11%, N=31). The least represented topic concerns Croatian international relations with Russia.

Graph 2: Main sources used in the articles published by Index.hr. (N=261)



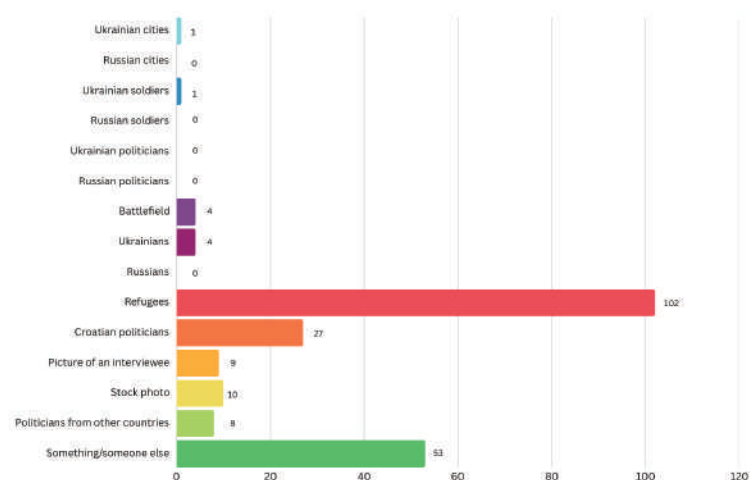
96% (N=261) of Index.hr's articles had sources, which show the journalists' extensive coverage and research abilities. Although they had plenty of sources, 33% (N=85) of all sources were official statements, often from political parties, politicians, or organisations coordinating refugees' needs when arriving in the European Union. The second most cited sources were Ukrainian politicians or governmental representatives. Citing Ukrainian governmental sources is mainly connected with regular video briefings by the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyj. For comparison, although 22% (N=59) of published texts focused on Ukrainian refugees as their main topic, refugees themselves were cited as sources in less than 3% (N=7) of articles. That in-

icates that they were mostly talked about but did not get the chance to be creators of their own stories and discourses surrounding them.

5.2. 24SATA.HR

In the analysed timeframe, 24sata.hr published in a total of 235 articles. Because some were published behind a closed paywall, they were unavailable for analysis. After excluding these articles from the total number, this study comprised 219 online articles. Regarding the type of article, 24sata showed more diversity than Index.hr. While 79% (N=173) of their articles were news pieces, they published more reports (5%, N=12), interviews (4%, N=8), and commentary articles (1%, N=3). As Index.hr, 24sata.hr also signed all of their authors, but mainly using their full names and surnames, which is the policy of their newsroom. However, 24sata also published a significantly higher number of agency texts - 58% (N=126). This shows that news agencies played a crucial role in the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, providing information, stories, and photographs to the Croatian online news outlets. Most of the articles published at 24sata.hr are medium length (65%, N=143), and less than 29% (N=63) are short news articles. It is interesting to acknowledge that 24sata.hr had almost the same percentage of long articles as its competitor. The main headline was informative in 80% (N=176) of articles. Sensationalist titles occupy 19% (N=42) of articles, fewer than their counterpart's, and were primarily used when citing refugees in stories focused on the sufferings caused by Russian aggression.

Graph 3: What was on the cover photographs of 24sata.hr when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (N=219)



Analysis of headline photographs showed that 24sata.hr put greater emphasis on showing the invasion of Ukraine through the experiences of refugees, showcasing them in their headline photos (47%, N=102), followed by the category 'Something/someone else' (24%, N=53). Photographs in this category mostly showed volunteers from the Polish-Ukrainian border and 24sata.hr's journalists who covered the refugees' stories. The third most common category was one in which Croatian politicians or governmental representatives commented on the refugees' issues and how Croatia copes with the influx of people. Similar to the previously analysed Index.hr, 24sata.hr used no photographs from Russia - their politicians, cities, or soldiers.

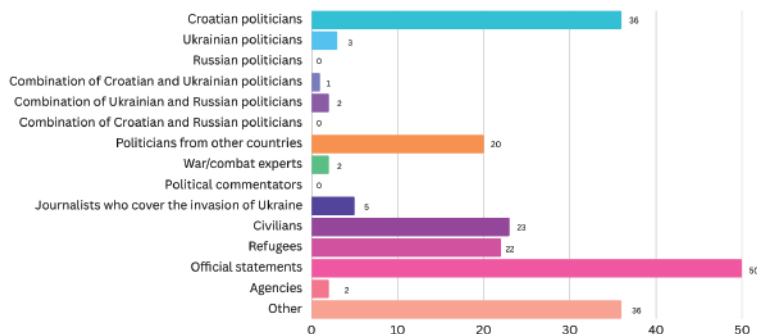
In the analysed timeframe, the topic of 66% (N=144) of 24sata.hr's articles were Ukrainian refugees, significantly more than the Index.hr. The stories covering refugees as their main topic focused on the experience of refugees finding a home in another country (40%, N=89), including stories about their integration, locating their families in European Union countries, and accounts of refugees expressing gratitude to their hosts for taking them in. 41% (N=83) of the stories centred on their experience as a victim of war and Russian occupation. When the articles addressed European or Croatian policies towards refugees, refugees were often referred to as 'others'.

The second most-coded topic of 24sata.hr's articles were categorised as 'Other' (11%, N=24), with stories from volunteers, NGOs, and humanitarian organisations helping refugees, distributing food and medicine, and helping with finding accommodation after escaping the war. This category also included articles about Russian troops taking the nuclear power plant Chornobyl and the potential dangers that could come afterwards. 5% (N=11) of published articles addressed the destruction in Ukraine, and almost 3% (N=6) reported on the chronological events of the invasion. Other topics proposed in the codebook were not found in 24sata.hr's reporting indicated that their use of hashtags under the stories was more connected to the topic they were focusing on in the article.

The great majority of articles were published on 24sata.hr (92%, N=202) had sources. Articles without sources were typically commentary articles or brief pieces that tracked the progress of the Ukrainian army using online maps. The most frequently used sources (25%, N=50) were official statements, which included statements from political parties, army leaders, and the highest levels of the state, followed by Croatian politicians or governmental representatives (18%, N=36). Because 24sata.hr newsroom sent their journalists to report from the Ukrainian border, they had more access to civilians, volunteers, and refugees, who were represented with

11% (N=22) respectively. Highly represented sources also included politicians and governmental representatives from other countries, primarily quoted in the stories about international politics and repercussions towards Russia. Russian politicians and war experts were not quoted when reporting these issues.

Graph 4: Main sources used in the articles published by 24sata.hr. (N=202)



6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study analysed how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees during the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It contributes to the existing literature on refugees in the media (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Dobrić Basanež & Ostojčić, 2021; Matulić & Škokić, 2024; Martikainen & Sakki, 2023), focusing specifically on Croatian online news outlets.

Firstly, while there have been some studies on refugees in Croatian media (Popović et al., 2022; Čepo et al., 2020), there has been limited research addressing Ukrainian refugees, particularly using quantitative content analysis. What is particularly pertinent in these findings is confirmation of previous findings (Popović et al., 2022; Sumuvuori et al., 2017), claiming that “refugees were given limited opportunities to speak of their experiences and suffering” (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 17). Although the group of refugees in this study differs (this study focused on Ukrainians), and there is a time lapse since previous studies, the trends in media reporting on refugees persist. Croatian media also used official statements as their primary news sources, confirming the first hypothesis and answering RQ1. Ukrainian refugees were sources in 6% (N=29) of all analysed articles, indicating that they were mostly talked about but did not get the chance to be creators of their own stories and discourses surrounding them. It is important to note 24sata.hr newsroom sent their journalists to report from

the Ukrainian border, so they had more access to civilians, volunteers, and refugees (10%, N=22, respectively), in comparison to Index.hr, whose journalists were not in the field, and had refugees as sources in less than 3% (N=7) of articles.

Secondly, although it could be expected that, due to purposive sampling, all articles would focus on refugees as their main topic, this has been proven untrue. There is an indication that, because the unprecedented invasion of Ukraine captured significant online engagement, media outlets utilised search engine optimisation strategies to position their content online. This means that the study anticipated a significant number of articles not writing about refugees at all (H2), despite the hashtag under the article. To address the second hypothesis, the study aimed to answer Research Question 2: What is the main topic of the article? The analysis showed that Index.hr and 24sata.hr both dedicated the most extensive number of their articles to the topic of Ukrainian refugees (22%, N=59 and 66%, N=144, respectively). In the case of Index.hr, the second hypothesis was confirmed. A significant number of articles published on their website did not feature Ukrainian refugees as the main topic, despite being marked with the hashtag #refugees. Other topics prevalent in the Index.hr's reporting on refugees is reporting on chronological happenings of invasion, destruction of Ukraine, international relations between Ukraine and Russia, and destruction and losses on the Russian side.

The last research question (RQ3), "If the article mentioned Ukrainian refugees, what part of the refugee experience did the article talk about?" was successfully answered through this analysis. The stories on refugees by Index.hr primarily focused on their struggles to flee the occupied territories and refugees as victims of the war. 24sata.hr, having more access to the refugees due to their field reporting, focused on the experiences of refugees regarding integration, resettlement, and gratitude toward host countries. When the articles addressed the topics of European or Croatian policies towards refugees, they were mentioned as 'others,' people who are talked about but do not speak for themselves. The policies and actions were brought up for them, but not in collaboration with them, without giving their input on the broader political or economic impact on their lives.

Lastly, an interesting finding emerged from this analysis. Correlating with the research conducted by Popović et al. (2022), who discovered frequent repetition of articles from other media and recycling of media content, this study discovered an intense use of agency texts. Croatian news agency Hina's news articles were published in their entirety by Index in 39% (N=105) of cases, and more than 58% (N=126) by 24sata. In the online news space, media outlets face immense pressure regarding rapid content

production, as “economic constraints are higher for online newspapers” (Welbers et al., 2016, p. 317). News agencies present a good opportunity to cut costs and time, and making commercially-driven decisions in a media business (Johnston & Forde, 2011) is justifiable. However, because both analysed online news outlets significantly relied on the same news agency (Hina) when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a question of diversity of their content is raised. Although this is outside the scope of this study, it could serve as a basis for another study on Croatian online news outlets.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, a notable limitation is the study’s timeframe. The analysed content represented the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, likely influencing the coverage and the identified patterns. Secondly, though quantitative content analysis systematically analyses articles published on the chosen topic, it can lack the nuances that a qualitative study would provide. Furthermore, addressing some of the research questions with an additional qualitative approach would provide a deeper insight into the current situation of the Croatian online media news market. This will be addressed by an additional study that the researcher is currently conducting.

Barbara Ravbar is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University. She holds an MA in Journalism and has five years of experience in journalism. She is a member of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), with research interests in gender and media, popular culture, social media, influencers and consumer studies.

ORCID number: 0000-0002-1986-7283

Conflict of interest

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding

This paper has not utilised any funding source.

REFERENCES

- Bell, D. A., Valenta, M., & Strabac, Z. (2021). A comparative analysis of changes in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attitudes in Europe: 1990–2017. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00266-w>
- Birchall, C., & Knight, P. (2022). *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/>

- org/10.4324/9781003315438.
- Bleyer-Simon, K., Da Costa Leite Borges, D., Brogi, E., Carlini, R., Kermer, J., Nenadic, I., Palmer, M., Parcu, P. L., Reviglio, U., Trevisan, M., Verza, S., & Žuffová, M. (2024). *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital era: application of the media pluralism monitor in the European member states and in candidate countries in 2023*. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/entities/publication/0aldf834-81b1-578d-b6bf-7f474f458c64>
- Bloom, P. B., Arikan, G., & Lahav, G. (2015). The effect of perceived cultural and material threats on ethnic preferences in immigration attitudes. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(10), 1760-1778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1015581>
- Blumell, L. E., Bunce, M., Cooper, G., & McDowell, C. (2019). Refugee and asylum news coverage in UK print and online media. *Journalism Studies*, 21(2), 162-179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2019.1633243>
- Coe, K., & Scacco, J. M. (2017). Content Analysis, Quantitative. *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, 1-11. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Czaika, M., & Di Lillo, A. (2018). The geography of anti-immigrant attitudes across Europe, 2002-2014. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(15), 2453-2479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2018.1427564>
- Čačić-Kumpes, J., Kumpes, J., Bogadi, S. K., & Podgorelec, S. (2024). Europska »migracijska kriza« i stavovi prema imigrantima i imigraciji u Hrvatskoj. *Migracijske i etničke teme*, 40(2), 217-252. <https://doi.org/10.11567/met.40.2.4>
- Čepo, D., Čehulić, M., & Zrinščak, S. (2020). What a difference does time make? Framing media discourse on refugees and migrants in Croatia in two periods. *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava*, 20(3), 469-496. <https://doi.org/10.31297/hkju.20.3.3>
- De Coninck, D. (2020). Migrant categorisations and European public opinion: diverging attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(9), 1667-1686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2019.1694406>
- Dobrić Basanež, K., & Ostojić, P. (2021). Migration discourse in Croatian news media. *Medijska Istraživanja*, 27(1), 5-27. <https://doi.org/10.22572/mi.27.1.1>
- Domovinski pokret. (2024). *Politički program*. <https://dp.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Politički-pogram-Domovinskog-pokreta.pdf/>
- Friedrichs, G. M., & Sommer, J. (2025). Ontological security crisis and role conception change: the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the European Union's role conceptions. *European Journal of International Relations*, 31(1), 126-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661241304533>
- Georgiou, M., & Zaborowski, R. (2017). *Media coverage of the "refugee crisis": A cross-European perspective*. Council of Europe. <https://edoc.coe.int/en/refugees/7367-media-coverage-of-the-refugee-crisis-a-cross-european-perspective.html>
- Grbeša, M., & Volarević, M. (2021). Media in Croatia: From Freedom Fighters to Tabloid Avengers. *Publizistik*, 66(3-4), 621-636. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-021-00683-y>
- Green, R. (2024, September 30). *The year of elections: The rise of Europe's far right*. International Bar Association. <https://www.ibanet.org/The-year-of-elections-The-rise-of-Europes-far-right>
- Greussing, E., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2017). Shifting the refugee narrative? An automated frame analysis of Europe's 2015 refugee crisis. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(11), 1749-1774. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2017.1282813>
- Hutter, S., & Kriesi, H. (2021). Politicising immigration in times of crisis. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(2), 341-365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2020.1853902>
- International Organisation for Migration (2021, December). *World Migration Report*. <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/>
- Iordache, M., & Blanchard, A. E. (2024). Perceptions of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees in Europe. *Acta Psychologica*, 249, 104439. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104439>
- Johnston, J., & Forde, S. R. (2011). The Silent partner: news agencies and 21st century news. *International Journal of Communication*, 5(1), 195-214. <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:371297>
- Kumpes, J. (2018). Religioznost i stavovi prema imigrantima u Hrvatskoj. *Migracijske i etničke teme*, 34(3), 275-320. <https://doi.org/10.11567/met.34.3.3>

- Mandić, J., & Klarić, D. (2023). Case study of the Russian disinformation campaign during the war in Ukraine – Propaganda narratives, goals and impacts. *National Security and the Future*, 24(2), 97–139. <https://doi.org/10.37458/nsf.24.2.5>
- Martikainen, J., & Sakki, I. (2023). Visual humanisation of refugees: A visual rhetorical analysis of media discourse on the war in Ukraine. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 63(1), 106–130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12669>
- Matulić, I., & Škokić, V. (2024). Media discourses of the Ukrainian refugees during the war in Ukraine. *St Open*, 5, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.48188/so.5.5>
- Medlobi, M., & Čepo, D. (2018). Stavovi korisnika društvenih mreža o izbjeglicama i tražiteljima azila. *Političke Perspektive*, 8(1–2), 41–69. <https://doi.org/10.20901/pp.8.1-2.02>
- Murić, D., Zulejhić, E., Živković, I., Nikolić, M., & Radojević, V. (2022). *Globalni narativi i lokalni akteri: 150 dana rata u Ukrajini i preko 1.500 dezinformacija u regionu*. SEE Check Network. <https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/Globalni-narativi-i-lokalni-akteri-150-dana-rata-u-Ukrajini-i-preko-1.500-dezinformacija-u-regionu-8.pdf>
- NATO. (n.d.). *Deterrence and defence*. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_133127.htm
- Otto, L., Glogger, I., & Boukes, M. (2016). The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication: A comprehensive framework model of sensationalism, soft news, infotainment, and tabloidisation. *Communication Theory*, 27(2), 136–155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12102>
- Panchuk, D. (2024). The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on public support for EU enlargement. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(10), 3128–3150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2336120>
- Peruško, Z. (2024). *Croatia*. Reuters Institute. <https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-vy6n-4v57>
- Peruško, Z. (2013). “Rediscovering the Mediterranean Characteristics of the Croatian Media System.” *East European Politics and Societies*, 27(4), 709–26.
- Popović, H., Kardov, K., & Župarić-Iljić, D. (2022). *Medijske reprezentacije migracija: Diskurzivne konstrukcije migranata, izbjeglica i tražitelja azila u hrvatskim medijima*. Ured za ljudska prava i prava nacionalnih manjina. <https://ljudskaprava.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Medijske%20reprezentacije%20migracija%20-%20diskurzivne%20konstrukcije%20migranata,%20izbjeglica%20i%20tra%C5%BEitelja%20azila%20u%20hrvatskim%20medijima%20.pdf>
- Prtoric, J. (2023, October 31). *Croatia: “Anti-leaks” legislation and new media law proposal spell trouble for journalists*. International Press Institute. <https://ipi.media/croatia-anti-leaks-legislation-and-new-media-law-proposal-spell-trouble-for-journalists/>
- Ravbar, B. (2026). Fighting disinformation in the European media context: the case of Croatia. In K. Turková & V. Macková (Eds.), *Threats, Disinformation and Regulations in the European Media Environment*. Bloomsbury.
- Rehejeh, F. G. (2020). To come or not to come: A content analysis of the refugee crisis in the Romanian mass media. *Saeculum*, 50(2), 159–173. <https://doi.org/10.2478/saec-2020-0027>
- Reporters Without Borders (n.d.). *Croatia*. <https://rsf.org/en/country/croatia>.
- Rothenberger, L., & Schmitt, M. (2024). Refugee women in the media – prevalence, representation and framing in international media coverage. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(16), 3913–3941. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2024.2344520>
- Sambaraju, R., & Shrikant, N. (2023). ‘All of a sudden, for no reason, they have been displaced’: Constructing the ‘contingent refugee’ in early media reports on the Ukrainian refugees. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 62(4), 1715–1732. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12652>
- Sumuvuori, J., & Vähäsöyrinki, A. (Eds.) (2017). *Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Press Coverage*. The Finnish Institute in London.
- Migration Data Portal. (n.d.) *Ukraine section*. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/ukraine>
- United Nations Development Programme. (n.d.). A ‘super year’ for elections. www.undp.org/super-year-elections
- The UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). *Ukraine emergency*. <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>
- Urbániková, M. (2022). Journalists as liars, servants, and sell-outs? On the declining trust in the

- media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *Global Media Journal: German Edition*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.55519>
- Vochocová, L. (2020). 'Frustrated women invite the immigrants to Europe': Intersection of (xenocentrism) racism and sexism in online discussions on gender aspects of immigration. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 333–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420973207>
- Welbers, K., Van Atteveldt, W., Kleinnijenhuis, J., & Ruijgrok, N. (2016). A Gatekeeper among Gatekeepers. *Journalism Studies*, 19(3), 315–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2016.1190663>
- Župarić-Iljić, D., & Lalić, S. (2024). *Stavovi prema strancima i manjinama u hrvatskom društvu u 2024. godini: prijetnja, susret, suživot?* Centar za mirovne studije.

“IT HAS SNUCK INTO ALL PARTS OF OUR LIFE” - A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF A SWEDISH SINGLE MOTHER’S EXPERIENCES WITH SCREEN TIME IN EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE

MAGNUS JOHANSSON

Department of Communication

Lund University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Screen time has become one of the more pervasive debates in recent years, eliciting recommendations from states and health organizations alike. While the debate often focuses on the negative aspects of screen time and screen use, actual experiences are seldom at the forefront of these debates. This article explores a Swedish single mother’s experience with her child’s screen time, in their everyday domestic life. The case is selected from a larger empirical body of 23 semi-structured interviews with 34 parents living in Sweden. A social phenomenological perspective is applied to explore the everyday expectations and negotiations this mother experiences and engages in. It is clear that the way screen time is experienced is highly context-dependent and often reliant on negotiation work around ambivalence and uncertainty. As the mother moves through the small life-worlds of her home life, screen time attains differing, and often diverging, meanings. As a phenomenon, screen time holds a distinct place in everyday life, dependent on modes of attention (visible in negotiations around rules, management and notions of trust) and inattention (as ‘naturalized’ and routinized in the domestic space).

KEYWORDS

Screen Time • Everyday Life • Parenting • Single Parents • Negotiations • Phenomenology

1. INTRODUCTION

'Screen time' has become an intensely debated subject in many western societies in the 2020s, connoting management, limitation and control of children and youths' media use in the context of everyday family life. In Sweden, the national health authority rolled out recommendations on screen time for young children in 2024 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2024), causing a pervasive public debate. Screen time constitutes a special issue in discussions on media developments in the digital age (exemplified by Australian social media age restrictions, or WHO's (2019) recommendations, where screen time is linked to child obesity). While children are often thought of as especially vulnerable in terms of health (Lupton, 2013), management of their digital practices ultimately befalls parents and caretakers. Discourses around screen time promote "practices that parents are expected to follow as responsible citizens of the state" (Willett & Wheeler 2021, p. 723). Substantial responsibility is placed on parents to cover all aspects of children's lives, which in the digital age means navigating complex situations and forms of mediation (Schofield Clark, 2013). Screen time, understood as time spent in front of screens, has become a product of the digital age, and is now largely a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday family life.

While the hypothesized harmful dimensions of media use and screen time have been extensively studied, "research on screen time does not acknowledge the unique behavioural context and users" (Pontes, 2021). Hence, it is essential to address the unique values, practices, and contexts within which parents navigate their everyday lives (such as socio-economic contexts). This article explores the everyday of one Swedish parent, "Ester," a single mother of an eight-year-old daughter, mainly through the social phenomenological perspectives of Alfred Schütz (1970; 1973) and Benita Luckmann (1970). It is important to note that when 'screen time' is used in this text, it connotes the term as it is used in everyday language. The use of 'screen time' is often criticized for concealing crucial aspects of media use in everyday life; since its inception, it has been linked to children's 'excessive' media use (see Engelhardt, 1991). Sandberg et al. (2024a) note that the term is often far too generalizing, covering a wide range of media practices, contents and technologies in one simplified expression. Within psychology, for instance, screen time denotes excessive use of media technologies (Tezol et al., 2022), excluding important contexts. This in turn has implications for how the term emanates in public discourse. Moreover, the term has been criticized for being too imprecise in referencing social problems. In usage, it does not account for families, parents, caregivers or children outside of (hetero)normative, nuclear family ideals. The presupposed notion is that it is a universal phenomenon. However, screen time as a term is (often deeply) integrated into families' everyday lives, including their everyday language. So regardless of

these issues, the term remains *meaningful* to parents. Related negotiations and media practices are engrained and inseparable from the mundane day-to-day (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Here, the central focus is on screen time as a form of management of children’s media use, which is how most parents describe the phenomenon when asked about it. Therefore, the usage of the term in the present article should be understood as a ‘phenomenon’ (which can be experienced by individuals), which adds to an understanding of parents lived experience with it.

The empirical case is one of 23 interviews with parents in Sweden during 2020 and 2023. Through social phenomenology, description and interpretation remains methods of understanding, focusing on the world as it comes into being to individuals (Bengtsson, 1998). The subjective experiences of Ester’s everyday family life function as a point of departure, where she negotiates the values, norms and subsequent practices associated with her child’s screen time. While parental perspectives have been at the forefront of a substantial body of research on media use and family life (Schofield Clark, 2013; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Sandberg et al., 2021; 2024a; 2024b), important specificities emerge through greater emphasis on parents’ taken-for-granted life-world. Moreover, many of the studies in the field of digital media use and families focus on ‘traditional’ families (Mannell et al., 2024). Hence, an important contribution of this article is investigating a single-parent household, which often involves different challenges and perspectives. Looking closer at single-parent households can shed light on these specific challenges and add to knowledge on non-normative family life. It is important to be conscious of the potential ‘othering’ of non-traditional families, to avoid mythologizing them (Golombok, 2015). The phenomenological perspective provides an alternative approach to *subjective* experience, which here involves a detailed analysis of the mother’s life-world as she *herself* experiences it.

The article’s analytical section begins with a short introduction to the phenomenological perspective operating in the analysis, exemplified through a few quotes from the larger body of interview data. These also highlight the experiences of Ester, who is the main analytical focus. One central theme is how screen time is part of the routinization of everyday life, and in some ways experienced as a ‘natural’ part of it. This theme contextually illustrates how parents experience screen time as part of their life-world, as another routine in modern media-saturated life. The article is based upon Ester’s subjective experiences with the phenomenon of screen time in her day-to-day, which is more thematically varied.¹

1 Ester becomes a specific case study, which is included in my PhD dissertation on parenting and screen time in everyday life, defended on September 12th 2025.

2. SCREEN TIME, PARENTING AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The contexts and ideas of media as catalysts for harmful effects are long-standing, often conceptualized as moral or health-related effects on audiences (see Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Leick, 2019; Nesi et al., 2022); the bulk of which has focused on negative effects (Kaye et al., 2020; Maricarmen, 2020). Psychological and medical studies have consistently linked young children's increased or unregulated screen time with decreased psychological well-being (Tezol et al., 2022). Hence, a vast body of research investigates the effects of screen time on child development (see for example Kracht et al., 2023; Yamamoto et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024; Slobodin et al., 2024), as well as tactics for regulating screen time for health reasons (Ponti, 2023). Further, screen time research tends to emphasize the relationship between screen use and physical activity (Iguacel et al., 2018; Forte et al., 2023). Often, these studies' discursive presentation carry values and norms that shape notions of "appropriate screen time use" (Vrinda et al., 2021) or "excessive screen time use" (Tezol et al., 2022). However, these notions of the broad, generalizing term screen time have been challenged by psychologists too, citing that it remains a blunt instrument (Kaye et al., 2021). Kaye et al. (2021) argue that it is two-fold; screen time does not function as an all-encompassing term for all media-related practices, neither are there any longitudinally established correlations proving long-term effects. As such, some argue for the need to pay greater attention to the contexts where families are exposed to media and screen time, resulting in development of specific methods and methodologies (see Barr et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the field of studies on digital media, children and families has been criticized for too often "looking backward to old debates, concepts, and methods rather than looking forward" (Mannell et al., 2024:623).

This has impact on public discourse, as negatively charged health perspectives tend to be premiered, ultimately defining what has become a "highly controversial concept" (Sandberg et al., 2024a). As such, the realities of actually living with the phenomenon mean that "[p]arents take on, and often amplify, the abundant and fearful claims that screen time is damaging their children physically and mentally" (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018, p. 179). Consequently, a counter-reaction to 'excessive' screen use has emerged, often coined digital detox (Syvertsen, 2020; 2023). Sometimes described as a movement, digital detox is predominately seen as individual practices, such as organized screen free retreats or spaces (Syvertsen, 2023). These practices are seen as responses to digitized society, which "permeate our everyday lives" (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021).

The norms around (self-imposed) digital disconnection signal perceived feelings of not being in control of one’s media use, which are shaped by social life (Fast et al., 2021). The arguments cement screen time as inherently bad or harmful, connoting that less is always better.

Research on screen time and family life does not only encompass psychological and health related perspectives, even if these are persistent in public discourse. Survey studies have shown how parents implement rules regarding screen time, based on the American Academy of Pediatric recommendations (D’Angelo & Moreno, 2019). Livingstone (2021) problematizes rules-focused perspectives and argues that when “screen time becomes a battle between parent and child, everyone loses” (2021, p. 89), with reference to the increased pressures to manage and enforce screen time that parents experience. This pressure is also noted in Sweden by Sandberg et al. (2024b), who have studied young children’s (0-3 years of age) screen use and interviewed their parents. Amongst several important conclusions, they argue that screen time as a concept does not specify what is actually done on the screen. Moreover, they discuss how screen time experiences and negotiations often rely on “personal moral values” (Sandberg et al., 2024b). According to Livingstone (2021; also see Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018), screen time negotiations are often grounded in anxiety, guilt and self-stigmatization. Media technology and practices are sources of struggle, seen as needing to be domesticated into everyday family life (Sandberg et al., 2021). These arguments are often based on “references to expert advice” (Mascheroni & Zaffaroni, 2025), for instance dictating how much is believed to be ‘excessive’.

However, parents’ individual experiences of screen time are not homogenous, which several studies illustrate. In the US, Willett (2021) notes that for the parents she interviewed, practices and decisions around screen time often contradict recommendation and regulation discourses. Managing screen media in the domestic space thus becomes “efforts to maintain ontological security” (2021, p. 340). In the UK, Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020) bring up the importance of policies relying on actual (heterogenous) experience, noting that parenting styles impact the way media use is handled in the family. Sandberg et al. (2024b) argue for similar perspectives within the Swedish context, as they see state recommendations as far too generalizing. In a study from the Spanish context, Monteiro et al. (2022) include pre-school teachers alongside parents, concluding that respondents reproduce public debates and recommendation discourses in their practices around screens. Discourses thus extend outside of family life, while still impacting it. In interviews with Australian parents, Jeffrey (2021) points to how socio-technological

perspectives on child development and everyday media technology management practices “intensify parental anxieties” (2021, p. 1057). Overall, these studies show how screen time is tied to intense and sensitive experiences and feelings, relating to specific ideals and norms.

3. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Ester is selected from interviews conducted with 34 parents living in Sweden, with both individual parents and couples (23 interviews in total). The focus has been understanding the experiences, ideas and related practices related to screen time in the parents’ daily life. This article represents a case study of one of the parents interviewed, which allows for a more detailed exploration of screen time in one parent’s everyday family life. The selection of the parent was based on thematic as well as contextual considerations. Ester is a young single mother of an eight-year-old who works irregular hours in a care home in a larger Swedish city (further presented in the opening of the analytical section). She was interviewed in her home at the end of 2023. Being a single parent has implications for Ester’s experiences of her daughter’s screen time, both in ideals and practices. It impacts the ways in which she negotiates and subsequently shapes screen time practices and norms in the domestic space. Her experiences constitute a thematic frame in which a phenomenological perspective allows for a subjective understanding of her subjective everyday situations.

As a case study, this article’s aim is to extract detailed knowledge from a single case. As Flyvbjerg (2013) puts it: “It is only because of experience with cases that one can at all move from being a beginner to being an expert” (2013, p. 222). While Flyvbjerg is referring to the use of case studies in educational methodology, this still rings true in terms of knowledge production through, as in this case, interview-based means. The context-dependence of a case study invites a deeper understanding that is sometimes lost in large-scale approaches; attention to the “nuanced view of reality” (Flyvbjerg 2013, p. 223) that this article relies on. While the case presented here is specific, it should be understood as part of a larger body of research on parenting, media and everyday life. Unique cases such as this can bring forth “black swans” (Flyvbjerg, 2013), which in larger studies might constitute small results, often left out in favor of more persistent patterns. Hence, while Sandberg et al. (2021) use a similar approach, they focus on two families with toddlers where everyday conditions differ from that of Ester’s, recognizing the need for more case-based unique knowledge within parenting and screen time in daily life, not least within non-traditional families.

4. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE

In this article, special focus is given to the “symbolic significance” (Shove et al., 2012) of screen time experiences as an integrated part of Ester’s life-world, following Schütz (1970; Schütz & Luckmann, 1973) social phenomenological perspective. A phenomenological perspective emphasizes individuals’ subjective experiences of phenomena and objects (Bengtsson, 1998). In phenomenology, the surrounding world is seen as transcendent – it exists regardless of individuals’ belief in it (which differs from Cartesian philosophy). Within the life-world, individuals encounter phenomena and other individuals, cultural and social norms, continually making sense of living with these dimensions of the mundane daily life. Schütz (1970) uses the notion of ‘natural attitude’ (also see Schütz & Luckmann, 1973) to illustrate the fabric of an experience as it is directed towards the world (as it appears to us). The natural attitude notion posits that the world appears unquestionable and taken for granted; we do not reflect on or question every detail. As Husserl (1995) notes, one can reflect on one’s place in the world and the relation one has to specific objects, however, this remains from the vantage point of ‘solid ground’ (1995, p. 70). We do not question the atoms and particles which make up our smart phone screen as we come into contact with it; the construct is as it appears to us, a solid black and shiny screen.² However, the screen is made up of atoms and particles, that is not in question. The question remains *how* we experience these objects and phenomena. Schütz (1970) uses Husserl’s (1995) notion of *intentionality* to explain this. Intentionality is a certain state of mind, directed at specific phenomena (of meaning) (Husserl, 1995; Schütz & Luckmann, 1973). To intend something is to make a connection with the intended phenomena, representing something in a certain way. This makes phenomenological philosophy unique, as it includes a natural scientific explanation of the world, yet still focuses on our lived everyday experience of it (West, 2010). It means understanding the world as intersubjective, as we share this conscious way of being with other subjects.

Screen technologies are very much part of this intersubjective world, as parents’ subjective experiences within the world remain a focal point. What can be extracted from understanding the “movements” (Moore, 2015) through daily life is that experiences of screen time are often part

2 Certainly, one can question and think about these subjects, the point being that phenomenology builds on the idea of taking these things for granted as a part of our everyday lives. We can wonder about them, but we still live with them as real and tangible objects of our lived experience.

of complex negotiations. Within the larger scope of material from which the case study is selected, screen time is often experienced as a more or less ‘naturalized’ part of everyday life. The management, and often struggle, that screen time entails for the parents is expressed as one of the many dimensions of mundane daily life. One mother states that: “It’s something that’s here and will continue to be, and maybe it will develop even more.” More than just being an example of how the phenomena is taken-for-granted in families’ everyday life, screen time remains consistent in the digital age and experienced in many of the “small life-worlds” (Luckmann, 1970) of the interviewed parents. Several of the parents acknowledge how screen time is part of what can be understood as “routinization work,” a site of negotiating the often-felt shame and self-stigmatization around the phenomenon (which is also noted by Sandberg et al., 2024a). As another mother notes: “In the end it becomes quite difficult ... Like “what is screen time?” [...] Our screens are part of our daily life.” Screen time, as an experienced phenomenon in daily life, is part of the routinization work that takes place constantly in the domestic space (and beyond). With this short introduction to the phenomenological perspective this article relies upon, the remaining sections focus on the case of Ester.

4.1. The small-life world of the domestic space

For Ester, a single mother living with her eight-year-old daughter in a larger town in southern Sweden, screen time becomes a topic that constitutes many facets of her daily life. Ester works irregular hours at a care home, acknowledging that she relies on her mother a lot for parts of her childcare. It allows her to work weekends and nights, which would otherwise be impossible. She does not disclose the role of her child’s father, simply telling me “no” when asked if he is involved in her and her child’s life. The routines and habits Ester and her daughter have established are thus often based on the two of them only. I ask Ester to describe a “typical Tuesday,” to further understand how screen time and media practices are incorporated in her day-to-day:

Ok, so if we say that I work as normal, because it depends on how I work. So, there’s no set routine. Well, there is, because [the child] has to go to school, so she has a routine. So yeah, there is a routine regardless of how I work. [...] On Tuesdays I also work out, and my mom comes over at night. That’s basically it. Tuesdays are pretty boring.

Tuesdays are typical, mundane weekdays for Ester, filled with work, working out and other routine activities. She explains that her daughter’s rou-

tines are more important than her own, as she wants her daughter to have consistency in her daily life. When Luckmann (1970) describes what constitutes small life-worlds, she posits that an individual is “a part-time citizen in a variety of part-time societies” (1970, p. 587). These societies, or contexts, are realms of expectation, shaping what is experienced and how. The domestic space is one such context, and as such contains its own meanings, expectations and experiences. Ester describes one such small life-world, which in turn relates to other small life-worlds (like work or going to the gym). Central here, however, is understanding the small life-world which Ester defines as the mundane domestic everyday – her home life. It remains a special place, with its own “horizons” (Husserl, 1995), for example, the expectations and relations experiences have with different phenomena that occur in this small life-world. As an example, when asked how Ester usually starts her day, she explains how screen use and screen time have become a regular occurrence in that mundaneness:

Then she takes her tablet and goes to get dressed. I prepare breakfast, she eats and watches something. And then she watches the tablet until it's time to leave. So, everything she's doing, she does together with her screen. And that's to avoid any conflicts in the morning. It's how two people who are tired in the morning survive.

The morning rituals include screen time as a coherent activity; the phenomenon constitutes large parts of the routine. As Barbaras and Lawlor (2012) note, there is a difference in the phenomenological “lived-experience,” which is simply a constant stream of experiences, and an “active dimension of life” (2012, p. 99). When Highmore (2011) describes the things which we interact with daily, “[b]eds, chairs and clothes accommodate us: most of the time they receive our ‘daily inattention’” (2011, p. 58). Screen technology and related practices oscillate between demanding attention and inattention, which constitutes parents’ everyday life. An active dimension of living requires attention, while other parts of living can be defined as intuitive or “just living.” While screen time can be understood as a permeating phenomenon in Ester’s everyday life, it often needs special attention, or specific acts. The interplay between attention and inattention, where Ester lets her daughter use the screen to maintain stability in the morning, utilizes both dimensions, albeit differently. Ester explains her daughter’s use of the tablet as a way to make up for the fact that it is just the two of them in their domestic space. The screen becomes both a “motivation to get out of bed” and a privilege that can be taken away “if she doesn’t do the things she’s supposed to.”

Building on expectations of trust, Ester's notion of screen time is a negotiation between keeping a manageable morning routine and establishing rules of conduct. Inattention to objects, as things that simply exist without much question (Highmore, 2011), is based on the objects having a quality of 'naturally existing,' often functionally. The tablet, and screen time, become functional objects in Ester's small life-world. This functionality works best when it allows for inattention – when screen time is part of their “just living.” Ester's experience of screen time in the morning is bound to the object as a keeper of peace. However, the phenomenon has a special attention-based need, when 'misused' by her daughter. She describes this notion of trust simply: “So if she does what she needs to, there is essentially less fighting.” The everyday becomes a small-life world with “familiar spaces of movement” (Moore, 2017, p. 64), where the maintenance of a coherent and recognizable flow of daily life is paramount for keeping struggles at bay. Even if contexts change, the movement is based on the familiar and “knowable” (Luckmann, 1970). Ester's negotiation around when screen time is 'ok' is based on her own experiences, as well as the more extraordinary aspects of it (when it is used as punishment or reward). This dualism of the ordinary and extraordinary lies at the heart of how the phenomenon is experienced by Ester.

4.2. The dualisms of screen time

On a more reflective note, when asked how she and her daughter discuss the subject of screen time, Ester expresses the experienced dualism of the phenomenon:

We talk quite a lot [about screen time] ... You don't want to scare [the children] either, because it's also a part of our life today. It's going to be there. So, I don't want to create fear that the internet is dangerous, because it's not. It's a huge asset. But you have to be careful with it. And with all that I feel it's my responsibility as a parent; I can't put that responsibility on you yet. I have to be the one to keep you safe.

The interplay between being compelled to act or just “living” is often based on what appears natural, and what appears disruptive (Barbaras & Lawlor, 2012). It becomes apparent that Ester's negotiation between discourses of risk and screen time, as an integrated feature of modern life, is highly context-dependent. As Ester expressed above, there needs to be a flow of simply living in the morning, encompassing a need to avoid conflict – they just need to “survive.” This is not always easy, as Ester argues. There needs to be mutual trust between the two of them, as they are both responsible

for keeping situations conflict-free. This is akin to what Moran (2021) dubs “joint agency,” where the subjects are not acting in solitude; rather, the experience is reliant on several subjects. Although Ester and her daughter have different experiences, they act towards an intersubjective coherence, where both agencies are inseparable. Things simply need to move along, with both individuals on the same page – especially since none of them are morning people. It is a mutual agreement that does not need to be verbalized daily, remaining within the coherent life-world as ‘naturalized.’ Screen time is experienced as part of this ‘naturalization,’ a coherent part of the small-life world. Ester also notes that her being a single parent impacts the responsibility she feels towards her child’s screen use:

Absolutely, of course as a single parent it’s another type of responsibility, like everything. Because I have the ultimate responsibility. [...] Primarily I think that when I can’t hack it there’s no-one else who can do it for me. And then the screen is there, for better or for worse. The good thing is that there’s a solution. The bad thing is that it might not even have been needed in the first place.

The seemingly simple example of Ester and her daughter’s morning routine hence encompasses complex experiences, which intertwine and shape the small-life world of the domestic space. The small life-world can be defined as such because of the “knowable” and specific negotiations and practices preformed in it. Ester illustrates this when she connects responsibility, trust and certain meanings of screen use to their morning routine. Ester is “intending” (Schütz, 1970; Husserl, 1995) screen time with very specific understanding, which can be both emotional (based in frustration or conflict) and rational (where screen use is negotiated as ‘harmful’). Simply “surviving” is thus no simple act. The morning has specific expectations, or “horizons,” based on mutual trust as well as experienced necessity. While the domestic space can be understood as a small life-world, it contains contexts that change as Ester moves through everyday life. Distinct expectations, which follow the different context changes, rely on experiences that also differ in meaning. However, these contexts are part of Ester’s “wide-awakeness” in her day-to-day, her “paramount reality” (Schütz, 1970, p. 253). Using the tablet to get through the morning is part of her domestic life, but moving from one context to another, expectations are subject to change. This paramount reality includes how she understands the diverging (and converging) contexts in which she finds herself. Not only does she have the responsibilities of a mother, but they are as a *single* mother. This is her subjective experience, in which she places full responsibility for her child’s upbringing on herself. It colors her experience of and expectations on managing her

daughter's screen time, meaning the horizons of her small life-world are dependent on her being single. The small life-world can also be understood as her being a single parent, with its specific horizons and modes of acting.

The morning only constitutes one example of Ester and her daughter's daily life – screen time is part of many contexts in their small life-world. Ester explains what she experiences as screen time (consistently using this term) sometimes looks in the evening:

On a Tuesday, we might just eat in front of the TV [...]. Even if we're watching together, we watch different things. So, the function [of screen time] in the evening I feel is relaxation, to close off a bit and wind down. [...] When it's been a crappy day, we'll take care of ourselves [...] and have a cozy night together.

Again, as the context changes, so does the way in which screen time is given meaning, how it is intended. Instead of making things function or simply “surviving,” as with the morning routine, screen time is now relaxation and winding down. Moving into another context is moving into another province of meaning, which can be very different from the next. The horizons which Ester explains here are wildly different to those of the morning routine. Here horizons of “coziness” and “taking care of ourselves” become associated with the phenomenon. As Ester moves through her daily life, her horizons around different phenomena change, depending on mood, a specific space or temporality. Not least is it dependent on the technology – for the evening, the television instead of the tablet. According to Ester, the television is still screen time; however, it is a *specific* screen time. Its character is social and seemingly far removed from the morning's survival mode. She no longer sees screen time as related to harm; instead, it becomes a way for her and her daughter to wind down together. Ester also mentions how her daughter, who often gets to choose what they watch, selects something she knows they both like, without much question. This becomes another example of how Ester articulates the joint agency she and her daughter share. The coherence of the everyday is shared, in Ester's experience, maybe even in a stronger sense in relation to being a single parent; as she says: “There's no-one else who can do it for me.” This also shows how screen use, media technology, and subsequently screen time, have become part of the ongoing everyday experience of Ester and her daughter, and the different meanings associated with the phenomenon.

4.3. Screen time, ambivalence and uncertainty

The examples above illustrate different contexts of experience, as well as how the norms and values around screen time are negotiated by Ester.

These negotiations are, however, not always clear-cut or certain; they often include that of the unknown, and ambivalence. These dimensions become clear when Ester continues to explain how she discusses screen time with her daughter:

You wouldn't let just anyone into our apartment. You let in people you know, people you trust. It's the same here, because they enter into your world, even if it's on a screen, they enter into your private life. They come in, you might be on your bed, they come into your bed, sort of, but through the screen. And I think she understands that.

Ester perceives the domestic space as a very specific space: a safe one for her and her daughter. She continues to explain that she feels her daughter understands these ideas and knows what is expected of her. Nonetheless, Ester notes that *more* is expected of her as a single mother. She is the one who needs to research the content her daughter accesses. Ester uses the example of *Roblox*, a digital game she felt the need to manage and, at first, restrict quite heavily. Their worlds are often far apart, and Ester acknowledges this. Screen time is associated with disruptive qualities that can invade the domestic family space established by the two of them, making it fragile in many ways. Ester notes that she cannot constantly surveil her daughter, and when things simply need solving (like the morning routine), she needs to be more inattentive to what is happening on the tablet. The ideals and norms around screen time as having harmful qualities creates expectations for the technology and its practices. While morning screen time keeps things calm, there is a world beyond the screen that can enter the domestic space, should Ester not be careful or prepared. The domestic space is as a specific realm of experience which Ester feels she must protect. While being an aggregation of many contexts, the domestic still provides specific “province[s] of meaning” (Schütz, 1970). In Ester’s metaphor, the virtual and physical worlds can bleed into each other. Considering these “*plural* senses of lived experience” (Cavallaro & Warren, 2025) allows for understanding screen time as something transcendent of the actual phenomenon. The meanings Ester ascribes to experiencing the object and phenomenon also have metaphysical dimensions (such as digital content that can have ‘real life’ consequences). Ester sees the phenomenon as potentially crossing into the safe space of the domestic, the small life-world, and bringing in something else. Further, the risk is tied to a specific object and practice, making the metaphor a “real” risk; the perception of the object is tied to the experience, which creates the “real” risk (O’Shiel, 2025).

The contexts of everyday life then hold their own unique meanings, rit-

uals, practices and norms (see for example Bausinger, 1984), and Ester relates to them through her small life-world (both in terms of being a single mother and in the domestic space). At the same time, the issues she sees as related to media practices are not separable from “the normative and performative discourse on “screen time”” (Mascheroni & Zaffaroni, 2025). Screen time requires attention from Ester, as she experiences the horizons of harm, while certain contexts rely on specific modes of inattention. When asked how she manages screen time in these different situations, Ester explains that: “For me, it’s very much a feeling.” Rather than moving through everyday life with screen time in terms of rules or strict management, she relies on what *feels* ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. As mentioned, experience and intentionality towards screen time can appear rational but is often based on emotion. Ester illustrates how this feeling is, once again, built on trust:

And I feel like it’s also one [reason for not having screen time rules] that me and her are pretty tight. And that has its good and bad sides. The good thing is that I feel like we talk about things [...] And I feel like there’s this unwritten rule that if we don’t do that, we will need more rules. Like, it’s freedom with responsibility. You’re allowed only what you can manage.

Trust becomes a large part of the expectations Ester experiences around screen time. However, uncertainty is prevalent in many of these contexts. Ester’s expectations are connected to her and her daughter being open around screen time, and what is expected within the domestic space. As long as Ester feels this line of communication is open, she can be somewhat inattentive towards her daughter’s screen time practices. She intends screen time to be reliant on trust and open communication but also values of risk and ‘routinized’ everyday practices. The complex ways in which Ester intends the objects and practices that make up screen time show how she herself moves between different provinces of meaning, in which the phenomenon attains different meanings. This leads to constant negotiations, which transform and occur on different levels. These negotiations also rely on Ester’s own specific context, that of being a single mother. She notes that the different modes of acting are also built on respecting if her daughter is “fully into something,” like a digital game or an episode on YouTube. Ester calls this one of the several “frames” she uses to discuss screen time with her daughter, which she feels allows for much easier approach than strict rules or restrictions around time or content. She uses these “frames” to contextualize the expectations her daughter should have around certain media practices. Ester explains how this makes it easier for her to relay “rules” in a way that makes sense to her daughter – a strategy

related to her having full responsibility in child-rearing. The “routinization work” that surrounds screen time and her child’s media practices fall primarily, if not solely, on her (and in certain contexts, her child). Making the morning routine function smoothly is not at the same level as making sure that negotiations around screen time practices are built on trust. The ideals and values Ester negotiates around screen time are thus part of several provinces of meaning, to differing degrees. Ester notes that her attitude towards screen time might be a product of her own relation to screens, as she says: “I don’t see myself as a screen person.” At the end of the interview, she reflects on whether she is actually doing the “right” thing when it comes to screen time:

I also think to myself that I should be more careful than I am. I should think more about it than I do. And I think it’s quite tricky because I also feel that I am a part of it all. Now it’s a part of society and you just have to accept it and find my way to relate to [screen time]. But it has snuck into all parts of our life, like.

As has been discussed in earlier parts of this article, Ester acknowledges the way in which screen time is experienced as infused into seemingly all parts of her life-world. Her perception of screen time being something unknown becomes apparent in her deliberation. She does not experience screen time as something separate from everyday life, yet it holds a special place in it. The right way to deal with this phenomenon is also a source of uncertainty. Ester feels she should be more careful than she currently is, as the outcome of screen time practices are unknown to her. Screen time, as a phenomenon, is in itself a source of uncertainty, as Ester intends it.

5. CONCLUSION

The larger data set mentioned at the beginning of this article (also see Johansson 2025) as well as Ester’s experiences show how parents learn to live with screen time as a ‘naturalized’ part of daily life. The specific case of Ester provides knowledge on the ambivalent dimensions of what meaning of screen time means in the domestic space (and beyond). As a single mother, Ester emphasizes the added child-rearing responsibilities she has as sole caregiver. Further, Ester sees the joint agency of her daughter as crucial to making screen time management work in their daily life, which she repeatedly attributes to her being a single parent. When following Ester’s movement through her everyday contexts and small life-worlds, the complexities of screen time as an everyday phenomenon emerge. Ester relies strongly on feelings of trust in the meaning-making processes around screen time, in intending the phenomenon. As she manages her daughter’s screen time,

she perceives the phenomenon as requiring a special kind of attention (or inattention). As the everyday contexts change and Ester (together with her daughter) moves through these contexts, so does the meaning of and how she intends the phenomenon. Screen time becomes a dualism in several ways, among them as both related to objects (screen technology) and connected to practices (like keeping the peace in their morning routine). These two dimensions are not separate to Ester, as she often discusses them in the same terms. The meanings of screen time as a phenomenon are in constant negotiation within Ester, as she on the one hand sees it as a consistent part of daily life, while on the other, negotiates the norms surrounding it (like those of harm).

This case shines a light on the specificities of screen time as experienced in everyday life. While the concept is often criticized, it is important to note that it holds specific value and understanding in parents' life-worlds. Understanding their struggles in the digital age, for example when questioning or seeking to improve policies (see arguments in Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Sandberg et al., 2024a), can be complemented by focusing on the negotiation work highlighted by a single case study. Ester's negotiations, expectations and experiences are ambivalent and even contradictory. She feels determined concerning some aspects, yet she also questions many of them. Here, a phenomenological account can shed light on the uncertainties of the experience, revealing the different facets of screen time. This is an exploration of what values and meanings these ambivalences, feelings and expectations create for Ester. Instead of focusing on the discourses and norms that Ester references and negotiates, a phenomenological account explores the norms and values that emanate from the subjective experience. This follows what Livingstone (2021) has argued for; screen time as a concept might need to be abandoned without neglecting the place it has attained in the experiences of everyday life. Screen time is indicative of much of contemporary (Western) family life; as an explanation of the struggles, ideals and experiences of contemporary parenthood, it can reveal plenty.

Magnus Johansson is a Lecturer at the Department of Communication, Lund University, Sweden. Magnus' dissertation explored parenting, everyday life and morality in relation to what is commonly known as screen time. He successfully defended his thesis in Lund on the 12th of September 2025. Magnus also has a special interest in writing, researching and publishing on digital games, often through the perspective of critical animal studies.

ORCID: 0009-0008-0983-6767

e-mail: magnus.johansson@iko.lu.se

Funding

No external funder was involved.

Conflict of interest statement

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

REFERENCES

- Barbaras, R., & Lawlor, L. (2021). *Introduction to a phenomenology of life*. Indiana University Press.
- Barr, R., et al. (2020). Beyond screen time: A synergistic approach to a more comprehensive assessment of family media exposure during early childhood. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01283>
- Bausinger, H. (1984). Media, technology and daily life. *Media, Culture & Society, 6*(4), 343–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443784006004002>
- Bengtsson, J. (1998). *Fenomenologiska utflykter: människa och vetenskap ur ett livsvärldsperspektiv*. Daidalos.
- Blum-Ross, A., & Livingstone, S. (2018). The trouble with “screen time” rules. In G. Mascheroni, C. Ponte, & A. Jorge (Eds.), *Digital parenting: The challenges for families in the digital age* (pp. 179–187).
- Cavallaro, M., & de Warren, N. (Eds.). (2025). *Phenomenologies of the digital age: The virtual, the fictional, the magical* (Routledge studies in contemporary philosophy). Routledge.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity.
- D'Angelo, J. D., & Moreno, M. A. (2019). Not at the dinner table—Take it to your room: Adolescent reports of parental screen time rules. *Communication Research Reports, 36*(5), 426–436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2019.1676898>
- Engelhardt, T. (1991). The primal screen. *Mother Jones, 16*(3), 68.
- Fast, K., Lindell, J., & Jansson, A. (2021). *Disconnection as distinction: A Bourdieusian study of where people withdraw from digital media*. Oxford University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2013). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Forte, C., et al. (2023). Associations between screen-time, physical activity and depressive symptoms differ based on gender and screen-time mode. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 32*(11), 2313–2322. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-023-02115-4>
- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication, 26*(2), 173–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01397.x>
- Golombok, S. (2015). *Modern families: Parents and children in new family forms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Higmore, B. (2011). *Ordinary lives: Studies in the everyday*. Routledge.
- Husserl, E. (1995). *Fenomenologins idé*. Daidalos.
- Iguacel, I., et al. (2018). Social vulnerability as a predictor of physical activity and screen time in European children. *International Journal of Public Health, 63*(2), 283–295. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-017-1043-5>
- Jeffery, C. P. (2021). Parenting in the digital age: Between socio-biological and socio-technological development. *New Media & Society, 23*(5), 1045–1062. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820912532>
- Johansson, M. (2025). *Parenting in screen times: Negotiations, practices and experiences in everyday family life* (Lund studies in media and communication: 32). Lund University.
- Kaye, L. K., et al. (2020). The conceptual and methodological mayhem of “screen time.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(10), 3661. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17103661>
- Kracht, C. L., Redman, L. M., Bellando, J., Krukowski, R. A., & Andres, A. (2023). Association between maternal and infant screen time with child growth and development: A longitudinal study. *Pediatric Obesity, 18*(7), e12996. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijpo.12996>
- Leick, K. (2019). *Parents, media and panic through the years: Kids those days*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Livingstone, S. (2021). The rise and fall of screen time. In *Masters of media: Controversies and solutions* (Vol. 1). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211054828>
- Luckmann, B. (1970). The small life-worlds of modern man. *Social Research*, 37(4), 580–596.
- Lupton, D. (2013). *Risk* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Mannell, K., et al. (2024). Digital media and technology use by families with infants, toddlers, and young children: A scoping review and call for forward momentum. *Journal of Children and Media*, 18(4), 605–628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2301486>
- Maricarmen, V., et al. (2020). From TVs to tablets: The relation between device-specific screen time and health-related behaviors and characteristics. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08958-6>
- Mascheroni, G., & Zaffaroni, L. G. (2023). From “screen time” to screen times: Measuring the temporality of media use in the messy reality of family life. *Communications*, 50(1), 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2022-0111>
- Monteiro, R., Fernandes, S., & Rocha, N. (2022). What do preschool teachers and parents think about the influence of screen-time exposure on children’s development? Challenges and opportunities. *Education Sciences*, 12(2), 137. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12020137>
- Moores, S. (2015). We find our way about: Everyday media use and “inhabitant knowledge.” *Mobilities*, 10(1), 17–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2013.848606>
- Moores, S. (2017). Digital orientations: Movement, dwelling, and media use. In T. Markham & S. Rodgers (Eds.), *Conditions of mediation* (pp. 55–72). Peter Lang.
- Nesi, J., Prinstein, M. J., & Telzer, E. H. (Eds.). (2022). *Handbook of adolescent digital media use and mental health*. Cambridge University Press.
- O’Shiel, D. (2025). The imaginary, magic, and hypervirtuality: On the phenomenological nature of digital screens. In M. Cavallaro & N. de Warren (Eds.), *Phenomenologies of the digital age: The virtual, the fictional, the magical* (pp. 110–125). Routledge.
- Pontes, H. M. (2021). Critically appraising the pitfalls of screen time effects research. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 55(9), 922. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00048674211024633>
- Ponti, M. (2023). Screen time and preschool children: Promoting health and development in a digital world. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 28(3), 184–192. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxac017>
- Sandberg, H., Sjöberg, U., & Sundin, E. (2021). Toddlers’ digital media practices and everyday parental struggles: Interactions and meaning-making as digital media are domesticated. *Nordicom Review*, 42(s4), 59–78. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0045>
- Sandberg, H., Sjöberg, U., & Sundin, E. (2024a). *Små barns digitala vardagsliv: Barndom, föräld-raskap och modernt familjeliv*. Daidalos.
- Sandberg, H., Sjöberg, U., & Sundin, E. (2024b). Parental voices on screen time guidelines in early childhood: Time to rethink and revise recommendations and policy? *Barn: Forskning om barn og barndom i Norden*, 42(3), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.5324/barn.v42i3.4700>
- Schofield Clark, L. (2013). *The parent app: Understanding families in the digital age*. Oxford University Press.
- Schütz, A. (1970). *On phenomenology and social relations: Selected writings*. University of Chicago Press.
- Schütz, A., & Luckmann, T. (1973). *The structures of the life-world*. Northwestern University Press.
- Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes* (1st ed.). Sage Publications.
- Slobodin, O., et al. (2024). Infant screen media and child development: A prospective community study. *Infancy*, 29(2), 155–174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inf.12488>
- Syvvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald Publishing.
- Syvvertsen, T. (2023). Framing digital disconnection: Problem definitions, values, and actions among digital detox organisers. *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 29(3), 658–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221140752>
- Tezol, O., et al. (2022). Excessive screen time and lower psychosocial well-being among preschool children. *Archives de Pédiatrie*, 29(1), 61–66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.arcped.2021.10.005>

- Vrinda, R., Krishna, A. R., & Kunnath, S. K. (2021). Appropriate screen time use to prevent speech and language delay in toddlers during the COVID-19 pandemic: A brief report. *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 32(4), 155–164. <https://doi.org/10.47985/dcidj.489>
- West, D. (2010). *Continental philosophy: An introduction*. Polity.
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2019, April 24). *To grow up healthy, children need to sit less and play more*. <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more>
- Willett, R. (2021). “In our family, we don’t watch those things”: Parents’ discursive constructions of decision-making connected with family media practices. *Journal of Family Studies*, 29(1), 327–342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2021.1896322>
- Willett, R., & Wheeler, N. (2021). Maintaining family stability in the age of digital technologies: An analysis of d/Discourse informing domestic screen media practices in three US families. *Children & Society*, 35(5), 722–735. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12420>
- Yamamoto, M., et al. (2023). Screen time and developmental performance among children at 1–3 years of age in the Japan Environment and Children’s Study. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 177(11), 1168–1175. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.3483>
- Yang, S., et al. (2024). Associations of screen use with cognitive development in early childhood: The ELFE birth cohort. *Journal of Child Psychology*, 65(5), 680–693. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13678>

‘REAL BULGARIAN MEN’ UNDER THREAT: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND MISOGYNY IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS ON GENDER ANTAGONISM IN BULGARIA

JULLIETTA STOENCHEVA
Malmö University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article explores the discursive construction of social identities in online discussions on gender antagonism in Bulgaria through a critical discourse analysis of posts on the anonymous Q&A platform *Spodeli*. Drawing on social identity theory and Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, the study examines how forum users construct an in-group identity of ‘the Bulgarian man’ by Othering women, gender-nonconforming individuals, Roma, and Western men as threats to national and masculine identity. The analysis highlights how platform affordances such as anonymity, lack of moderation, accessibility, and visibility facilitate the proliferation of misogynistic discourse. The findings show that despite sharing similarities with Western misogynist/anti-feminist discourses, discussions on the forum are largely shaped by post-communist anxieties around economy and national sovereignty. This study advances scholarship on networked misogyny by offering a situated analysis from an Eastern European perspective, revealing how gender antagonism is deeply intertwined with nationalist and anti-democratic currents in Bulgaria.

KEYWORDS

Hegemonic Masculinity • Networked Misogyny • Gender Antagonism
• Social Identity Theory • Othering • Critical Discourse Analysis • Social Media Affordances • Normalization • Eastern Europe • Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the surge in misogyny and anti-feminism online has received substantial scholarly attention (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Fontanella et al., 2024; Hoebanx, 2024), particularly in the Western context (e.g. Ging, 2019; Krendel, 2020; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Rothermel, 2023). While misogyny is far from a modern issue, it has recently taken on new forms, aided by advancements in digital technology. The internet has enabled the transnationalization and systematic mobilization of anti-feminist sentiments by established and emerging political actors who oppose women's rights and gender equality policies (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). These developments have changed both the narratives these actors employ and the methods they use to communicate their ideas (Ging, 2019), resulting in what Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016, p. 171) dub *networked misogyny* – “an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments.”

However, much less is written about this phenomenon's manifestations outside Western countries. One largely under-researched geographical area is Eastern Europe, and particularly former Eastern Bloc members, despite significant prevalence of anti-feminist sentiments and politics in the region. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) score lowest on the Gender Equality Index for the continent (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). Furthermore, concerted opposition to women's rights in the CEE region has impacted both institutional and civic levels. Authorities' gender equality efforts regularly face backlash, while NGOs endure funding restrictions, smear campaigns, and delegitimizing labels such as 'foreign agents' (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2024). A noteworthy case in Bulgaria is the rejection of the Council of Europe Convention on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2018, to which online alliances of conservative groups were instrumental (Darakchi, 2019).

Considering cultural differences and uneven democratic developments across Europe, the present study addresses the spread of networked misogyny in the context of Bulgaria – an Eastern European country on the Balkans. Using a discourse-historical approach to CDA informed by social identity theory and hegemonic masculinity, the study explores antagonistic gender discourses on the Bulgarian Q&A forum *Spodeli*. In doing so, it aims to identify constructed social identities and their role in amplifying hostility towards women and other enemy out-groups.

This study contributes an understanding of misogynistic discourse in online spaces and its political implications outside of an Anglo-Saxon context. A further contribution lies in the exploration of these issues beyond political actors, looking instead at how misogyny, anti-feminism and back-

lash against women's rights in Bulgaria are articulated and circulated online. The choice of platform is motivated by recent findings suggesting that online environments straddling the line between fringe and mainstream, where everyday topics intersect with extremist discourse and hate speech, can serve as gateways to radicalization (Åkerlund, 2021a), and contribute to the normalization of extremist discourse (Ekström, 2023). These previous findings underscore the importance of understanding the affordances of a platform such as *Spodeli*, which the present study contributes to.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF NETWORKED MISOGYNY

Previous research highlights how misogynistic discourse thrives on constructing in-group identities by scapegoating specific gendered out-groups as the root of societal problems (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). Misogynistic discourse often relies on rigid, binary gender categories, positioning men as the in-group and women as the out-group. Such discourse taps into emotional vulnerabilities and broader societal anxieties. Women are constructed as 'abject Others,' blamed for issues like economic instability, shifting political landscapes, or perceived cultural decline related to changes in gender roles and norms (Chang, 2022). This potent combination of emotional appeal and collective identity, Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012) argue, constructs a shared sense of grievance among men directed at a common enemy, thus increasing the virality potential of networked misogyny.

Networked misogyny plays a significant role in contemporary political struggles by amplifying and mobilizing forces around gender roles and hegemonic notions of masculinity. Online platforms have become fertile grounds for anti-feminist and misogynistic discourses, which are often intertwined with broader political agendas (Ging & Siapera, 2019). In her study of Turkish anti-Istanbul Convention groups' online posts, Eslen-Ziya (2022) highlights the connection between networked misogyny and mainstream political movements that seek to restrict or reverse gender equality policies. By framing gender equality as a zero-sum game, where gains for women equal losses for men, such discourse effectively galvanizes opposition to women's rights.

Understanding the circulation and articulation of networked misogyny within bounded national contexts is complicated given its transnational character. Local, regional, and global discourses mix on open, English-language platforms, where users often remain anonymous. While scholars increasingly recognize anti-feminism and misogyny as global phenomena (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Goetz & Mayer, 2023), there is a dearth of research into how misogyny manifests in non-English-speaking contexts. In the Balkan context, Milanović (2021) has attempted to capture anti-feminist

online discourses specific to Serbia by analyzing posts from Serbian IP addresses on the 4chan board /pol/ ('Politically Incorrect'). A key limitation, however, is the exclusive use of English-language data from an international platform. Since English proficiency in Balkan countries lags behind the European average (EF, 2024), this approach may fail to capture substantial segments of the population engaging with anti-feminist and/or misogynist rhetoric in local languages.

1.1. Historical Legacies and Contemporary Backlashes: Gender, Politics, and Identity in Bulgaria

Critical discourse analysis acknowledges that discourses both shape and are shaped by the environments in which they occur. This requires situating the present study within the Bulgarian socio-political context. Bulgaria's geopolitical position—a former Eastern Bloc member, part of CEE, the Balkans, and the EU—reflects a blend of diverse, sometimes contradictory, influences. These include the country's communist past, prolonged post-communist transition, the 2008 economic crisis, and EU policies following its accession.

As a “recent democracy” (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020, p. 2), Bulgaria continues to grapple with its past as an Eastern Bloc member (1946-1989). This period of sweeping reforms in many areas, including women's rights and societal roles, continues to shape debates in modern Bulgaria, where generational and ideological divides between the country's communist legacy and pro-European outlook persist.

According to Slabakova (1992, p. 140), during the communist period, society “was not so much male-oriented as Communist-party oriented” – which worked to the benefit of women's rights. In 1944, women obtained voting rights (Daskalova, 2004), and abortion, though intermittently restricted, became legal in 1956 (UN, 2002). By 1950, Bulgaria had implemented state-funded, universally accessible healthcare (Georgieva et al., 2007). Women entered education and the workforce, supported by social policies such as paid maternity leave, daycare facilities, and public canteens. The Bulgarian Women's Movement Committee pushed legislative reforms and showcased Bulgaria internationally as a leader in women's emancipation, particularly during the UN Women's Decade 1975-1985 (Ghodsee, 2012). However, the structural improvements to women's social stance were accompanied by strongly conservative public discourse. The state primarily referred to women as mothers, and motherhood was idealized as part of a ‘natural gender harmony.’ Although equality was guaranteed in principle, the state apparatus failed to acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences, overlooking the specific needs of i.e. queer women,

women from ethnic and religious minorities, and women with disabilities (Brunnbauer & Taylor, 2004).

Bulgaria's transition to democracy and EU integration was not without its controversies. Disillusioned by worsening living conditions post-1989, Bulgarians initially viewed EU membership with optimism – 72% were in favor of it before Bulgaria's EU accession in 2007 (Dimitrova, 2012). Women's rights were expected to benefit as well, with accession requiring alignment with the EU *acquis communautaire* on gender equality, including passing the Law on Protection against Discrimination (Daskalova, 2005). However, progress proved complex. Government efforts were focused on meeting economic and political benchmarks for accession, while social issues like gender inequality were sidelined, failing to properly enter the public debate (Luleva, 2016). Amidst this development, the imposition of Western gender equality models, without public debate or consideration of Bulgaria's unique historical and cultural context, led to resistance and waves of socialist nostalgia (Ghodsee, 2004). After the EU accession, development stalled, and emigration fueled by the 2008 economic crisis brought about demographic and labor market challenges (Bogdanov & Rangelova, 2012). In this context, there has been little public discussion of the lasting effects of the communist past, providing an opportunity for anti-EU political actors to reframe these issues as consequences of Europeanisation (Stanchev, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Bulgaria has recently seen a surge in anti-feminist and misogynist rhetoric. A notable event was the 2018 backlash against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which conservative and far-right actors in the country framed as a threat to traditional values and family structures in Bulgaria. The ensuing debates popularized the term 'gender ideology' – a catch-all phrase used to vilify feminist movements and promote fears of Western cultural imperialism (Kovacheva, 2023). This narrative has since merged with broader nationalist and anti-EU discourses, fueling hostility toward progressive human- and women's rights reforms. More recently, a 2024 law banning LGBTQ+ 'propaganda' in schools has further entrenched traditionalist views, casting gender equality advocates as cultural adversaries (Todorov, 2024).

2. SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE DISCURSIVE POWER OF OTHERING

This study draws on social identity theory (SIT) to understand how discursive tropes around gender antagonism help construct and reinforce hegemonic gender identities. SIT poses that (perceived) belonging to social groups influences individuals' self-presentation and compels them to act

in accordance with a *social identity* (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In intergroup conflict, SIT claims, social identity reinforces self-esteem, fosters in-group loyalty, and creates opposition toward out-groups.

At its core, SIT revolves around the discursive construction of identity. Group identities are shaped by *prototypes* - shared traits, behaviors, and values that form *stereotypes* about said group (Berger, 2018). This process involves *social categorization*: assigning identities to others, and *social identification*: aligning one's behavior to perceived group norms and emotional investment in the group's collective identity. Through *social comparison*, then, positive bias forms towards in-groups and negative bias - towards out-groups. Particularly in conflict, group identity motivates members to renegotiate perceived disadvantages in social hierarchies and seek *social change* (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Further, SIT posits that the need to maintain a positive social identity can lead to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This occurs through Othering - the discursive process wherein self-perceived 'dominant' groups define groups they perceive 'subordinate' as fundamentally different (Dervin, 2016; Jensen, 2011). By constructing the 'Other' as deviant, threatening, or morally deficient, social hierarchies are legitimized and in-group cohesion is reinforced (Jensen, 2011). Othering is thus deeply intertwined with SIT's mechanisms of social comparison and in-group favoritism, as it explicates the symbolic mechanisms through which out-groups are devalued and excluded.

Berger (2018) applies SIT to studying extremist groups/communities, showing how social identity formation lies at the core of justifying hostile and/or violent actions against out-groups. Extremism, he argues, relies on narratives claiming the necessity for (violent) measures against out-group(s) of 'Others' in the face of an imminent crisis/threat that these 'Others' pose to the in-group. In the present study, SIT is instrumental in identifying discursive constructions of gender-based social identities and beliefs about the in-group and its relationship to others. Berger's insights invite paying special attention to how ideas around masculinity and femininity on *Spodeli* lend themselves to violent interpretations of gender relations, potentially producing misogyny and inciting symbolic or physical violence.

2.1. Hegemonic Masculinity

This study is theoretically informed by Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 2005, 2013; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which offers a critical lens for understanding how dominant gender norms are constructed and maintained. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a culturally dominant form of masculinity that establishes itself as the most powerful

and respected gender ideal, thereby exerting control over other, marginalized masculinities, as well as over femininity. While few men completely embody the hegemonic masculine ideal, it operates as a social benchmark, compelling men to negotiate their identities in alignment with its expectations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This structure accommodates variations in masculine expression, but only as long as they ultimately reinforce the dominance of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, hegemonic masculinity sustains patriarchal dominance by legitimizing certain masculine traits and marginalizing others.

Messerschmidt (2019) further poses that hegemonic masculinity is not monolithic but is shaped differently in specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. Thus, he calls for scholars to examine hegemonic masculinities (plural) at the local, regional, and global levels. Global inquiries highlight that hegemonic masculinity often emphasizes physical appearance as a marker of male success (Coyne et al., 2022; King et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020). In the Bulgarian context, however, the hegemonic masculine ideal is more often constructed as a financially stable, patriotic Orthodox Christian holding 'traditional family values.' These characteristics are central to ethno-nationalist discourses that propagate anti-European and xenophobic rhetoric targeting various 'Others' like ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities (Luleva, 2018). The lens of hegemonic masculinity thus helps unpack the power dynamics embedded in such discourses, revealing how dominant masculine ideals marginalize alternative masculinities and femininities, perpetuating misogyny and gender antagonism.

2.2. Social Media Affordances for Gender Antagonism

The study applies an affordance focus to reflect on the role *Spodeli's* affordances play in shaping the type of discourses identified in the results. Emerging from the field of human-computer interaction, the affordances concept has been embraced by the social sciences, broadly defined as "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444). An affordance-focused approach thus invites researchers to consider the relational dynamics between technologies and their users while recognizing that although technological features can influence user behavior, they do not dictate it entirely (Evans et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2016).

Importantly, online networks and their logics are constantly evolving. Anonymous, low-moderation platforms (such as Reddit or 4chan) are a particularly prominent type of spaces where moderate and extreme discourses intermingle. Anonymity, a defining feature of such forums, allows users to share thoughts and express attitudes pushing the boundaries of

societal norms – thus not only amplifying the reach of extreme discourses, but also increasingly normalizing them (Åkerlund, 2021a; Stoencheva & Mileva Boshkoska, 2024). Massanari (2017) argues that the lack of accountability that anonymity provides affords anti-feminist, misogynistic, and potentially violent rhetoric to proliferate unhindered, and Ging (2019, pp. 642-643) similarly highlights that online anonymity “facilitates hostile and often illegal performances of masculinity [...] which would not go unchecked in face-to-face contexts.” Further, the combination of anonymity and minimal moderation—often justified as defense of ‘free speech’—proves especially conducive to hate speech (Åkerlund, 2023).

However, anonymity and moderation are only part of a broader ecology of affordances that enable the spread of misogynist discourse online. In her study of Reddit, Massanari (2017) demonstrates how algorithmic amplification contributes to the creation of “toxic technocultures” that reward inflammatory or emotionally charged posts with boosted visibility. The temporal persistence of online content further contributes to the sedimentation of misogynistic narratives. As Jane (2014) argues, the indefinite availability of posts containing what she calls “e-bile”—a specific genre of online discourse characterized by graphic, gendered, and often sexualized hostility—allows misogynistic narratives to be archived, recirculated, and recontextualized over time. Other harmful internet practices include ‘trolling’ and ‘shitposting’, which blur the lines between sincere and performative misogyny. This ambiguity allows users to deflect criticism by framing their posts as jokes or satire, even when they contain explicit threats or hate speech (Greene, 2019). These findings highlight the need to pay attention to platform affordances and their role in fostering gender antagonism.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The empirical focus of this study is the Bulgarian Q&A platform *Spodeli* (meaning *share*). Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, the research questions guiding the inquiry are:

- *What discursive tropes structure online gender debates on Spodeli, and how do they contribute to the construction and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity and related social identities?*
- *How do the social and technological affordances of the platform shape these discourses?*

The self-stated purpose of *Spodeli* is providing a safe space for people to discuss personal experiences, even controversial or taboo such, completely anonymously. In its structure, it shares similarities with popular interna-

tional website *Quora*: users post questions, generating one-to-many micro-threads that others can answer. To create a thread, one chooses from 13 available categories (among which *Love & Cheating*, *Sex & Intimacy*, *Family*, *Teenage*, *Drugs & Alcohol*, etc.), adds a title (their question), and writes a description (contextualizing the question). Published threads can be accessed via the 'Newest posts/comments' feed, keyword search, categories, or an admin-curated 'Editor's Choice' section.

The platform has retained its basic design since its creation in 2007, and lacks features standard to more modern social media platforms. Most significantly, visitors cannot create accounts, which ensures that posts and comments remain untraceable, but also prevents editing/deleting comments or following users. Images and hyperlinks are also disallowed. Further, one cannot reply to a specific comment – all answers to a thread appear chronologically, without algorithmic or personalized curation. Users can rate each answer with 1-5 stars, but rating does not affect answers' prominence in the thread.

Precise statistics about *Spodeli's* user base and popularity are unavailable, but third-party data indicate that it occupies a mid-tier position in Bulgaria's web landscape. According to website tracker SpyMetrics (2025), the site ranked #484 nationally in April 2025, with approximately 200,420 visits (a 7.5% decrease from the month before). No historical data is available for the period analyzed in this study, and there is no direct evidence regarding user demographics. However, based on its long-standing presence and daily activity, *Spodeli* appears to attract a relatively stable user base. Over 60% of the traffic comes from search engines rather than direct navigation (SpyMetrics, 2025), implying that most users are occasional visitors who discover the site while searching for specific topics online. Thus, *Spodeli* can be understood as a niche forum rather than a hub for fringe communities. As of April 2025, close to 200,000 threads have been started on *Spodeli*, many with hundreds of answers.

The T&Cs state the 'absolute freedom of speech' on the platform, aside from three simple rules: no sharing of personal details, no spam or advertisements, and no illegal content. Rather than applying reactive moderation, every post is reviewed by an admin before publication to ensure compliance. The platform's nature facilitates candid sharing about intimate and stigmatized topics such as sexual relationships, but also invites conversations about politics and worldviews. Freed from the constraints of accountability and reputation management that come with maintaining a user account, users appear more willing to articulate controversial or socially sensitive thoughts and opinions – including hate speech, sexism, racism, and homophobia. Consequently, *Spodeli* offers a window onto ex-

ploring polarizing debates on gender, which often escalate into misogyny and other forms of gender antagonism towards certain social groups.

This study draws on a sample of 3,221 *Spodeli* posts from 80 threads posted between 2020 and 2022. Threads were sampled by searching for the keywords ‘masculinity,’ ‘femininity,’ ‘feminism,’ ‘misogyny,’ and ‘misandry,’ chosen for their relevance to the study’s focus on gender antagonism. The collected material was read in its entirety and analyzed through critical discourse analysis (CDA).

The study takes a discourse-historical approach (DHA) to CDA. Discourse is conceptualized here as social actions mediated through text, which both construct societal norms and reproduce power inequalities (Wodak, 1996). DHA examines the interplay between text and context, which enables accounting for historical and cultural (re)contextualizations that inform the construction of gender-based social identities in the analyzed material. The analysis follows the DHA process outlined by Reisigl and Wodak (2009). First, the research questions were informed by contextual and theoretical insights, as outlined above. Next followed the data collection, where the focus was on capturing threads that potentially address gender antagonism. The initial reading of the data focused on identifying comments of interest; then, the research homed in on specific tropes that encapsulate antagonistic constructions of gender-based social identities to understand how they facilitate the social identity construction process. Particular attention was paid to the use of linguistic devices (i.e. metaphors, stereotypes, evaluative attributions), as well as to references to broader socio-historical narratives. Lastly, the findings were contextualized within Bulgaria’s historical and contemporary cultural and political dynamics, providing insights into how gender antagonism in online discourse aligns with broader sociopolitical trends.

Before I proceed to the analysis, I wish to acknowledge my positionality in relation to this research. As someone born and raised in Bulgaria, the socio-cultural context examined here is in many ways familiar and taken for granted, necessitating a conscious process of ‘denaturalization’ in order to critically analyze it. However, having lived in Western Europe for over a decade, I have observed recent political and cultural developments from a distance, which lends me a more of an ‘outsider-looking-in’ perspective. Inevitably, my personal position shapes how I approach the material.

4. FINDINGS: ‘BULGARIAN MEN’ AND THEIR ‘OTHERS’

This section explores how forum users construct the ‘Bulgarian man’ through discursive opposition to a range of Others: gender-nonconform-

ing individuals, Roma, 'Westerners', and women. The findings highlight the intersection of internationally-inspired and locally-specific tropes, illustrating how current sociopolitical realities, historical legacies, and contemporary global and local narratives play into these discourses, as well as how *Spodeli's* affordances affect their shaping and dissemination.

4.1. The Ideal 'Bulgarian Man'

The 'Bulgarian man' trope is recurring in the analyzed discussions, serving to encourage male users to adopt a shared identity tied to the patriarchal father-protector-breadwinner ideal (Luleva, 2018). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 841) argue, masculinity "represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices." Struggling to meet the hegemonic masculine ideal, *Spodeli* users work to actively renegotiate the traits of the ideal 'Bulgarian man' to better align with their own realities.

A notable contrast between the Western-centric understandings of hegemonic masculinity and its local articulation in the Bulgarian context is the focus on financial means rather than physical appearance. In contrast to Western literature, which emphasizes looks as central to the global hegemonic male ideal (King et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020), on *Spodeli*, wealth is considered the primary marker of a man's attractiveness. One user writes:

For women of our generation, financial status is paramount. It is, figuratively speaking, the "one" ahead of a multiple sequence of zeros, which makes a meaningful number (1000...). Other factors like education, manners, and physique each add another zero and raise your "value," but only provided that the "one" is already there.

This comment explicitly equates male worth with financial capital, discussing identity and human relations in market-driven terms. Like many other comments along the same lines, it demonstrates that users see their own masculinity challenged by their perceived economic disadvantages. Thus, the topic of wealth creates tension which they manage by positioning themselves against 'inferior Others'. The discussions illustrate how 'Bulgarian men' use social comparison to negotiate masculinity, defining it not by what it includes but by what it excludes. While a 'Bulgarian man' is typically seen as an ethnically Bulgarian, heterosexual, cisgender male living in Bulgaria, his acceptable demeanor is defined through opposition to various out-groups constructed to embody the criteria of exclusion from the in-group identity. In-group and out-group identities are formed through

stereotyping and de-individualization, with three major out-groups: ‘genders,’ Roma, and ‘foreign’ (Western) men.

4.2. The Threat of ‘Genders’ or ‘Gendered Others’

The group of ‘Others’ that *Spodeli* users most actively distance themselves from are men who, as they see it, ‘relinquish their masculinity’ by being or acting ‘feminine.’ This group includes homosexual, transsexual, queer, and ‘soft’ men – those whose self-expression does not conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal. The convergence of these alternative masculinities into one group demonstrates the centrality of ‘manliness’ to membership in the ‘Bulgarian men’ in-group. The English term *gender*, politicized during the anti-Istanbul Convention campaign, has taken on a new meaning in the Bulgarian context (Darakchi, 2019) and the Cyrillic transliteration of it (‘джендър’) is used on the platform as a derogatory noun signifying males deviating from the ‘traditional Bulgarian man’ image either by appearance, behavior, or ideology. Users actively engage in social comparison to position ‘genders’ as inferior to their perceived in-group, and anonymity emboldens them to voice disdain in particularly blunt, dehumanizing ways. Values associated with ‘genders,’ and hence seen as undesirable, include feminism, progressive views, and a pro-European stance.

This discourse mirrors global anti-feminist rhetoric, which links the feminist movement to a masculinity crisis (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). On *Spodeli*, however, users argue that Bulgarian men’s ‘feminization’ is a post-transition issue – an argument often evoked with undertones of socialist nostalgia. These ‘emasculated’ men receive not sympathy but contempt, contrasting them to heroic figures from the past said to embody a lost ideal of masculinity. The discourse reflects Western far-right discourses, framing the decline of ‘real masculinity’ as a threat to societal stability and the nation’s survival (Copland, 2023).

4.3. The Roma as an ‘Internal Threat’

Echoing the far-right’s transnational narrative of the ‘Great Replacement,’ which frames racialized Others as demographically and culturally overtaking white populations (Copland, 2023), the Roma minority in Bulgaria is often presented as an internal threat to the nation. The Roma are widely scapegoated in Bulgarian society, associated with stereotypes like poverty, illiteracy, theft, and uncontrolled reproduction (Canut, 2019). *Spodeli* users portray them as an outlawed, primitive ethnic group, using derogatory terms like ‘gypsies’ (‘*mangali*’). Paradoxically, some of the same traits that the Roma are vilified for—high fertility and resistance to institutional norms—are elsewhere idealized as markers of traditional masculinity and

cultural vitality. This contradiction reveals how racialized Others are discursively excluded from the symbolic rewards of hegemonic masculinity, even when embodying its celebrated attributes. Religion also plays a role, with the Roma often presented as uniformly Islamist. This despite the 2021 census showing that slightly more Roma profess Christianity than Islam, with the majority stating other or no religions (NSI, 2021). Positioning the Roma as Islamist serves to frame them as a 'dangerous Other' to the 'traditional Christian family virtues' central to the identity of 'Bulgarian men,' despite the ambiguity surrounding what these virtues actually entail.

4.4. Western Men as 'Abject Others'

Foreign men, especially those from the West, are another out-group against which the 'Bulgarian man' asserts his identity. This serves both to emphasize ethnic origin as central to this social identity and to reject perceived 'foreign values.' On *Spodeli*, resistance to Western ideals is celebrated as an act of national pride and a rightful duty for the 'Bulgarian man,' as reflected in comments like the following:

There's a proverb: everything new is well-forgotten old, and so it is with these pseudo-ideologies that are now imposing a "new normal" on us. Luckily, here in Bulgaria, although we are poorer and not as developed as the Western world, we have kept some common sense and traditions and don't accept everything that is offered to us at face value, because as a nation we have suffered for many centuries. Let them laugh at us "primitive Balkans" – in some areas, Western nations will never catch up to us.

One internationally prominent antifeminist far-right narrative revolves around the grievance of men's perceived lack of access to sexual relationships, framed as a societal threat to the survival of native populations (Copland, 2023). Here, the 'Western man' is presumed to have greater wealth and hence be preferred by Bulgarian women, creating a need to reassert Bulgarian male worth. While accusing 'Western men' of contributing to the 'extinction of the Bulgarian nation' by 'stealing' Bulgarian women, users simultaneously frame them as a race in decline that has fallen victim to Western liberalism and globalism. The lack of direct reply functions on *Spodeli* means these statements rarely face rebuttal or dialogue. Instead, the platform's affordances favor monologic assertions that gain performative traction by appealing to group identity.

Ethnic Bulgarians who emigrate represent a distinct subset of the 'Western men' trope. While Western far-right and anti-feminist narratives often focus on immigration, particularly from the Middle East, here the dis-

course centers on emigration as a threat to the nation's survival. For one, emigrants are implicated as 'foreign agents' who adopt Western values abroad and 'import' them back into Bulgaria through interactions with locals or by returning home. Moreover, they are seen as 'traitors', particularly for creating families with foreign partners. According to SIT, the attempt to switch social groups is perceived by the original in-group as a betrayal deserving of punishment (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), and this is evident in the way *Spodeli* users discuss the 'emigrant' out-group. National pride is essential to the 'Bulgarian man' identity, and staying in Bulgaria is discursively framed as a heroic act that safeguards the nation and its people. While emigrants are considered more appealing to women due to their improved financial means, they are still portrayed as inferior, falling short of both 'real' Westerners and 'real' Bulgarians. Forum users promote the idea that emigrants can never live and work on equal terms and gain the same financial means as Western Europeans. Pursuing the 'false promise' of a better life abroad is thus considered treason – an act which, users argue, renders emigrants morally inferior to 'Bulgarian men' while still financially inferior to Westerners.

4.5. 'Feminazis'

In addition to out-groups of 'Other' men, *Spodeli* users also position the social identity of 'Bulgarian men' in relation to women. Similar to observations from international platforms (e.g. Ging, 2019), discourses on the forum portray 'Bulgarian men' as victims of feminism and express nostalgia for a patriarchal 'golden age' – here, the pre-1989 communist period. Forum users discuss modern feminism as a form of 'social engineering' orchestrated by elites to subjugate men and manage the global population by turning women into 'feminazis' who seek female domination rather than equality. The West is blamed for 'importing' feminism to Bulgaria through globalization and mass emigration, and figures like George Soros are implicated in funding Bulgarian NGOs to spread pro-European and pro-Western ideologies.

Anti-feminist and misogynistic sentiments are often invoked to construct 'feminazi' women as an out-group, accusing them of abandoning their societal roles and becoming 'tyrants.' In addition to strengthening in-group unity through emotional appeal, these discourses call for counteractions that legitimize discrimination and even violence. This rhetorical acceleration is supported by the platform's absence of moderation mechanisms and lack of reply infrastructure, which removes friction that might otherwise slow or redirect antagonistic momentum. One user, for instance, claims that "the evil of feminism can only be defeated by physical force," warning that failure to act would spell disaster not just for men, but ultimately for

the entire humanity – a statement that in other contexts might be censored or challenged, but here persists and accumulates. Such discourses become potent catalysts for motivating violence against women by rationalizing it as a necessary response (Berger, 2018).

However, forum users disagree on how deeply feminism has taken root in Bulgaria, with some claiming it has not yet permeated all areas of society and politics and thus that there is room for resistance. Some see 'Western feminism' as a distorted counterpart to the 'real' feminism seen under the communist regime:

In Bulgaria, women have long now been an established part of the workforce thanks to socialism. We don't have gender pay gaps, we have as many women as men in high-paying jobs like IT, law, medicine. Women have the right to vote, to drive, to study. And this has never come at the expense of having a family. On the contrary, during the socialist regime women were supported in having both children and careers, unlike now. Western feminism tries to convince us it's either-or, but Bulgarians know what real feminism looks like – men and women as equal, not as the same.

Statements like the above serve to discursively establish feminism as a foreign ideology irrelevant to the lives of Bulgarian women, motivating calls for anti-feminist action. Moreover, calls to vote for nationalist far-right parties are frequent, which reflects international findings on the link between anti-feminism and far-right nationalism (Copland, 2023). Bulgarian far-right leaders are celebrated in these discourses as 'real Bulgarian men' protecting the nation, thereby integrating far-right ideology into the 'Bulgarian man' identity.

4.6. Bulgarian Women as 'Gold Diggers'

Although discussions about feminism on the platform often target women broadly, 'Bulgarian women' make up a distinct out-group characterized by materialism and obsession with money and status. This market-oriented framing of gender relations dominates throughout the dataset, tying into the hegemonic masculinity ideal of men as providers. Romantic relations are cast as competitive marketplaces, and failure to secure a partner is blamed on economic scarcity. Women, in turn, are described as for-sale objects seeking the highest bidder. However, these discourses seldom frame men as responsible for acquiring wealth, nor do they criticize wealthy men for their perceived advantages. Instead, critique is directed towards the 'mercantile Bulgarian woman,' a 'gold-digger' devoid of values seeking luxury over love or attraction. One user writes:

The mercantile woman exists! I don't know if she's a product of our time, or if this sort of women has always existed. Unfortunately, gentlemen, if you lack a shiny Jeep, an expensive suit, if you do not drink branded alcohol, then you are doomed to be alone.

The collective disdain toward 'mercantile' Bulgarian women is often expressed through affectively intense, emotionally saturated language. This emotional tone is encouraged by the platform's 'latest' posts visibility, which facilitates engagement with high-affect posts, and the lack of reply functionality, which favors one-directional venting over deliberative negotiation. In discourses highlighting this preoccupation with wealth above appearance, two distinctly Bulgarian tropes are often invoked: the *mutra* (literal translation: *mug*) and *kifla* (literal translation: *muffin*). To grasp their meaning, the historical and cultural contexts they are embedded in require further unpacking.

The term *mutra*—a slur emerging in the 1990s—became one of the defining tropes of the transition. Originally, it referred to mafia-like networks of former regime supporters, many of which ex-wrestlers, who exploited their ties to the dismantled communist regime to seize state-owned businesses during the post-communist privatization process. Representing “a large, physically strong, unintelligent mobster, hostile and prone to violence against ordinary people” (Bankov, 1996), the *mutra* later came to embody a post-transition image of male 'success', combining hyper-masculinity, aggression, power, and wealth.

The *kifla*, on the other hand, refers (usually derogatorily) to a glamorous woman exhibiting a “provocative, kitschy, trending [...] dressing and make-up style” (Stoykova, 2013, p. 280). The *kifla* look is often associated with *chalga* – a musical style popularized in the 1990s, mixing Bulgarian folklore rhythms with Ottoman, Romani, and Balkan influences. *Chalga* lyrics and aesthetics emphasize “the eroticizing of power,” often portraying “interactions of seduction mediated by money” (Muharska, 2019, p. 215). Female *chalga* artists' opulent, overly-sexualized appearance involves heavy makeup, hair extensions, revealing outfits, cosmetic enhancements like large silicone breasts and lip fillers, designer clothing, lavish jewelry, expensive cars, and luxury settings.

The Bulgarian figures of the *mutra* and *kifla* function as culturally specific counterparts to manosphere archetypes such as 'Chads' and 'Stacys' (Ging, 2019). Like 'Chad', the *mutra* symbolizes hypermasculine dominance. Likewise, the *kifla* plays a role akin to the 'Stacy' – she is hyper-feminine, sexually appealing, materialistic, and immoral. However, both tropes crystallize anxieties about gender, class, and morality in the aftermath of

Bulgaria's turbulent post-communist transition, adding affective complexity that is absent from the Western terms. On *Spodeli*, these tropes are evoked with a mixture of contempt, envy, and underlying admiration. While objects of mockery, they are also oddly admired as twisted ideals of male achievement. Muharska (2019) observes similar dynamics in her analysis of *chalga* culture's influence on the 2018 Istanbul Convention debate, suggesting that men compensate perceived economic shortcomings of the hegemonic masculine ideal by embracing a hyper-masculine image (of which hyper-feminine women are a part). She also emphasizes the importance of male "homo-sociality" among such men, where shared identity reaffirms and amplifies their masculinity.

5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study contributes to research on networked misogyny by addressing two important research gaps. First, it shifts the geographical focus from the predominantly Western-centered research to Eastern Europe, particularly Bulgaria, challenging assumptions that networked misogyny is a 'Western issue' specific to Anglo-Saxon online spaces. Second, it moves beyond political actors to examine how these discourses play out among 'ordinary' users in online environments.

The findings demonstrate how discourses on *Spodeli* invite men to identify with a hegemonic subject position of ideal Bulgarian masculinity, defined in opposition to various 'Others': gender-nonconforming men, Roma, 'Westerners', and women. The 'Bulgarian man' identity is negotiated in dialogue with hegemonic masculinity, elevating him as protector of nation and tradition while navigating anxieties of financial inferiority to Western men. Feminism is construed as a destructive force undermining traditional gender roles, and the 'Bulgarian woman' is depicted as mercantile and materialistic. Discourses are contradictory and diverse, but grounded in shared beliefs about society and gender. International and local interpretations intersect, with locally specific tropes like the *mutra* and *kifla* embodying financial struggles following Bulgaria's transition from communism to democracy. The discursive structure of these conversations follows a crisis narrative pattern, whereby out-groups are depicted as existential threats to the in-group requiring radical/violent solutions (Berger, 2018).

Arguably, the platform's affordances of anonymity, lack of hate speech moderation, visibility, and accessibility play a key role in sustaining these discourses. Anonymity creates an environment that unburdens users from accountability or reputation management. Further, the absence of user accounts fosters collective social identity expression rather than individual identity performance. This combination of affordances allows individuals

to externalize latent biases and align themselves with (violently) misogynist narratives in ways they might not in other contexts – despite claims of legal compliance, violence against women is openly discussed and even justified on the platform. Accessibility also plays an important role. The diversity of conversations on *Spodeli* attracts varying types of users and lurkers to the platform, meaning that users who do not intentionally seek out gender-hostile content are nonetheless exposed to it. Seeing such discourses proliferate unchecked can in turn lead to internalizing and perpetuating them. This aligns with earlier findings, suggesting similar platforms help mainstream hateful discourses (Åkerlund, 2021b). Finally, although *Spodeli* lacks content boosting algorithms, its ‘Latest’ feed functions as a visibility affordance that subtly amplifies antagonist discourse. Emotionally charged comments attract engagement, keeping provocative threads visible. This shows how even minimal design choices produce affordances that can shape discourse trajectories and help normalize hostility over time.

This study faces some limitations inherent to researching online platforms. Without user accounts, *Spodeli*’s user demographics or contributor numbers remain unknown, nor can the extent of trolling (intentionally insincere or provocative posting) be assessed. The sampling process might also have impacted the findings. The keywords used to collect data may not fully reflect the vocabulary of all users on the platform, introducing a potential bias toward more explicit or ideologically charged discussions. While the terms were chosen to capture relevant discourses, I acknowledge that they may have filtered out more implicit or colloquial expressions of gender antagonism. Nevertheless, the anti-feminist and misogynistic discourses identified here occur in parallel to political backlashes against gender equality initiatives in Bulgaria, such as the rejection of the Istanbul Convention and the 2024 law banning LGBTQ+ ‘propaganda’ in schools. Further, the observed anti-West discourses and the view of emigrants as ‘traitors’ resonate with nationalist and anti-European sentiments prevalent in far-right political rhetoric.

While these findings remain context-specific, insights from North American and Western European research suggest that they mirror discourses and practices characteristic of the global phenomenon of networked misogyny. Further empirical research is needed to fully understand how this phenomenon manifests in Bulgaria, but its abovementioned alignment with anti-democratic political trends highlights the need for vigilance in protecting democratic values. As Bulgaria redefines its post-communist identity, this research may help design interventions addressing grievances that fuel regressive discourse.

Julietta Stoencheva is a PhD candidate in Media and Communication Studies at Malmö University, Sweden. Her PhD project, *Everyday extremism in anonymous digital spaces*, explores the dynamics of online extremism and how it circulates through everyday discourse in liminal online spaces: anonymous platforms with minimal content moderation, which are not explicitly organised around extremist ideologies but operate at the blurred boundary between the fringe and the mainstream.

ORCID: 0009-0008-0275-5606

e-mail: julietta.stoencheva@mau.se

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful to my supervisors, Tina Askanius and Erin Cory, for their guidance throughout the research and writing process.

Funding

This research was supported by the HORIZON Europe project *OppAttune. Countering Oppositional Political Extremism through Attuned Dialogue: Track, Attune, Limit*, funded by the European Union (grant no. 101095170).

Conflict of interest

There is no potential conflict of interest to declare regarding this article's research, authorship, and publication.

REFERENCES

- Åkerlund, M. (2021a). Dog whistling far-right code words: the case of 'culture enricher' on the Swedish web. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(12), 1808-1825. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01369118X.2021.1889639>
- Åkerlund, M. (2021b). Influence without metrics: Analyzing the impact of far-right users in an online discussion forum. *Social Media+ Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211008831>
- Åkerlund, M. (2023). Politics of Deliberate Inaction: The disconnect between platform justifications and user imaginaries on content moderation in a 'free speech' online forum. *New Media & Society*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231190905>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478002772>
- Banet-Weiser, S., & Miltner, K. M. (2016). #MasculinitySoFragile: culture, structure, and networked misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(1), 171-174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1120490>
- Bankov, K. (1996). Lecture 8: Denotation and connotation. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and the concept of "Myth". In *Introductory lectures on semiotics*. New Bulgarian University. <http://ebox.nbu.bg/semiotika/semiotic/lessons/lesson08.htm>
- Berger, J. M. (2018). *Extremism*. MIT Press.
- Blais, M., & Dupuis-Déri, F. (2012). Masculinism and the Antifeminist Countermovement. *Social Movement Studies*, 11(1), 21-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.640532>
- Bogdanov, G., & Rangelova, R. (2012). Executive Summary: Bulgaria. In *Social Impact of Emigra-*

- tion and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe. European Commission.
- Brunnbauer, U., & Taylor, K. (2004). Creating a 'socialist way of life': Family and reproduction policies in Bulgaria, 1944–1989. *Continuity and change*, 19(2), 283–312.
- Canut, C. (2019). Tell Me That I Am Not a Ciganin, Damn Your Mother! The Social and Political Consequences of Enregisterment in Bulgaria. *Signs and Society*, 7(3), 398–426. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704985>
- Chang, W. (2022). The monstrous-feminine in the incel imagination: Investigating the representation of women as “femoids” on /r/Braincels. *Feminist Media Studies*, 22(2), 254–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1804976>
- Connell, R. (2005). *Masculinities*. Polity.
- Connell, R. (2013). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Connell, R., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & society*, 19(6), 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>
- Copland, S. (2023). Weak men and the feminisation of society: Locating the ideological glue between the manosphere and the far-right. In J. Goetz & S. Mayer (Eds.), *Global perspectives on anti-feminism: Far-right and religious attacks on equality and diversity* (pp. 116–136). Edinburgh University Press.
- Coyne, S., Shawcroft, J., Ruh Linder, J., Graver, H., Siufanua, M., & Holmgren, H. G. (2022). Making Men of Steel: Superhero Exposure and the Development of Hegemonic Masculinity in Children. *Sex Roles*, 86(11), 634–647. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-022-01293-2>
- Darakchi, S. (2019). The western feminists want to make us gay”: Nationalism, heteronormativity, and violence against women in Bulgaria in times of “anti-gender campaigns. *Sexuality & Culture*, 23(4), 1208–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09611-9>
- Daskalova, K. (2004). The women's movement in Bulgaria in a life story. *Women's History Review*, 13(1), 91–104.
- Daskalova, K. (2005). *Bulgarian women's history and socialist myths*. Indiana University.
- Dervin, F. (2016). Discourses of Othering. In *Interculturality in Education: A Theoretical and Methodological Toolbox* (pp. 43–56). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54544-2_4
- Dimitrova, A. (2012). Public Opinion in Bulgaria with Regard to the EU Membership in the Context of the Economic Crisis. *L'Europe en Formation*, 364(2), 289–304.
- EF. (2024). *EF English Proficiency Index: A Ranking of 116 Countries and Regions by English Skills*.
- Ekström, M. (2023). Authoritarianism in the discourse of online forums: A study of its articulations in the Swedish context. *Nordicom Review*, 44(2), 194–216. <https://doi.org/doi:10.2478/nor-2023-0011>
- Eslen-Ziya, H. (2022). Establishing networked misogyny as a counter movement: The analysis of the online anti-Istanbul convention presence. *Convergence*, 28(6), 1737–1753. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221089218>
- European Institute for Gender Equality. (2023). *Gender Equality Index 2023: Towards a green transition in transport and energy*.
- Evans, S. K., Pearce, K. E., Vitak, J., & Treem, J. W. (2017). Explicating Affordances: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Affordances in Communication Research. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 22(1), 35–52. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12180>
- Fontanella, L., Chulvi, B., Ignazzi, E., Sarra, A., & Tontodimamma, A. (2024). How do we study misogyny in the digital age? A systematic literature review using a computational linguistic approach. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1), 478. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02978-7>
- Georgieva, L., Salchev, P., Dimitrova, R., Dimova, A., Avdeeva, O., & Elias, M. (2007). *Bulgaria: Health system review*. WHO.
- Ghodsee, K. (2004). Red nostalgia? Communism, women's emancipation, and economic transformation in Bulgaria. *L'Homme*, 15(1), 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.7767/lhomme.2004.15.1.33>
- Ghodsee, K. (2012). Rethinking state socialist mass women's organizations: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985. *Journal of Women's History*, 24(4), 49–73. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2012.0044>

- Ging, D. (2019). Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4), 638-657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x17706401>
- Ging, D., & Siapera, E. (Eds.). (2019). *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goetz, J., & Mayer, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Global Perspectives on Anti-Feminism: Far-Right and Religious Attacks on Equality and Diversity*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Greene, V. S. (2019). "Deplorable" Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Red-pilling Normies. *Studies in American Humor*, 5(1), 31-69. <https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.5.1.0031>
- Hoebanx, P. (2024). Hegemonic Masculinity and Beyond: An Overview of Social Science and Interdisciplinary Research on the Manosphere. In A. Wagner & S. Marusek (Eds.), *Handbook on Cyber Hate: The Modern Cyber Evil* (pp. 543-563). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51248-3_26
- Hopkins, J. (2016). The Concept of Affordances in Digital Media. In H. Friese, G. Rebane, M. Nolden, & M. Schreiter (Eds.), *Handbuch Soziale Praktiken und Digitale Alltagswelten* (pp. 1-8). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-08460-8_67-1
- Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, Texts and Affordances. *Sociology*, 35(2), 441-456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/s0038038501000219>
- Jane, E. A. (2014). 'Back to the kitchen, cunt': speaking the unspeakable about online misogyny. *Continuum*, 28(4), 558-570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.924479>
- Jensen, S. Q. (2011). Othering, identity formation and agency. *Qualitative Studies*, 2(2), 63-78. <https://doi.org/10.7146/qs.v2i2.5510>
- King, N., Calasanti, T., Pietilä, I., & Ojala, H. (2021). The Hegemony in Masculinity. *Men and Masculinities*, 24(3), 432-450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x20981759>
- Kovacheva, R. (2023). The gender danger: How the EU became an enemy of traditional values in Bulgaria. In M. Winiarska-Brodowska (Ed.), *The New Communication Revolution* (pp. 45). Uniwersytet Jagielloński.
- Krendel, A. (2020). The men and women, guys and girls of the 'manosphere': A corpus-assisted discourse approach. *Discourse & Society*, 31(6), 607-630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520939690>
- Luleva, A. (2016). Post-socialist gender order in Bulgaria: Between state-socialist legacy and EU gender regulations. In J. Deimel & G. Schubert (Eds.), *Women in the Balkans/ Southeastern Europe* (pp. 89-105). Biblion.
- Luleva, A. (2018). Men and Masculinities in Post-Socialist Bulgaria. *Sociological problems*, 50(2), 590-604.
- Marshall, K., Chamberlain, K., & Hodgetts, D. (2020). Male bodybuilders on Instagram: negotiating inclusive masculinities through hegemonic masculine bodies. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 29(5), 570-589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1722620>
- Marwick, A. E., & Caplan, R. (2018). Drinking male tears: language, the manosphere, and networked harassment. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 543-559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1450568>
- Massanari, A. (2017). #Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society*, 19(3), 329-346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807>
- Messerschmidt, J. W. (2019). The Saliency of "Hegemonic Masculinity". *Men and Masculinities*, 22(1), 85-91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x18805555>
- Milanović, B. (2021). "To Conclude, Women Are a Mistake"—A Study of Serbian User Discourse on 4Chan's /Pol/ Board on Women within Political Ideology. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 27(2), 193-212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2021.1914436>
- Muharska, R. (2019). Chalga Culture Meets the Istanbul Convention: Grotesque Spectacle of Masculinity. *Traditions and transitions*, 1, 206-222.
- NSI. (2021). *Етнокултурни характеристики на населението към 7 септември 2021 година*.
- Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2009). The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis* (2 ed., pp. 87-121). Sage.

- Roggeband, C., & Krizsán, A. (2020). Democratic backsliding and the backlash against women's rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics. *UN Women*.
- Roggeband, C., & Krizsán, A. (2024). The Violent Implications of Opposition to the Istanbul Convention. *Societies*, *14*(6), 92. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14060092>
- Rothermel, A.-K. (2023). The role of evidence-based misogyny in antifeminist online communities of the 'manosphere'. *Big Data & Society*, *10*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517221145671>
- Slabakova, R. (1992). Research on women in Bulgaria: the hard way into the future. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *20*(3/4), 136-143.
- SpyMetrics. (2025). *Spodeli.net*. Retrieved 18 May 2025 from <https://spymetrics.ru/en/website/spodeli.net>
- Stanchev, E. (2023). The growing Russophilia of post-communist Bulgarian nationalism: between entanglements and paradoxes. *Araucaria*, *25*(53). <https://doi.org/10.12795/araucaria.2023.i53.19>
- Stoenecheva, J., & Mileva Boshkoska, B. (2024). Extremist narratives in the digital mainstream: Exploring online discussions about migration in Sweden. *MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research*, *40*(77), 122-143. <https://doi.org/10.7146/mk.v40i77.141525>
- Stoykova, M. (2013). Ключевые слова молодежного общения. In E. Stoyanova, A. Nikolova, & S. Kaleva (Eds.), *Русистика 2013: Сборник материалов международной научной конференции: „Русистика XXI века: традиции и перспективы”* (pp. 274-282). Himeria.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (2004). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In J. T. Jost & J. Sidanius (Eds.), *Political Psychology: Key Readings* (pp. 276-293). Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>
- Todorov, S. (2024, 07 August). Bulgaria's Parliament Unexpectedly Outlaws 'LGBT Propaganda' in Schools. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/07/bulgarias-parliament-unexpectedly-outlaws-lgbt-propaganda-in-schools/>
- UN. (2002). Bulgaria. In *Abortion Policies: A Global Review* (Vol. 1, pp. 73-74). United Nations Population Division.
- Wodak, R. (1996). *Disorders of discourse*. Longman.

EX-MUSLIMS' DIGITAL DISSENT: A CASE FOR MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ENUNCIATIVE PRAGMATICS

DEBORAH PHARES

Information and Communication Sciences
UCLouvain Saint-Louis, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This article argues for the use of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) combined with enunciative pragmatics (EP) to study how ex-Muslims articulate critiques of Islam/isms on platform X. It answers in what ways does the combination of MCDA and EP offers a robust approach for analysing ex-Muslims' discourse, and how it can be operationalised in practice. Unlike prior studies centered on personal narratives or sociological implications, our approach highlights the multimodal and performative nature of online apostate discourse. Drawing on Fairclough, Kress, and Van Leeuwen, MCDA enables analysis of textual, visual, structural, and practical features of tweets, revealing how meaning is produced, critique staged, and power claimed in the digital public sphere. Coupled with EP (Charaudeau), this framework examines how subjectivity, performativity, and positioning are strategically deployed. We contend that this approach illuminates the complex interplay between discourse, ideology, and power among apostates, a dimension still underexplored in current scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Ex-Muslims • Apostate • CDA • Multimodality • Enunciative Pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

This article argues for the relevance of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), complemented by enunciative pragmatics (EP), as an effective methodological framework for examining how self-identified ex-Muslims and/or apostates express their critical views on Islam/isms on the platform X (formerly Twitter). It seeks to address the following research question: In what ways does the combination of MCDA and EP offers a robust approach for analysing ex-Muslims discourse, and how can it be operationalised in practice?

Our interest in this subject of ex-Muslims stems from the recent observation of an emerging online epiphenomenon. “Before the emergence of the Internet, apostates have been living their lives in fear and discretion, keeping their apostasy mostly to themselves”. However, “the SNS (social networking site) has helped them to come out by allowing them to voice out their feelings, ideas, and philosophy” (Mohamad et al., 2018, p. 226). Similarly, “these days, the rise in apostasy declarations far exceeds the number of cases that were made publicly known years ago” (Mohamad et al., 2017, p. 98). This observation is further supported by Sahad, Abdullah, and Abdullah: “The cases of Muslim converts who decided to leave the religion of Islam are reported as increasing tremendously” (2013, p. 220).

The growing digital presence of these individuals engaging in critique of their former religion, represents a relatively recent and under-researched phenomenon within media studies. Their voices are emerging in an online public sphere already marked by intense political, cultural, and ideological contestation around Islam/isms. Investigating these discourses is important not only because they provide insight into a form of post-religious subjectivity, but also because they contribute to broader debates on Islam, freedom of conscience and expression, and the visibility of ex-Muslims.

Despite the growing interest in apostasy from Islam as a sociocultural phenomenon, existing literature, as seen in the literature review below, offers limited methodological reflection on how to systematically study the discourse of ex-Muslims in digital environments. Most studies focus on personal narratives, sociological and legal outcomes, leaving a gap in tools for analysing the critical, multimodal and pragmatic dimensions of this discourse. This paper addresses that gap by proposing and justifying a combined methodological framework: MCDA coupled with EP.

This combination will help shed light on the diverse ways in which ex-Muslims construct, negotiate, and perform their relationship to Islam/isms and apostasy on X. Their discourses range from analytical deconstruction of Islamic dogma to emotionally charged testimonials, often intertwined with humour, provocation, or political commentary. This com-

plexity demands an approach capable of attending to the multiple semiotic layers through which meaning is produced online.

Broadly speaking, our extensive research recognises apostates from Islam as a diverse rather than uniform group. In fact, one of the central interests of the study lies in the observation that not all apostates expose themselves online and identify as ex-Muslims and even fewer engage in militant discourse. Most of them remain low-profile and disengaged from public debate altogether. This distinction is critical as it focuses on an epiphenomenon that is developing outside the mainstream media. Furthermore, this research focuses on ordinary individuals, not historically and mainstream media renown figures of apostasy and/or critics of Islam, such as Ibn Warraq, Brother Rachid, Wafa Sultan, Hamed Abdel-Samad or Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The outcome of the broader research will highlight the diversity within this 'community' under study, by bringing to light the different ways of criticising their former religion and the different ideologies that are articulated in their discourse.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, we wish to clarify that this research does not seek to pass normative judgments on the content of these discourses. Rather, it aims to critically examine how a marginalised and often stigmatised group seeks to gain discursive visibility and legitimacy within a public sphere characterised by ongoing controversies over Islam, secularism, and religious freedom.

CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Defining apostasy anachronistically in Islam is not a simple matter, since it depends on the notion of religion, which itself has been perceived differently throughout history (Nongbri, 2013). This different perception of religion implies a different understanding of the term apostasy. For the sake of concision, in this article, we will approach apostasy as a 'simple' abandonment of religion. Newby (2002) defines: "An apostate is (...) one who denies Islam in either speech or action (...)" (p. 158). Leaving Islam is not merely a decision but a deeply transformative and often traumatic journey of self-questioning (Cottee, 2015, p. 8). Apostasy remains a taboo subject in Islam, unsettling even moderate Muslims, as it is perceived not only as a critique of the faith but as an attack on their identity (Cottee, 2015, p. 11).

Apostasy from Islam is not a contemporary phenomenon. Unlike historical knowledge which sheds light on the challenges of separating historical facts, legends and sacred tradition (Chabbi, 1996), Islamic tradition report that apostasy existed since the early days of Islam, with numerous cases recorded during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime (Alalwani, 2011). Historically, apostasy, blasphemy or the critique of Islam have been

viewed as heretical and diversely punishable and, in some countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives and Saudi Arabia, punishable by death sentences (Heaton, 2016; Virgili, 2015). Consequently, individuals renouncing their Islamic faith have often been silenced and compelled into clandestinity for their own safety not only in Muslim countries but also in the West and internationally as those accused of blasphemy against Islam can also be subjected to threats, violence, or executions (Marshall & Shea, 2011). Very few former Muslims claim their apostasy or their *murtad*¹ status (Heaton, 2016), some live their apostasy secretly and others are denounced apostates even though they don't present themselves as is.

In recent years, global ex-Muslim organisations have emerged to support individuals who leave Islam, offering community, advocacy, and safe spaces for discussion. The Central Council of Ex-Muslims, founded in Germany in 2007 by Mina Ahadi, played a pivotal role in establishing similar groups worldwide, including in the UK, North America, France, and the MENA region. These movements have gained momentum, leading to the establishment of two key commemorative days: "Apostasy Day" on August 22, which coincides with the UN's International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, and "Blasphemy Day" on September 30, marking the 2005 publication of the controversial *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons of Prophet Muhammad. These events advocate for the rights of apostates and the abolition of apostasy laws, emphasising freedom of thought and expression as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The interventions of public figures who identify as apostates or critics of Islam have provoked significant backlash within both religious and secular communities, with defenders of Islam framing these critiques as Islamophobic or politically aligned with far-right ideologies. This discursive tension highlights a broader struggle over the boundaries of acceptable criticism, the ownership of religious narratives, and the role of apostates' discourse in contemporary debates on freedom of religion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section we will see how the discourses of apostates or ex-Muslims have been studied so far. Despite a prolific academic literature on Islamic apostates, the topic remains sociologically marginal (Cottee, 2015, p. 1). The lack of sociological research may stem from sensitivities surrounding Islam and the fear of accusations of Islamophobia or association with far-

1 In Arabic: One who turns back. Gordon Darnell Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002).

right ideologies (Cottee, 2015, p. 2). To cite a few, existing studies focus on the process of leaving Islam, (Barbour, 1994; Bharat & Ford, 2022; Cottee, 2015; Pauha & Aghaee, 2018; Streib et al., 2009; Vliek, 2019, 2021). The studies generally shed light on their life trajectories, how they navigate their apostasy within Muslim or western societies (Bentabet, 2020; Eller & Khazaal, 2024 ; Meral, 2008), the practical, social and legal repercussions on their lives (Schirrmacher, 2009, 2016; Virgili, 2015), as well as the process of conversion and deconversion (Gooren, 2010; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Van Nieuwkerk, 2018) and statistical attempts to understand the phenomenon such as the Ex-Muslims of North America (2021) apostate report. Also, some media are interested in the case of ex-Muslims, and a scientific perspective has been provided on the media that report cases of apostasy (Mohamad et al., 2017).

Some innovative studies in online spaces include an analysis of digital activism among a transnational Arab community of ex-Muslims (Khazaal, 2017) and the impact of cyber-apostasy on Islam and interfaith relations (Pulcini, 2017). Nevertheless, few research, mostly in Malaysian context seem to have examined the online discourse of apostates such as analysis of social media speech acts, Facebook status updates, YouTube narratives and blog rhetoric (Bharat, 2022; Hashmi et al., 2022; Mohamad et al., 2018; Rashid & Mohamad, 2019). "The use of speech acts on social media is still not widely explored especially in the context of an apostate" (Mohamad et al., 2018, p: 226).

One of the studies, Hashmi, Ab Rashid, and Munir (2021), analysed 368 posts by 14 Malaysian ex-Muslims, thought the framework of the (TAP) Toulmin argument pattern (1958, 2003) and Erduran, Simon and Osborne (2004) argument-level scheme, concluding that most arguments against Islam lacked depth. However, they claim funding from by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia, an Islamic country that criminalise alleged blasphemy to religion, religious figures, beliefs, or principles (Hashmi et al., 2021). Another study, Rashid et al. (2018), examined the Facebook timeline of a Malaysian female apostate granted asylum in the U.S. due to death threats. Through thematic analysis of 4,000 posts, researchers found that her discourse portrayed Islam as coercive and discriminatory, reflecting common atheist and Islamophobic arguments. However, the study's methodological limitations and its questionable recommendations - describing apostates as haters, encouraging religious leaders to prevent apostasy and put apostates back on the right path - suggest influence from the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education's funding, and its presentation at a conference in Tehran, Iran being a country where blasphemy thus indirectly apostasy, are criminalised and can lead to death.

How MCDA coupled with EP be of added value?

While none of the analytical methods of the above research suggested the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA), multimodality and EP, we argue that this hybrid method provides a systematic framework to explore not just the why and what of apostate discourse, but the how: how meaning is shaped by the interplay of text, image, hashtags, emojis, and layout in digital platforms such as X.

It is uniquely suited for this type of research for three main reasons. First, MCDA enables a systematic analysis of how text, image, layout, and intertextuality combine to produce discursive meaning. Second, it facilitates the identification of underlying ideologies, argumentation strategies, and truth claims. Third, when paired with EP, it allows us to explore the performativity of discourse; the ways in which ex-Muslims perform subjectivity and construct legitimacy. In highly visual and performative environments, apostates not only say something, they also show it, stage it, and frame it in specific ways. MCDA coupled with EP enables researchers to uncover elements that might be lost in monomodal textual analyses. To support our claim, examples will be drawn from a pool of 125 tweets from 3 profiles over the course of the month of October 2024. However, this paper does not offer analysis results and discussion but rather preliminary outcome.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

We adopt a qualitative approach to explore the deep meanings and multimodal complexity of critical discourses. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of content within its specific context, capturing multiple layers of meaning and underlying ideologies (Denzin, 2011). Many studies on apostates also use qualitative methods, particularly those based on interviews (e.g., Cottee, 2015; Vliek, 2019), yet, this method recognises an epistemological challenge: knowledge is context-dependent - shaped by social, cultural, religious, and digital frameworks - unlike the universality sought in quantitative approaches (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021).

This study also follows an inductive approach with a grounded theory-inspired coding (Charmaz, 2006), meaning that it observes and explores the discourses without preconceived assumptions or hypothesis. Inductive methods, commonly used in qualitative research (Silverman, 2010), emphasise contextualisation and allow codes to emerge from the data itself. Unlike a deductive approach, which tests a pre-established hypothesis, inductive reasoning develops progressively, allowing 'theories' to be built directly from the data. Its flexibility enables adjustments based on emerging findings while striving to avoid biases commonly associated with assumptions on ex-Muslims. It is particularly relevant for exploring this un-

derstudied field, furthermore, it aligns with MCDA and EP, both of which stress the importance of contextualising data.

If we aim to understand how apostates discursively construct their relation to Islam via multimodal online means, we need to ask (1) how Islam/isms are represented in their discourses; (2) what arguments they use to delegitimise Islam/isms; and (3) what ideological convictions underpin their statements. MCDA and EP will allow us to answer these questions. When discussing 'representation', we adopt a constructivist perspective inspired by Stuart Hall. Constructivism asserts that social reality and knowledge are not objective, universal facts, but rather, they are constructed by individuals and groups (Hall, 1997). From this perspective, ex-Muslims create their own representations of Islam/isms through their multimodal discourse. The meaning they assign to their former religion and, consequently, to apostasy, is shaped by processes that reflect their subjectivities, interactions with their communities, and engagement with the wider world.

To understand the discourse of ex-Muslims, we opted for MCDA and EP after reviewing the variety of currents of thought and theoretical schools that constitute discourse studies, as described by Angermüller, Maingueneau, and Wodak (2014). We examined them through the prism of the sociology of knowledge which recognises the role of social actors in the production and circulation of knowledge while relying on methodological tools from qualitative research and grounded theory (Keller, 2007).

CDA provides a three-dimensional, methodical, and interdependent framework for multimodal textual analysis of meaning, discursive practices, and social practices (Fairclough, 1989, 1995). Upon further examination, CDA enables an understanding of the relationships between discourse and social elements such as power relations and social identities (Fairclough, 2012). From this perspective, social structures influence discourse and vice versa (Carranza, 1997), hence, a certain performativity of discourse.

“CDA aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (Fairclough, 1995, p.32).

Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) concept of multimodality serves as an analytical and interpretative framework to examine how meaning is constructed multimodally and how different semiotic modes (such as language, image, sound, body language, and others) interact in various forms of communication. The authors emphasise the importance of analysing

‘visual grammar’, which involves understanding how visual elements are used to convey a given meaning in a given context. They provide a set of tools to deconstruct and interpret these elements. In our research, multimodality is particularly relevant. The tweets under study often combine multiple semiotic modes. This framework allows us to examine how these different modes interact to represent Islam/isms. For instance, analysing visual choices, such as the use of specific symbols like alcohol or pork ham which are forbidden in Islam, and their interaction with linguistic elements can reveal discursive strategies used to construct critical representations, delegitimise certain aspects of religion and its application and valorise apostasy.

Furthermore, Kress and Van Leeuwen draw upon social semiotics, which explores how meaning is socially constructed and context dependent. This approach directly aligns with Fairclough’s and Charaudeau’s conception of discourse. The multimodal choices made by ex-Muslims allow us to deconstruct critical narratives and better understand how these discourses challenge or reproduce power dynamic and structures. Finally, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2020) approach adapts the concept of “metafunctions” (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) to analyse how meaning is created in multimodal texts. In our research, this includes examining the visual and textual resources of tweets to understand: (1) How critical ideas (ideational function) are developed. For example, a tweet highlighting a perceived contradiction between religious texts and a modern value.

Fig.1.1 📺 No compulsion in religion?

A famous verse in the Quran proclaims, ‘No compulsion in religion. For truth is clearly separated from error’ (2:256).

This verse is regularly quoted to promote the idea of an Islam that is tolerant of other religions. Yet it probably has nothing to do with religious freedom. (...) (Tweet screenshot, 21/10/2024)

Un célèbre verset du Coran proclame : "Nulle contrainte en religion. Car la vérité se sépare clairement de l'erreur" (2:256).

Ce verset est régulièrement cité pour promouvoir l'idée d'un islam tolérant envers les autres religions. Pourtant, il

[Show more](#)

Lactance, Institutions Divines	Coran
« Où est la vérité ? Là où aucune contrainte ne peut peser sur la religion » (II, IV, 7)	« Nulle contrainte en religion. Car la vérité se sépare clairement de l'erreur » (2:256)

16 58 194 14K

(2) How tweets establish a relationship with their audiences (interpersonal and polyphonic functions). For example, by using Arabic words such as *haram* or *mashallah* or a sarcastic tone.



Fig.1.2 Who is the author of this image? 🤔
 'I wear the hijab so as not to arouse men'. (Tweet screenshot, 20/10/2024)



Fig.1.3 Victim of Islamophobia (a young, veiled woman² trapped by the show 'forbidden zone'), Victim of Islam. In response of 20 minutes: Life is becoming increasingly difficult for Muslims in Europe. (Tweet screenshot, 20-11-2024)

(3) How these discourses are organised to produce coherent communication (textual function). For instance, the use of hashtags to structure information or visual comparisons like “before/after” Islam or Islam vs Islamophobia.

It is thus both possible and relevant to articulate Fairclough’s CDA and Kress and Van Leeuwen’s multimodality to analyse the discourse of ex-Muslims. Ultimately, since discourses are vectors of ideologies, this method enables the revelation of implicit ideologies conveyed by these discourses, by identifying lexical, visual, and rhetorical choices that construct worldviews. For

2 Lilia Bouziane: law student invited to appear on television shows in France

example, in criticising Islamic tradition, tweets might express ideologies linked to secularism.



Fig.1.4 I'm a Muslim from Quebec. I am a fervent defender of secularism. I'm against the hijab. I don't want my daughter to be taught by a teacher who wears a hijab. (Tweet screenshot, 20-11-2024)

To complete and refine this MCDA, EP deepens these analyses by examining the “grammar of meaning” and the performative dimensions - “speech acts,” argumentative and intentional aspects of discourse, as well as the pragmatic meaning tied to a given context (Charaudeau, 1992). Charaudeau’s enunciative pragmatics (1992) precisely emphasises the performative, interactive, and contextual dimensions of discourse. It enriches MCDA by allowing us to examine the intentions of the enunciators (ex-Muslims) and their relationship with their audience (followers) on X and sometimes beyond. In this context, the criticism expressed by ex-Muslims is not limited to informing but also aims to persuade, provoke, or mobilise, perhaps even to directly encourage apostasy. For example, a tweet exposing Muslims having doubts or who has apostatised after being convinced by an ex-Muslims’ discourse.



Fig.1.5 And it's always a pleasure for me to read the daily comments of those who ask themselves questions and even open their eyes to Islam with time, reflection, personal questioning, courage...

One of the pinned comments inside the tweet: I'm a bit ashamed today because I once insulted you in a comment Islam is a real fraud.

Underneath tweet: Converting to Islam: freedom of expression. Convincing people to leave Islam: racism and hatred. Absurd! (Tweet screenshot, 09-11-2024)

As Charaudeau highlights it, and as shown in the screenshot below, discourse is often polyphonic. The tweets regularly include quotations from the Quran, personal testimonies, or references to political discourse, each playing a role in the critical argumentation. For instance, an ex-Muslim might cite a Quranic verse to discredit the political positioning of a renowned figure.

Fig.1.6 Zineb El Rhazaoui last night: “The Palestinian resistance, today is October 7th, I hope that one day we will all celebrate this date as the day of Palestine’s liberation.”

This is nothing more and nothing less than an apology for terrorism!

(In the screenshot, in part: It was reported by Ibn Abbas that the Messenger of Allah said: “Whoever changes their religion, kill them.”) (Tweet screenshot, 26/12/2024)



Enunciative pragmatics sheds light on the relationship between discursive actors: ex-Muslims and their audience. This allows for an exploration of

how ex-Muslims use discourse to assert themselves as contesting social actors while addressing diverse audiences promoting underlying or explicit ideological beliefs. For example, they may adjust their tone depending on whether they are addressing believers, sceptics, or militant atheists, shifting from seriousness to cynicism. (Also seen in Fig.1.2, and Fig.1.3).

Key Concepts

'Discourse', 'Critique', 'Ideology'

Inspired by Fairclough (2012), we view discourse as a practice aimed at producing and transmitting meaning and/or constructing the world through verbal and non-verbal means. In this framework, discourse is an essentially contextualised, metadiscursive, and sometimes a polyphonic practice, both socially constituted and socially constitutive, carrying one or more ideologies. This perspective directly applies to the critical discourse of ex-Muslims, who construct a contestatory worldview against their former religion while engaging with contemporary societal issues such as individual freedom and religious critique.

Thus, we align, at least in part, with the definition of discourse provided by Reisigl and Wodak, which states that discourse is closely linked to context, varies according to its thematic focus, and takes place within specific spheres of social life, such as culture or politics. In the case of ex-Muslims on X, their critical discourse intersects with issues related to religion, human rights, and western values. This transforms discourse producers into social discursive actors - a notion also found in Charaudeau's EP - who interact and argue to defend positions they perceive as true or morally just, both in reaction to their experiences and as an attempt to influence their audiences.

"(...) a cluster of context dependent practices that are situated within specific fields of social action socially constituted and socially constitutive; related to a macro-topic; linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity, involving several social actors who have different points of view" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89, as cited in Angermuller et al., 2014).

Former Muslims, through their discourse, seek to influence society within a power dynamic, particularly by challenging the norms and beliefs associated with their former religion. Just as Charaudeau (1992) develops the notion of the 'speech act' and discourse performativity, Fairclough also considers discourse as an "active relationship to reality" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 41). In this sense, critical discourse also becomes political, with politics

defined by Charaudeau as: "A domain of social practice where symbolic power struggles take place for the conquest and management of power" (Charaudeau, 2005, p. 60). From a constructivist perspective, political discourse is not defined by its content or genre but by its ability to act upon reality within a specific communicative situation. This pragmatic approach highlights that discourse is not merely a vehicle for political ideas but a political action, where context and the intention of discursive actors play a central role in the politicisation of the message (Pirat, 2006, p. 196-197).

In the case of apostates, their critical discourse can be perceived as political. It is a performative practice aimed at deconstructing dominant representations while constructing new discursive and ideological identities. Fairclough (2003, p. 26, 2012, p. 11) articulates three key characteristics of discourse that describe how it operates within social life, as a "part of action": (1) Genres (ways of acting): These refer to specific ways of structuring and framing discourse, such as proselytism, critical testimonies, or advocacy for freedom of conscience, which apostates use to engage audiences on X. (2) Discourses (ways of representing): Apostates present specific representations of Islam, often criticising it as incompatible with certain universal values. These representations help to assess how similar aspects of the Muslim world are perceived differently based on adopted discursive positions. (3) Styles (ways of being): The discourse of apostates forms a way of constructing their critical identity, as ex-Muslims affirming an ideological and existential break with their former faith. These discursive styles include personal narratives and analyses, or forms of humour, sometimes even expressions of hate and anger.

Discourse, therefore, serves as a means of acting, representing, and constructing a particular ideological position. This dynamic fits within a contextual practice where discourse functions as both a tool for contestation and a means of legitimisation in the digital public sphere. The way this practice is understood and interpreted depends on three analytical elements: Production - the critical narratives of apostates; Form - the multimodal language within the context of X and Reception - how these discourses are perceived by audiences, for example, through retweets. These three dimensions interact with political and cultural concerns, generating a range of social effects (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11). In the case of apostates, the social impact of their discourse depends largely on their ability to legitimise themselves, mobilise compelling alternative narratives, reach diverse audiences, and respond to the resistance or contestation they encounter.

The discourses we study are generally produced directly online. Those digital discourses, also called by Paveau (2017) "native discourse", because they are born from and shaped by the digital medium itself, rather than

being transferred or adapted from traditional communication are a hybrid form of expression with a digital logic. They are characterised by elements of multimodality but also specific interaction dynamics inherent to digital platforms this is why they must be analysed withing the context of the digital platform.

The critical discourses of apostates on X also share the specific characteristics identified by Paveau (2017, p. 28,29) which support the use of MCDA in our analysis: (1) Composite, mixing verbal language and technological elements as seen in all above multimodal examples. (2) Non-linear, with hyperlinks leading to external sources such as videos. For example, tweets by Oukacha announcing his latest radio show invitation or his latest YouTube video.

Fig.1.7 “Saying that ‘immigration is an opportunity’ and that anyone who disagrees is ‘xenophobic’ is a bit excessive and won’t help in understanding the real issue,” says Majid, a listener of #OMSLT with @CyrilHanouna on #Europe1. (Tweet screenshot, 03/10/2024)



Fig.1.8 🤗 My new video, “These Human Expressions Spoken by Allah in the Quran”, is now on YouTube! There are so many verses where this supposedly perfect god speaks as if he were in the place of his human prophet (and vice versa). (Tweet screenshot, 27/10/2024)

(3) Augmented by the conversational nature of the web, where discussions are enriched through replies, shares, and reactions, such as retweets or tweets commenting on a screenshot. (4) Relational, thanks to hashtags and mentions that connect their discourse to other spaces or conversations due to the web’s networked structure. (5) Investigable, as tweets are accessible

and collectable in “open access.” (6) Unpredictable, as they are influenced by platform algorithms, making some tweets go viral while others lead to account suspensions due to user reports. This is indeed the case for several apostate profiles on X. The evolving nature of platform X presents challenges, such as account deletion and the ephemeral life of tweets. Our method is designed to remain flexible, combining systematic archiving (screenshots, metadata) with interpretive rigour.

Critique

Critical discourse, however, is a specific form of discourse. We distinguish between two major conceptions of critique. The first, inherited from the Greek tradition, is based on deliberate action carried out by experts - ex-Muslims perceiving themselves as experts and legitimate voices mainly because, once, they were Muslims learning the sacred texts and living their life within Muslim tradition and society. They believe their critique involves a thoughtful judgment based on thorough analysis based on experience. This approach, often called ‘normative critique’, is inspired by the Platonic tradition. The second, a more modern perspective, considers critique as an integral part of civic life, open to everyone and promoting democratic participation without requiring any expertise - where the selected ex-Muslims are ordinary citizens that decided to promote their ideas. Despite their differences, these two perspectives overlap, making them potentially complementary (Danblon, 2012). We also perceive critique as a tool for social, cultural, religious, and political change, as it can highlight injustices, inequalities, contradictions, and even illogical reasoning. Zienkowski (2018) introduces the idea of critique as a form of public ‘metadiscourse’ that allows individuals to recognise, rearticulate, and/or reconfigure the logics and rationalities that lead to social suffering. For the studied apostates, critique serves as both an outlet for distress and a tool for seeking recognition of their suffering, aiming to challenge and change societal norms.

Through their critical discourse, ex-Muslims challenge other, more dominant discourses about Islam, which brings us closer to a Marxist perspective where the apostate’s discourse function as a counter-discourse that oppose more dominant narratives. Fundamentally, counter-discourse refers to any way of making sense of the ‘world’ that seeks to deconstruct an initial discourse through argumentation (or other discursive strategies) and/or to propose an alternative ideological narrative (Carbou, 2015; Plantin, 1996). Ex-Muslims attempt to frame their interpretation of prior discourses, temporarily fixing their own meaning. These discursive practices are therefore constitutive of social, and even political, identities and

play a crucial role in the (de)legitimisation and hegemonisation processes (Blommaert, 2005; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

Critique can also take the form of self-criticism or a form of ‘reflexivity’ as introduced by Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) which involves self-observation and self-awareness for emancipatory purposes. In this sense, our studied population transitioned from being Muslims to ex-Muslims after what Mezirow’s (1991) call “transformative learning theory”, a meticulous questioning of their held beliefs and assumption. This process of self-critique, which takes time, could be considered a crucial element of the discourse.

Finally, it is important to distinguish between “emic” (or “phonemic”) and “etic” (or “phonetic”) discourse, a conceptual distinction originally made by Pike (1967). In modern qualitative research, an emic perspective focuses on the viewpoints of participants, whereas an etic perspective focuses on the observations of researchers (Markee, 2012). In our specific case: Any critical discourse from ex-Muslims will be considered emic and our critique of ex-Muslim discourse will be considered etic. This distinction helps clarify different perspectives and interpretations of key and sensitive terms, such as Islam and Islamisms as viewed by the researcher versus how these concepts are understood by discursive actors.

Ideology

We agree with Freedman’s (2003) point of view which sees ideology as a political phenomenon; a set of political ideas, beliefs, and opinions that are communicable and influential. He separates main ideologies with those who are more open to cooperation and pluralism like liberalism and socialism and those who do not, like fascism and communism. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA), Fairclough (1995) sees ideology as embedded in discourse, shaping and reinforcing power structures. He argues that some discourses become “naturalised”, appearing as self-evident truths, which conceals their ideological roots and sustains existing power dynamics.

Indeed, the notion of truth is central to the discourse of ex-Muslims. The Quran, as a form of divine knowledge, is relatively closed and difficult for humans to challenge. It is presented as an absolute truth because it is uncreated. Yet, this is precisely what ex-Muslims criticise, as they deconstruct this knowledge to expose and confront its errors and contradictions. Through their discourse, they construct their own truth. Charaudeau (2005) speaks of an ‘imaginary of truth’ or a ‘sociodiscursive imaginary’. What he means by ‘imaginary’ is not the absence of reality, but rather an image of reality imbued with the meaning that apostates give it through their relationship to the world and to others - in other words, through con-

text and experience (p. 158). Charaudeau distinguishes between “knowledge-based truths” (verifiable facts) from “belief-based truths” (values and convictions) that contributes to the construction of the “truth imaginaries” (Pirat, 2006). Ideology is seen as a tool that create a “truth effect,” making opinions appear unquestionable and legitimising political actions.

Apostasy from Islam could, in this context, potentially be regarded as an ideology in its own right - a question we intend to explore further. For now, however, we will focus our efforts on the notion of the “imaginary of truth.” While this concept can become problematic when it is essentialised or presented as universal (Charaudeau, 2005, p. 159), it remains fundamentally reflective and subjective, aligning closely with the processes observed in the critical discourse of ex-Muslims. The “imaginary of truth” employs ideologies as tools for constructing reality, enabling a more nuanced exploration of discourse.

RESEARCH DESIGN & DATA

Our investigation is characterised by a non-intrusive and non-participatory approach, avoiding direct interaction with the profiles. The content we have selected is freely accessible since the observed spaces do not require a prior friend request. We therefore adopt the status of observer with our personal X account, renouncing our anonymity. However, we chose to follow the analysed profiles, and most of them followed us back, which means they became aware of our online presence. The main language is French, but “code-switching”³ (Poplack, 2001) or “code change” on a multilingual platform such as X, pushes us to consider Arabic and English, when necessary.

To identify ex-Muslim profiles on the X platform, we began by examining profiles of former Muslims already known through our previous research dating back to 2015 on counter-discourses to ISIS propaganda. These initial profiles were selected because they publicly presented themselves as ex-Muslims and/or apostates. Starting from there, we were able to expand our field to similar profiles. We examined the profiles of the followers and the accounts they followed, one by one. Everyone who identified as an ex-Muslim or apostate was selected, regardless of the language used, provided it was one we understood. For each selected person, we undertook the same approach to enlarge the circle of profiles. Similarly, we observed the profiles of people who wrote comments and selected those

3 “Code-switching (CS) refers to the mixing, by bilinguals (or multilinguals), of two or more languages in discourse, often with no change of interlocutor or topic. Such mixing may take place at any level of linguistic structure, but its occurrence within the confines of a single sentence (...).” Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285248787_Code_Switching_Linguistic [last accessed, 19 Decembre 2024].

who presented themselves as ex-Muslims. On the other hand, we used the search bar by entering various keywords and hashtags related to the subject (#ExMuslims, #ExMusulman, #Apostat, #Apostasie) to find new associated profiles. We also referred to the suggestions of the algorithms which suggested similar profiles to those we were looking for. Not all profiles are created by a single person; some of the accounts are reportedly run by a group of former Muslims such as, for example, the 'Collectif d'Apostats'. At this stage, we are continuing our monitoring to find new profiles.

For this article, we focus on a one-month period on a reduced sample of three profiles of individuals with a number of 125 tweets. The first, Samrah Atika, is a woman who was born a Muslim (33 tweets), the second, Majid Oukacha, is a man who was born a Muslim (23 tweets), and the third is Vivi-Apostat, a young man who converted to the religion of Islam, then radicalised, then de-converted and is identifying himself today as ex-Muslim (69 tweets).

The selection of the three profiles was guided by their prominence and sustained activity within the French-speaking ex-Muslim digital sphere. These accounts were chosen not only for their large follower base and high engagement, but also for their diversity in terms of gender, rhetorical style and background experience. This allows for a more representative and comparative insight into the plurality of discourses within the apostate community.

Since we started keeping track of these accounts, every month of the year has been interesting to analyse. The month of October 2024 was chosen as a strategic temporal window for data collection due to a timeframe contemporary with the time we were developing this article showing a will to stay up to date. From a methodological standpoint, the focus on this single month enables an exploratory thematic analysis that remains manageable in scope, while offering sufficient data density to generate examples to support our proposed method.

On her X profile, Samrah Atika, of Moroccan origin, presents herself as an apostate and ex-Muslim, an activist for the right to apostasy in Islam. She puts forward her French and Amazigh identity. With Waleed Al-Husseini, she is the co-founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. Samrah defines herself as a survivor of Islamism. She campaigns against the wearing of the Islamic veil. She has chosen to disclose her identity and face and is subject to death threats. Her appearance on X dates back to 2011; however,

she lost her accounts twice due to people reporting it to the platform X⁴ and is now on her third.

On his X profile, Majid Oukacha who has also chosen to disclose his identity and show his face despite the death threats, presents himself as an ex-Muslim, writer, and YouTuber. He has managed to preserve his X account since 2015. He has a YouTube channel with 191 videos as of January 7, 2025, which he publicises on X. Of Algerian origin, and after apostatising around the age of eighteen, Oukacha has written and published several books. He describes himself as one of the first ex-Muslims to have openly criticised Islam on social media.

ViVi-Apostat is a 'native' Frenchman from a non-religious family, who converted to Islam around the age of fifteen, during the period of the ISIS caliphate, then radicalised and was imprisoned by the French state; he subsequently deconverted⁵. ViVi-Apostat has already disclosed his real name and has been the victim, on his X profile, of death threats and "doxing," a public and intentional disclosure on the Internet of personal information about a person by a third party, with the aim of humiliating, threatening, intimidating, or punishing the identified person (Douglas, 2016). He positions himself as an ex-Muslim and critic of Islam. ViVi-Apostat explains that he portrays 'authentic Islam.' He generally focuses on current events related to Islam.

DATA COLLECTION AND CHALLENGE:

To examine the constructed rhetoric on X, we suggest using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Since Elon Musk's takeover, it has become impossible to directly download tweets into the software. In this context, and to maintain the overall look of the tweet, we follow these steps: (1) Data collection, which involves taking full screenshots of tweets, renaming them, and categorising them based on profile names and months of publication. (2) Entering screenshots into NVivo and separately copy-pasting the text of the tweet into the created file. (3) Categorising tweets as either tweets or retweets, the latter emphasises the polyphony of discourse. And then steps 4 and 5 overlap: (4) Coding with NVIVO: the code being: "a word or a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summarising, salient, essential, and/or evocative attribute to a portion of textual or visual data" (Saldaña, 2012, p. 3) and (5) the three-dimensional analysis.

4 Meaning that users notified the platform's moderation team that her account has potentially violated the platform's rules or terms of service. This could lead to warning the user, temporarily suspending the account, or permanently banning it depending on the severity of the violation.

5 ViVi l'Apostat. (2024, May 31). *L'Apostasie en Islam, c'est mon histoire* [Conference]. Café Laique, Brussels.

Therefore, rather than analysing the tweets solely as text-based content, we consider their multimodal nature to take a critical look at the entire production. The implementation and spatialisation (design layout of the text, emojis, hashtags etc.) gives full meaning to a tweet. This is precisely why, we have made the labour-intensive and time-consuming choice to collect our corpus through screenshots, capturing tweets in their entirety rather than separating text from other modes. Modes being “semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter) action” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p.21).



... *Fig.1.7 My testimony as a former Muslim: Radicalised by Sunni Islam, I eventually broke through denial and recognised the danger of this ideology. Leaving this religion saved my life. Video. (From Islam to apostasy: The journey of a French former Muslim convert). (Tweet screenshot, 20/11/2024)*

For instance, in the above tweet, we code the text, the emojis and the image. We also watch the video in order to add notes to our coding - that will be of use during the analysis step.

Non-Anonymisation of Profiles in Our Study

Anonymising profiles in scientific research raises debates about data confidentiality and integrity. However, within the framework of our scientific research, we argue that it is crucial not to anonymise the studied profiles for several reasons. The profiles we have selected on X are public, and their content is accessible to all users. By using public data, we are already respecting the parameters chosen by users for sharing their infor-

mation. Many users have already opted for anonymity by using symbolic profile pictures and pseudonyms which carry specific meanings such as for example: *Muse ExMus*, *Super Kâfir*, *Mourta'd*, *L'Apostat Kafir*, *Ibliss*, *Mohamed AgNostic*... Their real identity is thus protected by their own choice to remain masked, making further anonymisation redundant and potentially diminishing the significance of the pseudonyms and symbols they use. Some users, despite the risks involved, choose to disclose their real identity by using their actual names and displaying their faces. This rather courageous decision is particularly exceptional and reveals a strong willingness to express themselves openly. Ignoring or anonymising these public identities would mean erasing an essential part of the significance of their bold stance. Moreover, the identity of users plays a key role in our analysis. The diversity of identity exposure, whether through anonymity, meaningful pseudonyms, or real names, adds depth and richness to our research. By preserving these identities, we ensure a more precise and faithful analysis that reflects the reality of the platform. Also, the systematic anonymisation of profiles could be perceived as invalidating the personal choices and political stance of users regarding their visibility and representation online. Respecting each user's decision about how they present their identity on X is essential to maintaining the integrity and authenticity of their choice and our study. As Khazaal, (2017) explains, "names in digital space have become keenly political, because proclaiming the stigma of leaving religion online may be the only public act of religious defiance Arabs can perform safely, given the serious threats apostates faced in Arab communities" (p. 271). Anonymising these names would be camouflaging their political stances. Finally, we don't pretend that our article will have any more undesirable impact and visibility over these individuals than their own public tweets.

Operationalisation of the Method and Analytical Potentials

As detailed earlier, this study proposes a hybrid methodological framework combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA (1989, 1995), Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal semiotics (1996, 2001), and Charaudeau's theory of enunciative pragmatics (2005). This integrative approach allows for a layered analysis that captures the complexity of meaning-making in ex-Muslims' discourse. The NVIVO coding will operate across three interrelated levels of analysis: (1) Micro-level: Textual analysis of multimodal tweets. At this level, close reading is applied to the content to uncover the processes of meaning-making. The analysis focuses on the "grammar of meaning" and "visual grammar," attending to non-verbal and paraverbal elements, polysemy, polyphony, intertextual references,

and metadiscursive features. Special attention is paid to how visual and textual components interact to construct representations, arguments and attitudes.

(2) Meso-level: Discursive Practices. This dimension examines the production, distribution, and reception of multimodal discourse. The goal is to analyse how tweets are crafted, circulated, and interpreted within the digital media ecosystem. We explore discursive strategies, selection of information, communicative intentions, emotional framing, and identity construction (both personal and collective). This level also foregrounds the performativity of apostate's discourse and their ideological positioning, shedding light on how discourses are shaped by and, in turn, shape social practices.

(3) Macro-level: Social Practices. At the macro-level, the analysis situates apostate discourse within its wider sociopolitical and cultural context. It considers how such discourse interacts with existing social structures and power relations. Key elements include mapping influence (whether reinforcing or challenging dominant structures), interpreting the discursive negotiation of legitimacy, and uncovering what Charaudeau terms the "imaginary of truth" i.e., the representation of certain beliefs as indubitable or self-evident. This level enables a critical understanding of how ex-Muslims' discourse contribute to reshaping debates around religion and freedom of expression.

The codes are then classified into three categories to answer the study research questions. The first category is that of multimodal representations of Islam/isms, the second is that of arguments that discredit the religion and the third is that of underlying ideologies. Analysis of these 3 categories will bring out themes and concepts for understanding the critical discourse of ex-Muslims.

Exploratory analysis

The exploratory analysis of the tweets of Atika, Oukacha and Vivi-Apostat reveals diverse yet converging forms of online activism among ex-Muslims. Despite distinct life trajectories, styles and rhetorical strategies, all three profiles demonstrate a sustained critique of Islamism and Islam and advocacy for secularism and recognition of apostate's rights. Their discourses range from personal and emotional testimonies to pragmatic and intellectual deconstruction as well as provocative language, reflecting a heterogeneous but thematically coherent opposition to Islamic dogma, gender-based oppression and leftist political ambivalence. They contribute to the digital visibility of ex-Muslims, engaging in a discourse that emphasises both individual emancipation and collective resistance.

We conclude cautiously with the early stages of potential concepts on the general critical discourse of ex-Muslims on X. Firstly, (1) the concept of '*DIY ideology*'⁶ emerges. While studying the discourse of extremists, Brace, Baele, & Ging (2023) talk about an ideological construction that they present as a 'composite ideology', a "mixed, unclear, unstable (MUU) ideology profile." Ex-Muslims as well seem to construct an ideology whose crafting is adjusted according to their overall condition. Their experiences are diverse, complex, and hyper-subjective. It would be difficult to assert that there is one single ideology that unites them all apart from the act of apostasy. However, among the militant population we are studying, many of them share a system of common ideas such as the rejection of religious dogma, the search for truth and meaning, and the desire for freedom of thought and expression leading to a certain form of democracy, nationalism and liberalism. That said they have their own "Truth imaginary" narrative. Apostasy from Islam could be seen as an ideological construct unique to ex-Muslims which could be termed *Ex-Muslimism*, *Apostasism*, or *De-Islamism*. These ideological discourses also have wider implications, notably (2) with the newly proposed notion of *Metareligion*, that we envision inspired by the notion of metapolitics defined as a cultural strategy aimed at influencing mindsets, ideas, and norms without directly engaging in institutional politics or as a clash between different political modes and models (Zienkowski, 2017). Here, Metareligion, would refer to online critical and performative discourses aiming to influence the relationship with religion, particularly Islam, while revisiting its philosophical, dogmatic, cultic and cultural foundations without necessarily going through Islamic religious channels. (3) In this case, we cannot overlook the role of the platform X, which ex-Muslims may perceive as a form of democratic playground and a tool for freedom of expression. This perception is based on the possibility of using anonymity to protect one's identity, the universal nature of the platform, and the instant access to a wide audience. While this platform can lead to polarising discourse, it fosters a democratic dynamic where everyone can, in theory, express themselves and engage in critique. All this leads us, inevitably, to the ultimate concept of (4) *Inverted Proselytism*. We understand that through their critical discourse on X, ex-Muslims may be promoting a form of thinking that encourages some Muslims to question and abandon Islam, thereby actively contributing to the transformation of Islamic beliefs leading somehow to apostasy. This could be perceived as an action to counter the Islamic online proselytism (Kholili, Izudin, & Hakim, 2024 ; Raya, 2025 ; Thoyib, 2024). Finally, (5) in ex-Muslim discourse, the

6 Do it yourself

distinction between Islam and Islamism is often blurred or no longer recognised. In their view, Islam is fundamentally synonymous with Islamism. Hence, we propose the term 'Islam(ism)' instead of Islam/ism to encapsulate this concept in a single word.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the value of combining MCDA with EP to study how ex-Muslims articulate critique on X. This method provides a layered toolkit for analysing multimodal discourses in online environments. By examining textual, visual, and performative layers of meaning, this approach reveals apostates' strategic communicative choices and ideological complexity.

Deborah Phares is a part-time, self-funded Ph.D. candidate in Information and Communication Sciences at UCLouvain Saint-Louis, Brussels. Affiliated with the Engage Research Centre for Publicness in Contemporary Communication, where her research focuses on online counter-discourses to Islamist propaganda. She holds two master's degrees and an AESS in her field and is the founder of the Esprit Critique association. She started her career in Beirut as a Creative Director and has taught various university-level communication courses. With more than two decades of experience, she has worked in political communication, advertising, and EU-funded initiatives.

ORCID: 0009-0007-0960-1944

e-mail: deborah.phares@uclouvain.be

Funding

The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no financial, personal, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research presented in this article. The study was conducted independently, without funding from universities, religious institutions, political bodies, or advocacy organisations that could be perceived as having a vested interest in the subject matter. Given the delicate and potentially controversial nature of the topic, the author reaffirms their commitment to neutrality, objectivity, and academic integrity throughout the research process.

REFERENCES

- Alalwani, T. J. (2011). *Apostasy in Islam: A historical and scriptural analysis* (N. Roberts, Trans.). International Institute of Islamic Thought.
- Angermüller, J., Maingueneau, D., & Wodak, R. (Eds.). (2014). *The discourse studies reader: Main currents in theory and analysis*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Barbour, J. (1994). *Versions of deconversions: Autobiography and the loss of faith*. University Press of Virginia.
- Bentabet, H. (2020). *Abandon de l'islam: De l'irréligiosité au reniement de la foi chez les musulmans en France*. L'Harmattan.
- Bharat, A. S., & Ford, J. (2022). Introduction: Contextualizing apostasy and "ex-Muslims" in France and North Africa. *Contemporary French Civilization*, 47(2).
- Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brace, L., Baele, S. J., & Ging, D. (2023). Where do 'mixed, unclear, and unstable' ideologies come from? A data-driven answer centred on the incelsphere. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 19(2), 103–124.
- Carranza, I. (1997). [Review of the book *Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of language*, by N. Fairclough]. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 18, 537–539.
- Carbou, G. (2015). Des contre-discours aux contre-mondes : L'exemple des commentaires d'internautes autour de l'accident de Fukushima. *Semen*, 39. <https://doi.org/10.4000/semen.10478>
- Chabbi, J. (1996). Histoire et tradition sacrée: La biographie impossible de Mahomet. *Arabica*, 43(2), 189–205.
- Charaudeau, P. (1992). *Grammaire du sens et de l'expression*. Hachette.
- Charaudeau, P. (2005). *Le discours politique: Les masques du pouvoir*. Vuibert.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. SAGE.
- Cottee, S. (2015). *The apostates: When Muslims leave Islam*. Hurst and Company.
- Danblon, E. (2012). Il y a critique et critique : Épistémologie des modèles d'argumentation. *Argumentation et Analyse du Discours*, 9.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Douglas, D. M. (2016). Doxing: A conceptual analysis. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 18, 199–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-016-9406-0>
- Eller, J. D., & Khazaal, N. (Eds.). (2024). *Nonbelievers, apostates, and atheists in the Muslim world*. Routledge.
- Erduran, S., Simon, S., & Osborne, J. (2004). Tapping into argumentation: developments in the application of Toulmin's argument pattern for studying science discourse. *Science Education*, 88(6), 915–933. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.20012>
- Ex-Muslims of North America. (2021). *Apostate report: Leaving Islam in North America*. <https://exmuslims.org/apostate-report/>
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2012). Critical discourse analysis. In J. P. Gee & M. Handford (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (1st ed., pp. 9–20). Routledge.
- Freeden, M. (2003). *Ideology: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Gooren, H. (2010). *Religious conversion and disaffiliation: Tracing patterns of change in faith practices*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE Publications.
- Hashmi, U. M., Rashid, R. A., & Munir, R. (2021). On the psychology of argument: A structural analysis of former Muslims' postings within Malaysian social media. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 740558. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.740558>

- Hashmi, U. M., Shahzad, M., Ab Rashid, R., Almekhlafy, S. S. A., Malik, M. Y., & Hashmi, H. A. (2022). Former Muslims' socio-religious discourse on social media: A speech acts analysis. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature. The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 28(4), Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2022-2804-14>
- Heaton, R. (2016). *Incredulous expressions: On atheism and apostasy in modern Islamic contexts*. Unpublished manuscript. https://www.academia.edu/30358804/Incredulous_Expressions_On_Atheism_and_Apostasy_in_Modern_Islamic_Contexts
- Keller, R. (2007). L'analyse de discours du point de vue de la sociologie de la connaissance: Une perspective nouvelle pour les méthodes qualitatives. *Recherches Qualitatives*, (Hors Série 3), 287–306.
- Khalil, M. H., & Bilici, M. (2007). Conversion out of Islam: A study of conversion narratives of former Muslims. *The Muslim World*, 97(1), 111–124.
- Khazaal, N. (2017). The cultural politics of religious defiance in Islam: How pseudonyms and media can destigmatize. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 14, 271–287.
- Kholili, M., Izudin, A., & Hakim, M. L. (2024). Islamic proselytizing in digital religion in Indonesia: The challenges of broadcasting regulation. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2357460>
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. Hodder Education.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Markee, N. (2012). Emic and etic in qualitative research. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Marshall, P., & Shea, N. (2011). *Silenced: How apostasy and blasphemy codes are choking freedom worldwide*. Oxford University Press.
- Meral, Z. (2008). *No place to call home: Experiences of apostates from Islam, failures of the international community*. Christian Solidarity Worldwide.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mohamad, A., Ab Rashid, R., Yunus, K., Abdul Rahman, S. B., Darus, S., Musa, R., & Mat Teh, K. S. (2017). Discourse analysis on newspaper reports of apostasy cases. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 16(48), 96–111.
- Mohamad, A., Rashid, R. A., Yunus, K., Abdul Rahman, S. B., Darus, S., Musa, R., & Mat Teh, K. S. (2018). Speech acts in the Facebook status updates posted by an apostate. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 8(4), 226–231.
- Newby, G. D. (2002). *A concise encyclopedia of Islam*. Oneworld Publications.
- Nongbri, B. (2013). *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. Yale University Press.
- Paillé, P., & Mucchielli, A. (2021). *L'analyse qualitative en sciences humaines et sociales* (5th ed.). Armand Colin.
- Pauha, T., & Aghae, A. (2018). "God never existed, and I was looking for him like crazy!" Muslim stories of deconversion. In K. van Nieuwkerk (Ed.), *Moving in and out of Islam* (pp. 333–361). University of Texas Press.
- Paveau, M.-A. (2017). *L'analyse du discours numérique. Dictionnaire des formes et des pratiques*. Éditions Hermann.
- Pike, K. L. (1967). Etic and emic standpoints for the description of behavior. In K. L. Pike (Ed.), *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior* (pp. 37–72). Mouton.
- Pirat, B. (2006). [Review of the book *Le discours politique: Les masques du pouvoir*, by P. Charaudeau]. *Politix*, 75(3), 196–200.
- Plantin, C. (1996). *L'argumentation*. Seuil.
- Poplack, S. (2001). Code-switching (linguistic). In N. Smelser & P. Baltes (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences* (pp. 2062–2065).
- Pulcini, T. (2017). Cyber-apostasy: Its repercussions on Islam and interfaith relations. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 32(2), 189–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2017.1298902>
- Rashid, R. A., Mohamad, A., Musa, R., Abdul Rahman, S. B., Darus, S., Yunus, K., & Mat Teh, K. S.

- (2018). *Representation of Islam in social media discourse produced by an apostate*. Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Web Research, Tehran, Iran.
- Rashid, R. A., & Mohamad, A. (2019). *New media narratives and cultural influence in Malaysia: The strategic construction of blog rhetoric by an apostate*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9985-5>
- Raya, M. K. F. (2025). Digital Islam: New space for authority and religious commodification among Islamic preachers in contemporary Indonesia. *Contemporary Islam*, 19(2), 161–194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-024-00570-z>
- Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2009). The discourse-historical approach (DHA). In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods for critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 87–121). Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2012). *The coding manual for qualitative research* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Sahad, M. N., Abdullah, S. A. C., & Abdullah, S. (2013). Malaysian news report on Muslim converts' issues: A study on Malaysiakini. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3(13), 219–226.
- Schirmmacher, C. (2009). *Apostasy and Sharia*. Martin Bucer Seminar.
- Schirmmacher, C. (2016). *Let there be no compulsion in religion (Sura 2:256): Apostasy from Islam as judged by contemporary Islamic theologians – Discourses on apostasy, religious freedom, and human rights*. VKW.
- Silverman, D. (2010). *Doing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Streib, H., Hood, R. W., Jr., Keller, B., Csöff, R.-M., & Silver, C. F. (2009). *Deconversion: Qualitative and quantitative results from cross-cultural research in Germany and the United States of America*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Toulmin, S. (1958). *The uses of argument*. Cambridge University Press.
- Toulmin, S. (2003). *The uses of argument* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Thoyib, M. S. (2024). The role of Islamic broadcasting in shaping public perception: Ethical approaches and modern media integration. *Berajah Journal*, 4(6), 1245–1256.
- Van Nieuwkerk, K. (Ed.). (2018). *Moving in and out of Islam*. University of Texas Press.
- Virgili, T. (2015). *Apostasy from Islam under Sharia law*. Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna Pisa.
- Vlieg, M. (2019). 'It's not just about faith': Narratives of transformation when moving out of Islam in the Netherlands and Britain. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 30(3), 323–344.
- Vlieg, M. (Ed.). (2021). *Former Muslims in Europe: Between secularity and belonging*. Routledge.
- Zienkowski, J. (2017). *Articulations of self and politics in activist discourse: A discourse analysis of critical subjectivities in minority debates*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zienkowski, J. (2018). Politics and the political in critical discourse studies: State of the art and a call for an intensified focus on the metapolitical dimension of discursive practice. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 16(2), 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1535988>

LONG COMMENT BRANCH SAMPLING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

AMALIE SCHEEL

Department of Information Studies and Digital Design
Aarhus University, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This article introduces Long Comment Branch Sampling (LCBS), a novel strategy for enhancing qualitative research of social media discussions. Addressing the challenge of purposive and systematic data sampling, particularly from large datasets from social media, LCBS builds upon and combines established digital methods and ethnographic approaches. Focused on discussions in comment sections, the article offers a structured, iterative process of selecting, sorting, and synthesizing data, providing practical tools for researchers grappling with substantial datasets. The strategy is demonstrated through an examination of meat reduction discussions on Danish Facebook pages, showcasing its applicability to various contested issues. By introducing the concept of “long comment branches,” LCBS navigates the non-chronological data format of comment sections, facilitating a systematic, qualitative approach. Underlining the importance of a multi-cycle and iterative process of selecting, locating, sorting, and batching, LCBS serves as a valuable tool for studying user engagements in comment sections.

KEYWORDS

Sampling • Social Media • Issue Publics • Netnography • Methodology

INTRODUCTION

When politics are discussed on social media, people gather around specific topics in formations of what has been termed ‘issue publics’ (Marres, 2005). The topics of discussion are as crystallized and dispersed as in all other parts of cultural life. However, when these discussions take place within digital infrastructures, the discussions happen dispersed in space and diffracted in time. Within a digital ecology, politics are performed everywhere, simultaneously. In corners and in open spaces. This diffraction and multitude poses a methodological problem for researchers interested in studying how discussions unfold: When data is everywhere and abundant, how does one select or sample data in a purposeful yet systematic way (Flick, 2018; Tracy, 2020)?

Previous studies of online discussions and issue publics have deployed digital methods relying primarily on hashtag collection, sentiment analysis, or other more automated approaches (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Papacharissi, 2014; Sanford et al., 2021). In other studies, digital ethnographic researchers have primarily made use of close readings or in-depth immersion in smaller communities (Gal, 2019; Hellmueller et al., 2021a; Olausson, 2018; Pires et al., 2023). While these methods are complementary, they represent distinct strategies for engaging with digital data.

The sampling approach proposed in this article, long comment branch sampling (LCBS), combines elements of both, developing a systematic process for selecting, sorting, and synthesizing comment sections in a way that reflects both the scale and the specificities of online discourse. This method is illustrated through a case study on meat reduction controversies in Danish Facebook comment sections but can be applied to various contested issues across different platforms. LCBS offers practical tools for qualitative researchers to navigate large volumes of data, providing an answer to the following research question: how can we purposively and systematically sample comment sections? The non-chronological structure of comment threads on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok presents challenges for analysis. Yet, by paying attention to both content and structure—what is referred to here as “long comment branches”—LCBS enables a systematic, qualitative approach to studying the content embedded in these data forms. While the scale of data on social media lends itself to large-scale quantitative methods (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2023; B. Chen et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2021) a qualitative approach can provide culturally situated close reading of discussions necessary for understanding the cultural implications of a phenomenon (boyd & Crawford, 2012). In this sense, LCBS facilitates a transition from big data to ‘thicker’ data (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017).

This article contributes to the literature on qualitative-oriented methods for social media by introducing LCBS, a sampling strategy that adapts purposive sampling to the specific challenges of studying comment sections on social media. While ethnographic methods such as interviews (Bauman, 2015), observations (Willis, 2019), and go-alongs (Jørgensen, 2016) have been adapted to digital contexts, similar adaptations in sampling comment sections remain underexplored. LCBS fills this gap by offering a concrete set of steps for researchers to systematically select pages, locate comment branches, sort comments, and batch posts. In this way, the article suggests the potentiality of sampling for long comment branches, i.e. long threads of replies, and selecting purposively from these. Grounded in the concept of online issue publics (Birkbak, 2013; Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Marres, 2005, 2015), it aims to bridge the methodological tools of digital methods for handling large datasets with the cultural sensitivity of ethnographic research.

FACEBOOK: AFFORDING DISCUSSIONS

Though LCBS can be applied more broadly, I use data from Facebook to showcase the sampling strategy in this paper. Founded in 2004, Facebook is one of the oldest actively used social networking sites. Globally, Facebook was the most popular social network site in 2022 with 2.91 billion monthly active users (*Biggest Social Media Platforms 2022*, n.d.). In comparison, number 2 on the list, YouTube, has 2.562 billion, and number 3 WhatsApp has 2 billion monthly active users. Though other platforms' user bases are growing faster than Facebook's, the social media incumbent continues to be an app and a site people use. In the local case of Denmark, Facebook is also the social media platform with the highest coverage in the population, with 65% of people aged 15-75 using it daily (DR, 2022).

Facebook's interface has changed many times throughout the years but some of the core structural elements of the site remain the same. Users have their own profiles, while companies or organizations can create pages for themselves which users can follow. Pages can then create posts that users, followers or non-followers, can react to in the form of emoji reactions (like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry), share on their personal profile, or comment on. It is the latter, comment sections, which serve as the main data structure processed in this article. A comment section belonging to a post can consist of comments (direct replies to the post), and an infinite number of replies to a comment, or replies to other replies. Comment sections are often not ordered chronologically. Instead, Facebook's default setting is to order them according to "most relevant" comments, with the option to instead "see all" comments. Further, Facebook's default setting is not

to show all comments in a comment section which means that long comment sections must be folded out manually. The interface and intricate data structure of Facebook's comment sections therefore pose a challenge for qualitative researchers interested in studying discussions through comment sections.

The structure of posts with a comment section where users can react and discuss is a common format beyond Facebook, and other social media platforms have a similar structure. This is the case with Instagram, LinkedIn, Reddit, and X (or previously, Twitter). It should be noted, however, that even though all of these platforms afford (Bucher & Helmond, 2017) comment section interaction it is most seen in the former two examples. In line with Jensen, Vahlstrup, and Bechmann (2018), I therefore argue that the use of LCBS should always be sensitive to the specific platform vernaculars of the research object.

Issue publics and methods for studying them

With the affordances of comment sections, social media sites, such as Facebook, facilitate debates or conversations, primarily in written form, serving as public discussion fora (Papacharissi, 2014). Here, it is possible to post a comment on a post and for other people to reply to this with comments or emoji reactions, making it possible for individuals, organizations, and companies to engage in discussions through the platform affordances.

Such politically engaged online publics are often 'fleeting' and 'topic dependent' (Papacharissi, 2014), and have been termed 'ad hoc issue publics' (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). These kinds of publics form around specific topics on social networking sites, which is supported by the affordances of the sites. Twitter and its hashtags have popularly been used as the prime example of this (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Papacharissi, 2014; Sanford et al., 2021). Here, publics form around a specific case, and specific hashtags are used as anchors for members of the issue publics. The members can then both use the hashtags when posting content on the platform and use the hashtag to search for other user-created content on the issue. The technical affordance of the hashtag then becomes an important tool for publics to form and gather information.

Though hashtags on Twitter are the most used case studies of issue publics, both due to the searchability of hashtags and the (former) accessibility of Twitter's API, some studies have also looked at issue publics on other platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, and Parler (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; B. Chen et al., 2023; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). Using other infrastructural affordances (de Seta, 2020) than hashtags, issues or controversies on social media platforms have also been

studied in terms of groups and pages (Küchler et al., 2023; Navon & Noy, 2023) or posts (Basmehi & Ignatow, 2021; Yarchi et al., 2021) on Facebook. In these cases, comment sections afford a place for people to express their opinions, both aimed at the page, other commentators, or other lurking users. Comment sections as affordances are thus key places and ways for issue publics to virtually gather and discuss topics of varying degrees from social movement initiatives (Hwang & Kim, 2015) to political topics such as livestock production or climate change (Koteyko et al., 2013; Olausson, 2018).

Issue or controversy mapping has been deployed as digital methods to study actors in platform-based sociotechnical environments using hyper-link or network analysis to study relations between actors (Burgess et al., 2019; Lepawsky et al., 2019; Marres, 2015; Venturini & Munk, 2022). While these studies seldom discuss sampling explicitly, they detail the ‘curation’ of datasets and its methodological implications. For instance, Venturini and Munk (Venturini & Munk, 2022, p. 164) consider how seed pages and tools like API queries, scraping, and crawling shape the collection and curation of datasets.

In addition to controversy mapping, some studies leverage platform affordances, such as hashtags, to identify and analyze online controversies (Basmehi & Ignatow, 2021; Koteyko et al., 2013; Qiu et al., 2019), while others employ more traditional ethnographic methods to examine cultural participation and the content of online discussions (Hendriks et al., 2016; Olausson, 2018, 2019). A growing body of research combine qualitative and quantitative methods to study social media comments, also termed ‘quali-quantitative’ (Venturini, 2024; Venturini & Latour, 2009) or ‘big-thick’ digital methods (Bornakke & Due, 2018). Using a similar issue-publics framework, Birkbak (Birkbak, 2012, 2018) demonstrates how such mixed methods enrich understanding of public engagement. LCBS builds on these efforts emphasizing qualitative assessments of digital environments and adopting an ethnographic stance. Despite comment sections being highly populated online places for political discussion and civic engagement, there is a lack of methodological tool kits, especially for qualitative researchers to navigate the dense, yet dispersed infrastructures of comment sections.

SAMPLING STRATEGIES FOR QUALITATIVE “BIG DATA”

The abundance of social media data, for instance in comment sections, poses a key challenge for qualitative research: how to carefully select data with a sensitivity to both research topic and the vernacular culture of the empirical context? This is both an epistemological and pragmatic issue: epis-

temological in questioning how knowledge of comment sections is shaped by methodological choices, and pragmatic in addressing the practicalities of sampling.

Sampling can take different forms, depending on what it means to represent. Though also used in qualitative studies today, the term ‘sampling’ originates from statistical research. In statistical research, sampling means taking out a small subset of a bigger dataset for analysis (Neuman, 2012). The sample is meant to be representative of the bigger dataset or population in focus, following different parameters. However, by integrating sampling into qualitative research, the focus on representativeness has shifted. Here, the sample is meant to be representative of the phenomenon, rather than the population (Luker, 2008). One of the common qualitative sampling strategies deployed is purposive sampling (Flick, 2018; Tracy, 2020). As the name suggests, purposive sampling is a process of sampling information-rich data to accommodate the research focus. There are many different genres of this sampling strategy, including sampling for extreme, deviant, critical, or typical cases, or maximal variation in cases (Flick, 2018). What they all have in common, is that cases or data are sampled with a specific research intention in mind, which is analytical or theoretical, rather than representational. In other words, purposive sampling aims to capture sections of the dataset that can represent the phenomenon of interest for further analysis. This implies that the aim is rich inductive analysis rather than statistical description of a specific demographic. Analysis done through purposive sampling is therefore not scalable or generalizable. However, as with most qualitative research, sufficient rich analysis of a phenomenon can give well-grounded indications of a more general nature.

Sampling becomes especially useful when working in a data-rich environment such as social media discussion forums or comment sections. Random sampling is one popular sampling strategy which is, as the name suggest, intentionally not purposive. However, more purposive sampling strategies include time, popularity, keyword, and thematic sampling are some often-used parameters for sampling comments in qualitative or mixed-methods studies, as the following sections will show. Though this section lists these sampling strategies as separate, it should be noted that they can be used in conjunction. The most common pairing is a purposive selection of a page or a group coupled with random sampling of posts or comments from the selection (Humprecht et al., 2020; Lowenstein-Barkai, 2022; Nelimarkka et al., 2020).

For studies with a specific timeframe as the object of analysis – for instance, case studies of events – time, or chronology have been used as parameters for the selection of comments (Hale et al., 2020; Martini, 2018;

Ron et al., 2020). Here, comments are sampled at predefined time slots (i.e., time they are posted). This makes it possible to follow the progression of discussions over time and account for time differences in cross-national discussions. The sampling strategy is also used in cases where specific offline events, e.g. the occurrence of many or few violent incidents (Ron et al., 2020), are important to the study. Similarly, 'liveliness' (Marres & Weltevrede, 2013) has been used as a sampling criteria to study how issues are shifting over time, focusing on topical shifts and thereby emphasizing the dynamic nature of digital culture.

Fully thematic sampling practices are often used in smaller-scale studies (Gal, 2019; Hellmueller et al., 2021; Olausson, 2018; Pires et al., 2023). Here, the researcher selects comments or comment sections that are especially fitting for the topic, case, or research question. This is often done after a longer period of immersion in a community, where the researcher has a good contextual understanding of the field. However, in cases where longitudinal studies are not possible, or where there is a need for a bigger pool of data to gather the breadth of opinions on a topic, utilizing digital tools to sort through the large amount of available data is useful.

Using digital methods, keyword search is often used to sample comments (B. Chen et al., 2023; Gillett et al., 2023; Harel et al., 2020; Lien, 2022). This process can be automated by scripts, but keyword search can also be done by manually searching for keywords using the platform's user interface, for example, Facebook's search bar (Navon & Noy, 2023). This is popularly done by collecting posts or comments by searching for predefined hashtags or keywords. Other studies snowball sample keywords by finding keywords that are often used in conjunction (Borah et al., 2023). Sampling by keyword is useful when looking for instances where publics discuss a specific topic and utilize the platform's affordances of hashtags. However, when studying discussions in comment sections, only using keywords to construct the corpus of data can easily pull the data away from its context, if the comment is detached from its comment section and post.

Lastly, an often-used parameter is popularity (Dale et al., 2020; Humprecht et al., 2020; Lowenstein-Barkai, 2022; Rega et al., 2023; Schlichthorst et al., 2019; Tschla et al., 2023). Here, studies have used the number of views (K. Chen et al., 2023), likes (Åhman & Thorén, 2021), or comments (Naab et al., 2023; Orth et al., 2020) to sample. Popularity can be an excellent parameter for selecting posts with high engagement. However, more passive interactions such as likes and views are not always an indicator that something is disputed or discussed, and it does not always give the most fruitful data for a thematic analysis of comments. Even the number of comments can be misleading. Depending on the topic, a large amount of

stem comments without replies is more an expression of dialogue between the user and the Facebook page, than direct discussions between users in long comment branches. Further, this popularity notion equates a high amount of comments with more discussion or interaction between users but this simple quantification of data (boyd & Crawford, 2012) is not always representative of the phenomenon. When interested in attitudes on a topic between people, an attuned version of popularity sampling is therefore needed. This is not least the case in dispersed, latent, or everyday discussions that might take place across time and space where locating specific places for discussions proves useful.

Figure 1: Popular sampling methods for social media discussions in comment sections.

	Object of analysis/parameters for selection	Scale of study	Automated or manual	Limitations for discussion analysis
Timeframe sampling	Time-sensitive topic, e.g. an event	Small-big scale	Automated/manual	Tied to a specific point in time, sensitive to events
Thematic sampling	Topic/research interest	Small scale	Manual	Narrow focus, requires long-term field immersion
Keyword sampling	Discussions around a specific keyword, e.g. a hashtag	Big scale	Automated/manual	Lack of context, lack of analytical depth
Popularity sampling	The most popular discussions on a topic	Small-big scale	Automated	Not always an expression of dialogue

The following sampling strategy will therefore combine and adapt timeframe, thematic, keyword, and popularity sampling strategies and use long comment branches as a specific sampling strategy. The next section will go through how each of these steps were followed in the case of online Danish meat controversies. Outcomes are then presented to showcase the usability of the sampling strategy, and lastly, the contributions and limitations of the strategy are discussed.

To ground the sampling method in empirical case and to showcase its applicability, LCBS will be introduced through the case of Danish meat reduction debates on Facebook. In recent years, the environmental impact of meat production—specifically its high CO₂ emissions—has sparked significant debate in Denmark, similar to trends in other European countries. This issue has led to political discussions and initiatives (Ministry

of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, 2021), but it has also become a point of contention among citizens, as food choices affect both individual and social identities. These debates have the nature of personal or ‘soft’ (Bouvier & Way, 2021) politics and are often seen played out online, combining notions of politics and the everyday. Meat reduction discussions work as a case for showcasing the LCBS method as it generates controversy and discussion, but in a dispersed way, meaning that the discussions take place across sites and comment sections. This fragmentation is characteristic of “soft” or personal politics on social media (Highfield, 2016, p. 31), where political conversations are less centralized and more dispersed, happening in an informal and scattered way. This means that a large amount of data exists but that the data is not as centralized as has been the case in studies on hashtag movements or more formalized online campaigns (Basmehi & Ignatow, 2021; Hautea et al., 2021; Orth et al., 2020). Thus, this kind of investigation also necessitates more rigorous sampling methods to locate and open the data for analysis.

INTRODUCING LCBS

LCBS is a platform-specific (Bucher & Helmond, 2017) approach to sampling drawing on concepts from interrelated methods such as digital ethnography (Hine, 2000; Pink et al., 2016) and, specifically, netnography (Kozinets, 2015). In netnography, attention is on both user culture and the researcher’s embeddedness in the material, seeing research as always situated. Aligned with netnography, LCBS is a sampling strategy where the researcher stays close to the empirical field to adapt the methodological procedures to the vernacular culture in which it operates. Further, with LCBS the researcher works with and through the data in multiple loops which is seen as an integral part of the analytical and netnographic process as it allows the researcher to access layers of meaning, thus thickening the data through the sampling process. In the following, I will introduce the different steps of the sampling strategy: *selecting pages*, *locating comment branches*, *sorting comments*, and *batching posts*. These will be introduced through the case of meat reduction discussions found on Danish Facebook pages.

Selecting pages

Data was collected in the form of comment sections from four different Danish public Facebook pages, here named P1, P2, P3, and P4. The four pages were chosen to get different views on the topic of meat and meat reduction as they represent different attitudes towards meat. The four pages claim to work with sustainability and a more sustainable future, but

they do so in distinctively different ways. Whereas P2 and P4 are explicitly working towards meat reduction or meat alternatives, P1 and P3 see meat consumption and production as part of the sustainable future and promote it as such.

The choice of open pages, as opposed to closed or open groups, was also based on the wish for variation in the sampling universe (Robinson, 2014). While there are a growing number of vegan or vegetarian groups gathered in Facebook groups, a similar tendency is not apparent for meat-eaters though more general food recipe groups do exist. Open pages were preferred not only for their accessibility but also because they tend to host a wider range of viewpoints, i.e. variation in opinions. In contrast, groups often display more ideological uniformity, partly due to stricter entry requirements, such as mandatory questionnaires designed to filter out bots and trolls. In seeking variation and saturation in perspectives, the study thus prioritized breadth of content and attitudes. However, given the dispersed nature of such discussions, LCBS does not claim to represent all Facebook venues where these conversations occur. Finally, sampled pages needed to demonstrate consistent activity (e.g., regular posting) and visible engagement in the comment sections.

Comments were collected across all four pages from January 2022 to January 2023. The timeframe of one year was chosen not to focus on specific events, as often is the case with timeframe sampling, but to focus on 'everyday discussions' throughout a year. The larger timeframe broadens the scope of the study and makes it possible to account not only for specific discussion-inducing events but to also include the everyday politics (Highfield, 2016) around the topic of meat reduction. This amounted to comment sections from 151 posts, 28,940 comments in total. To ensure sufficient data, comment sections had to meet a minimum comment threshold based on each page's general engagement level: P1: min. 30 comments, P2: min. 100 comments, P3: min. 10 comments, P4: min. 20 comments. In addition to the comments, metadata about their corresponding post was collected.

Locating comment branches

Through initial data immersion (Saldaña, 2013), what I call 'long comment branches' were chosen as the point of entry in data collection. With the theoretical interest in discussions between users, the data was structured so that replies to one comment were attached in continuation of the "stem comment", resulting in a branch-like data structure. The following example shows a comment branch with the stem comment (C1) and five replies (C2, C3, C4, C5, C6)

C1: Wow, that movie is stereotypical and pointless. Seriously, nobody sits around yell-ing for ‘dead animals’ like lunatics.

C2: Have you seen the advertisement for [Danish meat product manufacturer]?

C3: So, when others make a ridiculous commercial, another one has to be made, is that how it’s supposed to be understood?

C4: [Name of the previous commenter]. Proselytizing?? That’s exactly what the meat industry has been doing for years - we’re bombarded with meat commercials everywhere. And how do you think vegans can force their approach to food on you?? You still have your free will to choose meat/although meat consumption supports animal cruelty and destroys our planet, we definitely shouldn’t be informed about it...

C5: Satire.

C6: [Name of the previous commenter], spot on.

These long threads of replies, or comment branches, are important places of inquiry, as these are the places where people are directly discussing or interacting with each other. Identifying long comment branches is therefore a way to locate discussions in a different way than traditional popularity sampling. Often, popularity sampling would use the number of comments or reactions per post which can result in a collection of comment sections where people are only replying to the post and not each other. Locating long comment branches is, thus, a refined version of popularity sampling, particularly useful when studying discussions between people.

What qualifies as a ‘long’ comment branch varies by research context, much like how popularity is relative when based on likes, reactions, or comments. This relativity becomes clearer in the next section, where branches are sorted by length and relevance to the research topic.

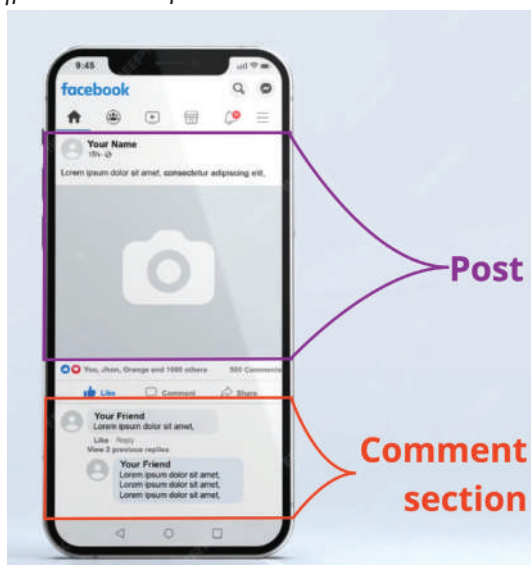
Sorting comments

Considering that not all comments were related to meat discussions in this large initial collection, further sampling was devised. Drawing on keyword sampling, the comments were filtered according to the topic of meat. This process was automated by a script that iterated over each comment and detected whether it included the word “meat” (including compound words

con-taining “meat”¹). The breadth and number of keywords are case-specific choices. In this study, using a broad term like “meat” allowed openness to diverse discussions which is useful for exploring varied issues around meat. It also avoided preemptively constraining normativity, which is crucial given meat’s contested status in Denmark. In contrast, studies focused on specific events may use targeted terms, such as events, laws, or actors, similar to hashtag-based research tied to movements or case tagging.

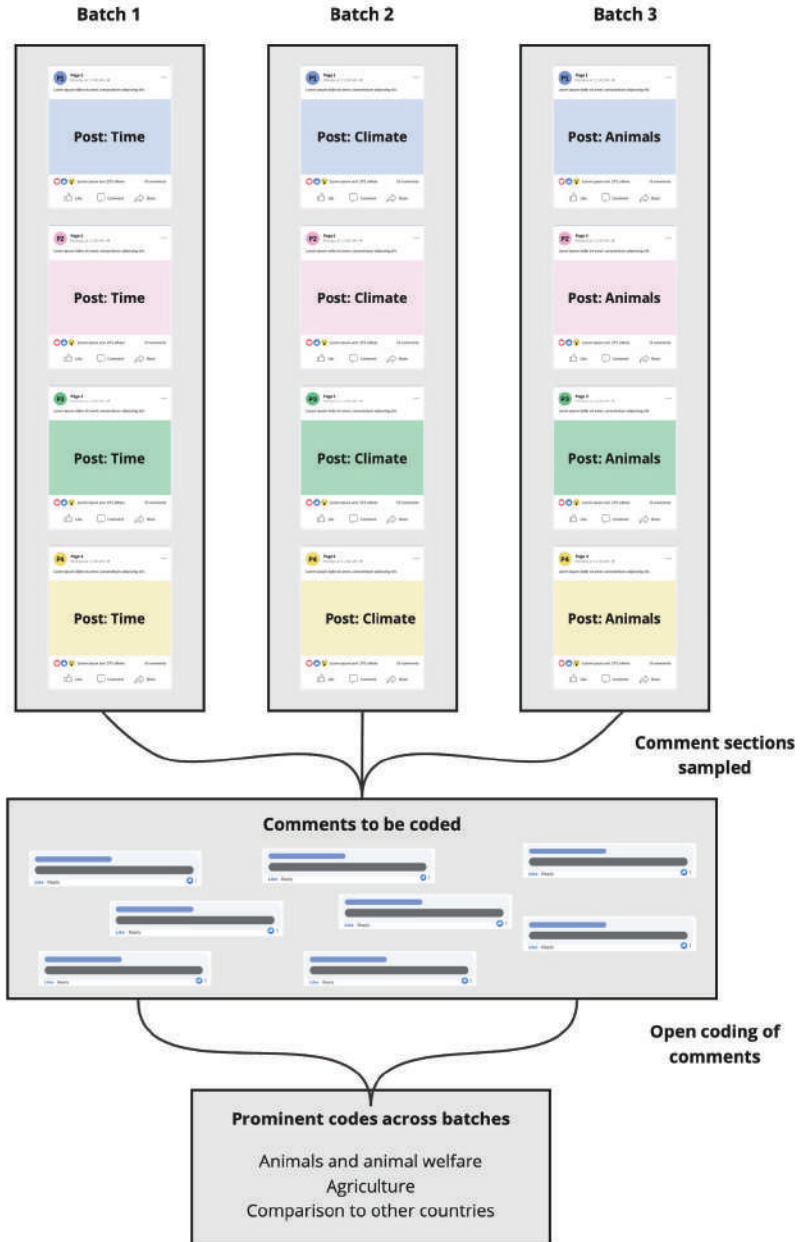
From this selection, the script listed the ten posts from each page with the longest comment branches. Note that this sampling was based on keywords from the comments and not the posts under which they were posted (see figure 4 for difference between comments and posts). This was chosen as the research interest was on what people discussed (comment content), and not necessarily what the four pages discussed or posted (post content). Though many previous studies using keyword sampling draw on the sampling of hashtags, this was not useful in this case, as hashtags were not widely used in the discussions. Instead, I queried from the content of the comments using a broad keyword, such as “meat”. This decision emphasizes the importance of sensitivity towards the vernacular culture of the field but also establishes that keyword sampling is possible in fields that do not use hashtags.

Figure 2: Difference between post and comment section.



1 Code available: https://osf.io/zg45t/?view_only=dd247c0d167a419794b163f87a7afcdf

Figure 3: Process of batching posts and coding comments, leading to the most prominent codes.



Batching posts

As the last step of LCBS, batching posts in themes was used to supplement the automated criterion-based filtering described above. This version of thematic sampling was done to further ensure that the sampled comments fit with the research interest. Thus, based on the top ten list of long comment branches that discussed meat, I identified three broader themes which at least one post per page could be categorized under: time, climate, and animals. This additional sampling step was crucial due to the broadness of the keyword “meat.” Unlike the previous script-based comment sorting, this step was manual and relied on qualitative assessment of recurring post themes. Thus, it is important to note that batch themes were solely based on the content of the posts, and not the content of the comments. While resembling content coding, this step should still be considered a crucial part of the sampling process, rather than merely data analysis, since it as a step for circling in on thematically relevant content which can then later be coded or analyzed otherwise.

Figure 4: Batch information.

Batch nr. and name:	Batch 1 - Time	Batch 2 - Climate	Batch 3 - Animals
Posts related to:	Changes in dietary habits, future of eating, developments in green agricultural technology.	Climate, climate change, actions to fight climate change.	Animals, animal welfare, meat production.
Range in nr. of comments pr. post:	144-1200	53-427	144-696
Total nr. of comments in batch:	1928	837	1253

Each batch included one post from each of the four pages, resulting in 12 posts with a total of 4018 comments which were sampled for coding. Here, immersion helped gain a more situated understanding of the data, and the insights gained from this were then used to batch posts by theme. This assures that the sampled data fits the research interest, in this case, meat discussions.

OUTCOMES OF USING LCBS

Following the batching of posts, all comment sections were coded following an inductive phronetic approach in two cycles (Tracy, 2020). Whereas the themes of the batches were based on post content, the codes were inductively developed from the comments. However, there were also codes with the same name as the batch themes: *time*, *climate*, and *animals and animal welfare*. Though this is somewhat a duplication of codes, it was needed, as

discussions in comment sections do not necessarily mirror the post content, and being able to code for these three themes within the comments was important to be able to answer the question of what topics are discussed.

The codes were then compared across post batches to see which themes were prominent across the batch topics of time, climate, and animals. The codes *animals and animal welfare*, *agriculture*, and *comparison to other countries* are core topics discussed in all three batches. Each of the core topics were in the top five most occurring codes of at least two of the three batches.

Figure 5: X indicates that the code is one of the five most occurring in the batch.

Code	Batch 1 Time	Batch 2 Climate	Batch 3 Animals
<i>Animals and animal welfare</i>	X		X
<i>Agriculture</i>	X	X	
<i>Comparison to other countries</i>		X	X
<i>Body and health</i>	X		
<i>Climate</i>		X	
<i>Pork</i>			X

It should be noted that all three codes (*animals and animal welfare*, *agriculture*, and *comparison to other countries*) occurred in all three batches, but each of them was only one of the five most occurring codes in two of the batches. Not surprisingly, the batch theme (time, climate, and animals) was also reflected in which codes were big in the individual batches, as the batch themes were descriptive of the post contents. However, *climate* and *time* were only prominent codes in the comments of the batches which had the same theme, whereas *animals and animal welfare* was not only a big topic in its corresponding batch, but also in batch 1, and therefore seems to be a prominent theme in meat discussions more generally.

This way of coding and mapping themes both within and across batches provides an overview of the most emergent themes in the data. However, other codes were only prominent in one batch, such as *body and health* (Batch 1), *climate* (Batch 2), and *pork* (Batch 3). This underlines that while some topics seem to be remarkable in many meat discussions, other themes of discussion are more specific to posts. In this way, LCBS makes it possible to differentiate what themes of discussion are tied to specific posts and what themes are significant across posts, and maybe even across contexts. Further, LCBS is a way to locate important places of inquiry, i.e., where discussions are happening, by identifying long and relevant comment branches. Therefore, LCBS is a strategy to uncover where discussions are taking

place as well as what themes are being discussed within the comment sections. These kinds of situation-specific maps (Clarke, 2003) could be a field of inquiry to further study how online discussions play out on a particular topic, in a particular time, and in particular online spaces.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF LCBS

Though LCBS was implemented in the case of meat discussions across four public Danish Facebook pages, the strategy is useful across cases on social media as the strategy is not case-specific, but specific to comment sections on social media platforms. In other words, it is dependent on the structure of the data, rather than the content of the data. This means that the sampling strategy also opens for comparative studies across platforms with similar data formats, such as comment sections on Instagram, reddit, and TikTok.

The sampling strategy proposed in this article is operating in the space between digital methods working with big data and digital ethnography working with thick description. As with other methods that 'borrow' from different methodologies, particularly when navigating the space between 'big' and 'small' data, LCBS also has limitations. The results gained from working with this strategy will not be generalizable or representational of a demographic, as is the case with statistically sampled data studies. The fieldwork will also not provide as exhaustive knowledge about the research participants, or rather, the commenters, as would be the case with long-term ethnographic fieldwork (Hine, 2015). However, the sampling strategy provides extensive knowledge about discussions on a specific issue across contexts. Though never completely detached from the people, the content of users' internet behavior, their comments, can be useful in constructing knowledge and building theory about a cultural phenomenon, in this case attitudes towards meat and meat reduction. Further, it provides knowledge on discussions happening across posts or contexts. This is important as the social media landscape is, by many, experienced as an ecology (Madianou & Miller, 2013) where people move between platforms, pages, and other infrastructural elements (Gammelby & Markham, 2018). Though this article only scratches the surface of the different themes of discussion, the strategy would also be useful for theory generation following a traditional grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, LCBS is a tool that can be utilized by a variety of fields studying content, communities, and controversies on social media. Thanks to its flexibility and emphasis on data structure over content alone, this sampling strategy can be applied in cross-platform studies which is a valuable feature given that issue publics often span multiple platforms. Future research could

adapt LCBS accordingly to gain broader insights into issue publics and reflect today's complex media ecologies.

However, one important note when implementing this strategy is the importance of the researcher knowing their data well. Tempting, and time-saving, as it is, filtering should not go before data immersion (Kozinets, 2015, p. 278). Data immersion is an important part of developing a sense of "what is going on" in the field. Further, and important for this sampling strategy, it also provides important hints about the data structure for the specific research topic. Are there a few, very long comment branches? Or are they smaller and more dispersed? Are some posts or pages especially theoretically or analytically fruitful? These are important questions to ask before starting the automated filtering process. Following the iterations of LCBS combined with constant data immersion can be a more tactical way for the qualitative researcher to make sense of their (big) data. Data immersion, together with the constant focus on content, ensure a close connection between data and researcher, which is key in qualitative research. Developing automated scripts to filter the data can lead to an embodied feeling of disconnect between researcher and data, but by theming batches of posts, the cultural context of the data is maintained. After all, working with data is inherently subjective (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 667) and though LCBS sees the data within its context of post and page, this is, of course, not the only cultural context the data should be seen in, meaning other ways of thickening the data can be needed (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017), such as interviews or other direct interactions with users.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented the notion of long comment branch sampling as a sampling strategy for studying online discussions through comment sections. Combining tools from popular sampling strategies in qualitative social media research, the article presents a novel sampling strategy, particularly useful for social media discussions in thread-like data formats. More specifically, this combines selecting pages, locating long comment branches as places of inquiry, filtering and sorting the comment branches using digital methods, and lastly, batching posts in themes. This process makes it possible to locate and sample the most thematically rich places of discussion and thus becomes a way to study issue publics in a culturally situated way. This sampling strategy can be seen as a multi-cycle and iterative process where the researcher works with the data through several loops of selection, collection, sorting, and batching. These iterations should not be seen as separate but rather as integral parts of the analysis of the data, and they entail repeated data immersion. This interlacing of digital

ethnography and digital methods is, therefore, a way to “thicken” (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017) data, and to go beyond infrastructural traces to gain a culturally situated understanding of discussions taking place on social media. The sampling strategy contributes with a set of practical steps for sampling theoretically rich places of discussion within comment sections. Just like other qualitative or ethnographic methods have been adapted to the empirical field of social media, LCBS is one way of trying to creatively adjust qualitative sampling strategies to fit the online environment, culture, and infrastructure, crucial to the field of internet research.

Amalie Scheel is a PhD candidate at the Department of Digital Design and Information Studies at Aarhus University. In her doctoral project, Amalie studies meat and meat reduction as a case of affective and everyday controversy in Denmark, contributing to the fields of social media studies, cultural studies of food, and Science and Technology studies. She holds an MSc in Information Studies and a BA in Aesthetics and Culture from Aarhus University.

ORCID: 0009-0005-0903-0534

e-mail: amni@cc.au.dk

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Pablo Velasco, Maximilian Schlüter, Jakob Kleofas, and Anja Bechmann for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article, and Kasper Meincke for technical assistance with the script. Thanks also to the special issue editors and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments, which have significantly improved the manuscript.

Funding

The author did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Conflict of interest statement

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

REFERENCES

- Åhman, H., & Thorén, C. (2021). When Facebook Becomes Faithbook: Exploring Religious Communication in a Social Media Context. *Social Media + Society*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211041644>
- Bandy, J., & Diakopoulos, N. (2023). Facebook’s News Feed Algorithm and the 2020 US Election. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231196898>
- Basmechi, F., & Ignatow, G. (2021). Forming an affective public online: Aggressive posts and

- comments in the My Stealthy Freedom movement. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i3.11471>
- Bauman, A. (2015). Qualitative Online Interviews: Strategies, Design, and Skills. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 10(2), 201–202. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-10-2014-1252>
- Birkbak, A. (2012). Crystallizations in the Blizzard: Contrasting Informal Emergency Collaboration In Facebook Groups. *NordiCHI '12 Proceedings of the 7th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction: Making Sense Through Design*, 428–437.
- Birkbak, A. (2013). From networked publics to issue publics: Reconsidering the public/private distinction in web science. *Proceedings of WebScience '13*, 24–32.
- Birkbak, A. (2018). Shitstorms, bobler eller sagsorienterede offentlig-heder? Digitale metoder og kontroverser på sociale medier. *Dansk Sociologi*, 29(1), 37–61.
- Borah, P., Ghosh, S., Suk, J., Mini, D. S., & Sun, L. (2023). Feminism Not for All? The Discourse Around White Feminism Across Five Social Media Platforms. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231186862>
- Bornakke, T., & Due, B. L. (2018). Big-Thick Blending: A method for mixing analytical insights from big and thick data sources. *Big Data & Society*, 5(1).
- Bouvier, G., & Way, L. C. S. (2021). Revealing the politics in “soft”, everyday uses of social media: The challenge for critical discourse studies. *Social Semiotics*, 31(3), 345–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1930855>
- boyd, danah, & Crawford, K. (2012). CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR BIG DATA: Provocations for a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 662–679. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878>
- Bruns, A., & Burgess, J. (2011). *The Use of Twitter Hashtags in the Formation of Ad Hoc Publics*. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/46515/1/The_Use_of_Twitter_Hashtags_in_the_Formation_of_Ad_Hoc_Publics_%28final%29.pdf
- Bruns, A., & Highfield, T. (2015). *Is Habermas on Twitter? Social Media and the Public Sphere* (A. Bruns, G. Enli, E. Skogerbo, A. O. Larsson, & C. Christensen, Eds.; 1st ed.). Routledge.
- Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2017). The Affordances of Social Media Platforms. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*. SAGE Publication Ltd.
- Burgess, J., Bruns, A., & Osman, K. (2019). Analysing scholarly contributions to public debate with social media issue mapping: A case study of the Australia Day controversy. *Communication Research and Practice*, 5(4), 393–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2019.1689688>
- Burgess, J., & Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2016). Mapping sociocultural controversies across digital media platforms: One week of #gamergate on Twitter, YouTube, and Tumblr. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), 79–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1155338>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Chen, B., Lukito, J., & Koo, G. H. (2023). Comparing the #StopTheSteal Movement across Multiple Platforms: Differentiating Discourse on Facebook, Twitter, and Parler. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231196879>
- Chen, K., Jeon, J., & Zhou, Y. (2023). A critical appraisal of diversity in digital knowledge production: Segregated inclusion on YouTube. *New Media & Society*, 25(11), 2855–2876. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211034846>
- Clarke, A. E. (2003). Situational Analyses: Grounded Theory Mapping After the Postmodern Turn. *Symbolic Interaction*, 26(4), 553–576. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2003.26.4.553>
- Dale, K. R., Raney, A. A., Ji, Q., Janicke-Bowles, S. H., Baldwin, J., Rowlett, J. T., Wang, C., & Oliver, M. B. (2020). Self-transcendent emotions and social media: Exploring the content and consumers of inspirational Facebook posts. *New Media & Society*, 22(3), 507–527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819865720>
- de Seta, G. (2020). Sociality, Circulation, Transaction: WeChat’s Infrastructural Affordances. *Verge: Studies in Global Asia*, 6(2), 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.6.2.0065>
- DR. (2022). *Medieudviklingen 2022*. https://www.dr.dk/static/documents/2023/01/24/medieudviklingen2022_a50af9a5.pdf

- Flick, U. (2018). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070>
- Gal, N. (2019). Ironic humor on social media as participatory boundary work. *New Media & Society*, 21(3), 729–749. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818805719>
- Gammelby, A. K., & Markham, A. N. (2018). Moving through digital flows: An epistemological and practical approach. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070>
- Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. Pluto Press. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/asb/detail.action?docID=3386687>
- Gillett, R., Gray, J. E., & Valdovinos Kaye, D. B. (2023). ‘Just a little hack’: Investigating cultures of content moderation circumvention by Facebook users. *New Media & Society*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221147661>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine de Gruyter.
- Hale, B. J., Collins, R., & Brown, D. K. (2020). Posting About Cancer: Predicting Social Support in Imgur Comments. *Social Media + Society*, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120965209>
- Harel, T. O., Jameson, J. K., & Maoz, I. (2020). The Normalization of Hatred: Identity, Affective Polarization, and Dehumanization on Facebook in the Context of Intractable Political Conflict. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120913983>
- Hautea, S., Parks, P., Takahashi, B., & Zeng, J. (2021). Showing They Care (Or Don't): Affective Publics and Ambivalent Climate Activism on TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211012344>
- Hellmueller, L., Lischka, J. A., & Humprecht, E. (2021). Shaping (non)-discursive social media spaces: Cross-national typologies of news organizations' heavy commenters. *New Media & Society*, 23(11), 3249–3267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820946454>
- Hendriks, C. M., Duus, S., & Ercan, S. A. (2016). Performing politics on social media: The dramaturgy of an environmental controversy on Facebook. *Environmental Politics*, 25(6), 1102–1125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2016.1196967>
- Highfield, T. (2016). *Social Media and Everyday Politics*. Polity.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. SAGE.
- Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, embodies and everyday*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Humprecht, E., Hellmueller, L., & Lischka, J. A. (2020). Hostile Emotions in News Comments: A Cross-National Analysis of Facebook Discussions. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120912481>
- Hwang, H., & Kim, K.-O. (2015). Social media as a tool for social movements: The effect of social media use and social capital on intention to participate in social movements. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39(5), 478–488. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12221>
- Jensen, J. L., Vahlstrup, P. B., & Bechmann, A. (2018). How to Compare Different Social Media: A Conceptual and Technical Framework. In J. Hunsinger, L. Klastrup, & M. M. Allen (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Internet Research* (pp. 1–16). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1202-4_32-1
- Jørgensen, K. M. (2016). The media go-along: Researching mobilities with media at hand. *Mediekultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 32(60). <https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekulturv32i60.22429>
- Kim, J. Y., Fusaroli, R., Park, H. W., & Bechmann, A. (2021). Systemic Gendering in Facebook Group Participation. *Social Media + Society*, 7(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211064906>
- Koteyko, N., Jaspal, R., & Nerlich, B. (2013). Climate change and ‘climategate’ in online reader comments: A mixed methods study: Climate change and ‘climategate’ in online reader comments. *The Geographical Journal*, 179(1), 74–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4959.2012.00479.x>
- Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publication Ltd.
- Küchler, C., Stoll, A., Ziegele, M., & Naab, T. K. (2023). Gender-Related Differences in Online Comment Sections: Findings From a Large-Scale Content Analysis of Commenting Behavior. *Social Science Computer Review*, 41(3), 728–747. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211052042>

- Latzko-Toth, G., Bonneau, C., & Millette, M. (2017). Small Data, Thick Data: Thickening Strategies for Trace-based Social Media Research. In L. Sloan & A. Quan-Haase (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983847>
- Lepawsky, J., Davis, J.-M., Akese, G., & Persaud, D. (2019). Cooking with Controversies: How Geographers Might Use Controversy Mapping as a Research Tool. *The Professional Geographer*, 71(3), 437–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2018.1531243>
- Lien, A. N. (2022). A battle for truth: Islam-related counterpublic discourse on Scandinavian news media Facebook pages. *New Media & Society*, 14614448211068436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211068436>
- Lowenstein-Barkai, H. (2022). “Write it down! I am an Arab”: The role of reader comments in the formation of networked counterpublics. *New Media & Society*, 14614448221101163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221101163>
- Luker, K. (2008). *Salsa dancing into the social sciences: Research in the age of info-glut*. Harvard university Press.
- Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2013). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(2), 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877912452486>
- Marres, N. (2005). Issues spark a public into being. In B. Latour (Ed.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. MIT Press.
- Marres, N. (2015). Why Map Issues? On Controversy Analysis as a Digital Method. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 40(5), 655–686. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243915574602>
- Marres, N., & Weltevrede, E. (2013). SCRAPING THE SOCIAL? *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 6(3), 313–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2013.772070>
- Martini, M. (2018). Online distant witnessing and live-streaming activism: Emerging differences in the activation of networked publics. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4035–4055. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818766703>
- Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2017). Platformed racism: The mediation and circulation of an Australian race-based controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), 930–946. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1293130>
- Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries. (2021, July 19). *De Officielle Kostråd*. Ministeriet for Fødevarer, Landbrug og Fiskeri. <https://fvm.dk/foedevarer/mad-maaltider-og-sundhed/de-officielle-kostraad/>
- Naab, T. K., Ruess, H.-S., & Küchler, C. (2023). The influence of the deliberative quality of user comments on the number and quality of their reply comments. *New Media & Society*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231172168>
- Navon, S., & Noy, C. (2023). Conceptualizing social media sub-platforms: The case of mourning and memorialization practices on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 25(11), 2898–2917. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211035769>
- Nelimarkka, M., Laaksonen, S.-M., Tuokko, M., & Valkonen, T. (2020). Platformed Interactions: How Social Media Platforms Relate to Candidate-Constituent Interaction During Finnish 2015 Election Campaigning. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120903856>
- Neuman, W. L. (2012). *Basics of Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative approaches* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Olausson, U. (2018). “Stop Blaming the Cows!”: How Livestock Production is Legitimized in Everyday Discourse on Facebook. *Environmental Communication*, 12(1), 28–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2017.1406385>
- Olausson, U. (2019). Meat as a matter of fact(s): The role of science in everyday representations of livestock production on social media. *Journal of Science Communication*, 18(06), A01. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.18060201>
- Orth, Z., Andipatin, M., Mukumbang, F. C., & van Wyk, B. (2020). Applying Qualitative Methods to Investigate Social Actions for Justice Using Social Media: Illustrations From Facebook. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120919926>

- Papacharissi, Z. (2014). Affective Publics. In *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (pp. 115–136). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.003.0006>
- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital Ethnography*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Pires, F., Ataci, T., & Araujo, W. F. (2023). What is so funny about platform labour in Brazil? Ride-hailing drivers' use of humour and memes on Facebook groups. *Convergence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231160622>
- Qiu, J., Lin, Z., & Shuai, Q. (2019). Investigating the opinions distribution in the controversy on social media. *Information Sciences*, *489*, 274–288. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ins.2019.03.041>
- Rega, R., Marchetti, R., & Stanziano, A. (2023). Incivility in Online Discussion: An Examination of Impolite and Intolerant Comments. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231180638>
- Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *11*(1), 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Ron, Y., Suleiman, C., & Maoz, I. (2020). Women for Peace: Promoting Dialogue and Peace through Facebook? *Social Media + Society*, *6*(4), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984461>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publication Ltd.
- Sanford, M., Painter, J., Yasseri, T., & Lorimer, J. (2021). Controversy around climate change reports: A case study of Twitter responses to the 2019 IPCC report on land. *Climatic Change*, *167*(3–4), 59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-021-03182-1>
- Schlichthorst, M., King, K., Reifels, L., Phelps, A., & Pirkis, J. (2019). Using Social Media Networks to Engage Men in Conversations on Masculinity and Suicide: Content Analysis of Man Up Facebook Campaign Data. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(4), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119880019>
- Statista. (n.d.). *Biggest social media platforms 2022*. Statista. Retrieved February 2, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
- Tracy, S. J. (2020). *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tsichla, E., Lappas, G., Triantafyllidou, A., & Kleftodimos, A. (2023). Gender differences in politicians' Facebook campaigns: Campaign practices, campaign issues and voter engagement. *New Media & Society*, *25*(11), 2918–2938. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211036405>
- Venturini, T. (2024). Quali-Quantitative (or non-binary) Methods. In A. Irwin & U. Felt (Eds.), *Elgar Encyclopedia of Science and Technology Studies* (pp. 176–184). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377998.ch18>
- Venturini, T., & Latour, B. (2009). The Social Fabric: Digital Traces and Quali-quantitative Methods. *Proceedings of Future En Seine*, 87–103.
- Venturini, T., & Munk, A. K. (2022). *Controversy Mapping: A Field Guide*. Polity Press.
- Willis, R. (2019). Observations online: Finding the ethical boundaries of Facebook research. *Research Ethics*, *15*(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117740176>
- Yarchi, M., Baden, C., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2021). Political Polarization on the Digital Sphere: A Cross-platform, Over-time Analysis of Interactional, Positional, and Affective Polarization on Social Media. *Political Communication*, *38*(1–2), 98–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1785067>

