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COUNTER-NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB MEDIA POLITICS: THE CASE OF ALJAZEERA

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Abstract

Aljazeera, the Qatari first-ranked all-news TV channel that was launched in 1996, has been considered an exception to strong censorship rules that dominate private and public media in the Arab world. It is the only satellite Arab TV channel that is independent from the Ministry of Information in its country of origin. Aljazeera is also believed to reinforce a shared Arab-Islamic identity and diligence in presenting a potentially impartial treatment of contemporary problems and critical voices throughout the Arab world (Lynch,2006). In this paper, I shed light on Aljazeera's continuing role in presenting counter-narrative coverage of critical political events in contrast with the rest of the Arab TV channels, using the media concept of contraflow as a theoretical framework. The theory of contraflow confirms the strong presence of counter-hegemonic information whose sources come from the non-dominant media outlets that are the results of growing privatization and transnationalization of media, particularly in developing countries. Drawing on the framework of contraflow, I point out the media techniques that Aljazeera utilizes in its counter-narrative reporting, such as the prominence exemplified in devoting generous airtime to covering public protests. Aljazeera also adopts a sharply defined editorial line in the way it covers the regional conflicts, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. My methodological approach consists of a close study of these particular techniques, which include prominence, the reliance on a clearly-defined editorial line and the use of digital journalism. Finally, I suggest that unlike the majority of the Arab TV channels including its first all-news competitor Al-Arabiya, Aljazeera succeeded in maintaining a strong position among the Arab audiences in the way it has covered the different political unrests related to the Arab Spring and more importantly in its persisting counter-war stand in relation to the recent violent attacks on the Palestinian territories.

Keywords: *Arab Television; Aljazeera; Contraflow; Counter-Narrative; Arab Spring; Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.*

1. Introduction

Aljazeera, the Qatari all-news TV channel launched in 1996, is argued to offer a different take on politically and socially controversial issues in the Arab world. This is primarily the result of Aljazeera's *laissez-faire* policy in which the station has autonomy from the Ministry of Information, making it an exceptional media case in the Arab world. The channel airs the most popular political Arab talk shows, such as *Shahed'Ala al-A'ser (Witness to An Era)*, hosted by Ahmed Mansour, which invites Arab political figures and spokesmen to offer their opinion about the most important political events that took place during a particular regime. *Akthar min Ra'iy (More than One Opinion)*, hosted by Sammy Hadad, also strives to present a variety of opinions regarding the latest news topics by featuring guests from different political and social persuasions. In addition, Aljazeera has been able to establish offices in different parts of the world that include Europe, the United States and Canada, which substantiates its prominent role in providing reliable news feeds regionally as well as internationally.

Aljazeera is also believed to offer credible news compared to western news outlets, which is exemplified in the Arab viewers' avid consumption of the channel and their intensive use of its website (Elmasry et al., 2013). Similarly, Aljazeera's reinforcement of the shared Arab-Islamic identity and its equally diligent treatment of the imposing problems in every Arab country are acclaimed for having created a public sphere where viewers across the Arab world invariably relate to the raised issues and critically discuss them. Marc Lynch (2009) has noted that "the new television stations create warm relationships among physically distant Arabs and greatly increase the emotional salience of political issues" (Lynch, 2009, p. 35). Lynch (2009) stresses the important role that transnational channels, specifically Aljazeera, have played in bringing Arabs together due to its showcase of national problems as urgent regional challenges that demand the involvement of every Arab actor.

In this paper, as a methodological approach, I shed light on Aljazeera's specific media techniques that contributed to its continuing role in presenting counter-narrative coverage of critical political events in contrast to the rest of the Arab TV channels, using the media

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concept of contraflow as the main theoretical framework. The theory of contraflow confirms the presence of information whose sources come from the non-dominant media outlets that are the results of growing privatization and transnationalization of media, particularly in developing countries. In this regard, Thussu (2006) has pointed out that a number of countries have successfully emerged as strong competitors to the flow of media generating from dominant countries, predominantly the United States. Thussu (2006) provides the example of the profusion of Indian films through the strong film industry of Hollywood and the Spanish-language telenovelas produced by Televisa (Mexico), Venevision (Venezuela) and Globo TV (Brazil) on different TV channels across the world. These two media genres are considered to be a viable example of the transnational success of media coming from the periphery (Thussu, 2006). The other media conglomerates that fall under this category according to Thussu (2006) are the pan-Arab TV channels MBC that targets specifically the Arab diaspora and the 24/7 news TV channel Aljazeera. It is stated that Aljazeera has been able to challenge the well-established popularity of CNN in the way it has covered events in which the affairs of the United States and the Middle East are intertwined. In 2006, Aljazeera was able to attain 50 million viewers across the world, destabilizing the long-standing influence of CNN's domination over the dissemination of news about critical events in the region (Thussu, 2006). In this context, the increasing privatization of media outlets, such as the case with Aljazeera is believed to have contributed to the proliferation of media flow from the South. Aljazeera's reporting has been able to reach the global audience through its English-language media platforms, contributing to the profusion of counter-hegemonic news. Aljazeera launched the English version of its Arabic website in 2002 stating that this platform is designed "to fill a niche for English speakers who want to get the other side of the story, the Arabic perspective". Hence, Aljazeera's decision to target western audiences substantiate its strong role in providing counter-hegemonic information. In fact, Aljazeera presents a successful example of a transnational TV channel that provides media coverage of events in a way that challenges the widespread global narratives but as importantly the regional narratives disseminated by other Arab TV channels, as I will demonstrate.

2. Material and Methods

In this paper, I focus more on the media techniques that made Aljazeera stand out among the Arab TV channels and not the western-based media outlets. Thus, the counter-narrative reporting of Aljazeera is discussed in contrast with the reporting of the rest of Arab TV channels whose contents are largely impacted by the ideologies of the ruling regimes. In this regard, my methodology consists of providing a detailed analysis of the media techniques that regionally distinguish Aljazeera in its coverage of the different political unrests in the Arab countries. First, Aljazeera is known for its reliance on the news-reporting technique of prominence, which refers to the generous devotion of airtime to covering the public protests, particularly subsequent to the Arab Spring in 2011, unlike the other Arab TV channels. Second, Aljazeera has consistently taken advantage of the media technique of digitalization by, for instance, presenting updated materials that come from Arab citizens who are able to post their personal footage on Aljazeera's site since 2011. Third, Aljazeera typically adopts a sharply defined and unchangeable editorial line in the way it covers the regional conflicts, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that began in 1948 and continues to exist nowadays. In my discussion of Aljazeera's distinguishable editorial line, I will provide different examples that confirm Aljazeera's unchangeable support of public movements and local forms of resistance. Finally, while relying on the theoretical media framework of contraflow during my analysis of Aljazeera's coverage of the recent critical events in the region, I suggest that Aljazeera succeeded in maintaining a strong position among the Arab audiences in the way it has covered the different political unrests related to the Arab Spring and more strongly in its persisting counter-war stand in relation to the recent violent attacks on the Palestinian territories spanning the period of 2023-2025.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Aljazeera and the covering of the Arab Spring

There has been an evident partial reporting of the public unrest that begun in 2011, which is currently referred to as the Arab Spring by the majority of the Arab TV channels except for Aljazeera. Protesters in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen took to the street to call for the end of corruption, authoritarian rule, and social injustices. Both privately-owned and state-run media outlets provided a complexly distorted coverage of the street

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manifestations. For instance, Egyptian satellite TV channels, headed by the state-run Channel 1, propagated a government-molded discourse depicting Tahrir protesters as claimers of demands that clash with Egypt's economic and political interests. Moreover, these channels alleged that the Tahrir protesters had been infiltrated by thugs or what is referred to as *baltagaa* in colloquial Egyptian, which would lead the country to instability. Also, live calls from ordinary Egyptians, providing personal disturbing experiences because of "the lack of security" served to reinforce the state's distorted reporting of unfolding events (Miles, 2011). More than that, while protests and occupied movements were still taking place, Egyptian TV aired old footage of normal traffic in downtown Egypt. Also, during the month of the revolution, in January 2011, the Egyptian government dismissed Aljazeera Mubasher from the satellite transmission system, Nilesat, and ordered the closing of Aljazeera offices in Cairo. This controversial media coverage prompted some prominent Egyptian journalists and TV talk-show reporters to resign such as Mahmoud Saad who later joined the Tahrir crowds. Given the clearly partial approach of both state-owned and private TV channels during the January and February unrest, the Egyptian protesters carried a number of forceful slogans such as "Lies, exclusively on Egyptian television" (Rahman, 2011). Despite the emergence of new state-independent TV channels like Al-Tharir which aims to provide forums that "represent the young people who led the revolution" (Mekay, 2011) the enduring presence of politically bigoted private TV channels, such as Al-Faraeen, which has relentlessly portrayed the revolutionaries as "foreign agents" puts the credibility of a number of contemporary Egyptian private TV channels into question.

Conversely, Aljazeera played a crucial role in its reporting of the Egyptian upheavals, offering a counter-narrative of what the Egyptian TV channels had been covering. Aljazeera performed live broadcasting from the Tahrir Square as well as invited prominent reporters and guest speakers, such as Azmi Bechara, who are known for being human-rights activists. Aljazeera's media content emphasized the legitimate demands of the protesters, providing safe platforms for oppositional leaders, which contributed to the discrediting of Mubarak's regime. More to the point, Aljazeera's counter-narrative content stood out partly thanks to its reliance on the technique of digital citizen journalism. Aljazeera made it possible for ordinary citizens, who in most cases lack professional journalism training, to participate in reporting and disseminating information through Aljazeera's official online platforms. Egyptian citizens played an important role in their gathering and sharing of footage that exposed the regime's aggression against the

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peaceful protesters, challenging the state-owned control over the media outlets. The shared content by the ordinary citizens was being reposted and incorporated by Aljazeera, bolstering its role in providing alternative and state-challenged reporting (Miladi, 2011). Similarly, during the recent public protests in Tunisia, Aljazeera was the first Arab TV channel to air the Tunisian protests that began in 2010 (Sanchez, 2020), countering the mainstream Tunisian media discourse. In fact, Tunisian satellite TV channels turned a blind eye to the internal tumultuous situation. Tunis 7 and Canal 21 maintained a firm silence on the killing of university graduate students and the persecution of other civilian protesters during the first two weeks of riots. Instead, these channels portrayed the protesters as thugs who posed a serious threat to the country's national security. This method, also adopted by Egyptian television, was used to depopularize the protesters and delegitimize their pro-democracy demands. In addition, the Aljazeera office in Tunisia, like its counterpart in Egypt, was closed down for fear that it would have access and air information deemed risky for Ben Ali's regime. Even after Ben Ali left office, national TV stations remained cautious about uncovering the horrifying corruption that characterized his regime. However, they later opened their space to previously exiled opposition figures while private ones, like Hannibal TV, took the liberty to criticize leaders from different political orientations (Owais, 2011).

While Tunisian and Egyptian satellite TV channels ignored covering the insisting public protests and occupied movements of the period 2011, Aljazeera's airtime was generously devoted to the revolutionary protests. In addition to the technique of consecrating abundant airtime to the coverage of the public protest, Aljazeera welcomed the Arab audience's digital sharing of instantaneous news. For example, Aljazeera's updated materials partly came from Arab citizens who posted their personal footage on Aljazeera's site. In fact, Aljazeera's success is partly due to its "referencing Facebook pages and Youtube in reporting the raw events" (Miladi, 2011). Hence, because of its sharply defined supportive stand in regard to the revolutions, Aljazeera was coined "the channel of the revolutions." Aljazeera is also accredited for having previously divulged the rigged nature of the presidential elections that took place in Egypt in 2005. While the Egyptian TV channels ignored the chaos and protests that characterized Mubarak's triumphant re-election, Aljazeera reported the violent and intimidating attacks of the state police against the voters (Seib, 2012). This is a clear example of how Aljazeera's counter-narrative challenged the Egyptian TV channels state-compliant narrative, confirming its pro-revolution position and steadfast support of the rebellious Egyptian youth. Overall,

thanks to Aljazeera's generous coverage, intelligent reliance on the new digital technology, and well-defined strategy regarding the most intense political events, Arab viewers did not feel the need to rely on neither international news outlets such as CNN or BBC for transparency in reporting nor on regional TV channels such as the ones mentioned earlier. Therefore, the contraflow nature of Aljazeera's content was specifically noticeable during the Arab revolutions which made the Arab viewers shun watching the Arab state-owned TV channels and focus on Aljazeera's coverage. Aljazeera also introduced a new media culture in the region by broadcasting 24 hours a day in order to guarantee the inexorable flow of its counter-narratives. All in all, Aljazeera's coverage of the public protest in the region contributed to enhancing its strong transnational position thanks to its reliance on alternative and independent news narratives.

3.2 Aljazeera and the coverage of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict

Before proceeding to discuss the media techniques used by Aljazeera in its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it should be noted that the only channel that can be considered as a real competitor to Aljazeera is Al-Arabiya. The latter is the second most significant all-news channel in the Arab world, which is Dubai-based and was launched by Al Walid Al Ibrahim, son-in-law of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, in 2003. Unlike Aljazeera, Al-Arabiya has generally adopted a moderate approach in its coverage of the political conflicts in Arab countries. For instance, during its coverage of the Iraqi war, Al-Arabiya showed less sympathy to Saddam's regime in contrast to Aljazeera, which made it more popular in Iraq. Also, unlike Aljazeera, Al-Arabiya shuns the use of ideologically loaded terms like "martyrdom" during its reporting of the ongoing wars and conflicts in the region. Despite this supposedly more balanced approach, Al-Arabiya's editorial line is very deferential of Saudi Arabia's political interests. Overall, Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya remain the most widely watched all-news channels in the Arab world. The approach that Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya adopt towards the coverage of the regional wars, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is heavily influenced by their political agendas. For instance, the relationship between Aljazeera and the United States has been characterized by tension compared with Al-Arabiya's strong alliances with American interests. As previously stated, Aljazeera adopts a sharply defined editorial line in its coverage of critical events, and the Palestinian issue is no exception. Aljazeera has been known for its relentless coverage of the different violent incidents taking place

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in the Palestinian territories. For instance, during the Palestinian *Intifada* in 2000, Aljazeera was the only Arab channel that presented graphic content to the Arab audiences.

First, one of the most significant techniques that distinguishes Aljazeera from the rest of the Arab TV channels including Al-Arabiya is the use of prominence in relation to the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Aljazeera devotes a considerably large number of reports regarding the unstable situation in the Palestinian territories. For instance, Aljazeera produced total 168 reports covering the tense period of 2008-2009 that exceed the amount of coverage of any Arab TV channel including Al-Arabiya (Elmasry et al., 2013). Interestingly enough, the number of reports remains the same both in times of war and peace. More to the point, Aljazeera relies on packages in its news format, providing coverage of events through field reporters exemplified in the use of 55 correspondents in its 168 reports in the period of 2008-2009. On the other hand, Al-Arabiya relies on studio anchoring and voice-overs, which reflects the limited allocated budget and the generally limited interest towards the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Aljazeera's word choice towards the reporting of Israel-Palestine also reinforces its exceptional role. Aljazeera often uses aggressor-related words such as "murder", "massacre", and "slaughter" in its reports of Israeli violence while providing on camera interviews for largely Palestinian officials (Elmasry et al., 2013). For instance, Hamas which is the Palestinian authority in charge of Gaza has been generously offered airtime on Aljazeera, shedding light on the daily struggle of the Gazawi population. In this context, Aljazeera focuses on featuring Palestinian casualties while reporting the personal stories of victims. This personalization of victims includes offering personal information such as names, age and occupation of Palestinian casualties for the goal of attracting attention and stirring regional and global sympathy. Additionally, more than half of Aljazeera's reports are packaged stories presented by reporters that are on site that is in both the Palestinian and the Israeli territories. This type of reporting is known to be high-budget and highly professional. Aljazeera's investment reflects its well-defined agenda towards the Palestinian political authorities. For instance, Aljazeera has always adopted a positive stand towards Hamas and has been more critical of the peace-keeping roles of Egypt, the United States and the United Nations, compared to the supportive stand of Al-Arabiya towards the US foreign policy in the region. In this regard, Aljazeera offered camera interviews to Hamas leaders twenty-four times during the 2008-2009 war on Gaza (Elmasry et al., 2013).

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This noteworthy reporting in relation to the Palestinian plight has intensified during the war in Gaza that started in October 2023 and just ended recently in January 2025. Aljazeera's technique of devoting generous airtime to the Palestinian case has been significant since the beginning of the war in Gaza. Aljazeera has been providing day-to-day reports of the continuous mass destruction of all aspects of life in Gaza. It first covered the forced evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in several areas of Gaza City, including the Sabra, Remal, Tal al-Hawa and Daraj neighborhoods, who had to follow the orders of the Israeli army in order not to jeopardize their lives. The first all-news TV channel has been constantly following the daily death tolls and the number of damages inflicted on the Palestinian strip. It claims to offer fact-based news, exclusive video footage, and exclusive photos and updated maps. Both the Aljazeera English and Arabic Facebook pages provide hour-to-hour reporting of any type of aggressive incidents taking place in Gaza. For example, Aljazeera's English version website on the December 16th, 2024 posted the killing of a Palestinian grandfather whose story about the loss of his granddaughter due to the Israeli attacks went viral in November 2023. The image of the Palestinian grandfather named Khaled Nabhan became famous worldwide because of his emotionally-loaded goodbye to his dead granddaughter as he kept kissing and hugging her while whispering words in her ears. Aljazeera insists on providing close personal stories of the Palestinian victims in order to draw attention and incite sympathy to their situation.

Second, Aljazeera has heavily taken advantage of different digital platforms in covering the Gaza war. Aljazeera English website also offers daily live updates of the Israeli aggressions against buildings, hospitals, human aids, refugee camps and other different entities. As of December 17th, 2024, Aljazeera English website presented live coverage of Israel's attacks on Kamal Adwan Hospital amid Gaza ceasefire push. In this regard, Aljazeera posted on its English version website a long documentary video named "Gaza: The War on Hospitals" explaining and condemning the systematic and intentional Israeli attacks on Palestinian hospitals¹. The video makes clear that the deliberate killing of Palestinian citizens who have either sought treatment or taken shelter is an old practice adopted by the Israeli army, which started from the Nakbah in 1948. The Nakbah refers to the historical event characterized by the violent persecutions and expulsions of half of

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/al-jazeera-world/2024/6/1/gaza-the-war-on-hospitals>. Accessed 18 December 2024.

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the Palestinian people, resulting in the creation of Israel. The Arabic-language site of Aljazeera also provides daily live coverage of the evolution of events in Gaza. As of December 19th, 2024, Aljazeera Arabic site posted information about the killing of four Israeli soldiers by the Palestinian fighters in contrast to the killings of fifty-six Palestinians by the Israeli army amongst international efforts to reach ceasefire agreement. On the other hand, Aljazeera has posted on its Arabic-language YouTube channel videos of recent destructions of buildings in Northern Gaza executed by the Israeli soldiers.

According to Aljazeera's posted information on its English-language official website, as of the present moment, Israel's war on Gaza has killed at least 45,028 Palestinians, which includes 17,000 children, and wounded 106,962 since October 7, 2023. Aljazeera has recently posted on its English version YouTube channel a video named "Investigating War Crimes in Gaza" that discusses not only the recent systematic Israeli attacks on the Palestinian territories and the brutal aggressions against the Palestinian citizens but also pinpoints the two historical moments in 1948 and 1967 that led to the occupation of the Palestinian land and the creation of Israel. The video that was posted in November 2024, almost a year after the beginning of the war on Gaza grossed almost two million views within two months since its release. Unsurprisingly, the hundreds of comments under the video are mostly in English since the video content is in that same language, clearly targeting the international community. An important number of the commentators expressed their gratitude for the role Aljazeera is playing in divulging the Israeli atrocities, praising the channel's high professional journalism. This video, in fact, contributes in shedding light on Aljazeera's outstanding role in remaining diligent in covering Israel's different types of aggression, not only transnationally but also internationally, relying on its English-language online platforms.

Third, the technique that has contributed to Aljazeera's outstanding role in providing counter-narrative reporting compared to the rest of the Arab TV channels is its strong adherence to a clearly well-defined, fixated editorial line towards political turmoil in the region, including the Palestinian case. As demonstrated earlier, unlike the majority of the Arab TV channels, Aljazeera has been regular in its coverage of hour-to-hour updates about the violent incidents in Palestine through its different digital platforms. More importantly, Aljazeera has demonstrated unprecedented support for the plight of the Palestinian people, comprising their military and diplomatic leadership. For instance, Aljazeera has invariably expressed its support to Hamas leaders, and this is exemplified

in the way it has covered their different forms of resistance. Aljazeera, for instance, has shown a clear sympathetic reaction to the murder of Hamas political leader Yahya Sinwar who was killed by Israeli soldiers on October 16th, 2024. Aljazeera posted a number of videos covering important events in Yahya Sinwar's life portraying him as a national hero and a martyr due to his long-standing memorable resistance against the Israeli occupation. Aljazeera's supportive stand to the political and military leaders of Hamas is made explicit from the titles of the videos posted on its Arabic YouTube channel such as "He fought till the last breath", "Yayha Sinwar from his birth to his martyrdom" and "what are Yayha Sanwar's last messages before his last scene?" Conversely, the Saudi-sponsored all news TV channel Al-Arabiya provided a neutral reporting on the murder of Yayha Sanwar without the use of words such as martyr or hero. Al-Arabiya even quoted an Israeli channel in its reporting of the unexpected killing of the political leader. More than that, MBC TV channel, which is also Saudi-sponsored prepared a very controversial report presenting Yahya Sanwar as a brutal terrorist², divulging its partiality towards Israel. This documentary has provoked the anger of the Arab viewers who called for the boycott of what they call the Zionist Arab TV channel³.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Though Aljazeera represents an exceptional case in the Arab mediascape in its approach and structure by being independent of the Ministry of Information and adopting a strongly well-defined editorial line towards the plights of the Arab people, Aljazeera, in fact, lacked a religiously impartial editorial line. The Palestinian-born Aljazeera manager, Wadah Khanfar, who was the managing director of Aljazeera for several years, had employed hardline Islamist journalists, which made the channel foster radical forms of Islam. It should also be noted that Aljazeera's popular political talk shows divulge troubling secrets mostly about past Arab regimes. For example, Witness to An Era has disclosed information about the way the late Moroccan King, Hassan II, ordered the elimination of his opponents following the failure of a state coup in the seventies. The same talk show made known confidential information regarding the inhuman treatment of Islamists during Nasser's regime. In addition, Aljazeera provided limited coverage of the pro-democracy protests in Bahrain. This is due to the Qatari foreign policy that

² <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x97mume>. Accessed December 19, 2024.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0W65jo2i9Y>. Accessed 19 December 2024.

necessitates loyalty to the Gulf Cooperation Council members. Hence, Aljazeera remains cautious in providing information that can backlash its interests in the Gulf region.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Aljazeera presents an exceptional case in contemporary Arab media politics. A large number of scholarships have studied the role Aljazeera has played in revolutionizing the media structure and content in Arab countries. Marc Lynch, for instance, has highlighted Aljazeera's ability to unite the Arab public sphere through its special packaging of critical political events in the region. In this paper, I have argued that Aljazeera has been distinguished by its audacity to present counter-narrative coverage of important political events compared to the rest of the Arab TV channels, including its competitor all-news TV channel Al-Arabiya. I used the theoretical media framework contraflow to pinpoint the outstanding role of Aljazeera in insisting on providing reporting that are at odds with the dominant news content of the other Arab TV channels. As discussed in my paper, Aljazeera has been able to maintain this unique position through three main techniques. The first technique is providing hour-to-hour coverage of updates in areas of political turmoil such as the case with the Palestinian conflict (prominence). The second technique is the reliance on different digital platforms to draw attention and incite sympathy of critical events. The last most important characteristic is its adherence to a sharp editorial line characterized by strong support to popular national movements and local resistance such as the case with the public manifestations during the Arab Spring, and the endless support towards Hamas's different forms of resistance.

5. Contributions and Limitations

My research paper contributes to the large number of scholarships performed on Aljazeera's content, structure, and political affiliation. For instance, Marc Lynch's acclaimed work on Aljazeera emphasized the role Aljazeera played in countering the media discourse of the previous repressive regimes in a number of Arab countries. As he puts it, "where Arab public life had for decades been dominated by the voice of the state, al-Jazeera ushered in a new kind of open, contentious public politics in which a plethora of competing voices clamored for attention" (Lynch, 2006, p.2). The discussion in my paper extends Lynch's argument in relation to the distinguishable position of Aljazeera in contemporary Arab media politics. My research sheds light on Aljazeera's continuing role in providing a counter media narrative of the different political unrests in the Arab

region, specifically in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More to the point, my research is distinguished by its focus on specific media techniques used by Aljazeera in its news coverage in contrast to the state-compliant media reporting of the rest of the Arab TV channels, including its competitor, all-news TV channel Al-Arabiya. Finally, both the structure and the content of Aljazeera provide a fertile opportunity for further research on the exceptional role performed by Aljazeera in revolutionizing the way important news items are covered both regionally and globally.

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DEAF SIGNERS' NARRATIVES ON VIDEO REMOTE INTERPRETING IN ITALY: FROM CHALLENGES TO OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH STAKEHOLDERS' COLLABORATION

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Abstract

Within sociocultural and semiotic frameworks, interpreting is conceived as a dynamic and flexible process shaped by contextual elements, such as the online modality. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) has spread rapidly, impacting sign language interpreting through both advantages and challenges for interpreters and Deaf users. In Italy, interpreting in Italian Sign Language (LIS)¹ faces this digital complexity, alongside the need to meet high-quality standards set by Deaf users, who have increasingly assumed an active role in interpreting. Consequently, research involving the Deaf community's perspectives appears essential to improve accessibility. However, data on Deaf users' viewpoints about VRI are still unavailable. This study investigates how six Deaf LIS signers perceive VRI across four settings. Adopting a constructivist orientation, data-driven and ethnographic approaches, semi-structured interviews in LIS were recorded on Zoom and translated into written Italian. Data were thematically analysed to generate shared meanings and subjected to a content analysis to quantify the occurrences of each perception type, discussed setting, theme, and macrotheme. This paper presents results for three of six macrothemes generated from the thematic analysis. Results show that participants perceive VRI as an opportunity for greater accessibility but emphasise the need for increased hearing awareness and updated interpreter training. Perceived benefits and obstacles differ across settings, with more technical issues reported during online conferences and more uncomfortable interactions

¹ The acronym LIS derives from the first Italian label *Lingua Italiana dei Segni*. The designation was later revised to the current *Lingua dei Segni Italiana*, reflecting LIS independence from Italian language. The old acronym has been maintained for readability (Volterra et al. 2022).

with hearing participants in video dialogue interpreting. These findings provide novel insights from Deaf narratives, acknowledging Deaf users' central role in developing high-quality interpreting services. Furthermore, a collaborative approach among stakeholders is proposed to transform challenges into opportunities, thus enhancing online accessibility

Keywords: *Video Remote Interpreting; Italian Sign Language; Deaf Signers' Narratives; Digital Accessibility.*

1. Introduction

Research on Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) is still developing, and Deaf users' perspectives, in Italy, remain underexplored. Understanding their experiences is crucial for improving accessibility and interpreting quality. Therefore, this study explores the perspectives of Deaf Italian Sign Language (LIS) signers' regarding VRI. Since the objective is to capture spontaneous perceptions, minimally influenced by pre-established assumptions, the work addresses these general research questions (RQs):

1. How do Deaf LIS signers perceive VRI?
2. How do these perceptions differ across four VRI settings?
3. How do Deaf LIS signers' perceptions align with the existing literature on VRI perceptions?

This paper first contextualises the investigation. Then it clarifies its methodology, and it presents and discusses the results. The last section summarises its contributions, future directions, and limitations.

1.1 Italian Sign Language, Deaf Community, and Interpreting

In the 1980s, Italian researchers began to investigate the visual-gestural communication used by Deaf Italians. This led to the linguistic legitimisation of LIS as a historical-natural language with its own structure separate from both other sign languages and spoken Italian (Volterra et al., 2022). Linguistic research has gradually fostered Deaf people's empowerment. From perceiving their condition merely as a disability (deafness), Deaf people began to embrace it as a way of being in the world (see

Ladd, 2003, for the concept of *Deafhood*)². The sense of belonging to a minority community lies in the sharing of values, behaviours, artistic representations, such as poetry and theatre, and LIS as their core language (Volterra et al., 2022). Nevertheless, only a small percentage of Deaf people acquire LIS from their parents, making peer interaction in adulthood a key factor in linguistic transmission. Indeed, the Deaf community is highly heterogeneous, with cultural identity and linguistic preferences influenced by several factors, including the age of LIS acquisition, family background, educational and rehabilitation paths, and the use of hearing aids or cochlear implants. Therefore, while some Deaf individuals use only Italian, others adopt a bilingual approach, using both Italian and LIS (Volterra et al., 2022). All Deaf signers are bimodal bilinguals, using two separate languages in different modalities: LIS in a visual-gestural modality and Italian in a spoken/written modality. The use and proficiency in both languages vary depending on various factors, such as context, communicative purpose, interlocutor, and individual experience (Grosjean, 1992).

Alongside Deaf empowerment, the role of LIS-Italian interpreters has evolved. First, they were hearing relatives who assisted Deaf families and spoke on their behalf. They gradually became professionals, advocating for a mechanical model of interpreting. Today, they are community allies (Bontempo, 2015). A turning point was the 2021 legal recognition of LIS and the professionalisation of interpreters and translators (Fontana, 2022), including through university-level education. Deaf individuals have become active users who choose interpreters, recognise their competence, provide feedback, and demand quality services. This highlights the need to include their perspectives in research (Fontana & Zuccalà, 2011; Gambini & Fontana, 2016). Within the sign language interpreting field (see Napier, 2010), this work contributes to LIS interpreting research from sociocultural and semiotic frameworks that view interpreting as a dynamic context-shaped process (Cokely, 1992; Volterra et al., 2022), also influenced by the online modality (Del Vecchio et al., 2024).

1.2 Video Remote Interpreting

The evolution of technology, including instant messaging, social media, and video call apps like Teams or Zoom, has improved communication both within the Deaf

² Henceforth, the word Deaf with capital letter will be used to mark and identify this sociocultural identity.

community and between Deaf and hearing people. The COVID-19 pandemic encouraged the Italian Deaf community to advocate for accessibility in media and discuss cultural-linguistic issues through live Facebook events. Since 2020, social media has shaped Deaf cultural and metalinguistic awareness (Tomasuolo et al., 2021), accelerating the need for high-quality interpreting education and services.

Meanwhile, VRI has gained widespread use, introducing new benefits and challenges for interpreters and Deaf users worldwide. However, research on this topic remains limited. While some studies examine interpreters' perspectives on VRI (*e.g.*, De Meulder & Sjim, 2024), fewer focus specifically on Deaf users' insights (*e.g.*, Vogler et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2017; De Meulder & Stone, 2024). In Italy, only a few studies address this topic (Izzo, 2024; Del Vecchio et al., 2024), and systematic accounts on such perceptions remain scarce. This study, therefore, contributes to this field.

Although VRI serves as an umbrella term in Europe, scholars have recommended considering the specific characteristics of each online context (Skinner et al., 2018). This study adopts three online settings already distinguished and described by Del Vecchio et al. (2024) (numbers 1-3), while proposing a fourth one (number 4):

- 1. Video Relay Service (VRS):** it is a company-managed service, in which the interpreter uses a videocall with a Deaf user and a phone call with a hearing person;
- 2. Video Dialogue Interpreting (VDI):** it typically involves a videocall with three actors -the Deaf person, the hearing person and the interpreter-, such as during a doctor's visit. It can be used either on demand or by appointment and may be managed by a company or privately.;
- 3. Video Conference Interpreting (VCI):** it refers to events like training courses and conferences;
- 4. Video Meeting Interpreting (VMI):** it regards interactive situations, like work meetings. Although this label is not found in the literature, it was added due to its specificity. Unlike the more passive VCI setting, VMI requires constant engagement and frequent turn-taking from all participants.

2. Material and Methods

To address the RQs, a qualitative methodology was chosen, guided by a constructivist framework that acknowledges the contextual influence on both data

collection and interpretation. Drawing on data-driven and ethnographic principles, semi-structured interviews were considered the most suitable method to obtain spontaneous data. These principles emphasise the importance of letting the data guide the analysis, ensuring that insights emerge from participants' narratives rather than from pre-existing assumptions (Silverman, 2006).

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, which generated analytical categories. Then a content analysis complemented these qualitative insights. The frequency of each category occurred in the dataset was calculated, providing an indication of their relevance in the narratives (Sections 2.3 and 3).

2.1 Participants

Six Deaf LIS signers participated in the study. Such a small sample is common in qualitative research with Deaf signers, as the Deaf community constitutes a linguistic minority and not all Deaf individuals use LIS, which makes recruitment challenging. Five participants were recruited through convenience and purposive sampling: they were informally contacted by the researcher, provided they met the inclusion criteria of being at least 18 years old (legal age in Italy), Deaf, LIS signers, and having experience with VRI. Since three participants were from Northern Italy and two from the South, a sixth participant from the centre was recruited through snowball sampling to ensure geographical balance. Each participant was assigned an identification number (P1-P6).

2.2 Data Collection

Firstly, participants received a PDF consent form via email, that provided full details of the research process and requested their consent for recordings and data use. The document was prepared in accordance with research ethical principles for Deaf participants (Singleton et al., 2014). It included both Italian text and LIS video translations prepared by the researcher, a certified LIS interpreter.

Secondly, participants completed a bilingual Google Form designed with three goals: to ascertain participants' inclusion criteria, to collect sociolinguistic information useful for data interpretation, and to gather preliminary data on the frequency of VRI use across four contexts. The questionnaire contained three sections: an explanatory section, a demographic one and a section with questions on VRI use frequency. It included nine

multiple-choice questions, five Likert-scale items, and only two open-ended questions. All questions were designed to avoid technical jargon.

Finally, semi-structured interviews in LIS were conducted using open-ended prompt questions, serving as general stimuli to elicit spontaneous narratives from participants. For example, they were asked to describe their overall experience with VRI and to discuss its advantages and disadvantages. The narratives were recorded on Zoom. This online modality provided flexibility in scheduling for both participants and the researcher and ensured the conversation was as comfortable as possible. Indeed, participants were familiar with online communication, whereas a physical camera in an on-site setting might have inhibited them (Gianfreda, 2010).

2.3 Data Manipulation and Analysis

The manipulation of raw data through translation and coding (Dam, 2001) represents a limitation. LIS interviews were translated into written Italian by a professional interpreter and cross-checked with the researcher. “An original data (source language) is different from a translated utterance” (Stone & West, 2012, p. 662). This implies the risk of distorting Deaf narratives and misinterpreting them during the analysis. While acknowledging that this process might have altered some original nuances of the data, lexical repetitions were preserved in the translation, as they were considered important for the analysis³. Moreover, choosing post-translation rather than simultaneous interpreting during interviews guaranteed greater accuracy and prevented participants from feeling constrained by the interpreter.

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 2019) was conducted to identify shared meanings and experiences through an iterative and interpretative process. While the analysis was mainly data-driven, the theoretical background presented and discussed earlier inevitably shaped the interpretative process. As Braun and Clarke (2012) pointed out, “it is impossible to be purely inductive, as we always bring something to the data when we analyze it” (p. 59). The inductive approach predominates, coexisting with researcher’s influence, which is methodologically justified in reflexive thematic analysis.

³ The Author translated some participants' quotations from Italian into English for this paper. While some nuances may be lost, this did not affect the analysis, which was conducted on the Italian scripts.

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The analysis in Microsoft Excel (Figure 1) involved an initial coding, in which small parts of the translated script were segmented and labelled “at the semantic or the latent level of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). Each code represented a meaningful unit related to a specific aspect of the participants’ narratives and was assigned a label summarising that unit. For instance, the segment “The deaf person can choose to watch the interpreter by pinning their video feed and follow both spoken and signed discourse” was coded as “Possibility to follow both spoken and signed discourse”. Secondly, codes-sharing related meanings were grouped into themes, and related themes were then grouped into macrothemes. Themes represent groups of related codes that capture a common idea, while macrothemes represent broader labels that encompass related themes. Coding involved the identification of the following features:

- **VRI type:** VRI (coded when comments referred to online interpreting without specifying settings); VRS; VDI; VCI, VMI; Other tools (coded when participants referred to communication tools other than VRI, such as subtitles);
- **VRI subtype:** Private or Corporate (for VDI); Online or Hybrid (for VCI);
- **Perception Type:** Positive, Negative, Other (when comments were neither explicitly positive nor negative).

Figure 1 Coding scheme on Microsoft Excel.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
ID	Segment	VRI type	VRI subtype	Perception Type	Code	Notes	Theme	Macrotheme

A preliminary analysis of three interviews served as a pilot study to refine the coding process. Once all interviews were available, the analysis was revised and completed. Finally, a content analysis was applied to count the occurrences of each discussed VRI type, VRI subtype, Perception Type, Code, Theme, and Macrotheme. This integrated the main qualitative analysis, providing an overview of their distribution.

3. Results and Analysis

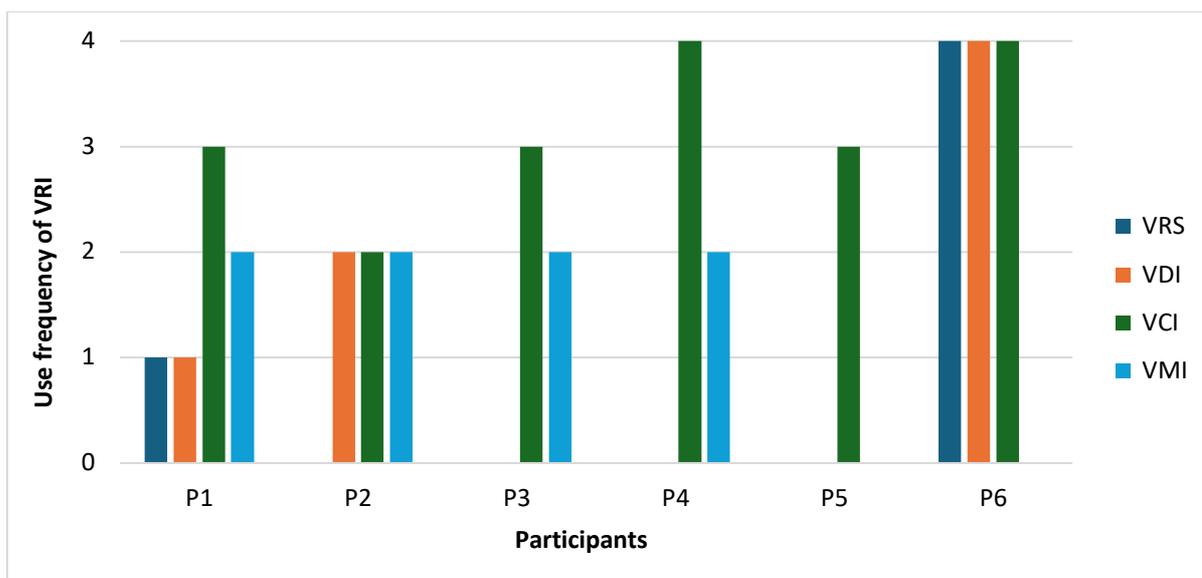
Table 1 shows the participants’ diverse backgrounds in terms of chronological age, LIS acquisition age, gender, geographic area, and education level.

Table 1 *Participants' demographic and sociolinguistic information.*

Demographic feature	Range/attribute	N participants
Chronological age (yrs)	18-24	1
	25-34	2
	35-44	2
	45-54	1
LIS acquisition age (yrs)	0-5	4
	16-20	1
	21+	1
Gender	Female	4
	Male	2
Geographic area	South	2
	Centre	1
	North	3
Education level	High school	3
	BA degree	1
	MA degree	2

Figure 2 illustrates the frequency of VRI use across participants and VRI types.

Figure 2 Participants' use frequency of VRI.

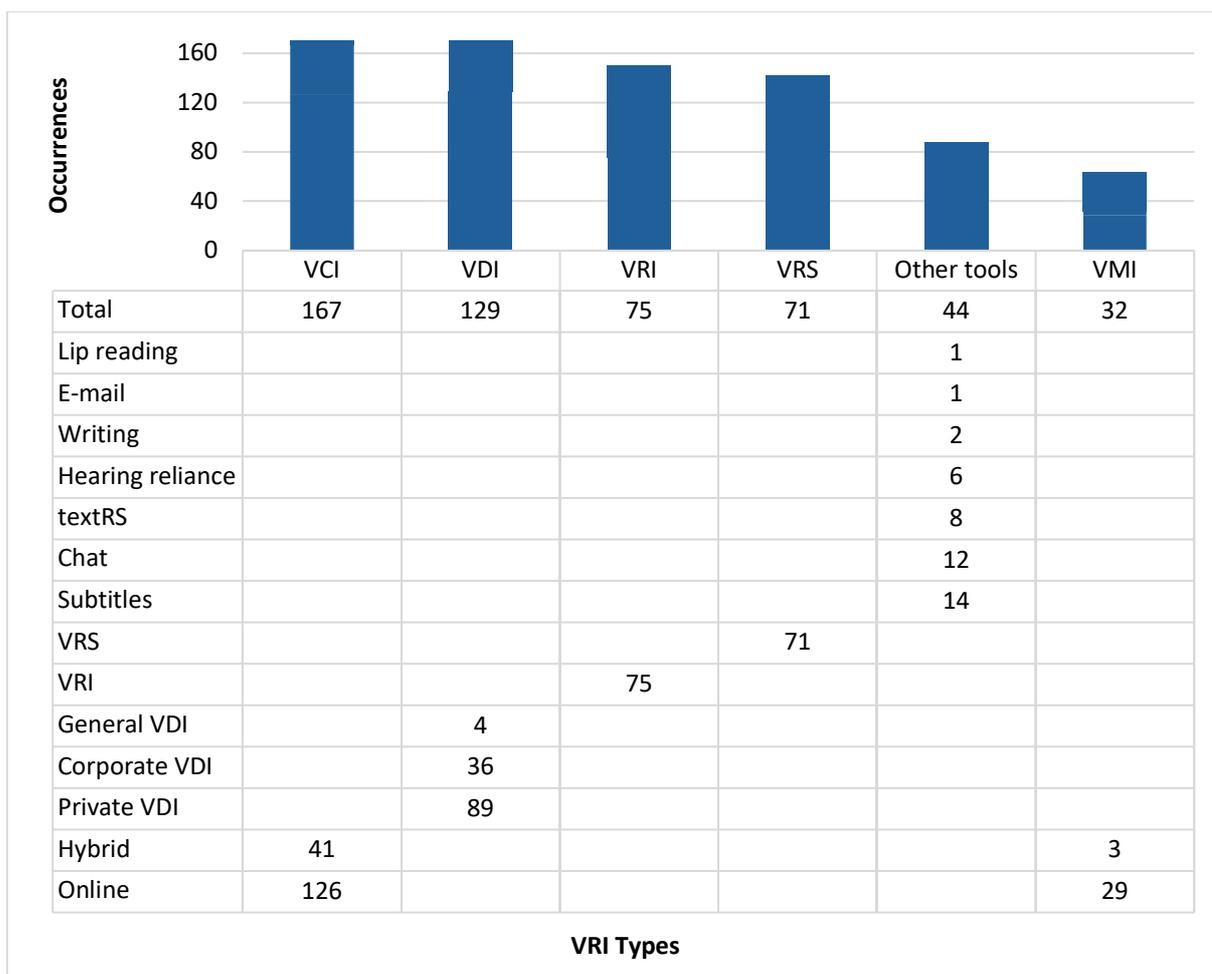


Note. Participants' self-reported frequency of use of four VRI types was measured on a Likert scale (0 = not at all; 1 = rarely; 2 = sometimes; 3 = often; 4 = very often). The values do not represent the number of times VRI was used but rather the ordinal frequency ratings provided in the questionnaire.

Follow-up interviews revealed misunderstandings in the questionnaire: specifically, no participant had experienced VMI. VCI and VDI emerged as the most frequently used VRI types, as reported by participants in the questionnaire and consistently reflected in the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews lasted two hours and a half and the thematic analysis led to 518 codes. Figure 3 shows the occurrences of each VRI type and subtype discussed.

Figure 3 Occurrences of discussed VRI types and subtypes.



Note. Each column represents the total occurrences of each VRI type (including Other tools), explicitly indicated in the row Total. When subtypes are available, their occurrences are indicated below. For example, codes concerning VCI totaled 167, divided into 41 for hybrid VCI and 126 for entirely online VCI.

The most discussed services were VCI and VDI, reflecting participants' most frequent experiences.

The findings resulted from the content analysis of Perception Type are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 *Occurrences of perception types on VRI.*

Perception type	Occurrences
Negative	219
Other	140
Positive	115
474 Total	

While the category ‘Other tools’ was included in Figure 3, which provides a general overview of the results across different contexts, it was excluded from the Perception Type analysis (Table 2). This focused specifically on understanding how Deaf users perceive VRI- that is, whether their comments expressed a positive, negative, or other attitude towards VRI (*e.g.*, neutral or purely descriptive statements). Including attitudes about other communication tools (*e.g.*, subtitles, chat) could have contaminated this specific analysis. Therefore, the findings in Table 2 are based on the total of 474 codes. Negative perceptions about VRI were more frequent, likely reflecting a need for detailed explanations and proposed solutions.

Twenty-three themes were created and grouped into six macrothemes. The content analysis shows that the most frequent macrothemes are Deaf awareness and action, Challenges and Benefits (Table 3).

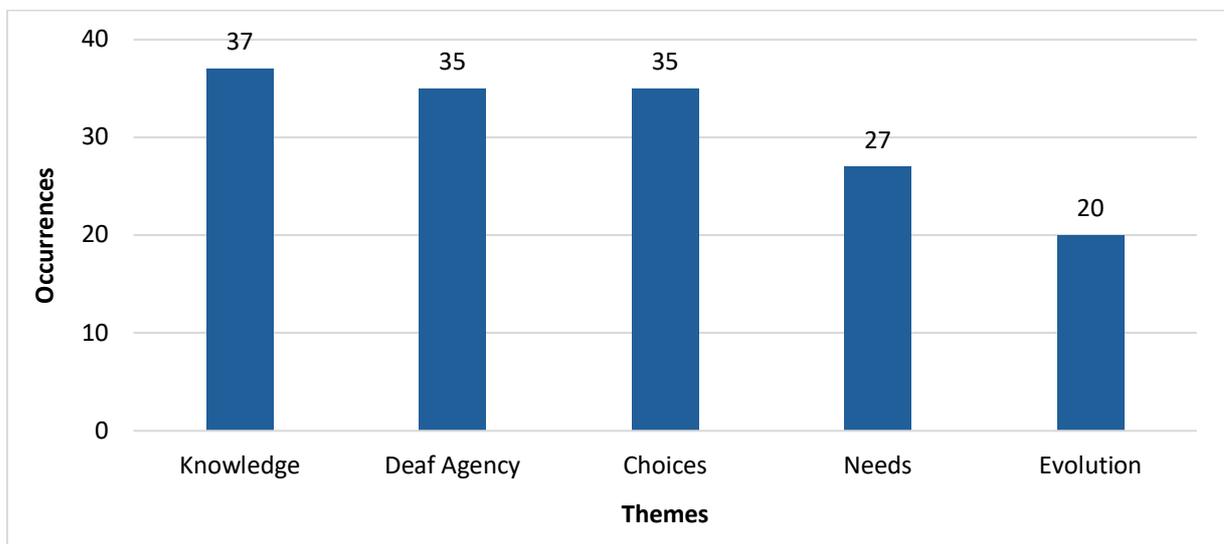
Table 3 *Occurrences of each macrotheme.*

Macrotheme	Occurrences
Deaf awareness and action	154
Challenges	115
Benefits	86
Hearing people	62
Multifaceted accessibility and communication	57
Interpreters	44
518 Total	

The occurrences of the themes belonging to each macrotheme are displayed in Figures 4 to 9. This paper specifically focuses on the theme Deaf Agency (within the macrotheme Deaf Awareness and Action), the macrotheme Hearing People and the theme Bimodal Bilingualism (within the macrotheme Multifaceted Accessibility and Communication), which are described in detail below. Results from Challenges, Benefits, and Interpreters are only mentioned, as they are useful for discussion (Section 4). Quotations from participants are abbreviated into Q and numbered accordingly (e.g., Q1, Q2).

The macrotheme Deaf Awareness and Action includes five themes (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Occurrences of themes within the macrotheme Deaf Awareness and Deaf Action.



Specifically, the theme Deaf Agency includes the data showing the dynamic responses of Deaf participants to hearing unawareness and behaviours. These responses involve a range of emotions, such as annoyance (see Q2), anxiety, shock, upset, perplexity, and resilience. In contrast, when VRI works smoothly without any discomfort, the experienced emotions are quietness and satisfaction.

Deaf Agency also entails explanations given by Deaf participants to hearing interlocutors to clarify different issues: the necessity of an interpreting service, the importance of good visibility of the interpreter, the communication barriers faced without accessibility, and the operation of VRI services. In addition, preliminary clarifications

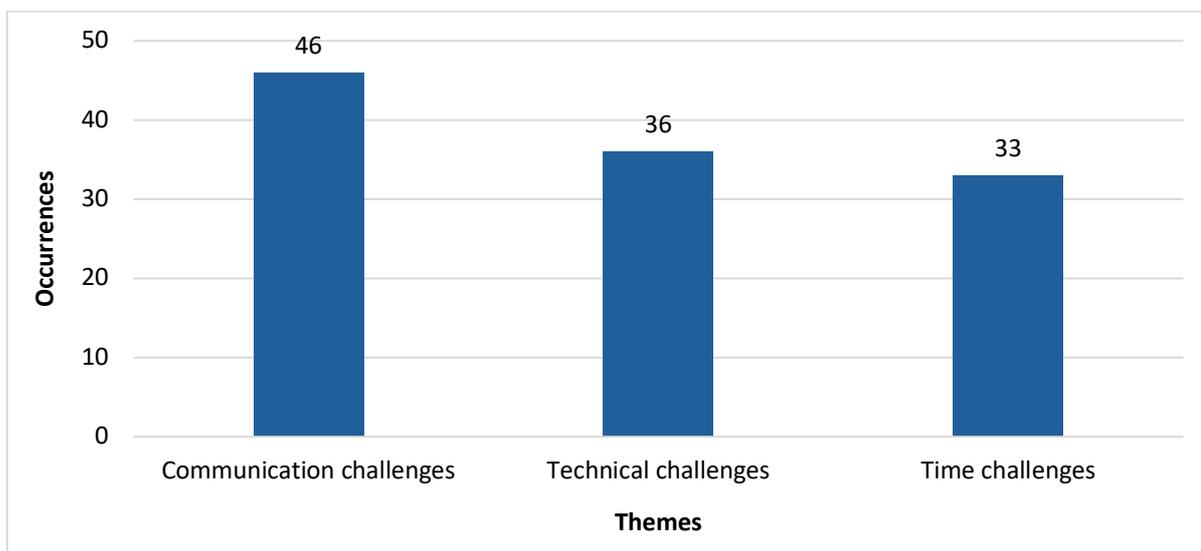
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before starting a Corporate VDI service are also provided to interpreters, who connect instantly without the opportunity to prepare their work in advance.

Another aspect of Deaf Agency regards concrete actions, conceived as demonstrations of one's own awareness or responses of hearing behaviours and comments. These actions include showing the smartphone screen to the hearing person, moving to overcome positioning difficulties in VDI (see Q2), and adjusting personal settings in VCI.

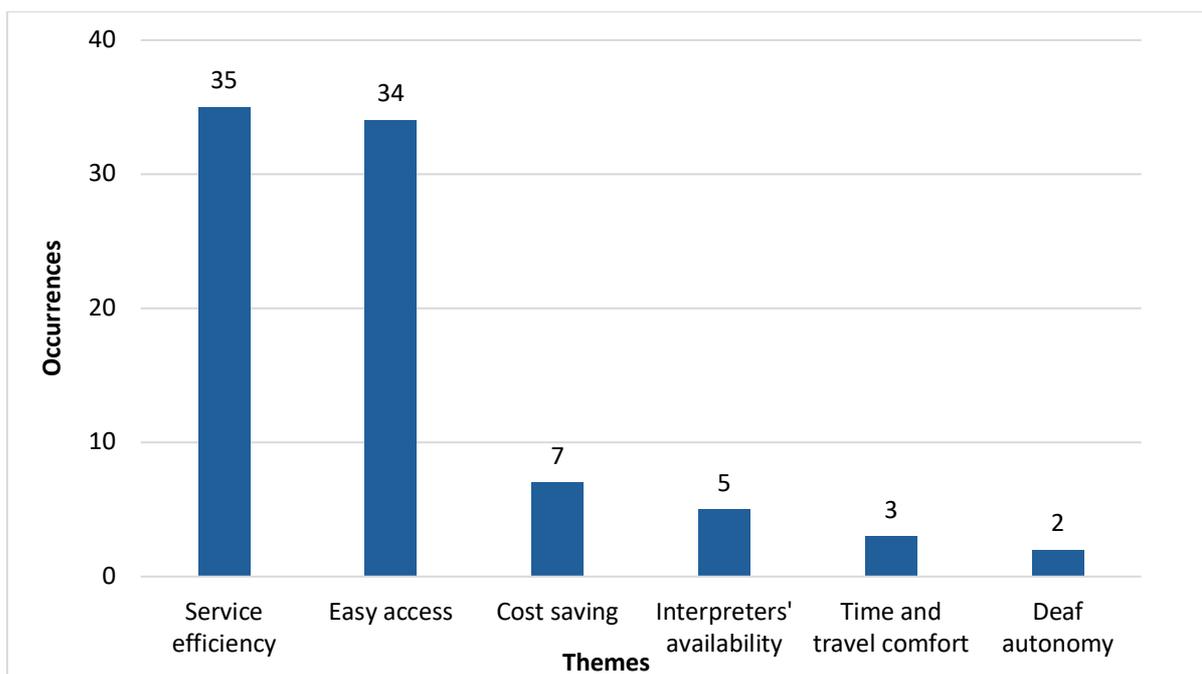
Among Challenges (Figure 5), Deaf participants highlight that during VCI when a presenter is signing, and the interpreters' video window is off, they are not able to lipread the interpreters' Italian discourse.

Figure 5 Occurrences of themes within the macrotheme Challenges.



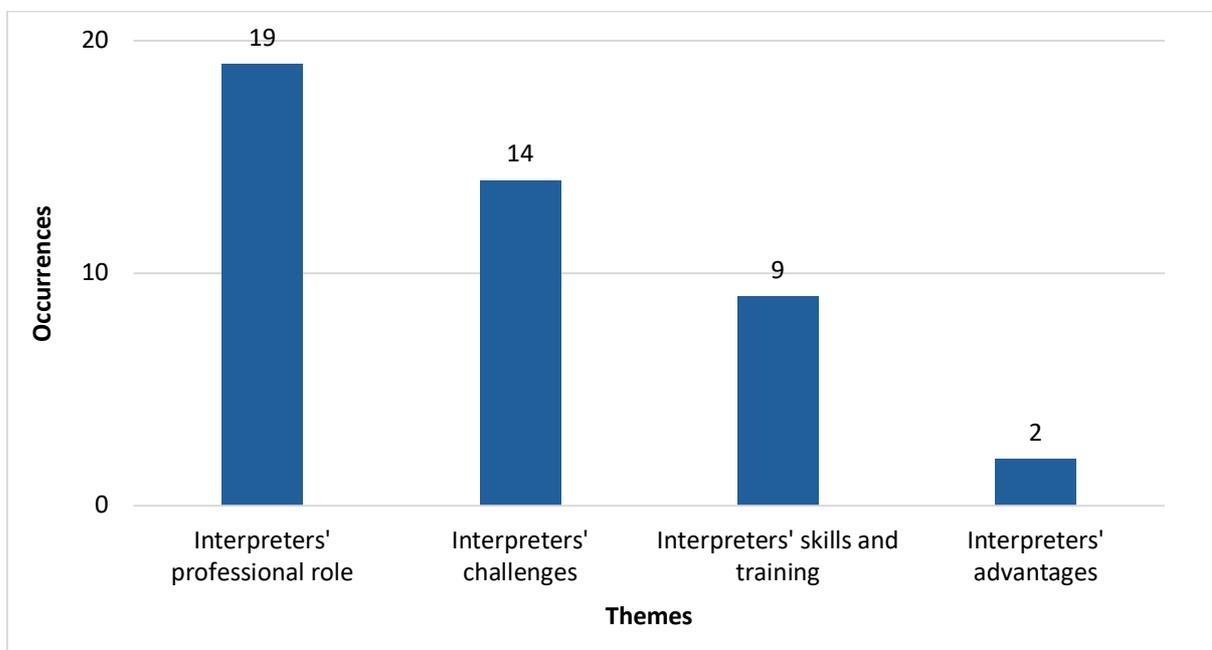
This happens because the interpreters' video window may be overlooked by technical moderators, which can transform potential benefits into barriers for Deaf users. Indeed, when every aspect works, the possibility to pin the presenter, interpreter, and slides in VCI is reported as one of the Benefits (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Occurrences of themes within the macrotheme Benefits.



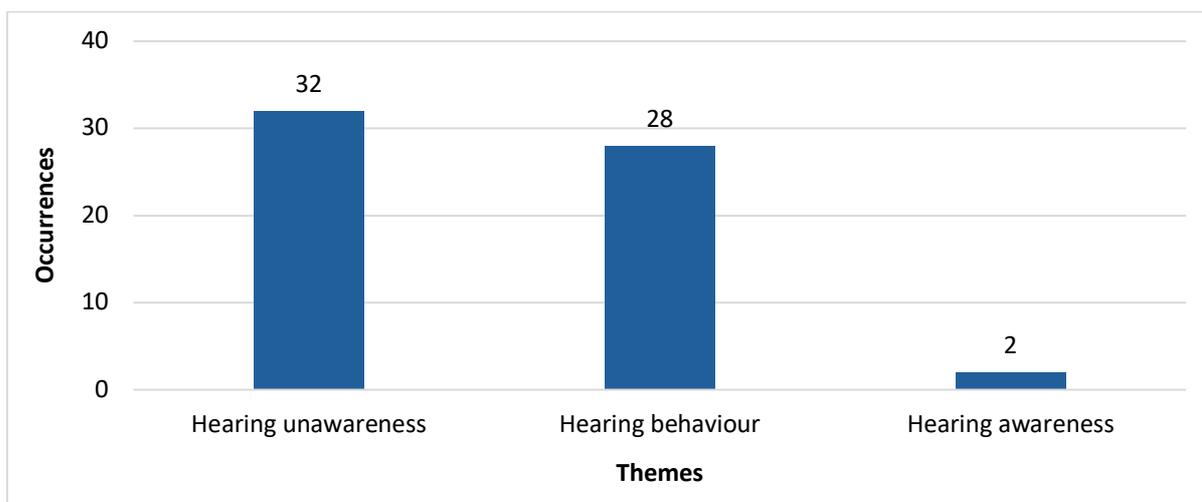
Participants' narratives also include comments about Interpreters (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Occurrences of themes within the macrotheme Interpreters.



Deaf users recognise interpreters' working challenges, such as the lack of contextual information in corporate VDI. The need for specific training is also underlined.

Figure 8 Occurrences of themes within the macrotheme *Hearing People*.



The macrotheme *Hearing People* displays three themes: *Hearing unawareness*, *Hearing awareness*, and *Hearing behaviours*.

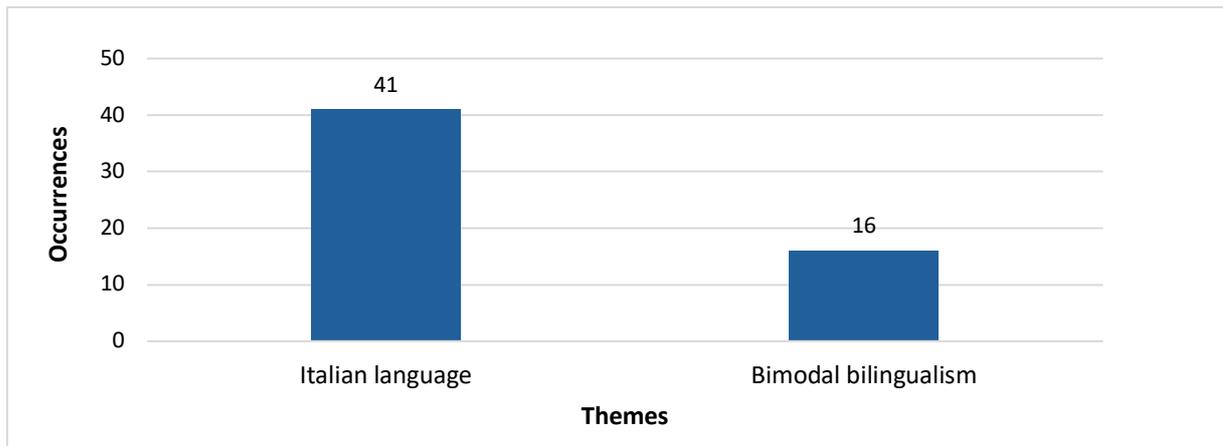
Hearing unawareness overall refers to the lack of knowledge and experience among hearing stakeholders regarding LIS, the Deaf community, and LIS interpreting. Deaf participants report this issue as being problematic, since it causes technical and time-related challenges. For instance, participants may experience delays in contributing to discussion during VCI: “I wanted to intervene, but I didn’t get feedback because the interpreter was signing everything. I waited, and only when the interpreter finished, did I raise my hand” (Q1; P6).

On the contrary, only one participant notes that VCI has increased awareness of Deaf users’ needs and LIS interpreters’ role in the workplace.

However, in most cases, this unawareness leads to behaviours perceived as intrusive, as described by the following quotation:

“Then he took my smartphone, and, in that moment, I tried to explain to him that I must see the interpreter. He put the phone on his desk, so I was forced to turn the other way. It annoyed me a bit” (Q2; P1).

Figure 9 Occurrences of themes within the macrotheme *Multifaceted Accessibility and Communication*.



The macrotheme *Multifaceted Accessibility and Communication* encompasses the themes of *Italian language* and *Bimodal bilingualism*. The former refers to the use of Italian as an alternative to VRI services, including lipreading, chat and subtitles.

The macrotheme *Bimodal bilingualism*, instead, refers to the choice or necessity of both language modalities, as offered by VCI: “If there is the interpreting service, I follow both spoken and signed discourses. I always say that both signed, and spoken interpreted discourse must be well visible, because Deaf people are not all the same” (Q3; P3). As highlighted in Q3, VCI allows Deaf users to access both modalities simultaneously, giving them the option to follow one or both. In addition, the use of one language appears as a complementary resource when comprehension difficulties emerge from the other one.

Moreover, a theme relating to *Bimodal Bilingualism* is *Knowledge of the community heterogeneity* (coded within *Deaf Awareness and Action* macrotheme), underscoring multifaceted accessibility needs and preferences. This is evident in the continuation of Q3: “Many times while voicing, only the signed discourse is pinned, but I disagree because there are oral Deaf individuals who are also part of the accessibility community” (Q4; P3).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Since the 1980s, knowledge about the linguistic status of LIS and the anthropological perspective on the Deaf community has grown, along with awareness-

raising campaigns targeting the hearing majority. Many hearing people have decided to learn LIS for personal or professional reasons. Nevertheless, in Italy the pathological and assistance-based view still coexists with the linguistic-cultural perspective. Although the legal recognition of LIS in 2021 represented a social milestone, it lacks references to minority languages, highlighting a gap in the current legal framework (Fontana, 2022). This historical and sociocultural context explains the hearing population's unawareness about the Deaf world, as revealed in this study.

Moreover, drawing on Deaf Studies, the theme of Hearing behaviours causing discomfort can be interpreted through the concept of Audism (Humphries, 1975, as cited in Bauman, 2004), referring to conscious or unconscious discriminatory practices and attitudes of hearing people towards Deaf people. The reactions labelled as Deaf Agency constitute a burden or additional responsibility, viewed as Deaf Tax (De Meulder & Stone, 2024). Such episodes mostly occur in VDI settings, suggesting that they are favoured by one-to-one interactions. A similar dynamic was observed onsite in medical dialogue interpreting: a Deaf patient, frustrated by a doctor's refusal to use an interpreter, provocatively suggested that the doctor cut his moustache to improve lipreading visibility (Fontana, 2022, p.205).

However, the increased hearing awareness reported by one participant as a consequence of VRI use suggests the potential for positive change when hearing stakeholders are properly informed. These data complement research on the sociocultural impact of LIS interpreting (Fontana & Zuccalà, 2011), suggesting that its online format — widely available in time and space — may accelerate this impact, thus contributing to shaping Deaf identities and hearing consciousness.

Another key finding concerns Multifaceted Accessibility and Communication. The multimodality of VCI platforms, offering parallel interpreting, subtitles, chat, slides, and speakers' views, effectively fits the diverse sociolinguistic heterogeneity of the Deaf community. Most importantly, it allows Italian and LIS discourses to be followed simultaneously, reflecting the bimodal bilingualism (Grosjean, 1992) and the heterogeneity of the Deaf community in Italy. This advantage of the online modality prompts reflection on complete accessibility as a guiding principle for both online and onsite events.

Addressing the RQs, the findings firstly show that VRI is perceived by Deaf LIS signers as a promising opportunity for greater accessibility. However, challenges related

to hearing unawareness or technical barriers can prevent VRI from reaching its full potential. This is reflected in the higher frequency of negative perceptions resulting from the content analysis. Accordingly, opportunities remain latent because they appear blocked by problems that could be solved. This possibility is demonstrated when participants refer to needs like updated interpreting training and increasing awareness among hearing people. Secondly, perceptions of benefits and obstacles differ across settings. VCI represents the most challenging aspect when poorly managed, otherwise it can serve as a model for multifaceted accessibility. VDI, though efficient when provided instantly by corporations, displays uncomfortable situations with hearing interlocutors. Finally, these findings align with the reviewed literature about the Deaf and the interpreters' perceptions on VRI worldwide. Deaf participants' considerations about interpreters reflect Italian interpreters' concerns, such as the need for updated training (Del Vecchio et al. 2024; Izzo, 2024).

5. Contributions and Limitations

This research provides insights into Deaf LIS signers' perceptions about VRI, contributing to LIS interpreting studies in Italy and the emerging field of VRI research. It strengthens the sociolinguistic framework in two directions: it confirms that interpreting shapes both interpreting practices and Deaf identities and shows that the online modality adds another layer of complexity to the mediating process, impacting Deaf-hearing interactions. From an anthropological perspective, this work presents interesting data for Deaf Studies research. This study underlines the importance of increasing hearing stakeholders' consciousness about the Deaf community to reduce the Deaf Tax and improve interactions between Deaf and hearing people during online and onsite interpreting.

These findings offer practical resources for interpreters' training and practice, in line with a co-construction approach that prioritises Deaf users (Gambini & Fontana, 2016). Challenges could be mitigated through increased collaboration among stakeholders, promoting an accessible digital environment. Therefore, the study offers new knowledge about the intersection of new media communication technologies and accessibility.

Despite its potential to raise hearing awareness, VRI can strengthen uncomfortable episodes between Deaf and hearing interlocutors. De Meulder and Stone (2024) noted a

reduced Deaf Tax for Deaf academics who can set off their webcam, avoiding constant eye-contact with interpreters. Further research could explore whether VRI alleviates or reinforces the Deaf Tax, and how Deaf users' sociolinguistic profiles impact VRI perceptions across settings.

In addition to the methodological constraints (Section 2), the small sample size limits generalisations to the broader Italian Deaf population. Ideally, participants could have been shown the Italian translations to improve accuracy and encourage further observations. Nevertheless, the work provides fertile data to stimulate future research not only in interpreting studies, but also in sociology, linguistics and sociolinguistics, Deaf Studies, and cultural studies.

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EMPOWERING MARGINALIZED VOICES THROUGH DIGITAL
PLATFORMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS
CAMPAIGNS IN MOROCCO

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Abstract

Digital platforms have emerged as vital sites of feminist activism today, both in the ways that multiple stakeholders mobilize and participate in discourses centered on gender equality, and in their capacity to reach large audiences. This article examines how digital tools are mobilized in pursuit of gender equality in Morocco through a comparative analysis of three initiatives: a grassroots campaign, a corporate-led program, and an institutional framework. Using qualitative content analysis of selected social media publications, the study examines their communication styles, narrative framing, and approaches to social change. The results show clear differences in levels of visibility, consistency, and forms of feminist articulation, highlighting the distinctiveness of each initiative in terms of organizational structure, resources, and political positioning. Situated within the broader body of scholarship on digital activism and feminist online engagement, this article contributes to a clearer understanding of how gender equality agendas are articulated in constrained socio-political contexts.

Keywords: *Gender Equality; Women's Rights; Digital Activism; Women's Empowerment; NGOs.*

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become key spaces for feminist mobilization in contemporary contexts where public discourse on gender equality is both socially sensitive and institutionally constrained. In Morocco, debates surrounding women's rights, particularly those related to gender-based violence, legal reform, and women's

participation in public life, have increasingly shifted to online spaces. These spaces enable feminist actors to share testimonies, raise awareness, and contest dominant social narratives, while simultaneously navigating the cultural, political, and institutional structures that shape public expression.

In this context, digital activism has become a central mode of engagement for advocating women's rights. Digital activism can be defined as political activism carried out through online platforms, combining fully online mobilizations with the use of digital tools to support offline collective action (Özkula, 2021). Existing research shows that social media facilitate connection, visibility, and mobilization by enabling marginalized groups, particularly women and young people, to share experiences, expand networks, and shape public debate (Salzinger et al., 2022; Hammoud, 2022). Digital platforms thus function, not only as channels of communication, but also as sites where power relations, social norms, and inequalities are negotiated.

Feminist digital activism has been particularly visible through testimonial and hashtag-based mobilizations, such as the #MeToo movement, which illustrates the capacity of online spaces to function as sites of collective testimony, solidarity, and political pressure (Jouët, 2018). By enabling survivors to publicly share experiences of gender-based violence, #MeToo demonstrated how digital platforms can transform personal narratives into collective claims. This form of digital feminist mobilization has contributed to renewed attention to issues of violence against women and structural gender inequalities and has informed feminist campaigns across diverse national contexts.

At the same time, existing research suggests that feminist digital activism does not operate within a single or uniform model. Studies have illustrated the diversity of digital feminist mobilization, ranging from decentralized, affective modes to more structured and organized forms of engagement (Özkula, 2021; Jouët, 2018). However, fewer studies examine how these different forms of feminist digital engagement coexist and operate within the same national context.

This article addresses this gap by adopting a comparative approach to feminist digital activism in Morocco. It focuses on three initiatives that represent distinct modes of engagement: a grassroots campaign (Masaktach), a corporate-led program (We4She), and an institutional framework (The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment). These initiatives differ in their organizational structures, target audiences, and relationships to political power, making them analytically relevant for

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examining how feminist claims are articulated across activist, corporate, and governmental spheres.

Conceptually, this study approaches digital feminist activism as a set of practices through which gender equality claims are articulated, circulated, and negotiated in online spaces, rather than as a fixed ideological or theoretical model.

Cyberfeminism emerged in the 1990s as a feminist framework, analyzing the intersections of gender, technology, and cyberspace, highlighting how digital spaces can both reproduce and challenge patriarchal structures, while encouraging women's active engagement with technology (Consalvo, 2002). Some initiatives engage in forms of cyber feminism, such as testimonial-based awareness campaigns and public denunciations of gender-based violence, while others deploy digital tools within more institutionalized or professional contexts. This diversity allows for an examination of the opportunities and constraints of digital platforms for feminist advocacy in Morocco.

This study mobilizes three complementary theoretical perspectives as analytical lenses to examine these dynamics. First, connective action logic (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) accounts for how digitally mediated mobilizations can operate without strict organizational structures, relying instead on personalized engagement and the wide dissemination of content, which is a particular characteristic of grassroots activism. Second, networked feminism highlights how digital media enable feminist actors to build solidarity, mobilize vulnerability, and reshape forms of collective action in online spaces (Vachhani, 2024). Finally, framing theory provides a useful framework for understanding how different actors construct and communicate gender equality issues through specific narrative patterns on digital platforms (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). These theoretical perspectives support the comparative examination of communication strategies, narrative framing, and modes of engagement adopted by the three initiatives.

The objectives of this study are to analyze how grassroots, corporate-led, and institutional initiatives use digital platforms to advocate for gender equality in Morocco, to identify the strengths and limitations of their respective communication strategies and to examine how cross-sector dynamics shape feminist digital activism within the Moroccan socio-political context.

2. Material And Methods

This qualitative comparative research design aims to investigate the role of digital platforms to advance gender equality struggles in Morocco. The analysis centres on three initiatives chosen for their contrasting organizational positioning, modes of engagement, and relationships to institutional power: a grassroots feminist campaign Masaktach, a professional network promoting gender equality in the corporate sphere We4She, and a governmental coordination body The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Examining these initiatives comparatively makes it possible to explore how feminist claims are articulated across activist, professional, and institutional spheres within the same national context.

2.1. Case selection and background

The initiatives were selected to allow the examination of three concrete and contemporaneous forms of feminist engagement in Morocco. Masaktach is examined as a grassroots case because it represents a form of digital feminist mobilization centered on testimony and public denunciation of gender-based violence, evoking dynamics like those associated with the *#MeToo* movement in the Moroccan context. We4She was chosen as a professional initiative because it reflects an emerging form of gender-equality advocacy situated within corporate and professional environments, involving economic actors and leadership networks. The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment was selected as the institutional case as it represents a recent state-led effort to centralize and coordinate gender-equality policies, under the current government. Together, these initiatives provide distinct, yet comparable, entry points for examining how gender-equality claims are articulated across grassroots, professional, and institutional spheres.

Masaktach is a grassroots feminist digital campaign first launched in Morocco in August 2018, initially through Twitter (Euronews, 2018). Human rights lawyer Leila Slassi and journalist Aida Alami founded Masaktach as a spontaneous initiative with no formal Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) affiliation or political sponsorship (Williams, 2020). This campaign was brought into being during a period of increased public debate regarding sexual violence against women and ongoing legal reform regarding gender-based violence. It aims first and foremost to break the silence surrounding sexual harassment, rape, and domestic abuse by soliciting testimony from

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women through the internet, but also to speak to a broader audience, and to demand social and legal accountability (Izzidien, 2018). The campaign is targeted largely at Moroccan women who are victims of gender-based violence but also engages media actors and public authorities (Morocco World News, 2018). In the wider context, Masaktach emerged in a post-2011 political climate where rights-based claims increased in visibility and digital platforms became increasingly used as spaces for civic expression and mobilization (Snyder, 2018).

We4She is a Moroccan network advocating equal opportunities for women in business leadership (We4She, 2021). It emerged between 2018 and 2021 as an offshoot of the pan-African Women Working for Change (WFC) network and was officially launched in December 2021 in Casablanca (We4She, 2021). Initiated by nine Moroccan female executives, We4She functions as an associative network bringing together women and men leaders, with the support of professional and business organizations, such as the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (CGEM) (CGEM, 2024; *L'Economiste*, 2022). Its objectives include increasing women's representation in executive and decision-making positions, providing mentorship and skills development, and supporting underprivileged women's access to the labor market (We4She, 2021; *L'Economiste*, 2022). The initiative developed in a political and legal context marked by Morocco's Law 19-20 (2021) amendment which mandates gender balance on the boards of public limited companies, building on post-2011 constitutional commitments to gender equality and broader economic development priorities aimed at strengthening women's participation in the labor market (Essabban, 2024).

The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment is an institutional initiative established in 2022, which had its initial formal meeting in March 2023, headed by the Head of Government (Kingdom of Morocco, Head of Government, 2023; Rahhou, 2024). Rahhou (2024) notes that this initiative engages representatives of government ministries, national institutions, business organizations, local authorities, and civil society actors to coordinate and oversee the implementation of public policies on gender equality. Its action framework adheres to the Government Plan for Equality 2023–2026 and has special emphases on the economic empowerment of women, the prevention of violence against women, and the fight against gender-based discrimination and stereotypes (Rahhou, 2024). The initiative exists within the wider political context conditioned by post-2011 constitutional commitments to gender equality and institutional reform, as well as by long-standing public debates on women's rights and economic

participation (Kingdom of Morocco, Head of Government, 2023). The Committee was formed after elections, in 2021, under the Akhannouch government, and follows previous reforms in Morocco, including Article 19 of the 2011 Constitution, changes to the Family Code, and gender quotas in political and economic institutions in accordance with royal directives for the family law reform, as well as national agendas in terms of economic inclusion under the New Development Model (Dao-Sabah, 2020). Its actions target Moroccan women, governmental bodies, enterprises, local authorities, and society at large to promote gender parity (Kingdom of Morocco, Head of Government, 2023).

2.2. Data sources and platform selection

The study is based solely on publicly available documents and online content produced by the selected initiatives. These sources include official statements, published campaign materials, and social media content disseminated through the digital platforms employed by each initiative. These platforms include Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Platform selection was therefore initiative-specific, reflecting where each initiative's digital activity was most visible and sustained, rather than applying a uniform platform framework across all cases.

2.3. Data selection and analytical approach

The analysis is based on a purposive qualitative sample of social media posts collected from each initiative. For each case, a fixed number of publications was selected from the digital platform(s) in which the initiative maintains a public presence, ensuring a comparable qualitative corpus across the three initiatives. The selection did not follow a fixed chronological period, as the initiatives displayed irregular publication rhythms, with phases of inactivity followed by renewed posting. A strictly time-based sampling strategy was considered inappropriate for comparative qualitative analysis. Instead, the study prioritizes the comparability of communication practices over temporal continuity.

Differences in platform presence and usage across the initiatives were analytically examined but did not constitute criteria for selecting posts. Platform choice was treated as an object of analysis rather than a determinant of the sampling strategy.

Engagement metrics, such as numbers of views, likes, or shares were not used as indicators of impact. By focusing on communication strategies and forms of expression rather than quantitative performance indicators, the analysis adopts a qualitative stance. The study follows three complementary steps. First, a structural analysis of each

initiative examines the organization and presentation of its digital presence. Second, a qualitative content analysis investigates dominant themes, communication strategies, and the use of digital tools. Finally, a comparative review reveals similarities and differences between the three initiatives, allowing for an examination of how organizational positioning and political context inform feminist digital activism in Morocco.

Sixteen posts were selected, per initiative, to build a manageable qualitative corpus that could be coded in depth while remaining comparable across cases. Because the three initiatives differ strongly in resources, platform use, and publication routines, the study uses an equal number of posts to ensure symmetry in the comparative design. Posting rhythm is therefore described as part of each initiative's communication strategy rather than evaluated against a "normal" frequency, since publication rates vary widely across platforms and organizational contexts. The analysis focuses on narrative framing, thematic priorities, and modes of engagement, not on performance indicators.

3. Results And Analysis

This section presents the results of the qualitative analysis of the digital communication practices of the three initiatives examined in this study. It explores how these initiatives organize their online presence, frame gender equality issues, and engage with audiences through social media platforms and institutional communication channels in Morocco. This section is structured around three main dimensions. It first examines the structural features of each initiative's digital communication, including platform use and publication rhythms. Then, it focuses on the central themes, narrative strategies, and framing approaches present in the content disseminated. Finally, a comparative analysis highlights points of convergence and divergence between the three initiatives, showing how differences in organizational context shape distinct forms of gender equality advocacy. The analysis draws on a qualitative review of selected social media publications and publicly available institutional documents, as detailed in the methodology section.

3.1. Structural analysis

The structural analysis investigates how each initiative organizes its digital presence in terms of platform selection, coherence across platforms and publication rhythm. Rather than measuring impact or effectiveness, these elements are examined as indicators of communication logic and organizational positioning.

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The three initiatives exhibit different approaches to digital structuring. Masaktach and We4She rely primarily on social media, whereas The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment adopts an exclusively governmental mode of digital communication through official websites.

Masaktach maintains a presence on both Facebook and Instagram, but without systematic synchronization between the two platforms. Publications often appear on one platform without being replicated onto the other, reflecting a fragmented rather than coordinated cross-platform strategy.

The initiative's biographical descriptions remain consistent across platforms, presenting Masaktach as a collective denouncing violence against women and rape culture in Morocco. Beyond this shared framing, however, content circulation remains irregular. This decentralized structure reflects the campaign's grassroots and provisional character, prioritizing expression and testimony over strategic digital planning.

We4She, by contrast, adopts a structured and multi-platform digital presence. The initiative is active on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, with platform-specific uses. Facebook and Instagram are primarily used for event promotion, campaigns, and awareness messages, while LinkedIn emphasizes professional networking, institutional partnerships, and leadership-oriented communication. YouTube allows for longer audiovisual formats, such as testimonials and awareness videos. Unlike Masaktach, We4She demonstrates a high level of synchronization between Facebook and Instagram, ensuring coherence and continuity across platforms. This integrated structure reflects the initiative's professional orientation and its positioning within corporate and institutional contexts.

The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment differs fundamentally from the two other cases. It does not maintain an official presence on social media platforms and communicates exclusively through official channels, including governmental websites and official press releases. Its digital visibility is therefore limited to formal announcements related to public policy frameworks, committee meetings, and governmental plans, such as the Government Plan for Equality 2023–2026. This communication model prioritizes formal legitimacy and top-down dissemination of information, while offering limited opportunities for interaction, feedback, or participatory engagement with citizens.

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Publication rhythm further differentiates the initiatives. Masaktach's digital activity is discontinuous, with visible phases of reduced or interrupted posting. In the material reviewed for this study, Masaktach's most recent posts date to 2021. Its content relies mainly on static visual formats, such as images accompanied by text or statistics, with limited use of interactive or audiovisual tools. We4She, by contrast, displays a more regular publication rhythm, particularly on LinkedIn, where posts highlighting partnerships, events, and initiatives appear consistently over time. This regularity contributes to a stable digital presence aligned with professional communication norms. The National Committee's communication rhythm, however, is event-driven and dependent on institutional milestones rather than ongoing engagement.

Overall, the structural analysis reveals three distinct communication models. Masaktach operates through a decentralized and irregular digital structure consistent with grassroots activism. We4She adopts an integrated and platform-specific communication strategy, reflecting its corporate and professional positioning. The National Committee's relies on centralized institutional communication, prioritizing formal visibility over interaction. These structural differences shape how each initiative positions itself within the digital public sphere and condition the forms of engagement they use.

3.2. Content Analysis

The content analysis examines how each initiative frames gender equality issues through digital communication, focusing on dominant themes, narrative techniques, and forms of address used to engage audiences. Rather than evaluating impact or effectiveness, the analysis seeks to understand how gender equality claims are constructed, justified, and circulated in relation to the objectives and positioning of each initiative.

Masaktach adopts a communication approach centered on denunciation and awareness-raising around gender-based violence. Testimonials constitute one of the most significant elements of its content and function as narrative devices that transform individual experiences of harassment, assault, or abuse into collective claims. These testimonies are frequently accompanied by contextual explanations or calls to break the silence surrounding violence against women, contributing to a framing that connects personal suffering to broader social and structural responsibility.

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In parallel, Masaktach disseminates factual content, including statistics and explanatory posts, which situate individual narratives within a wider social context. Legal references also appear in posts addressing procedural obstacles faced by victims or explaining existing legal provisions, framing violence against women as both a social and institutional issue. Beyond awareness-raising, Masaktach adopts an explicit political framing by questioning political candidates and public figures about their commitments to women's and girls' rights, thereby shifting attention towards institutional accountability in the fight against gender-based violence. The initiative further engages in the deconstruction of widely held myths that normalize or trivialize violence, challenging dominant narratives and reframing abuse as a systemic issue rather than an isolated or private matter. Overall, Masaktach relies on an affective, testimonial, and critical framing that combines information, political questioning, and implicit calls for civic engagement.

We4She adopts a contrasting framing strategy focused on women's empowerment within professional and corporate environments. Its content highlights themes such as leadership, diversity, equal opportunity, and economic inclusion. Rather than mobilizing denunciation or personal testimony, We4She foregrounds institutional partnerships, professional events, and success narratives that present gender equality as compatible with organizational performance and economic development. This approach is illustrated through publications announcing partnership agreements, the signing of collaboration contracts, and joint initiatives with economic and institutional actors. Campaigns such as Moussawat further exemplify this framing by presenting gender equality as a value proposition for businesses rather than as a site of conflict or injustice. The initiative also places strong emphasis on networking activities, including conferences, meetings, and webinars dedicated to gender equality in the workplace, as well as training and mentoring opportunities. Through these forms of communication, We4She reinforces a pedagogical and solution-oriented tone, framing gender equality as a collective endeavor involving corporate actors, policymakers, and professionals.

The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment adopts an institutional framing centered on policy dissemination and governmental commitment. Publicly accessible content consists primarily of official documents, press releases, and policy announcements published on governmental platforms. Key materials include the draft decree 2.22.194 establishing the Committee and the Government Plan for Equality 2023–2026, which outline state priorities regarding women's economic empowerment,

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the prevention of violence against women, and the fight against discrimination. These framing positions gender equality as a matter of public policy and governance. However, limited information regarding internal processes, implementation mechanisms, or partnerships reduces the visibility of concrete actions and constrains opportunities for public engagement beyond the acknowledgment of state initiatives.

Across the three cases, content framing reflects distinct orientations towards gender equality advocacy. Masaktach constructs gender inequality, primarily, as a social injustice requiring public recognition and collective awareness. We4She frames gender equality as a professional and corporate issue that can be addressed through collaboration, leadership, and institutional change within the workplace. The National Committee situates gender equality as a policy objective embedded in governmental planning and reform. These differences in framing illustrate how organizational positioning shapes the discourses through which gender equality concerns are articulated in digital and institutional spaces.

3.3. Comparative analysis

Table 1 Comparative overview of the three initiatives' digital communication.

Dimension	Masaktach (grassroots)	We4She (corporate-led)	National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (institutional)
Organizational positioning	Grassroots campaign; non-state.	Structured professional network connected to business actors.	State-led coordination body tied to government planning.
Origins	Launched August 2018- initiated by a lawyer and a journalist.	Emerged 2018–2021; Officially launched Dec 2021- initiated by Moroccan executives.	Established 2022; first formal meeting March 2023- chaired by the Head of Government.
Core objective	Break silence on GBV; collect; Testimonies; pressure for social/legal accountability.	Promote women's leadership and equal opportunities; Networking/mentoring; workplace equality.	Coordinate and oversee public gender equality policies (2023–2026 plan)
Primary target audience	Survivors, wider public, media, and public authorities.	Professionals, leaders, institutions, corporate partners.	Ministries, institutions, local authorities, business and civil society stakeholders.
Main platforms and channels	Facebook + Instagram	Facebook + Instagram + LinkedIn + YouTube	Government websites and official press releases (no official social media).
Cross-platform strategy	Fragmented (limited synchronization).	Integrated and platform-specific (notably LinkedIn for professional legitimacy).	Centralized, top-down dissemination.
Publication rhythm	Discontinuous; last observed posts around 2021.	More regular and sustained (especially LinkedIn).	Event-driven (linked to institutional milestones) .
Dominant framing of gender equality	Violence and rape culture as systemic injustice; Institutional accountability.	Empowerment, leadership, and diversity as organizational values.	Gender equality as policy objective and governance agenda.
Narrative style	Testimonial/ affective; Denunciation; Myth deconstruction.	Professional/solution-oriented; Partnerships; Success narratives.	Formal/ administrative policy language.
Participation & interaction	High (calls for testimonies; public questioning).	Moderate (engagement through events/networks).	Low (largely unidirectional).
Relationship to power	Bottom-up and critical.	Collaborative/negotiated with institutional and economic actors.	Top-down institutional authority.
Key strength	Amplifies marginalized voices; Strong visibility for GBV claims.	Coherent communication; Legitimacy in professional sphere; stable visibility.	Policy capacity and resources; National coordination role.
Main limitation	Sustainability/ continuity issues; Limited coordination ;	Less confrontational; may depoliticize structural injustice.	Limited transparency and citizen-facing engagement.

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Table 1 consolidates the comparative framework used in this section, so the analysis below can explain how Masaktach, We4She, and the National Committee produce distinct advocacy logics in Morocco. The analysis highlights clear differences, alongside limited points of convergence, in how these initiatives mobilize digital communication to address gender inequality. Although all three engage with the issue, they do so through distinct organizational logic and communication strategies, reflecting their differing positions within the social and political landscape.

A first key distinction concerns the initiatives' action models and their power relationship. Masaktach, as a grassroots initiative, relies on bottom-up mobilization and participatory communication. Its digital approach is built around public denunciation, testimonial sharing, political questioning, positioning citizens, particularly women affected by gender-based violence, as central actors in the articulation of feminist claims. We4She, by contrast, operates within a corporate and professional framework. Its action model is more formalized and institutionalized, aiming to influence organizational practices and leadership cultures through collaboration, partnerships, and professional engagement. The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment adopts a top-down institutional model, emphasizing policy coordination and state-led reform, with communication designed to reinforce governmental legitimacy rather than foster citizen participation.

However, while these differences are primarily structural, some overlap can be observed in the themes addressed. Both Masaktach and We4She engage in the deconstruction of gender norms, even though through different lenses. Masaktach frames gender inequality primarily in relation to violence, rape culture, and social injustice, relying on affective narratives and critical discourse to challenge normalization and silence. We4She, by contrast, approaches gender norms through issues of professional inequality, leadership representation, and economic inclusion, presenting diversity as a resource for organizational performance. These social and professional narratives are not directly addressed by the National Committee, which instead frames gender equality as a matter of public policy and institutional reform, privileging legal frameworks and national strategies, without directly engaging with the social justice concerns emphasized by Masaktach or the economic and professional inequalities addressed by We4She.

Communication channels further differentiate the initiatives. Masaktach and We4She both rely on social media, but they do so in

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contrasting ways. Masaktach prioritizes accessible forms of citizen expression through Facebook and Instagram, creating a community-oriented space centered on testimony and awareness. We4She, by contrast, adopts a segmented and targeted digital strategy across Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, addressing different audiences, particularly professionals and decision-makers. The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment does not maintain a presence on social media platforms and communicates exclusively through institutional websites, a choice that restricts opportunities for interaction and limits engagement, especially among audiences accustomed to participatory digital environments.

The levels of public interaction constitute another important point of differentiation between the initiatives. Masaktach actively encourages participation through calls for testimonies, public questioning of political actors, and myth-deconstruction campaigns that invite user engagement and interaction. We4She, by contrast, promotes engagement primarily within professional and institutional networks, emphasizing training activities, networking events, and the visibility of partnerships rather than open-ended public debate. The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment relies on a largely unidirectional communication model, disseminating information without mechanisms for feedback or direct digital interaction with civil society.

These differences involve both advantages and limitations that are closely linked to the institutional context of each initiative. Masaktach maintains a strong connection to social realities and has a clear capacity to amplify marginalized voices. However, its irregular publication rhythm and limited coordination across platforms lower the continuity and sustainability of its digital presence. We4She, by contrast, benefits from institutional legitimacy, structured communication practices, and access to corporate networks, which enhance its visibility and coherence within professional environments. At the same time, its consensual and solution-oriented framing distances it from more confrontational forms of feminist mobilization. The National Committee for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment benefits from direct government support and significant institutional resources, as it was established through draft decree No. 2.22.194 approved by the Council of Government in June 2022 and is chaired by the Head of Government, with participation from several key ministries, national institutions, business representatives, local authorities, and civil society organizations (Open Government Partnership, n.d.). This institutional anchoring grants the Committee

substantial policy-making capacity. However, its centralized and opaque communication practices limit transparency, accessibility, and public engagement, particularly in digital spaces.

Overall, the three initiatives illustrate complementary, yet uneven, approaches to communicating gender equality. Their differences highlight how organizational context, access to resources, and proximity to institutional power shape the narratives, communication channels, and modes of engagement through which gender equality claims are articulated in Morocco's digital and institutional public spheres.

4. Discussion And Conclusions

This study shows that digital media do not result in a singular model of gender equality advocacy in Morocco, rather, they amplify distinct advocacy logics shaped by organizational positioning, proximity to institutional power, and communication infrastructure. The comparison between Masaktach, We4She, and the National Committee highlights a key tension of digital feminist mobilization, although online platforms can extend visibility and participation, sustaining that visibility requires continuity, coordination, and adaptation to platform dynamics. As Şener (2021) explains, online struggles for visibility frequently require continued activity and are organized along algorithmic and commercial logics that structure what circulates. In this regard, Masaktach's strong testimonial and denunciatory framing can generate high symbolic visibility around gender-based violence, yet its discontinuous rhythm and limited cross-platform coordination constrain long-term continuity. By contrast, We4She's integrated multi-platform presence and professional communication norms support stable visibility and legitimacy within corporate networks, but its solution-oriented tone tends to avoid the more confrontational registers associated with grassroots feminist denunciation. Finally, the National Committee relies on formal institutional channels that reinforce state legitimacy but offer limited interactivity, which ultimately restricts citizen-facing engagement in digital spaces.

The findings also speak to the theoretical lenses mobilized in the introduction. First, Masaktach reflects key dynamics associated with connective action, insofar as participation is driven by personalized engagement, testimony, and the circulation of shareable content rather than a formal organizational structure (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Second, building on Vachhani (2024) conceptualization of networked feminism

as a digitally mediated mode of feminist politics shaped by affect and the reconfiguration of collective action, this paper uses the notion as an interpretive lens to read We4She's digital communication. We4She foregrounds professional networking, institutional visibility, and partnership-driven messaging across its platforms (We4She, 2021; *Confédération Générale des Entreprises du Maroc*, 2024; *L'Economiste*, 2022). Third, framing theory (Güran & Özarlan, 2022) helps explain why the three initiatives articulate gender equality claims differently despite pursuing the same broad agenda. Masaktach frames gender inequality through violence, silencing, and injustice. We4She frames it through empowerment, leadership, and workplace inclusion, and the National Committee frames it through policy planning and institutional reform. Rather than treating these differences as contradictions, the comparison suggests that gender equality claims circulate through multiple registers. These registers are effective, professional, and institutional. Each is shaped by distinct constraints and opportunities.

Cyberfeminism scholarship helps interpret the Masaktach case, given its emphasis on online testimony and public denunciation as modes of claims-making (Jouët, 2018; Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022). In line with this perspective, Masaktach most closely aligns with cyberfeminism modes of action through testimonial claims-making and the politicization of gender-based violence in online public spaces. We4She and the National Committee, by contrast, mobilize digital tools in more institutionalized ways. They use them to professionalize gender equality advocacy or to disseminate policy commitments, without adopting the same contestatory logic. This distinction is consistent with scholarship showing that feminist digital activism ranges from informal, effective mobilizations to structured, multi-platform communication strategies (Jouët, 2018; Özkula, 2021).

Finally, the comparison points to practical implications without reducing the analysis to prescriptive recommendations. Cross-sector collaboration can amplify reach and connect grassroots claims to organizational change and policy agendas, but it also requires the alignment of communication infrastructures and recognition of the unequal constraints faced by actors operating at different distances from institutional power. Multi-platform coordination can strengthen message coherence across audiences (Diers-Lawson, 2023). However, the cases examined here suggest that coordination is shaped by resources, organizational professionalization, and communication norms. Overall, this article contributes to research on digital feminist mobilization by showing how gender equality advocacy in Morocco is articulated through distinct digital and institutional

repertoires. These include testimonial denunciation, professionalized empowerment, and policy communication, each shaped by different relationships to visibility, participation, and legitimacy.

5. Contributions And Limitations

This study brings a new perspective on the use of digital platforms in the advocacy for women's rights in Morocco by comparing three different approaches, which are grassroots, corporate, and government-led initiatives. It highlights the dynamics that structure these initiatives and how they exploit the digital space to structure their discourse and mobilize their target audiences.

By proposing a comparative analysis, this study helps to better understand the adopted strategies within different institutional contexts. It equally offers a base for adapting these models within other advocacy initiatives and encourages reflection on possible collaborations between these sectors to achieve social change.

This study has some key limitations. The latter is based only on publicly available content; therefore, it limits the comprehension of the internal decision-making process of these initiatives. Future research could explore in-depth internal strategies through interviews with leaders, project and business managers, as well as beneficiaries of the programs. Studying the evolution of digital discourse in the long term is also interesting to understand how these initiatives adapt to social and technological change. Moreover, the study does not measure their impact. It mainly focuses on their strategies and structures.

Furthermore, access to data was an important limitation because it was challenging to obtain official documentation of some initiatives, such as the government-led ones. Another research axis could take on the interactions and collaborations between digital and on-the-ground mobilizations to better understand how online activism complements or transforms the traditional forms of engagement. Finally, a comparison on an international level will allow the identification of cultural and institutional specificities that could influence the efficiency of digital advocacy.

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GLOBAL NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY
CINEMA: PRODUCING AND REINFORCING GENDER
ANTAGONISM THE FILM *BARBIE* (2023) AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This article examines the circulation of contemporary gender narratives in popular cinema through a qualitative case study of the American film *Barbie* (2023). Focusing on the film's global cultural visibility, the study explores how its narrative and aesthetic strategies construct polarised representations of gender relations thus producing an antagonist discourse. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, the analysis integrates content analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and cinematographic examination to assess how dialogue, visual composition, colour schemes, and *mise-en-scène* contribute to the film's discursive framing of gender roles. Content analysis identifies recurring themes related to gender inequality, asymmetrical power relations, masculinity, femininity and social critique, while CDA examines how language and rhetoric articulate and legitimise particular representations of authority and subjectivity. The visual analysis further demonstrates how cinematic techniques reinforce these discursive constructions. The findings suggest that *Barbie* (2023) employs both overt and covert narrative devices that accentuate gender differences and frequently position male and female characters within confrontational frameworks. While the film is widely marketed as a feminist narrative, its reliance on exaggerated and simplified characterisations risks reproducing antagonistic perceptions of gender relations, potentially reinforcing adversarial interpretations rather than fostering nuanced or dialogical understandings. The article concludes that such narrative tendencies in contemporary popular cinema merit critical scrutiny, particularly regarding their role in shaping public discourse on gender and social relations.

Keywords: *Gender Power Relations; CDA; Feminism; Content Analysis; Cinematography.*

1. Introduction

The Western film industry has become a central cultural apparatus that both reflects and actively produces social norms, values, and power relations, particularly in relation to gender representation and its global circulation and reception. Cinema functions not only as a site of entertainment, but also as a discursive space in which meanings surrounding femininity, masculinity, and gendered subjectivities are constructed, naturalised, and legitimised. Historically, films have reinforced normative gender roles and hegemonic social behaviours, frequently depicting women as emotionally vulnerable or overtly passive social subjects, constrained by male authority. Such representational regimes contribute to the sedimentation of what Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualises as “discursive truths,” namely taken-for-granted constructions that shape public perception and sustain asymmetrical gender relations. This conventional binary framing of male and female social roles has thus played a significant role in structuring contemporary gender dynamics.

In recent years, however, a growing body of scholarly and mainstream work—particularly within feminist film theory and cultural studies—has sought to interrogate these representational patterns, arguing that cinema does not merely reflect social realities but participates in the production of gendered ideologies and antagonistic discourses. Concurrently, gender representations in popular films can function as sites of symbolic struggle, where power, identity, and resistance are negotiated. Contemporary gender dynamics in everyday social interactions further suggest that the proliferation of antagonistic discursive constructs is amplified by globally circulated cultural narratives, such as those articulated in *Barbie* (2023), whose widespread visibility grants it significant discursive authority.

Despite recent shifts in gender representation—most notably increased screen time and more prominent roles for female characters, partly influenced by feminist film theory—structural inequalities persist within the film industry. A study published in *Forbes*, for example, challenges the assumption of substantial progress. In a 2024 article, Elsesser (2024) reports that women accounted for only 35% of speaking roles in films

released in 2023, while merely 28% featured a female lead and only 22% were directed by women. These figures indicate that gender parity remains limited, despite the commercial and cultural success of films centered on female protagonists, such as *Barbie* (2023), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *The Shape of Water* (2017), and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). While the postmodern Western film industry frequently positions itself as opposed to archaic and essentialist portrayals of gender, promoting diversity and inclusivity, many productions paradoxically circulate contentious and polarising narratives. This contradiction is particularly evident in *Barbie* (2023), which, notwithstanding its overt feminist orientation, has generated extensive debate concerning its representation of gender relations and power structures. As Klein (2023) argues, globally circulating cinematic narratives such as *Barbie* often risk reproducing simplified gender stereotypes rather than critically and actively challenging them.

Barbie (2023) may thus be read as a postmodern articulation of asymmetrical gender power relations. The film foregrounds a female and a male doll as its principal protagonists and employs a visually stylised and self-reflexive aesthetic, supported by strong performances from the lead actors. Through the fictional space of “Barbie Land” the narrative constructs a matriarchal social order that is deliberately contrasted with the patriarchal “Real World” encountered by Ken. This spatial and ideological juxtaposition enables the film to engage with themes central to feminist film discourse, including gendered expectations, identity formation, and power asymmetry. While the narrative gestures towards critiquing both female and male social roles, its characterisation and linguistic strategies remain largely didactic and ambiguous. Moreover, although the film purports to challenge traditional gender norms and promote female empowerment, it simultaneously foregrounds a consumerist logic that shapes feminine identity, thereby reproducing and propagating certain exclusionary and stereotypical discourses.

From a CDA perspective, these narrative and visual strategies operate as mechanisms through which gendered meanings are normalised and circulated. The film’s discursive construction of masculinity and femininity reveals an underlying tension between progressive representational aims and the persistence of reductive social binaries. A close analysis of *Barbie* (2023) thus exposes the friction between feminist representational claims and the broader ideological frameworks within which the film operates. This tension raises critical questions regarding the capacity of contemporary global cinema to foster dialogical and empathetic gender relations, rather than reproducing oppositional and antagonistic configurations.

The primary objective of this article is to examine how *Barbie* (2023) reflects and produces contemporary global narratives of gender identity and gender antagonism, and how these narratives intersect with broader power structures. Employing a primarily qualitative approach informed by feminist film theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, this study argues that the film reiterates societal gender dissent through its discursive strategies, character construction, and cultural symbolism. By critically analysing the film's narrative, language and visual composition, the article investigates how contemporary cinematic texts may unconsciously reproduce gender discord. While progress towards more nuanced and equitable gender representation is evident, widely circulated cinematic narratives remain embedded within discursive cycles that privilege division and antagonism over unity, tolerance, and mutual understanding.

2. Theoretical framework and objectives of the study

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) constitutes a robust analytical approach for examining how language, communication, and power relations are embedded within discourse. Given that *Barbie* (2023) explicitly engages with questions of gender relations, CDA is employed to critically analyse the film's narrative structure, dialogue and discursive formations, as well as the broader social, cultural, and ideological meanings it produces and circulates. What distinguishes CDA from other analytical approaches is its emphasis on social practices and power relations rather than on linguistic choices in isolation (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). As such, CDA enables the identification of implicit and naturalised beliefs that are reproduced through influential cultural texts, including popular cinema.

The critical analysis of *Barbie* (2023) focuses on the representation and internal contradictions of gender identity, gender roles, and gendered power relations within contemporary cinematic narratives, particularly those with extensive global reach. Gender theory occupies a central position in the study and interpretation of visual texts (Cameron, 1992; Coats, 2003; Fausto-Sterling, 2000) that is why this article draws primarily on two influential theoretical frameworks within feminist film theory: Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze" and Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. These frameworks are mobilised alongside CDA to interrogate how gendered subjectivities are constructed, performed, and regulated within the film's narrative and visual construction. In addition, the article engages with scholarship on globalisation and

cinema to examine how transnational modes of production, distribution, and consumption shape gender representation in globally circulated films such as *Barbie*.

The principal objective of this study is to examine the propagation of gender antagonism in media, with particular emphasis on contemporary cinema. Through a clear conceptualisation of gender antagonism, the article analyses how cinematic narratives may construct and reinforce oppositional gender binaries, such as men versus women and masculinity versus femininity. Within this framework, CDA and content analysis are combined in a multi-layered analytical model that examines both the qualitative dimensions of discourse and the recurrence of gendered themes across the film's narrative. While CDA is employed to interrogate the ideological and power-laden dimensions of language and representation, content analysis serves to systematically identify and map key thematic patterns related to gender across selected scenes and character interactions.

Cinematographic analysis constitutes an additional and integral component of the methodological framework, enabling a closer examination of how visual elements—such as colour schemes, framing, *mise-en-scène*, and spatial organisation—either reinforce or subvert the gendered ideologies articulated through discourse and narrative content. The integration of these analytical tools allows for a comprehensive examination of the film's discursive, thematic, and visual strategies, consistent with the study's qualitative orientation.

For the purposes of this study, the primary data collection method involved repeated and comprehensive viewings of the film via a publicly accessible online streaming platform. Throughout the viewing process, particular attention was given to identifying and documenting key scenes, dialogues, and interactions involving male and female characters. The dialogue excerpts analysed in this study were either transcribed directly from the film or sourced from the official script by Gerwig and Baumbach, available online in PDF format. Both the film transcripts and the screenplay constitute the core textual data subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis and content analysis, forming the empirical basis for the study's interpretive claims.

3. Film background and critical overview

Barbie (2023) is an American film released on July 21st, 2023, by Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. The film is directed by Greta Gerwig and stars the Australian actress

Margot Robbie in the titular role of *Barbie*, alongside the American actor Ryan Gosling, who plays Ken. The film scored 88% on Rotten Tomatoes and 6.8/10 on *IMDb*. *Barbie* (2023) won a Golden Globe Award for Cinematic and Box Office Achievement and received eight Academy Award nominations, winning the Oscar for Best Original Song. Classified within the fantasy–comedy genre, the film is based on a screenplay Gerwig co-wrote with Noah Baumbach. The narrative follows *Barbie* and Ken on a journey of self-discovery triggered by an existential crisis. The film was an instant commercial success, breaking records at the American box office and grossing over USD 1.446 billion worldwide, thereby becoming the highest-grossing film of 2023. It currently ranks as the fourteenth highest-grossing film of all time.

The narrative begins when the previously oblivious and seemingly unconscious *Barbie* starts experiencing feelings of loneliness and anxiety linked to the pressures of perfection, notably upon discovering cellulite on her “perfect” doll body. This disruption propels her to venture into the “Real World” alongside Ken. Both characters are subsequently confronted with the complexities of gender dynamics, gender roles, and socially imposed expectations. *Barbie* is shocked to discover that the “Real World” is not governed by successful women, as is the case in “Barbie Land”. Ken, by contrast, reacts with excitement upon discovering that the “Real World” appears to be dominated by powerful, physically attractive, and socially successful men. This portrayal presents an exaggerated and reductive representation of reality, overlooking the fact that men, too, can be subjected to and harmed by patriarchal structures.

As the narrative unfolds, *Barbie* embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment, ultimately coming to the realisation that existence extends beyond physical appearance and perfection. Ken, initially captivated by the exaggerated masculinity he encounters, undergoes his own transformation, marked by struggles with identity formation and self-acceptance. The film highlights themes of feminism, gender equality, self-love, self-acceptance, and the influence of social norms on individual behaviour. However, the character development of both *Barbie* and Ken remains limited, focusing primarily on a linear progression from naïve ignorance to self-awareness and purpose. Notably, the film grants *Barbie* the highest degree of self-consciousness, culminating in her decision to become ‘human’, whereas Ken is denied this choice and remains confined to “Barbie Land” alongside the other Kens. It is thus the *stereotypical Barbie* who is afforded agency through her interaction with her real-life ‘creator’, Ruth Handler.

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The moment of *Barbie's* creation by Ruth Handler visually imitates Michelangelo's famous painting *La Creazione di Adamo* (1512) 'The Creation of Adam', which forms part of the Sistine Chapel ceiling in Vatican City. The painting depicts the Biblical creation narrative from the *Book of Genesis*, in which God bestows life upon Adam, the first man. In *Barbie* (2023), this scene is mirrored through a close-up of Ruth Handler's hands releasing *Barbie's*, closely resembling the iconic separation of God's and Adam's hands in Michelangelo's painting. This visual parallel symbolically reflect the act of creation by presenting a female creator who transforms the first *Barbie* doll into a human 'woman'.

This scene illustrates the extent to which the film industry operates as one of the most influential sectors of the media, capable of generating alternate realities and shaping the perceptions of global audiences. Films thus function as powerful agents in constructing beliefs and influencing public opinion (Spark, 2015). Blockbuster productions such as *Barbie* (2023) often prioritise entertainment value and commercial profitability over intellectual or critical depth. In this sense, such films can be situated within escapist cinema, characterised by familiar tropes, predictable narrative arcs, and reassuring resolutions. This tendency is evident in *Barbie's* ultimate success in "saving *Barbie Land* from patriarchy", as articulated by Ruth towards the film's conclusion, restoring maternal bonds and liberating the other *Barbies*. These narrative choices offer audiences a sense of closure aligned with expectation and desire. Ward and Grower (2020) argue that such portrayals of gender roles significantly influence viewers, either reinforcing traditional gender norms or contributing to their continued reproduction.

Recent scholarship has sought to measure the persistence of gender disparities between men and women across various domains, revealing that the gender gap continues to expand (Larivière et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2015; Lauzen, 2019). Within this context, popular culture emerges as a crucial site for the construction of social perceptions surrounding gender. Through media forms such as television, film, music, and social platforms, popular culture disseminates narratives and images that may either reinforce or challenge conventional gender roles. The film industry possesses the capacity to contest stereotypes through the portrayal of complex and empowered female characters. Thus, narrative structures employed in widely consumed films can shape how individuals interpret and perform their own gender identities by offering models of gendered behaviour and expression.

In this regard, a recent study by Haris et al. (2023) examines gender bias in English-language films through the analysis of gender role representation. The researchers compiled film scripts from various genres and applied natural language processing techniques to identify recurring patterns. Their findings reveal that male and female characters are frequently associated with personality traits aligned with entrenched societal stereotypes. Using mathematical modelling and machine learning techniques, the study further identifies biases whereby male characters are portrayed as assertive, dominant, and competitive, while female characters are more often depicted as cheerful, carefree, and emotionally positive. These findings suggest that improvements in female visibility and representation do not necessarily indicate the eradication of sexist biases. On the contrary, such biases persist and continue to reflect the stereotypes embedded within contemporary societies, irrespective of cultural or socio-economic contexts. In this respect, *Barbie* (2023) is no exception.

4. Film analysis: *Barbie*'s narrative and visual techniques – The representation of gender power relations

The film employs a range of distinctive narrative and visual techniques that add thematic depth to its discursive narration, character development, and stylistic idiosyncrasies. *Barbie* (2023)'s portrayal of gender relations is primarily articulated through its original use of narrative and visual strategies, notably through image composition, colour symbolism, and dialogue. This section examines these techniques, emphasising their importance to the overall narrative structure of the film and to the ideological meanings embedded within it.

4.1 Narrative techniques

- ***Metafiction***

Barbie (2023) makes extensive use of metafiction to blur the boundaries separating the “Real World” from the fictional space of “Barbie Land”. The transition between the two worlds is deliberately caricatural, exaggerating the physical and temporal distance between the two worlds. Characters frequently acknowledge their own existence within a fabricated narrative, openly referring to their artificiality and lack of human attributes. This self-reflexivity is evident when *Barbie* confronts a group of construction workers who sexually harass her. She responds thus:

*I don't know exactly what you meant by all those
Little quips, but I'm picking up on some sort of
entendre which appears to be double, and I would
Just like to inform you that I don't have a vagina and
He — {pointing at Ken} doesn't have a penis.
We don't have genitals.*

This discourse instant here marks self-recognition and adds complexity and nuance to the narrative, thus contributing to its emphasis on irony and self-awareness while also pointing to the fact that neither *Barbie* nor Ken are actually human.

● Subversion of expectations

The film initially plays into the traditional and stereotypical representation of the *Original Barbie* and the gender tropes historically associated with the doll. *Barbie*, portrayed by Margot Robbie, appears as a tall, blonde woman with blue eyes and a flawless silhouette. To move beyond this deliberate typecasting, the film gradually begins to subvert these conventional representations, challenging the audience's preconceived notions on femininity, capitalist consumer culture, and identity. This subversion is articulated most explicitly through *Barbie's* first encounter with a female young adult whom she assumes to be her owner. The dialogue in this scene is direct and confrontational, presenting a lengthy tirade delivered by a frustrated adolescent who attributes the perceived failures of feminist progress to the figure of the *stereotypical Barbie*. Sasha (*Barbie's* owner), and *Barbie's* second encounter with humans goes as such:

Sasha: You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented.

Barbie: No, I think you have that the wrong way around.

Sasha: You represent everything wrong with our culture: sexualised capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals.

Barbie: Whao hang on. You're describing something stereotypical. Barbie is so much more than that.

Sasha: Look at yourself!!

You set the feminist movement back fifty years. You destroy girls' innate sense of worth and you're killing the planet with your glorification of rampant consumerism.

(Gerwig & Baumbach, n.d.)

Barbie is thus confronted, for the first time, with the reality of the “Real World” where women are not fully and categorically empowered as they are in her fictional “Barbie Land”. This discursive exchange symbolises the core ideological message that the film seeks to convey to its global audience. It illustrates how the dialogue in *Barbie* (2023) constructs gender ideology by contrasting the lived experiences of real women with the idealised version of womanhood embodied by the *Barbie* doll. Sasha’s speech and direct mode of address function as a critique of both the “Real World” and the fictional world of “Barbie Land,” thereby reflecting and simultaneously reproducing dominant societal views on gender and femininity. Furthermore, Sasha’s repeated use of action verbs, with *Barbie* positioned as the grammatical actor, reveals her ideological stance and, by extension, that of the film. Nevertheless, attributing the historical misrepresentation and subjugation of women to a single doll remains an overly reductionist representation of the current situation of gender relations.

● Character development

The constructed narrative of the film focuses on *Barbie*’s journey towards self-discovery and what is presented as authentic empowerment. *Barbie* evolves from a flawless doll residing within a utopian matriarchal social order to a living, breathing human being named Barbara, who ultimately chooses to live in the “Real World”. Through this transformation, *Barbie* becomes Barbara- a woman who enters a social space where gender tensions persist and where conflicts between men and women are ongoing rather than resolved. The film thus relocates its protagonist from a simplified and ideologically contained world to a more complex social reality in which representations of women, femininity, and womanhood are shaped by the contradictions of postmodern existence.

While this transition appears to reject the rigid and categorical gender hierarchies that structure “Barbie Land”, it simultaneously foregrounds a world in which gender relations remain defined by persistent opposition. The “Real World” is depicted as a site of continual negotiation between the two sexes, suggesting that empowerment is achieved

not through structural transformation but through individual self-realisation. In this sense, the film reshapes gender power relations without fully dismantling the antagonistic binary social relations that underpin them, thereby aligning *Barbie*'s character development with the broader discursive tensions that the film constructs around gender identity and power.

● Humour

The film's dialogue employs sharp, pointed, and satirical humour that functions as an incisive critique of both societal expectations imposed on women and the commercialisation of female childhood playthings. Humour in *Barbie* (2023) operates on both linguistic and visual levels. One notable instance of visual humour occurs during *Barbie*'s first encounter with the executive board of Mattel, the owner and creator of the *Barbie* franchise. The board of directors is depicted as an exclusively male group convening in a circular, purple office, dressed uniformly in black suits while seated on pink chairs. This visual contrast produces comedic effect while simultaneously offering a critical commentary on traditional gender hierarchies, highlighting the irony that a female doll marketed primarily to women is designed, produced, and controlled by a group of men.

The film's first explicit reference to "female agency" is similarly framed through derision when the CEO of Mattel proclaims: "*But what do we really sell? {...} We sell dreams. And imagination! And sparkle! And when you think of sparkle, what do you think after that? Female agency!*" (*Barbie*, 2023). The CEO, who is deliberately kept nameless throughout the film, associates female agency with "sparkle," a linguistic choice that reveals his reductive perception of women's capacity to exert influence. The coupling of terms such as "sparkle," "dreams," and "imagination" with the concept of agency reflects a masculine, corporate understanding of femininity that trivialises women's actions, feelings, and aspirations. In this context, female agency is implicitly reduced to aesthetic appeal and emotional charm, reinforcing superficiality at the expense of substance, intellect, or structural power. Through humour, the film exposes these contradictions; while simultaneously reproducing the very discursive limitations it seeks to critique.

● Intertextuality

Although it is American production, *Barbie* (2023) is clearly designed for a global audience, which accounts for its extensive use of intertextual references drawn from a

range of cultural contexts. The film incorporates these references seamlessly into its narrative to enrich both the storyline and character construction. Such inter-textual elements include allusions to classic cinema, popular culture, and historical figures, most notably Ruth Marianna Handler, the American businesswoman who invented the *Barbie* doll in 1959. Handler also served as Mattel's first president and CEO from 1945 to 1975. Within the scope of this study, intertextuality functions not only as a stylistic device but also as a discursive strategy through which the film situates its gender narratives within broader cultural and historical frameworks. By invoking recognisable cultural symbols and real-life figures, *Barbie* (2023) reinforces its ideological claims while simultaneously appealing to a transnational audience, thereby amplifying the circulation and impact of its gendered representations.

4.2 Visual techniques

- **Colour**

The film employs a dominant pink-themed colour scheme, foregrounding its exuberant and fantastic setting as well as its discursive dimensions. This visual choice reflects the quintessential *Barbie* aesthetic while simultaneously functioning as a commentary on the ideal of hyper-femininity that the colour pink conventionally symbolises. Pink frequently carries connotations of naivety, superficiality, and exaggerated female agreeableness, particularly when deployed in a pejorative context; this cultural association helps explain the film's extensive reliance on the colour (Callaway, 2023). From a more nuanced discursive perspective, pink can signify a symbolic reappropriation of femininity and a departure from traditional gender norms. However, such reappropriation is largely absent in *Barbie* (2023). Instead, the film consistently deploys pink as a marker of women and of commodities marketed towards a female consumer base, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging established gender clichés. When *Barbie* chooses to assume a human form, the colour pink noticeably recedes and is replaced by more gender-neutral tones such as beige, blue, and white. Nevertheless, pink remains a persistent symbol of *Barbie*'s cultural legacy, underscoring the doll's enduring impact on popular culture and its centrality to ongoing debates surrounding femininity and female empowerment.

● Set design

The sets in *Barbie* (2023) are meticulously designed to foreground the exaggerated and outlandish nature of “Barbie Land”. Scenes set within “Barbie Land” combine retro and modern influences, creating a visually striking environment that supports a carefully crafted narrative. These aesthetic choices draw on cinematic techniques from earlier periods while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of contemporary filmmaking. This approach is particularly evident in Greta Gerwig’s use of practical effects whenever possible (Nemiroff & Amin, 2023). For example, transition sequences depicting *Barbie*’s movement between “Barbie Land” and the “Real World”, as well as her mobility within “Barbie Land” itself, are achieved through miniature models and in-camera effects—techniques reminiscent of classic cinema (Nemiroff & Amin, 2023). The film also pays explicit homage to cinematic history through its opening sequence, which references Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Gerwig employs this intertextual gesture as a symbolic reworking of liberation, recontextualising the original scene to signify women’s emancipation from traditional roles associated with motherhood and domesticity. Alongside these retro elements, the filmmakers make extensive use of CGI to enhance selected moments, particularly those that underscore shifting male–female power dynamics. Collectively, the film’s set design produces a visually immersive experience that not only captivates audiences but also reinforces the film’s discursive treatment of gender relations and power structures.

● Symbolism

Symbolism in *Barbie* (2023) is extensive; however, this section addresses only those visual motifs that directly influence the narrative and its central themes. Mirrors and reflections, for instance, are recurrent visual elements used to explore issues of identity, self-awareness, and self-recognition. Similarly, the repeated scenes of *Barbie* changing outfits signify the multiplicity and fluidity of roles that women can assume, thereby challenging the notion of a singular and fixed feminine identity. However, these varied social roles—often associated with successful and empowered women—remain largely confined to the idealised space of “Barbie Land”. The film does not grant its female characters the same diversity of identities or social roles within the “Real World”. The narrative thus implies that the “Real World” remains a restrictive space for women who aspire to success or influence, thereby reinforcing existing gender norms and clichés

and further contributing to the production of gender antagonism. The film fuels such antagonism through distortions of social roles, frequently implying that men are the primary obstacle preventing women from reaching their full potential, while largely disregarding intersecting factors such as social class, economic structures, or ethnicity.

The narrative and visual representations of gender constructs in *Barbie* (2023) also reflect society's emphasis on superficial beauty standards for both sexes. Ken, like *Barbie*, is portrayed as a blonde doll with a flawless physique, a depiction that overlooks the diverse roles men occupy in contemporary society. The sexualisation of the body is therefore not exclusively female but also male. Ken's representation as a perfect male supermodel constitutes a clear instance of gender misrepresentation. While the film juxtaposes these visuals with *Barbie*'s journey towards self-acceptance, it largely neglects the parallel trajectory of Ken, who similarly seeks empowerment after experiencing gender and physical effacement within "Barbie Land". The film critiques the superficial valuation of physical and intellectual attributes primarily in relation to women, while marginalising or dismissing similar issues affecting men.

At the same time, the film constructs two ideologically opposed worlds: a patriarchal one, designated as the "Real World", and a matriarchal one, represented by "Barbie Land". Addressing the issue of gender antagonism thus begins with the film's limited engagement with masculine representation, as the narrative predominantly concentrates on discursive elements that amplify opposition, resentment, and dissent rather than offering a more integrative or intersectional understanding of gender relations.

5. Masculinity and the male gaze: producing and reinforcing gender antagonism

Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the 'male gaze' was first introduced in her influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In this work, Mulvey critiques the ways in which visual media frequently portray women from a masculine perspective, foregrounding what the presumed male viewer desires to see in the female body. This dynamic is primarily discernible in *Barbie* (2023) through the casting of Margot Robbie in the lead role. Despite the film's attempt to challenge stereotypical representations of femininity, the camera work and shooting angles often accentuate Robbie's physical appearance, employing close-ups of her silhouette and dressing her in revealing or sexually suggestive attire.

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The concept of the male gaze posits that cinematic narratives are frequently structured to generate visual pleasure for a male spectator, positioning women as objects of aesthetic contemplation rather than as fully autonomous subjects. In *Barbie* (2023), the relationship between *Barbie* and Ken is framed through Ken's persistent infatuation with *Barbie* and his apparent inability to define his existence outside her social orbit. In the film's opening sequence, the narrator's voice-over, delivered by the British actress Helen Mirren, states: "*Barbie has a great day every day. But Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him*" (Gerwig & Baumbach, n.d.). While the *Barbies* of "Barbie Land" occupy a wide range of professional roles, the *Kens* are assigned a singular function: to attract the attention and approval of the *Barbies*, who rarely reciprocate their interest. Consequently, Ken repeatedly attempts to affirm his presence through *Barbie's* gaze, exclaiming, "*Hey Barbie! Check me out! / Hey Barbie, look at me!*" (Gerwig & Baumbach, n.d.).

Mulvey (1975) identifies three interconnected forms of the gaze: the gaze of the camera, which frames female bodies in ways that emphasise their physical attributes; the gaze of male characters within the narrative; and the gaze of the spectator. In *Barbie* (2023), the gaze of the camera operates alongside the gazes of male characters, particularly Ken and other male figures encountered in the narrative, including the construction workers who harass *Barbie* in the "Real World" and the all-male board of directors at Mattel. These male characters direct their gaze towards *Barbie* in ways that either assert dominance and control, as in the case of the construction workers and the administrative board at Mattel, or express insecurity and dependence, as exemplified by Ken and the other *Kens* in "Barbie Land". Through this interplay of desire and scrutiny, the film also engages the presumed male viewer by presenting images of women across a range of physical forms and social occupations.

Mulvey (1975) further argues that traditional cinematic narratives frequently position women in passive and subordinate roles, reducing them to objects of visual consumption. In *Barbie* (2023), this dynamic is partially reversed. Within the narrative structure, men are positioned in contrasting and often diminished roles across the two primary settings. In "Barbie Land", the *Kens* occupy subordinate positions, conforming to the social and gender roles assigned to them by their creators at Mattel. In contrast, the "Real World" presents men through exaggerated stereotypes, portraying them as aggressive, sexually assertive, violent, or emotionally frustrated. The sharp contrast between these two representational spaces is established early in the film, particularly

through the narrator's introduction of "Barbie Land", underscoring the film's reliance on oppositional gender constructions that contribute to the broader discourse of gender antagonism explored in this study. As the narrator presents "Barbie Land" she states:

All of these women are Barbie, and Barbie is all of these women. She might have started out as just a lady in a bathing suit, but she became so much more.

She has her own money, her own house, her own career. Because Barbie can be anything,

Women can be anything.

And this has been reflected back onto the little girls of today in the "Real World".

{...}

Thanks to Barbie all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved!

{with a knowing smirk and a change in her tone, leaning towards sarcasm}

...at least that's what the Barbies think.

After all they're living in Barbie Land. Who am I to burst their bubble?

(Gerwig & Baumbach, n.d.)

Through the narrator's use of sarcasm, the viewer is first introduced to the opposing realities of "Barbie Land" and the "Real World". These spaces are presented as distinct social orders in which women appear to have achieved none of what the narrator proclaims—an overt exaggeration of the actual conditions of the "Real World". In reality, women have attained many of the social, political, and economic advances referenced by the narrator, developments that cannot be attributed to the existence of the *Barbie* doll. In this context, *Barbie* functions as a discursive construct that foregrounds an extreme and stylised version of female reality, thereby producing a clear instance of gender antagonism. This antagonism is intensified through an implied and largely distorted representation of asymmetrical gender power relations, which accords men and patriarchy absolute and categorical dominance.

The film's extreme feminist discourse becomes evident through its narrative placement of women within two oppositional social realities in which female supremacy is achievable only within a fantastical, fictional space. At the same time, the film discursively subverts traditional cinematic gender roles by concentrating its narrative on female protagonists rather than male ones. Men, by contrast, are relegated to secondary

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positions as romantic interests or peripheral figures whose presence lacks long-term impact or narrative agency.

Within this framework, the concept of the ‘male gaze’ is deliberately inverted and reframed as a male experience through the character of Ken. Unlike conventional cinematic representations in which women are objectified and sexualised through the male gaze, *Barbie* (2023) satirises this dynamic by positioning Ken as the object of a ‘female gaze’. Ken thus becomes a figure of visual pleasure for the *Barbies* of “Barbie Land”. This reversal of gendered visual power exposes the absurdity of sexual objectification and invites global audiences to reconsider entrenched assumptions about gender roles and desirability.

Concurrently, the film constructs a multilayered portrayal of masculinity through Ken’s narrative arc. Ken’s process of self-awareness begins upon entering the “Real World” where he encounters men who appear socially dominant, physically powerful, and publicly influential in ways that sharply contrast with his marginalised status in “Barbie Land”. While *Barbie* initially remains oblivious to the implications of her new surroundings, Ken quickly becomes cognisant of the gendered hierarchies operating within this space, marking the beginning of his identity crisis and reinforcing the film’s broader discursive engagement with gender power relations and antagonism. *Barbie*’s obliviousness and Ken’s cognisance are apparent in the following exchange:

Barbie: Jeez, you would think a construction site at launch-time would be the perfect place for a little woman-power. But this was so...male.

Ken: Yeah, everything is almost, like, reversed here.

(Gerwig & Baumbach, n.d.)

Also, as Ken and “Barbie Land” in “The “Real World” they experience the attention they receive at the beach quite differently:

Barbie: What’s going on??

{random man}: *Give us a smile blondie!*

Barbie: Why are these men looking at me?

Ken: Yeah, they’re also staring at me!

Barbie: I feel kind of ill at ease...Like, I don’t know the word for it, but I’m...

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I feel conscious, but it's myself that I'm conscious of.

Ken: *I'm not getting any of that. I feel what could only be described as admired.*

{man 2}: *You're hot!*

Ken: *And there's no undertone of violence.*

Barbie: *Mine very much has an undertone of violence.*

(Gerwig & Baumbach, n.d.)

Ken's response to the attention he receives at the beach reflects how traditional constructions of masculinity shape men's social behaviour and their desire for admiration and respect. Within prevailing gender norms, Ken's actions reveal a deeply internalised need for validation and social recognition. This sudden awareness prompts him to orchestrate a coup in "Barbie Land", positioning himself as an authoritative figure and assuming leadership over "Barbie Land", changing its name to "Kendom". Ken's attempt to exert absolute control over "Barbie Land" represents a discursive moment in which toxic and hegemonic masculinity are foregrounded. While the film's depiction of toxic and hegemonic masculinity functions as a critique of normative masculine ideals, it simultaneously reinforces a framework of gender antagonism by presenting masculine empowerment primarily through domination and exclusion. Ken's intense and disruptive response during his journey towards self-awareness is notably contrasted with *Barbie's* comparatively restrained and introspective transformation. This asymmetry in character development further underscores the film's reliance on oppositional gender dynamics, reinforcing the broader thematic tensions that structure its representation of gender relations. Differences in male/female responses are further accentuated in the portrayal of *Barbie* and Ken's reaction back in "Barbie Land"; while Ken rebels through the establishment of a new 'country', *Barbie* goes into a typical female emotional breakdown:

Gloria: *What's wrong?*

Barbie: {between sobs} *I am...not...pretty...anymore...*

Gloria: *What? You're so pretty?*

Barbie: {shaking her head} *Stereotypical Barbie...is...pretty...*

{...} *I am not smart enough to be...interesting... {...} I can't do brains surgery,*

I've never flown a plane, I'm not president. No one in the Supreme Court is me...

I'm...just...not...good...enough for...anything... {she sobs bitterly}

In this exchange, *Barbie* expresses her frustration and sorrow over losing her home and her idealised matriarchal order to Gloria, her owner in the “Real World”. While the film claims to challenge traditional gender roles and social behaviours, it inadvertently reinforces gender stereotypes and antagonism through this interaction. Unlike Ken, who responds to crisis by asserting control and declaring a new leadership, *Barbie* reacts by withdrawing into despair, lamenting the loss of her beauty and perceived intellectual inadequacy. This reaction is evident in *Barbie*’s use of a sequence of negative categorical assertions, which emphasise her perceived inability to navigate a social context in which vulnerability appears unavoidable. By foregrounding stark contrasts between female and male characters, the film ultimately reinforces conventional gender roles rather than destabilising or challenging them. The struggle for authority and power between female and male characters, staged through the opposition of matriarchy and patriarchy, further entrenches gender antagonism. The film’s satirical juxtaposition of two extreme social systems does not encourage viewers to critically engage with the broader social, cultural, and economic conditions that shape gender relations and power dynamics. Instead, it risks narrowing the discourse to a zero-sum struggle for dominance in which both sexes compete for control.

Towards the film’s conclusion, the *Barbies* strategically exploit Ken’s displayed traits of toxic and hegemonic masculinity, using these characteristics against them to reclaim authority over “Barbie Land”. In doing so, they rely not only on intellect but also on their bodies, sexuality, and what they frame as men’s inherent flaws and vulnerabilities. The narrative culminates in the restoration of a matriarchal social order, with the Kens relegated to the margins of an unequal status quo. This resolution reinforces the film’s reliance on antagonistic gender binaries, privileging symbolic victory over a more integrative or transformative vision of realistic gender relations.

6. Understanding *Barbie*’s (2023) gender performativity and power relations

The post-structuralist gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler argues in her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender Identity* (1990, 2006) that gender is performative. She maintains that gender is constructed and sustained through the repeated enactment of speech, gestures, and everyday social interactions. The notion of performativity is introduced in the opening chapter of *Gender Trouble* (1990,

2006), where Butler asserts that “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (p. 25). In *Barbie* (2023), the protagonist initially appears as Stereotypical *Barbie*, the ideal embodiment of conventional femininity—visually flawless, sexually appealing, and fully compliant with culturally and socially constructed expectations of womanhood. As the narrative unfolds, *Barbie*’s previously unquestioned discursive assumptions about femininity begin to erode. She becomes increasingly aware of the constructed nature of her identity and gender role, leading her to question the authenticity and essence of her own “being”. *Barbie*’s challenge to established gender norms resonates with Butler’s argument that social subjects are constrained by culturally prescribed roles and behaviours.

Despite this awareness, *Barbie* does not undergo a profound transformation in terms of gender identity or social positioning. Rather, she becomes conscious of the lived realities of womanhood in the “Real World”. Her shift toward greater self-awareness discursively suggests the possibility of contesting traditional femininity. This transition from an idealised doll to a sentient social subject reflects Butler’s (1990, 2006) claim that gender is a performed identity rather than an innate essence. However, the narrative does not meaningfully enact a subversion of traditional gender roles. Instead, it subtly reinforces stereotypical patterns of gendered behaviour. Subversion, as theorised by Butler, remains limited to *Barbie*’s recognition that femininity does not need to conform to rigid and reductionist norms.

While femininity is generally portrayed in a favourable light, albeit at times exaggerated, masculinity is represented more negatively. Male characters, particularly Ken, embody performative masculinity. Ken’s exaggerated conduct reflects dominant societal expectations associated with masculinity, including physical strength, material acquisition, emotional restraint, and competition. His return to “Barbie Land” marks the onset of a crisis in masculine performance, revealing insecurity and vulnerability. This crisis prompts Ken to orchestrate a coup, dethroning the African American female president and declaring “Kendom” a totalitarian patriarchal regime. Although the film’s portrayal of male performativity is overtly pejorative, it mirrors *Barbie*’s own quest for empowerment, as she similarly seeks to dismantle the structures of “Kendom.” This exaggerated depiction of masculinity underscores the instability and volatility of gender performance and power relations.

Throughout *Gender Trouble* (1990, 2006), Butler emphasises the potential for resistance despite gender’s social and cultural construction. *Barbie*’s encounter with the

“Real World” does not inhibit her capacity for self-reflection or reinterpretation of identity. The film suggests that although *Barbie* initially internalises dominant perceptions of femininity, she gradually attempts to challenge and renegotiate them. One of the centrally discursive concerns advanced by the film is the relationship between consumer culture and gender performance. *Barbie* (2023) critiques the commercial logic underpinning “Barbie Land”, highlighting how consumerism shapes and regulates performances of womanhood. The film argues that idealised and unattainable images of femininity and womanhood circulated through marketing and advertising exacerbate women’s feelings of inadequacy, encouraging consumption as a means of self-validation. By perpetuating standards of perfection, these commercial narratives restrict individual expression and undermine self-acceptance.

In this respect, the film employs irony in its depiction of “Barbie Land” to ostensibly critique the very standards it simultaneously reproduces, including physical perfection and consumerist excess. This ambivalence aligns with Butler’s (1990, 2006) conceptualisation of gender performance as inseparable from dominant cultural narratives and normative frameworks, reinforcing the article’s broader argument concerning the reproduction of gender antagonism within contemporary cinematic discourse.

7. Conclusion

This article critically examined the circulation of contemporary gender narratives in popular cinema through a qualitative case study of the American blockbuster *Barbie* (2023). Drawing on CDA, feminist film theory, and cinematographic analysis, the study explored how narrative, visual, and discursive strategies contribute to the production and circulation of gender antagonism through a global, influential film. The analysis demonstrated that, despite its explicit feminist stance, *Barbie* (2023) relies on exaggerated and oppositional representations of gender relations which may reinforce antagonism rather than foster nuanced or dialogical understandings.

Methodologically, the study adopted a primarily qualitative, multi-layered approach. CDA enabled the identification of naturalised assumptions surrounding femininity, masculinity, and power embedded in dialogue and narration, while content analysis highlighted recurring themes of empowerment, disempowerment, toxic and hegemonic masculinity, and consumerism. Cinematographic analysis further revealed how colour symbolism, set design, framing, and visual motifs reinforce these discourses. The

convergence of these methods allowed for a comprehensive examination of how ideology operates across textual, visual, and narrative levels.

The findings point to a three-dimensional model of gender representation operating within *Barbie* (2023). The first dimension is **discursive and narrative**, encompassing dialogue, narration, and character development. At this level, gender is structured through oppositional binaries—matriarchy versus patriarchy, empowerment versus oppression—where women are positioned as primary agents and men are portrayed as passive, oppressive, or ridiculed figures. The second dimension is **visual and aesthetic**, articulated through the persistent use of pink, stylised set design, and idealised bodies. These visual strategies reinforce quintessential associations between femininity, consumerism, and superficiality, sustaining gender clichés despite moments of irony and self-awareness. The third dimension is **socio-cultural and ideological**, corresponding to the film's engagement with power, capitalism, and global media circulation. While the film critiques patriarchy and consumer culture, it often reduces gender inequality to a symbolic, often unrealistic conflict between men and women, overlooking structural and intersectional factors such as class, race, and socio-economic conditions.

The application of Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze further revealed that the film's apparent acts of resistance operated largely through inversion of the status quo rather than its transformation. Gender roles and power hierarchies are reversed but not dismantled, resulting in a narrative denouement that restores a utopian matriarchal social order while completely marginalising male agency. This outcome reinforces the film's antagonistic framework rather than offering a transformative vision of gender relations.

In conclusion, *Barbie* (2023) illustrates the ambivalence of contemporary popular cinema. That is, while it advances feminist rhetoric and foregrounds female narratives, it simultaneously reproduces polarised and adversarial gender representations. Given its global reach, such narratives merit sustained critical scrutiny, particularly regarding their role in shaping public perceptions of gender and social relations.

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HOLLYWOOD MOVIES THROUGH SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY: AMERICAN SNIPER AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This article aims to test the viability of Social Identity Theory (SIT) by attempting to apply it to the context of Hollywood films. SIT is a socio-psychological approach that underlines the idea of individuals constructing their social identity through cognitive processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison, which, if extended to a new scope, gives the theory the potential to predict what occurs in the mind of the viewers when watching a certain movie. By extending the premise of the theory, this paper examines in detail the possible impact of the selected movie on viewers through its interference with the processes of social identification. This work adopts content analysis as a methodology where an interpretative study of the Hollywood movie “American Sniper” allows a close and detailed examination of various relevant scenes, of course guided by the framework. This leads to predicting the interactions of the audience with the movie by spotting the mechanisms by which it interferes with the cognitive processes of social identification. All in all, this paper extends Social Identity Theory to the scope of media studies and especially film studies. We can conclude that the movie performs one of the cognitive processes and serves ready to consume results for the audience on which they base their identification. Finally, the use of Social Identity Theory uncovers the cognitive impact of the movie on the audience’s process of social identification and thus provides a new possibility of use for the theory.

Keywords: *Social Identity Theory (SIT), Social comparison, social categorization, American Sniper, Hollywood.*

1. Introduction

It is well established that movies have a big impact on our conception of the world which constitutes an important part of our identity. Being one of the biggest and most influential film industries, Hollywood may serve as a source of ready-to-consume cognitive data that can influence the cognitive processes enabling viewers to respond and interact in specific ways. Social Identity Theory is a socio-psychological approach that underlines the idea that individuals construct their social identity through cognitive processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison, which, if extended to a new scope, gives the theory the potential to predict what happens in the minds of viewers when watching a certain movie. That is, it can help us predict which social groups the viewers might be able to identify with and classify as in-group members, and which ones they would hold in lower esteem. Interestingly, not many studies are done on the possibility of approaching films, or more specifically Hollywood ones, using SIT, which may lead to a better understanding of issues related to film studies. In this sense, this study aims to test the applicability of the theory by attempting to apply it to the context of Hollywood movies. By extending the premise of the SIT, this paper also examines theoretically and in detail the potential impact of the selected movie on viewers through its interference with the processes of social identification. It draws from the theory of social identity to answer the following main questions: To what extent is SIT applicable to the study of films? And based on the premise of the theory, how can movies interfere with the process of social identification?

Since media content has a significant impact on individuals in the day-to-day life of the current technological world, many researchers and scholars have sought to explore the emergence of new socio-psychological phenomena involved in the consumption of certain mediated messages, often from the perspective of cultural analysis. However, this tendency to examine the effects of media messages on consumers has manifested, so far little interest in the relevance of SIT to the study of issues concerning movies, which might be of great use to pinpoint the cognitive processes that occur in the viewers' minds while interacting with the characters and situations in the movie.

The closest attempt to point to the theory's merits in understanding the processes of media stereotyping is Ramasubramanian and Murphy's (2014) study which indicates that Social Identity Theory's mechanism of *self-categorization* through group

membership fosters the formation of the individuals' stereotypical perceptions and attitudes of mediated messages, exposing favorable bias towards in-groups and, by extension, showing discriminatory behaviors towards out-groups.

The authors also suggest that SIT proves useful in offering interesting insights into the effects of media stereotyping on both minority and majority group members. That is, the use of stereotypical representations enhances a positive attitude towards the in-group that the audience identifies with. Furthermore, the authors allude to yet another socio-psychological approach that analyzes audience response to media, namely SIT. This approach is in tune with SIT as it deals with the integration of real-world experiences with mediated ones in constructing identities and behaviors. Although this essay deals with SIT in the context of media, it does not offer an exhaustive study of the possible instances in which movies might be able to interfere with the cognitive processes of social categorization. On another note, Curley (2009) uses SIT as a pertinent framework for the understanding of the mechanisms behind excluding or including applicant states in the EU expansion. By using SIT, Curley (2009) suggests that "the development of a national identity in relation to Europe is the most significant contributing factor to a policy to support/oppose expanding the EU to include applicant countries" (p. 650). In the same line, Greene's (2004) work reveals the pertinence of SIT in relation to the often-unexplored prejudiced party identification based on group belonging. The author maintains that social identity is an integral aspect of partisanship which, when measured, can contribute to accurate prediction and understanding of related political attitudes and behaviors.

Moreover, Ashmore et.al. (2001) indicate that SIT bears witness to its viability as an applicable framework for exploring and even reducing the risks of socio-psychological phenomena pertaining to violence, be it political or otherwise, intergroup conflict. Because this paper is concerned with the viability of SIT in allowing for a better understanding of how screen images (i.e., cinema) contribute to the processes of identification which lead individuals to form fixed perceptions about social groups, cultures and places, a touch up on some of the numerous attempts which have sought to investigate the issue of identity in the context of post 9/11 Hollywood cinema, although the theoretical framework is different. A relevant case in point is Senanayake's (2021) study, which shows the impact of mediated images led by Hollywood cinema on how individuals form fixed stereotypical perceptions and ideas of themselves and the other "Muslims", both before and after 9/11.

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Senanayake (2021) argues that Hollywood cinema contributes a great share to the formation of a stereotypical identity of Muslims, often depicted as barbaric and wicked to others. In other words, the author explains that this Hollywood discourse, especially after 9/11, campaigns Muslims as a threat to Western Society, and therefore fosters and promotes the construction of “US” versus “THEM” identities in popular culture. Although the author points out the role of Hollywood films in molding viewers’ perceptions, it fails to adequately address the processes that allow us to identify with certain characters and classify others as outsiders, which can be predicted through SIT.

It is essential to point out that one can never be completely exhaustive with the previous literature comprising a certain area of research. Similarly, the use of SIT in various contexts is widely common, especially in recent years. Recently, an interesting number of studies included SIT as a pertinent framework to approach matters pertaining to different fields. For example, in a medical context, Perry et al. (2022), in their article “Understanding Camouflaging as a Response to Autism-Related Stigma: A Social Identity Theory Approach”, rely on Social Identity Theory to examine the relationship between camouflaging and autism-related stigma, to test if camouflaging represents an individualistic strategy in response to stigma.

In a drastically different context, Arshad et al. (2022) focus, in their paper “Empowering leadership and employees' work engagement: a SIT perspective”, on understanding how empowering leadership leads to positive employee outcomes by examining the mediating and moderating mechanisms involved. Grounded in SIT, the authors propose a moderated mediation model to explain how empowering leadership interacts with leaders' prototypicality (the extent to which leaders embody the group identity) to influence employees' work engagement. The previous example highlights the variety of contexts in which Social Identity Theory is incorporated as a substantial framework to approach numerous aspects of human life, which only further highlights the potential this theory holds as a tool to analyze and study the world around us.

Given the scarcity of adequate scholarships devoted specifically to the insights provided by SIT into a better understanding of cinematic social phenomena, this work is an attempt to fill the existing gap in academic work on/about the importance of SIT to the study of films. This article offers a discussion of the ways in which SIT can predict what exactly occurs in the minds of the audience when watching movies and the way their brains interact with the characters.

2. Material and Methods

This thesis consists of a content analysis methodology and an interpretative study where a Hollywood film is to be closely read and analyzed through the lens of Social Identity Theory. A close and detailed study of various relevant scenes from the movie, of course guided by the framework, would be of great use to spot the mechanisms by which the movie can interfere with the cognitive processes of social identification. This paper uses *American Sniper* (2014) as a case study for various reasons. The relevance of the movie lies in that it is based on the real journey of the real American sniper, Chris Kyle, which is thought to be of great significance, as it may further intensify the process of social identification with the characters. Additionally, the movie highlights the journey of the American military who suffer through war for the peace of their country and glorifies the nobility of the American nationality. The movie falls within the context of the post-9/11 era, which would make its audience predisposed to react in specific ways in terms of sympathy towards the American soldiers and the American sniper.

This upcoming section engages in showing the relevance of notions such as the self, social identity, social categorization, and comparison, and how they relate to the study of cinema. More precisely, this section demonstrates how these key concepts and theories connect and form a useful approach to analyzing social identity construction through movies.

2.1 Social Identity from Symbolic Interactionism to Social Identity Theory

Symbolic interactionism rests on the foundation that the individual is embedded in a social structure that emphasizes the social character of identity that makes the individual. This suggests that one way of defining social identity is “the sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object”, which implies that “social identities take the form of cognitive schemas that enable an actor to determine ‘who I am/we are’ in a situation and positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations” (Wendt, 1994, p. 385). A sociological conception of identity links the inside and the outside, the ‘self’ and society. Inasmuch as individuals constitute a main component of society, the latter is fundamentally behind the construction of the individual’s identity.

According to SIT, social identity is “that part of the self-concept of the individual that derives from his knowledge about his membership in a social group(s), and from the

value and the emotional meaning that accompany this membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Using a social identity approach suggests a joint contribution between SIT and self-categorization theory. Social Identity Theory suggests that an organization or a group can obtain the power to change individual behaviors if it can modify their self-identity or the part of their self-concept that originates from the categorization with the emotional attachment to the group. In this respect, Schwartz et al. (2011) argues: “This focus on group identity from the perspective of the social identity approach, therefore, represents an important contribution to the understanding of group identity that transcends disciplinary boundaries” (2011, p. 202). Tajfel (1981) proposes that membership in a group provides the individual with a sense of belonging and can be an important source of pride and self-meaning. Thus, using Social Identity Theory, we can predict the behaviors and ideas that an individual might foster from his/her group membership, using the stream of thought that one might develop through the processes of the cognitive stage; the processes that result in dividing the world into ‘them’ and ‘us’.

To classify and tell apart the groups we belong to and identify with and the ones that make the ‘them’, social identity goes through a concoction of mental processes, namely social categorization, identification, and comparison. Accordingly, for social identity to be externalized, it passes through two processes: one is cognitive, the other motivational. Tajfel (1981) proposes that putting people into groups and categories springs from a normal cognitive process, which encompasses a human tendency to group things together. At this cognitive stage, a series of mental operations takes place, in which the self goes through categorization, identification, and comparison. At the motivational level lies the desire of the individual to tell his group apart from others, that is, the need to classify the ‘self’ and the ‘others’ or, in a collective context, draw a line between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’. Stets and Burke (2000) go on to assert that the self has an ability to see itself as an object that can be categorized, classified, and named in special ways, all in relation to various references such as social categories. This is the very process that takes place at the cognitive stage of externalization, according to the Social Identity Theory, and this is referred to as ‘self-categorization’ (Stets & Burke, 2000). Through this process, a social identity is formed. The Social Identity Theory defines the ‘social group’ that the ‘self’ aligns with as a body of individuals who have the same social identification or categorize themselves as members of the same social category.

Interestingly, we tend to define people based on their social categories more often than their individual characteristics. Consequently, this tool of social categorization is

powerful in the sense that it is often the determining factor in intergroup discrimination more than personal variables, such as personality traits. Moreover, one can identify with various social groups, but the identity related to one group or another may differ in salience according to the situation. As a result, a systematic bias of one's own group norms and values emerges against the other groups. As Schwartz et al. (2011) put it, "social comparison is perhaps the only way we can assess the true meaning or value of our own group (we define our groups, and more generally who we are, partly by comparison with others)", and a crucial tool that "tells us both who we are and who we are not".

Social comparison is a process by which people compare themselves, as a group member, to other groups, especially in terms of positive and negative traits. In simpler terms, people may view themselves as advantaged by their ethnicity because this one is related to a higher status when making a comparison with other ethnic groups, and in such cases, social comparison is used to maintain a higher level of self-esteem as we normally perceive our in-groups as a higher standard than an out-group. Accordingly, one central hypothesis of SIT is that members of an in-group will be in constant search to find the negative traits of an out-group and therefore, enhance their self-image. Hostility or intense disagreement between groups is not only a matter of competition, but also the result of rivaling identities, and that is because we tend to classify and define appropriate behavior by reference to the norms of the groups we belong to.

The Social Identity Theory suggests that we derive value from our belonging to the in-groups to a point where we hold our own groups in high esteem and "that we are therefore motivated to gain and maintain a sense of positive group distinctiveness from the other group(s) to which we do not belong, and against which we compare our own group" (Schwartz et al., 2011, p. 203). Interestingly, the process of social comparison does not happen through interactions only, it can also take place indirectly when virtual interactions happen with imaginary individuals, for example, through movies. While watching a movie, indirect interactions occur between the audience and the characters portrayed in it and, thus, the process of self-categorization suggested by SIT takes place through comparison, either consciously or unconsciously. People often relate or identify with a movie character regarding physical resemblance, profession, ethnicity and religion or similar attitudes towards things.

Hence, the relevance of social identity to the subject discussed in this paper lies in that it can serve as an interesting foundation to explain how many people can act and

react in coherent ways based on a shared understanding of social reality or memory. This perspective may be useful to comprehend the mental processes that occur when one identifies with imagined humans in the context of movies and, therefore, identify with those characters.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Social Identification through Characters in *American Sniper*

When watching a movie, the audience often identifies with certain characters because of the emotions and the traits they think they share. Accordingly, in a post-9/11 America, the audience of movies like *American Sniper* is more susceptible to identifying with the typically American characters because they are preconditioned by the traumatic events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

During the first seconds of the film, we are introduced to the sound of the Islamic call for prayer, accompanied by a background noise usually used in horror or dangerous scenes. The words chosen from the Islamic call for prayer are none other than the famous “Allah Akbar”, and this is a statement signifying that the viewer is in the presence of an Islamic religious context. This suggests a new social category of identification to which the average American who is “not Muslim” or is not familiar with the context of the call for prayer will not be able to feel a sense of belonging. Moreover, the menacing background noise plays an interesting role in creating a cognitive unconscious link between the social out-group in relation to Islam and the emotion of fear. This is a common strategy used by the American media, especially after the traumatic events of 9/11, to construct unconscious links between the social category of Muslims or Arabs and the notions of fear and terror. Thus, this scene already creates an out-group where the ‘other’ has not appeared on the screen yet.

The first scene depicts a group of what seems like American soldiers pacing cautiously in the middle of the ruins of wrecked buildings towards an unknown destination. Before any clear context, the audience is preconditioned to relate to and identify with an in-group of American Military soldiers deployed in a dangerous war zone, opposed to an out-group framed in the first seconds of the screen time. In other words, a binary opposition between two situations is constructed before the movie starts, and the audience will find themselves conducting the series of processes that lead to a social identification with the in-group of the American soldiers. This happens through a

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process of categorization based on prior cognitive data, where the military officers are considered a group with which the average American citizen identifies.

This process of categorization is aided by a range of cognitive data constructed in the mind of the audience under certain circumstances. The minimal data provided by the first seconds of the movie, together with the emphasis on the American soldiers' noble cause of guarding American and global peace, and the traumatic context of 9/11 that is embedded in the memory of the American citizens, divide the social categories presented so far in the movie into an in-group and an out-group. This automatically leads to the social comparison between the binary groups. Later, the movie keeps laying down character traits and situations that enhance the salience of the social category of "American" with which the audience is going to identify throughout the screen time.

Since the movie is painted from the U.S point of view, it emphasizes the contrast between the U.S army and the 'terrorist enemy'. After Chris Kyle decides to join the S.E.A.L corps, the viewers are introduced to the first step of the journey of the American soldiers in scenes that depict the harsh training that the future soldiers have to go through in order to fulfill their duty (Eastwood, 2014, 0:10:46). The soldiers are training day and night under unforgiving circumstances of exhausting physical exercises, psychological torment, and insulting treatment from their trainers. In addition to the straining long hours of physical training, they are also exposed to insulting treatment from their superiors who call them degrading terms and speak inferiorly to them (Eastwood, 2014, 0:10:46-0:13:33). Nonetheless, the future soldiers persevere through the hardships of training and show traits of endurance, bravery, strength, patriotism, and devotion for the country, as one of the soldiers makes it clear: "I came here to kill terrorists" (0:11:28).

It is also noteworthy that the level of detail and organization on the part of the American military is foregrounded. This is apparent in the scene where Chris is interrogated for one of his kills, in a way that emphasizes that the American army follows legal protocols and does not kill people randomly and that they take responsibility for every kill (0:33:43). The American army is shown to be highly equipped with all sorts of tools and latest technologies and makes moves following detailed orders, in contrast to the terrorist enemy who attacks abruptly and haphazardly using traditional weapons. Furthermore, in the sudden attack scene (0:29:35- 0:30:34), an interesting contrast highlights the difference between the American army and the enemy in taking action. At a certain point, a group of soldiers, steadily pacing in a strategic formation equipped with special cars, is abruptly attacked by a person, unknown yet to

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the viewer, driving an old car and carrying an artisanal bomb, a gas bottle normally reserved for domestic use. This stress on an unknown enemy with “primitive” tools and not-so-smart strategies serves as a reference point against which the positive traits of the American military are to be more valued by the audience.

Another instance where the audience might identify with the soldiers is when they are attacked by the enemy’s sniper, and two of the S.E.A.L members are shot suddenly right in front of Chris’s eyes and eventually pass away tragically.

The scenes discussed above function as references for the average American viewer, based on which they categorize themselves. The stress on the nobility of the American soldiers’ cause, in contrast to that of the enemy, along with the focus on their journey of suffering and hardships, facilitates the process of categorization with the American army as an in-group that is held, thanks to social comparison, in higher esteem against the out-group of the enemy.

At a more individual level, the audience gets to indirectly interact with the Hero, whose character is based on the real American Sniper: Chris Kyle, who is considered a national Legend. Kyle is the embodiment of the perfect American soldier, as he embodies all the positive traits mentioned above: he is the perfect sample of the in-group.

Being the hero of the movie and the pride of the American army, the character of Chris Kyle is depicted in a manner that highlights both his positive traits and his sorrowful journey as an American soldier. Chris’ positive traits play a key role in stimulating the processes of social identification. as most American citizens would easily identify with a patriot who risks his life to save his country. For instance, from the beginning, the audience is introduced to Chris as a patriotic American citizen who expresses anger when harm is inflicted upon other American citizens in other countries. Chris takes it upon himself to join the army to protect his country. Highlighting Chris’ love for and devotion to his country continues throughout the whole movie and later, in the bar scene where he meets Taya, he declares that he is ready to lay down his life for his country (0:16:17). Even when Taya questions his devotion, he answers without hesitation: “cause it’s the greatest country on earth and I’d do everything I can to protect it” (16:22). From the beginning of the movie, the character of Chris establishes himself as a determined and devoted man who is ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of his country. Upon being in contact with this character, the average American viewer would share a positive connection since both the viewer and Chris belong to the same social category. Thus, with social comparison, the audience would demonstrate a favorable bias

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toward their in-group, to which they belong alongside Chris, and hold it in higher esteem compared to the out-group (the enemy).

Another aspect that enhances the positive reception of Chris' character is the skillful mastery of his job. Chris manifests great endurance and precision in handling rifles since he is gifted with a unique precision in shooting his aim. Eventually, when Chris starts his missions, he turns out to be extremely effective at his job and fulfills his roles effortlessly. He is, therefore, constantly praised and applauded for saving his mates with his impeccable precision and acquires the nickname 'The Legend' for his clean kills. Overall, this emphasis on the snipers' unique heroism impacts the cognitive process of social identification, as the audience perceives him as the epitome of their in-group.

Interestingly, Chris Kyle's character is portrayed in the most positive way, which further enhances the viewers' identification with him as part of the same social group. He is not one to accept defeat, and that is apparent when he cannot forgive the death of his teammates and is determined to avenge them. Eventually, Chris locates the enemy's sniper and aims a perfect shot at him (0:33:37). Moreover, Chris does not doubt the nobility of his duty and believes in his vocation. Furthermore, Chris's fairness and mercy are highlighted in the scenes where his team breaks into the house of an Iraqi old man who suspiciously did not evacuate the city despite the authorities' orders (0:41:16). In this situation, Chris manages to remain calm and reasonable as he does not harm the man nor his family. Instead, he offers to protect them in exchange for valuable information that would lead them to their enemy. This shows the smart and merciful way in which the American Sniper handles a critical situation and makes it beneficial to the American army. Accordingly, he shows regret for having to shoot a child on his very first mission and is also distressed when another child is playing with a bomb on the other end of the rifle (1:35:22). The latter scenes underline Chris' suffering because of his soft side that cannot process the fact that kids in the enemy's country are not to be trusted and are evil.

Another positive trait of Chris' character that needs to be mentioned is his loving and caring side. When Chris calls home and is on the phone with his pregnant wife, he shows his loving character while consoling and gently communicating with her, despite being in the middle of an intense mission (0:34:50-0:36:28). Additionally, and in many scenes, Chris showcases his soft side during the moments he shares with his kids and wife which further underline his gentle playful family man side (2:00:17-2:03:44). That

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is apparent in the scenes where he makes an effort to spend quality time with his wife and kids. All in all, it is clearly highlighted that Chris is a family man who can monitor his behavior and shows a gentle character, especially when he's in the presence of his loved ones. Chris's caring side is further highlighted in his constant concern for his colleagues, who also risk their lives for the country's peace. Chris always worries about his mates who are going to be in danger of war, too.

Overall, the fact that Chris Kyle's character is painted as a model for the American citizen who becomes a soldier and risks his life for his country makes it easy for the audience to identify with him and consider him part of their in-group. The Social Identity Theory is of great use in this case as it explains the possible reactions and cognitive processes that lead to the viewer's categorizing the American hero as part of their in-group. All in all, despite being out of its usual scope of use, Social Identity Theory is highly beneficial in mediated interaction, such as the one that takes place when watching movies. It may allow us to comprehend how movies like *American Sniper* are able to engender certain reactions in the audience and help enhance the binary division between the heroic "Us" and the terrorist "Other".

On a different note, Chris Kyle's sorrowful journey as a S.E.A.L creates a deeper link in the minds of the audience as they can sympathize with a hero who suffers through the hells of psychological and emotional pains for the sake of his country. The movie is a memorial to the eponymous American sniper, who was eventually murdered by an unstable veteran he was trying to help. It is structured in a way that highlights Chris' positive traits to induce a sympathetic reaction in the viewer who will then be able to identify with Chris

Chris suffers from severe psychological torment as his missions are a heavy load on his psyche. Chris finds himself aiming his rifle again at another child who picks up a bazooka dropped by an enemy who has just been killed by the American sniper (1:35:18-1:35:57). Chris is shown to have moral scruples as he begs the child to drop the weapon so that he will not have to shoot him; the soldier is painted as a victim of the war. Because of these scenes, the audience develops a stronger link of sympathy towards Kyle and further identifies with him as an in-group member, especially since killing a child is justified by a desire to save a life that is deemed sacred. The movie portrays a different side of the military's suffering through the character of Kyle, who is put through the moral pain of having to kill a human in order to preserve the peace of their country; it is a reality they must face, and that is "imposed on them by the enemy."

Kyle's psychological issues resurface once he is released to go home in between his tours. The more he witnesses the horrors of war, the heavier his duty becomes. When he is back home from his first tour, Chris is traumatized and absent-minded all the time (0:53:08). He develops severe anxiety along with signs of its denial, and his wife is worried since he refuses to acknowledge his suffering, which creates problems between them and reveals an interesting side of the American soldiers' life. Often, soldiers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and feel detached from their families, and Kyle's story is meant to normalize the severe problem. His duty causes family stress and drives him away from his wife, as he feels pressure to be on the field fighting against the enemy.

The story of Chris' journey as a S.E.A.L depicts a path of sorrow of a hero who sacrifices his life to protect the peace of his country and who is unexpectedly killed by a person he tries to help. The part of Chris's story that highlights his pain is meant to elicit sympathy in the audience, which triggers a process of identification. Thanks to this, the viewers classify the Hero as part of their in-group and hold him in high esteem. As a result of the social comparison process, the audience will use Kyle's journey as a reference to compare with the terrorist Other and therefore, maintain a prideful conception of their in-groups.

3.2. The Process of Social Comparison with the Terrorist Out-group

To enhance the cognitive processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison that underlie SIT, the movie draws a clear line between the "us" and the "them" by constructing an evil, cunning, ambiguous enemy who contrasts with the American military's traits. Accordingly, the first characters to be introduced besides the soldiers are a suspicious-looking man and a suspicious veiled woman accompanied by her child. Despite their innocent look, these people are considered a threat, which is proved to be true, as the woman hands her child a bomb from within her veil to attack the walking military soldiers. Later, Kyle shoots the child, and instead of caring about or mourning his death, the mother shows more interest in finalizing their mission and picks up the bomb to proceed to throw it at the marines (0:27:41-0:27:48).

These instances are to be contrasted with the American family (Chris' family), which is represented positively and where the members live in harmony: the mother does not equip her kids with weapons to hurt anybody. In consequence, this contrast draws a distinctive line between the "us" and the "them" since the American

soldiers “only” defend themselves from the terrorist enemy. This enemy is depicted ambiguously, and the audience has little knowledge about their identities and motives and is often referred to as evil. As Chris and his friend put it: “F***ing evil bitch” (0:28:01), “Dude, that was evil like I never seen before” (0:29:19). The Social Identity Theory’s premise indicates that individuals know who they are from what they are not. Upon witnessing the negative traits of the enemy, the viewers categorize themselves with their in-group (American citizens) by classifying the individuals they interact with through the movie as the out-group, since, by comparison, they manifest traits with which the viewers cannot associate. This division is the center of the audience’s social categorization since it serves as a reference that enables them to classify the characters of the movie into in-groups and out-groups

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Although SIT is usually used to approach real-life situations between real humans, it can be extended to cinema. The film acts as a mediated social interaction, where viewers engage with characters and narratives tied to real-world identities, intensifying cognitive processes like categorization and identification. *American Sniper* constructs clear in-groups (American soldiers, citizens) and out-groups (terrorist enemies), fostering in-group favoritism by highlighting soldiers' nobility, patriotism, and suffering, while portraying the enemy as cruel and one-dimensional. This binary reinforces out-group derogation, simplifying complex realities into "us vs. them." The film’s emotional engagement and real-life basis amplify these cognitive processes, offering insight into how media shapes social identity and perception. This contrast conditions viewers to identify with American soldiers and Chris Kyle, classifying them as an esteemed in-group. The enemy’s cruelty is emphasized, relegating them to devalued out-groups. The film highlights the army’s sacrifices while exposing the terrorist Other’s evil, creating a binary that drives social comparison, categorization, and identification. This binary division provides the basis for the process of social comparison that leads to both social categorization and identification. We can conclude that the movie performs one of the cognitive processes and serves the result ready for the audience to consume further.

5. Contributions and limitations

Finally, the use of the Social Identity Theory uncovers the cognitive impact of the movie on the American audience's process of social identification and thus provides a new possibility of use for the theory. This thesis opens the possibility of extending the use of SIT to the study of movies, and further studies may allow a better vision for this thesis. It could be aided by quantitative data collection and analysis, which would allow the predictions of SIT to be backed by proof from the viewers' attitudes towards the movie.

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INTERACTIVE ART AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE
DEMOCRATISATION OF ART AND CULTURE: AUDIENCE
ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN DIGITAL
MEDIA

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Abstract

Interactive new-media art has long been associated with the potential to democratise both artistic practice and technological culture. This article examines whether and how this potential has materialised over the past two decades. It presents a comparative empirical study based on two waves of observations of audience behaviour (2007–2013 and 2023–2024), comprising 226 structured observations supported by questionnaire data. The study analyses how technological literacy, social interaction patterns and familiarity with digital interfaces influence the perception of interactive art. The findings show a clear shift from socially anchored modes of interaction—rooted in interpersonal expectations and role management—to technologically anchored behaviours that draw on everyday experience with digital devices. The results are interpreted through Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and supplemented with concepts from symbolic interactionism. The article argues that democratization in interactive art has been driven less by art itself and more by broad societal technological change. The implications for audience agency, reflective engagement and the future of technologically mediated art experiences are discussed.

Keywords: *Interactive art;, Perception of art;, New media art, Actor-Network Theory, Agency.*

1. Introduction

Multimedia interactive art, although its prototypes can be found much earlier, began to develop at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. In the first decade of the 21st century, interactivity in art still remained a new and unusual experience for its recipients. The relationship between them and interactive art has evolved significantly over the past fifteen years. On the one hand, new-media interactive art was perceived as a manifestation of broader social trends, including an increased emphasis on participation, civic engagement, and the desire to exert influence over one's environment within the artistic sphere. On the other hand, new-media art was understood as a form of neo-media training, serving as a tool for facilitating adaptation to a technology-driven world (Franckiewicz–Olczak, 2017). Early analyses emphasized the novelty of technologically mediated interaction and the resulting sense of uncertainty among visitors. As interactive technologies became increasingly embedded in everyday life, the forms of engagement observed in galleries and exhibitions transformed. These transformations raise questions about the factors that have contributed to greater ease of interaction, the relationship between technological competence and artistic interpretation, and whether interactive art has fulfilled the democratizing role originally attributed to it.

This article addresses the question of whether interactive multimedia art genuinely contributes to the democratization of art, or whether this process is driven primarily by broader socio-technological change. It revisits a long-term research project on the perception of interactive art. By comparing two waves of observations separated by more than a decade, it investigates how behavioural, cognitive, and interpretative strategies have changed, and how these changes intersect with broader cultural developments. The analysis incorporates symbolic interactionism and ANT to explore the dynamics between individuals, technologies, and social expectations. The study ultimately considers the implications of these findings for understanding agency, democratization, and the evolving human–technology relationship within the artistic domain.

This article draws on a comparative empirical study of audience behaviour in interactive art environments conducted in two waves: 2007–2013 and 2023–2024. The study is based on 226 structured observations carried out at New media art festivals and contemporary art exhibitions, supplemented in the first wave by questionnaire interviews. The research design allows for a quasi-longitudinal comparison of interaction patterns

across two distinct technological and cultural contexts. A detailed description of the methods and analytical procedures is provided in Section 2.

1.1. Interactive art and the role of the interactor

Interactive multimedia art requires the active participation of the recipient, conceptualised either as the “interactor” or the “user.” Kluszczyński (2001) argued that an interactive artwork does not exist independently of its interaction; rather, it emerges through the process of engagement between humans and the technological system. This constitutes a fundamental shift from understanding art as a static object to perceiving it as a dynamic process. Similarly, Paul (2003) described interactive art as an open structure based on continuous information flow, in which the recipient acts as a co-performer.

In recent years, however, interactive art has diversified. Many works no longer rely on direct human interaction but instead incorporate machine-to-machine communication, data-driven systems or remote participation from unaware online users. These developments complicate traditional understandings of interactivity and challenge earlier assumptions about the centrality of the human participant.

1.2. Generative art and AI

Generative art is post-conceptual art that has been created (in whole or in part) with the use of an autonomous, non-human system and can independently determine features of an artwork that would otherwise require decisions made directly by the artist. In some cases, the human creator may claim that the generative system represents their own artistic idea, and in others that the system takes on the role of the creator. In the context of this text, what happens between art and its recipient is more significant than what happens between the piece of art and its creator. Nevertheless, other phenomena in the art world are important because they provide a holistic picture of changes in art and can confirm the validity of the presented interpretations. Generative art provides a complementary perspective on changing artistic practices. While its origins date back to the 1960s, the rise of artificial intelligence has accelerated its development and public visibility. Generative systems can make independent decisions, raising questions about authorship, intentionality, and the nature of creative agency. Although this article focuses on interactions between artworks and recipients, the

broader technological context of AI contributes to evolving cultural perceptions of what constitutes meaningful engagement with technology.

1.3. Early assumptions: social interaction frameworks

In my early analyses of interactive art, I assumed that individuals approached technologically mediated environments through behavioural patterns derived from interpersonal interactions. Research conducted between 2007 and 2013 (Franckiewicz–Olczak, 2017) demonstrated that many visitors hesitated before interacting, observed others for guidance and attempted to perform their role correctly within the exhibition space. The similarity of interactions in interactive art to interpersonal interactions led to the interpretation of these situations in the context of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that posits that people use common language (verbal and nonverbal) to create shared symbols and meanings, which are used in both intra- and interpersonal communication (Blumer, 1969). Human behaviour is based on observing others and striving to be perceived in a certain way by others. Through social interactions, people learn and improve their behaviour. The most appropriate concept seemed to be that of a sociologist from the borderland of this theory, Erving Goffman (1982). Goffman's concepts of face, role performance and impression management provided an effective framework for interpreting these behaviours. Visitors perceived interactive artworks as social situations requiring negotiation, shaped by expectations of propriety and the avoidance of embarrassment.

Experiences of interpersonal interactions and how others perceive our behaviors were paramount in the experience of interacting with interactive art.

In the second wave of research conducted in 2023–2024, people interacted more readily with interactive works and focused less on other people in the exhibition spaces. This focus on devices, either excluding interactions with them from the social context or integrating them into a broader interactional context, leads to the search for a theory that will allow for the interpretation of the behaviors discussed.

1.4. Actor-Network Theory and distributed agency

A theory that allows for a non-human-centric perspective to be introduced into the analysis of interactions in interactive multimedia art is ANT (Latour 1991). According to ANT, everything in the social and natural world exists within constantly evolving

networks of relationships. ANT approaches social situations as heterogeneous networks of associations and adopts an analytical symmetry between human and non-human actants, focusing on how agency is enacted through relations rather than attributed *a priori*. Thus, objects, ideas, processes, and all other relevant factors are viewed as equally important in creating social situations. Latour's ANT (Latour, 1991) challenges the separation between human and non-human actors by proposing that agency is distributed across networks of people, objects, technologies, and institutions. Interactive artworks, particularly those incorporating reactive or semi-autonomous systems, exemplify this distributed agency. ANT underscores the material dimension of social phenomena, suggesting that technological systems contribute meaningfully to shaping behaviour, interpretations, and experiences. These assumptions can be fruitfully applied to the behaviours and experiences of art exhibition attendees.

1.5. Democratization of culture

Karl Mannheim's concept of the democratization of culture, presented in his essay of the same title Mannheim (1956), is useful for explaining the changes occurring in the interaction between the interactor and interactive art. The observed change is part of a broader trend related to the democratization of art. The processes of democratization and de-distantiation of art, including interactive art of new media, are part of broader macro-social transformations. Karl Mannheim understands de-distantiation as the disappearance and negation of vertical distances (Mannheim, 1956). In my research I analyze the disappearance of the distance between art and non-artistic reality, that is, the de-distantiation of art from life, or, more simply, the de-distantiation of art. Since art is perceived as a sphere primarily belonging to the sacred, and therefore considered a form of high culture, while everyday life is perceived as the profane, a form of popular culture, the processes of interacting with works of interactive art that draw on everyday experiences with technology described in my research align with Mannheim's concept of de-distantiation. The disappearance of distance is primarily the result of the de-differentiation between art and everyday life (Franckiewicz–Olczak 2018).

2. Results and analysis

2.1 Behaviour in 2007–2013

Analysis of observational data from 2007 to 2013 reveals recurring interaction sequences preceding engagement with interactive artworks. In most cases, interaction was preceded by a prolonged cognitive and social recognition phase, often lasting from a few seconds to several minutes. Visitors typically positioned themselves at a distance, observed other participants, and gradually approached the interface.

For example, in the case of one observed artwork, “*Replenishing Body*” by Ross Phillips, a visitor spent approximately 30 seconds observing another participant's interaction from a distance of four meters before approaching, reading the instructions, and only then initiating the interaction. This description is based on one observation sheet and is presented as an illustrative instance of a broader behavioural pattern identified across the dataset. Such sequences were characteristic rather than exceptional in early observations.

These sequences correspond to what Goffman (1982) describes as interactional framing and facework, in which individuals attempt to minimize the risk of embarrassment by carefully negotiating their entry into a public performance situation. Visitors observed in the earlier study approached interactive artworks with a noticeable degree of caution and reserve. Interaction was rarely immediate; instead, participants often engaged in prolonged observation before engaging. Exhibition labels and descriptive texts were read carefully and often repeatedly, suggesting that visitors sought clear cues regarding expected engagement and the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

A recurring feature of these encounters was a reliance on socially conditioned interaction patterns. Behavioral markers included visible hesitation, uncertainty about how to initiate interaction, and heightened attention to the reactions and actions of other visitors. In situations with unfamiliar interfaces or ambiguous interaction cues, participants often engaged in social referencing, observing others to identify appropriate behavioral patterns and assess potential social risks associated with interaction.

These behaviors indicate the presence of an underlying fear of "inappropriate behavior" in a public setting. This concern manifested itself in self-correcting gestures, hesitant movements, and avoidance of actions that might result in visible error or embarrassment. In many cases, visitors did not interact with the artwork at all, adopting a passive mode of reception by observing others' interactions from a distance.

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Importantly, the lack of interaction itself proved to be a significant and recurring outcome. In numerous observed instances, visitors entered the interaction zone, read the instructions, and ultimately decided not to initiate contact with the artwork.

Here is an example of this type of observation: a visitor entered the empty exhibition space containing the "Replenishing Body" exhibition, read the instructions, stood in the camera's field of view, and exited without pressing the shutter button. Such instances indicate that the refusal or withdrawal constituted an active interpretive stance, not merely a lack of engagement. Another example is an interaction with Vincent Elk's work "S(h)out": a person enters a room where several other people are looking at "S(h)out", but no one is currently using the work. The people stand against a wall, not approaching work. Observed initially from a distance, he observes the installation from a position like that of the others. Then he steps forward. He approaches the lectern with a microphone. He examines the device, watches the projection, and then quickly leaves. He appears stressed, his movements chaotic.

It is worth noting that this person returned to work after about 30 minutes, when no one else was in the room, and then began interacting with the work.

Such patterns suggest that interaction was not perceived as an automatic or obvious action, but as a socially regulated event requiring negotiation and situational awareness. Fear of inappropriate interaction, which could lead to situational embarrassment in the eyes of other exhibition participants, limited willingness to engage.

From a theoretical perspective, these behavioral tendencies can be interpreted using Erving Goffman's (1982) concepts of role-playing and face management. Interaction with artworks seemed to be primarily conceptualized as a social performance performed in the presence of others, in which maintaining social face and adhering to implicit norms of behavior took precedence over exploratory or experimental engagement with the technological interface itself.

2.2 Behaviour in 2023–2024

In contrast, observations from the second research wave suggest a significantly reconfigured actor-network in which the distribution of agency appeared more stable and less contested. Visitors typically approached interactive artworks with confidence, initiating interaction immediately and without visible hesitation. This behaviour indicates that interfaces were largely perceived as legible and predictable actors whose modes of operation aligned with visitors' prior technological experiences.

Instructional texts and external mediators played a diminished role in these interactions. Rather than relying on exhibition labels to stabilize the network, visitors appeared to draw on internalized scripts derived from everyday engagement with digital devices. As a result, the technological components of the artworks functioned as familiar actants whose agency was implicitly recognized but no longer problematized.

Social actors likewise played a reduced mediating role. People who interacted did not observe others and did not seem to pay attention to how others perceived their actions. Minimal social referencing suggests that interaction was no longer framed as a collectively negotiated event but as an individualized encounter between a human actor and a technological system. The network was thus temporarily stabilized through the presumed reliability of the interface and the visitors' confidence in their own technological competence.

From an ANT perspective, this shift can be interpreted as a transformation in the configuration of agency, in which interactive artworks were embedded within broader socio-technical assemblages extending beyond the exhibition space. Familiarity with digital infrastructures outside the museum effectively preconfigured the interactional network, reducing uncertainty and enabling immediate engagement.

Taken together, these observations point to a transformation in the interpretative framing of interactivity—from an activity embedded in social performance and normative uncertainty to one grounded in habitual technological fluency and individualized modes of engagement.

2.3 Comparative Findings

A comparison of the two research periods reveals a significant transformation in how visitors engage with interactive artworks. During the first wave, technological unfamiliarity influenced behaviour strongly, resulting in cautious, socially mediated interactions. Visitors framed the encounter primarily as a social situation, in which the risk of error required careful interpretation of others' behaviour and the renegotiation of one's own role within space.

In contrast, visitors in 2023–2024 displayed confidence rooted not only in artistic familiarity but in technological habituation. Their interactions were informed by everyday digital experiences, which provided behavioural scripts independent of the gallery context. This shift from socially anchored to technologically anchored interaction patterns change the fundamental nature of engagement. What was once required is now

regulated primarily by internalised understandings of how digital systems operate. These findings indicate that broader cultural shifts, rather than developments within art itself, have transformed audience behaviour. They also suggest that interactive art has become more accessible because visitors arrive equipped with technological competencies that override earlier uncertainties. This transition has implications for how meaning is produced, how agency is distributed and how participation is conceptualised in the context of digitally mediated interactive art.

3. Discussion and conclusion

3.1. Sources of agency in interactive art

Research suggests that the role of agency in interactive art has shifted from socially mediated decision-making to technologically grounded action. Earlier visitors negotiated their behaviour rather through interpersonal cues, whereas contemporary visitors primarily rely on internalized technological literacy. This shift suggests that cultural familiarity with digital devices now provides the primary foundation for engaging with interactive systems, reducing the cognitive load associated with technological novelty.

Drawing on Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration Giddens (1984), which addresses the fundamental dilemma of prioritizing social structure over human agency, interactive art can be understood as a field where this duality becomes particularly apparent. In interactive art systems, socio-technological structural frameworks—such as social rules and resources, interfaces, and spatial arrangements—not only constrain participants' actions but also enable them. Participant agency is thus exercised not in opposition to structure but through it. As familiarity with the underlying structure increases, participants gain greater interpretative competence and operational proficiency, which in turn enhances their capacity for meaningful action. Consequently, a deeper understanding of the system's structure fosters a higher degree of active engagement, transforming the participant from a passive observer into a co-constituting subject of the artwork. This dynamic illustrates Giddens's (1984) concept of structural duality, in which structure and agency are mutually dependent and continually reproduced in practice.

3.2. Democratization of art

In early 21st-century texts, theorists of new media art argued that it serves as a mechanism for familiarizing with technology (Paul, 2003; Grau, 2007). Without questioning this position, one can argue that the reverse relationship is much stronger. Interactive art itself is not a driving force behind technological democratization. Instead, broader societal changes appear to be the primary driver enabling more confident and inclusive interaction with interactive art. Interactive art benefits from processes of democratization but does not necessarily generate them. The implications of this shift require a more nuanced understanding of how participatory culture develops and how technologically mediated art operates within it.

3.3. Human–technology relations considering ANT

The increasing incorporation of intelligent systems into contemporary artistic practices destabilizes traditional distinctions between human and non-human agency. Actor–Network Theory (ANT) offers a particularly productive conceptual framework for analysing this shift, as it rejects the privileging of human intentionality and instead emphasises the relational constitution of action within heterogeneous networks. From this perspective, artwork can be understood not as discrete objects or expressions of singular authorship, but as dynamic assemblages composed of human actors, technological artefacts, algorithms, interfaces, spatial arrangements, and institutional contexts.

In the context of interactive and technologically mediated art, agency emerges as a distributed effect among these actants rather than as an attribute located exclusively in the human participant. Semi-autonomous systems - such as responsive environments, machine learning algorithms, or sensor-based installations- do not merely execute predefined functions but actively participate in shaping the conditions of experience. As gallery spaces increasingly function as sites where technological systems perceive, process, and respond to visitors' actions, the artwork operates as a network that co-produces meaning, behaviour, and interpretation.

Visitors are thus compelled to navigate environment structured by algorithmic decision-making, interface design, and reactive technological components, all of which exert a formative influence on perceptual and behavioural choices. In Latourian terms Latour (1991), these non-human elements act as mediators rather than intermediaries: they transform, translate, and redirect human intentions instead of

passively transmitting them. The experience of the artwork is therefore the outcome of ongoing negotiations between human and non-human actants, in which agency is continuously reconfigured.

This perspective complements and extends structural accounts of interaction by foregrounding the material and technological conditions through which action becomes possible. Rather than viewing structure as an abstract system or agency as a solely human capacity, ANT highlights how both are enacted through concrete associations. In interactive art, understanding the artwork as an actor-network reveals how participation is not simply enabled by technology but actively shaped by it, underscoring the fundamentally relational and post-anthropocentric nature of contemporary artistic experience.

4. Contributions

This study makes several significant contributions to the field of interactive art research. It offers a quasi-longitudinal perspective that captures behavioural transformations over fifteen years, showing how technological and cultural developments reshape the relationship between audiences and interactive artworks. By documenting changes in real-world engagement, the study provides empirical material that supports theoretical discussions about digital literacy, agency and the evolution of participatory culture.

Another contribution is the introduction of the analytical distinction between socially anchored and technologically anchored interaction patterns. This conceptual framework allows scholars to articulate differences in behaviour that emerge in technologically mediated environments. It highlights how behavioural strategies are conditioned not only by the artistic context but also by cultural shifts in human–technology interactions. This distinction therefore serves as a valuable tool for interdisciplinary research involving both art theory and human–computer interaction studies.

The study further contributes to re-evaluating long-held assumptions regarding interactive art's democratizing potential. The findings indicate that democratization processes arise primarily from external societal changes rather than from interactive art's intrinsic characteristics. This challenges narratives that attribute cultural transformation to artistic innovation alone and calls for

more empirically grounded analyses of how accessibility and participation function in contemporary art.

Finally, the integration of symbolic interactionism with ANT provides a theoretical model capable of addressing the complexity of interactions within technologically mediated art environments. This synthesis demonstrates how interpersonal dynamics intersect with distributed technological agency, allowing for a holistic interpretation of visitor behaviour that acknowledges both social and material influences.

5. Limitations

To contextualize the study's findings, several limitations must be considered. The first concerns the disparity in sample sizes between the two study waves. The extensive observations conducted between 2007 and 2013 contrast with the smaller sample from 2023 and 2024, which may impact comparability. Differences in exhibition settings further complicate the analysis, as new media festivals attract a technology-oriented audience, while general art exhibitions attract a broader audience with diverse expectations and competencies.

The second limitation concerns methodological asymmetry. The first wave included both observations and questionnaire interviews, allowing for deeper insights into visitors' motivations and interpretive strategies. The second wave relied solely on observational data, preventing direct access to visitors' subjective accounts. As a result, the study cannot fully reconstruct the internal cognitive or emotional factors shaping behaviour, limiting the interpretive depth of the analysis. The study also lacks demographic data that could explain how variables such as age, education, cultural background, and professional digital experience influence engagement. This lack of information limits the ability to attribute behavioural changes solely to temporal changes rather than differences in audience composition.

While the observational results should be treated with caution due to the limitations, these deficits could further limit inferences if the study sites, and therefore the audiences, were reversed in both waves.

Despite the above, both the study itself and the proposed interpretative framework allow for several conclusions.

6. Conclusion

Audience engagement with interactive art has undergone profound transformation over the past fifteen years. Contemporary visitors approach interactive artworks with confidence and rely on behavioural strategies derived from everyday technological use, in contrast to the hesitation and socially negotiated behaviours observed in earlier years. This transition underscores the significant influence of societal technological change on artistic perception.

These findings challenge previous assumptions that interactive art fosters democratization by familiarizing visitors with technology. Instead, it appears that democratization arises primarily from widespread technological literacy, which subsequently enhances the accessibility of interactive artworks.

Interactive art remains a valuable site for examining the evolving relationships between humans and intelligent systems. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into artistic environments, questions of agency, autonomy and interpretative responsibility gain importance. Understanding these dynamics is essential for anticipating the cultural consequences of technologically mediated art and for evaluating the future role of human agency in creative contexts.

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MULTIMODAL DIGITAL NARRATIVES: ENHANCING INCLUSION FOR THE DEAF COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This study explores how Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) fosters inclusivity and accessibility in the Deaf community by integrating visual tools such as emojis, stickers, and memes into digital narratives. CMC often merges oral and written characteristics, creating increasingly multimodal forms of interaction (D'Achille, 2019). For Deaf individuals, these tools go beyond decorative purposes to serve as essential means of communication, depicting metaphorical depth and functional clarity (Yang, 2019).

The research examines three key dimensions: i) accessibility through visual metaphors, because, nowadays emojis and stickers improve textual communication, promoting accessibility by simplifying complex messages and enabling efficient meaning-making (Caruso & Maffia, 2023); ii) cross-cultural communication by embedding cultural, humorous or symbolic references, visual tools facilitate intercultural dialogue and the creation of shared digital languages, fostering inclusivity (Fontana, 2013); iii) cognitive and social inclusion as the multimodal nature of CMC supports linguistic diversity, reducing cognitive barriers for the Deaf community while enabling active participation in digital spaces (Kress, 2010).

The methodology takes advantage of *digital ethnography* (Wesch, 2009) and *netnography* (Kozinets, 2010) to analyse Facebook interactions on topics such as social issues and creative expressions. Data reveal that visual tools act as bridges across linguistic and cultural gaps, restructuring digital inclusivity and empowering Deaf users to construct co-narratives in virtual environments.

Preliminary findings highlight multimodal digital narratives within the Italian Deaf community, showing how emojis, memes, and visual tools function as accessibility resources that support participation and Deaf agency online.

Keywords: *Digital inclusion, Visual communication, Deaf community, Multimodal narratives, Computer-Mediated Communication, Visual Metaphor, Memes, Emoji*

1. Introduction

In the digital age, especially in contemporary Digital Communication, the use of Multimodal Elements—including but not limited to emojis, memes, avatars, and visual metaphors—has taken on an increasingly critical role. These tools significantly enhance textual interactions while simultaneously fulfilling essential functions for accessibility and inclusivity in various communities. Particularly, for the Deaf¹ community, which mainly relies on visual forms of communication, multimodal digital narratives serve as a powerful medium for expressing emotions and communicating nuanced messages that may exist in conventional modes of discourse.

This study explores the impact of multimodal digital narratives on the Italian Deaf community, emphasising how these tools fill linguistic gaps, facilitate cross-cultural communication, and empower individuals to engage more actively in digital spaces. By integrating findings from diverse fields, including Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), *digital ethnography* (Wesch, 2009), and *netnography* (Kozinets, 2010), the research examines the ways in which Deaf individuals use visual storytelling to share personal experiences, challenge societal barriers, and advocate for their rights and representation. By referencing national and international literacy on digital communication and accessibility (Herring, 2004; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001), the aim of this paper is to place the use of multimodal strategies in the larger framework of digital interactions.

Italian studies have emphasised how crucial digital accessibility is to improve inclusivity for Italian Deaf people, especially on social media (De Monte et al., 2011; Ricci Bitti, 2016; Gianfreda et al., 2021). Given that social media is a platform for both

¹ In Deaf Studies, as Fontana (2022) explains, the distinction between *Deaf* (capitalised) and *deaf* (lowercase) reflects two different ways of experiencing deafness. The former refers to sign language users who identify with the Deaf community, while the latter describes individuals with hearing loss who do not share the social and cultural aspects of Deaf identity, often seeking integration into the hearing world. This distinction has led to a systematic classification between *Deaf* as a cultural identity and *deaf* as an audiological condition. Cf. Ladd (2003). In this article, the author chooses to adopt the first option, using it to emphasise the cultural and linguistic belonging of sign language users.

individual expression and community development, these findings are important to understand how Deaf users can take part in communities. Also, from an international point of view, researchers like Padden and Humphries (2005) have explained how online storytelling is essential to the advancement and preservation of Deaf culture, identity acknowledgment, and sense of belonging. Additionally, studies on *digital activism* (Milner, 2016) and *participatory media* (Shifman, 2013) demonstrate how multimodal communication techniques allow marginalised groups, such as the Deaf community, to claim their identities and challenge social norms.

The significance of this article lies in its contribution to the existing body of knowledge concerning the interaction between technology and inclusivity. By investigating the ways in which multimodal elements enrich self-expression, facilitate effective communication, and basically reshape online environments to accommodate the linguistic and cultural needs of Deaf users, the research aims to give a detailed understanding of digital communication dynamics. The outcomes are intended to inform future research directions in digital accessibility, as well as to provide insights that can guide the development of inclusive communication practices across online platforms. This investigation not only highlights the transformative potential of digital storytelling but also emphasises the necessity of embracing multimodal strategies to improve an inclusive digital discourse that aligns with diverse communities.

2. Multimodality in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

The way Computer-Mediated Communication (Wright & Webb, 2011; Sherblom & Rosenbaum, 2024) is developing has a considerable impact on workplace dynamics, teaching approaches, and interpersonal relationships. It is an umbrella term that involves various forms of communication through networked computers, including videoconferencing, phone calls, email messages, and instant messaging (Cleveland, 2020). As shown on the chart below (Figure 1), there is a key distinction between *synchronous* and *asynchronous* communication.

Figure 1 *Asynchronous and Synchronous Communication Components.*

Asynchronous Communication	Synchronous Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question & Answer (Q&A) with FAQ feature • E-mail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video Conference • Instant Messaging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Polling • Electronic Notepad • Time Schedule & Announcement Board • Document Conversion & Sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared Window Function • Shared Whiteboard • Consultation Session Recording • List of Participants

Note: Source Ang et al. (2012).

The first happens in real time, resembling face-to-face interaction. Platforms like e-chat, instant messaging and video calls enable immediate exchanges, fostering dynamic and interactive dialogue. On the contrary, asynchronous communication allows for time-lagged responses, as seen in emails, discussion boards, or mailing lists. While asynchronous CMC takes on characteristics of written communication, preferring structure and coherence while still being influenced by digital affordances, synchronous CMC tends to mimic spoken language through casual and quick exchanges (Herring, 2004). This approach emphasises how the form and function of digital communication are shaped by technology mediation, which also affects social norms, interactional etiquette and discourse modes. For instance, the popularity of GIFs² and emojis³ in text-based communication can make up for the lack of physical presence by simulating the emotional depth frequently present in in-person interactions. However, relying too much on these digital cues can increase the likelihood of ambiguity, particularly in culturally diverse contexts where interpretations can differ (Gao et al., 2013).

The multimodal nature of digital discourse enables Deaf individuals to participate more successfully, fostering an inclusive online environment that aligns with diverse linguistic needs. This effective communication is achieved using various modalities such

² A GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) is a digital image format that supports both static and animated images. Widely used in online communication, GIFs serve as a tool for visual expression, humour, and reaction-based engagement in digital discourse (Cfr. Miltner and Highfield, 2017).

³ Emojis are symbolic icons used in text messages and digital communication to visually express emotions, ideas, objects and concepts (Cfr. Danesi, 2016; Chang, 2016). Originating from Japan, they are considered an extension of emoticons, which are character sequences representing facial expressions.

as videos, GIFs, images and emoticons, which can convey emotions and context that may be lost in traditional text-based communication (Herring, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2006). By bringing together Deaf Studies, multimodality, and computer-mediated communication, this study positions digital narratives as key sites where linguistic accessibility, cultural identity, and participation converge.

2.1. Investigating Deaf Digital Discourse

To explore these multimodal practices, this study adopts a *digital ethnographic* approach (Wesch, 2009; Wali, 2010) combined with *netnography* (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, 2015). The former allows for the in-depth observation of user interactions in online spaces, while the latter provides a structured method for analysing digital behaviours, community engagement and identity development in virtual environments. In addition, data were analysed using a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis, integrating elements of thematic analysis and visual semiotics (Kress, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). First, recurring themes were identified across posts and comments (*e.g.*, accessibility, humour, identity disclosure, workplace inclusion). Second, visual elements were examined in relation to their semiotic functions, focusing on how emojis, memes, and images contributed to meaning-making, emotional expression, and social positioning within Deaf digital interactions. This mixed methodology supports the systematic examination of naturally occurring multimodal interactions within Italian Deaf online communities, offering insights into how visual tools enhance communication, accessibility and group cohesion.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. The analysis included content from public Facebook pages as well as private Facebook groups, access to which was obtained by formally requesting membership in accordance with platform regulations. Observation and data collection were conducted only after access was granted, and no content was collected from restricted spaces without authorisation. In line with ethical guidelines for digital ethnography and netnography (Kozinets, 2010), usernames, profile images, and any personally identifiable information were anonymised. Screenshots were selected and edited to prevent traceability. The study focuses on communicative practices rather than individual users, with particular attention to respecting community norms, privacy, and representation.

This paper examines how multimodal communication enhances digital accessibility within the Italian Deaf community by analysing data collected between 2021

and February 2024 (Limongelli, 2024)⁴. For this case study, a smaller sample was selected to focus on key topics of interest within the Deaf community, consisting of 17 posts and 44 comments, collected from two Facebook groups and one public page. Only posts and comments that included at least one multimodal element (*e.g.*, emojis, stickers, memes, reaction images, or avatars) were included in the analysis. Purely textual interactions without visual or multimodal features were excluded. Specifically, three thematic areas were considered: *cooking* (Figure 2), which serves as a space for leisure and entertainment, allowing Deaf individuals to exchange recipes and culinary advice; *community interactions* (Figure 3), which include daily updates and highlights within the Italian Deaf network and *workplace debates* (Figure 4), focused on job integration and disability rights, both crucial to social inclusion. These topics were selected due to their high engagement within digital Deaf spaces and their relevance to both daily life and broader issues of accessibility and inclusion.

Figure 2 *The Facebook group Cucina & LIS*



Note: Figure 2 - The Facebook group *Cucina & LIS - Le ricette dei sordi* has more than 7000 members, where everyone (deaf as well as hearing people) can comment or record a video message in which they can ask for and/or offer suggestions and tips for the preparation of dishes.

⁴ The complete data collection can be accessed through the following link on Google Drive: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1oqpOH5pWgHDOFvq98BubBR4rJSkttiIA?usp=sharing>

Figure 3 *The Facebook group Gruppo Sordi Italiani deals with issues related to the Italian Deaf community, offering a space for sharing experiences, support, news on deaf culture, accessibility, education and rights.*



Figure 4 *The Deaf Soul webpage focuses on inclusivity in companies and valuing diversity in brands. Through initiatives with an ironic and engaging tone, they address the issue of deafness, promoting more inclusive and respectful work environments.*



First, culinary discussions show cultural connection and social interaction, where Italian Deaf individuals actively share recipes, exchange cooking tips and discuss food culture through a variety of multimodal elements, such as videos, GIFs, images and reaction stickers. These conversations often rely on visual storytelling, where static and dynamic images play a central role in supplementing textual descriptions, making content more accessible.

From the original post, where there was a recipe of a cake for International Women's Day, Figure 5 and Figure 6 show many visual elements such as emojis to substitute words not only through facial expressions but also with representations of objects.

Figure 5



Figure 6



Indeed, in this case, comments integrate text with emojis and visual cues like smiling face with hearts, sunflowers, lilies, bunch of flowers. There are also stickers and personalised avatars, which are gaining popularity as multimodal tools that improve emotional expression and individuality in digital spaces (Yus Ramos, 2014). By allowing users to add personal features such as hair colour, eye shape or unique accessories, they fortify the connection between visual representation and self-identity.

An additional screenshot is presented (Figure 7), illustrating a recipe involving onions, where the emoji for deliciousness is used, along with the facepalming one to indicate physical unease related to indigestion. The well-known chef's kiss⁵ appears as a metaphorical and visual expression signifying perfection, excellence or appreciation. Moreover, visual aids in Figure 8, such as images of dishes, provide a further inclusive form of engagement.

⁵ Currently seen all over social media, the chef's kiss alludes to a gesture associated with chefs when they feel that a dish has been executed flawlessly. The gesture itself, as Jay Hathaway at *The Daily Dot* explains, is performed by "bringing [the] thumb and forefinger together, kissing them, and separating them again." Available at the following link: https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/chefs-kiss-internet-meme-phrase-origin?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Figure 7



Figure 8



Regarding the second group, community interactions demonstrate the evolution of sign language, with Deaf users frequently engaging in considerations about linguistic variations, but at the same time, they continuously publish daily updates and points of interest. These debates often incorporate visual metaphors, reaction images and customised avatars to clarify meanings and express further linguistic perspectives. Below (Figure 9 and Figure 10) it is possible to find another visual metaphor, thanks to the large

Facebook logo, which symbolises the platform's dominance in people's lives, suggesting a central authority.

Figure 9



The context was a Facebook outage, where people screamed, serving as a metaphor for exaggerated emotional responses or frustration, often seen in online discussions. In Italian, the sentence is *Per favore non arrabbiarti*, which means *Please don't get angry*: this caption paired with the image humorously contrasts the chaotic reactions, underscoring the often-disproportionate anger over minor issues, such as a platform breakdown.

Figure 10



The *facepalm* stickers stand for *this is not a big deal, let's not overreact*. In addition, the laughing sticker amplifies the humour of the moment, visually reinforcing the idea that the situation is trivial and should be laughed off. In this case it is supported by the comment *VAR x Inter*⁶, which reflects Italian humour linked to football culture.

Finally, workplace debates describe accessibility policies which generate significant discussions, especially in relation to employment rights, job discrimination and the integration of Deaf professionals in hearing-dominated environments. These discussions frequently manifest in humorous critiques and reaction memes (as shown in Figure 11), serving as both advocacy tools and community-building mechanisms that improve interconnection among Deaf users.

⁶ Video Assistant Referee (VAR) is a technology-assisted refereeing system used in football to review and correct critical decisions. It helps referees by providing video replays for key incidents such as goals, penalties, red cards and mistaken identity.

Figure 11



Another common visual tool is the meme, which usually uses a two-panel format (Shifman, 2013). Originally, a post from *The Deaf Soul* page published on 13 October 2023, which was adapted from the well-known *two-button choice* template⁷, visually represents the internal struggle of disclosing one's deaf identity. The character is depicted sweating, hesitating between two choices: *Non dico che sono sordo tanto non si vede* (in English *I don't say I'm deaf, after all, it's not visible* or *Lo dico magari mi sentirò meglio* (*I say it, maybe I will feel better*). In professional settings, Italian Deaf employees often encounter situations where they must decide whether to disclose their hearing loss. Choosing not to disclose it might help them avoid discrimination or unnecessary pity, but it can also lead to misunderstandings, lack of accommodations and increased stress. On the other hand, openly acknowledging their deafness could lead to greater understanding, accessibility and support, but also expose them to bias, exclusion or misconceptions. So,

⁷ It is a widely recognised internet meme format used to illustrate internal conflict, dilemmas or difficult decision-making. It originates from a panel in the 2014 webcomic *Ctrl+Alt+Del* by Tim Buckley, which originally depicted a character facing two buttons with different choices. Over time, the format evolved into a meme where different captions are placed on each button, representing two conflicting choices that cause anxiety, indecision, or moral dilemmas.

this meme humorously captures the exact moment of hesitation, showing how the decision is not straightforward and is often accompanied by anxiety and uncertainty. At the same time, it highlights the social and psychological burden of self-representation, especially in environments where inclusivity is not guaranteed. This coming out process is frequently faced by many Deaf individuals when deciding whether to reveal their deafness, particularly in professional or social environments. This process is a deeply personal decision that involves balancing self-acceptance, fear of stigma and the need for accessibility.

Figure 12



Another example of visual metaphor is found in the post from *The Deaf Soul* page, published on 17 December 2024. The translation of the caption above (Fig. 12) reads as follows: *2026 companies will invest in inclusive training for everyone. - Sure, but only if the disability is visible; otherwise, who even notices?*

In this case, a family holding hands walks on the beach, while one child is accidentally dropped, symbolising exclusion. The bottom panel zooms in on that child, emphasising the act of being left out. As can be seen in the text, this meme critiques the superficial inclusivity, highlighting biases favouring visible disabilities. Drawing on Milner's (2016) concept of *digital activism*, it illustrates public conversations, where humour and critique coexist. The use of exaggerated visuals with text creates an accessible, shareable critique, resonating within specific communities advocating for inclusivity and disability awareness.

As demonstrated by the examples above, the focus on visual metaphors is very important as an essential component of accessibility in Deaf digital communication. Unlike spoken or written language, they provide an intuitive means of conveying complex ideas, emotions and cultural references, which is particularly useful for Deaf people whose primary mode of communication is visual-gestural. As seen in previous studies (Orletti, 2004; Pistolesi, 2004), digital platforms offer unique affordances for visual representation, allowing users to engage in layered, expressive and highly interactive conversations. In this way, by analysing the frequency, function and thematic relevance of these tools, this paper explores how visual metaphors fill linguistic gaps, improve inclusivity and enhance engagement within Deaf communities.

3.The Impact of Visual Metaphors on Accessibility

Historically, auditory-based communication has marginalised Deaf individuals, limiting their participation in mainstream discourse that relies predominantly on spoken language (Padden & Humphries, 2005). However, the emergence of visual metaphors - especially emojis, stickers and animated GIFs - has introduced innovative and alternative modes of expression that significantly develop accessibility for Deaf individuals in digital communication. They perform several key functions that contribute to this increased accessibility. Firstly, they simplify complex ideas and abstract concepts, making them more understandable. This simplification is particularly crucial for Deaf individuals, who might struggle with nuanced vocabulary or complex syntax found in written communication (Chesi, 2006; Fabbretti & Tomasuolo, 2006; Fontana, 2015). Additionally, visual metaphors increase emotional expressiveness since they compensate for the absence of vocal intonation, which typically conveys emotion in spoken interactions. This emotional dimension is important, because it allows Deaf users to

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articulate feelings in a manner that text alone may fail to capture. Furthermore, these metaphors reinforce textual meaning, reducing ambiguity in digital exchanges (Danesi, 2016; Caruso & Maffia, 2023). By providing a visual context to texts, they help clarify the intended message, mitigating potential misunderstandings that could arise from written communication alone.

Beyond their functional role in communication, multimodal conventions also function as cultural markers that foster a sense of belonging and identity in Deaf online spaces (Gianfreda et al., 2021). Through memes, customised avatars and reaction stickers, Deaf users engage in participatory media, adapting digital content to reflect their social and linguistic experiences (Milner, 2016). Avatars, for example, provide a unique form of self-representation, enabling users to incorporate distinct physical features and accessories that reinforce their real-world identity (Yus Ramos, 2014). These digital practices assist Deaf individuals in addressing identity visibility, especially in professional settings, where acknowledging their deafness brings both advantages and disadvantages. In this way, multimodal strategies enable Deaf users to highlight systemic issues while reinforcing a shared cultural identity based on inclusivity and advocacy.

Figure 13

Aspect	Key Insights	Examples
Use of Emojis	They improve accessibility and express emotions universally	Clapping and facepalm emojis convey praise and humorous frustration
Avatars	They add personalisation	Clapping avatars and chef's kiss signal appreciation
Cultural Visual Metaphors	They critique social behaviours and connect cultures	Facebook logo for authority; laughing stickers for triviality
Community Dynamics	Visual tools create belonging and encourage collaboration	"Spectacular cake 🍷🍷🍷" reflects support

The findings of this research can be summarised in Figure 13, which highlights the importance of visual metaphors and multimodal communication in enhancing accessibility and self-expression within digital Deaf communities. Analysis of online

interactions reveals that digital communication is not merely text-based but relies on visual and multimodal strategies to compensate for the absence of auditory elements. This study examines how Deaf individuals use emojis, GIFs, reaction images, memes and customised avatars to navigate online spaces, express emotions and strengthen social connections. The results emphasise the transformative power of visual communication, demonstrating that these tools are not just decorative but essential accessibility mechanisms that allow Deaf users to fully participate in digital discourse (Herring, 2004; Caruso & Maffia, 2023).

4. Conclusions

As evidenced by earlier results about the impact of visual metaphors and multimodal strategies in digital accessibility, it is essential to consider how CMC's flexibility further supports the Italian Deaf community, which is highly heterogeneous in its linguistic and communication needs. Deaf individuals vary in their language use depending on factors such as family background, education and access to Italian Sign Language (LIS), leading to different communication preferences (Gianfreda et al., 2021). Some rely exclusively on spoken and written Italian, while others adopt a bilingual approach, alternating between Italian and LIS depending on context. This linguistic diversity highlights the importance of adaptable communication tools that accommodate different needs and ensure accessibility for all Deaf users (Fontana, 2013).

The official recognition of LIS in 2021⁸ further accelerated the demand for greater accessibility in digital communication (Fontana, 2022). In response, CMC's multimodal flexibility has proven effective in addressing these diverse needs. Tools such as subtitles (*e.g.*, TikTok captions), LIS translations and visual content exemplify how digital platforms support tailored interactions for Deaf users (Cardinaletti, 2022). By integrating textual, visual, and even auditory elements, online environments align with the visual-gestural nature of sign languages, making them a natural and inclusive space for Deaf communication. This smooth integration of visual metaphors and digital

⁸ Italian Sign Language was officially recognised in Italy with Law No. 69 on May 21, 2021, which updated Decree-Law No. 41 on March 22, 2021. Article 34-ter establishes that the Republic recognises, promotes and protects LIS and tactile LIS (LIS_t). Additionally, the Decree of January 10, 2022, regulated the professions of LIS and LIS_t interpreters, defining the requirements for their training and employment (Gazzetta Ufficiale, April 6, 2022). Available at the following link: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2022/04/06/22A02141/sg>

affordances ensures that messages are clear, engaging and accessible, reinforcing the role of CMC as a crucial means in fostering digital inclusivity for Deaf people.

5. Contributions and Limitations

From a theoretical perspective, although previous Deaf studies have looked at sign language recognition, subtitles, and written adaptations (Parton, 2006; Volterra et al., 2019), this study contributes by demonstrating how multimodality functions as an accessibility strategy rather than a stylistic enhancement. By integrating CMC theories (Herring, 2004), multimodality (Kress, 2010), and Deaf cultural perspectives (Padden & Humphries, 2005), the paper advances understanding of digital narratives as spaces of Deaf agency and cultural production. Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of combining digital ethnography and netnography with multimodal discourse analysis to investigate naturally occurring Deaf online interactions. This approach allows for a detailed analysis of visual meaning-making practices that are often overlooked in text-centred studies of online communication. From a practical standpoint, the findings offer insights for platform designers, educators, and policymakers by highlighting the importance of customisable, visually rich communication tools that align with Deaf users' linguistic preferences and everyday practice.

Despite these contributions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The investigation is based on publicly available Facebook interactions, which may not fully capture private or restricted-group discussions where different multimodal strategies might emerge. Expanding the dataset to include other social media platforms (for example, video-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok) would provide a broader perspective on how visual metaphors function across digital environments. Furthermore, while this research focuses on static visual elements (such as memes and reaction images), dynamic multimodal tools like sign language videos, AI-driven translation and gesture-based interfaces deserve further exploration.

To improve accessibility, future research should look at a greater variety of digital environments and incorporate cutting-edge technologies like interactive avatars, augmented reality (AR) and AI-driven sign language recognition (Wen et al., 2021). Also, quantitative methods (such as eye-tracking studies or user surveys) may offer statistical insights into engagement patterns, improving our comprehension of the most successful multimodal tools. Finally, cross-cultural comparisons among Deaf communities around

the world may reveal whether comparable multimodal strategies are influenced by linguistic and cultural variations or apply universally. Future studies should critically examine how these emerging technologies can support Deaf agency, enabling users to actively shape their communicative environments rather than passively receiving accessibility solutions. Framing these issues through their agency highlights Deaf users as co-designers and meaning-makers in digital spaces, reinforcing autonomy, self-representation, and participation.

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ONE CAFTAN AT A TIME: HOW MOROCCAN WOMEN ARE DRESSING FOR EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines how Moroccan female influencers use fashion content on TikTok to reclaim cultural identity, challenge dominant representations, and assert agency. Drawing on feminist media and postcolonial theory, the study analyses how these influencers incorporate traditional Moroccan and Amazigh attire into contemporary fashion practices and everyday self-presentation on social media. Using engagement metrics analysis, content analysis, and comparative analysis of TikTok videos, the article explores how fashion functions as cultural reclamation, how these practices challenge colonial and patriarchal representations of Moroccan women, and how fashion-based self-presentation operates as digital agency and empowerment. The findings show that blending traditional and modern fashion enables Moroccan women to assert culturally grounded self-representation, redefine beauty and modesty, and negotiate visibility on their own terms.

Keywords: *Feminist Media Theory; Visual Self-Presentation; Digital Agency; Fashion Activism; Cultural Identity.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Digital feminist activism in North Africa

In 1987, Fatima Mernissi (1987) wrote her seminal essay, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, in which she criticized the Eurocentric notion of women as biologically inferior. Mernissi (1987) argued that the need to control Moroccan women stemmed not from their inferiority but from a fear of their power,

leading to efforts to dominate them. She concluded that the West failed to understand the diversity of feminist struggles across cultures, a sentiment shared by many writers from the Global South. In that sense, the fourth wave of feminism, marked by the advent of social media, has allowed women on the margins, as Bell Hooks (1984) described them, to claim their space and have their voices and struggles heard (Cochrane, 2013).

Atifi and Touati (2020) explain that digital media has denied visibility to Moroccan female activists and ordinary women in traditional media. As a result, women take ownership of public spaces historically reserved for men, challenging patriarchal structures. Hirji (2021) provides examples of Muslim women worldwide who have boldly spoken out and claimed their truths, not without facing significant backlash. Similarly, in Morocco, women have used digital platforms to speak out, standing their ground against social injustices and patriarchal norms. This is exemplified by the creation of numerous influential accounts, such as *Masaktach* ("I Will not Be Silent"), which advocates against violence against women, and *7achak* (Excuse Me), which addresses taboo topics such as menstruation (Touati & Atifi, 2022). Additionally, many Moroccan movements gained momentum, challenging societal norms, the normalization of harassment, and legal restrictions, such as *#MeToo* and *#Stop490*, which targets Article 490 of the Penal Code that criminalizes extramarital sex (Mounia, 2022; Touati & Atifi, 2022).

1.2 Digital fashion and the tension between visibility and control

It is crucial to recognize that feminist advocacy and resistance take many forms, and sometimes, the most seemingly mundane actions can be the most powerful. This is true for fashion. Ibnu Wardaya et al. (2024) claim that digital technology has made fashion an "expression of cultural identity." They elaborate that social media has reshaped how fashion is "created, consumed, and communicated," providing a platform for global cultural expression and exchange. Muzna et al. (2021) contend that the digital fashion industry fosters empowerment and boosts confidence by promoting diversity, inclusivity and career opportunities. For Moroccan female influencers, fashion has become a steady source of income (El Idrissi Amiri & Ghourdou, 2024). Fashion has thus shifted from being seen as a trivial, 'feminine' pastime to a powerful form of self-expression and economic stability.

However, it is not always an instrument of empowerment. Zouitni and Ennam (2024) worry that mediatized fashion disseminates Eurocentric beauty ideals. They explain that much like colonialism, globalization has profoundly imprinted on Moroccan

youth the belief that the countries in power—the West—are the epitome of physical and intellectual ideals. Fashion becomes unrealistic, unattainable, and has an impact on Moroccan women's self-esteem and body image. Although Ibnu Wardaya et al. (2024) maintain that fashion is a symbol of cultural identity and a "visual marker of belonging and differentiation". Muzna et al. (2021) argue that fashion, particularly through social media influencers, perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces unrealistic standards to drive profits.

1.3 Positioning the present study

Existing scholarship on digital feminism in Morocco and North Africa has focused mainly on overt forms of online activism, legal mobilization, and discursive feminist campaigns, often treating fashion either as a marginal or economically empowering practice, or as a site of consumption shaped by Eurocentric beauty standards. Moreover, much of this work maintains a rigid separation between modern fashion and traditional dress or examines empowerment without sufficiently accounting for the ambivalent role of platform visibility and metrics. As a result, less attention has been paid to how everyday fashion practices on social media function simultaneously as cultural reclamation, symbolic resistance, and negotiated forms of agency.

Against this backdrop and drawing on feminist media theory and postcolonial theory, this paper examines how Moroccan female influencers use fashion content on TikTok to reclaim cultural identity, challenge dominant representations, and assert agency. Specifically, it addresses three research questions: how traditional Moroccan and Amazigh attire is incorporated into contemporary fashion practices as a form of cultural reclamation; how these fashion practices challenge colonial and patriarchal representations of Moroccan women; and how fashion-based self-presentation on TikTok functions as a form of digital agency and empowerment.

Unlike previous research that maintains a rigid divide between modern and traditional clothing, this paper emphasizes their fusion as a meaningful site of negotiation between heritage, visibility and power. Methodologically, the study combines content analysis with engagement metrics analysis, treating likes, comments, shares, and views as indicators of visibility and resonance rather than direct measures of impact. In this way, engagement serves as a proxy for audience alignment and circulation, complementing qualitative analysis to assess how fashion operates as digital activism on TikTok.

2. Material And Methods

This study adopts a multi-methods approach, combining engagement metrics, content, and comparative analysis to explore how Moroccan female influencers use fashion content on TikTok to challenge colonial and patriarchal norms, reclaim their cultural identity, and assert agency. The theoretical framework is grounded in postcolonial and feminist media theory, which informs the analysis of the content and impact of the influencers' fashion posts.

Three influencers and five videos per influencer were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis, enabling basic comparisons across accounts with different audience sizes. The influencers were identified through an exploratory TikTok search conducted between December 2024 and January 2025 using fashion-related and culture-related keywords (*e.g.*, “Moroccan fashion,” “caftan,” “Amazigh jewelry,” “Ramadan outfit,” “Moroccan style”), supplemented by hashtag searches and TikTok’s recommendation function. Accounts were screened for eligibility based on the following criteria: (1) the creator identifies as female and resides in Morocco; (2) the account is a personal, non-business account; (3) fashion constitutes the primary content focus; and (4) posts explicitly incorporate traditional Moroccan or Amazigh elements into contemporary or everyday outfits. Additionally, they were selected to represent a spectrum of audience sizes (large-following, mid-following, and small-following accounts), enabling comparative analysis across different levels of visibility and reach rather than statistical generalization.

To understand the reach and impact of Moroccan female influencers' fashion content, the study uses Exolyt, a social media analytics tool, to gather general engagement metrics for 15 TikTok videos (five from each of the three influencers). These videos were selected within a defined time window (January 2024–January 2025) and were the five most-viewed fashion-focused posts per influencer that met all inclusion criteria. The following Exolyt fields were extracted: number of views, likes, comments, shares, audience gender distribution, and audience geographic location. All metrics were collected as of January 14, 2025. Edited or deleted videos were excluded from the sample. To enable comparison across accounts of different sizes, engagement was normalized using the engagement rate formula: $(\text{Likes} + \text{Comments} + \text{Shares}) / \text{Views}$. All numerical values are reported using K (thousands) and M (millions) for readability.

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Content analysis examines how influencers use fashion to present their cultural heritage and assert their identity, with special attention to how they incorporate traditional Moroccan and Amazigh attire into modern, everyday wardrobes. A coding scheme was developed to identify key visual and performative elements across videos. The codebook included the following categories: (1) traditional element present (*e.g.*, *caftan*, *tekchita*, *mdema*, *majdoul*, *Amazigh jewelry*); (2) styling strategy (traditional, hybrid, or modernized); (3) posture and body language (*e.g.*, *assertive stance*, *relaxed pose*); (4) gaze direction (direct, indirect, or averted); (5) modesty level (high, moderate, low); and (6) occasion or context (everyday, festive, religious, public appearance). All videos were coded manually. To enhance analytical rigor, the coding categories were tested on a subset of videos before complete analysis, and coding decisions were documented to ensure consistency. Worked examples are provided in the Results section to illustrate how the codes were applied. The female gaze was identified through visual and verbal cues, including self-filming practices, peer-oriented address, assertive or ironic narration and captions, moments of boundary-setting, and bodily autonomy in posture and styling. Postcolonial resistance was determined through the visible incorporation of traditional Moroccan and Amazigh cultural markers—such as clothing, jewelry, and adornment—into contemporary fashion contexts, which were coded as acts of cultural reclamation.

A comparative analysis explores key differences and similarities in influencers' fashion content to identify recurring patterns of cultural reclamation, resistance, and agency. This comparative approach allows the study to examine how similar visual strategies operate across different levels of platform visibility. By examining their content through these lenses, this study seeks to contribute to discussions on digital feminism, cultural representation, and social media activism in Morocco.

Ethically, the study relies exclusively on publicly available TikTok content. Usernames are referenced only to the extent they serve as public creator identifiers. The analysis focuses on visual and discursive patterns rather than personal evaluation of the influencers themselves.

3. Results And Analysis

1. Influencer 1: @moroccanmirage

a) Engagement metrics

Number of followers	First video	Number of videos posted	Demographic by gender	Demographics by location
556.5K	2020	2.0K	73% Female 27% Male	60% from Morocco 9% France

Total views	Total likes	Total comments	Total shares	Total engagements (Likes + shares + comments)
267.3M	10.9M	142.8K	217.1K	11.3M

Average views	Average likes	Average comments	Average shares	Average engagement rate (Likes + shares + comments) / views
151.2K	4.9K	81	123	4.2%

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TikTok video	Date posted	Number of views	Number of likes	Number of comments	Number of shares	Engagement rate (Likes + Comments + Shares) / Views	Type of content
1	08/12/2024	877.1K	61.6K	2.1K	9.4K	8.3%	Modern take on re-wearing a traditional caftan
2	22/10/2024	128.1K	11.8K	315	849	10.2%	Modern ensemble with Moroccan-inspired detailing for a TV appearance
3	08/08/2024	485.3K	17.3K	151	294	3.7%	Response to a hate comment
4	06/08/2024	379.2K	16.3K	132	336	4.4%	Getting ready for the Amazigh Festival in Taghazout
5	11/06/2024	90.0K	5.8K	95	102	6.6%	Casual take on re-wearing a traditional caftan

The TikTok account has a strong female following (73%), mainly from Morocco (60%). Its high engagement rate of 4.2% is consistent with strong audience resonance, particularly for content that blends modern fashion with traditional Moroccan elements. Indeed, four out of five chosen videos have higher engagement rates than the average. Video 1 has the highest engagement rate (8.3%) and views (877.1K), which is consistent with audience interest in cultural reimagining.

b) Video content

Rime's username, "Moroccan Mirage," suggests a strategic effort to link her brand to Moroccan cultural identity. The term "Moroccan" anchors her content in her heritage, while "Mirage" reflects her artistic side as a fashion icon.

In video 1, Rime re-wears a Moroccan caftan as a long coat, paired with a corset and a satin skirt. She styles the caftan's Mdema and Majdoul as belts, pairing them with gold earrings, a pearl necklace, and a black purse, effortlessly merging old and new. She confidently gazes at the camera and refuses to justify her outfit choices, stating that she wears it this way because she wants to. The otherwise traditional attire becomes appropriate for a concert, effectively blending cultural heritage with contemporary style.

Video 2 presents a modern ensemble inspired by traditional Moroccan attire. The cropped jacket and wide-leg pants balance elegance and authority. By rejecting conventional dress standards for women and adopting a confident posture (sitting with her legs apart on the couch), Rime challenges gender norms and presents herself as an empowered individual in charge of her self-presentation while maintaining her cultural identity.

Video 3 is a response to a hate comment calling her an "ugly mess." The influencer wears a bold red top and black skirt, accessorized with Amazigh-inspired pieces: a beaded belt, earrings, a bracelet, and a lip accessory. These playful aesthetic challenges societal expectations around modesty, while staying true to cultural representation. Rime dances and lip-syncs to the music, stating: "If you do not like me, leave me alone. I will dance and wear new clothes, and if you do not like me, you can die" (translated from Arabic). Rime confronts the hate comment with humor, asserting her right to express herself freely.

Video 4 has @moroccanmirage getting ready for an Amazigh Festival. She wears a red textured coat with a long Amazigh-inspired necklace, blending traditional craftsmanship with contemporary style. Her accessories include a lip accessory inspired by Amazigh tattoos, henna-inspired designs on her hand, and face art resembling old Amazigh tattoos that honor the traditions of Amazigh women and symbolize cultural pride.

In the last video, Rime re-wears a traditional caftan, pairing it with jeans to make it accessible for informal settings. This casual interpretation of the caftan challenges its conventional use as a ceremonial garment. Rime thus promotes the idea that cultural attire can be adapted for contemporary lifestyles without losing its cultural significance.

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2. Influencer 2: @nouhailaelouahmani

a) Engagement metrics

Number of followers	First video	Number of videos posted	Demographic by gender	Demographics by location
12.7K	2020	111	77% Female 23% Male	91% Morocco 2% France

Total views	Total likes	Total comments	Total shares	Total engagements (Likes + shares + comments)
3.0M	166.8K	1.2K	4.5K	172.5K

Average views	Average likes	Average comments	Average shares	Average engagement rate (Likes + shares + comments) / views
27.0K	1.5K	11	40	5.7%

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TikTok video	Date posted	Number of views	Number of likes	Number of comments	Number of shares	Engagement rate (Likes + Comments + Shares) / Views	Type of content
1	28/03/2024	20.0K	794	11	51	4.3%	Modern take on traditional outfits during Ramadan
2	21/03/2024	66.4K	3.0K	37	441	5.2%	Modern take on traditional outfits during Ramadan
3	19/03/2024	6.8K	176	9	19	3%	Modern take on traditional outfits during Ramadan
4	15/03/2024	13.4K	371	8	88	3.5%	Modern take on traditional outfits during Ramadan
5	12/03/2024	53.3K	1.5K	17	208	3.2%	Modern take on traditional outfits during Ramadan

Nouhaila's account has a predominantly female audience (77%), mainly from Morocco (91%). It enjoys a solid engagement rate of 5.7%. Video 2 has the highest engagement rate (5.2%) and views (66.4K), showcasing strong audience interest in modern takes on traditional Moroccan outfits during Ramadan.

b) Video content

Nouhaila's videos consistently showcase a modernized take on traditional Moroccan outfits during the holy month of Ramadan. She pairs these outfits with minimalist accessories and high heels, adding elegance while maintaining modesty. Moroccan music plays in the background, reinforcing the cultural and seasonal context. Her confident and composed presence highlights self-expression and empowerment, subtly redefining how traditional clothing is perceived. Indeed, her approach is an alternative to the conventional view of modesty as restrictive. Her style resonates with the Moroccan audience by balancing cultural modesty with fashion, creating a look that blends tradition and modernity, especially during Ramadan.

3. Influencer 3: @cheerrrryblossom

a) Engagement metrics

Number of followers	First video	Number of videos posted	Demographic by gender	Demographics by location
3.9K	2021	432	81% Female 19% Male	72% Morocco 7% Egypt

Total views	Total likes	Total comments	Total shares	Total engagements (Likes + shares + comments)
986.1K	122.1K	2.9K	1.7K	126.8K

Average views	Average likes	Average comments	Average shares	Average engagement rate (Likes + shares + comments) / views
2.3K	264	7	4	12.9%

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TikTok video	Date posted	Number of views	Number of likes	Number of comments	Number of shares	Engagement rate (Likes + Comments + Shares) / Views	Type of content
1	13/01/2025	674	137	2	2	20.9%	outfit with a Moroccan touch (mdema)
2	04/01/2025	970	213	22	0	24.2%	outfit with a Moroccan touch (necklace)
3	22/10/2024	3.8K	543	17	13	15.1%	outfit with a Moroccan touch (belt)
4	16/02/2024	25.0K	3.3K	69	16	13.6%	Styled her mom's tekchita
5	28/01/2024	1.2K	176	7	0	15.6%	outfit with a Moroccan touch (necklace)

Though @cheerrrryblossom has the fewest followers (3.9K), it boasts the highest proportion of female followers (81%), with 72% based in Morocco. The account also has the highest engagement rate (12.9%) among the selected TikTokers, with all chosen posts exceeding the average. Video 4, featuring a restyling of traditional Moroccan dress, is the most viewed, with 25K views. The creator's engagement rate is consistent with her followers' interest in modern interpretations of traditional Moroccan outfits.

b) Video content

Maroua is adept at seamlessly integrating Moroccan cultural elements into her everyday clothes. In video 1, she uses the mdema as a belt for her outfit—a maroon turtleneck and white trousers. In video 2, she wears a chunky traditional necklace as a standout accessory with an off-the-shoulder sweater and denim miniskirt. In Video 3, @cheerrrryblossom repurposes the Moroccan necklace into a belt. She pairs it with a halter-neck dress that reveals her chest tattoo. In video 4, the creator restyles her mom's tekchita by wearing it backward with white pants and a gold belt. In video 5, she wears a long traditional necklace with a black top and skirt over jeans.

The young influencer's short red hair, chest tattoo, statement rings, defiant gaze, bold outfit choices, and sultry movements showcase her empowerment, autonomy, and self-confidence, challenging Morocco's patriarchal norms. However, she integrates traditional Moroccan elements into her style rather than relying solely on Western fashion to express herself. In doing so, she crafts an identity rooted in her culture and uniquely her own.

4. Discussion And Conclusions

In today's digital landscape, women are increasingly reclaiming their autonomy and challenging societal norms through the power of fashion (Muzna et al., 2021). This transformation is particularly evident on TikTok, where Moroccan female influencers like Rime, Nouhaila, and Maroua play a crucial role in reshaping the portrayal of Moroccan women. Their content serves as a vehicle for empowerment, cultural pride, and resistance against colonial and patriarchal expectations, offering ways to engage with both traditional and modern styles.

In this sample, engagement metrics indicate that the influencers' audience is predominantly Moroccan women, consistent with these young women's efforts to actively shape perceptions and trends in their country. This underscores the significance of studying how and why their content resonates. The high engagement rates of these videos align with the audience's interest in videos that blend modernity with tradition, suggesting that some Moroccan women are drawn to such representations and actively seek ways to incorporate cultural heritage into their everyday fashion choices. While Zouitni and Ennam (2024) claim that mediatized fashion erodes cultural identity, these

influencers' posts affirm that some Moroccan women remain deeply connected to their roots and find empowerment in the fusion of contemporary and traditional aesthetics.

Rime challenges patriarchal norms with boldness and defiance. Her interactive videos and use of fashion are a testament to her strength. Like the female internet users in Sundén and Paasonen's (2019) study, Rime employs humor as a key weapon in her fight against misogyny. This is particularly evident in Videos 1 and 3, where @moroccanmirage shuts down haters with witty comebacks, asserting her agency over her body and her right to dress and behave as she chooses.

Her decision to proudly wear Amazigh tattoos in one of her videos is a striking act of reclamation—not just of her autonomy but also that of millions of Amazigh women who have long been made to feel ashamed of this tradition due to Islamic perceptions that render it taboo. @moroccanmirage thus fits Cipriaso's (2022) explanation of the female gaze, as she maintains control over her image, rejecting passivity and subverting the male gaze.

Nouhaila's approach is different. Rather than Rime's bold and risky fashion choices, Nouhaila embraces modest fashion. Long's (2023) definition of the female gaze involves rebellion and anger, while Sundén and Paasonen's (2021) use humor and absurdity to reclaim the gaze, but Nouhaila remains poised, feminine, and modest. She never speaks in her videos and, as such, fits many of the standards of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). However, she is far from docile. Her confident gaze and modern fashion, inspired by Moroccan traditional clothes, empower her audience.

She redefines modesty as empowering and decolonizes Western perspectives on modest fashion as oppressive (Mirza, 2021). In a cultural setting where modesty holds significant value, Nouhaila satisfies her audience and, in doing so, pleases the female gaze (Cipriaso, 2022). She asserts that modesty, rooted in cultural identity, is a form of agency and individuality rather than restriction.

Maroua celebrates the female body through her confident body language and sultry fashion choices. With 81% of her audience being women, @cheerrrryblossom shows that her page is for women only, actively rejecting the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Her fashion and demeanor cater to the female gaze, aligning with Sundén and Paasonen's (2021) argument that women in digital spaces subvert patriarchal norms through playful self-presentation. Unlike Gill's (2021) argument that women often feel judged and watched on social media, Maroua's self-expression is neither constrained nor

performative for male validation. Instead, she blends sensuality with cultural symbols, using fashion to celebrate identity and individualism.

Wardaya et al. (2024) assertion that fashion serves as an expression of cultural identity in the digital age is particularly relevant here. As influencers, these women take pride in their heritage. They use fashion to decolonize Eurocentric standards and reclaim their Moroccan identity, blending cultural symbols with modern aesthetics.

To conclude, Rime, Nouhaila, and Maroua exemplify how Moroccan women use digital activism to reclaim agency and challenge societal norms through fashion. Their content speaks directly to Moroccan women, offering representation that mainstream media often lacks. By blending tradition with modernity, they redefine empowerment, challenge patriarchal expectations, and reshape cultural identity. Their fashion choices, music, and gestures appeal to the female gaze, making social media a space where representation is not only possible but necessary. Fashion becomes a powerful tool for these women to redefine beauty standards, express autonomy, and celebrate heritage, and as such, it becomes a powerful tool for those watching them.

5. Contributions And Limitations

By examining how Moroccan women use fashion content on social media to reclaim their cultural identity and assert agency, the article sheds light on the intersection of digital activism, postcolonialism, and feminism. Focusing on Moroccan influencers, the study examines how fashion becomes a tool for challenging stereotypes and reshaping narratives. This perspective adds to existing feminist and postcolonial scholarships, offering valuable insights into the intersection of gender, media, and cultural identity in digital spaces. Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study also offers practical implications. It indicates how fashion-based digital practices can be mobilized by Moroccan cultural institutions to promote contemporary forms of heritage preservation, by fashion educators to address digital self-presentation and cultural expression, and by content creators to negotiate visibility and agency within platform constraints without reproducing dominant norms.

While insightful, the study has limitations. It focuses on only three Moroccan female influencers, which may not capture the full range of perspectives in digital fashion activism. Additionally, the study is subject to selection bias, as it focuses on public, active, and self-branding creators whose visibility may not reflect the experiences of less

visible or private users. The reliance on engagement metrics also introduces metric bias, as engagement and visibility do not automatically equate empowerment. The focus on TikTok limits cross-platform comparisons that could provide a broader picture of fashion activism. Lastly, the research does not examine how audiences interpret or respond to the influencer's content, leaving room for future research to explore this further.

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**THE MANIFESTATION OF SELF-OTHERING THROUGH
COMIC REPRESENTATIONS: FACEBOOK AS A CASE STUDY**

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of humor on Facebook to construct a backward Moroccan identity. While the main purpose of internet memes is laughter, the nature of humor discourse softens speech, allowing them to transmit social ideologies and shape people's attitudes and worldviews. Hence, this form of self-representation celebrates backwardness as an important aspect of Morocco's cultural identity. This qualitative study seeks to investigate the social media movement #RedPill and its social implications, especially racism and sexism, and the way it creates an inferiority complex in the people's psyche, in which cultural identity becomes laughable. To do this, various posts were collected from Moroccan public groups using Facebook's search feature following a list of keywords. The posts collected all contain linguistic and visual content that possess aspects of self-othering. The data was then analysed using the emergent (emic) to categorize redundant themes such as essentialism, 'us' vs 'them', and backwardness, and the theoretical (etic) to categorize them into bigger frameworks that are self-othering and humor, along with Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). This study concludes that Facebook Red Pill content, constructs a self-othering narrative in which the authentic self is always inferior and ridiculed under the framework of laughter. These findings highlight the need to promote positive aspects of the Moroccan identity and create comedy without the need of self-debasement. Furthermore, this paper is a recommendation for authorities to identify this form of digital abuse, and for social media users to report it.

Keywords: *Self-Othering; Humor; Facebook; Morocco; Cultural Identity; Red Pill Movement; Representation.*

1. Introduction

Humor is an innate human characteristic that can be used as both a coping mechanism in one's daily life and/or past trauma, and as a form of entertainment to break the everyday routine (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). Nevertheless, beyond laughter, humor possesses heavy political and social issues (Gimbel, 2018). It is mainly produced to either conserve societal norms and correct deviance, or to oppose social and political norm structures (Webb, 1981). In the Web 2.0 era of participatory culture, where audiences have become producers, public events typically trigger a stream of Internet memes (Attardo, 2014). While online comedy fosters community and serves key functions like psychological relief, soft resistance and activism in censored environments, it can also carry detrimental effects.

The term meme was coined in 1976 by Dawkins to refer to small, gene-like cultural units of transmission that are spread from person to person by copying or imitation. Subsequent studies conducted on memes have put more focus on human agency (Laineste & Shilikhina, 2024). Limor Shifman (2013) structured the field and defined memes as digital items with shared content, form, and stance that circulate online. Other studies have attributed memes' success to their 'emotional resonance' (Miltner, 2017), highlighted the ironic and profane side of Internet memes (Milner, 2013), or linked their humor to incongruity (Laineste, 2013; Laineste et al., 2022). Furthermore, Wiggins (2019) contends that memes are ideological, semiotic acts of meaning-making that are always part of a discourse. Nevertheless, studying online humor requires an interdisciplinary approach that considers the humorous stimulus, speaker, receiver, and their contextual backgrounds (Laineste & Shilikhina, 2024).

Theoretically, memes are seen as subversive, liberating mass media from institutional constraints and giving voice to minorities; however, in practice, internet comedy is mostly conservative, specifically regarding those same minority groups (Shifman, 2014). Humorous trolling is considered a widespread issue of online abuse that aims to mock and taunt individuals and social groups under the framework of shared laughter (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016). Studies suggest that it mostly employs aggressive humor for entertainment purposes only (Bishop, 2014; Dynel, 2016; Glynn & Brown,

2023). Furthermore, since the appearance of social media, both anonymity and the scarcity of law regulations give way for racism, sexism, xenophobia, bullying, and verbal abuse to take place. Thus, memes are both promising, given their accessibility, and paralyzing, due to social media's focus on subjectivity over logic (Wiggins, 2019). Consequently, like all forms of comedy, memes are double-edged swords (Meyer, 2000) that can either bring people together or discriminate against social groups.

In this sense, an important function of memes is to foster community connections among like-minded people and to create platforms to share similar ideologies, even harmful ones. During the drafting of this article in late 2024, Morocco was advocating for a new version of the Family Code to strengthen women's legal rights. Therefore, the anticipated reform of the Family Code itself has become a major subject of comedy on Moroccan social media, celebrated by some and dreaded by others (Zouiten, 2024). Both individuals and communities utilized comic tools such as sarcasm, irony, satire, self-deprecation, and offensive comedy to criticize the Family code. What first started as harmless jokes and satirical takes to critique society and shed light on its marital issue, turned into an abusive discourse of power that segregates women, promotes sexist discourse and behavior, and spreads misinformation.

Moroccan law criminalizes specific forms of hate speech and online abuse on social media. For instance, under Article 447-1 of the Moroccan Penal Code, the unauthorized and non-consensual posting or sharing of private images is a punishable offense (Kingdom of Morocco, art. 447-1, 2018). Similarly, Law No. 73-15 contends that incitement to discrimination or hatred is punishable by one month to one year of imprisonment and fines ranging from 5,000 MAD up to 100,000 MAD. If the incitement is carried out through digital means, the penalties increase to one to three years of imprisonment and fines of 10,000 to 100,000 MAD (Bakkar Sbai, 2024). However, the vast amount of sexist and racist posts that circulate online is concerning, especially if they are masked with humor and shared within closed groups anonymously. The interplay between social media and offensive comedy contributes to the creation of echo chambers that spread hatred, discrimination and abuse, undermining the progress Morocco seeks.

The Red Pill Ideology (RPI) encompasses beliefs that advocate for male dominance and seek to liberate men from what is perceived as a society that favors women and exhibits hostility toward men (Ging, 2019). Ward (2022) sees RPI as a phenomenon that includes the misogyny paradox in which men's desire for women exists within a culture that encourages hatred towards women (Botto & Gottzén, 2022).

Interestingly, social media users employ humor as a mean to promote this ideology while simultaneously concealing its inherent dangers through comedic expression. Moreso, they share these harmful posts on Facebook through memes within closed groups.

Interestingly, in the Moroccan context, these posts go beyond provoking women in general and feminism, as a movement, in particular. Instead, they tend to create a division between the ‘traditional undesired Moroccan woman’ and the ‘Western desired woman’. This gives rise to a discourse of power that puts the Moroccan identity in an inferior status in comparison to its Western counterpart. Furthermore, the ones who create such posts segregate their own nationality, culture and ethnicity, and represent the Moroccan female as an alien subject, defining her entirely by what the Western woman is not. This process alludes to Edward Said’s concept of Othering (Said, 1979). Weedon (2004) explains that individuals often define themselves by what they perceive not to be (as cited in Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018) in postcolonial studies. However, the notion of the other refers to a member of a dominated out-group whose identity is seen as lacking. This creates a binary opposition that empowers the in-group with a positive identity, while making the out-group the subordinated other (Barker, 2004).

The memes investigated not only produce narratives that target women, but they subconsciously serve the European colonial ideology by positioning the West as the ultimate standard for comparison. Since the social media content is Moroccan, directed towards the Moroccan audience, written by Moroccan individuals, in which the object of ridicule is the Moroccan identity, this paper argues that this phenomenon represents a form of self-othering. Such memes aim to erupt laughter through cultural ridicule and self-debasement, in which identity becomes laughable. Here, the Red Pill Ideology in Moroccan Facebook extends beyond gender, opting to mock Moroccan cultural identity, while simultaneously celebrating its constructed “ugliness” and backwardness. This mirrors the way the West historically depicted the East as a backward civilization. Various studies in Postcolonial theory examine how the West represents the East, yet relatively less attention is given to how the East constructs its own representation, specifically through the medium of comedy and digital media.

The term “self-colonization” refers to the act of a nation that colonizes itself on the ideological level according to colonial Eurocentric standards (Kiossev, 2011). In this case, it is when the natives celebrate colonial attributes such as backwardness, ugliness, and savagery as markers of their cultural identity. This article bridges the gap between humor studies and postcolonial theory in Morocco, by investigating how self-othering

takes place in the construction of Moroccan cultural identity and its manifestation within humor. Consequently, the study at hand seeks to answer the following questions: How do Moroccan Facebook memes use humor to construct and represent the Moroccan woman? How do these memes manifest self-othering and construct a backward self-representation?

2. Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the function of humor in Moroccan Red Pill Facebook memes as a discursive tool for constructing self-othering narratives that frame Moroccan cultural and female identities as inferior and laughable. To do this, the study explores the use of comedy on Facebook, focusing on the Red Pill movement and its role in perpetuating self-othering that renders Moroccan cultural identity laughable. Facebook was selected as the primary social media site for this study as it is the most used network in Morocco, with 27,500,600 users in February 2025 (Facebook users in Morocco, NapoleonCat, 2025). Furthermore, the platform enables users to create public groups dedicated to specific topics, where members are not only able to comment and share but are also encouraged to post and contribute to the group's activity. This functionality provides the study with greater diversity and reach compared to other platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

The data collection procedure was purposive and thematic. Facebook posts were collected according to their relevance to the study's focus on the Red Pill ideology, humor, and deprecating representations of Moroccan women and culture. Thus, the posts had to be public within public Facebook groups to highlight the discourse's reach, they had to be Moroccan, a variable established by their use of Moroccan Arabic (Darija), and they had to possess a humorous aspect, which placed all selected content in the category of memes. For this study, memes are defined as "digital messages that share common form and/or content and at the same time allow for some sort of contextually appropriate modification" (Laineste & Shilikhina, 2024, p. 346). However, not all humorous social media content constitutes a meme, as the term specifically excludes singular or non-recurrent instances of online humor. This distinction is significant, as it explains the study's focus on particular posts that reproduce the Red Pill ideology and are widely shared, rather than on collecting a large volume of data. Consequently, this qualitative study focuses on a small, thematically selected sample of memes to conduct a detailed

analysis of the recurring patterns and meanings of self-othering through visual and linguistic variables, rather than on quantifying their frequency.

Consequently, the posts were selected by regularly monitoring public pages and groups related to comedy and popular culture, and by using Facebook's search engine with a set of keywords in Moroccan Arabic (Darija). The keywords used were: *l'mghribya w l'oroupya* (the Moroccan and the European), *7arakat red pill* (red pill movement), *l'bnt l'oroupya* (the European girl), *9ehwya* (dark-skinned), *roussiyat* (Russian females). The data was then sampled according to the study's criteria, meaning posts had to include binary oppositions between the Moroccan woman and the Western woman, and demonstrate popularity, as measured by their numbers of shares and comments. The sampled posts were collected from Red Pill groups and public comedy pages and were found to be within a timeframe from 2014 to 2025, highlighting the redundancy and continued spread of this ideology among Moroccans.

The data was sampled theoretically, based on the premise that self-othering is subconsciously disseminated by Moroccan social media users through comedy targeting Moroccan women; a mockery that transcends gender to implicitly critique the entire society and culture. This is achieved through binary oppositions with the West, thereby reproducing European colonial discourse. Given the rich nature of the data, it was thematically analyzed by integrating both emergent (emic) and theoretical (etic) perspectives. This approach facilitated the categorization and interpretation of self-othering representations within the collected posts. Emic themes were first identified in the selected posts and grouped into redundant categories; these were then organized within broader etic frameworks. Two primary etic themes were established: self-othering and humor. From the theoretically sampled data, four redundant emic sub-themes emerged within the humor category: sarcasm, irony, and marginalised comedy. The self-othering theme contained the subthemes of essentialism, 'us' vs. 'them' narratives, and backwardness.

Given the multimodal nature of the data, which consists of social media memes, the analysis was both visual and linguistic, as each post integrates an image with a descriptive caption that functions as the joke's punchline. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) was employed to examine the posts in their entirety and to understand how each mode (character; frame, lighting, position and text) contributes to meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Specifically, this study applies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design, analyzing the data through three meta-functions:

representational meaning, the viewer's interactive positioning, and the compositional framing that structures meaning through spatial elements. An interpretative translation method was used to render the Moroccan Arabic (Darija) source material into English. Guided by the author's position as a cultural and linguistic native, this approach was crucial for accurately conveying the humor and cultural aspects of the original texts.

3. Results and analysis

3.1. Marginalised comedy - us vs them, backwardness

Marginalised comedy uses the trope of “Us VS Them” to portray the marginal group, be it women, people of color, or homosexual individuals as victims (Gilbert, 1997). Similar to self-deprecation, marginalised comedy may also create power patterns that reinforce the said stereotypes against such groups. Edward Said (1979) explains that when the ‘other’ is portrayed as something alien, it ultimately makes the said ‘other’ to be discriminated against and feared (Gilbert, 1997).

The inferiority-superiority dichotomy is inherent to marginal comedy. For instance, a comedian may perform a joke that debases his own ethnicity, which is an identity shared with the audience. Consequently, both the comedian and the audience are positioned as inferior. When the audience understands the punchline and finds it humorous, they implicitly accept this assigned identification. In this framework, hierarchy becomes unescapable for Marginalised humor to occur. Marginalised comedy was found in the data collected, in which users express the higher status of Western women through binary oppositions that put Moroccan women in a lower status. The following post is within a Moroccan public Facebook page that regularly posts humorous content regarding the nation and its issues:

Figure 2 Screenshot of a post from a public Facebook group called “cracking up with Moroccan jokes hhhhhhhhhhh”



Original text: ضحكة البنت الأوروبية

و خدودها يحمارو و دغيا تسكت

ضحكة بناتنا

ركوع - قيام - سجود - شهيق - زفير - بكاء - تصفيق - تصفيق - و ضرب على الرجلي ما عرفناها ضحكة ولا أركان الحج

Translation: “a European girl’s laugh

Her cheeks turn red, and she quickly goes quiet.

Moroccan girls’ laugh

Bowing, standing up, prostrating, inhaling, exhaling, crying, clapping, stomping, and slapping their legs

We don’t know if it’s laughter or the pillars of Hajj!”

A multimodal analysis reveals how the image constructs its meaning. In terms of representational meaning, the image depicts an action process. One vector is formed by the girl on the right touching up her hair, an act signifying femininity. A second reactional vector is created by the middle girl, whose eyeline is directed toward the other participant with a smile, indicating engagement. Regarding interactive meaning, the image employs a medium shot, establishing a social relationship with the viewer. The eye-level angle suggests equality and invites involvement. While the middle girl's gaze is directed at her companion, the other gazes are directed toward the camera, directly engaging with the viewer. For compositional meaning, the characters occupy most of the frame, positioned at the bottom with the blue sky dominating the upper portion. Their blue shirts blend chromatically with the sky and sea, eliminating harsh visual lines and thereby highlighting their skin tone and blonde hair through contrast.

Here, the colonial discourse of the civilized West vs the uncivilized east is highlighted through representing European women as docile “her cheeks turn red” and well-mannered “quickly goes quiet”, while portraying the Moroccan woman as chaotic, unruly, and emotionally uncontrollable. Backwardness is evident in the meme by the exaggerated comparison of body language to a religious act that requires a lot of body movement. This ties it into a broader discourse of Moroccan women as backward or primitive, unable to fit into the Western ideal of restrained, composed femininity.

This meme utilizes marginal humor to emphasize how women are expected to conform to societal norms while highlighting the exaggerated "chaos" of Moroccan women, thereby alienating them from the sphere of all that is feminine. Hence, it frames Moroccan women as inherently non- feminine.

3.2. Irony – ‘us’ vs ‘them’, essentialism

The word irony is considered a rhetorical device used in comedy to mean the opposite of the utterance (Attardo, 2014, p. 399). Its association to humor can be explained either through the superiority theory that elevates the speaker, or the incongruity theory, when the audience grasps and finds humor in the unspoken implicit meaning (Garmendia, 2018). There are five types of irony: verbal, situational, dramatic, Socratic, and romantic (Garmendia, 2018). The most pertinent type for this study is verbal irony, which requires language use and the conscious act of communicating an implicit meaning; it involves saying something with an ironic intent.

Kendall Walton (1990) states that “to speak ironically is to mimic or mock those one disagrees with, fictionally to assert what they do or may assert. Irony is sarcasm” (Walton, 1990, p. 222). However, most scholars maintain that sarcasm and irony, while related, are not interchangeable concepts (Garmendia, 2018).

The data collected includes ironic aspects that create humor by targeting an individual or group of people who are not explicitly mentioned, and whom the audience is expected to recognize on their own. These are some examples with self-othering themes:

Figure 3 Screenshot of a member's post within a public Facebook group called "Moroccan Red Pill for men".



Original text: هادي روسية زوج ديالها مغربي تخيل كون كان مزوج مولات زرق مغربية هههه

Translation: "This is a Russian woman married to a Moroccan man. Now imagine if he was married to the Moroccan woman wearing blue hhhh"

A multimodal analysis reveals a constructed hierarchy. In terms of representational meaning, the main subject is a Russian influencer who lives in Morocco positioned centrally; an action process shows her hands clasped together, signifying docility. Her traditional Moroccan *djellaba* visually highlights cultural assimilation. The mocked Moroccan woman is in the far left, with an action vector formed by her hand on her hip, signaling impatience. Regarding interactive meaning, the Western woman is framed in a medium shot at eye level, inviting viewer involvement and suggesting equality, while her direct gaze engages the audience. In contrast, the Moroccan woman is distanced through a long shot. For compositional meaning, the Western woman's green *djellaba* creates a contrast with the setting, drawing attention and marking her as novel. The other woman's clothing blends into the background, diminishing her visual salience. In sum, these modals position the Western woman as more significant in the picture.

The irony in the meme lies in the fact that both women are wearing the same traditional Moroccan outfit (*djellaba*), however, although it is pertinent to the Moroccan woman's identity and heritage, its appearance on her renders her existence laughable, whereas on the Russian woman it is celebrated. The audience is thus meant to find this contrast amusing through its absurdity. The use of "hhhh" at the end of the utterance, urges the audience to interact with the meme and laugh. This meme constructs an us vs. them dynamic by comparing a Moroccan man's choice of a Russian wife with the

imagined alternative of a Moroccan wife. The humor here lies in the cultural distinction between the Russian woman who symbolizes beauty and unexpectedness, and the Moroccan woman who portrays disappointment and unattractive familiarity. The joke hinges on the difference between East and West, which in this case is Morocco and Russia, where the latter is positioned as inherently superior.

“Essentialism is the assumption that groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category” (Ashcroft et al., 2007). In this post, both identities are essentialized, implying that there is a fixed essence to being Moroccan or Russian. The following post is another example that highlights the tendency to essentialize the European identity as unparalleled and unique:

Figure 4 Facebook user’s post on his personal page.



Original text: هادي والله ماني نسكت عليها
الفرق بين المغربية و الأوروبية فرق والادح

Translation: “Honestly, I can’t stay silent about this. The difference between a Moroccan woman and a European woman is very clear.”

In the compositional metafunction of MDA, left placement signals familiarity, while right placement signals novelty. The figure positions Western girls on the right to indicate novelty and Moroccan girls on the left to indicate familiarity. Saliency is created through lighting: the right side is brighter, highlighting the Western girls’ pale skin—culturally considered beautiful in Morocco, while dimmer lighting emphasizes the Moroccan girls tanned or olive skin. Both images are medium shots, with direct gazes and high angles, placing the viewer in a position of power.

The post presents comedy that generates laughter through self-mockery and comparisons that create ‘laughable’ power patterns. The irony here lies in the fact that both Moroccan girls and seemingly Caucasian girls are posing in the same manner, yet the latter group still manages to appear inherently better and more natural in the pose. The saying “Honestly, I can’t stay silent about this” conveys the author’s frustration and

anger at the stark difference between the two ethnicities, which includes his own. This suggests that Moroccan men may feel ashamed of female ethnic features, rendering them undesirable. Although the post lacks explicit elements that invite laughter, its ironic intent is evident, and the humour is subtle.

3.3. Sarcasm – essentialism, ‘us’ vs ‘them’, dehumanizing

In comedy, irony is often confused with sarcasm, and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. The line separating the two can be blurry, and some authors have claimed that there is no clear-cut distinction between them (Garmendia, 2018). However, most authors maintain that sarcasm and irony, though related, are not interchangeable (Garmendia, 2018). Scholars differentiate between sarcasm and irony based on victims, aggressiveness, and clarity. Comedians, or speakers in general, implicitly showcase a negative attitude toward something or someone using irony (Garmendia, 2018). The target of this negativity or criticism is what scholars call the “victim” of the ironic statement. It can be the speaker themselves, the audience or a member of the audience, someone identified by the audience but absent from the scene, or even a broad or non-human target. Hence, while the victim of irony is not always of the same type, the victim of sarcasm is always present. Whether it is the speaker or the hearer, having a single victim is sufficient to classify the utterance as sarcasm (Garmendia, 2018).

The second characteristic that separates irony and sarcasm is the level of aggressiveness in the utterance. While irony may also be sharp, sarcasm is considered more hurtful toward its victim; sharper, more aggressive, and bitter (Garmendia, 2018). Therefore, in comedy, sarcasm either self-deprecates when directed toward the comedian or degrades its audience while elevating the speaker. The third and final characteristic is clarity, meaning that sarcasm leaves no room for doubt about the speaker’s intended meaning, while the audience may be oblivious to irony (Garmendia, 2018). Sarcasm is heavily employed on Moroccan Facebook to critique Moroccan women and unconsciously promote self-othering tendencies within the framework of laughter. Its use is mostly linguistically aggressive and explicitly targets a known group of people, in this case, the Moroccan female community.

Figure 5 Screenshot of a user's post on his personal page.



Original text: الفرق بين الفتاة الأوروبية و الفتاة المغربية

الأوروبية عينيها زورق و شفايفها حومر
المغربية عينيها حومر و شفايفها زورق

Translation: “the difference between a European girl and a Moroccan girl

The European has blue eyes and red lips

The Moroccan girl has red eyes and blue lips”

A multimodal analysis reveals the construction of a direct and idealized representation. The representational meaning features an action process, defined by a vector where the girl's hand delicately holds her neck. In terms of interactive meaning, the participant maintains a direct gaze with the viewer, emphasized by her striking blue eyes; the medium shot and direct angle, with her face dominating the frame, establishing an equal and involved relationship. For the compositional meaning, salience is created through color contrast: her thick red hair, red lips, and pale blue eyes stand out against a background of light brown crops. While her pale skin tone blends with this background, it further highlights her vividly red hair and lips and the brightness of her blue eyes.

The level of aggressiveness here is sharp, the victim is known, and the post leaves no room for doubt. Explicitly describing Moroccan ethnic features as “blue lips” carries racist connotations. In Morocco, individuals with a darker skin complexion are not described with the colors “brown” or “black,” but rather “blue,” to emphasize the supposed repulsiveness and hideousness of the skin tone. Moreover, describing the eyes as “red eyes” may carry the subliminal meaning that the Moroccan woman is evil and vile, while the Western woman’s “blue eyes” represent tenderness and innocence. This ultimately dehumanizes the Moroccan woman, stripping her of both feminine traits and

her humanity by depicting her in a grotesque manner. The picture is added to further highlight the user's point, depicting a girl with pale blue eyes and Western features.

Figure 6 *A post within a public page.*



Original text: شوف فيها مزيان و سير بلوكي ديك المعزة ديالك

Translation: “Look at her closely and go block that ‘goat’ of yours”

The picture features the American actress Kate Winslet, who serves here as a representation of Western beauty. It is a close-up, eye-level shot that establishes an intimate relationship with an involved audience. The subject's gaze is averted from the camera, portraying her as an object of observation, which in this context turns into an admiration of her beauty. Salience is created by her auburn red hair, which complements the red color of her cheeks. Her blue eyes also merge with the dark blue color of her shirt. The actress's face occupies the entire screen, inviting the viewer to gaze at her features. This post employs the same trope. It encourages Moroccan men to abandon their Moroccan female partners as a form of misguided revenge, based on the belief that Western women are more physically appealing. The use of the term “goat” to describe Moroccan women is culture-specific. While in the West, 'goat' praises someone as the greatest, in Morocco, it is derogatorily used to describe a woman with a dark complexion. Furthermore, using an image of Kate Winslet, a renowned English actress often regarded as one of Hollywood's beauties, to represent the West essentializes an entire identity into a fixed notion of beauty defined by blue eyes, pale skin, and fair hair. This indicates that those features are reserved for the West, desired by the Moroccan man, and unattainable by the Moroccan woman. Consequently, laughter erupts from the Moroccan woman's audacity to be with a Moroccan man while lacking such desired features. In this logic, ethnicity itself becomes an object of ridicule.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study concludes that Moroccan Red Pill digital content employs humor to perpetuate ethnic mockery, gender stereotypes, and hate speech, which subconsciously promotes a negative self-image of Moroccan identity. It highlights a process of self-othering, in which the authentic self is consistently depicted as inferior and ridiculed under the framework of laughter. Furthermore, it indicates the existence of hostile digital spaces in Morocco, particularly for female users.

The presence of sexist and racist discourse on social media, specifically targeting Moroccan women and Moroccan identity more broadly, reflects a significant social problem. The adoption of Red Pill ideology among male users directly contradicts Morocco's national aspirations for gender equality. This issue is exacerbated by the normalization of ethnic and racial slurs, which are frequently cloaked in humor. Moreover, Moroccan identity is persistently framed through a lens of 'ugliness' and backwardness, thereby reinforcing damaging stereotypes. The repetitiveness of certain emic sub-themes, such as essentialism and 'us' versus 'them' dynamic not only mirrors broader societal issues but also underscores the pervasive influence of colonial ideology on the Moroccan collective consciousness.

More troubling is the unresolved question of whether these men are conscious of their self-othering tendencies and their role in reproducing colonial discourse. Furthermore, racist and sexist discourse is widely normalized and framed as "humor" on Moroccan digital platforms, a practice that risks trivializing these behaviors in broader social contexts. Using comedy to spread harmful ideologies and target specific communities with hate speech is particularly dangerous on social media, where such content often faces minimal condemnation, and posts are usually anonymous. These findings underscore the critical need for dedicated humor studies in Morocco to analyze its use across digital platforms. This article also calls upon Moroccan content creators and media professionals to actively promote positive representations of Moroccan identity and to counter the pervasive narrative that frames it as inherently laughable.

5. Contribution and limitations

This study bridges the gap between humor studies and postcolonial studies. While various research in the field examines racist or sexist representations, very few address othering or, in this specific case, self-othering. Furthermore, there is a notable gap in

academic research on humor within Moroccan media, and this article serves as a stepping stone that could pave the way for further exploration in this area.

Finally, this study raises awareness of a form of digital abuse that is widely spread online. It also serves as a recommendation for authorities to draft policies that identify such abuse and hold those responsible for disseminating it accountable. Media, in all its forms, plays a crucial role in transmitting information and ideologies, and influencing people's worldviews. Therefore, it is essential for the public to be aware of these effects, and for authorities to promote media literacy through educational initiatives or mainstream media campaigns.

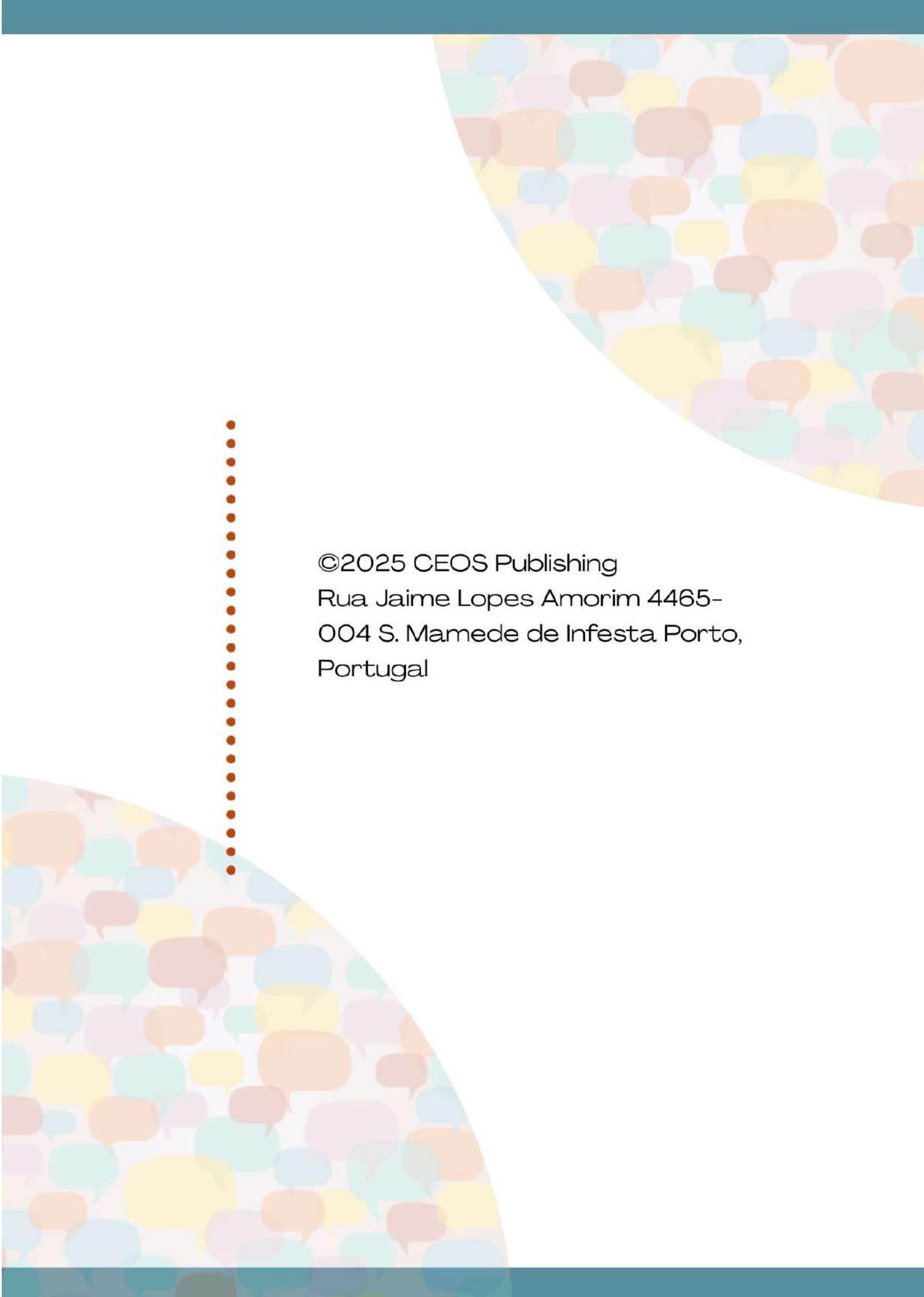
Every study has its limitations. Future research could explore other social media platforms, conduct interviews with content creators, and use surveys to assess audience impact. Ultimately, self-othering merits dedicated study and should be introduced as a critical concept both within Moroccan academia.

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