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Peak and Plateau Communication Experiences (PCEs)

An International Call for Inquiry

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Maslow's landmark conception of the generalised "peak experience" is revisited. Next the concept of "peak" communication experiences (PCEs), originally derived four decades ago from the generalised Maslow model, is reviewed. PCEs are defined as our times of highest happiness and fulfilment arising from our communication with others. While "peak" communication experiences have received scant conceptual and empirical attention, the work that has been done is briefly surveyed. The under-told story of Maslow's significant end-of-life conceptualising of "plateau" experiencing is then highlighted, and it is recommended that "plateau" communication experiences be included within the upper-distribution PCE domain going forward. The development of a "positive communication" paradigm within the communication discipline is traced, and it is suggested there now exists a foundational knowledge structure to provide conceptual home for inquiry into PCEs. Lastly, suggestions for the exploration of both "plateau" and "peak" communication experiences (PCEs) are offered.

Keywords: peak communication experiences, plateau communication experiences, peak experiences, plateau experiences, self-actualisation, positive communication, Abraham Maslow

Introduction: Peak experiences

More than sixty years ago Abraham Maslow (1971; 1970; 1968; 1959) introduced to the behavioural sciences the concept of the generalised "peak experience", a term which he coined (Hoffman 1988: 223). Maslow called upon data from 80 interviews, 190 survey respondents, 50 unsolicited reports, and the literatures of philosophy, aesthetics and

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spirituality to generate an overall description of peoples' highest moments of happiness and human fulfilment (Maslow 1968: Ch. 6). Maslow was at that time the first major psychologist since William James (1902) to explore the heights of human consciousness. Ever since Maslow, researchers have attempted to map these "peak experiences", psycho-physiological states activated during peoples' most positively-valued heightened states of awareness and being. Such elevating and memorable moments are usually triggered by an acute stimulus event such as a deep personal experience with nature, creativity, music, painting, sacred literature, visual art, solitude, shared love, childbirth, meditation, prayer, athletic endeavour, travel, and so on (e.g. Senecal 2021: 295–313; Hoffman et al. 2020: 608–628; Solberg–Dibben 2019: 371–389; Whitehead–Bates 2016: 1577–1598; Morgan–Coutts 2016: 202–217; Hoffman et al. 2010: 67–76; Hoffman–Muramoto 2007: 524–540; DeMares 2000: 89–103).

During reported "peak experiences", emotions of happiness, joy, appreciation, awe, love, appreciation and unity typically occur, and a momentary phenomenological transcendence of one's normal role-situated functioning (Yaden et al. 2017: 143–160). It is as if "new horizons" are sensed, and there is a temporary sensation of standing outside normal time, place, role and structure. There are modifications in sense-of-identity systems, alterations in allocation of attention, a relative unloading of standard linguistic structures, and other baseline operations are destabilised (Maslow 1968: 71–102). These special "peak experiences" tend to be perceived as among life's most precious moments, a conviction that what is happening is elusive yet meaningful and valuable, as if one has been at least momentarily uplifted to "higher" levels of feeling, perceiving and being, and there is often a strong sense of "uniting" with vast cosmic life forces (Maslow 1968: Ch. 21; Losoncz 2023: 117–132; Keltner 2023: 242–252).

Self-transcendent experiences (STEs) including "flow", "mindfulness", "gratitude", "awe", "peak experiences" and "mystical experiences" have each been the subject of over 1,000 research reports, and are posited as falling along a single spectrum of intensity (Yaden et al. 2017: 143–160). STEs share in common a relative dissolution of the sense of an egoic "separate self", i.e. boundaries of an isolated and skin-encapsulated "separate self" seem to fall away, and feelings of greater connection and oneness with something larger tend to occur. STEs are typically associated with positive outcomes, including emotional well-being and prosocial behaviour (Keltner 2023; Kaufman 2020; Yaden et al. 2017: 143–160; Fukui–Toyoshima 2014; Atchley et al. 2012; Rudd et al. 2012: 1130–1136; Wilson–Spencer 1990: 565–573; Olson et al. 1998: 13–24; Wuthnow 1978: 59–75). Of the "peak experience", Maslow (1968: 154) said: "And once we have been in it, we can remember it forever, and feed ourselves on this memory, and be sustained in times of stress." Significant meaning, depth and resilience is added to the lives of those who have had such expansive experiences, for as William Blake famously put it: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would be seen as it is, infinite" (as quoted in Huxley 1970: 189).

Peak communication experiences (PCEs): Pioneering foray

Even as of four decades ago there had already been many generalised "peak experience" studies (stemming from exposure to nature, the fine arts, prayer or meditation, sports, etc.), but glaringly absent from the "peak experience" literature were specific examinations of *interpersonal communication* as a pathway to elevated moments of human feeling and functioning. Gordon (1983) then presented a convention paper in Washington, D.C. entitled *Greatest Moments in Interpersonal Communication: Peak Communication Experiencing,* later published in truncated form (Gordon, 1985). Since this was the pioneering exploratory foray into "peak communication experiences" (PCEs), we shall attend to its method and results. Each of Maslow's 19 descriptors of the generalised peak experience were semantically tailored specifically to the interpersonal communication context. A technical Maslow descriptor such as: "Perception in the peak moment tends to be strongly idiographic and non-classificatory" was translated to read: "It's as though I compared this person with no other person — as we talked this person became more and more special and not interchangeable with anyone else." The 19 items were then assembled into a simple Likert-type survey instrument.

The prompt was as follows: "Will you think of the greatest moments in communication that you have ever had in your entire life? The peak moments in communication, the times when you felt that you and another person most got on one another's wavelength, when you most fully got through to the other, and the other got through to you. These times were probably within the upper 5 to 10% of all your experiences in communication in your life, the most positive communication encounters you have ever had, of the highest happiness and fulfillment. Will you check each of the following items that in fact applies to these rare peak communication experiences? Maybe none of these items will apply, maybe some will, maybe all will. Please be as accurate as you can in your responses." The aim was to discover how respondents might apply these Maslow-derived nineteen items, or not, to their "peak" communication experiences (PCEs).

A convenience sample of 86 Texas A&M University students served as respondents. The resulting data indicated that for a majority of the respondents (>50% of both females and males), 15 of the 19 descriptors did in fact apply to their PCEs. These data will be overviewed; the following percentages were unreported in the published factor analysis, as were item-by-item gender differences.

The four items that >75% of both females and males indicated as applying to their PCEs were as follows: "I was completely absorbed in the other person I was communicating with, and in what we were talking about — my total attention was present" (92% of females, and 94% males); "It's as though I compared this person with no other person — as we talked this person became more and more special, and not interchangeable with anyone else" (90%/89%); "I saw the beauty of the person I was communicating with, and the beauty of our communication itself, just as it was" (90%/78%); and "My listening seemed so open, so receptive, and the words just flowed in upon me without me grabbing or straining to understand" (80%/78%).

The other 11 items that at least 50% of both females and males indicated as applying to their PCEs include the following, and with five significant gender differences: “I felt very accepting and loving of the other person during our communication” (94%/69%, $p < .05$); “I saw the other person and our communication together in a richer way, a newer way, a more exciting way” (90%/67%, $p < .05$); “Our communication felt incredibly significant, as if it were somehow all there was in the universe” (68%/75%); “I would lose track of the passage of time, and of our physical surroundings” (68%/69%); “Our communication was valuable in and of itself, regardless of what it would lead to – it was enough, just the way it was, as an end in itself”(68%/67%); “During our communication I gained insight into a true level of truth than I usually see; my eyes were opened in a fresh way” (72%/61%); “I became more spontaneous, effortless, more myself, more whole in my communication” (88%/69%, $p < .05$); “I began to feel more childlike, in a healthy kind of way, in my communication – more freely playful, expressive, creative” (78%/53%, $p < .05$); “During our communicating my fears, anxiety, inhibitions and defenses all fell away” (72%/54%, $p < .05$); “The communication with this person moved me to awe, wonder, humility, reverence – there was something almost sacred about our act of communication” (60%/58%); “Everything somehow became more One, and I became more One with it all, through our communication” (54%/51%). The majority of the respondents were business and engineering students, yet they were willing to apply relatively rhapsodic descriptors to having entered through doors of expanded consciousness via interpersonal communication episodes with their fellow human beings.

Review of subsequent PCE research

When the term *peak communication experiences* is today entered into the standard databases one is struck by the paucity of theorising and research across the subsequent decades in this exciting and potentially useful area of human communication studies. We shall briefly overview this literature.

Goodall Jr. and Kellett (2004) entered the PCE arena two decades ago with their conceptual chapter *Dialectical Tensions and Dialogic Moments as Pathways to Peak Experiences* in an edited volume on human dialogue theory (Anderson et al. 2004). They suggested that quite often high-quality dialogue itself can constitute a form of “peak” communication experience, an “immersion experience” that is “beyond words”. Goodall Jr. (in Goodall Jr. & Kellett, 2004: 160) recalls an extended conversational encounter with a friend back in his high school days, held under the shining night stars and moonlit sky, that provided a special opening and uplifting to which he had been seeking to return ever since. Goodall Jr. and Kellett write (2004: 174): “It is as if the ordinary everyday self left the body (hence the experience of selflessness) and then returned to that body changed by the extraordinary experience in the dialogue zone.” Dialoguing is depicted as an energising form of human discourse in which creative dialectical tensions can arise, including tensions between competition and communion, problem solving and mystery, skill and surrender, seriousness and playfulness. More than this, there is a fusion of self and other into a larger “we” that then becomes “the

primary organic structure out of which dialogic communication emerges" (Goodall Jr. – Kellett 2004: 173). This quality of dialoguing can constitute a PCE.

When Chad Edwards (2010) and his Western Michigan University research team turned to PCE research just over a dozen years ago, Edwards was still able to claim that: "To date, there has been only one published empirical study examining the possibilities of individuals having peak experiences in communication." He and his research assistants conducted 76 interviews using 12 questions to elicit PCE memories, descriptions and reflections from their respondents. Seven themes emerged from the response-coding: *transpersonal unity; humanistic spirituality; time and space distortion; enriched perception; receptive non-judgmental openness; spontaneity; and changes in worldviews*. Such PCES go beyond our more mundane daily small talk exchanges, and lead us into another realm of intensity and meaning.

While autoethnography has often been used to record narratives of hardship, loss and pain, Torrens (2010), also a member of the Western Michigan team, wrote an autoethnography of her own recollected and ongoing PCEs and found the Gordon (1985) dimensions of "loving acceptance", "open-minded insight" and "spontaneity" to be clearly emergent. Here is a short excerpt from one of her entries: "It was like everything in my peripheral vision blurred and Jack was visible in high definition. It's so hard to describe because the word 'connection' isn't strong enough to represent what was happening between us. It was like everything that Jack was, and is, and will be, was colliding with everything that I am, have been, and will be. Time didn't matter, space didn't matter. On some level, our words didn't matter. What we said was not as important as what that conversation was creating" (Torrens 2010: 22).

Autumn Edwards (2010), also a leader on the Western Michigan PCE team, offers a creative and rich attempt to generatively theorise about PCEs. She notes that: "Despite early and groundbreaking work on 'Being' in peak communication experiences, the Communication discipline has largely neglected serious study of these intense, powerful, and deeply meaningful experiences. Taken as a whole, the scholarship has focused predominantly on what Maslow termed 'deficiency needs' to the neglect of human potential, growth, and the fulfillment of highest purpose." She then argues that "PCEs challenge the pillars of mainstream communication ideology", especially standard reductive notions that communication is primarily about individual goal-seeking, planning and the delivery of strategic outcome-directed messages in concrete time-bound and space-bound situations. A. Edwards points out that PCEs are not about effectively attaining instrumental objectives but rather they tend to be unplanned emergent encounters rich with intrinsic rewards and a strong unfolding sense of connectedness and even transcendence. She writes: "It is striking that when participants in [Chad] Edwards' (2010) investigation of PCEs were asked to describe their 'greatest moment in interpersonal communication,' none depicted an interaction that resulted from careful planning, produced some desired effects, realized pre-existing goals, or involved artfully crafted strategic messages. Nor did participants focus on elements of what we traditionally term 'communication competence'." She concludes that PCE research might call for a "radical recalibration" of communication conceptualising.

In a master's thesis study of PCEs under the direction of both Autumn and Chad Edwards, Beals (2011) held 12 semi-structured interviews to examine the role of PCEs in friendships. Three major PCE themes emerged: the sharing of a difficult or traumatic experience, a sense of companionship and a sense of helpfulness. Outcomes of PCE episodes were increased self-disclosure, depth of friendship and new perspectives, and the "results demonstrated both personal and relational growth for friends".

Five years later, in a conference paper by Socha et al. (2016), it was reported that when reflecting back upon childhood and adolescent "peak interpersonal communication experiences" respondents used such terms (in alphabetical order) as "acceptance, connectedness, encouragement, feeling heard, feeling special, love, inspiration, openness, relief, security, success, truthfulness, and validation". Topics broadly tended to revolve around one's future, one's past, a life stressor, or the mutual sharing of fun. During their "peak" communication episodes participants felt (in alphabetical order) "appreciated, cared for, challenged, connected, excited, happy, hopeful, inspired, joyful, loved, pleased, positive, relieved, special, supportive, transformed, and understood".

Mirivel (2019) in a recent book chapter entitled *On the Nature of Peak Communication* notes that "the concept of peak communication has received little attention from scholars across the discipline". Mirivel and his graduate students then interviewed fourteen respondents for an average of 25 minutes each, asking each interviewee to share three of their "peak" communication episodes. The resulting transcribed data were coded using the Mirivel (2014; Muñiz-Velázquez–Pulido 2019) model of "positive talk" that includes "greeting and creating, asking and discovering, complimenting and affecting, disclosing and deepening, encouraging and giving, listening and transcending". Mirivel posits that these "positive communication" behaviours can serve as catalysts for "peak" communication experiences. Although no numerical data are presented, Mirivel concludes that "the act of disclosing is the most dominant speech act in peak communication narratives [...]. The point is that peak communication moments are created by the willingness and courage to speak up, to reveal who we are and how we feel. And when people do that, they can create peak experiences" (Mirivel 2019: 56). Mirivel also goes on to say that "receiving encouragement was at the heart of our participants' peak communication experiences". Mirivel's "positive communication" behaviours provide useful direction for focusing future PCE studies.

The "peak communication" studies to date are informative, intriguing and a fine beginning, yet the bottom-line unquestionably remains that far more exploration remains to be undertaken by other motivated scholars from around the world. Such inquiry should also include "plateau communication experiences", and this takes us back once again to Maslow.

Maslow's "post-mortem" discovery: The plateau

An abrupt and dramatic event occurred late in Maslow's life that somewhat suddenly affected his view and valuing of "peak experiences". Maslow discovered what he called "plateau" experiences that were less emotionally intense than "peak" experiences, but

more available and lasting, and could also be better integrated into the rest of daily life. In spite of a couple of dissertations (Cleary 1996; Heitzman 2003), limited journal attention (Krippner 1972: 107–120; Cleary–Shapiro 1995: 1–23; Gruel 2015: 44–63), and less than a half-dozen pages within a recent book chapter (Kaufman 2020), Maslow's late-life recognition of "plateau cognition" remains an under-told story. Some of this story will be told here, largely drawing upon the words of Maslow himself from the final months of his life as to his newfound appreciation of "plateau experiencing".

On 6 December 1967, Maslow suffered a near-fatal heart attack. This initially put him in hospital intensive care, and then in a recovery wing, for a total of three weeks. Maslow's physician told him that he must take it easy going forward, and that he was at major risk for yet another, and possibly fatal, coronary failure (Hoffman 1988: 303–309). When released from the hospital and on medical leave from Brandeis University, Maslow was unable to summon the energy to give his address as incoming president of the American Psychological Association. But as the months progressed he did manage to conduct the duties of his APA office, and in 1968 he also completed a revision of his landmark *Toward a Psychology of Being* (originally published in 1962).

In early 1969 Maslow left Brandeis and accepted a corporate fellowship in Menlo Park, California. There he worked on more than a dozen articles, book chapters and gave talks at conferences and universities. He also revised his classic work *Motivation and Personality* (1970b), and then began assembling papers and articles that would appear as his final book, which appeared posthumously, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Maslow 1971). Maslow also did some revising of an earlier work, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* and wrote a new introduction to this small volume less than a month prior to his death (1970a).

On 8 June 1970, thirty months following his initial coronary, Abraham Maslow, slowly jogging beside his backyard pool in Menlo Park, experienced a second and this time fatal heart attack at the relatively young age of 62 (Hoffman 1988: 333–334).

Within that concluding two-and-a-half year period of his life, Maslow underwent a personal transformation. In mid-April 1970, less than two months before his death, Maslow participated in a conference in Kansas on "the voluntary control of internal states". The views expressed by Maslow there in a tape-recorded conference discussion seven weeks in advance of his death, and later edited by Krippner (1972), are the single richest source of Maslow's conception of "plateau" experiencing. Maslow said that he had been given a "bonus" with his added time of life since his first heart attack, and spoke of a readily accessible "heightened state of awareness" that he referred to as "the plateau experience". He fully knew he could die at any moment, and referred to this final period as his "post-mortem" life: "I've already gone through the process of dying, so everything from then on is gravy" (Krippner 1972: 119).

In informal discussion with Drs. Charles Tart, Andrew Weil, James Fadiman and Stanley Krippner at this 1970 "voluntary control of internal states" gathering, Maslow told of his own paradigm shift. He regretted that his earlier writings had unwittingly contributed to the desperate quest among some of the young in the 1960s for ecstatic "peak" experiences of orgiastic proportions. Maslow had come to a clear realisation that "some people run the danger of turning away from the world and from other people to

search for anything that will trigger peak experiences. This type of person represents the mystic gone wild" (Krippner 1972: 107). Maslow was aware that for every "Mount Everest" peak experience there would also be a steep descent down into the valley, and that this dramatic ascent and then rapid downturn was usually not easy on the mind–body system. The seeking of "peaks", Maslow had come to see, was fraught with demands, dangers and even the devaluing of everyday life: "Too many young people delude themselves with the 'Big Bang' theory of self-actualization. One of our tasks is to communicate better with young people and give them a greater appreciation of patience and for the miraculous elements in ordinary existence" (Krippner 1972: 120). Maslow (1968: 154) felt that emphasis could more productively be shifted to less intense forms of self-transcendence, "little moments of Being", including "foothill" or "plateau" experiencing.

In his own personal transition from "peak" to gentler "plateau" experiencing, Maslow found that: "I now perceive under the aspect of eternity and become mythic, poetic, symbolic about ordinary things. This is the Zen experience, you know. There is nothing excepted and nothing special, but one lives in a world of miracles all the time. This is a paradox because it is miraculous and yet it doesn't produce an autonomic burst" (Krippner 1972: 113). Maslow argued that we need another model that would include "plateau" and "high plateau" experiences: "It is to live at a constantly high level in the sense of illumination or awakening or in Zen, in the easy or miraculous, in the nothing special. It is to take rather casually the poignancy and the preciousness and beauty of things, but not to make a big deal out of it because it's happening every hour, you know, all the time" (Krippner 1972: 113–114). Other identifiers that Maslow (1968; 1970; Krippner 1972) applied to prominent aspects of the "plateau" experience are "serenity", "calmness", "peacefulness", "self-forgetfulness", "letting-be", "giving up the future in this moment", "transcending conventional time and space", "dropping masks", "appreciating", "becoming fascinated", "savoring", "enjoying", "non-judgmentalism", "non-evaluating", "Taoistic" and "non-interfering", "witnessing", "reverence" and "fusion". Maslow said that he could enter "plateau cognition" whenever he wished, and greater richness of the percept would be experienced (Krippner 1972: 116).

At this conference seven weeks before his passing, Maslow said of his transition from "peak" to "plateau" experiencing that: "The result has been a kind of unitive consciousness [...]. I can define this unitive consciousness very simply for me as the simultaneous perception of the sacred and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the rather constant or easy-without-effort sort of thing" (Krippner 1972: 113). Maslow knew that "these plateau experiences are described quite well in many [spiritual] literatures" (Krippner 1972: 115).

Maslow also came to believe that the plateau experience led to clearer, more awakened and accurate perception of the happenings of the world: "The plateau experience is a witnessing of reality. It involves seeing the symbolic, or the mythic, the poetic, the transcendent, the miraculous, the unbelievable, all of which I think are part of the real world instead of existing only in the eyes of the beholder" (Krippner 1972: 115). There

is much overlap between the life-changing insights had by Maslow and the realisations arrived at by the German existential philosopher Karl Jaspers (Gordon 2021; 2000).

It was following this mid-April 1970 conference that Maslow returned to California and set out to write a new preface for his book *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (1970a), which was published months after his death. There Maslow wrote the following, less than one month before his passing: "The great lesson from the true mystics, from the Zen monks, and now also from the Humanistic and Transpersonal psychologists, that the sacred is *in* the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's backyard [...]. To be looking elsewhere for miracles is to me a sure sign of ignorance that everything is miraculous" (1970a: x–xi). This is reminiscent of the classic line attributed to Einstein: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle" (Calaprice 2011: 483). Maslow noted that whereas the "peak" experience is often a highly-charged and purely emotional experience, the "plateau" experience is calmer and more serene, inevitably has a noetic and cognitive element about it, and is more voluntary (1970a: xiv–xv).

The human being is born into this world with a higher transcendent dimension, as Maslow viewed it, and it is our biological nature as a member of the human species to want to unfold our "full humanness" in our lifetime. This includes our capacity for "plateau" experiencing, and "anyone who cannot perceive the sacred, the eternal, the symbolic, is simply blind to an aspect of reality" (1970a: 79). Maslow was convinced that "plateau" experiencing can be taught and learned, but that it takes discipline, study, maturity, commitment and time. He realised that his entire life, including his own prior "peak" experiences, had prepared him to now finally earn and enter "plateau cognition" and see in a Unitive way at will, a merging of the temporal and the eternal in this here-now moment.

In the very final sentence of *Religion, Values, and Peak Experiences,* Maslow challenged his readers to activate their capacity to perceive not primarily from a deficiency-needs state, but to perceive more richly from our Being nature: "In this way, the eternal becomes visible *in* and *through* the particular, the symbolic and platonic can be experienced *in* and *through* the concrete instances, the sacred can fuse with the profane, and one can transcend the universe of time and space while being of it" (1970a: 116, italics in original). Maslow taught that a motivated and creative use of attitude, awareness and perception can enable one to see and behave from the perspective of what he termed the Being-Values (B-Values). He saw the B-Values as standing beyond egocentricity and ethnocentricity, and rising to the "cosmocentric" order (1970a: 96).

In Maslow's (1971) final posthumously published book, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature,* Maslow delineated B-Values that tend to be especially salient during states of self-transcendence. These are also values that have been held in high regard trans-temporally and trans-culturally: *Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Wholeness, Aliveness, Uniqueness, Justice, Completeness, Simplicity, Playfulness, Order, Effortlessness, Dichotomy-Transcendence, Perfection* (Maslow 1971: Ch. 9). In our perceiving of the world, "...the more whole the percept (the world) becomes, the more whole the person becomes. And also, the more whole the person becomes, the more whole becomes the

world" (Maslow 1971: 167). Maslow goes on the say that: "If we were able to accept as a major educational goal the awakening and fulfillment of the B-Values, which is simply another aspect of self-actualization, we would have a great flowering of a new kind of civilization" (Maslow 1971: 195). Maslow clearly establishes the important role of "plateau cognition" in this sentence: "The word 'peak experience' is more appropriate than I realized at first [...]. The climactic moment cannot endure, but B-cognition (Being-cognition) *can*" (Maslow 1971: 38, italics in original). Neither Maslow nor many others in the history of humanity have been able to unwaveringly behave from within a B-Values perspective, yet these lofty values do offer a guiding star by which humans' overall movements can be guided.

Meta-pathologies essentially result from B-Values deprivation, and can include *insecurity, alienation, hopelessness, selfishness, meaninglessness, indifference, anguish, cynicism, nihilism, disintegration, destructiveness, either/or thinking, confusion, chaos, fatigue, depression* and other forms of counter-valuing. These often result from frustrated idealism, and constitute a diminishment of our full humanness. As Maslow saw it, perceiving from the Being-realm has the potential for changing our personal experiencing, our life, our relationships, our relating with the world, and the world itself (Maslow 1971: Ch. 23).

After reviewing thirty-five meanings of the term "transcendence", Maslow then offers this condensed statement: "Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness; behaving, and relating as ends rather than as means to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos" (Maslow 1971: Ch. 21). Maslow later goes on to say that: "Transcendence can mean to live in the realm of Being, speaking the language of Being, serene B-cognizing, plateau living" (Maslow 1971: 275). And further: "Such an awakened person normally proceeds in a unitive way or in a B-cognizing way as an everyday kind of thing; certainly, whenever he wishes to. The serene B-cognition or plateau cognition can come under one's own control. One can turn it off and on as one pleases" (Maslow 1971: 276).

Maslow postulated early that we humans are born with an inner biological urge to self-actualise. Later in life he also learned that beyond the self-actualising of our potentials alone, many humans come to aspire to yet another level of "transcendence", to rise to a "higher" and even more "awakened" dimension of human functioning, beyond the "humanistic" level to the "transpersonal". In his introduction to the revised edition of *Toward a Psychology of Being* Maslow (1968) argued that the "Third Force" study of human beings (the humanistic model, subsequent to behaviourism and Freudianism) would need to become a "Fourth Force" directed towards greater "transcendence" of the egoic small 's' self, and union with the *Good,* the *True,* the *Beautiful, Kindness, Love, Wisdom, Peace* and all of humankind's other highest universal values. The Being-Values "are perceived, not invented" (Maslow 1968: 339), and "they command adoration, reverence, celebration, sacrifice [...]. Contemplating them or fusing with them gives the greatest joy that a human being is capable of" (Maslow 1968: 340).

Maslow (1968: iv) did not believe in institutionalised religious doctrine or an Old Testament anthropomorphic god, but he did believe in the evolution of the human spirit

beyond self-actualisation, and "centered in the cosmos": "We need something 'bigger than we are' to be awed by and commit ourselves to in a new, naturalistic, non-churchly sense." Maslow for most of his first forty years of life had been heavily oriented by his logical and linear "conceptual" mind, likely owing in no small part to his IQ of 195 (according to his early research supervisor E. L. Thorndike, the pioneer of intelligence testing; Hoffman 1988: 74). But in the final third of his life it could be said that Maslow more abundantly opened into what Teasdale (2022) terms "holistic-intuitive mind". As McGilchrist (2009: 164) has put it: "It is the task of the right hemisphere to carry the left beyond, to something new, to something other than itself."

Especially in his final 30 months, his "post-mortem" period as he referred to it, Maslow to an unprecedented extent in his life transcended "subject–object" consciousness, "self–other" duality, and "instrumental" consciousness (i.e. emphasising "doing" as opposed to simply "being"). He largely transcended the "optical delusion" of which Einstein (Calaprice 2011: 339–340) famously spoke, the "delusion of consciousness" that we humans are "separate" from other living beings, the whole of nature and the cosmos. Maslow, having faced and escaped his initial brush with death, had awakened to living on a higher "plateau": "The fully human person in certain moments perceives the unity of the cosmos, fuses with it, and rests in it, completely satisfied for the moment in his yearning for one-ness" (1970a: 95). This fusion with the larger Whole can help in making the world a better place for all, said Maslow (1970a: xii): "What I may call the bodhisattvic path is the *integration* of self-improvement and social zeal, i.e., the best way to become a better 'helper' is to become a better person."

It is time to more actively explore human communication experiences that go past "competence" alone, or beyond merely "satisfying" us by meeting our routine everyday expectations. We would do well to also study the "growing tip" of our most valued and uplifting communicative encounters, those that take us from the mere "transmission of information" to the more mysterious beauties and powers of self-transcendence and human "communion" (Marcel 2001).

A new conceptual home: "Positive communication"

For the past twenty-five years within the discipline of psychology there has been a highly successful movement to develop the sub-field of "positive psychology", a term coined by Abraham Maslow (1968: 73). "Positive psychology" was to "undergird a new science of strength and resilience" and actualise "high human potential" (Seligman 1998), and its impact has been huge (Lopez et al. 2018).

Within the discipline of communication there has also been a major allied evolutionary development, though far more recent than that in psychology. In his term as president of the USA's Southern States Communication Association, Thomas Socha of Old Dominion University in 2010 established, and addressed, the conference theme of "Positive Communication" (see Socha–Beck 2015: 190). And much as Martin Seligman's inauguration address to the American Psychological Association heralded in "positive psychology" and brought transformation to that discipline, Socha opened the door for

"positive communication" within our own international discipline. Shortly after, Socha and Pitts (2012) edited *The Positive Side of Interpersonal Communication.* Next, Pitts and Socha (2013) edited *Positive Communication in Health and Wellness.* Mirivel (2014) then authored the first undergraduate "positive communication" text, *The Art of Positive Communication.* Beck and Socha (2015) next edited *Communicating Hope and Resilience Across the Lifespan,* and Socha and Beck (2015) authored an article "Positive Communication and Human Needs: A Review and Proposed Organization Framework", appearing in the *Review of Communication.* Socha and Stoyneva (2015) went on to author a chapter on "Positive Family Communication", and Muniz-Velazquez and Pulido (2019) recently edited *The Routledge Handbook of Positive Communication.* And to further remedy the historical over-emphasis on the "dark side" in communication studies (e.g. Cupach–Spitzberg 2007; Olson 2012; Lin–Giles 2013: 1275–1290; Gilchrist-Petty–Long 2016; Olson–Fine 2016), or mid-distribution studies at best, Mirivel founded the "Positive Communication Network" (positivecommunication.net) to unite positive communication scholars from around the world. At the first "positive communication" online conference in 2023 there were approximately three hundred attendees. Mirivel has also founded the University of Arkansas at Little Rock *Peak Communication Project.*

The "positive communication" conceptual frame set by these works within the past decade offers a larger organising structure within which, going forward, the study of upper-distribution communication experiences can now find meaningful home. What A. Edwards (2010) said of "peak" communication experiences over a decade ago still holds true, "the communication discipline has been slow to document or theoretically ground these powerful communication successes". There is now a discourse-context for such inquiry. As Socha and Beck (2015: 191–192) have made clear: "In our opinion, among new and important areas for future inquiry, the topic of peak communication, or how good communication can get, is important to address [...] communication scholars have been shy about seeking to understand 'peak experiences' or the 'upper bounds' of relating."

Yet it is not only "peak" communication experiences that can be the focus of our upper-level inquiry as we move forward; attention will also need to be paid to our more common and accessible "plateau" communication experiences. Abraham Maslow did not come to discover and appreciate the "plateau" experience until the closing 30 months of his life: let us further extend this concept to "plateau" communication experiencing, as well as studying the statistically rarer "peaks" of communication that we occasionally reach. May we include both as the study of PCEs, "plateau" and "peak" communication experiences.

Why has neglect of our "peak" and "plateau" communication experiences, those that bring humans their greatest happiness, meaning and fulfilment, persisted until quite recently within the communication discipline? Likely for many of the same reasons that Maslow's own "peak experience" work initially had difficulty gaining traction within the discipline of psychology. For decades within psychology mainstream journal editors traditionally did not want to risk losses of credibility by admitting through the straight gate anything on the margins, that which would appear deviant or fringe (DeRobertis 2020: 8–32). Maslow was unable to get his first manuscript on "peak experiences" published by

American Psychologist, Psychiatry, or *Psychology Review,* all mainstream conservative journals. For more than two decades his ample research on dominance behaviours among monkeys, human motivation, the effects of environmental aesthetics on perception and other topics had been regularly published in the establishment journals, but his work on the unconventional topic of "peak experiences" barred him from entry (Hoffman 1988: 225). So Maslow presented his now-classic paper "Cognition of Being in the Peak Experiences" as his address as president of the APA's Division of Personality and Social Psychology in 1956 (just over a decade prior to his APA presidency), and eventually got it published in the *Journal of Genetic Psychology* (Maslow 1959: 43–66). Maslow never again chose to submit his work to the major APA journals (Hoffman 1988: Ch. 13). Relatedly, prominent psychologist George A. Miller acknowledged that he had to translate his own early research on speech and hearing into the language of behaviourism in order to get it published, and as DeRobertis (2020: 26) observes, "one's reputation as a scientist could depend on how well this trick was played".

In addition, Maslow came to see Western psychology as ethnocentric, and lamented its neglect of Eastern psychologies and philosophies (Maslow 1968: 78–79). It has been argued that this historically has been no less the case in Western communication theory (Gordon 2007: 89–107; Miike 2007: 272–278), and in other fields as well (Logan 2023; VanderWeele 2022: 170–180; Lomas et al. 2022: 155–180). Many are those who have argued that there has historically been a "machismo" factor in Western communication studies, an "agentic" mindset that has disvalued "soft" topics and favoured attention to power, strategy, rules, deception, compliance-gaining, face-saving, interaction management, goal-setting and planning, and related topics (e.g. Foss–Griffin 2022; Asante et al. 2014; Pelias 2004; Kim 2002; Goodall 1996). The traditional agentic control-oriented paradigm has dominated; the strategic search for all available means of persuasion in any given case, and this too often excluded "softer" topics from our vision.

Early on, Miller and Steinberg (1975) proudly and succinctly spoke in behalf of a "control" paradigm: "From success or failure in exercising control over the environment – particularly the other people in it – a person develops a picture of himself or herself. *As we see it, the development of self-identity is not primarily a function of communication, but rather a consequence of the outcomes of a person's communicative efforts to achieve environmental control*" (Miller–Steinberg 1975: 80, italics in the original). A traditional explicit and implicit "control" conception of human communication has not been cordial to the study of more positive and healthy "tender" communication phenomena. We have still not completely emerged from our residual mechanistic modelling of strategic communication messaging, and its dominant agentic (vs. communal) topics, definitions, framings and methods.

Even on the rare occasions when in communication studies we do venture into a "softer" topic area such as "interpersonal transcendence" during the listening process (Greene–Herbers 2011: 66–84) we do so from a cognitive science model such as "action assembly theory" where persons are primarily conceived of as sites for input-processing, representational formatting into long-term memory, output systems and not much beyond; mechanistic models applied to non-mechanical and elusive phenomenological

personal dynamics. Maslow (1970b: Ch. 13–14; 1968: Appendix A) called for more "holistic" methodologies and theorising in the study of humanistic and transpersonal phenomena, a better fit of questions and procedures (MASLOW 1970b; 1966: Ch. 2).

Perhaps also related to mainstream editorial restraint in academic communication journals has been what Maslow (1971: 35–40) referred to as the Jonah Complex, the human being's implicit fear of his own greatness. Awe and fear are intertwined, and can result in our fleeing. We are reluctant to lose control, there is both a need to know and an existential fear of knowing.

Be that as it may, in the past quarter-century a substantial impact has at last made within the discipline of psychology by "positive psychology" that today legitimises the study of such "tender" topics as *hope, inspiration, awe, gratitude, love, well-being, forgiveness, happiness, optimism, virtue, mindfulness* and so on. And now, within our own international communication discipline, the stage has been set by Socha, Mirivel and their colleagues through introducing "Positive Communication". A grand structural and conceptual home has been provided, and it is time to help occupy the premises. It is finally appropriate for those of us who study human communication processes and dynamics to energetically broaden our purview and turn with greater vigour to exploring the human being's more positive and heartfelt encounters, including our "plateau" and "peak" communication experiencing.

Larger contextual developments also provide testimony as to the timeliness of the PCE research topic. In 2022 the First Global Scientific Conference on Human Flourishing was sponsored by the Templeton Foundation (LOGAN 2023), and relationships between science, the human mind, beauty and transcendence were among the many rich topics explored as 4,000 people from over 100 countries participated. Additionally, the Harvard University Human Flourishing Program has just begun conducting a $43.4 million dollar five-phase study involving 240,000 participants from 22 different countries and investigating such areas as meaning, purpose, character, virtue, religion, spirituality and other life factors that promote human "flourishing".

Concurrently, it is roughly estimated that 275 million members of the world's population now practice meditation (KANE 2022), and in the U.S. the number of adults who meditate went up nearly 350% (to 35+ million) across the most recent five-year growth period for which data is available, 2012–2017, while among children aged 4–16 meditator increase was ninefold across that five-year span (CLARKE et al. 2018: 1–8). In the U.S. only between 3 to 11% of the population self-identifies as being neither "spiritual" nor "religious" (ROSMARIN 2018: 12). In the U.K. hundreds of members of Parliament have undergone mindfulness training, and it is estimated that 15% of U.K. adults have as well (SIMONSSON et al. 2023: 1362–1370). The term "spiritual awakening" entered into Google Search yields close to 39 million results, and around the world peoples' screens and earbuds are now replete with teachings about non-duality, mindfulness, breathwork, yoga, relaxation, peace of mind, near-death experiences, consciousness expansion, and other personal growth and self-transcendence topics. A half-century after Maslow's passing, themes pertaining to self-actualisation and self-transcendence are populating mainstream international discourse and practice at a rate that would likely stun even Maslow.

As Maslow once said, human relationships at their highest levels are about "considerably more than mere customer satisfaction". The construction and constriction of a separate egoic sense of "self" with which we humans tend to tightly identify obstructs us from connecting in markedly meaningful and consciousness-expanding ways with others outside of our in-groups. This remains a major problem facing humanity to this day. As Herschel (1951: 211) argued, if people are not more than human then they are less than human since humanity "is but a short critical stage between the animal and the spiritual". Or as Hyde (2010: Ch. 1) has put it: "Our passion for perfection is admirable; it defines who we are as metaphysical animals, creatures who have a longing [...] for completeness in our lives." A century ago Martin Buber (1970) was encouraging us to raise ourselves through higher quality human communication toward greater self-transcendence and "communion".

The time is at hand for communication scholars from around the world to take the next step in helping we humans transcend the socially constructed and restrictive identity states from which we typically operate. As pioneering heightened states of consciousness researcher Charles Tart summarised it: "Each of us is in a profound trance, consensus consciousness, a state of partially suspended animation, of stupor, of inability to function at our own maximum level" (Tart 2001: 106, 85–129). It is time for human evolution to rapidly accelerate in areas crucial to our continued survival and well-being on our planet Earth, including within the vital arena of humans communicating.

A new horizon: Peak and plateau communication inquiry

Questions are many: what are the textures and nuances of our both "plateau" and "peak" communication experiences, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually? How exactly do we choose to empirically monitor or measure such experiences? What more can we discover about the drivers of "plateau" and "peak" communication experiences? What is the nature of verbal discourse during "plateau" and "peak" communication encounters, what gets talked about, and how, and what gets de-emphasised? What is the influence of various nonverbal behaviours on PCEs? How does physical setting affect their likelihood? What is the relationship between PCEs and physical and mental well-being? What are the benefits of "plateau" or "peak" communication experiences to the person, the pair, the triad and small group, the larger organisation, the community, the world? How might co-created PCEs be used to affect levels of interpersonal, inter-group, and international conflict and cooperation? How frequently do PCEs occur within various groups, subcultures and cultures? What are the implications of varying definitions and conceptions of "plateau" and "peak" communication experiences? Which lines of existing communication research have potential utility for PCE theorising? What ethical questions emerge related to "plateau" and "peak" communication experiences? And one could go on without limit.

A prime area for international inquiry would be to ask how the variable of culture (and co-culture) relates to "plateau" and "peak" communication experiencing. As just one example, on the Bering Sea a small island of less than sixty square miles is home to

an indigenous Alaskan tribe known to outsiders as the Aleuts, while they call themselves the Unangan people, or "the Real Human Beings". The Unangan view human beings as intimately connected with others, nature, the universe and the divine, though not through our brains, but via our human hearts (Merculieff 2016). Their greeting to one another is "Aang wann" or "Hello my other self". One of the traditional Unangan hunting practices has been to learn to "think like a bird" which includes learning to step outside of discursive thought for hours at a time. "Plateau" and "peak" communication experiences between traditional members of this ancient tribe would likely be quite different from those within urban Budapest, Santiago and Melbourne, and across these cultures. We might wonder, within the many diverse cultures across Europe, Asia, North America, South America, Africa, Australia and Antarctica, what are the elements of what are considered to be relatively "plateau" communication experiences, what are their drivers, meanings, outcomes and overlaps, and what can be learned from these cultural differences and convergences that could then be put to good use in applied contexts?

Existing communication concepts that would seem relevant to the study of PCEs include "communicator style", "verbal and nonverbal immediacy", "self-disclosure", "verbal aggression", "supportive communication", "perceived homophily", "I-It" and "I-Thou", "conversational apprehension", "interpersonal communication motives", "memorable messages", "communication savouring", "rhetorical sensitivity", "feeling understood", "comforting communication", "openness to experience", "communicative flexibility", "fascination" and others. The aim of such inquiry, ideally, would include learning how to teach others to establish conditions for increasing the likelihood of "plateau" and "peak" communication experiencing.

Mirivel's (2014; Mirivel–Fuller 2022: 216–227) model of "positive communication" behaviours is also relevant. In his thematic analysis of interviews with 30 long-term communication professors, Mirivel (2017) concludes that these communication scholars and teachers have "gradually awakened" across their careers to becoming more mindful of their own communication behaviours. They have become more "fully functioning" human beings in the ways that Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1961) long ago conceptualised. This is not to say that these persons have "mastered" communication, but they have substantially grown in their use of "positive communication" behaviours. Mirivel (2017: Ch. 8–9) also observes that behind each of his six identified "positive communication" speech acts are deeper virtues, as follows: *Greeting* (Politeness), *Asking* (Humility), *Complimenting* (Gentleness), *Disclosing* (Courage), *Encouraging* (Generosity) and *Listening* (Transcendence). He suggests that the enactment of these speech acts and their implicit virtues by his interviewees in essence constitutes a "philosophy of being" that has been actualised within them across the decades. Mirivel (2017: 44) quotes prominent communication scholar John Durham Peters, one of his interviewees, who has now evolved to the awakened view that: "The self is the other, the other is the self." Later Mirivel (2017: 118) again quotes Peters: "I would say the ultimate thing is to love the other person. It comes down to love." Love, of course, entails egoic self-transcendence and a shared sense of being. This is PCE territory.

Also germane to the study of PCEs are dialogical models that emphasise such core practices such as *Warmth, Empathy, Genuineness, Vulnerability, Imagination and Improvisation, Present-Centeredness, Equality of Participation* and *Suspending* (Gordon 2020; Isaacs 1999; Anderson 1994). Central generative dialogue practices can be contributory to PCEs, as Goodall Jr. and Kellett (2004) observed two decades ago.

Methodologies in the study of PCEs would hopefully be diverse, including survey, qualitative interviewing, observation, ethnography, autoethnography, content analysis, correlational research, experimentation, literary and film analysis, personal narrative, historical investigation, phenomenological analysis and philosophical reflection. Preferably our methods of study will not be emotionally "distanced" and rationally remote, for as Maslow knew well (1966; 1968: Appendix A; 1970b: Ch. 2), "cold cognition" characterised by acute subject–object split and stemming from an impersonal "scientific" attitude can yield insufficient and biased understanding when studying experiential phenomena. Maslow would counsel a more engaged, sensitive, "personal" approach to this PCE topic area.

Challenges await as to how exactly to define "plateau" and "peak" communication experiencing. Maslow's main discriminators between "plateaus" and "peaks" have to do with frequency of occurrence, degree of emotionality and noetic quality. On their unitary continuum of self-transcendent experiences, Yaden et al. (2017) use as their two primary markers the degree of decreased self-salience (self-disappearance), and intensity of feelings of connectedness (union). Further creative conceptualisation and theorising within this upper-region of the self-transcendence experience continuum stands ahead.

Ideally PCE inquiry would not be for the sake of knowledge alone, but useful to the elevation of the human spirit and the quality of human communicating on our planet Earth. Relevant to increasing the likelihood of having PCEs, a few practical recommendations from Maslow's personal journals and private writings (Kaufman 2020: 245–248) are offered here: 1. Imagine that we are seeing this person for the last time ever, that they are going to die soon, and the time to treasure their presence and communication words is now; 2. Cultivate a sense of wonder, awe and infinite possibility; 3. Contemplate good people, lovable people, human beings with beautiful values; 4. Learn to become fascinated, totally absorbed, with even the smallest of life phenomena; 5. Gaze at objects and people from different angles and elevations, creatively reframe them in our mind, and be open to experience; 6. Be among children, babies, kittens, puppies and Mother Nature in all her forms; 7. Look at familiar people as if we have never *truly* seen them before; 8. Focus on people as *ends* in themselves, rather than as *means;* 9. Minimise relying on techniques and props for seeking external validation, and instead become "ultimately naked and self-revealing"; 10. Imagine our life will come to an end within the year, and savour each and every here-now moment; 11. Cultivate times of quiet contemplation and/or meditation, away from all responsibilities and distractions. Perhaps exercises can be developed and tested from within the above and other areas to raise communicators' probabilities of having PCEs.

Drivers, constituent features, structural elements, and immediate and delayed impacts of "peak" and "plateau" communication experiences remain to be more thoroughly conceptualised, theorised and researched. The world could conceivably benefit from a high-ceiling, multicultural, applied positive communication theory at this moment in human civilisation. Primatologist Frans de Waal (2005: 250) concludes that we human beings are among the "most internally conflicted animals to ever walk the earth". We are capable of inordinate destruction, "yet at the same time possess wells of empathy and love deeper than ever seen before". To the degree that PCEs have to do with fostering the latter, i.e. with connecting us to our common humanity, nature and the cosmos, they merit our attention.

Reminiscent of Plato's "allegory of the cave" (Lawhead 1996: Ch. 4), Maslow as well as others across time and place (Bucke 1901 [2009]; James 1902 [1929]; Underhill 1911 [2002]; Wolff 1973; 1976) have experienced and reported heightened states of consciousness that have had major impact on peoples' lives and ways of perceiving "reality". We humans are subject to "falsely" ontologising from our "ordinary" states of consciousness (Losoncz 2023: 117–132), from what Tart (2001) refers to as our "consensus trance". Encounters with nature, meditation, the sacred, the fine arts and other such precipitating events can at times enable us to step outside of our limiting default "realities". It is argued here that our "plateau" and "peak" communication experiences are also able on occasion to transform for the better not only our interpersonal relations, but our relationship with the greater *Whole*.

Less obstructed by the reducing-valve of the egoic self-structure, and experiencing greater interpersonal merger and transcendence through PCEs, can allow us at moments to cross ontological boundaries and enlarge our conceptions of ourselves, other people, nature and Life (Tressoldi–Woollacott 2023: 74–86). For a variety of good reasons, PCEs are definitely worthy of further exploration.

Conclusion

Fromm (1956: Ch. 2) concluded that: "The drive for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in the human being. It is the most fundamental passion, it is the force that keeps the human race together, the clan, the family, the society. The failure to achieve it means insanity or destruction." Similarly, Katriel and Philipsen (1981) wrote that: "Communication is an act of interpenetration [...] through communication the experience of self and other are merged and intensified." One of the founders of modern communication theory, David Berlo (1960: 130–131), saw that: "Communication represents an attempt to couple two organisms [...]. The goal of interaction is the merger of self and other [...]. The concepts of source and receiver as separate entities become meaningless, and the concept of process becomes clear." This is precisely what PCE inquiry seeks to promote: knowledge and practice pertaining to "coupling", to "merger", to the transcendence of separate "sources" and "receivers", to movement from the "transmission of messages" to the sharing and co-creation of deeper meanings and mysteries, movement from only just "competent communication" to "communion".

As existential philosopher Karl Jaspers (1931 [1957]: 211) deduced: "In the immaterial realm of mind there are, at any moment, a few indwellers who, entering into close proximity, strike flame out of one another by the intimacy of their communication. They are the origin of the loftiest movement which is as yet possible in this world." Jaspers (1960: 26–27) well knew that: "Awareness of being, illumination through love, and attainment of peace" are all rooted in communication.

How can people be enabled to safely relax, to become more congruent, to share their undivided presence with other human beings on deep matters of mutual meaningfulness? Enabled to truly sense another person's uniqueness, their non-interchangeability, their immeasurability? Empowered to feel accepting and loving toward others, to perceive their intrinsic beauty, as well as the beauty of this unrepeatable moment? To dissolve the egoic self, and to have eyes freshly opened in order to gain precious insights? How can people be given the means to touch upon the sacred, to become more *One* with the other(s), and with the *All?* This is the stuff of PCEs. It is about eventually surpassing "small talk" (pleasant as that can be), self-consciousness, conversational narcissism and strategic control, and transcending to larger awakenings of possibility.

We are living in an era of worldwide distress and dissolution, clash and chaos, divergence and divide (Rifkin 2009). Anything that international academic theorists, researchers and practitioners might offer toward the facilitation of "plateau" and "peak" communication experiencing is worth considering. This is made even more possible since there is now an established theoretical structure for such work within the communication discipline: the study of "positive communication". Studies of "positive communication" in general, and "plateau" and "peak" communication experiencing in particular, are still in their developmental infancy (Socha–Stoyneva 2015: 386–400). We would do well to bring these high-ceiling phenomena within our range of vision and engage with them, not simply for the sake of researcher career advancement but for their potential usefulness to humankind.

Inquiry into PCEs can be of value in learning how to better create an ethic of global cooperation, caring, connection and harmony. PCEs carry the potential to change our views of self and others, our relationships, our views of humanity, our actions in life. They can result in egoic self-transcendence, interpersonal communion and enhanced alliance with the *Good,* the *True,* the *Beautiful, Kindness, Wisdom* and *Service.* We in communication studies and allied intersecting disciplines have vastly more to discover and offer within this realm of "plateau" and "peak" communication experiencing. Generalised "peak experience" research has examined such triggers as ski racing, skydiving, bicycle riding, acting, motorcycle racing, public singing, swimming with dolphins and whales, tai chi, aikido, breathwork, visiting the Grand Canyon, etc. In this twenty-first century we would be wise to more energetically bring both "plateau" and "peak" *communication experiencing* (PCEs) within our province of pure communication inquiry.

As Matson and Montagu (1967: 6) knew, "the end of communication is not to *command* but to *commune*" (italics in original). "Communion", in its broadest sense, at times occurs most profoundly within human beings' PCEs. The stage has arrived for motivated scholars and researchers to move toward this exciting, rich and potentially valuable cutting-edge of human communication studies.

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The Disinformation Reaction to the Russia–Ukraine War[1]

An Analysis through the Lens of Iberian Fact-Checking

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The beginning of the war in Ukraine generated a wave of disinformation in Europe. Our research intends to cognise the reaction of disinformation agents to the outbreak of war, analysing publications checked by Iberian fact-checkers during the first ten days of the conflict. Specifically, we used Voyant Tools online software to perform a quantitative textual analysis, which allowed us to survey the most relevant topics, formats for spreading disinformation and media platforms. We also analysed the presence of political leaders, countries and military terminologies. Our findings indicate that video is the most common format to disseminate disinformation content, namely, to illustrate war scenarios. In addition, our research also showed that online video platforms, especially YouTube, are closer to terms that portray military actions. This may have implications for fostering a warmongering feeling. Finally, we found that the fake content checked was mostly favourable to Ukraine, which raises new poignant arguments for the contemporary debate about disinformation in war.

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Introduction

The dissemination of disinformation, as a political instrument, used with malicious intent to deceive or manipulate, to discredit opponents, war enemies, real events, true news or opposing political opinions is a very old practice, especially in times of strong political, economic and social crisis. The literature has pointed out a series of political stratagems, dating back to ancient Rome that used lies as their main tool (Ireton–Posetti 2018; Darnton 2017; Posetti–Matthews 2018). Even so, the repercussions of the spread of misinformation have never been as severe as they are today, where a lie can circulate faster than the truth (Vosoughi et al. 2018), fake news is more attractive to be shared (Baptista–Gradim 2022) and journalists are increasingly losing authority (Salgado–Bobba 2019; Trilling et al. 2016). In addition, the distribution of information is becoming more dependent on the work of the algorithms that integrate the functioning of social media, promoting the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers (Baptista–Gradim 2021; Zimmer et al. 2019).

The continued proliferation of online disinformation has contributed to an increase in distrust in the media and public institutions in general, leading to the decline of democratic systems (Bennett–Livingston 2018). Several studies (Wardle–Derakhshan 2017) have found that "disinformation agents" seek to cause strong emotions (such as fear, anger, panic, or anxiety), in order to exploit the anxieties, doubts and social and political prejudices of the masses, feeding conspiracies and rumours (Baptista–Gradim 2020). Faced with this problem, several government entities have joined efforts, nationally and internationally, to find mechanisms to combat the spread of misinformation. In 2018, the European Commission designated a task force of experts with the aim of creating a report that identified strategies and sought solutions against disinformation (European Commission 2018). Later, in 2020, it created the European Digital Media Observatory with the aim of bringing together fact-checkers and experts in disinformation, in order to support digital literacy initiatives and multidisciplinary work, in agreement with media organisations, for the fight against disinformation.

Despite this commitment against disinformation, the world has recently had to deal with profound and unexpected crises that, in themselves, have had serious social consequences. The disinformation originating in these crises has increased the international community's difficulty in overcoming them. If, on the one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has served, through disinformation agents, to instil distrust in public institutions, negatively affecting scientific truth (Bruder–Kunert 2021; Imhoff–Lamberty 2020); on the other hand, the invasion of Ukrainian territory by Russian troops, in February 2022, reinforced the power and severity of disinformation as a political weapon, in the midst of the post-truth era (McIntyre 2018). Suddenly, when the pandemic seemed to finally give a truce, Europe witnessed the beginning of a war that goes far beyond a local

armed conflict. The Russian "special operation" is also a hybrid conflict, one in which an in-formation war is crucial, with lies and manipulation of the media used as powerful combat weapons (Stănescu 2022; Bareikytė–Skop 2022).

The new digital ecosystem allows soldiers to be authentic war reporters, sharing videos and images of missile attacks and other military operations on social media (Stastna 2022). Even U.S. soldiers, during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, had turned to YouTube to share videos of military patrols and war scenarios (Andén-Papadopoulos 2009). This ease in spreading information about the theatre of operations also demonstrates the ease with which disinformation produced by malicious agents can circulate. It is true that social media already existed during the Syria or Iraq wars, but the conflict in Ukraine is "the first TikTok war" in the world, and the predominance of video in this social network will shape the information circulated (Chayka 2022). TikTok is different than YouTube as it only caters short-form videos that need to be very spectacular to be considered by the algorithm. The displayed content is defined by the algorithm. Furthermore, a study carried out by NewsGuard found that TikTok's code may be prioritising false and misleading content about the war in Ukraine (Hern 2022).

In fact, the use of manipulated and decontextualised videos and photos has been a recurrent technique to misinform public opinion. These images could boost conflict frames (Bartholomé et al. 2017), having implications on the public opinion. Since the first days of the war in Ukraine, fake videos have spread rapidly, especially through TikTok, even allowing fake live broadcasts to be made. Sardarizadeh (2022) noted that "while platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have been labelling false or misleading viral videos about the war, TikTok seems to be playing catch-up". On the other hand, Facebook and Twitter have been used for years as instruments of propaganda and disinformation (Benedictus 2016; Stelzenmüller 2017; Young 2021).

Several investigations have exposed political disinformation operations on social media by Russian agents, making known their interference in the U.S. elections in 2016 using trolls to exploit racial, social and political divisions (Benedictus 2016; Volchek–Sindelar 2015; Freelon et al. 2022). Russia is said to have been trying to take advantage of the internet for many years, long before social media existed, with various strategic actions on disinformation aimed at discrediting democratic countries (Mejias–Vokuev 2017; Yablokov 2022). This approach implies controlling "the flow of information", which is one of the goals of recent wars (Babacan–Tam 2022).

In this regard, since the Cold War, Russia has been identified as one of the main agents in the use of disinformation campaigns, both internally and externally (Scott 2022; Yablokov 2022; Treyger et al. 2022). Between Russia and Ukraine, the discourse around information warfare has increased since 2014, with the war in Donbass, namely through the use of disinformation as a weapon by Russia to shape political outcomes and to encourage military mobilisations (Treyger et al. 2022; Baumann 2020).

With the outbreak of war in 2022, Russian disinformation campaigns intensified around the conflict, seeking to destabilise Western politics, blaming the United States for the war and trying to justify its military action as an action to fight Nazis in Ukraine (Smart et al. 2022; Magdin 2022; Blankenship et al. 2022). However, Ukraine has

been held up as a role model for effective counter-disinformation efforts (Treyger et al. 2022). In this information clutter, Ukrainians have been known to wage war on social media, promoting false stories of war heroes or legends like the ghost of Kiev (Galey 2022) or the Ukrainian grim reaper (Wallace 2022). Moreover, with the figure of President Zelensky, Ukraine has promoted its cause and attracted global attention and sympathy through his videos on social media (Cohen 2022). Ukraine's success in social media leads some academics to think that Russia is losing the information war (Aral 2022). In a post-truth universe, Ukraine has also played its part. Aral (2022) states that "reports abound on social media of more than 4,000 Russian casualties, images of crippled Russian helicopters and armored vehicles and cellphone videos of savage Russian missile attacks on civilian targets". All this is confused, according to Aral (2022), in a mix of verified and unverified videos.

Faced with this problem, it is urgent to study disinformation as a combat strategy in the mid of an information war taking place in a media ecosystem governed by social media. Our study assumes an exploratory nature and its main objective is to understand how disinformation and its main agents reacted, at first, to the outbreak of a war in Europe. These agents refer to actors who spread disinformation. The study carried out a quantitative textual analysis of false content that was checked by the main fact-checkers in the Iberian Peninsula, with the aim of making a first survey of the most used formats, the most discussed topics, and the most important social media for disinformation agents. Our study also sought to ascertain whether the checks carried out by the fact-checkers showed any political bias, considering the political orientation of the checked contents (pro-Ukraine and pro-Russia).

Our research, like other studies (Recuero et al. 2022; Humprecht 2019), considers fact-checking as a data source, highlighting how important fact-checker databases can be to identify trends and strategies of online disinformation. Based on the objective of exploring the reaction of disinformation agents to the outbreak of war in Ukraine (O1), we aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which were the most common formats to disseminate disinformation content?

RQ2: How was disinformation shaped from a textual perspective?

RQ3: What was the relationship between the fake content checked and the political orientation towards the countries involved?

Methods

This study seeks to understand the reaction of online disinformation to the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine. Specifically, we analysed all publications classified as false by fact-checkers from Spain (Maldita.es) and Portugal (Polígrafo) related to the war during the first ten days of the conflict (Maldita.es n = 49; Polígrafo n = 22) (see supplemental material). Our analysis focuses on the media coverage of the main fact-checkers in the Iberian Peninsula, between 24 February and 6 March 2022. 24 February is the day universally accepted as the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine,

being that it was on this day that Russian troops invaded Ukrainian territory. Textual analysis was performed using Voyant Tools, in which corpora (also Polígrafo text) was introduced in the Spanish language.

We decided to select these two Iberian fact-checkers not only because of the geographical and linguistic proximity that exists between the two countries, but also because Portugal and Spain have a political party system and a media system with similar characteristics. This may affect the kind of journalistic coverage applied as polarisation is a common trend. It is also acknowledged that the authors come from these countries, which facilitates the analysis.

Besides that, in both countries there are other organisations that work on verification tasks. However, in Portugal Polígrafo is the only medium dedicated exclusively to fact-checking. In addition, Polígrafo covers a wide range of topics. In Spain, Maldita.es has had a wide impact on social media and society in general and is the only Spanish medium that is part of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation created by the European Commission in 2018. Hence, we assess that those fact-checkers are the two leading fact-checking sites in the Iberian Peninsula. Both analyse content of public relevance on a daily basis, verifying items found on the internet or provided by the audience.

Textual analysis from Voyant Tools

Voyant Tools is an online software that was created by two academics of computing applied to the humanities, Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, which provides a free online toolkit that allows quantitatively analysing a text corpus (Sinclair–Rockwell 2020). Several studies have tested and analysed the various functions of Voyant Tools, verifying that it is an easy-to-use tool that can be very important for academic librarians, but not exclusively in the humanities (Miller 2018; Sampsel 2018; Welsh 2014). Voyant Tools has 28 textual analysis tools that, in a few seconds, extract linguistic and statistical information from the corpus in various formats and sizes (Alhudithi 2021). In addition, this software stands out for the graphical and visual way in which it crosses and analyses the data, offering a wide visualisation window with a word cloud that highlights the most relevant words in the corpus, the distribution of words throughout the text, the context of occurrences and co-occurrences or existing correlations between terms (Figure 1).

Although Voyant Tools was developed to assist studies within the digital humanities, there are several studies from other scientific fields that used the software for textual data analysis. In an area far removed from humanities and literary studies, Maramba et al. (2015) used Voyant Tools to collect medical information, surveying and crossing words extracted from patient comments. On the other hand, Gao (2017) used the software to analyse texts from academic publications in order to identify the main trends and research interests. In marketing, Voyant Tools can also serve to analyse open responses from corporate sales and marketing employees (Hetenyi et al. 2019). More recently, due

to the multidisciplinary capacity of Voyant Tools, we found works in the literature that analyse the content of posts and comments on diverse social media, such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube (Mihálik et al. 2022; Prebor 2021; Archee 2021; Kiselev 2021). In addition, Voyant Tools has also been useful to analyse reader reactions to news (Ittefaq et al. 2023) and media coverage of relevant newspapers, through textual analysis of published news articles (Corvo – De Caro 2020).

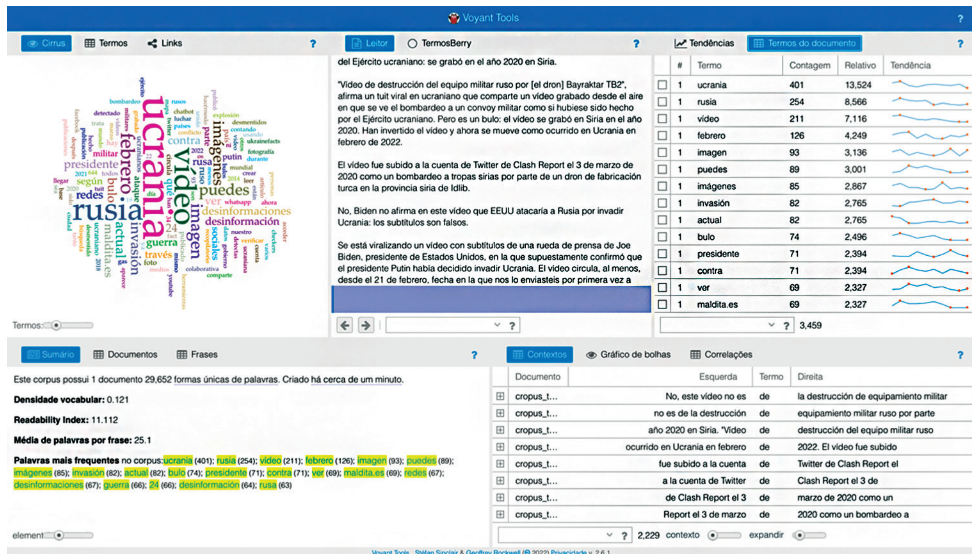

Figure 1: Screenshot of the entire corpus submitted to voyant-tools.org
Source: https://voyant-tools.org/

We performed text mining because this method allows to efficiently analyse an extensive corpus, composed of several minor units, applying various techniques to track the main topics or subjects and keywords of the document (Mhamdi et al. 2018). Above all, the study assumes an exploratory nature and aims to detect the most relevant words in the text, which allows the creation of categories or topics of analysis. For these reasons, we believe that text mining is the most efficient method, as it allows for "quickly extracting useful and innovative insights" (Jo–You 2019).

In fact, the frequency of words, and their co-occurrences in a given text help to understand the meaning of the text, which is why they are very important instruments for researchers to construct meanings. Hearst (1999: 3) refers that "data mining applications tend to be (semi)automated discovery of trends and patterns across very large datasets". Several studies (e.g. Lee et al. 2010), which applied the text mining method, used word frequency as the main analysis criterion. In our study, the most frequent words allowed us to construct several topics or category analysis, which contain important information about the corpus itself.

Procedure

In this study, the Voyant Tools software identified the most relevant words in the analysed text, considering the number of occurrences of words in the corpus. Subsequently, the researchers proceeded to categorise the words found to be the most relevant, into five categories: 1. names of political leaders; 2. nations or countries; 3. disinformation format; 4. social media; and 5. military words or terms associated with war scenarios. The selection of military words was based on the glossary of military terms from the Instituto Universitário Militar and the Academia das Ciências de Lisboa.[2]

After selecting the words for analysis, an attempt was made to understand the relationship between the various categories of words, distributed by the corpora: 1. publications by Maldita.es; 2. publications by Polígrafo; and 3. the corpus general. At first, we resorted to the "Corpus Terms" tool, from the Voyant Tools software, to observe which words have the highest number of occurrences in the corpus. Secondly, we analysed the co-occurrences of the most frequent words in order to carry out a qualitative reading of this relationship. We also analysed the distribution of words throughout the text, using the "Trends" tool, in order to observe how the frequency of words varies between the three corpora. This procedure was repeated for each category of words to analyse their distribution in the publications of the two Iberian fact-checkers.

Third, after completing a descriptive analysis of the data, our analysis focuses on the "general corpus", in which we include all publications by Polígrafo and Maldita.es. In this procedure, we calculated the most diverse relationships between words and categories in the text, considering the way in which military words are associated with various forms of disinformation and social media through the analysis of word flow diagrams.

Finally, we proceeded to analyse the correlations between the words in the same text. That is, we calculated Pearson's correlation coefficient by comparing the relative frequencies of words. Thus, a coefficient close to 1 indicates that the words are positively correlated, showing a similar tendency. When close to –1, the correlation between words is negative, revealing an opposite tendency.

Once the textual analysis was completed with the help of the Voyant Tools toolkit, we proceeded to an analysis of the total number of articles (n = 72) published by Polígrafo and Maldita.es in order to understand whether there was an ideological tendency of fact-checkers when checking the information. For this, we consider it important to analyse each fact-checking article and classify its content according to its political and ideological orientation: 1. Pro-Ukraine; 2. Pro-Russia; and 3. Neutral. This classification was established regarding the events fact-checked in the story. A neutral article is one that does not expose content in favour of either side, while pro-Ukraine or pro-Russia news items develop a verification that benefits one of them. For example, a pro-Ukrainian article could prove that the Russian news about the support of the Ukrainian people for the invasion are false. In this way, we were able to find out whether there are differences in media coverage, by fact-checkers, in relation to the war.

[2] Available online at www.ium.pt/container/106

Results

Analysing the word clouds formed by the most frequent concepts in the corpora (Figure 2), our study allows us to perceive, at first, that there are three words that are the most relevant in the total corpus: “Ukraine”, “Russia” and “Video”.

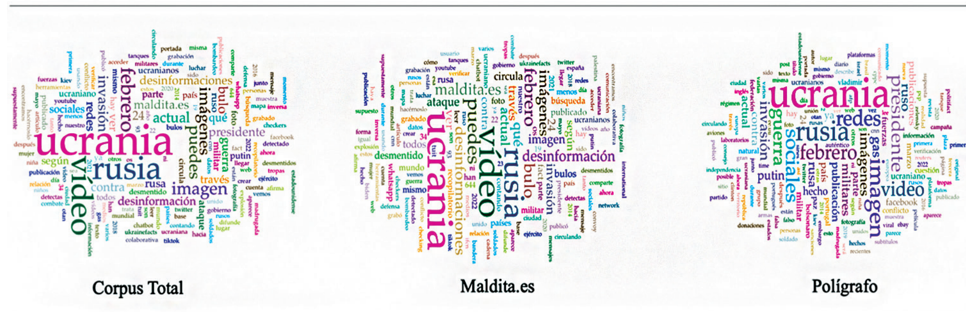

Figure 2: Word cloud of the analysed corpora
Source: https://voyant-tools.org/

Focusing the analysis on these three words, it is observed that two terms “Ukraine” and “Russia” identify the nations or countries involved in the war, while the word “Video” allows detecting the most relevant and verified format or means of dissemination by fact-checkers. However, comparing the Polígrafo corpus with the Maldita.es corpus, “Video” does not occur as frequently as, for example, the word “Image”, which also refers to a type of content dissemination format.

Table 1: Top 10 most frequent words in corpora

Top 10	Words	n	Co-occurrences
1	Ukraine	401	Russia (163), Invasion (63), Attack (43), Conflict (28)
2	Russia	254	Ukraine (162), Invasion (41), Attack (36), Denial (34), Disinformation (28)
3	Video	211	Hoax (26), Circulates (22), Ukraine (19), Publicado (16), Recorded (13)
4	February	126	2022 (26), Dawn (17), Ukraine (17), 23 (13), Russia (10)
5	Image	93	Networks (8), Hoax (7), Ukraine (7), Social (6), Russia (4)
6	Images	85	Video (10), Ukraine (7), Tank (4), Bombings (3)
7	Invasion	82	Ukraine (63), Russia (41), Denial (27), Russian (16)
8	Hoax	74	Video (28), Ukraine (12), February (8), Image (7)
9	President	71	Ukraine (20), Putin (13), Russian (9), Republic (7), Ukrainian (7)
10	Disinformation	67	Hoaxes (42), Denial (34), Russia (6), Ukraine (3)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Our findings indicate that video is the most recurrent format for disseminating uninformative content. Corroborating the results presented in Figure 2, Table 1 shows that only the words “Ukraine” (n = 411) and “Russia” (n = 254) occur in the text more frequently than the word “Video” (n = 211).

In addition, it should be noted that disinformation, related to the Ukraine–Russia war, considers visual elements to be important, since the words “Image” (n = 93) and “Images” (n = 82) appear as the most frequent words in the corpora of fact-checkers’ articles. In Table 1, it is important to highlight the word “Hoax” as a co-occurrence of terms such as “Video”, “Image” and “Disinformation”. Considering the countries “Ukraine” and “Russia”, it is observed that the co-occurrences point to the words “Disinformation” or “Denial” as being more associated with the word “Russia”.

Analysing Maldita.es, Polígrafo and Corpus Total comparatively, Figure 3 demonstrates that, in percentage terms, fact-checker Maldita.es effectively devoted more attention to video verification than Polígrafo. In addition, through Figure 3, we observe that Polígrafo focused more on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, while Maldita.es seems to have verified more content on WhatsApp, YouTube and TikTok. This may help explain the greater occurrence of the word “Video” in the Maldita.es corpus.

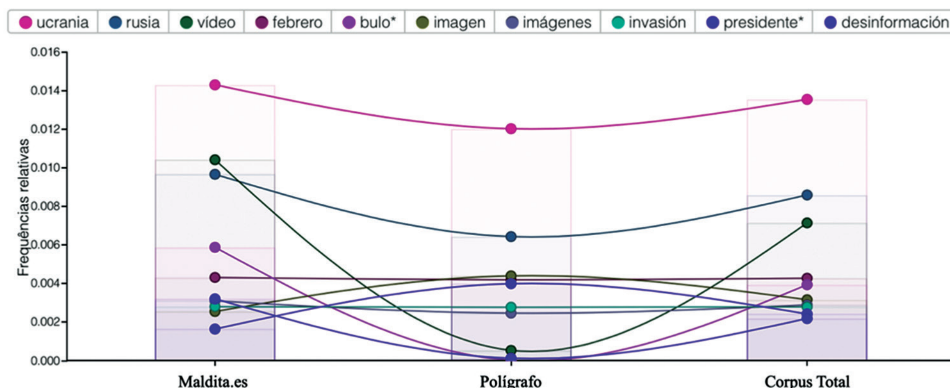

Figure 3: Relative frequency of the most frequent words in each corpus
Source: https://voyant-tools.org/

Through the analysis of Figure 4 (upper quadrant), we verified that the two most common disinformation formats in the corpora, video and image, appear associated with the illustration of war scenarios. We can see, on the one hand, that the association “video planes” appears with some frequency throughout the text. Although the word “video” is the most widely distributed word, it appears close to words such as “explosion”, “military”, “bombardment” or “troops”.

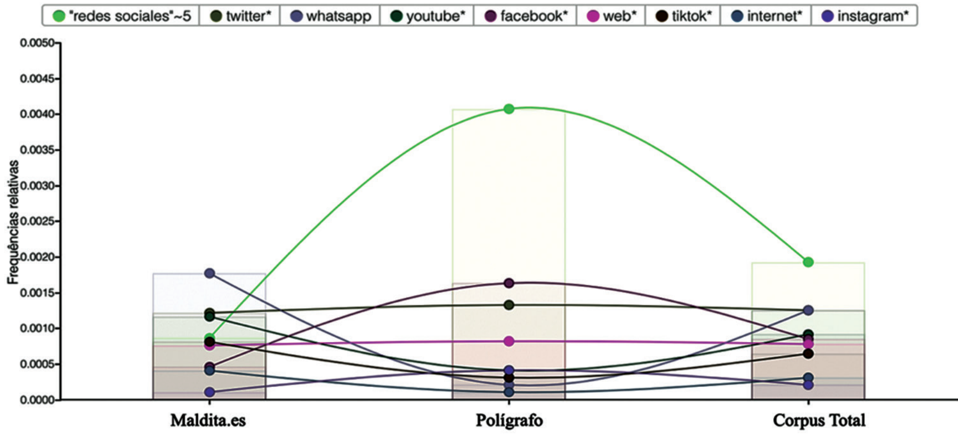

Figure 4: Flow diagram of the war words associated with the most common disinformation formats
Source: https://voyant-tools.org/

In the lower quadrant of Figure 4, we also find some association between military words and the word "Image", but not as clearly as when associated with the word "Video". Table 2 shows how social networks are correlated with military terms in the corpora.

Table 2: Association between words: social networks and war words (r of Pearson)

	Facebook	TikTok	YouTube	Twitter	WhatsApp	Instagram
Attacks	.35	.72**	.37	–	.58	.44
Explosions	.67*	.38	.81**	.18	–.55	–.08
Deaths	–	–.13	.66*	.63*	–.28	–
Victims	–	–	.65*	–	–	–
Planes	.08	.04	.64*	–.07	–.25	–.23
Missiles	–	–.37	.49	–.45	–	–
Bombing	–.42	.55	.47	.16	–.26	.23
Guns	.76**	–	.44	–.10	–.32	–.08
Fire	–	–	.23	–	–	–
Soldiers	–	–.53	.07	.31	.18	–
Military	–	–	–.61*	.04	–.21	–
Troops	–	–	–.08	.24	–	–

	Facebook	TikTok	YouTube	Twitter	WhatsApp	Instagram
Tanks	–	–.34	–.08	–.50	.26	–
Bombs	.62*	.02	–.19	–.07	–	–.35
Army	–.01	–.30	–.01	–	.47	–.25
Shots	–.06	–.08	–.40	.28	–.28	–
Armed forces	–	–	–.61	.39	–	–
Attempt	.15	–	–	–	–	–
Prisoners	–	–	–	.63*	–	–
Injured	–		–	–	–	.66*

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 2 shows positive and negatively significant correlations between the words that identify social networks and the words related to the war scenario. Therefore, statistically positive correlations between two words indicate that the words show a similar trend, increasing and decreasing together. In case of a statistically negative correlation, the words have opposite tendencies.

Thus, the word "YouTube" seems to be the one most associated with military terms. It is important to highlight the significantly positive correlations between "YouTube" and "Explosions" ($r = .81$, $p < .01$), "Deaths" ($r = .66$, $p < .05$), "Victims" ($r = .65$, $p < .05$) and "Airplanes" ($r = .64$, $p < .05$). We also highlight the strong positive correlation between "TikTok" and "Attack" ($r = .72$, $p < .01$). These data show, once again, the importance of video in the dissemination of misinformation related to war scenarios, since TikTok and YouTube are social networks that disseminate video content.

Table 3 presents the words that are significantly correlated with the relevant words that constitute the main categories of our analysis: 1. names of political leaders; 2. nations or countries; 3. format of disinformation; and 4. social media. As for the words that identify the nations mentioned in the corpora, the biggest difference is in how the words "Ukraine" and "Russia" are associated with other words. In Table 3, it is possible to observe that the word "Russia" appears positively associated with words related to fact-checking, such as "IFCN" ($r = .86$, $p \leq .001$), "Hoaxes" ($r = .85$, $p \leq .001$), "Checking" ($r = .83$, $p \leq .001$) or "Proven" ($r = .76$, $p = .01$).

Table 3: Significant associations of the categories in analysis with the other words of the corpus (r of Pearson)

Categories	Word	Positive correlation (words)	Negative correlation (words)
Nations	Ukraine	Explosion (r = .72, p = .01)	Putin (r = −.72, p = .01)
		Hoaxes (r = .63, p = .04)	Russian (r = −.70, p = .02)
		Planes (r = .63, p = .04)	Death (r = −.70, p = .02)
			Tank (r = −.65, p = .04)
			Nigeria (r = −.63, p = .05)
			Attacked (r = −.63, p = .05)
			Captured (r = −.63, p = .05)
			Checked (r = −.63, p = .05)
	Russia	IFCN (r = .86, p ≤ .001)	Facebook (r = −.72, p = .01)
		Hoaxes (r = .85, p ≤ .001)	Invades (r = −.64, p = .04)
		Checking (r = .83, p ≤ .001)	Government (r = −.63, p = .04)
		Checked (r = .76, p = .01)	
		Bombing (r = .76, p = .02)	
		Attack (r = .70, p = .02)	
		Hoax (r = .70, p = .02)	
		Disinformation (r = .70, p = .02)	
		Denial (r = .69, p = .03)	
		Dead (r = .68, p = .02)	
		Photo (r = .64, p = .04)	
		American (r = .60, p = .05)	
	China	Armour (r = .93, p ≤ .001)	
		Support (r = .90, p ≤ .001)	
		Support to (r = .83, p = .02)	
	Americans	Murdered (r = .75, p = .01)	
		Combat (r = .75, p = .01)	
		Assault (r = .70, p = .02)	
		Afghanistan (r = .69, p = .02)	
		Donetsk (r = .62, p = .05)	

Categories	Word	Positive correlation (words)	Negative correlation (words)
Leaders	Biden	Plane (r = .95, $p \le .001$) Gun (r = .88, $p \le .001$) Planes (r = .64, $p = .04$)	
	Putin	Mounting (r = .68, $p = .02$) Front page (r = .66, $p = .03$) Adolf (r = .61, $p = .05$)	Bombs (r = –.72, $p = .01$) News (r = –.62, $p = .02$)
	Zelensky	They died (r = .91, $p \le .001$) Communist (r = .84, $p \le .001$) Independence (r = .79, $p \le .001$) Historical (r = .76, $p \le .001$) Hashtag (r = .76, $p \le .001$) Prisoners (r = .75, $p = .01$) Release (r = .75, $p = .01$) Example (r = .74, $p = .01$) President (r = .73, $p = .01$) Dead (r = .73, $p = .01$) Armed (r = .65, $p = .04$) Bombed (r = .64, $p = .04$) TV (r = .63, $p = .05$)	

Categories	Word	Positive correlation (words)	Negative correlation (words)
Social Networks	YouTube	Explosion ($r = .81, p \leq .001$)	Facebook ($r = -0.71, p = .02$)
		Video ($r = .78, p \leq .001$)	Fake ($r = -.65, p = .03$)
		Hoax ($r = .74, p = .01$)	
		Americans ($r = .73, p = .01$)	
		Dead ($r = .66, p = .03$)	
		Fire ($r = .65, p = .03$)	
		Victims ($r = .65, p = .03$)	
		Would attack ($r = .65, p = .04$)	
		Injured ($r = .65, p = .04$)	
		Plane ($r = .64, p = .04$)	
		IFCN ($r = .64, p = .04$)	
		U.S. ($r = .63, p = .04$)	
		Biden ($r = .63, p = .04$)	
	TikTok	Crimea ($r = .88, p \leq .001$)	
		Dead ($r = .74, p = .01$)	
		Attack ($r = .72, p = .01$)	
		Injured ($r = .71, p = .01$)	
		Russia ($r = .67, p = .03$)	
		Americans ($r = .65, p = .03$)	
		IFCN ($r = .65, p = .04$)	
	Facebook	Europe ($r = .83, p \leq .001$)	Hoaxes ($r = -.81, p \leq .001$)
		U.S. ($r = .73, p = .01$)	Checking ($r = -.77, p \leq .001$)
		Guns ($r = .72, p = .01$)	Bombing ($r = -.71, p = .03$)
		Explosions ($r = .67, p = .03$)	Attack ($r = -.66, p = .03$)
		Bombs ($r = .62, p = .05$)	Denial ($r = -.66, p = .03$)
			Disinformation ($r = -.64, p = .04$)
	Twitter	China ($r = .77, p \leq .001$)	
		Fake ($r = .75, p = .01$)	
		Shooting up ($r = .65, p = .03$)	
		False ($r = .64, p = .04$)	
		Communist ($r = .64, p = .04$)	
		PCP ($r = .64, p = .04$)	
		Cyberattack ($r = .64, p = .05$)	
		Memes ($r = .64, p = .05$)	
		Nazi ($r = .63, p = .04$)	
		Dead ($r = .63, p = .05$)	
	WhatsApp	Checkers ($r = .91, p \leq .001$)	
		Denial ($r = .91, p \leq .001$)	
		Detected ($r = .91, p \leq .001$)	
		Disinformation ($r = .88, p \leq .001$)	
		Checked ($r = .84, p \leq .001$)	
		Fact ($r = .82, p \leq .001$)	
	Instagram	Image ($r = .83, p \leq .001$)	
		Armed ($r = .74, p = .01$)	

Categories	Word	Positive correlation (words)	Negative correlation (words)
	Video	Hoax ($r = .96, p \leq .001$)	Facebook ($r = -.90, p \leq .001$) Peace
		IFCN ($r = .92, p \leq .001$)	($r = -.71, p = .02$)
		Checking ($r = .88, p \leq .001$)	News ($r = -.67, p = .03$)
		Checked ($r = .81, p = .003$)	Post ($r = -.64, p = .04$)
		Bombing ($r = .81, p = .003$)	
		Explosion ($r = .78, p = .007$)	
		Offensive ($r = .78, p = .007$)	
		Russia ($r = .74, p = .01$)	
		American ($r = .73, p = .01$)	
		Fact-checkers ($r = .72, p = .01$)	
		Dead ($r = .70, p = .02$)	
		Attack ($r = .69, p = .02$)	
		Injured ($r = .68, p = .02$)	
		Ukraine ($r = .66, p = .03$)	
		Denial ($r = .65, p = .04$)	
		Disinformation ($r = .63, p = .04$)	
Formats	Image	Injured ($r = .89, p \leq .001$)	Checkers ($r = -.63, p = .04$)
		Photo ($r = .76, p \leq .001$)	Denial ($r = -.63, p = .04$)
		British ($r = .72, p = .01$)	
		Helicopter ($r = .70, p = .02$)	
		Germany ($r = .68, p = .03$)	
	Post	Polígrafo ($r = .89, p \leq .001$)	Maldita.es ($r = -.73, p = .01$)
		Military ($r = .86, p \leq .001$)	Denial ($r = -.66, p = .02$)
		America ($r = .86, p \leq .001$)	Hoax ($r = -.67, p = .03$)
		Guns ($r = .82, p = .003$)	Checking ($r = -.66, p = .03$)
		Europe ($r = .81, p = .004$)	Internet ($r = -.63, p = .04$)
		Clinton ($r = .75, p = .01$)	
		Aggressor ($r = .75, p = .01$)	
		Lie ($r = .74, p = .01$)	
		Facebook ($r = .68, p = .02$)	
		Portugal ($r = .65, p = .03$)	
		U.S. ($r = .65, p = .04$)	
		Peace ($r = .62, p = .05$)	

$^{*}p < .05$ $^{**}p < .01$

Source: Compiled by the authors.

As for political leaders, we noticed that the word “Zelensky”, which identifies the President of Ukraine, when compared to other leaders, has more relevant words significantly associated.

Focusing our analysis on the words that identify social networks, the tendency of the words “YouTube” and “TikTok” to appear positively associated with words of war is confirmed. The word “Facebook” is negatively associated with words related to fact-checking activity, such as “Hoaxes” ($r = -0.81, p \leq 0.001$), “Checking” ($r = -0.77, p \leq 0.001$) or “Denial” ($r = -0.66, p = 0.03$), which seems to indicate that this social

network has fallen into the background with regard to fact-checking priorities. Emphasising the differences between the fact-checkers Polígrafo and Maldita.es, the word "Post" appears positively associated with words such as "Polígrafo" ($r = 0.89$, $p \leq 0.001$), "Portugal" ($r = 0.65$, $p = 0.03$) and "Facebook" ($r = 0.68$, $p = 0.02$), but negatively correlated with Maldita.es ($r = -0.73$, $p = 0.01$). On the other hand, the word "Video" is positively and significantly associated with relevant action words of fact-checkers.

Analysing Table 4, we observe that, in 72 publications verified by the fact-checkers, more than 50% are Pro-Ukraine publications, with 30.6% of the disinformation verified as Pro-Russia. Of the remaining publications checked, 18.1% are neutral, not being evident that they favour Russia or Ukraine.

Table 4: Political orientation of content checked by fact-checkers (% per column)

Political orientation			Fact-checker
	Total %	Maldita.es %	Polígrafo%
Pro-Ukraine	51.4	51.0	52.2
Pro-Russia	30.6	32.7	26.1
Neutral	18.1	16.3	21.7
n	72	50	22

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Considering the ideological orientation of the political content of the verified publication (1 – Pro-Ukraine, 2 – Pro-Russia, 3 – Neutral), we did not find any significant trend between Polígrafo and Maldita.es [$\chi2$ (2, n = 72) = . 479, p = .78; v = .082].

Discussion and conclusions

Overall, our study highlights the importance of video for agents of disinformation in the early days of the war between Ukraine and Russia. After the words "Ukraine" and "Russia", the word "Video" was the one that came up most frequently in fact-checkers during the first ten days after the Russian invasion. Furthermore, our findings show that video was essential to illustrate war scenarios, such as bombings and explosions. In fact, these results are in line with the capabilities that technology currently has, with common mobile devices producing high quality videos.

As previously mentioned, this conflict is branded as the "smartphone war" (Stastna 2022). Several investigations related to the same period of our data collection warned that we were facing an information war, in which fake videos are broadcast to attract views (Sardarizadeh 2022). Also on the Ukrainian side, President Zelensky uses social media to share personal videos, apparently recorded spontaneously on a smartphone (OECD 2022). To date, 324 sites that spread war disinformation have been identified (NewsGuard 2022) and a report by the Center for Information Resilience, a non-profit

association created to combat disinformation, monitored and collected information from Ukraine, creating a database with around 7,000 videos (Strick 2022). The use of video by agents of disinformation is easily understandable, considering that video has a strong emotional impact and can quickly go viral. For example, at the beginning of the war, an influencer broadcasted live videos about the war and achieved almost a million views per night (Serafin 2022).

Nor can we ignore that the war in Ukraine coincides with the rise of the TikTok platform, an application that distributes video content, which in 2022 was the most downloaded in the world (Paul 2022). Furthermore, YouTube is also the most popular social media platform in Russia, having served to spread pro-Kremlin online disinformation, before YouTube blocked Russian state media (11 March) (Perrigo 2022; Golovchenko et al. 2022). Earlier, during the war in Syria, Russian state media sought, through YouTube, to legitimise their military intervention in that country (Crilley–Chatterje-Doody 2020). These data help, therefore, to explain the fact that our findings demonstrate that the words "YouTube" and also "TikTok" appear significantly related to the words of war in the text. It is also very important to note that our data collection took place before the main social media restriction policies imposed on Russian propaganda in relation to the war in Ukraine (Yuskiv 2022).

On the other hand, our results also show that the word "Russia" tends to be more positively associated with words related to disinformation (such as Hoax, Checking, IFCN, Denial) when compared to the word "Ukraine". However, our latest analysis regarding the political orientation of checked disinformation shows that half of the publications favour the Ukrainian nation. Although most of the prior research emphasises the role of the Russian state as disseminator of online disinformation (Yablokov 2022; Golovchenko 2020), the findings illustrate that more fake news were pro-Ukraine than pro-Russia in the time period investigated.

As previously happened in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Mejias–Vokuev 2017), it is possible that citizens actively participate in the distribution of false information. Considering the Russian invasion, some recent studies found that pro-Ukrainian narrative was oriented to foster support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian army (Thompson 2022). Beyond the action of the Ukrainian Government, some accounts of the civil society on Twitter or TikTok such as Ukrainian Memes Forces has generated contents to external audiences (Tilton–Agozzino 2023). Further research should definitely evaluate whether some of those messages could be categorised as disinformation.

In this way, our analysis seems to suggest that with regard to this information war, there is the spreading of disinformation on both sides. Nevertheless, some limitations should be acknowledged. Only two sites for two countries were analysed, which generates a small sample. In this sense, it would also be noteworthy to explore the evolution of the fact-checking activity during more extended time frames.

Despite those limitations, our findings seem to be aligned with some authors, who argue that Ukraine is winning the information war, seeking to expose Russian military weaknesses (Aral 2022). This perception may be influenced by journalistic biases and editorial interests within fact-checking organisations, but the fact is that the verified

content was pro-Ukraine during the first days of the war. Furthermore, it should be noted that already in relation to the fighting in Donbass between 2014 and 2015, Ukraine served as an example of how to face Russia's efforts to spread disinformation (Treyger et al. 2022).

In short, our research shows, firstly, that video is crucial for disseminating false war-related content, associated with online platforms that favour this format, namely YouTube and TikTok. The frequency of videos reveals an emotional approach related to war scenarios in terms of words, which is different to other topics. Secondly, our study represents an important contribution to the current debate about the role of disinformation not only as an offensive weapon, but also as a defence strategy in a disinformation war.

This preliminary, exploratory study also highlighted the role that fact-checking can play for researchers, allowing them to analyse their databases. Thus, in future studies, we intend to expand the analysed sample to publications by several European fact-checkers with the aim of identifying different strategies and motivations for spreading disinformation between the two nations at war.

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Patterns and Actors of Disinformation: Analysis of Debunked Hoaxes in Spain in 2022[1]

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This research examines the patterns followed by disinformation in Spain through the fact-checking activities of Maldita.es, the leading fact-checking organisation in Spain. We sought to answer three research questions: 1. What are the predominant topics of the hoaxes debunked by Maldita.es? 2. Who is responsible for the creation and dissemination of these hoaxes? and 3. In what formats and platforms are these hoaxes generally distributed? For this purpose, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of 729 hoaxes fact-checked in 2022 by Maldito Bulo. 40.7% of the debunked hoaxes were related to social issues, while 37.2% focused on political affairs. Regarding those responsible for the creation and dissemination, most of the hoaxes came from unidentified sources, although when the identity is known, the most frequent contributors are social media accounts, alternative and partisan pseudo-media and journalists. These results explore the general disinformation scenario in Spain, using fact-checking as an approximation and discussing its implications.

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Introduction

Fake news, misinformation and disinformation have received a growing interest in the scientific community in the last years, as they have become a concerning phenomenon that expands at an unprecedented speed through social media platforms and the modern communication ecosystem (Aïmeur et al. 2023; Vosoughi et al. 2018). Their effects not only reach communication and journalism but also put at risk the democratic system (Bennett–Livingston 2018; Romero-Rodríguez et al. 2021) and even the integrity and lives of individuals, as has been seen during the pandemic.

According to IAB (2023), 94% of Spaniards use the Internet, and from those, 85% are users of social media. Moreover, the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2023 (Newman et al. 2023) observed that 50% of Spaniards claim to access news on social media. The same study has observed that trust in the news is quite low in this country (only 33% of people in Spain trust the news, a value that has decreased in the last few years and is particularly low for news posted on social media). Furthermore, this report has consistently shown in the last years that the concern in Spain about online fake news is among the highest in Europe (62% in 2022, according to Vara et al. 2022). Besides, according to the Eurobarometer conducted in the winter of 2022–2023, 78% of Spaniards found disinformation frequently, compared to a 69% average in the EU (European Commission 2023).

The use and consumption patterns of news, mainly based on information found in social media, combined with the lack of media and digital skills of users, make social media the primary source of dissemination of fake news (Sharma et al. 2019; Shu et al. 2019), especially due to the ease with which erroneous or biased information can be generated and how difficult it is to detect them (Kumar–Shah 2018).

One of the great risks of fake news, in addition to their rapid dissemination, is that they have the appearance of being true and can be generated in large volumes (Shu et al. 2017), which impacts their perceived realism and, consequently, generates more credibility of the information (Romero-Rodríguez et al. 2021). In this line, Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that the online dissemination of false information occurs up to six times faster than accurate information, while 70% of users do not know how to distinguish between fake news and factual information, mainly due to the characteristics of novelty and attraction with which fake news is designed (Bovet–Makse 2019).

Usually, fake news is generated by political and electoral interests (Vosoughi et al. 2018), although by 2020, the World Health Organization attributed fake news the character of an "infodemic" due to the proliferation of false information related to Covid-19 and vaccines, leading to many conspiracy theories that gained credibility, putting public health at risk (Apuke–Omar 2021; Hartley–Vu 2020; Gupta et al. 2022).

Fact-checking: The fight against fake news

Disinformation is not new, but its dimensions and potential effects are. Accordingly, although the attempts to fight it are also not new (Grant 1995), they have intensified recently. Amongst them, fact-checking has been one of the most relevant. Fact-checking services generally have journalistic activities based on the systematic evaluation, verification and contrast of data, in which the accuracy of the affirmations found in an informative unit is evaluated (Lotero-Echeverri et al. 2018). In fact, many journalists positively appreciate the role of fact-checking (Martín García – Buitrago 2022), and many consider that fact-checking is rather a task of journalists themselves (Blanco-Herrero–Arcila-Calderón 2019), as this is a core practice of the ethical guidelines of the profession (McBride–Rosenstiel 2013). That also explains why many fact-checking initiatives are linked to larger media companies or are run with journalistic practices, even though in the last years more initiatives have been created as independent organisations supported by public institutions (Graves–Cherubini 2016).

Despite the effort of many fact-checkers to avoid the spread and distribution of fake news, the empirical evidence regarding the capacity of fact-checkers to reduce the effects of misinformation is divided: while some studies (e.g. Fridkin et al. 2015) conclude that exposure to fact-checking can reduce misinformation, other results (e.g. Garrett–Weeks 2013) find null effects, while, for example, Nyhan and Reifler (2010) find boomerang effects. In this sense, the efficacy of this activity is still under debate within the scientific community, but the general agreement tends to be limited but significant effectiveness (Ecker et al. 2019; Walter et al. 2020; Bode–Vraga 2018). It is also important to keep in mind the multiple cognitive reasons that prevent fact-checking from working in some cases (Lewandowsky et al. 2012), including the determinant role of source credibility (Bode–Vraga 2018; Vraga–Bode 2017). Anyhow, fact-checking tends to work better when matching the existing believes of the person exposed to it, although some research hints that Republicans in the U.S. tend to have more hostile feelings towards fact-checking (Shin–Thorson 2017).

To be effective and credible, fact-checking organisations must be non-partisan, transparent and independent. These organisations should be distinguished from other agencies by their exclusive focus on factual statements made by major political players in debates, speeches, interviews and press releases, limiting the issues to claims that can be definitively proven or disproven (Amazeen 2016). Thus, it is unsurprising that organisations such as PolitiFact, FactCheck.org and The Fact Checker agree and come to very similar verdicts (Amazeen 2016). However, Marietta et al. (2015), who analysed the checks performed on FactCheck.org, PolitiFact and The Fact Checker, sometimes evidenced disagreement on the level of veracity of the information.

Fact-checkers have gained professional prestige (Graves–Cherubini 2016), but their credibility and non-partisan nature could still make their judgment more influential and their pronouncements more effective, especially in cases where there is much conflicting information and social polarisation. Despite this expectation of a substantial fact-checker effect, it is naïve to suggest that mere exposure to truthful information

can shape beliefs in a post-truth context and in highly polarised political environments, where the notion of objectivity and impartiality is constantly challenged (Romero-Rodríguez et al. 2023).

Understanding this situation, the International Factchecking Network (IFCN) was born in 2016 to give more credibility to fact-checkers. Before including a fact-checker, it evaluates its commitments to balance and non-politicisation, to the transparency of sources, to the transparency of funding, organisation and links, to the methodology used, and, finally, to honesty and rectification. Also, with the rise of artificial intelligence, some researchers, such as Hansen et al. (2019), expose the existence of tools that can automatically identify verifiable claims and even establish a ranking of phrases worthy of being verified, which today are used by many social media platforms to limit the dissemination of fake news.

Fact-checkers in Spain

Most research on fact-checkers has focused on the United States (Graves–Cherubini 2016). On Spanish-language fact-checking, researchers have investigated the Spanish-language fact-checking platforms that the Duke Reporters' Lab included in 2018 in its database (Vizoso–Vázquez Herrero 2018), as well as nine Spanish-language initiatives that have emerged since 2010 in half a dozen Latin American countries (Palau-Sampio 2018).

One relevant work that should be studied here is López-Pan and Rodríguez-Rodríguez (2019), who identified and analysed fact-checking websites in Spain, complemented by interviews with journalists who have carried out fact-checking initiatives. They did this work guided by a primordial list provided by the research of Ufarte-Ruiz et al. (2018). In this work, López-Pan and Rodríguez-Rodríguez classify Spanish fact-checkers in the three typologies described by Graves (2016): a) promoted by civil society; b) linked to the media; and c) independent journalistic websites. Within this third group, we can find Verificat, Newtral and Maldita.es. Together with EFE Verifica and AFP, these three are associated with news agencies, the most relevant platforms nowadays, and they are signatories of the IFCN principles.

Setting of the study

Beyond their fact-checking activity, these platforms offer the best approximation to the state of misinformation in Spain. Given that they follow the principles of "viralization" – the spread of contents – and danger – potential risks for people or coexistence – their activity reflects the most relevant hoaxes and fake news that have gained presence at a certain point. With that perspective, several studies have used the activity of fact-checking platforms as an approximation to study disinformation patterns (Molina Cañabate – Magallón Rosa 2018; Salaverría et al. 2020; Gutiérrez-Coba et al.

2020; López-García et al. 2021). Our article has adopted a similar approach to the one used in these works.

These works have focused on specific issues surrounded by misinformation, but the academic efforts to systematically address the general activity of a fact-checker to understand the features of misinformation are more limited. Although research on disinformation has been fruitful and abundant in the past years, this means a knowledge gap because a broad and general understanding of fact-checking and disinformation is essential for developing more efficient strategies to counter and fight this phenomenon. In particular, it is essential to identify the topics, who and where are spreading them, and how the fact-checkers tackle them. In this vein, our study has one main goal: to identify the patterns followed by disinformation in Spain.

A key element when analysing a phenomenon is understanding the themes on which it revolves. Regarding misinformation in Spain, there have been works focused on health, very frequent during the pandemic (Salaverría et al. 2020), on climate change (Fernández-Castrillo–Magallón-Rosa 2023) or on migration (Narváez-Llinares–Pérez-Rufi 2022). But these works do not allow us to evaluate which themes are predominant in general terms. The works of Almansa-Martínez et al. (2022) or Gamir-Ríos and Tarullo (2022), with a methodology similar to the one that will be used here, were able to establish comparisons, finding a notable predominance of misinformation about health, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19, followed by political aspects. However, these are works focused on the pandemic period, so it is necessary to obtain a broader vision of misinformation in Spain. Thus, the first research question is posed:

RQ1: What are the predominant topics of the hoaxes debunked by Maldita.es in 2022?

The study of Blanco-Herrero et al. (2021) identified the perceptions of citizens about the responsible actors, but this does not necessarily match reality. The aforementioned works by Almansa-Martínez et al. (2022) or Gamir-Ríos and Tarullo (2022), in the context of the pandemic, found that the creators of hoaxes tend to be anonymous, with a significant presence of media or political actors. But, again, there are no studies that, in a comparative way, have examined a larger period of time to identify the actors that cause disinformation to proliferate in Spain. To delve deeper into this aspect the following research question is posed:

RQ2: Who is responsible for the creation and spread of the hoaxes debunked by Maldita.es in 2022?

Finally, understanding through which platforms disinformation is spread is essential to designing strategies to combat it and its effects. And this cannot be understood without also addressing the formats used, as they are strongly connected to the platform – e.g. text is more common on Twitter or Facebook, whereas video is predominant on TikTok, and pictures on Instagram. In fact, research on disinformation has predominantly focused on platforms such as Facebook (Allcott–Gentzkow 2017; Farkas et al. 2018) or Twitter (Grinberg et al. 2019), although others such as YouTube (Calvo et al. 2022), WhatsApp (Moreno-Castro et al. 2021), TikTok (Alonso-López et al. 2021) or Telegram (Rogers

2020) have gained relevance in recent years. At the same time, misinformation has been studied primarily as a textual problem, but aspects such as deepfakes and images generated by AI (Yang et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2019) are also adding new dimensions to the problem. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: In what formats and platforms do the hoaxes debunked by Maldita.es in 2022 usually spread?

Materials and method

To answer these questions, we have conducted a quantitative content analysis of 729 hoaxes debunked in 2022 by Maldito Bulo, the debunking branch of Maldita.es. The choice of Maldita.es as our object of study is explained by the fact that the studies focusing on fact-checking activities in Spain, such as those mentioned in the previous section, have used mostly Maldita.es as a reference (Fernández-Castrillo–Magallón-Rosa 2023; Narváez-Llinares–Pérez-Rufi 2022), although sometimes together with Newtral (López-García et al. 2021), the other main fact-checking agency in Spain. Together with the ease of access to the content (https://maldita.es/malditobulo/), the reasons for this choice are the fact that this is the most popular platform in terms of users or followers in social media (for instance, as of late September 2023, Maldito Bulo has 295.2 thousand followers on X, whereas Newtral has 198.4 thousand) as well as the most active (it accumulates the longest and oldest collection of debunks in Spain). Moreover, the focus will be on 2022, in which disinformation campaigns have been especially active after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but also given the continuation of issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination campaigns as other aspects related to politics or social issues.

All the articles, including explanations, reports, or phishing warnings, were removed, focusing the study only on debunks. Maldito Bulo offers three levels of verifications: Bulo (Hoax), verifiably false content; No hay pruebas (No proofs), content spreading misinformation, for which no independent sources exist as to claim their official falsehood; and ¿Qué sabemos? (What do we know?), for disputed content or information that cannot be classified as false but that could be used for disinformation purposes. Those verifications belonging to this last group were removed, as there is no certainty about their falsehood. Furthermore, fake news and hoaxes are often recurrent, and the same content might become popular over and over, which is why fact-checkers sometimes publish the same debunk several times, sometimes even more than once in the same year; thus, repeated debunks were also removed from the study. The links to the 729 analysed content can be found in the following folder of the OSF (https://osf.io/fd57a/?view_only=b42ffc9785ba464382e5322a6a550af5).

The links were collected in January 2023, the classification took place between January and March 2023. Two previously trained coders made this classification. To ensure the reliability of the classification, 79 cases (>10% of the sample) were double-coded. Then, using the Kalpha macro for SPSS (Hayes–Krippendorff 2007), we calculated Krippendorff's alpha, achieving an average value of 0.86, with all cases showing an

agreement over 0.65, which can be considered satisfactory (Neuendorf 2002). Although the codebook had more variables, the ones used for this research are described next. Except the second variable, which was designed ad-hoc, the categories in each variable were based on a preliminary review of the information that was provided in each debunk, on previous works (Almansa-Martínez et al. 2022; Blanco-Herrero et al. 2021; Gamir-Ríos–Tarullo 2022) and on the discussion with experts in the field during the validation process. The information has always been collected from the explanation provided within the debunk, which usually adds specific data about who, where and how the false information has started or spread.

- The main topic of the debunked information. More than one option was possible, but its presence had to be relevant for a topic to be chosen: Politics (focused on parliamentary activity or on the activity of politicians); Social (including education, crime or coexistence-related topics); Economy (business, employment, international economy, etc.); Science and technology (scientific discoveries, climate, new technologies; excluding health-related scientific elements); Health (vaccines, warnings, health tips, etc., including everything related to Covid-19); Others (miscellaneous for everything not included in the other topics).
- Scope of the debunked information. Only one option was possible between: Exclusively Spanish; mostly Spanish, with references to other countries; mostly international, with mentions to Spain; exclusively international or undetermined.
- Category of the person or institution originating debunked information. Except when selecting the last one, more than one option was possible: Political personality or party; news media or journalist; public figure; organisation or company; fake profile that supersedes a real person or institution; parody or satiric media or profiles; another type of profile in social media; not identified.
- Category of the person or institution participating in the spread of debunked information. Except when selecting the last one, more than one option was possible: Political personality or party; news media or journalist; public figure; organisation or company; fake profile that supersedes a real person or institution; parody or satiric media or profiles; another type of profile in social media; not identified.
- Format of the debunked information. More than one option was possible, as long as it referred to the hoax or misinformation itself and not to the messages spreading it: Textual; headline of news piece; WhatsApp or similar chain; image or meme; audio or video; interview, press conference or other forms of public declaration produced outside of digital platforms.
- The social media platforms in which the debunked content has been spread. Except when the first or the second options were selected, more than one option was possible: Not spread in social media; spread in social media, but no specific one is mentioned; Facebook; Twitter; Instagram; YouTube; LinkedIn; Telegram; TikTok; WhatsApp; others.

Regarding the actors responsible for the creation and spread of this false information, it is important to keep in mind that the policy of Maldito Bulo is to hide the identity of accounts participating in the spread of fake content when they do not belong to famous groups or people. On some occasions, even if the account is blurred in the main image of the debunk (see Figure 1), it might be visible later in the article, thus making it possible to identify it. A further search of the debunked content could have allowed the identification of specific accounts involved in spreading or creating fake news. However, this does not bring relevant knowledge, given that this activity, especially the sharing one, is unintentional on many occasions, and not much can be done to identify a person who once shared fake content.

Figure 1: Example of an image of a debunk in which the names and handles of the users spreading a hoax have been blurred
Source: Maldito Bulo (https://maldita.es/feminismo/20220317/charlas-feministas-presupuesto-20000-millones-igualdad/).

Results

Before addressing the results, it should be noted that 95.5% (n = 696) of the debunks were addressing hoaxes, whereas the other 4.5% (n = 33) were debunking misinformation without proof. The debunked content was either exclusively international (40.3% of the debunks) or exclusively national (38.4%). Although the activity of these fact-checkers tends to have a national approach and the exclusively national topics tend to be predominant; during 2022, the importance of international events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the death of Queen Elizabeth II or the World Football Championship in Qatar, have attracted significant attention. Moreover, this group includes all messages spread without specific mentions to any particular country, such as fake cures against cancer or antivaccination conspiracies.

Focusing now on the first RQ of the study, we can see that the most common topic is related to Social issues, present in 40.7% (n = 297) of the debunks. This includes hoaxes about specific social groups, coexistence, crime, or education. Secondly, 37.2% (n = 271) of the debunked content focused on Politics, including attacks on politicians or political parties or false information about the parliamentary activity. This topic is frequently interconnected with political polarisation and is often transversally present in other topics, as many phenomena are blamed on or used to attack the government or the opposition. For example, a hoax about passing a Law for trans people would be classified simultaneously as Social issues and Politics, whereas a hoax claiming that trans people are responsible for a crime would be only considered a Social issue.

Then the category *others* appears, with 21.0% (n = 153) of the cases. Although this was designed as a marginal category, its design took place before the war in Ukraine, and while some content related to the war might fall within politics (for instance, hoaxes related to Vladimir Putin or Volodymyr Zelensky), others were included in the miscellaneous category given their particularities and their independence from politics (for instance, number of victims or location of an attack). This category includes sports-related content, extensively present during the FIFA Soccer World Cup between November and December 2022. Afterward, Health was present in 11.5% (n = 84) of the debunks, frequently associated with the pandemic or vaccination. Economy and Science and Technology (5.3 and 5.2%, respectively) were the least frequent groups. Figure 2 visually shows these values:

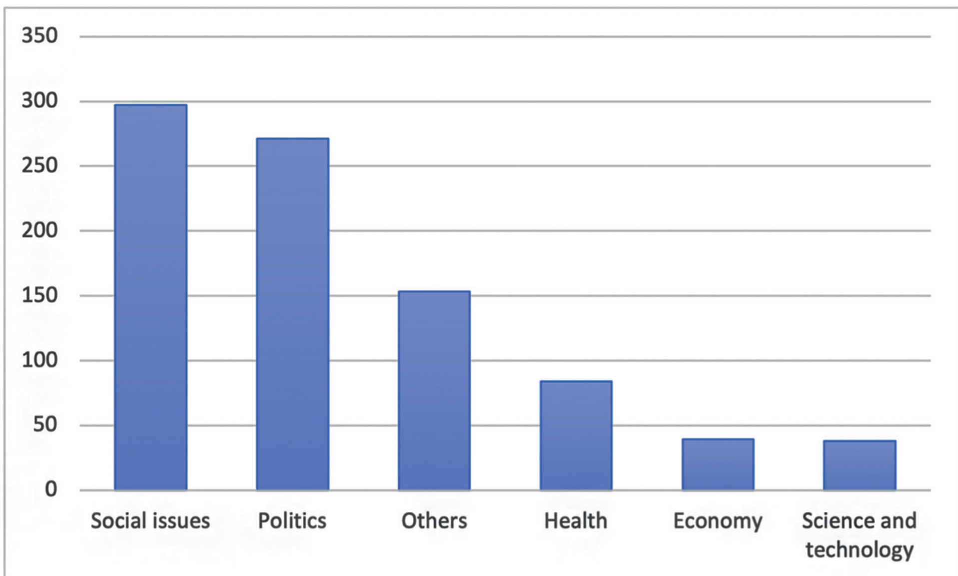

Figure 2: Main topics identified in the false information debunked by Maldito Bulo in 2022
Source: Compiled by the authors.

The second research question wondered who is responsible for creating and spreading fake content. Table 1 shows more in detail that in most cases, the identity of those creating or spreading fake information is unknown or, at least, not shared in the debunk. When the identity is known, the most frequent actors are some social media accounts and news media and journalists, although in both cases, there are pseudo-media or pseudo-journalists with very partisan or ideologically motivated agendas behind them.

Table 1: Actors behind the spread of false information debunked by Maldito Bulo in 2022

Entity	Creator	Spreader
Political personality or party	7 (1.0%)	6 (0.8%)
News media or journalist	67 (9.2%)	27 (3.7%)
Public figure	4 (0.5%)	3 (0.4%)
Organisation or company	–	–
Fake profile that supersedes a real person or institution	42 (5.8%)	–
Parody or satiric media or profiles	34 (4.7%)	–
Another type of profile in social media	90 (12.3%)	96 (13.2%)
Not identified	487 (66.8%)	592 (81.2%)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The third research question relates to more features of the hoaxes and debunked information. First, regarding the format, we see the predominance of text in 63.0% (n = 459) of the cases. In 32.2% (n = 235) of the cases, an image or meme was used, while in 27.2% (n = 198), there was a video or audio. Less frequent were the news or headlines (8.4%; n = 61), WhatsApp or similar chains (5.2%; n = 38), and other non-digital formats (0.4%; n = 3). These values can be seen with more detail in Figure 3.

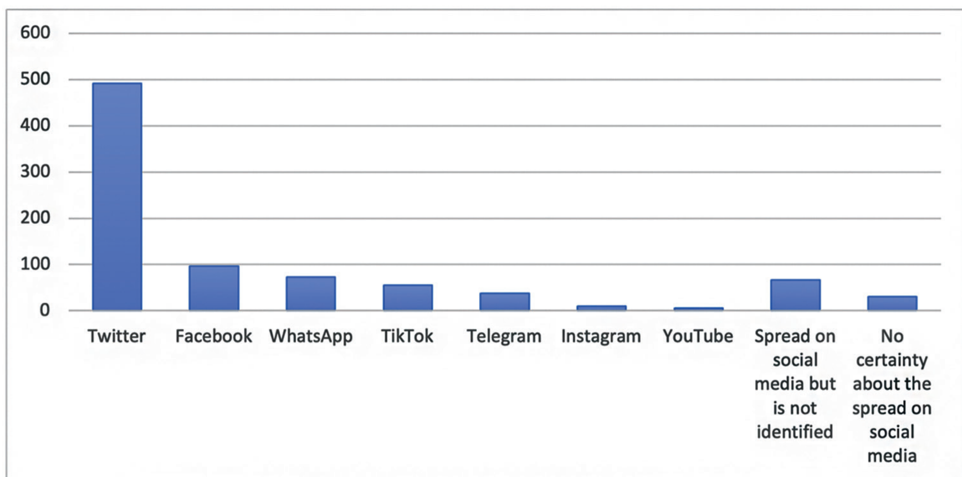

Figure 3: Social media in which false information debunked by Maldito Bulo in 2022 spread
Source: Compiled by the authors.

As mentioned in the methodology description, more than one format could be present. Thus, one common combination was using text to interpret images or videos; in many cases, the text was falsely describing the audiovisual content or making fake claims about it. For instance, a text falsely claiming that the person participating in a violent attack shown in a video is a political leader; another alternative could include deep fakes or visual modifications of the audiovisual content that makes the textual interpretation redundant.

Secondly, it is also possible to study on what social media platforms the fake content was spread, thus identifying where the efforts to fight misinformation should focus. The most present social media was Twitter, with 67.4% (n = 491) of the cases. The following platforms are far: Facebook reaches 13.2% (n = 96); WhatsApp reaches 10.0% (n = 73); TikTok, 7.5% (n = 55); Telegram, 5.2% (n = 38); Instagram, 1.4% (n = 10), and YouTube is present in 0.8% (n = 6) of the cases. In 9.1% (n = 66) of the cases, the content spread in social media, but none are identified, and in 4.1% (n = 30), there is no certainty about whether the debunked information spread in social media. Figure 4 shows these values.

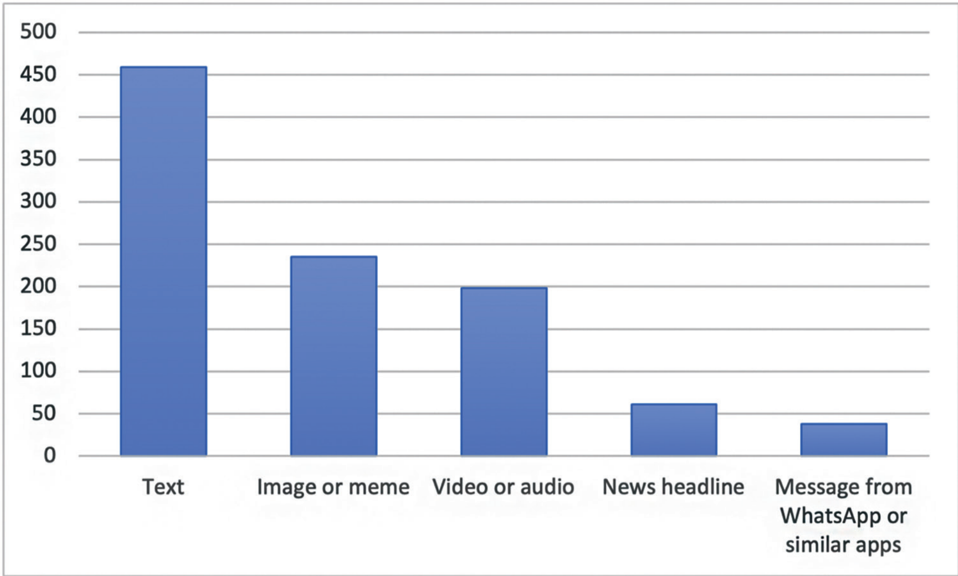

Figure 4: Formats of the false information debunked by Maldito Bulo in 2022
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Conclusions and discussion

Studying the features of disinformation is an essential step to address it more efficiently and effectively. Our article has attempted to offer more details on the topics, actors and platforms involved most present among the fake content debunked in 2022 by one of the leading Spanish fact-checkers.

The first observation, related to the predominance of social issues, has important implications, given that the specific issues included within this topic are related to coexistence and have a closer connection to issues that directly affect citizens. Of particular relevance is the potential role of disinformation in spreading hate speech (Evolvi 2018; Grambo 2019), which can be seen in the many debunks including attacks on social groups such as immigrants: a post-hoc test showed that up to 57.6% of all the debunks could have been used to spread hate, something even more common within the category of social issues, as it includes some of the associations – social burden, criminality, symbolic threat (Amores 2022) – most common against vulnerable groups such as migrants and refugees. The presence of many hoaxes spreading hate speech can be partly explained by the fact that one of the reasons motivating Maldito Bulo to debunk something is its danger for individuals and coexistence, and hate speech poses a grave danger for both; thus, false information spreading hate speech might be proportionally more present here than in real life. Nonetheless, given the particular challenges posed by disinformation spreading hated, rejection and extremist discourses (Schwarz–Holnburger 2019), it is important to pay attention to this connection.

Strongly related to that, the presence of political content is important because, although the hoaxes might not always spread hate speech, they contribute to the polarisation of society, especially in a context of growing affective polarisation (Iyengar et al. 2012), in which the political confrontation is not only guided by policy differences but by the belonging to a different group. This is also visible in the fact that many hoaxes have a transversal presence of political intolerance; for instance, in case of a message falsely accusing immigrants of crimes, the attack is not only aimed against them but also against the politicians that allow them to stay in Spain. It is also relevant to highlight that politics are less frequent than social issues when we study only the main topic, but they are transversally and underlyingly present in a large amount of the debunks, which connects with the great role of political misinformation already mentioned in the introduction (Vosoughi et al. 2018).

Regarding the actors responsible for the phenomenon of misinformation, some news media and journalists seem to be responsible for a significant proportion of the debunked information. It should be noted that the most frequent actors in this category are not well-established and traditional media or professionals but rather extremely partisan and pseudo-media, such as *Mediterráneo Digital, Alerta Digital* or the pseudo-journalist Alvise Pérez. The agenda and misinformation strategies of this type of actors have already been studied in the past (Palau-Sampio–Carratalá 2022) and should be differentiated from the role of real news media. Moreover, real news media are sometimes superseded by fake social media accounts, replicating their logo and name so that some content can be spread as if this news medium had been responsible for it, making it more believable or making this media less reliable. Thus, together with fighting these pseudo-journalists, the actual dimension of the responsibility of real journalists and news media needs to be further researched (Bakir–McStay 2018). It is also important to keep in mind that a large proportion of the debunked information circulated without a clear origin and thanks to the spreading activity of regular citizens, which are sometimes unaware of the consequences of their actions. Focusing on specific actions is important, but a deeper

understanding of the sharing patterns of those citizens will be also necessary in future research.

Finally, citizens consider that not only journalists and media are behind the creation and spread of fake news, but also politicians and political parties (Blanco-Herrero et al. 2021). This does not seem to be the case here, and their presence has been marginal in the debunks conducted in 2022 by Maldito Bulo, although long-term studies might be able to analyse whether this remains stable in other periods of time.

Regarding the format and platforms, there is a clear predominance of text and Twitter, respectively. One possible explanation for this is the fact that, although Twitter allows the use of other audiovisual elements, the text is still the most prevalent format, so it makes sense that, given the predominance of Twitter, the text is also very present. Another reason for the strong presence of text was already mentioned in the Results section, where it was mentioned that many audiovisual contents were accompanied by a textual interpretation that introduced false claims about what is depicted. Given the current advances in audiovisual forms of misinformation, including deepfakes and AI-based techniques, future studies will need to continue exploring formats, as it could be expected that text might lose relevance compared to these formats.

More challenging to explain is the strong predominance of Twitter. Some studies have pointed out that disinformation on Twitter was growing (Allcott et al. 2019), and there are claims that the fight against misinformation on Twitter has declined since the acquisition of Twitter –now X – by Elon Musk by October 2022 (Hickey et al. 2023; Smalley 2023), leading to a lack of compliance of the platform with the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation (Goujard 2023). These changes are, however, too recent and it is expected that the predominance of Twitter is rather explained by the focus on this platform by the fact-checkers than by its greater presence of misinformation. Determine the platform with most cases of false information is not part of this study, and future works will need to specifically address this.

However, the difference in the presence of debunks between Twitter and other social media platforms is too big to be explained by these factors. The main reason behind this is how Maldito Bulo conducts its research: they usually show some examples of messages spreading the debunked hoax; these examples do not pretend to reflect all the discussion around the topic but just to illustrate it, and these examples are usually tweets. Here it should be highlighted that fact-checkers do not seek to offer a complete image of the disinformation scenario but to verify or debunk specific scenarios. Accordingly, the use of tweets is reasonable, given the clarity and ease of access to this content, but this could also lead citizens to believe that Twitter is the primary source of fake news (Blanco-Herrero et al. 2021), while other platforms might be ignored.

Finally, it should be explained that the use of Maldito Bulo as a reference had a double intention: the study of the most relevant disinformation spread in Spain during 2022 and the study of the fact-checking activity of this organisation. Although this offers a complete approach to the research, it also poses a limitation by itself because the goal of these institutions is not to make a complete collection of the disinformation present in a society over a period or to analyse this false information but to verify some cases of potentially false contents and to debunk them when they are fake. The debunks offer

information about the debunked false information, and they can be used as an approximation to the otherwise immeasurable phenomenon of disinformation, but the biases of the fact-checker might affect the global perspective over disinformation. This could have been observed before when the significant predominance of Twitter was discussed.

It is also important to remember that fact-checkers cannot – and do not claim to – debunk all the fake news out there, and their perception of danger and virality, although validated by the IFCN, might not be generalisable for the whole society. For example, it has not been a subject of the study. However, there has been a more significant presence of debunks of content coming from what could be considered the political right: it will be a matter of future studies to determine whether the spread of fake content is more common among the right, as some international studies have hinted (Guess et al. 2019; Grinberg et al. 2019), or if the agenda and bias of the fact-checker are playing a role here.

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Social Media Influencers Defined by Adolescents[1]

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Social media influencers have emerged as digital celebrities, positioning themselves as role models for different audiences, particularly young people. Due to the inherent social and psychological immaturity of adolescents, they are considered a more vulnerable group, and thus, their digital behaviour and its potential impact on their identity development should be carefully studied. This study aimed to explore how adolescents perceive social media influencers. Sixty-two adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 living in Spain participated in 12 focus groups. The study attempted to understand how adolescents define the concept of social media influencers and which profiles they follow in order to identify the attributes they prioritised. This study describes the categories proposed by the adolescents, as well as the influence generated by social media influencers based on the age and socio-economic status of the interviewees. Additionally, the study reveals that adolescents from lower socio-economic levels and adolescents between 16 and 17 years old expressed a desire to become social media influencers.

Keywords: social media influencer, social media, entertainment, followers, parasocial relationship, brands, adolescents

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Introduction

According to Statista (2022), the global social media influencer marketing industry has more than doubled in size since 2019, reaching a record value of 16.4 billion U.S. dollars. In Spain, influencer marketing and native advertising were the fastest-growing categories, despite a nearly 24% drop in advertising expenditure in 2021, as reported by Infoadex in 2022. Advertisers find social media influencers attractive as brand ambassadors because they are perceived as authentic (Audrezet et al. 2020), credible (Djafarova–Rushworth 2017; Lim et al. 2017) and trustworthy, creating close, engaged relationship with consumers (Silva et al. 2021). Social media influencers can be seen as modern-day, whose practices and impacts resemble those of traditional celebrities, which have been extensively researched in the past (Mowen et al. 1981; Petty–Cacioppo 1980; Petty et al. 1983).

Social media influencers are skilled in creating high-quality content that inspires and resonates with their audience, which allows them to cultivate a following comparable to that of celebrities and film stars. They can then monetise this following through product promotion (Lowe-Calverley–Grieve 2020). According to social cognitive theory (Bandura 1999), followers tend to model their behaviours on those of influencers they observe, which makes them symbolic models to imitate. This effect is amplified by the perception of social media influencers as "close, intimate friends" (Meyers 2017), which reinforces the idea that anyone can achieve their level of popularity (Silva et al. 2021). This perception is particularly strong among children and adolescents. The stronger the parasocial interaction with influencers, the more reliable and attractive their message becomes. As a result, followers tend to view their recommendations of social media influencers as more trustworthy and attractive and are more likely to follow advice. These values are also transferred to the products and brands influencers endorse (Lim et al. 2017). Governments and institutions have become increasingly interested in the phenomenon of social media influencers. According to the European Parliament, "influencers are content creators who aim to build authentic and trusted relationships with their audience on social media, primarily on social media platforms" (Michaelsen et al. 2022: 9). Although laws and self-regulation guides for social media influencers vary between countries in the European Union, the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) has proposed recommendations for brands collaborating with content creators since 2018 (EASA 2018). As the boundaries between mass communication and interpersonal communication, and between producers and consumers become increasingly blurred, there is growing urgency to ensure transparency and protect vulnerable groups, particularly children and adolescents (Buckingham 2003: 310).

Given the strong link between adolescents and the consumption of influencer content, there is a pressing need to better understand the perceptions and attitudes of this age group towards this phenomenon (Zozaya-Durazo et al. 2023).

From opinion leaders to social media influencers

Various professionals such as musicians, scientists, athletes, actors and politicians, have the ability to influence people through their work, often being identified as role models due to their admirable qualities and inspiring attitudes. This influence is amplified when the influencer and influenced share similar characteristics such as profession (Lockwood–Kunda 1997). The power of influence exerted by a third party has been explored through the study of individuals who hold influence in specific fields, such as executives or superstars influencing university students, or in immediate environments (Scheer–Stern 1992; Lockwood–Kunda 1997). The emergence of social media influencers has shifted the focus towards those who have established themselves as opinion leaders through online platforms.

Social influence is a crucial factor in decision-making for individuals and groups, which has been studied in the context of communication and human behaviour. The influence of opinion leaders on mass audiences has also been widely explored through the media. The two-step flow theory of communication suggests that the information transmitted from one person to another has a stronger effect on the receiving party than if it were obtained through the media (McQuail 1997). This emphasises the role of opinion leaders as an important conduit for disseminating messages through mass media with exposure, medium, content and audience attitudes being the key factors that facilitate communication flow (Katz–Lazarsfeld 2006).

Opinion leaders possess the ability to influence others by changing their opinions and behaviour. Their dynamic, active profiles, vast exposure to information, and position of authority in their group make them capable of expressing persuasive opinions. The effectiveness stems from being trusted and esteemed by their followers, allowing them to persuade those close to them effortlessly and subtly in their daily interactions. This influence is stronger in some areas, and each opinion leader has a unique set of characteristics, making them prevalent in fields such as public affairs, fashion, marketing and cinema (Katz–Lazarsfeld 2006).

The impact of celebrities or famous individuals on consumer behaviour has been explored for decades from a commercial perspective. Studies have demonstrated that even when endorsing products that may not be of personal interest to consumers, the favourable effect of a celebrity's recommendation can be considerable because of their credibility, attractiveness and status in the eyes of consumers. This effect is further enhanced when consumers already associate the celebrity with the product being promoted (Mowen et al. 1981; Petty–Cacioppo 1980; Petty et al. 1983).

Celebrities are known for their talents or successful careers, and many of them have also built a strong presence on social media. Along with sharing content related to their personal and professional lives, they endorse commercial content with their followers.

Social media influencers are similar to traditional celebrities in their ability to convey authenticity (Audrezet et al. 2020), credibility (Djafarova–Rushworth 2017; Lim et al. 2017) and trust (Silva et al. 2021). However, for influencers to be successful, the audience must be able to identify with or relate to them (Kamins et al. 1989; Schouten

et al. 2020). With the rise of social media and increased connectivity, the concept of influence has evolved and expanded beyond traditional specific spheres or privileged profiles. Social media influencers have emerged and taken on functions that were once reserved for opinion leaders and celebrities (Thelwall et al. 2022).

Social media influencers are perceived by adolescents as personal, credible and relatable, which leads them to view them as close friends (De Veirman et al 2017). In fact, some adolescents develop a parasocial relationship with influencers (Lou–Kim 2019). The influencers create a natural image, which persuades viewers to follow and engage with them emotionally, despite the lack of affective reciprocity. This naturalness is consciously cultivated by celebrities, who encourage viewers to form imaginary relationships with them (Horton–Wohl 1956). Similarly, social media influencers foster a false sense of friendship with their followers (Lou–Kim 2019).

Social media's defining characteristics facilitate the idea of enhanced intimacy between communicators and their audience given the channel's potential for more frequent interaction and informal conversations, and openness to engagement. In addition, influencers can speak directly to the camera and involve the audience in relevant moments of their lives, creating a stronger sense of connection (Reinikainen et al. 2020). Users themselves have access to more resources than traditional media allows, such as commenting on, sharing and liking content posted by social media influencers, allow them to establish bilateral relationships with these influencers. As a result, viewers may be more easily influenced by the recommendations and advice of social media influencers (Caro-Castaño 2022), who are perceived as acquaintances and even friends. Previous research has shown that parasocial relationships can lead to an increase in the consumption of products promoted by social media influencers (Jin–Ryu 2020; Xiang et al. 2016).

This introduction provides the context for this study's RQ1:

RQ1. What defines a social media influencer and what characteristics do adolescents take into account to classify them?

The study also explores what motivates adolescents to consume influencer content. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is applied to understand how individuals actively engage with media content to meet social, informative, entertainment and learning needs. UGT proposes that individuals search for media content to interact socially, gain information about their environment, escape from routine through entertainment, build personal relationships and express their personal identity. The gratifications sought in the media are based on the audience's expectations and emotional evaluations, which influence their choice of media and content. This theoretical framework draws on the works of (Lasswell 1948; Nordenstreng 1970; McQuail 1984).

In this context, the second research question this study aimed to answer was:

RQ2. What gratifications do adolescents obtain when consuming content generated by social media influencers?

Despite the variation in critical capacity among this age group, previous studies have highlighted age and gender (Goodrich 2013; Roedder 1981; Sokolova–Kefi 2020) as variables that can affect the development of a critical attitude towards online content. Additionally, socio-economic status has been shown to play an important role in the individual development (Adler et al. 2019). In both research questions, we aimed to

determine whether there were differences in terms of age or socio-economic level. While several studies have attempted to define and categorise the phenomenon of social media influencer marketing, this research study takes an innovative approach by answering these questions from the perspective of the consumers of this content, particularly adolescents.

Method

Methodological procedures

To address our research objective, the authors conducted an exploratory qualitative study that included focus groups with adolescents aged 11 to 17 years of age in Spain. Using a qualitative approach allowed us to give participants a voice and gain insight into their decision-making, career aspirations and digital media habits. By using inclusive strategies, we were able to immerse ourselves in their day-to-day experiences and understand their perceptions of social media influencers (Silverstone 2005).

Focus groups are a valuable tool for gathering information, aimed at encouraging participants, particularly adolescents, to interact in a relaxed and informal setting to discuss a specific topic and generate group knowledge and agreement (Hernández et al. 2014). For this case, the focus groups were moderated by researchers who were specialists in the topic of discussion and trained in moderating to create a relaxed atmosphere that promotes interaction among participants and ensures the discussion remains focused on the topic of interest (Stewart–Shamdasani 2014).

To minimise any discomfort, the participants might feel being moderated by an adult on a virtual platform, we opted to select participants who already knew each other, even though this approach deviates from the typical recommendation for organising focus groups. This measure is often necessary in school-based research, as noted in previous studies (Gómez Espino 2012; Horner 2000; Smith et al. 2008). Despite this non-traditional approach, we took steps to ensure that the discussions were focused on the topic of interest and that all participants had an equal opportunity to share their views.

Due to the context determined by the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus groups were held virtually (in Microsoft Teams and Zoom Rooms), and the participants were always asked for their permission to record the session (with consent forms signed by their parents or legal guardians). The participants were told that the recordings were exclusively for academic use and would be used to fully transcribe the discussion.

The focus groups were organised with a semi-structured guide of questions with the aim of addressing the same topics in all groups while allowing for some flexibility. Our research questions came from the three main topics of the debate: conceptualisation, characteristics and the gratifications that influencers provide adolescents.

To encourage interactive and informal discussion, it was emphasised that the focus groups were not exams, so there were no right or wrong answers, and no one would be judged or evaluated based on their responses. After this introductory section to build

rapport, we spent a few minutes asking about the participants' general perceptions of social media. After this, we discussed the focus of the study by asking about the type of people they followed on different social media platforms. We directed the conversation towards the profiles of famous users/social media influencers they followed, delving into their relationship with these profiles to better understand why they followed them, and what level of credibility and trust they attributed to them. Finally, we also wanted to know the adolescents' opinions of social media influencers' role as brand collaborators and ambassadors and their reaction to it. The focus groups last between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. This fieldwork was conducted between April and June 2021. Table 1 shows the correspondence between the research questions and the guide of questions asked in the focus groups.

Table 1: Correspondence between the research questions and the structure of the questionnaire used to guide the focus groups

RQ	Guide of questions for focus groups
RQ1. What defines a social media influencer and what characteristics do adolescents take into account to classify them?	– Do you follow famous people/influencers on social media? – Who do you follow? – In your opinion, what is an influencer? Relationship with brands – Have you seen the influencers you follow promote products on their social media platforms? – Why do you think influencers promote brands? – What do you think about influencers promoting products and brands while you're watching their content? – Have you ever heard an influencer talk about a new product and then done some research about what the influencer said? Or is the information the influencer provides you with enough? (Situation presented using an example mentioned in the conversation.)
RQ2. What gratifications do adolescents obtain when consuming content generated by social media influencers?	– Why do you follow them? – Do you interact with the influencers you follow? – Do you trust what the influencer tells you on social media? Why? – Do you think influencers exaggerate or change things about their experience to make their posts more appealing?

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Procedure

The information analysis process is presented below:

- Phase 1. Literal transcription. The recordings of each focus group were transcribed verbatim.
- Phase 2. Identification of dimensions. The research team read the transcripts and reached a consensus on identifying the dimensions based on the scientific literature reviewed in this study.

- Phase 3. Categorisation process. The transcripts were reviewed once again, and the statements were sorted into categories based on the previously established dimensions defined for this study. The content analysis of the transcript was carried out using NVivo 12 Plus program (BOYATZIS 1995).

The process used to categorise the proposed themes can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Categorisation process

RQ	Dimension	Categories	Description	Example
RQ1. What defines a social media influencer and what characteristics do adolescents take into account to classify them?	Conceptualisation of the phenomenon of social media influencers among teenagers	Defining characteristics	Content creators; number of followers; collaborations with brands	"They spend their days on social media creating content that resonates with their audience and attracts followers, as this is how they earn their income." (FG7, girl, 8th–9th grade, middle SES.) They inspire others to adopt similar behaviours, purchase their products, and take an interest in their lifestyle. (FG12, girl, 12th–13th grade, middle SES.)
		Typology of influencers according to minors	Classification of influencers based on two factors: their professional trajectory and the social media platforms on which they create content	"It depends on the person; I may be less likely to trust an influencer who constantly does four collaborations a day, compared to someone like Rafa Nadal who has faced real problems and been in the news. In his case, I have greater trust because I know he has overcome challenges through his actions." (FG6, girl, 12th–13th grade, higher SES.) "An influencer is not the same as a YouTuber. While a YouTuber is someone who regularly uploads content to YouTube, an influencer can be found across various social media platforms. For example, many influencers on Instagram do not upload videos to YouTube and focus primarily on that platform." (FG12, girl, 12th–13th grade, middle SES.)

RQ2. What gratifications do adolescents obtain when consuming content generated by social media influencers?	Gratifications of following influencers among teenagers	Needs – social needs – information needs – entertainment needs – other needs	Motivations (social, informational, entertainment) driving the consumption of Influencer content among this age group	"Influencers often share dance videos and offer recommendations for various products or services. For example, during quarantine, I followed a celebrity's social media account and noticed that fans frequently recommended movies or TV shows in the comments section. It was a great way to discover new content and ultimately led me to watch something new." (FG10, girl, 8th–9th grade, low SES.)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Sample

A total of 62 adolescents from various regions of Spain participated in 12 focus groups, each comprising 5–6 members. The sample was recruited with the assistance of schools. To organise the focus groups, two filter criteria were established: the age of the adolescents and their socio-economic status (SES), the SES of the educational centre was determined, considering its type (private, subsidised or public) and geographic location, which was employed as an indicator of the socio-economic level of the minors' households (Andrino et al. 2019). Based on the academic year, four age categories were created, which included 11 years old, 12–14 years old, 14–16 years old and 16–17 years old participants. This approach provided a preliminary indicator of the socio-economic level of the households the adolescents came from (Andrino et al. 2021). Based on these criteria, the schools were segmented into higher level (income of > €30,000), medium level (€11,450–€30,350) and lower level (< €11,450), according to statistics from the National Institute of Statistics (Andrino et al. 2021). This two-fold segmentation was established because it was considered that the age of the minors and the socio-economic context of their families could impact the level of critical digital competence among adolescents (Smahel et al. 2020).

We reached out to schools across Spain that matched the three different profiles (private, subsidised and public) and had a suitable location to comply with the specified filter criteria. We explained the project to the directors and/or course instructors, who acted as intermediaries to contact the parents of the adolescents. The final decision on whether to allow their daughters and sons to participate in the study was made by the parents. Although the two-step contact process slowed down the sample selection process, it was considered necessary to segment the student profile and avoid using the ineffective cold-calling technique in research involving this age group.

Table 3 presents the distribution of the focus groups according to two defined filter variables.

Table 3: Total number of focus groups held

	Participant grade	Socio-economic profile of centre			
Age	Grade in Spain	Higher	Medium	Lower	Total
11–12	6th grade	1	1	1	3
12–14	7th–8th grades	1	1	1	3
14–16	9th–10th grades	1	1	1	3
16–17	11th–12th grades	1	1	1	3
	Total	4	4	4	12

Source: Compiled by the authors.

We selected a total of 17 schools to participate in the study, representing different regions of Spain and encompassing a variety of school types, including private, subsidised and public schools. These schools were chosen based on their socio-economic status (SES), which was determined by their type and geographic location. Six schools were classified as being at the higher SES level, at the medium level, and three at the lower level, to ensure that the sample was representative of the country's reality (north, south, centre, east and islands). The schools facilitated access to the 62 adolescents who comprised the final sample and participated in the focus groups. Of the 62 participants, 25 were boys and 37 were girls. These were distributed across four different age groups: 26% of ages 11–12; 21% of ages 12–14; 29% of ages 14–16 and 24% of ages 16–17. Participants of different ages were not mixed in the focus groups. The socio-economic level of the neighbourhood was assigned by the location of the schools: 20 adolescents belonged to the higher level, 22 to the medium level, 20 to the lower level (see Table 4).

Table 4: Grade and socio-economic level of participants

Grade	SES	Girls	Boys	Total
7th grade	Higher	1	2	3
	Medium	4	2	6
	Lower	3	4	7
8th–9th grades	Higher	4	1	5
	Medium	2	2	4
	Lower	4	0	4
10th–11th grades	Higher	5	2	7
	Medium	1	5	6
	Lower	1	4	5
12th–13th grades	Higher	4	1	5
	Medium	4	2	6
	Lower	4	0	4
Total		37	25	62

Source: Compiled by the authors.

This project involved several ethical issues to consider, especially regarding the participation of adolescents in the fieldwork. Therefore, prior informed parental authorisation was obtained, which was supervised by the Universidad Internacional de la Rioja Ethics Committee, that financed and reviewed this research project and approved the report.

Results

Definition: What is a social media influencer?

The adolescents interviewed identified three key requirements for a social media influencer: first, the profile must generate and share valuable content on social media; secondly, it must have a considerable number of active followers; and it must engage in product promotions. Interestingly, all interviewees, regardless of age, or socio-economic level, spontaneously mentioned that social media influencers sell products and attempt to persuade their followers of the benefits of those products. Therefore, it is not surprising that for them being a social media influencer is a viable profession for financial gain.

Define them through the content created

The adolescents associated the word "influencer" with someone who worked on social media and posted content for financial gain, regardless of their occupation: "They're on social media all day long creating content that people like and so people end up following them because that's how they make money" (FG7, girl, 12–14 years old, medium SES). Although the adolescents immediately assigned social media influencers a commercial role, they did not define them solely by their relationships with brands, but by their constant presence on the social media platform. In general, they saw them as content creators who aimed to influence the audience by sharing content: "They influence other people to do similar things, buy their products, look into their lifestyle" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES).

The adolescents also stated that what social media influencers shared was not always true: "You have to know that everything [the influencer] tells you is not true" (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES). Younger adolescents said that shared interests were enough to trust social media influencers' recommendations on topics such as video games: "If they have the same interests as us, then I do [trust them]" (FG1, boy, 11–12 years old, higher SES). However, credibility was not always essential: "I follow him because I like to see what he wears, new things, and because I like the style. I like what he does, so I follow him. Even though he has a fake life and all that, it's because I also like his content" (FG2, girl, 12–14 years old, higher SES). Their appreciation of shared content was more important than the influencers' credibility. Social media influencer's likeability and engagement were also very important factors, although the adolescents also expressed a sense of distrust towards them.

The adolescents evaluated the shared content based on the time and effort the social media influencer invested in producing it. They recognised that uploading content alone was not enough, as the quality of the content was essential. As one participant stated: "Right now, being an influencer has become quite fashionable, but it's one thing to upload edited videos ... and a very different thing to upload unedited four-minute videos and things like that" (FG 11, girl, 11–12 years old, lower SES). Therefore, the quality of the content had to be high enough to demonstrate the influencer's investment in time, effort and knowledge.

Define them through the number of followers

One of the most common ways among participants of defining social media influencers is to check the number of followers they have. This quantitative feature has become the measuring stick for determining if someone is a social media influencer or not. "They are people with the capacity to reach many people and it's usually related to a special talent" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES).

According to the interviewees, physical attractiveness and beauty were key features for attracting followers and were seen as comparable to developing any other skill. "If you're able to reach a lot of people, you're an influencer, either because you're pretty or handsome, or because you have or are developing a special talent" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). These attributes were seen as the deciding factors for having the greatest reach on social media. "It's not easy [to have followers] unless you're a model or something, or you're pretty or handsome, but the best place to attract followers is on TikTok" (FG8, boy, 11–12 years old, medium SES). The adolescents perceived aesthetics to be a crucial factor when social media influencers presented themselves.

Define them through their brands collaborations

In terms of the influence of recommendations on product and services, the older adolescents interviewed said that they searched for different opinions and used their own criteria when deciding a purchase, but they expressed some vulnerability and scepticism towards the products recommended and the behaviour of the social media influencers they liked the most. For example, one participant said: "There was one influencer who said, 'Wow! I love this make-up product'. And she was wearing it and everything, and said it looked great and everything. And then I checked, and she was using a beauty filter as well. So, I was really surprised because, if she was saying that the make-up was great, why was she using the filter? So, yes. I was very surprised" (FG5, girl, 14–16 years old, higher SES).

The older adolescents in the study associated the social media influencers' behaviour and the needs of their audience with the product they promoted. They naturally linked with the content their followers expected as one participant noted: "It depends a lot on

the kind of content the influencer makes ... a boy who only drinks energy drinks will be sent energy drinks to drink and sponsor because he has a specific audience" (FG12, boy, 16–17 years old, medium SES). The adolescents not only recognised the commercial value of the social media influencers but also understood the importance of the affinity that must exist between the influencer and their audience.

The adolescents spoke candidly about the commercial aspect of social media influencer activity and considered product promotion to be a defining characteristic of the term. As such, they excluded certain people they followed from the influencer category because they did not meet this requirement.

The classification

The interviewees considered the professional and personal trajectory of social media influencers, as well as the social network on which they most frequently publish content, as important factors in classifying and determining their typology. These aspects also relate to and justify the influencers' recommendations, including their authenticity, practicality and credibility.

Social media influencer as a profession

During the interviews, it was interesting to discover not only classified social media influencers based on their fame and impact on social media but also differentiated them according to whether they had gained their popularity through their profession or social media activity. As one participant pointed out: "Even football players are becoming influencers, so they also sponsor many sports things" (FG8, boy, 11–12 years old, medium SES). The adolescents further emphasised that those who regularly post content on social media, are on their way to becoming influencers. For example, one interviewee stated: "I would consider influencers to be people who regularly post content on social media" (FG2, girl, 12–14 years old, higher SES).

The adolescents valued celebrities who had gained their popularity through their profession before social media, such as singers, actors and athletes, as authorities. They believed that the celebrities' life story and experience provided credibility to their online endorsements. As one participant said, "It depends a lot on the person. I don't trust an influencer who's made it a profession and does four collaborations a day as much as I trust Rafa Nadal, for example, who had a real problem and who was in the news and everything, so I say, 'OK. I trust him', because I know that it happened to him and he solved it with that" (FG6, girl, 16–17 years old, higher SES). The adolescents recognised the importance of verifying the authenticity of social media influencers' recommendations by examining their offline behaviour. They understood that celebrities' online persona may not always align with their real-life actions and used this as a way to assess their credibility. The interviewees displayed greater scepticism towards social media influencers who owed their popularity solely to social media. For instance, one

interviewee stated: “If I see that she’s an influencer who works full time on this, well, I might not trust her as much as someone who has no need to share it” (FG6, girl, 16–17 years old, higher SES). In both cases, the adolescents were focused on confirming authenticity of what they saw, particularly the participants between 16 and 17. As a result, native social media influencers did not generate as much trust. Viewers could not verify these details through other channels like they could with social media influencers with a known profession, which incited greater trust.

Importance of the social media platform and the content posted

One approach that the adolescents commonly used was to distinguish social media influencers based on the platform where they shared content: “A YouTuber is not the same as an influencer. A YouTuber is just someone who regularly uploads content to YouTube, but there are many influencers on Instagram, for example, many people who don’t upload videos to YouTube, but focus much more on that platform. They’re also influencers” (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). The adolescents also did not usually associate YouTube content creators with the term “social media influencer”. They acknowledged that “there are YouTubers who are influencers and YouTubers who are not influencers” (FG2, boy, 12–14 years old, higher SES).

TikTok content creators were evaluated based on their ability to create impactful posts and generate new trends, particularly in the realm of dance. According to one participant: “All you have to do on TikTok is watch a celebrity or one of your idols dances, and you can learn that dance and start doing it” (FG10, girl, 12–14 years old, lower SES). The participants also distinguished between a YouTuber and a social media influencer and referred to those who posted on TikTok as TikTokers. As one participant put it: “I don’t see her as an influencer. I see her as a TikToker” (FG9, girl, 16–17 years old, lower SES). Participants in the study reserved the term “social media influencer” for individuals who used Instagram. As one participant explained: “A YouTuber is just someone who regularly uploads content to YouTube, but there are many influencers on Instagram, for example” (FG 12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). Instagram was perceived as a platform that prioritises the influencer’s image over the content they share, whether it be a story, video game, challenge or trend.

Once the adolescents acknowledged the influence content creators had on them, they began to recognise the differences between social media influencers based on their characteristics. They made this distinction when evaluating the effects that posted content had on their feelings and behaviour as one participant noted: “An influencer who helps people with depression or whatever is not the same as an influencer who just dances” (FG3, boy, 12–14 years old, lower SES). By assessing the impact of influencers’ posts on the audience they could differentiate them, as another participant says: “There’s another YouTuber I really like who doesn’t upload video games. He uploads soccer videos ... I really like them. They’re the ones I watch now, the ones that give me inspiration to maybe play soccer or do something” (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES).

Gratifications adolescents sought from influencers

Younger adolescents, between 11 and 14 years old, sought closeness and interaction with celebrities. They looked to connect with influencers who shared their interests and values, as one participant explained: “In the end, you’re the one who chooses an influencer because you supposedly like the same things and what she shows is supposedly in line with your tastes” (FG9, girl, 16–17 years old, lower SES). Adolescents were aware of their ability to curate their social media feeds and sought out profiles that were compatible with their interests to ensure that they saw content that matched their preferences. The study participants recognised that social media users choose who to follow based on their individual needs and interests. As one participant said, “It also depends on the person, for example, my little brother loves Legos and loves Star Wars and he follows Lego influencers and everything. On the other hand, my mother, who likes healthy cooking, follows influencers who cook healthy food and things like that” (FG5, girl, 14–16 years old, higher SES).

The adolescents’ experience on social media was dynamic, and they reported frequently following and unfollowing social media influencers based on the content they shared. As one participant said: “You see that she’s going on a trip somewhere, so maybe I’ll follow her while she’s on that trip and then unfollow her. It’s more so I can see the content she has on her profile at that moment” (FG6, girl, 16–17 years old, higher SES).

Although identifying with the social media influencers they followed was a basic requirement for the adolescents, once that criterion met, they followed influencers as a form of entertainment and distraction. For instance, male participants reported enjoying watching video game commentary, as one participant explained: “He also plays the video game I like the most, which is *Fortnite,* and when he makes comments, I’m entertained and watch how he plays” (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES). Sharing interests with the social media influencer remained a crucial factor in their decision to follow them. Social media influencers provided entertainment for adolescents both on and off social media because their recommendations, advice, and trends were incorporated into the adolescents’ daily lives. As one participant said: “They have a lot of dances, and they also recommend things. You can log on to any celebrity’s account and, during lockdown, for example, I used to log on to a celebrity’s account and there were always fans in the comments recommending a film or a series and it was very cool, because you ended up watching it” (FG10, girl, 12–14 years old, lower SES).

For many adolescents, social media influencers served as newscasters, providing a window to reality. As one participant explained: “They give you fun facts. I follow one that sometimes talks about politics and he’s very funny. I have a TikTok for every topic I like” (FG5, girl, 14–16 years old, higher SES). The study participants sought humour as a fundamental and relevant attribute when consuming content, regardless of the subject matter, including politics. This demonstrated that the principle of entertainment took precedence over other factors. Participants signed up for and followed various accounts to satisfy their individual tastes and needs. Another reason adolescents followed social media influencers was to stay informed about the influencer’s personal interests without intermediaries: “I follow quite a few rappers because, within music, rap is not very

mainstream, so that's where I find out what topics are being discussed, what songs, who's releasing albums and things like that, and I find out mostly through Instagram, which is what I mainly use it for. There are actors too and some that make me laugh and not much else" (FG12, boy, 16–17 years old, medium SES).

Social media influencers were a fundamental part of the adolescents' online experience, and they expressed interest and curiosity in learning more about them beyond what was presented on their profiles. Some adolescents even followed social media influencers who exposed other influencers. As one participant expressed: "It's a person who reveals scams by different companies and who focuses on people who do things like try to fool their followers on social media, for example. I think that, for me, I'm really interested in things like that because I like to read and acquire information on all those kinds of topics" (FG3, boy, 14–16 years old, lower SES).

Those participants who had hobbies or other extracurricular activities mentioned a certain educational intent in viewing social media content shared by experts. Their interests that linked them to social media influencers provided personal enrichment and self-benefit, as they reported viewing certain influencers to resolve their concerns and doubts on specific topics and to learn from them. As one participant explained: "Once I needed to buy a specific kind of paint, so what I did was to see which paint was most recommended by the artists (and therefore YouTubers) I liked the most, so I used them as a reference" (FG12, girl, 16–17 years old, medium SES). Some of them followed specialised social media influencers because they were authorities in their respective disciplines, making them valuable sources of information on aspects of their extracurricular lives. As one participant said: "They can give me advice about what I'm interested in, about certain hobbies I have or sports videos, for example. I play badminton as a hobby and watch videos of professionals playing to learn new techniques" (FG4, boy, 14–16 years old, medium SES).

For adolescents, anything social media influencers did was subject to being reproduced and shared among peers, creating opportunities for socialising on and off social media. Dance proposals, for example, served as a kind of social glue, providing a reason for socialising. As one participant said: "Some do dances and I like how they dance, and I get ideas for me and my friends. Or some because ... they're fashion designers or hairdressers and I get ideas for when I dye my hair ... I get ideas from each one of them for myself and there are some that, for example, day after day upload videos to raise your self-esteem, so to speak, and it kind of, in a way, makes the public feel good about these people" (FG3, girl, 14–16 years old, lower SES).

Differences based on age and SES

The age, and socio-economic status (SES) of participants highlighted differences in their opinions and positioning regarding social media influencers. Although some differences have been mentioned earlier, it was generally found that the age and SES variables were inversely related. Adolescents with lower income tended to be less interested in social media influencers than those in higher socio-economic groups. For example, students

between 11 and 12 years old from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less attracted to the online world and less interested in social media influencers than their peers in the same grade. As one participant explained: “Well, I don’t follow anyone. I usually watch videos. I usually watch AuronPlay or Ibai who react or play a video game” (FG11, boy, 11–12 years old, lower SES). The level of income earned by social media influencers from their online activity was a variable that was more important to higher-income adolescents and became less important as the interviewees got older.

Younger adolescents were increasingly drawn to profiles that were more focused on social media and became famous through their online activity, such as Charlie D’Amelio, Rubius, Wismichu and AuronPlay. However, participants between 14 and 16 years old tended to follow individuals who were famous for activities beyond social media, such as singers, athletes and actors, including Elsa Pataky, Rafa Nadal, Millie Bobby Brown and Will Smith. This shift in preferences may be related to the fact that adolescents between 11 and 14 expected a more intense and personal relationship with social media influencers.

Figure 1: Influencers followed by adolescents by age
Source: Compiled by the authors.

They valued the number of followers social media influencers had and appreciated when influencers responded to them directly through comments and private messages. As one participant explained: “It’s cool that they respond to you if you’ve been following them for a while, but even if you’ve been following them for a little while, still, it’s cool that they respond to you because, if you follow them, it’s because you like what they do” (FG7, girl, 12–14 years old, medium SES). However, these feelings of admiration for social media influencers tended to diminish with age, and other variables became more important.

Adolescents were more interested in seeing real aspects of influencers' lives, perhaps because it was easier for them to identify with them.

The main results are summarised in Figure 2.

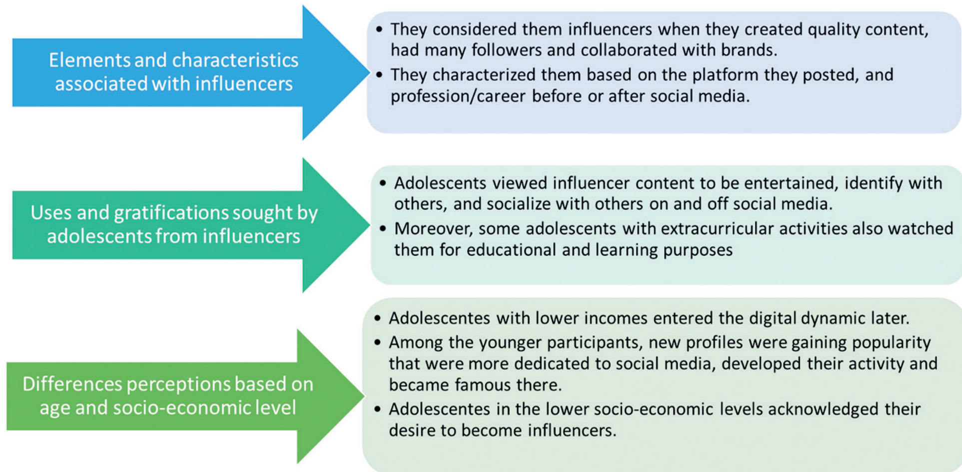

Figure 2: Adolescents' considerations about influencers
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how adolescents perceive social media influencers and identified three essential characteristics: constant activity on social media, significant number of followers and brand collaborations. While social media influencers share many characteristics with celebrity endorsement, as the ability to create and transmit authenticity, credibility and trust (Mowen et al. 1981; Petty–Cacioppo 1980; Petty et al. 1983; Audrezet et al. 2020; Djafarova–Rushworth 2017; Lim et al. 2017; Silva et al. 2021), they also possess new characteristics that arise directly from the social media platforms on which they post their content, such as the number of followers they have. Adolescents were aware of the significant impact that social media influencers had on their daily lives and recognised that they were often influenced by their recommendations. The capacity of social media influencers to influence the behaviour and decisions of their audiences is akin to that of opinion leaders (Scheer–Stern 1992; Lockwood–Kunda 1997). However, in this case of social media influencers, their potential to influence is not based on specific knowledge or talent but on their ability to relate to their audience capacity (Galeotti–Goyal 2009; Harrigan et al. 2021; Pilgrim–Bohnet-Joschko 2019).

Although there were some similarities in the adolescents' understanding of the role of social media influencers, one significant difference emerged. For adolescents, credibility was not a necessary trait for social media influencers, unlike the opinion leaders

proposed by Katz & Lazarsfeld (2006). On the contrary, adolescents were aware that social media influencers often fabricated or exaggerated their posts. However, this did not result in any penalty, such as unfollowing them, because adolescents followed social media influencers for entertainment purposes, rather than credibility.

The importance of entertainment in this age group's affinity for the content or platform where the social media influencer posted cannot be overlooked. As other research has shown, entertainment was crucial in retaining the attention and interest of the audience on social media. Any interruptions, such as persuasive messages or insipid comments, were perceived as obstacles by the adolescents, making the online experience sluggish (Feijoo et al. 2023; Kadekova–Holienčinova 2018; Sádaba–Feijoo 2022; van Dam – van Reijmersdal 2019).

The attraction that adolescents felt towards social media influencers was based on the parasocial relationship that could be established between them. It is important to understand this relationship in order to fully comprehend the role that social media influencers play in the lives of young people. It is important to note that participants between 11 and 14 years old saw social media influencers as closer figures (Meyers 2017), leading to a more intense parasocial relationship. As a result, they desired greater interaction with social media influencers compared to adolescents between 16 and 17. Participants between 11 and 14 often had more intense parasocial relationships with social media influencers and expected greater interaction from them than older adolescents. Therefore, it is important for influencers to manage expectations regarding response frequency to avoid triggering frustration. Additionally, the friendship-like relationships that adolescents formed with social media influencers contributed to the belief that anyone can become a media figure (Silva et al. 2021). Technical elements of the platforms used by social media influencers such as talking to a camera, liking comments and sending direct messages enhance this sense of closeness and contribute to the creation of a parasocial relationship between the influencers and the adolescent.

There are great challenges from a social point of view as adolescents are consuming in a regular way the content produced by social media influencers. On the one hand, to assure that this content is adequately identified when commercial interests are present should be a priority for responsible brands and companies (Zozaya–Sádaba 2022); on the other hand, media and advertising literacy efforts should be improved to properly include the particularities of digital and mobile consumption and of social media influencers content.

Limitations and future lines of research

The present study provides valuable conceptualisations and characterisations of adolescents. However, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should also include children of younger age. The use of the focus group technique limits the sample size, and the qualitative nature of the method means that general conclusions cannot be drawn from the results. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the sample size in this study was limited and the conclusions drawn are based on the inter-

pretations of the participants, which may not be representative of the broader population of adolescents. Authors did not encounter any issues related to conducting the focus groups online since participants had held classes online due to the pandemic. Therefore, future research should strive to include a larger and more diverse sample to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore the source effects and psychological impact effect that social media influencers have on adolescents' self-concept and perception of their environment. Further investigation into the parasocial relationship between adolescents and social media influencers would also be valuable. Besides conducting the focus groups, the authors designed the focus group guide, facilitating the task of interpreting the results.

Conclusions

The study confirms that adolescents are highly receptive to the commercial recommendations, advice, image and lifestyle shared by social media influencers. The criteria used to classify each social media influencer included the platform where they posted the most, the type of content they produced, the products they promoted and their professional background or experience prior to social media. Especially for older adolescents, the background of influencers becomes relevant for following them, while teens aged 11 to 14 are particularly interested in those content creators who are exclusively dedicated to social networks.

The participants valued feeling a sense of identification or inspiration from the profiles they followed, but entertainment remained a fundamental requirement for all social media influencers without exception. While entertainment may be the primary reason for following social media influencers, credibility also played a crucial role, especially when adolescents sought content related to specific topics such as sports, hobbies, etc. In fact, recommendations from influencers who are considered specialists in their fields can be highly persuasive for this age group. The study concludes that adolescents, regardless of age, did not consider credibility as a key factor when following or validating a social media influencer. Rather, they viewed them as entertainers who exaggerated their experiences to promote products; younger participants tend to view social media influencers as a universal source of entertainment, providing access to humour, controversy and gossip, and often develop a sense of closeness with them. Girls tend to follow influencers to discover new trends, while boys tend to explore current affairs, particularly in the areas of technology and video games.

Social media influencers possess some of the traits of conventional opinion leaders, such as the ability to sway opinions, beliefs and behaviours regarding personal appearance, purchasing options, etc. For influencers who have experience beyond social media, their background is a crucial component of their influence on the consumption choices of their audiences which aligns with source perception theories concerning the credibility of social media influencers. This point underscores the significance of the trajectory of social media influencers in relation to the credibility of their influence.

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Stigmatisation or Destigmatisation? An Analysis of Newspapers Reporting on Mental Health Problems in Malaysia

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Mental health has emerged as an international priority to secure health, well-being and human development. Media are important sources of health information, and this gives media a powerful voice in contributing to the creation, perpetuation, evolution and/or attenuation of stigma towards mental illness. Through employing stigmatisation as the theoretical framework and qualitative content analysis as the research method, this study examined the coverage of mental health problems during the Covid-19 pandemic by Malaysian legacy and online newspapers. Six dimensions of stigma (concealability, origin, course, disruptiveness, aesthetics and peril) were examined and it was found that individual level of origin and peril were the most prominent dimensions of stigma found in the reporting. In addition, the newspapers focused on promoting mental health awareness and literacy in their destigmatisation effort, while reflecting either a positive or neutral valence in their coverage. The implications of the findings were discussed with regard to the role of media in reporting mental health problems and destigmatisation of mental illness.

Keywords: mental health, mental disorder, mental illness, stigmatisation, destigmatisation

Introduction

A wealth of scholarly research on stigma was inspired by Erving Goffman's (1963) book entitled *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Link–Phelan 2001). Originally, the term "stigma" came from the Greeks, it refers to signs (e.g. branding, tattooing, cutting) that were burned, marked or cut into the body to identify a blemished or ritually polluted person. The bearers of stigma were usually slaves, criminals

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or traitors, who were believed to be "not quite human" and should be "avoided in public places" and "disqualified from full social acceptance" (Goffman 2006: 131).

Essentially, stigma is an ideology used to assert the inferiority of the stigmatised and justify the danger he/she represents. Notably, stigmatisation is a common phenomenon discussed in the mental health literature (Ramli et al. 2017). While various stakeholders have tried to challenge the stigmatisation by stating that mental disorder is like any other health problem and that it could affect anyone (Parrott et al. 2020), stigmatisation is "more debilitating and more difficult to overcome than mental illness itself" (Day et al. 2007: 2191).

Media are important sources of health information, and this gives media a powerful voice in contributing to the creation, perpetuation, evolution and/or attenuation of stigma towards mental illness. Myrick and Pavelko (2017) asserted that media and stigma are so intertwined that researchers have examined newspapers articles as a measure of structural stigma in society. Previous studies also found that the media have often portrayed mental disorder rather negatively (e.g. Elzamzamy–Wadoo 2020; Wahl 2003; Zucker 2019). Mental illness is often associated with violence, crimes, dangerousness, instability, irresponsibility, untrustworthiness, etc.

Public attitudes toward mental health problems are relevant to the social, psychological, physical and economic well-being of those affected by the condition. Hanafiah and Van Bortel (2015) pointed out that in Malaysia, schizophrenia carries the most stigma and receives the most discrimination, followed by bipolar disorder and depression. Furthermore, individuals living with mental illness in Malaysia reported an adverse impact of stigmatisation on their lives, including financial independence, social relationships and employment. Those who were employed have also reported experiencing exploitation at the workplace.

Zucker (2019) highlighted that responsible reporting of mental illness could contribute to the destigmatisation of the public health issue, and cultivate a society that would respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the vulnerable group. However, studies examining how Malaysian media report about mental health problems is limited (e.g. Baharuddin–Hamid 2014; Razali–Sanip 2018). Furthermore, none of the previous research employed stigmatisation as the theoretical framework. In addition, scholars also warned that mental disorder is expected to be the second most common health problem affecting Malaysians after heart diseases by 2020 (Chong et al. 2013).

This study aimed to examine the coverage of mental health problems by Malaysian legacy newspapers, which are published in Malay, Chinese and English language. The study also analysed an online-only newspaper in Malaysia. Specifically, it asked the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the stigmatising portrayal of mental health problems found in the reporting by Malaysian newspapers?

RQ2: What is the destigmatising portrayal of mental health problems found in the reporting by Malaysian newspapers?

RQ3: What is the valence of coverage on mental health problems reported by Malaysian newspapers?

Stigmatisation

Goffman (1963) explicated that stigma is a response to an undesired difference, while outlining three types of stigma. First, there are abominations of the body, which usually refer to various physical disabilities. Second, there are blemishes of individual characters including weak will, domineering passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs. It was mentioned that mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, homosexuality, unemployment, radical political behaviour, etc. fall under this category. Third, there are the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion. Expanding on Goffman's work, Jones et al. (1984) identified six dimensions of stigma: 1. concealability; 2. origin; 3. course; 4. disruptiveness; 5. aesthetics and 6. peril.

The following section presents previous studies conducted in both media and other disciplines that are related to the six dimensions of mental illness stigma. This is to offer an enriched context for the public health problem because mental disorder is also a multidisciplinary concern. Additionally, this study used a directed approach to qualitative content analysis, in which existing theory and prior studies on the topic are essential in helping to establish the coding scheme. Therefore, a review of the related literature is also important for a directed coding application.

Six dimensions of stigma

The concealability component describes how detectable a characteristic is. The visibility of mental health problems ranges from undetectable to highly noticeable, depending on the type of disorder, its severity and treatment status (Day et al. 2007). Individuals living with mental illness will usually conceal their condition to avoid prejudice and discrimination (Jones et al. 1984). Additionally, people with manageable mental disorder have more personal agency about whether and to whom to reveal their condition, how much information to provide, and what timing should be used for any disclosure (Myrick–Pavelko 2017).

Nevertheless, Henderson and Hilton (2018) addressed that there are negative consequences to concealing having mental illness. It deters people from obtaining useful information about the condition, while leading to treatment avoidance, increase dropout from treatment, reduce treatment adherence, self-stigmatisation and social isolation.

Origin refers to how the stigmatising condition came into being. Specifically, it is concerned with the extent to which the stigmatised person's behaviour may have caused the problem (Link–Phelan 2013). According to Carod-Artal (2017), the determinants of mental illness can be divided to micro- and macro-level. At the micro-level, individual characteristics (e.g. personality, disposition, beliefs, etc.) as well as genetic and other biological factors have been identified as causes of mental illness. At the macro- or societal level, social, economic, cultural and political factors play an important role in affecting people's mental health.

Notably, scholars addressed that individual responsibility for mental health have been emphasised much more than societal level responsibility (Hsieh et al. 2021;

Temmann 2021). Vishwanath (2014) also stated that behaviours that were thought to be within the control of individuals were more prone to being stigmatised, and such beliefs were founded in individualist cultures, whereby traditional conservative values of self-determination, internal control and self-discipline were emphasised.

The "just world" hypothesis (Lerner 1965) and meritocratic worldviews hold that individuals are personally responsible for the outcomes they experience. People might believe that individuals who experience significant life problems must have a character flaw. Consequently, these worldviews could lead to self and public stigmatisation towards mental illness (Rüsch et al. 2010). In contrast, Carod-Artal (2017) asserted that the determinants of mental health include not only personal attributes such as the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, behaviour and interactions with others, but also consist of social, economic, cultural, political and environmental factors such as national policies, social protection, living standards, working conditions, as well as family and community social support. Therefore, scholars advocated that the society should have a broader understanding about mental health, and understand that individuals with mental illness do not deserve what they get (Hsieh et al. 2021; Temmann 2021). Significantly, through stressing public health as social justice, Dorfman and Krasnow (2014) also argued that when public health practitioners acknowledge that personal behaviour is only part of what determines health status, they must contend with the physical, social and political environments surrounding individuals. The authors also called for media advocacy to apply social justice values to address the social determinants of health.

Myrick and Pavelko (2017) found that episodic frames were dominant in the news coverage of mental illness, in which personal story was featured and individuals were blamed for their own situation. The authors also revealed that thematic framing was rarely used to situate mental disorder as a societal issue. In addition, research showed that individualising health responsibilities could lead to negative public opinion, as well as eroding social support for policy to address the public health problem (Temmann 2021).

The course dimension refers to how the stigmatised condition will develop over time. It is also related to the likelihood for people with mental illness to recover and benefit from treatment (Jones et al. 1984). Research showed that users of mental health services found it particularly demoralising when a mental health professional informed them that they have a chronic, debilitating condition that will interfere with their education, capacity to work and ability to form a family (Link–Phelan 2013).

The disruptiveness aspect indicates the extent to which the stigmatised condition interferes in interpersonal interaction and communication, hence adding difficulty to social life. Pachankis et al. (2018) explained that most people are uncertain about how to interact with individuals with mental disorder because they lack knowledge and experience with the health condition. Therefore, Link and Phelan (2013) suggested that disruptiveness could be avoided if a mental health problem is successfully concealed.

According to Hanafiah and Van Bortel (2015), the four main groups of people who discriminated most against the mentally ill were family, friends, employers and health-care professionals. Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that some studies reported that

healthcare professionals were also victims of stigma due to their role and association in mental health services (Hansson 2017).

Historically, people with mental disorder have been an embarrassment to the family, hence it is not uncommon that they were locked by their families in basements, dungeons, prisons or hospitals and institutions (Dąbrowska–Wieczorek 2020). Tso and Park (2020) also found that in Chinese societies, cultural, philosophical and religious values contributed to severe forms of stigma and face loss experienced by families of the mentally ill. Consequently, these caused families to abandon mentally ill individuals.

According to Hidayat et al. (2020), the culture in Indonesia also perceive mental disorder as shameful. *Pasung* is the term used in the country to describe the method used by families to isolate and restrain people who are severely mentally ill and considered a danger to themselves or others. Although *pasung* has been banned since 1977 because it is a violation of human rights, the method continues to be used in areas with limited mental health services. Hidayat et al. (2020) also explained that *pasung* involves the use of chain shackles, rope or wooden stocks. The mentally ill are usually locked in cages and hidden spaces located at a distance from the community or in a separate hut.

Aesthetics refers to the extent to which a stigmatised condition elicits an instinctive and affective reaction of disgust (Link–Phelan 2013). The aesthetic aspect of the mentally ill is usually not obvious. However, when an individual with mental health problem is homeless, or when his/her condition deteriorates together with hygiene and self-care, the aesthetic characteristic (e.g. odour, appearance, clothing, etc.) could be salient, and hence evoking negative reaction from others.

The peril component is also known as dangerousness; it is related to the harm inflicted on oneself or others by the mentally ill (Jones et al. 1984). Foster and O'Mealey (2021) stressed that the peril dimension is a prominent predictor of stigmatising attitudes and desire for social distance from people with mental disorder, especially for those who develop psychosis.

Although only a small percentage of people with mental illness are connected to violent crimes, the media are more likely to report such news in headlines (O'Brien 2020). In addition, McGinty et al. (2014) found that news coverage in the U.S. tend to emphasise the strong association between mass shootings and serious mental illness. The cause of gun violence was often attributed to "dangerous people" rather than "dangerous weapons" (McGinty et al. 2014: 406).

Method

The newspapers chosen for this study were *Harian Metro* (Malay), *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese), *The Star* (English) and *Malaysiakini* (online-only). The first three are legacy newspapers, and they enjoy the highest circulation within their respective language stream (AdQrate 2020). According to the statistics released by AdQrate, the 2020 daily circulation of the legacy newspapers is 149,253 *(Harian Metro),* 338,568 *(Sin Chew Daily)* and 248,559 *(The Star)*. Although the legacy newspapers also publish online, their digital content is almost identical to the print version.

Malaysiakini is one of the most respected and successful online news portals in the country (MURUDI–TING 2019). According to SimilarWeb (2020), *Malaysiakini* has 2.5 million readers per day on desktop and mobile devices. Although the online news portal offers sections in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil language, this study only focused on the English section because other sections contain mainly translations of major English language stories.

This study employed qualitative content analysis (QCA) as the research method. QCA is divided into conventional (inductive), directed (deductive) and summative methods (HSIEH–SHANNON 2005; MAYRING 2020). The directed approach is guided by existing theory or prior research. Notably, the theory or literature help to identify the key concepts, formulate the research questions, provide predictions about the variables of interest or about the relationships among variables, as well as helping to determine the initial coding scheme (ASSARROUDI et al. 2018). The goal of a directed approach is to validate or extend a theoretical framework. The evidence can be presented by showing codes with exemplars and by offering descriptive evidence (HSIEH–SHANNON 2005). This study chose a directed approach because stigmatisation was used as the theoretical framework, and the coding scheme was developed based on the theory.

According to Dunn (2022), both nominal and ordinal qualitative data can be numerically summarised by counting the number of observations or computing the percentages in each level because these statistics help the researcher to better understand the data. Furthermore, findings recorded in both frequency and percentage could be presented in visualisable representation such as graphs, tables and charts. Additionally, in their discussion on using tables to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research, Cloutier and Ravasi (2021: 122) stated that researchers could create a table known as "cross-case comparative table" or "co-occurrence table" to present the findings. This table would be useful to show whether and how frequently different features of cases tend to co-occur, by ordering them in a way that visually demonstrates patterns in the distribution of these features. Cloutier and Ravasi (2021) also explained that these tables often employ frequency counts or summary qualitative descriptions of observations. Significantly, the authors claimed that these tables can be considered the visual equivalent of a correlation table for quantitative researchers. The current study also used frequency and percentage to summarise and compare the data in tables.

In addition, this study employed purposive sampling, which is also the most commonly used sampling method in qualitative content analysis (ELO et al. 2014). In qualitative studies, the researcher is interested in informants/documents that have the best knowledge/information concerning the research topic (RUBIN 2021). Since this study aimed to examine the coverage of mental health problems by Malaysian newspapers, the keywords used for search in the newspapers online archives were "mental disorder", "mental health" and variations of the terms (e.g. "mental illness", "psychological problem", etc.), which were found within headlines or body text of the articles. The articles were drawn from the time frame of 1 January to 31 December 2020, which coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collection started in March 2021, spanning across a period of three months.

This study collected 519 articles from the four newspapers as indicated in Table 1 and 2. The unit of analysis was the article, which included straight news, editorial, column articles, feature articles, letters and advice columns.

Table 1: Number of articles reporting mental health problems

Newspapers	Number of Articles
Harian Metro	49
Sin Chew Daily	209
The Star	219
Malaysiakini	42

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 2: Types of articles reporting mental health problems

Types of Articles	Harian Metro (n = 49)	Sin Chew Daily (n = 209)	The Star (n = 219)	Malaysiakini (n = 42)
Straight news	33	116	147	290
Editorial	0	0	0	0
Column articles	10	61	26	4
Feature articles	5	20	16	0
Letters	0	0	25	9
Advice columns	1	12	5	0

Source: Compiled by the author.

Appendix A records the operational definitions for the coding categories of the three research questions investigated in this study. RQ1 asks: "What is the stigmatising portrayal of mental health problems found in the reporting by Malaysian newspapers?" The stigma of mental health problems was examined from six aspects according to the dimensions outlined by Jones et al. (1984), namely 1. concealability; 2. origin; 3. course; 4. disruptiveness; 5. aesthetics; and 6. peril. An article could contain more than one dimension of stigma, and all of them were coded accordingly.

RQ2 asks: "What is the destigmatising portrayal of mental health problems found in the reporting by Malaysian newspapers?" This study employed an inductive approach to develop the coding categories for destigmatisation. After a preliminary examination of the data, the researchers outlined eight coding categories for destigmatisation (see Appendix A). An article could contain more than one category of destigmatisation, or contain both stigmatisation and destigmatisation statements, they were all coded accordingly.

RQ3 asks: "What is the valence of coverage on mental health problems reported by Malaysian newspapers?" Valence refers to the attitude expressed towards individuals with mental health problems. This study used the categories of supportive, critical and

neutral for the coding of valence (see Appendix A), and only the most dominant valence found within the articles were coded.

The 519 articles collected from the four newspapers were analysed using Excel. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to report the data. To ensure the reliability of this study, a communication graduate was chosen as the second coder. During the training session, the author (who was also the first coder) and the second coder coded 50 articles that were chosen randomly from the sample. Disagreements were analysed and some additional explanations were included to the coding instruction in the code book. Wimmer and Dominick (2014) suggested that between 10% and 25% of the body of content should be tested for inter-coder reliability. Therefore, this study randomly selected 10% of the news items, which was equivalent to 52 articles for the calculation of inter-coder reliability. Using Cohen's kappa, the inter-coder reliability was 0.932 (stigma), 0.915 (destigmatisation) and 0.974 (valence).

Findings

This study found that *The Star* contributed to the highest number of articles (219), followed by *Sin Chew* (209), *Harian Metro* (49) and *Malaysiakini* (42).

Concealability

As recorded in Table 3, the four newspapers did not mention much about the dimension of concealability. *The Star* had the highest percentage (21.27%) of coverage reporting that the symptoms of mental disorders are obvious, followed by *Sin Chew* (18.66%), *Harian Metro* (12.24%) and *Malaysiakini* (9.52%).

Table 3: Aspects of concealability reported by Malaysian newspapers

Concealability	Harian Metro (n = 49) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 209) %	The Star (n = 221) %	Malaysiakini (n = 42) %
Obvious	12.24	18.66	21.27	9.52
Non-obvious	0	3.35	6.33	0
Not mentioned	87.76	77.99	72.40	90.48

Source: Compiled by the author.

In its coverage of gaming disorder, *The Star* outlined three obvious signs of gaming addiction, which was advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO). It was also reported that a formal diagnosis of the condition requires the symptoms to persist for at least 12 months (Lee 2020). The signs include:

1. Lack of control over gaming such as time spent on games, how deeply an individual is immersed in it, unwilling/unable to stop a gaming session on his/her own, or use of dishonest means (lying, skipping school) to continue gaming.
2. Gaming becomes the main priority over everything else in real life, e.g. instead of studying for an exam, an individual stays up all night to level up his/her game character. Other daily activities and even personal hygiene may be neglected.
3. Continues to be more involved with gaming despite negative consequences and being reprimanded, which are completely ignored. This can cause significant deterioration of relationships, academic performance and personal hygiene.

Origin

Table 4 shows that all the newspapers except *Harian Metro* attributed mental health problems more to societal rather than individual level of origin. According to literature review, individual level of attribution tends to lead to stigmatisation, and hence this study found that *Harian Metro* carried the highest percentage of stigmatisation from the dimension of origin (54.42%). This was followed by *Sin Chew* (37.05%), *Malaysiakini* (28.40%) and *The Star* (26.03%).

Table 4: Levels of origin of mental health problems

Origin	Harian Metro (n = 79) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 421) %	The Star (n = 365) %	Malaysiakini (n = 81) %
Individual	54.42	37.05	26.03	28.40
Societal	45.57	62.95	73.97	71.60

Source: Compiled by the author.

As reflected in Table 5, among the various aspects under individual level of origin, thinking patterns were emphasised the most by *Harian Metro* (30.23%). In addition, *Sin Chew* (19.87%) and *Malaysiakini* (43.48%) highlighted the impact of loneliness. Meanwhile, *The Star* highlighted the most about unfortunate life events (28.42%). The unfortunate life events reported by the four newspapers included grief and loss, divorce, relationship problem, sexual harassment, sexual assault, war, disaster, etc.

Table 5: Individual level of origin of mental health problems

Individual level of origin	Harian Metro (n = 43) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 156) %	The Star (n = 95) %	Malaysiakini (n = 23) %
Genetics, hormonal fluctuations, brain development	9.30	17.31	6.32	0
Thinking patterns	30.23	19.23	6.32	0
Physical illnesses	2.33	3.21	1.05	4.35
Substance abuse	2.33	7.05	20.00	8.70
Excessive and dysfunctional usage of media/Internet	12.33	17.31	13.68	21.74
Loneliness	20.93	19.87	23.16	43.48
Unfortunate life events	14.65	13.46	28.42	13.04
Others	7.90	2.56	1.05	8.70

Source: Compiled by the author.

Malaysiakini reported that an undergraduate student suffered from depression during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. The student was afraid of being alone, especially in the dark. She also experienced palpitations, breathing difficulties, vomiting and had to sleep for more than 10 hours in order to recover (Bernama 2020).

Table 6: Society level of origin of mental health problems

Societal level of origin	Harian Metro (n = 36) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 265) %	The Star (n = 270) %	Malaysiakini (n = 58) %
Family problems	13.89	14.34	7.78	10.34
School bullying	2.78	1.51	1.85	3.45
Cyberbullying	0	1.13	2.22	5.17
Academic pressure	8.33	10.19	3.33	3.45
Occupational/workplace stress	2.78	12.08	8.52	17.24
Unemployment/economic turmoil/poverty	5.56	14.72	20.37	24.14
Culture and norms	22.22	1.89	1.48	0
Problems within the public health system	0	2.26	6.67	0
Problems in other systems	0	0	7.78	0
Covid-19 pandemic	44.44	39.25	37.04	36.21
Others	0	2.64	2.96	0

Source: Compiled by the author.

This study analysed the news articles published in 2020, which was the period of the outbreak of Covid-19. Therefore, the pandemic and the associated measures like lockdowns were attributed by all the four newspapers as the most dominant factor at the societal level for causing mental health problems (see Table 6).

In a letter published by *Malaysiakini,* the author wrote that 35,000 distress calls to the Health Ministry's Psychological Helpline between March and October 2020 were registered. The author also mentioned that due to Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown, many Malaysians were losing their jobs, faced pay cuts and immense pressures on meeting monthly bills and providing food for the family. In addition, sole enterprises, small and medium-sized enterprises as well as some big corporations were also facing unprecedented challenges to sustain their businesses. The author condemned that the Malaysian Government was in denial of the detrimental effects of prolonged lockdown. Furthermore, the author criticiszed that a mere RM24 million was all that could be allocated for mental health needs from the RM322.5 billion of the 2021 Malaysian Government budget (Lovrenciear 2020).

Course

The majority of the articles published by the four newspapers did not consider course as a dimension in their coverage of mental health problems. Even when mentioned, it was mostly reported that mental health problems were only a temporary condition, in which they were reversible and preventable (see Table 7). Only a small percentage in *The Star* (9.46%) and *Sin Chew* (4.31%) reported that mental health problems are permanent.

Table 7: Aspects of course reported by Malaysian newspapers

Course	Harian Metro (n = 49) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 209) %	The Star (n = 222) %	Malaysiakini (n = 42) %
Temporary/reversible/preventable	6.12	6.70	15.32	2.38
Permanent	0	4.31	9.46	0
Not mentioned	93.88	89.00	75.23	97.62

Source: Compiled by the author.

In an advice column published by *Sin Chew,* it was reported that mental illness is like any other physical illness (e.g. flu, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc.). The writer of the advice column is a psychologist and she suggested that mental health problems is nothing to be afraid of. She also stressed that the public should know that mental illness can be treated and cured, reversed and the patient can resume normal daily functioning (Zeng 2020).

Disruptiveness

According to Table 8, most of the coverage by the four newspapers also did not mention the dimension of disruptiveness. When it was reported, *Harian Metro* focused mainly on interference in professional relationship (6.12%). *Sin Chew* and *The Star* reported about interference in family relationship, which accounted for 11.74% and 9.73% respectively. *Malaysiakini* had equal coverage mentioning about interference in family, romantic and professional relationships, which was 2.33% for each category.

Table 8: Aspects of disruptiveness reported by Malaysian newspapers

Disruptiveness	Harian Metro (n = 49) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 213) %	The Star (n = 226) %	Malaysiakini (n = 43) %
Interfere in family relationship	4.08	11.74	9.73	2.33
Interfere in romantic relationship	0	0.47	0.44	0
Interfere in friendship	0	1.88	2.65	2.33
Interfere in professional relationship	6.12	3.76	8.41	2.33
Not mentioned	89.80	82.16	78.76	93.02

Source: Compiled by the author.

The Star reported about a family tragedy that happened in Singapore, in which a 35-year-old woman who was diagnosed with mental disorder refused treatment. Nevertheless, her parents did whatever was necessary to pacify her. It was also reported that the 66-year-old selfless, loving and devoted father and his wife were on the verge of suicide as their daughter became increasingly unreasonable and demanding. In November 2018, the daughter and her father had a confrontation in the kitchen, which ended with the father strangling his daughter. He was sentenced to two years and nine months in jail. A psychiatric assessment found that the father was suffering from a major depressive episode and significant caregiver stress, which substantially impaired his mental responsibility for his acts in killing his daughter (Aseanplus News 2020a).

In addition, *The Star* also published a column article written by a Malaysian professor who suffered from panic disorder. The professor shared that he could not go to work or even leave the house for fear that he might suffer an attack. Furthermore, he could only go to work if his wife came along. Eventually, his wife had to apply for early retirement just to accompany him to his lectures and everywhere else. The professor mentioned that he usually had one public speaking engagement a month but from 2006 to 2008, he refused all invitations and he revealed that panic disorder almost ended his career (Rasdi 2020).

Aesthetics

The aesthetic dimension is another category not highlighted by all the four newspapers. *Sin Chew* had only 0.48% coverage reporting about odour issues, while *The Star* had 0.91% coverage mentioning about the problem of hygiene (see Table 9).

Table 9: Aspects of aesthetics reported by Malaysian newspapers

Aesthetics	Harian Metro (n = 49) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 209) %	The Star (n = 219) %	Malaysiakini (n = 43) %
Odour	0	0.48	0	0
Hygiene	0	0	0.91	0
Not mentioned	100.00	99.52	99.09	100.00

Source: Compiled by the author.

According to *The Star,* the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown has exacerbated the problem of *pasung* in Indonesia. This is because the mentally ill's access to medication and treatment had been restricted. Therefore, their families had to chain and lock them up for fears they could harm themselves or others. It was also reported that the mentally ill often defecate and urinate without access to a toilet, with no ventilation aside from a small window to insert food, and extremely limited human contact. As a result, many of those subjected to *pasung* have been found to be undernourished, physically wasted and suffer from a range of untreated health conditions, and sometimes deceased (Aseanplus News 2020b).

Peril

Although most of the coverage by the four newspapers did not report about the dimension of peril, suicide was their major concern when they did cover about the issue. *Malaysiakini* was most dominant in relating suicide in the peril dimension of mental health problems (38.10%), followed by *Sin Chew Daily* (20.64%), *The Star* (18.10%) and *Harian Metro* (16.00%).

Table 10: Aspects of peril reported by Malaysian newspapers

Peril	Harian Metro (n = 50) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 218) %	The Star (n = 221) %	Malaysiakini (n = 42) %
Self-harm	2.00	3.67	6.33	2.38
Suicide	16.00	20.64	18.10	38.10
Dangerous to others	8.00	4.13	4.07	2.38
Not mentioned	74.00	71.56	71.49	57.14

Source: Compiled by the author.

Sin Chew reported that based on the WHO's findings, about 90% of suicide cases are associated with mental disorder. Suicide is among the top 10 causes of deaths globally. It is also the second leading cause of death among those who are between 15 to 29. In Malaysia, there are 2,000 suicides a year, or more than five such deaths a day. In 2017, a National Health and Morbidity Survey found that 10% of students between 13 and 17 showed suicidal thoughts, and the depression rate among teenagers was 18.3%. Furthermore, experts warned that mental health problems are expected to be the second most common health problems affecting Malaysians after heart diseases by 2020 (Sin Chew Daily 2020a).

Stigmatisation

Table 11 summarises the various dimensions of stigma towards mental health problems reported by the four newspaper (Tables 3–10). Only the obvious aspect of concealability, individual level of origin and permanent course were considered stigmatisation. Meanwhile, all aspects of disruptiveness, aesthetics and peril were taken into consideration as coverage contributing to the stigmatisation of mental health problems. The average percentage of each stigma dimension was calculated to obtain the final score of stigmatisation towards mental health problems.

Table 11: Dimensions of stigma towards mental health problems

Stigma	Harian Metro	Sin Chew Daily	The Star	Malaysiakini
Concealability (obvious)	12.24	18.66	21.27	9.52
Origin (individual level)	54.42	37.05	26.03	28.40
Course (permanent)	0	4.31	9.46	0
Disruptiveness	10.20	16.27	18.72	4.76
Aesthetics	0	0.48	0.91	0
Peril	24.49	25.36	27.85	42.86
Average of stigmatisation	16.89	17.02	17.37	14.26

Source: Compiled by the author.

On average, *The Star* scored 17.37% on stigmatisation towards mental health problems in its coverage, followed by *Sin Chew* (17.02%), *Harian Metro* (16.89%) and *Malaysiakini* (14.26%). Individual level of origin was found to be the most prominent dimension of stigma found in *Harian Metro* (54.42%) and *Sin Chew* (37.05%). Furthermore, peril was the most frequently reported dimension of stigma found in *The Star* (27.85%) and *Malaysiakini* (42.86%).

Destigmatisation

Table 12 shows that "promoting mental health awareness and literacy" was the leading aspect of destigmatisation found across the four newspapers. It was most frequently mentioned in *Sin Chew* (47.19%), followed by *Harian Metro* (36.36%), *The Star* (33.52%) and *Malaysiakini* (28.13%). On average, it was also *Sin Chew* that scored the highest in destigmatisation coverage of mental health problems (12.50%), followed by *Malaysiakini* (11.72%), *The Star* (11.33%) and *Harian Metro* (8.41%).

Table 12: Destigmatisation of mental health problems

Destigmatisation	Harian Metro (n = 49) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 320) %	The Star (n = 364) %	Malaysiakini (n = 42) %
Providing first-person narrative	1.82	0.94	2.47	0
Highlighting that mental illness is like any other physical illnesses	0	1.56	1.65	0
Mentioning that mental health problems could affect anyone	16.36	19.06	23.90	14.06
Calling to decriminalise suicide	0	2.19	3.85	10.94
Promoting mental health awareness and literacy	36.36	47.19	33.52	28.13
Calling for acceptance, empowerment and protection of individuals living with mental health problems	1.82	12.81	10.16	18.75
Urging for changes in the public health system	3.64	2.19	4.95	3.13
Urging for changes in other systems	7.27	6.88	10.16	18.75
Not mentioned	32.73	7.19	9.34	0
Average of destigmatisation	8.41	12.50	11.33	11.72

Source: Compiled by the author.

Harian Metro published a column article written by the Director of the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department (JAWI), Mohd Ajib Ismail. The author mentioned that Muslims need to return to the spiritual approach to cope with life stress, while carrying out practices that could cleanse the soul. He outlined three holy practices that could enhance an individual's mental and spiritual well-being: 1. repentance to Allah and correction of the wrong deeds; 2. being patient and pray; 3. being optimistic. It was emphasised that being patient means that an individual accepts God's test on his/her path of obtaining God's blessing. Those who are patient possess good personalities that reflect their love for God. By being patient, one could control him/herself from doing non-rational deeds or those that are against the Islamic laws, while making the correct

efforts in life. The author also stressed that Muslims must be optimistic and hopeful, it was stated that giving up hope is considered as cutting one's tie with Allah. Notably, the author also encouraged Muslims to seek for advice from medical experts and certified counsellors when they face tremendous life stress (Ismail 2020).

Sin Chew reported that heart disease patients could relieve symptoms of depression by practicing *tai chi*. It was explicated that *tai chi* is considered a mind–body exercise because it requires concentration on posture, relaxation and breathing. It is well suited for people of any age or exercise ability, and can be safely adapted for everyone. Previous studies have also shown that *tai chi* is effective in relieving insomnia, fatigue and depression among breast cancer survivors (Sin Chew Daily 2020b).

In addition, *The Star* contributed to the destigmatisation of mental health problems by urging for changes in different agencies and sectors. In a column article written by a member of the Malaysian Mental Health Promotion Advisory Council, the author highlighted that the promotion of mental health should encompasses the government, employers, community and family. It was also suggested that more can be done for the mentally ill, and it should not be limited to treatment, counselling and care but support for their next of kin as well as offering other benefits (Lee 2020). The author further proposed the following:

1. provide more benefits for the mentally ill such as insurance coverage which is now denied them
2. provide income tax relief for the parents or relatives who have to take care of the mentally ill
3. provide better healthcare services for the mentally ill in government hospitals as well as making available cheaper psychiatric drugs for them
4. remove all forms of discrimination against persons who have recovered from mental illness so that they can be successfully reintegrated into society
5. identify problems at workplaces related to poor mental health with a view towards developing a mental healthcare program for the employees, and
6. make available an employee assistance program that can provide both prevention and early intervention for workers' problems related to mental health stress and emotional issues which affect job performance

It is noteworthy that *Malaysiakini* published a letter which was written by the President of the Malaysian Mental Health Association, Dr Andrew Mohanraj. In the letter, the author addressed an incident in which a 42-year-old-man who attempted suicide was sentenced to one month in prison. Dr Mohanraj called for a total repeal or amendments to Section 309 of the Penal Code, which punishes those who survive a suicide attempt with up to a year in jail, a fine, or both. He also suggested that a psychiatric examination prior to the court proceeding would be the preferred course of action. Moreover, the author advocated that Malaysia must move towards a more compassionate, inclusive and resilient society by destigmatising mental illness and safeguarding the interests of persons with mental disorder and their families (Mohanraj 2020).

By publishing a letter written by an individual living with mental illness, *The Star* offered a first-person narrative and helped the readers to better understand the internal

feelings and thoughts of those who are affected by the health condition. The writer disclosed that she has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar mood disorder and schizo-affective disorder. She also wrote about her unpleasant experience when she was admitted to the hospital, in which she was not treated with dignity or respect, and her privacy was violated by the hospital staff (The Star 2020).

Valence

Most of the coverage on mental health problems in *Harian Metro* and *Sin Chew* carried a neutral valence, which was 67.35% and 59.33% respectively. In addition, positive valence was most dominant in the coverage by *The Star* (62.44%) and *Malaysiakini* (64.29%).

Table 13: Valence of coverage on mental health problems

Valence	Harian Metro (n = 49) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 209) %	The Star (n = 219) %	Malaysiakini (n = 42) %
Positive	14.29	39.71	62.44	64.29
Negative	18.37	0.96	4.98	2.38
Neutral	67.35	59.33	32.58	33.33

Discussion

Media portrayal of mental health problems play an important role in influencing how the public understands the issues and how relevant agencies could help to prevent and combat the public health challenge. In addition, media depiction of mental disorder can also help to reduce stigma, while advocating equal rights and protection for the vulnerable individuals. The differences in the number of articles published by the four newspapers in this study reflected that they have devoted unequal attention to mental health problems in Malaysia. It is noteworthy that *Sin Chew* not only reported extensively on the topic but also contributed to the highest percentage of column and feature articles compared to its counterparts. The articles in *Sin Chew* highlighted the importance of mental well-being, while educating readers to recognise, manage and prevent mental disorder. In short, the Chinese newspaper plays an active role in enhancing mental health literacy among the readers.

This study found that all the newspapers except *Harian Metro* attributed mental health problems more to origin at societal rather than individual level. Furthermore, the Malay daily emphasised on thinking patterns as the origin of mental health challenges. This finding is related to the Malays' (who are also Muslims) faith, which believe that mental illness is an outcome of abandoning or neglecting Islamic teachings and values. The Muslims also believe that God governs all aspects of human experiences including physical and mental health. Therefore, mental health challenges are often viewed to be

caused by weakness in faith, as penance for wrongdoings or a test of conviction (McCrae et al. 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown were attributed by all the four newspapers as the major factor at societal level for causing mental disorders. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have documented the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Choi et al. 2020; Torales et al. 2020). The negative effects included disruption of daily life routines, fear of infections, adverse economic impacts, emotional distress, substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, etc. According to Choi et al. (2020), the global Covid-19 response has focused primarily on containing spread and preventing mortality. However, the authors alerted that the pandemic has potential to create "a secondary crisis of psychological distress and mental health system spillover" (Choi et al. 2020: 340).

While the four newspapers in this study did not report much on the course of mental health problems, Conrad and Slodden (2013) stated that most of the diagnoses seen as mental disorder today were not always seen as mental illness previously. The authors also mentioned that the pharmaceutical industry, consumer and advocacy groups, health insurance industry and current level of science have become the most significant players in medicalisation. Aneshensel et al. (2013) also pointed out that the defining characteristic of a medical model is the assumption that mental disorder is a disease that is explained by genetic defects, biochemical imbalances, hormonal dysregulation and neuronal deficits that can be treated through medical means. Although the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM (2023) reflects a proliferation of diagnoses by including a greater range of human behaviour, Conrad and Slodden (2013) argued that psychiatric diagnoses are not necessarily indicators of objective conditions but should be seen as a product of negotiated interactive influenced by socio-political factors.

Similarly, Horwitz (2010) also claimed that the current health policy might be overly reliant on employing medical remedies for concerns that can often be addressed through alternative social policies. This includes enhancing parenting skills, investing in childhood development programs/child care, promoting healthy lifestyles, as well as reducing socio-economic inequality, workplace pressures and family demands. Aneshensel et al. (2013) also criticised that drug treatments provide temporary symptom control but do not cure the putative disease causing the symptoms. Additionally, Pūras (2017) said that many biomedical interventions could cause more harm than good if used excessively. The author also argued that the narrowly constructed biomedical model currently favoured in mental health policy is not compliant with the right to health and other human rights.

This study found that the four newspapers focused on promoting mental health awareness and literacy as an effort to destigmatise mental health problems. Mental health literacy (MHL) was first introduced by Jorm et al. in 1997. It refers to a person's knowledge and beliefs about mental illnesses, which enhances the ability to recognise specific disorders and to manage their own mental health more effectively. According to Jeon and Furnham (2017), Eastern countries showed poorer ability to recognise mental disorder than the Western countries. In their study to compare the ability to recognise specific mental disorders, Loo et al. (2012) conducted a cross-cultural study involving

British, Hong Kongers and Malaysians. They found that British showed the highest recognition rate for seven mental illnesses while Hong Kongers for two mental disorders and Malaysians none. It was also found that a higher percentage of British participants endorsed professional help for all mental disorders while more from Malaysia and Hong Kong preferred self-help and social support. Nevertheless, Van Beveren et al. (2020) revealed that increased medical literacy does not necessarily lead to increased social acceptance of individuals with mental disorder.

A literature review of stigma and mental illness in Malaysia reflects that there are social disapproval and devaluation of families with mentally ill individuals. Furthermore, there is also fear of mental illness among the general public, while the role of supernatural, religious and magical approaches are commonly used to treat mental illness due to scepticism of mental health services in the country (Ramli et al. 2017). Raaj et al. (2021) recorded that a cohort of traditionally conservative people in Malaysia tends to avoid medical treatment and seek religious or traditional healers. The author also explained that the term psychiatric illness means *gila* (crazy or madness) in Malay language, and it carries a highly negative connotation.

Notably, Hansson (2017) outlined three approaches to reduce public stigma towards mental illness, namely protest, education and contact. Protest actions address the injustice in various stigmatising descriptions or representations while education focuses on dispelling myths about mental illnesses with facts. Contact strategies include interpersonal contact with individuals living with mental illness because it is believed that personal contact will eliminate stereotypes and reduce negative attitudes. Significantly, Kalisova et al. (2018) also emphasised that the most promising approach in reducing stigma is individual-based interventions and stories that demonstrate that mental disorder is treatable and that mentally ill people can live satisfactory and functional lives in the society. Additionally, personal testimonials are powerful because the openness and rich context of the experiences convey stories of adversity, bravery, passion and triumph, which could yield greater understanding, tolerance and inclusiveness (Ma–Nan 2018; Zucker 2019). The media in Malaysia could work on reporting personal testimonials in their effort to destigmatise mental disorder.

While the coverage on mental health problems by *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* were mainly positive in tone, *Harian Metro* and *Sin Chew* carried a neutral valence. It is important to note that research has shown that news readers were more likely to share news about mental illness that was positive or neutral in tone and even more inclined to share stories about recovery from mental illness. Moreover, studies also suggested that readers were less likely to share news that stigmatises mental illness or that contain themes related to danger, violence and criminality (Adamson et al. 2017).

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity. It has also enabled mental health to emerge as

an international priority to secure health, well-being and human development. This study examined the coverage of mental health problems by Malaysian legacy and online newspapers. Six dimensions of stigma (concealability, origin, course, disruptiveness, aesthetics and peril) were examined and it was found that individual level of origin and peril were the most prominent dimension of stigma found in the reporting. In addition, the newspapers focused on promoting mental health awareness and literacy in their destigmatisation effort, while reflecting either a positive or neutral valence in their coverage. This study drew on stigmatisation as the theoretical framework, and existing knowledge about the theory could benefit from the description provided by the current study, especially on stigmatising portrayal of mental health problems.

It is important to examine the coverage of mental health problems by media because media will influence public opinion as well as social support for policy to address the public health issue. Furthermore, public attitudes toward mental illness are relevant to the social, psychological, physical and economic well-being of those affected by the condition. Future research could compare mental health reporting by electronic or social media, and between Covid and non-Covid period as the epidemic has led to many new mental health challenges across people with different demographic and sociographic backgrounds. In addition, future research could also look into media reporting of treatments and rehabilitation for mental health problems, which are important aspects in reporting the public health challenge.

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Appendix A

Operational Definitions

Dimension of Stigma

Concealability

1. Obvious: symptoms of mental illness are highly noticeable, characteristics of people with mental illness are highly detectable.
2. Non-obvious: symptoms of mental illness are unnoticeable, people with mental health problems are likely to report physical health problems such as fatigue, muscle aches, headache, etc. rather than admitting that they have psychological issues.

Origin

Individual level

1. Genetics/hormonal fluctuations/brain development: biomedical explanation about how a person's genes affect him/her reacting to environmental factors and may affect whether the person develops a mental illness as a result; combination of changes in DNA and certain environmental factors may lead to the development of a mental illness; hormone imbalance or hormonal dysregulation could lead to emotional problems; problem in neurodevelopment, etc.
2. Thinking patterns: mental wellbeing could be jeopardised by unhelpful thinking habits, e.g. having a negative outlook on life, lacking of a sense of personal control (believing that one's life is controlled by luck, fate or powerful others), catastrophizing, judgmental behaviour, overgeneralisation, having high-expectation of academic or work performance toward oneself, etc.
3. Physical illness: people living with chronic physical conditions often experience emotional stress and chronic pain, which are both associated with the development of mental illness like depression and anxiety.
4. Substance abuse: chronic use of some drugs could lead to both short- and long-term changes in the brain, which can lead to *mental illness such as* paranoia, depression, anxiety, aggression, hallucinations, etc.
5. Excessive and dysfunctional usage of media/Internet: exposure to harmful social media content, e.g. bleak depressive material, graphic self-harm content,

suicide-encouraging memes; fake or overly alarmist articles about Covid-19 on media, social media or the Internet; infodemic (rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about something, such as a disease) on mental health.
6. Loneliness: feeling of being alone due to movement control order; elderly or those who live alone may experience loneliness while others could feel lonely without being socially isolated.
7. Unfortunate life events: grief and loss, divorce, relationship problem, sexual harassment, sexual assault, homeless and other traumatic life experiences.
8. Others: any other causes at individual level that do not fit into the above-mentioned categories, e.g. difficulty in time management.

Course

1. Temporary/reversible/preventable: mental illness is an impermanent health condition that can be cured or treated effectively; mental illness is reversible and individuals can go back to their normal lives; reported stories of individuals recovering from mental illness; mental health issues can be prevented and it is within the individuals' locus of control, e.g. practicing positive psychology, exercise, meditate, having healthy and balance diet, etc.
2. Permanent: mental illness is enduring and untreatable; people with mental illness have to rely on medication for the rest of their lives.

Disruptiveness

1. Interfere in family relationship: individuals with mental illness could cause tension at home, have conflict or argument with parents, siblings, spouse or children.
2. Interfere in romantic relationship: individuals with mental illness have difficulty in finding a romantic partner or maintaining the relationship; conflicts always happen between people with mental illness and their partner.
3. Interfere in friendship: people with mental illness deliberately avoid normal social network or interaction; absence of social contact among people with mental illness; friends of people with mental illness could not understand their health condition and hence having misunderstanding that affect the friendship.
4. Interfere in professional/working relationship: people with mental illness are unable to perform optimally at work due to their health condition and hence affecting their professional relationship with superiors or co-workers; employees with mental health condition could affect productivity and profitability of a company; reported economy lost caused by mental health problems at the national or global level.

Aesthetics

1. Odour: people with mental illness have unpleasant smell.
2. Dirty: people with mental illness are unhygienic and dirty.
3. Unattractive: people with mental illness do not take care of their physical appearance.

Peril

1. Self-harm: people with mental illness cause physical harm or injury to themselves.
2. Suicide: death of people with mental illness, in which the mentally ill cause injury to oneself with the intent to die.
3. Dangerous to others: people with mental illness cause physical harm or injury to others.

Destigmatisation

1. First-person narrative: articles written by people with mental illness, in which the writers talked about their lives living/coping with the health condition, conveying their internal feelings and thoughts.
2. Like any other illness: mental illness is like any other physical sickness, and there is nothing to be afraid or ashamed of; mental illness can be treated like other sickness with medication or other medical approach.
3. Could affect anyone: reports the pervasiveness of mental illness; conveys the message that the health condition could affect anyone; reports the statistics of mental health problems at both national and global level.
4. Decriminalise suicide: calls for the government to abolish Section 309 of the Penal Code, which punishes those who survive a suicide attempt with up to a year in jail, a fine, or both.
5. Promoting mental health awareness and literacy: highlights the importance of mental health; outlines the common symptoms of mental health problems; calls for people to have a better understanding of mental health; promotes a culture of having conversation about mental health; encourage individuals in need to seek help from therapist and counsellor.
6. Acceptance, empowerment and protection: calls for understanding, sympathy and protection of people with mental illness; calls for the relief of suffering among people living with mental illness; disapproves those who inflicted harm, emotional suffering, violence, etc. toward people with mental illness; criticises discrimination and denial of rights, employment or career advancement opportunity of people with mental illness; condemns the denial of psychiatric treatment for those

who attempted suicide; calls to eradicate stigma against seeking mental health treatment.

7. Changes in public health system: calls for easier access to psychiatric treatment, e.g. not to require referral from government clinic; increase the number of psychiatrists in the country; provide cheaper psychiatric drugs; increase budget for mental healthcare; calls for general medical practitioner and social workers to play a preventive role by working together with mental health professionals; calls for special attention to be given to healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic period.
8. Changes in other systems: encourages better family communication; prevent school bullying or cyberbullying; improve work environment, identify problems at workplace related to poor mental health; develop mental healthcare program for employees; calls for zero tolerance for workplace bullying; calls for changes in education system; government to provide income tax relief for parents or relatives who have to take care of people with mental illness; higher rates of taxation on mammoth tech companies like Facebook and Twitter; medical insurance coverage to be extended to psychiatric disorders; calls for tech companies to launch tools and content to help users with mental health and wellness; calls for tech startups to help counter the effects of social isolation on people's mental health.

Valence

1. Positive: conveys a supportive, understanding, sympathetic, empathetic and compassioned impression towards people living with mental illness.
2. Negative: conveys a critical, unfavourable, judgemental, fearful impression towards people living with mental illness.
3. Neutral: neither positively nor negatively portrays people living with mental illness.

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