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Language Unleashed: The Anatomy of Hate Speech in Contemporary Discourse

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LANGUAGE UNLEASHED

THE ANATOMY OF HATE SPEECH IN CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE

Robert Lawson, Giuseppe Balirano and Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo

Language, Media and the Weaponisation of Hate.
By Way of Introduction

During the summer of 2024, the impact of hate speech was catapulted to international front-page news, following a series of far right and anti-immigration protests and riots that happened across England and Northern Ireland from July 30th to August 5th. These riots were initially catalysed by a senseless mass stabbing in Southport (Merseyside, UK), where three children were killed and another eight were seriously injured. On 1st August, the police confirmed that the attack had been carried out by a 17-year-old British national born in Cardiff and raised in the UK,[1] but by this point damaging misinformation about the attacker's identity had quickly taken root on social media, including false claims that the attacker was a Muslim immigrant or asylum seeker. This misinformation, circulated by far-right groups via a range of social media platforms, was further stoked by prominent right-wing politicians like Nigel Farage, who published videos critical of the police's handling of the attack, questioning whether "the truth is being withheld from us".[2] Although the police were following the legal requirement that a defendant under the age of 18 is granted anonymity,[3] this lack of transparency was quickly exploited by the far right. As Thomas Colley observes,

> because [the attacker] was seventeen and thus not yet an adult, the police delayed naming him for legal reason; but adhering to the law violated a key rule of politics: leave an information vacuum, and others will rush to fill it. Within hours, anti-immigrant politicians and influencers, mostly from the political right, spread conspiracy theories that this was yet another jihadist terrorist attack.[4]

While the riots very concretely played out in streets and squares across England, a battlefront simultaneously raged online, where far-right personalities, such as Tommy Robinson (also known as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon), attempted to orchestrate and manipulate racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim sentiment through social media posts and videos.[5] This intersection of 'real-world' violent protest, against a backdrop of rampant online misinformation, hate speech, and amplification of racial incitement, meant that although hundreds of protestors and rioters were pursued for a range of criminal charges based on their off-line activities (including destruction of property, violent disorder, theft, and anti-social behaviour).[6] Dozens more were charged and sentenced after posting messages intended to

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[1] Following Institute for Research on Male Supremacism guidelines on reporting male supremacist violence (IRMS 2024), and specifically the principle of 'no notoriety', we do not name the attacker in our discussion.

[2] See also Sean O' Grady, "This is what Nigel Farage is really up to on I'm a Celebrity...", *The Independent*, 20 Nov. 2023, https://www.independent.co.uk/, accessed 30 April 2025; Vikram Dodd, Ben Quinn, and Rowena Mason, "Former counter-terror chief accuses Farage of inciting Southport violence", *The Guardian*, 31 Jul. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[3] Janet Daley, "Nigel Farage is only offering shameless opportunism", *The Telegraph*, 3 Sept. 2024, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/

[4] Thomas Colley, "The Impact of Disinformation: Contrasting Lessons from the UK", 03 Oct. 2024, Australian Institute of International Affairs, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[5] Pamela Duncan et al., "Local. Left Behind. Prey to populist politics? What the data tells us about the 2024 UK rioters", *The Guardian*, 5 Oct. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com, accessed 30 April 2025.

[6] Vikram Dodd, Ben Quinn, and Rowena Mason, "Former Counter-Terror Chief Accuses Farage of Inciting Southport Violence".

incite racial hatred on social media, including posts calling for asylum seeker accommodation to be burned down or mosques to be bombed.[7]

The UK riots are, of course, only one instance in a tapestry of ongoing incidents of hate speech in recent years, but they nevertheless highlight the reality that hate speech is a pressing concern in the ever-evolving landscape of contemporary communication, casting a shadow over the foundational principles of diversity and inclusivity.[8] The urgency to address this issue is emphasised by the alarming escalation of divisive rhetoric in public discourse, thus recognising the need for more focused and thorough explorations. In this sense, linguistics, as a discipline, provides a unique perspective to dissect the intricacies of hate speech, uncovering the strategies, forms, and practices which characterise it. This exploration importantly extends to the evolution of hate speech in the digital age[9] and a consideration of the role of online platforms and social media in amplifying its reach and impact.[10] The interplay between linguistic expressions, digital communication, and the dissemination of hate speech poses a unique set of challenges that warrant scholarly attention.

Accordingly, the articles in this issue tackle these concerns through close analyses of hate speech across a range of online and digital contexts, demonstrating not only ongoing advances in the field, but also showcasing how far hate speech has infiltrated even apparently mundane spaces. In doing so, the articles shed light on the underlying mechanisms, identify recurring discursive patterns, and unravel the sociolinguistic aspects which contribute to the perpetuation of hate speech. By examining the linguistic dimensions of hate speech, the articles explore how language is weaponised to propagate discriminatory ideologies and incite hostility. This examination not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the problem but also contributes to the development of strategies and interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of hate speech on diverse communities.

In the first part of this introduction, we set out the background to the special issue, positioning the collected articles within a specific social and intellectual context. We then tackle some underpinning definitional issues, focusing on hate speech, harassment, and the related concepts of trolling, doxing, and other manifestations of discriminatory and practices. During this discussion, we also consider the social function of hate speech, particularly in relation to (dis)affiliation and othering. In the final section of our introduction, we provide brief summaries of each of the articles which comprise this issue, before concluding with some general observations about the broader utility of this scholarship beyond academia.

1. Background to the special issue

This special issue is the second collection of articles to emerge from a conference held at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in 2023 titled "Negative Solidarities: The Age of Anger and Hate Speech in the

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[7] Patrick Comerford, blog, 09 April 2024', https://www.patrickcomerford.com/2024_04_09_archive.html, accessed 5 October 2024; Maya Oppenheim, "The women involved in far-right riots across UK as social media awash with hate speech", *The Independent*, 7th August 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/, accessed 30 April 2025; Mariana Spring, "They were arrested for posting during the riots – will it change anything?", *BBC News*, 27 Sept. 2024, https://www.bbc.com/, accessed 30 April 2025.
[8] Giuseppe Balirano and Brownen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Naples: Paolo Loffredo, 2020); Majid KhosraviNik and Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally-Mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-Based Hostility", *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 14, no. 1 (26 Jun. 2018), 45–68, https://doi.org/10.1515/lpp-2018-0003.
[9] Balirano and Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate*; Zizi Papacharissi, "We Have Always been Social", *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 1 (1 April 2015), DOI: 10.1177/2056305115581185, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305115581185; Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).
[10] Tom Singleton and Graham Fraser, "Ofcom: Clear link between online posts and violent disorder", *BBC News*, 22 October 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70w0ne4zexo, accessed 30 April 2025.

Anglophone Globalized Public Sphere".[11] Responding, in part, to the growing political, cultural, and democratic crises across the Anglosphere, including the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), the Capitol Hill attack (2021), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), the conference invited contributions which explored the broader socio-cultural context within which hate speech operates. This includes examining historical precedents, societal attitudes, and the role of institutions in either perpetuating or countering the proliferation of hate speech. As such, the conference aimed to bring together presentations which dissected the linguistic dimensions of hate speech but also provided a holistic understanding of its societal roots and implications.

Since then, the world has seen further gains by right-wing nationalist political parties (as witnessed in the electoral successes in 2024 by the National Rally Party in France, the Freedom Party in Austria, and the Reform Party in the UK), escalation of the Israel-Hamas and Israel-Lebanon conflicts (2023), alongside rampant misogyny and sexism, increased rates of violence against women and girls, and the entrenchment of trans-exclusionary discourses, all set against a broader backdrop of a cost of living crisis, a climate change crisis, a mis/disinformation crisis, a healthcare crisis, mass migration, electoral tampering, the Artificial Intelligence movement and more. Not only do many of these issues further foment a destructive form of 'us vs. them' separatist politics, but they also work as a set of interconnected and intersecting 'polycrises',[12] what Lawrence et al. describe as "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects".[13] Such a febrile environment is ripe to be exploited by nefarious social actors seeking to advance their own ideological agenda to "establish clear lines of superiority and inferiority according to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, and sexuality".[14] This includes a range of racist, anti-immigrant, nativist, nationalist, white-supremacist, anti-Islam, anti-Semitic, and anti-LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others) belief".

Key to the conference (and by extension this issue) was Hannah Arendt's notion of 'negative solidarities', first used in her 1951 book *Origins of Totalitarianism*[15] and developed further in her 1957 essay "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the world?".[16] Reflecting on the media and technological developments that underpinned the post-World War 2 era (including nuclear power and the atomic bomb), Arendt posits that although these advances facilitated, in many ways, a "unity of the world", they could "just as easily destroy it and the means of global communication were designed side by side with means of possible global destruction". It is this collective fear of annihilation that Arendt characterises as 'negative solidarity", going on to note that "this solidarity of mankind in this respect is entirely negative; it rests, not only on a common interest in an agreement" but also "on a common desire for a world that is a little less unified".[17] For Arendt, negative solidarity also relates to the "structureless mass of furious

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individuals"[18] who only have in common a contempt for the present order, ultimately leading to a "world without connection and friendship, where the only basis of collective action is some kind of awful combination of anger and desperation". [19]

In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt is particularly concerned with the notion of hate as a function of negative solidarity, charting how it becomes weaponised by both the masses and the elite.[20] Extending this further, one of the vehicles through which negative solidarity is enacted is language, with hate speech arguably its most explicit articulation. As Reshaur[21] observes, "Arendt's writing documents how the idea of humanity, to which we give ourselves and from which we receive confirmation of our identity, has become a notion which terrorizes, haunts, grieves and burdens us". Hate speech, then, becomes one of the means through which negative solidarity is achieved, pitting groups and communities against one another, sometimes influenced (or even directed) by prominent public figures.[22] This interplay between the 'elite' and the 'masses' is a key part of understanding how hate speech becomes legitimised by culturally powerful groups, in some cases leading to an escalation of violent action spurred on by a manipulative frontman (or woman).

Such processes have historically been facilitated through a variety of broadcast media outputs, but it is fair to say that the democratisation of online (social) media platforms over the past 10-15 years has widened the sphere of influence.[23] More specifically, the shift to self-authored and self-published online media platforms[24] has led to substantial shifts in the vectors through which hate speech is transmitted. This also means that any consideration of hate speech must also take into account the role of different forms of media. Writing more than 70 years ago, Arendt[25] made the point that "for the first time in history all peoples on earth have a common present". Since then, this "common present" has become even more pronounced through the invention of social media, the ubiquity of high-speed internet and smartphone technology, and the hyper-connectedness of contemporary society. All of this has implications for the easy transmissibility of hate speech, outstripping even the reach and range of more traditional forms of broadcast media. Indeed, despite the democratic advances the internet has facilitated, especially in terms of civic participation in contemporary events, politics, and current affairs, the

> […] double-edged sword of anonymity allows online haters, trolls and keyboard warriors to take their cause seriously and devote time and energy to the task of choosing and targeting their designated victims while rounding up others who share in their convictions.[26]

We expand on some of these issues in the next section of our discussion.

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[18] Ibid., 315.

[19] Sean Illing, "The philosopher who warned us about loneliness and totalitarianism", *Vox*, 8 May 2022, https://www.vox.com/vox-conversations-podcast/23048597/vox-conversations-hannah-arendt-totalitarianism-the-philosophers, accessed 30 April 2025.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ken Reshaur, "Concepts of Solidarity in the Political Theory of Hannah Arendt", *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique,* 25.4 (1992), 731.

[22] See, for example, McIntosh's 2020 discussion of Donald Trump and hate speech, where she points out that "when authority figures express things once unexpressible, the masses feels like they have social license to follow suit". In Christopher McIntosh, "The Trump Administration's Politics of Time: The Temporal Dynamics That Enable Trump's Interests to Determine American Foreign Policy", *Time & Society*, 29. 2 (1 May 2020), 362–391, DOI:10.1177/0961463X20909048.

[23] For an extended discussion of the role of the media in promoting hate speech and facilitating discrimination see Robert Lawson and Laura Coffey-Glover, "Introducing Mediated Discrimination: Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Media Discourse", *Discourse, Context & Media*, 56 (2023), 100739, https://www.sciencedirect.com/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[24] In the form of Twitter/X, Discord, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as the less regulated forms of 'alt-tech', such as Gab, Rumble, and Truth Social; see Mario Peucker and Thomas J. Fisher, "Mainstream Media Use for Far-Right Mobilisation on the Alt-Tech Online Platform Gab", *Media, Culture & Society*, 45. 2 (1 March 2023), 354-372.

[25] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York, NJ: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 83.

[26] Balirano and Hughes, "Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*, v.

2. 'Hate Speech' and Digital Media

At this point, it is worthwhile giving more consideration to what 'hate speech' is as a concept. This discussion is complicated by the fact that 'hate speech' is not a monolithic entity, since different countries, laws, and organisations define and operationalise hate speech in different ways, while online forms of hate speech are arguably even murkier in terms of definition. Indeed, Balirano and Hughes[27] make the point that "many forms of online abuse are not recognised as harmful or are not classified as hate crimes across laws and legislation and, of course, what qualifies as hate speech per se also varies across countries and continents". This is further complicated by the tension between freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination.[28] While it is impossible to offer a comprehensive definition of hate speech in the space available, we can nevertheless briefly sketch out some of the main frameworks (both legal and otherwise).

At a global level, the UN's definition is a useful starting point, which notes that hate speech is

> […] any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.[29]

Similarly, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance defines hate speech as "forms of expressions which advocate, incite, promote or justify hatred, violence and discrimination against a person or group of persons for a variety of reason".[30] Looking more closely at legal approaches, the UK Public Order Act 1986 makes it an offence for a person to use "threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour that causes, or is likely to cause, another person harassment, alarm or distress",[31] with later amendments adding specific clauses for the incitement of religious or racial hatred or hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation, while a specific sub-section of the Communications Act 2003 (specifically Section 127) makes it illegal to send via a "public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character".[32]

As noted previously in this introduction, the affordances of digital media have shifted the landscape of hate speech in dramatic ways. Not only is it possible to send malicious communications via email, forum posts, public comments, Twitter messages, Facebook posts and more, digital media has "honed the very nature of hate speech through specific forms of harassment such as doxxing, trolling, cyberstalking, revenge porn, swatting, and others, each of which possesses its own set of ever-evolving rules and codes".[33] There are also many documented examples of stalking, harassment, and hate speech directed towards women, whether they work in the public eye (as journalists, reporters, actors, or musicians) or outside these industries,[34] alongside the less reported cases of sex-based hate speech

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[27] Ibid*.,* vi.

[28] For an extensive discussion of this debate, see Toni M. Massaro, "Shame, Culture, and American Criminal Law", *Michigan Law Review*, 89.7 (June 1991), 1880, https://doi.org/10.2307/1289392.

[29] United Nations, "What is hate speech?", 2023, https://www.un.org/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[30] Council of Europe, "Hate Speech and Violence", European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/hate-speech-and-violence.

[31] UK Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1986, sec.154, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64/section/4/data.pdf

[32] UK Communications Act 2003, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/section/127.

[33] Balirano and Hughes, "Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*, v.

[34] See Laura Barton, "'At first I tried to be polite, not to hurt his feelings': how a regular 'liker' on social media became my stalker", *The Guardian*, 16 Sept. 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/, accessed 30 April 2025; Tamsin Hinton-Smith et al., "'It's

presented throughout the auspices of the manosphere.[35] Consequently, hate speech has shifted from simply being an articulation of negative sentiment towards a supposed 'outgroup' to something all the more sinister, a collection of practices which exploit the interconnectedness between people's online and off-line lives to attack, silence, and suppress. The high-profile cases of individuals charged with social media hate offences in the aftermath of the UK riots in 2024 (see opening discussion) highlights the extent to which hate speech in digital spaces can also persuade and manipulate people to engage in further violent action. This threat is ultimately one which raises questions about social media companies' responsibilities in terms of moderating, policing, and intervening in cases of digital hate speech and their spill-over effects. For example, in recent years there has been several high-profile examples of "live-streamed hate", including shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand (2019) and Buffalo, New York (2022), where social media platforms have been unable to remove video clips of these events due to the proliferation of sharing on their sites[36] while videos of the religiously-motivated church attack in Sydney, Australia in 2024 were quickly shared across Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and elsewhere. More problematically, Twitter/X (since its take-over by Elon Musk in 2022) has refused to remove reported hate tweets and violent content[37] while simultaneously reinstating controversial racists, sexists, and extremists after they had been banned on the platform.[38] As a self-declared 'free speech absolutist',[39] Musk appears to be positioning Twitter/X as a real-life case study of what happens when the limits of freedom of expression come up against legal frameworks which protect people from freedom of discrimination. To that end, some governments are taking a much more proactive approach to tackle these problems. For example, the UK's Online Safety Bill (due to be introduced in 2025) is not only intended to bolster custodial sentences for those found guilty of posting or disseminating hate speech, but it also implements harsher penalties against social media companies if they fail to tackle or remove harmful content.[40]

The growing threat of different forms of hate speech can also be seen in relation to the concerning trend for the mainstreaming (and subsequently normalisation) of extremist positions, where previously fringe ideologies are given wider exposure through more well-established platforms.[41] For instance, up until late-2022, male supremacist and social media influencer Andrew Tate promoted his (explicitly misogynistic and sexist) views almost exclusively via videos and podcasts shared on YouTube, Twitter,

Not Something That We Think about with Regard to Curriculum'". Exploring Gender and Equality Awareness in Higher Education Curriculum and Pedagogy', *Gender and Education* 34.5 (4 July 2022), 495-511, https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1947472; David Mercer, "Forensic Psychologist Tells of 'Terrifying' Stalking Ordeal - and Reveals Why Some Celebrities Are Targeted", *Sky News*, 20 Jan. 2023, https://news.sky.com/

[35] See, for example, Frazer Heritage, *Incels and Ideologies: Exploring How Incels Use Language to Construct Gender and Race*, (Berlin: Springer Nature, 2023); Alexandra Krendel, "The Men and Women, Guys and Girls of the 'Manosphere': A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Approach", *Discourse & Society*, 31.6 (1 Nov. 2020), 607-630, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520939690; Robert Lawson, *Language and Mediated Masculinities: Cultures, Contexts, Constraints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[36] See Yasmin Ibrahim, Yasmin, "The Sharing Economy and Livestreaming of Terror: Co-Production of Terrorism on Social Media". In Kamaldeep Bhui and Dinesh Bhugra (eds.), *Terrorism, Violent Radicalization, and Mental Health,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 65-77; and Mac Ryan, Kellen Browning, and Sheera Frenkel, "Livestreams of Mass Shootings: From Buffalo to New Zealand", *The New York Times*, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com.

[37] Jason Burke, "Twitter Faces Legal Challenge after Failing to Remove Reported Hate Tweets", *The Guardian*, 10 Jul. 2023. https://www.guardian.com; Josh Taylor, "Elon Musk's X v Australia's Online Safety Regulator: Untangling the Tweet Takedown Order", *The Guardian*, 23 Apr. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com.

[38] Kate Conger and Sheera Frenkel, "Hate Speech's Rise on Twitter Under Elon Musk is Unprecedented, Researchers Find", *The New York Times*, 5 Dec. 2022, https://www.nytimes.coml; Arwa Mahdawi, "Elon Musk is Intrigued by the Idea Women Can't Think Freely Because of "Low T"', *The Guardian*, 7 Sept. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Zuhal Demirci, "UK's Online Safety Bill to be Fully Enforced Next Year", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 20 Aug. 2024, https://www.aa.com.tr; Tom Singleton and Irman Rahman-Jones, Imran, "Tech Firms Told to Hide 'toxic' Content from Children", *BBC News*, 8 May 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk.

[41] Liz Fekete, Liam Shrivastava, and Sophia Siddiqui, "Mainstreaming Hate: How the Right Exploits the Crisis to Divide Us, 2024, *Institute of Race Relations,* https://irr.org.uk/article/mainstreaming-hate-how-the-right-exploits-the-crisis-to-divide-us/.

Instagram, and other social media sites. Following his 2022 arrest in Romania on charges of rape, sex trafficking, and forming an organised crime group to sexually exploit women, however, he was consequently platformed across a range of major news outlets, including the BBC, the *Piers Morgan Show*, and other prime time televised news broadcasts, in addition to being the focus of several documentaries and countless news articles and opinion pieces. While these platforms may not have intended to directly amplify Tate's viewpoints, they undoubtedly facilitated their movement from the periphery of social awareness to a much more central position, consequently raising Tate's profile and introducing him to a wider audience which might not have otherwise engaged with his views.

3. Functions of Hate Speech

This special issue explores a range of critical themes associated with hate speech, including othering**,** collective identity, persuasive language, and the consequences of hate. Othering**,** as a concept, is central to understanding how individuals and groups are marginalised and excluded from social narratives, thereby creating an in-group versus out-group dynamic that fosters hostility.[42] This process intricately relates to the formation of collective identities, wherein individuals may experience (dis)affiliation based on shared characteristics or beliefs, further deepening societal divisions.[43] Throughout this issue, articles explore how the persuasive language employed in hate speech not only incites emotional responses but also reinforces these identities, often leading to broader societal consequences. Such language serves to normalise intolerance and perpetuate cycles of discrimination, revealing the profound impact that hate speech can have on social cohesion.[44] The volume also engages with the urgent call issued by Balirano and Hughes,[45] who remind us that "there seems to be a tendency to forget that ongoing, low-level hate speech is far more common than the dramatically violent hate crimes that capture public imagination". This observation underscores the need for a comprehensive discourse that addresses not just the extreme manifestations of hate but also the everyday forms that may go unnoticed yet have significant implications for public perception and social dynamics. By examining these interconnected topics, this special issue aims to foster a deeper understanding of hate speech and its ramifications in contemporary society.

4. Article Overviews

The first group of articles examines *Hate Speech in Political and Social Discourses*, exploring the pervasive presence of hate speech in political and social narratives and revealing how it is entrenched in everyday discourse. Through a focus on political rhetoric, social media, and public health communication, the authors explore the ways in which power dynamics and societal fears manifest as hate-filled language. From the rise of ethnic supremacist rhetoric in Italian politics to the manipulation of health crises like Monkeypox, these papers uncover the complex interplay between ideology, identity, and language in shaping modern hate speech.

In "Ethnic Replacement: Unfortunate Expression or Unacceptable Supremacism?", Guerra, Merlin, and Milani provide an interdisciplinary exploration of a highly charged political discourse in Italy. They focus on the inflammatory rhetoric used by Italian Minister Francesco Lollobrigida in April 2023, who

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[42] Fred Dervin, "Cultural Identity, Representation and Othering", *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (London: Routledge, 2012), 195-208.

[43] Merlin Brinkerhoff and Kathryn L. Burke, "Disaffiliation: Some Notes on "Falling from the Faith", *Sociological Analysis*, 41.1 (1980), 41-54.

[44] Benjamin Igbeaku, Evelyn Mbah, Friday Ikani, Fabian Ude, Peter Achadu, Doris Odo, and Dorathy Igbeakụ, "Hate Speech and National Cohesion", *EBSU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 14.4, 2024.

[45] Balirano and Hughes, "Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*, vi.

warned against ethnic replacement. The paper analyses reactions from both Italian and English-language media and social platforms, revealing how this phrase, deeply linked to far-right ideology, ignited public debate. Through linguistic and media analysis, the authors highlight the complexities of interpreting such divisive language in the context of migration and national identity.

In "#Ready4Dishy? Assessing Twitter/X's Controversial Engagement in UK Political Communication", Francesco Meledandri offers an analysis of public responses to institutional communications on Twitter/X, focusing on reactions to Rishi Sunak's appointment as UK Prime Minister in October 2022. The study utilises manual content analysis to assess the prevalence of supportive, non-supportive, and hateful commentary, revealing a significant predominance of negative and hostile engagement. By examining these interactions, the author critically addresses the implications of such discourse for political communication and the relationship between public figures and their constituencies in online environments.

In "Breaking the Chains of Bias: Investigating Monkeypox Narratives in Public Health Discourse", Cangero and Fruttaldo analyse how the monkeypox outbreak (July 2022–May 2023) has been disproportionately linked to gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men (GBMSM), leading to increased stigma and discrimination. The study utilises both quantitative methods to examine media coverage and qualitative discourse analysis of official documents from the UK, US, and Italy, framed by Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) theories. This approach aims to uncover how these narratives have marginalised LGBTIQ+ individuals and to advocate for a more inclusive and evidence-based public health communication strategy.

The second collection of articles deals with *Intersectionality and Hate Speech in Online Spaces*. In this section, the authors take an intersectional approach to explore how hate speech functions in digital spaces, particularly on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. The studies illustrate how ableism, fatphobia, sexism, and other discriminatory discourses coalesce to target marginalised individuals. By focusing on these overlapping identities, the authors emphasise the deeply personal and often invisible harm caused by online hate. This section highlights the digital landscape as both a breeding ground for exclusion and a site of resistance, where diverse identities collide with hate and resilience.

In "Analysing Intersectional Ableist and Fatphobic Discourses in Digital Spaces", Nisco and Raffone examine the intersection of ableism and fatphobia within online environments, specifically on TikTok. The study highlights the lack of consensus on whether obesity constitutes a disability and investigates how stigma related to both obesity and disability manifests in digital spaces. Utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods, the paper aims to shed light on discriminatory behaviours against fat people with disabilities (FPWD) and how these hateful intersectional discourses are constructed and enacted by social media users.

In "Shades of Veg*nism (and Beyond): A Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis of Dietary Hate Speech in YouTube Comments", Nacchia examines the relationship between dietary choices and identity, alongside the prevalence of hate speech in digital spaces. Adopting a socio-cognitive discourse analysis approach, the study analyses comments on a YouTube video to investigate the manifestation of hate speech against vegan, vegetarian, reducetarian, and meat-eating groups. The findings indicate that veganism is predominantly targeted by negative portrayals, with the discourse often rooted in moral and ethical debates about animal rights.

In "Beyond Words: Exploring Sexist Hate Speech Online and in the Multimodal Advertising System", D'Angelo examines the multifaceted nature of sexist hate speech and its subtle yet harmful impact on gender identity. The paper explores how such speech serves to oppress and exclude individuals, even in the absence of overt violence, and analyses its manifestation in advertisements across Italy, the UK, and France. It also reviews recent EU practices aimed at combating hate speech and supporting member states in addressing these issues.

Our third section considers a range of issues related to *Gender Identity, Representation and Hate Speech*. This section critically engages with the fraught relationship between gender identity, representation, and hate speech. Through an exploration of drag performance, media portrayals of femicide, and the toxic masculinity that fuels online hate, these papers focus on how gender is constructed and weaponised in contemporary discourse. The authors shine a light on how individuals and communities resist, reclaim, and subvert harmful narratives, making space for new forms of expression and solidarity. The research here is not only academic but deeply human, reflecting the lived realities of those navigating hostile discursive terrains.

In "Get in Some Good Trouble! Meaning and Representation in Drag Response to Hate Crimes: A Stylistic and Multimodal Analysis", Esposito examines the rise of intersectional activism following George Floyd's murder. The study analyses drag queen performances from RuPaul's Drag Race season 13 to understand their response to hate crimes through a Stylistic and Multimodal framework, and explores how these performances convey resistance and solidarity by investigating the representation of social actors and semiotic processes.

In "The Shadow Pandemic. An Analysis of Femicide in British News Coverage", Scotto di Carlo investigates the representation of femicide in the *Daily Mail* throughout 2021. The study critiques how media narratives often depict femicide as isolated incidents driven by individual motives, rather than addressing the complex socio-cultural factors involved, and examines the framing of these incidents in light of the UN's designation of femicide as a Shadow Pandemic. By employing Bacchi's framework alongside Critical Discourse Analysis and Thematic Analysis, the study aims to challenge misleading media portrayals and advocate for more responsible and sensitive reporting practices.

In "Hegemonic Masculinity and Toxic Technocultures: Discourse in the Review Bombing of HBO's The Last of Us", Spallaccia explores the phenomenon of review bombing as a form of ideological conflict and social distress from gaming communities. The study focuses on the cyber hostility directed at HBO's adaptation of *The Last of Us*, analysing the discursive strategies used against its inclusive representations. By applying Discourse Studies and the Discourse Historical Approach, the paper interprets review bombing as a manifestation of collective political resentment and toxic masculinity, offering insights into how these dynamics act as barriers to participation in contemporary media.

The final collection of articles explores *Cultural Representations and Hate Speech in Media*. The section turns to the role of media in either challenging or perpetuating hate speech, with a particular focus on cultural representations. Whether through Disney's portrayal of diversity or the biases in educational materials, these studies reveal how media shapes societal views and influences discriminatory attitudes. The section also addresses hate speech against historically marginalised groups, such as the Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities, exploring how online platforms can both amplify and counteract prejudiced narratives. Through a critical lens, the authors expose the power of representation in fostering either division or understanding.

In "Under a Sea of Anger: A CDA of Hate Speech in Facebook User Comments on Disney's Representation of Diversity in the USA and Italy", Aiezza examines social media reactions to Disney's commitment to cultural diversity. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis and multimodal techniques to analyse user comments on Disney's official Facebook pages concerning the remakes of *Lightyear* (2022), *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023), and *The Little Mermaid* (2023). The findings reveal polarised opinions on Disney's inclusivity initiatives, with some users praising them while others criticise them as 'wokeism' or forced inclusivity, highlighting a range of toxic fan behaviour and discriminatory attitude.

In "Exposing Bias, Disinformation, and Hate Speech in Educational Materials", Rasulo and De Santo explore how hate speech manifests in educational contexts, focusing on both overt acts like bullying and subtle forms such as bias and disinformation. They analyse the influence of PragerU, an organisation criticised for its K-12 teaching materials that allegedly distort historical and scientific facts. Using the

Pyramid of Hate framework and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, the authors examine how PragerU's narratives normalise biased ideologies and contribute to divisive discourse. The study highlights the rhetorical strategies used to evoke emotional responses and reinforce stereotypes, demonstrating how these narratives can escalate from subtle bias to overt hate speech, aiming to determine whether such content fosters an environment conducive to conflict and societal polarisation.

5. Conclusions and Implications

This special issue underscores the urgent need for more critical and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing hate speech and its online and offline manifestations. The collected articles reveal the challenges in accurately detecting, contextualising, and, most importantly, responding to hate-based language and behaviour, whether on an individual, community, or systemic level. As hate speech increasingly permeates media and digital platforms, ultimately seeping into offline environments, scholars are faced with a growing need to analyse how hateful narratives are constructed, disseminated, and normalised through various semiotic resources and media affordances.[46]

From a legislative and policy standpoint, the findings in this special issue emphasise the importance of adopting flexible frameworks that must account for the variety of hate speech forms, the underlying ideologies driving them, and their specific cultural, historical, and social contexts.[47] Legislation that narrowly defines hate speech based on a limited set of linguistic features or protected categories may overlook the evolving nature of hate speech, particularly in online environments where hateful discourse often operates subtly or through coded language. Consequently, legal and regulatory bodies should consider more context-sensitive approaches to combat hate speech, acknowledging that what constitutes harmful speech may differ across time, platforms, and social groups.[48]

At the heart of this argument is the pivotal role of linguistic research in deciphering the construction and normalisation of hate speech. Linguistics equips us with a potent arsenal of tools to dissect the discursive strategies and rhetorical elements that enable hate speech to flourish, such as the manipulation of grammar, word choice, and broader sociocultural narratives. This special issue thus underscores how, through the affordances of digital media, hate speech has morphed into new forms of expression, often intertwined with multimodal and algorithmically driven content.[49] For instance, memes, hashtags, and video content play a key role in amplifying hate speech, blurring the lines between online expression and offline consequences.[50]

Moreover, this research draws attention to the disconnect between academic inquiry and real-world interventions. While scholars have made significant advances in understanding hate speech's mechanisms, there remains a gap in translating these insights into actionable strategies for combating hate speech in practice. Policymakers, tech companies, and civil society organisations must collaborate closely with researchers to ensure that anti-hate initiatives are grounded in robust empirical evidence and are responsive to the lived experiences of affected communities.[51] This means developing better detection systems and fostering meaningful engagement with those most vulnerable to hate speech. Research has shown that online hate speech detection often relies on computational techniques that focus

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[46] Balirano and Hughes, 'Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*; Darren Kelsey and Majid KhosraviNik, eds., *Social Media, Discourse and Politics: Contemporary Spaces of Power and Critique* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[47] Barbara Perry, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes* (London & New York: Routledge, 2021).

[48] Alex Brown, *Hate Speech Law: A Philosophical Examination* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015).

[49] Eleonora Esposito, "The Visual Semiotics of Digital Misogyny: Female Leaders in the Viewfinder", *Feminist Media Studies* 23.8 (2023), 3815-3831.

[50] Zizi Papacharissi, "We Have Always Been Social".

[51] Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

on surface-level features like keywords and slurs. However, such methods may fall short of capturing the context-dependent nature of hate speech. [52]

Furthermore, there is a pressing need for diachronic studies that track hate speech's digital footprint over time, mirroring the phenomenon's inherently dynamic nature. Social, political, and cultural factors continually mould hate speech, implying that what may be classified as harmful or inciteful in one context may dramatically shift in another. [53] As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, digital hate speech possesses a fluid quality that adapts to changes in societal discourse, making it challenging to apply static definitions or regulatory frameworks. For instance, the surge of populist and nationalist rhetoric in recent years has contributed to the mainstreaming of hate speech that once existed on the fringes of public discourse. [54]

The discourse around hate speech solutions remains fraught with disagreement, particularly when balancing freedom of speech with protection against discrimination. [55] Developing effective interventions is thus a complex task, as the boundaries of free expression are continually contested, especially in digital environments where anonymity and rapid dissemination complicate efforts to curb hate speech. [56] Nevertheless, this collection of studies offers valuable insights into the structural and linguistic dimensions of hate speech, providing a foundation for future research.

As society grapples with the challenges of hate speech in the digital age, this special issue advocates for more responsible, inclusive, and socially aware media practices. This necessitates collaboration not only between scholars and practitioners but also between governments, technology companies, and civil society to ensure that the fight against hate speech is rooted in a shared commitment to equality, diversity, and human dignity. The implications of this line of research are clear: addressing hate speech must transcend reactive measures, focusing instead on proactive strategies that foster critical media literacy, platform accountability, and the promotion of inclusive public discourse.

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[52] Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, "Platformed Racism: The Mediation and Circulation of an Australian Race-Based Controversy on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook", *Information, Communication & Society*, 20.6 (2017), 930-946.

[53] Majid KhosraviNik, "Connecting the Digital with the Social in Digital Discourse: An Introduction to the Scene", in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media and Society: Integrating the Digital with the Social in Digital Discourse* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2023), 1-14.

[54] Ruth Wodak and Majid Khosravinik, "Dynamics of Discourse and Politics in Right-Wing Populism in Europe and Beyond: An Introduction", in Ruth Wodak, Majid Khosravinik, and Brijitte Mral, eds., *Rightwing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xvii-xxviii; Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE, 2015).

[55] See Jack Balkin, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018); Toni Massaro, "Equality and Freedom of Expression: The Hate Speech Dilemma", *William and Mary Law Review*, 32, 1990, 211-267.

[56] See Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*.

Part 1. Hate Speech in Political and Social Discourses

Elena Guerra, Stella Merlin and Marta Milani[1]

"Ethnic Replacement". Unfortunate Expression or Unacceptable Supremacism? An Interdisciplinary Approach to a Case Study in Italian Political Discourse

Abstract: On April 19, 2023, Italian newspapers published an article titled "Meno migranti, più figli. No alla sostituzione etnica" ("Fewer migrants, more children. No to ethnic replacement"), based on statements made by the Italian Minister of Agriculture, Francesco Lollobrigida. This gained immediate traction in the Anglophone foreign press, with *The Telegraph* publishing an article on the same day: "Italy risks 'ethnic replacement' because of low birth rate and high immigration, says minister". This study analyzes comments from April 19–26 on Italian and English digital news outlets and the related social media profiles. The perspective is strongly interdisciplinary, approaching the collection and study of journalistic data from both communicative and linguistic viewpoints, comparing occurrences in Italian and English. A pedagogical evaluation of the role of language in describing migration dynamics and their socio-cultural implications completes the picture, suggesting interventions to enhance awareness and self-awareness of communicative strategies.

Keywords: *"sostituzione etnica"*, *Great Replacement*, *Italian political discourse*, *social media discourse analysis*, *Hate Speech*

1. Introduction

On April 19, 2023, *La Repubblica* (pp. 1–2), along with other Italian newspapers including *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *Il Messaggero*, published an article titled "Meno migranti, più figli. No alla sostituzione etnica" ("Fewer migrants, more children. No to ethnic replacement"), based on statements made by the Italian Minister of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry Francesco Lollobrigida. His statement had immediate resonance in the Anglophone foreign press: among others, *The Telegraph* published an article on the same day: "Italy risks 'ethnic replacement' because of low birth rate and high immigration, says minister". This paper will analyze comments in the timespan April 19–26, 2023, posted on Italian and English digital news outlets and their related social media profiles.

For the purposes of the Social Media (henceforth SM) analysis, Jakobson's model of language functions can be successfully applied as a tool for the understanding of the reception of the same news in Italian SM compared to the English one. On one hand, the addresser (sender) perspective illuminates the content and the quality of vocabulary used in political discourse (see sections 2 and 3); on the other hand, the addressee (receiver) perspective shows the issues related to media literacy and education (see section 4). The most important outcome concerns the difference among addressees (receivers) both in receiving news and in making judgements on the basis of cultural context(s). In particular, in a comparative perspective, it is not trivial to observe that English addressees, instantiated

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by the Anglophone users of SM, do not necessarily know, or only have a superficial knowledge of, the specific addresser's perspective in the effective pragmatic creation of the linguistic content.

This paper, which combines methodologies and theories pertaining to media education, linguistics, and pedagogy, is structured as follows: after providing a contextualization of hate speech in European regulations (section 2), a corpus of data retrieved from both Italian and English digital news outlets is presented and linguistically analyzed (section 3); then, a pedagogical evaluation to describe hate speech processes and define possible solutions (section 4) is envisaged. In the final remarks, some general claims are made on the basis of the overall discussion of the case study and the different approaches involved, particularly highlighting the importance of education to prevent hate speech-related language events (section 5).

2. Hate Speech in Social Media Discourse and Complex Societies

We are living in a complex and increasingly interdependent contemporary society. The popularization of the Internet and media that allow us to reach huge audiences in real time enable us to come in contact with a bulk of multimodal information (in terms of images, videos, and photos) that are often difficult to decode because of the nature of the medium itself. These media are perceived as fast and distracting devices, contributing to make all areas of life more fluid.[2]

In its essence, globalization is certainly a unifying though conflicting phenomenon. As the world has become more and more interconnected, it has also resulted in increasing division.[3] We live in the age of "nowist" culture and hurried culture,[4] characterized by an (obsessive) search for something new, the renegotiation of meaning or fundamental references. Today's liquid-modern consumer society is inhabited by the shift from linear time to pointillist time.[5]

Thanks to smartphones and large-scale use of the internet, a permanently connected society allows the rapid sharing of images, news, videos, and comments that can bring people closer together with a wealth of information and stories; at the same time, it can also alienate, reinforce stereotypes and prejudices, and spread hateful and discriminatory messages.

Worldwide, six out of ten people are present and interact on online platforms and use the Internet in general. The number of active users on social media has risen to more than 5 billion, accounting for about 60% of the world's population, which according to official United Nations' estimates has surpassed 8 billion people.[6] According to the study, compared to last year, the number has increased by 5.6%, exceeding the 0.9% increase in the world's population. The most populous social network is Meta's Facebook with 2.19 billion users. Instagram, also owned by Meta, follows with 1.65 billion users.

A direct consequence of the spread of personal media intertwines with media education, which continuously studies and reflects on the use of mass media and language inclusively and open to change, as well as media literacy to counter the spread of hate speech (Unesco, 2022[7]; Council of Europe, 2020[8]). These are the main challenges of those who use words with different aims. As

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[2] Agostino Portera, *Educazione e pedagogia interculturale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022).

[3] Edgar Morin, *I sette saperi necessari all'educazione del futuro* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2001), 69.

[4] Stephen Bertman, *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed* (Westport: Praeger, 1998).

[5] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernità liquida* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2016).

[6] This was reported in a study by the monitoring company *Meltwater* and the agency *We are Social* in January 2024.

[7] Nicole Fournier-Sylvester, *Addressing hate speech: educational responses* (UNESCO, United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 2022).

[8] Martina Chapman and Markus Oermann, *Supporting quality journalism through media and information literacy (*Council of Europe, 2020).

Wittgenstein put it "the limits of my language are the limits of my world", or for Bauman if two people have the same experience, "a *eucolon* would include in the list primarily the occurrences he/she considers good and well, while a *discolon* would focus on what he/she found disparaging and off-putting".[9]

The "global village" that McLuhan predicted has definitely come true, highlighting human reactions that often do not focus on positive and constructive sharing processes but seem to be directed toward closure and preservation:

> As we begin to react in depth to the social life and problems of our global village, we become reactionaries. Involvement that goes with our instant technologies transforms the most "socially conscious" people into conservatives. When Sputnik had first gone into orbit a schoolteacher asked her second-graders to write some verse of the subject. One child wrote: The stars are so big/ The earth is so small/ Stay as you are.[10]

The online system and social network environments open the virtual space to the world of readers. Platforms such as X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIN have increasingly shortened the gap between readers of online news. Sometimes the perception about a phenomenon is very different from reality. For example, in Italy the population with a migration background as of January 1, 2023, is 5 million, 8.6% of population.[11] Though the widespread perception would consider an overestimated presence of immigrants in a country (see EURISPES 2018[12]), there are also instances of reversed attitudes towards this phenomenon. According to a web questionnaire administered in February 2019 to 1,196 high school students (age range: 13–20) on the presence of immigrants in Italy, only 12.8 percent of respondents provided the correct figure, while the most representative group (28.6 percent) believed that this number is between 500 thousand and 1 million, greatly underestimating the real number.[13]

If we compare spoken and written language forms diachronically, as Italian journalist and writer Sergio Lepri[14] reminds us, journalism has also been – as a mirror of a changing society – one of the causes of the great linguistic change that has characterized our country in recent decades. It represented an important medium (followed by radio and television and later trailed by the diffusion of the Internet) for the development of a more unified and more modern language; it has been a disseminator of culture, although often of a superficial and approximate nature.

In telling the realities and societies, journalism is much more dynamic than its narrative, as the latter adapts to reality more slowly. This narrative is fueled by politicians who have speculated on the alleged invasion of foreigners.[15]

News and their related comments run even faster online through social networks, tools of dissemination, and wherever users share such information flow. Without underestimating the role of news sites, politicians, and opinion leaders[16] the reworking that individual users do of biases between

[9] Zygmunt Bauman et al. *Education and Intercultural Identity: A Dialogue between Zygmunt Bauman and Agostino Portera* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

[10] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 1964), 43.

[11] IDOS, *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2023* (Roma: Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2023).

[12] Eurispes. Istituto di Studi Politici, Economici e Sociali, *Rapporto Italia*, 30th ed., Roma, 2018.

[13] Nunziata Ribecco et al., "What Influences the Perception of Immigration in Italian Adolescents? An Analysis with CUB Models for Rating Data", *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, 82 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seps.2022.101295.

[14] Sergio Lepri, *Scrivere bene e farsi capire. Manuale di linguaggio per chi lavora nel mondo della comunicazione* (Torino: Gutenberg 2000, 1988).

[15] Maurizio Corte and Elena Guerra, "I Media nella gestione dei conflitti e nella mediazione", in Alberto Teodoldi et al., *Manuale di Negoziazione e Mediazione* (Bologna: Zanichelli Editore, 2024).

[16] Stefano Pasta, *Razzismi 2.0. Analisi socio-educativa dell'odio online* (Brescia: Scholé, 2018).

comments, shares, 'likes' and posts is striking. This attitude should be read within a meeting point between some trends of social networking 2.0: the use of new media as a tool to support one's own social network, to analyze the social identity of other network members.

The major Web companies already claimed to take action against hate speech: YouTube explicitly bans it, Facebook bans it but allows messages with "clear humorous and satirical purposes" that "might otherwise be considered possible threats or attacks," while X/Twitter is the most permissive, not explicitly banning it. Several companies, such as Meta and YouTube, delegate monitoring to their user communities, via a reporting system used to process an algorithm developed through machine learning of this data and partly through a human supervisory work of so-called deciders who can intervene in a limited number of cases.[17]

One example is the option Facebook gives its members to report a post. Regarding the option "what kind of hate speech?" the social network diversifies the options into race or ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation, social caste, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, disability or illness, or other categories.

Walter Lippman introduced the term 'stereotype' into social sciences in 1922. Stereotypes constitute a type of 'mental shortcut' and a form of economizing thought. While stereotypes are forms of generalization that are neutral in themselves, 'prejudice' refers to an innovative and unjustified judgment towards other living beings.

According to Mazzara, stereotyping helps us in some cases to simplify thinking. In dealing with people we need to be able to make assessments about their qualities and possible behavior. This is why we activate a process of inference that leads us to predict the correspondence between certain traits immediately detectable and some hidden subjective characteristics. Though possibly misleading, it is a working framework. The difference lies in the ordinary use of inference and the distorted use in the case of prejudice and stereotyping: that is, when there is a tendency to arbitrarily link objective characteristics and social belonging with personal characteristics.[18] Language is not only a tool for communicating, but also for thinking.

In 1954, American psychologist Gordon Allport[19] proposed a value scale ranking prejudice according to the increasing harm it produces. The first step represents hate speech, that is speaking out against those who are different (ingroup to outgroup) through negative representations (antilocution) by means of stereotypes. The second step is isolation through avoidance where negative representations have become entrenched, turning them into actual prejudice through stigma. The third stage is discrimination, limiting or even denying opportunities in education, employment, social services, and public health. Physical attack is the fourth level of the scale, moving to violent aggression with no return. The tip of the pyramid is extermination, that is, physical elimination by removing all or part of the group of "different" people.

Where hate speech takes place can make a difference. According to Giovanni Ziccardi (2016),[20] there are four differences that connote online speech versus offline 'traditional' hate speech. The first is permanence: online hate remains active for a long time. The second is the unpredictable return of hate because it can return at any time: hate removed from the web can easily resurface online in a different form or with a different title. Anonymity, along with pseudonyms and fake names is the third feature, because the ability to remain anonymous on the web gives people the (mistaken) feeling that

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[17] Pasta, *Razzismi 2.0.,* 149.

[18] Bruno Maria Mazzara, *Stereotipi e pregiudizi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), 69-70.

[19] Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Boston: Pearson Addison-Wesley, 1954).

[20] Giovanni Zaccardi, *L'odio online. Violenza verbale e ossessioni in rete* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2016).

they can avoid consequences. The fourth is that the transnational nature of online hate speech makes the identification of legal mechanisms to fight hate speech more complex.

Remaining anonymous on the Web is very difficult, though. There are three categories of anonymity:[21] the perception of anonymity that creates disinhibition; approved anonymity, where data can be made available to authorities if the user violates the rules of the environment; and full anonymity, a very complicated practice that gives total anonymity by acting professionally.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) defines hate crimes as "crimes motivated by prejudice against a particular group within a society". This is the operational definition used by the Organization in its reports on hate crimes generated by racial and xenophobic hatred (2021), gender-based hatred (2021), anti-Semitic hatred (2019), and anti-Muslim hatred (2018), based on OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No. 9/09 of December 2, 2009, on combating hate crimes, which was approved by consensus by all member states.

In line with the Ministerial Council decision, a hate crime is not a particular type of crime. It can be an act of intimidation, threats, property damage, assault, murder, or any other crime. The term 'hate crime', 'bias-motivated', or 'bias crime' thus describes a type of crime, rather than a specific crime. A person may commit a hate crime in a country where there is no specific criminal sanction due to prejudice. The term therefore serves as a concept, rather than providing a precise legal definition.

At the European level, the European Union adopted the 2000 Directive Against Ethnic Discrimination: 2000/43/EC, which implements the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, and prohibits any direct or indirect discrimination, harassment, victimization, and any conduct that obliges a person to discriminate against another person. It also provided further extension through 2000/78/EC of November 27, 2000, on equal treatment in employment and occupation irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age, or sexual orientation.[22]

At the Italian level, the main reference is the U.N. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965, ratified in 1975 by Italy. The Mancino Law (no. 205, 1993) extended the legislation by condemning gestures, actions, and slogans related to Nazi-fascist ideology, whose purpose is to incite violence and discrimination on racial, ethnic, religious, or national grounds. Italian law also punishes the use of symbolism related to the aforementioned political movements.

Italy regularly reports data on hate crimes to the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Annual reports on hate crimes have been published since 2010. The Observatory for Security Against Discriminatory Acts (OSCAD) carries out activities to prevent, combat, and monitor hate crimes. OSCAD works closely with the National Office Against Racial Discrimination (UNAR), which deals with non-criminal hate incidents and coordinates a permanent consultation group to promote the rights and protection of LGBTIQ+ people. In 2022, according to the OSCE-ODIHR report, in Italy 1,393 hate crimes were recorded by police, including 1,105 racist and xenophobic hate crimes.

This category includes crimes registered in the *Sistema di Indagine* (SDI) database and committed on the grounds of "race"/skin color, ethnicity, bias against Roma and Sinti, nationality, language, anti-Semitism, bias against Muslims, and bias against members of other religions. Regarding the type of hate speech, there were 304 incitements to violence, and 262 threats/threatening behavior[23].

Research in social psychology[24] suggests that the phenomenon of group polarization on social media may be partly responsible for forms of extremism, which we often observe on the Internet,

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[21] Pasta, *Razzismi 2.0.*
[22] Victoria Guillén-Nieto, *Hate Speech: Linguistic Perspectives* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2023).
[23] OSCE ODIHR, *Italy Hate Crime Report 2022*, hatecrime.osce.org/Italy.
[24] Patricia Wallace, *The Psychology of the Internet* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2016).

backed by an apparent absence of a moderate voice. Initially, an individual may have relatively moderate views on a topic. However, after discussing it in a social group with others who lean in the same direction, that individual may move away from the middle ground and into extremism.

Even at the lexical level,[25] the language of online hate is constantly evolving, and automatic filters by algorithms may prove to be fallacious. Indeed, one can find words that are now classified in the hate speech category, but on the rhetorical-literal level it is impossible to recognize the provocative intent of the author who, for example, may use terms to denounce the most retrogressive clichés. Words that may be neutral and therefore not obscure according to Facebook's standards, may instead be used offensively.

The 2015 UNESCO publication 'Countering Online Hate Speech' suggests five different strategies to counter hate speech on the Web. One starts with education to empower people to counter hate messages, through media and information literacy to develop media users' technical and critical skills. Secondly, it focuses on the empowerment of politicians, media practitioners, and opinion leaders to counter hateful expressions for commercial, electoral, and propaganda purposes, reconsidering law intervention, sanctions, and legal measures to formalize online hate crimes in each individual country. Third is to highlight accountability through public discussion and the need for transparency in the management of information and those who disseminate it, and finally, to implement tools for managing hate speech.

The role of the education system is central, as it represents the way through which the citizens of tomorrow are formed for the workplace and institutions. According to Cohen-Almagor (2014),[26] we need to develop good digital citizenship, *netcitizenship*, as it is necessary to develop responsible codes of conduct when surfing the Internet to recognize and counter hate speech. "The term 'Netcitizenship' means good citizenship on the Internet. It is about developing responsible modes of conduct when surfing the Internet which include positive contributions to debates and discussions, and raising caution and alarm against dangerous Net expressions. Netcitizenship encourages counterspeech against hate speech, working together to provide a safe and comfortable virtual community, free of intimidation and bigotry".[27]

To extend the concept, one can take up earth consciousness as described by Morin (2001): *dobbiamo imparare a esserci*,[28] we learn to "be there" on the planet. This means learning to live, to share, to communicate, to be in communion. Taking the revolutionary[29] concept of interculturality in pedagogy, mass media, journalism and intercultural communication must be the basis of respect for feelings, understanding, listening to what reality (and how this is reinterpreted into the news) tells us, dialogue with and between different cultures, and a place where education for pluralism, legality, and peace is achieved.[30]

Consideration must be given to the act of understanding and meeting each other through listening and assertiveness, skills that enable people to express their emotions and opinions clearly and effectively without offending or attacking an interlocutor. There is an increasing urgency for media education that comes through the conscious use of language. When thinking, people must strive to reproduce their thoughts by using appropriate words, without offending, without lacking respect, so as not to trigger and fuel conflicts between people. A language act that works and builds encounter and

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[25] Federico Faloppa, *#ODIO Manuale di resistenza alla violenza delle parole* (Torino: Utet, 2020).

[26] Raphael Cohen-Almagor, "Countering Hate on the Internet", *Annual Review of Law and Ethics*, 22 (2014), 431-443.

[27] Cohen-Almagor, "Countering Hate on the Internet", 436.

[28] Edgar Morin et al. (2001), *I sette saperi necessari all'educazione del futuro*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 77.

[29] Agostino Portera et al., *Educabilità, educazione e pedagogia nella società complessa. Lineamenti introduttivi* (Torino: Utet, 2007).

[30] Maurizio Corte, *Giornalismo interculturale e comunicazione nell'era del digitale* (Padua: Cedam, 2014), 192.

listening is the one that starts from a posture, a willingness to express oneself and at the same time realize how one wants to be with the Other, thus aligning their hearts, minds, and words.

3. Assessing Hate Speech. Evaluation of Users' Reaction to a Piece of News. The Case of Minister Lollobrigida's Divisive Statement

The above-mentioned theoretical framework highlighted the importance of specific language acts in online environments, as well as the use of criteria such as appropriateness and respectful behaviors within digital communities. It is also true that hateful messages and responses characterize SM interactions, as this study tries to demonstrate.

3.1 *Description and Background of the Case Study*

The case study selected for this research is represented by the flow of comments posted by users in the timespan April 19–26, 2023, on digital news outlets related to *Corriere della Sera* and *The Telegraph*. Such comments stem from a public declaration made on April, 18, 2023 by Francesco Lollobrigida, the Italian Minister of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry, member of the national-conservative right-wing party *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Such a public communication event represents an instance of political communication, which could be commented in a polarized way by SM users, as this study tries to demonstrate.[31]

The primary source for the original news-content is a video[32] showing Minister Lollobrigida's speech, soon followed by the report issued by the Italian press agency ANSA (*Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata*), which normally serves as basis for news outlets. It is noteworthy to observe that the exact words used in the speech slightly differ; some minor details do not affect the whole discourse nor the explicit mention of "ethnic replacement" under examination, from the text originally shared by ANSA and then published by main Italian newspapers (*La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Sole 24 ore* etc.)

Some statements reported in the newspapers do not exactly correspond to the video of the Minister's speech, but were probably stated before or after the video sequence. In particular, references to a) a migration wave that has exceeded objective limits, and b) the importance to incentivized birth rating in order to think about the future of Italy (two themes that are reported in the digital articles) are not present in the video extract, possibly being said shortly before or after.

Before delving into the analysis of comments, it seems worth quoting the full text of the transcript of the Minister's speech:[33]

> Birth rates are not being intensified by convincing people to spend more time at home, as some have argued, because then they intensify intercourses. That is not the way. The way is to build welfare policies that allow people to work and have a family; the way is to support young couples to find employment. Regions where there is less welfare see a remarkable population decline compared with other regions. We cannot give in to the idea

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[31] Guillén-Nieto, *Hate Speech: Linguistic Perspectives*.
[32] The video is available on the YouTube channel of the newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano*.
[33] The English translation is by the author from the original Italian transcription: "Le nascite non è che si intensificano convincendo le persone a passare più tempo a casa, come qualcuno ha sostenuto, perché così si intensificano i rapporti. Non è quello il modo. Il modo è costruire un welfare che permetta di lavorare ed avere una famiglia, il modo è sostenere le giovani coppie per trovare occupazione. Le regioni dove c'è meno welfare vedono il calo demografico molto più importante rispetto alle altre. Non possiamo arrenderci all'idea della sostituzione etnica. Eh, l'idea della sostituzione etnica: vabbé gli italiani fanno meno figli, li sostituiamo con qualcun altro. Non è quella la strada."

of ethnic replacement. Eh, the idea of ethnic replacement: okay, Italians are having fewer children, we replace them with someone else. That's not the way.

Moreover, a look at the headings given by some newspapers could enrich the whole framework. Assuming that the mention of "ethnic replacement" is the one appearing in the video, *Corriere della Sera* actually simplifies and partially modifies the meaning of the statement by titling the news as "No to ethnic replacement"; the headline then presents a quotation which does not entirely correspond to the minister's *verbatim* expression.[34] A quotation is also reported in a *La Repubblica* heading with the same 'errors' of transcription imputable to the ANSA news release, while in the body of the article a more faithful quotation is reported, although some pieces are missing.[35]

The words concerning "ethnic replacement" have been in fact accompanied by some relevant paralinguistic facts, firstly the uncertainty expressed by the discourse marker "eh". At the textual level it is also relevant to observe that the topic of "replacement" is included in a wider context in which positive intervention for the amelioration of national welfare is also invoked. Nonetheless, as often happens in political, media, and SM Discourse, it was the single lexical unit, namely the collocation *sostituzione etnica*, to unleash hell on SM, because it was a strongly connoted collocation.

Briefly reminding the history of such an expression, suffice it to say that is related to the so-called Kalergi plan and to Renaud Camus' theory of *grand remplacement*, embraced by far-right groups in Western civilization. In a few words, such a conspiracy theory would assume that white people will be soon intentionally replaced by non-white people in Europe and Western civilization in general.[36] At the root of the idea are some European political and literary personalities, including Gerd Hosink (1941–2018), a neo-Nazi Austrian writer, especially known as a Holocaust denier, and Renaud Camus (1946–), a French writer who founded the *Parti de l'in-nocence* (*Party of in-nocence*) in 2002,[37] which supported Marine Le Pen and more recently Eric Zémmour. Renaud Camus is probably the inventor, linguistically speaking, of the so-called 'great replacement theory' in the forms shared by far-right political movements and white supremacy ideology. For these reasons, the expression "sostituzione etnica", is highly connoted and recognizable as part of the extreme-right vocabulary (see section 5), although retracing its precise genesis is by no means necessary.[38]

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[34] The title is: "Lollobrigida: 'No alla sostituzione etnica, incentivare le nascite'. Schlein: 'Parole da suprematista'". (Lollobrigida: 'No to ethnic replacement, need to incentivize births'. Schlein: 'Supremacist words'). The reaction is that of Elly Schlein, secretary of the *Partito Democratico* (PD, *Democratic Party*), the main opposition party in the Italian Parliament.

[35] The title is: "Lollobrigida: 'Bisogna incentivare le nascite, non arrendiamoci alla sostituzione etnica'. Schlein: 'Parole dal sapore di suprematismo bianco'". The quotation in the text is "Dobbiamo pensare anche all'Italia di dopodomani. Per queste ragioni vanno incentivate le nascite. Va costruito un welfare per consentire di lavorare a chiunque e avere una famiglia. Non possiamo arrenderci al tema della sostituzione etnica". Differently, *Il Sole 24 ore*, the economic Italian newspaper, reports the almost-exact transcription of the Minister's actual speech, apart from minor details irrelevant to the overall meaning. We are aware that these philological details have little relevance in the context of journalistic communication, even considering that the person who serves as a headline writer is often a different journalist from the one who writes the article itself. Moreover, the procedures for relaunching a news story from news agencies are well-known. However, for a complete and detailed linguistic analysis, we find it useful to also take a closer look at these more detailed aspects.

[36] For a general introduction with further references, see Brian Duignan, "Replacement Theory", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/replacement-theory (2024). Accessed June 10, 2024. For criticism and active opposition to such a theory, see www.immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Replacement-Theory-Explainer-1122.pdf.

[37] The party name is explained on the official website as "L'in-nocence – la *non-nocence*, la renonciation ou le refus de la *nuisance*, l'engagement ou l'aspiration à ne pas nuire" (In-nocence – *non-nocence*, the renunciation or refusal of harm, the commitment or aspiration to do no harm) evoking the Latin etymology of the term. www.in-nocence.org, accessed June 10, 2024.

[38] For an assessment of such a theory in Italian political discourse, see Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh, "La teoria della sostituzione etnica in Italia: una narrazione razzista e sessista", *From the European South*, 12 (2023), 105-122.

3.2. *Materials and Methods*

The news of Minister Lollobrigida's words was first collected in different news media, both in Italian (*La Repubblica*, *Corriere della sera*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*) and in English (*The Telegraph*, CNN, BBC): the corpus used for the linguistic analysis is formed by the flow of comments, focusing in particular on *Corriere della Sera* and *The Telegraph*.

From a quantitative point of view, a total number of 775 comments online from the newspapers' websites and their related Facebook and X/Twitter comments have been analyzed. Most of the comments have been extracted by means of *Exportcomments.com* (last retrieval, May, 9, 2024). The remaining number of comments (corresponding to a., d., and e. listed below), which were not otherwise available, were manually analyzed from screenshots taken in April 2023, in conjunction with the news. In detail, the analysis includes:

a. Comments on the *Corriere della Sera* website (53 comments);
b. Facebook comments on the official *Corriere della Sera* Facebook profile[39] (201 comments);
c. Tweets responding to the news from *Corriere della Sera* (288 comments);
d. Citations of the news from *Corriere della Sera* within X/Twitter (39 comments);
e. Comments on *The Telegraph* website (174 comments);
f. Tweets responding to the news from *The Telegraph* (20 comments).

Although at first glance the corpus is selective and quantitatively unbalanced with regard to the two languages (only e. and f. are in English, while a. to. d. are written in Italian), some comparative generalizations could be drawn in an interlinguistic perspective.

3.3 *Discussion and results of the case study*

From our analysis, most comments in Italian bearing disapproving (or even hateful) content are directed towards Minister Lollobrigida, unlike English comments, which never show a direct attack on the Italian Minister. He is addressed as the brother-in-law of Prime Minister Meloni, emphasizing the family ties between the two personalities, also recurring to a nickname (*Lollo dillo a tua cognata* "Lollo, tell it to your sister-in-law"), in some cases labelled as the brother-in-law *par excellence* (*Il cognato di Italia non ne azzecca una* "The Italian brother-in-law doesn't get one right"). Hate speech is not always uttered by means of direct attacks or use of profanity; rather, it is very often found in innocuous-looking sentences that require subtle irony to catch references and quotations, as the use of the semantic field of replacement (*Io propongo la sostituzione di Lollobrigida ma con chiunque, anche con un pupazzo, sarebbe sicuramente meglio* "I propose replacing Lollobrigida but with anyone: even a puppet would certainly be better"/ *A questo dovrebbero sostituirgli il cervello* "this man should have his brain replaced").

A minor number of hating posts are directed to the government in general, often addressed with the demonstrative pronouns *questi*, 'these people', which is marked as a pejorative (*Questi sono indietro di 70 anni, che senso hanno in un mondo globalizzato le parole: sostituzione etnica, sono una madre, sono cristiana, sono italiana ...* "These [people] are 70 years behind, what sense do the words have in a globalized world: ethnic replacement, I am a mother, I am Christian, I am Italian ... ")[40]. The same

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[39] *The Telegraph*'s Facebook profile has not been considered for the analysis because the news item had not been shared on this social network.
[40] The three last expressions refer to Giorgia Meloni's words first stated in 2019, then rebounced in political and SM contexts.

pejorative use of *questo* is found again in personal attacks to the Minister (*Ancora con la sostituzione etnica, ma questo è proprio fuori* "Again with the ethnic replacement, his man is just off"/ *E questo dicono sia lì per merito!* "And that man, they say, is there on merit!") also in dialect (*Chist è sciem*, "This man is dumb" in a Neapolitan dialect).

The English comments are mostly directed towards UK politicians and governments, and quite surprisingly, if we compare this information to the Italian original context, concerning Left-wing movements and parties in Europe (*Ethnic replacement was a deliberate Labour policy under Blair, as their own internal documents proved. Many of the culprits are still in Parliament.* / *He speaks the truth. The Left HAVE TO SHUT HIM DOWN. More and more Europeans are waking up. They can't keep the lid on this for much longer*). However, the picture is less surprising if one thinks of the British internal political context, as witnessed by some comments (*This is happening in UK now, but nobody in power wants to admit it*). Some posts, when allowed by the specific platform (this is the case of comments on the newspaper sites, unlike X/Twitter) are presented as a long argument explaining reasons and flaws of the alleged ethnic replacement theory. Of particular interest are a couple of ironic contents aimed at reversing the perspective (*Of course it's racist to say immigrants might take over a country and implement their culture in place of the natives - and of course that could never happen. Er....what is the history of America, New Zealand, Australia...*). Some disapproval is directed to the newspaper itself (*Yes, why is the Telegraph skewing the facts like this?*/ *Can The Telegraph please define "Hard Right"? Your woke journalists use it all the [time] to describe anybody right of Starmer*).

Linguistic and paralinguistic strategies can be detected and separated. From a linguistic point of view, the use of demonstrative pronouns is of particular interest because it can reveal the othering as well as instance of *we-code* vs. *they-code*.[41] The meaning of such demonstratives is retrievable only by means of the co-text and context, and is generally used in a derogatory sense. Clichés, together with the use of implicit assertions, also belong to the semantic-pragmatic part of linguistic analysis, in this case study concerning fascists, migrants, Muslims, colonization ... Finally, ironic statements are the most difficult to analyze because irony is not always transparent, thus understood by users and sometimes not understandable by the researcher, as in the following comments: *Bravissimo* / *Esattamente* / *Bravooooooo* / *Grande Lollobrigida*.[42]

4. Education and Pedagogical Competences as Counter-Narrative to Hate Speech

In the background of the major social and cultural transformations that characterize contemporary times, and the role of the media in increasing the risks of perspective distortion of social reality, it is important to recognize that all interpretation of the world and communication with other people takes place within "frames of meaning" that should not be absolutized (as in so-called differentialism or cultural relativism), but neither should they be misunderstood. Cultures exist, but they are neither immutable nor impermeable, and it is

> illegitimate to chain the individual to his or her group and culture of origin by denying human beings the capacity for autonomy, which is one of their main characteristics. Each individual, in fact, continually and originally redefines his or her relationship with his or

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[41] See Banu Baybars et al., eds., *Discourses and Practices of Othering: Politics, Policy Making, and Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023).
[42] On the understanding of irony, see Aline Vanin et al., "Some Clues on Irony Detection in Tweets", *WWW 2013 Companion: Proceedings of the 22nd International Conference on World Wide Web* (2013), 635-636.

her culture of origin as a result of [...] the environment (natural, historical, and social) and individual characteristics.[43]

In other words, pure cultures are an abstraction, and personal and social boundaries constantly change, forcing a rethinking of the identity project. This makes culture a structurally unfinished concept, as it shapes, organizes, and selects the messy original potentialities, which serve as a flywheel in the exploration of the unlimited evolutionary possibilities of symbolic character. Starting from this assumption, identity is generated from various cultural systems, which mark each person's existence;[44] not only – or not as much – the elements of the country in which one lives, such as language, the legislative system, the legal system, etc., but also the family, work, school, friendship network, neighborhood, etc., in which a plurality of variables intervene which further characterize and define cultures (such as gender, age, economic status, level of education).[45] Such cultural systems are also characterized by a set of processes that are, for the most part, acquired – that is, absorbed from birth in the environment in which one grows up – which considerably influence the life of the mind without often being fully aware of their performative, relevant presence. They are tacit cultural assumptions, ideas that are strongly rooted in a specific cultural system that become embedded in mental systems, from where they condition much of cognitive processing.[46]

The demanding task of education is, therefore, on an eminently moral level because it is not only a matter of describing diversity but of fostering coexistence and building relationships that generate mutual respect and recognition rather than exclusion. Recognition, individualization, and inclusion are therefore inseparable; in order to be able to dialogue and communicate effectively with the Other, it is necessary to consider him or her first and foremost as a subject with moral claims,[47] with a right to self-representation, and not as a member of a static category, as is frequently the case in everyday communication.

The stakes are high, and the banalization of hate and the lack of accountability for being on the Web pose an unparalleled educational challenge. There is a need to educate and educate us in generative communication, which avoids the conformism of common sense; this requires commitment, responsibility, and critical awareness. In a word, it requires competence.[48] The concept of competence refers to a dynamic set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and indicates mastery assumed in certain professional domains. [49] In this sense, competence encompasses an organic set of internalized knowledge that is used to interpret and analyze critical and complex situations. Deardorff[50] believes that personal dispositions represent the starting point on which knowledge and understanding (which includes culture-specific knowledge, but also cultural self-awareness and deep understanding) and specific skills can then be built. On the basis of these three dimensions, the activation of the subject's

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[43] Massimiliano Fiorucci, *Educazione, formazione e pedagogia in prospettiva interculturale* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2020), 40. The English translation is by the author.

[44] Ugo Fabietti et al., *Dal tribale al globale. Introduzione all'antropologia* (Milano: Pearson, 2020).

[45] Cristina Balloi, "Superdiversity: una prospettiva per le nuove sfide della pedagogia interculturale", *Ricerche pedagogiche*, 218 (2021), 47-66. See also Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[46] Luigina Mortari, *Ricercare e riflettere. La formazione del docente professionista* (Bologna: Carocci, 2009).

[47] Milena Santerini, *Da stranieri a cittadini. Educazione interculturale e mondo globale* (Milano: Mondadori Education, 2017). See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 1997).

[48] Marta Milani, "Diversità culturale e odio online: il ruolo della competenza interculturale", *Orientamenti Pedagogici*, 67.4 (2020), 31-44. Pasta, *Razzismi 2.0*. Agostino Portera, "Comunicazione e competenze interculturali: modelli a confronto e riflessioni critiche", *Pedagogia e Vita*, 69.1 (2011), 147-164.

[49] Piergiorgio Reggio, "Competenze interculturali ed esperienza professionale", in Piergiorgio Reggio & Milena Santerini, eds., *Le competenze interculturali nel lavoro educativo* (Bologna: Carocci, 2014), 17-29.

[50] Darla Deardorff, ed., *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (London: Sage Publications, 2009).

internal outcomes (adaptability, flexibility, ethno-relative outlook, empathy, etc.) and external outcomes, which consist of the appropriate "situational" behaviors for dealing communicatively (and otherwise) with situations, is possible. Namely, appropriate communication requires that participants in the interaction demonstrate an understanding of expectations about the behavior deemed acceptable in a given situation. Thus, communicators must be able to recognize not only the constraints imposed on their behavior by different sets of rules but also to act out a comparison free of stereotypes, prejudices, and offenses.[51]

In this sense, a first competence worth exploring when it comes to outlining a counter-narrative to hate speech is 'knowing how to interpret cultures'. It means the ability to be able to read words, gestures, and behaviors within a frame of meaning and, most importantly, by stepping out of one's ethnocentric gaze. Specific features of this competence include elements such as:

- holding up the uncertainty of understanding/incomprehension, suspending judgment, and controlling one's emotional reactions;
- recognizing the other's point of view as meaningful, even – and especially – when different or divergent from one's own. It means not banalizing the other's position, but searching for its deeper meanings, bringing out the motivations that drive the interlocutor to think in a certain way;
- recognizing differences, yet also looking for elements of similarity and possible convergence. Identifying, beyond even profound differences, common elements is – among other things – an additional important step in the exercise of intercultural competence;
- bringing back different customs and/or habits to known practices, one's own, thus bringing the unfamiliar back to known situations. Such competence facilitates understanding the thoughts and feelings of others; not to substitute one's own experience for that of others, but to understand them in depth.

A second macro-competence has to do with the ability to reduce bias, 'purifying' one's point of view from biased prejudiced views. The building of knowledge of reality is based on stereotypes and prejudices, universal and ordinary strategies related to perception, as they rely on the process of categorization.[52] The latter gives structure to human perception – through the translation of raw stimuli into precisely structured experience – giving it stability. Categories then tend to undergo a process of objectification and reification, which makes them seem like facts with autonomous existence, erasing their social and instrumental origin. Stereotypes, according to Lippmann's[53] (1922) definition, are fixed, impermeable knowledge that organizes representations of social realities, which by their nature are varied, mobile, and difficult to capture. In this way, facts, people, and things end up having their own precise place to which personal habits, tastes, and abilities have adapted; but, above all, individuality as such loses its value because it is disturbing, a source of cognitive 'noise.' Moreover, as stated by Allport,[54] stereotyping occurs when the initial category is enriched with judgments, usually negative. In fact, it operates according to mechanisms of projection and dislocation: negative attributes of the self or group to which one belongs are externalized and perceived as a characteristic of another person or social group, according to a negative perception of the external group that valorizes one's

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[51] Milton Bennett, *Principi di comunicazione interculturale. Paradigmi e pratiche* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2015).
[52] Chiara Giaccardi, *La comunicazione interculturale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005). Monique Eckmann and Miryam Eser Davolio, *Pédagogie de l'antiracisme: Aspects théoriques et supports pratiques* (Genève: IES Editions, 2002).
[53] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1922).
[54] Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Boston: Pearson Addison-Wesley, 1954).

own. When a stereotype becomes charged with affective and identity values, it becomes emotionally colored, and acquires, in addition to a cognitive function, the ability to guide attitudes and actions; thus, a prejudice is produced. These are *a priori* evaluations that represent images of a social group, minority, ethnic group, etc., in a generalized and simplistic way. The rigidity of stereotypes and prejudices depends not only on their emotional and identity significance but also on the strength of the mechanisms that enable their reproduction; some of them depend on individual cognitive activity, while others are related to language and the dynamics of communication. As for language, on one hand it has the power to categorize reality by activating networks of meanings, with possible attributional distortions, and on the other hand, it represents one of the most important dimensions along which the fundamental processes of social comparison and intergroup differentiation are activated. Media, for their part, build perceptive "normality," the categories and labels that enter common use, granting them a significant place and prominence.[55]

Therefore, the task of education is to disarm the destructive charge of stereotypes and prejudices by focusing on specific 'sub-competences':

- active and participatory listening and, while listening, processing reflective thinking into action. It is not enough to suspend judgment and stand by. It is important to enter the relationship with gentleness and respect and to try to explore the situation, asking questions oriented to better understand, but also to identify traces of potential to be constituted as a support base for an educational intervention strategy. At the same time, it is essential to allow oneself to be questioned by what emerges, to ask questions in order to understand how one can act and, if necessary, to modify one's action in the process;
- recognizing prejudice and allowing it to emerge. It is a matter of avoiding denial of the problem and recognizing in the situation some forms of prejudice and the possible repercussions. Allowing the prejudice to emerge without obstructing the Other as he or she formulates his or her thoughts is the first step to be taken. Subsequently, however, it is necessary to reveal reality for what it is. Only under these conditions is it then possible to accept the prejudice as the thought of the Other and identify the most appropriate strategies (argumentation, decentering, empathy, etc.) to promote its reduction;
- knowing how to decentralize. Decentralization "consists in bringing out, through introspection and, later, analysis, the frames of reference that the practitioner uses when perceiving and decoding otherness".[56] This is only possible through interaction with the Other, who plays the role of the one who allows his or her identity to reveal itself. Its first goal is to capture the personal and professional frame of reference through which the other person is perceived, especially in situations of culture shock; however, the references that emerge should not be perceived as misconceptions to be eradicated, but, on the contrary, as principles that it is important to make explicit. It is through the analysis of these references that one will be able to understand the reading grid and any distortions activated in one's knowledge paths. The second objective of decentralization is to identify and analyze the so-called "sensitive zones," that is, the areas in which one struggles most to communicate with the other person, in which misunderstandings are most frequent, misconceptions strongest, and emotions most violent. Recognizing such sensitive zones in fact, allows one to become

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[55] Corte, *Giornalismo interculturale*.

[56] Margalit Cohen-Emerique, *Per un approccio interculturale nelle professioni sociali e educative* (Trento: Erickson, 2017), 141. See also Margalit Cohen-Emerique, *Pour une approche interculturelle en travail social* (Rennes: Presses de l'EHESP, 2015).

aware of any prejudices that a person may have and not to allow oneself to be pervaded by emotionality;
- de-culturalizing conflicts and subjectivizing issues. Because not everything can be explained solely by cultural factors and motivations, it is important to refer to the multidimensionality of each person's existence and, therefore, the value of singularity. In addition, it is also necessary to take into account – from an ecological perspective[57] – the political, social, economic, relational, and individual contexts in which conflicts arise or from which they are generated;
- arguing one's reflections and evaluations. It involves giving reasons for one's beliefs and explanations by referring to facts and experiences rather than theoretical references.

A third macro-competence then concerns the search for shared horizons to promote communication and dialogue functional to the creation of shared planning, recognizing conflicts among people and groups, not so much through formal recall of values and principles, but by activating self-reflexive processes of continuous signification and re-signification of relational dynamics. There is a clear difference between approaching the Other out of a purely cognitive interest and approaching it in a functional way to build a 'space of encounter', understood as a sphere in which it is possible to experience relationships through concrete gestures and shared actions aimed at generating new horizons of meaning. Below are some specifics of the macro-competence in question:

- perceiving and recognizing ongoing (more or less hidden) conflict and the resulting emotional and relational difficulties (anger, lack of understanding of the elements at play, tension, etc). Even where there is no overt conflict, recognition of one's emotional states becomes an opportunity to question the different possible meanings of the relationship for the actors involved;
- recognizing the risk of displacing the problem. Indeed, bringing the conflict or problem back to formal or normative dimensions risks eluding both the heart of the matter and the meaning of what is happening for the actors involved. It is therefore important to embrace and interpret the cultural and personal meanings of the words used by the stakeholder;
- search for and recall past episodes – one's own and those of the people with whom one interacts – to help oneself and others enter a cross-cultural dynamic that activates the relationship between different systems of meaning and values. In this way, gestures, actions, and expressions are contextualized in relation to personal lived experiences;
- seek to propose readings and dialogues that go beyond high-visibility or overly media-laden cultural and/or religious symbols and understand that in the prejudice – one's own and others' – there are the thoughts and experiences that have contributed to forming it and that that prejudice must be joined by personal and meaningful experiences capable of bringing out other possible meanings and values;
- seeking and facilitating convergence, valuing the possibility of understanding among people with different cultural backgrounds.

In sum, even more important than denouncing or removing offensive content is the challenge and educational wager at stake. Citizens – even and especially digital ones – will therefore have to be properly trained as moral agents capable of critical subjectivity through counter speech that is not the symmetrical opposite of hate speech but consists in the pursuit of taking personal responsibility. In

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[57] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Die Ökologie der Menschlichen Entwicklung* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1986).

fact, O'Neill (1990),[58] without denying the importance of rights, argues that a rights-oriented communication is not always able to make rights a priority: they are important, but to have meaning and effect, they must be placed within a framework of duties, obligations, and commitments. While the rights-oriented approach looks at the position of the beneficiary, the duty-oriented approach looks at relationships from the point of view of the actor, at his or her moral dimension. This means that the duty to formulate clear and hate-free communication comes before the individual's right to receive such communication.

5. Final Remarks

This study tried to show the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding problems and suggest possible solutions, including legislative support, for a less negative and more conscious use of language in the public sphere. Media Education, Linguistics, and Pedagogy, as three different but interrelated disciplines within human science, could effectively cast new light on a multi-layered and complex phenomenon as SM Discourse nowadays is. Media expertise, together with the linguistic analysis of texts, leads to a fine-grained description of a given social phenomenon, such as hate speech in newspapers and related content, and meanwhile growing awareness paves the way for possible pedagogical interventions.

As for the comparative analysis of hate speech provided by our case study, a first observation concerns the general style of comments: it should be noted that the corpus of comments in Italian is in fact much more infused with hate speech than English discourse. This may depend on several factors, including a cultural constraint related to some idea of politeness. Moreover, the external viewpoint of a British user (or at any rate an English-speaking reader of *The Telegraph*) towards the Italian government might play some role for lesser involvement in the words and their possible consequences, providing that ideological/political leaning could have a role in voicing hate speech instances.

The most relevant result in a comparative perspective concerns the target of hate speech, which appears to be reversed in the two languages: in simpler terms, if the haters in the Italian SM are mainly people of the opposite orientation to Lollobrigida's, on the contrary in the British news, we register support for statements that appear to relate to the current British situation, especially in main cities.[59] Therefore, the target of such disapproval (not real hate speech, though) is not the Italian Minister or government, but the left and leftist culture, in general and in Europe.

The discourse of Minister Lollobrigida's speech has its roots not only in the Italian language but also in the Italian linguistic and cultural environment that has some evident echoes in the Italian addressee, which on the contrary may be not totally transparent to an English addressee. This is far from denying the possibility of translation and understanding a political discourse given in a different language: nonetheless, some linguistic elements could appear as decontextualized, and deprived of their multistratum of connotations.

The lexical choice of a given expression, in our case "ethnic replacement", appears as a clear self-qualification, because this specific collocation, whether consciously used by the Minister or not, still belongs to an extreme-right universe of words, which intentionally aims to communicate in a certain linguistic way. The party of *Fratelli d'Italia* (*Brothers of Italy*) has very openly-declared positions on migrations and relationships between native and non-native people in the national territory, and this is

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[58] Onora O'Neill, "Practices of Toleration", in Judith Lichtenberg, ed., *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1990), 155-185.

[59] For a recent analysis on political sentiments in Britain, see Huw Davies and Sheena MacRae, "An Anatomy of the British War on Woke", *Race & Class*, 65.2 (2023), 3-54.

also recognized by the users of the opposite faction (*Il governo Meloni usa un linguaggio tipico dei peggiori gruppi di suprematisti e neonazisti. Complimenti.* "Meloni's government uses language typical of the worst supremacist and neo-Nazi groups. Congratulations". Note the ironic use of the final sentence).

Moreover, the impression of this specific case study is that "sostituzione etnica" resembles a semantically semi-empty label, emptied of its deeper meaning connected to the history of the word and the concept, used here for community purposes to express membership of and loyalty to a given political group.[60]

The question in the title of the present paper ("Ethnic replacement". Unfortunate Expression or Unacceptable Supremacism?) might be actually answered both in a twofold and a negative way: both one and the other, but also neither one nor the other. The answer depends on the awareness of the sender (which may be guessed on the basis of other statements and political affiliation, but never fully defined *a priori*) and the decoding of the addressee, which is affected by language, context, and one's own ideological orientation.[61]

A more in-depth analysis of the corpus created for this study could reveal further insights in order to interpret the multi-faceted nature of comments. Such an analysis could benefit from all the complementary information, which can be inferred from the username, nickname, presentation, use of emojis in presentation and self-description given by the user; however, no hints are present in some cases to detect the real intention of the user in writing a specific post. In particular, identity emojis,[62] the use of capital letters, users' names, and multimodal expressions (e.g. adding of photos with famous people laughing or GIFs with endless applause) belong to paralinguistic and paratextual strategies that enable the reader to decode the possible content implicit in the text.

Progressive awareness of such underlying mechanisms of SM interactions could shed new light not only on the resulting communication strategies, but also on possible pedagogical interventions aimed at preventing this delicate phenomenon more effectively.

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[60] Teun van Dijk, "Ideology and Discourse Analysis", in *The Meaning of Ideology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 110-135.

[61] David Clementson. "How Web Comments Affect Perceptions of Political Interviews and Journalistic Control", *Political Psychology* 40.4 (2019), 815-836.

[62] See Sara Luxmoore et al., "Emoji, Language Games and Political Polarisation", *Fourth Conference on Computational Humanities Research* (Paris, 2023).

Francesco Meledandri

#Ready4Dishy? Assessing Twitter/X's Controversial Engagement in UK Political Communication

Abstract: The rise of social networking sites (SNSs) allowed common users to provide personal opinions, favouring the development of online discourse communities (Herring 2008). Though new media called for the identification of proper behaviours (Kiesler 1997), non-appropriate conducts have proliferated in SNSs, especially towards public personalities. Against this background, this paper aims at assessing the tone of reactions to institutional communications, especially in politics-related environments. Following a methodology used in other works (Meledandri 2023), the analysis would manually assess (van Atteveldt et al. 2021) the number of supportive vs. non-supportive and hateful engagement on Twitter/X. In detail, the assessment would focus on contents posted by Rishi Sunak following his appointment as new Prime Minister of UK in October 2022. Results from six examples show that three out of four comments in response to Sunak's contents are negative. Negativity and hate affect the reach and status of institutional stakeholders (Rathje et al. 2021), crushing the traditional affiliation process between politicians and their (alleged) electorate.

Keywords: *Social Media Studies*, *Social Media Discourse Analysis*, *Hate Speech*, *Sentiment Analysis*, *Political Communication*, *Politics in the UK*

1. Introduction

The need to interconnect with others for different reasons has proved to be a fundamental need when it comes to share information and build relationships. Over the years, technology revolutionized conventional communication, mostly based on face-to-face and proximity-based acts, leading to the emergence of a proper digital age based on instant and seamless interrelations.

After all, activities such as "social change, economic development, and human flourishing depend on innovation",[1] and communication practices in digital environment have been representing a consolidated reality for some years. The recent COVID-19 pandemic surely boosted this process, as the pandemic caused social (and direct) interactions to be reimagined; at the same time, digital and online communication tools proved to be an effective solution to overcome physical restrictions imposed by lockdowns and social distancing policies, and new communication-related technologies emerged and/or became entrenched. The post-pandemic scenario opened new frontiers in terms of human and social interactions, but it also witnessed the ultimate development of new forms of technological connection based on non-human agents, such as AI.[2]

One of the most relevant consequences of the increased use of digital media is the crucial role of online platforms in fulfilling people's need to convey ideas and opinions, as well as emotions and feelings. In this sense, online platforms represented a proper emotional shelter during the pandemic, certifying the pivotal role of such tools in voicing users' emotive statuses.[3] In this framework, it is important to underline that the choice of a suitable online platform is the key to provide successful

messages and interactions, depending on the *real* intention of users when conceiving such messages. As a matter of fact, the massive availability of platforms gives users the possibility to choose the most appropriate one depending on the goal to be attained, both in terms of active and passive users. Every kind of interaction – verbal or non-verbal, for instance – is part of a (digital) meaning-making process, with repercussions in both language and discursive terms.[4] This broad spectrum of linguistic possibilities may result in a diversified range of ideas conveyed by users, which in turn may lead to unique language acts. At the same time, ideas conveyed online can also result in pattern of repetitions that could be evaluated in order to analyse the impact that these acts could have in a broader language context and in these digital environments.

Against this background, this paper tries to shed light on a relevant trend that has been characterising online environments in recent years. A fundamental human right, that is freedom of expression,[5] often exceeds reasonable boundaries thus giving rise to language phenomena that are perceived as a new "normal" standard. In particular, the massive use of discriminating, violent and hateful contents has invaded the Net – and it is here to stay, also in terms of providing some *neutral* language acts with another textual and ideological effectiveness. Hate speech, in particular, leaked into "normalised communications through instant messaging systems [and] created a window of opportunity in which the expression of violent messages is no longer hidden or considered uncharacteristic of an ideological or political discussion".[6] This is why hateful messages become more relevant than neutral or positive ones since they have greater emotive impact in the digital readership, shaping the whole discourse-related reach accordingly. Due to their nature, the massive presence of hateful content may infringe social networking platforms' content policies, which are needed in order to provide reasonable interactions among users. Even though the presence of such policies may have direct consequences on Social Media discourse,[7] it is also true that "content moderation is hard […] because it is wholly unclear what the standards should be";[8] therefore, SNSs tend to be somehow tolerant regarding the thorny issue of hate speech.

This study aims at providing an empirical assessment in terms of the amount of toxicity (i.e. hateful and disrespectful contents) in response to institutional messages in online digital environments. In particular, the analysis would evaluate the number of positive vs. negative messages written as comments to some posts on Twitter (recently rebranded as *X*) issued by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Rishi Sunak, after being appointed in October 2022 following a political reversal within the Conservative Party.[9] Notwithstanding an event of this kind generates discontent among users & voters, the analysis shows that the degree of discontentment is voiced *a priori*, irrespective of the political event in itself. The paper is structured as follows: after describing the main features of Social Media discourse and the language-related implications of hate speech in online environments, the empirical section will focus on a case study involving the retrieval of data from a Social Media platform (Twitter/X). In particular, six examples involving the British political scene will be taken into consideration, focusing

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[4] Majid KhosraviNik, "Digital Meaning-making Across Content and Practice in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 19.2 (2022), 119-123.

[5] "Freedom of expression and information", *Council of Europe*, www.coe.int/

[6] Fernando Miró-Llinares et al., "Hate is in the air! But where? Introducing an Algorithm to Detect Hate Speech in Digital Microenvironments", *Crime Science*, 7.15 (2018), 10.1186/s40163-018-0089-1.

[7] Susanne Kopf, "Content Policies in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies: The Invisible Hand of social media providers?", *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines (CADAAD),* 11.1 (2019), 1-19.

[8] Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 9.

[9] Harriet Sherwood, "Rishi Sunak to become first British PM of colour and also first Hindu at No 10", *The Guardian*, Monday 24 October 2022, www.theguardian.co.uk, accessed 1 May 2024.

on Rishi Sunak's first institutional steps after his appointment. The tweets/posts[10] will be actually assessed via the bulk of comments following Sunak's Social Media-conveyed messages. The results will be evaluated both quantitatively (in terms of the amount of positive vs. negative messages on a single case vs. overall perspective) and qualitatively by providing some examples from the bulk of comments assessed, thus trying to understand the kind of language used in this form of vertical, top-down engagement (i.e. from an institutional message to the relevance of comments from *common* users).

2. The Relevance of Social Media Discourse

As stated above, interactions in online environments have been playing a central role in the field of communication. Part of the digital revolution, they are characterised by distinctive features though encompassed within conventional forms of language acts. Their importance has been growing over time, up to becoming "a massive presence […] in our daily routines […] [implying an] endless flow of information exchanged via networks".[11] The massive availability of data represents a milestone in re-defining the related language use and hierarchies among the stakeholders involved in this process. From a linguistic point of view, there has been a broadening of the paradigm based on CMC (Computer-based communication)[12] into forms of Computer-Mediated Discourse, "distinguished by its focus on *language and language use*".[13] Language acts in online environments deeply depend on the medium used and the intentions of addresser(s), thus allowing for a multi-node interconnection of users and related communication acts.[14] However, it is on some particular platforms that discourse(s) can be enacted and commonly recognised. Social Networking Sites (SNSs), also labelled as Social Media (SM) outlets, proved to be real aggregators in terms of users, but also in terms of significant language acts. The fragmentation and the related popularisation of such platforms enacted different discourses, and gave users "an opportunity to share mostly unfiltered opinions and allow a greater variety of ideas and opinions to be available in the public sphere".[15] As a consequence, sharing one's point of view in multi-faceted forms has become a common practice with unlimited potential that generates language instances, though several variables are involved in the related decoding process. In scholarly terms, the prominent role of SNSs led to the emergence of Social Media Studies that focuses not only on the role of these platforms but mainly to analyse social phenomena such as representation of reality/ies, the spreading of information or intergenerational communication.[16] Similarly, Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) hinges upon the manifold forms of communication in these scenarios not only in terms of different topics and interests, but also to highlight the multimedia and multimodal nature of these interactions, labelled as "structured representations […] including the newly emerging meaning-making artefacts and practices on Social Media, e.g. smileys, regimes of Likes, tags, etc.".[17] It is interesting to note that SM communication needs to rely on such multimodal forms of expression to accomplish meaning-making practices and to overcome any possible constraints that face-to-face contexts of use

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[10] Note: In this analysis, tweets/posts refer to contents posted on Twitter/X: after the rebranding process, the contents on this platform formerly known as *tweets* have changed to a more general notion of *posts.*

[11] Sandra Petroni "Pervasive Technologies and the Paradoxes of Multimodal Digital Communication", *LEA – Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente,* 3 (2014), 259-271.

[12] Susan C. Herring, "Computer-mediated discourse", in Deborah S. Tannen, Deborah Schiffrin and Heidi E. Hamilton, eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 612-634.

[13] Susan C. Herring and Jannis Androutsopoulos, "Computer-mediated discourse 2.0", in Deborah S. Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton and Deborah Schiffrin, eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis – 2nd edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015), 127-151.

[14] John Scott, *What Is Social Network Analysis?* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

[15] Gwen Bouvier, "What Is a Discourse Approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Other Social Media: Connecting with Other Academic Fields", in Gwen Bouvier, ed., *Discourse and Social Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-14.

[16] Nicoletta Vittadini, *Social Media Studies* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2018).

[17] Majid KhosraviNik, "Digital Meaning-making Across Content and Practice in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies", in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media Critical Discourse Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 1-5.

would fulfil more easily. This is why, within the framework of CDS-oriented analyses within SM platforms, tool-specific devices[18] and non-textual and paralanguage elements contribute to the realization of discourses which, in turn, grow virtual communities[19] based on variables such as common interests, languages, geographical areas, gender, age, etc.[20]

3. Beyond Freedom of Expression: Hate Speech as an Unresolved Issue in SM Contexts

As communication via SM outlets proliferates, several issues need to be challenged and solved accordingly. If "the world of meanings in Social Media impacts on individuals […] and infiltrates into the everyday life of practice users",[21] it is also true that such impact could also affect users negatively, bringing the semiotic significance of these language acts beyond the realm of digital communication.

A concerning issue deals with the increasing propagation of negativity in digital and online environments. Defined as "a common form for expressing prejudice and aggression",[22] the phrase *Hate speech* encloses a plethora of verbal (and non-verbal) forms of communication aimed at conveying harmful opinions towards an addressee or a group of people belonging to the same category. The use of derogatory terms has always characterised human communication, but these language practices had in online arenas – which can be labelled as spaces perceived by users as being "without any gatekeepers"[23] – an optimal breeding ground. In order to limit the impact of such behaviours, the Council of Europe tried to define hate speech as "all forms of expressions which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin".[24] This definition needs to be as comprehensive as possible in order to provide a legal framework needed to exclude these language occurrences from freedom of expression, which represents a fundamental right granted to people and extended to communication in digital and online scenarios in 2012.[25] From a legal point of view, it is difficult to frame hate speech due to the different legal systems it may fall in, as well as it entails an "uneasy balance between freedom of expression and the prohibition of incitement of hatred".[26] In these contexts, hate speech is envisaged as a "media practice [and] a network of multiple and interwoven media layers in which discourses emerge",[27] thus characterising its digital and persistent nature. Though hate speech could be labelled as

[18] Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk: Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

[19] Susan C. Herring, "Virtual community", in Lisa M. Given, ed., *Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (London: SAGE, 2008), 920-921.

[20] Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

[21] Cemile Tokgöz Şahoğlu, "Sexism in digital discourse of women. Connecting the digital and social dimensions when comparing the #Sendeanlat and #Metoo campaigns", in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media and Society: Integrating the Digital With the Social in Digital Discourse* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2023), 167-186.

[22] Areej Al-hassan and Hmood Al-Dossari, "Detection of Hate Speech in Social Networks: A Survey On Multilingual Corpus", *Computer Science and Information Technology*, 9.2 (2019), 83-100.

[23] Massimiliano Demata et al., "Editorial", *Altre Modernità* (2018), Special Issue: *Language and Discourse in Social Media: New Challenges, New Approaches*, ed. By Massimiliano Demata, Dermot Heaney and Susan C. Herring, i-x.

[24] "Guide to human rights for Internet users. Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)6 and explanatory memorandum", *Council of Europe*, www.coe.int.

[25] "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Global Report 2017/2018" (Paris: UNESCO and University of Oxford, 2018).

[26] Victoria Guillén-Nieto, *Hate Speech: Linguistic Perspectives* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2023).

[27] Alejandro Barranquero and Susan Morais, "Hate speech as a media practice. The portray of haters and polarization in *The Internet Warriors*", in Marta Pérez-Escolar and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo, eds., *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 193-204.

a specific category (unlike more general forms of aggressive speech[28]), it is undoubted that defamatory language does have a persistent impact in online communication, especially within the boundaries of SNSs due to their nature of networks of interrelated relationships among people/users. Reasons for this scenario may be found in the fact that there is neither face-to-face nor physical contact, and a physical filter (a screen, or a communication infrastructure) is used as a medium to overcome any language filters. Furthermore, in online scenarios there is a sort of *levelling effect*, or a sensation of a lack of hierarchical structure; everyone feels on the same level, especially when confronting the so-called Establishment. This is why common users are more likely to "challenge" personalities – as this study tries to demonstrate – thanks to the opportunity provided by SNSs in reaching anyone directly. This condition is also dependent on a poor culture of the Internet in not considering the consequences of some behaviours online, which may have serious repercussions in real-life contexts.[29]

4. Grassroots Negativity: Assessing the Amount of Toxicity in Response to Institutional Tweets/Posts. A Case Study

In order to confirm the above-mentioned assumptions according to which SM discourses are ravaged by hate speech and negativity, an analysis involving a specific topic has been carried out. Negative comments could be commonly detectable in online correspondence, but they are more likely to be found when controversial and divisive topics are involved, or when polarised views are backed by resorting to derogatory remarks. Politics is a case in point, since its communication practices lead to a harsh polarisation of views and those "who engage in divisive discourse typically rely on ideology to justify their points of view, and they expect their listeners will fall back on ideology to blindly accept such points of view".[30] In SM contexts, ideological polarisation is a spiral process since "these mechanisms are related to the new media role of social platforms and to the use of social media by politicians […] most politicians are delivering their official statements through these platforms, a single piece of mis/disinformation will rapidly become an instrument for ideological polarization used by allies and enemies".[31] This implies that the partisanship process that creates divisive ideologies involves all stakeholders. As a matter of fact, politicians try to intercept their (digital) electorate as a consequence of a massive involvement of users in political debate online, often characterised by non-constructive, harsh and polarised discussions.[32] The transfer of political discourses from real-life scenarios to online environments has been a growing trend, thus confirming the role of SM outlets as political arenas where politicians are actively involved in sharing their policies.[33] At the same time, SNSs represent a public space where everyone could enact interactions in response to institutional messages, which represents the core of the analysis of this case study.

4.1 *Background: The Troubled Post-Brexit Political Framework in the UK*

The analysis has been carried out focusing on some contents posted by British political representatives. Framing the context in which these acts have been uttered is of paramount importance to understand the

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[28] Isabel Ermida, "Distinguishing Online Hate Speech from Aggressive Speech: A Five-Factor Annotation Model", in Isabel Ermida, ed., *Hate Speech in Social Media: Linguistic Approaches* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 3-34.

[29] Sara Kiesler, ed., *Culture of the Internet* (Mahway NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997).

[30] Joseph Zompetti, *Divisive Discourse: The Extreme Rhetoric of Contemporary American Politics* (Solana Beach, CA: Cognella academic publishing, 2018).

[31] Marta Pérez-Escolar and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo, "How did we get here? The Consequences of Deceit in Addressing Political Polarization", in Pérez-Escolar and Noguera-Vivo, eds., *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*, 15-32.

[32] Ian Rowe, "Civility 2.0: A Comparative Analysis of Incivility in Online Political Discussion", *Information, Communication & Society*, 18.2 (2015), 121-138.

[33] Sara Bentivegna, *A colpi di tweet. La politica in prima persona* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

kind of reaction expected in the comments that follow institutional tweets/posts. The post-Brexit scenario has been affecting the political framework in the UK for some years, and the aftermath of the withdrawal of the nation from the European Union still has disruptive effects on international trade processes[34] but also in terms of cultural and media-related terms in the wake of other populist campaigns in the transnational scenario.[35] Soon after the Brexit vote, Morphet concluded that "each day brings another news headline, fresh resignation or unexpected implication of what is at risk for the UK",[36] underlining the uncertain situation that characterised the 2016 popular vote.

Brexit proved to be a divisive and polarised issue not only for UK citizens but also for the political Establishment.[37] In the timespan 2015-2024 (as of May 31, 2024) five Prime Ministers have been appointed after re-shuffles or general election, all belonging to the Conservative Party. Since October 25, 2022, the incumbent PM of the United Kingdom has been Rishi Sunak (as of May 31, 2024). Sunak is a British politician with Indian roots (his parents had Punjabi descent), who had been MP since 2015 and had an official role in the Boris Johnson's government as he had been appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer (2020-2022). Sunak is considered a rising star in the UK political scene; at the same time, his political career intertwined with his private life and his out-of-politics identity. As a matter of fact, Sunak was born in Britain to East African-born Hindu parents of Indian descent; furthermore, his personal wealth allows him and his family to be included among the richest people in UK.[38] These conditions could influence voters' behaviour and attitude towards candidates,[39,40] since they could be perceived as distant from common people's needs.[41] This confirms that labelling and prefabricated categorizations help in constructing and de-constructing public figures,[42] and Sunak is no exception in this sense.[43] Many negative comments to Sunak's institutional communications on SNSs emphasise that his origin or his wealth are two recurring factors used to utter negativity, as this study tries to demonstrate.

4.2 *A Top-Down Analysis of Tweets/Posts by Rishi Sunak: Setting Parameters*

In the light of the politically sensitive topic and context, the bulk of reactions to institutional tweets/posts may not follow traditional affiliation processes, resulting in a mixed engagement in which negativity can overcome the impact of supportive feedbacks in SM contexts. Following a vertical, top-down communication analysis implemented in other studies,[44] the assessment of comments to the institutional contents conveyed via SNSs would provide an overview of the general sentiment of users towards a politician and/or towards politics.

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[34] Steven Brakman et al., "EXITitis in the UK: Gravity Estimates in the Aftermath of Brexit", *De Economist* 171 (2023), 185-206.
[35] Barbie Zelizer, "Resetting Journalism in the Aftermath of Brexit and Trump", *European Journal of Communication*, 33.2 (2018), 140-156.
[36] Janice Morphet, *Beyond Brexit? How to Assess the UK's Future* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017).
[37] Monika Brusenbauch Meislová, "Discursive Construction of Affective Polarization in Brexit Britain", in Pérez-Escolar and Noguera-Vivo, eds., *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*, 98-112.
[38] As per "The Sunday Times Rich List 2024", *The Times* (2024), www.thetimes.com.
[39] Philip Cowley, "Politicians – we warn you not to be wealthy…", *YouGov UK* (2024), www.yougov.co.uk.
[40] Esther Webber, "Is Rishi Sunak Too Rich to Win the UK Election?", *Politico* (2024), www.politico.eu.
[41] Sana Noor Haq, "Sunak's wealth and right-wing politics mean he is far from representative, British Asians say", *CNN* (2024), *www*.edition.cnn.com.
[42] Joy Moncrieffe and Rosalind Eyben, eds., *The Power of Labelling: How People Are Categorized and Why It Matters* (London: Earthscan, 2007).
[43] In an interview with BBC, host Laura Kuenssberg showed Rishi Sunak a word cloud with the most common responses to the question "What does Rishi Sunak stand for?". Most of the relevant words involved his personal wealth (Rich people, Wealth, Rich, The Rich, Money, etc.). *X* (2024), www.x.com/BBCPolitics/status/1708418979151151508.
[44] Francesco Meledandri, "Out-of-the-(ballot)box: legitimation of a new popular will in Brexit-related social media engagement", in Katherine Ackerley et al., eds., *Thinking Out of the Box in English Linguistics, Language Teaching, Translation and Terminology: Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference* (Padova: Padova U.P., 2023), 157-182.

The analysis has been carried out on Twitter, a microblogging SNS which has been rebranded as *X* in July 2023. There are several reasons behind this choice. First of all, almost all profiles are set as public, thus granting a vast amount of free-to-use data. Furthermore, unlike other SNSs that spur users to use their real identity (such as Facebook, where users are more likely to create networks comprised of friends and relatives from real life[45]), many Twitter/X users use pseudonyms and non-identity-based references as their account names since those networks are more likely to be built on content-based or discourse-based interests. This aspect favours "conflict and polarisation emphasised by the relative anonymity, lack of physical presence and consequent *deinviduation* of computer-mediated communication".[46] The nature of Twitter/X allows users to anchor comments to the post it refers to, thus granting contexts and co-texts to be easily inferred. In addition, a wise use of tool-specific devices such as hashtags and mentions support the development of discourse communities based on interests, affiliation, origin, language – and also shared targets to attack.

5. Material and Methods: Identifying Case Studies (CS)

The starting point of this analysis is represented by the identification of tweets/posts by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Rishi Sunak (as of May 30, 2024). In particular, the timespan chosen focused on his tweets/post following his appointment as Prime Minister. A total number of six tweets/posts have been taken into account: five of them have been posted from Rishi Sunak's personal Twitter/X account (@RishiSunak), while one of them has been posted by the official account of Downing Street (@10DowningStreet). Five tweets/posts have been retrieved in the period October 23 – October 28, 2022 and represent the tweets that Sunak (and Downing Street) posted following his appointment as new PM of Britain. Only one tweet/post referred to a subsequent period (December 10, 2022) and involves Sunak's private life. Every tweet/post has been analysed as a standalone case, then they have been considered in an aggregated perspective. The institutional tweets/posts shall be referred to as CS+no. (Case Study 1 = CS1, and so on).

Comments to every CS have been exported using a dedicated tool. By means of a subscription-based tool available at *Exportcomments.com*, comments have been downloaded and aggregated as separate text instances. Exportcomments.com collects tweets/posts set as public, therefore this procedure complies with Twitter/X's privacy policy according to which "Twitter is public and Tweets are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone".[47] However, in the assessment process no personal information has been taken into consideration (e.g. names and/or nicknames, or location, if any) and examples of tweets/posts in the Discussion section are provided without mentioning such personal information. For each CS, the first 250 comments have been evaluated for this analysis. The number of comments for each CS has been considered adequate to provide an assessment of users' reactions to the content posted by the newly appointed PM of UK. Comments have been sorted in chronological order, so that the most immediate (and possibly spontaneous) reactions to an institutional content could be gathered. Some comments have been left out since they did not meet some essential criteria:
- only comments in English have been considered;
- nested comments, that is sub-replies to a comment, have been excluded. As a matter of fact, a reply to a reply is likely to result in a new communication, generating new intentions and/or prosodies;
- unrelated comments, that is comment pertaining to other topics clearly not associated with Rishi Sunak, the UK, the political scene, etc., have been left out. This category may include bots and spam accounts.

[45] Mariza Georgalou, *Discourse and Identity on Facebook* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
[46] Rita Faria, "Stance-Taking and Gender: Hateful Representations of Portuguese Women Public Figures in the NETLANG Corpus", in Isabel Ermida, ed., *Hate Speech in Social Media: Linguistic Approaches* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 311-340.
[47] Twitter Privacy Policy, https://x.com/en/privacy.

- ambiguous content due to poor context has been excluded since a clear assessment in terms of sentiment was not possible.

To assess the kind of engagement in response to CSs, each comment has been labelled as Positive (P) or Negative (N) for quantitative analyses (tool used: Notepad++). Responses providing supporting statements (e.g. congratulations, salutes, etc.) towards Sunak, Sunak's political party and/or the new government have been labelled as positive. Responses falling into the category of derogatory, offensive, hateful, critical opinions towards Sunak, Sunak's political party and/or the new government have been labelled as Negative. The assessment has been carried out manually, since quantitative and qualitative results may be more precise. As Van Atteveldt *et al.* pointed out in their comparison of methodologies to assess content on SM environments, "for smaller tasks it might be better to just use manual coding on a sufficiently large sample".[48] Furthermore, due to poor context, even automatic trained systems could fail in recognising the *real* intention of a comment since other variables are involved (such as irony and sarcasm) that make sentiment analysis a challenging task.[49]

6. Results

6.1 *Description of Case Studies (CSs)*

Case Study 1 (CS1) is the first tweet/post by Rishi Sunak after being appointed as new leader of the Conservative Party, and consequently as the new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Posted on October 22, 2022, it had considerable engagement (18K+ comments, 13.8K+ reposts/citations, and 76.9K+ likes as of May 30, 2024). Considering that the peculiarity of Twitter/X lies in sharing short posts (the platform has been characterised by posts up to 140 characters, then extended to 280[50]), the short textual message sticks to the specific feature of the medium chosen; at the same time, a longer text in the form of a picture (the so-called text to photo) is provided too.

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[48] Wouter van Atteveldt et al., "The Validity of Sentiment Analysis: Comparing Manual Annotation, Crowd-Coding, Dictionary Approaches, and Machine Learning Algorithms", *Communication Methods and Measures*, 15.2 (2021), 121-140.
[49] Vishal Kharde and Sheetal S. Sonawane, "Sentiment Analysis of Twitter Data: A Survey of Techniques", *International Journal of Computer Applications*, 139.11 (2016), 5-15.
[50] Note: Only verified, subscription-based accounts could write up to 10,000 character per tweet/post.

Figure 1. The tweet/post referring to CS1

Case Study 2 (CS2) refers to Sunak's first formal speech as new PM at Downing Street, on October 25, 2022. In terms of passive and active engagement, the tweet/post had 15K+ comments, 23.5K+ reposts/citations, and 160K+ likes as of May 30, 2024. This is an example of multimodal post, as a short text (*I will work day in and day out to deliver for you. Watch my speech from Downing Street*) is accompanied by the video of Sunak's speech. It is also interesting to highlight the use of an emoji, a visual cue used in many online environments with different tenors[51] and discursive implications,[52] depicting a hand pointing down with the index finger (👇). This element is used as visual indicator to interconnect the text and the video, guiding users towards the sequence of use of the tweet/post.

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[51] Christa Dürscheid, "Emojis Are Everywhere: How Emojis Conquer New Contexts", in Yannis Haralambous, ed., *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century: Proceedings Grapholinguistics and Its Applications*, vol. 4 (Brest: Fluxus Editions, 2020), 501-512.

[52] Susan C. Herring, "The Co-evolution of Computer-mediated Communication and Computer-mediated Discourse Analysis", in Patricia Bou-Franch and Pilar Garcé-Conejos Blitvich, eds., *Analysing Digital Discourse: New Insights and Future Directions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 25-67.

Figure 2. The tweet/post referring to CS2

Case Study3 (CS3) is a tweet/post by Rishi Sunak after his first meeting at the Cabinet on October 26, 2022. In terms of engagement, the tweet/post shows less interactions (4.4K+ comments, 2.8K+ reposts/citations, and 40K+ likes as of May 30, 2024). Multimodality is enacted by means of a picture of the PM while meeting the other members of the Cabinet.

Figure 3. The tweet/post referring to CS3

Case Study 4 (CS4) is a tweet/post by Rishi Sunak on October 28, 2022, in which the text (*Together we can achieve incredible things. Now let's get to work*) "certifies" the beginning of his mandate as PM. The content recalls a sort of "promotional" intention as the video accompanying the text offers a rapid

overview of Sunak's earliest days as the incumbent Prime Minister. The same emoji observed in CS2 (👇) acts as a connection between the textual and the visual part. In terms of engagement, the tweet/post has a considerable amount of passive reactions (73.5K+ likes) while active engagement is less vivid (7.8K+ comments and 7.2K+ reposts/citations as of May 30, 2024).

Figure 4. The tweet/post referring to CS4

Case Study 5 (CS5) is a tweet/post issued by the official account of Downing Street on the same day as CS4 (October 28, 2022) and recalls its same visual content. Compared with Sunak's personal account, engagement is less relevant notwithstanding the same content provided synchronously (4.5K+ comments, 2.9K reposts/citations, and 15K+ likes as of May 30, 2024).
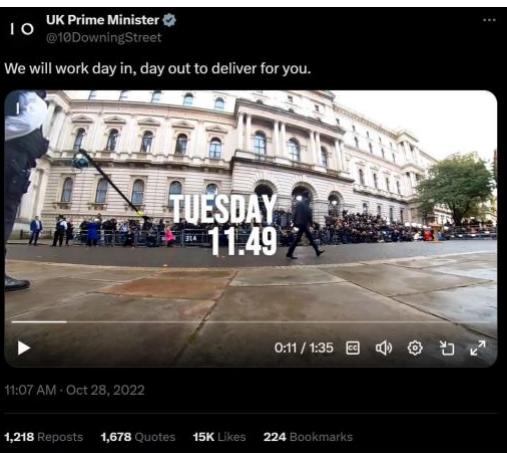
Figure 5. The tweet/post referring to CS5

Case Study 6 (CS6) is a tweet/post by Rishi Sunak ahead of a football match between England and France for the World Cup 2022 quarter finals on December 10, 2022. Though involving the same person,

this content is distant in terms of time and topic but it has been chosen to compare the assessment-related results obtained for CS1 to CS5 with an out-of-context message that somehow involves the relationship between the Prime Minister and his addressees. In terms of engagement, the tweet/post is consistent with the political-based ones (5.5K+ comments, 3.5K+ reposts/citations, and 63.7K+ likes as of May 30, 2024).

Figure 6. The tweet/post referring to CS6

6.2 *CSs' Sentiment: Assessment of Comments to Institutional Tweets/Posts*

As stated in the methodology section, for each CS 250 valid comments in chronological order have been gathered and assessed in order to evaluate the general sentiment of the "digital electorate" towards the newly appointed Prime Minister. The following table summarises the results obtained on a case-by-case basis:

Case study (CS) no.	Number of comments analysed	No. of positive comments	No. of negative comments	% of positive comments	% of negative comments
CS1	250	35	215	14%	86%
CS2	250	190	60	76%	24%
CS3	250	44	206	18%	82%
CS4	250	107	143	43%	57%
CS5	250	4	246	2%	98%
CS6	250	9	241	4%	96%

Table 1. Results of the assessment process (positive vs. negative comments) on a case-by-case basis

The following table shows the results on an aggregated basis, highlighting the mean percentage of positive vs. negative comments:

Overall CSs	Overall no. of comments analysed	Overall no. of positive comments	Overall no. of negative comments	Mean % of positive comments	Mean % of negative comments
CS1-CS6	1500	389	1111	26.17%	73.83%

Table 2. Results of the assessment process (positive vs. negative comments) on an aggregated (CS1 to CS6) basis

7. Discussion

Results are assessed and discussed as standalone cases, then in an aggregated perspective. This allows for a distinction among the different tweets/posts in case of discrepancies in the sentiment-related results; at the same time, each tweet/post gives its contribution in providing a more comprehensive result that could explain the general attitude of common people or users towards a divisive topic and/or the political élites. The first empirical evidence that emerges from the case-by-case comparison is that a negative sentiment overcomes a positive attitude in five cases out of six. Positive comments are generally overwhelmed by negativity, and there are only a few spaces for continuity of positivity that can provide support to the original, institutional message. Apart from CS2, the only one with a majority of positive comments, only CS4 shows a balanced situation (43% positive comments, 57% negative comments) while CS1, CS3, CS5 and CS6 show a disproportionate percentage of negativity (average value: 90.5%). This means that only one out of ten comments shows support for Rishi Sunak, his government and/or his political party.

Evidence from this data shows that the impact of negative comments following an institutional content is like a vicious circle, since an early bulk of disrespectful comments (especially in "the heat of the moment", soon after a tweet/post is issued) may trigger other users to act likewise, making positive comments less relevant and less likely to elicit similar attitudes. This behaviour is confirmed by other studies, according to which it is easier to show "out-party animosity (rather than increasing in-party warmth).[53] Though interpreted differently by online users, comments do have a role in influencing the general perception of a SM content associated with a personality, especially when dealing politics and/or politicians.[54] Positivity is rarely perceived, and when present tends to be impoverished due to some patterns of repetition that seem to lack authenticity or is perceived to be less impactful.[55] The analysis of the bulk of comments in CS2, the only one with a majority of positive comments, seems to confirm this hypothesis. Positive comments are almost all expressed as "bare" congratulations, sometimes accompanied by an emoji with a supportive meaning (e.g. hearts, clapping hands, smiling faces, flowers, etc.), and not as sympathetic comments in the form of structured sentences towards Sunak and/or the political consequences of his appointment. This may suggest the fact that these positive language acts could be the result of an automatized process of non-human accounts (the so-called "bots"), which act on the basis of a pre-arranged prompt. As a matter of fact, most of the positive accounts have Indian-sounding names and/or account names, along with a flag of India in their profile names and/or in their comments. Several comments also add "happy Diwali" along with the message of congratulations: this is a reference to a popular festival celebrated by the Hindu community at the end of October/early November, a period consistent with the timespan of the tweet/post by Sunak. Furthermore, an analysis

[53] Steve Rathje et al., "Out-group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media", *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A,* 118.26 (2021), 10.1073/pnas.2024292118

[54] Saerom Lee et al., "How People Perceive Malicious Comments Differently: Factors Influencing the Perception of Maliciousness in Online News Comments", *Front. Psychol*. 14:1221005 (2023), 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1221005.

[55] Andrea K. Bellovary et al., "Left- and Right-Leaning News Organizations Use Negative Emotional Content and Elicit User Engagement Similarly", *Affect Sci*, 2.4 (2021), 391-396.

of several accounts who commented the original tweet/post revealed that they are "dead" accounts, that is accounts of users with no content of any kind.[56]

On the other hand, negativity is expressed more explicitly, in various forms. Derogatory and insulting terms and expressions are quite commonly found, but at the same time many users hold against Sunak personally, as they refer to some of the above-mentioned "labels" he has had since he took the political field. Some of them mock his name (with many examples of "*Fishy*" or "*Dishy*" instead of Rishi), while others refer to his Punjabi origin (*"You may be the good economist. But not English. Not brought up with British values. Britain to have you as PM??!! Where is Britain heading to??!!"*| "*Not even English*"| "*Go back to India*") or his status as politician ("*He only wants the job to get richer and help out his posh job friends, I hope he falls miserably*"). Other comments refer to his personal life, in particular to an alleged accusation of tax fraud involving him and his family (*"Tax dodger"*| "*You paying your taxes now?*"| "*Has your family started paying their taxes yet?*"| "*First ask your wife to pay her taxes without hiding behind non dom, while enjoying all perks funded by British taxpayers*"). Other comments deride Sunak's verbal and non-verbal behaviours: a particular case is represented by a consistent use of the verb *to deliver* (*I will work day in day out to deliver for you/ Deliver for the whole United Kingdom*) or the related noun *deliver* (*I have the track record of delivery*…). Given the polysemy of the lemma *deliver,* users mock such use by referring to it as a synonym for *send* ("*When I next need to send a letter or parcel I will think of you"|"You couldn't deliver a letter"|"Deliver what? Takeaways? Online groceries? Clothes? We don't need you to deliver (whatever the heck you mean by that). We need you to govern […]*"). Other forms of negativity are context-dependent: an example is represented by several comments referring to Gary Glitter, an English former singer. One of the video posted in the tweets/posts (CS5) seems to have a background theme by Glitter, therefore users remarked upon this detail. Negativity is here inferred indirectly, as Gary Glitter has been accused of sexual misconduct and indecent assault, and sentenced to 16 years in prison. Therefore, the music theme chosen is a negative reference to Sunak and/or his government or his political party due to the negative reputation attributed to the English singer by online users ("*Gary Glitter!! Really"| "Is Gary Glitter the only musical act willing to be associated with the Tories?Did you stop to consider that his music might be an inappropriate choice?"| "Eww a Gary glitter soundtrack! Your PR is as out of touch as your whole cabinet! Muppets"| "I suppose the Tories have history with paedophiles Jimmy Saville Gary Glitter now? Tasteless"| "Using GARY GLITTER music in your video, says it all"| "Gary Glitter will be mortified to be linked to this government. It will surely damage his reputation*"). Other forms of negative comments include emojis as a standalone meaning-making practice (e.g. emojis representing the middle finger) or in combination with text and/or symbols to get a meaningful, insulting word (e.g. "*Tw@*", with @ being pronounced as "at" recreates the insult *Twat*; or "*Little w ⚓*", combining the sound of the word *anchor* with letter T to recreate the insult *wanker*).

CS6 is a particular case in point, since it refers to a non-political scenario; in a tweet/post issued on December 10, 2022, Sunak shows his support for the English national football team ahead of the 2022 World Cup match against France. The tweet/post includes the use of a tool-specific device, that is a hashtag (#threelions) to include his content in a common discursive context,[57] along with a picture of himself smiling at the camera while holding an England scarf above his head. This CS proved to be the one with the most overwhelming negativity, as only 9 comments out of 250 are positive. Negativity here follows recurrent patterns (hateful comments because of his Indian or non-British origin; for this reason, users think that Sunak cannot support the English National Team ("*Not even English*"|"*You're Indian mate :/*"| *Curse of this indian PM of England| India is better than England* 😅 *| Your India buddy| R u british?!!!!*) or to underline his alleged opportunism in non-political contexts, as in the case of football

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[56] Similar phenomena have been witnessed in other social media such as Instagram. See a discussion on Reddit.com.

[57] Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk: Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

("*Prime Minister of UK or England? Will see him to do this for Scotland or Wales in any tournament?*"| *Every time you see a Tory using an England game as a photo opportunity, you know we've lost before a ball has been kicked.| Pahahahaha! Man who has American citizenship and all of his holding held offshore, is an England fan. Stop. I can't breathe.*), thus proving that his digital reputation is undermined in both professional and personal settings.

8. Final Remarks

This study tried to demonstrate that in SM contexts negativity, in the form of comments to a tweet/post, can undermine the reach of the original content, especially when issued by accounts of the so-called *Establishment*. In a 2019 study, Clementson analysed the impact of comments to politics-related contents, finding out that users were influenced by the nature of such replies, thus affecting the perception of an original content.[58] Similarly, Shi et al. claimed that "it is no longer possible to consider the influence of news or other messages in the public information environment apart from the comments which follow them".[59] When it comes to politics, discussion proves to be quite divisive and polarised, even though negativity tends to prevail. This study, in particular, showed that in a series of six tweets/posts issued by the newly appointed Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the reaction of his "digital electorate" is mostly negative as almost three out of four comments (73.83% in an aggregated perspective) have been assessed as negative, with peaks of almost complete negativity (96% of negative comments in CS6). The impact of comments from common users as a reaction to institutional messages in digital and online environments can be a marker in terms of the general opinion towards politics,[60] which may differ from traditional, face-to-face affiliation processes even though similar forms of manipulation are used in these contexts, too.[61] In SM contexts, people/users do not care about Sunak's institutional role and tend to voice their non-affiliation towards him. This represents a break in the SNS-based circuit, according to which *followers* (like devotees of a political idea in real life environments) should be considered supporters – and not denigrators – of a given account. In many cases, a tweet/post is only the starting point or the triggering reason to post hateful, offensive or discreditable reactions. The data analysed confirm the fact that negative utterances are more likely to be associated with divisive topics such as politics,[62] especially in social networking platforms.[63] Though the analysis considered a limited dataset (250 comments per each Case Study), the study showed that responses based on negativity and hate could affect the reach of institutional messages, as well as they can crush the traditional affiliation and trust process between politicians and *their* (alleged) electorate. This also confirms Clementson's idea according to which "comments sections are extremely powerful" in deflecting perceptions towards a topic and/or a public figure.[64] The negative trend observed in the dataset seems to confirm evidence from Hsueh et al., who claimed that biased comments could influence

[58] David E. Clementson, "How Web Comments Affect Perceptions of Political Interviews and Journalistic Control", *Political Psychology*, 40.4 (2019), 815-836.

[59] Rui Shi et al., "Effects of Online Comments on Smokers' Perception of Antismoking Public Service Announcements", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19 (2014), 975-990.

[60] Raviv Cohen and Derek Ruths, "Classifying Political Orientation on Twitter: It's Not Easy!", *Proceedings of the Seventh International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (2013), 91-99.

[61] Richard Rogers and Sabine Niederer., eds., *The Politics of Social Media Manipulation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

[62] Armend Duzha et al., "Hate Versus Politics: Detection of Hate Against Policy Makers in Italian Tweets", *SN Social Sciences*, 1.223 (2021), 10.1007/s43545-021-00234-2.

[63] Xiaoyu Bai et al. "RuG @ EVALITA 2018: Hate Speech Detection in Italian Social Media", in Tommaso Caselli, ed., *EVALITA Evaluation of NLP and Speech Tools for Italian: Proceedings of the Final Workshop 12-13 December 2018, Naples* (Torino: Accademia U.P., 2018), 245-249.

[64] Sara Freeman, "Social Media Comments Can Impact Perceptions", *UGA Today*, Wednesday 26 February 20220, www.news.uga.edu, accessed 1 May 2024.

readers' behaviours as the latter could follow a sort of "social norm and adjusted their immediate response".[65] Considering the analysis carried out in this study, Twitter/X proves to be a virtual space in which many forms of interactions and access are found. This platform, in particular, aims to guarantee (almost) absolute freedom of speech "without fear of censorship",[66] but this may favour a trend characterised by abundant negativity and disrespectful responses towards institutional figures, especially considering the fact that most accounts use pseudonyms and/or nicknames. Negativity is achieved by means of device-specific tools such as hashtags and retweets/reposts, but also a wise use of hashtags could reveal ideological intentions. There are some limitations to consider: a small and limited dataset has been taken into consideration, and the assessment did not take into account the relevance of such comments in terms of active and/or passive engagement (likes, retweets/reposts and/or bookmarks, and nested comments) to confirm the actual impact it had on users. At the same time, the sentiment-based quantitative assessment provided is a marker of the overwhelming negativity in response to the institutional tweets/posts analysed. Further research is strongly advised by considering the above-mentioned features along with other variables (e.g. investigating the same topic with different timespans; or considering the involvement of other stakeholders of the British political scene) or topics (e.g. religion, economy, sports, etc.) by resorting to the methodology used in this assessment study.

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[65] Mark Hsueh et al., "'Leave Your Comment Below': Can Biased Online Comments Influence Our Own Prejudicial Attitudes and Behaviors?", *Human Communication Research*, 41.4 (2015), 557-576.
[66] "Freedom of Speech, Not Reach: An Update on Our Enforcement Philosophy", *X Safety* (2023), blog.x.com/en_us/topics/product/2023/freedom-of-speech-not-reach-an-update-on-our-enforcement-philosophy.

Fabio Cangero and Antonio Fruttaldo

Breaking the Chains of Bias.
Investigating Monkeypox (Mpox) Narratives in Public Health Discourse[1]

Abstract: Ever since its onset, the monkeypox outbreak (July 2022–May 2023), similarly to HIV in the 1980s, has been disproportionately associated with a category of people defined by international medical organisations and the media as gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men (GBMSM), since a higher percentage of infections has been reported among this cohort. Inevitably, the phenomenon has fuelled stigma and discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ community, leading to incidents of violence and ostracism. However, it was with the rollout of the vaccine in the UK and the US that monkeypox-related social exclusion soared to a dramatic extent, thereby reinforcing the false myth that sexual orientation can determine susceptibility to the virus. In this regard, official accredited sources like the UK NHS and the GOV UK website recommend that vaccine should be primarily administered to GBMSM "who have multiple partners or participate in sex groups or attend sex-on-premises venues", thus publicly constructing this category as more vulnerable to contracting the disease. In light of this, the present study employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the discourses underpinning the (mis)representation of monkeypox. In particular, the methodology will involve corpus-based approaches to analyse a large dataset of newspaper articles, while a more qualitative and discourse-based analysis will focus on a series of institutional documents issued by the UK, the US and Italian governments and medical organisations. Underpinning both approaches is a Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) theoretical background in order to gain a deeper understanding of the data to: (i) unearth the discursive strategies whereby media representations and official guidelines have fed marginalisation and stigma against LGBTIQ+ individuals; (ii) analyse the deleterious impact of prejudiced language use in formal documents and international media coverage on health-seeking behaviour; and finally (iii) call for a more inclusive and evidence-based approach to public health communication so as to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes and prejudices.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis*, *corpus linguistics*, *stigma*, *monkeypox (mpox) outbreak*, *official guidelines*, *news reporting*

1. Introduction

Since the eradication of smallpox was declared by the World Health Assembly in 1980, monkeypox (hereafter referred to as 'mpox'; see Section 5.1 for the reasons behind this choice) has become one of the most significant orthopoxvirus threats to global health.[2] Mpox, a human pathogen that was first identified in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) in 1970, has a significant historical background.[3] It emerged in the 1970s in Central and West Africa, marking the first recorded outbreaks and, over the past five decades, cases of the mpox virus have been documented in eleven African

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[1] The authors have jointly discussed and conceived this paper. Nevertheless, individual contributions in writing this research article are identified as follows: Fabio Cangero is responsible for Section 2, Section 4, and Conclusion; Antonio Fruttaldo is responsible for Introduction, Section 3, and Section 5.

[2] The period defining the mpox outbreak (i.e., July 2022–May 2023), as referenced in the text above, was officially established by the World Health Organization (WHO) based on the virus's epidemiological trajectory. For additional details, refer to the following website: https://worldhealthorg.shinyapps.io/mpx_global/, accessed 2 May 2024.

[3] Munawar Hraib *et al*., "The Outbreak of Monkeypox 2022: An Overview", *Annals of Medicine and Surgery*, 79 (2022), 1-4, DOI: 10.1016/j.amsu.2022.104069.

countries, which have been considered endemic to the disease as serological evidence suggests that various mammalian species harbour the mpox virus in endemic regions.[4]

The most recent outbreak of mpox was officially confirmed on May 7, 2022, following the presentation of symptoms consistent with the virus by a British resident who had recently travelled to Nigeria, a country with a high prevalence of the disease. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of March 31, 2024, over 95,226 cases have been reported across 117 countries worldwide, with more than 5,785 patients hospitalised globally for isolation or medical treatment. The United States reported the highest number of cases (i.e., 31,904 cases, with 58 deaths), followed by Brazil (i.e., 10,967 cases, with 16 deaths), Spain (i.e., 7,960 cases, with 16 deaths) and France (i.e., 4,206 cases, with fortunately no deaths).

#	Country or region	Total confirmed cases	Total probable cases	Total deaths
1	United States	31,904	0	58
2	Brazil	10,967	349	16
3	Spain	7,960	0	3
4	France	4,206	0	0
5	Colombia	4,090	0	0
6	Mexico	4,084	52	34
7	The United Kingdom	3,908	0	0
8	Germany	3,830	0	0
9	Peru	3,812	0	20
10	China	2,034	0	1
11	Democratic Republic of the Congo	1,763	0	2
12	Canada	1,499	77	0
13	Chile	1,449	26	3
14	Netherlands	1,299	0	0
15	Portugal	1,193	0	3
16	Argentina	1,136	0	2
17	Italy	1,042	0	0
18	Nigeria	843	0	9
19	Belgium	806	0	2
20	Thailand	755	0	1

Table 1: Mpox cases and deaths by country as of March 31, 2024 as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO).[5]

As Table 1 shows, the number of the cases reported globally is the reason why the unprecedented mpox outbreak in 2022-2023 caused international concern. Most cases reported were in Europe and the Americas and, because of the scale of the outbreak, the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom

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[4] Faheem Anwar and Aqsa Waris, "Monkeypox Virus Outbreak: A Brief Timeline", *New Microbes and New Infections*, 48 (2022), 1-2, DOI: 10.1016/j.nmni.2022.101004; Hraib *et al*., "The Outbreak of Monkeypox 2022: An Overview".

[5] The global overview of mpox epidemiological situation is reported online by the World Health Organization (WHO) at the following website: https://worldhealthorg.shinyapps.io/mpx_global, accessed 2 May, 2024.

Ghebreyesus declared the multi-country outbreak of mpox to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern between July 2022 and May 2023, issuing temporary recommendations to guide countries for a coordinated approach in the emergency response.
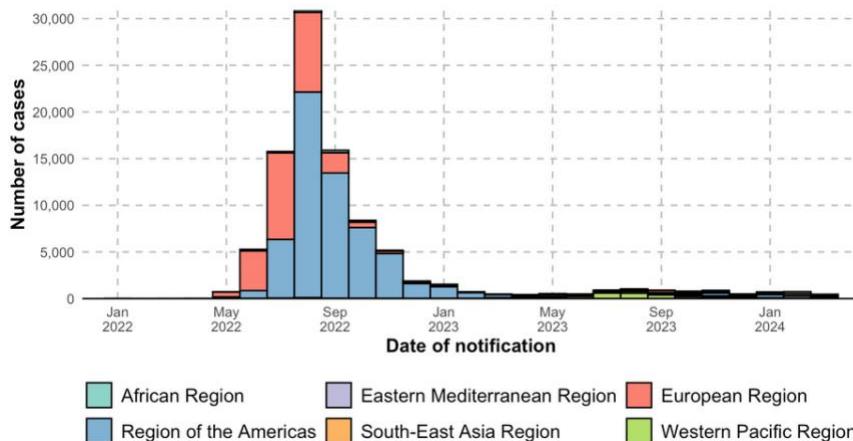
Fig. 1: Epidemic curve for mpox cases as reported up to March 31, 2024 (data taken from the WHO official website).[6]

In Figure 1, the epidemic curve of the mpox outbreak is provided showing that, since May 2022, a high proportion of these cases have been reported from countries without previously documented mpox transmission (specifically, outside of West and Central Africa). Throughout history, the emergence of certain stigma narratives has been a recurring phenomenon during the initial phases of outbreaks,[7] and such distorted narratives tend to be perpetuated through specific media framing strategies. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, biased news framing in online media has led to the proliferation of prejudice against Chinese and, broadly speaking, Asian communities in American society, with China often unfairly labelled as the primary source of the coronavirus, fostering discriminatory narratives targeting Asian individuals.[8] Similarly, in the early stages of the mpox outbreak, African nations were erroneously labelled as the 'source' of the virus's spread, a misconception largely fuelled by media news reporting but, most importantly, by what Grant and Halaly present as 'colonial superiority', which is the result of imperialism influences in the perception of foreign affairs, particularly regarding medical

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[6] The epidemic curve for mpox cases is available on the WHO official website at https://worldhealthorg.shinyapps.io/mpx_global, accessed 2 May, 2024.

[7] Gregory M. Herek and John P. Capitanio, "AIDS Stigma and Sexual Prejudice", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42.7 (1999), 1130-1147, DOI: 10.1177/00027642990420070; Winnie W.S. Mak *et al*., "Comparative Stigma of HIV/AIDS, SARS, and Tuberculosis in Hong Kong", *Social Science & Medicine*, 63.7 (2006), 1912–1922, DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2006.04.016; Chee T. Chang *et al*., "Monkeypox Outbreak: Preventing Another Episode of Stigmatisation", *Tropical Medicine & International Health*, 27.9 (2022), 754-757. DOI: 10.1111/tmi.13798; Weilun Ju *et al*., "Stigmatizing Monkeypox and COVID-19: A Comparative Framing Study of the Washington Post's Online News", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20.4 (2023), 1-20, DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20043347.

[8] Henna Budhwani and Ruoyan Sun, "Creating COVID-19 Stigma by Referencing the Novel Coronavirus as the 'Chinese Virus' on Twitter: Quantitative Analysis of Social Media Data", *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22.5 (2020), 1-7, DOI: 10.2196/19301; Yachao Li *et al*., "Constructing and Communicating COVID-19 Stigma on Twitter: A Content Analysis of Tweets during the Early Stage of the COVID-19 Outbreak", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17.18 (2020), 1-12, DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17186847; Angie Y. Chung *et al*., "COVID-19 and the Political Framing of China, Nationalism, and Borders in the U.S. and South Korean News Media", *Sociological Perspectives*, 64.5 (2021), 747-764, DOI: 10.1177/07311214211005484.

diseases or viruses.[9] The authors, following Karim's and Durham's observations,[10] emphasise the role of language in framing discussions with geographical spaces central to the process of 'othering' and media representations, similar to maps, shaping perceptions through language, visual imagery and symbols, thus positioning Western media as arbiters of 'normalising ideologies' around international standards of health (see Section 2 for a more detailed discussion). In this way, the Global North serves as a cultural reference point in geopolitical discussions, reinforcing power dynamics and reporting on global virus spread as a menace to westernised notions of civility often coming from African contexts.

In addition to racist discourses, discrimination surrounding mpox has also been directed at specific groups, such as individuals within the LGBTIQ+ community, with initial confirmed cases partially attributed to intimate encounters between men who have sex with other men.[11] This is the reason why, in the provocative title of their paper, Shah refers to mpox as the 'new gay plague', echoing the public attitudes toward such a virus as a result of media framing.[12] In this respect, the title draws a comparison, as will be further elaborated in Section 2, between the old (i.e., the HIV outbreak) vs new (i.e., the mpox epidemic) perception of the diseases, with HIV having been heavily stigmatised by media framing as a gay men-targeting illness since the 1980s. Scholars in the field of media studies often emphasise the concept of media frames in the frameworks of social constructionism and reality formation,[13] according to which the framing of an idea through various semiotic systems (including language itself) has the power to emphasise certain aspects while obscuring others.[14] Consequently, media contents such as news stories do not merely reflect reality; they actively shape it.[15] In this way, the use of metaphors,

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[9] Rachel Grant and Alan Halaly, "Paralleling the Gay Man's Trauma: Monkeypox Stigma and the Mainstream Media", *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (2024), 1-19, DOI: 10.1177/01968599241241467.

[10] Karim H. Karim, *The Media of Diaspora: Mapping the Globe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Meenakshi G. Durham, "Scene of the Crime: News Discourse of Rape in India and the Geopolitics of Sexual Assault", *Feminist Media Studies*, 15.2 (2015), 175-191, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2014.930061.

[11] Clarissa R. Damaso, "Phasing out Monkeypox: Mpox is the New Name for an Old Disease", *The Lancet Regional Health: Americas*, 17 (2023), 1-2, DOI: 10.1016/j.lana.2022.100424; Francisco Rocha *et al*., "Monkeypox and the Return of a Specter: The Healthcare Field in Dark Times", *Interface: Comunicação, SaúDe, Educação*, 26 (2022), 1-10, DOI: 10.1590/interface.220473; Mário Scheffer *et al*., "Monkeypox in Brazil between Stigma, Politics, and Structural Shortcomings: Have We Not Been Here Before?", *The Lancet Regional Health: Americas*, 17 (2023), 1–6, DOI: 10.1016/j.lana.2022.100394.

[12] Tej Shah, "'The New Gay Plague': Analysis of Public Attitudes toward Monkeypox", *medRxiv* (2022), 1-30, DOI: 10.1101/2022.11.01.22281797 (preprint).

[13] Teun A. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991); Teun A. van Dijk, *Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2009); Gregory M. Herek *et al*., "Stigma, Social Risk, and Health Policy: Public Attitudes toward HIV Surveillance Policies and the Social Construction of Illness", *Health Psychology*, 22.5 (2003), 533–540, DOI: 10.1037/0278-6133.22.5.533; Kathleen Tierney *et al*., "Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 604.1 (2006), 57–81, DOI: 10.1177/0002716205285589; Michael McCauley *et al*., "The H1N1 Pandemic: Media Frames, Stigmatization and Coping", *BMC Public Health*, 13 (2013), 1–16.

[14] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: Essays on the Organization of Experience* (Boston, MA: Northeastern U.P., 1974); William A. Gamson *et al*., "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18 (1993), 373-393; Giuseppe Balirano, "Framing Identities in Advertising: Multimodal Discourse Analysis", in Giuseppe Balirano and Maria Cristina Nisco, eds., *Language, Theory & Society: Essays on English Linguistics and Culture* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2015), 2-40.

[15] Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10 (2007), 103–126, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054; Paul D'Angelo, "Framing: Media Frames", in Patrick Rössler *et al*., eds., *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1-10, DOI: 10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0048; Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, "The Rainbow Conspiracy: A Corpus-Based Social Media Analysis of Anti-LGBTIQ+ Rhetoric in Digital Landscapes", in Stefania M. Maci *et al*., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse and Disinformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 306-324; Angela Zottola, *LGBTQ+ and Feminist Digital Activism: A Linguistic Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2024).

specific narrative techniques, and personal biases in discourse play crucial roles in moulding collective knowledge and influencing how we perceive the world around us.[16]

In an era characterised by globalisation and technological advancements, individuals increasingly navigate and make sense of their surroundings with images shaped by the media, using them to derive meaning about political and social issues. Therefore, the fact that, ever since its onset, mpox has been disproportionately associated with a category of people defined by international medical organisations and the media as gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with other men (GBMSM), as a higher percentage of infections has been reported among this cohort, inevitably fuelled stigma and discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ community, leading to incidents of violence and ostracism.[17] However, it is crucial to acknowledge a significant turning point in the mpox outbreak, coinciding with the vaccine rollout and leading to a noticeable increase in mpox-related social exclusion. Unsurprisingly enough, as previously underlined, the media played a substantial role in perpetuating these misconceptions. But what is interesting is that, in recommending prioritising for vaccination GBMSM, particularly "those who have multiple partners, participate in sex groups, or attend sex-on-premises venues",[18] official sources may have contributed to inadvertently frame this category as more susceptible to mpox, thereby encouraging and amplifying the misconceptions linked to the virus. Regrettably, this reinforced the false belief that one's sexual orientation or conduct could determine their vulnerability to the virus.

Given this background, in the following sections, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods will be adopted to investigate the discourses underpinning the (mis)representation of mpox in official governmental and medical guidelines and news reporting. The importance of these discursive forms of communication is highlighted by Chang *et al*.'s multilevel stigma mitigation framework,[19] which is based on Salihu *et al*.'s socio-ecological model.[20] This framework, with its five-level structure encompassing individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and public policy dimensions, provides a comprehensive tool to visualise and characterise various anti-stigma forms of intervention. In particular, we will focus on the community and public policy dimensions tied to shared values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, including disease-related stigma and discrimination, and the perspectives of laws, social services, and resource distribution to address inequalities. If these dimensions, which can be linked to media framing for the community dimension and to official governmental and medical guidelines for the public policy dimension, do not combat stigma but instead perpetuate it, the historical pattern of structural inequity and discrimination in responses to disease outbreaks will persist, as the case of mpox will serve as a stark reminder.

In this way, the present study aims to explore the ways in which official guidelines and the mainstream media reinforced stigma against GBMSM through its description and reporting on the 2022-2023 mpox outbreak. By investigating this topic, this article makes significant contributions to both queer studies and health communication domains since, by employing a critical discourse analytical perspective, different ideological discourses will be underpinned in the official voice of experts and the media coverage of the mpox outbreak. In particular, LGBTIQ+ stigma will emerge as one of the main ideological tenets of the texts under investigation, combined with racialised discourses linked to the misrepresentation of the virus as a form of attack against the Global North. Therefore, through an in-

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[16] Renping Liu and Cheng Chen, "How News Reporting Exacerbated the Monkeypox Pandemic in Spain and the US: A Corpus-Based News Values Analysis", *Global Public Health*, 19.1 (2024), 1-16, DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2024.2320422.

[17] Grant and Halaly, "Paralleling the Gay Man's Trauma".

[18] This specification is available on the UK Health Security Agency website, in the Q&A section addressing mpox, available at the following link: https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2022/10/28/answering-questions-on-monkeypox-vaccination, accessed 2 May, 2024.

[19] Chang *et al*., "Monkeypox Outbreak".

[20] Hamisu M. Salihu *et al*., "Socio-Ecological Model as a Framework for Overcoming Barriers and Challenges in Randomized Control Trials in Minority and Underserved Communities", *International Journal of MCH and AIDS*, 3.1 (2015), 85-95.

depth examination of these discourses, we aim to shed light on the underlying mechanisms through which stigma is perpetuated and offer insights for fostering a more inclusive approach to public health communication in order to avoid spreading negative stereotypes and prejudices.

2. Stigma, Minority Stress, Health Disparities and Transparency

In this section, a theoretical framework will be provided to facilitate a clearer interpretation and understanding of the discursive (mis)construction of mpox. Key concepts central to this study include *stigma*, *minority stress*, *health disparities* and *transparency*, all of which have massively informed this linguistic investigation.

One of the pioneering definitions of stigma provided by Erving Goffman frames it as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting",[21] resulting in the reduction of an individual to that stigmatising feature, which gradually comes to seep into every aspect of their persona. More specifically, this attribute can be regarded as the breach of a societal norm that an individual is inherently expected to abide by,[22] or the possession of a trait deemed socially undesirable.[23]

In the model expounded by Link and Phelan,[24] the initial stage of stigma formation involves the selection of the attribute to be stigmatised. In this regard, certain attributes are more prone to becoming stigmatised and stigmatising than others. For instance, characteristics like eye colour or tastes in food, music or movies are hardly ever the basis for stigma. On the other hand, attributes like skin colour, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, disability and obesity, to name but a few, often serve as catalysts for the rise of stigma and discrimination. The selection of the stigmatising feature is termed 'labelling',[25] involving the attachment of a category external to the individual onto them, which simplifies a person's complexity, reducing them to a stereotype or predefined category. This process also contributes to 'cognitive efficiency',[26] as predefined and stereotypical categories typically come with a set of defining features that allow us to readily form a mental representation of the stigmatised individual, stripping away their underlying complexity. Therefore, by categorising individuals based on external labels or attributes, we minimise the cognitive task of understanding and interacting with others.

The following step in the model hitherto described involves 'otherisation' or 'social othering',[27] whereby the stigmatising label gives rise to an irreconcilable dichotomy developing on the 'us' axis and the 'them' axis, which can even escalate to the point of violent behaviour and the exercise of violence when the 'other' is perceived as a threat.[28] This process often coincides with the use of linguistic expressions adopted by the in-group that totally identify members of the out-group with the stigmatising

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[21] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 3.

[22] Mark C. Stafford and Richard R. Scott, "Stigma, Deviance, and Social Control: Some Conceptual Issues", in Stephen C. Ainlay *et al*., eds., *The Dilemma of Difference: A Multidisciplinary View of Stigma* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1986), 77-91.

[23] Jennifer Crocker *et al*., "Social Stigma", in Daniel T. Gilbert *et al*., eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Fourth Edition, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 504-553.

[24] Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, "Conceptualizing Stigma", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27.1 (2001), 363-385, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Susan T. Fiske, "Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Discrimination", in Daniel T. Gilbert *et al*., eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Fourth Edition, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 357-411.

[27] van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*; van Dijk, *Society and Discourse*; James A. Morone, "Enemies of the People: The Moral Dimension to Public Health", *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 22.4 (1997), 993-1020; David W. Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2001); Massimiliano Demata, "The Language of Fear: Cybercrime and the Borderless Realm of Cyberspace in British News", *I-LanD Journal: Identity, Language and Diversity*, 1.1 (2017), 126-144, DOI: 10.26379/1008; Massimiliano Demata, "Of Infiltrators and Wild Beasts: Nationalism and Populism in Benjamin Netanyahu's Narrative of the Borders", *Journal of Language and Politics* (2024), 1–22, DOI: 10.1075/jlp.23084.dem.

[28] Link and Phelan, "Conceptualizing Stigma".

attribute. A case in point is the utilisation of medicalising structures such as 'HIV-sufferer' instead of 'person living with HIV' when illness is stigmatised.[29]

The subsequent step to otherisation is 'status loss', which occurs when the stigmatising label attributed to a targeted individual leads to their social status being devalued. It has been observed that social status loss can manifest in various ways, from socialisation to the world of work, with out-group members experiencing ostracism and marginalisation at varying levels.

Besides, from the perspective of Ecological Systems Theory (EST),[30] stigma can be unpacked into three different categories, that is, (i) structural, (ii) interpersonal and (iii) individual.[31] The term 'structure' refers to systems including governments, institutions, organisations and communities, where stigma is perpetuated through legal measures that limit or hinder access to certain services, thereby creating an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities between in-group and out-group members.[32] While structural stigma mainly occurs at an institutional level, interpersonal stigma is the immediate result thereof. More specifically, the former legitimises individuals outside the stigmatised community to enact stigma at an interpersonal level, for example by attacking, harassing, assaulting or discriminating directly members of the targeted group. At a deeper, yet equally significant level, lies individual stigma, which entails the internalisation of self-constructed "orientations to themselves, others, and their environmental circumstances".[33] This leads to expectations of rejection, a propensity for concealment,[34] heightened anxiety and avoidance of social situations for fear of being targeted.

The experience of stigma within a community at one or multiple levels lays the groundwork for what has been defined as 'minority stress',[35] originating from proximal and distal stressors unique to a

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[29] Luke Collins and Paul Baker, *Language, Discourse and Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2023).

[30] In Ecological Systems Theory (EST), it is posited that phenomena evolve across multiple levels and exhibit diverse manifestations. These levels are conceptually depicted as concentric circles nested within each other, similar to Russian nesting dolls. This metaphor illustrates that while a particular phenomenon may unfold differently depending on the level or concentric circle under consideration, all its manifestations are interconnected and stem from a common origin. See Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development", *American Psychologist*, 32.7 (1977), 513-531; Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1979); Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Recent Advances in Research on the Ecology of Human Development", in Rainer K. Silbereisen *et al*., eds., *Development as Action in Context: Problem Behavior and Normal Youth Development* (Heidelberg and New York: Springer, 1986), 287-309.

[31] Jaclyn M. White Hughto *et al*., "Transgender Stigma and Health: A Critical Review of Stigma Determinants, Mechanisms, and Interventions", *Social Science & Medicine*, 147 (2015), 222-231, DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.11.010.

[32] Mark L. Hatzenbuehler *et al*., "The Impact of Institutional Discrimination on Psychiatric Disorders in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: A Prospective Study", *American Journal of Public Health*, 100.3 (2010), 452-459.

[33] Ibid., 226.

[34] Concealment arises when individuals with a "stigmatising attribute" (see Goffman, *Stigma*, 3) seek to hide it to avoid becoming vulnerable to unjust treatment. Successful concealment, also referred to as 'passing' (see Walter O. Bockting *et al*., "Stigma, Mental Health, and Resilience in an Online Sample of the US Transgender Population", *American Journal of Public Health*, 103.5 (2013), 943–951), occurs when individuals with potentially stigmatising attributes manage to present themselves as members who do not belong to the stigmatised community, thus evading stigma. However, attempts to conceal one's identity can become a significant stressor, leading to persistent anxiety and hypervigilance.

[35] Ilan H. Meyer, "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence", *Psychological Bulletin*, 129.5 (2003), 674-697; Michael L. Hendricks and Rylan J. Testa, "A Conceptual Framework for Clinical Work with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Clients: An Adaptation of the Minority Stress Model", *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 43.5 (2012), 460-467; Cristiano Scandurra *et al*., "The Italian Validation of the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure", *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 7.2 (2020), 208-222, DOI: 10.1037/sgd0000366.

stigmatised minority group.[36] In Minority Stress Theory (MST), it is asserted that: (i) the stressors affecting targeted communities possess unique features not shared among other types of stressors; and (ii) the long-term effects of such stressors can bring about mental and health issues.[37] While social selection theory claims that individuals succumb to stressors owing to their inherent predisposition,[38] social causation theory contends that it is social factors to underpin stress.[39] In the theoretical framework adopted in this investigation, we will take the stance of social causation theory, framing health disparities in the context of mpox as rooted in social stigma-related factors.

One of the first definitions of health disparities dating as far back as the 1990s goes as follows:

> [health disparities] are not only unnecessary and avoidable but, in addition, are considered unfair and unjust. […] Equity in health implies that ideally everyone should have a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential and, more pragmatically, that no one should be disadvantaged from achieving this potential, if it can be avoided.[40]

What Margaret Whitehead highlights here is that factors such as social class, skin colour, gender identity, sexual orientation, living in an urban setting, to indicate but a few examples, can unfairly determine access to health resources. As a result, individuals who do not fit certain socially constructed norms cannot realise their "full health potential".[41] This concept lies at the core of health disparities, in that membership of a specific group can invariably affect an individual health status, with members of disadvantaged groups experiencing not only hardship and/or stigma but worse health outcomes and greater health risks than privileged groups as well. In contrast, two key principles undergirding health equity state that, firstly, healthcare access and resource allocation should be tailored to individuals' needs;[42] and secondly, equal medical treatment should be provided based on equal needs.[43] Health disparities can thus be regarded as the concrete realisation of long-established and deep-seated stigma perpetrated against a specific community, whose physical and mental health or healthcare access are compromised as a result of a combination of distal and proximal stigma-related stressors.

In this respect, it should be noticed that illness works as a powerful vehicle to socially construct and perpetuate stigma, especially when a solid link between a particular illness and a stigmatised community

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[36] Stigma can manifest in various forms, each with its own implications for an individual's well-being. Distal stressors are those that arise directly from immediate interactions, like facing discrimination or verbal abuse, which can provoke instant emotional and physical reactions. These are immediate, short-term and situation-specific. On the other hand, proximal stressors have a subtler, lingering and long-term impact. These stem from internalised negative beliefs or societal attitudes, leading to enduring feelings of shame, low self-esteem or social alienation. Although not tied to specific events, they can significantly affect mental and emotional health over time (see Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* [New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 1984]).

[37] David M. Frost and Ilan H. Meyer, "Minority Stress and the Health of Sexual Minorities", in Charlotte J. Patterson and Anthony R. D'Augelli, eds., *Handbook of Psychology and Sexual Orientation* (New York, NY: Oxford U.P., 2013), 252-266; David M. Frost *et al*., "Minority Stress and Physical Health Among Sexual Minority Individuals", *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 38 (2015), 1-8.

[38] J. Michael Bailey, "Homosexuality and Mental Illness", *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 56.10 (1999), 883-884.

[39] Bruce P. Dohrenwend, "Social Status and Psychological Disorder: An Issue of Substance and an Issue of Method", *American Sociological Review*, 31.1 (1966), 14-34; Bruce P. Dohrenwend, "The Role of Adversity and Stress in Psychopathology: Some Evidence and Its Implications for Theory and Research", *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 41.1 (2000), 1-19.

[40] Margaret Whitehead, "The Concepts and Principles of Equity and Health", *International Journal of Health Services*, 22.3 (1992), 106.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Lu Ann Aday *et al*., *Access to Medical Care in the U.S.: Who Has It, Who Doesn't* (Chicago, IL: Chicago U.P., 1984), 1-18.

[43] Gavin H. Mooney, "Equity in Health Care: Confronting the Confusion", *Effective Health Care*, 1.4 (1983), 179-185.

is established in discourse.[44] For instance, in the aftermath of the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s, Susan Sontag commented on the differences between being diagnosed with HIV and cancer in this way:

> Because of countless metaphoric flourishes that have made cancer synonymous with evil, having cancer has been experienced by many as shameful, therefore something to conceal, and also unjust, a betrayal by one's body. Why me? the cancer patient exclaims bitterly. With AIDS, the shame is linked to an imputation of guilt; and the scandal is not at all obscure. Few wonder, Why me? Most people outside of sub-Saharan Africa who have AIDS know (or think they know) how they got it. It is not a mysterious affliction that seems to strike at random. Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain "risk group," a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, job-mates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution.[45]

HIV is a shining example of how illness can develop into a shame- and guilt-ridden medical experience that not only proves life-changing for patients as far as their health status is concerned, but it also leaves on them an indelibly stigmatising mark that will forever set them apart as different from the others. As Sontag argues in the quote, "the illness flushes out an identity" that a newly diagnosed patient had gone to great lengths to conceal, thereby triggering a two-fold trauma: the first related to the contraction of a virus that will never be eradicated from their body (first stressor), the second related to a forced disclosure of their identity (second stressor). What is more, illnesses so heavily laden with stigma, like HIV and mpox, as will be shown later, are discursively construed as a well-deserved punishment meted out by divine providence for a blame or social transgression, like indulgence in controlled substances, deviant sexual practices and perversion. Therefore, illness comes to symbolise a divine retribution for deriving pleasure from what is discursively portrayed as unnatural sexual behaviour.

In light of the forced disclosure of one's sexual orientation or identity entailed by being diagnosed with some stigmatised diseases, along with the discriminating discourses surrounding them, we would like to finally mention the last key concept that will inform this analysis, namely, the distinction between *transparency* and *opaqueness* in illness delineated by Sontag.[46] More specifically, an illness defined as transparent is one enabling the other to see through the patients, betraying a diagnosis based on a set of symptoms and indicators ascribable to a specific condition, like tuberculosis. On the other hand, illnesses categorised as opaque do not exhibit any visible or specific symptoms suggestive of the illness afflicting the patient; they are latent, silent and often erupt violently in the last stages, when it is too late to take action, as in the case of cancer. While originally posited to highlight the difference in the symptomology of tuberculosis and cancer, these two concepts are aptly applicable to this study as well, since mpox undoubtedly falls within the category of transparent illnesses, given its tangible and recognisable symptoms.

In order to assess the social impact an illness can make on sufferers' lives, we will use a framework expounded by Joachim and Acorn,[47] which includes three main factors determining its severity: (i) the *strain* illness can place on social relationships, often related to its contagiousness or transmissibility. This factor addresses the question: *how likely am I to get infected if I get physically close to a sufferer?*; (ii) *aesthetic disturbance* and *change in appearance*, which involve the extent to which a patient's body

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[44] Lucy Yardley, *Material Discourses of Health and Illness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Richard Gwyn, *Communicating Health and Illness* (London: SAGE, 2001).

[45] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2013), 110.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Gloria Joachim and Sonia Acorn, "Stigma of Visible and Invisible Chronic Conditions", *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 32.1 (2000), 243-248.

undergoes an illness-induced transformation due to the onset of visible symptoms. For example, the occurrence of pustules, skin rashes, vomiting, open wounds/lesions, jaundice and weight loss or gain can augment transparency. This factor addresses the question: *how likely is my body to transform as a result of getting the illness*?; and (iii) *stigma-related issues*, which refers to the connection between illness and a particular marginalised community. This factor addresses the question: *does this illness contribute to the stigmatisation of the group I belong to?* In applying this framework to measure the severity of mpox impact, it can be observed that (i) mpox is highly contagious, transmitted through skin contact and occasionally infected droplets. This led to widespread fear of contagion and social hysteria, fuelled by extensive media coverage in news discourse (*strain*); (ii) one of the defining symptoms of mpox is the appearance of scaly crusts, lesions in the oral cavity and skin swelling. This makes its symptomology highly transparent, allowing everybody to see through the patients' body (*aesthetic disturbance/appearance*); (iii) the discourses around mpox have been marked by non-scientific fallacies and misconceptions, subtly suggesting that only gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with other men (GBMSM) can contract it, thus giving rise to unprecedented stigma and health disparities affecting this category (*stigma*).[48]

3. The Representation of the Mpox Outbreak: Corpus Collection and Methodology

In order to analyse the representation of mpox in official governmental and medical guidelines and news reporting, different data and methodologies have been adopted to provide a broader contextualisation of the discourses emerging from such texts. In particular, to analyse how the media represented the mpox outbreak, two corpora were collected following these criteria. We accessed NexisUni and employed the search terms 'monkeypox' and 'mpox' as well as relevant variations, selecting a timespan from January 1, 2022, to April 25, 2023, to create a two-million-word corpus named the mpox Media Corpus (MMC), representative of the global construction of the mpox outbreak in Anglophone media outlets. XML annotations were used to preserve contextual information about the news stories collected. Once the MMC was cleaned and tagged, it was then uploaded onto Sketch Engine for analysis.[49]

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[48] Julian W. März *et al*., "Monkeypox, Stigma and Public Health", *The Lancet Regional Health: Europe*, 23 (2022), 1-3, DOI: 10.1016/j.lanepe.2022.100536;

[49] Adam Kilgarriff *et al*., "The Sketch Engine", in Geoffrey Williams and Sandra Vessier, eds., *Proceedings of the Eleventh EURALEX International Congress: EURALEX 2004* (Lorient: Université de Bretagne-Sud, 2004), 105-116; Adam Kilgarriff *et al*., "The Sketch Engine: Ten Years On", *Lexicography*, 1.1 (2014), 7-36.
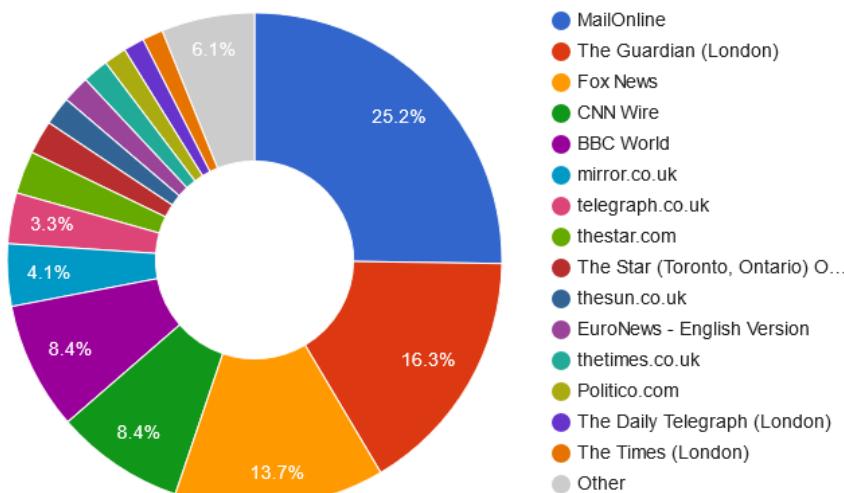
Fig. 2: Media sources included in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

Figure 2 shows the different media sources included in the MMC. As can be seen, next to traditional newspaper outlets, the MMC also comprises TV news reporting, that is, extracts of TV interviews or news broadcasts during which the mpox outbreak was discussed on specific news channels (e.g., Fox News, BBC World News, among others). This allowed for a more comprehensive investigation into the discursive representation of mpox in media discourse.

A second corpus was also collected in order to provide a contrastive analysis between global news reporting and the Italy's specific scenario. Indeed, as shown in Table 1 (see Section 1), given Italy's inclusion among the top twenty countries significantly affected by the mpox outbreak, the collection of the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC) was deemed necessary to also provide potential comparison between the global media representation and mpox portrayal in Italian news stories. Therefore, the VSC was collected by accessing once again NexisUni, using the expanded search terms 'vaiolo delle scimmie', 'monkeypox' and 'mpox', as well as relevant variations, and selecting only Italian media sources in the timespan from January 1, 2022, to April 25, 2023, to create a 250,448 word corpus.
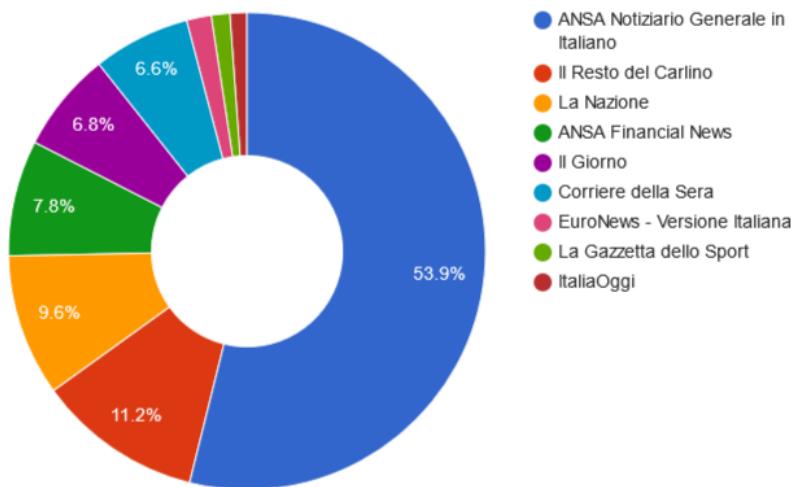
Fig. 3: Media sources included in the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC).

As illustrated in Figure 3, the majority of news stories originating from the Italian scenario and included in the VSC are from *ANSA Notiziario Generale in Italiano*. This is primarily because NexisUni is currently unable to offer a wider range of news stories from non-English-speaking countries. However, alongside *ANSA Notiziario Generale in Italiano*, there are also news stories sourced from traditional and well-established Italian newspapers including *Il Resto del Carlino*, *La Nazione*, and *Corriere della Sera*, among others.

While a more detailed analysis of the two corpora will be provided in Section 5, for the time being, the comparison between the VSC and MMC from a purely quantitative perspective yields some insights into their respective composition and density of news stories. As a matter of fact, if we want to focus on the density of news stories in the two corpora, we can underline that while the VSC corpus comprises 954 news texts in the timespan under investigation, the MMC corpus contains a significantly larger pool of 1,625 news texts in the same period of time, with the MMC corpus therefore including nearly seven times more tokens, thus indicating a substantial difference in size. Calculating the proportion between the two, we find that for every news story in the VSC corpus, there are approximately two news stories in the MMC corpus. This may suggest a higher density of news reporting within the MMC corpus, potentially indicating broader coverage of the topic. However, we must exercise caution in interpreting these findings, considering factors such as statistical significance and the representativeness of the two corpora.

The annotations introduced in the two corpora have also allowed us to analyse the distribution in news coverage of all the news stories linked to the mpox outbreak. Therefore, in the following figures (i.e., Figure 4 and Figure 5), the timelines of the media coverage of the mpox outbreak in the MMC and the VSC are displayed:
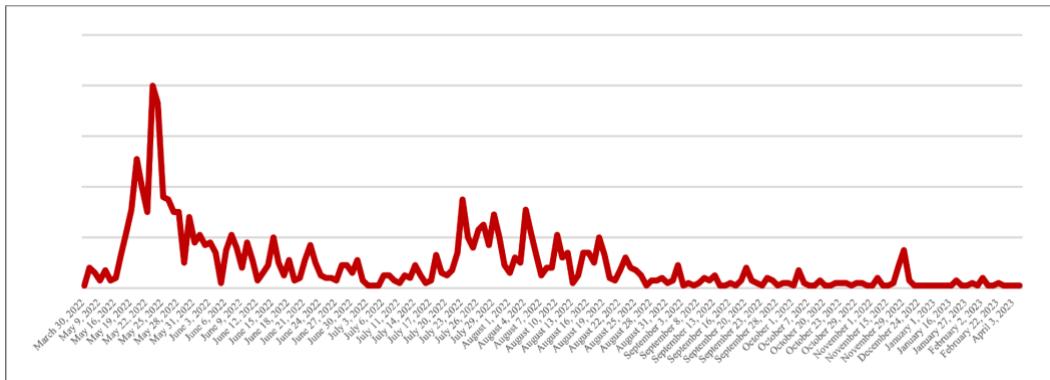
Fig. 4: Timeline of the media coverage of the mpox outbreak in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).
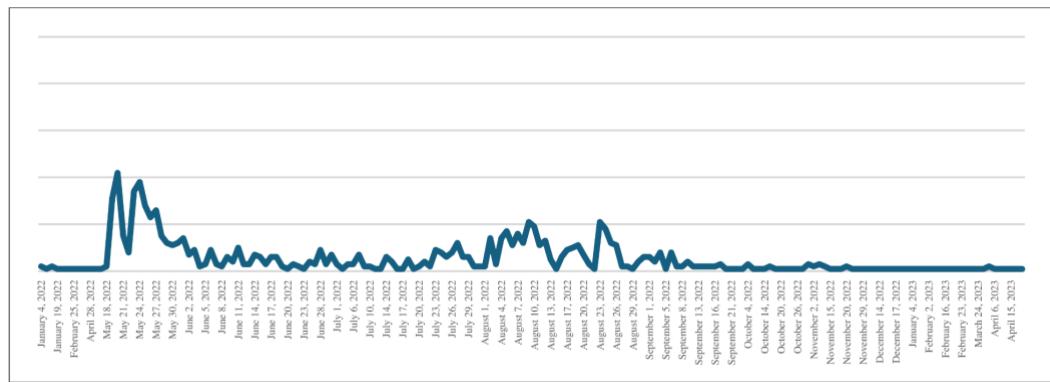
Fig. 5: Timeline of the media coverage of the mpox outbreak in the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC).

As can be seen from these figures, the media coverage is extremely similar. It reached a peak in the period from May 16 to June 6, 2022, when the first cases of mpox were reported in the Global North.[50] Another peak in news coverage was reached between July 17 and August 31, 2022. During this time, vaccine rollout efforts were encouraged by different countries and, notably, on July 23, 2022, the WHO declared mpox a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. This designation has only been used by the WHO for two other diseases: COVID-19 and Polio. Such a decision carries significant weight as WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus overruled a panel of advisers who could not come to a consensus. Furthermore, this opened the door for coordinating an international response to fight against this virus, thus explaining the peak in media coverage.

However, the timelines shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5 further highlight an interesting aspect related to the news reporting of the virus. In fact, global news reporting shows a broader retention of the news event, with peaks and periods when the mpox outbreak is still discussed. In contrast, in the Italian press, after an initial phase of extreme interest, reporting on the virus seems to diminish. This may be due to

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[50] Think Global Health, an initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations in collaboration with the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington, provides a detailed timeline with key dates and descriptions of main events linked to the mpox outbreak. The timeline can be accessed at https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org (last accessed: May 2, 2024).

the fact that the event in time was considered no longer newsworthy by the Italian press, something that might be deemed as worrisome as the global outbreak was only declared by the WHO as no longer a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on May 11, 2023.[51] The sudden drop in interest by the Italian press from September 2022 onwards therefore appears contradictory given the seriousness of the global threat. Another hypothesis linked to the sudden drop in interest is that once specific scapegoats for this outbreak were identified – specifically gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with other men (GBMSM) –, media attention gradually decreased globally and, more specifically, nationally in Italy. This hypothesis is confirmed by the close analysis of the data, and we refer to the dedicated sections of this paper analysing media coverage for more details (see Section 5). However, such a phenomenon could also be a case of *acclimatisation* to news where, after the initial peak of interest in it, public attention gradually dwindles as the event becomes normalised and assimilated into everyday life.

As part of the analysis of official documents issued by governments and health organisations, our investigation has focused on texts provided by the UK government (*gov.uk*), the New York City government (*nyc.gov*), and the Italian government (*salute.gov.it*). These sources were regularly updated with information about the anti-mpox vaccination campaign between July 2022 and May 2023. Different texts were then selected for qualitative analysis to investigate the discursive representation of mpox outbreak management from an institutional perspective (see Section 4 for a detailed examination of these texts).

As for our analytical framework, it combines insights coming from different theoretical and methodological approaches. While Section 2 has already provided a detailed background of the main theoretical tenets that inform our investigation, from a more discursive perspective, this study is guided in the qualitative and quantitative interpretation of the texts under scrutiny by a Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) framework of analysis. This is due to the fact that, while examining the linguistic elements in texts, CDS unveils the subtle yet profound influences of power dynamics in shaping and constraining interactions and behaviours.[52] From this perspective, which is the one adopted in the present study, language is therefore seen as playing a dual role: it is perceived as both (i) a construct of social and political life and (ii) something fundamentally shaped by the environment it is used in, forming a dialectical relationship between texts and contexts. Therefore, our investigation will pay close attention to the lexical choices made in the texts under scrutiny as terms and expressions individuals select reflect their affiliations, values and positions in the representation of societal issues. Furthermore, we closely examined the roles and relationships of the participants in the discourse, particularly with regard to the processes in which they are involved, to identify the agents performing actions and those affected by them.

While CDS, as previously argued, is one of the main frameworks of analysis in this study, another approach has been adopted, especially in order to deal with the large amount of data retrieved from the

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[51] The WHO decision is reported at the following website: https://www.who.int, accessed 2 May, 2024.

[52] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989); Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Fifteenth Edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992 [2013]); Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1995); Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Norman Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in Michael Handford and James P. Gee, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 1-12; Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in Teun A. van Dijk, ed., *Discourse as Social Interaction*, vol. 2 (London: SAGE, 1997), 258-284; Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak, eds., *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

media representation of the mpox outbreak. Indeed, corpus-based methodological approaches[53] have been utilised to deal with the large amount of texts collected to analyse how the media have reported news linked to mpox. It is crucial to underline, however, that while the quantitative results from the corpus analysis directly inform how commonly we will encounter a linguistic feature in the discourses surrounding the representation of the mpox outbreak, they will offer no information relating to the contextual factors favouring one linguistic feature over another (see Egbert *et al*. for a more detailed discussion of this aspect of corpus-based analyses).[54] It will be up to us to reconstruct such links between insights coming from corpus analysis and the societal contexts where those linguistic features were employed. Therefore, the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches will still guide our understanding of the texts under investigation, thus avoiding the common pitfall of merely relying on quantitative insights.

As for the corpus-based methodological approaches employed to analyse the texts under investigation, we have included an initial frequency analysis to identify the most commonly used terms in the datasets, followed by more qualitative methods aimed at contextualising the data and corroborating the quantitative insights. Specifically, concordance and collocation analyses were also conducted to explore the linguistic environments of selected terms in greater depth. The analysis was facilitated by the use of the Sketch Engine platform,[55] which provided additional tools that will be introduced and described in further detail in Section 5.

On the basis of this theoretical and methodological background, the following sections will firstly present a detailed analysis of the texts from the three government sources to shed light on the discursive strategies employed in the communication and management of the mpox outbreak (Section 4). Subsequently, a close analysis will be performed of how media outlets have reported the events surrounding the mpox epidemic through a corpus-based investigation of the global and Italian mediatic scenarios. The comparative analysis of the governmental and media discourses will therefore offer insights into the similarities and differences in the representation of the mpox outbreak and vaccination campaign across different types of discourse. In other words, our investigation seeks to answer the following research questions:

– **RQ1:** *What are the key discursive strategies employed by governmental and health organisations in communicating and managing the mpox outbreak, and how do these strategies reflect broader societal and political dynamics?*

– **RQ2:** *How do global and Italian media differ in their discursive representation of the mpox epidemic, and what factors predict the variation in news coverage?*

– **RQ3:** *How do lexical choices and linguistic patterns in media and governmental discourse shape public perceptions of the mpox outbreak, particularly in relation to the stigmatisation of specific social groups?*

By answering these research questions, the present study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role that language plays in shaping public perceptions and responses to health crises.

[53] Tony McEnery *et al*., *Corpus-Based Language Studies: An Advanced Resource Book* (London: Routledge, 2006); Tony McEnery and Andrew Hardie, *Corpus Linguistics: Method, Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2012); Paul Baker, *Using Corpora to Analyse Gender* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Paul Baker and Tony McEnery, eds., *Corpora and Discourse: Integrating Discourse and Corpora* (London: Palgrave, 2015); Jesse Egbert and Paul Baker, eds., *Using Corpus Methods to Triangulate Linguistic Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2019); Jesse Egbert *et al*., *Doing Linguistics with a Corpus: Methodological Considerations for the Everyday User* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2020); Anatol Stefanowitsch, *Corpus Linguistics: A Guide to the Methodology* (Berlin: Language Science Press, 2020); Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis*, Second Edition (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2023).

[54] Egbert *et al*., *Doing Linguistics with a Corpus*.

[55] Kilgarriff *et al*., "The Sketch Engine"; Kilgarriff *et al*., "The Sketch Engine: Ten Years On".

4. Key Insights from Official Guidelines for Mpox Management

This section will provide an analysis of mpox representation across official governmental websites, focusing on the UK government (*gov.uk*), the New York City government (*nyc.gov*) and the Italian government (*salute.gov.it*), which were regularly updated with information about the mpox transmission methods and anti-mpox vaccination campaign between July 2022 and May 2023. Our aim is to identify discursive cues on these platforms which appear to conflict with the medical guidelines endorsed by the respective institutions, contributing to widespread miscommunication that led to a biased shaping of the narrative surrounding mpox.

Let us now move on to Figure 6, Figure 7 and Figure 8, which will be used to draw a comparison between the informative sections on mpox transmission methods from the three websites previously mentioned:[56]

Transmission

Mpox does not spread easily between people unless there is very close contact.

Spread of mpox may occur when a person comes into close contact with an infected animal (rodents are believed to be the primary animal reservoir for transmission to humans), human, or materials contaminated with the virus. Mpox has not been detected in animals in the UK.

The virus is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, breathing in virus through the respiratory tract, or contact with mucous membranes (eyes, nose, mouth, genitals).

Person-to-person spread may occur through:

- direct contact with skin lesions or scabs (including during sexual contact, kissing, cuddling or other skin-to-skin contact)
- coughing or sneezing of someone who has mpox when they're close to you
- contact with clothing or linens (such as bedding or towels) used by someone with mpox

Fig. 6: Extract from the UK government website focusing on mpox transmission methods.[57]

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[56] The three screenshots were taken on April 28, 2024.

[57] The section of the UK government website devoted to mpox transmission methods can be reached online at https://www.gov.uk/guidance/monkeypox, accessed 2 May, 2024.

Transmission

Mpox is spreading almost exclusively through oral, anal and vaginal sex, and other intimate contact such as rimming, hugging, kissing, biting, cuddling and massage.

Mpox can spread through:

- Direct contact with a rash or sores of someone who has the virus, which is most common
- Prolonged face-to-face contact
- Contact with clothing, bedding and other items used by a person with mpox, which is less common

It is not yet known whether mpox can spread through semen, vaginal fluid, urine or feces.

A person with mpox can spread the virus to others from the time symptoms start until the rash has fully healed and a fresh layer of skin has formed. Some people can spread mpox to others from one to four days before their symptoms appear — it is not known how common this is. There is currently no evidence of people who never developed symptoms spreading the virus to someone else.

For more information, see CDC: How Mpox Spreads.

Fig. 7: Extract from the NYC government website focusing on mpox transmission methods.[58]

Come si diffonde Mpox da persona a persona?

Una persona affetta da Mpox è infettiva a partire dalla comparsa dei sintomi prodromici fino alla caduta delle croste di tutte le lesioni e la formazione di nuova pelle.

La trasmissione può avvenire attraverso il contatto fisico stretto (faccia a faccia, pelle a pelle, bocca a bocca o bocca a pelle), compresa l'attività sessuale, con una persona infetta, con i suoi fluidi corporei o le sue lesioni cutanee. Non è ancora noto se il virus possa essere trasmesso sessualmente attraverso i fluidi genitali.

Il virus può essere trasmesso anche da oggetti contaminati quali vestiti, lenzuola, asciugamani, posate, dispositivi elettronici e superfici.

Ulcere, lesioni o piaghe della bocca possono essere infettive e il virus può diffondersi attraverso il contatto diretto con la bocca, *droplet* respiratorie e probabilmente attraverso aerosol a corto raggio.

Il virus può anche diffondersi da una donna in gravidanza al feto, dopo la nascita attraverso il contatto pelle a pelle, o da un genitore infetto a un neonato o bambino per contatto stretto.

Le persone che sono contatto stretto, compresi gli operatori sanitari, i membri della famiglia e i partner sessuali, sono quindi a maggior rischio di infezione.

Fig. 8: Extract from the Italian government website focusing on mpox transmission methods.[59]

By having a cursory look at the three texts, it is immediately evident that the UK website markedly emphasises the rarity of mpox transmission, stressing that only close contact can cause it (from Figure

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[58] The section of the NYC government website dealing with mpox transmission methods is available online at https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/mpox.page, accessed 2 May, 2024.

[59] The section of the Italian government website devoted to mpox transmission methods can be reached at https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/malattieInfettive/dettaglioFaqMalattieInfettive.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=291, accessed 2 May, 2024.

6: 'Mpox does not spread easily between people unless there is very close contact'). It should be noticed that on the UK website, this information is not only fronted at the beginning of the mpox transmission methods section but is also conspicuously absent on the NYC (Figure 7) and Italian (Figure 8) websites. While this could be viewed as a minor difference at first glance, on closer inspection, it may reflect defining decision-making approaches and governance strategies rooted in the UK policies. This datum in fact appears to tie in with the literature on 'policy styles', that is, the different ways and coping strategies governments adopt to address social, political, financial and health-related problems.[60] As for the UK, Richardson and Zahariadis *et al.* argue that policymaking is characterised by (i) a 'reactive' rather than 'anticipatory' style, thus indicating a focus on addressing a problem after it has arisen, rather than taking proactive measures to prevent it beforehand; and (ii) a consensual style in its state-society relationship, in the sense that measures unpopular among citizens are rarely implemented due to the fear of losing public consensus or support. Thus, it could be argued that positioning the information related to the difficulty with which mpox spreads at the outset of the text epitomises: (i) a 'reactive' rather than 'anticipatory' approach because highlighting that people do not get easily infected does not stimulate cautious or preventative behaviour; and (ii) a consensual style in the state-society relationship, as downplaying the severity of the problem projects an image of the government as a strong, powerful and responsible father able to protect his citizens.

Another significant difference to be underlined concerns the representation of sexual intercourse as a potential mode of virus transmission. While the three websites acknowledge that scientific studies have not conclusively ascertained whether genital fluids can transmit the virus, they still include sexual activities among the practices to be avoided to prevent infection. However, the NYC website, in particular, foregrounds this information:

(1) Mpox is spreading almost exclusively through oral, anal and vaginal sex […]

and to make this connection between sex and mpox even stronger, the NYC website provides a thorough list of the sexual practices allegedly responsible for virus transmission:

(2) […], and other intimate contact such as rimming, hugging, kissing, biting, cuddling and massage.

While in all the texts there is mention of sexual intercourse as a risk practice, there are remarkable differences in the extent to which this information is presented and managed. The NYC website places it at the start of the text, asserting that mpox can "almost exclusively" be contracted through sexual activities and offering a full list of risk sexual practices. Contrariwise, the Italian and the UK websites mention it within the text, using the term "compresa" and "including" to suggest that sexual intercourse is just one of several risk practices leading to mpox transmission, and not necessarily the primary one:

(3) La trasmissione può avvenire attraverso il contatto fisico stretto (faccia a faccia, pelle a pelle, bocca a bocca o bocca a pelle), *compresa* l'attività sessuale, con una persona infetta, con i suoi fluidi corporei o le sue lesioni cutanee. Non è ancora noto se il virus possa essere trasmesso sessualmente attraverso i fluidi genitali. (emphasis added)[61]

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[60] Jeremy Richardson, *Policy Styles in Western Europe* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982); Nikolaos Zahariadis *et al.*, "Policy Styles and Political Trust in Europe's National Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis", *Policy Studies*, 44.1 (2023), 46-67.

[61] Translation: "Transmission can occur through close physical contact (face-to-face, skin-to-skin, mouth-to-mouth, or mouth-to-skin), including sexual activity, with an infected person, their body fluids, or skin lesions. It is not yet known whether the virus can be transmitted sexually through genital fluids".

(4) Person-to-person spread may occur through: direct contact with skin lesions or scabs (*including* during sexual contact, kissing, cuddling or other skin-to-skin contact) […]. (emphasis added)

In this regard, there is a case to be made that among the three websites under investigation the NYC website is the only one to establish such an explicit and strong connection between the virus and sex, while the others do not give it as much prominence. Hence, with respect to these data, two possible interpretations can be discerned: (i) the NYC policy style aims for clearer and unequivocal communication, working on the assumption that medical jargon is susceptible to misinterpretation on the part of the readers, so it is recommendable to expressly outline which practices pose a threat to individuals' health; or (ii) the NYC website strives to cement a stronger relationship between sexuality and illness, particularly mpox in this instance, compared to the UK and the Italian ones.

In addition, the inclusion of information as to the potential transmission of the virus from pregnant women to the foetus or through skin-to-skin contact after birth on the Italian website provides insights into the cultural and medical discourses. At first glance, this may seem insignificant, but on closer examination, it reveals underlying values associated with Italian culture:

(5) Il virus può anche diffondersi da una donna in gravidanza al feto, dopo la nascita attraverso il contatto pelle a pelle, o da un genitore infetto a un neonato o bambino per contatto stretto.[62]

More specifically, it can be seen that the family-centred structure and deep reverence for the sanctity of motherhood that are characteristic of Italian culture[63] are reflected in these scientific guidelines.[64] By acknowledging the foetus as a living and sentient being with the potential to contract the virus from its mother, the Italian website demonstrates a commitment to maternal and infant health that extends beyond the immediate postnatal period. On the other hand, the lack of such details on the UK and NYC websites may indicate distinct cultural outlooks on maternal and child health. This reveals a uniquely Italian cultural inclination to shield the family nest from any potential external risk that might play havoc with its inner balance. While maternal well-being remains a focus in these places, the different emphasis on family-centric approaches and the respect for motherhood observed in Italian culture may not be just as manifest.

The information consistently provided and highlighted across all the three online guidelines in the mpox transmission method section is the risk of transmission through direct skin-to-skin contact, particularly contact with lesions. However, when moving on to the sections discussing mpox vaccination on the UK and Italian websites, a heretofore unmentioned category emerges as a priority for vaccination, that is, gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with other men (GBMSM):

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[62] Translation: "The virus can also spread from a pregnant woman to the foetus, after birth through skin-to-skin contact, or from an infected parent to an infant or child through close contact".

[63] Marina Bettaglio, "Maternal Momoirs in Contemporary Italy", in Laura Lazzari and Joy Charnley, eds., *To Be or Not to Be a Mother: Choice, Refusal, Reluctance and Conflict: Motherhood and Female Identity in Italian Literature and Culture*, Special issue of *Intervalla: Platform for Intellectual Exchange*, 1 (2016), 47-60. Available online at https://www.fus.edu/intervalla/special-volume-1-to-be-or-not-to-be-a-mother-choice-refusal-reluctance-and-conflict, accessed 2 May, 2024.

[64] "Put on a pedestal and supported by a plethora of naturalistic religious and lay discourses, this powerful cultural construction continues to dominate the Italian cultural landscape" (Ibid., 48).

Who is MVA recommended for?

UKHSA currently recommends that MVA is offered to:

✓ **Healthcare workers who are caring for and who are due to start caring for a patient with confirmed monkeypox**

✓ **Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men.** Your clinician will advise vaccination for you if you have multiple partners, participate in group sex or attend 'sex on premises' venues

✓ **People who have already had close contact with a patient with confirmed monkeypox.** Vaccination with a single dose of vaccine should be offered as soon as possible (ideally within 4 days but sometimes up to 14 days)

Fig. 9: Extract from the UK government website focusing on the anti-mpox vaccination campaign.[65]

Al momento, la modalità di contagio e la velocità di diffusione, così come l'efficacia delle misure non farmacologiche fanno escludere la necessità di una campagna vaccinale di massa. Tenuto conto dell'attuale scenario epidemico e della limitata disponibilità di dosi, la vaccinazione, come profilassi pre-esposizione a partire dai 18 anni di età, viene offerta a:

- personale di laboratorio con possibile esposizione diretta a *orthopoxvirus*.

- persone gay, transgender, bisessuali e altri uomini che hanno rapporti sessuali con uomini (MSM), che rientrano nei seguenti criteri di rischio:

  - storia recente (ultimi 3 mesi) con più partner sessuali e/o

  - partecipazione a eventi di sesso di gruppo e/o

  - partecipazione a incontri sessuali in locali/club/cruising/saune e/o

  - recente infezione sessualmente trasmessa (almeno un episodio nell'ultimo anno) e/o

  - abitudine alla pratica di associare gli atti sessuali al consumo di droghe chimiche (Chemsex).

Fig. 10: Extract from the Italian government website focusing on the anti-mpox vaccination campaign.[66]

What is markedly inconsistent is that the online guidelines do never state that skin or lesions of GBMSM individuals are inherently more contagious than those of non-GBMSM individuals. However, GBMSM are listed as a high-priority category for vaccination on the websites. Furthermore, both extracts depict additional risk factors associated with this group, such as engaging in multiple partners, group sex, sex

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[65] The extract taken from the UK government website devoted to the anti-mpox vaccination campaign can be found online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/631619318fa8f502256a9570/UKHSA-12370-monkeypox-vaccination-leaflet.pdf, accessed 2 May, 2024.

[66] The extract taken from the Italian government website focusing on the anti-mpox vaccination campaign can be found online at https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/malattieInfettive/dettaglioFaqMalattieInfettive.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=291, accessed 2 May, 2024.

in specific environments like clubs or saunas, recent contraction of sexually transmitted diseases or participation in chemsex activities. In light of this, it can be argued that specific *mating strategies*[67] – the manners in which individuals engage in intimate, romantic or sexual activities – are mentally represented, socially constructed and discursively reproduced as pertaining to GBMSM. This misconstruction was physically enacted in the bias-driven anti-mpox vaccination campaign that classified this population as a risk group without scientific evidence. While stereotypes surrounding the gay and lesbian communities appear to be grounded in what has been termed a *gender inversion assumption*, according to which homosexuality leads to the individual performing behaviours stereotypically associated with the opposite sex,[68] this assumption does not apply to health concerns. In health contexts, gay people are more likely to be construed as a *health threat*[69] because their alleged promiscuity is inextricably linked to disease.[70] Based on the data analysed so far, it appears that discourses surrounding GBMSM and promiscuity may have subtly influenced and infiltrated the official online guidelines on mpox transmission, leading to the portrayal of this category as a risk group based on non-scientific principles.

In contrast to the UK and Italian websites, the NYC website not only steers clear of establishing this connection, with GBMSM going unmentioned, but also reiterates that access to anti-pox vaccination is guaranteed irrespective of sexual orientation and gender identity:

Eligibility

Vaccination is free and available regardless of immigration status.

The following people are eligible to be vaccinated in NYC:

- People of any sexual orientation or gender identity who have or may have multiple or anonymous sex partners, or participate or may participate in group sex
- People of any sexual orientation or gender identity whose sex partners are eligible per the criteria above
- People who know or suspect they have been exposed to mpox in the last 14 days
- Anyone else who considers themselves to be at risk for mpox through sex or other intimate contact.

Fig. 11: Extract from the NYC government website focusing on mpox vaccination campaign.[71]

The guidelines above restate twice that there is no direct correlation between a specific sexual orientation or gender identity and a higher risk of contracting mpox, for emphasis falls on the construction of sexual intercourse as a risk practice. This point is conveyed through the repeated use of the opening noun phrase "People of any sexual orientation or gender identity", which precedes the relative clauses "who have or

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[67] David Pinsof and Martie G. Haselton, "The Effect of the Promiscuity Stereotype on Opposition to Gay Rights", *PloS One*, 12.7 (2017), 1-10, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0178534.

[68] Mary E. Kite and Kay Deaux, "Gender Belief Systems: Homosexuality and the Implicit Inversion Theory", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 11.1 (1987), 83-96.

[69] Catherine A. Cottrell and Steven L. Neuberg, "Different Emotional Reactions to Different Groups: A Sociofunctional Threat-Based Approach to Prejudice", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88.5 (2005), 770-789.

[70] In this regard, it can be noticed that the connection between unprotected sex/unsafe sexual practices and GBMSM as well as HIV and GBMSM is still widespread, despite extensive debunking of these associations. See Peter Hegarty and Felicia Pratto, "The Effects of Social Category Norms and Stereotypes on Explanations for Intergroup Differences", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80.5 (2001), 723-735; Damian R. Murray *et al.*, "Perceived Threat of Infectious Disease and its Implications for Sexual Attitudes", *Personality and Individual Differences*, 54.1 (2013), 103-108; Sarah K. Calabrese *et al.*, "Sexual Stereotypes Ascribed to Black Men Who Have Sex with Men: An Intersectional Analysis", *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 47.1 (2018), 143–156, DOI: 10.1007/s10508-016-0911-3.

[71] The extract from the NYC government website linked to the mpox vaccination campaign can be found online at https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/mpox-vaccination.page, accessed 2 May, 2024.

may have multiple or anonymous sex partners, or participate or may participate in group sex" and "whose sex partners are eligible per the criteria above". This introductory noun phrase plays a pivotal role in providing a different representation of the virus compared to the UK and Italian guidelines, in that it is significantly more in tune with scientific evidence and, most importantly, is more inclusive for individuals who may have been exposed to the risk of transmission.

Other documents that are worth analysing in this investigation include the mpox vaccination registration forms. However, our focus will be limited to the model provided by the California Department of Public Health, as it is the only publicly accessible document available online for examination.

Current Gender Identity
☐ Genderqueer or non-binary ☐ Woman/Female ☐ Man/Male ☐ Trans Female/Trans Woman ☐ Trans Male/Trans Man ☐ Prefer not to say
☐ Identity not listed

Which of the following best represent the patient's sexual orientation?
☐ Bisexual ☐ Gay, lesbian, or same-gender loving ☐ Heterosexual or straight ☐ Questioning, unsure ☐ Prefer not to say
☐ Orientation not listed

What sex is listed on the patient's birth certificate?
☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Nonbinary or intersex ☐ Prefer not to say

Is the patient Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin?
☐ Yes ☐ No

What is the patient's race or nationality?
☐ American Indian ☐ Asian ☐ Black or African American ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ☐ White ☐ Prefer not to say
☐ Race not listed

Fig. 12: Extract from mpox vaccination registration form provided by the California Department of Public Health.[72]

As can be noticed in the extract from the mpox vaccination registration form above, applicants must enter sociodemographic details such as their current gender identity, sexual orientation, sex listed on the birth certificate and race/nationality. Nonetheless, if vaccination is provided only to the risk categories mentioned above, failure to provide this information could potentially lead to the applicant being denied vaccination. Therefore, access to vaccination entails what has been referred to above as the *flushing out* (revelation) of an individual's identity, making it transparent in the process. In addition to reinforcing stigma against GBMSM, this vaccination campaign may unwittingly transform the act of vaccination into a "telltale" moment, echoing Sontag's metaphorical phrase,[73] for it casts the act of receiving the vaccine as a revealing marker, subtly exposing individuals as either healthcare workers or members of the GBMSM community – the two groups able to access the vaccine.

5. The Representation of the Mpox Outbreak in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC) and the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC)

In the following section, we now turn our attention to how the mpox outbreak was represented in media discourse by investigating, as previously described (see Section 3), two corpora: the mpox outbreak in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC), representative of global news reporting, and the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC), representative of the Italian media scenario. Both corpora have been analysed by employing specific corpus linguistics tools.

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[72] The form is available online at https://eziz.org/assets/docs/MPOXregistration_consentform.pdf, accessed 2 May, 2024.

[73] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*.

In particular, a frequency analysis was firstly performed to get a sense of the most frequently used terms in the two corpora. Even though such an approach emphasises frequencies over other aspects of language use in the analysis of data, it must be regarded as a starting point for our investigation, which has then used more qualitative approaches to the contextualisation of the data. Therefore, concordance analysis and collocation analysis were also performed on the data under investigation so as to better understand the linguistic environment of each word taken into consideration.

As for the collocation analysis, we employed a span of five words to the right and five words to the left for consideration and the statistical measures utilised for computing collocates were LogDice, MI3, and LogLikelihood, in order to observe specific linguistic associations from different perspectives.[74] In the adoption of Sketch Engine[75] as the online software for corpora analysis, we have also employed some of the tools provided by this platform, particularly the word sketch tool and the word sketch difference. As for the latter, it can be used to quickly analyse the collocates and contextual words of a given lemma, thus offering a concise summary of its grammatical and collocational patterns. These findings are then categorised into grammatical relations, identifying elements like objects or subjects of verbs, modifiers, and more, which can be also visualised in a relationship graph. The analysis of the collocates and contextual surrounding of a lemma is guided by rules within the sketch grammar of the software. As for the word sketch difference tool, it facilitates the comparison between two different lemmas by contrasting collocations, thus allowing for an analysis of how they are distinctively used in context. In other words, by examining collocates, this tool offers valuable insights into variations in usage and meaning when contrasting two lemmas by automatically generating word sketches and highlighting the collocates that distinguish the two. In this way, by using a colour-coded system, Sketch Engine assigns a unique colour to each search word, generating two word sketches for comparison. This comparison is conducted across different grammatical relations, with colours indicating the frequency of each collocate relative to the search words. The intensity of the colour reflects the strength of the collocation, while neutral white lines represent collocates with no preference for either search word.

After this brief description of the main corpus linguistics techniques used in the analysis of the MMC and the VSC, in the next sections, we will comment on the main results ensuing from the application of these tools, offering a broader understanding of the implications and significance of the linguistic patterns observed in the corpora.

5.1. *Discursive Representation of the Mpox Outbreak in the MMC*

In this section, we will start by focusing firstly on the media representation of the mpox outbreak in global news reporting. Therefore, in Table 2, a word frequency list of the MMC is provided, displaying the first twenty content words most frequently occurring in the corpus. Next to the raw and relative frequency of each item in the list, we have decided to also include the relative document frequency, that is, the percentage of documents that contain the item. Therefore, only the words that show a relative document frequency of 100% were included in the list, thus implying that these are words that are well-distributed in the corpus under investigation.

#	Item	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency (pmw)	Relative document frequency
1	*monkeypox*	13,902	7,987.76	100%
2	*cases*	9,074	5,213.70	100%

#	Item	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency (pmw)	Relative document frequency
3	*said*	8,057	4,629.36	100%
4	*health*	7,921	4,551.22	100%
5	*people*	6,658	3,825.53	100%
6	*virus*	6,036	3,468.14	100%
7	*more*	5,260	3,022.27	100%
8	*disease*	3,848	2,210.97	100%
9	*outbreak*	3,792	2,178.79	100%
10	*contact*	3,767	2,164.43	100%
11	*uk*	3,611	2,074.79	100%
12	*men*	3,605	2,071.34	100%
13	*now*	3,343	1,920.80	100%
14	*spread*	3,291	1,890.93	100%
15	*first*	3,180	1,827.15	100%
16	*new*	3,164	1,817.96	100%
17	*vaccine*	2,929	1,682.93	100%
18	*other*	2,907	1,670.29	100%
19	*like*	2,751	1,580.66	100%
20	*US*	2,716	1,560.55	100%

Table 2: First twenty content words in the word frequency list extracted from the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

As can be seen from Table 2, while some of the words frequently occurring in the MMC are straightforward indicators of how newsworthiness is constructed in the media products we have taken into consideration,[76] with items such as 'now' (raw frequency [r.f.]: 3,343; normalised frequency [n.f.]: 1,920.80) constructing timeliness or 'new' (r.f.: 3,164; n.f.: 1,817.96) and 'first' (r.f.: 3,180; n.f.: 1,827.15) enhancing unexpectedness, there are three specific elements that demand our focused attention: the items 'people' (r.f.: 6,658; n.f.: 3,825.53), 'contact' (r.f.: 3,767; n.f.: 2,164.43), and 'men' (r.f.: 3,605; n.f.: 2,071.34).

Our initial focus will be on 'people' and 'men', which are being analysed together due to their role in highlighting a notable shift in the discursive representation of the mpox outbreak. In fact, upon closer examination of the concordance lines for these two terms, it becomes evident that, initially, the virus was portrayed as impacting 'people' in a general sense:

(6) Experts have stressed that human-to-human transmission is rare, but said some *people* who have come into contact with the individual will be contacted as a precaution.

(7) Cases in the UK are rare, with the viral infection – which was first found in humans in 1970 – most prevalent in parts of Western and Central Africa. In most instances it causes a mild illness, with fever

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[76] Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, *News Discourse* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, "Why Do News Values Matter? Towards a New Methodological Framework for Analyzing News Discourse in Critical Discourse Analysis and Beyond", *Discourse & Society*, 20.10 (2014), 1-24; Monika Bednarek, "Voices and Values in the News: News Media Talk, News Values and Attribution", *Discourse, Context & Media*, 11 (2016a), 27-37; Monika Bednarek, "Investigating Evaluation and News Values in News Items That Are Shared via Social Media", *Corpora*, 11.2 (2016b), 227-257; Helen Caple and Monika Bednarek, "Rethinking News Values: What a Discursive Approach Can Tell Us about the Construction of News Discourse and News Photography", *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 17.4 (2016c), 435-455; Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, *The Discourse of News Values: How News Organizations Create Newsworthiness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford U.P., 2017).

usually followed by a rash breaking out, usually on the face. Most *people* recover within four weeks, medics said today, although the virus can cause serious illness in rare cases.

(8) It was first discovered in a colony of monkeys in the modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1958, with the first human case confirmed in 1970. In most cases it is a "mild self-limiting" illness and the majority of *people* recover within a few weeks, experts say.

(9) Monkeypox does not spread easily between people. It is usually a mild self-limiting illness and most *people* recover within a few weeks. However, severe illness can occur in some individuals.

The fact that the virus was initially constructed from a discourse perspective as affecting people in general is testified also by the meta-data introduced into the corpus, underlining that from May 18 to May 31, 2022 there is a peak in occurrences of the word, with texts from May 23, 2022 featuring the word 416 times (n.f.: 3,972.99). Additionally, the examples provided extracted from the concordance lines are chronologically ordered and, as can be seen, portray the initial phases of the media coverage of the virus as 'people'-oriented.

However, upon further analysis of the corpus data, it becomes evident that there was a shift in the discursive representation of the mpox outbreak. In fact, as the events progressed, the focus transitioned from a general impact on 'people' to a more specific emphasis on 'men' within the media discourse. This shift can be observed in the increasing frequency of the plural term 'men' in the corpus, with a peak in frequencies in the period June–August 2022, indicating a notable change in the narrative and attention given to the affected demographic. Therefore, as the outbreak progressed and official guidelines began to identify a specific segment of the population more affected by it (see Section 4 for a detailed account), the discourse underwent a transformation: mpox transitioned from a 'people'-oriented to a 'men'-oriented virus, therefore linguistically represented as potentially affecting male individuals more and, in particular, those who have sex with other men, as can be seen from the word sketch difference in Figure 13, where the lemmas 'man' and 'person' are compared.

man 4,314× | | | | | | | | | **person** 1,521×

verbs with "man/person" as object

	man	person
affect	40	0
urge	37	0
warn	39	0
involve	16	0
include	34	0
test	11	0
encourage	10	0
advise	10	0
return	8	0
confirm	23	0
age	8	0
accuse	6	0
identify	9	0
kill	6	0
impact	5	0
arrest	4	0
admit	4	0

	man	person
alert	4	0
find	6	0
queue	3	0
consider	4	0
be	196	40
say	26	10
suspect	10	3
treat	6	4
mean	4	3
believe	4	3
vaccinate	9	9
infect	6	15
diagnose	11	79
know	0	4
keep	0	3
contract	0	3
require	0	4
expose	0	3

	man	person
become	0	6
touch	0	4
damage	0	3
choose	0	3
recognize	0	3
call	0	24
class	0	30

Fig. 13: Word sketch difference of the lemma 'man' and 'person' in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

As can be seen from the word sketch difference provided in Figure 13, the verbs typically collocating with the lemma 'man' as their object are displayed in green, while the verbs collocating with the lemma 'person' as their object are displayed in red. By analysing such results, it quickly becomes apparent how the group of processes involving male individuals is significantly larger than those involving people in general. Moreover, the type of verbal processes linked to these two lemmas distinctly indicates that while 'people' are at the centre of diagnostic interest (i.e., the verb 'diagnose' strongly collocates with this lemma), 'men' are primarily represented as being affected by the virus – a clear discursive indication of a targeted population. This shift in the journalistic narrative prompts a deeper exploration of the reasons behind the altered representation and the implications it carries. Therefore, further investigation into the linguistic patterns and contextual usage of the term 'men' in relation to the mpox outbreak is essential to understand the evolving narrative and its underlying constructs. Indeed, the emergence of 'men' as a prominent term in the context of the mpox outbreak suggests a deliberate shift in focus within media coverage driven, as we have seen, by specific linguistic representations in institutional discourse, and this is the reason why Figure 14 shows a visualisation of the word sketch for the lemma 'man' in the MMC:
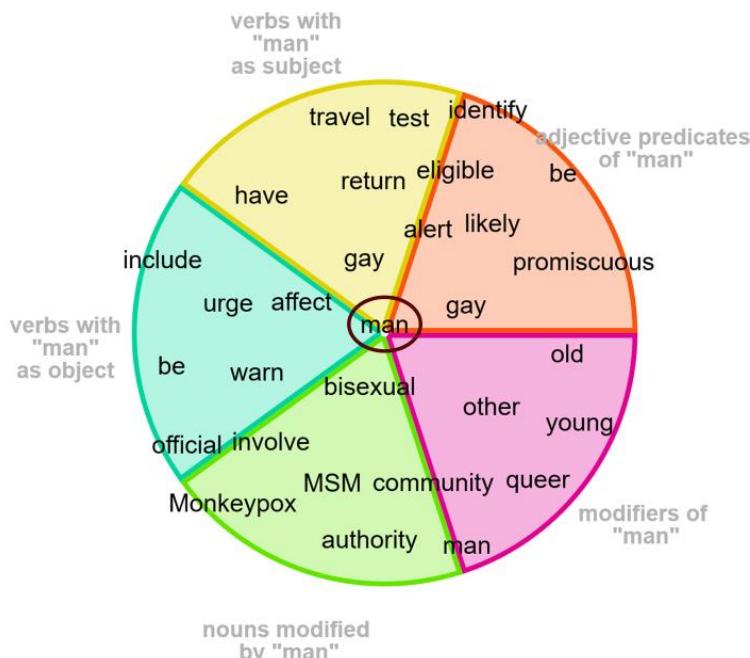
Fig. 14: Visualisation generated via Sketch Engine of the word sketch for the lemma 'man' in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

An examination of the word sketch for the lemma 'man' indeed reveals fascinating collocational patterns associated with this linguistic element. It becomes evident that a particular segment of the population, specifically gay, bisexual and men who have sex with other men (GBMSM) individuals, is being linguistically identified as the most vulnerable to mpox. Within this group, those who engage in promiscuous sexual behaviours are the ones deemed in need of vaccination and care.

Turning our attention to the wordlist provided in Table 2, the frequent use of the word 'contact' (r.f.: 3,767; n.f.: 2,164.43) in the MMC is also noteworthy. In fact, when we used the concordancer to observe

its behaviour across the news stories, we identified a pattern that can be easily noticed in the following examples extracted from the concordance lines:

(10) Health officials said they are investigating where and how the latest cases of monkeypox acquired their infection. People who might have been in close *contact* with either case are being contacted and given information and health advice, the UKHSA said.

(11) UKHSA is rapidly investigating the source of these infections because the evidence suggests that there may be transmission of the monkeypox infection in the community, spread by close *contact*.

(12) Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton, says the latest cases may be the first time transmission of monkeypox though sexual *contact* has been documented, but this has not been confirmed, and in any case it is probably close *contact* that matters.

(13) Officials stress that the virus is only spread through very close *contact*. It is not known to be a sexually transmitted disease.

As argued in the previous section, the noun 'contact' tends to occur when means of transmission are explained, and this is the reason why it typically occurs with the adjectives 'close' (MI3: 28.63; Log Likelihood: 12,481.22; LogDice: 12.75) or 'direct' (MI3: 25.52; Log Likelihood: 3,987.95; LogDice: 11.43), as it is 'close personal contact' to spread the virus, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. However, once again, this appears at odds with the mpox narrative woven by the media, in which GBMSM individuals are the main carrier of the virus. In fact, if close contact is enough to get infected, why are only GBMSM discursively targeted?

The fact that GBMSM are indeed discursively constructed as the scapegoats of the mpox outbreak is further underscored when we examine the list of adjectives that are most frequently used in the corpus provided in Table 3:

#	Item	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency (pmw)	Relative document frequency
1	*other*	2,907	1,670.29	100%
2	*first*	2,410	1,384.72	100%
3	*new*	2,129	1,223.27	100%
4	*gay*	1,997	1,147.42	100%
5	*sexual*	1,887	1,084.22	100%
6	*close*	1,769	1,016.42	100%
7	*public*	1,679	964.71	100%
8	*high*	1,489	855.54	100%
9	*last*	1,482	851.52	100%
10	*infected*	1,337	768.20	100%
11	*bisexual*	1,325	761.31	100%
12	*many*	1,319	757.86	100%
13	*infectious*	1,058	607.90	100%
14	*african*	587	337.28	100%
15	*unusual*	521	299.35	100%
16	*endemic*	493	283.27	100%
17	*severe*	479	275.22	100%
18	*tropical*	441	253.39	100%
19	*direct*	424	243.62	100%

#	Item	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency (pmw)	Relative document frequency
20	*western*	303	174.10	100%

Table 3: First twenty adjectives in the word frequency list extracted from the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

As can be seen, there is a distinct prominence of references to 'gay' (r.f.: 1,997; n.f.: 1,147.42) and 'bisexual' (r.f.: 1,325; n.f.: 761.31) men in the MMC. These adjectives consistently appear in contexts that not only highlight the vulnerability of these individuals to the virus but also stress the importance of them taking specific precautions to prevent its transmission (see Figure 15):

Fig. 15: Randomised concordance lines showing the context of use for the adjectives 'gay' and 'bisexual' in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

This linguistic phenomenon is of particular significance as it reflects the media's role in framing the narrative around mpox: by repeatedly associating 'gay' and 'bisexual' men with both the highest susceptibility to the virus and the necessity for protective measures, the media influence how this segment of the population is perceived and how public health measures are formulated. Such a discursive construction is further exacerbated by the type of linguistic associations that are formed in media discourse, reinforcing stereotypical notions and stigmatising this group of individuals, as the word sketch provided in Figure 16 shows:
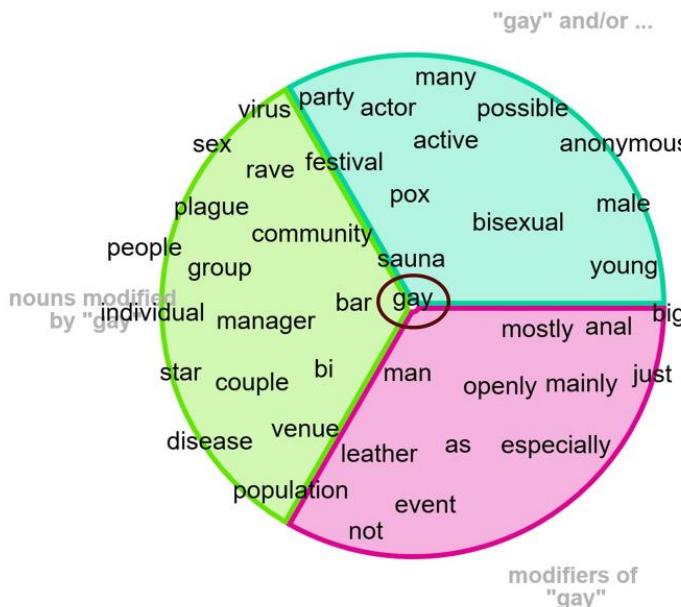
Fig. 16: Visualisation generated via Sketch Engine of the word sketch for the adjective 'gay' in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

Therefore, as can be seen from Figure 16, it must be added that an examination of the word sketch for the lemma 'gay' reveals a discursive construction that reinforces that idea of promiscuity linked to the spread of the virus. Words such as anonymous sex encounters, saunas, gay fetish communities (i.e., leather, rubber, etc.), and plague are indeed extremely indicative of this. In this way, the deliberate emphasis on gay and bisexual men in media coverage of the mpox outbreak raises critical questions about the intersection of language, public health and societal attitudes, underscoring the need to avoid specific types of narratives around public health crises that can influence the allocation of resources and support to affected communities. Furthermore, the linguistic associations and portrayals of specific demographics in relation to the mpox outbreak highlight the broader issues of discrimination and marginalisation within public health discourse. Indeed, by discursively foregrounding certain individuals as particularly vulnerable and, therefore, indirectly responsible for the spread of the virus, the media perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contributes to their social stigmatisation. This not only hinders effective public health communication but also perpetuates disparities in access to healthcare and support systems. In light of these linguistic implications in the media coverage of the mpox outbreak, it is therefore imperative to pay close attention to the language used in public health communication and framing of epidemiological narratives. By taking into consideration the implications of language choices and contextual representations, there is an opportunity to challenge and reshape the narrative around infectious diseases, fostering inclusive and evidence-based responses that prioritise public health equity and social justice rather than reproducing specific ideological discourses.

However, if we go back to the adjective frequency list, there are other two elements that are worth our attention, that is, the adjectives 'African' and 'endemic'. These two terms have been taken into consideration because of the effect that the discursive constructions linked to them caused and the reparative actions taken by the WHO.

Fig. 17: Sample of randomised concordance lines for the adjectives 'African' and 'endemic' in the Mpox Media Corpus (MMC).

As we can see from the sample of concordance lines shown in Figure 17, mpox is discursively constructed as being endemic to African countries. From such a geographical area, mpox has then affected other countries. Therefore, we can clearly see that the media are also constructing the virus as an outside enemy that is attacking Western society, thus also leading to racist discourses and a process of otherisation, whereby the virus is seen as an outside enemy menacing the Global North. In order to curb such a discursive construction, which was exacerbated by the media coverage of the virus, on November 28, 2022, the WHO issued a document to address the use of racist and stigmatising language in different contexts, hoping that the change of the name from 'monkeypox' to 'mpox' would mitigate this discursive escalation:[77]

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[77] The document can be found online at https://www.who.int, accessed 2 May, 2024.

Fig. 18: An extract from the WHO's document recommending the adoption of the word 'mpox' as a preferred term for monkeypox.
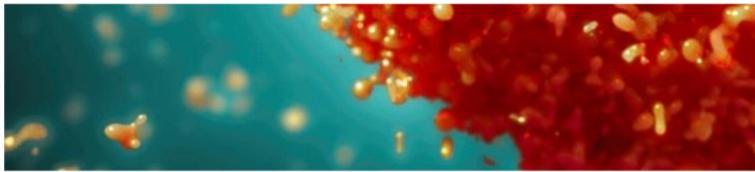
The WHO's recommendation that the word 'mpox' be adopted instead of the term 'monkeypox' to refer to the virus was made following consultations with global experts and considerations including scientific appropriateness and usability in different languages. However, one of the main reasons prompting such a suggestion was to avoid stigmatising specific regions of the world (specifically, African countries). Therefore, by introducing the term 'mpox', the WHO aimed to mitigate the concerns raised by experts addressing the observed racist and stigmatising language associated with the original term in the midst of a global outbreak. Nonetheless, the following example taken from the concordance lines of the word 'African' illustrates the type of reaction coming, for instance, from Fox News at the name change, also showing the type of close association that mpox was discursively linked to:

> (14) Will the pox get renamed so monkeys won't feel ashamed? The WHO gets bitter about diseases named after a critter. The World Health Organization is changing the name of monkey pox because name shouldn't reference places or animals and it could be stigmatizing. True. But what exactly is stigmatizing? The monkey part or the pox part? Or the fact that you got infected from anonymous depraved sex at outdoor concerts? It's why I stopped eating bananas at Lollapalooza. But it's the name they got a problem with. Virologist saying in the context of the current global outbreak continued reference to and nomenclature – scroll that back there – of this virus being African is not only inaccurate, but it's also discriminatory, and stigmatizing. How could it be discriminatory?

As evident, the commentary trivialises the name change, making light of the situation and potentially contributing to the stigmatisation of those affected. Indeed, it stigmatises individuals who may have contracted mpox by associating it with 'anonymous depraved sex at outdoor concerts'. This not only perpetuates negative stereotypes but also deflects from the seriousness of the health issue by focusing on sensationalised aspects.

5.2.   *Discursive representation of the mpox outbreak in the VSC*

In this section, we will now move on to the analysis of the media representation of the mpox outbreak in Italian news reporting. Therefore, in Table 4, a word frequency list of the VSC is offered, displaying the first twenty content words most frequently used in the corpus. Also in this case, next to the raw and

relative frequency of each item in the list, we have decided to also include the relative document frequency, thus implying that these are words that are well-distributed in the corpus under investigation.

#	Item	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency (pmw)	Relative document frequency
1	*vaiolo*	2,000	7,985.69	100%
2	*scimmie*	1,655	6,608.16	100%
3	*casi*	1,635	6,528.30	100%
4	*virus*	914	3,649.46	100%
5	*persone*	573	2,287.90	100%
6	*vaccino*	546	2,180.09	100%
7	*salute*	501	2,000.41	100%
8	*rischio*	495	1,976.46	100%
9	*malattia*	491	1,960.49	100%
10	*oms*	405	1,617.10	100%
11	*paesi*	375	1,497.32	100%
12	*dosi*	373	1,489.33	100%
13	*vaccinazione*	360	1,437.42	100%
14	*ministero*	346	1,381.52	100%
15	*regione*	339	1,353.57	100%
16	*infettive*	337	1,345.59	100%
17	*primo*	335	1,337.60	100%
18	*uomini*	313	1,249.76	100%
19	*sintomi*	302	1,205.84	100%
20	*contatti*	292	1,165.91	100%

Table 4: First twenty content words in the word frequency list extracted from the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC).

As can be noticed, the word frequency list is extremely similar to the one already commented on for the MMC. However, a notable peculiarity merits our attention, represented by the term 'rischio' (translation: 'risk'; r.f.: 495; n.f.: 1,976.46). A word sketch visualisation of the term shows that the word is typically used to assess the situation and/or instruct specific measures to curb the outbreak:
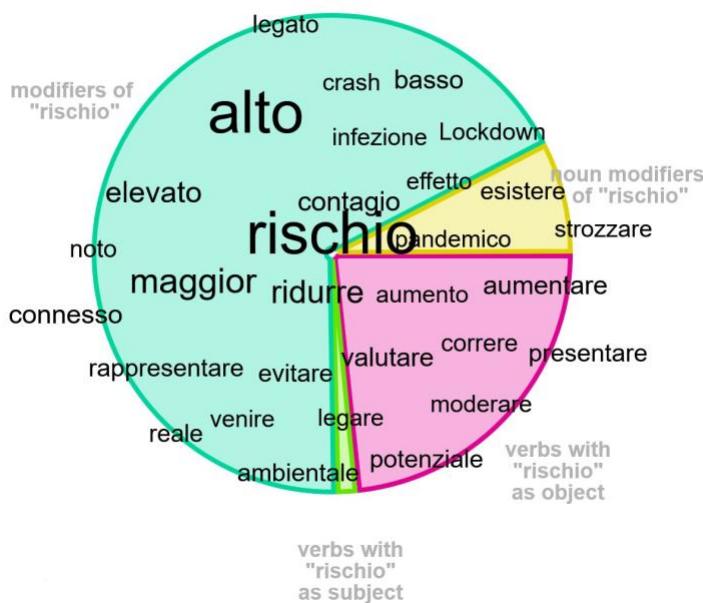
Fig. 19: Visualisation generated via Sketch Engine of the word sketch for the term 'rischio' in the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC).

Nonetheless, what Figure 19 fails to show is that, among the strongest collocates of the term 'rischio', we have items such as 'categorie' (translation: 'categories'; MI3: 21.03; Log Likelihood: 842.12; LogDice: 12.03), 'soggetti' (translation: 'subjects'; MI3: 20.79; Log Likelihood: 805.87; LogDice: 11.99), and 'persone' (translation: 'people'; MI3: 17.32; Log Likelihood: 347.63; LogDice: 10.77). More specifically, the term 'rischio' is found in phrases of the type 'categorie a rischio' (r.f.: 42; n.f.: 167.7), 'soggetti a rischio' (r.f.: 39; n.f.: 155.72), and 'persone a rischio' (r.f.: 28; n.f.: 111.8). These general expressions, therefore, do not necessarily refer to who these individuals are; these risk categories, however, are clearly defined by the ministerial guidelines and, therefore, the ideological value linked to the scapegoating technique used is hidden thanks to this linguistic strategy. However, as the following examples show, it is clear who these categories are from the concordance lines extracted from the corpus, and how they are constructed discursively:

(15) In accordo con la circolare del ministero della Salute, la vaccinazione non ha carattere di massa ma è diretta alle persone a maggior *rischio* di infezione da Monkeypox virus, come le persone gay, transgender, bisessuali e altri uomini che hanno rapporti sessuali con uomini, che rientrino in una serie di criteri di rischio, e il personale di laboratorio con possibile esposizione diretta a orthopoxvirus.[78]

(16) Il Ministero [della Salute] ha individuato poi, tra le categorie a *rischio*, le persone gay, transgender, bisessuali e uomini che abbiano avuto rapporti sessuali a *rischio*. Vista l'esigua quantità di dosi a disposizione non si sta ancora ragionando in termini territoriali, e l'auspicio è che arrivino al più presto nuovi rifornimenti. Riguardo invece all'individuazione dei soggetti a *rischio*, la valutazione verrà fatta

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[78] Translation: "As per the Ministry of Health directive, vaccination efforts are not aimed at mass immunisation but rather at individuals at higher risk of Monkeypox virus infection, such as gay, transgender, bisexual people and other men who have sex with men, meeting specific risk criteria, as well as laboratory personnel potentially exposed to orthopoxvirus".

dai medici dei reparti delle malattie infettive, saranno loro a stilare gli elenchi e a inviarli nel laboratorio di Forlì, sempre ovviamente nel rispetto della privacy.[79]

(17) Per esempio, affermano gli autori dell'editoriale, potrebbe non essere sufficiente la cosiddetta vaccinazione 'ad anello' offerta ai contatti di una persona positiva, ma per contrastare l'infezione potrebbe rendersi necessario un approccio più aggressivo che offra la vaccinazione a tutte le persone ad alto *rischio*.[80]

(18) Le strutture di Malattie infettive e Igiene hanno già degli elenchi di persone a *rischio* che verranno chiamate direttamente; inoltre, i cittadini che ritengono di dover fare il vaccino potranno fare riferimento, in specifici orari, direttamente ai numeri di telefono delle Malattie infettive presenti nelle due Aziende: qui troveranno anche una sorta di servizio di "counselling" per spiegare la loro situazione e per un eventuale inserimento nelle agende per la vaccinazione.[81]

As can be observed in the examples provided, the word 'rischio' plays a pivotal role in constructing the discursive categorisation of individuals and groups identified as vulnerable to the mpox virus. Indeed, the term is not only employed to assess the epidemiological situation but also to delineate specific social groups considered at higher risk of infection. These groups – particularly gay, transgender, bisexual individuals, and men who have sex with men – are therefore singled out as the primary focus of public health interventions, such as vaccination, as seen in examples (15) and (16). This linguistic strategy effectively highlights the marginalisation of certain populations by linking them explicitly to the notion of risk. For instance, in example (15), 'rischio' is used to create a hierarchy of vulnerability, with GBMSM placed at the forefront of those deemed in urgent need of protection. The explicit mention of this group reinforces their status as a high-risk category, implicitly connecting their sexual practices to the spread of the virus. Example (16) further emphasises this categorisation, with the phrase 'categorie a rischio' (trans.: 'risk categories') directly associating this population with the threat of infection. The discourse here normalises the identification of GBMSM as inherently more susceptible, without providing a deeper explanation of the virus's transmission mechanisms that might otherwise neutralise such a targeted focus. In examples (17) and (18), 'rischio' continues to function as a tool for justifying public health measures, such as expanded vaccination efforts. These examples, therefore, demonstrate that the repeated use of the word 'rischio' in the VSC constructs a narrative that aligns risk with particular identities, behaviours and 'mating' strategies (see Section 4), thereby reinforcing social and sexual stereotypes. While this linguistic framing aims to target high-risk groups for medical intervention, it simultaneously perpetuates stigmatising associations between sexual orientation, behaviour and disease, which risks undermining broader public health awareness.

A contrastive analysis of the term 'risk' in the MMC has shown a difference in the discursive representation of how the concept of danger linked to the spread of the virus is constructed. Indeed, in international news reporting, the notion of risk is linked to general public concerns (e.g., from the

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[79] Translation: "The Ministry [of Health] has then identified gay, transgender, bisexual individuals, and men who have engaged in risky sexual behaviour as risk categories. Due to the limited availability of doses, vaccination territorial distribution planning has not yet commenced, with hopes resting on the swift arrival of new supplies. As for identifying at-risk individuals, this falls to doctors in infectious disease departments, who will compile the lists and forward them to the laboratory in Forlì, all while ensuring utmost privacy, of course".

[80] Translation: "For instance, the authors of the editorial suggest that relying solely on the so-called 'ring' vaccination, provided to the contacts of a positive individual, may not suffice. Instead, a more assertive approach, encompassing vaccination for all high-risk individuals, might be necessary to effectively combat the infection".

[81] Translation: "Infectious Diseases and Hygiene facilities already keep lists of at-risk individuals who will be contacted directly. Additionally, citizens wishing to receive the vaccine can refer to specific phone numbers during designated hours at the Infectious Diseases departments of the two Health Authorities. Here, they will also find a 'counselling' service available to explain their situation and potentially schedule their vaccination appointments".

concordance lines: '(overall) risk to the general public', 'the risk of transmission to the general population', 'the risk to the population', etc.), highlighting potential impacts on society as a whole. In contrast, Italian press coverage emphasises that the concept of risk is associated with individuals who can contract and spread the virus. 'Risk', therefore, is no longer an abstract notion but is linked to animated actors who may be considered responsible for the outbreak. This subtle shift in emphasis signifies a crucial aspect in the portrayal of the outbreak in Italian news reporting, focusing on the individual implications rather than the broader societal impact.

#	Item	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency (pmw)	Relative document frequency
1	*primo*	735	2,934.74	100%
2	*sanitario*	447	1,784.80	100%
3	*infettivo*	381	1,521.27	100%
4	*nuovo*	374	1,493.32	100%
5	*ultimo*	350	1,397.50	100%
6	*sessuale*	350	1,397.50	100%
7	*europeo*	312	1,245.77	100%
8	*stretto*	239	954.29	100%
9	*possibile*	226	902.38	100%
10	*mondiale*	192	766.63	100%
11	*scorso*	186	742.67	100%
12	*alto*	186	742.67	100%
13	*cutaneo*	182	726.70	100%
14	*generale*	159	634.86	100%
15	*grave*	156	622.88	100%
16	*noto*	148	590.94	100%
17	*italiano*	148	590.94	100%
18	*positivo*	147	586.95	100%
19	*diverso*	144	574.97	100%
20	*africano*	139	555.01	100%

Table 5: First twenty adjectives in the word frequency list extracted from the Vaiolo delle Scimmie Corpus (VSC).

In order to further contrast the MMC and the VSC, Table 5 shows the list of adjectives that are most frequently used in the corpus representative of Italian news reporting. As can be seen, also in the case of the modifiers that are usually employed in connection with the mpox outbreak, there are no striking differences if compared to the list of most frequently used adjectives in the MMC (see Table 4). Some noteworthy absences are represented by the terms referring to gay, bisexual and men who have sex with other men (GBMSM) individuals, even though, as previously discussed, these are still included in the Italian discursive representation of mpox through a peculiar linguistic strategy found in the VSC. However, the same racist discourses can also be found in the Italian press, with the adjective 'africano' (translation: 'African'; r.f.: 139; n.f.: 555.01) used to describe the provenance of the virus and, therefore, linking the outbreak to this geographic area. This linguistic strategy therefore perpetuates biased representations also within the Italian press coverage of the mpox outbreak.

6. Conclusion

In the light of the multiple analyses reported in the previous sections, it is now clear how mpox was selected as a 'stigmatising attribute' and arbitrarily attached to a minority group, GBMSM, resulting in

their discursive representation as a 'health threat' and their subsequent 'status loss', as described in Section 2. This has led us to the critical question of how lexical choices and linguistic patterns in media and governmental discourse shape public perceptions of the mpox outbreak, particularly in relation to the stigmatisation of specific social groups (RQ3). In this respect, it can be argued that, in our case study, stigma subtly trickles not only across news discourse, biased by nature and thus less surprisingly,[82] but it also slithers its way into official governmental guidelines, which are supposed to maintain neutrality.

Additionally, the cross-linguistic analysis of governmental guidelines opened a window on the key discursive strategies employed by governmental and health organisations in languaging, representing and managing the mpox outbreak (RQ1), as outlined in Section 4. The differences in how the UK, US and Italian guidelines address mpox transmission and risk groups reveal not only variations in policymaking styles but also underlying cultural attitudes towards healthcare communication. The linguistic choices made in these guidelines mirror broader societal dynamics, with officialdom strongly echoing the culture and ideology of the contexts of reference.

Finally, this study has also begged the question as to how global and Italian media differ in their discursive representation of the mpox outbreak, and what factors may predict variation in news coverage (RQ2). As discussed in Section 5, a comparative analysis of the MMC and VSC revealed that global media wove a strong connection between GBMSM-specific sexual behaviour and the contagious nature of the disease, resulting in stigma-ridden discourses surrounding the social category targeted. On the other hand, Italian media reproduced discursively such narratives shifting responsibility onto governmental guidelines, thus avoiding commitment and lowering epistemic modality. Both contexts, however, contributed to framing GBMSM as at the root of the outbreak, reinforcing broader discourses of racial and sexual marginalisation.

In addition, it can be concluded that the stigma formation process here in play developed out of a problematic interaction, or perhaps a 'perverse dialogue', between news reporting and the institutional domain. In fact, this analysis has shown that mpox-related stigma began to surface in news reporting when official websites linked to the UK, US and Italian governments released their guidelines on how to avert the risk of contagion. For example, a linguistic shift in support of this can be seen in the transition indicated in Section 4 and Section 5 from the construction of mpox as a people-oriented to a GBMSM-oriented disease. This conceptual fallacy arises from a glaring inconsistency between the scientific evidence regarding mpox transmission methods – primarily skin-to-skin contact and contact with infected lesions – and its intra-linguistic misguided translation, so to speak, which categorises GBMSM individuals as a high-risk group. Ever since that moment, and on the strength of the AIDS pandemic decades before, mpox has come to be discursively (mis)portrayed as a 'new gay plague', as Shah maintains,[83] rooted in deviant 'mating strategies' whereby non-straight male individuals develop intimacy with each other. This process shows the dangers underlying the overlapping between scientific communication and stigma, where the influence of stigma on scientific discourse can engender biased narratives that deeply embed themselves into societal consciousness, shaping our perceptions of reality.

Besides, the cross-linguistic contrastive comparison of the UK, US and Italian official guidelines on mpox transmission methods not only reveals slight information mismatches but also divergent manners of information distribution across the texts, alongside diverse approaches to healthcare issues and underpinning cultural-laden aspects. In summary, based on this investigation, it can be argued that (i) the UK guidelines highlight the rarity of mpox transmission, seemingly with the intent of mitigating potential worry or apprehension among people, which embodies a culture-specific 'policy style' (see Section 4) unique to the UK government; (ii) inconsistencies arise in how the three guidelines address

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[82] Flavia Cavaliere, *The Shaping of the News: How Information Can Be Moulded by the Press* (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2012).
[83] Shah, "'The New Gay Plague'".

sex as a transmission factor: while NYC places sexual intercourse in top-of-the-heap position in the risk factors list and fleshes it out with an array of practices purportedly responsible for infection transmission, the UK and Italy use linking words such as 'including' and 'compreso' when referring to sex as a risk factor, thereby reducing its prominence compared to the NYC guidelines; (iii) the mention of pregnancy solely in the Italian guidelines prompts reflections on the significance attributed to motherhood within the culture of reference, Italy, as this theme remains completely unaddressed in the other two guidelines. In view of this, our study suggests that despite the official and government-bound nature of guidelines, these will invariably carry culture-dependent elements that undermine the outer veneer of objectivity of officialdom.

This analytical background thus leads us to question the validity and legitimacy of the anti-mpox vaccination campaign management, primarily in its targeting risk groups who have been defined as such on less than scientific grounds. Erroneous and biased premises, which falsely suggest that GBMSM are more inclined to certain 'mating strategies' (see Section 4) have mistakenly caused the viral spotlight to be cast on them, once again fortifying the stigmatisation of non-straight men as social pariahs. From this standpoint, illness, mpox in this case, turns into an instrument to deepen the roots of stigma by projecting the idea that GBMSM are inherently more vulnerable to infection, as discussed in Section 4 and Section 5. It can be noticed that the medical domain is engaged to produce a 'dialogic expansion'[84] of the false narratives surrounding the long-established and cemented link between homosexuality and promiscuity, all too often held accountable for the spread of viruses.

While this study provides a detailed analysis of how news reporting and governmental guidelines (mis)represented the onset and spread of mpox at an international and national level, resulting in biased narrations redolent of homophobic and racist discourses (see Section 5), its analytical scope does not extend to its construction across social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X and TikTok. By collecting a corpus representative of the social media construction of this phenomenon, it would be possible to gain deeper insights into how public perceptions and reactions were influenced and how misinformation or alternative viewpoints may have proliferated in these digital spaces.

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[84] James R. Martin and Peter R. R. White, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Part 2. Intersectionality and Hate Speech in Online Spaces

Maria Cristina Nisco and Annalisa Raffone

Analyzing Intersectional Ableist and Fatphobic Discourses in Digital Spaces. The Case of TikTok[1]

Abstract: Medicalized definitions of obesity and disability classify them as conditions under which people experience serious physical and psychological pathologies affecting the body, having severe implications in their daily lives, and forcing them to face inequalities at the personal, social, political, and cultural levels. There is currently no agreement on whether obesity is a disability; nevertheless, ableism and fatphobia frequently intersect, accentuating weight and disability stigma in offline and online environments. As Goffman points out, stigma is "an attribute that is deeply discrediting", and it is caused by stereotypes and mental models embedded in society. Hate Speech against fat people has been attested in literature, especially concerning their representation in the press and Social Media Spaces (SMSs). Indeed, although social media have become places where counteracting narratives around these issues are shared, and several anti-discrimination laws have been implemented over the years, Hate Speech Online (HSO) is still pervasive. Despite the abovementioned research, to the best of our knowledge, no investigations have been conducted so far on fatphobia at its intersection with ableism in SMSs. Accordingly, this paper will examine an under-researched form of HSO, namely discriminatory behaviors against fat people with disabilities (henceforth, FPWD), through a quantitative and qualitative approach to provide insights into how hateful intersectional discourses on disability and obesity/fatness are construed and enacted, focusing on how social media users participate in the process of meaning production.

Keywords: *Ableism*, *Fatphobia*, *Hate Speech Online*, *Intersectionality*, *Social Media*, *TikTok*

1. Ableist and Fatphobic Discourses: Hate Speech in Social Media Discourse

There are complex relations between obesity and disability. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Obesity Report,[2] the rates of people living with overweight or obesity are constantly increasing, with serious health risks associated with rising levels of obesity.[3] In fact, obesity is one of the key risk factors for a number of noncommunicable diseases and the leading risk factor for disability.[4] Disability, on the other hand, which can be experienced by almost everyone temporarily or permanently at some point in life, is similarly increasing partly due to population ageing as well as to risk of developing comorbid conditions, among them obesity. Therefore, despite intervention efforts, both obesity and disability remain major concerns worldwide. While medicalized definitions of obesity and disability classify them as conditions under which people experience serious physical and psychological pathologies affecting the body,[5] the inequalities people are forced to face at the personal, social, political, and cultural levels, merge into forms of discrimination representing not merely a public health concern

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[2] World Health Organization, "WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022", *WHO* (2022), www.who.int.
[3] World Health Organization, "Obesity", *WHO* (2022), www.who.int.
[4] Ibid.; Rebecca M. Puhl et al., "Policies to Address Weight Discrimination and Bullying: Perspectives of Adults Engaged in Weight Management from Six Nations", *Obesity*, 29.11 (2021), 1787-1798.
[5] Ibid.; World Health Organization, "Disability", *WHO* (2022), www.who.int/.

but also a social justice problem leading to social bias and prejudice, which then results in varying forms of stigma.

In a classic formulation, stigma has been defined as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting", something that reduces the stigmatized person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one".[6] In this view, stigma can be described as "a special kind of relationship between an attribute and a stereotype",[7] as something that is embedded in a "language of relationships".[8] Interestingly, stigma can be said to occur as a discrepancy between 'virtual social identity' (namely, how a person is characterized by society) and 'actual social identity' (the attributes really possessed by a person).[9] Stigmatized individuals would thus experience a deviant condition, society identifying them as flawed or spoiled (see also Jones).[10] Besides locating stigma at the dimension of the individual, some definitions have further stressed the fact that if stigma is an attribute or feature that conveys a devalued social identity within a specific context, this identity is then construed by identifying who belongs to a particular social group and whether a certain characteristic may lead to a devalued social identity in a given context. It can be conceptualized based on the processes of cognitive categorization; in other words, it takes place when a mark links an individual via attributional processes to undesirable characteristics that are collectively deemed as discrediting. As such, stigma does not appear to be located entirely and exclusively within the stigmatized person, but also within a social context that defines an attribute as devaluing.[11]

As a situational threat, stigma directly affects FPWD via mechanisms of discrimination, expectancy confirmation, and stereotype activation, and indirectly via threats to their personal and social identities.[12] It may then result in forms of ableism and fatphobia which increasingly appear as pressing issues nowadays, because they influence individual and collective acceptability. More specifically, ableism and fatphobia are two systems of oppression which have received less theoretical and empirical attention compared to other such systems.[13] Ableism draws on a set of beliefs and practices that devalue and discriminate against people with disabilities (PWDs) and often rests on the assumption that PWDs need to be 'fixed', to some extent.[14] Fatphobia refers to a dislike of fat/obese people based on their body size, having severe implications on employment, education, interpersonal relations and so forth.[15] Unfortunately, ableism and fatphobia frequently intersect and interact,[16] perpetuating a web of bias and injustice rooted in a variety of different negative feelings such as intense dislike, superiority, disgust, recrimination, shame or fear.[17] These sentiments can all trigger violent actions/reactions, strengthening

[6] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 3.

[7] Ibid., 4.

[8] Ibid., 3.

[9] Ibid., 2.

[10] Edward E. Jones, *Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1984).

[11] Jennifer Crocker et al., "Social Stigma", in Daniel T. Gilbert et al., eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Fourth Edition (New York: Oxford U.P., 1998), 504-553.

[12] Brenda Major and Laurie T. O'Brien, "The Social Psychology of Stigma", *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56 (2005), 393-421.

[13] Laurie Cooper Stoll and Justine Egner, "We Must Do Better: Ableism and Fatphobia in Sociology", *Sociology Compass*, 15.4 (2021), e12869.

[14] Zawn Villines, "What is Ableism, and What is its Impact?", *MedicalNewsToday* (2021), www.medicalnewstoday.com.

[15] Matt Lowe, "Your Guide to Understanding & Combating Fatphobia", *All about Obesity* (2021), www.allaboutobesity.org.

[16] Stuart W. Flint and Jeremé Snook, "Disability Discrimination and Obesity: The Big Questions?", *Current Obesity Reports*, 4.4 (2015), 504-509.

[17] Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Napoli: Paolo Loffredo Editore, 2020); Maria Cristina Nisco, "Online Abuse and Disability Hate speech: A Discursive Analysis of Newspaper Comment Boards on Harvey's Law", in Balirano and Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate*, 75-91; Mark Sherry et al., *Disability Hate Speech: Social, Cultural and Political Contexts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); Bronwen Hughes and Maria Cristina Nisco, eds., "Special Issue on Disability, Shame and Discrimination*", International Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, 16.4 (2022); Annalisa Raffone, "'Her Leg Didn't Fully Load in': A Digitally-mediated Social-Semiotic Critical Discourse Analysis of Disability Hate Speech on Tiktok", in Bronwen Hughes and Maria Cristina Nisco,

and accentuating weight and disability stigma both in offline and online environments, and often converging in forms of hate speech.

When dealing with the issue of hate speech, whether it be offline or online, two conflicting principles emerge: freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination.[18] In fact, if the value of free speech and expression is undeniable, the uncontrolled manifestations of those who engage in hateful, discriminatory acts can hardly be recognized as harmful, especially in the digital ecosphere: "[t]he definition of hate speech online and the laws curtailing such forms of speech are in constant flux due to the supranational character of the internet, the slippery nature of online harassment, and the porous relationship between actual violence and discriminatory speech".[19] Hate speech against fat and disabled people, just like other cases of discrimination, tends to draw on the cultural illusion of ideal people, confining the 'Other' to the status of ultimate inferiority: indeed, hate pertains to the intentional devaluing of the 'Other' so that the superiority of the majority is confirmed, it is drawn out by rejected traits, characteristics, and non-conforming bodies.[20]

In this context, digital communication represents a double-edged sword since if, on the one hand, it connects different people, groups, and societies on a broad scale, on the other hand, the anonymity afforded by the screen may lead to derogatory and offensive behaviours which reflect the explicit intention to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred. The expansion of Social Media Sites (SMSs) has transformed the ways in which people can interact, not merely offering an alternative way of engaging in communication but, most importantly, providing a number of different communicative dynamics and structures which have the potential to empower minority or stigmatized groups by granting them access to a public sphere, thus providing them with a voice.[21] SMSs, however, have also served to replicate and perpetuate the social discrimination and inequalities that people already experience in 'real' life, leading to prejudicial attacks and stigmatization against lesser represented groups (in this case, fat and disabled people), thus generating some discriminatory discourses that reach larger audiences (see Lupton)[22] and then turn into ableist and fat-phobic practices and attitudes within society.

Among the different SMSs, TikTok was specifically chosen for investigation in this case-study for a number of reasons. Initially launched in 2016, TikTok grants users the possibility to create short-form videos, to upload entertaining content and to share funny moments. According to statistics, in the last few years, TikTok's usage has exploded, with 1.5 billion monthly active users in 2023 and an expected 1.8 billion by the end of 2024.[23] The platform is said to feature a 180% growth among those aged 15-25 during and soon after the Covid-19 pandemic (namely from 2020 onwards), because people spent more time on social media during quarantine, in fact it was the most downloaded app in 2021, beating long-

eds., *Disability, Shame and Discrimination, Special Issue of International Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, 16.4 (2022), 17-42; Annalisa Raffone, "Sex, Love, and Stigma: A Social Media Critical Discourse Analysis of Sexual-Emotional Disability Discourse on Reddit Posts", in Margaret Rasulo and Jan Engberg, eds., *The Emotional Valence of Innovation and Change: Discourses of Societal Transformation*, *Special Issue of the Identity, Language and Diversity Journal (I-LanD)*, 1.2022 (2022), 113-131; Maria Cristina Nisco, "Framing Disability and Sexuality: An Analysis of Instagram Users' Comments", in Paola Catenaccio et al., eds., *Dimensions of Framing: Representation, Cognition, Interaction*, Special Issue of *Textus*, 1.2023 (2023), 157-178.

[18] Balirano and Hughes, *Homing in on Hate*.

[19] Ibid., vi.

[20] Katharine Quarmby, *Getting Away with Murder: Disabled People's Experiences of Hate Crime in the UK* (London: Scope, 2008); Leah Burch, "'*All Parasites Should Perish': Online Disablist Hate Speech and a Welfare Rhetoric on 'Reddit'*" (Liverpool: Liverpool Hope University, 2016); Sherry et al., *Disability Hate Speech*.

[21] Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, eds., *The Language of Social Media Identity and Community on the Internet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[22] Deborah Lupton, *Fat*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[23] David Curry, "TikTok App Report 2024: Holistic Overview of the Most Popular App of Past Three Years", *Business of Apps* (2024), www.businessofapps.com.

time favorite social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat.[24] Although, as of January 2024, TikTok ranked (by number of monthly active users) as the fourth most popular platform worldwide (falling respectively behind Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram),[25] it was deemed of central importance among the social media platforms that are most popular with younger generations – especially with users aged 11-17[26] – as data show that they spend nearly two hours per day on TikTok, making it the social media platform they use most.[27] This makes it a significant SMS for engaging in a global dialogue[28] and extremely interesting for this research, since it offers a wide range of views on the online presence of ableist and fatphobic discourses, across geographical areas, showing diverse viewpoints and perspectives on the intersecting issues of disability and obesity. In fact, unlike other platforms, TikTok's short-form video content allows for the quick and engaging dissemination of information,[29] with micro-narratives evolving into a trend of expression, telling stories using digital tools that combine text, images, videos, and sound. Indeed, while it offers the chance to showcase oneself, share personal experiences, and connect with others,[30] thus democratizing content creation, it simultaneously runs the risk of perpetuating or reinforcing entrenched stereotypes.

In order to explore the above-mentioned dynamics in the digital realm, this study delves into the complexities of disability and weight bias in social media discourse, positing that meaning is construed and negotiated through social interactions, in the ongoing interplay between individual actions and societal structures. More specifically, this research aims to investigate 1) whether social media interactions on TikTok perpetuate or curb the stigmatization of weight and disability, and 2) how fatness and disability – and FPWD – are discursively portrayed in TikTok users' comments. It is the authors' belief that such key research questions require empirical evidence from social media discourse since people are embedded in a process of meaning-creation, which has significant consequences on how fat and disabled people are discursively construed and socially perceived on the basis of some prevailing – and contrived – categories. If such categories operate by perpetuating social inequalities, to what extent can they be unearthed, reconfigured, and deconstructed to foreground social change? Indeed, social media may exacerbate experiences of stigma or they may serve to provide a space to build solidarity, reduce isolation, and increase awareness of inherent bias and prejudice.

The way language constructs, reifies, and often conceals realities through subtle but pervasive power mechanisms reveals covert layers of assumed 'truth' present in the text[31] which bear hierarchical relationships assigning specific values to identities (see Derrida).[32] Such mechanisms provide the boundaries for classification on the basis of social, cultural, and political norms and practices; people are, therefore, labelled not so much (or not necessarily only) as a result of an internal/individual condition, but rather as a result of a social assignment. Accordingly, FPWD are assigned various forms of social designations, they are created and maintained in and through words, in a continuous discursive exchange and construal that make up human interaction and then, in turn, reality. By emphasizing the

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[24] Laura Ceci, "TikTok: Usage during COVID-19", *Statista* (2022), www.statista.com.

[25] Stacy J. Dixon, "Most Popular Social Networks Worldwide as of January 2024, Ranked by Number of Monthly Active Users", *Statista* (2024), www.statista.com.

[26] The investigation could thus take into account the age-group targeted by the Parthenope-funded research project.

[27] Jack Shepherd, "25 Essential TikTok Statistics You Need to Know in 2024", *The Social Shepherd* (2024), www.thesocialshepherd.com.

[28] Laura Ceci, "Distribution of Tiktok Users Worldwide as of January 2024", *Statista* (2024), www.statista.com.

[29] Shuwei Zeng, *Chinese Female Representation on Short Video Applications and Their Perception: Douyin (Tiktok) as a Case Study* (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2023).

[30] Jingfang Li et al., "Exploring Cultural Meaning Construction in Social Media: An Analysis of Liziqi's YouTube Channel", *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 23.4 (2023), 1-12.

[31] The term *text* is used in the broadest sense possible, referring both to written material and to everyday-life contexts, daily situations and activities through which meanings and identities are produced, reproduced, and possibly contested.

[32] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins U.P., 1976); Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

role of language and discourse as pivotal elements in the daily construction of fatness and disability, this study seeks to investigate public understanding of such concepts.[33]

2. Theoretical Framework

Starting from the premise that a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the relationship between language and ideology would yield significant insights into data analysis and findings,[34] the theoretical and methodological foundations of this work are represented by the combination of Corpus Linguistics (CL)[35] and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS).[36] Beginning with Baker et al.,[37] merging corpus linguistics techniques and critical analytical tools has proven significant[38] with both small and large corpora.[39]

Whereas CL, due to its quantifiable nature, allows for greater objectivity,[40] Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) enables the in-depth exploration of the context-based motives underlying speakers' linguistic choices.[41] Concerning the investigation of HSO as a social phenomenon, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach[42] is particularly suitable for the present research since it is founded on the idea that society, discourse, and cognition are interrelated and assumes that people's attitudes and behavior are shaped by 'ideologies' or abstract mental models that are expressed and reproduced through discourse. Thus, discourse structures help unveil how ideologies and power are exerted over people and, in this case, minority groups. Indeed, research has demonstrated that minorities are the primary targets of hate speech.[43] Furthermore, this study will also consider how the extensive use of SMSs reinforces and amplifies discursive power dynamics which are "more subtle and complex" in digital environments.[44] These dynamics frequently result in perpetuating prejudice and negative stereotypes and in the emergence of novel forms of group dominance and contrast between in-groups and out-groups, displayed through linguistic and digital cues.

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[33] For the purposes of this study, authors will employ both the terms 'overweight/obese/obesity' (which are mostly preferred from a medical perspective) and 'fat/fatness' (terms many activists prefer to adopt when referring to their body size).

[34] Debbie Orpin, "Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis: Examining the Ideology of Sleaze", *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 10.1 (2005), 37-61.

[35] Paul Baker et al., "A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press", *Discourse & Society*, 19.3 (2008), 273-306; Paul Baker, "Acceptable Bias? Using Corpus Linguistics Methods with Critical Discourse Analysis", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9.3 (2012), 247-256.

[36] Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)", in John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 582-596; Teun A. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Cognition in Society", in David C. Mitchell and David Crowley, eds., *Communication Theory Today* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1996), 107-126; Teun A. Van Dijk, *Discourse and Power* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Teun A. Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge. A Sociocognitive Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2014).

[37] Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*

[38] Alan Partington and Anna Marchi, "Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis", in Douglas Biber and Randi Reppen, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of English Corpus Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2015), 216-234; Mark Nartey and Isaac N. Mwinlaaru, "Towards a Decade of Synergising Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis: A Meta-Analysis", *Corpora*, 14.2 (2019), 203-235.

[39] Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*

[40] Pascual Pérez-Paredes and Niall Curry, "Epistemologies of Corpus Linguistics across Disciplines", *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 3.3 (2024), 100141.

[41] Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*

[42] Van Dijk, *Discourse and Cognition in Society*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Power*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.

[43] Audun Fladmoe and Nadim Marjan., "Silenced by Hate? Hate Speech as a Social Boundary to Free Speech", in Arnfinn H. Midtbøen et al., eds., *Boundary Struggles: Contestations of Free Speech in the Public Sphere* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2017), 44-75.

[44] KhosraviNik, *Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)*, 584.

3. Corpus Design

3.1 *Data Collection*

The *Fat&Disabled* corpus, named after the hashtag used to search data on the TikTok platform, was collected between July and August 2023. The hashtag *#fatanddisabled* was selected due to its highest number of postings about the subjects of inquiry at the time of data collection. Six posts were chosen for data analysis as they exhibited the highest views and comments.

   After being separated into several files named according to the number of the post (e.g., comments belonging to the first video were saved as TT1), data were submitted to a semi-automatic cleaning procedure involving a long process of duplicate and non-English post removal.

3.2 *Participants*

The comments were retrieved from videos of (young) FPWD sharing their lives and experiences on TikTok while also raising awareness on the critical topics of fatness and disability:

1. Data from the TT1 file belong to a video (deleted at the time of writing), posted by user @superchloeoneyeah, who has more than one TikTok account. In their current active account, which counts 100.8k followers, they describe[45] themself as follows: "I'm disabled I'm an adult I have Bipolar 2 and Anxiety I am Australian She/Her".
2. The TT2 file comprises comments from a video posted by user @big.dee, who has 126k followers and defines themself as "just a big fat giantess kicking a** #fredabelly 🍩".
3. Data for TT3 were retrieved from a video by user @mtndewguy44, who has 142.4k followers. In the caption, the person describes themself as "Hi I'm Tim". The caption also incorporates their email and a hyperlink leading to the webpage of their brand.
4. The TT4 file includes comments from the video posted by the official TikTok account of *TLC* (*Travel and Living Channel*), an American television network focusing on lifestyle choices and personal stories.
5. TT5 comprises comments from the video posted by user @yurvyo, followed by 294 people. The video caption only contains a blinking emoticon: ;).
6. Finally, data from TT6 were collected from a video (deleted at the time of writing) by user @jordallenhall, who has 161.7k followers. The caption of the account only says: "No bio yet".

3.3 *Data Analysis*

An integrated approach was adopted for data analysis to ensure a consistent and reliable framework. Basic corpus linguistics analyses[46] were combined with thematic analysis[47] and CDA.[48]

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[45] The captions from the TikTok accounts of the corpus were not edited and are reported as shown on the platform.

[46] Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*; Baker, *Acceptable Bias?*; Adam Kilgarriff et al., "The Sketch Engine", in Geoffrey Williams and Sandra Vessier, eds., *Proceedings of the 11th EURALEX International Congress* (Lorient: Université de Bretagne-Sud, 2004), 105-115; Adam Kilgarriff, "Getting to Know Your Corpus", in Peter Sojka et al., eds., *Text, Speech and Dialogue*, Volume 7499 (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 3-15.

[47] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3.2 (2008), 77-101.

[48] KhosraviNik, *Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Cognition in Society*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and* Power; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.

Each sub-corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine[49] for the quantitative analyses, and a wordlist analysis was performed to identify potential discourses. Figure 1 displays the 50 most frequent words per sub-corpus.
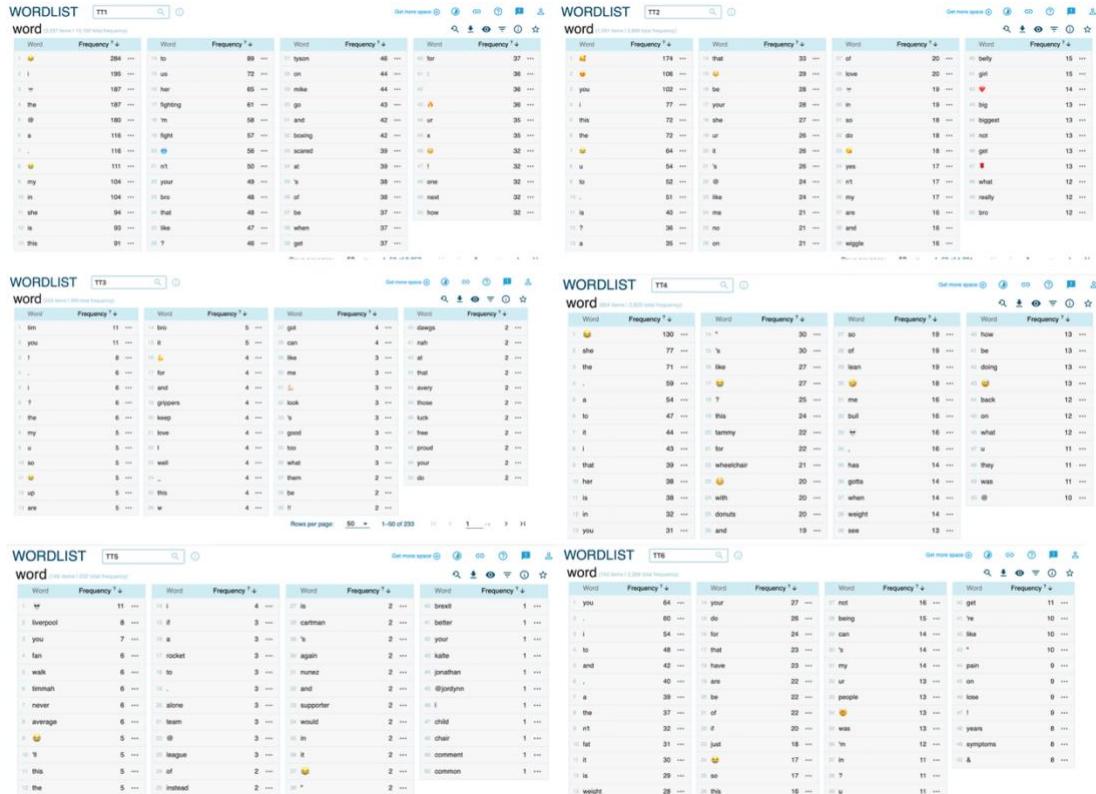
Fig. 1: Sketch Engine word list analysis per sub-corpus

Since, as expected, most of these words were function words and emojis, only the first 50 content words per sub-corpus were initially considered for the analysis. Nonetheless, although providing some interesting insights into data, they were not adequate to gain a deeper understanding of or to identify the topics around the hate against fat and disabled people. However, the thematic analysis performed through a close reading of all sub-corpora allowed for the identification of four main themes, some of which were further divided into subthemes related to the hateful discourses emerging around fatness and disability. One theme comprising positive comments of support and appreciation for several protagonists featured in the videos was also identified. The resulting themes and subthemes were named as follows: 1. *Dehumanization* (and its subthemes (a) *Zoomorphic metaphors*, and (b) *Fictional and non-fictional characters*); 2. *Unsolicited derogatory advice*; 3. *Harmful jokes* (and its subthemes (a) *Food-related jokes*, (b) *Healthy lifestyle jokes*, (c) *Body or fat-related jokes*, and (d) *Disability-related jokes*); 4. *Personal attacks and negative characterization*; 5. *Positive comments of support and appreciation*.

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[49] Kilgarriff et al., *The Sketch Engine*; Kilgarriff, *Getting to Know Your Corpus*.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 *Dehumanization*

Dehumanization has been identified as a primary form of hate speech, and it is used to create, establish, and enhance the distinction between a dominant in-group and a subordinate out-group.[50] It encompasses intentional verbal and non-verbal ways of portraying specific people or groups by assigning them non-human characteristics that deprive them of human dignity. Dehumanization contributes to the process of 'othering' (i.e., the voluntary differentiation between more and less powerful groups resulting in the establishment and maintenance of social distance),[51] often involving the use of metaphors as ideological tools[52] to create "ideological cognitive representations"[53] through which certain groups exert power and impose their socio-cognitive standards on other groups.

In the corpus,[54] the macro theme *dehumanization* was further divided into the subthemes *zoomorphic metaphors* and *fictional and non-fictional characters*, both of which include figurative language used by haters to address the protagonists of the videos.

The use of zoomorphic metaphors has already been proven to be frequently employed by TikTok users to address and ridicule PWDs negatively.[55] Zoomorphism consists in assigning animal characteristics to human beings. Even though the use of zoomorphic metaphors can reflect a positive attitude towards the establishment of a likeness between humans and animals, in the context of HS(O), animalizing people is a means of demonizing and insulting them and, for this reason, "only a discursive reading of a zoomorphic metaphor can serve as a reliable indicator of its cognitive properties".[56] Dehumanization in the form of animalization represents a 'discursive practice'– that favors the negative construction of people deemed inferior and undesirable – and a 'cultural fact', originating from one's experience and knowledge of the external world, which is then used with harmful intentions such as dominating, oppressing, and excluding people.[57] Some examples from the corpus are:

1. Damn another **beached wale** (TT2)
2. **cows** stand on two feet? (TT2)
3. Well well well! Tim no longer wants to be an **elephant** good for him 💪 (TT3)
4. **bear** 🐻 (TT1)
5. Tammy your one lazy animal ... Just like a **bull**? (TT4)

The idea behind haters' usage of zoomorphisms is that humans are superior to animals. They linguistically construct their viewpoint by comparing the protagonists of the videos to large animals (*beached wale, cows, elephant, bear, bull*) to criticize them for their weight. This contributes to the

[50] Babak Bahador, "Classifying and Identifying the Intensity of Hate Speech", *ITEMS: Insights from the Social Sciences* (2020), www.items.ssrc.org.

[51] Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, "Fat Chance! Digital Critical Discourse Studies in Discrimination Against Fat People", in Balirano and Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate*, 3-50.

[52] Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.

[53] Marina Díaz-Peralta, "Metaphor and Ideology: Conceptual Structure and Conceptual Content in Spanish Political Discourse", *Discourse & Communication*, 12.2 (2018), 130.

[54] All excerpts from the corpus have not been edited.

[55] Raffone, *'Her Leg Didn't Fully Load in'*.

[56] Svetlana A. Petrenko and Alexander P. Petrenko, "Zoomorphic Metaphor and Its Correlation with Linguistic Worldview in British Fiction", in Natalia G. Bogachenko, ed., *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Volume 111 (London: European Publisher, 2021), 717.

[57] Charo Lacalle et al., "'Seals', 'Bitches', 'Vixens', and Other Zoomorphic Insults: The Animalisation of Women as an Expression of Misogyny in the Spanish Manosphere", *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 11.1 (2024).

stigmatization of fat people and the creation of a distinction between an in-group – *Us*, in van Dijk's[58] words – represented by *fit* people, and *Them*, the out-group, comprising *fat* people, considered different and lesser because they do not adhere to the standards of *normativity*. Indeed, despite the increased attention toward and support of what is defined as 'positive body image', the standards of the perfect body – muscled for men and thin for women – still prevail, often having detrimental effects on people's mental and body health with severe implications for social relationships.[59]

Similarly, the comparison with fictional and non-fictional characters perpetrated by haters aims, on the one hand, to ridicule the TikTokers for their body shape and, on the other, to feel empowered over them through derogatory humorous speech acts:

6. **Avengers** level threat (TT1)
7. The next **Mike Tyson**, right here (TT1)
8. **Muhammad Ali** been quiet since this one (TT1)
9. **Powerless rangers** (TT1)
10. Wat **pet sim update** is this (TT1)
11. You're gonna be the next **Incredible Hulk** except you'll be called incredible fat (TT2)
12. You're going to be your next **Mickey Mouse** called Mickey fat (TT2)

In the online environment, dehumanizing metaphors have the power to normalize such behavior, counting on the role played by humor in figurative language to mitigate the offense and blur the line between a joke and the speakers' true intentions.[60] Nevertheless, in the abovementioned cases, the speakers rarely lessen the offensiveness, as the potentially covert HS becomes overt due to the additional linguistic content provided. In (6) and (9), haters compare the TikTokers to two well-known groups of heroes: *The Avengers* (*Marvel* superhero characters known for their superpowers, friendship, and intuitive personalities that help them overcome challenges from their enemies) and *Power Rangers* (legendary superheroes predating the *Marvel* characters, identifiable by their color-coded suits and recognized for their strength, agility, and super abilities). However, this comparison is performed through mockery. When mentioning the 'Avengers level threat', the speaker refers to a catastrophic event or enemy that poses an enormous danger and could potentially destroy the entire world or universe. In this case, the speaker's real intention is to convey the idea that the person in the video is so unfit that they could be a danger to the world and have the ability to destroy it. On the other hand, when using the Power Rangers' name by distorting it (power*less*) through minority comparative, the speaker aims to indicate that the person has no physical power due to their body size.

Increased adiposity has been demonstrated to reduce mobility and impact muscle strength.[61] Nevertheless, medical investigations and research findings often become an excuse for enhancing the stigmatization of marginalized groups. Indeed, in (7) and (8), the speakers compare the TikTokers to two famous non-fictional characters, namely two professional American boxers (*Mike Tyson* and *Muhammad Ali*) renowned for their physical strength and agility, suggesting that fat people lack both. This perpetuates the still pervasive and harmful stereotype that fat people are clumsy and unable to be physically active.

Humor in metaphors is primarily used to ascertain their effectiveness.[62] This is especially evident in (10, 11, 12). In (11), another reference to *The Avengers* is made by mentioning the *Incredible Hulk*, a

[58] Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.
[59] Emilie Lacroix et al., "Normative Body Image Development: A Longitudinal Meta-Analysis of Mean-Level Change", *Body Image*, 45 (2023), 238-264.
[60] Luke Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline: Individual Journeys to Extremism Online", *First Monday*, 24.6 (2019).
[61] David J. Tomlinson et al., "The Impact of Obesity on Skeletal Muscle Strength and Structure through Adolescence to Old Age", *Biogerontology*, 17.3 (2015), 467-483.
[62] Lacalle et al., *'Seals', 'Bitches', 'Vixens', and Other Zoomorphic Insults*.

green-skinned, muscular humanoid with immense physical strength. This characteristic is compared to the absence of the same feature by the target of the comment to such an extent that the speaker distorts the superhero's name and refers to the TikToker through the epithet *incredible fat*. Similarly, the speaker in (12) chooses the character of *Mickey Mouse*, an anthropomorphic mouse known for his agility, to mock the person in the video by calling them *mickey fat*. Finally, instance (10) can only be fully understood by referencing the video game *The Sims*, a gamified version of real life with numerous expansion packs adding features to the open-ended gameplay. From a discursive viewpoint, this metaphor, alongside the one in (12), can be considered amid 'fictional characters' and 'zoomorphic metaphors' as it refers to the fictional pets that a gamer can find in the social simulation game. Since its first appearance in the 2000s, *The Sims* has undergone numerous updates. Thus, the commenter mocks the person in the video by comparing them to a newer, updated version of pets in the game. The result is the objectification and vilification of fat people and a devaluation of their bodies and human dignity, which ultimately leads to their marginalization and increased alienation.

4.2 *Unsolicited Derogatory Advice*

Although SMSs can be a helpful and valuable means of disseminating positive messages concerning the risks connected to an unhealthy lifestyle, their resonance and innate feature of allowing the immediate spread of information can play a pivotal role in worsening weight stigma.[63] Cook et al.[64] have identified an ecological system of weight stigma characterized by three levels: (a) the structural level, referring to the negative mental models about weight that are embedded in societal systems; (b) the interpersonal level, involving the stigma created through interactions, which media environments can intensify;[65] and (c) the intrapersonal level, which refers to the internalized negative beliefs held by people, which can impact upon their personal lives and influence their perceptions about their capabilities and self-worth.

People frequently think that making fat people feel ashamed of their (potentially unhealthy) lifestyle choices and the size and shape of their bodies will somehow contribute to their weight loss.[66] Contrarily, fat shaming serves to perpetuate the prejudices against fat people – including being "morally and emotionally impaired", "alienated from their sexuality", and "discontent with themselves",[67] – and to degrade them by harsh criticism for not meeting idealized body standards.

Things worsen when weight stigma intersects with disability. PWDs are often blamed for being a burden on society,[68] in addition to being considered unattractive, undesirable, and unable to engage in community activities.[69] Intersectionality refers to the discrimination faced by individuals and groups who have multiple overlapping identities, such as sex and race, disability and fatness, and gender and religion, to name but a few. It offers a significant framework for understanding the mental models

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[63] Olivia Clark et al., "Weight Stigma and Social Media: Evidence and Public Health Solutions", *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 8 (2021), 739056.

[64] Jonathan E. Cook et al., "Intervening within and across Levels: A Multilevel Approach to Stigma and Public Health", *Social Science & Medicine*, 103 (2014), 101-109.

[65] Clark et al., *Weight Stigma and Social Media*.

[66] Kris Gunnars, "The Harmful Effects of Fat Shaming", *Healthline* (2024), www.healthline.com; Alice E. Schluger, "Body Shaming: The Effects and How to Overcome it", *HelpGuide.org* (2022), www.helpguide.org.

[67] Christian S. Crandall, "Prejudice against Fat People: Ideology and Self-Interest", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66.5 (1994), 883.

[68] Donna Lero et al., "Introduction to the Special Issue on Disability and Work: Toward Re-Conceptualizing the 'Burden' of Disability", *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 32.3 (2012).

[69] Raffone, *Sex, Love, and Stigma*.

encoded in society that shape people's experience of the world.[70] Research[71] has shown that labeling obesity as a disability could lead to the pathologization and stigmatization of fat people and the incrementation of anti-fat bias, i.e., the construction of fat people as individuals with negative personality traits.[72] In the corpus, several instances have been identified in which fatness and disability are discursively pathologized, which perpetuate negative perceptions against FPWD:

13. Pls stop. ur **body** needs help (TT2)
14. You need to lose weight ur at high risk for a **heart take** (TT2)
15. waw it's not **healthy** (TT2)
16. straight outta **cancer** (TT1)
17. the reason, in and of itself, a disability...? Bruh **your lazy not a disability**. Damn **stop with all the excuses for being fat**. (TT6)
18. **take responsibilities for your actions**, there's people that are born disabled and can't change **you made yourself disable** and you can change it. (TT6)
19. Being overweight isn't a disability **you can choose to be fat** and you can lose weight I have a disability **you are just lazy** So it's fluid retention? How fyckin much are u drinking? Lose weight (TT6)

These kinds of comments relate to the concept discussed by Balirano and Hughes as 'the pathologizing discourse',[73] in which they explain how stigma and shame towards fat bodies are perpetuated when medical viewpoints on what is 'normal' and what is 'pathological' are spread and widely accepted as universal truths, thus enhancing the in-group and out-group differentiation in society. Indeed, the examples reveal a significant use of medical terminology (such as *heart take*, *healthy*, *cancer*, *lose weight*) to offer unsolicited derogatory advice to encourage the TikTokers to lose weight.

Although medical research has demonstrated the strong impact of obesity on the development of cardiovascular diseases[74] and cancer,[75] framing it as a moral failure reinforces the enduring narratives of fatness as 'wrong conduct', 'ugly', and something that needs to be eradicated through medicalization.[76] Indeed, in instances from (13) to (16), haters blame the TikTokers for being fat, bringing life-threatening illnesses upon themselves because of their unhealthy behavior. Nevertheless, there are numerous reasons for weight gain, from psychological to underlying medical factors, and discursively shaming people for their weight while hiding behind anonymous accounts only perpetuates the stigma against them. Also, it can lead fat people to adopt unhealthy weight-reducing eating habits to seek acceptance in society.

Considering the nature of the TikTok videos created by FPWD, an interesting aspect of the hateful comments is that the pathologizing discourse is primarily applied to obesity rather than disability. Indeed, users blame the disabled people in the videos for causing their disability by being 'too lazy' to lose weight. They urge them to 'take responsibility for [their] actions' and 'stop with all the excuses for being fat', thus equating fatness to disability. The immediate consequence is that users impose a double identity on the TikTokers, considering one to be the result of the other. Despite this, the individuals

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[70] Symeon Dagkas, "Problematizing Social Justice in Health Pedagogy and Youth Sport: Intersectionality of Race, Ethnicity, and Class", *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 87.3 (2016), 221-229.

[71] Rabia Belt, "The Fat Prisoners' Dilemma: Slow Violence, Intersectionality, and a Disability Rights Framework for the Future", *Georgetown Law Journal*, 110.4 (2022), 785-833.

[72] Emily B. Kramer et al., "Reducing Anti-Fat Bias toward the Self and Others: A Randomized Controlled Trial", *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 12.1 (2024), 46.

[73] Balirano and Hughes, "Fat Chance!"

[74] Tiffany M. Powell-Wiley et al., "Obesity and Cardiovascular Disease: A Scientific Statement from the American Heart Association", *Circulation*, 143.21 (2021), e984-e1010.

[75] Tim Byers and Rebecca L. Sedjo, "Body Fatness as a Cause of Cancer: Epidemiologic Clues to Biologic Mechanisms", Endocrine-Related Cancer, 22.3 (2015), R125-R134.

[76] Samantha Murray, "Pathologizing 'Fatness': Medical Authority and Popular Culture", *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25.1 (2008), 7-21.

featured in the videos might not align with this identification and the labels imposed on them. Consequently, they are subjected to a process of cross-identification and cross-categorization shaped by the standards imposed by society.[77]

4.3 *Harmful Jokes*

4.3.1 *Food-related Jokes and Healthy Lifestyle Jokes*

The macro theme *harmful jokes* comprises the highest number of comments. Data analysis showed that the butt of haters' harmful jokes was once again directed more at fatness than disability, as if disabled people deserved more respect than fat people based on the assumption that being fat or becoming fat (thus, turning fatness into a disability) is a choice, whereas having or developing disabilities is not.

The first two subthemes of the macro theme were entitled *food-related* and *healthy lifestyle jokes*. *Food-related jokes* comprise the so-called military metaphors,[78] including the verb *to fight*. According to research,[79] military metaphors are frequently employed in daily interactions, especially in healthcare settings, where individuals with diseases are often described as *fighting for* their lives and engaging in a *battle* to overcome their *struggles*.

As shown in the following excerpts, military metaphors involving the verb *to fight* are used in the corpus in a twofold way:

20. Fighting for **the last bucket of kfc** (TT1)
21. Fighting for the **bigmac** (TT1)
22. She fighting for some **nuggies** (TT1)
23. Bro is practicing to knock her **vegetables** off her plate (TT1)
24. let me guess, that's a **diet coke** she drinking. It's nice to see her happy. Is she still alive? (TT4)
25. training to fight some **salad** (TT1)
26. okay then is she **fighting the over cabbages off**? (TT1)
27. Disability to eat **vegetables** (TT6)

On the one hand, the phrasal verb *to fight for* (meaning *to struggle to get something*) is followed by terminology related to junk food such as *kfc*, *bigmac*, and *nuggies*. These instances can be understood by considering the intended goal of some of the videos in which the TikTokers' purpose is to show their weight loss journey. Accordingly, the haters' idea is to mock them by implying that their workout does not aim at weight loss. Instead, through the metaphor, they intend to state that the TikTokers only use the treadmill (shown in the videos) to reach this type of food more rapidly.

On the other hand, the verb *to fight*, used without the preposition or as a phrasal verb (*to fight off*, meaning *to push away*), is accompanied by vocabulary related to healthy food, such as *salad* and *cabbages*. In this case, haters lay further blame upon the TikTokers by implying that they are fat because they avoid healthy food. Moreover, in (23), the speaker mocks the person in the video showing their daily workout by stating that natural food such as *vegetables* has been *knocked off* the plate. The imagery resulting from the metaphorical representation of physically exercising to push away vegetables from a plate serves to ridicule the person, adding to the disrespectful use of the slang *bro* – an epithet usually shared between friends – to overcome the existing social and spatial distance between the speaker and the target of the comment. In (24), the speaker sarcastically uses the expression *let me guess* (i.e., let me

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[77] Anna Mollow, "Disability Studies Gets Fat", *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015), 199-216.

[78] Edward Raupp, "Military Metaphors: Inappropriate Lessons from the Language of Violence", *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies*, 2.2 (2022), 61-65.

[79] Denisa Drăgușin, "Metaphorical Gender Stereotypes in Written Medical Discourse", *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 4.1 (2014), 1224-1262.

say what I think it is), followed by a mention of a beverage some people drink when dieting (*diet coke*) to imply that the person in the video fools themselves by drinking something that is supposedly sugar-free, but that, in reality, should not be consumed given their current 'body condition', as its ingredients are still dangerous for the health. The implication becomes overt with the negative expression *Is she still alive?* which aims to state that with all the junk food and sugar intake – known to cause not only weight gain but also health problems such as heart disease and diabetes[80] – it is unlikely that they are still alive. What is further indicative of offensive mockery is the instance (25) in which the speaker derogatorily makes fun of the disabled person by pointing out that their disability is not 'real' and that their only disability is the inability to eat healthily.

Despite their distinct discursive use, the way in which military metaphors are employed in the corpus reveals a cultural orientation towards what is considered 'the good' and 'the normative' (being thin) and what should be fought and eradicated (fatness). The findings are consistent with research[81] highlighting the central role of metaphorical representation in attributing the causes of fatness to various factors, particularly individual behavior and the food and beverage industry.

Healthy lifestyle jokes represent a specific subtheme as it involves comments that do not directly address and focus on the people in the videos but on their viewers, namely the commenters themselves. Through derogatory jokes in the form of 'fat talk' and 'diet talk' based on diet-culture myths – such as the belief that being thin will make one more attractive or that exercising a lot will give the appealing body one wishes for – they attempt to distance themselves from what they believe to be the unhealthy lifestyle of the TikTokers:

28. **motivation** to continue my **fast** 💀 (TT2)
29. **Watch this when I want a late night cookie** (TT2)
30. motivation to **work out** (TT2)
31. Wow you're really **inspirational**, you've successfully **inspired me to not eat today**. (TT2)
32. my **motivation** to go to the **gym** (TT1)
33. 3am **motivation** (TT1)

Fat talk consists of making negative statements about one's body or weight, while diet talk involves discussing dieting, such as which foods lead to weight loss and which do not, or what should be eaten or avoided. However, diet talk is not centered on pursuing a healthy lifestyle for well-being but rather on changing one's appearance to achieve an (occasionally) unrealistic weight and body shape in line with societal physical and beauty standards. These comments portray fasting and avoiding food intake as positive behaviors compared to being fat. Contrarily, it is well-established that a healthy lifestyle involves consuming nutrient-dense food, adequate proteins, and a balanced exercise routine.[82] Also, when fasting is not medically supervised and controlled, such as in the case of intermittent fasting, it can pose serious health risks and lead to the development of eating disorders.

By stating that watching their videos will *inspire* them to go to the gym for muscular improvement or *motivate* them to restrict their food intake for weight loss, haters contribute to spreading the previously mentioned culturally-based weight bias, promoting and disseminating the dangerous culture of 'thinspiration'[83] and 'muscularity'[84] through SMSs, while sarcastically criticizing the TikTokers for not

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[80] NHS, "Sugar: The Facts", *Nhs.uk* (2022), www.nhs.uk.
[81] Colleen Cotter et al., "Framing Obesity in Public Discourse: Representation through Metaphor across Text Type", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 174 (2021), 14-27.
[82] NHS, "Eating a Balanced Diet", *Nhs.uk* (2022), www.nhs.uk.
[83] Clark et al., *Weight Stigma and Social Media*.
[84] Vajisha U. Wanniarachchi et al., "Fat Stigma and Body Objectification: A Text Analysis Approach Using Social Media Content", *Digital Health*, 8 (2022), 205520762211174.

adhering to these expectations. These mocking comments reflect the speakers' disdain for fatness, contributing to fat shaming and encouraging self-deprecation through fat and diet talk.

4.3.2 *Body or Fat-related Jokes and Disability-related Jokes*

Two additional sub-themes were included in the macro theme 'Harmful Jokes', which were named 'Body- or fat-related jokes' and 'Disability-related jokes', depending on the specific content of the comments. However, it is worth noting that, in some cases, comments could actually fit both sub-themes, since they appeared to have a twofold nature striking the chord of both fatness and disability, which hindered a straightforward distribution into one single sub-theme.

A huge number of jokes centred on fatness could be retrieved and, in almost the totality of instances, fatness could be said to stand in for other personality traits, such as overindulgence and sloppiness, through the use of metaphors describing the TikTokers by means of ironic and sarcastic references to jelly candies (34), to their 'seemingly' pregnant bellies (35 and 36), or their bodies in general (37 and 38).

33. **jellybelly** (TT1)
34. Congratulations on the **18 month baby** (TT2)
35. You look **24 months pregnant** (TT2)
36. **she has enough oil in her body** to end the use of fossil fuels 😩 🤣 (TT4)
37. **i don't think humans are meant to be your size** cause we didn't come w wheel chairs we had to create them for ppl like u to feel better (TT6)

A widespread negative perception emerging from comments is the one according to which fat people 'get what they deserve', namely they are held responsible for their weight because they lack willpower and thus deserve their 'plight', which triggers antipathy and stigma. From a micro-linguistic perspective, the use of the second person pronoun, which allows TikTok viewers and haters to directly address the protagonists of the videos, seems to imply a more straightforward form of personal criticism, although they are not referred to by proper names. By choosing second person pronouns, haters try to build a direct connection with the TikTokers, they want to get the message across, engaging with the person who is being spoken to. Indeed, the second-person has a rich range of readerly effects: it increases involvement, it demonstrates familiarity, effectively creating an accusatory tone and tension between the writer and the reader (the protagonist of the video). The use of personal deixis, which is the act of referring to another person, appears a very widespread strategy within the comments of the *Fat&Disabled* corpus to shade the tone and intent of the speaker/writer. Considering the surrounding social circumstances, personal deixis can also encode the social identities and relationships of the participants to a communicative event, which also makes it relevant in terms of social deixis.

Abusive and insulting language, rife with sarcasm and mockery, could also be detected in the many jokes that concentrate on disability; in fact, the TikTokers are teased and made fun of for their disability, their perceived awkwardness and their non-standard traits. In such cases, disability itself is treated as a joke, it is ridiculed by employing name-calling which is meant to be disrespectful and insulting towards the target of irony (as 39 to 41 show). The term *chromosome* is metonymically used as a form of figurative language on the basis of its contiguity with the concept of disability; by changing and substituting a name, metonymy can create new imagery, new – and more powerful – word choices, bringing along a range of vivid and complex semantic associations. Similarly, the TikTokers are also mocked for the mobility aids they use (see 42).

38. Rocky 7: loss of the **chromosome** (TT1)
39. Extra **chromosome** took the ropes here (TT1)

40. She's fighting the **chromosome** away 😵 (TT1)
41. if only that wheelchair manufacturer built the twin towers (TT4)

Additionally, jokes were based on the most noticeable external characteristics or genetic characteristics, sometimes associating down syndrome with stupidity, once again making disability stand for something else (43 and 44).

42. i think she's missing a **chromosome** (TT1)
43. look it's avery down syndrome (TT3)

Many of the instances retrieved feature a linguistic formulation based on the use of the third person pronoun which, in such cases, seems to suggest an exclusion of the mocked person from the community of TikTok users who are commenting the videos, which acts like a segregation, a symbolic seclusion occurring in the virtual space and reflecting social dynamics in the real space. Third person pronouns can also be said to fall within personal deixis, although they designate the non-narrated participant, someone who is not positioned within the communicative event. By means of this manipulative strategy, explicit forms of ableism are enacted, denigrating and classifying a specific group of people as 'less than', as lacking something, as defective, which is, in itself, a verbal aggression implemented by resorting to derision, cynicism and sarcasm, characterizing forms of interaction maliciously directed at a target who is laughed at.

The use of sarcasm is extremely common in the comments included in this sub-theme. If, as Goffman claims,[85] people tend to be stigmatized for three main reasons – namely, for being a tribal out-group member, for possessing a character flaw, or for possessing a physical abnormality – distinct psychological mechanisms underlying specific types of antipathy and hostility can be triggered, which, in turn, leads to social exclusion. Weight and disability stigma seems to be encompassed by two of the above-mentioned reasons: in fact, FPWD can be perceived – and stigmatized – both for their physical abnormality and their character flaws. This dual perspective, rooted in physical as well as in mental-behavioral stigmas, seems to generate increasing forms of hostility for bodies and personalities/identities that do not conform to an ideal norm. In fact, sarcasm is often employed to express judgment towards something/someone that is deemed negatively, it conveys ridicule, mocking or teasing in an offensive and aggressive manner with the aim to reprimand or indirectly criticize someone. Accordingly, the comments retrieved from the *Fat&Disabled* corpus appear to deploy such sarcastic and cynical traits through a verbal – as much as social and cultural – assertiveness and dominance.

4.4 *Personal Attacks and Negative Characterization*

A remarkable number of comments expressing the viewers' repulsion, their emotional response to the TikTokers' videos, and their sense of rejection were retrieved from the corpus (as 44 to 50 show). In the comments included in this sub-theme, a rather explicit evaluation of the people in the videos as worthless, defective and, above all, repulsive can be noticed, since the lexical items and linguistic formulations used appear extremely sharp, direct and harsh.

44. **I shat myself** after watching this (TT1)
45. **This thing is so disgusting** 🤢 **looking at it makes me sick to the stomach** (TT2)
46. **I'm uncomfortable** (TT2)
47. **Shameful, disgusting, unhealthy & disgraceful** (TT2)
48. **I may throw up** (TT2)

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[85] Goffman, *Stigma*.

49. can u get off my for u page pls (TT3)
50. **This woman makes me want to throw up**. Bottom of the barrel. She's not going to see 2024 (TT4)

A worrying number of TikTok users and haters expresses intense distaste or disgust, especially in reaction to fatness (rather than disability); disgust, in particular, can be seen as a strong predictor of negative attitudes and behaviours towards fat people, as a central component of weight bias (see Vartanian).[86] In such cases, 'physical disgust' and 'moral disgust' appear as two separate but overlapping functional domains, jointly eliciting verbal aggression, stigma and hate speech especially through the mechanism of shaming and blaming that was enacted by many haters. As one of the strongest emotions that a person can experience, shame is used as a way to manipulate or control subjects, carrying an intrinsically negative message which triggers the feeling of being worthless, humiliated, rejected. Shame is then converted into blame, when negative judgement affects social esteem (how a person is valued in a community) and social sanction (the person's low social esteem is attributed to their choices and actions, it is their responsibility). This seems particularly true in the case of fatness, which is viewed as a consequence of people's poor choices that do not comply with dominant, normative expectations. Therefore, the TikTokers are treated with contempt and exposed to public shaming and blaming with strategies that focus on the target's physical appearance as well as on their character and behavior, with specific emphasis on their mental and/or moral qualities.

Such inferences to a somewhat 'substandard' psychological character (which lead, for example, to deem some individuals as lazy, undisciplined, untrustworthy or weak-willed because they engage in blatantly self-destructive behaviours) or, additionally, inferences based on perceptions of 'substandard' physical appearance (as in the case of fat people or people with physical disabilities, both possibly perceived as deformities) result in widespread and pervasive prejudice (see Van Leeuwen et al.).[87] Therefore, perceptions of fatness and disability align with a perspective which regards fat and disabled people as blameworthy for their outcome, thus deserving discrimination.

The instances from the corpus suggest that as a multifaceted emotion, disgust appears to be elicited by a range of stimuli associated with specific bodily reactions, such as nausea, avoidance and withdrawal (namely, distancing from the elicitor of disgust), rejection (namely, physical and/or social rejection). Such reactions invariably lead to stigmatizing behaviours mostly targeting people for their fatness rather than their disability. Indeed, obesity appears to elicit not only physical disgust but also moral/social disgust, as a response to persons who seem to have broken social norms or moral codes.[88] Fatness is thus viewed as a moral failing, a betrayal of the community for selfish reasons, which constitutes a threat to its public health and its economic life, something that 'disturbs' and disgusts TikTok viewers, as their comments show.

4.5 *Positive Comments of Support and Appreciation*

The last sub-theme that could be identified for analysis comprised positive comments, expressing support and appreciation for the TikTokers, for what they were trying to do by posting videos to engage with issues of (self-)acceptance and recognition. An extremely low number of comments in the *Fat&Disabled* corpus, in fact, conveyed approval and advocacy for their courage in speaking up, appearing in public, trying to increase general awareness about these issues. Roughly 4% of all the

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[86] Lenny R. Vartanian, "Disgust and Perceived Control in Attitudes Toward Obese People", *International Journal of Obesity*, 34.8 (2010), 1302-1307.

[87] Florian Van Leeuwen et al., "Is Obesity Stigma Based on Perceptions of Appearance or Character? Theory, Evidence and Directions for Further Study", *Evolutionary Psychology*, 13.3 (2015), 1474704915600565.

[88] Joshua M. Tybur et al., "Microbes, Mating and Morality: Individual Differences in Three Functional Domains of Disgust", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97.1 (2009), 103-122.

comments retrieved showed some kind of empathy and sympathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of other people and to relate to other people's experiences and lives (as 51 to 55 show).

51. These comments don't pass the vibe check. Y'all need to chill (TT1)
52. so good darling (TT2)
53. you got this Tim keep it up (TT3)
54. you're wonderful for explaining this! this world is missing compassion. Absolutely blows my mind how apathetic ppl can be (TT6)
55. ur so right its good to spread awareness and speak out abt these issues (TT6)

In such cases, the authors of comments blame other TikTok users and viewers for lacking compassion, for their inability to alleviate other people's suffering. The use of adjectives with a positive connotation to express appreciation for the protagonists of the videos conveys a sense of concern and care for their feelings, a sense of kindness of which the great majority of comments were devoid. Moreover, in these online interactions, TikTok users prefer to use the video-makers' proper names (for instance, Tim, Tammy), something which has crucial implications. Indeed, names play a pivotal role as far as identity and emotions are concerned; the act of calling a person by their name can have a subtle impact reflecting intimacy, respect, and even power relations and dynamics in so far as it is an explicit way to identify someone. Addressing individuals by their name may give rise to affective bonds or lead to agreement and, to some extent, closeness and proximity, due to the sense of sharing that is created as a powerful relationship-developing strategy which conveys attention, acknowledgment, and a wish to engage personally. Therefore, far from being a mere coincidence, the choice of calling the TikTokers by their names bears considerable socio-cultural implications, especially in terms of identification and identity representation. The issue of proper names appears extremely important to understand reference, since naming is the initial way to construe and designate general relationships between words and the world or reality, it is a semiotic index. In contrast with the previously mentioned use of second and third person pronouns, the pragmatic use of proper names realizes the phenomenon of reference by providing the TikTokers in the videos with their socio-cultural identity: names function not only as tools for identification but also as tools for the social classification of individuals, they tell the community who those individuals are and what their place within that community is.

5. Conclusions

5.1 *Final Remarks: Part One*

The internet and social media serve as a powerful tool for FPWD, enabling them to make their voices heard and engage with society. However, SMSs are still steeped in a high level of abusive behavior both online and offline, which is often under-reported and under-prosecuted; indeed, online space has increased the venues where such abuse occurs, and, since it can actually reach people in their homes, it can intensify their sense of isolation stemming from a wider culture that is hostile to FPWD, society as a whole portraying them as farcical, foolish or villainous.

Deeply ingrained as prejudice is in societal values, it surfaces in online interactions in SMSs, releasing negative and prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, which results in FPWD confronting both ableism and fatphobia and finding themselves in intertwined threads of discrimination which create a battlefield where self-acceptance and social acceptance collide. Such a collision concerns their inherent characteristics as much as their cultural/symbolic value, namely it mostly pertains oppression. FPWD seem to fall below (or beyond) the threshold of acceptability, of what is considered culturally acceptable, therefore they are repeatedly exposed to mockery, bigotry and hatred.

Through the shame and blame mechanism that could be detected in some of the comments retrieved, the need to claim moral high ground could distinctly be noticed, especially in relation to fatness – haters implicitly construing themselves as resisting temptation, doing the right thing, complying with a regulated social and healthy behavior. Indeed, they stress the *others'* personal or moral failings. An interesting aspect emerging from analysis in relation to this mechanism concerns the fact that the TikTokers video-makers gain visibility, expose their fatness and their disability, forcing viewers to confront their discomfort when watching; therefore, they cause a sort of short circuit: they overturn the hierarchical relationships that assign specific values to certain identities and deconstruct them.

This study is meant to be an invitation to implicate ourselves in the ongoing discursive and social construal of the Other, in this case FPWD, contributing to the daily reaffirmation or denial of some defining categories. If individuals derive meaning from social interactions and construe their identities through these interactions, as it seems to be the case, the TikTokers employ social media to present and project a version of themselves that does not necessarily align with societal prevailing and normative views and standards, but rather disrupts them. By taking into account the overt and covert assumptions emerging from the haters' comments, this paper tries to engage with dominant hierarchical systems dismantling them, unraveling alternative subjectivities offered by the video-makers in the very act of negotiating their identities within the digital realm. The TikTok videos selected for this study can be seen as points of entry, spaces where the ableist and fatphobic logic can be accessed and then deconstructed, only to admit multiple meanings, to reconfigure anomalies as spaces of opportunities. In doing so, the intersecting dichotomies fat vs. 'normal-sized' body and ability vs. disability can be dissected and collapse inwards upon themselves, acknowledging the complexity of socially encoded stereotypes that entrap individuals.

As we explore the intricate and evolving landscape of social media discourse and interactions in search of improved forms of inclusion and equality, intersectionality – where ableist and fatphobic discourses intersect – remains a critical area to unravel the many nuanced realities faced by different groups and thereby contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social media representations. Such understanding might be achieved by recognizing a crucial need to be collectively exposed to diverse narratives and representations, to enhance media literacy and strengthen education and awareness on varying forms of discrimination and hate speech.

5.2 *Final Remarks: Part Two*

The development of media literacy is crucial for countering hateful narratives and harmful practices based on enduring stereotypes contributing to the perpetuation of the marginalization and alienation of minority groups such as fat and disabled people, particularly when intersectional discourses overlap.

The identification of 'in-group' and 'out-group' representations is crucial for understanding power dynamics and controlled practices enacted in SMSs where social distance is shortened through textual and digital features and sensitive content easily spread.

TikTok is a peculiar SMS since it allows the creation of evolving communities around the most diverse topics through trends (i.e., viral short videos characterized by specific moves, sound effects, and/or hashtags), connecting people worldwide. Although TikTok[89] has implemented various *ad hoc* policies over time to contrast harmful behaviors, people's aggregation based on negative mental models, prejudice, and standardized labels is complex to arrest. Indeed, the present study has highlighted how the affordances of SMSs, such as the anonymization behind fake accounts, along with the use of metaphorically damaging and abusive language, interact to (a) disseminate false information and promote harmful advice about dieting and (b) spread negative portrayals of fatness and disability as

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[89] TikTok, "Countering Hate Speech & Behavior", *TikTok* (2024), www.tiktok.com.

moral failures and shaming conduct, with disability also represented as caused by obesity. Accordingly, the hashtag *#fatanddisabled*, positively used by the TikTokers to both interact with people who are in similar situations and raise awareness about the capabilities they have *despite* their circumstances, turns into an aggregator of haters derogatorily pouring their disdain and attempting to impose on them their 'normative' viewpoints on the body, which is almost always associated with being healthy, thin and/or muscled and, thus, attractive and desirable.

There is a fine line between humor, sarcasm, irony, and offense;[90] however, in SMSs, they overtly become significant pragma-linguistic strategies to exercise power over minorities (in this case, FPWD) and *otherize* them. The various epithets haters chose to address the people in the videos can undoubtedly quickly spread from TikTok across other SMSs and enter the hateful vocabulary of those sharing the same adverse views, which results in keeping a "negative semantic prosody"[91] around fat and disability.

The deprecating discourses and glossaries developed around fat and disability – propagated through digital environments – can drastically impact real-life subordinating and hegemonic processes over FPWD, feeding that part of society believing firmly in the 'abnormality' of these bodies and attempting to make them adhere to 'normativity' through offensive, discriminating, and alienating attitudes in various aspects of social life.

Contemporarily, this paper has shown that FPWD use SMSs to confront and challenge these viewpoints expressed through the discursive micro-level of the comments they receive and the broader macro-level of societal imagery and representations around fatness and disability to which the comments align. This is pursued with various means, from managing their social media account features (e.g., deleting all the negative comments) to regularly posting content (i.e., they continue to release videos without deleting the hateful comments), to even taking practical counter-actions. An example is represented by one TikToker from the corpus who created their brand, *Timsomy21*, based on their disability. As the brand's name shows, it combines the person's name (Tim) and their disability (i.e., Trisomy21 *aka* Down syndrome or DS) to promote a positive image of Down syndrome and raise awareness about adopting orphans with DS.

The critical discursive analysis of the digitally-based *Fat&Disabled* corpus has hopefully provided meaningful insights into the enduring negative values around fatness and disability – particularly when they intersect – that manifest through the linguistic strategies adopted by haters on TikTok to address them and through which damaging ideologies are constructed, enacted, and spread, which result in group differentiation and marginalization in both online and offline environments.

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[90] Balirano and Hughes, "Fat Chance!"
[91] Ibid., 46.

Francesco Nacchia

Shades of Veg*nism (and Beyond). A Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis of *Dietary* Hate Speech in YouTube Comments

Abstract: With growing awareness of health, environmental, and ethical concerns, the rise of veganism has become increasingly prominent on multiple fronts. However, the flourishing of this phenomenon should be understood not only in numerical and commercial terms, but also in terms of its impact on the identity of those who adopt these lifestyles. Within a group characterised by strong internal identification, at the same time, individuals' subjective interpretation and modulation of information can potentially lead to issues of discrimination and othering. By adopting a socio-cognitive discourse studies approach, the paper presents the results of an analysis of a corpus comprising 1,932 comments in response to the YouTube video entitled "Ending the Battle Between Vegans, Vegetarians, and Everyone Else | Brian Kateman | TEDxCUNY" to assess instantiations of hate speech targeting the VEGAN, VEGETARIAN, REDUCETARIAN, and MEAT-EATING groups. Results show that hate speech is predominantly addressed to vegans, that *negative character* is the most common strategy used, and that issues concerning morality and ethics in killing animals underpin the ideologies onto which hatred is modelled.

Keywords: *hate speech*, *social media discourse studies*, *socio-cognitive discourse studies*, *veg*nism*, *YouTube comments*

1. Introduction

With growing awareness of health, environmental, and ethical concerns, the rise of veganism and other alternative eating habits has become increasingly prominent on multiple fronts. Suffice it to say that compared to a decade before, the number of vegans in the UK had increased by 360% in 2016[1] and that in 2021 the figure amounted to approximately 79 million vegans worldwide[2] so that "[t]he global vegan food market is…projected to reach a size of USD 37.5 billion by 2030".[3] Also, notably, "72% of Gen Z vegans plan to stay that way for at least the next five years",[4] emphasising a sustained commitment to the vegan lifestyle among younger generations which is a reassuring figure in terms of the growth prospects for the near future. However, the flourishing of this phenomenon should be understood not only in numerical and commercial terms, but also in terms of its impact on the (social) identity of those who adopt these lifestyles and the discrimination coming from other groups. Specifically, being a group characterised by strong internal identification and propensity for activism,[5] vegans might be perceived as more 'dangerous' as a minority threatening a majority – the omnivores. Indeed, it has been shown that veg*ns[6] are "evaluated equivalently to immigrants, asexuals, and atheists, and significantly more

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[1] Liana Minassian, "Why the Global Rise in Vegan and Plant-Based Eating is No Fad (30x Increase in US Vegans + Other Astounding Vegan Stats)", *Food Revolution Network* (2022), www.foodrevolution.org.

[2] Andrew Anthony, "From Fringe to Mainstream: How Millions Got a Taste for going Vegan", *The Guardian*, Sunday 10 October 2021, www.theguardian.com, accessed 20 April 2024.

[3] Research and Markets, "Global Vegan Food Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report 2023-2030: Increasing Social Media Campaigns by Celebrities are Pushing Veganism into the Mainstream", *Yahoo!Finance* (2023), www.uk.finance.yahoo.com, accessed 20 April 2024.

[4] Christine Zulkosky, "Gen Z, Veganism, and the Future", *The Food Institute* (2023), www.foodinstitute.com.

[5] See: Chelsea Chuck et al., "Awakening to the Politics of Food: Politicized Diet as Social Identity", *Appetite*, 107 (2016), 425-436; Matthew Feinberg et al., "Understanding the Process of Moralization: How Eating Meat Becomes a Moral Issue", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 117 (2019), 20-72; Daniel L. Rosenfeld and Anthony L. Burrow, "Development and Validation of the Dietarian Identity Questionnaire: Assessing Self-perceptions of Animal-product Consumption", *Appetite*, 127 (2018), 182-194.

[6] The expression is meant to include veganism and vegetarianism.

negatively than Blacks"[7] by omnivores, and that they are referred to as deviants, bigots,[8] sentimentalists and hostile extremists.[9] This testifies to the fact that dietary preferences lead to very strong and clear-cut positions against individuals as such, and also raise issues concerning ethnicity, gender and religion. However, this discrimination is not unilaterally experienced by vegans, rather, vegans can also perpetrate such discrimination against other groups. The variety of motivations leading people to adopt a vegan lifestyle[10] underscores the proneness of veganism to personal interpretations which can lead, in turn, to various redefinitions of the concept – in some cases quite major ones – and the emergence of related groups associated with them.[11] Not sticking painstakingly to the vegan norm, these groups might not be necessarily welcomed with open arms by vegans who also generally disapprove of omnivores. It has been noted, indeed, that "the attitudes of veg*ns toward meat eaters are significantly more negative compared to the attitudes of meat eaters toward veg*ns"[12] and that "[v]eg*ns displayed notably negative attitudes towards flexitarians, who may be seen as a group that contaminates the vegetarian ingroup's purity and morality".[13] In practice, veg*ns are discriminated against by omnivores, but at the same time they discriminate against both omnivores and those who partially adopt veg*nism more than they suffer from it, creating a cycle of discrimination whose root is difficult to identify and therefore difficult to eradicate.

Considering this scenario and the assumption that social media "replicate and perpetuate the social discrimination and inequalities that people already experience in 'real' life",[14] the paper presents the results of an analysis of a corpus comprising 1,932 comments in response to the YouTube video entitled "Ending the Battle Between Vegans, Vegetarians, and Everyone Else | Brian Kateman | TEDxCUNY" adopting a multi-method approach to: i) identify potential instances of hate speech directed towards individuals within four specific groups – VEGAN, VEGETARIAN, REDUCETARIAN, MEAT-EATING; ii) classify these instances according to their degree of intensity; and iii) identify the ideologies that support the instances of hatred. The first research question was addressed through the implementation of the comprehensive six-part *Rabat Threshold Test*;[15] after that, the instances of hate speech were categorised in accordance with Bahador's *Hate Speech Intensity Scal*e;[16] finally, a manual qualitative analysis focusing on the discursive structures revealing underlying ideologies informed by a Socio-Cognitive

[7] Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson, "It Ain't Easy Eating Greens: Evidence of Bias toward Vegetarians and Vegans from both Source and Target", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 20.6 (2017), 726.

[8] Annie Potts and Jovian Parry, "Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-free Sex", *Feminism & Psychology*, 20.1 (2010), 53-72.

[9] Matthew Cole and Karen Morgan, "Vegaphobia: Derogatory Discourses of Veganism and the Reproduction of Speciesism in UK National Newspapers", *British Journal of Sociology*, 62.1 (2011), 134-153.

[10] Despite being founded primarily on animal welfare, the main reasons why individuals choose to adopt a vegan diet are 'health benefits' (52.1%) and 'environmental benefits' (17.1%), with 'animal welfare' ('do not want to eat animal-based products') ranking third (16.9%), followed by 'family factors' (10.7%) and 'inspiration from influencers' (3.3%). Liam Gilliver, "Gen Z is Most Likely to go Vegan for their 'Health' but Meat Cravings are a 'Big Barrier' – Survey Finds", *Vegan Food & Living* (2023), www.veganfoodandliving.com.

[11] Micol Forte and Francesco Nacchia, "Vegan or Vegetarian? An Investigation into the Current Usage of the Terms in English, French, Spanish and Italian", *Rivista Internazionale di Studi Europei*, 1.4 (2015), 50-67.

[12] Sara Pabian et al., "Meating Halfway": Exploring the Attitudes of Meat Eaters, Veg*ns, and Occasional Meat Eaters toward Those who Eat Meat and Those who do not Eat Meat", *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 163.3 (2022), 408.

[13] Sabahat C. Bagci et al., "Intergroup Attitudes between Meat-eaters and Meat-avoiders: The Role of Dietary Ingroup Identification", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 25.5 (2022), 1240.

[14] Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, "Fat Chance! Digital Critical Discourse Studies on Discrimination Against Fat People", in Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Naples: Paolo Loffredo Editore, 2020), 11.

[15] United Nations Humans Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Threshold Test on Hate Speech Now Available in 32 languages", *United Nations* (2020), www.ohchr.org.

[16] Babak Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech and the Limits of Current Definition", in Christian Strippelet et al., eds., *Challenges and Perspectives of Hate Speech Research* (Berlin: Digital Communication Research, 2023), 291-298.

Discourse Studies (henceforth also SCDS) approach was performed. The outcomes of this study aspire to make a substantive contribution towards evidencing the main forms, delineating the underlying reasons, and elucidating the inherent peril of hatred within and beyond the veg*n community in social media.

2. Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts

In light of the premises above and considering that this study seeks to elucidate power dynamics among different social groups with a specific emphasis on out-group attitudes influenced by ideologies, often resulting in othering and discriminatory practices, from a theoretical standpoint it is grounded in Socio-Cognitive Discourse Studies:[17]

> SCDS deals with the ongoing communicative Common Ground and the shared social knowledge as well as the attitudes and ideologies of language users as current participants of the communicative situation and as members of social groups and communities.[18]

SCDS make a crucial step by including a cognitive relationship between discourse and society, whereas most Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) concentrate on defining discourse within its social and political settings. They emphasise the fundamental importance of cognitive representations as well as the fact that many discourse structures can only be fully understood in terms of a variety of cognitive notions:

> many properties of words, sentences and discourses cannot be accounted for without at least partial description of properties of underlying mental representations, such as models, knowledge and other forms of social cognition – besides the socioculturally shared knowledge of grammar and discourse genres – of individual language users on the one hand, and of social groups or communities on the other hand.[19]

Within this framework, members of society embody not only social but also discursive structures. This means that they can mentally align to these structures before manifesting them; furthermore, as social actors, they can engage and communicate within ideological groups, sharing perspectives on crucial social issues and contributing to exacerbating polarisations[20] potentially connected to discriminatory practices and hate speech. As concerns this latter concept, although certain common features have arisen over the last several years, hate speech is commonly regarded as a wide, contentious notion with ill-defined boundaries, making a definitive definition difficult to come by. Generally:

> hate speech is understood as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race", colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation.[21]

One attempt to categorise hate speech was made by Bahador[22] who distinguished four typologies of hate speech groups: *immutable characteristics* (traditional hate speech groups); *occupations and industries*;

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[17] Henceforth also SCDS.
[18] Teun A. van Dijk, "Socio-Cognitive Discourse Studies", in John Flowerdew ad John E. Richardson, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 28.
[19] Ibid., 33.
[20] Teun A. van Dijk, *Ideology – A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998).
[21] Recommendation CM/Rec (2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Combating Hate Speech (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 20 May 2022 at the 132nd Session of the Committee of Ministers).
[22] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech", 293.

countries; and *others*, which includes other groups of people (such as 'the elite') that are generally excluded in traditional definitions. Bahador[23] also designed a *Hate Speech Intensity Scale* comprising six levels – *disagreement*; *negative actions*; *negative character*; *demonising and dehumanising*; *violence*; and *death* – which are accompanied by descriptions and expressions associable with that specific level. The most 'alarming' categories are the last three, while the first three categories are understood as 'early warnings'. In this context, an important tool in the fight against hate speech is the *Rabat Plan of Action*[24] "on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence"[25] which gathers the results of several OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) expert workshops. The tool was devised to tackle the issue of incitement to hatred and provide a threshold test for identifying possible cases of hate speech by taking into account six factors: 'context'; 'speaker'; 'intent'; 'content and form'; 'extent of the speech act'; and 'likelihood including imminence'.[26] The last point is particularly interesting and is the one that needs to be investigated further to distinguish "between permissible speech and speech that may amount to incitement",[27] since an incitement does not have to result in an offence for it to be considered a crime; at the same time, there has to be some recognition of real danger:

> even if negative words towards groups such as insults do not constitute hate speech, it is an early warning that should be addressed before it becomes acceptable and builds tolerance for more extreme forms of speech.[28]

Nowadays, one of the most powerful vehicles of hate speech is certainly the Internet, especially considering the increasingly central role that social media play in our lives, to the point where drawing a line between offline and online life is hardly possible. Online social media – which "[p]rovide a means for users to connect with one another"[29] – have made it possible for individuals to produce news and information in addition to consuming it. Despite its democratising nature, however, digital conversations have become dominated by disrespect and rudeness which have contributed to creating a more poisonous set of online behaviour norms and therefore paved the way to unchecked offensive behaviour. In particular, YouTube, the video-sharing platform founded in 2005, is a platform where users can interact through the comments section therefore "provid[ing] a medium for viewers to share their feelings and opinions about the YouTube video and to engage in other kinds of meaning-making"[30] and a multi-level interaction. Like other successful Social Networking Sites, YouTube comments sections have been

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[23] Ibid., 296.

[24] The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech also refers to this test. See: Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, "United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech", *United Nations*, www.un.org.

[25] United Nations, "Threshold Test".

[26] United Nations Humans Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "OHCHR and Freedom of Expression vs Incitement to Hatred: The Rabat Plan of Action", *United Nations* (2020), www.ohchr.org.

[27] United Nations Humans Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Opening Remarks by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein at a Press Conference during his Mission to Fiji", *United Nations* (2018), www.ohchr.org.

[28] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech", 294.

[29] Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase, *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016), 5.

[30] Michele Zappavigna, "Ambient Affiliation in Comments on YouTube Videos: Communing around Values about ASMR", *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 44.1 (2021), 23.

described alternatively as sites of swearing,[31] conflict,[32] antagonism,[33] and racialised hostility[34] thus providing fertile ground for this study. Therefore, far from considering YouTube simply as a source of data, a Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) perspective – whereby "digital discourse [is analysed] from a critical perspective that is technologically aware and socially oriented at the same time"[35] – is adopted.

3. Corpus and Method

The corpus is represented by the script and comments extracted from the YouTube video "Ending the Battle Between Vegans, Vegetarians, and Everyone Else | Brian Kateman | TEDxCUNY",[36] which was selected for analysis as one of the most popular videos concerning reducetarianism, one in which the coiner of the term and co-founder of the practice, describes the concept.

Basically, YouTube comments come in the form of short texts accompanied by the user's profile picture, username, a timestamp, and the number of likes the comment received. Commenters are allowed to post comments in response to previous comments; these are indented and concealed under the first comment to form a conversation thread. The extraction took place on October 10, 2023, through the *Mozdeh* software. For the purposes of the study, it was considered useful to also extract the script of the video and analyse it in order to better understand the nature of the comments based on the content to which they are addressed. After the extraction phase, the REDU_PEACE Corpus described in Table 1 below was created:

	REDU_PEACE Corpus	
	Video transcript	*Comments*
Date	2014	2014-2023
#	1	1,932
Tokens	2483	95,587
Types	764	8,667

Table 1. The REDU-PEACE Corpus

Note that the number of comments decreased from 3,322 at the time of extraction to 1,932. This is due to certain criteria implemented in the extraction process, namely

- – elimination of duplicates;
- – inclusion of English comments only;
- – elimination of comments from the same user.

While the choice of language is justified by the author's research interest, the other two criteria were set to avoid altering the corpus with potential spam and trolls.

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[31] Mart Dynel, "Swearing Methodologically. The Impoliteness of Expletives in Anonymous Commentaries on YouTube", *Journal of English Studies*, 10 (2012), 25-50.

[32] Patricia Bou-Franch and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, "Conflict Management in Massive Polylogues: A Case Study from YouTube", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 73 (2014), 19-36.

[33] Anthony McCosker, "Trolling as Provocation: YouTube's Agonistic Publics", *Convergence*, 20.2 (2014), 201-217.

[34] Dhiraj Murthy and Sanjay Sharma, "Visualizing YouTube's Comment Space: Online Hostility as a Networked Phenomena", *New Media & Society*, 21.1 (2019), 191-213.

[35] Eleonora Esposito and Majid Khosravinik, "Discourse in the Digital Age: A Critical Introduction", in Eleonora Esposito and Majid Khosravinik, eds., *Discourse in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 8.

[36] Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJJtRWFL_gw.

The study's objective is to identify instances of hate speech coming from and/or directed at distinguishable groups, consequently, only comments made by or addressed to individuals who identify with the lifestyle in question were taken into account. Given the difficulty in distinguishing between vegans, vegetarians, reducetarians and meat-eaters – e.g. a straightforward reference to abstaining from meat does not provide sufficient information to ascertain whether one is a vegan or a vegetarian –, the subsequent stage involved the identification of comments containing the keywords related to the four macro-groups of interest: VEGAN (keywords: 'vegan' and 'veganism'), VEGETARIAN ('vegetarian' and 'vegetarianism'), REDUCETARIAN ('reducetarian', 'reducetarianism', 'reducitarian', 'reducitarianism'), and MEAT-EATING, ('meat eater', 'meat-eater', 'meat eating', 'meat-eating' 'omnivorous', 'omnivore', 'omnivorism', 'carnism', 'carnist', 'carnivore').[37] Upon completion of this process, the final REDU_PEACE comments corpus amounted to 1125 comments in total (see Table 2).[38]

Group	Number of comments
VEGAN	746
VEGETARIAN	227
REDUCETARIAN	157
MEAT-EATING	641

Table 2. Number of comments per group

At this point, the initial analytical step involved a meticulous qualitative manual analysis, following the procedural steps of thematic analysis[39] for getting an understanding of the main themes covered by the video. Then, the comments were analysed manually by triangulating different methods in order to answer the following research questions:

1. Are there potential instances of hate speech directed towards individuals within specific groups?
2. How can these be classified by intensity?
3. Which ideologies underpin hatred?

In order to answer the first research question, the comprehensive six-part *Rabat Threshold Test* was implemented to the set of comments targeting the four groups for the identification of hate instantiations. The second phase was carried out in accordance with Bahador's (2023) *Hate Speech Intensity Scale* through which comments were categorised by intensity; finally, in the third phase the comments containing instances of hate speech were analysed according to a SCDS approach in an attempt to pinpoint the discursive structures revealing the main ideologies associated with hatred. The procedure described here was employed while dealing with a limited corpus in order to ensure transparency and replicability in future studies utilising larger corpora.

3.1 *(Not Just) Dietary Identities*

The purpose of this subsection is to provide the definitions of the four lifestyles covered in the study – vegan(ism), vegetarian(ism), reducetarian(ism) and meat-eat(ing)(er) – in order to provide background

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[37] The *Mozdeh* search function is utilised with the inclusion of the conjunction 'or', which returns all comments in which one or the other word appears.
[38] Note that there can be more than one keyword in the same comment, so the final number of comments in the corpus is not the sum of them all.
[39] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis", *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11.4 (2019), 589-97.

for those less familiar with the subject and allow for a sound interpretation of the results of the subsequent analysis:

- Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.[40]
- Vegetarians don't eat fish, meat or chicken.[41]
- Reducetarianism is the practice of eating less meat – red meat, poultry, and seafood – as well as less dairy and fewer eggs, regardless of the degree or motivation. This concept is appealing because not everyone is willing to follow an "all-or-nothing" diet. However, reducetarianism is still inclusive of vegans, vegetarians, and anyone else who reduces the amount of animal products in their diet. … Eating fewer animal products reduces your risk of heart disease and certain types of cancers, decreases your carbon footprint and the suffering of farmed animals, and even alleviates the global food and water crises. … While flexitarians primarily eat plants with the occasional inclusion of meat, eggs, and dairy, reducetarians mindfully and gradually reduce their consumption of these animal products with respect to their own diet.[42]
- [A meat eater is a] person or animal that eats meat.[43]

As the definitions indicate, while vegetarianism represents a distinct dietary practice in itself, veganism encompasses a philosophy that extends to various aspects of an individual's life, prioritising rejection of the commodity status of animals[44] and considering human welfare and environmental concerns as correlated aspects.[45] In practice, being strictly limited to the mere consumption of animal flesh, a vegetarian may identify as such while consuming a meatless sandwich in a fast-food chain that primarily focuses on meat sales. Conversely, a vegan would likely refrain from ordering meatless food from such a restaurant as this would mean indirectly supporting a company that promotes the killing of animals, even without buying meat directly. The common perception of veganism solely in terms of dietary restrictions, namely the abstinence from meat, eggs, and dairy products thus fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of veganism. Therefore, while it is appropriate to consider the value of food as a "central [element] to our sense of identity [and how t]he way any given human group eats helps it asserts…both its oneness and otherness of whoever eats differently",[46] it is necessary to consider the role of the driving principle of veganism – animal welfare – and at least two sub-elements integral to its definition – human health and the environment – in order to accurately frame it. Then, the definition of reducetarianism is just as intricate. Indeed, it encompasses all the elements considered by veganism – namely environmental, health and animal-related concerns – while placing less emphasis on the degree of adherence to its norms. Unlike veganism, animal exploitation is still allowed at varying and customisable levels according to one's taste. It should be noted, however, that a distinguishing feature of reducetarianism is its emphasis on reduction, which distinguishes it from other practices, such as flexitarianism. Consequently, according to reducetarian pioneers, individuals who adhere to a vegan or vegetarian diet are to be considered reducetarians at the final stages of the reduction process. Finally,

[40] "Definition of Veganism", *The Vegan Society*, www.vegansociety.com.
[41] *The Vegetarian Society*, www.vegsoc.org.
[42] "Faq", *Reducetarian Foundation*, https://www.reducetarian.org/
[43] *Collins Dictionary*, https://www.collinsdictionary.com.
[44] Helena Pedersen and Vasile Stanescu, "Conclusion: Future Directions for Critical Animal Studies", in Nik Taylor and Richard Twine, eds., *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies: From the Margins to the Centre* (London: Routledge, 2014), 262-276.
[45] Dana Hudepohl, "Why going Vegan is one of the Best Things you can do for the Environment", *Forks Over Knives,* Thursday 6 January 2021), www.forksoverknives.com, accessed 20 April 2024.
[46] Claude Fischler, "Food, Self and Identity", *Social Science Information*, 27.2 (1988), 275.

the definition of meat-eating concerns a lifestyle that involves incorporating meat into one's diet, regardless of the type and quantity. It is important to note that in this context there may be an overlap with reducetarianism, which still includes meat consumption. For this reason, individuals who consume meat are understood to be those who consider eating meat to be an important personal trait,[47] one of the fundamental aspects of their identity,[48] and, of course, those who have not embarked on a reducetarian path.

3.2 *Research Ethics*

Although no explicit consent to partake in this research was received from the commenters, the comments were extracted from an open access Social Networking Site (YouTube), freely accessible by anyone having an Internet connection even without creating a personal account. For this reason, it is considered appropriate to use the posted comments without the explicit consent of the commenters; at the same time, it should be noted that private information such as photo, nationality, nickname, and any other personal information was left out.[49]

4. Analysis

In the next subsection (4.1), the results of the thematic analysis of the transcript are presented. The next four subsections (from 4.2 to 4.5) present, instead, the results of the analysis of the comments. The instances of hate speech identified are presented in ascending order of intensity for each group. The classification of hate speech by intensity excludes the first level, namely *disagreement*, being considered of little use for the ideological characterisation of social groups. In the tables, the nouns are presented in the singular form, while the verbs are presented in the base form in order to enhance the accessibility of the work, with the exception of instances where it was deemed appropriate to report words/expressions as written by commenters. In the tables, spelling was corrected where necessary; instead, comments were reported in their original form. Finally, due to the limited space available, only excerpts from relevant comments are shown.

4.1 *Thematic Analysis of the Transcript*

A thematic analysis of the video transcript was conducted as the initial step to identify the content users were responding to. Specifically, it was imperative to comprehend the meaning of 'peace' in relation to the definitions of 'vegan' and 'vegetarian'. The following table (Table 3) reports the themes generated.

#	Themes
1.	veg*ns make you feel awkward
2.	avoiding meat is hard because of its unequalled taste
3.	vegans are reducetarians in their last phase
4.	reducing still means making an impact
5.	the word reducetarian is imbued with negative connotations
6.	few people consider themselves 100% veg*ns
7.	meat-free diets are a romantic ideal

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[47] Alison J. McAfee et al., "Red Meat Consumption: An Overview of the Risks and Benefits", *Meat Science*, 84.1 (2010), 1-13.
[48] Lisa F. Clark and Ana-Maria Bogdan, "The Role of Plant-Based Foods in Canadian Diets: A Survey Examining Food Choices, Motivations and Dietary Identity", *Journal of Food Products Marketing* 25.4 (2019), 355-77.
[49] Ruth Page et al., *Researching Language and Social Media*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2022), 75.

8.	the word reducetarian can help focus on shared commitments

Table 3. Themes in the speaker's talk – chronological order

The speaker initially assumes the persona of a vegan for the first three minutes before unveiling his true reducetarian identity. The perspective he embraces during this parody plays a crucial role in shaping the first theme, which involves suggesting that vegans make others feel out of place (theme 1) due to their perceived superiority, thereby indirectly accusing them. Subsequently, he argues that primal urges, such as taste, are the reasons why some individuals cannot forgo meat consumption (theme 2), thus justifying omnivores in their dietary choices. Following this, he introduces his own interpretation of veganism, appropriating the concept by asserting that it represents the final stage in a transition from omnivorism to veganism, with reducetarianism serving as a stepping stone (theme 3). He advocates for his perspective by citing evidence supporting the principles of reducetarianism, particularly emphasising the positive impact reducetarians can still have while not completely eliminating meat from their diets (theme 4). Furthermore, he contends that vegans misinterpret the term 'reducetarian' (theme 5) and questions the efficacy of their campaigns (theme 6), deeming them unrealistic (theme 7). Finally, he concludes by asserting that one of the virtues of reducetarians, in comparison to other groups, lies in their promotion of dialogue through a shared focus on common ethical and environmental objectives (theme 8). Based on the results of the thematic analysis, it can be affirmed that the promotion of peace takes place through the promotion of an innovative dietary style that presents itself as an intermediate pole between two extremes on the same continuum and the concurrent mockery of veganism. The guiding principle for the speaker seems to be related to the environment rather than animal welfare, which is instead subordinated to the sacredness of taste. This, however, is not the case with diets encompassing meat-eating which the speaker seems to embrace. These findings served as the foundation for the subsequent comments' analysis.

4.2 *Against Meat-eating*

The categorisation of hate speech addressed to the group of meat-eaters by intensity (see Table 4) reveals that accusations of negatively impacting the environment, denying their responsibility, and blaming vegans are classified as level-two (*negative actions*). Then, their intelligence is disparaged (e.g., 'closeminded idiot', 'psychopath', 'ignorance', etc.), as is their resoluteness (e.g., 'lacking self-discipline', 'irresponsible', etc.), morality (e.g., 'hypocrite', 'unethical', etc.), and selfishness ('selfish', 'egoistical', etc.). In addition to an instance of conventional dehumanising ('dick'), accusations of generating pain – not only to animals – also through harsh references to concentration camps for animals and support to slavery are found. Meat-eaters, however, apart from being accused of behaving violently, suffer external threats as in the case where one commentator, speaking on behalf of the entire vegan community, states that they are looking for them to attack them. Finally, they are accused of being murderers ('murder', 'murderer', etc.) and of loving the taste of death, as well as being tempted to make death threats.

MEAT-EATING	
Intensity	**Instantiations**
Negative Actions	blame (the vegan); cheat; destroy (the environment); go into denial; go into anger; screw up (the planet).
Negative Character	brainwashed (x2); can't self-discipline; closeminded idiot; coward; egoistical (view);

	extreme; extremist; full of bullshit; hypocrite; ignorance; immoral; irresponsible; laughable; lying ass; psychopath; recklessness; selfish; unethical; weak.
Demonising and Dehumanising	dick.
Violence	abuser; (entire veg movement out there that is) coming for you and your knives; (to be with) concentration camps for animals; harm others; (generate) suffer; support slavery.
Death	(ready for the) death threats; kill; murder; murderer; support murder; the flavour of death.

Table 4. Instances of hate speech targeting the MEAT-EATING group categorised by Intensity according to Bahador's *Hate Speech Intensity Scale* from level 2 to level 6

The most salient ideology that emerges against meat-eaters is that eating meat is immoral, unethical and adopted by people with a guilty conscience and no sensitivity:

1. He seems to miss the point. Vegans are practicing <u>morals</u>, and <u>ethics</u>. Carnivores are <u>immoral</u>, and <u>unethical</u> because their diet choice is destroying the environment…[50]

2. Someone talking about things he hasn't experienced, again. Carnists are just laughtable. Oh, and by the way: people that are vegan (or vegetarian, in a process of change) or have the potential to be one just recognise themselves without speaking about it. <u>They are at peace with their conscience and you can definetly feel it if you're at peace too</u>. You did trick just other carnists that don't know either what you're speaking of.

3. The reason that dinner is uncomfortable is because <u>the carnist feels judged. You know by who? By their own conscience</u>. Some then go into denial, projection and anger, blaming the vegan. But yes, there IS a division between vegans and carnists; the only division that's valid between people: that of the <u>moral vs. the immoral</u>. If you're sitting with a known abuser, it shouldn't be comfortable, and it shouldn't be put aside as a "lifestyle choice" so we can have a nice evening.

This is shown in comment 1 by means of two positive terms associated with vegans ('morals' and 'ethics') being juxtaposed to the same couple of terms in the negative form for meat-eaters ('immoral' and 'unethical'). To promote this view, comment 2 refers to the meat-eater's conscience; while it is stated that those who do not eat meat can feel at peace with their conscience, the meat-eater is rhetorically invited to feel whether he or she feels at peace with his or her conscience, pragmatically implying that he or she cannot – this is achieved by the intensifier 'definitely' as well as the previous offences. Similarly, comment 3 attempts to polarise the discourse (meat-eaters VS non-meat-eaters) by using a similar technique to comment 1, that is by juxtaposing words with positive ('moral') and negative values ('immoral'), and associating the latter with meat-eaters.

In addition to comment 3, where it is somehow detectable, other comments seem to display accusations against meat-eaters of having an exclusively anthropocentric view, excluding everything that is not human from the sphere of beings that deserve living their life:

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[50] As stated in section 4, comments are reported in their original form. Grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes were not fixed in order not to omit potential deliberate linguistic choices.

4. being vegan is about <u>ANIMAL CRUELTY. WHY</u> the hate?? So all vegan haters love to see animals get <u>tortured</u>?? psychopaths. Its not about your egotistical views. its about <u>ANIMAL WELFARE</u>. stop being <u>SELFISH</u>.
5. I'm not the nazi...you are with your <u>concentration camps for animals</u>...Yeah...I'd like to stop animals being bred to be eaten...its so fucked up!!!
6. Nothing is more hateful than murder of <u>innocent and voiceless</u> beings. Shame on you. If some vegans are hateful of <u>murderers</u>, I can understand it.

This can be seen, for example, in comment 4, where insults and other explicit expressions are used with regard to the treatment of animals (e.g., 'torture'); also the use of capital letters for words that encapsulate the concept ('animal cruelty', 'why', 'animal welfare', and 'selfish') contributes to conveying the message. Similarly, in comment 5 animals are equated with humans ('concentration camps for animals'). Replacing a term commonly used for animals, such as, for example, 'intensive farming', with a term that has historically and tragically been used to describe humans ('concentration camps'), helps personify animals and attribute them feelings commonly neglected to them. Finally, in comment 6, a similar idea is expressed via the use of adjectives that mark a potential vulnerability of animals ('innocent' and 'voiceless') in contrast to the violence inherently attributed to humans ('murderers'). Once more, the status of the animal is elevated by associating it with the act of being murdered, which is typically used between humans – "the crime of intentionally killing a person".[51]

4.3 *Against Reducetarianism*

Those who adhere to the reducetarian lifestyle are subjected to a range of insults, including those pertaining to their intellectual abilities (e.g., 'daft', 'dumb', 'stupid', and 'stupidity') as well as relational ones (e.g., 'selfish', 'self-centred', and 'in-compassionate'). Additionally, they are insulted based on their physical appearance (e.g., 'does not look healthy') and subjected to more general insults (e.g., 'ridiculous' and 'mediocre'). Then, only one instance of conventional dehumanisation ('shit') is reported. As regards the two most dangerous levels, they are accused of being cruel towards animals (see Table 5).

REDUCETARIANISM	
Intensity	**Instantiations**
Negative Actions	/
Negative Character	apathetic; (a big load of) bullshit; daft; dumb; full of crap; hypocrite; in-compassionate; irresponsible; lazy; (does not) look healthy; mediocre; moronian; ridiculous [x2]; self centered; selfish; stupid; stupidity.
Demonising and Dehumanising	shit.
Violence	(animal) cruelty; (to be for) suffering and violence.
Death	murder (less animals); kill (animals) [x2].

Table 5. Instances of hate speech targeting the REDUCETARIAN group categorised by Intensity according to Bahador's *Hate Speech Intensity Scale* from level 2 to level 6

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[51] Cambridge Dictionary, "Murder", <u>www.dictionary.cambridge.com.</u>

As concerns the analysis of other discursive structures, two key points emerge. In the following excerpts, a notion of moral absolutism envisaging the adoption of a specific lifestyle and concurrently condemning all partial choices is observed:

7. Reducitarian ? That's for mediocre people who just don't care enough about this planet or their health or <u>old people who don't want to change their habits</u> because 'God knows how many days I have on this world'.
8. Btw: 'To my vegan and vegetarian friends: You too are 'Reducitarians', because you are so very much committed to reducing your consumtion of meat.' I'm vegan and i kindly disagree... I don't reduce my meat consumtion...i cut it out completely. Just one more thing: Do you think farm animals care if you order a smaller steak? Do you really think that? ...Next time <u>I'll only rape a person for 30 minutes instead of 1 hour</u>...i feel better about myself now...
9. Reducitarian? LOL There are already so many words to describe people who can't be consistent in what they are doing. There is only ONE question: Are you for <u>suffering</u> and <u>violence</u> or are you against it. According to your answer you live your life. Not according to some ridiculous new word which changes its meaning every now and then…
10. Reducitarianism is whack..IF youre gonna do something you might aswell go all the way (vegan) ... no animal was happy: <u>oh were gonna be killed just 2 days out of 7 -.-</u>

In comment 7, the commenter attributes the difficulty in making a definitive decision regarding the total elimination of meat to the inability of the older generations to change their habits. This reveals a negative conception of the past from which the models we are used to drawing our ideas about the world are inherited. In comment 8, absolutism is evidenced by a hyperbolic comparison to emphasise the brutality in killing animals, with a parallel drawn between this and the crime of sexual violence. In comment 9, the frame of violence is activated through the expressions 'suffering' and 'violence'. This specific frame is commonly rejected by the brain, which fails to register the pain experienced by an animal at the moment of consumption by means of a phenomenon known as *meat paradox*, attributable to a "[c]ognitive dissonance[,] whereby one omits to acknowledge the animal behind the meat – the origin of meat is dissociated from living animals, as 'meat' and 'animals' become two unrelated categories".[52] The discourse then extends to meat-eaters, informing them that eating meat is tantamount to generating and perpetuating violence. In comment 10, thanks to a personification of an animal sarcastically claiming to be happy to be killed less often than usual, it is argued that reducetarianism is inadequate for safeguarding animals from harm.

Another view that emerges from the set of comments targeting reducetarians concerns the potential dangers of creating new words to justify one's own interests:

11. <u>Ridiculous</u>. So...reducetarians, <u>now that they have a label, will reduce more?</u> That's <u>daft</u>.
12. This guy in a <u>moronian</u>.
13. Reducitarian? LOL <u>There are already so many words to describe people who can't be consistent in what they are doing</u>.

This is exemplified in comment 11, where the use of pejorative terminology is employed in a sarcastic question about the extent to which employing a label can help accomplish certain objectives. In comment 12, a blend with the same structure as the term 'reducetarian' is used to create an insult. A

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[52] Elisa Aaltola, "The Meat Paradox, Omnivore's Akrasia, and Animal Ethics", *Animals (Basel)*, 9.12 (2019), 3.

presupposition is evident in comment 13, where a negative opinion is expressed towards other existing terms that have not led to practical results.

4.4 *Against Vegetarianism*

Hate speech towards vegetarianism does not fall into the categories of those who engage in negative actions, demonise and dehumanise (see Table 6). Vegetarians, instead, are perceived as uncompromising, as evidenced by their association with the negative terms 'hypocrite'. This perception is distinct from the other two groups vegetarians are often compared to, namely, 'stupid' and 'hypocrite'. Similarly, they are also perceived as instigators of violence. Furthermore, they are accused of being generators of death while at the same time are subjected to death-wishing hatred.

Vegetarianism	
Intensity	**Instantiations**
Negative Actions	/
Negative Character	hypocrite; laughable; stupid; worse (than meat eaters).
Demonising and Dehumanising	/
Violence	(vegetarians) generate pain; (vegetarians) generate suffering.
Death	(please) Die and RIP; (vegetarians) generate death; kill (vegetarians).

Table 6. Instances of hate speech targeting the VEGETARIAN group categorised by Intensity according to Bahador's *Hate Speech Intensity Scale* from level 2 to level 6

A common view retrieved in the comments is that of human inability to really change things:

14. DUDE: Life here on Earth is short for ALL of us, whether human, or animal/bird/sea life creature Life, (even insect and microscopic Life.) If <u>you</u> truly <u>believe</u> Earth life is all there IS ever going to be for ANY of <u>us</u>, then <u>your</u> preaching of not eating 'each other' might make a little sense to <u>me</u>... ...ONly that it seems logical to <u>yOu</u>. By the way, is Life before being given birth to it, (which Life FEELS emotions and physical sensations before birth,) JUST as <u>important</u> to <u>you</u>? Alright then : this life seems SHORT to the REST of <u>us</u> in the human race who avoid becoming exclusively vegetarian, so <u>we</u>'re inSTEAD surviving and thriving the best <u>we</u> CAN, while here.
15. To all the vegans and the vegetarians with the same argument below: Your vegetables also generate death, pain and suffering. <u>Harvesting machines kills mices</u>, birds and many insects that by your beliefs, deserves the same amount of respect given to a cow, pig, chicken and fish. <u>Pesticides even more</u>... And not everybody has space, time and patience to grow vegetables in a garden. And <u>organic food is very expensive</u>. <u>And if you are not doing everything, you are a hypocrite.(sarcasm)</u> All those comments just generate more distinction and hate.
16. Vegans ,Vegetarians....Please Die and RIP!! (or) <u>Let others live their lives.</u>..

In comment 14, the use of the personal pronouns 'me', 'you', 'we/us' promotes a confrontation between vegetarians and non-vegetarians in which the former are attributed ideas vegetarians themselves might

not necessarily agree with. The commenter appeals to the brevity of life to support their argument that humans should make the most of the time they are given. In comment 15, the powerlessness of humans is seen in their inability to avoid pain by using negative terms and intensifiers. This can also be seen in comment 16, where the inability to really change things is summed up in the proverb 'live and let live', preceded by an explicit instantiation of hate speech.

4.5 *Against Veganism*

Accusations of being intolerant ('dogmatic', 'moralize', 'the purest', etc.) and critic ('criticise', 'finger pointing', 'harass, etc.) towards those not sticking to their ideals are frequent in level two. In the *negative character* level, then, references to the sphere of (moral) superiority ('elitist', 'snob', 'sanctimonious', 'superior', 'self-rigorous', 'self-righteousness', etc.) and radicalism ('fanatical', 'extreme', 'zealot', 'cuckoo fundamentalist', 'militant', etc.) are common. Other recurring references are to the physical traits and health of vegans ('ugly', 'look bad', 'malnourished', etc.), followed by violent character traits ('aggressive', 'bully', 'hostile', etc.). Offenses concerning their intelligence and sensibility ('simple-minded', 'idiot', 'stupid', etc.) as well as two linguistic blends ('dirtarian', 'judgementarian') that have negative connotations are reported. Demonisation here draws from the political sphere. Indeed, it is observed that vegans are frequently associated with members of the right-wing and left-wing extremism ('fascistoid' and 'communist'). With regard to dehumanising, references to the animal world and the world of atmospheric phenomena ('snowflake')[53] are found. In the context of *violence*, vegans are accused of generating violence and suffering. However, this argument is further complicated by the fact that vegans often condemn those who do not share their beliefs. In this set, some commenters rhetorically claim that eating vegans alive/raw might solve the problems vegan claim to be solving through their approach. However, to a greater extent, death threats and accusations of vegans being murderers and exerting violent to those who do not embrace their ideals are frequent (see Table 7).

Veganism	
Intensity	**Instantiations**
Negative Actions	alienate (anyone/people) [x2]; brow beat; cheat; criticize; crow that they're the 'purest'; dick move; finger pointing; force (their ideas) on the others; (don't give a shit about anything but) get(ing) *phat*; harass (vegetarians); hate; (egovegans) hijack (science/veganism); make hateful comments; make irrational comments; moralize; (reduce everything to) propaganda [x2]; push their ideas; (egovegans) sabotage (veganism); shame (vegetarians); throw insults; troll (vegetarians).
Negative Character	aggressive [x2]; angry [x2]; annoying; bigot; brainwashed; brat; bully; butthurt [x3]; childlike (mindset); cuckoo fundamentalist; cunt; dirtarians; disappointing (waste of a human); dogmatic; dumb; elitist; embarrassing (waste of a human); extreme; extremist [x5]; (puritanical)

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[53] "[A]n insulting way of referring to someone who is considered by some people to be too easily upset and offended". Cambridge Dictionary, "Snowflake", www.dictionary.cambridge.com.

	fanatic; fanatical; freaks; hated; hateful [x2]; hater; head in the sand (mindset); hipster; hostile; hostility; hypocrite [x4]; idiot [x2]; indignant; inquisitionesque (attitude); intolerant (left); irrational; (huge) jackass; jacked up; judgementarian; laughable; little (waste of a human); little [x2]; look bad; lunatic; malnourished; militant; (hypersensitive) morality; moron; naive (mindset); obsessive; pathetic (waste of a human) [x2]; phat phucking phucks; (unable to do) physical work; pouting (waste of a human); preachy; (pretentious) prick [x2]; primitive; radical; sanctimonious; self-absorbed; self-righteous [x2]; self-righteousness; simple-minded; (douchy) snob; stupid [x3]; suck [x3]; (morally) superior [x2]; (moral) superiority (ego) [x2]; twat; ugly; (religious) zealot.
Demonising and Dehumanising	communists; fascistoid (attitude); Hitler; jihadists; ostriches with their head in the sand; prick; snowflake; waste (of a human).
Violence	(vegans) chastise people; (vegans) generate pain; (vegans) generate suffering.
Death	(please) die and rip; eat vegans (alive/raw) [x3]; (vegans) generate death; kill (vegans); (vegans) kill plantae species; mass murderers; (vegans) put down dissenters; (vegans) shoot.

Table 7. Instances of hate speech targeting the VEGAN group categorised by Intensity according to Bahador's *Hate Speech Intensity Scale* from level 2 to level 6

There is evidence of comments that perpetuate the idea of veganism as unnatural and unhealthy and that, conversely, only an animal-based diet is a comprehensive and healthy one:

17. You need a comma in there lol it looks like you're saying you're a vegan rancher - which to my knowledge doesn't exist. Could you imagine a vegan actually doing the physical work required in your job lol plus obviously if they tried, they'd understand the issues you raise & immediately dump their vegan ways!

18. …Scientifically it's well known vegans suffer malnutrition unless they're very CAREful and are consulting experts which seems ridiculous to need to do, to ARTIFICIALLY, meaning through LABS, supplement their diet to dodge becoming anemic and so forth... ...and to need to seek out other weird vegan foods to FIX the malnourishment, (such as Vitamin B-12 deficiency, as only ONE example.)…

19. I hear 'Veganism' and immediately think Pretentious pricks who think because the live on a vitamin deficient diet that they are superior. Ask any vegan where they get their B12 or Bio-available (bio-available means you body can actually make use of it) Vit A and they immediate point to supplements. A perfect diet does NOT need to rely on supplements.

20. Malnourished vegan trying to tell us how healthy lack of animal foods is...

In addition to the explicit terms 'malnourished' and 'malnutrition', comment 17 activates the masculinity frame associated with physical strength, stating that being a rancher requires physical labour and that, as a consequence, is not suitable for vegans. Comment 18 draws to authoritative sources in order to assign its claims to scientific sources that validate the commenter's thesis. Reference is also made to the need for supplements that makes veganism not naturally sustainable for the human body, as is also observable in comment 19. Finally, in comment 20, the naturalness of the consumption of animal foods is presupposed to be the carrier of a state of health.

The most overarching ideology, however, is one that describes vegans as intolerant, dogmatic and unwilling to open to dialogue with people who do not share their ideals:

21. To all the butthurt vegans here (I'm one myself, just not butthurt (o:): We wanna save animals, right? Encouraging people to eat less meat saves animals. Fact. People who already reduced their meat intake are more likely to go vegan. Fact. If you really wanna help the animals as much as possible, swallow your pride and suggest a reduction of meat consumption when people say they don't wanna commit fully to a vegan lifestyle.

22. That's why most moderate 'vegans' don't call themselves vegan anymore. There is a new dietary lifestyle called 'Plant based diet', which is what vegans who aren't radical cult members call themselves solely to differentiate from these lunatics. I rather support the plant based dieters....as they aren't pricks, and actually stand by their values. Hopefully, it won't wind up being infected with these intolerant radicals like the vegan community did.

23. Title is extremely misleading. Also, even if I never ate another bite of animal product for the rest of my life, I will NEVER call myself a vegan because I don't want to be associated with a group of hateful self-righteous people. Vegans are a big reason most meat eaters don't stop eating meat.

24. What the Health, Cowspiracy, etc were possibly the worst thing that could happen to veganism. These documentaries convert many people, yes. But then they put their supervegan capes and go around chastising people. They're young and were vegan for 1 month to 1 year, and think they know everything about the world. Normal vegans call them 'egovegan', for their huge egos. Learn a little about the vegan movement and you'll see 'egovegans' have hijacked and sabotaged the movement time and time again since it's beginning.

25. User 19021473 Yes, for those who are exploited (humans I mean) by industries it's just as bad. Oh, of course, all vegan information is out there. But few people are interested. And few people think a vegan dish is more than a salad that can't be compared to a nice juicy steak. So the fact that vegan cuisine is somewhere on google is irrelevant because that information who could persuade people won't be doing it. I see a problem there. Finger pointing doesn't change people;s mind, it makes people take distance and consider it twice before joining a club that behaves like that. Veganism will take much longer to change the world. Not that I have a problem with it, but it's funny to see the vegan ego sabotaging the vegan cause.

26. Ofc im a lame excuse. for jihadists, all other 99,99% of people who doesnt blow themselves are lame exuses, for hitler all other races were lame excuses, but hey, the 0.1% of people (vegans) that agree with u are right, not the other 99,9% ;)

27. This is the exact attitude why people hate vegans, this fashistoid, inquisitionesque attitude that can be observed down below in the comment section. Your moral high ground is non existent. Have a look at the agriculture, basically you are eating frikking oil. What you need to do is knowing where your food is coming from.

28. I love meat, and I will continue to eat them on a frequent basis with no remorse. If you think that is wrong, you're a bigot. Good for you for choosing to be a vegetarian or a vegan. Now scurry off, and don't tell me what or what not to eat.

In comment 21, the expression 'vegans' is preceded by the negative adjective 'butthurt' in order for the commenter to subsequently disassociate themselves from that group; however, they suddenly rejoin the group by using the inclusive 'we' but immediately dissociate themselves from the 'butthurt vegans' by addressing them as 'you'. In comment 22, the dissociation is achieved thanks to the use of the positive adjective ('moderate') to the less rigid group of vegans and the concurrent series of insults targeting 'strict' vegans. In contrast to the previous comments, in comment 23 a total rejection of the label 'vegan' is reported – no alternatives by means of positive or negative adjectivation are proposed by the commenter. In comment 24, the distinction is again made thanks to lexical and morphological means. In particular, the commenter addresses the disdain for strict vegans by creating two blends ('supervegan' and 'egovegan'). In comment 25, another very common and shared ideology is observed, that is the one according to which vegans are sabotaging their own cause due to their attitude. Perhaps, the most serious accusation is found in comment 26, in the form of an analogy comparing the thinking of vegans to that of Hitler and jihadists. Comments of this kind are very common (see also comment 27, in which vegans are described as 'fascistoid'), albeit using more general terms such as 'extremist'. Another very common idea is that vegans are simply incompetent, unintelligent or uneducated, as seen in comment 28, where the assumption that eating meat is the norm and that the vegan is the abnormal is also evident.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, through a triangulation of different methods applied to a specific case study, this research has attempted to analyse the discursive strategies used to generate and perpetuate out-group dynamics between the VEGAN, VEGETARIAN, REDUCETARIAN and MEAT-EATING groups within the Social Networking Site YouTube, with a specific focus on the instances of hate speech.

Specifically, it aimed at answering three research questions concerning the trajectory of hate speech to the four groups, its intensity and the ideologies underpinning the hostility. Results show that most of the hate speech is directed at vegans (62 comments), followed equally by reducetarians and meat-eaters (14 comments) and finally vegetarians (5 comments). Considering that the talk in the video essentially covers themes against vegans and given the conception of veganism as a true lifestyle, several comments within the selected micro-corpora display vegans arguing in favour of their own perspective to counter the speaker's, possibly triggering the hatred towards them. Therefore, this study shows that while it is true that vegans do object to the ways of being/eating of others, this rarely leads to instances of actual hate speech, or at least much less than they themselves experience.

In terms of intensity, level 3 (*negative character*) is the most common, followed by level 2 (*negative actions*). Few instances of *demonising and dehumanising* (level 4) are reported, albeit harsh ones, associating vegans with fascists and Nazis. Interestingly, when it comes to the more serious categories, instances of *violence* (level 5) and *death* (level 6) are mostly present as accusations that the group is violent and causes death rather than as direct (death) threats.

Then, with regard to the ideologies emerging out of comments containing instances of hate speech, meat-eaters seem to be discriminated against because of their immorality and anthropocentric perspective whereby the right to life seems to be limited to human beings only. Reducetarians, in a similar way, are discriminated against for their perceived moral instability deducible from their tendency to privilege partial and temporary choices, whereas moral absolutism – encompassing an all-or-nothing perspective – should be the norm. This might exacerbate polarisations by limiting people's choice to either veganism or meat-eating, with no chance to choose a more flexible and/or slow-paced transition suited to one's nature. The hostility towards vegetarians, then, seems to stem from a general lack of confidence in humans' ability to change things, as if initiatives are required that are too far beyond human power, therefore making all efforts – like going vegetarians – pointless. Finally, vegans are, as

said, the most targeted group. The main accusations levelled against this group are that they are intolerant and not very open to dialogue with those who do not – or only partially – share, their ideas. Hatred towards the perceived dogmatism of vegans is evidenced by instances in which the more tolerant vegans seem to justify the discrimination directed at strict vegans by non-vegans which also leads them to create labels (e.g., 'egovegans') to distance themselves from their fellows. Their diet is also considered unnatural and unhealthy, therefore standing as a complementary perspective to that according to which meat-eaters "rationalize that meat consumption is natural, normal, necessary, and nice [thus enabling themselves] to continue in a dietary practice that has increasingly come under public scrutiny".[54]

The results therefore contribute to the study of online hatred around animal exploitation/eating; however, some limitations are present. Firstly, the corpus building criteria implemented in this study probably led to the exclusion of those comments addressed to the speaker that do not include any of the keywords. This is because, although the speaker may be understood to be a member of the reducetarian community, including them would have led to a disproportionate number of comments towards the latter, which would have altered the purposes of the study. Also, this video calls for peace among all dietary groups, but proposes a particular viewpoint: that of reducetarianism. A 'technical' issue has to be considered too: *Mozdeh* may have missed some comments. Finally, this is a case study limited to one video; future studies could extend it to a larger corpus including comments from more videos. Also, they might consider other videos on this topic, perhaps focusing on a different practice. In addition, exploring these issues on alternative platforms and conducting more targeted studies of partial-vegan groups could provide further valuable insights into how to deal with this type of hate.

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[54] Jared Piazza et al., "Rationalizing Meat Consumption: The 4Ns", *Appetite*, 91 (2015), 126.

Francesca D'Angelo

Beyond Words. Exploring Sexist Hate Speech Online and in the Multimodal Advertising System

Abstract: Sexist hate speech is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, deeply rooted in our society, which can take different and dangerous forms, difficult to identify and tackle. As language affects our perception of the world, it is crucial to raise awareness of the most silent, implicit and potentially oppressive aspects of gender identity hate speech. First, the paper analyses the reasons why sexist speech represents an instance of hate speech, being characteristically hostile and oppressive. Indeed, it aims at silencing, excluding, and degrading the addressees of hate, without necessarily being violent. Second, the intersections of hate speech, sexist hate speech, and gender identity discrimination, as they manifest in multimodal advertisements, is examined with an insight into the underlying mechanisms and societal impact of such practices. Third, a discussion of the most representative cases of how the discourse of sexist hate speech is conveyed in the advertising systems of three different countries – Italy, UK, and France – is provided. Finally, the paper includes an overview of the most recent and effective practices adopted by the EU to assist member states in preventing and combating hate speech.

Keywords: *Sexist hate speech*, *linguistic ostracism*, *sexist advertisements*, *digital hate*, *gender equality*, *human rights*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, due to the digital revolution, the online world has become a "free" space where everyone can express their own opinion, without the control and adequacy to the standards imposed on the traditional communication media. Hence, similarly to other issues recently included in the human rights domain, such as vulnerability and discrimination by association, hate speech raises a few controversies, especially among those groups who fear the development and established protection of minorities and vulnerable groups.

The much wider availability of new technological communication tools has allowed us to be constantly connected with people everywhere in the world, to have access to global news and information and to experience different modes of expression. As discussed by KhosraviNik, the digital interface provides a number of communicative affordances.[1] For instance, it provides the opportunity to work together in producing content; perform interpersonal communication; and have access to see and respond to institutionally and user-generated content and texts. Hence, differently from offline communication, not only is the online space an interactive, multimodal reality for creating and sharing content continuously but also a virtual place that has empowered ordinary people to participate in text production and distribution.[2]

Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that, apart from these undeniable communicative affordances, the immediate, free, and constant access to the web as active users and content producers

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[1] Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)", in John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2017), 583-596.

[2] Majid KhosraviNik, "Critical Discourse Analysis, Power and New Media Discourse", in Yusuf Kalyango and Monika Kopytowska, eds., *Why Discourse Matters: Negotiating Identity in the Mediatized World* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 287-306.

has brought with it an increasing spread of online violence (or cyberhate). In other words, the online space has become "the new frontier for spreading hate".[3] An interesting study by KhosraviNik and Esposito investigates the main factors to be considered as responsible for the digital discourse of hate.[4] First, the anonymity of the authors is seen as crucial to boosting online aggressive and denigratory language. Indeed, the perceived or presumed anonymity of the users is closely linked to a disinhibited attitude, also known as the "Gyges effect", which refers to Plato's myth of invisibility. Hence, this notion of anonymity, on a continuum ranging from real to perceived anonymity, leads to the belief that cyberspace is a communicative context of a different nature from real, face-to-face interactions. It is considered less important and freer due to the physical separation between the interlocutors and the addressees of hate.

The article discusses the importance of situating patriarchy enforcing speech within the category of hate speech, particularly in those contexts where it does not necessarily assume the forms of violent and aggressive language. Indeed, the most salient feature of hate speech is that it is characteristically hostile and oppressive and tends to discriminate, vilify, degrade and silence the targeted group. "It constitutes an oppressive act and the oppressive function of hate speech is precisely what makes it morally, socially, and politically objectionable".[5] Therefore, it can be argued that sexist, misogynistic and gender identity hate speech, being intrinsically oppressive in their nature and function, constitute clear examples of oppression and ostracism without necessarily resorting to violence and aggressivity. Importantly, in the context of multimodal online advertising, the broader meaning of "language" is here adopted, including not only verbal language but all the multi-semiotic resources exploited by the advertising industry to portray gender identity and gender roles. Exploring different perspectives, from a sociolinguistic point of view, the work aims to shed light on the complex interface of linguistic hostility, ostracism and gender representation in the advertising system. First, a disambiguation of the concept is provided by pointing to the necessity to distinguish the different nuances that characterise a phenomenon with ancient roots but still not adequately defined and acknowledged, both socially and within the international legal framework. By comparing the most influential definitions of sexist hate speech, sexist speech, and misogynistic language, a broader and more inclusive concept of the language of hate is assumed. One which considers the multifaceted aspects of the issue, on a continuum that ranges from the most subtle and hidden sides of hatred language and ostracism, difficult to identify and tackle, to the most explicitly conveyed forms of sexism, discrimination, and hate.

Second, the various aspects of linguistic hostility and ostracism will be addressed within the multimodal framework of the online advertising systems to explore the most hidden, implicit, and subtle forms that hate speech may assume. Considering that hate speech is oppressive and patronising, aiming at subordinating and belittling its target, it follows that any form of gender identity, misogynistic and sexist speech should count as hate speech even though they often oppress without the face of violence. Nonetheless, once acknowledged that gender identity hate speech bears the key features and scope of hate speech, it is important to be aware that it represents an instance of hate speech that requires a specific analysis because of the peculiar and problematic nature of gender discrimination. Hence, the article contributes to the literature by filling the gap on the discourse of hate in contemporary society by providing a more nuanced account of the different forms that hate speech may assume in the digital advertising system. Specifically, drawing on the most relevant contributions to the study of language and gender, the paper explores a number of common features to identify subliminal, discriminatory or degrading messages in three countries - the UK, Italy, and France – with different legal frameworks to

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[3] James Banks, "Regulating Hate Speech Online", *International Review of Law, Computers, and Technology*, 24.3 (2010), 234.
[4] Majid KhosraviNik and Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally Mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-Based Hostility", *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 14.1 (2018), 45-68.
[5] Louise Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating: On Misogyny, Sexism, and Hate Speech", *Hypatia*, 33.2 (2018), 257.

address the phenomenon. To this end, the comparison among the selected study cases of British, Italian, and French advertising campaigns allows us to define distinct types of gender representation in multimodal averts as well as the specific linguistic and semiotic strategies employed. Additionally, the analysis provides valuable information on the approaches of the monitoring bodies and stakeholders involved in each country in combating sexist advertising. Finally, the last section is devoted to critical considerations of how sexist hate speech is handled in international human rights law. It points to the need to acknowledge and address hate speech both within the framework of gender equality instruments and the anti-hate speech framework established by international human rights bodies.

2. Defining Sexist Hate Speech(es): Linguistic Ostracism, Oppression, Hate

Considered within the framework of the international human rights law, hate speech is one of the most interesting, yet ambiguous phenomena to identify, acknowledge, and tackle. Indeed, the urge to develop a legal definition of hate speech was due to the necessity to indicate clear boundaries between freedom of expression on one hand, and sexist discrimination on the other. Indeed, any attempt to stop sexist hate speech online is constantly in contrast with those who claim that it operates within the area of restriction of freedom of expression. Such restrictions are only applicable in limited situations, including racist and/or homophobic statements. However, the path towards the inclusion of sexist hate speech within the same standards, offering the same protection granted against racist or homophobic hate, has not been easy. A first attempt towards a broader definition of hate speech, including different dimensions of the phenomenon comes from the Council of Europe (CoE): "All forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin".[6] Certainly, this definition does not portray the actual complex and digitalised modern society, where the Internet and the online sphere have become a "battlefield" over free speech.[7] Indeed, first, it does not take into account the profound impact that the language of hate has nowadays due to the spread of the new, digital communication tools. Second, gender equality and freedom of expression are seen very often as contrasting rather than intertwined principles because of the abused freedom of expression as a pretext to justify and legitimise cases of sexist hate speech. This conflict seems to be one of the major obstacles to fight sexist hate speech, especially because the digital media of communication (e.g. social media) are more difficult to control, being less obliged than the traditional media in terms of respect of the ethical standards and quality and reliability of the news and output.

A more detailed, specific definition, at the international level, taking into account sexist hate speech as a form of gender violence, can be found in the CoE in its Recommendation CM/Rec (2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism:

> Any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice or behaviours based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline, with the purpose or effect of: Violating the inherent dignity or rights of a person or a group of persons; or resulting in physical, sexual, psychological or socio-economic harm suffering to a person or a group of persons; or Creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment; or Constituting a

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[6] Council of Europe (CoE), *Recommendation No. R(97) 20 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on "Hate Speech"*, 1997.
[7] Katarzyna Sękowska-Kozłowska1, Grażyna Baranowska, Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, "Sexist Hate Speech and the International Human Rights Law: Towards Legal Recognition of the Phenomenon by the United Nations and the Council of Europe", *International Journal Semiot Law*, 35 (2022), 2323-2345.

barrier to the autonomy and full realisation of human rights by a person or a group of persons; or Maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes.[8]

Compared with the previous one, this definition constitutes a crucial step forward in the acknowledgement of sexist hate speech as an explicit form of violence and/or gender discrimination and ostracism towards specific minority groups. Indeed, in the CoE R(97), the only implicit reference to gender discrimination and/or hate speech could be found in the generic expression "discrimination and hostility against minorities". Instead, in the CoE CM/Rec (2019)1, it is clearly pointed out that sexism is based on the concept that "a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex". Not only does this claim include a much broader target, such as LGBTQ+ groups, but it also addresses the human rights protection of any vulnerable groups, specifically because of their gender and/or gender representation.

Another fundamental aspect that is worth discussing about the last definition, considering the impact of the new digital modes of communication, is the inclusion of the multimodal and multi-semiotic aspects of the phenomenon. Indeed, it refers to both "online and offline" speech, to written and spoken language. Also, it broadens the domain by citing any type of semiotic instrument we may exploit and resort to with the purpose of inciting or conveying hate: "any act, gesture, visual representation". This latter remark is particularly relevant for the current discussion in that it highlights the importance of going "beyond words", widening the domain of any mode of communication that may convey hostility towards the targeted minority group.

Hence, the CoE urges member states to take concrete and effective measures to prevent and combat sexist hate speech in all its manifestations, providing guidelines to implement appropriate legislation and policies. Indeed, considering the dramatic impact of this issue on the public and private lives of women, this recommendation represents a milestone in combating gender stereotypes and sexism, calling for specific actions by member states and pointing to any language and communication mode. It also marks the urge to introduce and implement legislation banning sexism in media and advertising, which will be the focus of the following sections.

Sexism and discrimination negatively affect any area of the personal and private life of people by imposing, implicitly or explicitly, certain societal roles to play and to conform to, based on their gender rather than their aptitudes, will, or ambitions. For example, women are less represented and less frequently found in decision-making positions such as in politics, law, and business. On the other hand, men have been traditionally seen as less involved in care work and are expected to behave in a more assertive way. However, it is important to highlight that sexism and gender-based bias also affect all those people who identify with a non-binary representation of biological sex. Indeed, looking at the findings of the survey published in May 2020 by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, a significant growth in the phenomenon of anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech can be noticed.[9]

As already mentioned, providing a definition of hate speech that may consider the different nuances of meaning, targets of hate and modes of communication is a controversial issue, still scholarly debated. Although it is not a recent phenomenon, lately, sexist hate speech has been taking a whole new dimension due to the spread of the Internet and social media as a new means of everyday communication. It may take many forms, depending on the medium used to convey hate and the type of victim it is targeted to. For instance, it can be sexist hate speech (i.e. gender-motivated hate speech), sexualised hate speech, cyber-sexism or cyber-gender harassment. Each of these expressions highlights different dimensions of gender-based hostility, with hate speech focused on incitement to violence or discrimination, sexualised

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[8] Council of Europe, *Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on Preventing and Combating Sexism*, 2019.
[9] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "A long way to go for LGBTI equality" (2020), www.fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/eu-lgbti-survey-results.

hate speech integrating sexual degradation, and the cyber categories emphasising the digital context where this abuse occurs. Indeed, one of the key issues that creates obstacles, especially online, in detecting and tackling the phenomenon is the lack of clear-cut boundaries among the several aspects that the language of hate may assume. For instance, labelling every single act of sexist speech as hate speech can be misleading and may translate into a sort of trivialization of the problem of hate speech against women.

A first important clarification must be made between what can specifically be considered sexist hate speech and any other linguistic statements and expressions that, despite being oppressive, do not constitute examples of hate speech. This difference has been discussed and clarified in detail by Richardson-Self who draws a first line between "sexist speech" which is not hateful and "misogynistic speech", explicitly featured with hate speech.[10] According to the author, examples of sexist speech, not hateful, are to be found in all those oppressive linguistic expressions which lead to the marginalisation of women, such as patronising a grown woman by calling her "girl".[11] Thus, sexist speech differs significantly from misogynistic speech in that the latter shows some key traits of hate - i.e. violence, hostility, coercion – and it aims to stigmatise, vilify, and disparage its targets. Nonetheless, despite being aware of this important distinction and that both phenomena should be addressed with specific tools, in this paper, instead of adopting the label "misogynist speech", the expressions sexist speech and sexist hate speech will be preferred being the most used in international human rights law and academic contexts. Hence, the assumption that sexist speech falls into the category of hate speech is taken as a starting point since gender identity speech, sexism and misogyny, despite the different traits, all share the oppressive nature and the degrading function of hate speech, which is precisely what makes them socially and morally objectionable. degrading function of hate speech, which is precisely what makes them socially and morally objectionable.

One of the main problems faced when attempting to tackle sexist language is that it intrinsically belongs to the written and spoken linguistic code and, accordingly, it is difficult to change. Usually learned at an early age, sexist language could be considered a linguistic habit. Ruscher refers to a particular gender-biased language that implicitly excludes groups based on their gender and sexual orientation.[12] She maintains that expressions that exclude members of specific groups serve some of the functions of linguistic ostracism. For example, "an invitation to faculty and their wives or a statement that the office is undermanned suggests where women do and do not belong".[13] The negative evaluation and exclusion of the outgroup of women, thus, can also be conveyed through conversational conventions that are part of everyday speech and, although more subtle, they equally suggest that some groups are less visible or important.

Besides, among the reasons for this phenomenon, the lack of knowledge about what constitutes sexist hate speech may play a significant role. A study by Swim et al. sheds light on two important aspects of the issue under investigation.[14] That is, not only is sexist hate speech difficult to detect, but the lack of awareness of what can be considered as sexist hate speech also leads to a higher likelihood to perpetuate this behaviour. Based on a continuum of explicitness of the language of hate, the study provides an accurate definition of three diverse types of sexism: i.e. blatant, covert, and subtle. Blatant sexism is described as "obviously unequal and unfair treatment of women relative to men".[15] Covert sexism, on the other hand, is defined as "unequal and unfair treatment of women that is recognised but purposefully

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[10] Louise Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating: On Misogyny, Sexism, and Hate Speech", *Hypatia,* 33.2(2018), 256-272.
[11] Ibid., 261-262.
[12] Janet B. Ruscher, *Prejudiced Communication: A Social Psychological Perspective* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).
[13] Ibid., 42.
[14] Janet K. Swim, Robyn Mallet, Charles Stangor, "Understanding Subtle Sexism: Detection and Use of Sexist Language", *Sex Roles*, 51.3-4 (2004), 117-128.
[15] Ibid., 117.

hidden from view".[16] On one hand, blatant and covert sexism are easier to detect and recognise as forms of discriminating language, on the other, covert sexism is more hidden, being conveyed in a less explicit form. Finally, the last type of sexism discussed is subtle sexism. Specifically, "(it) represents unequal and unfair treatment of women that is not recognised by many people because it is perceived to be normative, and therefore does not appear to be unusual" (117). Thus, sexist hate speech, in many cases, has been reported to be hidden in the form of subtle sexism in that it consists of speech that implicitly reinforces and perpetuates gender stereotypes and status differences between women and men.[17]

Interestingly, it has been argued that unlike old-fashioned sexists who explicitly endorse gender inequality and traditional gender roles, modern sexists express beliefs that indirectly condone the unequal treatment of women and men.[18] What is dangerous about subtle sexism is that it may not be noticed at all when certain behaviours are not overtly defined as sexist and, consequently, it is not considered problematic. Neo-sexist beliefs, indeed, have been associated with a lower ability to detect and label sexist conduct as sexist. What is more, such a lack of awareness correlates with higher levels of engagement in such behaviour since, as it has been observed, it is not possible to notice or/label sexist behaviours and to act against this conduct.

To better understand what subtle sexism might look like, it is worth analysing two examples provided by Richardson-Self. First: "Imagine that a man exclusively calls women girls, without much conscious reflection on why he does it, and that he does so without expressing any ill will. This nonetheless implies the inferior status of women to (implicitly) adult men, and as such (again, implicitly) justifies men's being given more credence and authority".[19] It can be noticed that this apparently harmless expression, in fact, tends to attribute a lower status to women. What is more, Lynne Tirrell marked the socio-economic consequences that the expression may have on women in the following terms: "Its inappropriate use for an adult woman serves a purpose, to rationalise paying her less for her work, treating her as incapable of making serious decisions, and similar sorts of behaviours that undercut the full expression of her autonomy".[20]

The second example concerns the assumption that all women undertake forms of feminine-coded labour that are confined to the household. Specifically, the former Prime Minister of Australia Tony Abbott once remarked, "What the women of Australia need to understand, as they do the ironing" while explaining the economics of carbon pricing.[21] This can be considered as a subtle form of sexism in that not only does it present as natural and inevitable the gendered division of labour but, most importantly, it implicitly characterises women as cognitively inferior to men. Indeed, it portrays women as unable to understand the nuances of carbon pricing. In other words, they are unable to get important public, worldly matters from economics and science.

3. Sexism and Gender-Based Discrimination in Online Advertising Systems

The rise of online platforms has transformed advertising into a powerful tool that reaches global audiences instantly. However, this shift has also facilitated the spread of harmful content, including hate speech and discriminatory messaging embedded within digital ads. As already argued, the most pervasive form is sexist hate speech, where gender-based hostility intersects with broader patterns of

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[16] Ibid.
[17] See for example: Mary Crawford, "Gender and Language", in R. K. Unger, eds., *Handbook of Psychology of Women and Gender* (New York: Wiley, 2001), 228-244.
[18] Swim et al., "Understanding Subtle Sexism".
[19] Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating", 261.
[20] Lynne Tirrell, "Genocidal Language Games", in Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan, eds., *Speech and Harm: Controversies over Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 193.
[21] As reported in Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating", 262.

online discrimination. These dynamics are often normalised in targeted ads that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, undermine equality, and reinforce exclusionary norms.

Indeed, due to the potential perception of women as preferred targets for sexually aggressive behaviours, the language of advertisements has been the object of extensive research focused on the correlation between perpetuating certain stereotyped images of women and men and the promotion of gender-based aggressive behaviour, sexism, and objectification.[22] Indeed, advertising is a particularly fruitful scenario to investigate the impact of gender models and sexism conveyed by online media advertising systems. According to the social learning theory proposed by Bandura and Walters in 1963, people model their behaviours based on the observation and imitation of the models they are exposed to.[23] If one considers the persuasive technique of the language of adverts and all the multimodal and multi-semiotic resources it exploits, it follows that the damaging and oppressive attitudes and standards conveyed by certain adverts are likely to be considered normal or, even worse, desirable. When applying this theory to hate speech, gender discrimination, oppression, and ostracism, it is worrying to see the harmful impact this practice has on the victims' health and well-being, and on their personal and professional lives. A report by Alexander et al. shows that people are influenced by advertising to such an extent that they are limited in their capacities to resist it. In other words, we have little choice about how we respond to advertised messages. Although not consciously aware, we hear or see a message, we process it, and such a message affects and limits our behaviour.[24]

Hence, as we have seen, sexist and gender stereotypes pervade the world of online advertising systems with detrimental effects on the health, self-esteem, self-perception, and personal choices of the victims. What emerges after a close look at the existing European normative framework, together with the provision of codes of ethics/conducts and various guidelines on sexist adverts is that, overall, sexist advertising features can be distinguished as follows:

- Gender stereotypes;
- Denigratory, humiliating or offensive attitudes towards one sex/gender;
- Objectification;
- Sexualisation;
- Nudity;
- Gender-based violence.[25]

Gender stereotypes employed by sexist advertising campaigns resort to gender clichés condensing a limited perception of what we consider (or ought to consider) as feminine and masculine. These stereotypes can be of a different nature: i.e. descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive.[26] The first defines beliefs about how men and women typically act; the second concerns beliefs about how they should act; the third refers to features that are not desirable for either gender but are permitted for one of the two and proscribed for the other. All of them have been seen to have a profound impact in terms of restricting aspirations, limiting potential, expectations and, therefore, social participation of both women and men. A study by Stewart et al. provided evidence to maintain that attitudes towards gender stereotypes could

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[22] Kyra Lanis and Katherine Covell, "Images of Women in Advertisements: Effects on Attitudes Related to Sexual Aggression", *Sex Roles*, 32.9-10 (1995), 639-649.
[23] As reported in CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising: Ways Ahead", February 2023, 12.
[24] Jon Alexander, Tom Crompton, Guy Shrubsole, "Think of me as Evil? Opening the ethical debates in advertising", *Public Interest Research Centre and WWF-UK*, 2011.
[25] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 19.
[26] Anne Koening, "Comparing Prescriptive and Descriptive Gender Stereotypes About Children, Adults, and the Elderly", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), 2.

be shifted by increasing awareness of gender norms, which will translate into a change of attitude.[27] Indeed, the authors point out that a change of route is needed and that adverts may have a fundamental role in this respect, by breaking down the same gender stereotypes they have been portraying since the early days and discontinuing their perpetuation.

As regards the second type of sexist advertising, based on denigratory, humiliating or offensive attitude towards one sex/gender, it implies the representation of one sex/gender in such a way that can be considered offending. This can be conveyed, for instance, by showing somebody as unable to act in a certain way, think rationally, or perform a task because of their gender. Yet, other possible scenarios referring to these types of sexism in adverts include the depiction of one gender, usually women, as servile to the other or being socially, emotionally or economically subordinated.

Objectification of the human body through sexist advertising contributes to the promotion of gender-based violence against women. Besides, it is important to notice that sexualisation and objectification in adverts often overlap, in that people may be objectified in a sexualised manner. Specifically, objectification can be defined as "the process of treating someone as an object rather than as a human being".[28] An example could be depicting a static body to advertise a service or a product that is unrelated to it. Additionally, the person's body may appear as a mere decoration, replaced with pieces of objects, and/or portrayed with animal-like features. Notably, sexualisation is the most widely used technique to sell services and products and occurs when one or multiple elements are included such as a focus on erogenous body parts, a depiction of body-shaped objects, or visual associations established between some products and a person's body form, pornographic representations, people portrayed as sexually available, in overly sexualised gaze or in submissive positions. In most of these cases, the advertised goods have nothing to do with sexuality or reproductive rights.

An interesting study by McKenzie et al. analyses the way in which recent adverts have been influenced by post-feminist notions of women's freedom and equality by substituting the traditional images of women committed to family care and children with images of women as sexually in power, independent and ambitious.[29] This controversial issue opposes advertising agencies and the CoE. The first claim that they have embraced the changing cultural ideals of our society providing, in their view, a progressive and empowering role of women nowadays. On the other hand, the point of view of the CoE is that such "empowered" portrayals, in fact, have a damaging impact on women's bodies and image. Indeed, it has been argued that these representations undermine any effort made to achieve gender equality by associating women's success and empowerment with physical attractiveness, sexuality, and desirability to men.

Closely related to the two phenomena just described – objectification and sexualisation – is the portrayal of gender-based violence in commercials. Indeed, according to Gurrieri and Hoffmann, when the perpetuation of gender-based violence in adverts is correlated with attitudes and social behaviour that tolerates hate, in particular violence against women, the aggressive conduct is supported by sexist beliefs, and blames victims for sexual violence.[30] Yet, the greater tolerance of sexual aggression, considering gender-based violence as normal, leads to a higher degree of acceptability of men's use of sexually coercive attitudes. Indeed we are exposed daily to scenarios where violence is normalised or even made attractive. Adverts present aggressive language and attitudes as amusing, sensual, pleasing,

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[27] Rebecca Stewart et al., "*Gendered stereotypes and norms: A systematic review of interventions designed to shift attitudes and behaviour*", *Heliyon*, 7.4 (2021), e06660.

[28] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 20.

[29] Mandy McKenzie M. et al., "Advertising (In)equality: the Impact of Sexist Advertising on Women's Health and Wellbeing", *Women's Health Victoria*, Melbourne, 2018.

[30] Lauren Gurrieri and Rob Hoffmann, "Addressing and Preventing Sexist Advertising: An Analysis of Local and Global Promising Practice", RMIT University, Melbourne, 2019.

and powerful. However, as it has been noticed, images, models and language that convey violence lead to a society that supports and tolerates violence and blames the victims.

Finally, another significant point that is worth discussing about gender representation in adverts concerns how the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed. First of all, LGBTQ+ people are excluded from adverts in most cases since heterosexuality is usually presented as the norm. On the other hand, in those rare cases when the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed, they present stereotyped images such as gay men denied of their maleness and associated with female attributes such as a particularly well-groomed appearance, language, and way of talking. Usually, they are employed to sell beauty, fashion, and home décor goods, traditionally associated with women. As regards lesbian women, they are represented in ways which deny their femaleness, i.e. unwomanly or even manly, and shown in erotic poses meant to attract the heterosexual target.[31]

4. A Comparative Overview of Case Studies of Discriminatory Advertising: UK, Italy, France

To better understand how subtle sexism is conveyed in advertising, the following section explores a number of case studies of adverts which have been the object of debate for sexist content and/or form, in countries with a different regulatory framework on sexist hate speech and discriminatory language in adverts. Indeed, the cases presented – UK, Italy and France – allow us to analyse and compare the multimodal and multi-semiotic resources employed to convey the most hidden face of hatred language: i.e. discrimination, oppression, and ostracism without the face of violence. Besides, an overview of the practices undertaken to combat sexist and discriminatory adverts will be presented to reflect on the necessary decisions and actions that are worth considering in future to combat the phenomenon, aiming to create an international framework as a coherent and reliable point of reference.

As regards the UK, a ban on adverts featuring "harmful gender stereotypes" or those which are likely to cause "serious or widespread offence" was introduced in 2019[32] by the British advertising control body. Scenarios such as a man with his feet up while a woman cleans, or a woman failing to park a car have been the object of censure. The new rule follows a review of gender stereotyping in adverts by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) - the organisation that administers the UK Advertising Codes, covering both broadcast and non-broadcast adverts, including online and social media.[33] The ASA review showed that harmful stereotypes could "restrict the choices, aspirations and opportunities of children, young people and adults and these stereotypes can be reinforced by some advertising, which plays a part in unequal gender outcomes". The BBC reported the ASA chief executive's point of view on this matter: "Our evidence shows how harmful gender stereotypes in ads can contribute to inequality in society, with costs for all of us. Put simply, we found that some portrayals in ads can, over time, play a part in limiting people's potential".[34]

Hence, not only do images and stereotypes portrayed in adverts affect the way we perceive ourselves, the social attitudes and roles attributed to women and men, but they also contribute to creating invisible, subtle obstacles to the social and professional participation of people being stigmatised and objectified. A further aspect that is worth noticing about the ASA report concerns the collection of data based on people's perceptions and reactions to harmful gender stereotypical images conveyed in some emblematic adverts. Among the most representative cases, there is a 2017 television advert for *Aptamil* baby milk

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[31] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 22; Antonio Fruttaldo, "Communing Affiliation and the Power of Bonding Icons in Collective Narratives. The Case of #GrowingUpGay", in *Language, Heart, and Mind: Studies at the Intersection of Emotion and Cognition*, 66 (Berlino: Peter Lang, 2020), 283-301.
[32] "'Harmful' Gender Stereotypes in Adverts Banned", *BBC* (14 June 2019), www.bbc.com/news/business-48628678.
[33] Advertising Standard Authority (ASA), "Depictions, Perceptions and Harm – A Report on Gender Stereotypes in Advertising", (2017).
[34] "'Harmful' Gender Stereotypes".

formula, which showed a baby girl growing up to be a ballerina and baby boys becoming engineers and mountain climbers as adults. The evidence suggested that some parents felt strongly about the gender-based aspirations shown in this advert noting the stereotypical future professions of the boys and girls shown. More specifically, parents pointed to the lack of diversity in gender roles, which are not representative of our society.

Other examples of adverts that are likely to be banned, according to the new British regulation, include:

- Adverts which show a man or a woman failing at a task because of their gender, like a man failing to change a nappy or a woman failing to park;
- Adverts aimed at new mothers which suggest that looking good or keeping a home tidy is more important than emotional well-being;
- Adverts which belittle a man for carrying out stereotypically female tasks.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the new rules do not preclude the use of all gender stereotypes. Instead, the main goal of ASA was to identify "specific harms" that should be avoided. So, for instance, it would still be possible to show women doing the shopping or men doing DIY or use gender stereotypes as a way of challenging their negative effects.

Along the same line, recent research, carried out in Italy by Valtorta et al. provides updated findings on gender stereotypes in Italian children's TV commercials.[35] In particular, it documents the presence of sexualisation, highlighting the negative consequences it has on girls, including body dissatisfaction, depression, and lower self-esteem, as well as adverse effects on girls' relationships with their peers.[36] Indeed, this media reinforcement has significant implications for children, shaping their perceptions of gender roles. Previous research findings indicate that stereotypical media representations contribute to children's acceptance of gender-stereotyped beliefs, which are linked to bullying and ostracism of gender-nonconforming peers.[37]

More specifically, the aforementioned study by Valtorta et al. provides a content analysis of 185 commercials, aired between 6 pm and 8:30 pm on the three most popular Italian children's channels, was conducted. Two raters coded variables such as verbs used, voice-over characteristics, settings, pace, and activities of main characters, facilitating comparisons with previous research on gender stereotyping. The findings shed light on the role of communication media as socialisation agents that continuously affect individual behaviours and attitudes. Additionally, it can be inferred that advertising also wields an influence on the socialisation process. It is considered to have unintended consequences on the values and lifestyles adopted by members of society, especially children. Commercials targeting girls frequently featured prosocial verbs, feminine voice-overs, domestic settings, and themes of warmth and interaction. In contrast, those aimed at boys included more antisocial verbs, masculine voice-overs, non-domestic settings, and themes related to technical information and competitiveness. Boys were depicted engaging in active and competitive activities, such as running and solving brain teasers, while girls were shown

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[35] Roberta Rosa Valtorta et al., "Gender Stereotypes and Sexualization in Italian Children's Television Advertisements", *Sexuality & Culture*, 27 (2023), 1625-1645.

[36] Lisa Groesz et al., "The Effect of Experimental Presentation of Thin Media Images on Body Satisfaction: A Meta-analytic Review", *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 31 (2002), 1-16; Amanda J. Holmstrom, "The Effects of the Media on Body Image: A Meta-analysis", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48 (2004), 196-217; Rocìo Rivadeneyra et al., "Distorted Reflections: Media Exposure and Latino Adolescents' Conceptions of Self", *Media Psychology*, 9 (2007), 261-290.

[37] Alexandra Henning et al., "Do Stereotypic Images in Video Games Affect Attitudes and Behavior? Adolescent Perspectives", *Children, Youth and Environments*, 19.1 (2009),170-196; Erica S. Weisgram et al., "Pink Gives Girls Permission: Exploring the Roles of Explicit Gender Labels and Gender-Typed Colours on Preschool Children's Toy Preferences", *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 35 (2014), 401-409; Jennifer J. Pike et al., "The Effects of Commercials on Children's Perceptions of Gender Appropriate Toy Use", *Sex Roles*, 52.1-2 (2005), 83-91.

playing with dolls, engaging in domestic tasks, and applying makeup. Although the overall level of sexualisation was low, girls were more sexualized than boys, particularly through "adultification". This included depictions of girls in adult poses and wearing adult accessories or tight-fitting clothing. This gender disparity in sexualisation aligns with the findings of another study, by Owen and Padron, revealing that girls' action-figure narratives contained more social words, while boys' action-figure narratives emphasised power and aggression.[38]

To contrast the phenomenon, a major step forward in the Italian Legal framework has been the approval of the 'Infrastructure Decree' (Decree-Law No. 121 of 10 September 2021). Italy's senate agreed, with 190 to 34 votes, to ban any adverts which consist of sexist, discriminatory, or anti-abortion content from appearing anywhere across their entire transportation infrastructure. In particular, the transport and infrastructure decree bans adverts in public that are seen to perpetuate stereotypes about women and minority ethnic or religious groups, as well as any adverts that discriminate against gender identity or orientation.

The central issue prompting the implementation of the ban is that posters on streets and on transportation are "injurious to individual freedom". The decree amends, among others, Article 23 of the Highway Code (Decree Law 285/1992) on advertising on roads and vehicles, inserting a paragraph 4-bis, which states that "any form of advertising whose content proposes sexist or violent messages or offensive gender stereotypes or messages that violate respect for individual freedoms, civil and political rights, religious beliefs or ethnicity, or that is discriminatory with reference to sexual orientation, gender identity or physical and mental abilities is forbidden on roads and vehicles". Subsequent paragraphs 4-ter and 4-quater provide for the issuance of a ministerial decree of enforcement, and the sanction for the violation (revocation of the posting authorisation by the road owner). Nonetheless, it must be noted that this Law does not apply to the online and Television advertising system.

For a thorough understanding of the different gender representations of British and Italian TV advertisements, it is worth referring to Centonze and Taronna's comparative analysis of gender stereotypes and sexism in English language, considering an English-speaking country and a non-English speaking country: *i.e.* Britain and Italy.[39] In particular, the results of this interlinguistic and comparative research have brought about interesting data demonstrating the diversified aspect of discriminatory gender identity construction in the two nations. For example, female roles characterising the Italian section of the corpus are represented in a more traditional way than in the English section (53.2% vs 23.8%). Nonetheless, these results are not in line with the data referred to the decorative roles of women in Italy and in the UK. Indeed, based on the previous factor under investigation concerning female role characterisation, one would expect a higher percentage of decorative roles in the Italian advertising system. Instead, these roles are less recurrent in the Italian corpus than in the English one (17.7% vs 23.4%).

An interpretation that has been advanced concerns the prevalence of cosmetic/care body products in the English section of the corpus. Another, more interesting account relates to the different distribution of female co-presence in the corpus. In fact, women are represented alone in the English sub-section of the corpus while women-men co-presence is very low. This would explain the notion of an overall non-traditional representation of women, as empowered human beings within the society. This image of women in power is also confirmed by the pragma-linguistic analysis of the study. The use of the first-person pronoun together with hedging strategies aiming at making the female protagonist's voice heard, highlight a sense of female empowerment and autonomy. For instance, the study marked the use of

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[38] Patricia Owen and Monica Padron, "The Language of Toys: Gendered Language in Toy Advertisements", *Journal of Research on Women and Gender*, 6.1 (2015), 67-80.
[39] Laura Centonze and Annarita Taronna, "A Multimodal Analysis of Gender Representations in British and Italian TV Advertisements", in Lucia Abbamonte and Flavia Cavaliere, eds., *Updating Discourse/s on Method/s*, *MediAzioni*, 34 (2022), A116-A141.

assertive and modal verbs expressing the protagonist's confidence to act, against the stereotyped gender models propounding submissive women.

As regards the case of France, it is particularly relevant to resolve the apparent contrast, already introduced, between freedom of expression and human rights when dealing with sexist hate speech online. The issue has been resolved by the French Media Law in the following terms by the Freedom of Communication Law: "Audio-visual communication is free. The exercise of this freedom may be limited to the extent required […], for the respect of human dignity, the freedom and property of other people, and the pluralistic nature of the expression of ideas and opinions". In addition, Law n. 2006-396 introduces a specific provision against discrimination in audio-visual communication media. In particular, the High Authority for Audio-visual Media (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel or CSA) ensures that human dignity is respected in all publicly transmitted programmes and sanctions all programmes that break the law.

Hence, this is the body in charge of monitoring the respect for women's rights in the advertising field. Interestingly, in 2017, the CSA published the results of a study analysing 2000 advertising spots broadcasted between 2016 and 2017.[40] Considering how alarming the results were in terms of sexism and gender discrimination, the institution initiated a discussion with the representative of the media communications, and advertising sectors to work together towards the achievement of the same goal: fighting against sexual, sexist, and gender stereotypes in adverts. One of the most important outcomes of this initiative was the development of a Charter, signed on a voluntary commitment by the entities involved in March 2018.

Another relevant public institution with the aim of ensuring gender equality in the media is the High Council of Equality between Women and Men (Haute Conseil à l'Egalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes – HCEfh). When sexism in adverts or gender discrimination is identified in the media, the HCEfh notifies the relevant institution. An example of an advert that has been considered sexist by the HCEfh is one published by an Internet service provider in 2014 which included the following slogans: "Download as fast as your wife changes her mind" and "Download as fast as your husband forgets his promises". Both were considered as discriminatory based on sexist clichés, but the first was accused of conveying a denigratory, undermining image of women as not being able to make rational decisions. The Jury of Ethics reviewed this complaint and confirmed the sexist content of the advert.[41]

Gurrieri and Hoffmann highlight a particular aspect of the French legislative framework in terms of control and sanctioning of outdoor advertisements.[42] Indeed, the CSA can only exercise control over audio-visual broadcast content. Accordingly, a significant portion of advertising systems including, for example, posters and billboards, is excluded. In these cases, the decisions on discrimination issues are taken by the Professional Advertising Regulation Authority (ARPP), an advertising self-regulation mechanism created in June 2008. An example of a billboard which has been banned by the ARPP is a 2017 poster by the well-known fashion brand Yves Saint Laurent.[43] After receiving more than 120 formal complaints in Paris, the brand was ordered to modify the visual because it incontestably breached the self-regulatory code. Indeed, the poster was accused of representing a degrading image of women, featuring models in fishnet tights and high-heeled roller skates, legs splayed, striking a pose in a suggestive position.

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[40] Le Conseil superieur de l'audiovisuel, *Women's representation in TV advertising*, 2017.
[41] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 30.
[42] Lauren Gurrieri and Rob Hoffmann, *Addressing and preventing sexist advertising: An analysis of local and global promising practice* (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2019).
[43] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 30; Julien Rath, "Paris voted to Ban 'Sexist and Discriminatory' Outdoor Ads", *Business Insider* (2017), www.businessinsider.com/paris-voted-to-ban-sexist-and-discriminatory-outdoor-ads-2017-3.

5. Conclusions

It has been seen how online platforms have become a breeding ground for the perpetuation of different and multilayered forms of hate toward specific targets, especially women, contributing to their silencing, marginalisation, and exclusion. In other words, the digital sphere has now become the ideal space for what has recently been defined by Balirano as the "Mantropocene", the enactment and perpetuation of misogynist hate and offensive behaviour.[44] Hence, understanding how to properly situate patriarchy and subordinating speech is paramount and requires a broader, interdisciplinary approach going "beyond words", including the analysis of all the multi-semiotic resources exploited by the advertising system in different contexts.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the current discussion is that the insidious phenomenon of hate speech, in its intersection with sexism, ostracism and discrimination in the digital sphere, may often assume various forms which are very difficult to recognise, detect, and tackle. Indeed, it has been discussed that sexist speech, despite the peculiar nature of gender identity subordination, still falls within the category of hate speech, offering a clear example of oppression without (necessarily) the face of violence. Nonetheless, what emerges from the analysis on gender representation in the British, Italian, and French advertisements included here is that sexism, misogyny and, in general, gender identity hate speech share the same characterising features of hostility, ostracism, vilification, and discrimination towards the targeted groups. In particular, in all the three countries, it is possible to identify the presence of subtle sexism, which on one hand reinforces and perpetuates gender stereotypes and status differences between men and women while, on the other, conveys a very limited, objectified and sexualised representation of the human body.

The most significant and alarming consequences of these factors can be summarised in terms of ostracism, greater societal tolerance towards gender-based violence, body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem of the victims. It is important to notice that the UK, Italy, and France all are aware of the major role played by these communication media with the degrading and undermining images they portray. Indeed, on one hand they contribute to creating subtle and invisible obstacles to the social and professional participation of the people being stigmatised while, on the other hand, they tend to create a society that tolerates this form of oppression since it is not immediately recognisable as an explicit act of violence. Hence, all these countries have taken action to contrast the subtle sexism of online and off-line adverts, including posters and billboards on the street. However, a particular aspect of the French legislative framework dealing with advertisements that is worth reporting is that it can only exert control over audio-visual content. This means that a significant portion of the advertising system, such as posters and billboards on the street, is then excluded.

Besides, it is crucial that any discussion on sexist hate speech be preceded by a premise on which aspect of the phenomenon we are addressing and in which context it is occurring (i.e. digital, physical, national, international). Thus, from a sociolinguistic point of view, as it has been argued, it is important to acknowledge sexist speech as a form of hate speech that tends to oppress, silence, exclude, and vilify the addressees of this insidious form of hate, with alarming consequences for the target group. On the other hand, from a legal point of view, being able to distinguish between sexist speech and sexist hate speech permits us to consider the latter as a form of violence against women and/or gender-based minorities and to sanction it appropriately.[45] Indeed, it is not just a labelling issue since sexist speech and sexist hate speech are often treated differently in legal frameworks being the former more extreme

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[44] Giuseppe Balirano, "On the Margins of the Manthropocene: Semiotic Violence against Women in Politics as a Form of Diamesic Creativity", *Margins Marges Margini*, 1.1 (2023), 56-78.

[45] Katarzyna Sękowska-Kozłowska1 et al., "Sexist Hate Speech and the International Human Rights Law", *International Journal Semiot Law*, 35 (2022), 2323-2345.

and often explicitly outlawed under international human rights standards, while the latter in general, including sexist advertising, can fall under regulatory and soft law approaches that focus on discouraging rather than criminalising the behaviour.

Thus, both sexist speech and sexist hate speech ought to be considered as human rights issues, handled internationally by means of the anti-stereotyping framework of CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention, imposing on state parties obligations to contrast gender stereotypes through education and media monitoring.[46] Nonetheless, the revised CEDAW Committee's GR N. 35 of 2017 does not directly address hate speech against women as a specific form of violence. The only advancement is the introduction of a general reference to "contemporary forms of violence occurring online and in other digital environments".[47] Hence, considering that the advertising domain is a fruitful scenario for spreading sexist hate speech, acknowledging its specific nature could be an important achievement towards the elimination of the phenomenon.

Hence, significant advancements within international human rights law can be acknowledged. For instance, one cannot overlook the provisions developed to be used as reference points to address hate speech within the context of the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination. Among the most recent documents, adopted by the CoE, the 2018-2023 Gender Equality Strategy is noteworthy. Its main purpose is to identify the goals and priorities of the CoE on gender equality, the working methods and strategies to prevent and combat gender stereotypes and sexism.[48] What is particularly relevant, for the purpose of the current discussion, is that the role of media, social media and advertising has been emphasised and included in one of the most important Strategic Objectives. Indeed, the CoE has pointed the need to take the following action: "to prepare a draft recommendation to prevent and combat sexism, including guidelines to prevent and combat it online and offline, covering new forms of sexism affecting women and men in private and public spaces, and addressing sexist language…, sexist hate speech, sexism in media and in advertising".[49]

Yet, two additional problematic aspects that need further investigation and improvement are, on one hand, the lack of an internationally acknowledged, coherent legal framework to detect and combat hate speech in the digital sphere. On the other, the need to refine the linguistic and technological tools available to disambiguate the soft boundaries between what can be labelled as "hate speech" and what falls instead within the principle of "freedom of expression".

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[46] United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, "CEDAW/C/GC/35" (2017).
[47] Ibid., 20.
[48] Council of Europe, *Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023* (coe.int), https://rm.coe.int/ge-strategy-2018-2023/1680791246.
[49] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 17.

Part 3. Gender Identity, Representation and Hate Speech

Roberto Esposito

"Get in some good trouble!"
Meaning and Representation in Drag Response to Hate Crimes.
A Stylistic and Multimodal Analysis

Abstract: In recent years, incidents of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and religion have risen sharply. The murder of George Floyd has sparked the emergence of movements that intersect various rights initiatives. This activism is more intersectional, highlighting the awareness among activists of the need to address multiple levels of discrimination simultaneously. This has emerged through public protests and celebrity support for equality and solidarity, despite being countered by right-wing policies. This article examines solidarity and resistance movements from a linguistic and multimodal perspective, focusing on televised drag queen activism, specifically on one episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 13, recorded in 2020. The study examines how drag queens perceive and respond to hate crimes, testing a cross-disciplinary approach using Stylistics and Multimodality. Drag performances are analysed in terms of transitivity and representation of social actors, to investigate and better understand the semiotic process of meaning-making, and to gain insights into the drag community's response to Hate Speech.

Keywords: *hate speech*, *hate crime*, *drag queens*, *RuPaul's drag race*, *multimodality*, *stylistics*

1. Visibility and Activism: Study's Overview

The last five years were marked by a series of discriminatory incidents, predominantly of an ethnic, gender, and religious nature. Among them, the murder of George Floyd has represented an indelible image, and a critical trigger for our society's battles. Although it is evident that similar tragic events already occurred before the ongoing decade, the increasing pervasiveness of (social) media has undoubtedly contributed to foster the awareness of different forms of social inequality, as a vehicle of both information and Hate Speech.[1] Similarly, and consistently observed by media such as *The Guardian*, the fight against hatred has manifested in two main broad forms: on the one hand, strikes and street marches, which have also become a sharing point of reflection for activists engaged in different fights, such as racism, gender equality, and climate change;[2] on the other hand, activism has been significantly endorsed by artists, athletes, and celebrities, who used their media exposure to foster equality and by taking concrete action and spreading solidarity messages.[3] Thus, activism has recently been supported by a higher consciousness – one effect of globalisation. The evidence of this strong

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[1] Giuseppe Balirano, and Brownen Hughes, "Editors' Introduction", in Giuseppe Balirano and Brownen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Napoli: Loffredo, 2021), v-xiv.
[2] Jessica Murray, and Aamna Mohdin, "'It was empowering': teen BLM activists on learning the ropes at school climate strikes", *The Guardian*, Tuesday 11 August (2020), https://www.theguardian.com, accessed 30 April 2025.
[3] Daniel Gallan, "Usman Khawaja Challenges Cricket's Uncomfortable Relationship with Activism", *The Guardian*, Friday 15 December (2023), www.theguardian.com, accessed 30 April 2025.

defiance of power is that both public protest[4] and artistic social engagement[5] are challenged by far right-wing politicians and with a series of actions that are sometimes repressive.

In the present article I try to exemplify these movements of solidarity and resistance from a linguistic and discursive perspective, by specifically focusing on televised drag queens' activism. This study has two main objectives: (1) investigating the modalities through which drag queens perceive, discuss and respond to hate crimes; (2) testing a cross-disciplinary approach that hybridises frameworks from stylistics and multimodality. The first purpose is pursued through the analysis of a conversation and discussion retrieved from an episode of the thirteenth season of the TV contest *RuPaul's Drag Race*[6] (RPDR). The season was recorded in 2020 and aired at the beginning of 2021. In episode 5, *The Bag Ball*, drag participants seized the opportunity presented by their visibility to initiate a discourse on the ethnic crimes that have happened in 2020. The matter is importantly discussed from an intersectional point of view, as the queens highlight the ethnic-gender oppression suffered by Black trans lives.

The methodological purpose of this article is closely related to drag art, as drag performances are a proper field for investigating two complex linguistic issues: (a) how the joint use of language and body triggers a semiotic process of meaning-making that can hopefully foster social change; (b) the re-semiotization of the concept of 'style', which ought to be no longer conceptualised only in stylistic terms – how a text says what – but also according to a more common idea of style, therefore in visual and aesthetic sense.

This introduction is followed by a review of some remarkable linguistic research on the verbal and non-verbal performativity of drag queens, along with a framing of Hate Speech and 'hate crime' in relation to the drag community. Successively, a methodological section illustrates the stylistic and multimodal categories chosen for the analysis, namely Paul Simpson's model of transitivity[7] and Theo van Leeuwen's network system of the representation of social actors[8]. In the fourth section, after giving some context about RPDR's format, the analyses be carried out. Finally, some concluding remarks wrap up considerations on drag response to Hate Speech, and on the application of the cross-disciplinary approach proposed.

2. Drag, Drag Language, and Hate Speech

It is always appropriate to provide a comprehensive definition of the term 'drag'. It has undergone significant evolution over time, yet there is a certain degree of consistency about what the word 'drag' evokes in mind. According to Gonzales and Cavazos, "although there is no generally agreed upon definition of 'drag', an appropriate characterization of drag performers is individuals who publicly perform gender […] as well as blur the lines between masculine and feminine".[9] The act of drag subverts the dominant ideologies and heteronormative binaries by challenging conventional gender norms. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity: "The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules

[4] Adria R. Walker, "Seven Organizations the Far Right is Targeting for Diversity Efforts Post-Affirmative Action", Friday 12 April (2024), www.theguardian.com, accessed 30 April 2025.
[5] Nadia Khomami, "ACE's 'Political Statements' Warning to Artists Came After Government Talks", Friday 17 May (2024), www.theguardian.com, accessed 30 April 2024.
[6] Nick Murray, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Logo TV (2009-2016), VH1 (2017-2022), MTV (2023-present).
[7] Paul Simpson, *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* (London: Routledge, 2004), 26.
[8] Theo Van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors", in Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2003), 66.
[9] Jorge C. González and Kameron C. Cavazos, "Serving Fishy Realness: Representations of Gender Equity on RuPaul's Drag Race", *Continuum*, 30.6 (2016), 1.

precisely through the production of substantializing effects".[10] According to Butler, drag exemplifies gender performativity, as it subverts traditional gender roles through exaggerated performances associated with a birth sex different from one's own. Within drag culture, these performative practices are vividly embodied, as testified by television representations of drag, which evolved alongside the lived realities of the drag community, mutually influencing each other while navigating the heteronormative constraints of mainstream media.[11] The most compelling example is *RuPaul's Drag Race*, an American reality competition television series created by drag icon RuPaul Charles. Each season features a diverse group of drag queens who compete in various challenges to win the title of America's Next Drag Superstar. The show premiered in 2009 and has since become a cultural phenomenon, celebrating drag culture and providing a platform for drag queens to showcase their talents and eventually get a start to their careers. As host, mentor, and head judge, RuPaul guides contestants through a series of challenges designed to test their charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent (C.U.N.T.).

Among RPDR's most enjoyable moments, there are those sophisticated linguistic performances that contribute to the construction of gender identities. It has been demonstrated through sociolinguistic research that language plays a crucial role in the formation and perpetuation of drag identities. According to Barrett, drag queens rely on multiple linguistic codes and styles to construct their social and gender identities.[12] One example that has drawn the attention of much linguistic research is the drag practice 'reading', that is making humorous and sometimes exaggerated remarks about someone's perceived flaws or characteristics as a form of mock impoliteness. [13] Studies have demonstrated that LGBTQ individuals frequently engage in ritual insults and playful putdowns in order to foster in-group solidarity.[14] McKinnon further elaborates that such practices help drag queens develop a "thick skin" to navigate the hostile environment they often face, both within and outside the LGBTQ community.[15]

Drag queens' thick skin is a critical area of study where drag culture intersects with Hate Speech. The subverting performance of gender often makes drag queens the target of hateful language. Hate Speech, as well as hate crimes, are acts motivated by bias, prejudice, or animosity towards a particular group on the basis of social categories like ethnicity, gender identity, religion, or sexual orientation.[16] Although it is not easy to provide an all-encompassing framing of such phenomenon, Hate Speech remains a challenging issue that requires, linguistic, rhetorical, but also other types of analysis to understand its impact and elaborate counter-strategies, as it can manifest in various forms, which means not only verbal, but also non-verbal and symbolic expressions.[17] It is of paramount importance to gain insight into how drag performers interpret, address, and react to Hate Speech. Within research on drag culture, many scholars have focused on both public performances and behind-the-scenes interactions of drag performers in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of their community and their responses to social hostility.[18] This study also aims to contribute to research on the social and linguistic practices that influence the experiences of drag queens.

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[10] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 45.

[11] Pierre Macherey, "A Production of Subjectivity", *Yale French Studies*, 88 (1995), 48.

[12] Rusty Barrett, "Indexing Polyphonous Identity in the Speech of African American Drag Queens", in Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, and Laurel A. Sutton, eds., *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 314.

[13] Jonathan Culpeper, *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 208.

[14] Stephen O. Murray, "The Art of Gay Insulting", *Anthrophological Linguistics*, 21.5 (1979), 211-223.

[15] Sean McKinnon, ""Building a thick skin for each other": The Use of 'Reading' as an Interactional Practice of Mock Impoliteness in Drag Queen Backstage Talk", *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, 6.1 (2017), 121.

[16] Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic, "Images of the outsider in American law and culture: Can free expression remedy systemic social ills?", In Richard Delgado, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1995), 217-227.

[17] Chris J. Vargo, and Toby Hopp, "Fear, anger, and political advertisement engagement: A computational case study of Russian-linked Facebook and Instagram content", *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 97 (2020), 743-761.

[18] Dana Berkowitz, and Linda Belgrave, ""She works hard for the money": Drag queens and the management of their contradictory status of celebrity and marginality", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39 (2010), 159-186.

In conclusion, the study of drag culture, gender performativity, and Hate Speech suggests that language and performance can intersect in complex ways to construct and challenge social identities. By examining the linguistic and embodied practices of drag queens, researchers may gain a deeper understanding of how these performers navigate and resist societal norms that seek to marginalise them. In this respect, RPDR is a proper case study, as it profoundly impacted both the LGBTQ+ community and mainstream culture. It has brought drag culture into the spotlight, fostering greater acceptance and understanding of gender diversity and artistic expression.

3. A Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Style(s) and Representation(s)

3.1 *The Encoding of Meaning: Style as Choice*

Language plays a crucial role in shaping and defining everyday experiences, encompassing actions, events, thoughts, and perceptions. In Simpson's words, it does so by

> encoding into the grammar of the clause a mechanism for capturing what we say, think and do. It also means accommodating in grammar a host of more abstract relations, such as those that pertain between objects, circumstances and logical concepts. When language is used to represent the goings on of the physical or abstract world in this way, to represent patterns of experience in spoken and written texts, it fulfils the *experiential* function. The experiential function is an important marker of style, especially so of the style of narrative discourse, because it emphasises the concept of *style as choice*".[19]

This means that language allows for the representation of the same event in multiple ways, according to what Halliday indicates as "mental picture of reality".[20] Stylistician's task is to understand why a particular structure is chosen over others. These stylistic choices, whether conscious or unconscious, significantly impact the structure and interpretation of texts.

The system used to frame experience in language is called transitivity. On semantic, pragmatic and discursive levels of language, transitivity has less to do with verbs taking direct objects, but rather and with how meanings are encoded in the clause, representing different types of processes. Transitivity typically identifies three key components of processes: the process itself (usually a verb phrase), the participants (usually noun phrases), and the circumstances (usually prepositional or adverb phrases). Figure 1 shows the model of transitivity proposed by Simpson, drawing on Halliday's theories. However, this model does not prevent the overlapping of humans' different experiences. In this model, six types of processes are identified:

1. Material processes: those of doing, involving an actor (obligatory) and a goal (optional).
2. Mental processes: those of sensing, involving a sensor and a phenomenon.
3. Behavioural processes: sitting between material and mental, representing physiological actions.
4. Verbalization processes: those of saying, involving a sayer, a receiver, and a verbiage.
5. Relational processes: those of being, establishing relationships between entities.
6. Existential processes: those asserting existence, typically occurring with 'there'.

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[19] Simpson, *Stylistics*, 22.
[20] Michael A.K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold 1994), 106.
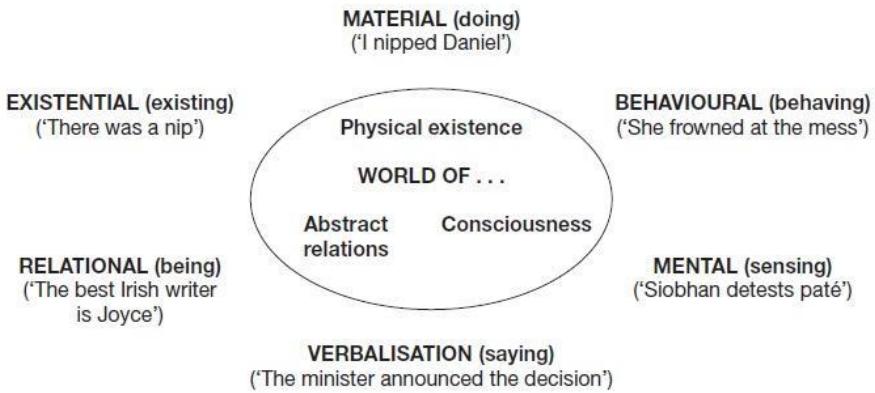
Fig.1: Simpson's model of transitivity

Relational processes are further divided into three types and two modes (Fig. 2). The types are *intensive* ('x is y'), *possessive* ('x has y'), and *circumstantial* ('x is at/is in/is on/is with y'). The modes are *attributive*, when the process describes a quality, and *identifying*, when it defines one entity through another.

Type	Mode attributive	identifying
intensive	Paula's presentation was lively	The best Irish writer is Joyce Joyce is the best Irish writer
possessive	Peter has a piano	The Alpha Romeo is Clara's Clara's is the Alpha Romeo
circumstantial	The fête is on all day	The maid is in the parlour In the parlour is the maid

Fig. 2: Relational processes grid

The model of transitivity and the relational processes grid are used in the first round of analysis carried out in this study to investigate drag queen's discursive encoding when discussing the Black Lives Matter momentum.

3.2 *Discourse and Representation*

In his study, van Leeuwen examines the ways in which social actors can be represented in English discourse. He sets out to develop a socio-semantic inventory with the aim of understanding the sociological and critical relevance of these representations before delving into their linguistic realisation.

Van Leeuwen's approach diverges from traditional linguistically oriented Critical Discourse Analysis by prioritising sociological categories over purely linguistic ones:

> There is no neat fit between sociological and linguistic categories, and if Critical Discourse Analysis, in investigating for instance the representation of agency, ties itself in too closely to specific linguistic operations or categories, many relevant instances of agency might be overlooked. One cannot, it seems, have it both ways with language. Either theory and method are formally neat but semantically messy (as in the dictionary: one form, many meanings), or they are semantically neat but formally messy (as in the thesaurus: one concept, many possible realisations). Linguists tend towards preserving the unity of formal categories. I shall here attempt the opposite approach, hoping to provide a set of relevant categories for investigating the representation of social actors in discourse.[21]

Van Leeuwen introduces several key concepts and frameworks for the analysis of the representation of social actors:

1. The concepts of *exclusion* and *inclusion* are of central importance in this context. This entails examining the inclusion or exclusion of specific individuals or groups within a discourse, as well as the implications of these choices. Exclusion can be achieved through two distinct mechanisms: *backgrounding* and *suppression*. In the former, the subject in question is made less prominent, whereas in the latter, it is entirely omitted from the discourse.

2. The process of role allocation is a crucial aspect of discourse analysis. This aspect concerns the roles ascribed to social actors, specifically whether they are depicted as active agents or passive recipients in various contexts. The analysis demonstrates how these allocations can vary depending on the narrative or institutional context.

3. *Activation* and *passivation* are two key concepts in this analysis. The term 'activation' is used to describe the representation of social actors as dynamic participants in actions. In contrast, the term 'passivation' is used to describe the portrayal of social actors as affected by actions. This distinction is of crucial importance for the comprehension of the portrayal of agency within texts.

4. *Genericisation* and *specification*: Social actors may be represented generically (as part of a group) or specifically (as individuals). This decision affects how readers perceive the generalisability of the actions or attributes described.

5. The process of *assimilation* is defined as the act of incorporating a social actor into a larger collective. This can be achieved through two distinct methods: *aggregation* and *collectivisation*. This refers to the representation of social actors as part of a group, either as an aggregate (collectivisation) or as individuals within a group (aggregation).

6. The process of *nomination* and *categorisation* is as follows: The act of nomination involves the naming of individuals, whereas categorisation is the process of classifying them according to their social or functional identities. These choices reflect the manner in which identities and social roles are constructed in discourse.

van Leeuwen presents a system network (Fig. 3) that summarises the principal ways in which social actors can be represented. This network integrates various lexico-grammatical and discourse-level linguistic systems, including transitivity, reference, nominal groups, and rhetorical figures. The network underscores the interconnectedness of linguistic and sociological categories in discourse analysis. It can

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[21] Van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors", 33.

be applied to different kind of contexts, such as politics, media, and everyday communication. The Representation of Social Actors (RSA) system network is suitable for the analysis of the drag context, as it highlights the power of language in shaping social reality, representing identity, and challenging underlying biases and power structures.
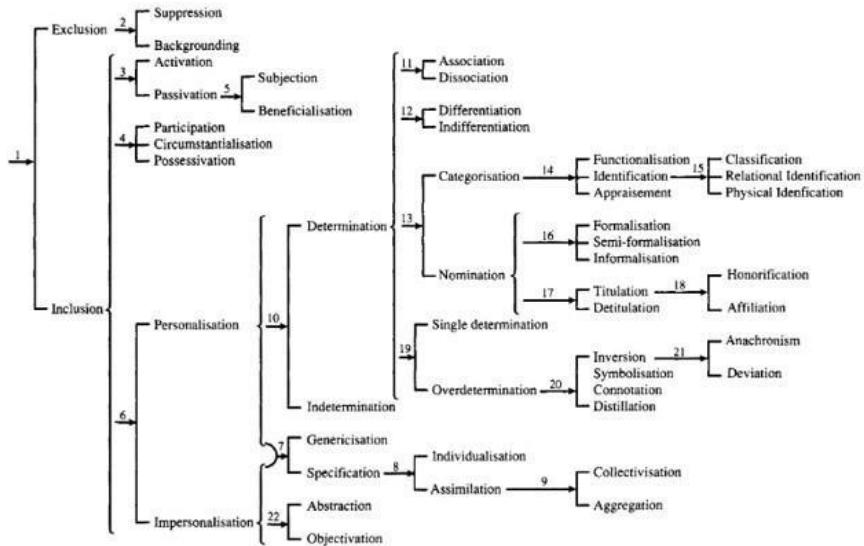

Fig. 3: Van Leeuwen's system network for the representation of social actors

4. Drag Discourse on Hate According to Simpson and van Leeuwen's Frameworks

Building on the theoretical frameworks by Simpson and van Leeuwen, the article now turns to the analysis of the extract retrieved from season 13 episode 5, *The Bag Ball*. This section is divided into two paragraphs, respectively dedicated to stylistic and then representational analysis. However, it is first necessary to provide some context about the structure of RPDR's episodes.

The format of RPDR comprises a number of recurring phases. At the beginning of each episode, the racers engage in a 'mini challenge', a brief, often comedic task. It may take the form of photo shoots, rapid costume changes, or other activities. They serve to facilitate interaction and provide the contestants with opportunities to win small prizes or advantages in subsequent phases of the episode. Then, the programme progresses to the 'maxi challenge', the main event, which varies in nature and complexity. The format of RPDR encompasses a variety of elements, including parody, musical performances, celebrity impersonation, and, most importantly, the design and construction of outfits for runway presentations. Subsequently, the contestants present their creations on the runway, where they are evaluated on their creativity, fashion sense, and ability to embody the challenge's theme. At the end, the queens receive feedback from a panel of judges, who assess the contestants based on maxi challenge and runway. The two queens who are deemed to have performed the least well in the episode must compete in a lip-sync battle. This showdown determines which queen will remain in the competition and which will be eliminated.

The conversation under analysis takes place in the so-called Werk Room, specifically before the maxi challenge, and during the dragging process while the queens put on their make-up and outfits. The moment is typically marked by exchanges of opinions, shared concerns, and encouragement for the show, all often delivered with the usual drag humour. However, in this episode from 2021, this moment is completely different. As the queens prepare, the drag performer LaLa Ri starts talking about the anti-racist protests of the Black Lives Matter movement. A debate ensues regarding the alarming surge in ethnic hate crimes that have occurred in 2020. However, the murder of George Floyd was the epicentre from which activists have insisted on the necessity to fight for rights with an intersectional approach. The episode under analysis represents a perfect example where discriminations of non-binary, non-cisgender and black non-privileged people may intersect.

Despite the sequence's overall duration of 3'33", it is an intense moment of alternate shots in the Werk Room and behind-the-scenes interview, where queens appear as 'male'. The debate oscillates between an analysis of the distressing reality of the events discussed and a sharing of opinions and emotions.

4.1 *Transitivity Processes*

For the analysis, the script of the sequence has been divided into five segments. The criterion follows the observation of significant shifts in the process of linguistic encoding of meanings, the analysis of which requires illustration and comment at regular intervals.

To facilitate comprehension, a brief list of abbreviations of transitivity processes and relational sub-processes is provided:

Material Process	MaP
Behavioural Process	BP
Mental Process	MeP
Verbalisation Process	VP
Relational Process	RP
intensive	in.
possessive	p
circumstantial	c
attributive	a
identifying	id.
Existential Process	EP

The abbreviations are employed as tags in the subsequent analysis of the conversation in the Werk Room, which is mostly tagged at the level of clauses unless whole sentences convey the same kind of transitivity process. Queens talking behind the scenes are indicated as 'interviewed' (int.). When more than one queen or one unidentified speaks, they are indicated with '–'.

LaLa Ri	So I have a question.
Kandy Muse	What's the tea?
LaLa Ri	So with the whole Black Lives Matter movement going on, [EP] has anyone been protesting? [MaP]
–	Yeah, for sure.

Kandy Muse	When all the marches and protests in New York City were happening, [EP] I made sure I was out there [RC: c, id.] protesting [MaP].
Kandy Muse (int.)	Being an Afro-Latino from the South Bronx, [RP: c, a] when I see Black people [MeP] being murdered by police, [MaP] it just puts so many things into perspective. [MeP]
Kandy Muse	Fighting for Black lives is very, very important to me. [RP: in., a]

EP as an opening process of transitivity is a predictable occurrence, as it dictates the topic-context of the discussion. EP and MaP answer the question "What happened?" and are generally conveyed in continuous tenses. Although there is no 'there' to introduce the EP, the present continuous in LaLa Ri's question makes up for it by indicating the continued and thus existential state of a subject, which – another characteristic of EP – is the result of a nominalisation from verb to noun, i.e. move > movement. Another difference between EP and MaP lies in the higher 'concreteness' of the latter, as is evident from the main clause, in which the verb 'protest' indicates something more concrete.

The same pattern of transitivity is reproduced in Kandy Muse's answer. As this is also the first sharing of personal experience in the conversation, there occurs a RP, the transitivity of being. As shown by Simpson's model, these processes pertain to the realm of "abstract relations". This seems to contrast with the meaning of Kandy Muse's statement, which informs of their physical presence in the protests. However, the queen's use of 'make sure' allows for a shift from thoughts to deeds. This is achieved through the relational sub-processes: "I was out there" conveys a circumstantial process with identifying mode. Kandy Muse's interview-like talk continues with another RP. Here, the discourse shifts from identifying to attributive mode, as Kandy defines themselves according to their ethnicity and origin. This is followed by a first MeP, one concerning perception: seeing the murder of Black people by police triggers a process of elaboration and recognition. It is interesting to note how the text has already started to require flexibility of the model of transitivity. The verbs 'see' and 'put' should be classified as MeP, but in the conversation the act of seeing goes beyond the simple physical act of observing, the same way 'to put things into perspective' exemplifies a MeP by itself.

At the end of his talk, Kandy summarises the previously observed processes with another RP, which is intensifying ("very important") and attributive ("to me").

Symone	Of course, we all know the George Floyd thing [MeP] that really, like, sparked all this shit. [MaP]
–	Yeah.
Symone	And thank God. I mean, like, not since that-- It's sad that that had to happen, [RP: c, a] but I'm happy [RP: in., id.] that people are waking the fuck up, [MeP] because it's always been there. [RP: c, a]
Symone (int.)	Being Black [RP: in., id.] and seeing the George Floyd video being played over and over and over again, [MaP] there's a level of trauma that comes with that shit. [MeP] So even with Corona going on, [MaP] I felt immediately compelled [MeP] to be involved in protests here in Los Angeles [RP: c, id.]. Because enough is enough [RP: in., a]. Things need to change.

Upon tagging of transitivity processes in the first segment, in the second one it becomes evident that the conversation is pragmatically and discursively settled, with MaP no longer alternating with EP, but rather accompanied by further MeP.

Symone points at the murder of George Floyd as the catalyst that precipitated the situation, making it clear that, although tragic (c, a), truth is the problem has always been there (c, a), thus the tragic event at least had the effect of opening people's eyes onto a sad reality that is far beyond that. The phrasal verb 'wake up' is a compelling example of MaP, except that here it is used figuratively to mean 'becoming aware', therefore in a MeP.

A similar ambiguity is immediately, again evident in Symone's interview-like talk. Following a transitivity pattern like that of Kandy Muse (RP and MaP), the queen comments on the repeated viewing of Floyd's murder as a traumatic input. So, while the trauma is undoubtedly a MaP, it is also a MeP. A further example of a false MaP is in "I felt compelled", followed by new RP. This expression refers to the COVID-19.

LaLa Ri	I don't know if you guys heard about the whole Rayshard Brooks thing that happened in Atlanta that got all of this press. Well, that actually happened, like, two minutes away from my house. [MaP] [RP: c, a]
–	What?
–	Oh, my God, girl.
LaLa Ri	Like, at the *Wendy's* that I go to on a daily basis. [RP: c, a] This situation happened [EP] and it kind of scared me, [MeP] because I'm, like, that could have been me. [RP: in., id.]
Symone	That could have been you. [RP: in., id.]
LaLa Ri	Easily. You know what I mean?
LaLa Ri (int.)	It kind of just really hit me [MeP] that I could easily be in that drive-thru, [RP: c, id.] and there could be a situation [EP] where they pull me over [MaP] just because I look like I don't belong in that type of car. [RP: in./p/c, id.]
Symone	It's a fear that a lot of Black and Brown people live with. Like, it's not a fucking game or it's not a joke. [RP: in., a] [MeP]
LaLa Ri	It's really not.
LaLa Ri (int.)	I don't know how it escalated [MaP] from him saying that he can just walk to somebody's house [VP] to him being shot. [MaP] That's crazy to me [RP: in., a] how it went from-- ooh-- how it went from... [MaP] Now I'm gonna cry [BP]. You can just be a Black person in this world [RP: c, id.] and you can just get killed for nothing. [MaP] Like... It's just-- It's scary [RP: in., a] that you could just get killed just because of the color of your skin. [MaP] Like...

The analysis now moves to the third segment, which is the pivotal one. Once again, LaLa Ri employs a mixed transitivity of MaP and RP (c, a), this time to refer to the murder of Rayshard Brooks, another incident of racism, dating back to 2020, occurred in Atlanta, and in which police officers were involved again. LaLa Ri's specifying her domicile in proximity to the site of the incident appears to be mere idle gossip. However, it soon takes the form of an identification with the victim, in fact the RP changes from circumstantial and attributive ("two minutes away from my house", "the Wendy's that I go to...") to intensive and identifying ("that could have been me").

The identification is then reinforced by an even more elaborate transitivity, which LaLa Ri conveys in her interview-like talk as a version of the killing of Rayshard Brooks in which they are the victim. Following the occurrence of a new MaP to be interpreted as a MeP ("hit"), a complex functioning of the relational sub-processes can be observed, as they become cross versions between circumstantial/attributive, which are more descriptive, and intensive/identifying, which lies more in identity and emotion. LaLa Ri's first RP is circumstantial and identifying. In contrast, the second one deploys a highly referential style, as the utterance "I look like I don't belong in that type of car" encodes

an unquestionable identifying mode, but it can also express and thus pertain to all the three types of RP: it is intensive since there is a comparison between a pre-assumed conforming identity and a non-conforming one; there is possession, that is ethnic and social belonging, encoded in the image of the car; it is circumstantial as an everyday life situation is imagined.

Symone offers a series of intensive and attributive RP, which are opposed to those employed at the beginning by LaLa Ri: "It's a fear that…", "It's not a fucking game", "It's not a joke". This chain can be tagged as a whole MeP, through which Symone addresses the audience.

LaLa Ri's second interview-like talk is the most intense and emotional of the whole sequence. This is enhanced by sad and melancholic music played in the background. Most of the transitivity processes are MaP, sometimes accompanied by RP, as evidenced by the queen's observation of a distressing reality in which Black people are at risk even when leaving their house. The occurrence of the verb 'say' marks the first instance of VP, a process that is of interest in the last segment. For the first and only time, also occurs a BP, here expressed with the verb 'cry'. This exceptional case is addressed in the subsequent section, as it is pivotal to the implementation of van Leeuwen's system network.

Tamisha Iman	The thing about the fight is Black people been fighting to show who they are for years [MaP] and it took one incident for others to realize [MeP] that we all are still one [RP: in., id.].
Tina Burner	Oh, yeah. I think that's the most inspiring thing that came out of New York, is, like, to see the support [MeP] to show up, even during, like, COVID [RP: c, a]. You may be scared to leave your house, but think about, like, people of color and, like, transgender people who have been scared their whole lives to, like, leave your front door, to, like, walk down the street [MeP].
–	Yeah, true.
Tamisha Iman	The Black Lives Matter movement is moving [EP], but the trans lives, we losing them left and right [MaP].
–	Yeah.
Tamisha Iman	And it's not being recognized [EP/MeP] and it's not being talked about [EP/VP] and covered [EP/MaP] like it should.
Olivia Lux	Statistically, Black trans lives are the most at-risk [RP: in./c, id.].
–	Uh-huh!
–	Yeah, Olivia. That is true.

The fourth segment displays significant changes, starting from the background music, which becomes more upbeat and empowering. Three other queens take the floor at this point. The first one is Tamisha Iman, who reiterates Symone's perspective, emphasising the historical discrimination suffered by Black people. Transitivity is cohesive, starting with a MaP ('fight') and progressing through a MeP ('realise') until reaching an intensive and identifying RP enhancing identity and equality – "we all are still one".

Tamisha posits an intersectional perspective that goes beyond the single social axis of ethnicity to encompass the categories of health and gender. Tina Burner codifies these meanings in a positive way, commenting on the support that has emerged, on the one hand, despite the state of emergency caused by COVID, and on the other in the face of the fear that not only Black people but also transgender people have always lived with. Once more, MaP should be regarded as MeP. Tamisha summarises Tina's words with a particular set of transitivity processes. After returning to the descriptive EP/MaP structure with the verbs 'move' and 'lose', along with a MeP ('recognise'), a VP ('talk about') and a MaP ('cover'), she enacts denouncement and sensitisation. This is achieved through the continuous tenses repeated

twice out of three, which characterises the whole sentence as an EP, the acknowledgment of something that is (not) happening.

Olivia Lux amplifies the assertions of Tamisha and Tina through a RP that, in addition to being identifying, is both intensive and circumstantial, as the expression "at-risk" is both an adjective and a preposition+name compound denoting vulnerability.

Tamisha Iman (int.)	I think [MeP] we're headed in the right direction, [RP: c, id.] but I really do think [MeP] we got a lot more work to be done. [EP] We have to understand [MeP] that we are one, [RP: in., a] and we fight as one [MaP] and we fail as one [MaP].
LaLa Ri	Well, girls, now we know [MeP] what to do when we leave this competition. [MaP] We have to use our voices [MaP] and do the right thing. [MaP] [VP]
–	Amen.
–	Absolutely.
LaLa Ri	So use that platform wisely. [MaP]
Tamisha Iman	And get in some good trouble! [MaP]
–	[all laugh]
–	Come on!

The last segment resumes with Tamisha Iman, this time in the interview-like talk, who wraps up the entire sequence. A general overview of the transitivity tagging and a comparison between the first and the last segments shows a reverse process. This last segment begins with MeP of elaboration, such as 'think' and 'understand', and progresses through never missing RP. Ultimately, it ends with the prevalence of MaP. The statement "we fight as one and we fail as one" encapsulates the entire discussion, elucidating how the drag community, transcending their context, perceives, processes, and responds to hatred. Tamisha is joined by LaLa Ri, who commits to a process of empathy with her sisters, employing a MeP now encoded with the verb 'know', which conveys a higher level of awareness than the other mental verbs. With only MaP, LaLa Ri encourages the other queens to use drag art as a means of activism, both while they're on RPDR and when the competition is over. The invitation to use their voices – that is to say their body language and identity – signifies that the highly performative verbs 'use' and 'do' encode not only MaP, but also VP.

Tamisha's ironic closing claim finally restores the humorous vibes typical of the Werk Room. The aim of this final MaP is to transform one's own disadvantage into an opportunity, a 'good trouble'. While encoding such an important meaning, it is inevitable to tag this process as material, as it represents the ultimate endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement.

4.2 *Representation of Social Actors*

In this section, the conversation in the Werk Room undergoes the second analytical lens, that of the representation of social actors. The segmentation is the same of the stylistic analysis. This second round of investigation operates differently from the previous one, as instead of going down into the more detailed levels of language, it operates on to the broader level of discourse, also in relation to the frames shown in the multimodal grid. Apart from the frames, the grid contains the numbering of the frames, the relative verbal audio material, and the RSA tags.

For this kind of analysis, it is even more interesting to consider when queens speak in the Werk Room or behind the scenes. As also observed by Balirano, they are presented in two very dissimilar situations in the show: they appear as male when preparing for the exhibition in drag (the pre-

transformational representation phasal set), and as female when acting on the stage as competitors (drag phasal set). It is interesting to observe the way social actors construct their *in fieri* transformation through the semiotic and highly symbolic act of 'becoming women.' When appearing as men, the represented participants are always in close-ups, individually or as a homogeneous group, they are shown as if they were part of the audience, sharing their life narratives as a strategy fostering […] the representation of the participants as if they were "one of us".[22]

Before applying the second framework, one thing that should be underlined again is that the conversation and the dragging process take place in front of mirrors: this dialogue is a discourse on identity, exploring the concept of identity while engaging in the act of identity construction.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
1		**LaLa Ri**: So with the whole Black Lives Matter movement going on, has anyone been protesting?	Collectivisation Participation
2		**Kandy Muse**: Being an Afro-Latino from the South Bronx, when I see Black people being murdered by police,	Classification Circumstantial. Subjection
3		**Kandy Muse**: it just puts so many things into perspective.	Abstraction

[22] Giuseppe Balirano, "Who's Afraid of Conchita Wurst? Drag Performers and the Construction of Multimodal Prosody", in Maria Grazia Sindoni et al., eds., *Mapping Multimodal Performance Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016), 173.

In van Leeuwen's framework, LaLa Ri's topic proposal, which has been tagged as EP and MaP, is a case of *collectivisation* and *participation*. The first strategy occurs when social actors are represented as a single subject, by means of plural or mass nouns; the second one is a form of activation occurring when social actors actively operate in the discourse.

The patterns of relational, mental, and material transitivity, which have been identified as a recurrent feature of the dialogue between the queens, are also evident at the discursive-representational level. When Kandy Muse identifies themselves as "Afro-Latino from the South Bronx", it is a clear strategy of *classification*, plus *circumstantialisation*, that is representing social actors according to their identity and in a given context and situation. This is a social process – in this case an ethnic *identification* – through which social actors are affiliated with a specific group. The MeP observed in this conversation and in the discussion of the topic can correspond to a case of *subjection*, a strategy of passivation where the subject(s) are negatively affected by the action expressed by the verbs. The effect of the *passivation* is represented through *abstraction*, a strategy of *impersonalisation* where non-human subjects become social actors, often denoted with words like the pronoun *it*.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
4		**Symone**: It's sad that that had to happen, but I'm happy that people are waking the fuck up, because it's always been there.	Appraisement Participation Abstraction
5		**Symone**: Being Black and seeing the George Floyd video being played over and over and over again,	Classification Subjection

| 6 | | **Symone**:

There's a level of trauma that comes with that shit. | Subjection |

Symone's resolution (as well as Tamisha's) is reflected in their language and how, through RSA, they propose a conceptualisation of hate crimes in educational terms, namely the possibility of raising awareness of the plight of Black people. Following the incident, the awakening of individuals who comprehend and respond to Floyd's murder is represented with a sequence of *appraisement*, *participation*, and *abstraction*. *Appraisement* occurs for the first time in this analysis, and it consists of a strategy of evaluation. Symone judges the perception of Floyd's murder first as a negative, and then as a positive fact. Then, as Kandy Muse, they use classification and passivation to increase the meaning of what they say. The discourse is helped by the gesture of pointing out made by Symone (frame 7), that makes it clear that the "level of trauma that comes with that shit" does not affect only to black people, but rather everyone.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
7		**LaLa Ri**: Now I'm gonna cry.	Participation
8		**LaLa Ri**: [cries]	

9		**LaLa Ri**: You can just be a Black person in this world	Classification Circumstantial.
10		**LaLa Ri**: and you can just get killed for nothing. Like...	Subjection
11		**LaLa Ri**: It's just-- It's scary, that you could just get killed just because of the color of your skin. Like...	Appraisement Subjection

Since LaLa Ri's segment is the most emotionally charged and paced at a slower tempo, the representation process also adapts to the rhythm of the interview-like talk. LaLa Ri represents themselves by means of *participation* in two steps: the first one is verbal, enacted with future tense, while the second occurs along with that unique behavioural process of crying. As for the stylistic analysis, this pivotal moment ignites a gradual change in the RSA as well, which deviates from the representations of the two preceding passages. *Classification* dramatically increases when LaLa Ri expresses anguish at being a black individual constantly at risk (*circumstantialisation*). Like Kandy Muse and Symone – though in a more emotional way – LaLa Ri speaks about the lives of Black people through appraisement and subjection.

#	Frame	Verbal audio material	RSA
12		**Tamisha Iman**: The thing about the fight is Black people been fighting to show who they are for years	Classification Circumstantial.
13		**Tamisha Iman**: and it took one incident for others to realize that we all are still one.	Abstraction Individualisation
14		**Tina Burner**: Oh, yeah. I think that's the most inspiring thing that came out of New York, is, like, to see the support to show up, even during, like, COVID. You may be scared to leave your house, but think about, like, people of color and, like, transgender people who have been scared their whole lives to, like, leave their front door, to, like, walk down the street.	Circumstantial. Subjection Classification Subjection

| 15 | | **Olivia Lux**:

Statistically, Black trans lives are the most at-risk. | Classification |

The intersectional wave spreading from the other queens in the fourth segment makes the RSA change as it does with transitivity analysis. However, the observation of this moment is even expanded by RSA itself, thanks to a close look at the frames. The intersectionality that has already emerged in the verbal analysis is enhanced by the intervention of Tamisha Iman (frame 12), a brown queen, with the framing of the white queen Elliot with 2 Ts (frame 13). However, the most significant intervention is that of Tina Burner, another white queen, who highlights the activism manifested in the health emergency and, above all, the condition of Black trans people. This point is finally brought to the fore by Olivia Lux, another Black queen, who points out that Black trans people are "statistically more at risk".

Tamisha's discursive representation commences with a *classification* that has become a central tenet of the argument: namely, that Black people have been engaged in a long-standing struggle to define and assert their identity. The emphasis on temporal duration encodes a *circumstantialisation* that prepares for the strategies identified for frame 13. The *abstraction* of the social actor-subject of the sentence vehicles the focus on the meaningful statement "we all are still one". Despite the plurality that should provide *collectivisation*, this passage can also be considered a case of *individualisation*, if we consider the awareness-raising intent that drag queens have towards their audience.

The observation put forth by Tamisha Iman is supported by Tina Burner and Olivia Lux. The former refers to the protest movements that occurred in New York despite the ongoing pandemic as an illustrative example of intersectionality. Tina combines subjection and classification to illustrate how the fear of leaving home during a lockdown may have prompted people to imagine the fear that Black and transgender people have historically.

#	Visual	Verbal audio material	RSA analysis
16		**Tamisha Iman**: We have to understand that we are one,	Individualisation

17		**Tamisha Iman**: We have to understand that we are one, Individualisation
18		**Tamisha Iman**: and we fight as one and we fail as one. Participation
19		**Tamisha Iman**: And get in some good trouble! Participation

With Tamisha Iman's speech, which was supported and argued by the non-Black queens, the discourse of "being one" is now consolidated. This is evidenced by the shots of Symone and LaLa Ri's determined and focused gazes. In an interview-like monologue, Tamisha again represents herself, her sisters, and the audience with a strategy of *individualisation* aimed at fostering equality. As transitivity is reintroduced to material processes at the conclusion of the sequence, RSA also demonstrates a return to predominantly *participation* representation. It is noteworthy that even with RSA, the final statement, "And get in some good trouble!", retains the same potential ambiguity that led to the material process being interpreted as a verbalisation process. In this context, the concept of *participation* posits that social actors are represented as actively engaged in the performativity of the action expressed by the verb. Consequently, if the concept of "good trouble" is linked to the utilisation of drag art as a form of activism, RSA serves to illustrate how the performativity of language encompasses all levels of language, from phonology and phonetics to pragmatics and discourse analysis.

5. Concluding Remarks

The two-stage analysis proposed in this study, although conducted on an isolated and minimal case study, yielded a considerable number of results regarding both drag community and the methodologies employed. Of course, the analysis of such a limited object does not allow for broad and precise observations on the field of drag queens and Hate Speech. However, the two distinct yet complementary analyses have revealed the extent to which drag queens are capable of creating and encapsulating meanings with their language and body performativity, along with a representation of self that, whether static or kinetic, enriches the meaning of what is expressed verbally.

Concerning the stylistic results, existential and material processes are employed as preambles and serve to set the context for the discourse. The complex relational processes are the ones most frequently employed by drag queens, whose talks often regard identity matters. The three types of relational processes (intensifying, possessive and circumstantial) and the two modes (attributive and identifying) are employed by drag queens as 'handles' to regulate the flow of discourse, enabling them to control the conversation. Mental processes facilitate emotional and mental elaboration, both positively and negatively, so as to justify and pace the transition from one process to another. The verbalisation processes become more and more pronounced in the sequence analysed, although they must be sought by forcing Simpson's transitivity model. However, as both analyses show, a concretisation of language is precisely what is desired and necessary for drag queens. The single behavioural process tagged naturally calls for a multimodal analysis of representation of social actors.

A summary of transitivity processes in the sequence helps to draw conclusions about how drag queens position themselves in relation to hate crime. In the first two segments, the pattern is broadly EP/MaP>RP>MeP>MaP. A tentative interpretation of the pattern suggests that drag queens position themselves in relation to their identity, as perceived by themselves and others. This is followed by a psychological process that leads to a new perspective on the matter discussed. In the third segment, the chain of transitivity is almost reversed: MeP/RP>EP/MaP. This happens along with LaLa Ri's manifested emotions. The fourth segment's chain is MaP>MeP/RP(EP), but it can be interpreted as an existential process. In the fifth segment, different processes converge towards a continuity of material processes, possibly concealing processes of verbalisation: …>MaP(VP).

With regard to the representation of social actors, it is finally possible to see in which part of van Leeuwen's system network drag queens gravitate while engaged in their conversation. The speakers are consistently present and characterised linguistically and visually, positioning themselves in the zone of *inclusion*. Strategies of *activation* and *passivation* manifest when drag queens contextualise their lived experiences. While *activation* is declined in both *participation* and *circumstantialisation*, *passivation* occurs exclusively as *subjection*, whereby the speaker discusses the various factors affecting them in society. This often corresponds to the alternation of material and mental processes. Another very frequent strategy is *collectivisation*, which emphasises drag queens both as a community and as individuals whose intersectional identities simultaneously represent the cause of their discrimination and the appropriate conceptual framework for responding to hate crimes. With regard to the occurrence of *individualisation*, it is noteworthy to observe the position of this strategy within van Leeuwen's framework. Both *collectivisation* and *individualisation* are situated within the domain of *specification*, which represents the sole form of representation oscillating between *personalisation* and *impersonalisation*. This disambiguation appears to align with the way in which drag queens alternately utilise singularity and plurality, personal narratives and general considerations, to foster solidarity and equality amongst the audience.

Finally, whenever ethnic or gender identity is discursively pointed out, the process of RSA delves more deeply into van Leeuwen's chart, towards the area of *categorisation*, specifically declined in

classification, even when representation is carried out through words pertaining more to *physical identification* or *connotation*, such as "black". As an umbrella strategy, *categorisation* encompasses six sub-representations, which are more specific and potentially functional for an analysis focused on traditional drag performances. Indeed, this study represents the inaugural experiment of a broader research project where the categories considered in this study are investigated more systematically in a specialised corpus of verbal and non-verbal drag performances, always retrieved from *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In this regard, the methodological experiment carried out in this piece of research has confirmed the synergy between stylistics, multimodality, and drag culture, which provide a fertile field for Critical Discourse Analysis:

> If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse. [...] There is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an "act", singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power.[23]

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[23] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 225.

Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo

The Shadow Pandemic. An Analysis of Femicide in British News Coverage

Abstract This study investigates how femicide is represented in the UK's Daily Mail throughout 2021. Despite ongoing institutional and governmental efforts to combat this gender-based crime, media coverage often perpetuates narratives that obscure the complex socio-cultural factors involved, presenting femicide as a series of isolated events driven by individual motives. With the United Nations highlighting the alarming rise in femicides as a "Shadow Pandemic", it is crucial to examine how these incidents are framed and challenge misleading narratives. Drawing on a corpus from the UK's *Daily Mail*, this study applies Bacchi's (2009) "What is the Problem Represented to Be" framework alongside Critical Discourse Analysis and Thematic Analysis to explore the portrayal of femicide in this outlet and assess the broader implications of such framing. Through this analysis, the study contributes to challenging dominant media representations and advocate for more responsible and sensitive reporting practices.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis*, *thematic analysis*, *femicide*, *United Kingdom*, *news coverage*, *victim-blaming*, *hate-speech*

1. Introduction

Femicide, one of the most extreme manifestations of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), can broadly be defined as the intentional killing of a woman committed on the grounds of gender-related factors.[1] These can encompass misogyny, societal norms surrounding masculinity, and the belief that men must assert control over women by suppressing, discouraging, and punishing behaviours deemed unacceptable for women. Despite concerted efforts to combat this crime, it remains a persistent issue worldwide, reinforcing cycles of hatred, harm, and trauma across societies.[2]

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought renewed attention to this issue, exposing not only the vulnerabilities within national and global healthcare systems but also a disturbing rise in violence against women (VAW), which the UN has termed a "Shadow Pandemic".[3] As nations struggled to contain the spread of the virus through lockdowns and movement restrictions, the unintended consequences on GBV became increasingly apparent. The pandemic served as a catalyst, intensifying existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, especially for women already living in precarious situations. Confinement in limited living spaces, enforced isolation with abusers, and the disruption of support networks exacerbated these challenges, leading to increased levels of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. At the same time, access to essential services and support systems became severely restricted, leaving many women with nowhere to turn.[4]

However, what is particularly troubling is the surge in femicides observed in some countries following the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions. As societies attempted to return to a sense of normalcy, the number of femicides rose sharply in 2021 and has since shown no signs of decline.[5] Globally, nearly 81,000 women and girls were killed in 2021, a figure that climbed to 89,000 in 2022—

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[1] Diana Russell and Nicole Van De Ven, "Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal" (1976), www.ojp.gov.

[2] Shalva Weil, Consuelo Corradi, and Marceline Naudi, eds., *Femicide Across Europe: Theory, Research and Prevention* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2018).

[3] UN Women, "'The Shadow Pandemic': Violence Against Women During COVID-19" (2020), www.unwomen.org.

[4] Ibid.

[5] EIGE, "'Femicide': Name It, Count It, End It!", *European Institute for Gender Equality* (2021), www.eige.europa.eu.

the highest annual toll in the past two decades. In 2021 alone, approximately 45,000 of these victims (56%) were murdered by an intimate partner or family member.[6] In Great Britain, the focus of this study, the number of women killed in 2021 was 33% higher than the previous year, increasing from 110 to 146.[7] This trend has been partially attributed to the fact that during the period of prolonged, close contact with their abusive partners, many women became acutely aware of their intolerable situations and sought to escape their abusive environments as soon as restrictions were lifted. This transitional phase led to an escalation in violence: the desire for newfound autonomy and liberation from oppressive, misogynistic relationships was perceived by violent men as a direct challenge to traditional power dynamics. As noted by Siguenza, "given the greater freedom of women, which in a macho perspective means 'loss of control', the aggressors became out of control and reacted more violently".[8]

Unfortunately, the press has largely failed to convey the complex socio-cultural factors underlying these crimes, often representing femicides as isolated incidents driven by individual motives such as jealousy or temporary insanity.[9] By framing these tragedies as the result of personal impulses, exacerbated by the extraordinary circumstances of the time, the media overlooked the broader systemic issues and entrenched patterns of gender-based violence that contribute to femicide.[10] The main problem with such portrayals is that they not only undermine efforts to combat GBV but also contribute to a culture of impunity surrounding perpetrators, since news coverage may function as an echo-chamber for hatred and misleading representations of VAW.[11]

Against this backdrop, this study aims to address this gap by examining the representations of femicide in British news coverage. By analysing a corpus of data from the UK's Daily Mail, this research applies Bacchi's[12] "What is the Problem Represented to Be" framework and Discourse Analysis to investigate how femicide is framed in this news outlet. This study aims to deepen understanding of femicide and highlight the media's role in preventing violence by raising awareness of all forms of hatred and GBV. It also advocates for promoting gender equality and dismantling harmful stereotypes, recognising the media as a crucial agent in these efforts.

2. The Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions on Femicides

The discourse surrounding femicide during the COVID-19 pandemic has received significant scholarly attention, revealing the complex interplay of societal, cultural, and systemic factors that underpin misogyny and GBV.[13] In 2020, Dubravka Simonovic, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against

[6] UN Women, 'The Shadow Pandemic'.
[7] Karen Ingala Smith, "2021. Counting Dead Women", *Karen Ingala Smith* (blog), Monday 8 February 2021, www.kareningalasmith.com, accessed 4 May 2024.
[8] Carmen Siguenza, "Los Asesinatos Machistas se Disparan en España tras el Final del Estado de Alarma", *EFEMINISTA* (blog), Tuesday 1 June 2021, www.efeminista.com, accessed 4 May 2024.
[9] Michele Lloyd and Shula Ramon, "Smoke and Mirrors: UK Newspaper Representations of Intimate Partner Domestic Violence", *Violence Against Women*, 23.1 (2017), 114-139, DOI: 10.1177/1077801216634468; Antonella Napolitano, "'A Pandemic within the Pandemic': A CDA of Social Media Comments on Domestic Violence during COVID-19", *Lingue Culture Mediazioni - Languages Cultures Mediation,* 10 (2023), 201-228, DOI:10.7358/lcm-2023-002-napa.
[10] Mariana Aldrete et al., "Media Representations of Femicide. A Systematic Review of Literature in English and Spanish", *Annals of the International Communication Association* (2024), 1-37; DOI: 10.1080/23808985.2024.2336924.
[11] Vasu Goel et al., "Hatemongers Ride on Echo Chambers to Escalate Hate Speech Diffusion", *PNAS Nexus*, 2.3 (2023), 1-10, DOI:10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad041.
[12] Carol Bacchi, *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (Richmond, AU: Pearson Higher Education, 2009).
[13] John Boman and Owen Gallupe, "Has COVID-19 Changed Crime? Crime Rates in the United States during the Pandemic", *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45.4 (August 2020), 537-545, DOI:10.1007/s12103-020-09551-3; Caroline Bradbury-Jones and Louise Isham, "The Pandemic Paradox: The Consequences of COVID-19 on Domestic Violence", *Journal of Clinical Nursing* (2020), 2047-2049, DOI: 10.1111/jocn.15296; Eduardo Cocco et al., "The Devil in the Details: Changes Under Stable Trends of Femicide in Italy During COVID-19 Lockdowns", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 40.2 (2024)**,** DOI: 10.1177/10439862241245890; Antonella Napolitano, "'A Pandemic within the Pandemic'; Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo, "'Mine

Women and Girls, highlighted the global surge in GBV, aptly labelling it a "shadow pandemic".[14] While some studies[15] have pointed to an increase in non-lethal domestic violence incidents during lockdowns worldwide, others have noted that certain areas experienced stability or even a decrease in their femicide rates.[16] These trends have been attributed to fewer women attempting to leave their partners during lockdowns and the increased difficulty and risk for ex-partners to reach their intended victims.[17]

However, the easing of lockdown restrictions in 2021 triggered a sharp rise in femicides, notably in the United Kingdom, where the number of recorded victims increased by 33%, escalating from 110 to 146.[18] From a discursive standpoint, it is crucial to analyse how the media have depicted this surge, as biased narratives might reinforce misogynistic stereotypes, inspire emulation, and minimise the broader societal factors that contribute to this crime.[19]

It is undeniable that the psychological toll of lockdowns—intensified by stress, fear, frustration, isolation, and financial instability—has contributed to increased risk factors for domestic violence and femicide globally.[20] However, this work suggests that news reporting on femicide may have skewed the readership's understanding of this reality, potentially framing pandemic-related stressors as justifications for fatal violence. When reports highlight men citing stress as a motive for their actions, they may inadvertently obscure the deeper dynamics of abuse, offering excuses that shift responsibility away from perpetrators and divert attention from the underlying societal issues.[21] This analysis will therefore challenge the reductive narratives often presented in such reporting, advocating for a more thorough exploration of the ingrained inequalities, gender norms, and power imbalances that perpetuate GBV.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Bacchi's "What is the Problem Represented to Be?" approach as its theoretical frameworks. CDA examines how language and discourse both shape and reflect power relations, social structures, and ideologies.[22] It seeks to uncover hidden meanings, underlying assumptions, and power dynamics within texts and discourse practices, highlighting the role

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[14] UN Women, 'The Shadow Pandemic'.

[15] Boman and Gallupe, "Has COVID-19 Changed Crime?"; Bradbury-Jones and Isham, "The Pandemic Paradox"; Cocco et al., "The Devil in the Details".

[16] Marcelo Aebi et al., *Prisons and Prisoners in Europe 2021: Key Findings of the SPACE I Report* (Council of Europe, 2022); Schröttle, Monika, et al., "Comparative Report on Femicide Research and Data in Five Countries: Cyprus, Germany, Malta, Portugal, Spain", *FemUnited Project* (2021), www.repositorio-aberto.up.

[17] Siguenza, "Los Asesinatos Machistas se Disparan en España tras el Final del Estado de Alarma".

[18] Karen Ingala Smith, 'Coronavirus Doesn't Cause Men's Violence Against Women', *Karen Ingala Smith,* Tuesday 15 December 2020, www.kareningalasmith.com, accessed 4 May 2024.

[19] Boman and Gallupe, "Has COVID-19 Changed Crime?"; EIGE, "Measuring Femicide in the United Kingdom" (2024), www.eige.europe.eu; Siguenza, "Los Asesinatos Machistas se Disparan en España tras el Final del Estado de Alarma".

[20] Gunes Asik and Efsan Nas Ozen, "It Takes a Curfew: The Effect of Covid-19 on Female Homicides", *Economics Letters,* 200.C (2021), www.econpapers.repec.org; Carmen Vives-Cases et al., "Coping with Intimate Partner Violence and the COVID-19 Lockdown: The Perspectives of Service Professionals in Spain", *PLOS ONE,* 16 (October 2021), DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0258865.

[21] Amber Sutton and Haley Beech, "The Impact of Stay-at-Home Orders on Safety and Stability for Women: A Topical Review of Intimate Partner Violence and Intimate Femicide in the United States During the Initial Phase of COVID-19", *Journal of Family Violence*, 39.5 (2024), 811-825, DOI:10.1007/s10896-023-00530-w.

[22] Teun A. van Dijk, "Discourse Semantics and Ideology", *Discourse & Society,* 6.2 (1995): 243-289, DOI: 10.1177/0957926595006002006; Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach", in *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 1-14, DOI:10.1002/9781118611463.wbielsi116.

of language in constructing social realities and perpetuating dominant ideologies.[23] This makes CDA an invaluable framework for analysing media representations, policy documents, and various forms of discourse, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these elements contribute to the framing of social issues.

Bacchi's "What is the Problem Represented to Be" (WPR) approach,[24] initially designed to assess how legislators conceptualise and frame issues, offers a structured methodology for analysing problem representations, drawing on principles from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Thematic Analysis (TA).[25] The approach consists of a series of six key questions, outlined in Table 1, which guide a critical examination of how problems are constructed within policy discourse. These questions explore the origins of problem representations, the underlying assumptions driving them, what aspects are left unaddressed or silenced, the effects produced by these representations, and how alternative perspectives can challenge or replace them.

"What's the Problem Represented to Be?" Approach

1.	What's the "problem" represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2.	How has this representation of the "problem" come about?
3.	What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the "problem"?
4.	What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?
5.	What effects are produced by this representation of the "problem"?
6.	How has the problem been questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

Table 1: Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" Approach

Through Questions 1-3, Bacchi[26] argues that every policy embodies a constructed representation of the 'problem', which inherently involves certain assumptions. For instance, if a policy aimed at improving women's status focuses on education and training, it presupposes that the primary barrier to women's advancement is their lack of skills, overlooking other significant factors such as sexism or hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, if femicide is depicted as a series of isolated incidents driven by individual mental health issues, this portrayal neglects and dismisses the broader socio-cultural factors underpinning the crime.

Questions 4 and 5 address the silences within the problem representation, focussing on whose 'voices' are omitted, marginalised, or excluded, and the impacts of these omissions and what is omitted in the representation. For instance, discussions concerning VAW frequently marginalise the experiences of black, lesbian, transgender, and disabled women.[27] This neglect hinders a full understanding of VAW and results in policies and support services that fail to address the unique needs of these groups, thereby perpetuating systemic inequalities. Finally, Question 6 investigates how the prevailing problem representation can be questioned, challenged, and redefined, opening avenues for critical intervention and more inclusive solutions.

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[23] Teun A. van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis", *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (2015), 466-485.

[24] Bacchi, *Analysing Policy*.

[25] Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (2006), 77-101, DOI:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa; Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, "Thematic Analysis", *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12.3 (2017), 297-298.

[26] Bacchi, *Analysing Policy*.

[27] Thomas J Billard, "Writing in the Margins: Mainstream News Media Representations of Transgenderism", *SocArXiv* (preprint 2018), DOI:10.31235/osf.io/4q8f3.

While the WPR framework is predominantly used for evaluating policies, its application to media discourse and news coverage remains relatively unexplored.[28] Nevertheless, its focus on deconstructing problem representations and exploring alternative viewpoints is highly pertinent for analysing media representations of femicide. This framework offers valuable insights into how language and framing shape public understanding of femicide and its broader social and cultural contexts. As previously noted, the language employed in news reporting profoundly influences public perceptions by reinforcing specific narratives about femicide.[29] Consequently, applying both Discourse Analysis and the WPR framework to the examination of femicide in British news coverage can reveal the underlying socio-cultural power dynamics associated with this issue and demonstrate how alternative representations could foster greater social awareness and understanding.

4. Corpus and Methodology

The corpus under examination (henceforth 'DM2021') encompasses the coverage of femicides by the UK's Daily Mail[30] throughout 2021.This source was chosen due to its prominence as the most widely read online news source in Great Britain during that year, indicating its substantial influence on public opinion and its potential to shape widespread perceptions of femicide.[31] However, it is crucial to recognise that the Daily Mail is a right-wing tabloid newspaper, characterised by its sensationalist approach and often polarised reporting. This editorial style may affect the framing of stories, the language used, and the selection of incidents covered. While this style undeniably drives its popularity, it also risks distorting the public's understanding by spreading biases and reinforcing preconceptions. The fact that it resonates with so many readers suggests that its framing of issues not only reflects but also reinforces what its audience already believes—or is inclined to believe. Thus, while DM2021 provides valuable insights into public discourse on femicide, the inherent biases typical of tabloid journalism, such as an emphasis on dramatic or emotionally charged elements, must be considered. These factors are crucial when interpreting the findings, as they may not fully represent the broader media landscape or the more nuanced perspectives found in other publications.

In the compilation of DM2021, the cases reported in the Daily Mail were systematically cross-referenced with Karen Ingala Smith's "Counting Dead Women" project[32] to ensure comprehensive coverage. This project, annually acknowledged in the UK Parliament on March 8th, provides a detailed list of women killed over the previous year. For this study, each case of femicide listed in Ingala Smith's project was manually verified against the Daily Mail's online archives to confirm whether it was reported. This process involved a detailed manual search of the newspaper's website, with the first article published for each case being selected to maintain consistency in the analysis.

From a preliminary analysis, it was observed that, unlike past patterns identified by Meyers[33] at the turn of the millennium, when violence often went underreported in national news, the Daily Mail covered a substantial majority of femicide cases. Specifically, it reported on 82% of these cases, publishing 119 articles out of a total of 146 cases.

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[28] Myrna Dawson and Michelle Carrigan, "Identifying Femicide Locally and Globally: Understanding the Utility and Accessibility of Sex/Gender-Related Motives and Indicators", *Current Sociology*, 69.5 (September 2021), 682-704, DOI:10.1177/0011392120946359.

[29] Bacchi, *Analysing Policy*, 7.

[30] *Daily Mail Online*, www.dailymail.co.uk.

[31] Charlotte Tobitt and Aisha Majid, "National Press ABCs: Impact of latest UK lockdown on circulation", *Statista,* Tuesday 23 February 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/529970/uk-online-newspaper-market-by-daily-average-unique-browsers/, accessed 4 May 2024.

[32] Smith, "2021. Counting Dead Women".

[33] Chen Reis and Sarah Meyer, "Understudied and Underaddressed: Femicide, an Extreme Form of Violence against Women and Girls", *PLoS Medicine* 21 (18 January 2024): e1004336, DOI:10.1371/journal.pmed.1004336.

Once the DM2021 corpus was compiled, it was annotated with metadata for each case, including the victim's name, age, relationship with the perpetrator, the perpetrator's age, stated motives, the weapon used, references to the perpetrator's criminal history, and any relevant comments.[34] This data was then organised and analysed using a combination of manual coding and the text analysis software QDA Miner[35]. Developed by Provalis Research, QDA Miner is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool that offers a range of features for organising, coding, retrieving, analysing, and visualising qualitative data.

To apply Bacchi's framework, a thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's multi-phase analysis process[36]. Initially, the analysis involved familiarising with the corpus by noting the primary topics covered in the Daily Mail's coverage of femicide. The second phase entailed querying the corpus for metadata and relevant terms related to femicide and annotating the data using QDA Miner. In the third phase, these codes were manually organised into overarching themes until saturation was achieved. During the final phase, the themes were then synthesised into key macro-themes according to Bacchi's framework (Q1-6). QDA Miner's quantitative analysis tools were then employed to quantify the frequency of recurrent codes, revealing prominent patterns in how femicide was framed. For ethical considerations, all sensitive information was anonymised, ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of individuals discussed in the coverage.

DM2021	
Number of articles	119
Time-Span	January 1_{st} -December 31_{st} 2021
Types	7706
Tokens	115714

Table 2: Corpus DM2021

5. Results

5.1 What is the 'problem' represented to be (Q1), how it has come about (Q2), and what assumptions does this representation of the 'problem' imply (Q3)?

To address the first three questions, the corpus was coded to categorise the causes of femicide explicitly mentioned within the texts. This process involved examining how the 'problem' of femicide was represented in the corpus (Q1), with a particular focus on the explanations provided for its occurrence (Q2) and the underlying assumptions implied by these representations (Q3).

In DM2021, the 'problem' of femicide is predominantly framed as a series of isolated criminal incidents perpetrated by individual men often sentimentally linked to their victims. These crimes are frequently attributed to the perpetrators' psychological distress, mental health issues, or personal and emotional motives.

5.2 Femicides as Isolated Criminal Acts

Each case in DM2021 was individually reviewed to extract and categorise data on victim-perpetrator relationships. The initial extraction and categorisation of relationship data were conducted manually to

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[34] Please note that due to space constraints, the detailed results of the metadata analysis and thematic coding have not been included in this paper. Interested readers are welcome to contact the author directly for access to this information.
[35] Provalis Research, Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software, available at: https://provalisresearch.com.
[36] Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology" and "Thematic Analysis".

ensure accuracy. The data was then entered into QDA Miner, where it was organised and analysed using the software's quantitative tools to generate the statistics presented in Table 3.

Victim's Relationship with Perpetrator	%
Significant Other (Husband, Boyfriend, Partner)	47%
Ex or Lover (Ex partner, ex-husband, ex-boyfriend, extramarital relationship)	18%
Family (Son, Grandson, Brother, Brother-in-law)	13%
Acquaintances (Acquaintances, friends, Neighbours)	12%
Strangers (Stranger, Date)	8%
Other/Not provided/Unknown	2%

Table 3: Victim-Perpetrator relationships in DM2021

The analysis revealed a strong correlation between femicide and intimate relationships. Nearly two-thirds of the cases (65%) involved current or former partners, emphasising the endemic nature of femicide within domestic contexts. This finding is consistent with the literature on intimate partner violence (IPV).[37] Moreover, the involvement of family members in 13% of cases underscores the broader familial and societal factors contributing to these crimes.[38] The COVID-19 pandemic, with its associated lockdowns, likely intensified pre-existing vulnerabilities, creating conditions conducive to lethal violence.

However, a thematic and discourse analysis of the Daily Mail's coverage revealed a contrasting picture. The newspaper often portrayed the 'problem' of femicide (Q1) as one of isolated incidents of domestic violence, rather than acknowledging them as part of a wider societal problem rooted in gender inequality and power imbalances. This narrow focus obscures the complex interplay of factors contributing to femicide, including social attitudes, economic disparities, and insufficient support services.

Despite these findings, the thematic and discourse analysis of the corpus revealed a contrasting picture. The newspaper often portrayed these cases as isolated incidents of domestic violence, rather than acknowledging them as part of a wider societal problem rooted in gender inequality and power imbalances. This narrow focus obscures the complex interplay of factors contributing to femicide, including social attitudes, economic disparities, and insufficient support services. Some examples have been provided below (Examples 1-4):

(1) We are in the very early stages of our investigation; however at this time 'we believe this to be an isolated incident' and a man has been arrested on suspicion of murder. (DM2021-11)[39]

(2) 'This is an isolated incident' and 'there is no wider risk to members of the public'. Our neighbourhood teams will continue to support and speak to local residents. (DM2021-78)

(3) We know our communities will be shocked and saddened by these events, but 'we wish to reassure them that there is no risk to the general public' at this time and we are supporting our colleagues. (DM2021-14)

(4) Police are not looking for anyone else in connection with the death of the woman and 'there is no risk to the community'. (DM2021-2)

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[37] Eve Waltermaurer, "Measuring Intimate Partner Violence (IPV): You May Only Get What You Ask For", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence,* 20.4 (2005), 501-506, DOI: 10.1177/0886260504267760.

[38] Nancy Glass et al., "Female-Perpetrated Femicide and Attempted Femicide: A Case Study", *Violence Against Women*, 10.6 (2004), 606-625, DOI:10.1177/1077801204265016.

[39] The cases are referenced in the examples as DM2021, followed by the case number reported by the Daily Mail since the beginning of the year.

While the data does show that most femicides were linked to instances of IPV (65%), the Daily Mail's emphasis on "reassuring" (Example 3) that most cases were due to individual and personal circumstances with no reference to the systemic nature of such violence fails to address the broader cultural and societal norms that perpetuate male dominance and control over women. The implicit (21%) or explicit (26%) framing of these incidents as "isolated incidents" (Examples 1-2) that represented "no risk" (Examples 3-4) for the general public contributes to a minimisation of GBV, since it suggests that femicides are rare anomalies rather than recurring events rooted in a culture that often condones or ignores male violence against women. By not acknowledging the widespread and interconnected nature of these acts, the Daily Mail's reporting might have inadvertently reinforced the very social and cultural conditions that allow such violence to continue.

Moreover, approximately 18% of the cases involved men who had previously been in a romantic relationship with the victim. This high incidence of ex-partners committing femicide, second only to current partners, reveals the continuing threat posed even after a relationship has ended and underscores the persistent danger women face from those men who view them as possessions. It reinforces the necessity of understanding femicide as a continuation of control and power dynamics that extend beyond the boundaries of the relationship. However, even in these instances, the Daily Mail failed to critically address the connection between leaving an abusive relationship and escalation to femicide. Of the 77 cases perpetrated by (ex) spouses, partners, or boyfriends, 46 (60%) were not examined in this context. This is illustrated by the following examples (Examples 5-7):

(5) David Maggs, 71, told police officers 'he had sat on her bed and asked to talk with her about the financial aspects of their divorce', but she had told him to 'Get out and leave it to the solicitors'. 'This made him angry', he said; however, he claims he does not recall what happened next. (DM2021-16)
(6) Nigel Diakite, 20, 'launched a brutal attack' on young mother N'Taya Elliott-Cleverley 'after she planned to leave him'. (DM2021-68)
(7) A husband killed his new bride before stuffing her body into a suitcase 'after she told him she had bipolar disorder and wanted a divorce', a court heard. Thomas Nutt, 45, is accused of murdering Dawn Walker, 52, after her body was found 'dumped' in undergrowth at the back of his house four days after they were married. (DM2021-16)

Across these examples, the discourse often centres on the victim's actions as potential triggers for violence, which can inadvertently imply causality or assign blame. When femicides are described as resulting from a woman's decision to leave a relationship, without adequately highlighting the perpetrator's accountability, it problematically suggests that the victim's actions or attitude provoked the violence. For instance, Example 6, depicting the man as having "launched a brutal attack" … "after she planned to leave him" indirectly implies that her intention to leave was the catalyst for the brutality, rather than focussing on the perpetrator's possessiveness. Similarly, framing a couple's financial issues related to divorce as causing men to become "angry" (Example 5) can suggest that such issues trigger violent reactions.

This narrative oversimplifies the complexities of abusive relationships and fails to address the need for comprehensive policy measures and societal change to prevent such tragedies. It inadvertently normalises and excuses violent behaviour by implying that men's violent responses are justified by emotional distress or a sense of loss, treating such violence as a natural consequence of relationship breakdowns. By presenting causative links between leaving an abusive relationship and femicide without sufficient explanation, these representations risk conveying the dangerous notion that staying in an abusive relationship might be safer than leaving, as leaving could result in death. This perspective

detracts from addressing the broader societal norms that normalise violence against women, as well as the inadequate legal protections and lack of support systems for those trying to escape abusive situations.

5.3 *Femicides as a Result of Mental Distress/Disorders*

In response to Q2 on the causes of femicides, an analysis of perpetrator metadata alongside the reasons cited in DM2021 reveals that, although it's impossible to pinpoint a single motive for these crimes, certain patterns do emerge. A substantial portion of cases (43%) are described as resulting from the man's temporary insanity, sudden anger, or mental disorders. These factors are often intertwined with sentimental issues, such as jealousy and the inability to accept abandonment, which account for 23% of the reported cases. This indicates a recurring narrative in DM2021 that frames femicide within the context of intense emotional and psychological disturbances, frequently connected to relationship dynamics, as can be seen in Table 4 below:

Reasons	%	Example
Mental issues and anger	43%	"Her husband was becoming angry and obsessed about small things". (DM2021-46) "He described hearing a 'Voice encouraging him to do this'". (DM2021-47)
Jealousy/non acceptance of abandonment	23%	"He was a jealous and controlling husband and she was deeply unhappy". (DM2021-62)
Not mentioned	11%	
Financial distress	6%	"He was in financial need because he was in debt to drug dealers". (DM2021-119)
Other	6%	
Sex/rape	5%	"He killed the teenager after she rebuffed his sexual advances". (DM2021-140)
Drugs/alcohol	4%	"He was drunk at the time and could remember why he attacked her". (DM2021-30)
Suicide pact	1%	"A husband who killed his terminally-ill wife in a suicide pact has told how they shared a last drink together before going to the bottom of the garden to end their lives". (DM2021-46)
Honour	1%	"Was Iranian mother's death an 'honour killing'?" (DM2021-136)

Table 4: Reasons for Femicides Provided in DM2021

Most femicides in DM2021 are framed as the result of uncontrolled anger or mental health issues (43%). The problem with this type of representation is that by medicalising femicide and linking it to mental health, the crime is portrayed as an anomaly caused by illness or distress, rather than as a foreseeable consequence of deeply rooted hatred and gender inequalities. This framing shifts focus away from systemic factors, such as societal tolerance of male aggression, and instead associates femicide with temporary or permanent (often self-diagnosed) mental dysfunctions, as can be seen in examples 8-12:

(8) During our investigation, it was determined that 'Kaushik Solanki was suffering from an abnormality of mental functioning which led to him taking his wife's life'. (DM2021-48)
(9) Throughout the trial 'Virtosu claimed to have been hearing voices and suffering a psychotic disorder'. He claimed that his sister-in-law had appeared to him as having devil-like shining red eyes to support a defence of diminished responsibility, but he did not convince the jury. (DM2021-62)

(10) 'Self-confessed psychopath jailed for life' after killing neighbour 'because he didn't like her'. (DM2021-19)
(11) Franklin McLeod, 55, stabbed 53-year-old Marlene Coleman through the neck 'in a fit of jealous anger' on June 16 last year in their shared flat in Lewisham, southeast London. (DM2021-77)
(12) See told a nurse he had harboured 'terrible thoughts' of killing his mother in a use fire while 'feeling low'. 'He described hearing a voice encouraging him to do this'. (DM2021-91)

These appeals to (self-diagnosed) distress ("he was feeling low"-Example12), experiencing psychotic episodes ("he was hearing voices"-Example 9) or other forms of mental anguish ("psychopath" killed his neighbour "because he didn't like her"-Example 10) are a recurring pattern in which perpetrators of femicide strategically invoke assertions of mental illness to lessen their accountability. The danger of these representations lies in their potential to create an echo-chamber for emulation, encouraging perpetrators to seek diminished responsibility under the UK's Mental Health Act[40] rather than facing full culpability for their actions.[41]

These appeals address not only chronic mental illnesses but especially temporary insanity and anger triggered by "jealousy". Representing femicide as a crime of passion rooted in jealousy can romanticise possessive behaviour and intimate partner violence.[42] Once again, this framing presents this form of violence as an irrational, emotional reaction rather than a symptom of deeper societal issues and entrenched hatred, as illustrated in Examples 13 and 14:

(13) 'A jealous boyfriend' has been jailed for life after he brutally murdered his partner moments after having sex with her because 'he thought she had cheated on him'. (DM2021-47)
(14) A dancer was stabbed to death by her 'jealous boyfriend' when 'she went to break up with him' after they fell out over an episode of Love Island after 'she told him she found one of the contestants attractive'. (DM2021-111)

When femicides are depicted as the result of sudden, individual outbursts of anger and jealousy ("he thought she had cheated on him"-Example 13) often triggered by trivial reasons (e.g. "she told him she found one of the contestants attractive"-Example 14), the prevailing perception is that these incidents are inherently unpredictable. Most importantly, this narrative importantly shifts responsibility away from the perpetrators, implying that such acts occur spontaneously and without warning, making them difficult to foresee and prevent.[43] Consequently, this viewpoint may undermine prevention and education efforts, rendering them ineffective. Alongside factors like financial disputes (6%) and intoxication (4%), these narratives suggest that femicide stems from immediate, solvable issues linked to women's actions, rather than from deep-seated systemic power imbalances.

It is notable that DM2021 explicitly identifies only one case as an 'honour killing'. This case, involving an immigrant woman from Iran, raises significant questions about whether her death was driven by "cultural reasons" associated with "honour" and shame (Example 15):

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[40] UK Parliament, "Mental Health Act 1983", Statute Law Database (1983), www.legislation.gov.uk.
[41] End Violence Against Women, "Breaking Down Violence Against Women", *End Violence Against Women* (blog) (2024), www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk, accessed 4 May 2024.
[42] Alessia Forciniti and Emma Zavarrone, "Data Quality and Violence Against Women: The Causes and Actors of Femicide", *Social Indicators Research* (pre-print 2023), DOI: 10.1007/s11205-023-03254-y.
[43] Lucia Busso, Claudia Roberta Combei, and Ottavia Tordini, "The Mediatization of Femicide: A Corpus-Based Study on the Representation of Gendered Violence in Italian Media", *Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria*, 28.3, 29-48; Gosse Minnema et al., "Responsibility Framing under the Magnifying Lens of NLP: The Case of Gender-based Violence and Traffic Danger", *Computational Linguistics in the Netherlands Journal* 12 (2022), 207-233.

(15) Was Iranian mother's death an 'honour killing'? Police probe whether woman, 47, found dead in Liverpool home was killed 'due to cultural reasons'. (DM2021-136)

While this instance sheds light on the issue of 'honour killings' prevalent in certain countries,[44] it also risks reinforcing stereotypes that some communities are more prone to such violence, potentially overshadowing the universal nature of GBV.[45] This dichotomy underscores the need for nuanced and culturally sensitive reporting on femicides, to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and acknowledge the broader societal factors contributing to GBV. Furthermore, the Daily Mail's portrayal of 'honour killings' as foreign to the UK context, contrasted with the depiction of domestic cases as mere 'individual' disputes, creates a form of othering.[46] However, it is essential to recognise that the Daily Mail is a right-wing tabloid newspaper known for its sensationalist approach and often polarised reporting. Therefore, its editorial style significantly influences the framing of stories, the language used, and the selection of incidents covered. This inherent bias means that the data derived from DM2021 does not offer a comprehensive cross-section of British news but rather reflects the particular viewpoints and tendencies of the Daily Mail. Consequently, while DM2021 provides valuable insights into public discourse, its portrayal of issues such as 'honour killings' and domestic femicide may reinforce stereotypes and biases, given its status as a widely read yet ideologically skewed publication. This factor must be taken into account when interpreting the findings, as they do not fully represent the broader media landscape or the more nuanced perspectives found in other types of publications.

From a broader perspective, it is important to recognise that representations of femicide in news coverage, as exemplified by the Daily Mail in this study, are shaped by a range of factors. Primarily, the media's focus on sensational and dramatic narratives often emphasises the mental state of perpetrators, creating a more compelling and engaging storyline for public consumption. These biases reflect wider societal norms and prejudices, which influence media coverage and perpetuate inequalities in representation.[47]

Additionally, the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions has heightened awareness of domestic violence, leading to increased media reporting on such incidents.[48] However, since news coverage frequently functions as an echo chamber,[49] adopting a more critical and proactive approach to reporting on femicide could enable news outlets to question and potentially reshape the prevailing narrative, rather than merely amplifying it. This could help prevent the emulation of such acts by perpetrators who might use mental distress as a justification, which can lead to a mitigation of their sentences. This shift could not only foster a deeper understanding of the root causes of femicide but also promote more effective prevention and education strategies, ultimately helping to reduce its occurrence.

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[44] EIGE, "Measuring Femicide in the United Kingdom".

[45] Recep Doğan, "Is Honor Killing a "Muslim Phenomenon"? Textual interpretations and cultural representations", Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 31.3 (2011), 423–440, DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2011.599547; Aisha Gill and Avtar Brah, "Interrogating Cultural Narratives about 'Honour'-Based Violence", European Journal of Women's Studies, 21.1 (2014), 72-86, DOI: 10.1177/1350506813510424.

[46] Revital Sela-Shayovitz, "'She Knew He Would Murder Her': The Role of the Media in the Reconstruction of Intimate Femicide", Journal of Comparative Social Work, 13.1 (2018), 11-34, DOI:10.31265/jcsw.v13i1.157.

[47] Mariana Aldrete et al., "Media Representations of Femicide. A Systematic Review of Literature in English and Spanish", Annals of the International Communication Association (2024), DOI: 10.1080/23808985.2024.2336924.

[48] Ana Santos, "Humanizing without Sensationalizing: Investigating Femicide", Global Investigative Journalism Network (2023), www.gijn.org, accessed 4 May 2024.

[49] Seth Flaxman et al., "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption", Public Opinion Quarterly, 80.1 (2016), 298-320, DOI:10.1093/poq/nfw006.

5.3.1. *Femicides as a problem of 'men killing women', not 'women being killed'*

To further investigate the implied attribution of accountability to perpetrators (Q3), the analysis included a grammatical examination of headlines within the corpus. This approach was chosen to determine whether perpetrators were depicted as active subjects or if victims were presented as passive subjects, with or without reference to their perpetrators. This focus on headlines is particularly relevant because headlines serve as the first point of engagement for readers and are crucial in shaping initial perceptions of responsibility and agency. Unlike the full articles, which may contain nuanced discussions, headlines often distil the core message into a few words, making them particularly powerful in influencing public perception. The analysis builds on previous studies conducted in other countries,[50] such as Italy,[51] which have shown that passive constructions in news headlines (e.g., "*la donna è stata uccisa*" > "the woman was killed") often divert attention away from the perpetrator, compared to active forms (e.g., "*l'uomo ha ucciso la donna*"> "the man killed the woman"), which more directly attribute blame.

Analysing these choices is essential as they reveal how agency, responsibility, and victimisation are conveyed through the grammatical structure of headlines, thereby uncovering biases and informing more balanced and responsible reporting practices. Since headlines play a crucial role in shaping readers' perceptions and setting the tone for the entire article — and often are the only part some readers engage with — they not only capture attention but also provide a framework for understanding the narrative. Therefore, it is imperative that headlines accurately and responsibly reflect these core issues.

Contrary to the aforementioned studies,[52] the headlines in DM2021 predominantly present perpetrators as agents and subjects (67%). This framing might be influenced by the subject-verb-object (SVO) structure of English and this language's preference for active sentences,[53] but it bears the effect of highlighting perpetrators' culpability. This should not be underestimated, since this framing has the effect of implying and presenting the issue of femicide more as a problem of "men killing women" rather than as "violence against women", regardless of the reasons given for the crime. The three categories of grammatical structures found in the corpus are presented in Table 3 below:

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[50] Sally Johnson and Astrid Ensslin, "'But Her Language Skills Shifted the Family Dynamics Dramatically'. Language, Gender and the Construction of Publics in two British Newspapers", *Gender and Language*, 1.1 (2013), 229-254, DOI:10.1558/genl.v1i2.229; Michele Lloyd and Shula Ramon, "Smoke and Mirrors: UK newspaper representations of intimate partner domestic violence"; Paul Mason and Jane Monckton-Smith, "Conflation, Collocation and Confusion: British press coverage of the sexual murder of women", *Journalism*, 9.6 (2008), 691-710, DOI: 10.1177/1464884908096241; Louise Wattis, "Analysing Local Newspaper Coverage of Murders Involving Street Sex Workers", *Feminist Media Studies*, 22.2 (2022), 425-440, DOI:10.1080/14680777.2020.1804975.

[51] Lucia Busso, Claudia Roberta Combei, and Ottavia Tordini, "Narrating Gender Violence A Corpus-Based Study on the Representation of Gender-Based Violence in Italian Media", in *Language, Gender and Hate Speech: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (2020), 39-58, DOI:10.30687/978-88-6969-478-3/002; Nicoletta Mandolini, "Il Femminicidio Raccontato. Il Discorso Narrativo Italiano sulla Violenza Letale di Genere tra Giornalismo e Letteratura" (Doctoral Thesis), University College Cork, Ireland (2018); Erica Pinelli and Chiara Zanchi, "Gender-based Violence in Italian Local Newspapers: How Argument Structure Constructions can Diminish a Perpetrator's Responsibility", in *Discourse Processes between Reason and Emotion: A Post-Disciplinary Perspective* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 117-143; Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo, "'Mine or No One Else's'".

[52] See notes 51 and 52.

[53] Alireza Jalilifar and Zohre Shooshtari, "Active or Passive: That Is the Question", *BRAIN: Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 2.4 (2011), 29-38, DOI:10.62145/ces.v2i2.52; Yusri Ali Lubis, Reysha Miranti, and Yani Lubis, "Passive Voice and Active Voice in Sentence Structure", *Journal of Psychology, Counselling and Education*, 2.1 (2024), 59-64, DOI:10.62145/ces.v2i2.52.

Structure	%	Frequency
Perpetrator as the Agent	67%	"Man, 42, murdered his mother by setting fire to their flat, court hears". (DM2021-64) "Husband, 46, brutally murdered his wife in her home while their daughter was in the next bedroom". (DM2021-67)
Victim in a Passive Sentence with the Agent	9%	"British woman, 62, is beaten to death with a shovel by her toyboy lover". (DM2021-18)
Victim in a Passive Sentence with No Agent	24%	"Mother-of-two, 43, who was found dead at road junction with stab wounds". (DM2021-31) "Mother-of-five strangled to death in murder-suicide had complained to police she was being harassed". (DM2021-32)

Table 5: Subject and Agent patterns in DM2021

The pattern "Perpetrator-as-Agent" (67%) directly associates the murderer with the action of committing the crime, as can be seen in Examples 16 and 17:

(16) Man [S], 42, murdered [V]his mother [O] by setting fire to their flat, court hears. (DM2021-64)
(17) Husband [S], 46, brutally murdered [V] his wife [O] in her home while their daughter was in the next bedroom (DM2021-67)

This structure is used in DM2021 exclusively when the accused perpetrator has been formally charged with the crime, likely due to considerations surrounding the presumption of innocence. Textually, this approach fosters a more direct and engaging narrative, which effectively captures readers' attention.

In 9% of the headlines, the victim is presented within a passive structure while still referencing the perpetrator as the agent [S/recipient + passive verb + by + agent]. This choice keeps the victim central, emphasising her experience and evoking sympathy, while also conveying crucial information about the perpetrator, thus ensuring a sense of justice and accountability. DM2021 typically uses this approach in particularly brutal or sensationalised cases, where focusing on the victim's suffering creates a strong emotional impact and sustains public attention on the gravity of the crime, as illustrated in Examples 18 and 19 below:

(18) British woman [S/RECIPIENT], 62, is beaten to death [VOICE +pass] with a shovel by her 'toyboy lover' [AGENT]. (DM2021-18)
(19) Schoolgirl [S/RECIPIENT], 15, allegedly murdered [VOICE +pass] by brother [AGENT], 19, died after she was strangled, inquest hears. (DM2021-74)

The use of passive structures in this category may serve a double purpose: first, it foregrounds the victim's suffering and directs readers' attention to their plight to evoke sympathy. For instance, highlighting brutal or sensational details like being "beaten to death with a shovel" (Example 18) or being "strangled" (Example 19) amplifies the emotional impact of the headlines. This framing taps into readers' emotions, particularly given the tabloid nature of the Daily Mail, where such approaches may be driven by commercial interests rather than a commitment to responsible journalism. This practice certainly runs contrary to the International Federation of Journalists' Guidelines on reporting femicide, which caution against exploiting victims' suffering for sensationalism.[54]

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[54] International Federation of Journalists, "International Guidelines on Reporting on Violence Against Women" (2021), www.ifj.org, accessed 4 May 2024.

Moreover, the identification of the perpetrators as "toyboy lover" (Example 18) and "brother" (Example 19) suggests that the choice to use the perpetrator as the rheme of these headlines might be intended to add a sensational element. The term "toyboy lover" implies an age-discrepant, potentially scandalous relationship, while the mention of "brother" highlights the betrayal and horror of fratricide. These sensational details make the stories more emotionally charged and relatable for readers, but they also serve as strategies to attract and retain readership by focusing on dramatic aspects, often overshadowing broader social issues and potentially leading to victim-blaming. Unfortunately, this editorial approach is characteristic of the *Daily Mail*'s sensationalist tabloid style.[55]

24% of the headlines concentrate exclusively on the victim or the crime itself without referencing the perpetrator (S, VOICE +pass). This approach frequently emphasises the tragedy of the incident, which may sometimes indicate either a lack of available information, as illustrated in Examples 20 and 21:

(20) Mother-of-two [S], 43, who was found dead [VOICE +pass] at road junction with stab wounds. (DM2021-31)
(21) Mother-of-five [S] strangled to death [VOICE +pass] in murder-suicide had complained to police she was being harassed. (DM2021-32)

In DM2021, this type of headlines results from ongoing investigations and highlight the need for justice or the continuing threat posed by a perpetrator who is still at large or not convicted yet. This can create a sense of unease and urgency in the readership, prompting public interest and concern while awaiting further developments in the case.

Therefore, the data reveals that the articles in DM2021 frequently position the perpetrator as the agent in active sentences, thereby emphasising their accountability and the dramatic nature of the crime. This approach aligns with a narrative style that values clear and direct storytelling, potentially enhancing reader engagement. While it is unclear whether this preference for active voice is a deliberate journalistic choice or simply a characteristic of the English language structure, it undeniably results in the perpetrator's role being prominently highlighted. Even when the Daily Mail contextualises some cases as involving transient mental instability, the headlines still effectively underscore the perpetrator's responsibility. In comparison with news coverage in other countries, such as Italy, where passive constructions might be more prevalent due to slower investigative processes or differing journalistic priorities, the active voice in UK articles, such as "X killed the woman", serves to foreground the perpetrator's actions. This contrast suggests that, regardless of intent, the use of active sentences in DM2021 implies and contributes to a focus on the perpetrator and reinforces the themes of crime and justice.

5.4 *What is Left Unproblematic in this Problem Representation? Where Are the Silences? What Effects are Produced by this Representation of the Problem?*

The analysis of femicide reporting in DM2021 reveals several critical omissions that reflect a broader narrative 'silence'. This silence includes both the failure to address femicide as a systemic issue, as discussed earlier, and the neglect of specific categories of female victims, thereby shaping a skewed and incomplete understanding of the issue.

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[55] Christian von Sikorski and Melanie Saumer, "Sexual Harassment in Politics. News about Victims' Delayed Sexual Harassment Accusations and Effects on Victim Blaming: A Mediation Model", *Mass Communication and Society,* 24.2 (2021), 259-287, DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2020.1769136; Alessia Tranchese, *From Fritzl to #metoo: Twelve Years of Rape Coverage in the British Press*, Palgrave Studies in Language, Gender and Sexuality (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023).

Notably, the dataset shows a disproportionate focus on younger victims compared to national statistics, with older women significantly underreported. This discrepancy suggests a selective focus in the Daily Mail's coverage, which aligns with broader media patterns of marginalising certain groups.[56] Furthermore, despite a growing international consensus on the use of the term 'femicide'[57] to denote these crimes, the Daily Mail's avoidance of this terminology undermines the recognition of these acts as a form of GBV.

5.4.1 Selective Reporting

While the national data shows a considerable number of femicides among older women, DM2021 presents fewer cases involving this demographic, indicating a possible bias in news reporting that may reflect societal ageism.[58] The analysis of women killed in 2021, categorised by age groups, revealed a peak in fatalities among those aged 20 to 50 (51% of DM2021). This suggests heightened vulnerability within this demographic, potentially influenced by factors such as increased exposure to risky environments and higher rates of domestic violence. However, even if there is a discernible decline in fatalities with advancing age, significant numbers of victims persist across older age groups, emphasising the need for comprehensive strategies to address VAW across all ages. Yet, it is interesting to note that while DM2021 reports on the majority of cases that occurred in 2021, those it did not report on are mainly cases involving older women. Table 6 shows the number of femicides reported in national data compared to the number of cases reported by the Daily Mail, highlighting a prevalence of unreported cases in the 50+ age range (-21% compared to national statistics).

Age Range	National Data	Daily Mail
15-20	9	9
21-30	24	23
31-40	26	20
41-50	25	18
51-60	18	12
61-70	20	17
71-80	13	11
81+	11	9

Table 6: Comparison between National Data and Daily Mail news coverage based on victims' age

These omissions highlight the silences inherent in the Daily Mail's narrative. By focusing primarily on younger victims and neglecting older victims, it presents a skewed understanding of femicide, which fails to reflect the full extent of GBV in the UK. This selective reporting leads to an underestimation of the prevalence and impact of femicide on these overlooked groups, hindering efforts to address systemic issues and provide adequate support and resources for all victims of GBV.

It must be said that the Daily Mail's omissions concerning the killings of older women reflect a significant issue with the categorisation of femicides in the UK. Until 2019, victims over the age of 59

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[56] Camelia Bouzerdan and Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, "Killings in Context: An Analysis of the News Framing of Femicide", *Human Rights Review* 19 (2018), 211-228, 10.1007/s12142-018-0497-3.

[57] UN Women, "'The Shadow Pandemic': Violence Against Women During COVID-19".

[58] Merve Basdogan, Zulfukar Ozdogan, and Lesa Huber, "How Ageist and Sexist Framing Is Used in Turkish Media to Normalize Femicide: A Content Analysis", *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021), 3089–3114; Sarmitė Mikulionienė and Ilona Tamutienė, "Perceptions of Domestic Violence against Older Women: When Sexism Is Compounded by Ageism", *Violence Against Older Women, Volume I: Nature and Extent* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019),15-39.

were not included in the Crime Survey for England and Wales.[59] In 2021, the age-cap was raised to 74, but this still excluded femicides committed in institutions such as care homes and refuges. This selective categorisation impacts the perception of which cases should be recognised as instances of VAW and might influence news reporting as well. According to a study by Bows,[60] one in four domestic homicides involve people over 60, with the vast majority being female, representing 25% of the total and the fastest-rising domestic homicide rate in the UK. Additionally, one in six older people experience abuse each year. Despite this data, a 2020 poll conducted by the charity Hourglass[61] revealed that 30% of the public did not view harmful behaviour towards older people, such as hitting, as abuse. This highlights a troubling lack of awareness and recognition of the abuse and femicides affecting older women. As explained by Bows:[62]

> When you look at police data on abuse, rape and murder, older women aren't there. If a crime is looked at, at all, it's treated as a safeguarding issue, gender neutral, 'elder abuse' with no perpetrator. If you are found at the bottom of the stairs at 40, the police are probably going to ask questions. Deeply entrenched ageism means that if you are 80, it's, 'Well, she probably fell.'

Therefore, these deliberate decisions made by the Daily Mail could reflect and reinforce societal biases concern ageism, valuing younger women more or perceiving older women's lives as less significant or less impacted by violence.

Similarly, the underrepresentation of foreign women in DM2021 suggests another layer of 'silence'. The omission of cases involving women from diverse racial and national backgrounds potentially reflects a broader pattern of exclusion in media narratives, which might contribute to reinforcing stereotypes and neglecting issues related to race and immigration status.[63] This selective reporting can skew public perception of who is considered a 'typical' victim of femicide, further marginalising these already vulnerable groups. The omission of 11 cases involving foreign women highlights a concerning silence regarding issues related to race, nationality, and potentially immigration status. It must be remembered that the UK signed the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence[64] only in 2022 and it reserved the right not to be bound by Article 59. This article requires states to protect migrant women whose residency depends on an abusive spouse or partner, including suspending deportation to facilitate applications for residence permits.[65] Although no direct link can be established between this governmental stance and the Daily Mail's reporting gaps, the selective coverage may influence public perceptions of who qualifies as a 'typical' or 'newsworthy' victim of femicide. Such omissions, unless reported sensationally as in the 'honour killing' case discussed, contribute to the marginalisation of foreign women in media narratives. This selective attention risks overlooking these groups in policy responses, support services, and advocacy efforts,

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[59] Office for National Statistics, "Crime Survey for England & Wales" (2024), www.crimesurvey.co.uk, accessed 4 May 2024.

[60] Hannah Bows, "Considering Older Victims and Survivors - Hannah Bows", White Ribbon UK, 2024, www.whiteribbon.org.uk, accessed 4 May 2024.

[61] Yvonne Roberts, "End Femicide: 278 Dead. The Hidden Scandal of Older Women Killed by Men", *The Guardian*, Sunday 7 March 2021, www.theguardian.com, accessed 4 May 2024.

[62] Bows, "Considering Older Victims and Survivors".

[63] Mariana Aldrete and Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol, "Framing Femicide in the News, a Paradoxical Story: A Comprehensive Analysis of Thematic and Episodic Frames", *Crime, Media, Culture* 20.3 (2024), 231-249, DOI:10.1177/17416590231199771; Floretta Boonzaier, "Spectacularising Narratives on Femicide in South Africa: A Decolonial Feminist Analysis", *Current Sociology*, 71.1 (2023), 78-96, DOI:10.1177/00113921221097157.

[64] Council of Europe, "The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)" (2011), www.coe.int.

[65] Amnesty International, "UK: Istanbul Convention Finally Comes into Force but the Government Stops Short of Protecting All Women" (2022), www.amnesty.org.uk, accessed 4 May 2024.

sending a troubling message that their lives are less significant and reinforcing existing prejudices and systemic inequalities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, upon examining the terminology and referencing practices within DM2021, it is extremely concerning that the term 'femicide' appears only once. This single mention (Example 22) refers to the UK's 'Femicide Census' statistics,[66] which underscores the alarming frequency of women killed by men over the past decade. This reference is not even linked to a specific case:

(22) The most recent 'Femicide Census' from 2020 found that during the last decade a woman was killed by a man every three days.

The omission of the term 'femicide'—despite international advocacy for its inclusion in news reporting[67]—diminishes the recognition of these crimes as manifestations of GBV and may undermine public awareness and policy responses. Legally, UK criminal law does not specifically define femicide; rather, such cases fall under the broader categories of murder or manslaughter.[68] International bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union stress the importance of addressing GBV, including femicide, through initiatives designed to identify femicides (Name it), enhance understanding (Know it), and develop effective measures to eradicate it (Stop it).[69] In light of these recommendations, journalists have the opportunity to incorporate the term 'femicide' into their reporting, ultimately leading to a more informed public discourse and effective policy responses.

Overall, the analysis of femicide reporting in DM2021 reveals significant omissions that expose a broader narrative 'silence'—affecting not only 'who' is reported but also 'what' remains unaddressed. The underreporting of older women can be linked to ageist biases that trivialise their experiences, rendering them as less significant or impactful. Similarly, the lack of coverage for foreign women may reflect racial and immigration-related prejudices, marginalising their victimisation and promoting a limited view of femicide that ignores the intricate intersections of race, nationality, and gender. Such omissions obscure the systemic nature of femicide, often rooted in misogyny and power dynamics that transcend age and race. By focusing on individual perpetrators or specific victim profiles, reporting can reinforce harmful stereotypes and hinder a comprehensive understanding of this issue. A broader perspective is essential to effectively address femicide and drive meaningful social change.

5.5 Conclusions: How Can the Problem be Questioned, Disrupted, and Replaced?

The analysis of the Daily Mail's coverage reveals a persistent tendency to frame femicide as an isolated act perpetrated by mentally disturbed individuals. By focusing on perpetrators' mental health and employing narratives of 'love gone wrong',[70] the tabloid obscures the systemic roots of these crimes in misogyny and gender inequality. This approach perpetuates harmful stereotypes and undermines public understanding of femicide as a form of gender-based violence. As one of the UK's most widely read newspapers, the Daily Mail holds significant influence over public opinion. Therefore, its framing of femicide not only reflects but also reinforces prevailing biases, contributing to a distorted public perception that downplays the broader societal factors at play.

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[66] Yvonne Roberts, "End Femicide".
[67] EIGE, "Measuring Femicide in the United Kingdom".
[68] Ibid.
[69] OHCHR, 'Femicide Watch Initiative', OHCHR (2015), www.ohchr.org, accessed 4 May 2024.
[70] Gabriela Torres, "Writing Terror on the Bodies of Women: Media coverage of violence against women in Guatemala", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 52.4 (2020), 837-838, DOI: DOI: 10.1017/S0022216X20001054.

While The Daily Mail generally excels in using active voice constructions to name perpetrators and hold them 'grammatically' accountable—thereby framing femicide as an issue of 'men killing women' rather than 'women being killed by men'—its selective representation of victims and its failure to explicitly recognise femicides as a distinct crime leave a gap in the portrayal. This framing both reflects and reinforces a broader societal reluctance to acknowledge femicide as GBV, marginalising certain categories of victims and failing to present a complete picture of the crime. To address this issue, a more inclusive reporting approach is needed, one that ensures all victims, regardless of age or ethnicity, receive attention. This would highlight the widespread nature of femicide and ensure that marginalised groups are not overlooked, fostering a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the issue.

To "question, disrupt, and change" this problematic representation (Q.6), there must be a shift towards news coverage that contextualises femicide within the broader framework of gender inequality and societal norms. This entails recognising and highlighting patterns and commonalities across cases, rather than treating them as isolated incidents. By portraying each femicide as an individual event with no broader implications for the general public, the Daily Mail's representation suggests that "gender-based violence is merely a by-product of complicated and challenging relationships between equals".[71] This perspective diminishes the systemic nature of gender-based violence and obscures its root causes.

What is left unspoken is that before punishment, there could be prevention. News outlets, including the Daily Mail, often prioritise sensationalised reporting of femicides after they occur, rather than proactively educating the public on how to prevent them.[72] In the case of the corpus under examination, this approach might have been influenced by the Daily Mail's right-wing perspective, which can lean more towards retribution than preventative measures.[73] However, it is important to emphasise that since news coverage can function as an echo chamber, news reporting could be used as a weapon against the dominant public representation of femicides and of gendered violence as a whole. Paraphrasing the Council of Europe's campaign against sexism, once violence is "seen", it should be "named" for what it is, and also "stopped".[74]

In this regard, the International Federation of Journalists' Guidelines[75] provides critical insights on how to disrupt the problematic representation of femicide. To achieve this, journalists should employ accurate, non-judgmental language, avoiding sensationalism and excessive details while ensuring sufficient information is provided to maintain the integrity of the case. News coverage should consciously avoid all forms of victim-blaming, whether implicit or explicit, and should not suggest that the tragedy is inevitable.[76] Instead, journalists should frame femicide as a manifestation of deeply entrenched social issues. Upholding confidentiality and respecting victims is paramount, yet it is equally important for reporters to engage with experts and women's organisations to provide comprehensive, informed perspectives. Articles should also include information about accessing local support networks. This would allow news reporting to promote an alternative narrative that emphasises prevention and support, reinforcing the understanding that femicide is a preventable structural issue rather than an inescapable tragedy.[77]

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[71] Council of Europe, "*Guidelines on Gender Equality and Violence against Women for Armenian Journalists and Media Workers*" (2020), www.rm.coe.int, accessed 4 May 2024.

[72] Monica Gerber and Jonathan Jackson, "Authority and Punishment: On the Ideological Basis of Punitive Attitudes towards Criminals", *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* (2015), 1-28, DOI: 10.1080/13218719.2015.1034060.

[73] Darren Kelsey, "Defining the 'Sick Society': Discourses of Class and Morality in British Right-Wing Newspapers during the 2011 England Riots", *Capital & Class* 39.2 (2015), 243-264, DOI:10.1177/0309816815583393.

[74] Council of Europe, "Sexism: See it, Name it, Stop it", *Human Rights Channel* (2020), www.coe.int, accessed 4 May 2024.

[75] International Federation of Journalists, "International Guidelines on Reporting on Violence Against Women" (2021).

[76] Ibid.

[77] Caterina Peroni, "Gender-Based Violence and 'Feminicide' in Queer Italian Movements: Questioning Gender, Sexuality, and the (Hetero)normative Order", *Oñati Socio-legal Series*, 5.6 (2015), 1557-1579.

While this study does not explore the link between the psychological impacts of COVID-19 and VAW, it is plausible that the lockdowns gave women more opportunity to reflect on their relationships and consider alternative futures. The pandemic has raised concerns about its potential to exacerbate existing triggers, which, rather than serving as mere excuses, may have intensified the challenges faced by individuals in abusive situations. Lockdown measures, intended to control the virus, inadvertently restricted women's access to support networks and options for escaping abusive environments. However, it is important to recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic did not create new tendencies towards violent behaviour in individuals who were not previously predisposed to such actions. Instead, it likely intensified existing dynamics of control, hatred, abuse, or violence within relationships. [78] Thus, while acknowledging the heightened risks posed by the pandemic, particularly for women and children who endured confinement with an abuser, attention must remain on addressing the underlying dynamics of intimate partner violence beyond the immediate context of the pandemic.

This study does not claim to be exhaustive or representative of all UK news reporting. However, the corpus analysed provides valuable insights into dominant narratives about femicide and highlights the potential for widespread harm through widely accessible media outlets. While the Daily Mail's coverage shows some alignment with the UN's call for local 'femicide watches' [79] in terms of reporting frequency and perpetrator identification, it continues to predominantly frame these crimes as driven by jealousy, mental illness, or victim/institutional blame. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these issues are not exclusive to the Daily Mail, underscoring the necessity for broader media analysis. The prevailing media landscape highlights the significant work needed to foster a more nuanced and gender-sensitive representation of femicide and violence against women, which is fundamental to addressing the underlying societal causes.

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[78] Ingala Smith, "Coronavirus Doesn't Cause Men's Violence Against Women".
[79] OHCHR, "Femicide Watch Initiative".

Beatrice Spallaccia

Hegemonic Masculinity and Toxic Technocultures.
Discourse in the Review Bombing of HBO's *The Last of Us*

Abstract: Review bombing is an internet phenomenon in which a mob of users posts a deluge of negative reviews and low rating scores in a short period of time against a product they consider offensive. It can be interpreted as a form of ideological conflict, which frequently corresponds to an outburst of social distress from gaming communities. This contribution focuses on the cyber hostility against HBO's adaptation of one of the most successful video games in recent times: *The Last of Us* (TLoU). Inspired by the tenets of Discourse Studies and of the Discourse Historical Approach, the paper analyzes the discursive strategies used to attack the series' inclusive representations. It suggests interpreting review bombing as a form of collective political resentment which conflates overt and covert forms of hate speech towards marginalized groups. Drawing on existing research on hegemonic masculinity, geek communities, and online hate speech, the contribution offers insights on how toxic masculinity functions as a gatekeeper to participation in contemporary media.

Keywords: *online hate speech*, *digital discourse*, *toxic masculinity*, *geek masculinity*, *review bombing*, *The Last of Us*

1. Hegemonic Masculinity and Geek Culture

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, which was introduced by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in the 1980s, has become a pivotal theoretical element of gender studies over the last 40 years. It refers to "the social arrangements that give a particular kind of masculinity a hegemonic position in sexual politics and that marginalize others".[1] In this view, hegemonic masculinity "embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men".[2] It is, therefore, normative and instrumental in maintaining the patriarchal system.

Hegemonic masculinity is not only constructed in relation to women, but also to other forms of marginalized masculinities. Indeed, this social order has been established also thanks to the cultural reconfiguration of nontraditional forms of masculinities as stigmatized outgroups and negative symbols, especially gay men. This ideological aversion to gay and queer individuals, as well as to women, has been studied across different research fields. In media and communication studies, toxic forms of masculinity have been investigated also within geek communities.[3]

Since the late 1970s, geek culture has maintained a complex relation with models of masculinity. Although historically associated with the demographic of the straight, white, cisgender male,[4] the image of the 'nerd'[5] has long been interpreted as antithetical to traditional hegemonic masculinity in Western

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[1] Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 58.
[2] Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender and Society*, 19.6 (2005), 832.
[3] See Fergus Murray, "A Separate Reality: Science, Technology and Masculinity", in Eileen Green et al., eds., *Gendered by Design: Information Technology and Office Systems* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993),64-80; Lori Kendall, "'Oh No! I'm a Nerd!': Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum", *Gender and Society*, 14.2 (2000), 256-274; Michael Salter, "From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse", *Crime Media Culture*, 14.2 (2018), 247-264.
[4] See Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).
[5] *Geek* and *nerd* are used interchangeably in the paper, meaning "a person that has a high technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication on a given object, especially technological and/or linked to themes like fantasy, science fiction, video games,

society. Indeed, geek masculinity has been defined as "an identity forged by rejecting both feminine-marked culture and constructions, as well as the traditional athletic male aesthetic".[6] However, as pointed out by Thiago Falcão et al., "the archetypal model of the hypermasculine nerd ... only outlines the substitution of a traditional hypermasculine ideal for another standard that continues to maintain hegemonic masculinity within pop culture".[7]

In more recent times, this has had a strong impact on the negotiation of power in the contemporary digital space, as thoroughly investigated by academic research dedicated to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and online communities.[8] Several studies in this research field have focused on power dynamics in geek communities, that is, those communities which "tend to coalesce around geek interests – technology, science, popular culture (particularly of the science fiction, fantasy, and comic book variety), and gaming".[9] In their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett reflect on identity policing in contemporary nerd communities writing that "geekdom is at a crossroads. Once defined by their outsider status and victimization, geeks are now powerful enough as a subculture to make victims out of others".[10] As a result, over the last decade, the digital space has seen the emergence and proliferation of several phenomena which show the "socio-technical congruence between geek masculinity and online abuse".[11] Examples of this are the gendered forms of trolling and flaming, both investigated extensively in CMC studies since the late 1980s as forms of online hostile discourse and anti-social behaviors.[12] Definitions of *flaming* abound in academic research and have evolved through the years. For example, in 1986, Jane Siegel et al. saw flaming as "the expression of strong and inflammatory opinions", while in 2010, Peter Moor et al. defined it as a behavior "displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language" (1536).[13] An academic definition of *trolling* is provided by Claire Hardaker; according to her, this is the behavior of "a CMC user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement".[14] More recently, one of the internet practices that has worked to reaffirm toxic gendered ideologies is review bombing. This is a jargon expression used "to refer to a phenomenon where a crowd of people performs an explicit, perceptible sabotage of a website", posting negative public ratings and reviews of a cultural

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etc.". Definition provided by Thiago Falcão et al., "Conservatism and Toxic Masculinity in Gamer Culture: An Approach to *Magic: The Gathering*", *MATRIZes*, 15.2 (2021), 253.

[6] Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Cham: Palgrave, 2017), n.p.

[7] Falcão et al., "Conservatism", 258.

[8] See, for example, Susan Herring, "Gender and Power in Online Communication", in Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, eds., *The Handbook of Language and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 202-228; Susan Herring, "Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior", in Sasha Barab et al., eds., *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 2004), 338-376; Susan Herring, "Discourse in Web 2.0: Familiar, Reconfigured, and Emergent", in Deborah Tannen and Anna Marie Tester, eds., *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media* (Washington, DC: Georgetown U.P.), 1-25.

[9] Adrienne Massanari, "#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures", *new media & society*, 19.3 (2017), 331.

[10] Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic*, 11-12.

[11] Salter, "Gamergate", 251.

[12] See, among others, Martin Lea et al., "Flaming in Computer-Mediated Communication. Observations, Explanations, Implications", in Martin Lea, ed., *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication* (New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992), 89-112; John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7.3 (2004), 321-326.

[13] Jane Siegel et al. "Group Processes in Computer-Mediated Communication", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 37.2 (1986), 161; Peter J. Moor et al., "Flaming on YouTube", *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26 (2010), 1536.

[14] Claire Hardaker, "Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: From User Discussions to Academic Definitions", *Journal of Politeness Research*, 6.2 (2010), 237.

product.[15] This technique has been used on review aggregator platforms such as Metacritic, Rotten Tomatoes, and IMDb to attack inclusive and gender-positive representations in mainstream media, especially in video games or films. Among the most recent and (in)famous incidents of review bombing is that which has targeted HBO's adaptation of one of the best-selling video games in recent times: *The Last of Us*.[16]

The present contribution, therefore, focuses on the cyber hostility against this cultural product and analyzes the discursive performance of toxic masculinity in geek communities. More specifically, the paper presents some preliminary findings of a qualitative pilot analysis of the discourse employed on the aggregation site Metacritic to review bomb HBO adaptation.

2. *The Last of Us*

Created by Naughty Dog and Sony, *The Last of Us* (TLoU) is a Play Station video game series, critically renowned for its emotional storytelling, unforgettable characters, and suspenseful action-adventure gameplay. It consists of two main parts: TLoU I and II. The former was released in 2013, has sold over 20 million copies, and spawned the latter, that is, a sequel which was published in 2020. In January 2023, a drama adaptation, which was created by the director Craig Mazin and one of the game developers, Neil Druckmann, debuted on American HBO Max.

The story of both the game and the drama is set in a post-apocalyptic America, ravaged by a Cordyceps fungus brain infection which has turned large parts of the population into rampaging zombie-like monsters. The lives of survivors are constantly threatened not only by the Infected but also by ruthless factions fighting over the control of territories: on one side, the highly militarized government agency FEDRA, which has established quarantine zones across the U.S., on the other, hunters, smugglers, and revolutionary militia groups like the Fireflies which revolt against FEDRA's fascist-like militarization. The story follows the actions of two protagonists, Joel and Ellie, respectively interpreted by Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey in HBO adaptation. Joel is a veteran smuggler who lost his daughter Sarah at the onset of the pandemic, while Ellie is a teenager who is immune to Cordyceps and, thus, she is possibly the key to humanity's survival. Joel is tasked by the Fireflies with escorting Ellie to safety and finding a cure to the infection. Through a series of flashbacks, the narrative introduces secondary characters, like the commander of the Fireflies Marlene, the survivalist Bill, Joel's partner Tess, and Ellie's girlfriend Riley.

TLoU holds a special place in mainstream media production, because the traditionally violent post-apocalyptic setting is the backdrop for more inclusive and progressive representations, in terms of character evolutions and identities. This innovative element is even stronger in HBO drama. First, it provides a more in-depth representation of Ellie's queer relationship with her girlfriend Riley (S1E7 – *Left Behind*). Second, it dedicates an entire episode (S1E3 – *Long, Long Time*) to the love story between two formerly peripheral characters, Bill (Nick Offerman) and Frank (Murray Bartlett). Bill is a paranoid and lonely survivalist, who has learned to thrive in the post-apocalyptic world, until a chance encounter with Frank radically changes his life. They fall in love and build a happy life together. As critic Darren Mooney writes, "Bill discovers that there is something more meaningful than his own self-preservation. In Frank, he finds joy and happiness. He gets to live, not just survive".[17] Indeed, the episode shows that

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[15] Venera Tomaselli et al., "Review Bomb: On the Gamification of the Ideological Conflict", in Oscar Bernardes et al., eds., *Handbook of Research on Cross-Disciplinary Uses of Gamification in Organization* (Hershey: IGI Global, 2022), 335.

[16] See, among others, Claire Whitley, "Review Bombing Is About Power, Politics and Revenge -- but It's not About Art", *The Conversation* (2023), *www.theconversation.com*.

[17] Darren Mooney, "No, That Episode of *The Last of Us* Was Not 'Filler'", *Escapist Magazine* (2023), *www.escapistmagazine.com*.

it is possible to find love and happiness even in the post-apocalyptic horror, as well as to experiment and to live alternative models of masculinity based on mutual protection and care.

Representations of non-hegemonic masculinity are not prevalent in post-apocalyptic settings, which have been traditionally dominated by patriarchal values.[18] Despite according to James Berger apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic representations "put forward a total critique of any existing social order",[19] Raffaella Baccolini[20] has analyzed how most post-apocalyptic narratives do not portray a radical change in gender roles: patriarchal systems, that were present before the disaster, continue to dominate even during the reconstruction process. As Baccolini stresses, in this context TLoU provides alternative representations of gender roles, because it further deconstructs the mainstream post-apocalyptic narrative of masculinity as inevitably violent.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the third episode, which emphasizes Bill and Frank's storyline, has polarized the opinion of critics and Internet users online, influencing their reviews on the whole series. On the one hand, professional critics have acclaimed it "the best adaptation of a video-game ever made"[21] and "absolutely magical television ... for its brave, poignant, heartbreaking character study".[22] On the other, HBO drama attracted the ire of users who were outraged by the episode's queer content and by the supposed transformation of Bill from an hypermasculine character into an emasculated man; these users, thus, turned to social media and web aggregators to label the show as the epitome of the so-called woke ideology and to review bomb its production.

3. Review Bombing and Metacritic

Part of the wider phenomena of online hate speech, review bombing (RB) is an internet practice in which a mob of accounts (i.e., a digital crowd) posts "a large number of negative reviews and low rating scores in a short time span".[23] Review bombers are usually politically right-wing users "who intend to hurt sales of a product they decide offends them or is otherwise culturally or politically objectionable".[24] This phenomenon frequently corresponds to an outburst of social distress from gaming communities, as demonstrated by Venera Tomaselli et al. in their statistical analysis of the RB which occurred right after the release of Sony's game TLoU II.[25] As the scholars point out, that was the most prominent case of RB until 2020. Similarly, three years later, the premiere of HBO adaptation from TLoU I met with a deluge of negative reviews on many platforms, including the review aggregator Metacritic.

Metacritic is a subsidiary of the Fandom company. It collects both professionals' and users' reviews of a variety of products, such as films, television shows, music albums, and video games. For each item, Metacritic develops an algorithm called Metascore, "which aggregates the opinion of experts into a unique number within 0-100",[26] as well as a user score within 0-10. Registered users can also post textual reviews, along with their score. Metacritic rating system automatically breaks down users' reviews into

[18] See Carlen Lavigne, *Post-apocalyptic Patriarchy: American Television and Gendered Vision of Survival* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2018); Graeme John Wilson, "'What's the Difference Between Men and Women?': Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Walking Dead*", *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 7.1 (2019), 36-57.

[19] James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7.

[20] Raffaella Baccolini, "Rapporti di genere nelle narrazioni post-apocalittiche", paper presented at the Conference *Oltre l'Apocalisse. Immaginari comparati alla fine dell'umano*, University of Padua (19 April 2023).

[21] John Nugent, "The Last of Us Review", *Empire Online* (2023), *www.empireonline.com*.

[22] Andy Welch, "The Last of Us Recap Episode Three – Absolutely Magical Television", *The Guardian*, Monday 30 January 2023, *www.theguardian.com*.

[23] Giulio Giacomo Cantone et al., "Ideology-Driven Polarisation in Online Ratings: The Review Bombing of *The Last of Us Part II*", https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.01140 (2023), 3.

[24] Jen Glennon, "Metacritic Has a Review Bombing Problem", *Inverse* (2020), *www.inverse.com*.

[25] Tomaselli et al., "Bomb".

[26] Cantone et al., "Polarisation", 6.

three groups: positive (user score within 10-7), mixed (user score within 6-4), and negative (user score within 3-0). Each category can be consulted via a drop-down menu. Figure 1 below shows the polarization between critics' and users' opinion for TLoU II videogame (left) and HBO series (right). More specifically, on the one hand, both products received a very high Metascore and a must-badge by professional critics, and, on the other, considerably low scores by users.
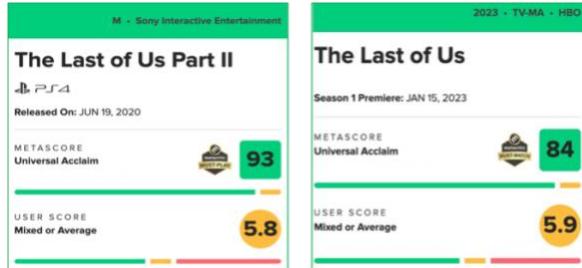

Figure 1. Polarization of critics' and users' opinion on Metacritic

4. Methodology

Metacritic was chosen as the primary source for the present study mainly because it had faced many major incidents of RB and struggled to counter this phenomenon, as investigated by some recent academic studies.[27] My pilot qualitative analysis focuses on users' negative textual reviews of the entire series, as well as of episodes S1E3 and S1E7. These are the episodes dedicated to queer characters and which triggered the RB.

Therefore, in order to build my database, the texts were selected by using the filters provided by Metacritic platform. More specifically, the "negative reviews" filter only shows those comments with a 3-0 user score. This was selected to filter reviews for Season 1, as well as for S1E3 and S1E7.

The texts were captured in September 2023 from Metacritic webpages[28] via NCapture for Chrome. This is a web-browser extension which enables to gather web content and to import it into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Thus, the captured texts were imported to Nvivo 14 and analyzed manually. Reviews written in languages other than English (e.g., Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, French), as well as those that were posted more than once, were deleted. This resulted in a final database of 407 reviews (of which 197 reviews for the whole series, 180 for S1E3, and 30 for S1E7).

The qualitative analysis is inspired by the tenets of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), one of the major approaches developed in the research field of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The DHA was introduced by Ruth Wodak and her colleagues from the Department of Linguistics of Vienna University to investigate the rhetoric of far-right populism. Since then, the DHA has been used extensively to analyze conservative discourse in politics and media representations, as well as racist and

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[27] See Tomaselli et al., "Bomb"; Cantone et al., "Polarisation"; Javier Coronado-Blázquez, "A NLP Approach to 'Review Bombing' in Metacritic PC Videogames User Ratings", https://arxiv.org/abs/2405.06306.
[28] Texts were captured on the following Metacritic webpages: *www.metacritic.com/season1*, *www.metacritic.com/episode3*, *www.metacritic.com/episode7*.

supremacist narratives of the "politics of fear".[29] The DHA focuses mainly on five discursive strategies which are defined in Table 1 below:

Nomination	Discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions
Predication	Discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions (positively or negatively)
Argumentation	Justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness
Perspectivation	Positioning the speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance
Intensification	Modifying the illocutionary force of utterances

Table 1. DHA Discursive strategies[30]

The present contribution aims to address the following research questions:

- – How is hegemonic masculinity discursively articulated in RB?
- – What types of gender-based prejudice intertwine in this digital discourse?

In the attempt to answer these research questions, the following sections provide illustrative examples of the above discursive strategies, and discuss some key preliminary findings of the qualitative analysis conducted on the cyber hostility against TLoU on Metacritic.[31]

5. Analyzing the Dataset

5.1 *Automated Language Censoring System*

A first element that emerges from the dataset is that in nearly 100 reviews some words appear censored through a string of asterisks. Excerpts (1) and (2) below provide just a couple of examples:

- (1) This **** **** isnt even close to what happens on the game, Bill kills himself and gets a **** blowjob, very explicit
- (2) Filler episode with annoying **** agenda

To understand this feature, I contacted Metacritic's editorial team. In an e-mail exchange, Metacritic co-founder Marc Doyle informed me that the aggregator uses an automated language censoring system to blank out sensitive words with asterisks. Doyle added that this system is shared among Fandom subsidiaries (such as GameSpot, GameFAQs, and Metacritic itself), and works through a set of words. However, he could not provide me with the list of sensitive words. To try and get a general understanding of this mechanism, after capturing my dataset, I submitted a mock review to Metacritic, which purposely contained both toxic language and neutral terms. Table 2 shows the original text of my review and the censored version that was published on Metacritic.

Original text:	Censored text:
The show is fucking shit, it contains too many queer characters. queer woke agenda for gays	The show is **** ****, it contains too many **** characters. **** woke agenda for ****

Table 2. Mock review to test Metacritic Automated language censoring system

This example seems to suggest that the system censors not only offensive expressions that are typically found in hate speech,[32] such as swearing and loaded words (e.g., *fucking shit*), but also terms that today are not offensive per se, like *gays* and *queer*. According to Fandom community guidelines users cannot post "any material that is inappropriate, profane, vulgar, offensive, disparaging, defamatory, obscene, or sexually explicit".[33] However, the automated system, which was probably introduced to limit hateful and offensive content, does not seem to be an effective measure to face the phenomenon of review bombing.[34]

Therefore, it is not possible to assess the extent to which hate speech is actually present in Metacritic reviews. Also, it is not always possible to study discourse "in its unexpurgated entirety"[35] as it should be done when dealing with potential hateful speech. However, more covert forms of ideologically charged discourse can be found throughout the dataset, especially in the predication, perspectivation, and argumentation strategies. The qualitative analysis conducted on the dataset shows that toxic masculinity is performed by recurring to three intertwining types of discourse, namely sexist discourse, anti-woke discourse, and homophobic discourse. The following sub-sections provide and discuss some illustrative examples taken from the texts in the review bombing under investigation.

5.2 *Sexist Discourse and Self-Victimization*

Sexist discourse has landed at the centre of recent academic research dealing with the proliferation of gender-based prejudice and its rhetorical features on the Web.[36] It does not come as a surprise, then, that instances of sexist attitudes are found in the rhetoric of toxic masculinity. Excerpts (3) to (8) below serve as examples:

(3) Ellie was not an always-anger cμnt
(4) so damn ugly like that Bella Ramsy thing
(5) the awful face of bella ramsey and her lack of acting skills
(6) Bella Ramsey is the worst live action Ellie, but she surely is the best fluid liquid goblin

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[32] Definitions of hate speech abound in scholarly research and legal contexts and often differ in terms of targeted groups. Broadly speaking, it can be defined as "any communication that disparages a target group of people based on some characteristic such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristic". The definition is provided by John Nockleby, "Hate speech", in Leonard Levy et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Constitution 3* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference US, 2000).

[33] Fandom, "Terms of Service – Gamespot, Metacritic, TVGuide, ComicVine, GiantBomb, GameFAQs", *Fandom* (2022), *www.fandom.com*.

[34] Interestingly, the system does not detect – and thus does not censor – a sexually explicit, vulgar term like *blowjob*, as shown in excerpt (1).

[35] Emma Jane, "Back to the Kitchen, Cunt. Speaking the Unspeakable about Online Misogyny", *Continuum. Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 28.4 (2014), 558.

[36] For the debate on definitions of sexist and hate speech, see Donna Lillian, "A Thorn by Any Other Name: Sexist Discourse as Hate Speech", *Discourse & Society* 18.6 (2007). For the research on sexism and misogyny online see, among others, Claire Hardaker and Mark McGlashan, "'Real Men Don't Hate Women': Twitter Rape Threats and Group Identity", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 91 (2016); Majid KhosraviNik and Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally Mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-Based Hostility", *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 14.1 (2018); Emma Jane, *Misogyny Online: A Short (and Brutish) History* (London: Sage, 2017).

(7)   Bella Ramsey makes me think of Gollum from The Lord of The rings
(8)   Ellie is arrogant, emotionless, reckless

Examples of sexist discourse abound in the predication strategies used to review Bella Ramsey and her rendition of Ellie. As shown by this selection of excerpts, both the actor and her character are qualified negatively, through pejorative adjectives (*arrogant*, *emotionless*, *ugly*, *worst*) as well as gender-based insults (*cunt*)[37] and metaphors that hint at physical ugliness, monstrosity, and deformity (*goblin*; *Gollum from the Lord of the Rings*). This reminds of rhetorical elements typically found in sexist discourse, where women are attacked through an abundance of "scathing, appearance-related judgments [and] ad hominem invectives".[38] All these discursive devices show the strong objectification that is commonly found in misogynistic discourse. In particular, *so damn ugly* and *the awful face*, in excerpts (4) and (5) respectively, recall two of the aspects that characterize women's objectification according to feminist philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton, namely "reduction to body" (i.e., identifying a woman with her body or body parts) and "reduction to appearance" (i.e., treating a woman primarily in terms of how she looks or appears).[39]

These few examples also show that gender-based resentment is not always conveyed discursively through overt forms of hate speech. Excerpt (8) contains three adjectives which are not openly denigratory or insulting per se (i.e., *arrogant, emotionless, reckless*). However, they all express characteristics which often are not associated to in-real-life women, as well as to female characters in cultural products: in fact, women and girls of all ages have long been stereotypically represented mainly as "beautiful, kind, delicate, sweet, fearful, affectionate, emotional, caring" and usually "their actions and behaviors conform to the three-fold imperative to be good-looking, obedient, and caring".[40] Such representations have been shaped by patriarchal ideology and, at the same time, have influenced gender hierarchy and sustained hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, Ellie's nontraditional features – along with Ramsey's nonbinary gender identity[41] – make them suitable targets for review bombers guided by conservatist values.

Several other reviews show how conservatism gets reaffirmed through a discourse that intertwines sexism with other hegemonic ideologies, such as white suprematism. This is visible in particular in those reviews referring to the ethnically diverse cast of TLoU, as well as to Pedro Pascal's interpretation of Joel. Although Pascal has been praised by many professional critics for his ability to show the protagonist as a tough but also vulnerable man, review bombers did not like his rendition. Excerpts (9) and (10) serve as examples:

(9)   nothing is normal anymore nowadays. All female roles are strong, brilliant, all white men are stupid, no good, are stupid.
(10) They turned Joel into an indecisive and incompetent idiot who can't do anything right just because he is a straight man. Every female and ethnic diversity quota person is portrayed as exceedingly wise, skilled and kind. Every bad guy is a white man.

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[37] Also note that the intentional misspelling of the disparaging term *cunt* in excerpt (3) is sufficient to bypass Metacritic automated censoring system and post an overtly offensive review.
[38] Jane, "Kitchen", 560.
[39] Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification and Internet Misogyny", in Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore, eds., *The Offensive Internet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P, 2010), Kindle Edition; Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2009), 228-229.
[40] Raffaella Baccolini et al., "Gender, Literature and Education for Children and Young Adults", in Raffaella Baccolini et al., *Literature, Gender and Education for Children and Young Adults / Littérature, genre, éducation pour l'enfance et la jeunesse* (Bologna: BUP, 2019), 7.
[41] In excerpt (6) Ramsey's gender identity is ridiculed as she is defined "the best fluid liquid goblin".

These excerpts exemplify how patriarchal and supremacist ideologies interplay in discourse. In (9) and (10) HBO's attention to diversity and inclusive representations is reframed as a purposeful victimization of 'true' masculinity, which is supposed to be straight and white in the minds of review bombers. It is therefore visible how a narrative that is simply more inclusive – and realistic – in terms of gender and ethnic diversity is perceived as a threat aimed at overturning the status quo, i.e., the lost 'normality' invoked in excerpt (9), and eventually at devaluing the power of straight white men. Such conspiracy theory is discursively sustained thanks to an argumentation fallacy in excerpt (10) ("They turned Joel into an indecisive and incompetent idiot who can't do anything right *just because*[42] he is a straight man"), and more generally by recurring to the so-called victim/perpetrator reversal strategy, which characterizes conservatist ideologies and works to present historically marginalized groups as hegemonic.[43] In excerpt (10) we can also find the argument from example, where the supposed transformation of Joel "into an indecisive and incompetent idiot" epitomizes the victimization and the demonization of traditional masculinity, as well as the distortion of the original features of the series and its characters.

In the texts quoted above, thus, these strategies are also linked to conspiracism. Recent studies in psychological science have shown that "belief in conspiracy theories appears to be driven by motives that can be characterized as epistemic (understanding one's environment), existential (being safe and in control of one's environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group)".[44] Moreover, such theories can offer some form of compensation for groups that have been perceived – and have perceived themselves – as outsiders that can use conspiracy theories to subvert hierarchies of power.[45] More specifically, in online communities such as the geek community, often "conspiracy theories represent normative positions [and] may offer an important source of belonging and shared reality".[46] Also, within the geek community, conspiracy theories have come to define the so-called anti-fandom. This is "a form of critical fandom that is politically and culturally opposed to new developments in a franchise they are already fans of".[47] As investigated by Robert Letizi and Callan Norman, in alt-fandoms "conspiracy theories are fabricated in order to defy the supposed ideological and narrative transgressions of a new text".[48] Prominent examples of this phenomenon are the anti-woke sentiments often expressed on contemporary digital platforms, and which are found also in the RB here under analysis.

5.3 *Anti-woke Discourse*

Excerpts (11) to (18) below exemplify the interdiscursivity between the rhetoric analyzed so far and the anti-woke discourse, and give some insights into the discursive weaponization of *woke*.

(11) An insufferable borefest of the woke agenda
(12) Another woke serie … trying to impose its deviance, instead of telling a story.
(13) It is a rubbish work imbued with the idea of political correctness. The political correctness advocated by drugman is political brainwashing, not correct politics.
(14) WARNING!!! This show contents an LGBT, woke, ****, lesbians Propaganda.

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[42] My emphasis.
[43] See Ruth Wodak "The Boundaries of What Can Be Said Have Shifted", *Discourse & Society*, 31.2 (2020), 235-244.
[44] Karen Douglas et al., "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26.6 (2017), 538.
[45] Ibid., 541.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Warren Green, "A Game About Hate: The Last of Us Part II Review Bombing, Ugly Fandom and Metacritic", in Derek Foster et al., eds., *Audience Studies – Participatory Culture of Fandom* (2023), *www.ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub*.
[48] Robert Letizi and Callan Norman, "'You Took That from Me': Conspiracism and Online Harassment in the Alt-Fandom of *The Last of Us Part II*", *Games and Culture*, 19.4 (2024), 513.

(15) this show is just an excuse to throw more woke political nonsense down the viewers throat.
(16) t's a trap! The entire purpose of the series seems to be to promote woke ideology.
(17) Blatant wokewashing.
(18) anti-family sentiment, liberal, force fed wokeism and apparently total nonsense concept at the start.

These are just some instances of the recurring use of the terms *woke* and *wokeism* in the RB which occurred on Metacritic against TLoU. Although in contemporary conservative discourse the adjective *woke* is used as a negative qualification, the Merriam Webster dictionary traces its origin as a neutral term in African American Vernacular English (i.e., a US slang), where *awake* is often rendered as *woke*, as in "I was sleeping, but now I'm woke".[49] Since 2014, this adjective has gained widespread use as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, especially after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by four white police officers, an episode which has become the epitome of police brutality and violence against Black people in the U.S.[50] Thus, *woke* has gained a new popularity as a byword for social awareness, with the meaning of "alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice".[51] Nevertheless, in most recent times, it has often been used as a derogatory term, "as a means of characterizing such alertness (or the political and social views stereotypically associated with it) as doctrinaire, self-righteous, or pernicious".[52] This process of discursive reframing and weaponization has occurred especially in conservative political and media discourse of English-speaking countries and beyond. As analyzed by Bart Cammaerts, similarly to *cancel culture* and *politically correct(ness)*, conservative media have turned the adjective *woke* and the noun *wokeism* into disparaging labels, and social justice has undergone a process of "abnormalisation", while the so-called social justice warriors (SJWs) have been reframed as having "extreme deviant political positions".[53]

This is the reason why both *woke* and *wokeism* often appear in the discourse here under analysis along with other ideologically charged terms, like *agenda* in excerpt (11), *propaganda* in (14), *political correctness*/*nonsense* in (13) and (15), or *ideology* in (16). At the same time, to stress the supposedly intolerant attitude of SJWs, these terms are frequently employed with verbs expressing aggressiveness and violence, such as *impose*, *throw down the throat*, and *force fed*, respectively in (12), (15), and (18). Moreover, in excerpt (14) the capitalization of *warning* and the repetitions of the exclamation mark (*WARNING!!!*) can be interpreted as intensification strategies aimed at strengthening the message and capturing readers' attention. This excerpt also shows the rhetorical interplay between anti-wokeism and another discourse that features in hegemonic masculinity, that is, the homophobic discourse.

5.4 *Homophobic Discourse*

Instances of homophobic attitudes abound in the reviews of episode three, dedicated to Bill and Frank's story. However, homophobia is not always conveyed through overt forms of hate speech. Let's consider the following examples:

(19) Third series - inappropriate and excessive..
(20) too graphic for me
(21) The 3rd episode ruins the entire series, totally garbage content with zero relevance to the series
(22) The third series is just a shame! Agenda. I do not recommend it!

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[49] "Woke", *Merriam Webster* [n.d.], *www.merriam-webster.com*.
[50] See Deborah Douglas et al., "One Year on, How George Floyd's Murder Has Changed the World", *The Guardian* (2021), *www.theguardian.com*.
[51] "Woke", *Oxford English Dictionary* [n.d.], *www.oed.com*.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Bart Cammaerts, "The Abnormalisation of Social Justice: The 'Anti-Woke Culture War' Discourse in the UK", *Discourse & Society* 33.6 (2022), 730.

(23) But Series 3 is just a disgusting unnecessary non-canonical liberal agenda that no one asked for.

Here homosexuality is not mentioned explicitly, but some adjectives, nouns, and verbal expressions attribute negative evaluations to episode three: the episode itself is qualified as *inappropriate and excessive* in (19), *too graphic* in (20), while in (21) it is labeled as the element which "ruins" the overall quality of the series. This is rendered discursively also by employing strongly evaluative and ideologically charged expressions such as *garbage*, *a shame* and *disgusting unnecessary non-canonical liberal agenda*, respectively in (21), (22) and (23). Also, expressions like "for me" (20) and "I do not recommend it!" (22) show the employment of perspectivation strategies to strengthen the user's ideological involvement in this discourse.

Other reviews express homophobic resentment more explicitly. It is, therefore, interesting to consider the discursive strategies that some users employ to argument their negative reviews.

(24) all the action and interesting bits have been removed in exchange for old men porn, sexualizing children, and the frequent forced woke preaching.
(25) **** rom com with soft porn.
(26) episode 3 is where I drew the line. An entire episode dedicated to the **** love affair between Bill (Nick Offerman) and Frank (Murray Bartlett). Lots of **** sex. Kissing. Nudity.
(27) When I saw the kiss I had to pause and skip, but skip right the moment the fk each other, and fk my eye, that screen over my eyeeeee, damn ittt
(28) Anita Sarkesian write you a letter this time around too? I dont even dare buying the remake of TLOU on PS5 either. Pretty sure he crammed in some **** fisting scenes in there all together with a pride parade.

Although some words appear censored, it is clear from this selection of excerpts that both the protagonists of the episode and their love story are reframed through toxic masculinity. In all five reviews, the gay love story is reframed as pornographic content, by recurring to a hypersexualizing rhetoric and expressions like *old men porn* (24), *soft porn* (25), *nudity* (26), *fisting* (28). Such argumentations are, nevertheless, fallacious: in fact, the episode itself does not show any explicit sex scene and nudity is almost non-existent, unlike traditional gendered narratives which strongly objectify women both in mainstream media and in the gaming industry.

Excerpt (27) expresses a stronger homophobic reaction from a user who laments his involuntary exposition to a supposed same-sex intercourse. Here the user's disgust closely reminds a gay panic reaction, which is discursively expressed through coarse language ("fk each other, and fk my eye") and character flooding ("my eyeeeee, damn ittt"), that is, "the deliberate overuse of a character within word boundaries".[54] These are two elements that commonly characterize toxic discourse online and can also be interpreted as intensification strategies which strengthen the illocutionary force of the message. Thus, the homophobic distress shown here confirms previous findings on heterosexist attitudes in the geek communities, where "heterosexuality remains an important component of geek identities, interconnected as it is with hegemonic masculinity".[55]

Excerpt (28) shows another discursive element that is interesting to point out, that is, the nomination of Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian is an American feminist media and videogame critic who became one of the most targeted women during the GamerGate controversy. As analyzed by recent scholarly research and media coverage alike,[56] GamerGate was born in 2014 as an online movement ostensibly dedicated

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[54] Ine Gevers et al., "Linguistic Analysis of Toxic Language on Social Media", *Computational Linguistics in the Netherlands Journal*, 12 (2022), 42.
[55] Kendall, "Nerd", 267.
[56] See, among others, Simon Parkin, "Gamergate: A Scandal Erupts in the Video-Game Community", *The New Yorker* (2014), www.newyorker.com; Andrea Braithwaite, "It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity", *Social Media+Society*, 2.4 (2016).

to reforming ethics in video games journalism, but it soon developed into a misogynistic harassment campaign against feminist users, who are perceived as a threat to traditional video games – and gamers. For this reason, it has been defined as a "web-based campaign of harassment against women who make, write about and enjoy video games, masquerading as a movement of gamers upset about a perceived lack of ethics among games journalists".[57] More specifically, the online harassment against Sarkeesian started right after she developed a video series on sexist tropes in the video game industry; she soon became the target of a massive harassment which has rapidly escalated and used different tactics typical of online misogyny, such as sexualized insults, image-based harassment, rape and death threats, doxxing, and mass shooting threat at public events.[58] Therefore, Sarkeesian's nomination is sufficient to show the interdiscursivity between two recent articulations of toxic geek masculinity, i.e., GamerGate and the review bombing here under analysis.

5.4.1 *Emasculation*

A recurring topic in the discourse analyzed is the supposed emasculation of Bill, exemplified in excerpts (29) to (32) below.

(29) Ep3 turning straight man, masculine with survival into a pansy
(30) Bill is stupid in the TV show. Bill is suppose to be a man up, a badass and a tactical person but in the show he's the opposite round.
(31) they decided to make Billy, a conservative doomsday prepper misanthrope into a **** guy who kisses and has relations with the first strange weird dude to end up at his doorstep
(32) An episode focused on two men playing house in the middle of an apocalypse. Terrible.

This selection of reviews shows the discursive dichotomy used to name and qualify the original Bill from the videogame and Offerman's rendition of the character in the TV series. The former is described as the quintessence of traditional hypermasculine ideals; he is "a straight man, male with survival" (29), "a man up, a badass and a tactical person" (30), "a conservative doomsday prepper misanthrope" (31). Conversely, Offerman's Bill is denigrated through a series of discursive elements which convey the lack of male traditional features: he is insulted for being *stupid* (30) and *a pansy* (29), the latter being an offensive term used against effeminate gay men. The supposed transformation of Bill into an effeminate – and almost childish – character is also reaffirmed in excerpt (32), through the verbal expression *to play house*, meaning in American English "to pretend in child's play to be grown-up people with the customary household duties".[59] This not only refers to the semantic field of stereotypically female household duties, but is also in stark opposition to the apocalyptic theme.

In the examples quoted above, alternative models of masculinity are rejected by appealing to the trope of the straight survivalist, which is a typically hyper-masculine hero. Hyper-masculine models play a central role in a system based on hegemonic masculinity, despite being often unattainable ideals. Analyzing the role played by ascendency and complicity in the cultural expression of masculinity, Raewyn Connell notes that:

> the cultural ideal (or ideals) of masculinity need not correspond at all closely to the actual personalities of the majority of men. Indeed the winning of hegemony often involves the

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[57] Taylor Wofford, "Is GamerGate About Media Ethics or Harassing Women? Harassment, the Data Shows", *Newsweek* (2014), *www.newsweek.com*.

[58] For an in-depth analysis of the online harassment campaign against Sarkeesian, see Beatrice Spallaccia, "Gamification of Cyber Misogyny in the USA", in *It's a Man's World (Wide Web): A Critical Analysis of Online Misogyny and Hate Speech* (Bologna: BUP, 2020), 65-90.

[59] "Play House", Collins Dictionary, *www.collinsdictionary.com*, n.d.

creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures, such as the film characters played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone. ... The notion of 'hegemony' generally implies a large measure of consent. Few men are Bogarts or Stallones, many collaborate in sustaining those images.[60]

Finally, it is worth mentioning the strategic use of *beard* in some other reviews, as shown below:

(31) certainly is disgusting to straight audiences that do not want to see two haired and beard men kissing each other and naked making love to each other in a post-apocalyptical zombie story.
(32) Waiting a week in order to watch half a series of how the beards of two smugglers are intertwined - well, that's it.
(33) they didn't have to show us a whole one hour of grown men with beards groping each other.

These three excerpts shows that the noun *beard* is used as a metaphor for masculinity, which the reviewers here interpret as humiliated and castrated by homosexuality. Therefore, the metaphor of the beard becomes strategic in homophobic discourse, because it is employed to create a discursive dissonance between Offerman's traditionally male physical appearance and his character's sexual orientation. This overt animosity against gay characters and their representation confirms that homophobia is an essential element of hegemonic masculinity. To quote once again Connell's words:

> The most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual ... and a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual. This subordination involves both direct interactions and a kind of ideological warfare. ... These transactions are tied together by the contempt for homosexuality and homosexual men that is part of the ideological package of hegemonic masculinity.[61]

The analysis of the selected excerpts thus shows how hegemonic masculinity works to marginalize queer men as members of a stigmatized outgroup, and how this ideological warfare against subjugated masculinities is conducted discursively.

6. Conclusion

This paper has focused on RB, that is, an internet phenomenon that has spread in recent years on online platforms to express ideological conflict over inclusive representations in cultural products such as HBO adaptation of TLoU. While some studies have been published lately to investigate RB in fields such as computer science and statistics,[62] the present contribution has framed it within the broader phenomenon of hate speech and recognized it as one of the many tactics used online to reaffirm prejudice discursively. This study has presented the first qualitative analysis of covert and overt forms of hate speech found in Metacritic negative reviews of HBO adaptation of TLoU part one. By analyzing the discursive strategies found in this dataset, this contribution has shown that toxic masculinity values do emerge from the study of the phenomenon and discourse under scrutiny. Moreover, it has demonstrated that "contemporary hegemonic masculinity is built on two legs, domination of women and a hierarchy of intermale dominance".[63] To answer the research questions, it has investigated how hegemonic masculinity gets

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[60] Connell, *Gender*, 184-185.
[61] Ibid., 186.
[62] Tomaselli et al., "Bomb"; Cantone et al., "Polarisation"; Coronado-Blázquez, "Ratings".
[63] Terry Kupers, "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison", *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61.6 (2005), 716.

discursively articulated in the RB against TLoU, through the victimization of female and queer characters alike. The qualitative analysis has confirmed that conservatist and normative values are reaffirmed discursively by intertwining two traditional forms of gender-based prejudice, misogyny and homophobia, with more recent anti-woke sentiments. Nevertheless, the study comes with some limitations. First, as pointed out in section 5.1, Metacritic automated censoring system made it impossible to determine the extent to which hate speech – especially in its overt forms – is present in the dataset. Second, for constraints of space, the pilot study could only address a few aspects of the microstructure of the texts, and some discursive strategies found in the quoted excerpts could not be analyzed more thoroughly. A third possible limitation lies in the fact that the analysis developed was exclusively qualitative. Therefore, future research may be conducted to analyze the corpus by joining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Despite these limitations, the contribution has highlighted that, when faced with inclusive narratives, many members of TLoU audience seem to have a twofold problem, which is simultaneously linked to assumptions about the genre of the product and its expected narrative setting, and to their own identity. First, part of the audience of post-apocalyptic stories seems to be still conservatist and to consider inclusive representations as conflicting with post-apocalyptic narratives. Second, new models of masculinity unveil the fragility of geek identity, which has historically been constructed as a marginal masculinity.[64] As Adrienne Massanari writes, "suggesting that geek culture can also be oppressive and [that can] marginalize certain populations may create a sense of cognitive dissonance for these individuals, who likely view themselves as perpetual outsiders".[65] And yet RB can be interpreted as an example of what Massanari calls "toxic technocultures". These are toxic cultures which are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks, and which demonstrate "retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race, by pushing against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism".[66] The cultural roots of online toxicity make it imperative to keep investigating RB and other forms of collective political resentment against historically marginalized groups, to better understand how they are articulated online, and how they get reaffirmed in discourse. I consider this the most effective way to study how hegemonic, toxic masculinity still functions as a gatekeeper to participation in contemporary media.

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[64] Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic*.
[65] Massanari, "Technocultures", 332.
[66] Ibid., 333.

Part 4. Cultural Representations and Hate Speech in Media

Maria Cristina Aiezza

Under a Sea of Anger.
A CDA of Hate Speech in Facebook User Comments on Disney's Representation of Diversity in the USA and Italy

Abstract: This study explores social media discourses surrounding Disney's recent commitment to cultural diversity. It analyses user comments from the company's official Facebook pages in the United States and Italy, in reaction to the remakes *Lightyear* (2022), *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023), and *The Little Mermaid* (2023). Using corpus investigation tools, prevailing discourse patterns and trends were identified, categorising contents based on their prevailing stance, theme, and hate speech intensity. Critical discourse analysis was applied to gain insights into the issues and concerns raised by commentators, while multimodal critical discourse analysis guided the examination of visual elements. Findings revealed diverse opinions on Disney's inclusivity initiatives, highlighting their polarising nature. In both countries, through words and images, some praised the diversity efforts, while others criticised them for violating the original 'canon' and as examples of 'wokeism' or forced inclusivity. Some netizens exhibited toxic fan behaviour and even explicit discriminatory attitudes.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis*, *corpus assisted discourse studies*, *multimodal critical discourse analysis*, *fandom*, *social media discourse*, *hate speech*

1. Introduction

1.1 *Disney and 'Wokeism' in the USA and Italy*

The year 2023 marked the centenary of Disney, a pioneer and leader in the animation industry.[1] Since its founding in California, the Walt Disney Company has evolved into a multinational mass media and entertainment conglomerate. Its portfolio includes theme parks and resorts, and it has recently expanded its reach through acquisitions such as Marvel, Star Wars, Pixar, Avatar, Alien, The Muppets, and The Simpsons. In 2019, Disney launched its streaming service Disney+. In 2023, the company ranked 87th on the Forbes Global 2000 list and is recognised among Forbes World's Most Valuable Brands, achieving the 7th position in 2020.[2]

Disney has played a profound role in shaping international popular culture. Its classic movies have influenced the imagination, behaviour, and values of children worldwide. Disney princesses, with their well-defined physical, behavioural, and linguistic features, have not only captivated audiences but also shaped societal norms, codifying traditional models and dreams of romantic relationships, masculinity, and femininity.[3] This impact is so pervasive that the term 'Disneyfication' was coined to indicate "the process of changing something so that it entertains or is attractive in a safe and controlled way".[4] However, alongside its celebrated legacy, the company faced substantial criticism for perpetuating outdated and bigoted viewpoints, particularly for reinforcing gender and cultural stereotypes, especially

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[1] D23: The Official Disney Fan Club, "Disney History", *D23* (2023), www.d23.com/disney-history.
[2] Forbes, "Profile: Walt Disney", *Forbes* (2023), www.forbes.com/companies/walt-disney.
[3] Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin, Texas: U. of Texas P., 2005).
[4] Cambridge U.P. & Assessment, "Disneyfication", *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* (2024), www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disneyfication.

through its portrayal of women as subordinate and its reliance on white, Western, cisgender, and male-dominated perspectives.[5]

In response to increasing demand, Disney's animation industry has undergone significant evolution over the years, reflecting broader societal shifts toward greater diversity and representation. The company has taken steps to depict different behaviours and values, notably through independent heroines who prioritise fairness and personal fulfilment over romance[6] and through storylines that tackle social issues and promote solidarity. Disney has chosen to showcase a range of stories and amplify minority voices, featuring characters with diverse physical traits, ethnicities, geographic origins, and genders. This commitment to cultural diversity that overcomes stereotypes is evident in movies like *Moana*, *Coco*, and *Soul*.[7] As part of its *Stories Matter* initiative, Disney also addressed its historical racism and sexism by adding disclaimers to older films with negative and stereotyped portrayals of people and cultures and other problematic scenes such as non-consensual kisses. Moreover, it made announcements in its theme parks more inclusive.[8]

Disney's new direction has not been universally welcomed, often leading to considerable disapproval, a controversy that highlights the broader challenge of achieving widespread inclusivity in the media and, by extension, in society. The present study specifically focuses on the reception of Disney's diversity efforts in two distinct regional contexts: the United States of America, where Disney is headquartered, and Italy, where the company has long enjoyed great popularity.[9] Disney's global presence provides a valuable opportunity to compare how the same inclusive initiatives are perceived across different cultural contexts, each shaped by distinct historical and contemporary issues related to diversity, representation, and human rights. According to Amnesty International's most recent reports,[10] both the United States and Italy experience troubling levels of intolerance, hate speech, and hate crimes. In the USA, significant concerns include discrimination and violence against women and based on gender identity. Legislative measures, purportedly justified under the guise of religious freedom, have curtailed or effectively eliminated LGBTQI+ rights. Additionally, refugees and migrants are frequently targeted by violence and racism, with antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents reported. The disproportionate use of police force against Black communities further underscores the persistent human rights challenges.[11] Similarly, in Italy, gender-based violence remains alarmingly high and anti-discrimination safeguards for LGBTQI+ individuals are inadequate. The country also grapples with racist hate speech and discriminatory political discourse, accompanied by a proliferation of racially motivated and antisemitic hate incidents and the mistreatment of ethnic minorities and migrants.[12] In

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[5] Mia A. Towbin et al., "Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films", *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 15.4 (2004), 19-44; John Wills, *Disney Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers U.P., 2017).
[6] Eleonora Federici et al., "Disney is a Gendered World: How a Little Mermaid Becomes a Sirenetta", *Ocula*, 20 (2019), 1-25; Emanuela Ammendola, "Gender Revolution in The Princess and The Frog Prince Charming? No, Thank You!", *I-LanD Journal*, 2 (2020), 51-69.
[7] Minjeong Kim and Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel, "No Face, No Race? Racial Politics of Voice Actor Casting in Popular Animated Films", *Sociological Forum*, 38.2 (2023), 510-531.
[8] Steve Rose, "Cotton Plantations and Non-Consensual Kisses: How Disney Became Embroiled in the Culture Wars", *The Guardian,* Wednesday 16 June 2021, www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jun/16/how-disney-became-embroiled-in-the-culture-wars, accessed 30 April 2024; The Walt Disney Company, "Stories Matter", *The Walt Disney Company* (2023), www.storiesmatter.thewaltdisneycompany.com.
[9] Fulvia Caprara, "Walt Disney e l'Italia", *La Stampa,* Thursday 01 February 2014, www.lastampa.it, accessed 30 April 2024.
[10] Amnesty International, "United States of America 2023", *Amnesty International* (2023), www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/north-america/united-states-of-america/report-united-states-of-america; Amnesty International, "Italy 2023", *Amnesty International* (2023), www.amnesty.org
[11] Amnesty International, "United States of America 2023".
[12] Amnesty International, "Italy 2023".

such contexts, the deployment of popular media to promote the full implementation of human rights has the potential to generate support but may also trigger a backlash against multicultural change.[13]

In both countries, Disney's representation strategies have been perceived by some as forced and insincere, part of a corporate agenda to impose progressive viewpoints. Critics have argued that Disney's moves towards inclusivity are driven by political correctness, accusing the company of pandering to contemporary social trends at the expense of traditional values and cultural heritage.[14] Some have described these changes, such as the inclusion of non-Caucasian or LGBTQI+ characters, as attempts at racial replacement or inappropriate sexualisation of children. This has alienated some consumers, with certain conservative and Christian families choosing or threatening to stop purchasing Disney products and services.[15]

Right-wing politicians and activists have labelled Disney as 'woke'.[16] The word originally referred to being alert to social injustice and inequality, particularly concerning race. However, its meaning has evolved, and it is now often used by conservatives as a pejorative label to criticise those who, in their view, extremise the fight for racial and social justice. The term denotes someone who professes progressive values but may exhibit an intolerant or dogmatic attitude towards differing perspectives.[17] In 2021, this English word even found its way into the Italian dictionary, where it is listed with both meanings.[18] Disney's inclusivity efforts have become a battleground in 'culture wars',[19] fuelling strong disagreements and polarisation of opinions between progressives and conservatives. The company has also faced criticism for participating in 'cancel culture',[20] which involves withdrawing support for people deemed objectionable. In Italy, the expression mainly signifies the removal of anachronistic and potentially offensive representations, for instance, about patriarchal culture, racial discrimination, and gender differences, therefore often coinciding with the English concept of 'wokeism'.[21]

Republican politicians in the USA have exerted pressure on Disney through actions extending beyond mere rhetoric and boycotts. Ron DeSantis, Governor of Florida and former Republican candidate in the 2024 USA presidential election, has embarked on a crusade against wokeism, with Disney

[13] Joanna Batt and Michael Lee Joseph, "Part of Whose World? The Little Mermaid, Fantasy Media, and Casting Backlashes as Racial Projects for Social Studies Classrooms", *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 19.1 (2024), 34-50.

[14] Ryan Faughnder, "Inside the Right's 'Moral War Against Disney' as Florida Culture Conflict Intensifies", *Los Angeles Times,* Friday 15 April 2022, www.latimes.com, accessed 30 April 2024; Armando Fumagalli, "Ideologie, creatività, politica, finanza: la favola Disney affronta la crisi", *Avvenire*, Wednesday 14 February 2024, www.avvenire.it/opinioni/pagine/appena-chiuso-il-centenario-uno-dei-marchi-di-cul, accessed April 20, 2024.

[15] Kevin Breuninger, "DeSantis Claims That Disney Sexualizes Children Are 'Preposterous,' CEO Bob Iger Says", *CNBC,* Thursday 13 July 2023, www.cnbc.com/2023/07/13/desantis-attacks-on-disney-are-preposterous-ceo-bob-iger-says.html, accessed April 20, 2024; Barbara Berti, "Pro Vita e Famiglia contro la Disney: 'Non andate a vedere *Lightyear*'", *Luce!*, Thursday 23 June 2022, www.luce.lanazione.it/attualita/pro-vita-e-famiglia-contro-la-disney-non-andate-a-vedere-lightyear-y9uxsayj, accessed April 30, 2024.

[16] Ryan Smith, "Nikki Haley, Ron DeSantis Go to War Over 'Woke' Disney", *Newsweek*, Thursday 11 January 2024, www.newsweek.com/nikki-haley-ron-desantis-disney-iowa-debate-donald-trump-election-1859767, accessed 30 April 2024.

[17] Denise Filmer and Gianmarco Vignozzi, "'Don't Call me Woke!': Tracing the Pragmatic and Emotive Trajectory of the Word of Our Era", *I-LanD Journal*, 1 (2022), 8-30; Merriam-Webster, "Woke", *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (2024), www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke.

[18] Treccani, "Woke", *Vocabolario Treccani* (2024), www.treccani.it/vocabolario/woke_(Neologismi)/?search=woke.

[19] Zack Stanton, "How the 'Culture War' Could Break Democracy", *Politico*, Wednesday 5 May 2021, www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/05/20/culture-war-politics-2021-democracy-analysis-489900, accessed 30 April 2024; Cambridge U.P. & Assessment, "Culture War", *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* (2024), www.dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/culture-war.

[20] Merriam-Webster, "What It Means to Get 'Canceled'", *Merriam Webster Arts & Culture* (2023), www.merriam-webster.com; Britannica, "Cancel Culture – Top 3 Pros and Cons", *Britannica ProCon.org* (8 August 2023), www.procon.org.

[21] Beatrice Cristalli, "Non si può più dire niente", *Treccani,* Thursday 7 October 2021, www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/scritto_e_parlato/cancel_culture1.html, accessed 20 April 2024; Treccani, "Cancel Culture", *Vocabolario Treccani* (2023), www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cancel-culture_%28Neologismi%29.

emerging as a prominent symbol of this broader cultural conflict. He recently enacted legislation aimed at curtailing specific topics of discussion, including the *Parental Rights in Education* Act, dubbed *Don't say gay*, which prohibits public schools from engaging in "classroom discussion" or "instruction" about sexual orientation or gender identity.[22] Additionally, the *Individual Freedom* Act, or *Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees – Stop WOKE*, prohibits teaching that people share responsibility for others' past actions based on their race, sex, or national origin.[23] Disney's public disapproval of DeSantis's legislative actions, especially from former CEO Bob Chapek,[24] led to repercussions, as the governor attempted to curtail Disney's administrative privileges in its Florida park and dissolve Florida Reedy Creek Improvement District established in 1967. By state law, the Walt Disney Co. possesses extraordinary powers over the 25,000-acre area near Orlando, including the ability to issue bonds and provide its own utilities and emergency services. This legal framework facilitated Disney's establishment of its Florida theme park, contributing to its growth as the state's largest taxpayer and private employer. Dismantling the district would transfer financial burdens and commitments to local municipalities and citizens. DeSantis passed legislation to revoke Disney's self-governing authority, replacing its controlling board with handpicked Republican allies. Prior to the transition, Disney supporters on the board signed agreements granting the company more control over some aspects of Disney World, prompting a lawsuit from the district. DeSantis even threatened to construct a prison or a rival amusement park nearby. In response to the legal action, Disney countersued DeSantis, alleging "a targeted campaign of government retaliation".[25] DeSantis's stance was viewed as anti-business not only by Disney's CEO Robert A. Iger but even by his Republican allies, leading to tensions that undermined DeSantis's popularity. In March 2024, allies of DeSantis and Disney reached a settlement agreement regarding the governance of Walt Disney World, marking a resolution to their contentious dispute, while the *Parental Rights in Education* act was overturned.[26]

Disney has also faced criticism in Italy, where the company has long exerted a significant cultural influence. Involved in various initiatives focused on corporate social responsibility and inclusivity within the country,[27] the entertainment giant has encountered resistance akin to that experienced in the United States. Notably, Italian far-right politicians, including Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, have opposed Disney's progressive stance. To advance their propaganda agenda, they exploited specific controversies, such as the speculation surrounding the potential revelation of princess Elsa from *Frozen* as being lesbian[28] and the debates over the depiction of non-consensual kisses in stories like *Snow*

[22] The Florida Senate, "House Bill 1557: Parental Rights in Education", *The Florida Senate,* Friday 1 July 2022, www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF, accessed 30 April 2024.

[23] The Florida Senate, "House Bill 7: Individual Freedom", *The Florida Senate,* Friday 1 July 2022, www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7/BillText/er/PDF, accessed 30 April 2024.

[24] Bob Chapek, "Statement on Disney's Support for the LGBTQ+ Community", *The Walt Disney Company,* Friday 11 March 2022, www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/statement-on-disneys-support-for-the-lgbtq-community, accessed 30 April 2024.

[25] Ryan Faughnder, "How the Gay Rights Showdown Threatens Disney's Unprecedented Self-Rule in Florida", *Los Angeles Times,* Wednesday 20 April 2022, www.latimes.com, accessed 20 April 2024; Charles Homans, "Man vs. Mouse: Ron DeSantis Finds Taking On Disney Is a Dicey Business", *The New York Times,* Tuesday 26 April 2023, www.nytimes.com, accessed 30 April 2024; Brooks Barnes, "Disney Sued by Florida for Control of Theme Park's Expansion", *The New York Times*, Tuesday 2 May 2023, www.nytimes.com, accessed 30 April 2024.

[26] BBC, "Disney and DeSantis Allies End Legal Dispute over Control of Theme Park", *BBC News,* Monday 27 March 2024, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68675795, accessed 30 April 2024.

[27] Matteo Sportelli, "Creatività lunga un secolo. Gli obiettivi di Disney Italia a quasi 100 anni dalla fondazione", *Forbes*, Tuesday 18 October 2022, www.forbes.it/2022/10/28/come-walt-disney-italia-avvicina-centenario-fondazione, accessed 30 April 2024.

[28] Antonella De Gregorio, "Salvini: 'Elsa di *Frozen* lesbica? Vogliono il mondo all'incontrario'", *Corriere della Sera*, Friday 2 March 2012, www.corriere.it, accessed 20 April 2024.

White.[29] These issues have been used to promote ideals centred around traditional imagery of fairy tales, romantic relationships, and family.

1.2 *Polarisation, Reactionary Fandom, and Hate Speech in Social Media*

Disney boasts a large, dedicated global fanbase, characterised by "[a] collective identity based on a shared enthusiasm for some aspect of mass culture and regular participation in group activities arising from this".[30] Fans tend to display their loyalty through behaviours such as intense affective investment, enjoyment of related content, collective meaning-making and appropriation, a strong sense of community, social interaction, and identity performance.[31] In the digital age, companies that are the object of fandom, like Disney, can leverage computer-mediated communication, particularly social media, to enhance public engagement and reputation, promptly address customer concerns, and identify emerging needs.[32] These corporate digital media channels also provide a space for audiences to engage and voice their opinions, thus democratising access to media expression. Participatory cultures around media texts have flourished through web-based tools, with social media acting as modern-day letter columns where fans can easily find, discuss, and organise their favourite topics and shows, often aggregating around hashtags.[33]

Nevertheless, online fandom is subject to the drawbacks of digital communication. Users often equate visibility and popularity with legitimacy, overlooking the importance of credibility and relevance.[34] Social media structure creates stance-rich environments,[35] driven by the distribution of likes and dislikes, fostering affiliation[36] but also amplifying negative speech.[37] The (pseudo)anonymity and physical distance provided by these platforms can lead to disinhibition and deindividuation, facilitating the spread of abusive language.[38] Furthermore, the adoption of a conformist mob mentality can deepen the polarisation of positions,[39] while algorithms that control content visibility can amplify misinformation and harmful rhetoric.[40] Hate speech remains a key concern, defined as expression that promotes violence, hatred, or discrimination against a person or group of individuals based on their personal "protected characteristics",[41] including "race, colour, language, religion, nationality, national

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[29] Il Messaggero, "Biancaneve, bufera sulla Disney: 'bacio rubato senza consenso, lei dormiva'", *Il Messaggero,* Wednesday 5 May 2021, http://www.ilmessaggero.it/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[30] Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2016).

[31] Renee Barnes, *Fandom and Polarization in Online Political Discussion: From Pop Culture to Politics* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 51.

[32] Michael B. Goodman and Peter B. Hirsh, "Electronic Media in Professional Communication", in Vijay K. Bhatia and Stephen Bremner, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Professional Communication* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 129-146.

[33] Meredith L. Pruden, "A Journal of Impossible Things Tweeted Discourses of Gendered Digital Fandom on the Thirteenth Doctor and #NotMyDoctor Hashtag", in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media and Society Integrating the Digital with the Social in Digital Discourse* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2023), 187-208.

[34] Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Techno-Discursive Design, Affective Communication and Contemporary Politics", *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11 (2018), 427-442.

[35] David Barton and Carmen Lee, *Language Online: Investigating Digital Texts and Practices* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

[36] Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012).

[37] Sergio Andrés Castao-Pulgarín et al., "Internet, Social Media and Online Hate Speech: Systematic Review", *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 58 (2021), 101608.

[38] John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7.3 (2004), 321-326.

[39] Crispin Thurlow et al., *Computer Mediated Communication: Social Interaction and the Internet* (London: Sage, 2009).

[40] Karen Hao, "How Facebook Got Addicted to Spreading Misinformation", *MIT Technology Review,* Thursday 11 March 2021, www.technologyreview.com/2021/03/11/1020600/facebook-responsible-ai-misinformation, accessed 30 April 2024.

[41] Meta, "Hard Questions: Who Should Decide What Is Hate Speech in an Online Global Community?", *Meta,* Tuesday 27 June 2017, www.about.fb.com/news/2017/06/hard-questions-hate-speech, accessed 20 April 2024.

or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation".[42] This concept is often contrasted with freedom of speech, which, while essential, must be subject to restrictions to protect people's safety, reputation, and rights.[43] Online hate speech encompasses various forms, such as cyberbullying, bashing, and defamation,[44] and remains challenging to detect and regulate.[45]

The present study specifically examines user comments on Disney's Facebook pages. The social media platform implements policies for hate speech prevention and moderation, while simultaneously defending self-expression. Nonetheless, the site acknowledges that identifying hateful content may be difficult and often unsuccessful, as it requires contextualisation and an understanding of the original intent.[46]

Popular culture has become a central arena in the ongoing culture wars. Digital fan practices, similar to political discussions, frequently involve partisan and cultural polarisation. The recent efforts towards inclusion, especially in film and television franchises, have received mixed reactions from fans, audiences, and critics.[47] Such conflicts can also result in harmful behaviours, including anti-fandom, reactionary fandom, and toxic fan practices. Anti-fandom refers to individuals engaging in discussions or creating alternative versions of original media, often driven by antagonistic sentiments.[48] Reactionary fandom is characterised by strong opposition to changes or developments within a particular media franchise, typically motivated by a desire to preserve traditional or 'original' elements. These fans resist perceived alterations to core aspects of the object, such as character portrayals, storylines, or themes, often when these modifications involve inclusive elements, like diversity in casting or updates to reflect modern values.[49] Toxic fan practices encompass negative and harmful behaviours, such as organising boycott campaigns in response to creative decisions.[50] In this context, other concerning phenomena are also evident, such as gatekeeping those not considered 'true' fans, review bombing, hate-watching, shitposting, trolling, doxing, and harassment.[51] Studies have focused on the overlap between toxic fandom and trolling,[52] highlighting fan efforts to create disruption and exacerbate conflict, in order to upset and provoke an emotional response from a targeted group. Phillips observed that trolls are often motivated by 'lulz', a form of "unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter".[53] More extreme actions highlight the darker side of free speech, which is frequently invoked to justify hateful behaviour towards

[42] Council of Europe, "Recommendation CM/Rec (2022) 16 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Combating Hate Speech", *Council of Europe* (20 May 2022), www.search.coe.int.

[43] The United States of America, *Constitution of The United States of America, as Amended* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2007); Council of Europe, *European Convention on Human Rights* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2020).

[44] Nancy E. Willard, *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress* (Champaign, Ill.: Research Press, 2007).

[45] Michael Herz and Peter Molnar, *The Content and Context of Hate Speech: Rethinking Regulation and Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2012); Paula Fortuna and Sérgio Nunes, "A Survey on Automatic Detection of Hate Speech in Text", *ACM Computing Surveys*, 51.4 (2018), 1-30.

[46] Meta, "Hard Questions".

[47] William Proctor and Bridget Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15.1 (2018), 127-142.

[48] Melissa A. Click, "Introduction: Haters Gonna Hate", in Melissa A. Click, ed., *Anti- Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age* (New York: New York U.P., 2019), 1-22.

[49] Mel Stanfill, "Introduction: The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary", *Television & New Media*, 21.2 (2020), 123-134.

[50] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[51] Hayden Buckfire, "'Review Bombing' Reveals Social Media's Cruelty", *The Michigan Daily*, Monday 11 March 2024, www.michigandaily.com/opinion/review-bombing-reveals-social-medias-cruelty, accessed 30 April 2024.

[52] Suzanne Scott, "Towards a Theory of Producer/Fan Trolling", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15.1 (2018), 143-159.

[53] Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 24.

marginalised groups and identities. This logic makes it difficult to differentiate between "playful (if antisocial) irony, satire, and parody and 'earnest' racism"[54], sexism, or homophobia.

Hate can be as potent a motivator as admiration, serving to unify and sustain communities around shared negative sentiments toward a text. As noted, "[h]ate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, and meaning, and 'effects' or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture".[55] These negative discursive practices have real-life impacts, as the repeated condemnation of an object by members of the same community can effectively position it as despicable, or "disgusting",[56] influencing public opinion and behaviour.

2. Aims and Purposes

The present investigation explores the reception of Disney's recent inclusivity efforts by analysing user-generated discourses to understand public perceptions and attitudes, examining both supportive and hostile reactions. Social media platforms serve as valuable data sources, being key sites where public opinion is formed and expressed. Building on prior research into social media discussions of polarising issues in popular culture,[57] this analysis focuses specifically on written and visual instances of hate speech in Facebook comments. By assessing the nature and extent of negative reactions, the study aims to uncover the dynamics of online disapproval and the underlying sentiments driving such hostility.

The research seeks to offer a novel contribution to the field by examining comments on recently released films through a comparative approach, assessing how cultural contexts in the United States and Italy influence public responses to inclusivity efforts in popular media. Investigating hate speech in social media discourses is crucial to understanding online resistance to inclusive representation, comprising reactionary and toxic fandom practices, as these responses may reflect broader trends of political and cultural polarisation and discrimination. The study attempts to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers to achieving inclusivity in contemporary entertainment.

3. Corpus and Methods

A review of international online newspaper articles concerning recent Disney media products, along with an inspection of official social media pages, confirmed that several movies had become targets of hate speech, particularly in relation to specific traits of certain characters. Critical areas of dispute included ethnic backgrounds (e.g., African American and mixed ethnicities), gender and sex (e.g., LGBTQI+ individuals and women), and physical attributes (e.g., body-shaming and characters with disabilities). The films *Lightyear*,[58] *Peter Pan & Wendy*,[59] and *The Little Mermaid*[60] were selected as focal points for this study for multiple reasons. They all exemplify the company's recent commitment to diversity and involve reimaginings or updates of iconic animated classics. Additionally, their release

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[54] Ryan M. Milner, "Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz", *The Fibreculture Journal*, 22 (2013), 61-91, 74.

[55] Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48 (2005), 841.

[56] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[57] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars"; Thi Gammon and Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan, "Too Black to Be The Little Mermaid? Backlash Against Disney's 2023 *The Little Mermaid* – Continuity of Racism, White Skin Preference and Hate Content in Vietnam", *Feminist Media Studies* (2024), 1-7.

[58] Angus MacLane, *Lightyear*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2022).

[59] David Lowery, *Peter Pan & Wendy*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures, 2023).

[60] Robert Doyle Marshall Jr., *The Little Mermaid*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures, 2023).

in the same years (2022-2023) seemed to have generated a unified discourse and interconnected public reactions on Disney's social media platforms.

Lightyear (2022) served as a prequel to the *Toy Story* (1995)[61] saga, functioning as a film within a film, designed as the movie that inspired the Buzz Lightyear toy. The new cartoon featured a lesbian love story and a kiss between Space Ranger Alisha Hawthorne and her wife, Kiko, which ignited controversy and resulted in the film being banned in several Middle Eastern and Asian countries.[62]

The Disney+ home-video movie *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023), a live-action remake of the animated film *Peter Pan* (1953),[63] stirred various points of contention. Criticism was mostly related to the non-Caucasic physical traits of some characters, resulting in accusations of 'race swapping'. Peter Pan, originally depicted with fair skin and red hair, was portrayed by Alexander Molony, a boy with mixed ancestry and dark-brown hair. Tinker Bell, traditionally rendered as a glowing blonde pixie with fair skin and blue eyes, was played by Yara Shahidi, an Iranian-American/Nigerian actress, with a black complexion, dark-brown hair, and brown eyes. Further objections were raised about the inclusion among the 'Lost Boys' of girls, children from different ethnic backgrounds, and an actor with Down syndrome.[64]

The 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* (known as *La Sirenetta* in Italian) also faced substantial scrutiny. Princess Ariel's character, originally illustrated in Disney's animated movie (1989)[65] with fair skin, flaming red hair, and blue eyes, was reinterpreted by Halle Bailey, a black American actress with copper-red dreadlocks and brown eyes.[66]

The present analysis centres on a corpus of user comments extracted from posts promoting the selected Disney movies on the company's official Facebook pages in the United States and Italy. The timeframe spans from 11th December 2020 to 20th October 2023. Disney's original posts included announcements, slogans, quotes, and film reception data, accompanied by pictures, videos, and fan art. By comparing the two contexts, the study seeks to uncover how cultural differences influence the reception of inclusivity efforts in popular media.

Table 1 provides an overview of the corpus, detailing the number of posts dedicated to each movie in the respective countries, along with the number of comments received. Additionally, it shows the token (total number of words) and type (number of distinct words) counts for the comments. It is important to note that only direct comments were considered in the collected corpus, excluding any replies. As evident from the table, a noticeable disparity in engagement levels emerged across the corpus, with *The Little Mermaid* garnering higher interaction rates in both countries, while *Lightyear* received comparatively fewer comments in Italy.

Disney Facebook USA					Disney Facebook Italy				
Topic	N. Posts	N. Com.s	Tokens	Types	Topic	N. Posts	N. Com.s	Tokens	Types
Lightyear	39	8,313	167,090	17,885	*Lightyear*	22	138	2,305	726

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[61] John Lasseter, *Toy Story*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 1995).

[62] Tim Gallagher, "Lightyear Filmmakers Were Expecting Bans in Countries with 'Backward Beliefs' Says Producer", *Euronews,* Monday 13 June 2022, www.euronews.com, accessed 30 April 2024.

[63] Hamilton Luske et al., *Peter Pan*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney, 1953).

[64] Snejana Farberov, "'Peter Pan' Fans Slam Trailer for 'Woke' Remake with Girls Among Lost Boys", *New York Post*, Thursday 2 March 2023, www.nypost.com/2023/03/02/fans-slam-trailer-for-woke-live-action-peter-pan, accessed 30 April 2024.

[65] John Musker and Ron Clements, *The Little Mermaid*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures, 1989).

[66] Kate Ng, "Halle Bailey Speaks About the Importance of Keeping Her Locs While Playing Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*", *The Independent,* Tuesday 23 May 2023, www.independent.co.uk/life-style/halle-bailey-ariel-locs-mermaid-b2344258.html, accessed 30 April 2024.

Peter Pan & Wendy	17	10,098	175,015	20,375	Peter Pan & Wendy	20	529	11,798	2,565
The Little Mermaid	40	42,323	790,192	58,589	La Sirenetta	61	8,577	197,334	17,516
Total	96	60,734	1,138,291	74,207	Total	103	9,244	211,437	18,403

Table 1. Corpus data

The analysis focused on user comments, considering the tendency to express engaged and extreme views in these spaces, also including stereotyping and hateful language. These texts often emphasise negative aspects of perceived adversaries, fostering a sense of community and camaraderie among like-minded individuals.[67]

A mixed-methods approach was employed for the analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)[68] provided a valuable lens to explore the specific issues and concerns voiced by users, particularly to examine the enactment, reproduction, and contestation of discourses related to power, dominance, and inequality within online domains. This approach was especially pertinent when netizens reacted in response to perceived 'otherness' and diverse ideological stances. Critical discourse studies concerning the negative portrayal of social actors and manifestations of social discrimination provided valuable reference.[69] The study also built upon prior critical analyses examining social media discourse[70] and hate speech,[71] with a focus on toxic fan practices.[72] Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis[73] guided the examination of visual elements in comments that overtly or covertly conveyed hate speech. Corpus investigation tools, namely WordSmith Tools 7[74] and SketchEngine,[75] supported the analysis to uncover patterns and trends,[76] identifying linguistic phenomena that might have otherwise remained unnoticed.[77]

[67] Barnes, *Fandom and Polarization in Online Political Discussion*.

[68] Teun A. Van Dijk, "Ideology and Discourse Analysis", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11.2 (2006), 115-140; Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Third Edition (London: Sage, 2016), 23-61.

[69] Theo van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors', in Carmen Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 32-70; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

[70] Majid KhosraviNik and Johann W. Unger, "Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Third Edition (London: Sage, 2016), 205-233; Rodney H. Jones, "Social Media and Discourse Analysis", in Michael Handford and James Paul Gee, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2023), 427-440.

[71] Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, "Fat Chance! Digital Critical Discourse Studies on Discrimination Against Fat People", in Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Naples: Paolo Loffredo Editore, 2020), 3-50; Eleonora Esposito and Sole Alba Zollo, "How Dare You Call Her a Pig, I Know Several Pigs Who Would Be Upset if They Knew: A Multimodal Critical Discursive Approach to Online Misogyny against UK MPs on YouTube", *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 9.1 (2021), 47-75; Magdalena Jaszczyk-Grzyb et al., "A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of Hate Speech in German and Polish Social Media Posts", *Moderna Språk*, 117.1 (2023), 44-71.

[72] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[73] David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Approach* (London: Sage, 2012); Maria Grazia Sindoni, "Direct Hate Speech vs. Indirect Fear Speech: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of The Sun's Editorial '1 in 5 Brit Muslims' Sympathy for Jihadis'", *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 28 (2018), 267-292.

[74] Mike Scott, *WordSmith Tools 7.0*, software (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2019).

[75] Lexical Computing CZ s.r.o., "SketchEngine", *SketchEngine*, software (2023), www.sketchengine.eu.

[76] Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006); Paul Baker et al., *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013); Gerlinde Mautner, "Checks and Balances: How Corpus Linguistics Can Contribute to CDA", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Third Edition (London: Sage, 2016), 154-179.

[77] Lexical Computing CZ s.r.o., "SketchEngine".

Several previous studies were particularly relevant for this analysis. Gammon and Phan[78] examined the reception of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) in Vietnam, where the casting of a black actress as Ariel provoked significant online criticism and calls for boycotts. Their research explored cultural factors involved, such as racism, white supremacy, resistance to inclusivity, beauty standards, and hate speech. Using an intersectional approach, incorporating the concept of "misogynoir",[79] the authors interpreted the negative responses to Bailey as reflective of the dual pressures faced by black women: racism, through the preference for white skin, and sexism, with an excessive focus on female appearance. Nevertheless, it has been noted that disputes over casting decisions and the preservation of canonical texts have long been part of fan communities. Since the early 2000s, the rising prominence of fan cultures has introduced new opportunities and tools, alongside increased media attention on ideological and discursive conflicts within these communities, notably in user-generated communication.[80] Proctor[81] argued that journalists often 'cherry-pick' negative statements from social media, manufacturing controversy about rising toxicity, which may be simplistically attributed to certain subsets of fans. The scholar has conducted several discourse studies on toxic fandom, including the hashtag campaign "#blackstormtrooper" during the Disney era of *Star Wars*, specifically in relation to J.J Abrams' *The Force Awakens* (2015).[82] Such initiative emerged as potential evidence of a racially-fuelled backlash against the casting of black actor John Boyega as a Stormtrooper. Proctor highlighted that many comments did not reveal overt racism but rather concerns over "canonical fidelity",[83] referring to adherence to the established narrative in the fictional world. Yet, it has also been contended that framing fan opposition as defence of the original artform can be misleading, as much of the discontent likely stems from a "fear of not seeing their whiteness reflected on the screen".[84]

Building on this context of fan disputes and critiques, the present study focused on identifying and analysing hate speech within user discourses. Forms of hate speech in text and images were classified into broad categories based on their intensity. Initial indicators of hate speech included expressions of disagreement, encompassing the articulation of opposing viewpoints and the framing of situations in terms of an 'us' versus 'them' dynamics. More intense forms of hate speech involved negative characterisation, with derogatory remarks and insults directed at the 'out-group'. At a higher intensity, hate speech could be manifested as dehumanisation and demonisation, associating individuals or groups to sub-human or non-human forms, such as garbage or monsters.[85]

For the present analysis, multiword sequences were extracted from user comments with the SketchEngine N-grams tool as a sampling indicator of trends. The lexical bundles obtained for each of the three movies in both countries were categorised based on opinion, topic, and hate speech intensity, and some representative examples were discussed.

Hashtags, a distinctive tool in online conversation, were also examined as part of the polarising trend in social media communication. Typically consisting of words, phrases, or clauses written as a single

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[78] Gammon and Phan, "Too Black to Be The Little Mermaid?".

[79] Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York U.P., 2021).

[80] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[81] William Proctor, "'I've Seen a Lot of Talk about the #blackstormtrooper Outrage, but Not a Single Example of Anyone Complaining': The Force Awakens, Canonical Fidelity and Non-Toxic Fan Practices", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15.1 (2018); Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[82] Jeffrey Jacob Abrams, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015).

[83] Proctor, "'I've Seen a Lot of Talk about the #blackstormtrooper Outrage'".

[84] Adam Serwer, "Fear of a Black Hobbit", *The Atlantic,* Wednesday 14 September 2022, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/09/lord-of-the-rings-rings-of-power-fantasy-sci-fi-racist-criticism/671421 cit. in Nell Geraets, "#NotMyAriel: Why Everyone Is Arguing About The Little Mermaid Reboot", *The Sidney Morning Herald,* Thursday 15 September 2022, *www.smh.com.au,* accessed 30 April 2024.

[85] Babak Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech and the Limits of Current Definition", in Christian Strippel et al., eds., *Challenges and Perspectives of Hate Speech Research* (Berlin: Digital Communication Research, 2023), 291-298.

word and preceded by the # sign, hashtags can be inserted in messages to indicate participation in trending practices and affiliations. They can be utilised to increase the visibility of specific issues, marking a topic and categorising posts to reach targeted users. Hashtags can convey a stance and reinforce the collective identity of supporters of a particular cause within online discourse.[86] In the present study, hashtags extracted from the entire USA and Italian subcorpora were analysed to identify possible patterns in evaluative language and attitudinal alignment.

Additionally, images included in the user comments were considered, recognising that visual elements significantly contribute to the spread of hate. As noted by the United Nations, "[h]ate speech can be conveyed through any form of expression, including images, cartoons, memes, objects, gestures and symbols".[87] Facebook provides an array of expressive tools, including emojis, stickers, GIFs, images and videos (referred to as "graphicons").[88] Emojis, small digital images or icons, are employed to represent ideas, emotions, or objects. Similar to emojis, stickers are newer graphical elements designed to portray emotional state, attitude, and opinion, often featuring character illustrations.[89] GIF is a file format that simulates an animation by cycling through a sequence of static images. Within Facebook messages, users can incorporate pre-made GIFs sourced from third-party services by searching for tags or keywords defining their topic. In this study, visual elements integrated into the comments, specifically those manifesting or suggesting hate speech, especially recurrent ones, were identified through an ad hoc Python script.[90] They were categorised by theme and hate speech intensity, exemplified, and analysed. Among the visual media, particular attention was placed on GIFs, primarily due to their higher propensity to create Internet memes, which repurpose pieces of media to convey a cultural, social, or political expression, often through humour.[91] The exact counts of the GIFs identified in the corpus are detailed in Table 2. As anticipated from the varying sizes of the corpus components, comments about *The Little Mermaid* featured the greatest number of GIFs, mainly in the USA section.

Disney Facebook USA		Disney Facebook Italy	
Topic	N. GIFs	Topic	N. GIFs
Lightyear	394	*Lightyear*	5
Peter Pan & Wendy	589	*Peter Pan & Wendy*	26
The Little Mermaid	2,095	*La Sirenetta*	403
Total	3,078	Total	434

Table 2. GIFs in the corpus

4. Analysis

The following paragraphs provide an analysis of select textual and visual elements in user comments. Relevant data are collected in tables, including the number of raw occurrences, indicated in parentheses. In the excerpts, any original spelling and punctuation errors were preserved. Translations from Italian

[86] Krista Bunskoek, "3 Key Hashtag Strategies: How to Market Your Business & Content", *Wishpond* (2014). www.blog.wishpond.com/post/62253333766/3-keyhashtag-strategies-how-to-market-your-business; Michele Zappavigna, "Searchable Talk: The Linguistic Functions of Hashtags", *Social Semiotics*, 25.3 (2015), 274-291.

[87] United Nations, "Understanding Hate Speech", *United Nations* (2023), www.un.org.

[88] Susan C. Herring and Ashley Dainas, "'Nice Picture Comment!': Graphicons in Facebook Comment Threads", *Proceedings of the Fiftieth Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2017), 2185-2194.

[89] Artie Konrad et al., "Sticker and Emoji Use in Facebook Messenger: Implications for Graphicon Change", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 25.3 (2020), 217-235.

[90] Dino Aiezza, *Most Frequent Similar Images*, software (2024).

[91] Alexis Benveniste, "The Meaning and History of Memes", *The New York Times,* Wednesday 26 January 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/crosswords/what-is-a-meme.html, accessed 30 April 2024.

were provided by the author of this paper. When quoted within the main text, Italian expressions are presented in their English translation.

4.1 *Lexical Bundles*

Through SketchEngine, N-grams containing from 3 to 6 words were extracted from Facebook user comments about each of the three movies in both countries (*Lightyear* USA and ITA, *Peter Pan & Wendy* USA and ITA, and *The Little Mermaid* USA and *La Sirenetta* ITA). The 500 most frequent bundles in each subset were further examined, concordanced, and categorised based on prevailing stance, thematic content, and hate speech intensity.[92] N-grams were classified under five broad groups of expressions: in favour of the movie; against it; against Disney remakes in general; against cast or voice cast choices; against wokeism and cancel culture. Tables from 3 to 7 display the most frequent lexical sequences within the categories. For some films, not all themes are represented in the tables, as frequent N-grams may not have been identified. Comments featuring some of the most significant bundles (underlined in the quotations) were exemplified, accompanied by commentary discussing the associated discourses and motifs. It is important to note that, in some instances, thematic groupings may overlap within these examples.

    As shown in Table 3, particularly in the entire USA component and for *The Little Mermaid* in both countries, a portion of the most frequent expressions showed support for the movie, with compliments on the actors, excitement, and eagerness to watch it (e.g., "can't wait") with family and friends, often as a bonding experience for women (e.g., "take the girls"). Many praised the casting of a black person as Ariel, applauding Disney's steps towards greater diversity. This film stands as one of the rare instances in which a Disney princess has been played by a black lead actress, thereby underscoring the importance of representation. Specifically, many netizens from the USA commenting on *The Little Mermaid* linked their support to the joyful and heartwarming reactions from young black girls upon learning about the casting choice, echoing similar reactions appeared on social media:[93]

> Aww my daughter said she looks just like me <u>can't wait</u> too take her (*The Little Mermaid* USA)

In Italy, a considerable part of positive texts also defended the movie against detractors, responding to the racist backlash regarding the protagonist's skin colour:

> Io lo vedrò e non me me frega nulla di tutti sti commenti pietosi e stupidi che razza di persone siete giudicare in base al <u>colore della pelle</u> ... si la sirenetta che anche io da piccola vedevo era capelli rossi e pelle bianca...embe dove sta sto problema ... lei è bellissima ed bravissima [I will watch it and I don't care at all about all these pitiful and stupid comments what kind of people are you judging based on <u>skin colour</u> ... yes the little mermaid I also used to watch as a child was red hair and white skin...so what's the problem ... she is very beautiful and very talented] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

American commentators appeared to demonstrate their familiarity as Disney fans by incorporating movie quotes such as "To the infinity and beyond" from *Toy Story* or "Part of your world" from *The Little Mermaid*. Users also remarked that the movie held a special place for them, as "(one of) my favourite" Disney cartoon. Consequently, their endorsement of the remakes suggested that others might also recognise their merit.

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[92] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".
[93] Remy Tumin, "A New Ariel Inspires Joy for Young Black Girls: 'She Looks Like Me'", *The New York Times*, Thursday 15 September 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/arts/little-mermaid-trailer-halle-bailey.html, accessed 30 April 2024.

Lightyear USA
to infinity and beyond (37), can't wait to see (24), going to be (22), for this movie (18), we have to (17), to go see (16), have to take (15), take the kids (15), we should take (13), looking forward to (12), it comes out (10), can't wait for this (9), I wanna see (8), I wonder if (8), Toy Story universe (8), based off of (7), give it a (7), I will be (7)
Lightyear ITA
di Toy Story [of Toy Story] (2)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
can't wait (110), excited for this (19), a good movie (12), movie was great (10), she was great (8), she was so (8), excited to watch (7), I watched it (7), one of my favorite (7), her as Tink (6), her as Tinker Bell (6), I enjoyed it (6), last night and (6), loved the movie (6), love the diversity (6), movie was good (6)
Peter Pan & Wendy ITA
non vedo l'ora [I can't wait] (7), a me è piaciuto [I did like it] (4), di colore e [of colour and] (3)
The Little Mermaid USA
can't wait (1,487), going to be (231), excited for this (184), to watch this (169), looking forward to (130), her voice is (118), this movie is (112), so excited for (110), want to see (110), I love the (108), so excited to (106), my favorite Disney (94), don't care (85), to see this movie (83), we have to (81), we need to (76), I loved it (62), one of my (60), it comes out (57), Halle Bailey is (55), looks so good (55), going to watch (54), Melissa McCarthy as Ursula (53), Part of your world (53), take the girls (53), a beautiful voice (52), you don't (52), better than the (50), on Disney plus (49), Melissa McCarthy is (48), can we go (44), it was a (44), when I was (44), I love her (43), I think it (43), have to go (42), forward to seeing (41), want to watch (39), for this one (38), Awkwafina as Scuttle (37), it was so (37), at the end (36), she has a (36), this looks amazing (35)
La Sirenetta ITA
colore della pelle [skin colour] (72), a me è piaciuto [I did like it] (31), non vedo l'ora di vederlo [I can't wait to watch it] (27), è piaciuto molto [liked it very much] (26), visto ieri sera [watched it last night] (24), andiamo a vederlo [let's go and watch it] (19), devo dire che [I have to say that] (19), andrò a vederlo [I'm going to watch it] (16), è piaciuto tanto [liked it a lot] (16), mio cartone preferito [my favourite cartoon] (16), è piaciuto tantissimo [liked it a lot] (15), lo andrò a vedere [I'm going to watch it] (14), un bel film [a nice film] (14), con mia figlia [with my daughter] (13), uguale al cartone [same as the cartoon] (13), la mia principessa preferita [my favourite princess] (10), visto al cinema [watched at the cinema] (9), personaggio di fantasia [fictional character] (9), ha una voce [she has a voice] (9), è più bella [she is more beautiful] (9)

Table 3. N-grams: Support for the movie

Another group of clusters, instead, conveyed strong disapproval and refusal to watch the movie (see Table 4). In some instances, the outright rejection was not even accompanied by an explanation. Demeaning sarcasm was frequently employed in both countries, with categorical expressions such as "no thank you" or "how about no" and "I can't wait to miss it". In other cases, opposition was linked to motivations that could be purely ideological or related to personal preferences (which will be further explored in subsequent tables and examples).

Lightyear USA
I will not (18), no thank you (18), don't care (17), don't want (17), won't be watching (17), I will never (13), don't have (10), don't think (10), on this one (10), pass on this (9), don't need (8), will not watch (8)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
won't be (19)
The Little Mermaid USA
no thank you (57), not going to (49), I won't (47), won't be (47), of the movie (44)

La Sirenetta **ITA**
ma anche no [how about no] (53), non vedo l'ora di perdermelo [I can't wait to miss it] (34), non mi è piaciuto [I didn't like it] (21), non lo vedrò [I won't see it] (18), non lo guarderò [I won't watch it] (14), ma per favore [oh please] (13), neanche/nemmeno/manco se mi pagano [not if they paid me] (12), aspetta e spera [wait and hope] (11), non andrò a vederlo [I won't go to see it] (9), sarà un flop [it will be a flop] (9)

Table 4. N-grams: Disagreement with the movie

In particular, notably for *Peter Pan & Wendy* USA and for *The Little Mermaid* in both countries, netizens' opposition was framed not around casting choices but rather against the trend of producing remakes instead of novel stories. Commentators urged Disney to "come up with something new" and criticised the adaptations, especially the live-action films (also including, e.g., "Beauty and the Beast"), as unoriginal, useless, and pejorative (see Table 5).

Peter Pan & Wendy **USA**
the live action (21), a live action (20), stop with the (20), don't care (19), live action remakes (19), is going to (17), come up with (14), over and over (14), live action remake (13), another Peter Pan (12), don't need (10), how many Peter (10), make new movies (8), these live action (8), out of ideas (7), the original story (7), they need to (7), a new movie (6), Beauty and the Beast (6), come on Disney (6), need to stop (6)
The Little Mermaid **USA**
the live action (142), live action remakes (109), a live action (94), come up with (53), live action remake (52), the animated version (38)
La Sirenetta **ITA**
il live action [the live action] (29), la Bella e la Bestia [Beauty and the Beast] (28), i live action [the live actions] (26), il Re Leone [the Lion King] (24), un live action [a live action] (22), live action di [live action of] (16), qualcosa di nuovo [something new] (14), questo live action [this live action] (12), live action Disney [Disney live action] (10), non capisco perché [I don't understand why] (9), problema non è [problem is not] (9)

Table 5. N-grams: Disagreement with and negative characterisation of Disney remakes

Another significant N-gram category expressed disapproval of the casting choices in the live-action movies and voice cast in the animated movie and Italian dubbing (see Table 6). Comments criticised what was perceived as a disruption of the pre-established canon and continuity, highlighting frustration with the creative liberties taken by filmmakers.[94] In the USA, one notable issue was the replacement of Republican actor Tim Allen as Buzz Lightyear's voice (e.g., "no/without Tim Allen"), which sparked an outcry, especially among conservative *Toy Story* enthusiasts who perceived the decision as part of a woke agenda:

> Eh Hard pass, don't need Disney indoctrinating kids and it says it all that <u>Tim Allen isn't the voice</u> of Buzz. This is going to be a big dud. (*Lightyear* USA)

In both countries, the cast looks and their adherence to established models were compared to previous versions. *Peter Pan & Wendy* was contrasted not only with the Disney classic animated movie but also with the popular film *Hook* (1991),[95] starring a brilliant Robin Williams, and *Peter Pan* (2003),[96] featuring Jeremy Sumpter, remembered as a teen idol of the time. Commentators conveyed their love and attachment to these imageries and actors through exclusive, absolute expressions such as "will always be" and "the only one/Peter Pan". Such phrases eliminated the potential for alternative

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[94] Proctor, "'I've Seen a Lot of Talk about the #blackstormtrooper Outrage'".
[95] Steven Spielberg, *Hook*, film (U.S.A.: Amblin Entertainment, 1991).
[96] Paul John Hogan, *Peter Pan*, film (U.S.A.: Universal Pictures, 2003).

interpretations or adaptations, reinforcing a rigid adherence to the original canon, while marginalising diverse representations.

Some users went so far as to normatively define how the characters should or should not appear, rejecting the recent multicultural choices, with varying targets and degrees of emphasis, criticism, and sarcasm. In both nations, Peter Pan's looks became a subject of ridicule. Referring to the mixed heritage of actor Alexander Molony playing the protagonist, many drew comparisons to other culturally diverse Disney heroes such as Aladdin, Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*, or Tarzan, and wrote of a "Mexican" or "Indian" Peter Pan:

> Bollywood version of Peter Pan eh it'll be a good comedy (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

> Ah hanno rifatto il libro della giungla ? [Oh have they remade the jungle book ?] (*Peter Pan & Wendy* ITA)

Especially in the USA, commentators also exhibited strong resistance to altering the fairy's ethnicity:

> Tinker Bell is white not BLACK ! (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

The use of the simple present in expressions like "Tinker Bell is" reflected an assertion of general, unchangeable truths, emphasising the writer's perception of an immutable racial identity for the character. By pairing this tense with the copula "be", writers framed their argument as a factual statement. The stark opposition created through contrast underscored a defence of white supremacy, by emphasising a dichotomy between what was perceived as right ("white") and wrong ("black").

Besides criticism about Peter Pan and Tinker Bell, casting objections in both countries were also directed at the 'politically correct' forced inclusion of girls and black children among the Lost Boys:

> facciamo Peter Pan indiano, Trilly nera e ci aggiungiamo qualche bimbo sperduto afro? Poi sulla sessualità di qualche personaggio ci lavoriamo con calma. [let's make Peter Pan Indian, Tinker Bell black, and add some African lost boys? Then we can work on the sexuality of some of the characters later.] (*Peter Pan & Wendy* ITA)

Some USA citizens openly supported DeSantis's fight against Disney to counter what they saw as part of a larger woke drift, which they wished to halt:

> Of course ...they changed tinkerbell and added girls to the lost boys . Glad Desantis did what he did. Obviously not enough. (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

The decision to cast Ariel as a character of different ethnic and physical characteristics from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* from 1989 was met with considerable criticism in both countries. The opposition to Bailey as Ariel was largely based on the perceived failure to faithfully replicate the original animation, which held significant nostalgic value for audiences. Critics emphasised that she "doesn't look" like Ariel, citing missing features they deemed essential, including a white complexion and wishing "her hair was red". However, many acknowledged the actress's talent, 'despite' her appearance:

> I'm expecting that Ariel skin was white and her hair was red like in the Cartoon Movie that I watched before when I was a kid , but I think this is good tho because of her voice (The Little Mermaid USA)

When commenting on the casting of black actresses, users framed their arguments not only around accusations of 'blackwashing', but also in relation to physical traits. As noted by Gammon and Phan[97], the previous portrayal of *The Little Mermaid* adhered to typical Western beauty standards and was considered a sex symbol. Bailey was instead viewed as unattractive, not fitting the princess archetype, and some showed a preference for Jessica Alexander, the white supporting actress playing Vanessa (the villain Ursula's human alter-ego and Ariel's romantic rival), to be the protagonist, as she aligned more closely with beauty canons and the established imagery of Ariel (see also Paragraph 4.3).

Among the USA N-grams, the phrase "a drag queen" emerged, used as a criticism targeting Disney, this time to advocate for a more inclusive and representative casting choice than actress Melissa McCarthy portraying Ursula. Many voiced a desire to see a queer artist in the role, paying homage to the drag queen performer who had inspired the original Disney rendition.[98]

Lexical clusters in the Italian comments about *La Sirenetta* frequently contained an overt rejection, in the form of a protest, using expressions like "she is not Ariel/The Little Mermaid" and criticised Bailey's appearance on the basis that "she has nothing to do with", is not "the true Ariel" or "faithful to the original" drawing. This strong negation reflected a reactionary stance, sometimes explicitly linked to her non-Western traits, particularly her black skin (e.g., "Little Mermaid of colour", "Ariel's skin", "dark skin"). A peculiar racist motif emerged in Italy, associating black individuals with alien immigrants, employing an 'actionalisation' strategy:[99]

> La sirenetta nera <u>non è la</u> sirenetta originale perché voler con messaggi subliminali farci accettare i clandestini? E non solo nei film! [The black little mermaid <u>is not the</u> original little mermaid why do they want to make us accept illegal immigrants through subliminal messages? And not just in movies!] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Connecting casting choices to the alleged agenda of promoting illegal immigration is not only unfounded but perpetuates conspiracy theories and harmful stereotypes.

Downplaying white privilege and racial prejudice were evident, conveyed overtly or covertly. For instance, Italian comments framed the casting of a black actress as a discrimination against redheads, while also highlighting the inappropriateness of dreadlocks, a hairstyle closely associated to Black culture:

> Io ho <u>i capelli rossi</u> . Mi sento discriminato. Anche quelli rossi di capelli sono una minoranza… perché eliminare la sirenetta con <u>i capelli rossi</u> e mettere questa(che per me è brava) con i rasta, senza senso. [I have <u>red hair</u> . I feel discriminated against . Those with red hair are also a minority... why eliminate the <u>red-haired</u> little mermaid and put this one(who I think is good) with dreadlocks, nonsense.] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

In Italy, the theme song "Under the sea" was exploited in wordplay by many commentators for various antagonistic/toxic purposes: to wish the film would sink at the box office; to elaborate on the absurdity of having a black (albeit fictional, a mermaid) character living in a place where one cannot get a tan; and to criticise the Italian rendition. Another point of contention in Italy was indeed dubbing, with a well-known target of scrutiny being Italian-Egyptian singer Mahmood, who voiced Sebastian the crab. He was considered as the "ruin of the film", and his ethnic background was even used to mock shipwrecked migrants and rescuers through poor black humour:

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97 Gammon and Phan, "Too Black to Be The Little Mermaid?".
98 Elaina Patton, "How an Outrageous Drag Queen Found Mainstream Fame in 'The Little Mermaid'", *NBC News*, Thursday 26 May 2023, www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-pop-culture/outrageous-drag-queen-found-mainstream-fame-little-mermaid-rcna86421, accessed 30 April 2024.
99 Wodak and Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 52.

Già <u>il doppiaggio italiano</u> di Sebastian è la rovina del film. Come si fa a definire un capolavoro? [<u>The Italian dubbing</u> of Sebastian is already the ruin of the film. How can you call it a masterpiece?] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Un nordafricano che canta <u>in fondo al mar</u>.. Immaginate solo per un attimo le Rakete de noaltri come reagiranno!!! [A North African singing <u>under the sea</u>.. Just imagine for a moment how our local Rakete will react!!!] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Lightyear USA
no Tim Allen (58), without Tim Allen (29), Buzz Lightyear of Star Command (27), the voice of Buzz (21), Tim Allen isn't (19), Tim Allen is Buzz (18), in Toy Story (14), is Buzz Lightyear (13), not Buzz Lightyear (13), the movie Andy (13),why does he look (13), Buzz Lightyear movie (10), in this movie (10), the same without (10), is the only (9), not the same (9), not without Tim (9), Tim Allen as Buzz (9), should have been (8), would have been (8), what happened to (7)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
the Lost Boys (63), Peter Pan is (30), Tinker Bell is (24), she was a (21), will always be (21), Pan and Wendy (19), doesn't look (13), Once Upon a Time (11), Peter and Wendy (11), version of Peter Pan (11), original Peter Pan (10), Hook with Robin Williams (9), Hook will always be (8), Captain Hook and (7), the only one (7), I think the (6), she looks so (6), was the best (6), the original characters (6), Tinkerbell is black (6), to be white (6)
Peter Pan & Wendy ITA
isola che non c'è [Neverland] (11), film su Peter Pan [film about Peter Pan] (6), l'ho trovato [I found it] (5), Peter Pan indiano [Indian Peter Pan] (5), unico Peter Pan [only Peter Pan] (5), Peter Pan messicano [Mexican Peter Pan] (4), attore che interpreta Peter Pan [actor playing Peter Pan] (3), con gli occhi [with eyes] (3), Libro della Giungla [Jungle Book] (3)
The Little Mermaid USA
don't know (81), doesn't look (57), her hair was (53), they don't (51), to the original (49), no es Ariel [Spanish: is not Ariel] (47), wish her hair (47), about this movie (46), a drag queen (46), don't think (46), the red hair (45), bright red hair (44), in this movie (44), it was a (44), should have been (43), supposed to be (42), it doesn't (40), the only thing (39), of the original (36)
La Sirenetta ITA
non è Ariel [she's not Ariel] (72), non è la [she's not the] (40), i capelli rossi [red hair] (67), In fondo al mar [Under the sea] (50), gli occhi azzurri [blue eyes] (29), non c'entra [has nothing to do] (27), la vera Ariel [the true Ariel] (24), l'unica cosa [the only thing] (23), il cartone animato [the cartoon] (20), il fatto che [the fact that] (20), in lingua originale [in the original language] (19), del cartone animato [the cartoon] (18), in fondo al mare [under the sea] (18), fedele all'originale [faithful to the original] (15), nel cartone animato [in the cartoon] (15), Pirati dei Caraibi [Pirates of the Caribbean] (15), attrice che interpreta [actress playing] (14), Sirenetta di colore [Little Mermaid of colour] (14), il doppiaggio di [the dubbing of] (13), personaggio di Ariel [character of Ariel] (12), quella del cartone [the one from the cartoon] (12), con i rasta [with dreadlocks] (11), il doppiaggio italiano [the Italian dubbing] (11), la voce di Sebastian [Sebastian's voice] (11), me la ricordavo [I remembered her] (11), scelta dell'attrice [actress choice] (11), al cartone animato [to the cartoon] (10), Ariel del cartone [Ariel from the cartoon], coi capelli rossi [with red hair] (10), dai capelli rossi [with red hair] (10), la pelle di Ariel [Ariel's skin] (10), la pelle scura [dark skin] (10), niente/nulla a che vedere [nothing to do] (10), sarebbe stata perfetta [she would have been perfect] (10), un cartone animato [a cartoon] (10)

Table 6. N-grams: Disagreement with and negative characterisation of (voice) cast

A set of bundles in the corpus was categorised as articulating opposition to what was seen as wokeism and cancel culture. These expressions often entailed threats of boycotting the company and hopes for its financial downfall, also invoking the slogan "Go woke, go broke" to suggest that embracing progressive values would lead to economic losses. In particular, the inclusion of a lesbian love story in *Lightyear*

sparked backlash from some segments of the USA Facebook audience. They condemned Disney (e.g., "shame on you") for allegedly catering to the wealthy elite while abandoning traditional values and denounced what they perceived as a dangerous promotion of homosexuality. Netizens sarcastically reiterated the phrase reflecting gender essentialism, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls", in response to Disney's discontinued use of this formula in theme park announcements in favour of more inclusive greetings:

> Congratulations on your worldwide bomb how's those stocks go woke go broke . (*Lightyear* USA)

> Disney sucks!!! Another corporation that bows down to the 1%! Guess I'll even have more money as I won't be buying anything Disney! And there are a lot!! Our families mean more then Mickey! Keep pushing this narrative.... Americans push back! Thank you ladies and gentlemen , boys and girls! (*Lightyear* USA)

> We cannot allow our children to watch your stupidity and encouraging homosexuality.... shame on you . The first thing I did I deleted all Disney channel's from my channels list. Shame on you (*Lightyear* USA)

As previously observed, several comments regarding *Peter Pan & Wendy* in the Italian component described the film as lacking imaginative or novel elements and merely conforming to the trend "of political correctness":

> Immagino era proprio così urgente e necessario l'ennesimo remake, tra l'altro non solo il solito live-action freddo e forzato, ma pure un film in voga con il minestrone di politicamente corretto da regalare al pubblico. Fantasia ne abbiamo? [I guess yet another remake was really so urgent and necessary, and not just the usual cold and forced live-action, but also a film in trend with the mishmash of political correctness to present to the public. Any imagination left?] (*Peter Pan & Wendy* ITA)

Comments to *Peter Pan & Wendy* USA and *The Little Mermaid* in both countries contained references to Disney animated movie *The Princess and the Frog*,[100] whose heroine is an African-American girl. Users provocatively asked for a film inspired by it where the cast would be "all white" or the actress "albino":

> When they make the princess and the frog movie they better do an all white cast just saying (*The Little Mermaid* USA)

> Aspetterò con ansia il film di " La principessa e il ranocchio " mi raccomando la principessa deve essere "albina" altrimenti mi arrabbio! [I will eagerly await the movie of " The Princess and the Frog " but remember the princess must be "albino" or else I'll get angry!] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Hyperbolic language was employed to critique what some fans perceived as excessive political correctness and extremism, also suggesting that "at this point" they expected Disney to make even more unreasonable casting choices. This attitude seemed to reflect a reactionary stance against efforts to diversify media representation and a denial of the white privilege long enjoyed in popular media:

> Woke Disney. Every character should just be not white at this point. (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

> A questo punto troverei politicamente corretto che se in futuro faranno un live action di Pocahontas venisse interpreta da un attrice svedese o Finlandese [At this point I would find it politically correct that if in the

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[100] John Musker and Ron Clements, *The Princess and the Frog*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2009).

future they made a live action of Pocahontas it would be played by a Swedish or Finnish actress] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Additionally, under posts on *Lightyear* USA, the commenting function was exploited to express opinions on the dispute between Disney and actor Johnny Depp, renowned for his portrayal of Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Depp stated that, during the legal battle with his ex-wife Amber Heard, who accused him of domestic violence, he had been removed from his role in the Disney's saga, leading him to feel a victim of cancel culture.[101] Consequently, his fans in the USA demanded apologies (e.g., "apologize to Johnny", "public apology to") from the animation giant and called for his reintegration:

> The most important question. After winning the court case against Amber, will Disney apologize to Johnny Deep for removing him from the movie " Pirates of the Caribbean "? (*Lightyear* USA)

Lightyear USA
apologize to Johnny (73), boys and girls (22), go woke go broke (21), you don't (20), the box office (19), ladies and gentlemen (17), shame on you (16), public apology to (15), Pirates of the Caribbean (14), in his grave (13), supposed to be (12), a movie about (10), this is not (10), a Disney movie (8), no longer be (8), of our children (8), that Disney is (7), the end of (7)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
The Little Mermaid (29), Princess and the Frog (18), at this point (10), if you want (10), what a joke (6)
Peter Pan & Wendy ITA
del politicamente corretto [of the politically correct] (4), di politicamente corretto [of politically correct] (3), il politically correct [the politically correct] (3)
The Little Mermaid USA
Princess and the Frog (52)
La Sirenetta ITA
il politically correct [the politically correct] (29), a questo punto [at this point] (22), il politicamente corretto [the politically correct] (19), Principessa e il Ranocchio [Princess and the Frog] (18), del politically correct [of the politically correct] (13)

Table 7. N-grams: Disagreement with and negative characterisation of Disney as woke and engaging in cancel culture

4.2 *Hashtags*

Hashtags were extracted from the entire USA and Italian subcorpora and categorised primarily as indicators of a topic or markers of stance. Each of the two subcorpora was analysed as a whole due to the limited amount of data available. Nevertheless, this approach offered meaningful insights into emerging trends within the two contexts.

A viral hashtag in the USA was "#NotMyAriel"[102] and similar variations (see Table 8), which were primarily inserted without additional commentary and constituted a strong protest against casting a black actress as Ariel. The use of negation and first-person singular possessive adjective portrayed the character as not aligning with the fan's traditional rendition, depicting her as unaccepted, unrepresentative, unwanted. Moreover, this collective portrayal positioned her as not belonging to the same group as 'us', but rather as the 'other'. Hashtags also marked opposition to other casting (e.g., "#NotMyUrsula" and "#notmypeterpan") and voice casting (e.g., "#TimAllen") choices. Some hashtags

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[101] Carly Mayberry, "Johnny Depp, Amber Heard and the Dangers of Cancel Culture", *Newsweek,* Monday 02 May 2022, www.newsweek.com/johnny-depp-amber-heard-dangers-cancel-culture-1701880, accessed 30 April 2024.
[102] Geraets, "#NotMyAriel".

conveyed disagreement with the company's perceived progressive agenda, with some including predictions or desires for failure regarding Disney's projects (e.g., #BoycottDisney", "#gowokegobroke"). Disney itself was sometimes referred to as "#WokeDisney". Additionally, support was expressed for Johnny Depp (with hashtags like "#justiceforjohnnydepp").

Topic
#Disney (23), #TheLittleMermaid (11), #Lightyear (6), #disney100 (2), #disneyworld (2), #MelissaMcCarthy (2), #TheLittleMermaid2023 (2)
Support for the movie
#excited (2)
Disagreement with/negative characterisation of cast
#NotMyAriel (93), #notmylittlemermaid (6), #HalleyBaileysucks (4), #nomyariel (4), #sheisnotmyariel (4), #notmymermaid (3), #NotMyUrsula (3), #shesnotAriel (3), #notmypeterpan (2), #justsaying (2), #terrycrews (2), #TimAllen (2),
Disagreement with/negative characterisation of Disney as woke
#BoycottDisney (11), #gowokegobroke (9), #GetWokeGoBroke (6), #WokeDisney (4), #fail (3), #flop (3), #boicotdisney (2), #BoycottWOKEDisney (2), #donewithDisney (2), #FireChapek (2), #no (2), #woke (2)
Disagreement with/negative characterisation of Disney as engaging in cancel culture
#bringbackjack (7), #justiceforjohnnydepp (7), #CancelDisney (5), #justiceforJohnny (5), #JusticeForJohnnyDeep (4), #ApologizeToDepp (3), #JusticeForJohnnyDepp (3), #bringbackjacksparrow (2), #bringbackjohnny (2), #IStandWithJohnnyDepp (2), #JohnnyDepp (2)

Table 8. Hashtags in the USA subcorpus

In the Italian component, although no popular hashtags were identified (see Table 9), the ones that were retrieved reaffirmed the previous analysis, featuring threats to boycott, expressions of rejection, ridicule, and even offensive language. Hashtags may serve as valuable starting points for further explorations. Notably, "#lasiNeretta" ["#theblacklittlemermaid", also circulated in Spanish as "La SiNegrita"] was productive in the extended phrase in the corpus "La SiNeretta" (16 occurrences). This concise label incorporates a derogatory connotation by referring to the protagonist's skin colour through the use of a 'somatonym', a strategy that symbolises a social actor by a physical characteristic, based on a meronymic relationship.[103] Similar to English, in Italian, employing "nero" ["black"] as a noun to identify individuals or groups based on skin colour is indeed considered offensive, as it oversimplifies and generalises a diverse population.[104]

Topic/location
#Sirenetta [#LittleMermaid] (2), #buzzlightyear (1), #disney (1); #Sardegna [#Sardinia] (3), #sardegnafilmcommission [#sardiniafilmcommission] (1), #Sardinia (1)
Disagreement/negative characterisation
#ioboicotto [#iboycott] (2), #arielneranonsipuovedere [#blackarielisunbearable] (1), #barzelletta [#joke] (1), #bellamerda [#sucks] (1), #boicottaggio [#boycott] (1), #BTS (1), #charmed (1), #choc [#shock] (1), #coerenza [#coherence] (1), #comeappizzareunfilm [#howtoruinafilm] (1), #disagio [#awkward] (1), #Ghesboroariel [#Fuckariel] (1), #iostoconursula [#istandwithursula] (1), #lasiNeretta [#theblacklittlemermaid] (1), #lasirenEtnica [#theethniclittlemermaid] (1), #NO (1), #NOGRAZIE [#NOTHANKS] (1), #NotMyAriel (1), #poveretti [#poorthings] (1), #Politicamentecorrettiaveterottoilcazzo [#Politicallycorrectpeopleivefuckinghadit] (1), #stayschiodato [#staydumped] (1), #StopCancelCulture (1)

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[103] Wodak and Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 53.
[104] Accademia della Crusca, "Nero, Negro e Di Colore", *Accademia della Crusca,* Friday 12 October 2012, www.accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/nero-negro-e-di-colore/734, accessed 30 April 2024.

Support for the movie against haters
#fateviunavita [#getalife] (1), #ridicolih [#ridiculoush] (1)

Table 9. Hashtags in the Italian subcorpus

4.3 *Visual Elements*

An initial inquiry of the visual elements included in the comments, with a particular emphasis on GIFs conveying negative sentiments, was conducted and a classification was proposed. Numerous graphic representations conveyed disapproval through various allusions. The compiled categories of hate were based on Bahador's typology[105] and adapted to reflect the trends observed in the visual corpus under study. The groupings identified encompassed: disagreement expressed by original movie characters or Internet memes; disagreement with or negative characterisation of new casting choices, also including oversimplification and stereotyping of the 'out group'; disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney company, including attacks on the company for being woke or engaging in cancel culture; dehumanisation of the 'out-group', via images of trash, excrement, and vomit. Select examples will be shown and examined, with some related comments reported when available. The raw frequencies in the tables indicate the occurrences of a GIF within a specific movie and country subcorpus, although many were found across multiple components.

Lightyear		*Peter Pan & Wendy*	
(USA 4) *Buzz Lightyear Of Star command was the buzz lightyear movie* 😄	(USA 2) *Nope*	(USA 6)	(USA 4)
The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta			
(USA 19; ITA 14) *Avete distrutto un mito* 😔 *[You've destroyed a myth* 😔*]*	(USA 11; ITA 12) *Very sad.*😔 *I'll never ruin my childhood memories.*		

Figure 1. GIFs: Disagreement by original movie characters. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

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[105] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".

Several visuals reproduced cartoons and (voice) actors, often reusing scenes from prior versions which were 'approved' by the commentators. In many GIFs, the traditional characters displayed emotions like sadness, anger, doubt, and rejection. Such sentiments were exploited to convey the fans' dislike, aversion, and disappointment regarding Disney's choices in the remakes, almost as if the 'originals' themselves were also upset with Disney (Fig. 1).

International and local Internet memes were also used to demonstrate refusal, frustration, unease, and embarrassment at the remakes, including scenes from movies and TV shows (Fig. 2). Similar feelings were represented through crying, downcast face, thumbs down, facepalm, or 'see-no-evil' monkey emojis and stickers. Sometimes, the people in the 'disagreeing' GIFs could even share some personal characteristics with the object of rejection, such as the drag queen performer Ru Paul, as part of the LGBTQI+ community (Fig. 2), actor Danny Glover (Fig. 6), or other black characters (Fig. 7).

Figure 2. GIFs: Disagreement by Internet memes. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

Some GIFs contrasted the current movie cast with the preferred original versions. Commentators implicitly or explicitly pointed at the former (white) characters as the correct renditions, unfavourably comparing them with the perceived inadequacy of the new choices (Fig. 3).

In discussions concerning *Peter Pan & Wendy*, particular scrutiny was directed towards ethnically diverse casting choices. Comparisons were drawn to characters from previous Disney films, positioning older representations of Pan as the 'real' and beloved versions.

Within the discourses about *The Little Mermaid*, GIFs featuring Ariel from the cartoon and her friends were nostalgically shared, underscoring a preference for the original portrayals, specifically focusing on the princess's appearance. At times, alternative casting suggestions were proposed, often advocating for white-skinned and red-haired actresses, who could better embody Ariel as a sex symbol. Examples included actresses such as Amber Heard (known for playing a marine heroine in Disney's *Aquaman*) or Miriam Leone in Italy. Regrettably, Halle Bailey faced instances of body shaming also

related to other physical attributes, particularly her supposedly wide-set eyes. She was compared to a hammerhead shark or fictional characters with distorted traits such as Sid the sloth from *Ice Age*, or Sloth from *The Goonies*, alongside dehumanising[106] references to monsters like Predator or Alien.

Lightyear	*Peter Pan & Wendy*	
(USA 2) *Didn't Disney have a tv show that Buzz Lightyear was already based off of…?*	(USA 10; ITA 5) *L' unico peter pan ♡ [The only peter pan pan ♡]*	(USA 9; ITA 1) *This was my legit first crush growing up.*
The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta		
(USA 31; ITA 7) *Ice age 4 looking pretty good.*	(USA 22; ITA 8) *This is the Little Mermaid.*	

Figure 3. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of cast. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

A group of GIFs was classified as opposing wokeism and cancel culture (Fig. 4). Several included discriminatory content, especially in discussions related to *Lightyear*, with explicit disliking of the Rainbow flag and references to the film ban in numerous Middle Eastern and Asian countries. Additionally, some USA GIFs even propagated the grooming accusation, a harmful stereotype used to demonise LGBTQI+ individuals, alleging paedophilic and manipulative behaviours towards children. Other GIFs expressed dissent towards wokeism, often employing irony or satire. This included, for both countries, the ironic presentation of black individuals as the new versions of characters in Disney movies.

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[106] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".

Lightyear		Peter Pan & Wendy	
(USA 3) *They're at it again!!!*	(USA 2) *Go Broke*	(USA 2) *Disney version 2022* 🤡	(USA 2)

Figure 4. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney as woke. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

Following his removal from the *Pirates of Caribbean* franchise, Johnny Depp allegedly testified under oath that he would not reconsider portraying Captain Jack Sparrow for Disney, not even for 300 million dollars and more than a million alpacas.[107] In a show of solidarity with Depp and in opposition to the company's perceived cancel culture, users flooded Disney's USA Facebook page with emojis and GIFs featuring Depp and alpacas (see Fig. 5).

Lightyear	
(USA 6) *Apologize to Johnny*	(USA 3)

Figure 5. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney as engaging in cancel culture. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

In opposition to cast and thematic choices in new Disney movies, derisive and offensive laughter was noted (Fig. 6). The laughing reaction, indicative of toxic and trolling practices,[108] has become a widespread online trend, notably since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemics, as a common means to deride adversaries and their beliefs and convey a lack of empathy.[109] The clown emoji was also employed, suggesting that the company was behaving foolishly and ridiculously with its forcibly inclusive and insincere choices.

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[107] Ryan Smith, "What Do Alpacas Have to Do with Johnny Depp Trial? 'Pirates' Joke Takes Off", *Newsweek*, Friday 20 May 2022, www.newsweek.com/alpacas-johnny-depp-trial-amber-heard-pirates-caribbean-1708495, accessed 30 April 2024.
[108] Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*.
[109] George Driver, "No Laughing Matter: Why It's Time to Cancel Facebook's Haha Reaction", *The Spinoff,* Wednesday 15 December 2021, www.thespinoff.co.nz/media/15-12-2021/no-laughing-matter-why-its-time-to-cancel-facebooks-haha-reaction, accessed 30 April 2024.

Lightyear	*Peter Pan & Wendy*	
(USA 3)	(USA 6)	(USA 3) *Fake*

The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta	
(USA 11; ITA 2) *Definitely not my childhood Little Mermaid period* 🧜	(USA 10) *Tanked in china already, lol*

Figure 6. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney's choices through laughter. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

Disney's despised new movies and characters were also metaphorically compared to unpleasant things, resulting in debasing, humiliating, and even dehumanising characterisation.[110] Several GIFs referred to waste and bodily waste, using memes with the word "trash", garbage bins, or depictions of excrement (Fig. 7), which were present as emojis and stickers in both countries. In particular, the dumpster fire GIF was embedded in the USA to describe the movie as a failure,[111] with the image simultaneously conveying a menacing and violent scene of vandalism.

Peter Pan & Wendy		*The Little Mermaid*	
(USA 4) *Looks like*	(USA 3)	(USA 5)	(USA 5)

Figure 7. GIFs: Negative characterisation of Disney's choices and dehumanisation through trash and excrement. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

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[110] Wodak and Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 53; Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".

[111] Don and Y F, "Dumpster Fire", *Know Yor Meme* (12 February 2018), *knowyourmeme.com/memes/dumpster-fire*.

Moreover, other GIFs marked the object of the comment, when considered as representing some form of difference, as disgusting. This was achieved by displaying images of vomit or simulations of vomiting through memes (Fig. 8). The puking sticker was also frequently employed in both countries. This use of visceral content was intended to evoke extreme repulsion and disdain, emphasising a strong negative reaction to the perceived deviation from traditional or expected norms.

Peter Pan & Wendy	*The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta*	
(USA 3) *Gross*	(USA 4; ITA 4) *Ed ecco come reagiamo noi. [And this is how we react]*	(USA 3; ITA 2)

Figure 8. GIFs: Negative characterisation of Disney's choices and dehumanisation through vomit. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

5. Conclusions

Amidst the backdrop of the so-called 'culture wars', debates and conflicts have arisen on contentious issues such as national identity, cultural diversity, family values, and sexual orientation. Children's culture serves as a space where entertainment and learning intertwine with the construction of identities in society, incorporating elements such as gender, race, and class.[112] In this context, the present study delved into the reception of Disney animation's recent promotion of cultural diversity in the United States and Italy, by examining Facebook posts commenting on select movies serving as remakes of classics.

Preliminary findings suggested a range of opinions and discourses regarding Disney's inclusivity initiatives. In both sampled countries, positive expressions were retrieved, including enjoyment of the new Disney movies, appreciation for the company's efforts, excitement to share viewing experiences with loved ones, and defence against detractors. It was heartening to witness individuals finding joy in seeing themselves represented, and reassuring to observe anti-haters advocating for inclusivity and admonishing other commentators for imposing their reactionary perspectives onto fictional characters.

Conversely, a notable presence of negative sentiment was noted. Many fans expressed dislike and disapproval of remakes and resentment toward forced diversity or exhibited explicit discriminatory attitudes. Netizens exploited the medium availabilities, leveraging various semiotic tools, including words, hashtags, and visuals, to articulate their opinions. They also often circumvented the already weak anti-hate speech policies of Facebook by utilising less regulated content, such as third-party GIFs.[113]

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[112] Henry A. Giroux, "Animating Youth: The Disneyfication of Children's Culture", *Socialist Review*, 24.3 (1995), 23-55.
[113] Rebecca Heilweil, "Antisemitic Content Sneaks onto Facebook Through Gif Feature", *Forbes,* Friday 7 July 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccaheilweil1/2017/07/07/antisemitic-content-sneaks-onto-facebook-through-gif-feature, accessed 30 April 2024.

These graphics, which may consist of visuals and/or text, could display more explicitly hateful, disrespectful, or discriminatory content or be used with an implicit degrading intent.

The study identified both international and localised targets and trends in hate speech. For instance, anti-LGBTQI+ discourse was more visible in the USA, likely because the news of the lesbian love story in the film *Lightyear* did not gain as much traction in Italy. Racial prejudice sentiments seemed to be more evident in Italian negative comments and sometimes explicitly linked to anti-immigration positions. Although hashtags were not frequently employed, the protest campaign "#NotMyAriel" against casting actress Bailey as Ariel garnered support in the USA. Rejection of the new remakes varied in intensity, ranging from genuine requests for adherence to canonical fidelity to masked or explicit negative sentiments and discrimination. The number of user comments was higher in the USA, resulting in a greater presence of visuals. In contrast, in Italy, only *The Little Mermaid* saw significant interaction and visual engagement. Although the volume was comparatively lower, the negative sentiment in Italy echoed similar themes of contrast, rejection, and disgust towards new films and casts also observed in the USA.

It should be noted that this analysis did not aim to assess the reception of any single Disney movie. Instead, it sought to provide an overview of audience reactions to various forms of diversity represented in recent media products. This exploratory study focused on sampled frequently occurring expressions and visuals in user-generated discourse, with particular attention to hateful content and did not quantify positive versus negative comments. Therefore, the conclusions drawn are to be regarded as indicative of observed trends in the reception of inclusivity in popular culture rather than exhaustive analyses.

This study did not focus on the immediate triggers of hateful language. While campaigns of hate were quite ubiquitous, it appeared evident that images showcasing the pride and centrality of 'others' and 'intruders' were the primary drivers for derision, disdain, rejection, and hate. Nevertheless, it should be added that Disney might somehow even take advantage of culture wars for business purposes, as potentially controversial choices and, consequently, social media posts are likely to stimulate debate, increase engagement, and, thereby, extend the page reach.

In the corpus analysed, hate discourse was not only produced by occasional flamers or spammers but rather appeared as a dominant narrative emerging from the accumulation of derogatory comments. Disney's attempts to diversify its narratives and characters were perceived as a threat, prompting resistance from those feeling their cultural identity was being challenged. This backlash was further fuelled by statements and actions from conservative politicians. Users engaged in a collective practice of chastising the company for its perceived moralising choices and for renouncing white privilege. In this way, commentators also attacked the real or fictional characters involved, targeting their 'protected' characteristics, especially gender and ethnicity. Critical expressions were joined with practical forms of protest, including boycotts, against what they saw as a forcefully progressive political agenda embedded in storytelling. Conspiracy theories, such as allegations of attempts at race-swapping and grooming, were at times propagated by critics. Disney's inclusivity and its minority subjects were unwelcome and viewed as not representative of the traditional values that the animation company had long embodied. Adversaries argued that these changes distorted the company's legacy and alienated its longstanding audience. White cisgender individuals positioned themselves as the 'in-group', delineating their preferences and judgements, dictating norms of acceptability to defend a constructed tradition and morality. Critics voiced discomfort and resistance to the encroachment of outsiders into their own spaces, fearing a loss of cultural hegemony and desiring to maintain the status quo. As a result, these netizens, from behind their screens, framed subjects with different characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, physical features, and gender, as the 'other', dangerous, ugly, and disgusting, thus justifying marginalisation and discrimination.

Contaminating the realm of children's fairy tales, hurtful words and symbols were wielded in adult online practices of signification and evaluation, to deny underrepresented groups their place in the narrative. Online discourse was therefore employed to suppress minorities' right to expression and, ultimately, their existence, not only in fantasy media but in society as a whole.

This study highlights the risks associated with the underregulation of social media and advocates for the implementation of more stringent policies against hate speech. The largely uncontrolled virtual aggression has indeed the potential to normalise discrimination and can serve as a dangerous catalyst and justification for harm in real life.

Margaret Rasulo and Maria De Santo

Exposing Bias, Disinformation, and Hate Speech in Educational Materials

Abstract: Manifestations of hate speech can be observed in overt acts of homophobia, bullying, and race/ethnicity-based discrimination. While these are clear examples, hate speech can also manifest in more subtle yet equally harmful ways, such as deceit, bias, half-truths, and systemic disinformation, which may infiltrate protected spaces like educational institutions. One notable example is PragerU, an organization accused of bending historical and scientific facts and spreading disinformation about critical social issues through its controversial K-12 teaching materials. This paper, utilizing the Pyramid of Hate framework alongside Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, and Wodak's argumentation strategy from Discourse Historical Analysis, examines the extent to which PragerU's visual and verbal narratives contribute to the normalization and legitimization of biased ideologies, potentially fueling divisive discourse. By deconstructing multimodal elements such as language, imagery, and framing techniques, this study explores how specific rhetorical strategies evoke emotional responses, reinforce stereotypes, and subtly propagate exclusionary or discriminatory views. Additionally, by mapping this content onto the Pyramid of Hate framework, the research aims to identify how such narratives may facilitate the progression from more subtle forms of bias and prejudice to more overt manifestations of hate. Ultimately, this paper seeks to determine whether PragerU's content fosters an environment where conflict is incited and capable of evolving into more dangerous, hate-filled discourse, thereby contributing to broader societal polarization.

Keywords: *argumentation theory*, *educational resources*, *alternative media*, *bias and disinformation*, *Pyramid of Hate*

> *The time will come when diligent research over long periods*
> *will bring to light things which now lie hidden.*
> Lucius Annaeus Seneca - *Natural Questions Book* VII [25,4]

1. Introduction[1]

Seneca's quote resonates with the aim of this study which is to expose the discursive strategies employed by conservative media outlets to spread bias and disinformation in the private and public spheres, including the educational arena. Drawing inspiration from the philosopher's wisdom, the study specifically addresses the growing demand for a nuanced understanding of the cultural, sociopolitical, and technological roots of the mediated proliferation of distorted information, highlighting the dangerous repercussions this unsolicited interference can have on educational processes.[2]

Generally speaking, what stands for biased attitudes and disinformation is certainly a challenge to discern, mainly due to the fact that these features are not always acknowledged as such, or they might be unconsciously harbored. Indeed, being unaware of one's opinion of people, institutions or world issues can shield potentially harmful mindsets and behaviors which may manifest in forms of hate speech.[3]

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[1] The present paper is the result of a collaborative effort of both authors. In particular, Margaret Rasulo is responsible for sections 1.1,1.2, 2, 3, 7.2, 8; Maria De Santo is responsible for sections 1.3,1.4, 4, 5, 6, 7.1, 9.

[2] Randall Calvert, "The Value of Biased Information: A Rational Choice Model of Political Advice", *The Journal of Politics*, 47.2 (1985)*,* 530-555.

[3] Andrea Prat and David Strömberg, "The Political Economy of Mass Media", in Acemoglu Daran et.al., eds., *Advances in Economics and Econometrics: Tenth World Congress* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013), 135-187; Simon Anderson et al., eds., *Handbook of Media Economics*, vol. 1A (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015).

The bias and disinformation nexus is readily exploited by online partisan media which thrive on the endorsement of political affiliation to further their shared interest in influencing people's attitudes towards all things political, including private lives and personal welfare. One tactic employed by these social actors is to selectively present information based on the criterion of like-mindedness.[4] This concept is described as homophily, wherein audiences opt to receive information from sources that align with their political, religious, or identitarian beliefs, often facilitated by the persuasive influence of powerful media echo chambers.[5]

1.1 *Explaining the Bias and Disinformation Nexus*

Bias and disinformation lie at the core of this investigation, thus it is essential to define these terms, beginning with the more threatening concept of disinformation.

The term disinformation is often used interchangeably with misinformation, yet the motivation underlying these communication practices differs. Disinformation is deliberately fabricated to mislead the general public by intentionally misstating the facts, thus foregrounding the notion of purpose of the agent. Misinformation entails getting the facts wrong, resulting in the unintentional spreading of false or inaccurate information.[6] Keeping this distinction in mind, the present study makes use of the term disinformation as it best describes the premeditated and calculated spreading of falsities in the provision of educational materials regarding well-established knowledge recognized by solid epistemological institutions.[7]

The concept of bias refers to an inherent imbalance of points of view, often leading to belief extremism and polarization. Particularly in educational contexts, the interference of bias in knowledge dissemination processes can hinder the pedagogical advancement of critical thinking skills, especially with reference to young learners.[8] More alarming is the consideration that because information processing is the result of acts of assembling and constructing, the presence of bias is nearly inevitable. This implies that individuals or entire organizations whose main activity is to create content, might do so in a self-serving and advantageous manner as they are enabled to pass on their own ideological, political and social biases.[9]

In this analysis, we examine the case of two K-12 educational videos commissioned by Prager University Foundation (PragerU), a US ultra-conservative media organization. These educational resources serve PragerU's purpose of providing alternative right-wing narratives regarding various issues, including critical concerns such as climate change, gender identity, immigration, slavery, racism, and hate speech. In the exemplification of their conservative perspective, PragerU utilizes the core content of these issues to present their counter-narratives by means of denialism, skepticism, conspiracy theories, prejudice, and white nationalism which oppose existing scientific or historical information.

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[4] Kristoffer Nimark and Stefan Pitschner, "News media and delegated information choice", *Journal of Economic Theory*, 181 (2019), 160-196.

[5] Daron Acemoglu et al., "Misinformation: Strategic Sharing, Homophily, and Endogenous Echo Chambers", NBER Working Paper No. 28884, (2022), www.nber.org.

[6] Patricia Alonso-Galbán P and Claudia Alemañy-Castilla, "Curbing Misinformation and Disinformation in the Covid-19 Era: A View from Cuba", *MEDICC Re*, 22 (2022), 45-46; Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan H, "Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making", *Council of Europe Rep*, 27 (2022), 1-107; Don Fallis, Don "What Is Disinformation?", *Library Trends*, 63.3 (2015), 401-426.

[7] Michela Del Vicario et al., "Polarization and Fake News: Early Warning of Potential Misinformation Targets," *ACM Trans Web (TWEB)*, 13.3 (2019), 1-22.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Emily Haisley and Roberto Weber, "Self-serving Interpretations of Ambiguity in Other-regarding Behavior", *Games and Economic Behavior* 68.2 (2010), 614-625; Bruno Deffains et al., "Political Self-serving Bias and Redistribution", *Journal of Public Economics*, 134.C (2016), 67-74.

Indeed, under the guise of First Amendment rights, PragerU's revisitation of educational content has only been partially contested but never discontinued.[10]

Self-described as alternative media sources, organizations such as PragerU exist outside mainstream media as plausible substitutes,[11] and often promote radical or extreme political views in their agenda-setting. Some media consumers, disillusioned with mainstream sources, turn to these platforms for content which they believe is closely aligned with their belief systems. For instance, a 2020 Gallup survey found that only nine percent of respondents trusted mainstream media, while nearly sixty percent expressed little to no trust, citing misinformation and polarization as possible causes of dissatisfaction.[12]

Within this frame of reference, it is important to recognize that alternative media platforms are bipartisan entities, covering the political spectrum from extreme left to extreme right, allowing parties to advance their interests.[13] Among these platforms are those that produce educational content, a focus that has enabled them to penetrate US curriculum provision. PragerU, for example, is currently a provider of extra-curricular resources adopted by schools in Florida, Arizona, and Oklahoma, and with other states closely considering adoption.[14]

1.2 *Falsity as a Trigger of Hate Speech*

The presence of bias or disinformation, in the form of inaccuracies, contradictions, and out-of-context claims, often remains unnoticed in educational resources produced by alternative education vendors.[15] This observation has prompted the investigation of the spreading of slanted or false information, intentionally crafted to cause public harm or gain personal profit, to be treated as a human rights issue protected by national and international constitutional law.[16] According to this principle, causing public harm can potentially incite hatred manifested through hate speech. Determining the level of harm or danger, however, is complex as some acts may not immediately exhibit physical evidence of discrimination, violence, or criminal activity. Instead, these traces are often embedded in subtler expressions such as humor-based insults, jokes, and even in argumentative discussions,[17] making them less likely to be recognized as hate speech.[18] To address this insidious issue, the study employs the Pyramid of Hate.[19] This tool is used to identify harmful discursive behaviors by evaluating their severity based on a 5-level scale which encompasses seemingly innocuous behaviors positioned at Level One to the most distressing ones positioned at Level Five.

[10] "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Cong. Rsch. Serv., *First Amendment, Constitution Annotated, (*2019) constitution.congress.gov.

[11] Nimark and Pitschner, *Mainstream Media*.

[12] Saman Malik and Sarah Peterson, "How U.S. Media Lost the Trust of the Public", *CBC News*, (2021), www.cbc.ca.

[13] Geoffrey Cohen, "Party over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85 (2003), 808-822.

[14] Natasha Holt, "Controversial PragerU Curriculum Approved for Florida Classrooms, but It's Unclear Where It Will Be Used", WUFT, (2023), www.wuft.org.

[15] Olivia B. Waxman, "What It Means That Florida Will Allow Conservative PragerU Content in Schools", *Time* (2023), time.com.

[16] Carme Colomina et al., "The Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Processes and Human Rights in the World", *Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union PE*, (2021), www.europarl.europa.eu; PGA, "Disinformation vs. Misinformation: The Issue of Dangerous Speech", *Parliamentarians for Global Actions*, www.pgaction.org.

[17] David Hitchcock, "The Practice of Argumentative Discussion", *Argumentation*, 16.3 (2002), 287-298.

[18] Nadine Strossen, "Freedom of Speech and Equality: Do We Have to Choose?", *Journal of Law and Policy*, 25.1 (2016), brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu;).

[19] ADL, "Pyramid of Hate", *Anti-Defamation League* (2021), www.adl.org.

1.3 *Navigating Alternative Knowledge and Hate Speech in Educational Settings*

The educational sphere has long grappled with hate speech in its various manifestations. As purveyors of established knowledge, one might assume that these educational environments would be impervious to the manipulation of facts, particularly concerning educational materials. However, whether driven by social ideology, political interference, or educational reform initiatives,[20] education is no stranger to transformation, and has frequently been exposed to inaccurate or incomplete information.

This paper aims to explore how educational spaces serve as coveted access points for proponents of alternative truths targeting new generations. In the case in point, the intervention of these ultra-conservative content providers is often framed as safeguarding American values against a perceived dominant ideology, which they identify as left-wing, liberal, or woke. As a contrastive measure against an authoritarian bend, platforms such as PragerU advance their own ideological perspectives by implanting a bold argumentation framework in their video narratives. As evidenced in the analysis, these stories contain rhetorical and visual elements that coalesce to alter some well-established facts, events or occurrences, and critical social policies regarding theories of gender and race.

Given this backdrop, one may question how these alternative outlets evade oversight from educational authorities. Reflecting on the contentious global debate surrounding political interference in educational content, particularly within the US context, this could be attributed to the decentralized nature of curriculum development across the 50 states.[21] In particular, state boards of education, agency leaders, school districts, local schools, and teachers and parents play varying roles in the design and approval of K-12 curricula, often resulting in a lack of centralized regulation.[22]

In adopting the case study structure of data presentation, the study examines two short K-12 educational videos sourced from PragerU's archive of 80 videos dedicated to this age range. It is essential to specify that the two products are analyzed as separate case studies, and are therefore representative of other videos under the same typology, namely those targeting 3rd, 4th and 5th graders, and those targeting 6th graders to high school students. To corroborate this approach, the analysis touches upon the most frequently occurring aspects of rhetorical argumentation and multimodal composition, and is therefore illustrative not only of the other series of videos, but also of the methodological framework employed.

The videos were downloaded from PragerU's website and transcribed. As mentioned, given the inherent multimodal nature of these products, and the significant issues addressed which span across historical, scientific, geographical, and social topics, an interdisciplinary analytical approach was deemed necessary. Consequently, the study adopts a combination of two prominent approaches within the field of Critical Discourse Studies. For the analysis of linguistic evidence, the study employs the argumentation strategy of Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), and the associated concept of *topos*.[23] Multimodal Discourse Analysis[24] is subsequently applied to the exploration of other semiotic

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[20] Imad Harb, *Higher Education and the Future of Iraq*, Special Report 195 (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2008).

[21] Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York: Rutledge Falmer, 2004).

[22] NCES, "Who Influences Decision Making about School Curriculum: What do Principals Say?", *National Center for Education Statistics* (1995), nces.ed.gov.

[23] Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-historical Approach (DHA)", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer eds., *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage, 2009), 87-121; Ruth Wodak, *Politik mit der Angst. Zur Wirkung rechtspopulistischer Diskurse* (Berlin: Konturen, 2016), 254.

[24] Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021).

resources which also contributes to the identification of a multimodal argumentative structure underlying the video representations.[25]

1.4 *Research Focus*

To best address the issues briefly described above, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Can educational resources be susceptible to disinformation and bias?
2. How does an argumentation framework enhance the discursive strategies of bias and disinformation fabricated by PragerU?
3. To what extent can biased and misleading information serve as a reservoir of hate speech?
4. How can the Pyramid of Hate be used to understand, identify, and interpret varying intensity levels of hate speech?
5. What are some of the possible implications on learning processes that can be expected from the infiltration of distorted information?

2. Disinformation Tactics as Facilitators of Hate Speech

> *No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin,*
> *or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate…".*[26]
> Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr King's quote reminds us that hate speech needs to be taught, indicating that people learn it from others in a variety of contexts, including educational settings where the dissemination of established knowledge and scholarship is both a practical and ethical responsibility. From this perspective, the study argues that the teaching and assimilation of misleading or distorted information, embedded in the retelling of historical events and scientific facts, can potentially exacerbate polarized opinion and lead to the propagation of conspiracy theories, thus detrimentally affecting society in general, and particularly impacting younger adults and children.

Disinformation poses a significant threat to these young minds, especially when organizations such as PragerU deploy communication tactics that are potential triggers of political or social divisions. Unfortunately, inattentive educational stakeholders exposed to such tactics often unwittingly facilitate the dissemination of disinformation as they fail to recognize its infiltration. According to the American Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA),[27] some of these tactics are designed to build trust and credibility over time by employing strategies such as cultivating fake or misleading personas, crafting conspiracy theories to drown out opposing viewpoints, and amplifying narratives tailored to resonate with the views of specific audiences.

It is also plausible that disinformation tactics exploit the notion of *identity protective cognition*, wherein individuals selectively credit or discredit evidence based on their commitment to competing cultural groups.[28] Some studies suggest that the foundation principle of this cognitive process is culture,

[25] Bruce E. Gronbeck, "The Vision/Visuality Dichotomy in Argument Studies", in Charles Arthur Willard, ed, *Critical Problems in Argumentation* (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 2005), 487-495; Assimakis Tseronis, "Argumentative functions of visuals: Beyond claiming and justifying", in Dima Mohammed and Marcin Lewiński, eds., *Virtues of argumentation: proceedings of the 10th International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA)* (2013), 22-26.
[26] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, (New York City: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).
[27] CISA, "Tactics of Disinformation", *Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency* (2022), www.cisa.org
[28] David Sherman and Geoffrey Cohen, "The Psychology of Self-defense: Self-Affirmation Theory", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, (2006), 183-242.

which is understood to be cognitively prior to the assimilation of fact.[29] According to this mechanism, individuals tend to acquire habits of mind that reinforce beliefs aligned with their identity-defining affinity group, regardless of contrary evidence.[30] Despite new evidence supported by current, updated, and fact-checked information, individuals of opposing persuasions often persist in supporting their group's position or identity, as seen in the case of climate change denialism, where notwithstanding overwhelming scientific evidence, deniers continue to obstruct legislation and spread conspiracy beliefs.

Therefore, it is apparent that hate speech thrives on disinformation tactics and biased attitudes, and the absence of a universally accepted definition of such phenomena at both international and national levels weakens efforts to eradicate all hate-related incidents. Fortunately, there are some recommendations issued by different governing bodies, including the Council of Europe's Recommendation No. R (97) 20, aimed at fostering consensus. This document defines hate speech as encompassing "all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin".[31]

However, if hate speech is seen as a discursive response rooted in existing systematic discrimination targeting groups identified by their protected characteristics,[32] other targets might be overlooked or excluded. Hate speech destabilizes not only protected vulnerable groups but also other members of the general public, including children and adolescents who are particularly vulnerable. For instance, the dissemination of bias and disinformation in educational materials, while not directly causing physical violence, hinders the public's ability to critically discern truthful information from biased or false information. In essence, the distortion of information poses a significant danger as it can potentially escalate into conflict and lead to hate-inducing behaviors.

Clashing with academically-established knowledge raises concerns about exacerbating the polarizing fear of 'the other',[33] primarily due to conflicting values and identities. Polarization of positions can also foster conspiracy theories, often involving suspicions that certain outgroups are dangerous and harbor secretive plans.[34] Although there is abundant literature on the nature of conspiracy theories, little is known about the inclination of younger age groups towards these beliefs.[35] However, there is sufficient evidence that increased exposure to conspiracy or to biased attitudes could influence the extent to which younger age groups are more susceptible to believing anti-scientific or anti-historical facts than older adults, likely due to the age-relate insufficient development of critical thinking skills.[36]

[29] Dan M. Kahan, "Misconceptions, Misinformation, and the Logic of Identity-Protective Cognition." *Cultural Cognition Project Working Paper Series No. 164,* Yale Law School, Public Law, Research Paper No. 605, Yale Law & Economics Research Paper No. 575, (2017).

[30] Kahan, *Identity Protection*.

[31] CoE, "Recommendation No. R(97)20 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on "Hate Speech" (Rec(97)20 1997); "Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Measures to Combat Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity" (CM/Rec(2010)5 2010); "General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech" (CRI(2016)15 2015); "Recommendation CM/Rec (2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Combating Hate Speech". (CM/Rec(2022)16 2022).

[32] Katharine Gelber, "Differentiating Hate Speech: A Systemic Discrimination Approach," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24.4 (2021), 393-414.

[33] Teun van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Sage, 1998).

[34] Alfred Moore, "On the Democratic Problem of Conspiracy Politics", in Joseph Uscinski, ed., *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York: Oxford U.P., 2018), 111-21.

[35] Michael Wood and Karen Douglas, "Are conspiracy theories a surrogate for God?" in Dyrendal Asbjørn et al., eds., *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 87-105.

[36] Ibid.

3. The Pyramid of Hate

As hate speech manifests in various layers and intensities, the study utilizes a taxonomic framework to pinpoint the perilous nature of discursive behaviors recognized as offensive, aggressive, and discriminatory. This framework, known as the Pyramid of Hate,[37] serves as a powerful visual tool to identify and assess the level of severity of discursive strategies. Originally conceptualized as a scale by psychologist Gordon Allport in 1954,[38] it was adapted into a pyramid format by the Anti-Defamation League in 2018. The Pyramid delineates five levels of hate-inducing language, symbols, and images, progressing in complexity from the least dangerous Level One to the most perilous Level Five. Analogous to an actual pyramid, the upper levels rest upon the foundation of the lower ones. This suggests that if individuals or institutions normalize or accept behaviors at lower levels, it is likely to pave the way for the acceptance of behaviors at higher levels. Once normalized, these behaviors can effortlessly permeate various contexts, including educational environments, thus possibly compromising the integrity of knowledge and learning. In the context of this study, the Pyramid of Hate (Figure 2) is employed to examine a reservoir of biased attitudes, facilitating the classification of the risk level posed by PragerU's educational resources.
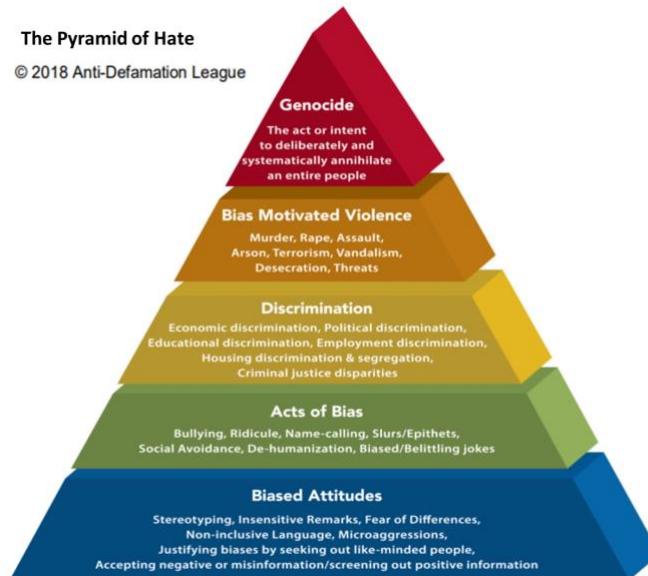
Fig. 1. The Pyramid of Hate

4. PragerU

For decades, both liberal and conservative partisan groups have leveraged affiliated media outlets to promote educational policies aligned with their respective worldviews.[39] Among these media

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[37] Anti-Defamation League (2018).

[38] Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

[39] Ruth Milkman, "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest", *American Sociological Review*, 82.1 (2017), 1-31.

organizations involved in educational content creation with their own communication channels is PragerU, the frontrunner of our case study. [40]

Fig. 2. PragerU homepage: https://www.prageru.com; https://www.prageru.com/prageru-in-your-school

The conservative foundation PragerU produces animated, 5-minute videos and social media content that cover a diverse array of topics, attracting millions of followers, including children and educators.[41] The organization's burgeoning popularity largely stems from its videos, which offer conservative perspectives on economic, political, scientific, and cultural matters. Above all, PragerU's ultimate purpose is "to offer a free alternative to the dominant left-wing ideology in culture, media, and education", thus protecting children from what they call 'woke' narratives taught in most schools.[42]

PragerU's ethos centers around cultivating conservative values, as encapsulated in their motto of *starting them off young.*[43] From this standpoint, the organization critiques the left-wing concept of cancel culture,[44] contending that this practice undermines traditional family values, gender identity, and established scientific and historical facts. The following quote from PragerU's 2023 annual report elucidates the organization's stance:

> The left makes up its own "truth." Using cradle-to-grave messaging, these lies about America and Judeo-Christian values are told to Americans on a massive scale. If these lies are told often enough – without being challenged – young people will believe them. Not because they make

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[40] www.prageru.com.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid..

[44] Najida Gvozden and Lovisa Zetterlind, "The Complexity of Cancel Culture: Unveiling the Personal and Social Drivers that Influences the Decision to Cancel" (Umeå University, 2023), umu.diva-portal.org.

> sense, but because that's the only thing they hear… We are dedicated to: A life guided by Biblical values, protecting children's innocence, celebrating America's exceptional history, civic responsibility, rejecting woke culture, and defending free speech.[45]

However, PragerU's branding can be misleading at first sight as the organization is not a university. Established in 2009 by Allen Estrin and conservative radio talk show host Dennis Prager, PragerU operates as a content-producing, conservative and nonprofit foundation, despite seeking validation as an educational institution. To justify its role, PragerU criticizes the American education system for allegedly "indoctrinating" students with radical ideas concerning critical race theory, systemic racism, gender fluidity, and anti-Americanism.[46]

Nevertheless, PragerU boasts a substantial footprint, hosting over 900 videos on its platform and more than 2000 on its YouTube channel. Its free materials, available in multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Spanish, French, and Russian, cover diverse subjects such as Biography, Life Lessons, Civics, Global Issues, Clean Energy, Environment, Honesty, Life Skills, Science, Self-Help, and Stewardship. The company claims to have garnered over 3 billion viewers across its webpage and social media platforms, with nearly 2.5 million subscribers, including over 700,000 parents, grandparents, and educators subscribed to its kids' content. [47]

Presumably, in the effort to boost their credibility level, PragerU's K-12 video material is presented by over 170 famous presenters, including two of the most widely-known conservative and right-wing political commentators and TV anchors, namely Ben Shapiro from The Daily Wire, and Charlie Kirk from Fox News. Adding to the appeal of these videos, those targeting younger audiences are produced by using limited animation technique which is quite recognizable and easy to understand as it employs child-friendly language, stereotypical characterization, full color, bigger-than-life cartoon subjects and lots of humor. However, these videos often omit, distort, or dismiss important historical facts, indicating the presence of various forms of disinformation. The videos that target older students are not cartoon-like, but feature real-life characters and incorporate symbols of youth culture such as music, fashion, slang, hobbies, and social media. While these videos may exhibit a higher level of factual reporting compared to those for younger audiences, they still prioritize overtly conservative values and biased perspectives.

5. The Dataset

This study's dataset comprises two videos which were selected from a collection of 80 products targeting K-12 students. As space is always an issue, the selection was based on the following criteria: age range, topic significance, and overt occurrences of bias and disinformation. Of the two videos, the first targets third, fourth and fifth graders from one of the most popular and most viewed brother-and-sister cartoon series entitled *Leo and Layla's History Adventures*. This series uses time traveling to obtain answers to some questions about past or current issues such as slavery and climate change. For older students, the selected video regards the highly controversial topic of masculinity. Additional information extracted from the PragerU website is provided in the figure below.

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[45] PragerU, "2023, Annual Report", www.prageru.com.
[46] Ibid..
[47] Ibid.

Fig.3 Selected PragerU Videos

It is important to note that prior to the analysis, the content of the video about Columbus was fact-checked against pre-existing and established knowledge regarding the historical figure.[48] With regards to the video about masculinity, a review was conducted concerning the worldwide current debate on gender identity and discrimination as well as studies about inclusivity as a practice against prejudice and bias.[49]

6. Methodology

This study is inspired by the interdisciplinary field of Critical Discourse Studies[50] which draws together a group of approaches applied to the critical analysis of linguistic and other semiotic resources in their social contexts. In particular, the present methodological framework draws on verbal or rhetorical argumentation as its primary method of analysis, thus relying on the tools afforded by Wodak's argumentation strategy in the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA),[51] and the concept of *topos*. The videos, due their inherent multimodal nature, are also analyzed by employing the socio-semiotic approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA).[52] As this study's second analytical approach, MDA contributes to exposing the verbal argumentation strategies by visually expressing their underlying scheme. The methodological framework is therefore designed to detect and analyze biased or distorted knowledge that is articulated through grammatical, rhetorical, and lexical devices as well as through

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[48] B. Myint, "Was Christopher Columbus a Hero or Villain?", www.biography.com.

[49] Roger Andre Søraa et al., "Diversifying diversity: Inclusive engagement, intersectionality, and gender identity in a European Social Sciences and Humanities Energy research project", *Energy Research & Social Science*, Vol. 62, (2020), 101380, www.sciencedirect.com.; CSHA, "Gender Equality and Inclusivity", www.csha.org; IESOGI, "Reports on Gender: The Law of Inclusion & Practices of Exclusion", 2021, www.ohcr.org.

[50] Johann Wolfgang Unger, "The interdisciplinarity of critical discourse studies research", *Palgrave Communication*, 2.15037 (2016); Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)", in John Flowerdew and John Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2017), 583-596; Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[51] Wodak and Reisigl, *The Discourse-Historical Approach*.

[52] Kress and van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*.

visual evidence.[53] These devices are used to construe narratives containing denial strategies, one-sided argumentation, and justification of positions, usually formulated as metaphors or symbols, claims, warrants, emotive language, self-positioning vs. positioning of opposite others (us vs. them), good vs. evil and other dichotomies, and counter-attribution of responsibilities and values.[54]

Yet, while Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal toolkit is remarkably useful for the identification of relevant semiotic resources other than language, such as symbols, images, and music, the actual analysis constitutes a challenge as children's limited animation products often lack the variety of critical representational, interpersonal and compositional features commonly afforded by multimodal products. The study, as argued in the following sections, attempts to find a feasible solution by focusing on salient meaning-making features.

6.1 *The Discourse Historical Approach*

The DHA deals with the linguistic aspects of a text and discourse while providing a multifaceted social critique aimed at integrating "a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources, the background of the social and political fields in which discourse is embedded, and the context where analyzed discourses take place".[55] In other words, the DHA considers the historical context of a problem, and facilitates the integration of knowledge about the historical sources and the social and political fields in which discursive "events" are embedded.[56] This is accomplished by implementing four strategies which are: 1) nomination (how social actors, objects, phenomena and events are named and referred to linguistically); 2) predication (which characteristics and features are attributed to the actors, objects and phenomena); 3) argumentation (a process used to justify claims of truth and often relies on *topoi*, i.e., argument schemes, used to connect the premise of an argument to its conclusion); 4) perspectivization (deals with positioning the speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance); 5) intensification/mitigation (modify the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances). This study primarily focuses on the strategy of argumentation as explained in the following section.

6.2 *Verbal or Rhetorical Argumentation, and the Concept of Topos/Topoi*

Persuasiveness is the principal strategy of argumentation, and the subject matter of rhetoric, technically residing in reasoning processes that lead a communicative act from assumed premises to a conclusion. Wodak defines argumentation as "a nonviolent linguistic as well as cognitive pattern of problem-solving that manifests itself in a (more or less regulated) sequence of speech acts which form a complex (and more or less coherent) network of statements. Thus, argumentation allows challenging or justifying validity claims such as truth and normative rightness."[57]

Wodak's work and the present study draw on Aristotle's original notion of argumentation, and the concept of *topos,* which means place or location in Greek.[58] In Aristotelian terms, the argument is guaranteed its transition towards the conclusion by means of an argumentation scheme which is

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[53] Reiner Keller, *Doing Discourse Research: An Introduction for Social Scientists* (London: Sage, 2013).

[54] Axel Gelfert, "Fake news: A definition", *Informal Logic*, *38*.1 (2018), 84-117; Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier "Analysing discourses and dispositives: A Foucauldian approach to theory and methodology", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (London: Sage, 2016), 109-136.

[55] Ruth Wodak, *The Discourse-Historical Approach*, 65.

[56] Ibid, 63-94.

[57] Ruth Wodak, "Argumentation, Political," in Gianpietro Mazzoleni, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), 1-9.

[58] Gideon Burton, *Silva Rhetoricae*, Brigham Young University, rhetoric.byu.edu/.

formulated and represented as *topos*. Examples of the latter can be found in Aristotle's *Ars Rhetorica,* classified into two main types as shown in Table 2: the general *topoi* that apply to commonplace topics, and the specific *topoi* that apply only to a specific discipline.[59]

Common *Topoi*	Special *Topoi*
Definition	Judicial
Genus/Species	Justice (right)
Division	Injustice (wrong
Whole/Parts	Deliberative
Subject/Adjuncts	The Good
Comparison	The Unworthy
Similarity/Difference	The Advantageous
Degree	The Disadvantageous
Relationship	Ceremonial
Cause/Effect	Virtue (the noble)
Antecedent /Consequence	Vice (the base)
Contraries	
Contradictions	

Fig. 4 Aristotle's list of *topoi*

Originating from Aristotle's definition, the concept of *topos* in the DHA is expressed as follows: "[*topoi* or *loci*] are parts of argumentation which belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable premises. They are the content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim." Provided below is a list of Wodak's topoi.[60]

1. Usefulness, advantage	9. Finances
2. Uselessness, disadvantage	10. Reality
3. Definition, name interpretation	11. Numbers
4. Danger and threat	12. Land and right
5. Humanitarianism	13. History
6. Justice	14. Culture
7. Responsibility	15. Abuse
8. Burdening, weighting	

Fig. 5 Wodak's list of *topoi*

With reference to the identification of a *topos* or *topoi*, during the initial viewing of the videos, one main and recurrent *topos* began to emerge, corresponding to Wodak's 'Usefulness and Advantage' which was previously formulated by Aristotle as 'the Advantageous'. However, according to the authors, the adjective-used-as-a-noun form 'the Advantageous', seemed to be a more fitting metaphor as it evokes

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[59] Aristotle, *Topica*, trans. by Forster Edward S. (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1989); Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. by Freese John H. (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1991); Sara Rubinelli, *Ars Topica: The Classical Technique of Constructing Arguments from Aristotle to Cicero* (Berlin: Springer, 2009).
[60] Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 74.

the notion of exploitation to procure an advantage, thus extending the former's notion of what is merely useful or handy (7).[61]

As for the argumentation scheme through which the *topos* of 'the Advantageous' is operationalized, the study draws on Wodak's adaptation of Toulmin's model.[62] This model, illustrated in the analysis of the two videos, presents three basic moves: 1) the data, or the argument described as the premise that establishes the case; 2) the warrant which backs the argument on the basis of the evidence presented, and answers the question why the argument/data means the claim is true; 3) the claim which asserts the initial argument by producing an epiphanic moment.

6.3 *Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and Argumentation*

Video products are mostly hybrid or multimodal ensembles as they comprise intersemiotic meaning-making resources.[63] With reference to PragerU kid's videos, especially those for very young children, these are characterized by limited animation, and are therefore performed with reduced action. However, as mentioned, these ensembles contain many other salient features that help to get meaning across, such as facial gestures, saturation of color, symbols, vectors, and information layout.

It is important to specify that although the study does not fully implement what is properly known as multimodal argumentation, mainly due to the limited animation feature of these video sequences, it does take into consideration one of its founding aspects which the study acknowledges and adopts. [64] This consists in the understanding that multimodal arguments are basically different ways of conveying an argument whose message is interpreted by the interlocutor, and reconstructed by the analyst as a set of propositions that support or attack a conclusion.[65] With this in mind, the deployment of a multimodal argumentation approach to decode the sequence of visual expressions is subsequent to a detailed multimodal analysis of the meaning-making resources, and primarily used to visually galvanize what is claimed in the verbal argument scheme. This means that the claim, with its epiphanic moment, is brought to the fore only if the selected images are read as a multimodal ensemble, and not as separate units.

A relevant example of how different semiotic modes perform within multimodal argumentation is the analysis of cartoons which have long been regarded as visual arguments. Functioning as such, the cartoonist's art is to express a definite standpoint through multimodal and argumentative expedients that must be sufficiently persuasive to convince intended audiences. Considering such premises, many of PragerU's videos are about cartoon characters, and possess cartoon features that require an amalgamation of intersemiotic resources of image, text, and audio, including music. In this case, the analysis focuses on how the words of the speakers coordinate with the series of images, so that the latter become more understandable, and the former become more vivid because they are coordinated with images.

As for the foundation of MDA, the term multimodality was used for the first time at the Sydney school of semiotics by Halliday and refers to the modes of analysis applied to objects and words inferred from semiotics, and from semiotic modes, such as image, sound, and language.[66] Grounded in social semiotics of visual communication,[67] MDA is an approach that looks at multiple modes of

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[61] Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-historical Approach", in Karen Tracy et al., eds., *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

[62] Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003).

[63] Gunther Kress, *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[64] Leo Groarke, "Going Multimodal: What is a Mode of Arguing and Why Does it Matter?", *Argumentation*, 29.2 (2015) 133-155.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Theo van Leeuwen, "Multimodality", in Deborah Tannen et al., eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2015).

[67] Kress, *Multimodality*.

communication such as spoken and written text, images, color, audio-visuals, music, and diagrams or graphics in a media text. It is a systematic way of studying not just how these individual modes communicate, but how they interact with one another to create semiotic meaning.

The three metafunctions of multimodal analysis are inherited from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics approach to language as a social semiotic process.[68] These are the Representational extrapolated from Halliday's Ideational metafunction, the Interpersonal from the Interactional metafunction, and the Compositional from the Textual metafunction.

In brief, the analysis of the intersemiotic relationship between visual and verbal modes in representational terms requires the identification of participants, the processes or the activity described, their attributes or qualities, and the circumstances in which the action takes place. As for the interpersonal metafunction, the relationships between the visual, the producer and the viewer are considered according to the power relations that are established. Compositional features, which are the primary source of this study's analytical framework, are related to the layout of the page in terms of coherence. Some of these are: the positioning of the information value (placement of elements to the left - given information or to the right - new information), visual salience expressed in terms of color, shape and size, and visual framing.[69]

7. Video Analysis

Figures 6 and 7 used for the analysis of the videos contain three columns. The first column on the left contains the three argumentative moves; the middle column contains the corresponding transcribed sequences; the right column contains the visual resources that correspond to the sequences. The commentary explaining the argumentative moves is provided after each table.

7.1 Analysis of *Christopher Columbus: Explorer of the New World*

In this video, Christopher Columbus is a controversial historical figure who, according to PragerU, has been delegitimized, and his identity cancelled by wokeism. Through the brother and sister investigators, PragerU aims to boost Columbus' heroic nature by giving him a total remake from a controversial figure to absolute hero who should be celebrated.

The first video sequence (Screenshot 1), corresponding to the argument in Column 1, begins with the most salient character of the video, namely Leo, center-screen and working on his laptop. His sister Layla enters the room and asks: "What's up with the face?", directing the audience's attention towards Leo's puzzled look, thus addressing the issue of the public sentiment about Columbus Day, and why some people are against celebrating this important historical figure. He tries to enumerate the reasons by using his fingers, a multimodal expedient that signifies logical thinking. The dark colour of the grey computer that highlights the seriousness of searching for the truth, contrasts with the bright yellow of the sofa. The term FREE THINKER is written in white letters on the laptop, emphasizing that Leo and Layla are not influenced by common opinion. This expedient most likely serves as a priming technique through which the viewers are prepared to accept the alternative version that Columbus himself will provide. The children then time travel to meet Columbus who is portrayed as a positive character driven by the desire to explore new worlds. This is another priming technique used to construct the turning point in which Columbus talks about his bravery, acknowledging that slavery was a necessary evil, and violence was used to defend himself and his people from the indigenous people.

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[68] Michael A.K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning* (London: Hodder Education, 1978).
[69] Kress and van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse Analysis.*

Argumentation scheme	Rhetorical argumentation	Multimodal argumentation
Argument: Some historical figures are controversial because they commit some objectionable but necessary acts.	Leo: … Some of the teachers at my school really don't like Christopher Columbus and don't think he should have a holiday, but some do… Columbus … was a really mean guy who spread slavery, disease and violence.	Screenshot 1 Time: 0:43
Warrant: Christopher Columbus is a controversial historical figure who acted for the good of humanity according to the standards of the day.	Columbus: Allow me to give you a little biographical information so it all makes sense.	Screenshot 2 Time: 2:25
	Columbus: … and that opened up the desire and the opportunity to figure out a path by the sea.	Screenshot 3 Time 4:05
	Columbus: … they were vicious warring cannibals!	Screenshot 4 Time: 8:53

	Columbus: Some of the native folks from where I just left do those things [eating people and human sacrifice] regularly. So, these people in your time who think it was a peaceful paradise are misinformed. Or lying.	Screenshot 5 Time: 9:25
	Layla: Yes, but what about slavery? You didn't deny that. Columbus: Deny? No. Slavery is as old as time and has taken place in every corner of the world. Even amongst the people I've just left. Being taken as a slave is better than being killed, no? I don't see the problem.	Screenshot 6 Time: 9:28
	Columbus: Ah. Magnifico. That's wonderful. I'm glad humanity has reached such a time. But you said you're from 500 years in the future. How can you come here to the 15th century and judge me by your standards of the 21st century?	Screenshot 7 Time: 9:56
Claim: Christopher Columbus is a controversial but heroic figure.	Leo: I don't think Christopher Columbus was a villain and maybe he wasn't a hero but he sure did some heroic things that are definitely worth celebrating.	Screenshot 8 Time: 12:24

Fig. 6. Christopher Columbus: Explorer of the new world

In this second move, or the warrant, through which the turning point occurs, Columbus provides factual information about his life. On the deck of a caravel, in Screenshot 2, Columbus is on the left (given information, established, and confirmed by Columbus), and the children are on the right (new information that will be conveyed through the children's renewed perspective). The larger-than-life Columbus represents his authoritative figure, owing to both his age and his reputation, thus enhancing his credibility. As this is a limited animation cartoon video, action is reduced, and the only other element that changes position, along with Columbus' arms, is the caravel that rises and falls, creating a rhythmic movement that accompanies the explorer's narration with background music. Resembling a documentary-style soundtrack, such as those used for historical documentaries, the music sets the tone for a celebration in commemoration of the explorer's expeditions. Indeed, as the narration unfolds, the rhythm is quick-paced as Columbus tells us about his feats, then pauses to allow the viewer to take it all in, but only to pick up momentum again towards the final outcome. The caravel is also a salient element as it draws attention to Columbus' extraordinary adventure. This part of the narration is visually represented through graphic materials and itineraries (Screenshot 3) which, at the end of the story, will contribute to the redemption of the historical figure in the eyes of the two protagonists.

In an abrupt fashion, the atmosphere and the music change, prompted by Leo's affirmation: "I'm sorry Mr. Columbus, but I heard at school that you spoiled paradise and you brought slavery and murder to these peaceful people". Columbus then gives his version of the story stating that those places were not a "paradise of civilization".

Screenshot 4 shows Leo's reaction to Columbus' narration about cannibals. Leo, center-screen, but Leyla's position, instead, is that of a mere observer of the scene as she is partially visible on the left in the background. Leo's big blue eyes are indeed the real protagonists in this screenshot as on one hand, they are the same color of the sky, representing his infinite desire for knowledge, while on the other, they seem to show doubt. Leo's gaze is indeed a powerful semiotic resource in all of the scenes. In the

meaning-making process, his gaze, which is at times a demand for attention (when looking at the viewers), and at times an offer when searching for information (when looking towards Columbus or his sister), contributes and supports the rhetorical argumentation process in each of the moves.

In Screenshot 5, Columbus, with a worried look and open arms, ready to provide the missing information, is probably aware that his truth will disturb Leo and Leyla. On the right side of the image, the children are ready to receive this new information. This frame creates an intersemiotic connection between their puzzled facial expressions, and the verbal information as the explorer simultaneously asserts: "So, these people in your time who think it was a peaceful paradise are misinformed. Or lying". This frame also triggers an intertextual connection to PragerU's video introduction where the video authors ask: "Why is Columbus Day being replaced with Indigenous Peoples' Day? Do your kids know the truth about Christopher Columbus?".

In Screenshot 6, the issue of slavery is once again addressed. Leo is tight-lipped, while Layla's arm is extended towards Columbus, thus forming a connecting vector. The children are both aware that Columbus' answer will be crucial in resolving the issue.

In Screenshot 7, Columbus is zoomed in as he needs to create a personal moment with the children while he affirms that his actions cannot be judged by people who have a different perspective because they live in a different epoch.

In the third move, or the Claim, the two young people seem to realize, in a closing epiphanic moment, that Columbus deserves a celebration of his own. In Screenshot 8 Leo and Layla are back in their living room. Leo is on the sofa with his laptop again, but he is now smiling, and his eyes show no sign of worrying. He extends his finger to highlight that they have conclude that Columbus is a heroic figure worthy of a proper celebration.

The multimodal analysis of this cartoon focuses mainly on the intersemiotic connection between the verbal and the visual resources by means of eyes, gaze, and hand and body gestures, resulting in a multimodal artefact crafted to offer a different perspective on Columbus, thus responding to PragerU's initial question "Do your kids know the truth about Christopher Columbus?".

7.2 Analysis of *How to embrace your masculinity!*

The analysis of this video aims to explore the meaning-making process by means of which the semiotic resources have been combined to provide a positive standpoint on the concept of masculinity. In this video, the narrator is a young man who tells his viewers to value their masculinity by embracing it, against those who say that masculinity is toxic.

The first move, or the argument, is constructed using three statements to assert the importance of masculinity, namely to (1) "defeat Nazi German in World War II", (2) "mine coal and keep Americans warm", and (3) "have a solid family and a strong country today". Textual information in (1) and (3) is reiterated through captions that appear on the screen while the narrator is speaking, while only (2) is represented visually. In Screenshot 1, the argument is visually constructed by means of a scene depicting two men, dressed casually, and working in a mine with a pickaxe in their hands. The two characters, representing the archetype of the hardworking man, are center images and therefore salient elements. Their mining activity conveys strength and the power of masculinity.

The warrant is gradually constructed by means of a series of statements, formulated on the idea that masculinity makes men strong and courageous and respectful towards women. Screenshot 2 depicts a young man with a grimace on his face, and dressed in typically traditional college clothes. His gaze turned towards the young woman on the right seems to express uncertainty as she is looking at him with disapproval. The term "wuss" used in the text offers an explanation of how the young man is perceived by the woman, which is the exact opposite of the image of masculinity PragerU is trying to build throughout the video.

Fig 7. How to embrace your masculinity!

Screenshot 3, on the contrary, represents men's strength and courage, and is a stereotypical representation of gender. Indeed, a young woman, or a "damsel in distress" is being robbed by a young man (given element on the left), while another young man (new element on the right) saves her by defeating the aggressor.

Screenshots 4 and 5 respectively illustrate two examples of men with hero status. The narrator introduces these scenes by affirming that it is important "to choose your heroes carefully". In Screenshot 4 there is a policeman, or an iconic image of law and order, who is able to stop unruly drivers simply by raising his arm. This image is followed by that of a negative hero, in Screenshot 5, represented by a famous TV presenter. This TV personality is mocked as he uses exaggerated gestures and facial expressions making him look like a buffoon host in a Woke show, a clear intersemiotic connection to PragerU's stance against woke culture.[70]

Screenshot 6 shows a boy and a girl having dinner. Both are dressed up for the occasion, and the blond hair, finely dressed young lady represents the typical white American female. The young man is reprimanded on his bad manners, thus supporting the narrator's affirmation that men should have good manners, have patience and pay the bill! Upon leaving, the young man remarks that "women are complicated".

The epiphanic moment occurs when the claim is made by the narrator that men are naturally heroic and strong in nature thanks to their masculinity. This leads to Screenshot 7 which recaps the main tips provided in the video. The image is composed of a colored background with waves that create a movement effect, and a numbered list of actions that recall the instructions provided throughout the video on how to become a man and embrace masculinity. This list has the function of a text that has to be "used rather than read"[71], as it conveys the core message of the authors: "grow up and be a man", which means being independent, strong, courageous and gentle (with women).

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[70] www.prageru.com
[71] Kress and van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*.

The multimodal analysis evidenced that this video constructs and conveys specific narratives about masculinity, employing visual and textual elements to create a cohesive and persuasive argumentation strategy.

8. Discussion

According to dictionary definitions, the term advantageous means something that is beneficial, good, but also discriminatory, utilitarian, opportune, and profitable. It also states that the term refers to any action that is "appropriate for achieving a particular end [or] implies a lack of concern for fairness.[72] The *topos* 'the advantageous', as exploited by PragerU, according to the video evidence, is all about opportunism, profitability, and unfairness. In fact, the perceived advantageousness of young minds is not lost on PragerU whose tactics leverage the willingness to be motivated that children and young adults usually have.

The learning principle of providing multiple perspectives regarding an issue is a cornerstone of social studies teaching practice in K-12 schools.[73] Teachers commonly provide students with various primary sources documenting the same event or prompt them to compare historical interpretations from different secondary sources. The objective is to foster critical evaluation of sources, guide students in formulating sound historical or scientific inquiries, and instill the understanding that individuals hold diverse viewpoints that shape their perceptions and evaluations of the world.

This pedagogical and uncontested practice is the foundation on which this study builds its line of reasoning. In other words, every PragerU action, affirmation, or attitude contained in their video material is tested against and contested according to the soundness, robustness and reliability of educational principles. The stoutness of this approach has led the authors towards the firm belief that PragerU capitalizes on the principle of multiple perspectives by creating videos that introduce alternative and often conflicting views on past and present issues, while advancing a general argumentation scheme that aligns with their partisan agenda. Throughout the paper, it is argued that PragerU's nexus of bias and disinformation is positioned against what is perceived as a pervasive leftist and 'woke' agenda embedded in American K-12 curricula. PragerU, following the lead of numerous right-wing affiliated think tanks, seeks to influence young audiences who will eventually constitute a significant source of electoral votes.

Indeed, the study's theoretical and methodological foundation draws on argumentation theory, and specifically on a unique dual scheme which operates through both rhetorical and visual strategies. With reference to the paper's core *topos*, that of '*the Advantageous',* PragerU presents its own version that builds on the act of 'doing what is best for the well-being of the collectivity'. However, as noble as this resolution might sound, the interpretation of content creators such as PragerU can even teach kids that slavery was a necessary evil, white folks are superior, men are strong and heroic while women need saving, and that cancel culture is a destruction of history invented by the left to indoctrinate humanity against tradition and Christian values.

As discussed, through the deployment of both rhetorical and visual discursive strategies, PragerU taps into the emotional aspect of argumentation theory, as exemplified by Aristotele's rhetorical triangle of Ethos, Logos, and Pathos.[74] The appeal to Ethos is done by presenting itself as a legitimate educational institution or benefactor of learning. Logos is used to reason with viewers and convey its conservative values and perspectives. Pathos is the most exploited of the three emotional aspects as it emerges as the

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[72] "Advantageous", www.vocabulary.com.

[73] Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Sciences Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001).

[74] Robert Bartlett, *Aristotle' Art of Rhetoric*, Translation with an Interpretive Essay (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Omar Rosas and Javier Serrano-Puche, "News media and the emotional public sphere – Introduction", *International Journal of Communication*, 12, (2018), 2031-2039.

most prominent rhetorical element, elicited through relatable, engaging, and emotionally resonant characters interacting with the audience.

By looking at the results in a broader perspective, one of most significant findings of the study is the involvement of alternative and politically affiliated media platforms like PragerU in the misappropriation of educational content. At this pivotal age, students often lack the critical discernment necessary to navigate complex life events, rendering them vulnerable, as are their parents, to bias and disinformation. This vulnerability occurs even in the absence of support from educational institutions, which are expected to safeguard students from unreliable materials, even those used for extracurricular purposes. Consequently, exposure to biased and distorted content can distort learning processes that should ideally foster impartiality.[75]

As mentioned, the digital revolution has reshaped the landscape of digital spaces in today's information society.[76] Some of these spaces serve as breeding grounds for harmful social phenomena, where hate speech can proliferate unchecked under the guise of presenting different perspectives or voices. PragerU's platform, by their own admission, spearheads a vigorous campaign against leftist ideologies, thereby enabling ignorance, disinformation, and manipulation to dominate discourse on critical issues.

While the precise impact of content manipulation on student learning cannot be realistically quantified within the scope of this study, as it would need the implementation of other methods of inquiry such as questionnaires and interviews, it is evident that this phenomenon is on the rise, largely due to the progressive influence of digital media with ramifications in educational spheres worldwide. The proliferation of hate speech as a consequence of bias and disinformation has been exacerbated by digital technologies, often undermining and discrediting mainstream media.[77] This has led to increased polarization among the general public, a phenomenon leveraged by PragerU as part of its '*the Advantageous*' rhetoric.[78] Thus, based on extensive research conducted on the general impact of bias and disinformation in everyday life, the study can only speculate on the potential trajectory that this oppositional behavior can follow, and the mystification it could produce in learning materials.[79]

Referring to the Pyramid of Hate, its application enables the identification of escalating behaviors that pose a threat, along with an understanding of the challenges associated with halting their progression once initiated. This implies that by examining the various levels, it becomes feasible to determine the stage at which intervention would be most effective. Specifically, the Pyramid delineates factors likely to contribute to advancement toward higher levels, including tolerated offenses, puns, and stereotypes perpetuated by the media, and even biases stemming from one's community and family. With this perspective in mind, by way of illustration, the study has identified the levels and the main discursive strategies employed in the narrative accounts presented in the videos. As a reminder, the upper levels include the attitudes of the lower levels. These are:

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[75] Jared Piazza, "Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 15.1 (2022), 55-77; Badar Mohamed and Florijančič Polona, "Assessing Incitement to Hatred as a Crime Against Humanity of Prosecution", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 24.5 (2019), 656-687.

[76] Matthew Costello et al., "Social Group Identity and Perceptions of Online Hate", *Sociological Inquiry*, 89.3 (2019), 427-452.

[77] Raphael Cohen-Almagor, "Freedom of Expression v. Social Responsibility: Holocaust Denial in Canada", *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 28.1 (2013), 42-56.

[78] Morgan Kelly, "Political Polarization and Its Echo Chambers: Surprising New, Cross-disciplinary Perspectives from Princeton", (2021), *Princeton University*, www.princeton.edu; Donato Vese, "Governing Fake News: The Regulation of Social Media and the Right to Freedom of Expression in the Era of Emergency", *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 13.3 (2022), 477-513.

[79] Brittan Heller and Larry Magid, "Parent's and Educator's Guide to Combatting Hate Speech – ConnectSafely" (2029), www.connectsafely.org; Waldron Jeremy, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard U.P., 2012).

Level One - stereotypes and insensitive remarks; justifying biases, screening out well-documented information, racism (Columbus video);
Discursive strategies: metaphors, symbols, language exemplifying self-positioning as good vs. evil (or the other);
Level Two - fear of differences; misogynist behavior (Masculinity video);
Discursive strategies: symbols, emotive language such as expressions highlighting the weakness of women and the strength of men, and cisgender values;
Level Three - economic, educational and political discrimination (Columbus and Masculinity videos)
Discursive strategies: counter-attribution of responsibilities and values, self-positioning vs. positioning of 'the other', language of conforming to the expected societal role.

The Pyramid of Hate therefore serves to enhance comprehension of how content manipulation that emphasizes societal reprimand and exclusion can lead to hate-inducing behaviors, including those that are seemingly innocuous such as those masquerading as educational activities. These must be acknowledged and mitigated before they evolve into more severe behaviors on the uppermost levels of the Pyramid.

9. Conclusion

Hate, defined as an intense, sustained, and enduring aversion to others,[80] serves as the primary catalyst for hate speech behaviors. While there exists significant variation in the definitions of hate speech,[81] and a consensus on its boundaries remains elusive, it is generally agreed that this form of expression fundamentally involves the manifestation of hatred toward specific individuals and groups, implicitly or explicitly labeling them as undesirable and legitimizing hostility towards them.

Upon initial examination, PragerU's educational videos may not appear stigmatizing, hostile, or dangerous, and this realization presents a challenge as biased attitudes and disinformation infiltrate learning materials without detection. Indeed, contrary to common thought, hate speech is not limited to more evident acts of bullying, body shaming, or violent anti-civil rights protests or criminal activity. As argued, the discursive strategies employed in PragerU's videos seem to encourage a wide range of conspiracy theories, false assertions, and various forms of denial that have the potential to challenge the epistemology of knowledge.

The complacent and often desensitized attitude towards the dangers posed by a media-controlled market of educational materials provides opportunities for organizations like PragerU to infiltrate content that aligns exclusively with their value system, thus curtailing the development and nurturing of a critical approach to life.

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[80] Allport, *Levels of Hate*.
[81] Matteo Vergani et al., "PROTOCOL: Mapping the Scientific Knowledge and Approaches to Defining and Measuring Hate Crime, Hate Speech, and Hate Incidents" *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18.2 (2022), e1228.

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