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LONG COMMENT BRANCH SAMPLING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

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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 (Basmehci & 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 (Basmehci & 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.

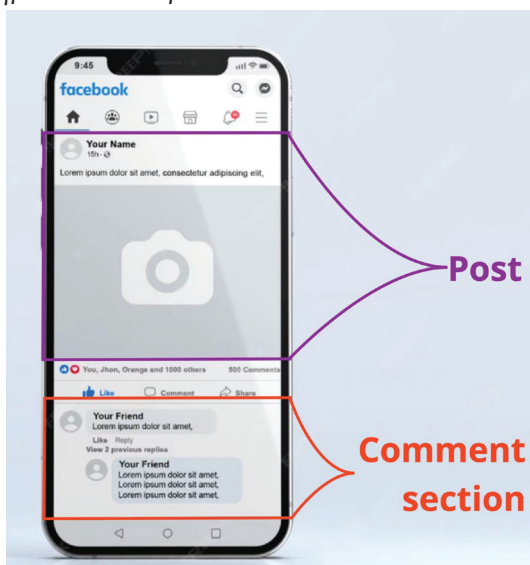
Sorting comments

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 actor, similar to hashtag-based research tied to movements or case tagging.

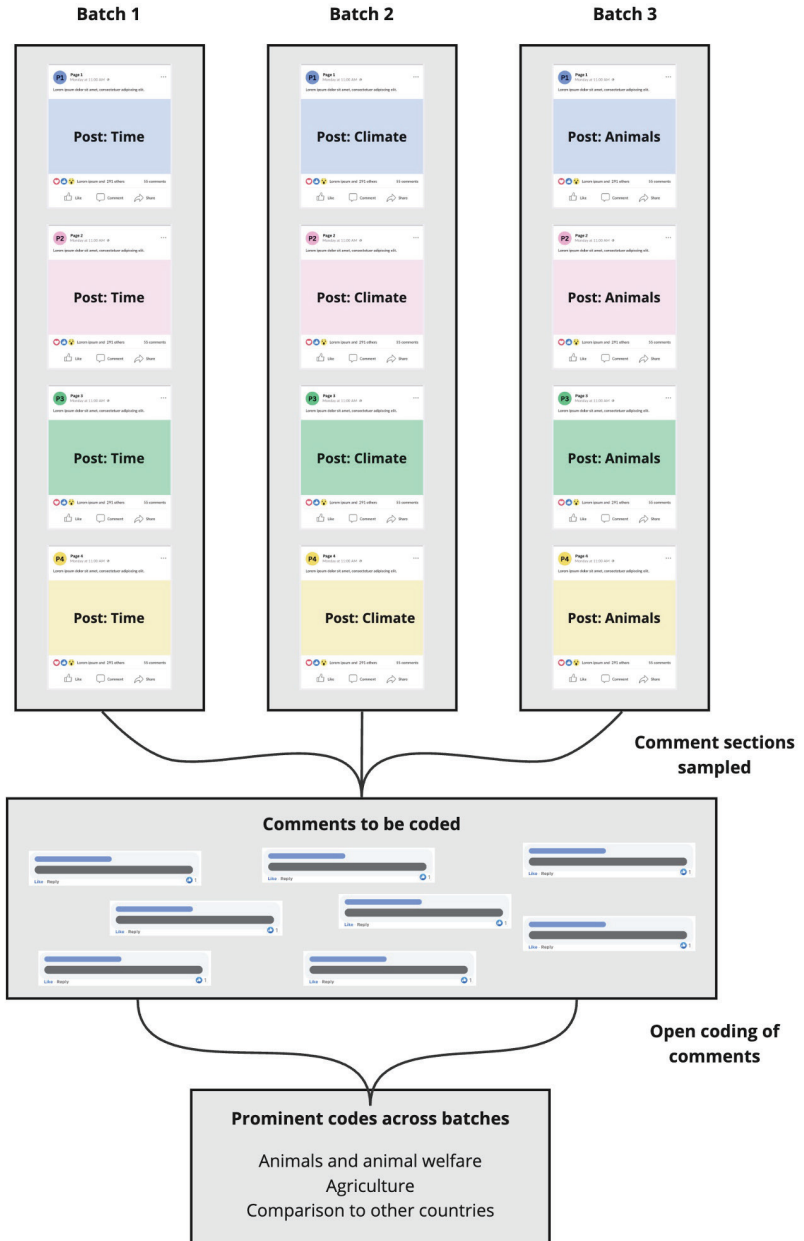
From this selection, the script listed the ten posts from each page with the longest comment branches. Note that this sampling was based on keywords from the comments and not the posts under which they were posted (see figure 4 for difference between comments and posts). This was chosen as the research 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.

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