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CONTINUITY OF INFLUENCE AFTER ABDICATION: MIANGUL ABDUL WADUD AND THE TAX EPISODE IN SWAT STATE ERA (1955-1956)

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Abstract

This article examines the persistence of informal authority after abdication through the case of Miangul Abdul Wadud as Wali of Swat and his interactions with the Government of Pakistan during the income tax dispute of 1955–56. Drawing on official correspondence, it analyzes the controversy arising from attempts by tax authorities to assess income on the basis of "world income," including assets within Swat State. The study argues that, despite his abdication in 1949 in favour of his son, Miangul Abdul Wadud retained significant informal influence, enabling him to shape administrative outcomes through formal appeals and personal networks. The response of political authorities, who emphasized the primacy of political considerations over fiscal enforcement, reveals the negotiated nature of state authority in the frontier princely entities. It contributes to broader debates on state formation by demonstrating how sovereignty and administrative integration remained contingent and negotiated rather than absolute.

Keywords

Swat State; Wali of Swat; Tax; Pakistan; Political Agent; Miangul Abdul Wadud

1. INTRODUCTION

Primary sources pertaining to the Swat State era (1915-1969) remain widely dispersed across a range of repositories, both institutional and private, within the country and abroad. A number of historical events relating to the Swat State era surface only fragmentarily within formal archival repositories in Pakistan. In many cases, official records

provide merely a cursory reference to an occurrence, without preserving the fuller documentary trail that would allow for a comprehensive reconstruction of the episode. While such references are valuable in establishing the occurrence of particular events, they frequently lack the accompanying correspondence and contextual documentation that would illuminate their causes, processes, and consequences. This absence of continuity in the archival record results in significant gaps in the historical narrative, leaving many episodes only partially understood. The missing layers of correspondence are essential for capturing the broader socio-political context in which these events unfolded. Consequently, such fragmentary documentation renders many aspects of the Swat State era incomplete and, at times, liable to oversimplification. The recovery and integration of dispersed or privately held sources, alongside a more systematic exploration of underutilized archival collections, are therefore crucial to reconstructing these episodes in their fuller historical essence.

A substantial body of literature has examined the integration of princely states into the successor states of South Asia following the end of British rule in 1947. These studies have generally focused on the accession, constitutional incorporation, administrative reorganization, and the extension of central authority into formerly autonomous political entities. The princely entities "have been notoriously absent from the historiography of South Asia" and are "treated as one homogenous group" (Bangash, 2015: 13). Rather, the princely states differed markedly in their origins, constitutional arrangements, administrative institutions, relationships with the British colonial state, and the political circumstances surrounding their accession after 1947 (Bangash, 2015: 14). Although the existing scholarship on Swat has significantly advanced our understanding of the state's political and administrative history, it has paid comparatively little attention to the informal relationships and personal networks that continued to shape political interactions after integration into Pakistan. The relationship of the central government with Swat State, was neither linear nor uniform; rather, it depended upon negotiation, accommodation, and collaboration with influential rulers whose authority persisted alongside formal institutions. This perspective is particularly relevant to the States in the Frontier, where governance combined state authority with indigenous leadership structures, making sovereignty a negotiated rather than absolute process. Viewed in this context, Swat State was not simply a peripheral territory but a dynamic arena in which formal authority and informal influence continuously intersected.

The present study developed on un-consulted correspondence highlights the important aspect of informal authority and political influence after the formal withdrawal of Miangul Abdul Wadud (reign 1917-1949) from rulership of Swat State. The study demonstrates that his relinquishment of official power does not necessarily signify the disappearance of his political relevance and that the former princely ruler of Swat continue to exercise considerable influence through personal prestige, patronage networks, symbolic authority, and longstanding relationships with the Pakistani state institutions. In addition to it, the article contributes to study of taxation and the capacity of governments to assert authority, regulate economic activity, and define political relationships between the centre and princely

rulers. The study also examines how authority was negotiated between a former ruler of Swat State and the Pakistani state in the years following the independence of Pakistan. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on state formation by demonstrating that the incorporation of princely states into Pakistan was not solely a matter of formal constitutional arrangements but was also shaped by personal relationships and informal influence. The episode offers insights into post-princely authority by revealing how former rulers could continue to exercise political relevance and prestige long after relinquishing office, thereby challenging the assumption that abdication necessarily marked a complete withdrawal from public and political life.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: RULE AND ABDICATION OF MIANGUL ABDUL WADUD

For a proper understanding of this specific research, it is necessary to situate it within the broader historical background of the reign of Miangul Abdul Wadud and his relationship with the state of Pakistan. Miangul Abdul Wadud ruled the Swat State from 1917 to 1949, playing a foundational role in its political consolidation, administrative organization, and the establishment of centralized authority in the region (Barth, 1985: 58-59). His long tenure not only shaped the internal structure of the state but also defined its external relations, particularly during the transitional period marking the end of British paramountcy and the emergence of Pakistan in 1947. It is worth noting that Miangul Abdul Wadud served within the Pakistani era for a brief but significant period of two years, from 1947 to 1949 (Uddin, 2025: 24). During that time, his relationship with the Government of Pakistan have been marked by cordiality, cooperation, and mutual respect. His role in the post partition era of Pakistan extended beyond mere accession, encompassing active mobilization of support during the referendum of 1947, where he sent personal envoys and utilized his "moral and spiritual influence" to secure votes in favor of Pakistan. Financially, his contributions were substantial and varied, including direct support to the Muslim League and donations to national funds (Hussain, 1962). Thus the integration of Swat State into the new political framework was managed without overt conflict, reflecting both the pragmatic approach of the Pakistani state and thus the "interests of Swat and the rest of the country were not at variance" (Hussain, 1962: 127).

In 1949, Miangul Abdul Wadud abdicated power in favour of his son, Miangul Abdul Haq Jahanzeb, thereby formally withdrawing from direct governance (Barth, 1985, 104). With this transition, his direct interaction with the Pakistani administration ostensibly came to an end, and the affairs of the state were thereafter conducted under the leadership of the new Wali within an evolving administrative framework. The abdication might, at first glance, suggest a clear rupture in political engagement; however, as the subsequent evidence indicates, such a conclusion would be overly simplistic. Despite his formal withdrawal from power, Miangul

Abdul Wadud continued to engage with the Pakistani state and to exert a degree of influence in matters affecting his interests and status.

3. THE TAX EPISODE FROM THE LENS OF CONTINUITY OF INFLUENCE (1955-1956)

Before examining the fiscal correspondence of 1955–1956, it is important to note that a significant shift had occurred in the relationship between Pakistan and the Swat State in 1954. During the first seven years after independence, the Government of Pakistan largely refrained from intervening in the internal affairs of Swat, and its officials exercised considerable caution in their dealings with the state. This policy changed during the reign of Miangul Abdul Haq Jahanzeb, who had succeeded his father as Wali in 1949. The political settlement of 1954, marked by the promulgation of the Swat Interim Constitution Act, 1954 and the Supplementary Instrument of Accession, formally redefined Swat as a federated unit of Pakistan while introducing constitutional changes in its administrative relationship with the centre (Mayne, 1955: 155).

In 1955, a significant dispute emerged between the former ruler of Swat, Miangul Abdul Wadud (ruling era from 1917-1949) and the Government of Pakistan concerning the assessment of income tax on his private properties and financial assets. The present study draws upon a set of six key letters preserved on file at Tribal Affairs Research Cell (Peshawar), which are discussed here as primary evidence of the episode.[1] These documents collectively trace the evolution of the dispute, from the initial notices issued by the Income Tax Officer, to the formal protest and personal interventions by Miangul Abdul Wadud, and finally to the involvement of political and central authorities seeking to mediate the matter. Taken together, these letters provide valuable insight into the contested nature of fiscal authority, the persistence of informal influence after abdication, and the negotiated character of state integration in the early years of Pakistan. Rather than recounting each letter in chronological detail, the following discussion analyzes and interprets the correspondence thematically. By examining the documentary evidence through key analytical themes, it seeks to explain the mechanisms through which Miangul Abdul Wadud continued to exercise influence after his abdication and to draw broader conclusions regarding informal authority, frontier governance, and the relationship between the former princely rulers and the postcolonial Pakistani state.

The first notice issued by the Income Tax Officer, Nowshera, on 2 August 1955 illustrates this duality. While the letter required him to comply with statutory income tax obligations by declaring his "total World income", it simultaneously addressed him with the honorific "The Founder of Swat State" (No.1462-M, dated: 2/8/1955, Office of the Income Tax Officer,

[1] The Tribal Research Cell (TRC), Peshawar, is a major archival repository containing an extensive collection of primary sources relating to the former princely states and tribal areas of the erstwhile North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan.

Nowshera to the ruler of Swat State, File No.202-S.Sts, 6/Swat, Political Branch, Tribal Affairs Research Cell, Peshawar). This mode of official address is significant because it reflected an enduring acknowledgment of his historical and political stature despite the transfer of State's authority to his successor. His continued recognition and status became even more evident in subsequent official correspondence as the Political Agent observed that the Income Tax Officer's action had "seriously upset the Founder of Swat", while senior officials later recommended that "it is not advisable to compel the Founder of Swat and his son to disclose all their property in Swat" (Political Agent, Dir, Swat and Chitral, Malakand to Khan Saadullah Khan, Esquire, Political Secretary to The Governor, NWFP, Peshawar, D.O.No.3352-C/St-1, Dated: the 5th September, 1955, TARC). Such expressions indicate that governmental authorities did not regard him merely as a common citizen subject to ordinary administrative procedures. Rather, his identity as the founder of Swat State[2] continued to shape official perceptions and administrative responses. His symbolic authority therefore remained an important political resource long after his formal abdication. The correspondence also reveals an important tension between bureaucratic administration and political governance. The Income Tax Officer approached the matter strictly as a legal obligation, requiring the ex-ruler to submit returns of his "total World income" and comply with the provisions of Pakistan's income tax legislation. From the perspective of the fiscal bureaucracy, the issue was a routine matter of tax assessment. The ex Wali, however, interpreted the issue in fundamentally political terms and argued that the Income Tax Officer's actions represented "official interference in the internal affairs of the State" and warned that such measures were "bound to lead to most grave political consequences" (Copy of a D.O letter dated the 3rd September, 1955, from the Founder of Swat, to the Political Agent, TARC). He maintained that "political considerations precede monetary gains" and cautioned that the existing policy towards the frontier states should not be undermined by routine fiscal enforcement (Copy of a D.O letter dated the 3rd September, 1955, TARC, Peshawar). In his view, compelling members of the ruling family to disclose their worldly income would discourage investment and destroy the confidence that had encouraged capital to remain within Pakistan. The disagreement therefore extended beyond taxation itself. Whereas the Income Tax Department sought administrative uniformity under statutory law, Miangul Abdul Wadud framed the dispute as one involving political commitments, historical understandings, and the special constitutional position of the frontier states. The correspondence thus illustrates the coexistence and occasional conflict between bureaucratic rationality and political pragmatism in Pakistan's early administration.

The documentary evidence also demonstrates that Miangul Abdul Wadud exercised influence through well-established political and administrative networks. Rather than

[2] The debate surrounding the term "Founder of Swat State" has been briefly discussed in existing literature; however, its repeated inclusion in official government correspondence makes it particularly intriguing and underscores its potential for further scholarly debate and future research.

limiting himself to formal legal procedures, he communicated directly with senior political officials responsible for frontier administration. His appeal was addressed to the Political Agent, who subsequently forwarded the matter to the Political Secretary, thereby ensuring that his concerns reached higher governmental authorities. The Political Agent openly supported many of his concerns, recommending that "suitable instructions may kindly be issued to the Income Tax Officer, Nowshera" (Political Agent, Dir, Swat and Chitral, Malakand to Khan Saadullah Khan, D.O.No.3352-C/St-1, TARC, Peshawar). Later correspondence from the Tribal Affairs Department similarly requested that "necessary steps may please be taken for the exemption of the Founder of Swat State and his son from declaring their 'World Income'." These communications indicate that his representations received serious consideration within the highest administrative circles. Besides, the importance of personal relationships is further illustrated by his decision to send his Private Secretary, Talemand Khan, to discuss the matter directly with the Political Secretary (Ruler of Swat State to Political Secretary of Minister for Frontier States & Tribal Territory, Govt. of West Pakistan, TARC, Peshawar.). Rather than relying exclusively upon written correspondence, he employed his trusted official to facilitate personal engagement with the senior officials of the province. These interactions demonstrate that informal authority operated alongside formal bureaucratic procedures, with personal networks functioning as an important component of political influence.

A further theme that emerges from the official correspondence concerns the legal ambiguity surrounding the constitutional relationship between Pakistan and the Swat State. Miangul Abdul Wadud based his appeal upon Section 60 of the Pakistan Income Tax Act and argued that Pakistan should adopt an approach similar to that followed in India, where non-residents were not necessarily required to declare their worldwide income. More significantly, the Political Agent questioned the legal basis of the Income Tax Officer's actions, observing that "the Income Tax Act has not yet been made applicable to the Frontier States and Regions," making it "doubtful whether the Founder of Swat is liable to pay tax" on income derived from property within the state (Political Agent, Malakand to Esquire, Political Secretary to The Governor, NWFP, the 5th September, 1955, TARC, Peshawar.). This uncertainty transformed what appeared to be a straightforward fiscal matter into a constitutional question concerning the relationship between the central government and the frontier states. The correspondence therefore illustrates that sovereignty within Pakistan's frontier regions remained negotiated rather than absolute. Administrative decisions were shaped not solely by the statutory provisions of the country but also by political agreements, constitutional uncertainties, and the distinctive status of formerly autonomous princely states.

Finally, the correspondence demonstrates that taxation could not be separated from the internal politics of the ruling family. The Political Agent observed that Miangul Abdul Wadud had not submitted a list of his private property because he maintained that "as long as he was alive, he was the full owner of his property with powers to alienate it as permitted under the

Mohammadan Law" (Political Agent, to Khan Saadullah Khan, TARC). The issue therefore extended beyond taxation to questions concerning ownership, succession, and authority within the ruling household. The Political Agent further warned that continued pressure by the Income Tax Department might revive Miangul Abdul Wadud's suspicion that the matter represented "the revival of the old game at the instance of the Wali and with the connivance of the Government." He cautioned that compelling the former ruler to disclose his assets would "cause bad blood between the father and the son," thereby creating unnecessary political complications (Political Agent, Malakand to Khan Saadullah Khan, TARC). These observations reveal that fiscal administration in the frontier region was inseparable from broader political considerations. Government officials recognized that routine tax enforcement could affect not only state finances but also the stability of the ruling family and, consequently, the political order within Swat. The correspondence therefore demonstrates that frontier governance required continuous negotiation between bureaucratic objectives, dynastic politics, and the enduring influence of former ruler of Swat.

Interestingly, in his autobiographical reflections, Miangul Abdul Wadud offers a revealing insight into his post-abdication position, particularly concerning the question of financial entitlement and personal expenditure. Writing in the context of his retirement after 1949, he emphasizes a deliberate renunciation of state-supported privilege, noting that "at the time of retirement I did not apportion a Privy Purse to myself, nor have I asked for it afterwards" (Hussain, 1962: 132). This is significant within the broader framework of princely integration in South Asia, where privy purses were commonly institutionalized as a means of compensating former rulers following the transfer of sovereignty. Equally important is his assertion that "I just cannot bring myself to demand anything I may need" and rather than relying on state provisions, he highlighted his financial independence by stating that "I bear all my personal expenses from the revenue of my personal property." At the same time, Miangul Abdul Wadud maintained the continuity of his symbolic and social standing, observing that "nevertheless, I have been able to retain my status as the Founder and the first Ruler of Swat, and meet all the requirements of my position as such" (Hussain, 1962: 132). This suggests that, despite the absence of formal financial arrangements such as a privy purse, his position continued to carry expectations of representation, hospitality, and prestige. Taken together the above primary sources, illuminate an important dimension of Miangul Abdul Wadud's post-rulership identity: a conscious balancing of financial independence, personal dignity, and the preservation of status. In the broader historical context, they reinforce the argument that abdication did not entail a complete withdrawal from public life, but rather a reconfiguration of authority in which symbolic legitimacy and personal resources continued to sustain influence.

Although the six letters do not reveal the final resolution of the income tax dispute or the ultimate decision reached by the concerned authorities, leaving the episode archivally incomplete. Nevertheless, these documents provide sufficient evidence to reconstruct the principal contours of the dispute, the issues under negotiation, and the nature of the

interaction between the former ruler of Swat State and the Pakistani state during the early years following accession. More significantly, the correspondence demonstrates that the dispute extended well beyond a routine question of taxation. As the thematic analysis has shown, the letters illuminate the complex relationship between formal state authority and the enduring informal influence exercised by Miangul Abdul Wadud after his abdication. Although he no longer occupied the position of ruling sovereign, his political stature, historical legitimacy, and personal prestige continued to command exceptional respect among the government officials. The correspondence consistently reflects a tone of deference and careful diplomatic engagement rather than the detached bureaucratic language typically associated with ordinary tax assessments. This suggests that the issue was approached not merely as a legal or fiscal matter but as one carrying broader political implications. The correspondence therefore illustrates how bureaucratic decision-making in the early post-independence period remained shaped not only by statutory regulations but also by considerations of political expediency, regional stability, and the management of influential local elites.

These historical sources highlight that Miangul Abdul Wadud's political relevance after his abdication was not merely symbolic. Rather, he was able to sustain his influence through various means even after relinquishing formal authority. He continued to exercise his authority through different channels. The most significant mechanism behind his continued influence was his widely acknowledged status as the founder of the Swat State, primarily due to his extraordinary role in introducing numerous reforms and successfully establishing various state institutions and departments (Qasmi, 1940, 59). Consequently, the stature and prestige that he had accumulated during his more than three decades of rule did not diminish with his abdication. Similarly, he continued to enjoy access to Pakistan's political intermediaries, who frequently met him during their visits to the Swat State, thereby facilitating cooperation and coordination (Hussain, 1962: Appendices, viii). Through these interactions, he was able to communicate his concerns, which subsequently reached the higher governmental authorities. In addition, Miangul Abdul Wadud maintained close relations with the ruling elite soon after partition. At a time when the Government was engaged in consolidating its authority over the newly integrated frontier states and maintaining political stability, he remained closely associated with government officials and continued to promote cordial relations with the central government. The exceptional regard in which Miangul Abdul Wadud and the Swat administration were held by senior political officials is evident from the correspondence of the Political Agent. The P.A offered an emphatic endorsement of Miangul Abdul Wadud's administration, describing the state as "a haven of peace" where prosperity was increasing, revenues were being invested in roads, schools, and hospitals, and public contentment was widespread. Such an unequivocal defence by a senior administrator illustrates the extraordinary confidence that political authorities placed on him and demonstrates the close relationship that continued to shape official attitudes towards him in the years that followed (Letter No. 888-s, dated 4th

December 1948, by Political Agent of Chief Commissioner NWFP, File No. 74/ Swat, TARC, Peshawar). Taken together, these factors demonstrate that Miangul Abdul Wadud's continued influence after his abdication was firmly grounded in the political realities of the time and in the significant role he had played during his rule in shaping the landscape of the State.

4. CONCLUSION

The significance of the tax episode (1955-1956) lies not in the final outcome of the dispute, which remains unknown because of the absence of later correspondence in the file, but in what the surviving letters reveal about the nature of political authority in the early years of Pakistan. At first sight, the case appears to concern a routine question of income tax. A closer reading of the correspondence, however, shows that it was much more than a fiscal matter. The issue developed into a broader political question involving the relationship between the newly established Pakistani state and a former ruler whose formal ruling authority had ended but whose personal influence remained intact. The letters clearly demonstrate that government officials did not deal with Miangul Abdul Wadud as they would have dealt with an ordinary taxpayer. Instead, they recognized his unique historical position as the founder of the Swat State and carefully considered the wider political consequences of every administrative step they proposed to take. The correspondence further suggests that the integration of Swat State into Pakistan did not mark a sudden or complete break with the past. Although sovereignty had formally passed to Pakistan and constitutional changes had altered the state's legal position, political relationships developed during the princely period continued to influence official decision-making. Miangul Abdul Wadud retained his influence, that, rested not on constitutional office but on the reputation, legitimacy, and personal relationships that he had built during more than three decades of rule. The transition from princely rule to integration was thus marked by continuity as well as change. The case also demonstrates that the early Pakistani state did not rely exclusively on legal provisions and bureaucratic procedures when dealing with the former frontier states. Instead, administrative decisions were frequently shaped by political realities. Officials recognized that rigid enforcement of legal rules could create unnecessary tensions, not only with influential former rulers but also within politically sensitive frontier regions. More broadly, this episode encourages a different understanding of the integration of the princely states into Pakistan. The process should not be viewed simply as a constitutional event completed through Instruments of Accession, legal enactments, or administrative reforms. It was also a political process that required negotiation, mutual accommodation, and the careful management of relationships with regional elites whose authority remained significant even after accession. The personal prestige, historical legitimacy, informal networks and influence also played an important role in shaping political interactions after integration.

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ARTICLE

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EXPERIENCES OF FAMILY THERAPY AND WORK SATISFACTION AMONG EMPLOYED MALE CLIENTS WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER UNDERGOING REHABILITATION IN KENYA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Although family therapy has been used in addiction treatment since the 1960s, its importance is not adequately supported by research. The current study investigates how family therapy interventions may influence the outcomes of work satisfaction and encourage productive reintegration of individuals into the workforce. The major objective of the current study was to assess the experiences of family therapy and work satisfaction among employed male clients with substance use disorder undergoing rehabilitation. The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature with a target population of 64 clients. Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants who met the predefined eligibility criteria. Recruitment continued until the researchers determined that additional interviews were no longer generating substantially new codes or themes; thirty-one participants were interviewed.The data was coded and consequently subjected to thematic analysis. Study findings may lead to the advancement of efficient treatment methods for employed male clients who exhibit substance use disorder.

Keywords

Substance Use Disorder; Family Therapy; Work Satisfaction; Kiambu County

1. INTRODUCTION

Family therapy deals with challenging relational, behavioural, psychological and emotional dynamics. The therapy is applicable in instances of substance abuse, schizophrenia, somatic problems, recovery from child neglect and relationship issues (Lebow, 2020). Family theorists affirm that the origin of distress in a client is relational and originates from problematic interactional paradigms (Reiter, 2017). Established in the 1950s, family therapy sprang up independently in diverse settings with research performing an important role in moulding its theories and practices (Dallos & Draper, 2010).

Marriage and family therapy have been linked to increase in the probability of a patient's self-restraint, coupled with enhancement of functional interactions. This is realized by mainly trying to achieve the depreciation or absolute abstinence from substance use and raising the patient's fulfilment with their interactions while also working towards alleviating intimate partner violence and adaptation of children in the case of clients who are parents (O'Farrell & Clements, 2011). The relationship between family and substance dependence is characterized by pessimism and issues within the family of the person who suffers from the disorder (Lee et al., 2011). In Kenya, widespread data on extreme substance use disorder among persons uncovers terrifying statistics, emphasizing the immediate need for cost effective and innovative approaches to rehabilitation and addiction treatment (NACADA, 2020). The current study sought to investigate the experiences of family therapy and work satisfaction among employed male clients with substance use disorder undergoing rehabilitation in Kenya.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Work satisfaction has been defined as an appraisal of one's work experience which could result in either positive or negative emotions, depending on said appraisal, and as such has been regarded as a crucial indicator of an individual's attitude toward their work and a predictor of work behaviour (Purwanto, 2022). In a study done by De Gieter et al. (2021), person-environment fit theory and boundary theory were used to examine the effects of work-nonwork boundary management fit on the work-family interface. Findings revealed that work-non-work boundary-management fit positively correlated with family satisfaction and performance in the family domain, while in the work domain, it had a favourable influence on characteristics like job satisfaction.

Nielsen et al. (2017) also explored the connection between family therapy and work satisfaction, with emphasis on the discussion of workplace resources that are considered key instruments in the determination of employee well-being and improving work performance. The study classified these resources into four levels; individual, social, leader, and organizational. When it comes to determining individual-level resources, self-efficacy, competence, and self-esteem are some of the tools that help employees manage their job demands that are experienced and reach satisfaction at a personal level. Similarly, Maynard

et al. (2015) believe that social-level resources are comprised of the amount of social support and quality interpersonal relationships that not only promote teamwork, but also offer needed assistance for the employees to manage work and family responsibilities. Therefore, the resources indicate that personal characteristics and social networks are the most effective ways to overcome work-family conflicts. Kelloway and Barling (2010) opine that organizational resources provide further evidence of the systemic nature of workplace factors. Employees' health can be influenced by the style of leadership and the quality of interactions, such as leader-member exchanges (LMX), that the leader creates. This is usually done in the form of a positive work culture.

Crane and Triston (2007) study about behavioural marital therapy revealed improvements in marital satisfaction, alongside the revelation that depressive symptoms in wives exhibited a lesser degree of reduction when they received cognitive therapy in isolation. These observations emphasize that family-cantered interventions function on the foundational principle of interdependence among various systems, including the balance between professional and familial responsibilities, which may differ according to gender. Interventions frequently involved instructing parents on effective communication strategies with their children, a competency that was particularly critical for working mothers who were balancing dual roles. Furthermore, reductions in healthcare use were most significant among high utilizers, indicating that proactively addressing stressors within the family structure, including occupational pressures before their escalation, generated benefits both on an individual and organizational level.

Gonzalez et al. (2016) study in USA established that employee connection with family and friends was significant in predicting community attachment and, subsequently, employee turnover. The study highlighted that heightened friendship and family helped organizations with employee retention, and therefore, a stronger community base for employees meant they valued and maintained their services to the organizations as compared to those with a poor community fit. Notably, this study suggested that organizations and employers recognize the role of family and friendship in their policies to increase work satisfaction and reduce turnover. Another study by Young et al. (2013) in the United Kingdom analyzed attitudes, behaviour, and habits of individuals by focusing on the workplace and organization-based behaviour change initiatives, revealing that the strongest indicators of change included awareness, performance feedback, financial perks, infrastructure, training, and support from management. The study provided evidence that feedback on employees' efforts tends to influence how they behave, although a recommendation was made to ascertain the extent to which external factors either facilitate or impede sustainable behaviors in the workplace, different from those in the family or community.

An online survey assessing 265 Italian employees conducted by Toscano and Zappala (2020) investigated the effects of social isolation on work satisfaction. Results of the study demonstrated a negative association between social isolation and work satisfaction,

highlighted by the issues brought about by social isolation, including stress, anxiety, and depression. The study informed the significance of social relationships and the adversity that comes with the experience of loneliness, all of which were found to impact an individual's impression of productivity and subjective sentiments of work satisfaction. Gopalan and Pattusamy (2020) also established family satisfaction as a key contributory factor to job satisfaction, with the level of family satisfaction assessed as having significantly more importance in a study conducted on both genders as compared to work satisfaction. The study further confirmed that both genders prioritized family satisfaction due to the intimate and lifelong nature of familial relationships, although women were found to value family satisfaction more than men.

According to Kounenou (2016), economic instability imposes significant pressure on family systems, frequently disrupting caregiving responsibilities and relational boundaries. These disruptions are particularly noticeable in families experiencing coercive interactions, prolonged separations due to migration, or overwhelming demands for caregiving, which can result in role reversals or confusion about roles. In such instances, therapists have to carefully manage conflicting expectations, striking a balance between advocating for the comprehensive needs of the family and the practical challenges of collaborating with agencies limited by regulatory constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Cădariu and Rad (2025) also believe that within the employment spectrum, the Eco-Systemic Family Therapy (ESFT) model emphasizes the importance of emotional control, executive skills, and empowering parents, all grounded in an established family structure. Concurrently, it addresses external stressors and systemic obstacles such as poverty, discrimination, and fragmentation of services, which can profoundly impact family stability.

Another study conducted by Wijayati et al. (2019) in Indonesia indicated that emotional intelligence and self-awareness play a key role in influencing work satisfaction among female teachers, who reported that emotional intelligence helped them regulate their emotions, resulting in higher levels of work satisfaction and thereby strengthening their commitment to their profession. The study also demonstrated the interplay with family conflicts, highlighting the increase in family conflict, resulting in poor productivity by negatively impacting performance. The research suggested that school principals focus on addressing family-related challenges, which would improve emotional intelligence, thereby enhancing performance and job satisfaction. Purwanto (2022) equally believes that family and work domains tend to have an influence on each other, respectively, and such was the case in a correlational study conducted in Indonesia with 1045 female employees across different sectors. The employees reported that family played an instrumental role in their decision to seek employment, in addition to influencing their levels of job satisfaction. The findings of the study implied that family issues had a significant negative association with job satisfaction. In a study by Zhang et al. (2019) in China, family motivation is viewed as a strong motivator for increased work efforts, which in turn leads to increased productivity. Findings revealed that workers view their respective jobs as a means to support their family, especially

through the financial gains, and therefore, family motivation heightens employees' instrumental meaning of their work as a means to sustain and support those important to them.

According to Kane (1998), confidence in a social context refers to the interplay of integrity, confidence, and connectedness, which is shaped by mentality and manifested in one's actions and emotions. In the workplace, confident performance results from the interaction of all three aforementioned aspects. Healthy confidence at the workplace has been observed to promote effective work behaviour, including sharing knowledge, participating frequently, and even the proactive pursuit of changes. Additional study findings by Halilsoy (2024) state that self-confidence is important to work satisfaction because it fosters a balanced professional life. The study further confirms that self-confidence inspires growth in confidence, which enhances performance in both social and professional settings, directly contributing to work satisfaction. Confidence increases employee engagement in workplace discourse, thereby promoting assertiveness and improving time management, all of which ultimately lead to work satisfaction.

In China, Nielsen et al. (2020) uncovered an indirect correlation between family-work conflict and job satisfaction in a study involving a sample of 560 high school students, which assessed the relationship between family and job-life satisfaction. The study findings highlighted two mediating factors: psychological capital and emotional exhaustion, both of which constitute job-life satisfaction and significantly relate to work-family conflict. From a practical perspective, the study demonstrated that the negative effects of work and family conflict can be mitigated by providing psychological resources or interventions that enhance psychological capital while addressing emotional exhaustion. In Malaysia, Yew et al. (2018) implemented Stamps' Index of Work Satisfaction (IWS) to measure the level of work satisfaction and identify the specific factors that were causing most dissatisfaction, including pay and remuneration dissatisfaction, unfavorable work environment, access to medical services for nurses and their families, and child care facilities. The tool also effectively identified areas in their work where the 219 nurses were most satisfied, including professional status and teamwork.

Research carried out by Alessandri et al. (2018) identified emotional stability as a key contributor to self-efficacy beliefs that were deemed crucial to workers managing emotions over time. Workers who had higher emotional stability indicated a higher capability of dealing with work-related emotions, which in turn increased their resistance to stress, while those who scored on the lower spectrum had a susceptibility to anxiety, insecurity, depression, absenteeism, poor performance, and job dissatisfaction. In India, Gopalan and Pattusamy (2020) ascertained that the ability to balance family and work responsibilities was crucial for job satisfaction, which in turn affected professional fulfilment and the perception of life success. The research findings indicated that family satisfaction's role in increasing job satisfaction was important in mediating between work-role uncertainty and professional fulfillment.

Mishra et al. (2017) survey of 398 married service sector employees elucidated the significance of psychological capital and supervisor support. Psychological support fostered innovative work behaviour by providing employees with crucial attributes, including self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, and hope which helped individuals address work challenges with confidence, positivity, and resilience in the face of setbacks. Supervisor support, on the other hand, directly influences employees' innovative behaviour by enhancing trust, fairness, and a sense of responsibility among employees, in turn encouraging them to eclipse their regular duties and engage more in creative problem-solving. From the study, psychological capital and supervisor support displayed a great relevance in promoting work satisfaction, with the former facilitating resources to manage challenges while the latter creating an enabling environment for supervision.

Abdul Rahman et al. (2017) examined aspects of family and work satisfaction among 426 nurses whose profession they determined as highly family-intrusive profession where work and family needs often clash and impact each other. Results from the study indicated that increased age and marriage status were substantially associated with higher levels of work satisfaction. An additional study by Haji Matarsat et al. (2021) revealed that individuals who smoke cigarettes, those with health issues, and those who had family issues reported significantly lower levels of work satisfaction. In South Africa, Matjeke and van Dyk (2020) examined the association between conflict surrounding work and family life and job satisfaction among single parents serving in the South Africa National Defense Forces. The single parents reported a significant correlation between work-family conflict and work satisfaction whereas social support had an indirect but significant relationship with work satisfaction.

Separately, while investigating aftercare interventions for employees discharged from rehabilitation, Braaf and Roman (2024) also highlighted that when families participate in counseling and awareness programs, employees experience a more nurturing reintegration into the work environment, which aids in diminishing stigma and promotes empathy among co-workers. In a similar vein, the inclusion of family members in aftercare assistance facilitates more seamless transitions back to work roles, allowing individuals to effectively reconcile personal and professional obligations, thereby improving overall job satisfaction. Amah (2019), on the other hand, revealed that family support and resources were significant determinants of job satisfaction from a study conducted in Nigeria. Additionally, the findings demonstrated that extended family support showed a positive link with family satisfaction, which in turn was a crucial predictor of the functional capabilities of working mothers while reducing work-family conflict.

Afulani et al. (2021) used a cross-sectional study to assess the different factors associated with job satisfaction which included family support, job satisfaction before the pandemic, perceived support from management, and perceived communication from management among healthcare workers in Ghana and Kenya. From the findings, family support had a positive correlation to the work satisfaction of healthcare workers while other factors such as

stress and burnout had a negative correlation to work satisfaction. Pertaining to family support, the greater the support, the higher the levels of work satisfaction. The study was key to highlighting the important effects of family support on work satisfaction in healthcare workers.

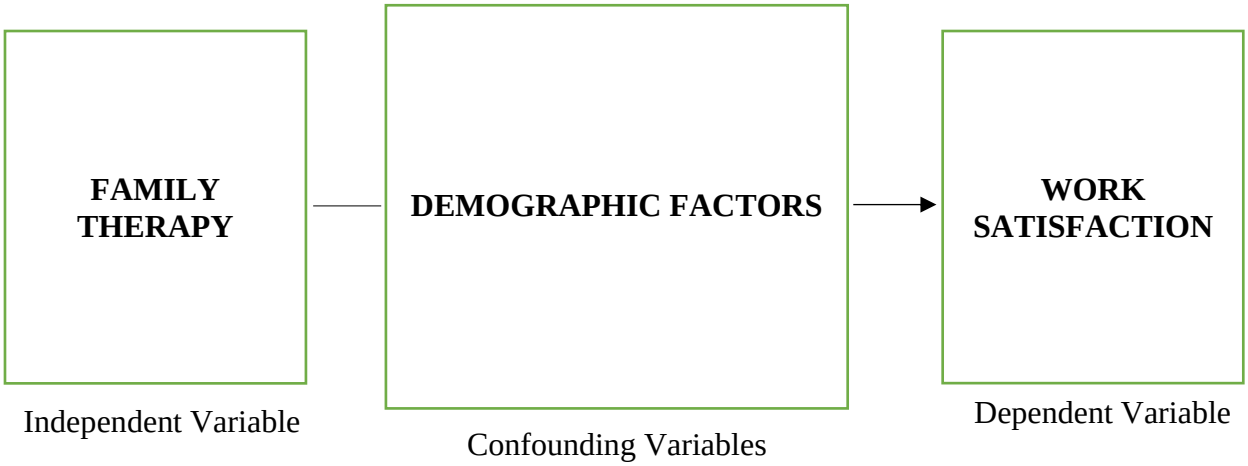
Across the literature, not many studies have investigated how psychological interventions, key among them being family therapy, affect work-family attributes such as work-family satisfaction. To address this gap, this study has taken the initiative to try and ascertain whether family therapy would have any influence on work-family enrichment by assessing its value on work satisfaction.

This study is anchored on the family systems theory (Bowen, 1976). The theory postulates that family members influence the behaviour of each other as a result of direct and indirect interdependence. The interactions among family members are transactional and bidirectional. Pathological communication and response to one another's behaviour encourages change in behaviour. Through family interaction and interdependence, male clients with substance abuse disorder may experience work satisfaction due to pathological communication and transactional interdependence which may in turn influence their behaviour in the work environment.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The research conceptualized that work satisfaction may be influenced by family therapy, which was the independent variable of the study. In this study, work satisfaction was used to refer to individuals' opinion about their task output.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

This section provides information about research design, study population, sampling techniques, instrumentation, data collection procedure, data analysis and ethical consideration.

4.2. Research Design

The study employed exploratory and descriptive research approach to achieve contextualized and elaborate experiences of participants. This technique provided details about the interplay between work and family patterns within specific settings of substance use disorder rehabilitation. The process of data collection involved carrying out interviews to achieve detailed qualitative data from interviewees. This technique permitted the interrogation of thought, emotions and experiences of participants in a comprehensive and flexible manner. The interviews were intended to involve the wide scope of participant familial dynamics, age disparities, religious belief, socioeconomic positions and environmental factors. Data collected was analyzed through thematic analysis, which included detecting, analysing and summarizing the themes or patterns in the data. This technique was effective due to its adaptability (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.3. Study Population

Participants of the study involved male clients diagnosed with substance use disorder. Target population involved adults above 18 years because employed persons in Kenya are obliged to meet this criterion. Therefore, the research drew its participants from a study population which was composed of 64 employed males between 18-60 years. Target population was drawn from Kiambu county due to the existence of rehabilitation facilities within the county.

4.4. Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants who met the predefined eligibility criteria. Recruitment continued until the researchers determined that additional interviews were no longer generating substantially new codes or themes. Thirty-one participants were interviewed. Data saturation is a significant concept in research since it ensures that the collection of data stops once new insights, patterns or themes cease to emerge (Ahmed, 2025).

4.5. Instrumentation

Data was collected through semi structured interviews, which were considered to be the most suitable methods for understanding the perspectives of the participants. The

instruments offered a systematic and flexible structure for the interviews, which provided comprehensive examination of the relevant themes.

4.6. Data Collection Procedure

The researchers secured research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) through the University of Nairobi. Thereafter, consent was obtained from the directors of respective rehabilitation centres using relevant documentation to collect data. Consent was equally needed from individuals who formed part of the study prior to administration of research tools. The study used an average of 25 minutes per interview for all the interviews conducted (Thorsteinson, 2017). The interviews were carried out by researchers in person and recorded through the use of electronic recording devices for transcription and analysis. The interviewees participated voluntarily and were accorded confidentiality.

4.7. Data Analysis

Data analysis in a qualitative study requires systematic approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The current study utilized MAXQDA 24 to allow for the analysis of qualitative data. This process started with an inductive thematic analysis, which involves identifying pattern, themes and relationships within the data (Leech et al., 2011). Attention was given to repeated phrases, words, patterns of behaviour and the broader social and cultural contexts from which the patterns emerged. The thematic analysis process in the current study focused on work satisfaction. Other variables considered included marital status, age of respondents, frequency of substance use. These variables enabled the research to contextualize themes in personal experiences of participants.

Through a collection of steps, data was transcribed for acclimatization and colour coding of pieces of raw data. After identifying the list of codes, themes were collated and mapped. The definition of themes allowed for analysis to identify the story held by each theme in the context of the study. More investigation was undertaken between themes and different levels of themes, then collected, improved and plotted on separate maps to indicate problems and possible solutions.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Introduction

This section presents result and discussions of experiences of family therapy and work satisfaction among employed male clients with substance use disorder undergoing rehabilitation. Work satisfaction themes presented in this section emerged from thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

5.2. *Demographic Profile of Respondents*

The current study sample was composed of thirty-one male clients undergoing rehabilitation.

Table 1 – Distribution of Respondents by Demographic Characteristics

S/N	*Demographic Variable*	*Response*	*Frequency*	*Percent*
1	Age group	18–35 years	14	45.2%
		36–50 years	14	45.2%
		51+ years	3	9.6%
		Total	31	100.0%
2	Current Relationship Status	Single	9	29.0%
		Married	14	45.2%
		Separated	6	19.4%
		Widowed	2	6.4%
		Total	31	100.0%
3	Level of Education	Secondary education	9	29.0%
		College education	11	35.5%
		Bachelor's degree	8	25.8%
		Master's degree	3	9.7%
		Total	31	100%
4	Living Condition	Alone	9	29.0%
		Spouse	2	6.5%%
		Spouse and Children	10	32.2%
		Other Family Members	2	6.5%
		Child/Children	2	6.5%
		Non-relative	4	12.9%
		Parents	2	6.5%
		Total	31	100.0%
5	Substance of Choice	Alcohol	25	80.6%
		Marijuana	3	9.7%
		Khat	1	3.2%
		Cigarettes	2	6.5%
		Total	31	100.0%
6	Length of substance use	1–3 years	1	3.2%
		3–5 years	2	6.5%

		5–7 years	2	6.5%
		7–10 years	1	3.2%
		More than 10 years	25	80.6%
		Total	31	100.0%
7	Frequency of substance use	Daily or almost daily	24	77.4%
		Monthly	3	9.7%
		weekly	4	12.9%
		Total	31	100.0%
8	Additional substances	Cigarettes	8	25.8%
		Cannabis	7	22.6%
		Cannabis and cigarettes	3	9.7%
		Khat	2	6.5%
		Khat and cigarettes	1	3.2%
		NONE	10	32.2%
		Total	31	100.0%

Source: Author

Concerning living conditions, most respondents lived with their spouses and children (32.1%, n=10), followed by those who lived alone (30.1%, n=9). A few of them lived with non-relatives (14.0%, n=4), some lived with other family members (7.6%, n=2), entirely with a spouse (7.6%, n=2) or with their children (6.4%, n=2).

A large proportion of respondents (80.6%, n=25) pinpointed alcohol as their favourite substance, while other participants indicated that they used marijuana (9.7%, n=3), cigarettes (6.5%, n=2) or khat (3.2%, n=1). Most of the respondents confirmed to have been involved in substance use for over 10 years (80.6%, n=25) with daily or almost daily consumption (77.4%, n=24) while others indicated weekly use (12.9%, n=4) or monthly use (9.7%, n=3). Concerning additional substances, 32.3% (n=10) confirmed no use, while others consumed cigarettes (25.8%, n=8), cannabis (22.6%, n=7), a composition of cannabis and cigarettes (9.7%, n=3), khat (6.5%, n=2) or a composition of khat and cigarettes (3.2%, n=1).

Table 2 – Work Satisfaction Themes

S/N	***Work Satisfaction Themes***	***Frequency***	***Percentage***	***Percentage (valid)***
1	Increased self-awareness	20	64.52	68.97
2	Improved work relationships	19	61.29	65.52

3	Confidence in work abilities	18	58.06	62.07
4	Psychological stability at work	18	58.06	62.07
5	Clear Communication at work	16	51.61	55.17
6	Rediscovering the purpose of work	14	45.16	48.28
7	Work-life boundaries	12	38.71	41.38
8	Coping with work challenges	11	35.48	37.93
9	Improved problem solving	11	35	37.93
10	Workplace support	10	32.26	34.48
	Documents with theme(s)	30	96.77	100.00
	Documents without theme(s)	1	3.23	
	Analyzed documents	31	100	

Source: Author

Increased self-awareness emerged as a prominent theme (see Table 2), highlighted by 20 of the 31 participants who indicated its significance as part of work satisfaction which was exemplified in the following excerpts: "If I revert to old habits like lateness, it would indicate no real improvement" (PARTICIPANT 6).

> "There is also the aspect of, in a situation whereby there's an assignment that's not very clear to me, I'm able to seek guidance and support, boldly and confidently from the required offices" (PARTICIPANT 24)

> "I identified my weaknesses in terms of laxity and, laziness" (PARTICIPANT 29).

The responses from the participants seemed to suggest that increased self-awareness may enable them understand their behavioural patterns, leading to identification, improvements, and implementation of changes. Participant 6 acknowledges the futility of reverting to old habits and indicates a conscious effort to maintain positive changes. Participant 24 reports that self-awareness may improve workplace communication and problem-solving skills, while Participant 29 recognizes his shortcomings and indicates the need to address them to improve both work and family. These responses align with Wijayati et al. (2019) findings, reinforcing the aspect that enhancing emotional intelligence, particularly self-awareness, improves productivity and job satisfaction while addressing the negative effects of family dynamics on performance.

Another notable theme identified was improved work relationships. Participants reported the sense of responsibility they felt towards their work relationships. The following

excerpts indicate the theme: "It will improve work relationships. When I was absconding duty, I was overworking them. Somebody has to come and cover whatever you could have done. So, by that, when you go back, now you can be fully at work." (PARTICIPANT 8).

> "I'm more sympathetic to other workers who work far from home or young families" (PARTICIPANT 22).

> "I think there's a lot of things in family therapy that can be ported to work like that. Specifically, for me, it was understanding the other person's needs. It's where the other person is coming from. Put yourself in their shoes. Trying to understand what they are going through." (PARTICIPANT 31).

Participants perceived that family therapy increased peoples' awareness about how their behaviour affected others in the workplace, essentially giving them a sense of accountability in their workplace interactions. Acknowledging previous absenteeism and the strain it placed on the colleagues indicates how Participant 8 recognizes the importance of fully engaging at work for personal and collective reasons. Regarding empathy, Participant 22 similarly reported an increase from family therapy and appeared more understanding of co-workers facing familial challenges. Participant 31, on the other hand, highlighted the skills transferred from family therapy to the workplace relationships, including being more understanding of others. Similarly, Gonzalez et al. (2016) maintain that family therapy enhances empathy and understanding towards colleagues in the process, reinforcing the value of community ties within the workplace for the participants.

Another theme which emerged from the study was the contribution of family therapy to confidence in work abilities, allowing individuals to perform duties with greater assurance and reliability. This is depicted in the sentiments of Participant 15 and Participant 17 as reported:

> "I feel I can now work longer because my family now understands the demands of my job. Family therapy has helped the work aspect because now I can undertake extra duties without worry" (PARTICIPANT 15).

> "It will make me work better. It will make me a better teacher because I'm a teacher. It'll make me a better citizen. Currently, I feel important in the building work because now I can use this change as a block" (PARTICIPANT 7).

Feedback from the participant suggests a positive correlation between confidence at work and work-family enrichment as facilitated by family therapy. The responses indicate that family therapy may be associated with confidence, which in turn may enhance performance of professional responsibilities. Participant 15 indicated that, from family therapy, the family's understanding of work demands has improved, thereby allowing them to work extended hours and take on additional duties without concern. Similarly, Participant 7 expressed that family therapy would enhance not just their performance professionally but

their overall societal role as well. These findings suggest that a greater level of support from families may increase an individual's confidence at work, in turn enhancing work performance. Kane (1998) and Halilsoy (2024) believe that confidence is a booster for effective workplace behaviour, such as proactive participation and improved time management, all of which contribute to job satisfaction and performance.

The importance of psychological stability at work was underscored by 18 participants who shared their experiences of feeling balanced and secure in their roles as indicated in the participants' feedback: "My colleagues are the people that I also call family because as the people I see every morning and every day. I can't work without my family. I can't work without my colleagues. I have established a very good working environment without emotion, without the negative emotions of maybe hangovers and addiction" (PARTICIPANT 28).

> "The good thing is that especially knowing that you're going to work without any resentment, that you're in a recovery journey and you have people who are supporting you, it will actually make me work efficiently" (PARTICIPANT 10).

> "Now, there is better cohesion with family members, which was one of the factors that stressed me. When I'm stressed, I do not usually go to work, I go take alcohol. When there is good cohesion when we are well, and the interaction with my family and my wife is better I'm motivated to go to work" (PARTICIPANT 4).

The findings suggest the participants' emphasis on the significance of psychological stability and its importance to their work satisfaction. The role of supportive relationships both at work and in their personal lives in fostering a positive work environment was highlighted, as indicated, for instance, by Participant 28, who describes the colleagues as family and emphasizes the importance of a harmonious and emotionally stable workplace free from negative elements. Additionally, Participant 4 indicates how improved relationships with family members were linked to reduced stress and increased motivation. These findings interlink with those of Alessandri et al. (2018), which underscore the importance of psychological stability, a key aspect of work satisfaction, which in the case of this study is reinforced by supportive networks at home and work, significantly contributes to work-family enrichment.

Additionally, clear communication at work was identified as an important aspect of work satisfaction from the participants' feedback: "Being more open and not skipping things. When somebody is wrong or when a colleague is wrong, you talk about it and you discuss and things are kept in the open and the productivity becomes much better." (PARTICIPANT 26).

> "One instance is that, now I know for certain, if I have an issue with anyone, I should face it head-on, and not call in, like I used to do." (PARTICIPANT 13).

> "Family therapy has helped a lot because my boss now usually communicates with my family about my whereabouts. Even me coming here, the boss played a very big role with my family because they decided that I came to this place." (PARTICIPANT 5).

Participants perceived that clear communication may be an essential factor for achieving work satisfaction. Feedback indicates that open dialogue and directly addressing issues may improve productivity and workplace dynamics. Participant 26 reported the value of openly addressing issues at work and maintaining transparency, while Participant 13 outlines their personal growth in effectively handling conflict at the workplace rather than avoidance. Additionally, integration of family therapy into communication practices was perceived to be beneficial, as Participant 5 noted how their boss's involvement in communicating with their family played a crucial role in their work attendance and overall well-being. Purwanto (2022) maintains that the family and work spectrum tend to have an influence on each other.

In the theme concerning rediscovering the purpose of work, participants associated transformative experience with family therapy. This was summarized through the following observations: "Being in therapy made me realize that I need to provide for my family, and that means I need to be serious about my job. I've rediscovered why I do what I do." (PARTICIPANT 13).

> "Taking this responsibility, especially since in my case it's a business, means getting to be accountable. I now feel more connected to the work I do and more motivated to make it successful." (PARTICIPANT 21).

Responses from Participant 13 and Participant 21 indicate a shift in their understanding of professional goals and the influence of family therapy. The participants reported their newfound commitment to their jobs by recognizing the necessity of being responsible providers for their families, as well as accountability in their business. These insights were in connection to the findings of Zhang et al. (2019), highlighting family motivation as a critical motivator to enhancing the instrumental meaning of work and increasing the perception of increased work effort's vitality to sustaining the family. This evidence, therefore, suggests that family therapy is perceived to foster a deeper understanding of the importance of work not only to the individual but to their family as well.

Further examination of feedback from respondents indicated work-life boundaries as another emerging impact of family therapy on work satisfaction. Participants reported the role family therapy played in establishing boundaries between their work and personal lives and, in the process, ensuring that their responsibilities do not infringe on their overall well-being as indicated: " I tended to choose the wrong colleagues, like say, workmates. I always went with the ones who indulged in merrymaking. Family therapy has shown me how to be able to interact with healthier workmates." (PARTICIPANT 4).

> "I think it goes back to the aspect of putting a healthy distance between work and home." (PARTICIPANT 15).

From the responses of Participant 4 and Participant 15, a recurring theme that emerged was that family therapy helped the participants understand the need to implement work-life boundaries. Participant 4, for instance, indicates the importance of being consciously selective with choosing and maintaining different relationships at work that positively influence their lives, underscoring the importance of boundaries. Participant 15, on the other hand, reports the need to exercise caution regarding the boundaries between work and personal lives. These findings corroborate with Gopalan and Patusami (2020), study which shows that establishing work-life boundaries is an important aspect of work satisfaction and professional fulfilment.

> Additionally, participants reported that family therapy enabled them to cope with work challenges, which led to enhanced stress management, resilience, and work efficiency. The participants associated the strategies employed to navigate work challenges with greater efficiency. "With stress management, I'll work knowing that I have a good support system from my family and also friends that I've not yet communicated with, but when I do get off of work, that's knowing that it's just easier to just go and tell them what is on your mind." (PARTICIPANT 2).

> "It helps that I communicate with him. being the firstborn, it's very bad when I don't have a good relationship with my father, and now, at least, having that relationship there, working with it, even if it's a day at a time, it's helping me cope and also work more efficiently." (PARTICIPANT 10).

Participants also reported that family therapy enabled them cope with challenges. They perceived that supportive family relationships and communication stood out as the key changes initiated by family therapy that allow the participants to approach work-related challenges with better effectiveness. Participant 2 highlighted how essential a good support system at home was to processing workplace stress and establishing a sense of relief. Further, the participants reported that family therapy influenced the individual's ability to cope with workplace demands by highlighting the benefits of addressing familial issues in the workplace. Participant 10 mentioned the benefits of resolving and rebuilding his relationship with his father and its influence on his coping mechanisms and efficiency at work. Similar to the study conducted by Afulani et al. (2021), in which perceived family support positively correlates to work satisfaction, these results emphasize the importance of family support from family therapy on coping and work satisfaction.

Improved problem-solving skills were reflected in the experiences of participants who reported that family therapy enhanced skills in that regard. This was summarized by the following excerpts; "From family therapy, I have learnt that I can't use alcohol or any of the other substances as a coping mechanism. I'll just have to handle it. So whatever challenge

comes up with me my supervisor, my boss, or whoever is in charge of me. I have to directly go to them and just communicate where I may have fallen short or they may, they might have done wrong towards me." (PARTICIPANT 2).

> "Sometimes we have staff meetings, it would be wrong for me, as his deputy, to go to the staff and criticize what the boss had said in the meeting. In that case, I've learned if I see anything negative about it, to approach him and talk to him the two of us give him my reasons of the same." (PARTICIPANT 14).

Responses from the participants associated a link between family therapy and improved problem-solving skills in the workplace. They reported that family therapy may equip individuals with mechanisms of addressing workplace challenges such as interpersonal issues, as indicated by Participant 14, who indicates a need to adopt a more inclusive and respectful form of conflict resolution. Participant 2, on the other hand, highlights a change in coping with workplace issues from using psychoactive substances to using open communication to address colleagues and supervisors. The findings align with the role of psychological capital derived from the family, including efficacy, resilience, and optimism in equipping individuals with the confidence to address workplace challenges (Mishra et al., 2017).

The theme of workplace support was also reported by the participants. They suggested that family therapy may enhance their appreciation for workplace support and their awareness of the encouragement received from co-workers and managers.

> "Family therapy benefits me because my employer who brought me here says now it is out of control. I am a very respectable person, very truthful. They say now before they leave me to just go and mess up somewhere so that I also don't quit my job. Let us just take him somewhere for him to secure his job." (PARTICIPANT 11).

> "My work has challenges, and the government gives out directives that those who are assessed to be stressed or under the influence are recommended and referred to rehabs to eliminate what is bothering them, and that is something I'm benefitting from." (PARTICIPANT 12).

Respondents reported that family therapy intervention appeared to have enhanced an individual's recognition of workplace support, especially supervisor support. The response from Participant 11 highlights the implications of a proactive employer in the provision or facilitation of therapy essential to not just the individual's wellbeing but to securing their employment as well, therefore creating a positive perception of workplace support. Similarly, Participant 12 perceived the importance of policies that facilitated family therapy and thereby directly benefitting both the work and family spectrums. The responses from the participants associated workplace support availability with personal and professional challenges. This corroborates results from Mishra et al. (2017) which indicate that the

interplay between psychological capital from family and supervisor support can be crucial to achieving work satisfaction.

Despite the potential for family therapy to influence work satisfaction, some participants reported no direct influence through no perceived impact on work. This was indicated by the following quotes:

> "No family therapy has not had any effect on my employment." (PARTICIPANT 27).
>
> "In terms of work, family therapy doesn't have much of an impact because my job doesn't have a lot of interpersonal interaction." (PARTICIPANT 1).
>
> "I have not been to work so I'm not yet sure whether the changes will translate to work. (PARTICIPANT 22).

These accounts suggest that for some individuals, the benefits of family therapy may not easily transfer to the workplace, especially when roles involve little interpersonal interaction or when participants have not yet returned to work. The sentiments of Participant 1 highlight the importance of job context in determining whether therapy outcomes can be applied, while responses from Participant 27 and Participant 22 emphasize both perceived irrelevance and uncertainty about the future transfer of therapeutic gains. This pattern aligns with broader findings from Su-Kubricht et al. (2024), that scepticism toward therapy can be influenced by cultural and family factors, with female participants often affected by expectations to handle problems independently. Such perceptions may lead to a decreased sense of relevance or value of therapy outcomes in non-family domains like the workplace.

Findings of the study established that family therapy may have influence on work satisfaction. Improvement results from attributes such as increased self-confidence, better emotional regulation, improved relationships all around, and a better understanding of the participants' roles.

Satisfaction gained from family therapy too seemed to have influence on self-confidence and motivation to work, since individuals would not want to abscond duty and to revert to old habits. Burrell et al., (2018) believe that self-confidence amplifies its impact beyond individual motivation and performance, permitting individuals to gain control over their interactions within their social environment and their behaviours too.

This study also established that individuals who achieve self-awareness identify their weaknesses and develop improved workplace communication, being able to seek support confidently when where tasks assigned are not quite clear to them. Gong et al. (2021) maintain that strategies which improve self-confidence create conducive environments for task completion where individuals seek mentorship and guidance from experienced individuals, which promotes positive emotional state that strengthens capability and competence.

Individuals reported that they experienced a peaceful and emotionally stable workplaces as a result of family therapy. They also managed to establish good working environments devoid of negative emotions, addiction and hangover. Gong and Paulson (2017) affirm that emerging adults with increased family expressiveness, heightened family cohesion and reduced family conflict are more competent in controlling their emotions.

Family therapy equipped participants with a sense of accountability in their workplace interactions. They understood the need to engage competently in their assigned duties for individual and collective benefit. The aim of family therapy is to create widespread changes which result to desirable outcomes and wellness for all individuals within the system (Lebow, 2018).

Some people don't believe in the direct influence of family therapy on work satisfaction, suggesting that the benefits may not transfer to all work contexts or individuals. Notwithstanding, this study underscores the potential of family therapy as a tool for improving workplace dynamics and personal well-being, warranting further exploration into its application across diverse work environments. Wijayati et al. (2019) and Gonzalez et al. (2016) emphasize the role of emotional intelligence and empathy in enhancing work satisfaction

6. CONCLUSION

Findings established a positive relationship between family therapy and work satisfaction although other participants maintained that its benefits did not extend to all professional settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study suggests the formation of policies relevant to employee assistance programs that benefit employees going through rehabilitation or those who need psychological assistance, either for themselves or for important others. This would result to great milestones in enhancing the quality of life of employees, regularizing mental health related interventions and improving the wellbeing of the workforce.

Governments and relevant stakeholders need to apportion resources for facilitating the creation of awareness about the significance family therapy in improving mental health This may include increasing training of professionals, developing family intervention programs and conducting further research.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: This study used non-public data confined to clients with substance use disorder. Participant privacy restricted the researchers from public release of the data.

Ethical Consideration: Research license was obtained from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, through the University of Nairobi. Participants were informed about the aim of the research before commencement of data collection. Names of respondents and data provided was treated with utmost confidentiality. Data was used for research purposes only.

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ARTICLE

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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)'S FUNDING LANDSCAPE IN THE SHADOW OF TRUMP'S EXECUTIVE ORDERS: RESOURCING IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article traces the impacts of the Executive Orders issued during the early phase of Trump's second presidency upon funding for civil society actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It takes stock of the key thematic and geographic areas affected by funding cuts and shortfall, including particularly activities conducted by actors committed to advocating for social change (e.g. those focused on reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights, diversity and race etc). At the same time, highlighting areas that have been spared major cuts (e.g. strategic military/security partnerships and curbing migrant flows to the West) indicates emerging shifts in donor priorities. Beyond documenting funding reductions in the region, the article contributes to existing literature by arguing that the Executive Orders have compounded, and been compounded by, parallel, sometimes pre-existing crises for civil society actors. In light of the above, the article concludes by reflecting on possible approaches that may be taken by civil society actors going forward.

Keywords

Foreign Aid; NGOs; Donor Policy; Localisation; Philanthropy; Sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the implications of developments during the early phase of US President Trump's second term on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) funding landscape for civil society, research and humanitarian activities, and the resultant impacts on activism and knowledge production. In particular, it focuses on disruptions caused by Executive Orders passed by President Trump between re-etnering office in January 2025 and the end of December of that year. Additionally, the article considers other parallel, and sometimes preceding, shocks and crises that have also affected the funding landscape in MENA.

The article seeks to answer questions about which civil society actors, sectors and streams of works have been (most) affected by funding cuts. It also considers what kinds of programming and interventions have been minimally impacted through the disruption caused by Executive Orders, and what this implies for the trajectory of international aid and donor engagement. By taking five case studies, covering Lebanese, Libyan, Palestinian, Syrian and regional contexts, the article illustrates the impacts and risks that such decisions and actions have had for the work of civil society actors in the region, while also tracing efforts to establish more creative, sustainable and localised funding pathways to ensure the continuity of vital civil society and research work going forward. Beyond documenting funding reductions in the region, the article contributes to existing literature by arguing that the Executive Orders have compounded, and been compounded by, parallel, sometimes pre-existing crises for civil society actors. With this in mind, the concluding section reflects on possible strategic approaches for both civil society actors and supportive donor entities seeking to navigate such challenges.

2. METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This article employs a mixed methodology. Firstly, it draws on desk review of secondary reporting about Trump's Executive Orders and their impact on the MENA region. Given the recency of the topic under study, there are limited relevant articles in peer-reviewed journals. Instead, available sources include donor reports, grant databases, organisational disclosures, NGO and UN activity reporting, selected to capture both the scale and the complexity of civil society funding across the MENA region. I prioritised the inclusion of public sources from different levels (governments, international foundations, private-sector, national and local actors) for the triangulation of information to the extent possible.

Secondly, desk review was complemented by 15 key informant interviews with representatives from civil society actors. These interviews added the perspective of individuals directly affected, presenting their daily concerns, which were often not covered in published literature. Alongside contributing to the article's broader mapping of macro dynamics across the MENA region, these interviews additionally feed into 5 case studies focused on individual civil society actors working in Lebanese, Libyan, Palestinian, Syrian and

regional contexts with a view to examining and illustrating impacts as well as mitigating strategies. While not representative of the full range of experiences by civil society actors across the entire MENA region, these case studies were selected to collectively illustrate the diversity of actors impacted in different geographic contexts. The temporal scope of the case studies was up until the end of 2025, with each interviewee contacted several times throughout that year via online communication to monitor both initial impacts of the Executive Orders and how actors were seeking to respond over time.

The chaotic nature of Trump's Executive Orders means that it has been challenging to comprehensively follow their disruptive impacts. Solid data are often only partially available, with cited figures varying across public sources rendering systematic tracking difficult. Indeed, research attempting to "follow the money" is hindered by methodological considerations relating to both limited availability of publicly accessible data and structural complexities within the international aid industry. While a review of NGO funding notes growing academic attention given to NGO fundraising over the last decade (Al-Nowairah & Saji, 2024), a number of methodological considerations present limitations regarding the accurate tracking of NGO funds. Although donors regularly announce funding pledges, full datasets are often not publicly available. For instance, a 2025 assessment of funding transparency notes that there is "no reliable overview of EU funding granted to NGOs" (European Court of Auditors, 2025). Moreover, given political sensitivities, some civil society actors in MENA have operated without overtly declaring that they are recipients of US (or other western) funding. Equally, NGOs will not always be inclined to report on suspended funding while in the process of advocating for its recovery. Ultimately, most data on philanthropic grant-making globally is self-reported (Sovner, 2017), making it largely patchy as well as fragmented. Inconsistent, sometimes unclear, reporting periods further make it difficult to draw conclusions about longitudinal developments.

Another challenge relates to the funding landscape itself. The complex structural mechanisms used to disperse funds through "trickle-down" processes make capturing the true reality of where money is invested a bewildering task. This is especially the case when funding is allocated through modalities such as "pooled funding" mechanisms where multiple actors may report on use of the same funds, potentially resulting in double counting. Reporting on different levels can also be confusing or deceptive, and many times details about the regional share of globally earmarked funds are simply not available. Indeed, it has been acknowledged in existing literature that where data on funding sometimes exists on the global level, there may still be "limited aggregated knowledge of how much funding – and through what channels – goes to local actors at the country level, particularly funding that reaches local actors indirectly" (Els, 2017). At the same time, non-standardised budget reporting categories, and lack of breakdown across programmes, partners and locations further complicate the picture, impeding accurate analysis.

Nonetheless, to the extent possible, the early sections of this article provide an overview of available data on these dynamics. To this effect, the article scopes other research published on the impact of the Executive Orders and wider developments in the MENA funding landscape. A particular focus here is given to studies that present discussion of quantitative data that can potentially fill gaps otherwise existing in information concerning affected programming and wider impacts. Later sections of the article consider other shocks and crises that have also impacted the MENA funding landscape. Finally, the article seeks to reflect on ways forward for MENA actors to secure the necessary resources to achieve their goals, while considering questions of future sustainability and ethics. It does so by providing a series of recommendations tailored to civil society actors and funding bodies looking to provide more sustainable and meaningful support within this challenging landscape.

3. DISRUPTIVE EXECUTIVE ORDERS DURING TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY 2.0

This article focuses on the impact of Executive Orders issued between January and December 2025. Since returning to office in January 2025, Trump broke historic records for the most Executive Orders issued during the first 100 days by any US president (Gómez & Bryson, 2025). Of the 147 issued by early May 2025, a number of these Executive Orders had reportedly brought about disruptive change expected to have long-lasting impacts (Gans, 2025). Notably, most of the Executive Orders passed to date that have directly impacted international aid were passed in the first two months of Trump's second Presidency. Alongside a rollback on environmental protection agreements, restoring the death penalty, and the controversial introduction of various trade tariffs,[1] multiple executive actions have related to the suspension of well-established funding pathways, and the demolition of bodies responsible for the management of such funding. Indeed, one of the slews of 26 Executive Orders Trump signed on his very first day back in the White House (20 January 2025) brought in a 90-day pause in US foreign development assistance pending reviews of "programmatic efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy" (Executive Order 14169, 2025). This was on the grounds that "The United States foreign aid industry and bureaucracy are not aligned with American interests and in many cases [are] antithetical to American values" (Ibid, Section 1). The near-total freeze of US foreign assistance ultimately paved the way for the complete dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) - an independent body operating since 1961 (Kates et al, 2025). Other Executive Orders issued the same day brought in the withdrawal of US funding from the World Health Organisation (Executive Order 14155, 2025) and the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) (Executive Order 14158, 2025) - an entity further empowered by later Executive Orders to dismantle government agencies and funded organisations.

[1] For a full compilation of the Executive Orders issued by President Trump, see: https://www.dlapiper.com/en-gb/insights/publications/2025/01/trump-executive-orders.

Following outcry against the sudden cuts to funding, on 29 January US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a waiver, instructing that "implementers of existing life-saving humanitarian assistance programs should continue or resume work if they have stopped" (US Department of State, 2025a). The waiver explicitly stated that there would be no continuation of any activities related to abortion, family planning, gender, transgender surgery, and DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] "ideology programs". On 19 February, the "Commencing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy" Executive Order "eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law" the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), alongside other organisations, on the basis of the President considering it an "unnecessary governmental entity" (Executive Order 14217, 2025). Other Orders suspended funding to United Nations agencies (Executive Order 14199, 2025). Given that the US had been by far the largest single donor to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for its humanitarian work with Palestinian refugees in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, Trump's sudden cancellation of all US funding to the agency has had significant impacts on the international community's ability to secure continued assistance to Palestinians in these countries. While there have long been arguments that many large UN entities, and the humanitarian system in general, are in need of reform, the Executive Orders have produced large-scale dysfunction - symbolized by the massive wastage of supplies that could feed 3.5 million people for a month while held in storage (Revell, 2025).

4. MAPPING IMPACTS OF TRUMP'S EXECUTIVE ORDERS ON MENA'S FUNDING LANDSCAPE

In addition to the global rejection of the established rules-based order and multi-lateral humanitarian and development action, the Executive Orders since January 2025 have had a significant impact on the funding landscape for humanitarian, research and civil society actors in MENA. This is on top of existing funding challenges as the result of unmet fund-raising goals for regional humanitarian responses. Already during Trump's first term as President (2017-2021), the top budget line in US spending for MENA was cut 12% despite overtures to the strategic importance of the region to the Administration (Middle East Democracy Centre, 2017). For instance, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)'s budget was cut by 58% in 2017 (Ibid).

The Executive Actions of 2025 have had much more devastating impacts on MENA given the effective zeroing out of USAID and other federal agencies. Indeed, in 2024 USAID was providing some $4.2 billion to the region, approximately half of which was focused on humanitarian aid to Gaza, Iraq, Syria and Yemen (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2025: 2). Notably, the main areas to have been spared funding cuts in the region have been the strategic military aid to Israel and Egypt (Sinai) (The Guardian, 2025). This has sent a clear message to civil society professionals and wider populations in the region that international donor priorities are for their own military and security interests, while the promotion of

"progressive" values has been sidelined. The US trade wars (themselves partly implemented through Executive Orders) have reportedly had an impact on start-up funding across MENA, further widening the gender funding gap in this area (El-Shaeri, 2025).

UNHCR's regional operations, notably including the already markedly under-funded Syria refugee response plan (UNHCR, 2024), have been significantly cut due to suspension of US funding through the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM). A large proportion of this funding was covering activities focused on Child Protection and Sexual & Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), while some countries in the region relied significantly on US funding (e.g. Iraq reportedly at 70%).[2] While PRM released some suspended funding following the 90-day period, the future of refugee assistance in MENA continues to look bleak. In noting the disproportionately high impacts of funding cuts on displaced populations globally, by July 2025 UNHCR reported 43% cuts to its programmes in the Middle East and North Africa - the highest impact in any of the world's regions - cf. 26% cuts in the Asia/Pacific region; 31% in East and Horn of Africa; 34% in Europe; 25% in West, Central and Southern Africa; 42% in the Americas (UNHCR, 2025: 5-7). The agency further details that: "In Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, severe cuts to financial aid, shelter assistance and health care are forcing families to choose between food, medicine, and rent. Key protection services for children and survivors of sexual violence are also being suspended, with others at risk" (Ibid, 6). A key informant in Iraq reported that most of the main providers of legal assistance to Syrian refugees (including NRC, UNHCR and its partners) had all drastically reduced their activities to the point that some teams are no longer able to adequately monitor evolving needs and protection trends.[3]

Support to Palestinians - both humanitarian and civil society - has been particularly badly hit by the recent funding crisis. After the first Trump Administration had already eliminated the vast majority of funding for humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in the Middle East (Beaumont & Holmes, 2018), funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was restored under the Biden Administration (Al Jazeera, 2021). Shortly into Trump's second term in the White House, in February 2025 the President issued an Executive Order effectively defunding UNRWA on the claim that the agency had become "infiltrated by members of groups long designated by the Secretary of State as foreign terrorist organizations" and that agency staff had been involved in the 7 October 2023 attack against Israel (Executive Order 14199, 2025). It should be noted that decisions to suspend funding to UNRWA by the US, UK and Germany following the 7 October attacks predate President Trump's return to office (Livingstone, 2024), although it is notable that Germany did commit subsequent funding to UNRWA in April 2024 (UNRWA, 2024). In parallel to the UNRWA funding crisis, in March 2025 the USAID-funded Middle East Regional

[2] Author interview with UNHCR staff member working in the Amman Regional Bureau, October 2025.
[3] Author interview with Iraqi lawyer working with an INGO in Iraq, September 2025.

Cooperation (MERC) program, which was created in 1979 to foster exchanges between citizens of Israeli and Arab states, was also shut down (Dayan & Samuels, 2025).

Trump's war on DEI, in conjunction with the massive funding cuts, has also significantly impacted civil society organisations striving for social change in the MENA region. For instance, as described in Case Study 1, HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement lost its funding to directly support human rights defenders (Hearst, 2025). The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which had been established to focus on providing smaller grants to non-governmental actors to work on "political freedoms" (Yerkes & Wittes, 2004), was named by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as one of the 2,600 entities under scrutiny for closure (New York Times, 2025a). Similarly, the US State Department's support of pro-democracy activists in Iran through the Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) program was suspended. Meanwhile, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which frames its MENA engagements as "support[ing] advocates throughout the region, including independent civil society organizations, think tanks and research centers, and media working towards democratic goals" (National Endowment for Democracy, undated), had mounted legal challenges against Trump's funding freeze (New York Times, 2025b). A February 2025 *op ed* issued by a centre founded by the conservative reformer currently heading the OMB is critical of NED's MENA work in stating that: "Among the groups unintentionally empowered by NED's "pro-democracy" meddling in the Middle East are radical jihadists like the Houthis in Yemen, the Al-Nusra Front in Syria, and the Islamic State (otherwise known as ISIS) in Syria and Iraq" (Center for Renewing America, 2025).

While most of the EOs related to international aid were issued during the early period of Trump's second Presidency, a number of later EOs are interesting for the new policy directions they imply. Firstly, in June 2025, President Trump passed an Executive Order initiating the lifting of sanctions on Syria in recognition of "the positive actions taken by the new Syrian government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa" (Executive Order 14312, 2025). This EO further authorised the Secretary of State, in consultation with the Secretary of the Treasury and the Attorney General, to "take all appropriate action with respect to the designation" of HTS and Sharaa as "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" (Ibid, Section 8). As discussed in Case Study 3 on Syria, the US government's lifting of sanctions on the country as part of its stated commitment to support Syria's transition coincides with an increased focus on alignment with foreign and trade policy interests. Other Executive Orders have shifted the US's intervention in MENA to focus on new very specific directions of cooperation and engagement underlined by US national security interests. This is clear, for example, in the "Assuring the Security of the State of Qatar" Executive Order of September 2025, which explicitly frames its objectives through the prism of "shared interests, and the close relationship between our armed forces". This EO ultimately states that the "The United States shall regard any armed attack on the territory, sovereignty, or critical infrastructure of the State of Qatar as a threat to the peace and security of the United States" (Executive Order 14353, 2025). While this Executive Order is not directly related to civil society funding, it

makes clear the prioritisation of strategic military cooperation with selected MENA states (including also Egypt, Jordan and Israel) over principled engagement with the third sector.

The timing of Trump's disruptive Executive Orders also coincided with multiple other factors that have exacerbated the impacts in given contexts. For instance, ongoing conflict in Sudan has contributed to a deterioration in the humanitarian situation in the country. Just a few months prior to the funding cuts, UNICEF had welcomed the grant of $1.75 million funding from the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) to respond to the refugees fleeing the escalating humanitarian crisis in Sudan (UNICEF, 2024). Lebanon was already suffering from multiple pre-existing crises (as discussed in Case Study 4). Meanwhile, the Case Study 3 below considers how the fall of the Assad regime in Syria during December 2024 brought new urgency at a time of resource confusion. Ultimately, the funding cuts introduced by Trump's Executive Orders have both compounded, and been compounded by, parallel crises and challenges affecting the MENA civil society space.

5. PARALLEL DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING MENA'S FUNDING LANDSCAPE

In addition to Trump's cancellation of funding to UNRWA, the MENA civil society and research landscape has been significantly impacted by the political positioning of various western donors following Hamas' 7 October 2023 attack against Israel, and Israel's subsequent genocidal intensification of Gaza. While many prominent European donors who had been active in supporting civil society actors in the MENA expressed immediate solidarity with Israel following the 7 October attack, the failure by some to comment equally assertively on the unfolding genocide against the Palestinian people thereafter exposed problematic political positioning, and created ethical and reputational dilemmas for activists and partners in the region. For instance, youth activists withdrew from the *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* (FES) programming in Tunisia over the organisation's perceived back-tracking, then silence, over, and lack of solidarity with, Palestinian victims of Israel's state violence and human rights violations (El Atti, 2023). Similarly, the lack of any modification or supplement to the immediate declaration by Chairman of the German foundation, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung* (KAS) that it stands in "uneingeschränkte Solidarität" (unconditional solidarity) with Israel following the 7 October attack exposed the organisation's one-sided position (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2023). More widely, German actors have been accused of showing a lack of "balance" in their approach to Middle East engagement (Casey, 2024). This is highlighted by a controversial law passed by the German parliament, which tied funding for cultural and scientific projects to support for Israel by making actors calling to boycott Israel or actively supporting the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement ineligible for German funding (Frag den Staat, 2024; Whittle, 2024). This can be alongside the tendency to "weaponize" against civil society actors critical of the Israeli state's action the expansive International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism – an observation shared by a key drafter of the IHRA (Stern, 2019). This trend predates Trump's

return to office. In parallel, some MENA-based organisations report increased challenges and opacity regarding passing German vetting.[4]

Prior to 7 October, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had already severely impacted economies in the region (International Crisis Group, 2022), and resulted in a diversion of funds and interests away from the region, with expectations in 2022 that many MENA states would experience a 25-50% funding cut, while Egypt was projected to incur up to a 75% reduction in humanitarian funds (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2022). The above developments have coincided with a general scaling-back of European Union and other western funding provided for democracy promotion and wider international development assistance in the MENA. Some such developments are part of global framing to reduce international development spending, such as the UK's 2025 announcement of a major cut in international aid to fund increased military spending - primarily as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Crerar & Stacey, 2025). This, *inter alia*, has resulted in a significant funding reduction for programs targeting women and girls, and supporting gender equality (Care International, 2025), further compounding the shrinking in support to the Women, Peace and Security agenda over recent years (Avichezer, 2024). For its part, France announced significant cuts to its development aid funding for the 2025 financial year (Masseguin, 2024). Further, it is clear that much available funding for civil society and humanitarian actors in MENA is premised on clear security objectives of western states - e.g., the UK Integrated Security Fund (UK Government, 2023). For its part, the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) announced a structural reform, including the elimination of Division "S," which is responsible for stabilization, peacebuilding, crisis prevention and humanitarian assistance programs. (Centre for Humanitarian Action, 2025).

Coinciding with increased annual anti-gender spending in Europe, fourfold from 2009 to 2018 (Datta, 2021), recent years have seen resourcing for LGBTI communities and inclusive gender justice movements cut globally. Part of this is resulting from the Open Society Foundation (OSF)'s strategic shift initiated in 2021 (Nowrojee, 2021), which ultimately led to the closure of its Human Rights Initiative and Public Health Program that had each extensively supported LGBTI+ communities worldwide. Indeed, according to a review by the Global Philanthropy Project focusing on the impacts to LGBTI+ funding, it was found that 8% of the budget of LGBTI+ movements outside the USA had been provided by the OSF (Global Philanthropy Project, undated). This highlighted how the sector had become heavily reliant upon OSF funding (Igoe, 2024). As elections have resulted in swings to the right across Europe, commentators have warned about the likely impacts on funding to gender equality initiatives (Coi, 2024).

Civil society work committed to intersectional social change has been particularly negatively affected by de-funding by the US government, but also through wider funding dynamics. Notably many feminist and women's rights movements were already facing

[4] Author interviews, anonymised, May 2025.

funding challenges, indicated by a 2022 study finding that most Women's Rights Organisations had never received unrestricted or multi-year funding (Alliance for Feminist Movements and Equal Measures 2030, 2025: 8). Women rights advocates have highlighted concerns over funding cuts against the context of the global anti-gender movement and anti-feminist backlash. In Lebanon, for example, one civil society advocate highlights how "a rising backlash [against feminism] in Lebanon and the MENA region" has coincided with ongoing budget cuts in the MENA region. (UN News, 2025a). Globally, women-focused programming, and that focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights for young women living with disabilities, women living with HIV, those who identify as LGBTQ, has been significantly impacted, with particular focus on the Global South.

Finally, another recent dynamic that has coincided with US funding cuts is the policy shift in the engagement of Gulf donors. While historically cautious to fund human rights programming, many Gulf states have engaged in large-scale humanitarian donation. Notably, the Gulf states have been major donors to a number of UN agencies, including UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP (Pericoli, 2025). However, the recent reduction in western funding to the MENA region has coincided with Gulf states "redraw[ing] their foreign financial policies, shifting away from the "open-handed aid" model that had characterized them for earlier decades" (Ali, 2025). Instead, "Funding has now been tied to political and economic conditions and to standards related to state authority and governance" (Ibid). This results in further challenges for MENA civil society actors who must operate in an increasingly restrictive climate.

The following five case studies Illustrate a range of dynamics confronting civil society actors in the MENA region. They highlight a number of common points: namely the vulnerability of locally-rooted civil society to donor dependency, and the compounding effects of parallel and preceding shocks to the funding and operating landscape.

5.1. *Case Study 1: HuMENA's Suspended Support to Human Rights Defenders Regionally*

The case study of HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement highlights the risks of donor dependence, especially for human rights defenders working on DEI and LGBTQ+ subjects. It illustrates how wider dynamics present barriers to replacing lost funding from other sources and represent further challenges when operating in an environment increasingly hostile to human rights and equality work. As an organisation working to support the work and wellbeing of human rights defenders across the Middle East and North Africa, HuMENA reported loss of 76% of its overall funds as a result of suspension of US support through Trump's Executive Orders. HuMENA had been receiving some of its funding from USAID directly and another portion through the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The organisation was consequently forced to close 3 projects in their entirety and to scale down

other operations.[5] These included programming focused on LGBTQ rights in Morocco and civil space in Tunisia, while also having to reduce staffing and downsize activities more broadly, resulting in a clear reduction in impacts for planned activities. The organisation's Executive Director, Mostafa Fouad, reported how these programmes supporting human rights defenders and social movements had been providing strong connections with activists working on the ground. "Now we are in a phase of trying to find other ways to continue the support", he added. HuMENA has also faced challenges in its work as a result of the fact that, not only have they lost funding, but so too has the entire civil society ecosystem. Some organisations not directly implicated by the loss of US funds have been negatively impacted by the generally more competitive environment that the US funding cuts have produced, resulting in many organisations having to reduce their staff or have them go part-time. "Everyone is suffering from this issue," remarks Fouad. "The only winners are the authoritarian regimes in the region."

HuMENA considers the loss of USAID funding to its Human Rights Defenders at Risk programme as part of the "wider attack on human rights and equality work". Following a 3-month assessment by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) after the initial Stop the Work Order, the organisation's work was ultimately fully terminated on the basis that its projects did not align with the direction of the new US administration. HuMENA has sought to work with its partners to explore ways to fill some of the lost funding, but the gap remains unfilled. While its Executive Director reports that several EU state actors expressed an interest in engaging to fill the gap, little such funding materialised since European priorities shifted towards funding military assistance in Ukraine after Trump's confrontational Oval Office meeting with Zelenskyy in February 2025 (Bayer et al, 2025). Other European foundations and donors proved to have complicated paperwork, or include a minimum project budget, making it difficult for small or medium-sized organisations to apply. Alternatively, the requirement to provide a full external audit similarly *de facto* excludes smaller actors given the high costs involved in covering such services. HuMENA also found that some European donors prefer to fund NGOs with registration in their own countries, which proved to be a further obstacle.[6]

Reflecting on the possible regional implications, HuMENA's staff expect to see that national civil society actors in many countries will struggle to survive, anticipating that "as many as 70% might close up their operations within the next two to three years." While the present lack of opportunities for sustainable engagement with, and real capacity building of, local actors is a pressing challenge, HuMENA acknowledges that the funding crisis has sometimes "forced" closer collaboration as well as sharing of data and resources. Indeed,

[5] Author interview with Mostafa Fouad, HuMENA Executive Director, 23 June 2025.

[6] For example, many Italian public funding schemes for civil society (e.g. through the Agenzia Italian Per La Cooperazione Allo Sviluppo, AICS) are restricted to organisations legally established and registered in Italy as per Law No. 125/2014: https://www.aics.gov.it/fields-of-action/osc-profit-ed-enti-territoriali/elenco-osc/?lang=en.

Fouad revealed that HuMENA and two other organisations have been contemplating merging in order to combine forces to better operate within the current landscape.

5.2. *Case Study 2: Al Magharbia Foundation Struggling to Map Impacts in Libya*

This case study of a research centre in Libya shows how even attempts to take stock, and map the full picture, of the impacts brought about by funding cuts were themselves impacted by the demolition of civil society infrastructure due to the same shocks. Further, the case highlights the wide range of sectors affected and the intersection with political currents already hostile to civil society actors. In Libya, such dynamics played out against the backdrop of civil society having been severely restricted for more than 40 years of Gaddafi's rule, followed by actors struggling under an unstable legal framework for a decade and a half since his fall. US agencies had been working on implementation of a 10-year strategy signed under the Biden administration focusing on sustainable peace (US Department of State, 2022). This included tying interventions to a long-term political vision promoting transition towards unified civilian-led governance, enhanced public services and inclusive, democratic institutions. Many projects were focusing on integration of marginalised communities in southern Libya into the national framework. Libya had also been identified as one of 5 target geographic areas in the 10-Year plan under the Biden Administration's Global Fragility Act (GFA) seeking to address conflict and promote stability (US Embassy in Tripoli, 2023), with over a billion USD dedicated to target these areas over a 5-year period (Alliance for Peacebuilding, undated). Actors working in the peacebuilding sector, including Mercy Corps, US contractors such as Tetratech, and their local partners were consequently hit hard by the sudden suspension of US funding to activities in Libya in early 2025. Chemonics International and Democracy International's interventions to support transitional governance in Libya were among the USAID-funded programmes terminated in early 2025 (Siken, 2025). The former included the Libya Governance and Civil Society Program (LGCS), known locally as the "Taqarib" (Coming Together) project, which supported Libyan municipalities in service delivery. USAID had also been a key supporter of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Libya to provide capacity building for electoral authorities over a number of years. IFES's website currently shows Libya as a country of "Past Programming" and makes no mention of it under "Current Activities", suggesting a suspension of the Foundation's work in the country (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, undated). Municipal elections in Libya have been significantly affected by funding cuts since election committees lost US funds, ultimately resulting in elections being delayed by several months (Kouachi & Abu Shamala, 2025).

Having been recently re-established by a group of Libyan peacebuilding professionals after a period of suspension following "uncertainty in the civil society legal framework", Al Magharbia Foundation for Public Policy and Democratic Enhancement sought to assess the

situation and impacts of these funding cuts.[7] The organisation launched a survey appealing for civil society actors to share information about the implications of cuts on their work. However, the group reports that the fact that impacts were so widespread hindered their ability to access accurate information and fully take stock of the situation. "Almost everyone was affected so they did not have time to fill out our survey. We did get 10 submissions with some interesting data, but then we found ourselves unable to dedicate time to proper analysis of the results since we had also been directly impacted", explains the founder of Al Magharbia, who had also immediately lost his work and income as a consultant on a Tetratech programme.

Nonetheless, reporting suggests that governance, economic development, elections, and peacebuilding work has been severely affected, while some security cooperation interventions in Libya continue. The reduction in US engagement in southern Libya has provided an opportunity for increased Russian intervention there (Ghoulidi, 2025). While Russia has refocused its influence on Libya following its withdrawal from Syria in late 2024 (Lovotti & Pavia, 2024), it appears to have invested little in civil society there. The founder of Al Magharbia reported that almost all projects and consultancies relating to governance were terminated immediately following news of Trump's first Executive Orders in office with stagnating impacts on the Libyan NGOs and development sector, as well as for key Libyan government institutions that had been reliant on US funding. The impact of US funding cuts in Libya has been exacerbated by a government crackdown on NGOs in the country. While many draconian laws and other measures used to target and harass activists in Libya predate Trump's Executive Orders (Human Rights Watch, 2025a; International Commission of Jurists 2023), the loss of international support has generally negatively affected the broader civil society ecosystem. In addition, ten INGOs supporting migrants in Libya, including the Norwegian Refugee Council, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and Terre des Hommes, were suspended in April 2025 on accusations of "hostile actions that undermine" national security (Arab Weekly, 2025). The representative from Al Magharbia further explained that "this is not the first time Libya has been vulnerable to cuts due to its heavy reliance on international funding", adding that many non-humanitarian INGOs left the country between 2014-17.

Meanwhile, much European funding for Libya remains focused on responding to potential trans-Mediterranean migrant flows. For instance, an early proposal of the European Commission's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028-2034 gives an indication of possible future funding allocation priorities, suggesting that "the amount of money allocated to migration matters will be significantly increased from the previous budget" (tripling from 25 billion to 81 billion Euros), while "the Commission has made borders the top priority" (Lindsay, 2025). Of the total 2 trillion Euro MFF, 42.9 billion Euros is proposed to go to the Middle East, North African and the Gulf - disbursed through the "Global Europe" instrument (European Commission, 2025e). While it is officially stated that "Global Europe

[7] Author interview with founder, June 2025.

will guarantee the EU's longstanding support for peace, democracy, human rights, civil society, free media and local authorities" (Ibid), this funding may also include the EU's externalisation of migration control (Lindsay, 2025), primarily through the training and equipping of North African Security Forces and Coast Guard services tasked to "stem" the flow of migrants into Europe by means of interception and forced returns (for such practices in Libya, see, e.g. Mellersh, 2025).

Reports suggest that the USAID has suspended its previously approved £50 million aid package to Libya, which was due to focus on i) governance and anti-corruption ii) voter engagement iii) media integrity to combat disinformation, much of which was largely administered through Chemonics International (Libya Express, 2025). It should be noted that foreign funding in Libya has been a sensitive issue following international intervention to topple Gaddafi that resulted in years of chaotic civil conflict (Mikaïl, 2013: 5). This has resulted in some observers responding to news of USAID funding cuts by providing critical accounts of the history of US (and EU) funding creating donor dependency (Fetouri, 2025), and "U.S. imperialist aims in maintaining instability and dominance over the country" (Osazua, 2024). It is, therefore, perhaps noteworthy that security cooperation between the US and Libya appears to continue largely unaffected (AlMamlaka TV, 2025). For its part, EU funding has been largely premised on combating migration to Europe by, for example, providing funding through the Tripoli government to municipalities to cope with the flow of migrants (Middle East Monitor, 2023; Dettmer, 2017). The transactional nature of Trump's position on Libya has been clear through the focus of his Administration on continuing engagement with the National Oil Corporation (NOC), while Europeans continue to prioritise curtailing migration (Libya Review, 2025; Rashed, 2025). In contrast, civil society actors working for social change have often both lost funding and been entangled in political debates as Trump's Executive Orders have produced division within Libyan society on the value of international funding, with some countering the above critiques with recognition of the benefits achieved through - sometimes indirect - USAID funding (Diwan Research, 2025). In all cases, the sudden US funding cuts to civil society, research and humanitarian actors in Libya has had disruptive impacts on programming.

5.3. *Case Study 3: Cuts Coinciding with Regime Change in Syria*

The case study of Syria highlights the coincidence of significant funding cuts with new stabilisation needs brought about by the sudden political transition following the fall of the Assad regime in late 2024. The case shows how funding uncertainty can disrupt services even when assistance is nominally exempt or unaffected. Confusion over waivers and delayed funds had severe consequences for service continuity when humanitarian and civil society needs were changing rapidly and organisations were trying to adapt their operations. In this situation, funding cuts exposed civil society actors to heightened public criticism and frustration arising from the gap between expectations and reality.

Trump's cuts to USAID and other Executive Orders impacting the MENA funding landscape have coincided with Syria's transition following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Due to donor fatigue and other "competing" priorities, by August 2025 the UN coordinated Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria had only received 11.6% of the required USD 3.19 billion funding to cover surveyed needs (The Syria Report, 2025). While Syrians have been relatively patient and sympathetic towards the fact that the new authorities have been impacted by international sanctions (introduced against the former Assad regime), and were therefore largely unable to pay public salaries for their first six months in power, many have not shown the same level of understanding towards civil society actors in the country who have often had their budgets decimated by international (primarily US) funding cuts.[8] Often, everyday Syrians have little awareness of the extent to which civil society and humanitarian actors have been negatively impacted by the global funding crisis, and are critical of their limited capacities in responding to the newly emerging needs following the fall of the Assad government in late 2024. As sanctions remained in place in Syria for the first six months following the regime change, the population turned to civil society to perform the government's functions (that had previously been largely bank-rolled by Assad's ally, Russia).

The inability of NGOs to effectively respond to the situation and fill these gaps, while actors such as the World Bank have been cautious in engaging decisively post-regime change, has the potential to lead to increased tensions between members of different conflict-affected communities in the country. This risk is greater given the large movements of population returns following December 2024, which have often resulted in challenges for social cohesion and reintegration given the many intractable HLP issues that have been left behind as Syria's population has been affected by multiple waves of displacement. Syrian actors affected by funding cuts have been wide-ranging, including women's groups, humanitarian and medical actors, victims' associations, emergency services and media actors (Danon, 2025; Al-Khateeb, 2025).

During this critical period, the suspension of most of the US funding channelled through the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) to beneficiaries through Syrian NGOs has resulted in the US no longer being the single largest active donor within the Syrian context. Further, despite Marco Rubio's 29 January waiver for the continuation of life-saving humanitarian assistance including "core life-saving medicine, medical services, food, shelter, and subsistence assistance, as well as supplies and reasonable administrative costs as necessary to deliver such assistance" (US Department of State, 2025a), there has been much confusion as Syrian relief actors have found themselves exposed to previously unimaginable financial risks as expected funds have not arrived. An NGO specialising in the provision of prosthetic limbs, stated: "We were informed that the grant was suspended without receiving

[8] This point was prominent within discussions during a community consultation held in Douma, rural Damascus, organised by a Syrian NGO in April 2025.

the operating costs for the first month of 2025, which caused a financial breakdown due to previous invoices and operating expenses" (Al-Khateeb, 2025). As a result, its centres were forced to close due to lack of operating costs despite significant investment in the set-up. Some local NGOs even faced security threats from supplies due to unpaid payments.[9] Elsewhere, there have also been real humanitarian impacts, with whole camps and informal settlements suddenly cut-off from services. For example, ACTED reportedly suspended its Food Security and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services (including waste removal) to camps in the Bab al-Hawa region of Idleb (Ibid). While Human Rights Watch reported that the US government's suspension of aid to organizations in the al-Hol and al-Roj camps in northeastern Syria could exacerbate life-threatening conditions due to the immediate and palpable impact on all aspects of the response, including the delivery of essential goods by organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2025b), this is one of the areas where implementation was granted a reprieve given the security sensitivities of the camp residents' affiliations with ISIS (Böhm, 2025).

The Syrian media landscape has also been significantly hit by funding cuts, with several agencies having "scaled back on key areas of their operations, or ceased output entirely, since late January" (Dixon, 2025). While few of these platforms had publicly acknowledged their US funding, they have conspicuously "decreased their output across broadcast, online and social media since the end of January" - including counter-disinformation efforts. Several outlets saw a significant drop in activity in February 2025, downsizing operations - with one station (Radio Al Kul) suspending all social media operations, including livestream broadcasts, and Halab Today freezing its activity from 30 January to 22 February (Danon, 2025). Given that this coincided with the critical period of regime change and immediate transition, "[t]he move poses questions about the ramifications of the US's shifting global role for the future of local, independent reporting and fact-checking in Syria in the tumultuous transition period ahead" (Ibid). Verify-Sy reported that it had been receiving hundreds of requests a day since the takeover asking for verification of social media content, and had not been able to respond while there was an increase in fake and misleading media with a sectarian focus since December 2024. It should be noted that the Department of State's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Office of Assistance Coordination (NEA/AC) had announced in 2023 support for independent media in Syria to the value of $15 million (Funds for NGOs, 2023). As actors were seeking to respond to the transition (including switching the locus of their operations to Damascus etc), funding uncertainty and limited resources have reduced their response capacity. The raising of sanctions, initially by the US (Slattery et al, 2025), and then by the EU (Council of the European Union, 2025), presented some new opportunities for civil society and humanitarian actors working in Syria, but many Syrian civil society actors have nonetheless struggled to find alternative funds to cover some of their core activities.

[9] Author interviews, anonymised, March-June 2025.

5.4. *Case Study 4: Implications for Lebanon: Compounding Cumulative Crises*

The Lebanese case reveals how sudden funding cuts can compound an already severe, overlapping crisis. Since 2019, the country's financial collapse, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosion, and the effects of the war in Ukraine have weakened the funding environment. The aid reductions arising from Trump's Executive Orders have added further pressure across many sectors of civil society implementation, with rights-based initiatives being particularly badly impacted. At the same time, debate about localization, collaboration, and more sustainable funding models presents avenues for examining possible responses. Together, these dynamics make the case valuable for understanding how aid dependence, donor decisions, local capacity, and political narratives shape civil society's ability to sustain essential services and advocacy in MENA.

Prior to the start of Trump's second presidency, Lebanon was already facing multiple crises affecting the funding landscape for civil society, humanitarian and research actors. The ongoing financial (and liquidity) crisis affecting the country since 2019 had been exacerbated by each of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2020 Beirut port explosion and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Delacloche, 2025). USAID had been providing significant support to actors in Lebanon, including through the Syrian refugee response (Moussa, 2025). As Lebanon has been home to the largest refugee population per capita in the world, such assistance has been critical. The country has seen a reduction in foreign aid from $220 million in 2024 to only $70 million for 2025 (US Department of State, undated). While some 142 million of the 2024 funds were earmarked for military financing and a further 80 million for humanitarian assistance, a significant proportion of the remaining funds covered Quality Instruction Towards Access [23 million] and Higher Education [20 million] (Ibid). Indeed, the education sector has been particularly badly hit, as the US had been both supporting the school system and providing scholarships for university students (Al-Faour, 2025). Indeed, university education has also been badly impacted by cuts and the preceding Covid-19 and economic crises (Now Asharq, 2025).

The funding cuts have left Syrian refugees in Lebanon short of material essentials due to suspended cash assistance and other relief aid, sometimes resulting in child malnutrition (Osseiran, 2025). With only 14% of UNHCR's operational planning for Lebanon covered by secured funding, the agency has had to cut 347,000 Syrian refugees from a joint cash assistance programme with WFP from April 2025, and anticipated being unable to support another 206,000 after June (Ibid). Meanwhile WFP has itself also reduced assistance from 830,000 to 660,000 Syrian refugees and from 162,000 to 40,000 for vulnerable Lebanese citizens. This has likely resulted in community members resorting to negative coping mechanisms (including "survival sex") and exposing families to generalised vulnerabilities that are likely not captured in reporting, while also having impacts on social cohesion as refugees and members of host communities struggle to provide for themselves. Such dynamics were already apparent in Lebanon in 2023 when Helem, an LGBTQ+ NGO in

Lebanon decided to suspend its UNHCR-funded programme to support LGBTQ+ refugees as it had been unable to fundraise to "match" support for the host community (Medina, 2023). Lebanon's economic collapse, together with aid budget cuts, has contributed to a worsening climate for queer people in the country (Ibid). While LGBTQ+ and gender equality movements have been historically strong in Lebanon, the crackdown in recent years has coincided with global reduction in support for associated programming, e.g. from well-established donors like the Open Society Foundation to organisations such as KAFA, Mada Network and LADE (Al-Akhbar, 2023; Jang & Howe, 2023).

In reflecting on the possible implications of cuts to civil society support in Lebanon, Alaa Sayeg, Democracy Matters Initiative Advisory Group Member at MEDC stresses how society in Lebanon has been able to weather multiple crises by relying on civil society as a constant support, adding that "[i]t has stepped in every aspect where the government has failed and it kept people with the basic needs and services", and further questioning: "What happens when the last safety net is pulled away? What happens when the US development aid, one of the few remaining lifelines, is suddenly frozen?" (Middle East Democracy Center & Arab Center Washington DC, 2025). His own response is that "we need to focus on localization and supporting local civil society groups to survive and to innovate for funding options and to use this crisis as an opportunity and to change it, to be an opportunity for more collaboration between civil society groups to keep all the achievements that have been done in the past and to save what can be saved." For his part, Nadim Shehadi has argued that "There may be some benefits from a reset triggered by the USAID freeze and the European squeeze" if it is possible to overthrow some of the inefficient and redundant bureaucracy in the aid sector (Shahadi, 2025). In this respect, one research consultant has observed a possible silver lining in the opportunity to promote stronger local partnerships and collaborations between academia and NGOs for more sustainable funding models (Tabsh, 2025). Indeed, prior to Trump's funding cuts, Lebanese women's groups were already calling for a reformed approach to funding civil society (Hivos, 2024).

Even when not directly impacted by funding cuts, actors within the civil society landscape have been negatively impacted by the wider fallout of Trump's Executive Orders and the associated discourse. An example is the main current of the migrant domestic workers solidarity movement in Lebanon. Despite reportedly not having been historically supported by US funding, a Tweet by Secretary of State Marco Rubio claimed "The American taxpayers should not be funding misguided programs like "Building the Migrant Domestic Worker-Led Movement in Lebanon" (Rubio, 2025). This shows how the most vulnerable can become the target of political stunts within the international funding landscape. Notably, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon had already significantly suffered from the Covid-19 crisis (International Labour Organisation, 2020), and then again by displacement caused by Israeli strikes on Lebanon (Kelly & Michaelson, 2024). Such rhetoric from US officials may be damaging to rights-based movements even when not recipients of US funding in the first place (Hamadi, 2025).

5.5. *Case Study 5: UNRWA's Aid to Palestinians – Making of a Pariah Humanitarian Agency*

The Palestinian context presents a critical case for examining how donor decisions and political pressures can converge to constrain both humanitarian operations and civic space. UNRWA's experience demonstrates the vulnerability created by reliance a limited donor base: the suspension of US funding compounded a funding crisis that predated Trump's second term, while Israeli restrictions on the agency's operations and barriers to aid entry intensified the demands on its services. The case also shows how the politicisation of aid complicates long-term funding. Debates over the agency's neutrality and management have shaped subsequent donor decisions, even as some donors resumed or maintained contributions. Beyond humanitarian agencies, US sanctions targeting Palestinian NGOs and the criminalization of pro-Palestine groups elsewhere illustrate how political action can directly affect civil society organizations and their ability to operate. At the same time, the Palestine case highlights important efforts to protect civic space through coalition-building, knowledge production, and collective action. Together, these dynamics speak to the interaction of funding dependency, politicisation of aid and associated political restrictions on civil society across MENA.

Humanitarian aid organisations and civil society movements targeting Palestinians have been particularly negatively affected by Trump's funding cuts, amidst wider action to discredit relevant Palestinian actors. UNRWA was already facing a crisis as a result of funding cuts during President Trump's first term in office (BADIL, 2018). With the US historically being UNRWA's biggest funder, the complete suspension of funding to the agenda has created a resource crisis at the very time UNRWA seeks to respond to the massive humanitarian needs caused by Israel's war on Gaza. This has been exacerbated by Israeli laws restricting the agency's operations (UN News, 2025b), alongside the wider blockade of aid into Palestinian territories (particularly Gaza), resulting in a situation of famine (UN News, 2025c). Despite speculation about engagement from Gulf countries to fill UNRWA's funding gap following concerted advocacy efforts targeting the region (Alhasan & Alajlouni, 2024), the agency faced a funding deficit of 200 million USD (Nichols, 2025).

Prior to Trump's Executive Order targeting UNRWA, the agency was already struggling to survive. Alongside the US, other donors that had temporarily suspended funding to UNRWA following the 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas include Canada, Australia, Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, Estonia, Japan, Austria and Romania (AlJazeera, 2024). While many of these states had eventually resumed their support to UNRWA, the politicisation of the agency has made long-term fund-raising challenging. Within the UK's announced renewed funding to UNRWA in July 2024, part is specifically targeted at facilitating reforms of the agency's management (UK Government, 2024). In 2024, Swiss lawmakers voted to suspend funding to the agency, citing risks of assistance going to Hamas (Merlin, 2024).

Other actors have, however, continued support for UNRWA. The Australian government, for instance, has maintained annual support to UNRWA of approximately 20 million Australian dollars, committing at least two additional one-off donations of support (10 million and 21.5 million AUD respectively) since the start of Israel's full-scale military operations in Gaza in 2023 (Keene, 2025). Following the announcement of Trump's January 2025 Executive Order against UNRWA, Norway, as the fifth biggest donor to UNRWA, stated that it intended to continue its support to the agency (Donor Tracker, 2024). The European Commission reports "stepping up" to support UNRWA's work (European Commission, 2025d).

Besides EOs, the US has on multiple occasions imposed sanctions on Palestinian NGOs, either based on the accusation of links to Hamas (Reuters, 2025), or for engaging with the International Criminal Court (ICC) procedures to investigate and prosecute Israeli nationals (US Department of State, 2025b). In the latter case, the Executive Order sanctioning the ICC established the provisions through which these NGOs were subsequently the target of their own sanctions (Executive Order 14203, 2025). Globally, pro-Palestine groups, such as the Palestine Action in the UK, have similarly faced criminalisation (Siddique, 2025). In order to "counter efforts to restrict civic space by supporting civil society in three areas: coalition building, knowledge production, and collective action", Hivos has, with funding from Norway, established its first partnerships with civil society actors in Palestine (Hivos, 2025).

6. DONOR RESPONSE AND PUSHBACK STRATEGIES

In response to the funding cuts to MENA actors resulting from US Executive Orders, some other actors have stepped in to partially address some of the emerging gaps. For instance, in May 2025 the European Commission announced provision of some "boosted" humanitarian funding to Syria, Lebanon and Gaza - €50 million for Gaza, €20 million for Northeast Syria, and €13 million for Lebanon (European Commission, 2025c). However, such gestures are limited in covering what has been lost. In particular areas of programming, other international actors have stepped in to - partially - fill some of the gaps left by the US funding cuts. This particularly includes programming for Syria where compelling arguments relating to the new political situation can make engagement appealing to donors. For instance, the EU pledged 2.5 billion Euros for Syria transition and host countries (European Commission, 2025a), while Japan has donated to support UNHCR's work with civil registration systems inside Syria (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2025). Likewise, in May 2025 the European Commission announced a new aid package for Yemen (European Commission, 2025b). Such programming is often disbursed through UN structures where - if involved at all - national civil society actors sometimes serve simply as service delivery mechanisms rather than being able to develop their own strategic interests.

While MENA civil society activists have themselves long been sceptical of US foreign policy interests, the sudden suspension of so-called "pro-democracy" funding has left actors in the sector faced with new existential questions as alternative resourcing options remain

scarce. It is widely acknowledged that international funding - in both its provision and its withdrawal - can have negative impacts on civil society movements in MENA, including through co-option towards Global North policy priorities. Discourse around "systems change" has been prevalent in the aftermath of Trump's Executive Orders, with some in the relief sector calling for a "humanitarian re-set" (UN OCHA, 2025). In response to the "broken" aid system, a number of actors have launched initiatives designed to mitigate negative impacts or even to reform the dominant *status quo* (Catalyst 2030, 2025). For instance, Impact Funding has begun to curate a live directory of funding opportunities "Driving Systems Change Across the Globe". Funding mapping efforts have been undertaken, sometimes with a particular regional focus, e.g. Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central and North Asia (Dalan Fund, 2025).

A number of donors supportive to civil society, usually with smaller pools of funds, have focused on more flexible grant-making. Some funding has been ear-marked to directly support the transformation of the aid industry by centring affected communities (Legatum, 2025). The Doria Fund was established in 2021 as a notable response to the wider funding dynamics in the MENA funding landscape, including risk of international co-option of regional feminist movements (Abou-Habib et al, 2021). This constitutes part of the emerging global ecosystem of feminist funds (Hessini, 2020). The continuation of the Asfari Foundation and Makesense's Tabadol Sustainability Grants to civil society actors in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine (with 2025 expansion to those in Syria also) in notable for its design focus to "develop creative solutions to sustain the transformational change they are leading in their communities" through innovation and collaboration with social entrepreneurs (Tabadol Program, undated).

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The case studies incorporated within this article present how Trump's Executive Orders signal a trajectory towards more conditional funding against a backdrop of his Administration's transactional engagement with the MENA region (and beyond). This politicisation has exposed the vulnerability of civil society to donor dependency for regional actors (Case Study 1), while hampering the ability of civil society advocates to even take stock of the scale of impacts (Case Study 2). At the same time, Trump's actions to limit funding to civil society have coincided with major other shocks like the fall of the Assad regime in Syria (Case Study 3), and have compounded pre-existing and ongoing crises in Lebanon (Case Study 4). Finally, politicisation of the civil society space accompanies funding cuts introduced by the Executive Orders is perhaps at its most evident when considering the role of UNRWA in its support to Palestinian refugees (Case Study 5).

While seeking to do "more with less", many civil society and research actors have struggled to find replacement funding from alternative sources to smoothly continue their programmatic activities. To an extent, the EU has stepped in to cover certain areas, and some

commentators have speculated that other actors - China, Russia and the Gulf - might step up to partially fill present gaps (Belbagi, 2025). Reportedly, already "China and Russia are becoming increasingly intertwined with Egypt and Jordan, especially the former" (Holyoke, 2025). Such aid - if provided - may be just as transactional and linked to the policy interests of these other world powers, signalling a greater politicisation of the MENA funding landscape, which would likely further disadvantage human rights-based programming. Civil society actors are currently facing the dilemma of accepting funding from unprincipled donor sources in order to "save" their current staffing structures and ongoing programmes. Moreover, it is unlikely that any such increases in aid provided by these countries will be a full substitute for the large-scale USAID funding providing life-saving material humanitarian assistance to millions across the region. Nonetheless, policy-makers have highlighted the potential to use the present tragedy to focus on a much-needed "humanitarian reset" to transition towards a more "efficient" and fit-for-purpose aid system (Lennon, 2025).

As this article's five case studies have demonstrated, Trump's Executive Orders do not operate in isolation, but compound – and are compounded by – other challenges in the funding landscape. While the long-term implications of such funding changes for civil society actors in the MENA region remain to be seen, many actors are already wisely exploring new collaborations to maximise resources. This might include sharing resources through regional consortiums, allowing local NGOs to bypass INGO resource monopolies. Innovative cross-sector collaborations among research entities, NGOs and the private sector can also unleash new potential, and particularly help in building the capacity of smaller civil society organisations who might otherwise struggle to access funds unilaterally. Meanwhile, civil society actors might benefit from negotiating contractual protections ensuring that funding cannot be made conditional upon political alignment with a donor government policy. Pushing for direct, flexible, multi-year funding that includes overheads and operational costs is equally important to ensure sustainable civil society development. Alongside this, diversified funding, including through private-sector partnerships and socially-responsible entrepreneurs may help increase possibilities for sustained engagement. This can ultimately contribute to the consolidation of networks of civil society actors built around principled engagement.

For their part, supportive donors should consider launching smaller grant opportunities in order to support grassroots movements who have been cut off from funding they were receiving through other channels. Moreover, it is important that they ensure funding conditions do not exclude new or smaller NGOs (e.g. by removing requirements relating to minimum annual budget). Providing opportunities for multi-year and flexible funding will be vital to supporting long-term sustainability of civil society actors across MENA, while localising funding through regional mechanisms is essential to ensure national actors can access resources.

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BALANCING LIBERTY AND SECURITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN'S SURVEILLANCE LAWS AND DATA PROTECTION REGIME

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Abstract

With the growing reliance on digital infrastructure in Pakistan's governance, tensions between national security and fundamental rights have emerged, as the state has become an active participant in surveillance, and data protection norms remain fragmented. This article aims to provide a doctrinal and comparative examination of Pakistan's legal regime on electronic surveillance and data protection, including constitutional protections for freedom of expression and privacy under Articles 14 and 19 of the Constitution, as well as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and the Fair Trial Act 2013. It looks at the role of these instruments in empowering agencies such as the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, and their alignment with international rights-based instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as international data protection frameworks such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation. Theories on the liberty-security paradox, social contract theory, and surveillance capitalism serve as the foundation of the discussion, while the secondary empirical sources include case law, civil society sources, and policy reports. The analysis reveals structural shortcomings in judicial oversight, accountability, and independent data regulation, and calls for rights-based reforms such as explicit recognition of digital privacy, the restriction of general censorship and surveillance laws, and an independent data protection authority. The article situates Pakistan's approach within the international discourse on digital constitutionalism and sets out a course of action for integrating security objectives with comprehensive safeguards for fundamental rights.

Keywords

Digital Surveillance Law; Data Privacy Rights; Constitutional Law (Articles 14 & 19); National Security vs. Civil Liberties; Comparative Data Governance

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly hyper-connected world, digital presence has become almost unavoidable (Zuboff, 2019). In Pakistan, rapid technological adoption, which is reflected in initiatives such as the "Digital Pakistan" vision and the planned rollout of advanced mobile networks, has coincided with the expansion of state powers to monitor, filter, and retain online communications (Government of Pakistan, 2021; MoITT, 2023). This dual trajectory creates a core tension: while digital technologies promise inclusion, efficiency, and economic growth, they also facilitate extensive surveillance, content control, and large-scale data collection under relatively weak regulatory safeguards (DRF, 2022; Freedom House, 2023).

For the purposes of this article, digital surveillance refers to the systematic monitoring, interception, and analysis of electronic communications and personal data by state agencies or entities acting on their behalf (Foucault, 1977; Zuboff, 2019). The data protection regime comprises the constitutional provisions, statutes, regulations, and institutions that govern how personal data is collected, stored, processed, and shared, including proposed data protection legislation and sectoral rules (European Union, 2016; Khan & Baloch, 2023). Together, these elements shape what may be called Pakistan's emerging digital governance framework—the set of rules and practices through which the state exercises authority in the online sphere and regulates the rights and responsibilities of digital citizens (De Gregorio, 2021; DRF, 2022).

International assessments have already raised concerns. Freedom House's 2023 Freedom on the Net report categorizes Pakistan as "Not Free," highlighting pervasive censorship, surveillance, and arbitrary restrictions on online content (Freedom House, 2023). Domestically, legislation such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and the Fair Trial Act 2013 has been criticized for granting broad powers to enforcement and intelligence agencies with limited judicial oversight, while comprehensive data protection legislation has remained stalled in the legislative process (Fair Trial Act, 2013; Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016; Khan & Baloch, 2023; Shah, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the article asks whether Pakistan's current legal architecture can reconcile legitimate security objectives with constitutional guarantees of privacy and free expression, and how it compares with evolving global standards on digital rights and data governance (Dyzenhaus, 2006; Dworkin, 1977; UNHRC, 2011). It approaches these questions through doctrinal analysis, comparative legal study, and engagement with theoretical frameworks on liberty and security, aiming to provide a conceptually clear and

policy-relevant assessment rather than a solely advocacy-driven critique (Dyzenhaus, 2006; Zedner, 2005).

1.1. Problem Statement

Pakistan's digital surveillance powers are regulated by legal provisions that have raised concerns about the scope of state authority and the adequacy of judicial oversight. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016, as amended in 2025, regulates electronic offences and online content, while the Investigation for Fair Trial Act 2013 provides a legal framework for warrants authorizing surveillance and interception. Questions remain about the effectiveness of independent oversight and the availability of remedies for individuals whose rights may be infringed. At the same time, the absence of a comprehensive data protection law leaves significant gaps in the regulation of how citizens' personal data is collected, retained, and shared, particularly where national security is invoked.

These dynamics create a structural imbalance between the state and individuals in the digital domain, where security is routinely prioritized over liberty and where fundamental rights protections remain under-specified and weakly enforced.

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To examine the extent and constraints of Pakistan's current surveillance legislation.
2. To pinpoint institutional and legal gaps as well as other weaknesses in the data protection regime.
3. To investigate how state surveillance affects civil liberties, particularly privacy and freedom of expression.
4. To assess how well Pakistan complies with international human rights standards in terms of data protection and surveillance.
5. To put forward workable legislative and policy changes that guarantee harmony between individual freedom and state security.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. General Background of the Study

The rapid expansion of digital governance has compelled scholars to reconsider how states balance individual rights against security imperatives. In developing countries such as Pakistan, this tension is intensified by weak legislative safeguards, uneven institutional capacity, and fluctuating political conditions. As a result, the relationship between surveillance regimes, data protection laws, democratic norms, and human rights has become a significant area of legal and interdisciplinary inquiry.

2.1.1. Surveillance and State Power

One of the foundational concepts in surveillance studies is Michel Foucault's notion of the panopticon, which conceptualizes surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism embedded within institutions and social relations (Foucault, 1977). In this framework, surveillance is not merely an act of observation; it is a technique of control that shapes conduct through the possibility of being watched. Lyon (2007) extends this analysis by explaining that contemporary surveillance has evolved into a system of continuous collection, classification, and use of personal data for governance and control. This transformation raises serious concerns for privacy, autonomy, and accountability, especially in settings where legal and institutional restraints are weak.

In Pakistan, the enactment of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA) significantly expanded the state's surveillance and content-control powers, often with limited judicial oversight. Shah (2022) argues that PECA's vague language and procedural ambiguities enable disproportionate uses of state power, particularly against freedom of expression and political dissent. In this sense, PECA reflects the broader logic of what Zuboff (2019) terms "surveillance capitalism": the extraction and monetization of personal data for political and economic ends. In Pakistan's context, however, these concerns are intensified by the fact that state institutions, rather than only private platforms, are central actors in the surveillance ecosystem.

2.1.2. Conceptual Models in the Balance of Liberty and Security

The tension between liberty and security has long been central to constitutional law and political theory. Dyzenhaus (2006) argues that even in times of emergency, democracies cannot abandon legality or the rule of law in the name of security. Similarly, Dworkin (1977) maintains that individual rights trump utilitarian calculations and majority preferences, meaning they cannot be overridden lightly by collective claims.

In Pakistan, however, courts have not developed a fully coherent doctrine for balancing these competing interests. Although the right to privacy was affirmed in Benazir Bhutto v. Federation of Pakistan (PLD 1988 SC 416), judicial protection of privacy and related digital rights has remained inconsistent, particularly in cases involving electronic surveillance, online censorship, and data access. Digital rights scholars and civil society actors have therefore criticized the judiciary for failing to impose meaningful constraints on executive overreach, especially where surveillance practices are justified in the name of national security (Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2022).

2.1.3. Comparative Approaches to Data Protection

The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has become a global benchmark in data governance. Its rights-based framework emphasizes individual control over personal data and is supported by principles such as purpose limitation, data minimization, transparency, lawful processing, and independent regulatory oversight (Kuner, 2017; European Union, 2016). These principles are not adequately reflected in Pakistan's draft Personal Data Protection Bill, which has been criticized for its weak institutional independence and broad security exemptions (Khan & Baloch, 2023).

India offers another important comparative reference. In Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017), the Supreme Court of India recognized privacy as a fundamental right and established proportionality as a critical constitutional test for restrictions on privacy. Nevertheless, scholars have noted that Indian data protection debates continue to face criticism due to broad national security exemptions and limited accountability of state agencies (Basu, 2020). These developments show that, even in relatively stronger constitutional systems, the challenge of harmonizing digital governance with human rights remains unresolved.

The United States presents a different model, particularly through Fourth Amendment jurisprudence. In Carpenter v. United States (2018), the Supreme Court held that access to historical cell-site location data generally requires a warrant, thereby reaffirming constitutional limits on state access to digital information. Solove (2006) has similarly emphasized the concept of informational self-determination, arguing that individuals should have meaningful control over the collection and use of their personal data. However, U.S. surveillance law remains uneven across different national security and law enforcement contexts, and thus does not offer a fully settled model.

2.1.4. Digital Age and International Human Rights Law

At the international level, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides a key benchmark for evaluating state interference with privacy and expression (United Nations Human Rights Committee [UNHRC], 1988). Under this framework, restrictions on rights must be lawful, necessary, reasonable, and proportionate. These principles were reaffirmed in the United Nations General Assembly's resolution on the right to privacy in the digital age, which condemned unnecessary and arbitrary surveillance as incompatible with international human rights obligations (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2013).

Pakistan's legal framework has not consistently met these standards. The UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern over the lack of effective remedies and independent oversight in Pakistan's surveillance environment in its review of the country (UNHRC, 2017). More broadly, as De Gregorio (2021) notes, digitized governance can quickly become a mechanism of control unless it is restrained by constitutional and human rights safeguards.

This is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where surveillance powers have expanded faster than the regulatory structures designed to constrain them.

2.1.5. Civil Society and Legal Mobilization

Civil society has become an increasingly important actor in challenging excessive digital surveillance and censorship. In Pakistan, the Digital Rights Foundation has played a leading role in documenting digital rights violations and supporting litigation against unlawful surveillance and content restrictions (Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2022). Similarly, Byte for All v. Federation of Pakistan (2020) became a landmark case in which civil society challenged arbitrary website blocking, prompting judicial recognition of due process requirements in content regulation.

Epp (1998) explains that the protection of rights often depends on legal mobilization, meaning that rights are advanced through networks of lawyers, activists, advocacy organizations, and strategic litigation. This framework is particularly relevant to Pakistan, where civil society and public interest litigation have become essential tools for constraining state power in the digital sphere. However, the effectiveness of such mobilization remains limited unless accompanied by broader legislative reform and judicial consistency.

2.2. Literature Gap

Although there is a substantial body of international literature on digital surveillance, privacy, and data protection, comparatively little scholarship critically examines Pakistan's legal and institutional framework from the standpoint of constitutionalism and international human rights law. Much of the existing material consists of legal commentary, policy critique, or advocacy reports, including the work of Shah (2022) and the publications of the Digital Rights Foundation, but these sources often lack sustained theoretical engagement with the liberty–security paradigm or comparative constitutional analysis.

Moreover, comparative legal research in this area has tended to focus on the United States and the European Union, with insufficient attention to the Global South and the distinctive conditions of states such as Pakistan, where weak democratic governance and security-centric policy approaches shape the regulatory environment. Existing literature also pays limited attention to the judiciary's evolving role in the development of digital rights jurisprudence in Pakistan.

In addition, while civil society activism and online resistance are frequently discussed in grey literature and media reporting, there is relatively little doctrinal or empirical scholarship assessing the extent to which such efforts influence legal reform or policy outcomes. This article seeks to address these gaps by offering a normative and comparative analysis of

Pakistan's surveillance regime and data protection environment within a constitutional and human rights framework.

2.3. Research Questions

1. What is the impact of Pakistan's surveillance laws on the freedom of expression and privacy of its citizens?
2. What procedural and legal shortcomings exist in the way PECA 2016 and related frameworks are being implemented?
3. How is the protection of personal data affected by the lack of a stand-alone data protection law?
4. How does Pakistan's legal system stack up against global standards such as the ICCPR and GDPR?
5. What changes are required to bring Pakistan's digital governance into compliance with its constitutional and international legal commitments?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in doctrinal legal analysis, comparative case study, and theory-driven interpretation, supplemented by systematic content analysis of secondary empirical material.

3.1.1. Doctrinal legal analysis

The core method is close reading and interpretation of primary legal sources: constitutional provisions (especially Articles 14, 19, and 10A), statutory instruments (including the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016, the Fair Trial Act 2013, and successive drafts of the Personal Data Protection Bill), and leading judicial decisions such as Benazir Bhutto v. Federation of Pakistan, Moiz Baig v. Federation of Pakistan, and Byte for All v. Federation of Pakistan. These texts are analyzed to identify the scope of surveillance powers, rights safeguards, and institutional checks.

3.1.2. Comparative legal case study

The article employs a selective comparative lens, focusing on three reference jurisdictions: the European Union (GDPR framework), India (post-Puttaswamy privacy jurisprudence), and the United States (Fourth Amendment doctrine and post-9/11 surveillance law). These jurisdictions are chosen because they represent well-developed but distinct approaches to

regulating surveillance and data protection, allowing Pakistan's framework to be assessed against multiple models rather than a single ideal type.

3.1.3. Theoretical framing

The analysis is guided by normative theories of the liberty–security paradigm (Dyzenhaus, 2006; Zedner, 2005), social contract theory (Locke), rights-based constitutionalism (Dworkin, 1977), and critical surveillance studies (Foucault, Zuboff). These perspectives provide conceptual tools for evaluating whether Pakistan's legal arrangements maintain proportionality, accountability, and respect for individual rights in the digital sphere.

3.1.4. Secondary data and content analysis

The article systematically reviews reports and policy documents produced by civil society organizations (e.g., Digital Rights Foundation, Media Matters for Democracy), international bodies (UN Human Rights Committee, Freedom House), and survey organizations (Gallup Pakistan). These materials are coded for recurring themes such as "judicial oversight," "chilling effects on expression," "data breaches," and "public awareness," which are then used to corroborate or challenge the doctrinal findings.

3.2. *Limitations*

The study does not include primary empirical data, such as interviews, surveys, or ethnographic fieldwork, and relies instead on publicly available legal texts, case law, and secondary empirical reports. As a result, the analysis cannot claim representativeness regarding citizens' experiences of surveillance or data misuse; rather, it offers a normative and comparative evaluation of the legal framework and institutional practice. Future research could build on this work by conducting empirical studies of affected communities, enforcement agencies, and judicial actors.

3.3. *Expected Contribution*

This study makes several contributions to scholarly and policy debates on digital governance in Pakistan:

3.3.1. Closing a Jurisprudential Loophole

Describing the constitutional theory and international human rights principles to the Pakistani surveillance and data protection framework, this research piece provides an

analysis that is, in large part, analytically lacking in the current jurisprudential legal scholarship.

3.3.2. Connecting the Comparative Dimension

The comparative review of legal regimes in the European Union, the United States, and India helps situate Pakistan's digital governance framework within broader international trends and identify potential avenues for domestic legal reform. This comparative understanding is said to be used in domestic improvement and local communications on digital rights.

3.3.3. Theory

Incorporation of the liberty-security paradigm, the social contract theory, and surveillance capitalism offers a sound normative model of approaching the investigation of digital laws in democratic societies. This enhances interdisciplinary enlightenment in the field of law as a theory, politics, and information governance.

3.3.4. Policy-Based Reform Recommendations

This paper makes specific legal and policy recommendations based on global best practices, intended to help policymakers and civil society groups, as well as lawmakers and digital rights activists, take into consideration in lawmaking in Pakistan.

3.3.5. Capacity Building

Judicial precedents, the draft of legislative changes described in this study, civil society litigation, and other measures should serve as a reference point for further advocacy, legal reforms, and research in the sphere of digital rights and constitutional law by enabling the consolidation and analysis of the current experience.

4. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This paper has its theoretical underpinnings in the longstanding tensions between individual liberty and collective security, the dilemma posed by this dichotomy in constitutional democracies, and discussions of digital governance. Unlike classical political thought, contemporary legal thought, and surveillance studies, this study will adopt a multidisciplinary approach to critically evaluate the surveillance and data protection regime in Pakistan.

4.1. Liberty vs. Security Paradigm

The liberty-security trade-off is a hegemonic theoretical approach to legal and political debates. It assumes that when under the threat of security issues like a terrorist attack, or cyber attack, or even internal unrest, states tend to resort to emergency actions that restrict civil rights and liberties, allegedly to ensure social control (Zedner, 2005). This model has taken prominence most notably in the post-9/11 legal context, as emergency law and broad surveillance have become the norm.

David Dyzenhaus (2006) opines that, even in emergency conditions, democratic states must operate within a legal grey zone, in which all executive measures must fall within the rule of law. The view is a rejection of Carl Schmitt's theory of the sovereign exception; it holds that governance is legitimate only when it upholds legality and protects rights. The normative position taken in this study is Dyzenhaus's, whereby the surveillance legislation in Pakistan is assessed for compliance with the principles of legality, accountability, and proportionality.

4.2. Social Contract Theory

This study also relies on John Locke's (1689) social contract theory, which holds that people agree to give up some of their freedom to the state in exchange for the security of life, liberty, and property. It should be noted, nonetheless, that Locke insisted that this is a conditional contract; the legitimacy of the state depends on its capacity to secure the protection of basic rights, and a failure to do so can give rise to resistance or reformation.

The duty of the state in the digital environment is to protect informational self-determination, privacy, and the dignity of the person. The social contract is broken when surveillance mechanisms go beyond necessity and proportionality, because they compromise the very freedom they are meant to protect. This can be regarded as a critical lens for examining Pakistani digital laws to determine whether the state has exceeded its legitimate limits.

4.3. Rights-Based Jurisprudence

This study is also guided by Ronald Dworkin's (1977) theory of rights, according to which individual rights take precedence over collective interests. Contrary to Dworkin's text, it is argued that individual rights should not lie prostrate at the threshold of majority rule or managerial expediency. Any restrictions on fundamental freedoms must be examined with the strictest scrutiny of the reasons, including the requirements of legality, necessity, and adequacy.

In the Pakistani context, the increased surveillance authority of the state at the expense of citizens' rights under PECA 2016 and the lack of an independent data protection law are evaluated as possible infringements of Dworkin's rights-based approach. This theoretical

direction obliges a normative appraisal of the extent to which digital governance structures are conducive to the protection of individuals, and the extent to which they are merely conducive to executive discretion unbounded by checks or review.

4.4. *Surveillance Capitalism and Panopticons*

In addition to normative political theory, normative legal theory, and legal philosophy, the work presents critical surveillance studies. The panopticon, introduced by Michel Foucault (1977), explains how the main mechanism by which society currently regulates itself, without applying any coercion, is the idea of being watched. Even in the digital era, the impact of this disciplinary mechanism increases, with round-the-clock surveillance shaping potential behavior and curbing dissent.

The theory of surveillance capitalism developed by Shoshana Zuboff (2019) goes even further, emphasizing that personal data becomes currency in the hands of state and commercial entities, which use it to infer personal behaviors and manipulate it in ways that align with their interests. This presents a very grave issue of consent, autonomy, and participatory democracy. This is even more problematic in Pakistan, where the country puts minimal safeguards on data protection, and state surveillance is non-transparent.

4.5. *Human Rights Norms Internationally*

International legal theory is also incorporated in this study, particularly the framework set out by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 17 contains the right to privacy, and Article 19 contains freedom of expression; both provisions include limitations because they must be underpinned by law, be necessary in a democratic society, and be proportionate to the objective sought. These are international law principles that are enshrined in the General Comment No. 16 and General Comment No. 34 of the UN Human Rights Committee, which act as a guide to measuring the obligations of Pakistan under international law.

This multidimensional approach, incorporating these theoretical underpinnings, enables the study to examine how Pakistan's digital governance can safeguard national security without undermining fundamental rights. This approach not only identifies normative gaps but also provides guidance on developing rights-based, legally responsible digital policies.

5. LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

Pakistan’s legal framework governing digital surveillance and data protection is fragmented, security-oriented, and only partially aligned with constitutional guarantees of privacy, expression, and fair trial. At the constitutional level, Article 14 protects dignity and the privacy of the home; Article 19 guarantees freedom of speech subject to “reasonable restrictions”;

and Article 10A secures the right to a fair trial (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973). These provisions provide an important normative foundation but do not themselves establish detailed procedures for interception, data retention, notice, independent authorization, or post-surveillance remedies.

The foremost statutory instrument in the digital sphere is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA). PECA was enacted to address cyber offenses and regulate unlawful online content, but several of its provisions grant broad and open-textured powers to public authorities. For instance, Section 37 permits the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to block or restrict access to information on grounds such as "the glory of Islam" or "public order" without clear statutory tests of necessity and proportionality (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, s. 37). Section 54 authorizes law enforcement agencies to seek access to data held by service providers, again with limited transparency and weak ex post oversight (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, s. 54). Commentators have criticized these provisions for enabling expansive censorship and surveillance that can extend beyond narrowly defined criminal purposes (Shah, 2022).

The Fair Trial Act 2013 complements PECA by regulating the use of modern investigative techniques, including electronic surveillance and interception. In theory, the Act requires warrants and judicial authorization for specified forms of monitoring (Fair Trial Act, 2013). In practice, however, scholars and civil society organizations argue that authorization procedures are opaque, evidentiary thresholds remain low, and affected persons rarely receive notice after surveillance has occurred (Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2022; Sheikh, 2022). These patterns raise serious questions about compliance with Article 10A and with due process standards under Articles 14 and 19.

A major structural weakness in Pakistan's digital governance is the absence, to date, of a fully enacted and comprehensive data protection law. Successive drafts of the Personal Data Protection Bill between 2020 and 2023 have sought to regulate the collection, processing, and sharing of personal data (Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication [MoITT], 2023). Yet these bills have not been adopted by Parliament, and they have attracted criticism for proposing a data protection authority embedded within the executive branch rather than as an independent regulator (Khan & Baloch, 2023). Security exemptions, particularly for intelligence and law enforcement agencies, further undermine the scope of protection by excluding precisely those actors that collect the most sensitive personal information (Khan & Baloch, 2023).

Institutionally, Pakistan's digital governance regime is shaped by bodies such as the PTA, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), and the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). These agencies play key roles in regulating telecommunications, investigating cyber offenses, and managing identity systems. However, their mandates often combine regulatory, investigative, and data holding functions without robust external oversight. For example, reports of biometric data leaks from NADRA in 2022 suggest that millions of citizens' identity records were compromised and allegedly traded on the dark web,

yet there was no statutory obligation to notify affected individuals or publicly disclose the breach (Baloch & Khan, 2023). This stands in contrast to jurisdictions such as the European Union, where the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) imposes strict breach notification requirements on data controllers (European Union, 2016).

Policy documents reinforce the predominance of security rationales. The National Cyber Security Policy 2021 emphasizes protection of critical information infrastructure, threat detection, and defensive capabilities but pays relatively limited attention to privacy, data protection, and accountability safeguards (Government of Pakistan, 2021). Civil society organizations have argued that such policies risk normalizing exceptional measures and treating citizens primarily as potential threats rather than as rights bearing stakeholders (DRF, 2022; Media Matters for Democracy [MMfD], 2024).

By comparison, the GDPR provides a comprehensive, rights-based framework for data governance, built around the principles of lawfulness, fairness, transparency, purpose limitation, data minimization, and integrity (European Union, 2016). In India, the Supreme Court's judgment in Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India recognized privacy as a fundamental right under the Constitution and established proportionality as a central test for limitations (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, 2017). While these models respond to different constitutional and political contexts, they demonstrate that strong security and robust rights protection need not be mutually exclusive. Pakistan's current framework, in comparison, remains more fragmented, executive-driven, and weakly anchored in explicit data protection principles.

Taken together, the legal and policy context reveals a persistent asymmetry between state power and individual protection in Pakistan's digital sphere. Constitutional guarantees exist, but they are not systematically implemented through coherent, rights-focused regulation. Surveillance and data governance are governed by a patchwork of laws and policies in which exceptional powers risk becoming routine. This asymmetry provides the backdrop for the analysis and recommendations that follow.

6. ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The doctrinal and comparative analysis shows that Pakistan's digital surveillance regime is characterized by broad legal authority, weak procedural safeguards, and limited institutional accountability. Although the state's objectives of national security, cybercrime prevention, and public order are legitimate, the current legal framework often translates those objectives into expansive powers that are difficult to scrutinize and easier to misuse. The core finding of this study is therefore not that surveillance is per se unlawful, but that the legal environment in which surveillance occurs lacks the safeguards required by constitutionalism and international human rights standards.

A first analytical finding is that the relationship between Articles 14 and 19 of the Constitution and the country's surveillance laws remains underdeveloped in judicial and

administrative practice. Article 14 protects privacy and dignity, yet the scope of those rights in digital communications is not consistently defined in ordinary legislation. Article 19 allows reasonable restrictions on expression, but broad content-blocking and censorship powers have often been exercised through vague statutory language rather than narrowly tailored rules. This creates a tension between constitutional principle and regulatory practice: rights are formally recognized, but operationally weakened.

A second finding concerns the structure of statutory authority under PECA 2016 and related laws. The Act has played a central role in expanding state capacity to investigate online conduct, block content, and pursue digital offenses. However, the analysis suggests that its wording often favors executive flexibility over legal precision, especially where concepts such as "public order" and "unlawful content" are invoked. In the absence of clear definitions, strong warrant requirements, and transparent review procedures, broad statutory discretion can become a vehicle for censorship or selective enforcement. This is particularly problematic in politically sensitive contexts, where legal tools may be used to suppress criticism rather than address genuine harm.

A third finding relates to surveillance practices and due process. The Fair Trial Act 2013 and similar frameworks permit monitoring and interception for investigative purposes, but the study finds that procedural safeguards remain incomplete in practice. In theory, judicial oversight exists; in practice, the threshold for authorization may be insufficiently demanding, and affected persons are rarely informed after surveillance occurs. Without notice, meaningful challenge becomes difficult, and the right to an effective remedy is weakened. This pattern is inconsistent with the requirements of fair trial, transparency, and accountability in rights-limiting measures.

The study also finds that Pakistan's data protection environment remains structurally fragile. Successive drafts of the Personal Data Protection Bill indicate some recognition of the problem, but the absence of a fully enacted, independent data protection regime means personal data remains vulnerable to collection, retention, and unauthorized sharing. The NADRA breach and related reports of biometric data leakage illustrate how serious the consequences can be when large-scale identity systems are deployed without equally strong accountability and breach-notification requirements. Data protection is therefore not a peripheral administrative issue; it is central to privacy, dignity, and trust in state institutions.

The comparative analysis strengthens this conclusion. The GDPR demonstrates that data governance can be rights-based without undermining legitimate administration by combining lawful processing standards with independent supervision, user rights, and enforcement mechanisms. Indian constitutional jurisprudence, especially after Puttaswamy, shows that privacy can be recognized as a fundamental right even in systems facing substantial security pressures. By contrast, Pakistan's framework remains more fragmented and executive-driven, with fewer institutional barriers against misuse. The comparison does not suggest that Pakistan should replicate foreign models wholesale, but it does indicate that more robust safeguards are both possible and legally desirable.

The institutional analysis further shows that the problem is not confined to statutes alone. Surveillance and censorship are also shaped by how agencies interact with one another, by the relative weakness of independent review, and by the limited practical accessibility of remedies for affected persons. Where one institution controls data collection, another authorizes blocking, and a third investigates alleged misuse, the absence of a clearly independent oversight body allows responsibility to diffuse rather than concentrate. That diffusion makes accountability difficult and encourages a culture of administrative deference.

The case studies examined in the article support this diagnosis. Reports of journalist intimidation, internet restrictions during politically sensitive periods, and the interception of communications suggest that surveillance and content control have been used in ways that extend beyond narrow criminal investigation. Likewise, examples of biometric data vulnerabilities show that even when surveillance is justified by public service delivery or security, data-handling practices may still expose citizens to significant harm. These examples do not prove every use of surveillance is abusive, but they do demonstrate a recurring pattern in which rights protections lag behind state capacity.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the view that Pakistan's current regime does not yet meet the requirements of a properly balanced liberty–security framework. Under a rights-based approach, state action that limits privacy or expression must be legal, necessary, proportionate, and reviewable. Many of the legal and institutional features examined in this study fall short of that standard because they rely on broad discretion rather than narrowly circumscribed authority. The social contract perspective reinforces this conclusion: where the state uses digital power to monitor and control without adequate accountability, it risks undermining the trust on which legitimate authority depends.

At the same time, the discussion should remain analytically balanced. Pakistan faces real security threats, including cybercrime, extremism, online disinformation, and attacks on public institutions. These concerns justify a regulatory framework for surveillance and content moderation, but not an unchecked one. The central issue is therefore not whether the state may regulate digital activity, but whether it does so through laws and practices that remain faithful to constitutional limitations and human rights standards. On the evidence reviewed here, the answer is only partially affirmative.

Overall, the results indicate three broad conclusions. First, Pakistan's legal framework recognizes privacy and expression in principle but does not adequately operationalize them in the digital sphere. Second, the current surveillance and data governance architecture remains too heavily influenced by executive discretion and security rationales. Third, meaningful reform requires not only new legislation but also stronger institutional independence, judicial discipline, and rights-based administrative practice. These conclusions directly support the article's reform agenda and explain why a doctrinal-comparative approach is appropriate for the subject.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has examined Pakistan's digital surveillance and data protection framework through qualitative, doctrinal, and comparative lenses, informed by theoretical debates on liberty and security, the social contract, rights-based constitutionalism, and surveillance capitalism (Dyzenhaus, 2006; Dworkin, 1977; Foucault, 1977; Zuboff, 2019). By analyzing constitutional provisions, primary legislation, case law, policy documents, and secondary empirical material from civil society and international bodies, it has assessed the degree to which Pakistan's digital governance aligns with domestic constitutional commitments and international human rights standards.

The core conclusion is that Pakistan's digital governance architecture is currently tilted towards security-centric regulation and executive discretion, with insufficient attention to structured rights protection and independent oversight. Surveillance powers under PECA 2016 and the Fair Trial Act 2013, combined with delayed and limited data protection reforms, have created a legal environment in which privacy, expression, and fair trial rights are recognized in principle but remain vulnerable in practice (DRF, 2022; Shah, 2022; Sheikh, 2022). Freedom House's designation of Pakistan as "Not Free" in its 2023 Internet Freedom report underscores the real-world impact of this imbalance, including censorship, arbitrary content restrictions, and chilling effects on online participation (Freedom House, 2023).

At the same time, the analysis acknowledges that Pakistan faces significant challenges in relation to cybercrime, extremism, disinformation, and the protection of critical infrastructure (Government of Pakistan, 2021). A regulatory framework that enables targeted, lawful, and effective surveillance is therefore necessary. The problem identified in this article is not the existence of surveillance powers as such, but the way in which they are designed, interpreted, and exercised. In their current form, these powers often lack clear statutory limitations, robust judicial scrutiny, and meaningful avenues for redress.

Comparative experience demonstrates that alternative configurations are possible. The GDPR demonstrates how data protection can be integrated into digital governance through enforceable rights, independent oversight, and robust accountability obligations (European Union, 2016). The Puttaswamy judgment in India and subsequent privacy jurisprudence illustrate how courts can articulate privacy as a fundamental right and require proportionality in restrictions (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, 2017). These examples are not offered as models for direct transplantation, but as evidence that rights-based digital governance is compatible with serious security concerns when carefully designed.

7.1. Normative and Legal Reform Recommendations

7.1.1. Constitutional consolidation of digital rights

Courts should continue to develop jurisprudence that explicitly extends the protection of Articles 14 and 19 to digital communications and online spaces, building on decisions such as Moiz Baig v. Federation of Pakistan and Jibran Nasir v. Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, which have recognized digital privacy and condemned blanket content blocking (Moiz Baig v. Federation of Pakistan, W.P. No. 4054/2021; Jibran Nasir v. Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, W.P. No. 3148/2023). Legislators can support this trajectory by amending relevant statutes to incorporate clear references to constitutional standards and by codifying safeguards developed in case law.

7.1. Narrowing surveillance and censorship powers

Provisions in PECA and related statutes that confer broad powers to block content or obtain data should be reformulated to include narrow, precise grounds, explicit definitions, and high thresholds for interference. Restrictions on online expression or privacy should be tested against the tripartite criteria of legality, necessity, and proportionality, in line with ICCPR jurisprudence and the UN Human Rights Committee's General Comments No. 16 and 34 (United Nations Human Rights Committee [UNHRC], 1988, 2011). This would reduce the scope for arbitrary or politically motivated uses of surveillance and content control.

7.1.3. Strengthening judicial oversight and due process

Judicial authorization under the Fair Trial Act should be made more substantive by requiring detailed reasoning on necessity and proportionality in each warrant, particularly for intrusive forms of digital monitoring. Wherever feasible, affected individuals should receive post-surveillance notice and an opportunity to challenge the legality of interception or data access (Sheik, 2022). Courts should scrutinize and, where appropriate, exclude evidence obtained through unlawful or procedurally defective surveillance, thereby reinforcing the integrity of Article 10A's fair trial guarantee.

7.1.4. Enacting an independent data protection regime

Pakistan should prioritize enacting a comprehensive data protection law aligned with global best practices and establishing an independent data protection authority. The authority should have the power to oversee both public and private data controllers, investigate complaints, impose sanctions, and require breach notifications, including in cases involving large identity databases such as NADRA (Baloch & Khan, 2023). Security exemptions should be narrowly tailored, subject to strict oversight, and not used to shield systemic misuse or negligence.

7.1.5. Enhancing institutional accountability and transparency

Institutions such as PTA, FIA, and NADRA should be subject to clearer reporting duties regarding their use of surveillance and content-blocking powers, including the publication of aggregate data on warrants issued, content blocked, and breaches reported (DRF, 2022; MMfD, 2024). Parliamentary committees, audit bodies, and human rights institutions can play important roles in reviewing these reports and calling for reform where patterns of abuse are identified.

7.1.6. Integrating rights-based standards into cyber security policy

Cybersecurity policies should explicitly incorporate privacy and data protection principles alongside security objectives (Government of Pakistan, 2021). This includes adopting privacy by design in state digital projects, applying impact assessments for new surveillance technologies, and ensuring that any emergency measures remain subject to time limits, review, and legislative control (Dyzenhaus, 2006; Zedner, 2005).

7.1.7. Supporting civil society, legal mobilization, and public awareness

Civil society organizations such as DRF and MMfD, as well as public interest litigants, have been instrumental in bringing digital rights issues before the courts and the public (DRF, 2022; MMfD, 2024). The state should safeguard space for such advocacy, refrain from using surveillance powers to target activists, and include civil society in consultative processes on law reform. Educational initiatives on digital rights and data protection can empower citizens to demand accountability and make informed choices about their online behavior.

7.2. Concluding Reflections

Pakistan's digital governance stands at a critical juncture. The rapid expansion of surveillance capacities and data-intensive technologies has outpaced the development of coherent rights-protective norms and institutions. Without reform, there is a risk that security justifications become routine and that exceptional measures are normalized, with long-term consequences for privacy, expression, and democratic participation. Yet this trajectory is not predestined. By adopting reforms grounded in constitutional principles, comparative experience, and theoretical insight, Pakistan can move towards a digital governance model that protects both national security and fundamental rights.

In the final analysis, the question is not whether the state may regulate the digital sphere, but whether it does so through laws and practices that respect human dignity, privacy, freedom of expression, and the right to a fair trial. A rights-oriented digital environment

requires that surveillance and data governance be subject to clear law, independent oversight, and meaningful public accountability. The recommendations offered here are intended to contribute to that transformation and to support ongoing scholarly, judicial, and policy efforts to reconcile liberty and security in Pakistan's digital age.

Statements

Ethical Considerations: Human subjects, including primary empirical data collection, are not used to conduct this study, but several ethical considerations have been noted to maintain academic honesty and accountable research.

Intellectual Honesty: Any legal, theoretical, and policy information sources have been given due acknowledgment in terms of the reference style used (APA 7th edition) to avoid plagiarism and maintain academic standards.

Objectivity and Neutrality: The paper is also supposed to be based on a neutral, analytical style with no politicization. It also critically analyzes state actions and laws, grounded in the normative principles of constitutionalism and human rights, without favoring either party or ideology.

Propriety of Confidentiality and Transparency: The study does not speculate on confined or secret government methods of surveillance, but only draws on publicly accessible information, as well as confirmed court documents.

Beneficence and Non-maleficence: The definition of the research draws on the principle of beneficence by ensuring to do good by publishing the results of how the researchers got to the point of proposing the idea of legal reformation and Civil liberties protection without jeopardizing the location and existence of any digital rights activists or civil society organizations by divulging dangerous tactics or unpublished legal approaches.

The cultural sensitivity and local context: The analysis is respectful of the legal, cultural, and political context of Pakistan since there are legitimate state interests in national security without underestimating the requirement of constitutional and rights-based protection.

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QUEER KINSHIPS AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE AND POWER: TRANS EXPERIENCES OF HOUSING IN DELHI'S MARGINS

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Abstract

Transmasculine life in Delhi, India is built on the disputed ground of home, kinship, and spatial justice. Through this research, I question the ways in which these bodies move and struggle against the violent geographies of urban housing. The paper explores how trans people re-discover their place in a city where light, air, and safety are allocated according to casteist and neoliberal logics through the prism of space and power. The research question is: How do transmasculine people manage the spatial management of power when they seek habitable spaces? What are their ways of establishing other kinship networks as resistance to systemic exclusion? Based on the spatial triad introduced by Henri Lefebvre and biopolitics introduced by Michel Foucault, the paper demonstrates how the housing markets and state policies of Delhi, including the Transgender Persons Act (2019) and the Garima Greh shelters, impose the exclusion on the basis of the Brahminical and colonial continuities. Queer theory (Halberstam) and intersectional feminism (Crenshaw) can also shed light on the intersection of caste, class and gender to make transmasculine lives infrastructurally invisible, and Southern urbanism (Roy, Simone) can make informal kinship networks to be seen as radical praxis. The research methodology is based on participatory action research and life histories of 12 transmasculine collaborators and prioritizes their embodied knowledge. Early evidence has shown that home is a place of both violence and creative resistance: the natal families tend to expel trans bodies and the chosen families and queer homemaking: shared apartments, protest camps, and Satpula Park as shelter are life lines. Mental and physical health disparities are also worsened by housing insecurity, and trans precarity is escalated by overcrowding, violence, and homelessness due to the pandemic. This study does not only

criticize the violent calculus of urban planning by making trans epistemologies of space central, but also envisions a radical futurity in which housing justice starts with people who have learned how to construct homes out of fragments.

Keywords

Trans homemaking; Spatial justice; Trans Futurity; Urbanity; Urban Housing

"We build our own houses to live inside, because the world does not make room for us."

Ocean Vuong, On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2019)

"The home, like the nation, is a space of both sanctuary and exclusion."

— Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology (2006)

1. INTRODUCTION

On a hot and humid afternoon of 2024 in Delhi, Loveleen and I sat together in his two-bedroom shared apartment in Mehrauli. We looked at the sunlight that came in from the balcony of his house, as he traced the geometry of light in his shared apartment, how the sun's generosity stops at the bedroom door of only those who can afford to pay for it. The sun's glow comes at a cost. Loveleen described how it is expensive to keep oneself alive, tallying the arithmetic of trans survival: the medical expenses, psychiatric medicines, appointments, and HRT alone cost over 10,000 INR, food and emergency medical expenses, and the overbearing cost of travelling in the city. For him, the housing market seems ridiculous when rent is charged proportionate to how much sun one desires. Before moving into his current house, he and his friend had scoured through Khirki Extension for a place, but all they could find in their budget were houses with zero ventilation of any kind. Even his current house, despite having two bedrooms, only has one bedroom that has light and ventilation (Loveleen, interview, 2024).

In the fast-paced metropolitan chaos of Delhi, it seems like trans persons like Loveleen pay extra for the privilege of not mouldering. This is the quiet violence of "inclusive" cities, where many trans lives are priced out of light itself. Echoing Loveleen's hunt for light and breathable space in the rental market, N, another participant who lived in Khirki Extension for a little over a year with their partner A, shared how the struggle in these lightless and airless cubes is a common experience. Most of the houses in that area that are affordable come with the condition of having no sunlight. It means tubelights are switched on at all times; it also means not knowing what time of the day it is. The only saving grace is the sheer number of queer and trans people who live there, some of whom are now friends and acquaintances. N is also grateful for Satpula Park, which they and their partner would run to, as the house had no light and would often feel suffocating. They felt sadder in that house

because of the lack of natural light. Seasons would change from winter to summer, and it would get harder to be enclosed in darkness that can only be banished through artificial lighting. N felt as if they were just losing it because of the darkness (N, interview, 2024).

These lived experiences of spatial exclusion demand a theoretical framework that bridges queer urban studies with Dalit feminist critiques of space. The "sunlight tax" that Loveleen describes operates not just through neoliberal economics but through what Rao (2020) helps us see as casteist urban planning, where access to light and air follows Brahminical hierarchies of purity and pollution. Loveleen's and N's stories, of sunlight rationed by rent, of bodies priced out of breathable space, are not isolated struggles. They are part of a larger spatial, biopolitical calculus that governs who gets to thrive in Delhi's so-called "inclusive" urban landscape. Their experiences expose how trans lives are disciplined through housing markets, state policies, and casteist urban infrastructures, systems that echo colonial logics of exclusion. These exclusions have been intensified by the 2026 Amendment to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, which restricts legal recognition to certain socio-cultural identities and omits transmasculine persons entirely, and by the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls, which has disproportionately disenfranchised trans voters.

This paper asks: How do transmasculine people in South Delhi experience and navigate housing precarity, and how are these experiences shaped by caste, class, gender, religion, and sexuality? Three sub-questions guide the study: (1) How do rental markets and state shelter systems distribute light, air, privacy, and safety? (2) What kinship and spatial practices do participants develop to make home under conditions of exclusion? (3) How do these practices challenge or reproduce dominant urban logics in Delhi? This paper does not claim to represent all trans people in Delhi. It draws on the experiences of 12 transmasculine participants in South Delhi and treats their narratives as situated, embodied knowledge. Broader claims about urban governance, caste, and biopolitics are made cautiously and are grounded in this specific ethnographic context.

To untangle these questions, I draw on a Southern Queer Urbanism framework, utilising Lefebvre's spatial triad, Foucault's biopolitics (and in my argument the biopolitical triage), and Ambedkar's critique of caste. These theories reveal how trans precarity is engineered, as well as how trans communities reclaim space through kinship and resistance. This paper's methodology, rooted in ethnographic fieldwork and participatory research, centres the voices of my participants, treating their survival strategies as embodied theory. Their hunt for light, their escapes to Satpula Park, and their shared apartments are not just acts of endurance; they are queer urban praxis, challenging the city's violent geographies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study builds on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad (conceived, perceived, and lived space), Michel Foucault's (1978, 1995) biopolitics, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's (1936/2014)

analysis of caste-based spatial segregation to examine how trans communities navigate and resist Delhi's exclusionary urban landscapes. These three frameworks are rarely placed in direct conversation. I argue that they are not merely complementary but mutually constitutive. Biopolitical triage, the process by which populations are sorted into those made to live, those let die, and those rendered temporarily tolerable but never permanently viable, operates through the production of space. Conversely, the production of space is the mechanism through which biopolitical sorting becomes material, visible, and enforceable. Ambedkar's critique of caste spatiality reveals that this sorting is not only biopolitical but Brahminical, caste hierarchies of purity and pollution determine who deserves light, air, and shelter. I term this synthesis biopolitical-spatial triage: a framework that holds together Foucault's biopolitical sorting, Lefebvre's spatial production, and Ambedkar's caste critique.

2.1. Lefebvre's Spatial Triad: Conceived, Perceived, and Lived Space

Lefebvre's framework reveals how conceived space is materialised in Delhi's master plans, which privilege heterosexual family units, while perceived space manifests in the constant safety calculations trans individuals must make when navigating hostile environments (Lefebvre, 1991). Lived space, in contrast, emerges in Khirki's unauthorised colonies, where trans residents creatively adapt their surroundings, transforming kinship into spatial praxis. This aligns with Simone's (2004) concept of "people as infrastructure," where marginalised communities forge survival networks through informal urban practices.

Conceived space is the space of planners, technocrats, and capital, abstract, quantified, and represented in master plans, policy documents, and rental markets. It is where biopolitical triage is planned and encoded. Perceived space is the space of everyday practice, the routes we take, the calculations we make, the places we avoid or seek out. It is where biopolitical triage is encountered and negotiated. Lived space is the space of imagination and appropriation, where alternative meanings are produced, where bodies reclaim and repurpose what was not designed for them. It is where biopolitical triage is resisted and subverted.

2.1.1. Foucault's Biopolitics: Care, Control, and the Carceral Logic of Welfare

Foucault's (1978) biopolitics helps decode the state's regulation of trans lives through spatial control. The Garima Greh shelters, ostensibly spaces of care, operate under a "care-control" regime, mandatory curfews, skill-training registers, and the lexical slip of calling residents "inmates," echoing the colonial 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (Government of India, 1871) that criminalised Hijras. This continuity exposes how postcolonial governance reproduces exclusion under the guise of welfare (Dutta, 2012). Similarly, the Transgender Persons Act (2019) (Government of India, 2019), which mandates certification for accessing housing and

welfare, replicates colonial tactics of surveillance, forcing trans individuals to "prove they are human" to deserve basic rights.

Foucault's biopolitics, and specifically what I term biopolitical triage, describes how power operates not primarily through sovereign command but through the regulation of life itself. Populations are sorted: some are invested in, protected, made to thrive; others are abandoned, exposed, allowed to die; and still others are rendered temporarily governable but never permanently viable. This triage is not abstract. It requires infrastructure, walls, documents, curfews, registers, certificates, ventilation ducts, sunlight. The Garima Greh shelters materialise this triage in architectural form: residents are made governable (through skill-training registers and medical record-keeping) while their tenure is rendered temporary by design. The "sunlight tax" that Loveleen describes, where rent is proportionate to how much sun one desires, is another expression of conceived space as biopolitical triage: access to light and air is distributed according to caste, class, and gender hierarchies, materialised in rental markets and building codes that treat ventilation as a luxury rather than a right.

2.1.2. Ambedkar's Critique of Caste Spatiality: Purity, Pollution, and the Sunlight Tax

Ambedkar's (1936/2014) work illuminates the casteist underpinnings of Delhi's housing markets, where a "sunlight tax" operates as an invisible infrastructure of exclusion. Lower-caste trans tenants often pay more for worse housing, revealing how caste dictates access to light, air, and safety, a biopolitical calculus that mirrors colonial hygiene laws barring "natives" from verandas (Foucault, 1984). This spatial triage, recast as neoliberal "market logic" (Harvey, 2005), reinforces caste-class hierarchies.

What Foucault's biopolitics reveals about state surveillance and Ambedkar exposes about caste spatiality converge in Delhi's housing markets. The medical certification requirements of the Transgender Persons Act (2019) operate through what Paik (2021) terms "Brahminical biopolitics," where both colonial bureaucracy and caste purity tests determine who deserves shelter. The micro-spatial exclusions that participants described, such as being asked to wash one's hands before entering a shop while no other customer received such instructions, exemplify how caste-based purity-pollution ideologies continue to govern everyday spatial interactions, even in ostensibly secular urban spaces. This micro-spatial exclusion mirrors the larger structural denial of light and air in rental housing: both operate through a logic that designates certain bodies as polluting and therefore undeserving of spatial dignity.

2.1.3. Biopolitical-Spatial Triage: The Synthesis

The synthesis I propose for this paper, biopolitical-spatial triage, holds that biopolitical sorting and spatial production are inseparable. In my argument for this paper, Foucault's

biopolitical triage is spatialised through the three dimensions of Lefebvre's triad, and I assert that the spatial triad is always already biopolitical and casteist.

Conceived space as the site of biopolitical planning. Delhi's master plans, the SMILE scheme guidelines, and the Transgender Persons Act (2019) are not neutral documents. They encode biopolitical triage by determining who deserves shelter, for how long, under what conditions, and with what documentation. The Garima Greh shelters, with their mandatory curfews, in/out registers, and one-year stay limits, materialise this triage in architectural form: residents are made governable while their tenure is rendered temporary by design. The "sunlight tax" is another expression of conceived space as biopolitical triage: access to light and air is distributed according to caste, class, and gender hierarchies, materialised in rental markets and building codes that treat ventilation as a luxury rather than a right.

Perceived space as the site of biopolitical encounter. Transmasculine individuals navigate Delhi through constant safety calculations, which neighbourhoods to avoid, which landlords to approach, which routes to take, which parks to seek out. These calculations are not merely practical; they are encounters with biopolitical triage. When participants described seeking housing in areas with Dalit and/or Muslim majorities, they were articulating a spatial strategy that responds to biopolitical sorting. The perceived space of Khirki Extension, dense, informal, "unauthorised," becomes a refuge precisely because it has been abandoned by the state. The "prying eyes" that participants described in Malviya Nagar are the perceptual manifestation of biopolitical surveillance: bodies are sorted, gendered, and policed in the everyday navigation of space. The perceived space of the city is where transmasculine people learn, through repeated encounters, where they are allowed to be and where they are not.

Lived space as the site of biopolitical resistance. Where the state sees disorder, trans communities produce alternative spatialities. The shared apartments of Khirki Extension, the escapes to Satpula Park, the protest encampments of anti-CAA demonstrations, these are not merely survival strategies. They are lived spaces that refuse biopolitical triage. When N envisions a queer space with light, air, cats, and their queer friends, all existing and thriving together, they are articulating a spatial imaginary that rejects the state's calculus of temporary viability. When R displays pictures of Ambedkar or the trans flag in their home, they are claiming space through symbols of anti-caste and queer resistance. These are acts of what I term improvised sovereignty: modes of dwelling that emerge from the fragments of a system that refuses to make room. They do not overturn biopolitical triage, but they subvert it from within, producing spaces where trans lives are not merely tolerated but sustained.

2.1.4. Southern Queer Theory and the Politics of Kinship

Southern queer theory, particularly Dutta and Roy's (2013, 2014) work on Hijra gharanas, frames chosen families as urban survival systems, challenging normative discourses on

home. Trans resistance, through protest alliances, shared apartments, or makeshift shelters, constitutes a living decolonial praxis (Mbembe, 2016), subverting state-sanctioned exclusion. The geography of safety that participants described, seeking housing in Dalit and/or Muslim-majority neighbourhoods, reveals how caste and religion structure not only exclusion but also strategies of survival. These neighbourhoods, marginalised by the state and marked as "unauthorised" or "illegal" (Ghertner, 2015), become paradoxical refuges where gender nonconformity can evade surveillance. The density of Khirki Extension, which urban planners condemn as congested, is precisely what enables trans residents to spot queer folx and move through public space with reduced risk of harassment. This finding complicates dominant narratives of urban informality: where the state sees disorder, trans communities engineer what Simone (2004) calls "people as infrastructure," networks of care woven into the cracks of a system designed to exclude them. The "prying eyes" that vanish in Khirki's density echo Phadke et al.'s (2011) argument that marginalised bodies hack the grid, turning planning failures into shields.

2.1.5. Intersectionality and the Compounding of Biopolitical-Spatial Triage

The findings underscore the necessity of intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) in understanding housing precarity. Caste, class, gender, religion, and disability intersect to produce compounded exclusion. Participants' experiences of caste-based hygiene rituals, combined with their partners' Muslim identities, illustrate how multiple marginalisations converge in everyday spatial interactions. The SMILE scheme's exclusion of sex workers and beggars, many of whom are Dalit and Bahujan trans women, reinforces casteist stigma while simultaneously excluding those most in need of housing support. The financial burden of medical transition, HRT, psychiatric medicines, appointments, compounds housing costs, making survival in Delhi "unaffordable" even for those with formal employment. As Loveleen's accounting reveals, the cost of keeping a trans body alive in Delhi exceeds the cost of housing itself, a finding that demands attention to the intersection of healthcare and housing precarity.

Emerging scholarship at the intersection of queer and caste studies (Dutta & Roy, 2014) demonstrates how Brahminical notions of purity/pollution manifest spatially in rental markets. The "character certificates" demanded by landlords, the restrictions on visitors, the prohibition of multiple transgender persons sharing a room, all operate through a logic that designates trans bodies as polluting, dangerous, or morally suspect. This logic is not merely discriminatory but actively produces housing precarity: it renders trans individuals unrentable, forcing them into windowless boxes, overcrowded shared rooms, or outright homelessness.

2.1.6. Summary of the Framework

The synthesis of Lefebvre, Foucault, and Ambedkar thus allows us to see how biopolitical triage is not an abstract logic but a spatial practice, materialised in plans, policies, and infrastructures; encountered in everyday navigation; and resisted through the production of alternative spatialities. In Delhi, the transmasculine participants in this study navigate a city that sorts them into temporary shelters, windowless rooms, and abandoned neighbourhoods. But they also produce spaces of breath, light, and kinship in the cracks of that system. Biopolitical-spatial triage is the framework that holds both dimensions together: the violence of sorting and the possibility of otherwise. It is through this lens that I now turn to the ethnographic material, tracing how conceived, perceived, and lived space are produced, encountered, and contested in the everyday housing struggles of transmasculine Delhi.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of my doctoral research on the meaning of home for transmasculine persons in Delhi. While the wider doctoral fieldwork remains ongoing (June 2022–August 2026), this article draws on a bounded analytical stage: data collected between June 2022 and December 2024 with 12 transmasculine participants in South Delhi. This cut-off allows for a coherent analysis of housing experiences gathered during a period of intensive fieldwork, while acknowledging that the broader project continues. The material presented here should therefore be read as a focused analysis of this specific dataset, not as final conclusions about all transmasculine people in Delhi. My contributors for this paper belong to the areas of Khirki Extension, Humayunpur, Malviya Nagar, Chhatarpur, Mehrauli, and Munirka.

The study is longitudinal and iterative: I conducted repeated visits, follow-up interviews, and participant observation across 8 phases. My PhD project inquires about the concept of home and its meaning for transmasculine persons living in the national capital Delhi, specifically in the south, south-west, and south-east parts of the city.

For my doctoral project, I recruited 25 transmasculine participants through snowball sampling, community organisations, social media, and personal networks. For the purpose of this particular paper, I spoke to 12 of them separately. Inclusion criteria were: age 21 and above; self-identify as transmasculine; resident of the larger South Delhi area for at least six months; willing to discuss housing histories. Data collection included life-history interviews, follow-up conversations, participant observation in homes, neighbourhoods, parks, and community spaces, and fieldnotes. Where participants consented, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated from Hindi/Hinglish/Bangla to English.

Participatory action research (PAR) (Kindon et al., 2007) shaped the study in the following ways: participants helped refine interview themes, they also interpreted preliminary findings, suggested sites for observation, and commented on analysis. Participants who took on these additional tasks are described as co-researchers and

contributors; otherwise, I use the word "participants" to describe them. I use "co-researchers" only for those who helped refine interview themes, interpret preliminary findings, or suggest sites for observation. They were not formal co-authors. These particular words are important to me as a community member researching and examining lives of those whom I call "my people." When I attribute them as co-researchers, I attempt to address the knowledge that I have built while thinking through and with them. It has been a conscious decision to make this paper and my larger doctoral research a product of co-building and co-conspiring against the systems that keep us on the outside.

The fieldwork for this paper concluded in December 2024, before the passage of the 2026 Amendment. The brief on the amendment and the Special Intensive Revision included in the "Carceral Care" section is therefore presented as post-data-collection policy context, not as part of the empirical analysis. It demonstrates the ongoing relevance of the paper's arguments about biopolitical-spatial triage and the state's regulation of trans lives.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis followed an iterative, reflexive process combining deductive and inductive approaches. I began with open coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes, identifying recurring descriptions, phrases, and experiences. Codes were then grouped into focused categories based on patterns across participants. For example, the theme of "sunlight tax" emerged from participants' repeated emphasis on the relationship between rent, ventilation, and light, terms they themselves used to describe their housing conditions. "Geography of safety" was developed from participants' accounts of navigating neighbourhoods and their calculations about where they could live without harassment. "Kinship as infrastructure" arose from narratives about shared living arrangements and mutual support networks.

These themes were then interpreted through the theoretical framework of biopolitical-spatial triage, examining how they reflected conceived, perceived, and lived space. I shared preliminary thematic summaries with participants for feedback, and their responses shaped the final interpretations. This process was not linear but iterative, moving between data, theory, and participant feedback.

By engaging transmasculine participants as co-researchers, the methodology challenges extractive academic practices, instead prioritising embodied knowledge (Ahmed, 2006) and community-driven narratives. The research traces how transmasculine individuals reclaim space, whether through queer homemaking, protest alliances, or everyday survival tactics, offering a grounded critique of neoliberal urbanism (Roy, 2011). Through this approach, the study not only exposes the colonial continuities in housing policies (Legg, 2007) but also highlights trans resilience as a form of spatial justice (Soja, 2010), reimagining the city as a site of radical possibility.

5. ETHICS

This study is grounded in a feminist and queer ethic of care that understands research not as a transaction of extraction but as a relation of accountability, reciprocity, and mutual vulnerability. Following Sloane (2026), I approach positionality not as a fixed identity category to be declared once, but as a relational and contingent site: continuously negotiated through encounters with participants, shaped by shifting dynamics of power, access, and trust. This framing resists what Sloane calls "performative reflexivity" and instead positions ethical engagement as a continuous practice embedded in the research relationship itself.

5.1. *Relational Reflexivity and Positionality*

I am a trans non-binary queer person, who belongs to the oppressor caste and is affiliated with a central government university in the nation's capital. These positionalities carry weight in a study concerned with how caste and class determine access to housing. Despite these identities, I belong to the transmasculine community, the very community I work with, making my everyday life "my field"; my social world, built with trans flatmates and friends, is a site of shared homemaking. This embeddedness grants me an intimate, insider's view. Yet, my femme gender presentation marks me as an outsider within specific transmasculine spaces, situating me in a profound and troubling paradox. A paradox that I negotiate with in my day to day life.

My positionality has fundamentally shaped my methodology, compelling me to adopt my methodological framework. This is not an academic choice but an ethical necessity, a way to dismantle the extractive gaze and frame this work as a collective project of world-making.

5.1.1. Consent as Ongoing and Dialogical

Informed consent in this study was not a single moment of signing a form. Drawing on feminist critiques of procedural ethics (Bell & Salmon, 2011; Drenten & Gurrieri, 2025), I treated consent as an ongoing, dialogical process. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point, decline to answer specific questions, or ask me to stop recording. Where participants shared experiences of violence or discrimination, I paused to ask whether they wished to continue. In several cases, participants themselves redirected the conversation or chose what not to narrate. As Asquith et al. (2026) argue in their work on queering ethics of care, "safety in knowledge production" means that participants should be empowered to not tell some of their stories when doing so would deepen harm. I understood my responsibility as creating conditions in which silence, deflection, or redirection were as legitimate as disclosure.

This approach also meant that consent was revisited at multiple points: before the first interview, before follow-ups, before sharing preliminary findings with participants, and before using specific quotations in this paper. Participants reviewed their quotations and had

the opportunity to revise, contextualise, or withdraw them. This practice resonates with participatory action research (PAR) principles (Kindon et al., 2007), where participants are treated as collaborators in knowledge production rather than as sources of data.

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5.1.2. Ethics of Care and the Politics of Naming

This study centres transmasculine participants, and I was attentive to the politics of naming and categorisation. Trans communities in India are not monolithic; "transmasculine" itself is a category I use analytically, not one that all participants use to describe themselves. I followed participants' own language in interviews and fieldnotes, only translating into academic categories during analysis. I also avoided using the term "respondent," which carries extractive connotations, and instead use "participant" or "collaborator" throughout, reserving "co-researcher" for those who took on additional interpretive or advisory roles.

All names in this paper are pseudonyms chosen by participants themselves where possible. I have avoided including identifying details such as specific addresses, workplace names, or distinctive personal histories that could compromise anonymity, especially given the small size of Delhi's transmasculine networks. In one case, a participant asked that a particular anecdote not be included because it could identify them; that request was honoured. Drawing on Drenten and Gurrieri's (2025) feminist ethic of care framework, I understood my responsibility as care to the participant, care to the procedure, and care to the relational context of the research.

5.1.3. Power, Vulnerability, and Reciprocity

Feminist research ethics requires attention to the power asymmetries that structure the research relationship. As a trans non-binary researcher working with transmasculine participants, I was acutely aware that my institutional affiliation, caste location, and access to academic platforms positioned me differently from those I interviewed. This does not mean that participants were without agency: they navigated the research relationship with their own strategies, choosing what to share, when, and how. Several participants explicitly used the research encounter to reflect on their own experiences, and some described the interviews as a space where they could articulate thoughts they had not previously verbalised. For me as the person asking questions and for my participants and co-researchers

as the ones sharing their lives with me, the dialogue was also a way for us to relook our lives in the city and how it shapes our lives.

I attempted to address these asymmetries in the following ways: by sharing the cost of the meals, sometimes even cooking with them; by making the research process transparent: participants were told how their words would be used, who the intended audience was, and what the limitations of academic publication meant for them. Lastly, by recognising that reciprocity in research is not always immediate or material. As Walters et al. (2026) argue, relations of care in feminist research involve trust, recognition, openness, vulnerability, and empathy, not simply the exchange of information for compensation. I remain in contact with several participants, and some have become interlocutors whose insights continue to shape my thinking beyond the formal research relationship.

6. LIMITATIONS

This paper has several limitations. First, it is based on 12 transmasculine participants in South Delhi. It does not claim to represent the experiences of all transmasculine people in Delhi, nor of trans women, Hijra/Kinnar communities, or the wider trans population. Second, the geographical focus on South Delhi means that the findings may not be transferable to other parts of the city, where caste, class, and housing dynamics differ. Third, while the wider doctoral fieldwork remains ongoing, this paper draws on data collected between June 2022 and December 2024. The findings presented here are therefore an analytical stage rather than final conclusions. Fourth, this paper does not include the perspectives of institutional stakeholders such as shelter administrators, landlords, or policymakers. The analysis of Garima Greh and the SMILE scheme is based on policy documents and participant accounts, not on direct study of these institutions. Fifth, the paper cannot address the full range of housing experiences, including homelessness, which was not the focus of this study. Finally, while participants described Khirki Extension and similar areas as relatively safe compared to other neighbourhoods, this does not mean these spaces are safe in a broader sense. They remain sites of precarity, subject to eviction, demolition, and state neglect. The relative safety they offer is contingent and fragile.

7. CARCERAL CARE: THE BIOPOLITICS AND SURVEILLANCE OF GARIMA GREH SHELTER HOMES

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment launched the SMILE scheme in February 2022, under which shelter homes for transgender persons were set up, called Garima Greh. These shelter homes are crucial when it comes to emergency housing; however, they present numerous challenges: they are disproportionate to the population of transgender persons in the country, there are limitations on the duration of stay, and they show a paternalistic approach, among others.

There are currently 12 Garima Greh shelter homes functioning in only nine out of 28 states in the country. When it comes to Delhi, there is only one shelter home that can house just 25 transgender persons at a time, making it difficult to cater to 4,213 persons who live in the city, a gross undercount. Moreover, these homes only function as "short-stay homes" as they do not allow residence for more than a year, unlike other shelter homes for homeless people that are run by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB), where residents stay for as long as they need. The Garima Grehs operate on what Foucault (1995) would recognise as a double logic of care and control. The shelters are required to maintain registers of the in and out timings, as well as extensive medical and other personal records of all residents. The guidelines of the shelter homes also do not provide safeguards or directives to seek explicit and informed consent from the residents, to prevent any invasion of their privacy.

Proving themselves to be just a waystation in the state's biopolitical calculus instead of being a refuge in need, it perpetuates a regime of surveillance. Additionally, the limited "shelf life" of housing embodies what Spivak (1988) terms "enforced gratitude," a colonial tactic repurposed as welfare. This countdown to homelessness in the guise of rehabilitation exposes the system's central paradox: it exists to declare trans lives governable (through skill-training registers and mandatory curfews) while ensuring they remain temporary. Transgender bodies are marked as perpetually in transition, never entitled to permanence.

The insistence on the "Transgender persons certificate" issued by the National Portal for Transgender persons to access basic support services, such as medical care and shelter homes, among others, not only replicates the tendency to surveil (just like colonial era tactics), but also echoes Foucault's "scientia sexualis" (1978). The state's pathologization of transness to control who gets housing rights furthers the regime of surveillance, where residents trade autonomy for a bed.

It is also interesting to note that the guidelines for the SMILE scheme often refer to residents of Garima Grehs as "inmates," a lexical slip that betrays the shelter's carceral logic. This "slip" seems deeply rooted in colonial legacies of Victorian morality and the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which pathologized gender nonconformity and targeted "eunuchs." The law, upon examination, tells us that although anti-Hijra provisions were repealed in 1911, the policing of gender and sexuality continues and echoes not only in language but also in spirit in all postcolonial legal and policing practices.

However, decoloniality in this context cannot be seen as merely "delinking from British Colonialism," since Victorian notions of purity can find similarities in the Hindu Brahminical obsession with "purity" and "pollution" rooted in caste. Jessica Hinchy (2019) also notes this in the criminalization of the Hijra community through the Criminal Tribes Act as it coincided with its attempt to "control untouchable, low caste and itinerant groups that were labelled 'criminal tribes', or hereditary criminals by caste occupation."

In a 2013 interview with Gee Semmalar and Bittu Rajaraman, Living Smile Vidya, an actor, author, and veteran Dalit trans activist, stated that transphobia is a "type of

brahminism." "It gives us no other option but to do 'dirty' jobs like sex work and begging, and then calls us 'dirty,' just like the caste system," she added (Vidya, 2013). This snippet becomes more important when we look at the SMILE Guidelines, which explicitly prohibit the use of shelter homes for trans persons engaged in sex work and begging, common sources of livelihood that trans persons engage in after being denied education and employment due to social stigma and discrimination. This, in effect, excludes a large section of trans persons who may need shelter. Despite the decriminalization of "begging" by the High Court of Delhi in 2018 and repeal of the relevant provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959, the SMILE Guidelines seem to perpetuate further prejudice towards those relying on "beggary" to earn a living. These barriers limit the access of the shelters only to a certain class of trans persons, while reinforcing the stigma and shame attached to hijra and kinnar identities, thereby further marginalizing them. In my understanding, trans lives are rendered temporarily governable but never permanently viable.

These institutional conclusions are based on analysis of publicly available SMILE scheme guidelines, the Transgender Persons Act (2019), the Transgender Persons Rules (2020), and participant accounts. They do not claim to represent the perspectives of shelter administrators or staff, who were not directly studied for this paper.

8. THE 2026 AMENDMENT: THE EROSION OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

While the fieldwork for this paper concluded in December 2024, a significant policy development has since reshaped the landscape of trans rights in India, with direct implications for the housing precarity documented here. On 13 March 2026, the Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment, Dr. Virendra Kumar, introduced an amendment bill to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. The amendment bill sought to redefine transgender identity by restricting it to only a few socio-cultural identities, specifically kinner, hijra, aravani, jogta, eunuch, or a person with intersex variations. The bill categorically stated that the definition "shall not include, nor shall ever have been so included, persons with different sexual orientations and self-perceived sexual identities" (Government of India, 2026). The bill omitted the entire transmasculine community, including trans men and genderqueer people who were recognised under the 2019 Act.

This legislative move directly contradicts the 2014 NALSA v. Union of India Supreme Court judgment, which recognised self-identification of gender as a fundamental right under Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Indian Constitution, and declared that no person can be forced to undergo medical procedures to prove their gender identity. With the new amendment, the rights-based model established by NALSA was replaced by a restrictive, state-defined model of recognition.

Of particular concern is Section 18 of the amendment, which criminalises the use of force or undue influence to compel someone to present as transgender, punishable with five to ten years imprisonment, and imprisonment for life or ten to fourteen years if the victim is a child

(Government of India, 2026). The vague language of "influence" and "compel" echoes the colonial Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which sought to eradicate gender non-conforming people, and leaves space for surveillance, control, and violence. This provision can be weaponised by the state and natal families to target trans kinship networks, supportive medical workers, and even supportive parents.

The amendment was passed by the Lok Sabha through a voice vote on March 13 and by the Rajya Sabha on 25 March 2026, after the opposition walked out of the House. Despite widespread protests, the bill received presidential assent on 30 March 2026, one day before the Transgender Day of Visibility. As of writing, over nine petitions have been filed in various courts challenging the amendment, including a petition in the Rajasthan High Court where the Division Bench headed by Acting Chief Justice S.P. Sharma sought a response from the Central Government (Nair, 2026).

The government's defence of the amendment rests on two claims: that the Act was never intended to protect "persons with various gender identities, self-perceived sex/gender identities or gender fluidities," and that the new amendment grants protection only to those "who face severe social exclusion due to biological reasons for no fault of their own and no choice of their own" (Nair, 2026). These claims are historically false, as the 2019 Act was the legislative outcome of the NALSA judgment, making self-identification a right derived from the Constitution, not the statute.

The amendment compounds the precarity documented in this paper by rendering transmasculine identities legally unrecognisable. If transmasculine individuals cannot obtain a "Transgender persons certificate," they cannot access the welfare schemes, medical care, or shelter homes that require such documentation. The Garima Greh shelters, already inadequate and carceral in their logic, become even more inaccessible. The "sunlight tax" and the geography of safety that participants described are thus intensified by a legal regime that denies their very existence.

9. THE SPECIAL INTENSIVE REVISION AND ELECTORAL DISENFRANCHISEMENT

The amendment must be understood alongside another contemporary development: the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls conducted by the Election Commission of India. The SIR, first implemented in West Bengal and Bihar, has disproportionately affected trans persons. In West Bengal, 250 out of 1,811 names of those belonging to the "other gender" category were deleted in the first exclusion list published in December 2025. An additional 29 names were removed in the list published on 28 February 2026, and 230 names were brought under adjudication (Chatterjee & Sengupta, 2026). In Tamil Nadu, 9,464 trans persons were on the electoral rolls prior to the SIR, but the number dropped to 7,617 afterwards. Notably, the Transgender Card is not included in the List of Indicative Documents published by the Election Commission for SIR purposes.

The SIR ties voting rights directly to proof of one's parents' history as voters, failing to account for the natal family violence and abandonment that many queer and trans individuals experience. Under Indian law, only citizens can vote. The 2026 instructions published by the Commission for Bihar and West Bengal elections specifically stated that in cases where a person is suspected to be a foreign national, their case would be referred to the competent authority under the Citizenship Act, 1955 (Election Commission of India, 2026). The ECI, in choosing to exclude, can flag an individual as a suspected foreigner, triggering processes that may result in a conclusive determination that a person is a foreigner and an illegal migrant.

This exclusion, compounded by the exclusion of transmasculine persons from the 2026 Amendment, can effectively disenfranchise many. The precedent is alarming: during the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam in 2019, over 2,000 trans persons were excluded from the final list, largely due to challenges in providing pre-1971 documentation because of familial abandonment and mandatory binary gender options in application forms. Disenfranchisement through state machinery has been a recurring feature of trans persons' lives.

These developments demonstrate how biopolitical-spatial triage operates not only through housing markets and shelter systems but through the legal and electoral infrastructure that determines who counts as a citizen. The 2026 Amendment and the SIR are not separate issues; they are interlocking mechanisms of exclusion that render transmasculine persons legally unrecognisable, politically disenfranchised, and spatially displaced. They are the contemporary expression of the colonial logics documented throughout this paper.

10. FINDINGS

The findings presented here emerge from life-history interviews, follow-up conversations, and participant observation with 12 transmasculine participants between June 2022 and December 2024. This dataset constitutes a coherent analytical stage within the wider doctoral fieldwork. Each quotation is attributed by pseudonym, method, and date.

10.1. The Sunlight Tax and Spatial Deprivation

A consistent finding across all participants was the systematic denial of natural light and ventilation in affordable rental housing. Loveleen's observation that "the rent charged is proportionate to how much sun one desires" (Loveleen, interview, 2024) captures a broader material reality: housing within the financial reach of transmasculine individuals is overwhelmingly characterised by windowless rooms, inadequate ventilation, and reliance on artificial lighting at all hours. N's description of their Khirki Extension home, where "tubelights are switched on at all times" and seasonal changes became "harder to be enclosed in darkness" (N, interview, 2024), was echoed by multiple participants. R's characterisation of such dwellings as "just a box, all weather long" (R, interview, 2025) and A's reflection on how

even "shadows can be a privilege" when natural light is entirely absent (A, interview, 2024) point to what participants themselves termed a "sunlight tax," a premium extracted from trans bodies for the basic necessity of breathable, lit space.

This deprivation operates through what participants identified as a casteist logic embedded in rental markets. V's account of being instructed by a Brahmin kirana store owner to "wash [his] hands before entering" the shop, while no other customer received such instructions (V, interview, 2024), exemplifies how Brahminical purity-pollution ideologies continue to govern everyday spatial interactions. The shopkeeper's behaviour, prompted by learning V's caste location and his partner's Muslim identity, reveals how caste and religion intersect to produce micro-spatial exclusions that compound the larger structural denial of habitable space.

While these patterns were consistent across participants, there was also variation. Not all participants experienced housing insecurity in the same way. Some, like Loveleen, had formal employment and a stable income but still struggled with the high costs of housing and medical transition. Others, like V, had moved to Delhi from smaller towns and faced additional challenges related to migration and lack of local networks. Some participants had found relatively stable housing in Khirki Extension, while others had moved multiple times in a single year. The "sunlight tax" was a common experience, but its severity varied according to income, caste location, and the availability of kinship networks.

10.1.1. Rental Discrimination and the Geography of Safety

Participants consistently reported that finding housing required navigating not just material deprivation but active discrimination. Landlords demanded exorbitant deposits, required "character certificates" from cisgender guarantors, and imposed rules such as restricting visitors or prohibiting multiple transgender persons from sharing a room. M's account of friends who "were assaulted near their rented house in Sheikh Sarai by a drunk neighbour for long hair and painted nails" (M, interview, 2023) illustrates the everyday violence that transmasculine individuals face in their own neighbourhoods.

In response, participants developed sophisticated spatial strategies for safety. V articulated a clear calculus: "we knew that an area that mostly has a Dalit and/or Muslim population would be the safest for us" (V, interview, 2024). This finding suggests that transmasculine individuals actively seek out neighbourhoods already marginalised by caste and religious hierarchies, understanding these spaces as offering relative anonymity and reduced surveillance compared to upper-caste, Hindu-majority areas. The density of Khirki Extension, which urban planners might label "unauthorised" or "congested," emerged as a paradoxical refuge, a space where, as A noted, "we would spot queer folx" and where friends "who do not pass as cis-het" could visit without fear (A, interview, 2024). Conversely, moving to "respectable" neighbourhoods like Malviya Nagar brought increased surveillance, with A

describing "surveilling, prying eyes trying to gauge gender and spotting the 'odd ones out'" (A, interview, 2024).

This strategy of seeking housing in Dalit and Muslim-majority neighbourhoods was not universal. Some participants prioritised proximity to work or community networks over safety calculations. Others, particularly those with higher incomes, were able to access housing in areas that were less marginalised. The geography of safety described here is therefore not a universal pattern but a strategy adopted by those with limited options.

10.1.2. Kinship Networks as Infrastructure

A dominant pattern across all narratives was the centrality of chosen kinship networks to housing survival. Participants consistently described shared apartments with other queer and trans individuals not merely as economic necessity but as deliberate acts of community-building. M's account of living "with my three queer and trans friends" in a Khirki house with ventilation and light, a "rare find in this area" (M, interview, 2023), highlights how collective living enables access to better housing while simultaneously creating protective social environments. N's vision of a future queer space, "light, air, cats, and their queer friends, all existing and thriving together" (N, interview, 2024), captures the aspirational dimension of these kinship networks.

The importance of these networks extended beyond shared housing to daily survival practices. N and A's use of Satpula Park as a respite from their lightless home exemplifies how trans individuals repurpose public spaces as extensions of domestic life when formal housing fails to provide basic habitable conditions. The park functioned as a "heterotopia of compensation," a space where breath and light could be accessed when the rental home offered neither.

10.1.3. The Body as a Site of Precarity

Participants consistently linked housing insecurity to bodily and mental health disparities. Loveleen's detailed accounting of expenses, "my psychiatric medicines, appointments, and HRT alone cost over 10,000 INR" (Loveleen, interview, 2024), reveals how the financial burden of medical transition compounds housing costs, making survival in Delhi "unaffordable even on a salary of 30,000 INR" (Loveleen, interview, 2024). The physical and psychological toll of living in windowless, airless spaces emerged as a recurring theme. N described feeling "sadder in that house because of the lack of natural light" and feeling as if they were "just losing it because of the darkness" (N, interview, 2024). These testimonies suggest that housing deprivation is not merely material but profoundly somatic, it produces what might be termed a spatial depression, where the built environment itself becomes a source of mental distress.

10.1.4. Resistance and Queer Homemaking

Despite these conditions of precarity, participants demonstrated multiple forms of resistance. The very act of creating shared queer households constitutes what Halberstam (2005) terms "queer homemaking," a refusal of heteronormative domestic timelines and an assertion of alternative spatial logics. R's practice of displaying "pictures of Ambedkar or the trans flag" in their home represents a deliberate claiming of space through symbols of anti-caste and queer resistance (R, interview, 2025). N's vision of a queer space "sans the fear of judgment or violence" expresses not merely a desire for safety but an insistence on abundance, light, air, community, and care, as fundamental to trans life (N, interview, 2024). These acts of homemaking, however small and precarious, constitute what participants understand as resistance: as R stated, "I still resist in the small ways I can" (R, interview, 2025).

11. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a complex topography of spatial exclusion and resistance. This discussion interprets those findings through the framework of biopolitical-spatial triage, which holds that Foucault's biopolitical sorting and Lefebvre's spatial production are mutually constitutive, and that both are structured by Ambedkar's critique of caste spatiality. Rather than restating the findings, this discussion advances the theoretical argument by showing how the ethnographic material demonstrates the operations of biopolitical-spatial triage across conceived, perceived, and lived space.

11.1. Biopolitical-Spatial Triage: The Synthesis in Practice

The empirical material presented here allows me to develop and refine the concept of biopolitical-spatial triage. Read through this lens, the experiences of participants reveal how conceived, perceived, and lived space converge. Loveleen's sunlight calculation, N's lightless room, and V's experience of casteist hygiene rituals are not isolated anecdotes. They are moments where the three dimensions of Lefebvre's triad intersect with Foucault's biopolitical sorting and Ambedkar's caste critique.

11.1.1. Conceived Space: Biopolitical Planning and the Sunlight Tax

When the findings are read through Lefebvre's (1991) conception of conceived space, they reveal how Delhi's rental markets and shelter guidelines encode biopolitical triage. The windowless, airless rooms that participants inhabit are not accidental but engineered, reflecting what Ambedkar (1936/2014) identified as spatial untouchability: the systematic denial of habitable space to those deemed impure by Brahminical standards. The "sunlight tax" that Loveleen describes is not merely an economic mechanism but a spatial expression of caste hierarchy. Access to light and air is distributed according to purity and pollution,

mirroring colonial hygiene laws that barred "natives" from verandas (Foucault, 1984). This spatial triage, recast as neoliberal "market logic" (Harvey, 2005), reinforces caste-class hierarchies by rendering trans and Dalit-Bahujan bodies unworthy of spatial dignity.

The SMILE scheme guidelines and the Transgender Persons Act (2019) operate through the same logic. The certification requirement, the register-keeping, and the one-year stay limit are not administrative oversights but constitutive features of a carceral welfare regime. They determine who deserves shelter, for how long, and under what conditions. The state's pathologisation of transness, echoing Foucault's (1978) "scientia sexualis," operates through what Paik (2021) terms "Brahminical biopolitics," where both colonial bureaucracy and caste purity tests determine who deserves shelter. The Garima Greh shelters thus function as conceived spaces that encode biopolitical triage in architectural form.

The 2026 Amendment represents an intensification of this logic, restricting legal recognition to state-approved identities and criminalising the very kinship networks that trans communities rely on for survival. The amendment is not a departure from the carceral logic of the 2019 Act but its logical extension: if the 2019 Act rendered trans lives temporarily governable through certification, the 2026 Amendment renders transmasculine lives permanently unrecognisable.

11.1.2. Perceived Space: Biopolitical Encounter and the Geography of Safety

The findings also demonstrate how biopolitical triage is encountered in perceived space, the space of everyday navigation and safety calculations. The geography of safety that participants described, seeking housing in Dalit and/or Muslim-majority neighbourhoods, reveals how caste and religion structure not only exclusion but also strategies of survival. These neighbourhoods, marginalised by the state and marked as "unauthorised" or "illegal" (Ghertner, 2015), become paradoxical refuges where gender nonconformity can evade surveillance. This finding complicates dominant narratives of urban informality: where the state sees disorder, trans communities engineer what Simone (2004) calls "people as infrastructure," networks of care woven into the cracks of a system designed to exclude them. The "prying eyes" that vanish in Khirki's density echo Phadke et al.'s (2011) argument that marginalised bodies hack the grid, turning planning failures into shields.

Yet this refuge is precarious by design. As Ghertner (2015) argues, Delhi's urban governance operates through "aesthetic consensus," marking spaces like Khirki as "illegal" not due to material inadequacy but because their densities defy bourgeois ideals of order. The very characteristics that make these neighbourhoods safe for trans residents, density, informality, the presence of other marginalised communities, also render them vulnerable to eviction, demolition, and state neglect. The paradox is stark: the more a space is neglected by the state, the more it may shelter those the state refuses to see. This is the cruel calculus of urban survival in Delhi, and it is a direct expression of biopolitical-spatial triage.

11.1.3. Lived Space: Biopolitical Resistance and Queer Homemaking

The findings further demonstrate that lived space is where biopolitical triage is resisted and subverted. Where the state sees disorder, trans communities produce alternative spatialities. The shared apartments of Khirki Extension, the escapes to Satpula Park, and the protest encampments of anti-CAA demonstrations are not merely survival strategies. They are lived spaces that refuse biopolitical triage. The centrality of chosen kinship networks to housing survival, what participants describe through shared apartments, rotating care systems, and the repurposing of public spaces, aligns with Halberstam's (2005) concept of "queer time and place." Halberstam challenges the normative life trajectories tied to heterosexual domesticity, marriage, homeownership, and nuclear family units, arguing that queer lives often unfold in non-linear, improvisational ways. In Delhi, this manifests in trans communities' refusal to conform to traditional housing trajectories. The flight to Satpula Park, the rotating care systems, the hosting of friends who need a place to stay, these constitute what Halberstam might call "queer scheduling" against capitalist and casteist notions of productivity.

The concept of "queer homemaking" that emerges from participants' narratives constitutes what Halberstam might call a radical futurity: not just claiming space but reimagining the very temporality of belonging. The refusal to accept the city's violent geographies as permanent is not abstract but grounded in daily practices of care. This resistance finds theoretical articulation in Dutta and Roy's (2013, 2014) work on Hijra gharanas, which frames chosen families as urban survival systems that challenge normative discourses on home. The shared apartments of Khirki Extension, the protest encampments of anti-CAA demonstrations, and the makeshift shelters of Satpula Park all constitute what Mbembe (2016) terms living decolonial praxis, subverting state-sanctioned exclusion through everyday spatial practices. These practices challenge the state's insistence on fixed, legible forms of domesticity, offering instead what might be called improvised sovereignties: modes of dwelling that emerge from the fragments of a system that refuses to make room.

12. WHAT THE EMPIRICAL MATERIAL ADDS

The empirical material presented in this paper extends existing theoretical frameworks in three ways. First, it demonstrates that biopolitical triage is not only a macro-level process but is experienced in the intimate spaces of the home, where the absence of light and air produces what participants describe as a "spatial depression." Second, it shows that caste and gender are not separate axes of oppression but are mutually constitutive in the production of housing precarity, a finding that complicates frameworks that treat them as distinct. Third, it reveals that resistance is not only collective and public but also domestic and everyday, enacted through the creation of shared households and the display of anti-caste

symbols. These findings refine our understanding of how biopolitical-spatial triage operates in the specific context of Delhi's rental markets.

12.1. Intersectional Implications for Housing Justice

The findings underscore the necessity of intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) in understanding housing precarity. Caste, class, gender, religion, and disability intersect to produce compounded exclusion. The SMILE scheme's exclusion of sex workers and beggars, many of whom are Dalit and Bahujan trans women, reinforces casteist stigma while simultaneously excluding those most in need of housing support. The financial burden of medical transition, HRT, psychiatric medicines, appointments, compounds housing costs, making survival in Delhi "unaffordable" even for those with formal employment. As Loveleen's accounting reveals, the cost of keeping a trans body alive in Delhi exceeds the cost of housing itself, a finding that demands attention to the intersection of healthcare and housing precarity.

While this paper emphasises the role of caste, gender, and transphobia in shaping housing access, it is important to acknowledge that broader economic conditions also contribute to housing precarity. Delhi's rental market is characterised by high costs, limited availability, and exploitative landlord practices that affect many marginalised groups. The experiences of transmasculine participants are thus not solely attributable to transphobia; they are also shaped by class position, the city's wider housing crisis, and the informal nature of much rental housing. What this paper argues is that caste and gender compound these broader economic conditions, producing particular forms of vulnerability for transmasculine people.

Emerging scholarship at the intersection of queer and caste studies (Dutta & Roy, 2014) demonstrates how Brahminical notions of purity/pollution manifest spatially in rental markets. The "character certificates" demanded by landlords, the restrictions on visitors, the prohibition of multiple transgender persons sharing a room, all operate through a logic that designates trans bodies as polluting, dangerous, or morally suspect. This logic is not merely discriminatory but actively produces housing precarity: it renders trans individuals unrentable, forcing them into windowless boxes, overcrowded shared rooms, or outright homelessness.

The domestic space shapes sexuality in correspondence with the ways sexuality shapes how the domestic space is conceived. In the course of a person's life, they witness only one kind of family and "home" where there is a man, a woman (married to each other), and their children. The media and even books (educational and otherwise) seem to recognise a particular kind of "home" and family that is rooted in cis-hetero-patriarchal ideas, which queer persons find difficult to navigate. Feminist critiques of domestic space (Blunt & Dowling, 2006) reveal how housing design and policy are deeply embedded in patriarchal assumptions. The idealized "home" as a private, nuclear family unit is a relatively recent

construct, tied to colonial and Brahminical notions of respectability. In Delhi, this manifests in rental markets where landlords demand "character certificates" and enforce gendered dress codes, policing trans bodies under the guise of maintaining "family environments." The windowless, airless rooms that many trans residents inhabit are not accidental but engineered, reflecting what Ambedkar identified as spatial untouchability. Feminist urbanism, therefore, must grapple with how housing policies reproduce intersecting oppressions, rendering marginalised lives infrastructurally invisible.

This intersectional analysis demands rethinking housing policy beyond identity categories. The SMILE scheme's exclusion of sex workers reveals how caste operates through moral policing disguised as welfare. An intersectional housing justice would require, as Dutta and Roy (2014) argue, recognising Hijra gharanas as legitimate housing models rather than pathological communities.

12.1.1. Toward a Politics of Spatial Justice

The housing struggles of the transmasculine networks I worked with in South Delhi reveal both the violence of exclusionary urban policies and the resilience of queer homemaking practices. From protest encampments that become temporary homes to kinship networks that function as urban infrastructure, trans individuals are rewriting the spatial contract of the city. The synthesis of Lefebvre, Foucault, and Ambedkar demonstrates that biopolitical triage is not an abstract logic but a spatial practice, materialised in plans, policies, and infrastructures; encountered in everyday navigation; and resisted through the production of alternative spatialities.

From the sunlight calculations that ration light by rent to the time-limited shelters that render trans lives temporarily governable, trans communities navigate what we might call "caste-time," the temporal regimes that dictate who gets to stay and for how long. Their resistance points toward what Halberstam calls "queer futurity," not just claiming space but reimagining the very temporality of belonging. The task ahead is to amplify these subaltern blueprints into policy, recognising that true housing justice begins where Western models end, in the embodied wisdom of those who have learned to make homes from fragments.

13. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how transmasculine individuals in Delhi navigate a city that systematically denies them habitable space through interlocking systems of casteist urban planning, neoliberal housing markets, and biopolitical state governance. The "sunlight tax" that Loveleen describes, the windowless boxes that R and A inhabit, and the carceral care of Garima Greh shelters all point to a broader logic: the trans lives documented here are rendered temporarily tolerable but never permanently viable. Yet within these conditions of precarity, trans communities have developed sophisticated strategies of resistance, shared

apartments that become sites of queer homemaking, kinship networks that function as urban infrastructure, and the repurposing of public spaces like Satpula Park as extensions of domestic life.

The theoretical framework developed here, synthesizing Lefebvre's spatial triad, Foucault's biopolitics, Ambedkar's critique of caste, and Halberstam's queer temporality, has illuminated how spatial exclusion operates simultaneously through material deprivation, discursive violence, and the regulation of bodies. The findings have shown that housing precarity is not merely an economic issue but a site where caste, gender, class, and religion intersect to produce compounded exclusion. The geography of safety that participants described, seeking refuge in Dalit and Muslim-majority neighbourhoods, reveals how marginalised communities navigate and resist these intersecting oppressions.

The concept of "queer homemaking" that emerges from participants' narratives offers a radical alternative to dominant housing paradigms. N's vision of a space with light, air, cats, and their queer friends is not merely a dream but a blueprint: a demand for housing that is abundant, collective, and grounded in care rather than surveillance (N, interview, 2024). This vision challenges the state's insistence on fixed, legible forms of domesticity, offering instead what might be called improvised sovereignties, modes of dwelling that emerge from the fragments of a system that refuses to make room.

The claims made here are grounded in the experiences of 12 transmasculine participants in South Delhi. They do not claim to represent the experiences of trans women, Hijra/Kinnar communities, or the wider trans population in Delhi. Where broader patterns are suggested, these are offered as hypotheses for further research rather than conclusions. The task ahead is to amplify these subaltern blueprints into policy. This paper has shown that housing justice for transmasculine people in Delhi requires attention to the interlocking systems of caste, gender, and class that produce precarity. While the findings presented here are based on a small sample and a specific geographical context, they suggest the need for policies that recognise the right to light, air, and safety as fundamental to mental and physical wellbeing. Future research should extend this analysis to other marginalised communities and to the institutional actors who shape housing policy. As Loveleen observed, "We build our right to breathe into the cracks of this crumbling city" (Loveleen, interview, 2024). This research has shown that these cracks are not merely sites of survival but of radical possibility, spaces where trans communities are not just enduring but reimagining the very meaning of home.

Since the completion of fieldwork, the 2026 Amendment and the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls have further entrenched the exclusions documented in this paper. These developments underscore the urgency of the arguments made here: that housing justice for transmasculine people cannot be separated from legal recognition, electoral participation, and the broader struggle for citizenship itself.

The task ahead is to amplify these subaltern blueprints into policy, recognising that true housing justice begins where Western models end, in the embodied wisdom of those who have learned to make homes from fragments. As Loveleen observed, "We build our right to

breathe into the cracks of this crumbling city" (Loveleen, interview, 2024). This research has shown that these cracks are not merely sites of survival but of radical possibility, spaces where trans communities are not just enduring but reimagining the very meaning of home.

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ARTICLE

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EMPLOYMENT GENERATION, GENDER-DIFFERENTIATED EMPLOYMENT ELASTICITY, AND FDI VOLATILITY IN INDIA'S TEXTILE INDUSTRY: 2011-12 TO 2022-23

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Abstract

Despite accounting for a large share of employment and manufacturing output, the relative importance of the textile in industrial employment and GDP has increasingly been questioned due to its apparent structural decline, despite the fact that the absolute share of the sector is growing. Secondary data has been used for this paper from ASI, MOSPI financial year for 2011-12 to 2022-23 and DPIIT annual calendar year for 2011 to 2023. This study uses secondary data from ASI, MOSPI and DPIIT to estimate employment elasticity of textile Industry, overall industry Male and female textile employment using log-linear OLS models (with FMOLS and CCR robustness check), and measures FDI volatility using Coefficient of Variation and Cuddy-Della Valle Instability Index. GVA, GDP and employment in the textile industry has decreased in relative terms despite positive absolute growth. The elasticity of employment in textiles is significantly lower than the all industry elasticity (0.248 vs. 0.405); female textile employment elasticity is higher than that of the industry (0.422 vs. 0.248). The inflows of FDI are highly volatile (Coefficient of variation = 48.67%) and have 6.99% long-run growth. These results suggest an "employment-poor growth" in textiles, as the overall employment elasticity is weak, but not the same for men and women. The outcomes, alongside with the lack of macroeconomic stability of FDI inflows, suggest a need for more targeted policy interventions, based on a labor-intensive approach and a gender strategy, to bolster the employment and investment path of the sector's structural vulnerability, in the wake of the incomplete post-COVID recovery.

Keywords

Textile Industry; Employment Elasticity; FDI; Gender; India

1. INTRODUCTION

India aims for being a developed nation by 2047, and the textile and garment industry has a significant role to play in economic development. The government's focus on the modernization and advancement of the textile industry highlights the crucial role of the textile industry in India's overall sustainable development and productivity. The textile and apparel industry has made significant contributions from an employment perspective, in terms of job creation and relief from labor shortages. It is a source of employment for many, and of income to millions of people, particularly women in rural areas. The textile and apparel industry wholeheartedly supports the government's various empowerment initiatives, including Make in India, Skill India, Women Empowerment and Rural Youth Employment (Annual report 2022-23, Ministry of Textiles).The textile industry is one of the oldest industries of the economy in India. India's textile industry is a significant contributor to the country's economy, providing employment opportunities and boosting the gross domestic product (GDP), industrial output, and exports. India's foundation of textile industry is its large industrial sector that has a diversified base of various fibers/yarns. India's textile industry has the potential to develop a variety of goods to cater to many different market segments both in India and abroad. The government had a number of programs to draw private equity and create jobs. ICRA expects Indian clothing exporters to see a 9-11% increase in revenue in FY25 as selling catalogue has been progressively cut across key end markets, and there has been a shift in global sourcing to India.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Although the textile industry has played an important role in manufacturing output, exports and employment in India in the past, it seems its relative importance may be declining, as its share of manufacturing GVA, GDP and total industrial employment is starting to fall, while absolute output and employment have increased. This has become a concern in relation to the decreasing responsiveness of employment to output growth (possible "employment-poor growth"), as well as highly volatile inflows of foreign direct investment and uncertain recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Existing research tends to analyze the patterns in output, employment and FDI separately and leaves two important questions unanswered: whether there are gender differences in employment, and how the industry has fared since 2020. This study aims to address these gaps in an integrated framework on the contribution of GVA, employment elasticity (with gender disaggregated estimate) and volatility of FDI in the textile sector for India during 2011 to 2023.

1.2. Objective of the study

- To analyse changes in the share of GVA of textile industry and contribution to GDP at constant (2011-12) prices in textile sector from 2011-12 to 2022-23.
- To determine the trend of contribution of the textile industry in the overall industrial employment during the study period.
- To estimate the employment elasticity of female employment in the textile industry, and to analyse gender differences in employment response to output growth.
- To analyze the trend of FDI inflows to Indian textile industry and to calculate the level of volatility and instability of FDI inflows in the textile industry with Coefficient of Variation and Cuddy-Della Valle Instability Index.

1.3. Significant of the study

This study is important because it offers an integrated empirical study of the three dimensions of GVA contribution, employment elasticity and FDI volatility of Indian textile which industry are normally analysed separately, and provides an estimate of employment elasticity disaggregated by gender for the textile industry, which is new to the literature. The results span from pre- and post-COVID (2011-12 to 2022-23), and are produced using robust econometric techniques (OLS, FMOLS, CCR with diagnostics testing) to provide evidence-based guidance to policymakers to target specific interventions (such as labour-intensive incentives, and gender-based support) and provide investors and industry bodies with a better understanding of the investment instability of the industry.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Theoretical Background

This study can be understood through theoretical frameworks available from the economic literature, which are pertinent to the empirical patterns observed. There are several theoretical frameworks available from the economic literature, which are relevant to the empirical patterns observed in this study: falling shares of GVA and employment in the industry, low elasticity of employment, and the volatility of FDI inflows in the textile industry in India. In this section, the theories of structural transformation, jobless growth and employment elasticity to output are used to place the results of the study in the context of established economic theory.

2.2. Structural Transformation Theory

Structural transformation theory (Lewis, 1954; Kuznets, 1966; Chenery & Syrquin, 1975) explains that as economies develop, they move resources from low productivity sectors (typically agriculture) to high productivity sectors (typically industry and service sectors). In

this sense, the reduction of a sub-sector's share in GDP, or in employment, might not be a real reduction: it can be seen as a shift of resources from a sub-sector to other expanding sub-sectors.

2.3. Employment-poor Growth Hypothesis

More precise and for the purpose under consideration, more diagnostic is the so called poor-employment growth hypothesis, which refers to situations of increase in output without an increase in employment (Rangarajan, 2008; Papola, 2013). Unemployment usually results from capital deepening, mechanization, automation or a change in production technique that leads to a growth in labour productivity, that is, an increase in total production without corresponding growth in total labour absorption. The employment elasticity of output, the percentage change in employment to a one percent change in output (Kapsos, 2005) is a direct measure of this hypothesis. A low elasticity is associated with weak employment responsiveness (employment-poor growth), a high elasticity is associated with strong, output-proportional employment generation, and an elasticity of 1 or more is associated with output proportional employment responsiveness.

2.4 Empirical Existing Study

Gera N (2012) the growth of the textile sector adds much to the Indian economy on the aspects of job creation, export earnings and industrial development. It accounts for approximately 20% of total industrial production, and encourages innovation and investment, leading to economic progress in general. Samiyah and Maqbool. (2014) explore textile sector plays a crucial role in the economic development of India, driving the economic growth of the nation and boosting export potential, foreign direct investment (FDI) and job creation. Lal and Shweta (2017) analysis the paper doesn't specifically highlight the effect of growth of textile industry on the overall economic development of India. It is trade competitiveness oriented, and emphasizes the importance of diversification, technological development, and improving the competitiveness and performance of the industry.

Agarwal (2018) success of this textile industry helps to stimulate the economic growth of India in many ways such as employment generation, development of regional economies, high value textile products, and promotion of entrepreneurship using modern technology in textile production, supply, marketing and communication sector which positively contributes to the country's creative economy. Agarwal (2019) industrial development is expected to gain momentum in the textile sector with an investment of $120 billion and creation of 35 million jobs by 2024-25, contributing to the overall economic development of India by way of better infrastructure, production capacity and exports, playing an important role in the overall industrial development. Prakash et al. (2020) explore textile sector plays an important role in the Indian economy as it contributes 2% to the Gross Domestic Product, offers large

employment opportunities and has a share of 15% in export earnings. Investment and upgrading improve productivity and promote economic development and improvement of competitiveness on international markets.

Al-Fadhat and F.Nadita (2021) textile industry is one of the important sectors of the Indian economy accounting for second largest share of exports in the world. It helps in job creation, external trade and foreign exchange earnings that are important to overall economic development of India. Singh and Singh (2022) development of the textile industry plays a significant role in the economic development of India, as it improves the production process, exports, and the employment of people. It has an important role in industry, supporting investment and utilization, and helping to increase overall industry performance and stability. Kumar et al. (2023) growth of textile industry also has positive influence on the economic development of India as it contributes to the manufacturing and industrial GDP in spite of its share percentage in GDP falling. However, there are obstacles to be overcome, especially for those industries that are traditional such as footwear, which must be revitalized to continue its growth. Usmansyah and Subiyantoro (2023) paper emphasizes the contribution of textile industry in the GDP, its contribution in foreign exchange reserves and absorption of labour. The text does not mention India specifically, but a similar effect can be assumed for the economic development of India, if the Indian growth of textiles is assumed.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Study Period and Scope

The present study is based on the economic performance, employment generation (financial years 2011-12 to 2022-23) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows of the textile industry in India during the calendar year 2011 to 2023 for a period of 13 years. This period was chosen to reflect both the pre-pandemic growth phase and the post-pandemic recovery phase, to assess the structural resilience of this sector in the course of a full macroeconomic cycle. In the context of this study, the textile industry is defined as per the classification in the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI).

3.2. Data Sources

All the data used in this study is based on the secondary data, which has been gathered from official Government sources: Data on sector-wise and aggregate manufacturing GVA was collected from the National Accounts Statistis (NAS), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) and the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), Government of India. The Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), MOSPI was used to obtain data on total persons engaged, gender-disaggregated employment and supervisory/managerial staff. The FDI inflow data on a sectoral basis has been sourced from the Department for Promotion of

Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. To avoid the effect of price-level changes, and to be able to study the effect of real (i.e. in constant prices) economic growth rather than nominal/inflationary movements, all monetary variables have been expressed in constant (2011-12) prices and deflated using the series of GVA deflators published by the MOSPI. The data on FDI inflows are reported in current USD million, as per the convention followed by DPIIT.

3.3. *Variable Construction*

Gross Value Added (GVA): GVA at constant 2011-12 prices (₹ crore) in the textile sector and industry (manufacturing) sector is calculated by deflating nominal GVA with the respective GVA price deflator for the textile sector and industry (manufacturing) sector published in the National Accounts Statistics.

Employment (EMP): Employment is reported as the number of people engaged in textile industry (and industry as a whole), under the ASI. In the gender disaggregated analysis, employment is broken down into persons engaged and persons engaged (male) and (female) using the worker-category classification in the ASI records.

Skill Intensity: Skill intensity is built as a proxy of the relative concentration of skilled/supervisory labour in the sector's workforce and is defined as:

$$Skill\ Intensity = \frac{Number\ of\ Supervisory\ and\ Managerial\ Staff}{Total\ Number\ of\ Persons\ Engaged}$$

This ratio represents the number of people in supervisory, technical and managerial positions compared to the total number of workers (production/manual workers). The information regarding supervisory and managerial staff and total persons engaged were obtained from ASI records for the respective years.

3.4. *Model Specification*

3.4.1. *Employment Elasticity Model*

The employment elasticity approach is the same as in the employment elasticity literature (Kapsos, 2005) and employs a log-linear (double-log) Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) specification.

$$\ln(Emp_t) = \alpha + \beta_1 ln(GVA_t) + \beta_2 \ln\ (Skill\ intensity_t) + \varepsilon_t$$

Where:

- $\ln(Emp_t)$ =natural logarithm of total persons engaged in year t

- $ln(GVA_t)$ = natural logarithm of GVA at constant 2011-12 prices in year t
- ln $(Skill\ intensity_t)$ = natural logarithm of the skill intensity ratio in year t
- β_1 = the employment elasticity coefficient, representing the percentage change in employment associated with a 1% change in output, holding skill intensity constant
- ε_t = the stochastic error term

This specification is computed separately for (i) the textile industry, (ii) industry (manufacturing) overall (as a comparator), (iii) male employment in the textile industry and (iv) female employment in textile industry using ln(GVA) as the only regressor, due to data limitations on disaggregation by gender of the skill intensity), to examine the relative and gender-differentiated employment reactiveness of the sector to output growth.

3.4.2. *FDI Trend and Volatility Analysis*

The trend in FDI inflow is examined descriptively and through a linear time – trend regression:

$$FDI_t = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 T_t + \mu_t$$

where

- FDI_t represents FDI inflows in the Indian textile industry in year t, measured in USD millions.
- γ_0 is the intercept, representing the estimated FDI inflow when the time-trend variable equals zero.
- γ_1 is the time-trend coefficient, indicating the average annual change in FDI inflows.
- T_t is the time-trend variable, indexed from 1 to 13 for the calendar years 2011–2023.
- $\mu_t$is the random error term, capturing variations in FDI inflows not explained by the linear time trend.

Annual calendar-year data for textile industry for the period 2011–2023 are used to analyse foreign direct investment (FDI) in Indian textile industry, which has 13 observations. This series runs outside of a main study period (financial years 2011–12 to 2022–23). The estimated trend is used to determine the direction of change of FDI inflows over the period. The 13 calendar years of data used for descriptive statistics and volatility measures are identical.

3.4.3. *Measuring Volatility*

Coefficient of Variation and Instability Index

To quantify the fluctuation in the FDI inflows formally, the Coefficient of Variation (CoV) and Cuddy-Della Valle Instability Index (CDVI) were calculated. The difference between the CoV and the CDVI (Cuddy & Della Valle, 1978) is that the latter corrects for any apparent linear

trend, thereby providing a clearer picture of the year-to-year variation that is not explained by the linear trend.

$$CV = \frac{\sigma}{\bar{X}} \times 100$$

$$CDVI = CV \times \sqrt{1 - R^2}$$

Where σ is the standard deviation, $\bar{X}$ is the mean of the FDI series, and R^2 is obtained from an OLS regression of FDI on a linear time trend.

3.5. *Diagnostic and Robustness Checks*

The residual normality test is used for each OLS model, as are the serial correlation tests (Breusch-Godfrey LM, 1 lag, Durbin-Watson) and the tests for parameter and variance stability (CUSUM, CUSUM of Squares) for heteroskedasticity. If serial correlation is found, Newey-West (HAC) standard errors are used. Each sample model is re-estimated by FMOLS and CCR as a robustness check to ensure the consistency of the elasticity coefficients, irrespective of the model.

4. RESULT

The contribution of textile, apparel and leather industry to manufacturing gross value added (GVA) and to India's economy (GDP) is presented in Table 1 during the period 2011-12 to 2022-23. The analysis highlights significant trends about the relative economic importance and structural changes in the sector.

Table 1 - Analysis of Textile Industry GVA in Manufacturing GVA and India's GDP

Year	Manufacturing GVA(in crore)	Textiles, Apparel and Leather Products GVA(in crore)	India's GDP(in crore)	% share of Textile Industry to GDP of the Manufacturing Sector	% share of the Textile Industry in India's GDP
2011-12	1409986	153238	8736329	10.86802	1.754027
2012-13	1486873	177398	9213017	11.93093	1.925513
2013-14	1560709	216411	9801370	13.86619	2.207966
2014-15	1683938	216429	10527674	12.85254	2.055808
2015-16	1903850	258936	11369493	13.60064	2.277461
2016-17	2054764	261079	12308193	12.70604	2.121181
2017-18	2209428	280873	13144582	12.71246	2.136794
2018-19	2328992	300013	13992914	12.88169	2.144039
2019-20	2259706	290913	14534641	12.87394	2.001516
2020-21	2329160	263593	13694869	11.31706	1.924754

2021-22	2561033	312949	15021846	12.21966	2.083296
2022-23	2504663	280436	16071429	11.19654	1.744933

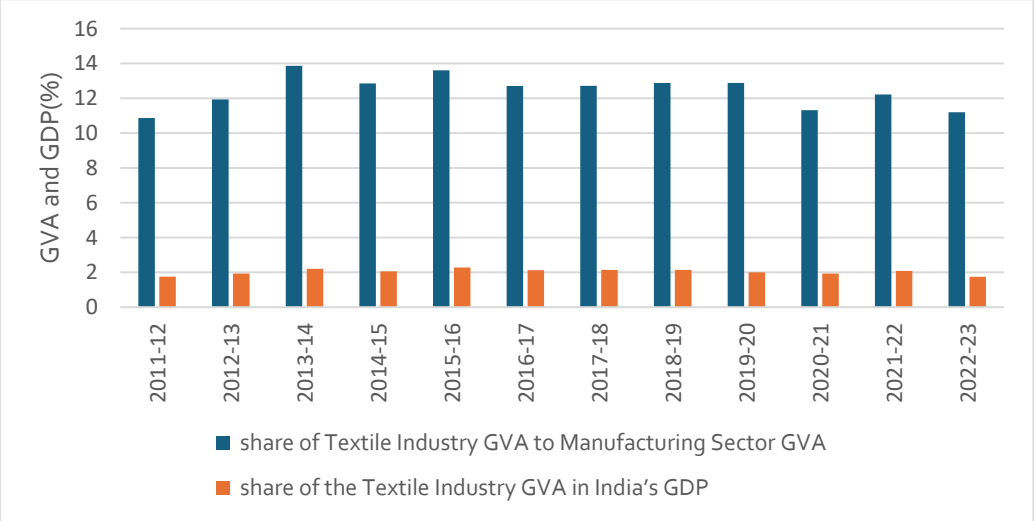
Source: National Accounts Statistics, 2024.

The contribution of the textile sector to manufacturing GVA grew first and then contracted during the study period (2011-12 to 2022-23), increasing from 10.87% to 13.87% of manufacturing GVA in 2013-14, broadly stable at 12-14% until 2019-20 and then dropping significantly to 11.20% in 2022-23 (as presented in Table 1 and Figure 1). The participation of the sector in Indian GDP also shows a similar trend, reaching its highest percentage of 2.28% in 2015-16 and then falling to 1.74% in 2022-23, the lowest level in the period.

Both series display a clear drop in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with some level of recovery in 2021-22 but a resumption of the decline in 2022-23, which suggests that the sector's recovery from the pandemic is not complete, but rather a continuation of a post-pandemic trajectory that is distinct from its pre-pandemic structural position.

The similar timing of both series reaching their peaks in the mid-2010s and of both reaching their lowest or near-lowest points at the end of the period indicates that the loss of relevance of the textile industry is related to the contribution of textile industry to manufacturing and the contribution of manufacturing to the national economy, rather than to the textile industry alone. This pattern is consistent with the structural transformation and jobless-growth frameworks discussed in Section 5.2, and sets up the employment elasticity findings (Section 4.3, 4.4, 4.5) as a plausible explanation for this relative decline.

Figure 1 - Trend of Textile Industry GVA



Source: Author computation

Overall: Textiles continue to be a significant contributor to manufacturing but are not a large share of the economy as a whole and are slowly declining.

Table 2 - Share of Textiles Industry Employment to Total Industrial Employment

Year	Total Employment(Number)	Textiles Employment(Number)	Share of Textiles Employment in Total Industrial Employment (%)
2011-12	13429956	1458073	10.86
2012-13	12950025	1408669	10.88
2013-14	13538114	1496194	11.05
2014-15	13881386	1537959	11.08
2015-16	14299710	1565090	10.94
2016-17	14911189	1560102	10.46
2017-18	15614619	1678671	10.75
2018-19	16280211	1673250	10.28
2019-20	16624291	1629101	9.80
2020-21	16089700	1549243	9.63
2021-22	17215350	1659772	9.64
2022-23	18494962	1722672	9.31

Source: Annual Survey of Industry, MOSPI

Table 2 shows trends in total industrial employment and the percentage of the total industrial employment in the textile industry for 2011-12 to 2022-23. The analysis highlights important structural changes in the labour absorption capacity of the textile industry.

The textile industry had a share of 10.86 per cent in total industrial employment in 2011-12. This share grew slightly in the first few years to 11.08 per cent in 2014–15. This means that the role of the textile industry as a major employment generator in the industrial sector was relatively stable, and slightly better, during the first part of the study period.

But, since 2015–16, it can be noticed that the share of employment in the textile industry starts decreasing. The share fell from 10.94 per cent in 2015–16 to 9.80 per cent in 2019–20, and further declined to 9.31 per cent by 2022–23. The textile industry's ability to create jobs has diminished compared to the rest of industry, as evidenced by this regular decline.

The overall growth of employment in the textile industry was observed in absolute numbers, with 1,458,073 workers in 2011-12 compared to 1,722,672 workers in 2022-23. But it is less than the Industrial employment which grew from 13.43 million to 18.49 million in the same period. The difference in absolute growth and the shrinkage in percentage shares of employment is due to relative structural change, as the other industrial groups have increased their employment base more than textiles.

A significant decline in overall industrial employment and textile jobs is seen in the period 2019-20 to 2020-21, which could perhaps be linked to economic disruptions in this period. There is some recovery in the following years, but the textile industry never returns to its previous proportion of employment suggesting a long-term structural shift.

The overall results indicate that the role of the textile industry in providing jobs in India is still significant, but it is decreasing in importance in the overall picture of the industrial labour market in the country. This could be due to greater mechanization, restructuring of production or greater employment growth in other sectors.

Table 3 - OLS Regression Results: Employment Elasticity (Textile Industry)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Log (GVA)	0.248	0.044	5.540	0.0004***
Log(Skill Intensity)	0.125	0.292	0.428	0.6786
Constant (C)	11.516	0.868	13.264	0.0000***

Model Statistics	Value
R-squared	0.775
Adjusted R-squared	0.726
S.E of regression	0.032
F-statistic	15.571
Prob (F-statistic)	0.001
Durbin-Watson stat	1.661

Dependent Variable: LOG (Employment)
Method: Least Squares
Source: Author calculation, Note: ***indicates significance at the 1% level.

The results of regression reported in Table 3 above are the estimates of the elasticity of the textile industry with respect to gross value added (GVA) of the economy for the period 2011-2022 after controlling for the skill intensity of the textile industry.

The coefficient of Log (GVA) is 0.248 which is statistically significant at 1 per cent level (t = 5.5402, p = 0.0004), meaning a 1 per cent increase in output (GVA) is reflected in a 0.25 per cent change in employment in the textile industry given the skill intensity level. This elasticity is far below unity, suggesting a relatively inelastic labour response to output growth – output has grown faster than employment and this could reflect capital deepening or mechanisation, not labour absorption, in the sector.

After controlling for output effects, skill intensity has a positive but insignificant effect (t = 0.428, p = 0.678) on employment in this specification.

The model is statistically significant (F = 15.571, p = 0.001), and the adjusted R^2 (0.726) accounts for about 77.6% of the total variance in employment (R^2 = 0.775), which is good, given the small sample size. The Durbin-Watson statistic (1.661) indicates no first-order serial correlation, but the robustness checks in this study reveal second-order serial correlation and the use of HAC-corrected standard errors in making final inferences (see diagnostic tests).

Table 4 - OLS Regression Results- Employment Elasticity (ALL Industry)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Log (GVA)	0.405	0.111	3.637	0.0054***
Log (Skill Intensity)	-1.000	1.000	-1.000	0.343
Constant (C)	8.312	1.200	6.924	0.0001***

Model Statistics	Value
R-squared	**0.909**
Adjusted R-squared	0.888
S.E of regression	0.037
F-statistic	45.006
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000
Durbin-Watson stat	1.067

Dependent Variable: Log (Employment)
Method: Least Squares
Source: Author calculation, note: ***indicates significance at the 1% level.

Table 4 shows the overall employment elasticity for industry is estimated by this regression over 2011-2022, with the same specification as in the model for the textile industry.

The elasticity of output with respect to employment is 0.405 and significant at 1 per cent level (t = 3.637, p = 0.0054) for industry as a whole, which is higher than the elasticity of the textile industry of 0.25. This further indicates that industry as a whole is doing a better job of driving employment growth from output growth than is the textile industry specifically, which is consistent with the "jobless growth" trend seen in textiles.

The effect of skill intensity on employment is statistically insignificant (t = -1.000, p = 0.3434) and negative in this specification, after controlling for output.

The model is highly significant overall (F = 45.006, p = 0.0000), and explains about 90.9% of the variation in employment (R^2 = 0.9091; adjusted R^2 = 0.888). The Durbin-Watson statistic (1.067) however, is significantly below the textile industry model (1.661) and near to the lower critical boundary, indicating possible positive first-order serial correlation that should also be formally tested (Breusch-Godfrey LM test) prior to finalizing inferences as is done for the textile industry model.

Table 5 - OLS Regression Results – Employment Elasticity (Female Employment, Textile Industry)

Variable		Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Log (GVA)		0.422	0.060	6.937	0.0000***
Constant (C)		7.076	0.755	9.363	0.0000***

Model Statistics	Value
R-squared	0.828
Adjusted R-squared	0.810
S.E. of regression	0.044

F-statistic	48.124
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000
Durbin-Watson stat	2.200

Dependent Variable: Log (Employment)
Method: Least Squares
Note: ***significance at 1% level. Source: Author computation using EViews.

Table 5 shows regression provides an estimate of the elasticity of female employment in the textile sector, that is, the log of female employment is regressed on the log of GVA for textiles alone in 2011-2022.

The coefficient is 0.4223, which is highly statistically significant (t = 6.937, p = 0.0000) and suggests that for every 1% rise in output (GVA) in the textile industry, there is a 0.42% rise in the number of females employed in this area. It is significantly more elastic than the overall elasticity of the textile sector (0.2488) estimated earlier (combined male and female workers) and even close to the all-industry elasticity of 0.405.

The model fits well, explaining 82.8% of the variation in female employment (R^2 = 0.828; adjusted R^2 = 0.810), and is highly significant overall (F = 48.124, p = 0.0000). Compared to the textile-aggregate model and the all-industry model, the Durbin-Watson statistic (2.200) is more ideal (2), meaning that there is no evidence of autocorrelation.

Table 6 - OLS Regression Results- Employment Elasticity (Male Employment, Textile Industry)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Log (GVA)	0.166	0.039	4.174	0.0019***
Constant (C)	11.654	0.493	23.607	0.0000***

Model Statistics	Value
R-squared	0.635
Adjusted R-squared	0.598
S.E of regression	0.0290
F-statistic	17.426
Prob (F-statistic)	0.0019
Durbin-Watson stat.	1.614

Dependent Variable: Log (Employment)
Method: Least Squares
Source: Author calculation

Table 6 shows that, the employment elasticity of male labourers in the textile industry is found to be positive and statistically significant at 1 per cent level (p = 0.0019) from the OLS results presented in Table 4.6. This means that, for every 1 per cent rise in GVA in the textile industry, employment in the male population rises by 0.166 per cent, which is comparatively low. The F-statistic is statistically significant for overall model fit (17.426, p = 0.0019) and R-squared is 0.635, meaning that GVA accounts for around 63.5 per cent of the variation in male employment. First-order autocorrelation is not strong, with the Durbin–Watson statistic

being 1.614. In conclusion, the results indicate that there is a positive, but less than proportional, effect of an increase in textile-sector production on the employment of men.

Table 7 - Comparative Summary

Metric	Textile Industry	All Industry	Female Employment (Textile Industry)	Male Employment (Textile Industry)
Employment Elasticity (β)	0.248***	0.405***	0.422***	0.166***
R-squared	0.775	0.909	0.828	0.635
Durbin-Watson	1.661	1.067	2.200	1.614
F-statistic (p-value)	15.57(0.0012)	45.01 (0.0000)	48.12(0.0000)	17.42(0.0019

Source: Author calculation

The findings of Table 7 indicate that the growth of employment in the textile sector is positively but not proportionately associated with the textile sector's output growth. Overall, the estimated employment elasticity is 0.248 for total employment, 0.422 for female employment and 0.166 for male employment, all of which are significant at 1 per cent. The larger elasticity of female employment, compared to male employment, implies a greater employment reaction to the elasticity of the female labor force. Overall, the results indicate employment-poor rather than strictly jobless growth: employment is growing at a slower rate than output. Specific mention of male dominated components or specific textile activities is not made without supporting evidence.

Table 8 - Volatility Measures for FDI Inflow (Textile Industry)

Measure	Value
Number of observations	13
Mean FDI inflow	USD 271.88 million
Standard Deviation	USD 132.32 million
Coefficient of Variation (CoV)	48.67%
Trend regression R^2	0.0616
Cuddy-Della Valle Instability Index (CDVI)	47.15%
CAGR	6.99%

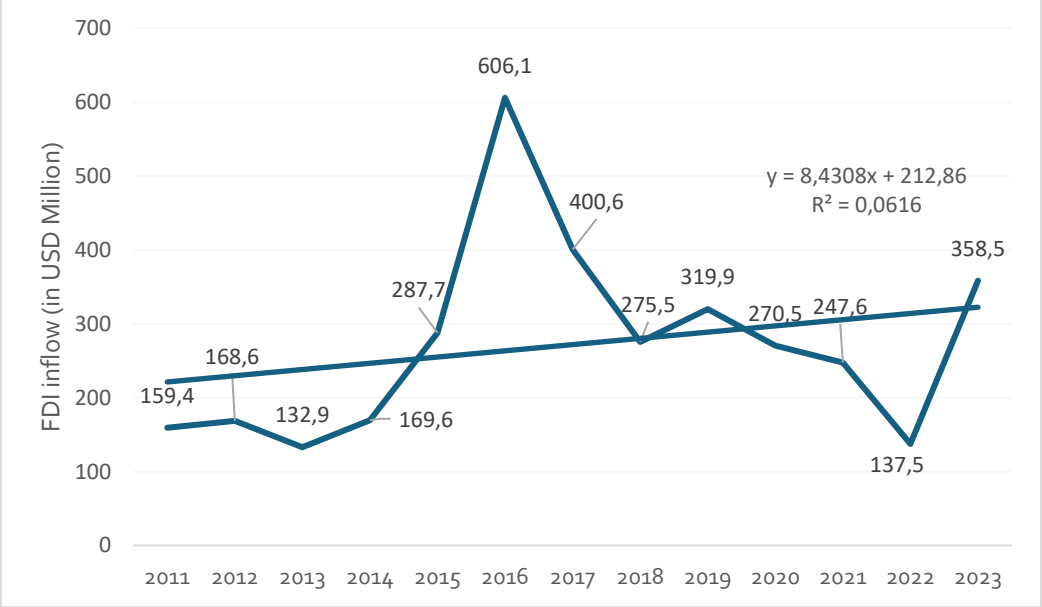
Source: Author computation

Table 8 shows the relative dispersion of the FDI inflows is relatively high, as the Coefficient of Variation for the period under consideration is 48.67%, well above the threshold of 30-35% that is generally considered a sign of high instability in macroeconomic time series (Cuddy & Della Valle, 1978). The CDVI was calculated to distinguish between trend-adjusted instability and true fluctuations as a raw CoV is subject to inflation if a smooth underlying trend is

present. The linear time trend accounts for just 6.16% of the variation in the series of FDI inflows (R2 = 0.0616), suggesting there are no strong systematic growth or decline patterns in the series. The CDVI (47.15%) is therefore still near the raw CoV, which suggests that the volatility seen is indeed a true indication of an unpredictable year-on-year change in investor behaviour, and not a smooth trend mistaken for volatility.

This is also confirmed by the fact that the CAGR for the 13-year period was 6.99% per annum. Overall, these findings suggest that FDI inflows to the textile industry in India are more volatile and structurally vulnerable, as manifested by sudden episodic surges of FDI inflows (as seen in 2016) rather than a gradual and continuous growth, which corresponds to the theoretical relationship between investment volatility and structural vulnerability discussed and which has direct implications for the ability of the sector to sustain structural capacity to generate long-term job creation and capital formation.

Figure 2 - Trend in FDI Inflow into India's Textile Industry



Source: Author computation, data obtained by https://www.texmin.gov.in/documents/textile-data?page=1

Figure 2 shows FDI inflows to the textile industry (2011-2023) have been fluctuating around almost a flat trend with sharp increases, decreases from USD 159.4 million in 2011 to a high of USD 606.1 million in 2016, and then dropped unevenly to USD 137.5 million in 2022 and then increase USD 358.5 million in 2023. This is in line with the CoV (48.67%) and CDVI (47.15%) reported in Table 4.7 as the series is very unstable with only one significant spike, followed by fluctuating values — this is visually confirmed by the trend line (R^2 = 0.0616) which explains less than 5% of this movement and therefore shows that the series lacks any meaningful long-term growth direction.

5. DIAGNOSTICS AND STABILITY TEST RESULTS

Table 9 - Diagnostic test results- All Four Employment Elasticity Models

Test	Textile Industry	All Industry	Female Employment (Textile)	Male Employment (Textile)
Jarque-Bera (Normality)	0.832(0.659)-Normal	0.553(0.758)-Normal	0.764(0.682)-Normal	0.482(0.785) Normal
Breusch-Godfrey LM (Serial Correlation)	0.062(0.809)-No correlation	0.569(0.590)-No correlation	0.857(0.378)-No correlation	1.760(0.232)-No correlation
Breusch-Pagan-Godfrey (Heteroskedasticity)	0.879(0.447)-Homoskedastic	3.435(0.077)-Homoskedastic	0.261(0.620)-Homoskedastic	0.023(0.881) Homoskedastic
CUSUM (Parameter Stability)	Within bounds - Stable	Within bounds - Stable	Within bounds - Stable	Within bounds - Stable
CUSUM of Squares (Variance Stability)	Within bounds - Stable	Within bounds –Stable (mild drift near 2022)	Within bounds - Stable	Within bounds - Stable

Note: F-statistics reported with p-values in parentheses. Source: Author computation using EViews.

Table 9 indicates all four models meet the following basic OLS assumptions: normality of residuals, homoskedasticity, and parameter/variance stability across 2011-12 through 2022-23. The model with serial correlation is only for the textile industry and at the second-order lag only (corrected using Newey-West (HAC) standard errors). Neither of the two models, the all-industry model nor the model for women employed, suggests serial correlation at any of the lags examined, although the all-industry model has a relatively low Durbin-Watson statistic that, however, the formal LM test confirms was not a real autocorrelation problem. Taken as a whole, these findings indicate that the employment elasticity estimates provided by all four models are statistically sound and are inferential.

6. ROBUSTNESS RESULTS

Table 10 - Robustness check results- All four Employment Elasticity Models

Estimator	Textile Industry	All Industry	Female Employment (Textile)	Male Employment (Textile)
OLS	0.248***(0.0004)	0.405***(0.0054)	0.422***(0.0000)	0.166***(0.0019)
FMOLS	0.266***(0.0002)	0.426***(0.0134)	0.464***(0.0000)	0.190***(0.0043)
CCR	0.259***(0.0000)	0.450***(0.0067)	0.454***(0.0000)	0.179***(0.0009)
Range	0.248-0.266	0.405-0.450	0.422-0.464	0.166-0.190
R^2 (OLS)	0.775	0.909	0.828	0.635

Note: Coefficients represent employment elasticity (β); p-values in parentheses. ** Significant at 5%, *** significant at 1%. Bartlett kernel, Newey-West fixed bandwidth = 3.0000 used for FMOLS/CCR. Source: Author's computation using EViews.

Table 10 shows, to assess the sensitivity of the results to the estimator used, the employment elasticity estimates in each model are presented for all three estimation methods (OLS, FMOLS, CCR) and these ranges turn out to be rather small. Overall, the elasticity of the textile sector is the lowest at 0.25-0.27 followed by the all-industry elasticity at 0.41-0.45; male employment elasticity is 0.16-19, while the elasticity of female employment in the textile industry is highest at 0.42-0.46 and strongest across all specifications. This consistency reinforces the robustness of the key result of this study: Textiles' employment responsiveness is lower than that of the manufacturing sector as a whole, but greater for women than for men.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 The decline in the GVA and employment share is a structural decline.

As both GVA and industrial employment in the textile sector have increased in absolute terms, they have seen a relative decline, as would be expected in the context of the structural transformation framework (Kuznets, 1966; Chenery & Syrquin, 1975), in which other manufacturing sub-sectors have seen a faster relative growth. This is in accordance with Kannan and Raveendran's (2009) note of 'jobless growth' in the organized manufacturing sector in India.

7.2 Weak Employment Responsiveness as an Indicator of Employment-Poor Growth

The results show that the employment elasticity of the textile industry is 0.248, which is lower than the overall industry employment elasticity of 0.405, suggesting that the employment responsiveness is weak in the textile industry. Despite the positive elasticity, meaning that the growth of output continues to create jobs, the elasticity of employment is less than one, implying jobless and employment-poor growth. This trend could be driven by greater mechanization and/or capital intensity of the textile sector, in line with the overall studies of the declining employment elasticity across Indian manufacturing by Misra and Suresh (2014).

7.3 The Gender Dimension

The employment elasticity for females (0.422) is considerably higher than that for males (0.166), revealing that the employment effect of textiles output is greater for female workers than for male workers. The discovery indicates that there is an important gender dimension to the employment response to output growth. However, the available results are not conclusive as to which activities, if any, are associated with these differences, for example, spinning, weaving, garmenting or finishing. But there is no assumption that such sectoral gender patterns exist unless there is supporting evidence. The results, however, show that

employment responsiveness in the textile sector is not gender-specific which offers a gender perspective on the analysis of employment-poor growth.

7.4 *Volatility and structural vulnerability of FDI*

The volatility level of FDI inflows (CoV = 48.67% and CDVI = 47.15%) and the CAGR (6.99%) in the long term suggest that the sector has developed a stable, regular investment trend in spite of an increase in the current inflows in 2016. This volatility is indicative of lack of sustained investor confidence, as Dunning (1993) framed it, which may be related to policy uncertainty or competitiveness concerns, and not steady structural improvement, as UNCTAD (2022) observed generally in the context of volatility in manufacturing FDI in developing economies.

7.5 *COVID-19 Impact and Recovery*

This decline in all GVA, employment in 2020-21.Followed by partial recovery in 2021-22, and a continued contraction in 2022-23, and FDI indicators in 2020 to 22, FDI recovery in 2023. Indicates that the sector's recovery has been fragile and incomplete, and should be closely watched because of its low underlying elasticity of employment.

7.6 *Robustness of Findings*

The stability of the estimates of elasticity across OLS, FMOLS and CCR estimators, along with the passing of all the major diagnostic tests (with appropriate HAC correction where applicable) confirms that the results of the study, which are the low elasticity of employment in the textile sector, the higher elasticity of female employment, and the high volatility of FDI are not due to model misspecification and serial correlation, but rather, they are structural properties of the sector.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are some limitations to this study. First, the analysis is based on the data available from the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) that covers only the organized/formal sector, and does not include a significant informal and home-based textile workforce, so the employment and elasticity numbers reported here should be viewed as formal sector figures only. Second, the number of annual observations (n = 12) limits the power of the regression models, although this was somewhat compensated for through the use of multiple estimators and full diagnostic testing. Thirdly, because gender disaggregated skill-intensity, information was not available. The findings of this study would be strengthened and extended if the informal and gender-disaggregated employment data from PLFS were used and the sample could be

extended by using quarterly or firm-level data and by testing mechanization/capital-intensity as a driver of employment elasticity directly.

8.1. Policy Implications

The recommendations imply that the policies of the textile industries should focus on promoting labour intensive sectors, like garment industries, and other employment generating activities of the industry, by providing specific incentives, easy access to finance, technology upgradation and aiding MSMEs. Promoting industry-relevant skill development, safe and accessible workplaces, childcare facilities and improved access to formal employment through policies will strengthen the employment capabilities of women. Extra focus also needs to be given to the informal and home-based textile workers who are not included in the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) data. The simplified registration of workers, access to social security, health, accident and pension protection, may enhance their working conditions and policy planning visibility. Lastly, more predictable investment policies, stable and reliable infrastructure, simplified approvals and processes and support for productive investments could help diminish uncertainty and strengthen FDI inflows into the textile sector in a more stable and sustained manner. All these measures can contribute to improved employment creation, women's economic activity, protection of workers and the sector's contribution to inclusive economic growth.

9. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the economic performance, employment changes in Indian textile industry during financial years from 2011-12 to 2022-23 and FDI inflows annual calendar years from 2011 to 2023 in an integrated empirical framework covering trend analysis, estimation of elasticity of employment, volatility measurement and robustness test.

The results indicate that there is a consistent trend of relative structural decrease on all three dimensions studied. The textile sector's share of manufacturing GVA fell from a peak of 13.87% (2013-14) to 11.20% (2022-23), and its share of India's GDP declined from a peak of 2.28% (2015-16) to 1.74% (2022-23). Likewise, textile workers' share of total industrial workers has also declined from 11.08% in 2014-15 to 9.31% in 2022-23, despite the absolute increase in the number of textile workers, which seems to suggest that other industrial sub-sectors have been growing at a faster relative rate.

This trend can be best understood by the employment elasticity estimates. The employment elasticity in the textile industry (0.248) is comparatively low as compared to all industry (0.405), so this indicates that there is an "employment-poor growth" pattern in the textile industry, which is probably due to mechanization, capital deepening in production etc. These estimates are consistent across OLS, FMOLS, and CCR estimation methods (narrowly 0.248-0.266 for textiles and 0.405-0.450 for industry as a whole) and were found to be

consistent after passing several diagnostic tests for normality, homoskedasticity and parameter stability; serial correlation was corrected by HAC as appropriate.

One of the important and novel results of this study is that this employment-poor growth pattern is gender-specific.

Male and Female Employment (Textile Industry): The results showed that the employment elasticity coefficients of females (0.422) were higher than males (0.166), which meant that the role of female employment was closer to the explanatory variables than males. The R-squared value of the female employment model is also higher (0.828) than that of the male model (0.635), suggesting that the model fits the data better. The f-statistics show that both models show statistical significance at the conventional level. (Ahlawat & Renu, 2018; chami. R (2012) International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Female employment -presumably in the more labour-intensive segments of the garmenting and finishing activities -has been more responsive to the growth of output than the sector's workforce as a whole. This shades the employment-poor growth story in a different light: on the aggregate level of the economy, it is indeed the case, but not everywhere in the textile industry.

The FDI inflows to the sector were also highly volatile, with a CoV of 48.67% and a trend adjusted Cuddy-Della Valle Instability Index of 47.15% and a long run CAGR of 6.99%. In the staring year 2011 of this, study USD 159.4 million. The single rise in 2016 (USD 606.1 million) and subsequent fall back to USD 137.5 million by 2022 and USD 358.5 million in 2023 suggests the sector has not had a successful path to stable and sustained investor confidence.

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ARTICLE

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A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON HUMAN–AI COLLABORATION AND CREATIVE DECISION-MAKING AMONG WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN EVENT PLANNING

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Abstract

Human–Artificial Intelligence (AI) collaboration is increasingly important for women entrepreneurs in creative service industries, particularly event planning, where business success depends on creativity, speed, personalization, and effective decision-making. However, women-led micro, small, and medium enterprises often face administrative overload, limited digital readiness, and insufficient access to AI-related support, which may restrict their creative capacity. This preliminary study aims to assess the reliability and validity of a research instrument designed to examine the relationship between AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction, AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement, AI Readiness and Digital Competence, Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity, and Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning. A quantitative pilot study was conducted with 30 women entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur's event planning industry. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using SmartPLS 4.0. The findings indicate that all constructs achieved acceptable reliability and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.816 to 0.928, composite reliability values ranged from 0.891 to 0.945, and average variance extracted values ranged from 0.672 to 0.840. These results confirm that the instrument is suitable for full-scale empirical research. The study contributes preliminary evidence for examining AI as a cognitive and creative support tool for women entrepreneurs, supporting SDG 5: Gender Equality.

Keywords
Artificial Intelligence; Women Entrepreneurs; Event Planning; Creative Decision-Making; Cognitive Resource Allocation; Pilot Study; SmartPLS

1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping business operations through automation, data analysis, and decision support. In creative services, generative AI has also become relevant to ideation and content development. Recent empirical studies show that AI can improve performance on some creativity tasks, although results vary according to the task and the way humans interact with the system (Koivisto & Grassini, 2023; Lee & Chung, 2024). In event planning, this development is especially relevant because entrepreneurs must coordinate vendors, schedules, budgets, client communication, and visual concepts while also responding to unexpected operational changes. These demands are particularly intense in micro and small enterprises, where owners often perform managerial, administrative, and creative roles simultaneously.

The Malaysian context strengthens the relevance of the issue. SME Corp. Malaysia continues to identify digital transformation as a central component of MSME development, while the World Bank reports that Malaysian SMEs often adopt customer-facing digital tools more readily than advanced productivity-enhancing technologies (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2026; World Bank, 2022). Capability gaps, financing constraints, and uneven digital readiness can therefore influence how deeply small firms benefit from new technologies. For women entrepreneurs in event planning, these constraints may reduce the time and cognitive energy available for creative ideation and strategic problem-solving. AI may consequently function as both an automation tool and a support mechanism that frees attention for higher-value creative work.

Recent scholarship has begun to examine the creative possibilities and limitations of Human-AI collaboration. Rafner et al. (2023) argue that generative AI is creating new opportunities for hybrid human-AI creativity, while McGuire et al. (2024) show that creative outcomes depend on how the human role is structured: participants benefited more when they acted as co-creators rather than simply editing an AI-produced output. Lee and Chung (2024) similarly found that ChatGPT could increase the creativity of generated ideas in several experimental tasks. However, these studies do not directly address women-led event planning MSMEs or the cognitive mechanism through which routine-task automation might create additional space for creative decision-making. This leaves a contextual and theoretical gap that is particularly relevant to creative entrepreneurship in Malaysia.

This paper therefore asks whether the research instrument developed to examine Human-AI collaboration and creative decision-making among women entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur's event planning sector is sufficiently reliable and valid for use in a full-scale study.

Five constructs are evaluated: AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction, AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement, AI Readiness and Digital Competence, Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity, and Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning. The model draws on Cognitive Load Theory, which explains the consequences of limited working-memory resources (Sweller, 1988), and technology acceptance perspectives originating in the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989). Together, these perspectives provide a basis for examining how reduced routine burden and greater readiness to use AI may support creative outcomes.

This pilot study contributes in three ways. First, it provides preliminary measurement evidence for a Human-AI collaboration instrument adapted to women-led creative enterprises. Second, it brings together cognitive-load and technology-acceptance perspectives in a model that treats Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity as a potential mechanism rather than assuming that AI automatically produces better creative decisions. Third, it provides a methodological foundation for a larger PLS-SEM study in a sector where AI adoption is developing quickly but empirical evidence remains limited. The contribution at this stage is therefore measurement-oriented: the pilot establishes whether the proposed constructs can be assessed consistently before structural relationships are tested with a larger sample.

The study also addresses a practical question: where can AI add value without displacing human judgment? Event concepts must remain sensitive to client preferences, cultural expectations, budgets, brand identity, and feasibility. The present research therefore treats AI as a complementary resource. Entrepreneurs remain responsible for selecting, adapting, and implementing ideas, while AI may assist with repetitive tasks, information processing, and alternative generation. This human-in-control perspective is consistent with recent work emphasizing co-creation rather than passive reliance on AI outputs (McGuire et al., 2024).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature on Human–AI collaboration, women entrepreneurship, AI readiness, cognitive resource allocation, and creative decision-making. This is followed by the development of the research model and hypotheses. The methodology section explains the pilot study design, sampling approach, research instrument, and data analysis procedures. The results section presents the reliability and validity findings, followed by a discussion of their implications for the full-scale study. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting the theoretical, practical, and methodological significance of the pilot study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH MODEL

2.1. Human–AI Collaboration in Event Planning

Human-AI collaboration refers to the coordinated use of human judgment and AI capabilities to perform tasks, solve problems, or generate alternatives. In event planning, AI can support

scheduling, invoice drafting, client communication, social-media content, budgeting assistance, mood-board development, and preference analysis. Recent research suggests that generative AI can expand idea sets and improve creative performance in some contexts, but that benefits are not uniform across tasks or users (Lee & Chung, 2024; Koivisto & Grassini, 2023). The most appropriate interpretation is therefore augmentation rather than substitution: AI can produce or recombine possibilities quickly, while human users retain responsibility for context, meaning, ethics, and final judgment.

This distinction is especially important in event planning because creative quality is intertwined with operational precision and interpersonal sensitivity. A technically novel suggestion may still be unsuitable if it conflicts with a client's identity, event purpose, cultural norms, or budget. McGuire et al. (2024) found that creative self-efficacy and the role assigned to the human collaborator matter for Human-AI creative performance. Their results support the view adopted here: AI is most useful when entrepreneurs remain active co-creators who evaluate and reshape outputs rather than functioning as passive editors.

2.2. AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction

AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction refers to the extent to which AI tools reduce the time and mental effort required for repetitive business activities such as scheduling, customer follow-ups, document preparation, and routine coordination. Cognitive Load Theory proposes that working memory is limited and that unnecessary cognitive demands can reduce the resources available for more complex thinking (Sweller, 1988). In small event businesses, frequent interruptions from administrative work may fragment attention and restrict sustained creative thought. Automation is therefore expected to matter not simply because it increases efficiency, but because it may release cognitive resources that can be redirected toward concept development, problem-solving, and strategic decisions.

2.3. AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement

AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement refers to the extent to which entrepreneurs believe AI can help them generate, elaborate, compare, or refine creative alternatives. This perception is relevant because users who see AI only as an administrative tool may engage with it differently from users who view it as an ideation partner. Experimental evidence increasingly shows that generative AI can improve idea production under some conditions (Lee & Chung, 2024), while other studies caution that Human-AI collaboration can reduce originality when users merely edit an AI-generated starting point (McGuire et al., 2024). Accordingly, the construct captures perceived support for creativity without assuming that every AI-assisted output is inherently more creative.

2.4. AI Readiness and Digital Competence

AI Readiness and Digital Competence refer to entrepreneurs' preparedness, confidence, and ability to adopt and use AI tools effectively. Digital competence includes learning new functions, troubleshooting basic problems, judging the relevance of generated outputs, and integrating tools into existing workflows. Technology readiness is important because access to a tool does not guarantee effective use. The World Bank (2022) notes that Malaysian SMEs can face capability and information constraints that limit deeper digitalization, while SME Corp. Malaysia (2026) continues to emphasize technology, innovation, and digitalization within the MSME development agenda. In this study, readiness therefore includes both practical competence and willingness to experiment responsibly with AI.

For women entrepreneurs managing small firms, readiness may also be shaped by time for learning, subscription costs, access to training, and confidence in evaluating unfamiliar digital outputs. These considerations make the construct broader than technical literacy. A respondent may be comfortable with standard digital tools yet still lack confidence in prompting, validating, or adapting AI-generated material. Measuring readiness separately is therefore important for distinguishing the potential value of AI from the entrepreneur's capacity to realize it.

2.5. *Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity*

Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity refers to the redirection of mental effort from routine operational demands toward ideation, evaluation, and strategic problem-solving. This construct provides the mechanism linking automation to creative outcomes. Cognitive Load Theory suggests that when unnecessary demands consume working-memory capacity, fewer resources remain for complex cognitive activities (Sweller, 1988). In event planning, AI-assisted reduction of repetitive communication, scheduling, or document preparation may therefore create additional attention for comparing concepts, adapting ideas to client needs, and anticipating implementation problems. The proposed mediator avoids a simplistic assumption that AI directly creates creativity; instead, it focuses on how AI may change the allocation of the entrepreneur's own cognitive resources.

This mechanism is consistent with recent Human-AI research that emphasizes process rather than technology alone. Broekhuizen et al. (2023), examining AI in open innovation, argue that AI's value for complex and unstructured innovative activity depends on how it is incorporated into collaborative processes. Applied to event entrepreneurship, AI is most likely to support creativity when it reduces low-value cognitive demands while leaving interpretation, synthesis, and final strategic decisions directly with the entrepreneur.

2.6. *Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning*

Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning refers to the ability to generate, evaluate, adapt, and implement novel and useful responses to client needs and market conditions. Creativity

in this sector is not limited to aesthetics. It includes selecting feasible alternatives under budget and time constraints, solving last-minute operational problems, personalizing experiences, and balancing originality with execution. Recent generative-AI research illustrates why both novelty and human judgment matter: AI systems can perform strongly on divergent-thinking tasks, yet the strongest human ideas can still match or exceed AI-generated ideas (Koivisto & Grassini, 2023). Creative decision-making is therefore treated as a human entrepreneurial capability that AI may support, but not replace.

2.7. *Proposed Hypotheses*

Based on the research framework, the following hypotheses are proposed for the full-scale study:

- H1: AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction positively influences Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning.
- H2: AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement positively influences Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning.
- H3: AI Readiness and Digital Competence positively influence Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning.
- H4: AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction positively influences Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity.
- H5: AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement positively influences Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity.
- H6: AI Readiness and Digital Competence positively influence Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity.
- H7: Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity positively influences Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. *Research Design*

This research used a quantitative, cross-sectional, survey-based pilot design focused on measurement-model assessment. The cross-sectional element refers to data collected from participants at one point in time, while the pilot element refers to the preliminary testing of the questionnaire before full-scale data collection. The purpose was not to estimate causal effects or test the seven structural hypotheses conclusively. Instead, the pilot examined whether the adapted items produced adequate internal consistency and convergent validity for the intended population. This design is appropriate for an early PLS-SEM stage in which measurement quality must be established before structural relationships are evaluated (Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

3.2. *Population and Sample*

The target population consisted of women entrepreneurs involved in the event planning industry in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. A purposive approach was used to obtain 30 pilot participants who were involved in business and creative decision-making and had relevance to digital or AI-enabled tools. The sample was used for preliminary instrument assessment rather than population-level inference. Consequently, no claim is made that these 30 respondents represent the full distribution of women entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur. The full-scale study will require a substantially larger sample to test the proposed direct and mediating relationships.

3.3. *Research Instrument*

A structured questionnaire was used as the main data-collection instrument. It contained demographic questions and five constructs measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Items were adapted from established measures and reworded for the event-planning and AI context. Table 1 identifies the principal source used for each construct. Because several original scales were developed before the emergence of generative AI, contextual adaptation was necessary; the pilot was therefore used to determine whether the resulting items behaved consistently in the intended setting. The present article reports construct-level reliability and convergent-validity evidence and does not claim that the original instruments were designed specifically for generative AI.

Table 1 – Constructs and measurement sources

Construct	Number of Items	Source
AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction	6	Davis (1989)
AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement	3	Tierney and Farmer (2002)
AI Readiness and Digital Competence	5	Hung et al. (2010)
Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity	5	Agarwal and Karahanna (2000)
Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning	5	Scott and Bruce (1995)

Source: Authors

3.4. *Data Collection*

The questionnaire was distributed digitally through online channels suitable for reaching women entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur. Participants were informed of the study purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and their right to discontinue participation. Responses were then prepared for analysis in SmartPLS 4.0. Because this was a pilot focused

on the measurement model, the analysis concentrated on the consistency and convergence of the construct indicators rather than on structural path significance.

3.5. *Data Analysis*

The measurement model was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (rho_a and rho_c), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Consistent with contemporary PLS-SEM guidance, reliability values around or above 0.70 were treated as acceptable for established multi-item constructs, while AVE values above 0.50 were used as evidence that a construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators (Hair et al., 2022). The analysis was limited to the statistics available from the pilot output reported in this article. Structural coefficients, mediation effects, predictive assessment, and broader discriminant-validity evaluation are reserved for the full-scale study.

3.6. *Use of Artificial Intelligence in Research*

Artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited and supportive manner during manuscript preparation, mainly for language refinement and structural clarity. All conceptual development, theoretical framing, questionnaire design, data collection, SmartPLS analysis, interpretation, reference checking, and final academic judgment remained the responsibility of the authors. AI was not treated as an author or co-author and did not replace scholarly responsibility.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. *Reliability and Validity Findings*

The pilot study results indicate that all constructs achieved acceptable reliability and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.816 to 0.928, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Composite reliability rho_c values ranged from 0.891 to 0.945, indicating strong internal consistency. AVE values ranged from 0.672 to 0.840, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.50 and confirming adequate convergent validity.

Table 2 – Pilot study reliability and validity results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability rho_a	Composite Reliability rho_c	AVE
Creative Decision-Making in Event Planning	0.816	0.837	0.891	0.731
AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction	0.875	0.880	0.910	0.672
AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement	0.905	0.906	0.940	0.840

AI Readiness and Digital Competence	0.928	0.929	0.945	0.776
Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity	0.914	0.914	0.937	0.750

Source: Authors

4.2. *Interpretation of Findings*

The results indicate that the five constructs are sufficiently consistent for progression to the full-scale study. Creative Decision-Making recorded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.816 and rho_c of 0.891; AI-Automated Administrative Task Reduction recorded 0.875 and 0.910. AI Perceived Creativity Enhancement produced an alpha of 0.905 and AVE of 0.840. AI Readiness and Digital Competence recorded the highest alpha at 0.928, while Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity achieved 0.914. All AVE values exceeded 0.50. These values support acceptable internal consistency and convergent validity at the pilot stage (Hair et al., 2022), but they do not demonstrate the proposed causal relationships.

4.3. *Discussion*

The pilot findings support the measurement suitability of the proposed framework and provide a basis for full-scale testing. The results are consistent with recent Human-AI literature in showing that creativity-related collaboration can be meaningfully studied through distinct dimensions rather than by treating AI use as a single behaviour. Lee and Chung (2024) found that ChatGPT could improve creative idea generation across several tasks, while McGuire et al. (2024) demonstrated that the structure of collaboration and creative self-efficacy influence whether AI assistance helps or hinders creative output. The present instrument complements this literature by separating perceived creativity support from administrative-task reduction and AI readiness, thereby allowing the future study to examine different routes through which AI may affect entrepreneurial decision-making.

The strong reliability of Cognitive Resource Allocation for Creativity is particularly important for the theoretical model. Recent creativity studies establish that AI can generate strong ideas or support human ideation, but they do not by themselves explain whether entrepreneurs become more creative because AI saves mental effort, increases confidence, broadens idea sets, or changes workflow. The proposed mediator addresses this gap by operationalizing the possibility that reduced routine burden releases attention for higher-order creative work. This interpretation remains provisional until mediation is tested in the full sample, but the pilot results show that respondents can answer the construct items consistently.

The findings also have practical implications for women-led MSMEs. Malaysian digitalization policy continues to emphasize technology adoption and capability

development, while evidence indicates that smaller firms can struggle to progress from basic digital use toward more advanced productivity-enhancing applications (World Bank, 2022; SME Corp. Malaysia, 2026). Training programmes should therefore move beyond general awareness and provide practical experience with AI-assisted scheduling, proposal development, client communication, concept generation, and output verification. At the same time, recent research cautions against passive dependence on AI. Entrepreneurs should remain active co-creators who assess whether suggestions are appropriate for client, cultural, financial, and operational requirements (McGuire et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

This study evaluated a pilot instrument for examining Human-AI collaboration and creative decision-making among women entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur's event planning industry. All five constructs exceeded the reported thresholds for internal consistency and convergent validity, supporting use of the instrument in the next phase of data collection. The study's contribution is preliminary and methodological: the pilot confirms that the proposed measures can be used coherently, but it does not yet establish that AI causes better creative decisions or that Cognitive Resource Allocation mediates the proposed relationships. Those claims require the planned full-scale PLS-SEM analysis.

The revised framework also responds to current literature by positioning the entrepreneur as an active Human-AI collaborator. Recent studies show both the creative potential of generative AI and the importance of preserving human agency in the creative process (Rafner et al., 2023; Lee & Chung, 2024; McGuire et al., 2024). In the event-planning context, this means that AI may be most valuable when it reduces routine burden or expands alternatives while the entrepreneur retains responsibility for interpretation, personalization, feasibility, and final judgment.

Several limitations should guide interpretation and future work. The pilot sample is small, purposively selected, and limited to Kuala Lumpur; the analysis is cross-sectional and focused on measurement properties rather than causal inference. The full study should use a larger sample, evaluate the complete measurement model, test the seven structural hypotheses and mediation effect, and consider whether AI experience changes the relationships. Future research could compare creative-service sectors or examine the model longitudinally as AI tools evolve.

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ARTICLE

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MAPPING THE AVAILABILITY OF IBALOI LANGUAGE RESOURCES IN BAGUIO CITY AND BENGUET

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Abstract

The Ibaloi language is in decline in Baguio City, the cultural heartland and ancestral home of the Ibaloi people, due to its decreasing transmission to younger generations. This study aimed to review and assess the availability and distribution of Ibaloi language resources and their role in preservation efforts. Using a document review method, 134 materials from the Benguet Provincial Library and the Baguio City Public Library were analyzed based on document form, year of publication, author type, language use, and publication status. Findings reveal that while most documents focus on cultural background and are primarily written in English by local authors, there is a significant lack of updated linguistic resources essential for effective teaching, learning, and revitalization of the language. Additionally, many materials lack clear authorship and publication dates, raising concerns about their credibility. The study concludes that without accessible, relevant, and up-to-date educational

materials, the intergenerational transmission of the Ibaloi language remains at risk. It is therefore recommended that more contemporary and literature-based resources be developed to engage younger generations and support language preservation efforts.

Keywords
Ibaloi; Indigenous language; Document review; Baguio City

1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in human society, serving not only as a primary means of communication but also as a key expression of culture. It serves as a vehicle for conveying and preserving traditions, values, and collective identities (Sirbu, 2015). Language reflects a nation's perspectives, worldview, and sense of identity (Hamidi, 2023). Beyond its communicative function, language represents a society's cultural wealth, enabling its members to share information and make sense of both material and spiritual aspects of life (Ogli, 2020).

While language generally serves as a tool for communication and cultural expression, Indigenous languages go beyond this function by embodying distinct worldviews, knowledge systems, and deep-rooted connections to ancestral lands (Annet, 2024). These languages are native to specific geographic regions and are typically spoken by Indigenous communities that have inhabited those areas for generations. Often marginalized and classified as minority languages, Indigenous languages face the risk of extinction due to social, political, and economic pressures (Hikwa & Masiri, 2017). In some countries, these are referred to as dialects and accorded less importance than national languages, contributing to their eventual loss (Degawan, 2019). The loss of these languages would not only erase unique cultural identities but also sever the living connection to traditions and knowledge systems. As such, Indigenous languages are fragile and require deliberate efforts to preserve, nurture, and revitalize them (Annet, 2024).

In a study conducted by Jha (2018), eleven causes of language endangerment were identified from both linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives, based on empirical evidence. These are: (1) confinement of the language to priests, where languages remain largely restricted to the literary expressions of religious and spiritual leaders; (2) fear of complex learning, as learners are often told that these languages are difficult to master due to the extensive rote memorization, complex grammatical rules, and word declensions required; (3) the globalization of English, whose growing dominance overshadows many other languages and establishes it as the primary medium for global communication; (4) lack of economic activities and opportunities, since a language, like currency or newspapers, gains power only through widespread circulation, and without economic incentives or job opportunities linked to it, a language is likely to decline; (5) intra-community marriages, which limit individuals'

exposure to the languages and cultures of other communities; (6) lack of interlingual communication among different social groups, including limited practices of code-mixing and code-switching; (7) linguistic jingoism, or the practice of assigning national prestige to a dominant language while devaluing endangered ones; (8) political bias, which fosters discrimination among social groups and plays a divisive role along sociopolitical lines; (9) lack of institutional support, such as insufficient representation of a language in public domains; (10) lack of research and documentation on endangered languages; and (11) lack of a sense of pride and value for the language.

There are approximately 7,000 languages spoken worldwide today, but scholars have counted just 23 in use among more than half of the globe's population of 7 billion (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA], 2019). Additionally, at least 40% of these languages are endangered (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2024). The world's 370 million Indigenous peoples are estimated to speak more than 4,000 different languages. Unfortunately, approximately 600 languages have disappeared in the last century, and they continue to disappear at a rate of one language every two weeks. UNESCO predicts that between 50–90% of Indigenous languages (approximately 3,000 languages) will disappear by the end of this century, being replaced by dominant languages such as English, Mandarin, or Spanish (IWGIA, 2019).

The Philippines is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with over 180 languages spoken across its islands. The country is home to 186 languages, of which 184 are living, and two are extinct. Of the living languages, 175 are Indigenous, and nine are non-Indigenous (Eberhard et al., 2021). Being steeped in rich history and culture, the Philippines also shelters a large number of languages that are genetically non-Philippine such as Chavacano, a Spanish-based creole spoken in Zamboanga City and Cavite province; Lannang-Oe or the Philippine Hokkien spoken by the ethnic Chinese population in the Philippines; and English, the country's official language used in commerce, law, and education. Furthermore, the Philippines has Filipino as the national language and Filipino Sign Language (FSL) as the country's official language of the Filipino deaf community. As one may note, the Philippine linguistic ecology is evidently rich and diverse (Chester & Usero, 2021).

As outlined by Moseley (2010), the Indigenous languages of the Philippines are all Austronesian. Spanish-based creoles also developed during the Spanish colonial period; most of these are now extinct, except for Chavacano, which remains vigorous, particularly in the southern part of the country. Among the many Austronesian languages, at least thirteen have 500 or fewer speakers. Other languages are considered vulnerable, with slightly larger speaker populations. Many more small languages may become endangered due to the spread of the national language, Filipino (based on Tagalog), as well as major regional languages.

According to Headland (2003), thirteen of the endangered or extinct Austronesian languages are or were spoken by small Negrito groups. These languages often carry related

names, such as Agta, Alta, Arta, Ayta, Atta, or Ata, and are further identified by their geographic location. Similar languages with the same or related names are spoken in other regions and are less endangered, while some have already become extinct. The Negrito populations, scattered across the northern and central Philippines, are considered the original Indigenous peoples. Their languages were gradually replaced by those of incoming Austronesian-speaking groups, who likely arrived from the north several millennia ago.

In Luzon, specifically in Benguet, Ibaloi ranked third among the most commonly spoken languages, with 16.5% of households using it, according to the 2020 Census of Population and Housing (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2023), following Kankanaey (36.3%) and Ilocano (33.9%). While the language remains vibrant in towns such as Kabayan, Itogon, and Tuba, its use has notably declined in Baguio City (Anton, 2022). This decline is particularly unfortunate, as Baguio, formerly known as Kafagway, was originally the ancestral home of the Indigenous Ibaloy people (Tolentino & White, 2024).

The situation in Baguio City is especially concerning, as many Ibaloi families have chosen not to pass the language on to their children, contributing to its endangered status (Anton, 2022). Simons and Fennig (2021) similarly classify Ibaloi as an endangered language, noting its decreasing transmission to younger generations. Academic voices, such as Eufronio "Morr" L. Pungayan, emphasize the urgency of language preservation, warning that without proactive efforts, Ibaloi may face extinction (Northern Dispatch, 2012). Community accounts further reveal that among many clans in Baguio, children and youth rarely speak the language, highlighting its ongoing decline. Therefore, the diminishing presence of the Ibaloi language in Baguio City highlights the urgent need for revitalization efforts. If the language is endangered even in its cultural heartland, neighboring municipalities where Ibaloi is also spoken may eventually be affected as well. This is because language loss is often linked to cultural and social shifts (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003), and when a language weakens in one area, it can impact its vitality and transmission in other regions.

In light of the challenges facing the Ibaloi language, particularly its decline in Baguio City, the ancestral home of the Ibaloi people, this study aims to review and assess the availability of Ibaloi language documentation. The focus is on evaluating how existing materials contribute to the revitalization of the language. A pertinent example highlighting the significance of language resources is the study conducted by Tullay and Pelila (2025), which revealed a scarcity of Kankanaey language materials. These gaps have been identified as major obstacles in the effective teaching and learning of the Kankanaey language, especially within the framework of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program. The MTB-MLE policy, mandated by the Department of Education [DepEd] (2016), promotes the use of learners' first language as both a subject and medium of instruction from kindergarten to Grade 3. This initiative is not only educationally strategic but also a key approach for revitalizing endangered languages like Ibaloi.

In relation to Tullay and Pelila's (2025) work, this study similarly seeks to examine the state of language resources in the context of the Ibaloi language. It aims to assess whether the same challenges of limited documentation and educational materials are present for Ibaloi, and how this may impact its revitalization efforts. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What is the distribution of Ibaloi language resources according to (a) forms of documents, (b) year of issue, (c) types of writers, (d) language used, and (e) publication status?; and (2) What topics emerge from existing documents that will serve as resources in the study of the Ibaloi language?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of Ibaloi language documentation and its potential role in supporting revitalization initiatives. This will be valuable to stakeholders such as educators, linguists, policymakers, and community leaders working to preserve and revitalize the Ibaloi language.

2. METHODOLOGY

The researchers utilized a document review method to search for materials about the Ibaloi language across target libraries. This approach represents a structured methodology that systematically scrutinizes documents to uncover, extract, and analyze pertinent information (Bowern, 2009). Moreover, the researchers followed the typology outlined by Raza et al. (2023) for conducting such reviews, including research design, inclusion criteria, document search, and data analysis.

2.1. Inclusion Criteria

The study considered alternative terms recognized by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF). These terms, including Ivadoi, Ibaloi, Ibaloy, Nabaloi, and Nabaloy, reflect linguistic variations officially recognized in various classifications. Additionally, previous references, such as in the Kankana-ey language, recognized spelling differences within specific ethnolinguistic groups, reinforcing the importance of inclusivity in language documentation. Furthermore, the materials needed to meet the four fundamental requirements outlined by the DepEd (2016) for educational use. These requirements consist of orthography, a dictionary, a grammar book, and literature or other reading materials.

Another essential criterion was that the materials must be accessible through the Benguet Provincial Library (BPL) and the Baguio City Public Library (BCPL). Tullay and Pelila (2025) noted that these institutions provide public access to a variety of resources and constitute the most accessible repositories of documentation and educational materials on the languages of Benguet, including Ibaloi. As such, it was crucial to assess the availability of these materials. Additionally, inclusion in the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) further validated the availability of these materials for public reference. The OPAC listing ensured that the documents were properly cataloged and retrieved within library systems.

2.2. *Document Search*

The researchers used the OPAC of the public libraries to search for the documents. The researchers used five keyword sets. First, the keyword /Ibaloi/ was used for the initial search; it expanded to include the following keywords: /Ibaloy/, /Ibadoy/, /Nabaloi/, /Ivadoy/. Ager (2024), in his comprehensive overview of the Ibaloi language, notes that Ibaloi is also known as Ibadoy, Ibaloy, Ivadoy, and Nabaloi. He explains that these variants reflect the diverse pronunciations and spellings used by different communities. For instance, the pronunciation of "b" as [v] between vowels contributes to variations like Ivadoy. Furthermore, these terms are used interchangeably by the Ibaloi people themselves. The "oi" ending is influenced by English orthography, leading some to prefer "Ibaloy" or "Ivadoy." Linguists often distinguish between "Ibaloy" (the people) and "Nabaloy" or "Inibaloy" (the language). Here, Table 1 shows the distribution of the number of documents to be reviewed across both target libraries. In the Benguet Provincial Library, after searching all the keywords, 124 documents came out – 65 for Ibaloi, 46 for Ibaloy, 3 for Ibadoy, 5 for Nabaloi, 5 for Ivadoy.

Table 1 – Distribution of the number of documents screened for review

Search Terms	Initial Search	No. of Literature Excluded	Reasons for Exclusion	No. of Literature Included
Benguet Provincial Library (OPAC)				
Ibaloi	65	10	Unrelated (1); Duplicated (9)	55
Ibaloy	46	10	Unrelated (1); Duplicated (5); Not Found (4)	36
Ibadoy	3	1	Duplicated	2
Ibadoi	0	0	-	0
Nabaloi	5	-	-	5
Nabaloy	0	0	-	0
Ivadoy	5	1	Duplicated	4
Ivadoi	0	0	-	0
Baguio City Public Library (OAPC)				
Ibaloi	7	2	Duplicated	5
Ibaloy	8	2	Duplicated	6
Ibadoy	0	0	-	0
Ibadoi	0	0	-	0
Nabaloi	0	0	-	0
Nabaloy	0	0	-	0
Ivadoy	0	0	-	0
Ivadoi	0	0	-	0

Additional Available Book Resources	21	-	-	21
TOTAL	**160**	**26**		**134**

Source: Authors

After reviewing the list of these documents, 20 documents were excluded for various reasons: 1 was unrelated to the Ibaloi language, as it discussed man-made attractions in Ibaloi municipalities, and 9 were duplicates under the Ibaloi category, including 5 under Ibaloy and 4 that were not found, which means these books are shown in the OPAC search but are missing in the library catalog. Additionally, 1 document for Ibadoy and 1 for Ivadoy were excluded due to duplication. As a result, 102 documents from the Benguet Provincial Library were considered for review: 55 for Ibaloi, 36 for Ibaloy, 2 for Ibadoy, 5 for Nabaloi, and 4 for Ivadoy.

On the other hand, a total of 36 documents were found at the Baguio City Public Library (BCPL): 7 under the search term "Ibaloi," 8 under "Ibaloy," and 21 additional book resources identified through the library catalog. These 21 books contain articles related to the Ibaloi but are not included in the OPAC. The International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD) establishes the standard for recording or transcribing bibliographic data elements in a specific sequence as the basis for the description of cataloged resources. It also prescribes punctuation conventions to ensure that bibliographic information is understandable independently of the language used in the description (Byrum et al., 2010). All libraries are required to standardize the presentation of bibliographic information in catalogs and bibliographies to ensure consistency and facilitate user access. However, the 21 additional books from BCPL are not reflected in the OPAC because the terms "Ibaloi" or "Ibaloy" do not appear in their titles. Only materials with these terms explicitly stated in the title are included and searchable in the OPAC, which explains why these relevant resources were not immediately visible. After a thorough classification process, two documents, each from the "Ibaloi" and "Ibaloy" search results, were excluded due to duplication. Consequently, a total of 32 documents were considered for review: 5 under "Ibaloi," 6 under "Ibaloy," and 21 from the additional book resources.

In total, out of the 160 documents that were searched, 24 of these were excluded due to duplication, and unrelatedness, and are not found, leaving 134 documents found in BCP and BCPL that were considered for review from the keywords Ibaloi (f=60), Ibaloy (f=42), Ibadoy (f=2), Nabaloi (f=5), Ivadoy (f=4), and Additional Available Book Resources (f =21).

2.3. Data Analysis

The researchers used Google Sheets to classify the identified documents by form, year of issue, type of writer, language use, and publication status. Later, a frequency distribution was used to classify Ibaloi-related documents. Smith (2014) describes it as a method of

summarizing a set of numerical data in tabular or graphical form, by forming class intervals of the variable and displaying the number of observations in each class. Utilizing frequency distributions is a fundamental approach in data analysis, particularly effective for identifying patterns, understanding data spread, and detecting outliers. This method organizes data into categories, allowing researchers to observe how data points are distributed across different intervals. Such an organization helps pinpoint areas of concentration and scarcity, as well as highlight anomalies that deviate from the overall pattern. For instance, in analyzing materials related to the Ibaloi, frequency distributions can reveal which areas are well-represented and which are underrepresented, thereby guiding further research. This approach not only facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the existing data landscape but also helps identify gaps that may warrant further investigation.

2.4. Ethical Consideration

Along with ethical considerations, although the libraries are public and open to all, thereby eliminating the need for communication letters, the researchers still followed research protocols, ensuring that research conduct was communicated properly. Upon entering the respective libraries, the researchers registered accordingly as one of the library's standard operating procedures. Whenever the researchers needed assistance, they approached the assigned librarians with courtesy and greetings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Distribution of Ibaloi Language Resources

3.1.1. Forms of Documents

Table 2 categorizes the documents identified by the researchers into four document types. Notably, 120 documents (88.06%) are classified as general books, periodicals, and academic works, while sixteen (11.94%) fall under compilations. The researchers define general books as works of fiction and nonfiction that cover a range of subjects, including history, culture, literature, religious texts, language, and linguistics. In this context, history and culture were combined, as were language and linguistics, due to their overlap.

Of the 19 documents classified as general books, the majority—47 (35.07%)—pertain to history and culture. These include works by Abaya (2017), Anavic (1985), Antero (2010), Anton (2010, 2022), Anton et. al. (2010), Afable (2011), Arcellana and Novicio (1999); Bitog (2021), Cadalig (2021), Canilao (2011), Comanda (2014), Fong (2017, 2021a, 2021b), Merino (1989), Moss (1920), Niwane (n.d.), Prill-Brett (2004), Pungayan (2016, 2019), Ramos (1994), Sagud and Cimatu (2019), Salibad and Rood (1989), Santos (2017), Scheerer (1933), Sumeg-ang (2005), Tapang (1985), Ventura et al. (2018), and Wiber (1984).

Additionally, 16 documents (11.94%) are classified under literature, consolidating various stories, including some about the Kankanaey and Kalanguya. Under language and linguistics, there are three dictionaries. Two are at the Baguio City Public Library, while the other is at the Benguet Provincial Library. One, authored by Ameda (2011), which includes phonology, grammar, and morphophonemics. The other, by Caro (2010), is a Kalanguya dictionary that includes translations in English, Ibaloy, Kankanaey, Ilocano, and Tagalog. The last one is authored by Baucas (2003) titled Ibadoy (Ibaloi) Vocabulary Translation. It is anticipated that there were at least materials on plain orthography and grammar under language and linguistics; however, there were none in either library. Three dictionaries were found instead. Meanwhile, four guidebooks are still found under Language and Linguistics, including the works of Anton (2010), Bucaoto et al. (2016), Baucas (2003), and Pungayan (1999). Under religious text, one Bible was found, published by the International Bible Society (Dibshon mengi-kan ni pansigshan: The New Testament, 1978). The other religious text was authored by Medina (2000).

Table 2 – Distribution of the number of documents screened for review

	Frequency	Percentage
General Books		
History and Culture	47	64.38%
Literature	16	21.92%
Religious Text *Bible*	 2	 2.74%
Language and Linguistics *Dictionary* *Guidebook*	 3 5	 4.11% 6.85%
Total	73	100.00%
Periodicals		
Journal	7	35.00%
Magazines	0	0.00%
Newspapers	13	65.00%
Newsletters	0	0.00%
Total	20	100.00%
Academic Works		
Doctoral Dissertation	6	24.00%
Master's Thesis	10	40.00%
Pamphlet	1	4.00%
Clippings	7	28.00%
Magazine	1	4.00%
Total	25	100.00%
Compilations		

NCIP Related Files	3	18.75%
Municipal Related Files	13	81.25%
Other Library Compilations	0	0.00%
Total	16	100.00%
Grand Total	**134**	**100.00%**

Source: Authors

Moreover, there are documents in the form of journals, magazines, newspapers, and newsletters, classified as periodicals, because these issues are released at regular intervals. Journals, though they can be classified under academic works, are classified under periodicals. Some journal articles are found at the Benguet Provincial Library, and these are authored by the following: Lacanaria (2000), Leaño (1987), Pungayan (1985), and Tabora (1978). Unlike typical online journal articles, these articles have physical copies in libraries because they were printed.

No magazines were found in either library, suggesting scarcity in this area. On the other hand, there are 13 (9.70%) newspapers found at Benguet Provincial Library, which were contributed by Abad (2016), David (n.d.), Cadalig (2024), Carantes (2021), Empian (2019a, 2019b), Latawan (2013), Okubo (2010), and Pungayan (2022). Newsletters have not been found in either of the two public libraries.

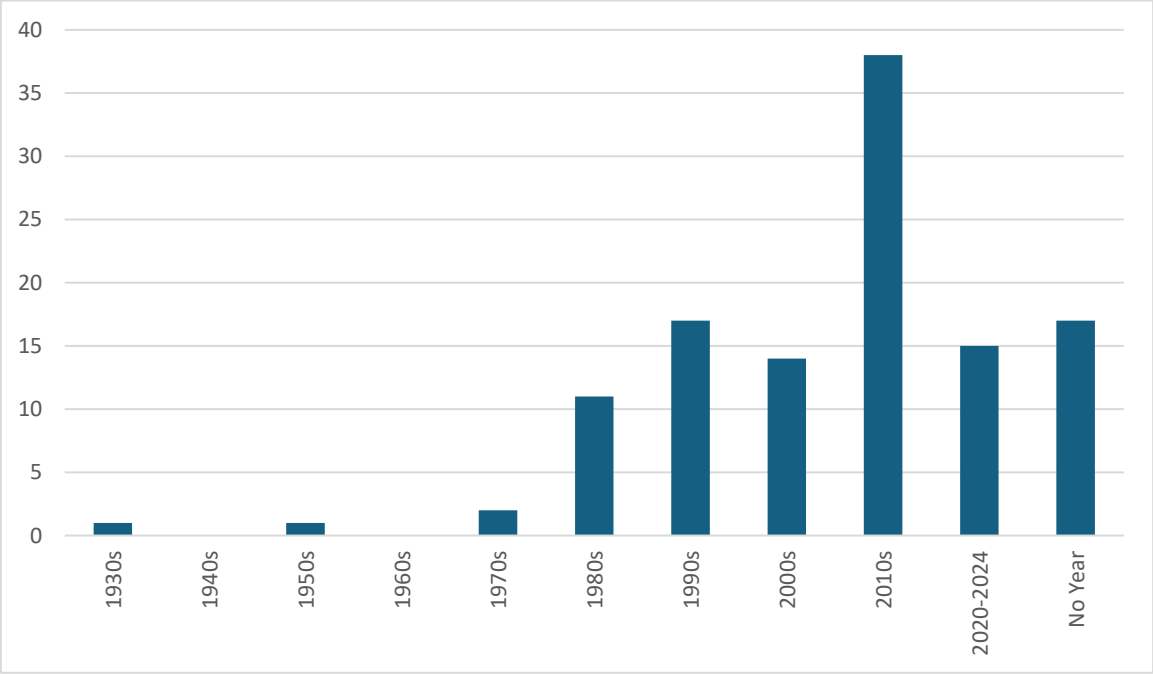
Next are the documents classified under academic works. In distinction, these are scholarly documents produced within educational settings. In the study, six doctoral dissertations (4.48%) were identified, of which five were authored by Prill-Brett (Prill-Brett, 1990, 1992, 2004; Prill-Brett & Tolentino, 2015; Prill-Brett et al., 1998), while the other had no identified author. There are more master's theses related to Ibaloi, totaling 10 (7.46%). These are the works of Atos (1982), Badongen (1997), Boado (1996), Doriano (2015), Kidlo (2022), Kieth (1997), Pagnas (2000), Panagon (2010), Sari (n.d.), and Wiber (1984).

Lastly, there are 16 (11.94) compilations, some of which are files from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples – Cordillera Administrative Region (NCIP-CAR), and others are municipal-related files. There are three identified NCIP-related files authored by Bolislis (1996), Cadalig (2023), and another one titled Indigenous Cultural Communities' Pagkilala" Recognize Indigenous Peoples and Ancestral Domains (Vol. 1) with no identified author. As to the municipal-related files, there are 13 in total, all found at the Benguet Provincial Library. Nine of these are about the Province of Benguet Provincial Board Resolutions over the years (Province of Benguet, 2015, 2017, 2020). However, the rest discusses Politics, property, and law in the Philippines upland, authored by Wiber (1984); Towards understanding peoples of the Cordillera, authored by Rico-Costina and Defuntorum (2001); and Tuba ethnohistory, authored by Prill-Brett et al. (1998).

3.1.2. Year of Issue

Figure 1 shows 134 documents grouped by the decade in which they were published. The oldest known document is from the 1930s, with one entry titled "The Archive: A collection of Papers pertaining to Philippine Linguistics" by Scheerer (1933). The 1950s also had just one document. No documents were found from the 1940s or 1960s.

Figure 1 – Frequency distribution of the published materials from 1930 to 2020



Source: Authors

Interest in Ibaloi studies slowly started in the 1970s, with 2 documents published. These showed an early effort to study the Indigenous people of Northern Luzon. In the 1980s, the number of documents grew to 11. These focused on the Ibaloi tribes, their culture, and property systems. This decade showed a move toward more serious and organized research about Ibaloi life and language.

The 1990s saw even more growth, with 17 documents. This was one of the most active decades, with many academic studies and collections addressing topics such as sociolinguistics, traditions, land rights, and cultural rituals. It showed that researchers and institutions were becoming more interested in preserving and learning about Ibaloi heritage.

In the early 2000s (2000–2009), 14 documents were produced. These focused on dictionaries, cultural studies, laws, and educational materials. This time, there was a shift toward creating more formal, easier-to-understand resources about the Ibaloi language and culture.

The biggest increase happened in the 2010s, with 38 documents more than any other decade. This boom was driven by increased academic research, publications, and community projects. The topics were diverse, including identity, health, laws, music, and youth. This

shows that more people, both scholars and locals, were becoming involved in studying and promoting Ibaloi culture. From 2020 to 2024, 15 documents were published. This shows that interest in Ibaloi studies is still strong. These recent works include articles in newspapers, books, collections, and research studies. They often discuss current issues such as cultural preservation, governance, heritage protection, and land rights. Lastly, 17 documents have no known publication date. Even without dates, they offer important insights into Ibaloi customs, stories, and cultural knowledge. These include essays, folktales, cultural studies, and photo collections.

3.1.3. *Type of Writers*

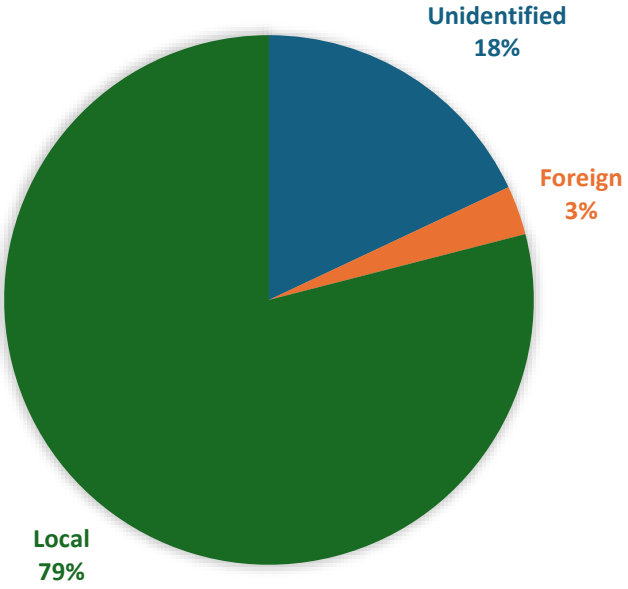
Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of different types of writers featured in books and other materials related to the Ibaloi language. Of the materials reviewed, 79% are authored by local writers, 3% by foreign writers, and 18% have unidentified authors. The majority of the works found in both the BCPL and the BPL were written by local authors. This significant proportion of local authors indicates that Filipino writers, particularly those from the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), are the primary contributors to the written literature on the Ibaloi language. The small percentage of books by foreign writers (3%) suggests limited external interest in the language. Additionally, the 18% of books with unidentified authors highlight the lack of crucial information in some materials, suggesting that certain works may be missing essential documentation or are not properly recorded.

Specifically, the 79% of writers (Anton, 2010, 2022; Canilao, 2011; Santos, 2017; Caro, 2010; Fong, 2017; Prill-Brett, 2004; Tapang, 1985; Ameda, 2011; Panagon, 2010; Sumeg-ang, 2005; Sagud & Cimatu, 2019; Salibad & Rood, 1989; Ramos 1994; Arcellana & Novicio, 1999; Abaya, 2017; Pilo et al. 2022; Aguilar-Cariño, 1990; Guinaran, 2016; Boado, 1996; Pagnas, 2000; Badongen, 1997; Pungayan, 2016; Cadalig, 2021; Niwane, n.d.; Ventura et al., 2018; Comanda, 2014; Onjon ni Ivadoy Inc., 2022; Merino, 1989; Bitog, 2021; Carantes, 2013, 2021; Wilson, 1958; Listino & Awas, 2010; Dizon, 1999; Bucaoto & Macaraeg, 2016; Leaño 1987; Lacanaria, 2000; Tabora, 1978; Gentozola, 2016; Latawan, 2013; Abad, 2016; David, n.d.; Pungayan, 2022; Okubo, 2010; Doriano, 2015; Sari, n.d.; Guinaran, 2002; Alimondo, 2020; Caro, 2010; Cadalig, 2023; Bolislis, 1996; Rico-Costina & Defuntorum, 2001; Bagamaspas & Hamada-Pawid, 1985, 2010; Anavic, 1985; Fong, 2017; Mang-oy, 2010; White, 2009; Sacla, 1987a, 1987b; Diwas, 2016; Baucas, 2003; Cadalig, 2024; Empian, 2019a, 2019b; Kidlo, 2022; Kieth 1997; Cabreza, n.d., 2019, 2020; Alimondo, 2020; Ameda et al., 2011; Delima, 2013; Atos, 1982; Baucas, 2003; Moss, 1920; Medina, 2000; Antero, 2010; Onjon ni Ivadoy Inc., 2022; Province of Benguet, 2015, 2017, 2020). The 18% Foreign writers (Wilson, 1958, 1965; Wiber, 1984; Scheerer, 1933; Afable, 2011). The unidentified writers have no names, so writers who were not written have no basis for determining what type of writers they are.

Here, most of the materials fall into the general books category, with a strong focus on history and culture. However, there are only a few materials that focus on the language itself,

like dictionaries. Most of these materials are written in English, with only a small portion in Ibaloi.

Figure 2 – Frequency distribution of the types of writers on the identified documents



Source: Authors

3.1.4. *Language Use*

Table 3 reveals that most works on the Ibaloi language are written in English, but the language is used in various forms. While many are entirely in English, others are combined with Ibaloi texts or include translations. Table 3 shows that among the 134 documents reviewed, 114 (85.07%) are English-dominant, with varying use of the Ibaloi language.

Table 3 – Frequency distribution of documents in terms of the language used in writing

	Frequency	Percentage
English		
Full English Text	59	44.03%
English with Ibaloi Text	53	39.55%
English with Ibaloi Translation	2	1.49%
Total	114	85.07%
Ibaloi		
Full Ibaloi Text	1	0.75%
Ibaloi with English Text	4	2.99%
Ibaloi with English Translation	5	3.73%
Total	10	7.46%
Other Languages		
Other Languages with Ibaloi Text	8	5.97%

Other Languages with Ibaloi Translation	2	1.49%
Total	10	7.46%
Grand Total	**134**	**100.00%**

Source: Authors

Of these English-based works, 59 (44.03%) are written entirely in English. Examples include Innovation and Social Change: The Ibaloy Cattle Enterprise in Benguet by Tapang (1985), Ibaloi Customary Law on Natural Resources by Prill-Brett (2004), and Cordillera Tales by Aguilar-Cariño (1990). Meanwhile, 53 (39.55%) feature English text with Ibaloi content integrated into the narrative. These are exemplified in works such as Chiva: A Reader in Ibaloy History and Culture by Fong (2017), Indigenous Ibaloy Songs by Panagon (2010), and To My Fellow Igorot Youth by Guinaran (2016).

These findings suggest that English remains the dominant medium for documenting Ibaloi culture and scholarship. The high usage of English may reflect both academic convention and the intent to reach a broader readership. However, the incorporation of Ibaloi texts highlights an effort to retain cultural identity and authenticity within these works.

On the other hand, a relatively small number of works highlight the Ibaloi language. Ten (7.46%) of the documents reviewed fall into this category. Among them, 1 (0.75%) is written entirely in Ibaloi, while 4 (2.99%) contain Ibaloi text integrated within English content. Notably, Panagon (2010) demonstrates the educational value of Ibaloi texts in his work. Additionally, 5 (3.73%) feature Ibaloi alongside English translations, such as A Handy Guidebook to the Ibaloi Language by Anton (2010) and Ibaloy: Dictionary, Phonology, Grammar, Morphophonemics by Ameda (2011). These efforts point to a growing awareness and initiative toward the preservation and academic representation of the Ibaloi language.

In addition to English and Ibaloi, 10 (7.46%) documents are categorized as using other languages. Of these, 8 (5.97%) are written in other languages but include Ibaloi texts, and 2 (1.49%) are written in other languages with Ibaloi translations. For example, The Vocal Repertoire of the Ibaloi from Kabayan = Ang Repertoryong Pantinig ng Ibaloi sa Kabayan by Santos (2017) reflects a bilingual structure, while Dictionary: English–Benguet dialects: Ibaloi, Kankana-ey, and Kalanguyah by Atos-Ramos (2010) showcases multilingual integration. These works demonstrate the presence of Ibaloi within a broader linguistic context, contributing to the rich multilingual environment in which it exists.

The results confirm the dominance of English in works related to Ibaloi studies, whether used entirely or in combination with Ibaloi texts. This pattern may be attributed to institutional and academic standards or the goal of reaching wider audiences. Nevertheless, the integration of the Ibaloi language, either through embedded texts or translations, reflects a meaningful move toward cultural preservation and inclusion. The interaction of Ibaloi with other regional languages, as seen in the works of Santos (2017) and Caro (2010), underscores its relevance in the Philippines' multilingual discourse. Overall, these patterns show a layered

and inclusive approach to language use that bridges scholarly reach and cultural representation.

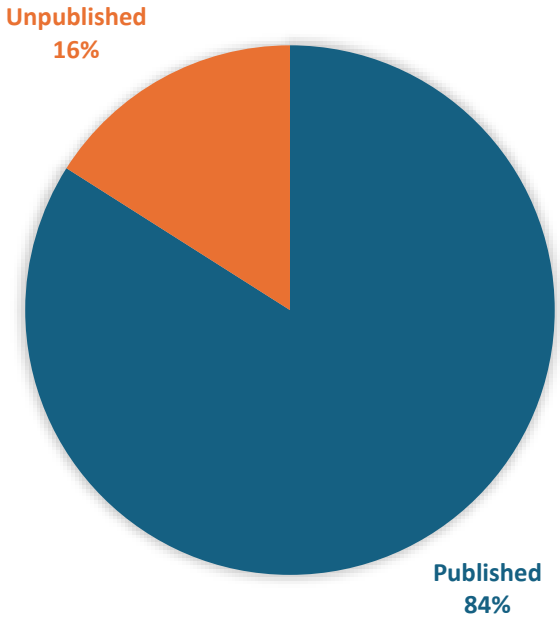
3.1.5. *Publication Status*

In this area of research, there are only two categories: the published and unpublished documents. Within the parameters of this research, published materials must meet basic requirements, such as being published by a publishing company or publishing house, having an ISSN/ISBN, and being copyright-protected.

As presented in Figure 3, 113 (84%) of the included materials are published (Anton, 2010, 2022; Canilao, 2011; Santos, 2017; Caro, 2010; Fong,2017; Prill-Brett, 2004; Tapang, 1985; Afable, 2011; Ameda, 2011; Panagon, 2010; Sumeg-ang, 2005; Scheerer, 1933; Sagud & Cimatu, 2019; Salibad & Rood, 1989; Ramos, 1994; Arcellana & Novicio, 1999; Abaya, 2017; Fong, 2021a, 2021b; Pilo et al., 2022; Guinaran, 2016; Prill-Brett et al., 1998; Prill-Brett, 1990, 1992, 2004; Boado, 1996; Pagnas, 2000; Badongen, 1997; *Cordillera Literature*, 2001; Pungayan, n.d., 2016, 2019; Cadalig, 2021; Niwane, n.d.; Ventura et al., 2018; Wiber, 1984; Comanda, 2014; Anton et. al., 2010; Onjon ni Ivadoy Inc., 2022; Merino, 1989; Bitog, 2021; Carantes, 2013, 2021; Schools Division Office of Benguet, 2013; Aguilar-Cariño, 1990; Wilson, 1958; Pungayan, n.d., 1997, 1985, 1999, 2022; Listino & Awas, 2010; Dizon, 1999; Bucaoto & Macaraeg, 2016; Leaño, 1987; Lacanaria, 2000; Tabora, 1978; Gentozola, 2016; Latawan, 2013; Abad, 2016; David, n.d.; Okubo, 2010; *Faculty Research and Publications*, 2015; *Faculty research and publications: Book of abstracts* (Vol. 2), 2017; Wiber, 1984; Doriano, 2015; Sari, n.d.; Guinaran, 2016; Alimondo, 2020; Caro, 2010; Cadalig, 2013; Bolislis, 1996; Rico-Costina & Defuntorum, 2001; Wiber, 1984; *Ibaloy Support in the 1998 Revolution*, 1997; Bagamaspas & Hamada-Pawid, 1985, 2010; Antero, 2010; *Encyclopedia of Benguet Indigenous Knowledge and Systems*, 2024; Fangloy, 2015; Sacla, 1987a, 1987b; Prill-Brett & Tolentino, 2015; *Istorya Pangkep ni Kaapon tan Karaujan (Stories About our Ancestors and Customs)*, 2022; Guinaran, 2016; Baucas, 2003; Cadalig, 2024; Empian, 2019a, 2019b; *Preserving the Ibaloy Culture Through Schools of Living Tradition*, 2018; Cadalig, 2023; Prill-Brett, 1992; Kidlo, 2002; Kieth, 1997; Okubo, 2010; Cabreza, n.d., 2019, 2020; Alimondo, 2020; Prill-Brett et al., 1998; University of the Philippines Baguio, Cordillera Studies Program, & Delima, 2013; Atos, 1982; Moss, 1920; Medina, 2000; Wilson, 1965; Antero, 2010; Onjon ni Ivadoy Inc., 2022).

Grey Literature, according to Tullay and Pelila (2025), is the term being used to refer to unpublished materials. These are materials that have not been peer-reviewed or formally published. Out of the 134 materials or documents included in the final list, 21 (16%) are not published. While grey literature can provide valuable insights, it often lacks the rigorous peer-review process of traditional academic publications, making critical assessment essential (University of Sussex Library, n.d.). Further assessment of the documents will ensure their credibility and reliability.

Figure 3 – Frequency distribution of documents according to publication status



Source: Authors

3.2. *Topics Emerging from Existing Documents*

A comprehensive review of all the documents retrieved from both libraries was conducted. Similar to the study of Tullay and Pelila (2025), the 134 documents were categorized into three topics: language background, literature, and linguistics. Out of the 134 documents, 106 fall under the Language Background, 20 under Literature, and 8 under Linguistics.

3.2.1. *Language Background*

Understanding a language's historical, cultural, and social foundations provides deeper insight and understanding into its subtleties, nature, and unique features. In reviewing the available resources, it is evident that although all texts addressed the Ibaloi language, the majority (106 documents) focused heavily on the cultural, social, and historical experiences of the Ibaloi people. In particular, several key topics emerge from the resources. Gender roles, identity formation, and community well-being are examined in Ibaloi Conversations on Identity, Community, and Well-being (Anton, 2010). The impact of colonial encounters and collective memory is critically analyzed in Of Gold, Spanish Conquistadors, & Ibaloi Generational Memory (Canilao, 2011), while A People's History of Benguet (Bagamaspas & Hamada-Pawid, 1985, 2010) provides a broader historical and socio-political narrative that contextualizes Ibaloi experiences within provincial developments. Cultural expressions and oral traditions are highlighted in The Vocal Repertoire of the Ibaloi from Kabayan (Santos, 2017), showcasing the richness of Indigenous performance and ritual. Documentations and

discussions on history and cultural continuity are thoroughly presented in Chiva: A Reader in Ibaloy History and Culture (Fong, 2017), discussions on the historical settlements of the Ibaloi people are shown in History of the People of La Trinidad (Antero, 2010), complemented by Notes on Ibaloy Culture History: A Photographic Essay (Afable, 2011), which visually narrates cultural transformation. The Ethnography of the Ibaloi (*The ethnography of the Ibalois*, n.d.) provides an in-depth discussion on the culture, behavior, and interactions of the Ibaloi people, further discussed in Ethnography of the Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Cordillera (Sumeg-ang, 2005). The Bokod: Executive Summary Report on the Conversion of CAD No. CAR-CADC-150 (*CAR historical background*, n.d.) provides crucial insight into the land rights and ancestral domains of the Ibaloi, Karao, and Kalanguya tribes, linking legal recognition with cultural preservation. Linguistic diversity and Indigenous knowledge systems are compiled in The Archive: A Collection of Papers Pertaining to Philippine Linguistics (Scheerer, 1933) and supported by multilingual references such as the Dictionary: English–Benguet dialects: Ibaloi, Kankana-ey, and Kalanguyah by Atos-Ramos (2010). Further expanding the cultural and historical narrative, Ibaloy Customary Law on Natural Resources (Prill-Brett, 2004) discusses community-based governance and ecological practices, while Innovation and Social Change: The Obaloy Cattle Enterprise in Benguet (Tapang, 1985) examines adaptive strategies in livelihood practices. Agricultural practices were also presented in Cultivation of Kintuman-Ibaloi Style (*Cultivation of Kintuman – Ibaloy Style*, n.d.). Kaapuan: Benguet Heritage (Fong, 2021a) and Modernization and the Cultural Practices of Benguet (Ramos, 1994) explore how evolving traditions respond to modernization pressures. Beliefs and customary practices are also detailed in Some Folk Beliefs and Practices Among the Mountain People of Northern Luzon (Tabora, 1978), Nabaloi Law and Ritual (Moss, 1920), and Istorya Pangkep ni Kaapoan Tan Karajuan (Stories About Our Ancestors and Customs) (Onjon ni Ivadoy Inc., 2022), providing rich cultural contexts for language and behavior.

There are also newspapers retrieved during the compilation of documents that spoke of significant events, topics, and concerns that involve the Ibalois and their culture and traditions, and these are the works of: Latawan (2013), Abad (2016), David (n.d.), Pungayan (2022), Okubo (2010), Carantes (2021), Cadalig (2023; 2024), Empian (2019a, 2019b), *Ibaloy Support in the 1998 Revolution* (1997), and *Preserving the Ibaloy Culture Through Schools of Living Tradition* (2018). These documents help show that the Ibalois and their culture and traditions had endured over time and the changes it brought.

Some of the documents include doctoral dissertations and master's thesis, which highlight history, culture, traditions, and Indigenous knowledge and practices.The documents include the works of Prill-Brett (1990), Pagnas (2000), Badongen (1997), *Faculty Research and Publications* (2015), *Faculty research and publications: Book of abstracts* (Vol. 2), 2017; Wiber (1984), Doriano (2015), Sari (n.d.), Kidlo (2022), Kieth (1997), and Atos (1982). These documents, in a deeper sense, delve into understanding the Ibalois, what and how they ought to be, in the aspects of history, culture, and tradition, and Indigenous knowledge and practices.

Moreover, several documents highlight how Ibaloi can be incorporated into educational programs and cultural revitalization initiatives, reinforcing cultural pride and facilitating the transmission of Indigenous knowledge across generations, such as Ibaloy Leads Creation of First Youth Club in AU School (Empian, 2019a, 2019b) and also the clipping titled Youth reacquainted to the gods, goddesses of Benguet by Bitog (2021). Additionally, the 2nd International Conference on Cordillera Studies (Abaya, 2017) and related academic efforts highlight ongoing initiatives to preserve Indigenous knowledge. These works capture the struggles, resilience, and ongoing evolution of the Ibaloi identity while supporting modern efforts to sustain and promote their language and heritage.

These works not only capture the enduring traditions and evolving identities of the Ibaloi people but also highlight ongoing initiatives to protect, revitalize, and promote the language within modern educational and cultural frameworks. They collectively serve as vital references for understanding how language is deeply intertwined and connected with social structure, historical experiences, and cultural continuity. Thus, these materials provide substantial resources for introducing and learning the language's background and context. They offer rich insights into cultural references, historical developments, and social customs, which are vital to understanding the language's features. Cultural studies help explain and highlight the meanings of specific terms; historical references trace and record changes in syntax, pronunciation, and semantics; and social norms provide context for appropriate language use.

3.2.2. *Literature*

From 20 documents, literature emerged as a topic. These documents highlight folktales, oral literature, music, and songs. Particularly the works of Aguilar-Cariño (1990) and Fong (2021a, 2021b). Guinaran (2016), Schools Division Office of Benguet (2013), *The Ethnography of the Ibalois* (n.d.), Wilson (1958), Pungayan (n.d.), Listino and Awas (2010), Dizon (1999), and *Istorya Pangkep ni Kaapon tan Karaujan (Stories about our ancestors and customs)* (2022) present a list of numerous tales that highlight the culture, traditions, and values of Benguet and the rest of the Cordilleras.

More recent contributions, such as PuLaG by Pilo et al. (2022) and To My Fellow Igorot Youth by Guinaran (2016), compile literary works, including essays, short stories, and poems, some of which are written in Ibaloi. These contemporary pieces demonstrate that Ibaloi remains a living language capable of creative expression. The work of Carantes (2013), A Brief Survey of Philippine Theater Form and Insights into the Mimetic Elements of Some Cordillera Cultural Practices, delves into Philippine Theater and the culture of the Cordilleras, including that of the Ibalois. This can be used in Art Appreciation classes, serving both as a cultural and linguistic resource. Meanwhile, Pungayan (n.d.), through his work The Temper and charisma of the ba-diw in three Ibaloi towns, offers a glimpse of the Ibalois' ba-diw, a chant that reflects the life and culture of the said ethnic group. Engaging with such literary and performative

traditions nurtures a deeper understanding of the Ibaloi worldview and language. Aside from these, two documents can be associated with religion: Dibshon Mengi-kan ni Pansigshan (Dibshon mengi-kan ni pansigshan: The New Testament, 1978) and C.I.C.M. missionaries and Indigenous Filipinos (Medina, 2000), which play a role in language use and transmission. In addition, Indigenous Ibaloy Songs: A Curricular Resource for Teaching of Panagon (2010) is a study that sees songs not only as an art but also as a medium for promoting the preservation of culture and tradition, practices, and linguistic learning. Aside from that, we also have Boado's (1996) Mga Katutubong Kuwento ng mga Ibaloy sa Benguet, which gives a glimpse into the life of the Ibalois in earlier times.

Literature, by its nature, plays a vital role in language revitalization as it enlivens cultural imagery, evokes emotional responses, and connects readers to the lived experiences of a people (Abdullayeva, 2021). These materials, therefore, serve not only as documentation but as active tools in the revitalization of the Ibaloi language. By integrating them into education, public readings, and community programs, they can engage younger generations through artistic expression, making the language more accessible, meaningful, and relevant to contemporary life.

3.2.3. Linguistics

Eight (8) documents were recorded in this category, including dictionaries, guidebooks, and studies. Three of these are dictionaries that contain Ibaloi words with definitions and translations, as well as other local languages such as Kankana-ey and Ilocano, with English and/or Filipino translations, including the books of Caro (2010), Ameda (2011), and Baucas (2003).

The work of Anton (2010), titled A Handy Guidebook to the Ibaloi Language, is one of the guidebooks recorded in this category. It discusses the Ibaloi language, including its basic vocabulary, pronunciation guides, and grammar and sentence structure. Ibaloi words and expressions with English translations are the main content of Baucas's (2003) work titled Ibadoy (Ibaloy) Vocabulary Translation. Pungayan's (n.d.) work, Nabaloi in 12 Lessons, offers a structured approach to understanding the basics of Ibaloi; it contains discussions on Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, and Cultural Context. Another work noted under this category is Baucas (2003), which examines Ibaloi words with English translations. A study conducted by Bucaoto and Macaraeg (2016) analyzed the Pangasinan-Ibaloi Consonant Phonemes. This helps understand the connection between the Ibaloi and Pangasinan languages. The other one, titled Faculty Research and Publications, has no identified author and was published in 2015. Likewise, Faculty Research and Publications: Book of Abstracts (Vol. 2), published in 2017, also has no identified author. Both were published by the University of the Philippines Baguio.

These resources are crucial for teaching the technical aspects of the language. They not only support structured language instruction but also serve as foundational references for

serious learners. Furthermore, they play an essential role in language preservation and revitalization by documenting vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in accessible formats. By providing structured learning pathways, these materials help ensure that future generations have the tools necessary for in-depth study and meaningful engagement with the Ibaloi language.

4. CONCLUSION

The Ibaloi language is a vital component of the Ibaloi people's culture, history, and identity. A review of materials from the Benguet Provincial Library and the Baguio City Public Library reveals that a significant number of resources on the Ibaloi language are available. These include dictionaries, guidebooks, literary works, and studies, which can effectively support instruction in schools, particularly within the MTB-MLE program. However, while these materials are sufficient for introductory and general teaching purposes, they may still be insufficient for more advanced, in-depth study. If the Ibaloi language is to be offered as a full course in higher education institutions as part of a language revitalization effort, additional academic resources and comprehensive linguistic studies will be necessary. At present, the available materials are well-suited for promoting awareness and basic understanding of the language and culture, particularly among younger generations, to help ensure that the language remains visible and valued. Nonetheless, sustained efforts in documentation, curriculum development, and scholarly research are essential for truly revitalizing and institutionalizing the Ibaloi language.

Additionally, most available documents are outdated, with the more recent materials authored by a limited number of individuals. A majority of these materials are written entirely in English or include only limited Ibaloi text, limiting their effectiveness for immersive language learning. This lack of diversity and the scarcity of updated, contemporary resources pose a challenge in effectively teaching the Ibaloi language and culture, especially to younger generations. In an age dominated by technology and fast-evolving media trends, learners are more likely to engage with content that resonates with their lived experiences and interests. Language materials that are modern, relatable, and presented in formats familiar to today's youth, such as digital media, interactive apps, or social platforms, are crucial. Creating new materials written by and for the current generation can foster deeper connections and interests, making Ibaloi learning more relevant and appealing to young learners. Without such updates, revitalization efforts may struggle to capture the interest and meaningful engagement of the very audience they aim to reach.

5. RECOMMENDATION

There is a clear need to develop updated, relevant materials in Ibaloi, including dictionaries, grammar guides, storybooks, and other educational tools. To ensure cultural authenticity and inclusivity, more works featuring Ibaloi translations should also be produced.

Additionally, the creation of literary works, such as poems, short stories, and narratives written in or translated into Ibaloi, is highly recommended to promote deeper appreciation and everyday use of the language, particularly among younger generations.

Furthermore, for revitalization initiatives to succeed, it is essential to systematically compile, organize, and make existing Ibaloi language resources accessible. A centralized, well-documented body of materials would serve as a vital foundation for both formal education and independent learning, ultimately supporting efforts to preserve and promote the Ibaloi language. One limitation of this study is that it did not classify the learning materials by specific Ibaloi dialects. Therefore, future research is recommended to categorize these materials according to the distinct Ibaloi dialects to provide more nuanced and accurate insights. Since this study focused primarily on Baguio City and Benguet, future researchers are encouraged to broaden the scope by assessing available resources in neighboring provinces such as Nueva Vizcaya, La Union, and Pangasinan, where Ibaloi is also spoken.

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THE CITY AS A CHARACTER IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper treats the city as a character in contemporary Spanish literature. The city is not merely a physical space or background; it is a dynamic entity that informs stories, affects personal and collective identities, and interacts with larger social and cultural conversations. The city is portrayed as a living organism, a symbol of memory, struggle, change, displacement and cultural diversity, thus blurring the traditional boundaries between setting and character. This investigation considers selected works of Andrés Trapiello, Benjamín Prado, and Lucía Etxebarria, with an emphasis on the authors' transformation of urban spaces into significant, symbolic, and affective terrains. It examines how specific cities and neighbourhoods act as narrative agents which interact with characters and help build plot, identity and meaning. Their representations show that urban spaces are not just geographical locations, but intricate sites where personal experiences and social identities are constantly negotiated in changing cultural, political and historical contexts. The paper also discusses how literary representations of the city reflect major social issues in contemporary Spain such as alienation, globalisation, migration, social fragmentation and class inequality. The interaction of individuals and urban space shows tensions of tradition and modernity, belonging and displacement, individual and collective memory. Ultimately, the study claims that the city operates as an agent, symbol and narrative presence at the same time, offering valuable insights into the changing cultural, social and historical realities of contemporary Spain.

Keywords

City as Character; Contemporary Spanish Literature; Urban Identity; Cultural Memory; Social Issues; Literary Urbanism; Symbolic Landscapes

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades literary scholars have paid more and more attention to the importance of space and spatiality, especially to the representation of cities in literary texts and to the role of urban environments in the construction of meaning. Traditionally the city has often been treated as a mere backdrop or setting for the lives of characters and the occurrence of events. Streets, buildings, neighbourhoods and public spaces were generally secondary elements of the narrative. But modern literary studies have contested this reading by highlighting the non-passive and non-neutral quality of space. Instead it can be a proactive player in creating characters, stories, memories and wider social and cultural change.

In this way the city can almost become a character in the story, participating in the story development and influencing how the readers perceive the experiences of those who live there. This is especially true of contemporary Spanish literature, where urban spaces are often conceived as spaces of life and multiple layers. The city is not just a geographical space, but an active presence that interacts with the characters, shaping their identities and experiences. The contemporary Spanish city is designed as a space of constant change and transformation, the result of historical memories, globalisation, migration, social inequalities and cultural diversity. The literary city is therefore a space in which individual experiences are inscribed in broader social and historical processes.

The present study examines the works of Andrés Trapiello, Benjamín Prado and Lucía Etxebarria, and pays special attention to the way these authors build the city as a dynamic and significant character in their narratives. Each author has a different literary style and emphasises different aspects of the urban experience, but their works show that the contemporary Spanish city is not static or homogeneous. Trapiello's representations are more explicitly engaged with questions of history, memory and urban transformation, while Prado explores relationships between personal experience, social realities and changing urban environments. Meanwhile, Etxebarria often connects city life with personal identity, relationships, gender and cultural change. From these different points of view the city appears as an intricate environment in continuous interaction with the people living in it. The main argument of this study is that the city has a form of agency. It is not that the city acts literally like a human being, but rather that urban space is an active force on characters, events, feelings and meanings. Streets, neighbourhoods, buildings and public spaces acquire symbolic significance through the memories and experiences associated with them.

The city is therefore more than a collection of physical structures; it is an emotional, historical and cultural landscape. Memory is especially important in the relationship between people and urban space. Cities are palimpsests of the past in a process of constant physical and social change. Buildings may become old and disappear, neighbourhoods may change, new populations may arrive, but memories connected with particular places can continue to influence people and communities. The city thus fulfils a double role: it preserves personal

and collective memories and it provides opportunities for new experiences and identities. The character-city interaction also evokes the questions of belonging and alienation. Characters can feel a sense of belonging in some spaces, and a sense of alienation or dislocation in others. The anonymity, freedom and social possibilities of urban spaces can also generate loneliness and isolation. Such experiences show how strongly identity is related to the places in which people live. Finally, literary representations of the city allow us to analyse bigger issues in contemporary Spain such as globalisation, migration, cultural diversity, social inequality and urban change. Thus, spatial analysis can help us understand the city not simply as setting, but as an active component of literary meaning. Ultimately, the modern Spanish literary city is a site of memory, identity, conflict, transformation and possibility, providing us with valuable insights into changing social and cultural realities in present-day Spain (Compitello & Larson, 2001; Douglas, 1933; Mulero, 2018).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between literature and urban space has become an increasingly important area of research in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Recent scholarship has moved beyond the city as a geographical setting, and has increasingly explored the ways in which urban environments are involved in the formation of memory, identity, social relations, and narrative meaning. Recent research on Spanish culture shows how spaces can be places of multiple temporalities of history and places of convergence of past and present (Aguilera-Mellado et al., 2024).

This is a development of special interest to contemporary Spanish literature, where cities are often locations of cultural change, social conflict, memory and individual experience. Recent studies also talk about the social production of urban space through everyday practices and interactions. For instance, García and Gorfinkiel (2024) show how the design and use of urban neighbourhoods produce social relations, interaction and community cohesion. While their study is sociological, it has implications for literary analysis, in that it shows that urban spaces are not neutral environments. The meanings attached to particular places are shaped by the ways in which people inhabit, move through and interact with cities. Literature also turns streets, neighbourhoods, public squares and other urban sites into spaces that affect character and plot development.

The city has been the focus of much recent literary scholarship, but not as a passive backdrop, but as a dynamic cultural landscape. Hurtado and Torregrosa(2022) study Madrid in Elvira Lindo's *A corazón abierto* and the relationship between the urban landscape, everyday social reality and memory. Their analysis demonstrates how the literary representations of Madrid can preserve individual and collective memories of the past. The urban environment is deeply linked to personal memory and historical experience, demonstrating the way literary space can function as a repository of social and emotional meanings.

This relationship between the urban transformation and the literary representation is also present in the recent studies on the contemporary Spanish narratives. Similarly, Picón's (2019) analysis of Rafael Reig's *Sangre a borbotones* and Javier Moreno's *2020* shows how transformations of public space may be central to the construction of contemporary urban dystopias (Picón, 2019). Her study shows how the structuring and the accessibility of urban space can affect narrative structures and representations of violence, control and social relations. The article is about dystopian fiction but its approach is helpful for the present study in that it shows how changes within the city can actively shape narrative possibilities rather than simply providing a setting for events.

More recent scholarship has also examined the relationship between urban space and historical memory. The 2024 special issue of the Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies, "Ruinas modernas: Untimely Spaces and Multiple Temporalities in Modern and Contemporary Spanish Culture" (Aguilera-Mellado et al., 2024) emphasises the significance of space in comprehending the connection between memory, history, and contemporary Spanish culture. The emphasis on ruins and multiple temporalities is particularly relevant to literary representations of cities, as urban spaces are often marked by vestiges from different historical epochs. Buildings, streets, monuments and neighbourhoods can be both a sign of present and a repository of memories of previous social and political experiences.

Another important strand of recent scholarship concerns the city's relationship to contemporary social change. Studies of Spanish urban environments increasingly indicate that cities are defined by processes of inequality, segregation, mobility and changing forms of belonging. Recent research on Madrid and Barcelona continues to explore socio-spatial inequalities and residential segregation, demonstrating that urban space reflects wider social divisions. The developments are relevant to the field of literary studies as contemporary writers tend to represent cities through experiences of inclusion, exclusion, displacement, alienation and belonging. The literary city can thus be a mirror of the unequal social structures that organise urban life.

Recent work on Spanish literary representation of the city further shows that urban environments can be critical to the aesthetic organisation of literary texts, as González et al. (2023) point out in his research on urban space in *Poemas puros* by Dámaso Alonso. In *Poemillas de la ciudad* the modern city appears as an active agent in the construction of the internal logic of the literary representation. Although his study is of an earlier period, it provides support for the larger argument that the city is able to shape literary form and meaning, rather than merely provide a geographical site.

Recent studies on Spanish cultural landscapes also show the importance of the city as a literary space. Recent research on urban environments has increasingly drawn on ideas of memory, mobility, public space, social interaction and cultural identity. The literature proposes that the meaning of a city is created by the relationship between physical structures and the experiences of people who inhabit them. (So, for example, literary representations

of cities are to be read as interpretations of social life, not as transparent representations of places on the map.)

This view is especially helpful when analysing the work of Andrés Trapiello. His paintings of Madrid often relate the city of today to memory, history and personal experience. Cities are meaningful because they carry the traces of past experiences and of historical transformations.

Recent work on urban memory supports the understanding of literary cities as spaces in which different temporalities coexist. In this sense, Madrid can be read not only as the setting of Trapiello's narratives, but also as an active entity that shapes the narrator's view of the past and the present.

Another relevant perspective on the relation between literary characters and the city can be found in the work of Benjamín Prado. Prado's writing often deals with memory, identity, social tensions, relationships and existential uncertainty. These themes can be explored through the spaces in which his characters move and interact. The city offers opportunities for encounters and movement, but it can also generate anonymity and alienation. Much recent work on urban literature has focused on these very tensions between mobility and exclusion, community and isolation, individual experience and wider social structures. The city in Prado's work can thus be approached as a narrative setting that shapes the emotional and social experience of characters.

Lucía Etxebarria adds one more dimension, since her literary representation of urban spaces is closely linked to issues of gender, identity, sexuality and social change. More recent scholarship on urban space has emphasised that the access to and experience of the city is not the same for all social groups. People's experiences of public and private spaces may be shaped by gender, social position, mobility and cultural expectations. This view offers an important framework for the study of Etxebarria's characters, whose experiences of contemporary urban life often involve questions of autonomy, relationships, identity and alienation.

The recent scholarship thus identifies a number of important dimensions of the literary city: urban space can preserve memory, structure social relationships, reflect inequality, influence identity, and participate in narrative development. But there remains an important gap. Much of the current research looks at the city as a landscape, setting, cultural space, site of memory or representation of social transformation. By contrast, the city as a figure carrying out actions usually ascribed to literary characters has received less attention. This study helps to fill this gap by conceptualising the city as a narrative agent or a character.

The idea of the city as a character does not imply that the city has a literal human consciousness. Instead, it explores the way an urban setting can gain narrative agency by the impact it has on characters, events, emotions, memories and themes. A city becomes character-like when its spaces influence the behaviour of characters, shape their identities, create conflicts, preserve memories, and contribute to the development of the narrative. The

city can thus have a kind of narrative presence comparable to that of a character, although its agency is exercised through geographical, social, historical and symbolic structures.

By applying these perspectives comparatively to the work of Andrés Trapiello, Benjamín Prado, and Lucía Etxebarria, this study contributes to recent scholarship on urban space, memory, and public space, as well as to contemporary Spanish culture. Trapiello's Madrid can be analysed in terms of historical memory and continuity, the urban settings of Prado in terms of social and existential tensions, and Etxebarria's cities in terms of gender, identity, mobility and alienation. These three authors together enable us to investigate different ways of making the city an active presence in the narrative of contemporary Spanish literature, rather than a background.

Therefore, although the current corpus of literature provides a good basis for approaching the importance of urban space in Spanish literary studies, the present research broadens this conversation by considering the city as a character. The study asks not only where literary events take place, but what the city does within the narrative, how it affects characters, how it holds memories, and how its transforming identity helps to construct meaning. Thus, the contemporary Spanish city can be read as a physical environment, a social structure, a cultural memory, an emotional landscape, and an active narrative participant.

The city has been the object of existing scholarship on contemporary Spanish literature as setting, cultural landscape, social space, and site of memory, identity, and transformation. More recent work has also examined the impact of the urban environment on characters and their representation of social change. But relatively little attention has been paid to the city itself as a character-like narrative presence. More specifically, there is a need for comparative research that investigates the active impact of the city on characters, events, emotions, memory, and the evolution of narrative. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analysing the works of Andrés Trapiello, Benjamín Prado and Lucía Etxebarria, and, in particular, their representations of urban spaces, which transform the city into an active participant in the narrative, rather than a passive setting.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a qualitative, comparative and textual research methodology of the representation of the city as a character in contemporary Spanish literature. The study approaches selected literary works of Benjamín Prado, Lucía Etxebarria and Andrés Trapiello. These authors were chosen because their work deals substantially with urban space, memory, identity, social relations and individual experience, offering diverse points of view from which the narrative function of the city can be analysed. The main data are selected novels and literary texts written by the three authors. The study uses close reading and qualitative textual analysis to explore the functioning of urban spaces in the narratives. Close reading is especially suitable as it allows for detailed analysis of language, description, narrative point of view, characterisation, symbolism and recurring spatial patterns. Close

reading is a kind of analytic attention. As recent methodological scholarship has noted (Ohrvik, 2024), it is a systematic rather than impressionistic way of reading literary texts. Methodologically, the study draws on the emerging field of Literary Urban Studies, which explores the relationship between literary texts and cities and offers methodologies for analysing how narratives create and interpret urban spaces (Finch, 2021). This study does not examine the city as a place, but rather how the physical city interacts with its literary version. More recent work in literary urban studies has also been concerned with the relation between the textual and the material city and with how literary texts represent urban complexity and memory (Gurr, 2020). The textual analysis is built on five analytical dimensions: (1) urban space and narrative agency, (2) memory and history, (3) identity and belonging, (4) social and emotional experience, and (5) urban transformation. These categories are used to identify recurring patterns across the chosen texts. Specific attention is paid to passages in which the streets, neighbourhoods, buildings, public spaces and other urban locations shape the actions, relationships, memories or emotions of characters.

The study also looks into the narrative function of urban space. It questions whether the city is merely a backdrop to the events or whether it is actively involved in the development of the story. Recent studies on urban space and fiction have also suggested analysing physical and narrative space through descriptive, symbolic and narrative attributes, showing how urban environments can affect the structure and meaning of fictional narratives (Puche and Castro, 2022).

The approach is comparative, i.e. the similarities and differences between the three authors are identified. The paper examines Trapiello's representations of the city with reference to memory and historical continuity, Prado's urban environments with reference to social tensions, personal experience and alienation, and Etxebarria's representations with reference to gender, identity, interpersonal relationships and contemporary urban experience. These categories are not considered as fixed boundaries but as analytical points through which overlapping themes can be found.

Finally, the study compares and interprets the findings regarding the degree of character-like becoming of the city in the selected narratives. The city as a character is not meant to suggest the city possesses literal human consciousness. Rather, it refers to the extent to which the urban environment generates narrative presence through its effects on characters, its shaping of events, its remembrance of events, its creation of conflicts and its contribution to the thematic development of the text. This qualitative and comparative approach allows the study to investigate how contemporary Spanish writers transform the city into an active narrative presence instead of a mere passive setting.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Andrés Trapiello: The City as Memory and Historical Continuity

Madrid is the center of the relationship between individual experience, memory, and history in the literary work of Andrés Trapiello. The city is offered not just as the geographical stage on which the narrative takes place but as a space for the remembrance and interpretation of the past. Streets, buildings, neighborhoods, squares, and other familiar urban places gain significance through the memories associated with them. The physical city then becomes tightly bound with the psychological and emotional experiences of the narrator and characters. One of the most relevant features of Trapiello's portrayal of Madrid is the coexistence of different timescales. The modern city is shaped by former historical periods, and these marks make the past present in the everyday city life. A street or building might seem banal today but at the same time it calls to mind personal memories or historical events. The city therefore functions as a sort of living archive. Its spaces preserve experiences that would otherwise be lost, linking individual memory with collective history. This connection between space and memory also shapes the narrator's concept of identity. Walking through familiar places, observing the changes in neighbourhoods, or remembering earlier versions of the city can spark a dialogue between the past and the present. Madrid thus is an active participant in the act of remembering, rather than a mere backdrop to the act of remembering. A city can make individuals think, feel homesick, remember, and sometimes feel lost. Trapiello's urban representation can be understood, therefore, as the city's embodiment as a character. Madrid has a literary personality, clearly identifiable, forged by its streets, architecture, history and the changing social environment. It shapes the narrator's view of the past and contributes to the emotional tone of the story. The city is a changing place, and this, too, becomes part of the narrative. In this way, Madrid does not stay still while the characters are developing; its transformation parallels, and sometimes affects, their own experiences.

4.2 Benjamín Prado: The City as Social and Emotional Space

Benjamín Prado offers a different but complementary view of the literary city. In his works, urban environments are inseparable from social relationships, personal experiences, memory, uncertainty and emotional conflict. The city becomes a place where characters meet other people, negotiate relationships, confront personal problems, and search for meaning. The urban space is thus directly responsible for the emotional and social dimensions of the narrative. Prado's urban representation is characterised by the tension between movement and alienation. The city permits characters to roam free in streets and public places and provides opportunities for encountering strangers and acquaintances. At the same time, the big city setting may result in anonymity and alienation. One can be in a crowd and still be hopelessly alone. This contradiction is at the heart of the experience of modern urban life and adds an important dimension to Prado's narratives. Urban spaces may also be a reflection of characters' inner lives. A certain street, neighbourhood or public place may become associated with a relationship, a conflict, a memory or a moment of personal

transformation. The significance of the space, therefore, evolves from the experiences that take place within it. The city is full of emotion because the characters imbue its physical settings with personal meaning. The urban space that Prado represents also allows individual experiences to intersect with larger social realities. The city consists of different social groups, lifestyles and ways of interaction. Characters deal with social inequalities, changing relationships and the pressures of modern urban life. Thus, the city can be interpreted as a social structure that moulds individual experience. From the perspective of the present study, the urban environments of Prado exemplify how a city can achieve a character-like function without being personified. The city determines the way characters move, interact, remember and build themselves. It is a place where streets and public spaces are conducive to conflicts and relationships. So the city becomes a character in the story, rather than a backdrop.

4.3 *Lucía Etxebarria: The City, Gender, and Identity*

The freedom associated with urban life, however, is accompanied by certain forms of alienation. The autonomy fostered by anonymity can also lead to emotional seclusion. Individuals might experience a sense of estrangement from their surroundings, despite having access to diverse social and cultural settings. This contradiction is typical of the complexity of life in modern cities. The city offers freedom, but that freedom does not automatically create belonging. Also important for Etxebarria's representation of the city is the gender perspective. Women, men and people in different social positions experience urban space differently. Public and private spaces can be sites of reproduction or challenge of gender expectations.

Thus, the city participates in the construction of female identity, becoming part of the social environment in which characters negotiate autonomy and belonging. Etxebarria's writing thus allows us to read the city as a presence that is like a character, as it affects the choices, relationships, emotions and identities of her characters. It creates opportunities, pressures, moments of conflict and transformation. The urban environment is woven into the fabric of the characters, not something separate from them.

4.4 *The City and Globalisation*

Globalisation has become a recurring theme in modern Spanish literature, and the city has a prominent role in this process. The city space is a reflection of the effects of globalisation on the economic and cultural spheres, resulting in greater diversity but also greater inequalities. The city space in the studied literary corpus is represented as an interactive space formed under global trends. Migration, tourism and economic transformation change the city space and create opportunities and problems for the inhabitants. The mediation of the above processes is a demonstration of the power of the city space.

4.5 *The City as a Symbolic Landscape*

The city is not only thematically pertinent, but it also functions as a symbolic landscape in contemporary Spanish literature. It also embodies broader themes such as modernism, fragmentation and change. The urban landscape can serve as a useful metaphor, since it often mirrors the complexity of human existence. For example, maze-like alleyways might symbolise confusion or uncertainty, while open urban landscapes might symbolise freedom or possibilities. Symbolism is important in transforming the city from a setting to a character.

5. DISCUSSION

The city in contemporary Spanish literature is more than a geographical setting, as the analysis of Andrés Trapiello, Benjamín Prado and Lucía Etxebarria shows. In the works examined here, the construction of memory, identity, relationships, emotions and social experience involves urban space. The city thereby becomes an active narrative presence, affecting characters and contributing to the development of meaning. The comparison also suggests that the city is not a character in quite the same way in each author's work. In Trapiello, Madrid is profoundly connected to memory and history. Streets, neighbourhoods and buildings keep traces of personal and collective experiences and allow the past to remain present in the contemporary city. Therefore, the narrator's reflections on time, memory and identity are closely connected with urban transformation.

In Prado the city is more connected to social interaction and emotional experience. Urban spaces offer possibilities of encounter, but also anonymity and isolation. People can be with others and still be lonely or uncertain. Specific streets and public spaces become emotionally charged because of the relationships, conflicts and memories associated with them. Thus, the city affects the social and psychological experiences of the characters.

Etxebarria adds another dimension – the relation between urban space and gender, identity, autonomy and belonging. The city provides opportunities for autonomy and self-assertion, but also for insecurity and alienation. The anonymity of the city allows characters to cast off conventional expectations and to experiment with alternate identities, but it does not ensure emotional belonging. In this way, the city becomes part of the process through which characters negotiate their identities.

Despite these differences, all three authors depict urban space as something that interacts with human experience. The city has no agency in the same way as a human character, but it can exercise a kind of narrative agency by affecting characters, events, memories and emotions. The streets, buildings, neighbourhoods and public spaces gain significance through repeated experience and become closely linked to the development of the narrative. The results also indicate a strong relationship between urban transformation and personal transformation. As cities change, characters are often faced with changes to their own identities, relationships and memories. The literary city is, thus, a record of social change and a place in which individual change happens. These results support the main thesis

of the study that the city can be read as a character-like narrative presence rather than as a setting. The city is reflected in Trapiello mainly through memory and historical continuity, in Prado through social and emotional experience, and in Etxebarria through gender and identity. While their approaches differ, all three show that the city has a part in how characters experience and interpret their worlds. The paper thus argues for reading the city as character as a productive way of understanding contemporary Spanish literature. Such a perspective expands the notion of literary figure beyond the human, and provides a way for urban spaces to gain identity, emotional weight, historical depth and narrative power.

6. CONCLUSION

The city is considered as a character-like presence in contemporary Spanish literature, through the works of Andrés Trapiello, Benjamín Prado and Lucía Etxebarria. The analysis reveals the city as more than a mere geographical setting. It plays an active role in the construction of memory, identity, emotions, relationships and social experience. It has been shown by research that every author builds a different relation between the urban space and the narrative. In Trapiello, the city is closely linked to memory and historicity; in Prado it turns into a place of social interaction, emotional experience and alienation; and in Etxebarria urban space is closely linked to gender, identity, autonomy and belonging. Yet, all three authors present the city as an active agent, affecting the characters and contributing to the development of the plot. The results also indicate that the city can have a sort of narrative agency without being literally personified. The streets, buildings, neighbourhoods and public spaces become meaningful through the experiences linked to them. Urban transformation is also a metaphor of personal and social transformation. The city is not only a reflection of human experience but also a character in its own right. This study shifts the focus from the city as setting to the city as narrative presence and contributes to a wider understanding of the representation of the city in contemporary Spanish literature. This implies that literary characters can be more than just human figures, and it suggests possibilities for space itself to acquire the qualities of character through the agency of memory, identity, emotional significance, and narrative influence. Finally, the work of Trapiello, Prado and Etxebarria shows that the contemporary Spanish city is not only the stage where stories take place, but it is also a constituent element in the construction, experience and understanding of these stories. The character-like entity of the city then provides a fertile model for future studies of the intersections of literature, urban space, memory, identity and social change.

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ARTICLE

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FINANCIAL DEVELOPMENT–INEQUALITY NEXUS: MODERATING ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY IN LOW-INCOME AFRICAN ECONOMIES

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Abstract

Low-income African countries continue to experience persistent rise in income inequality despite efforts to reform their financial systems and promote financial development for inclusive growth. This study investigates the effect of financial development on income inequality, with particular emphasis on the moderating role of institutional quality. The study utilized panel data for 19 low-income African countries from 2000 to 2023. Panel regression was employed, and the Hausman test indicates that fixed effects model was the most appropriate estimation techniques. The findings highlight a significant negative relationship between financial development and income inequality in both the baseline and augmented models. Specifically, improvement in financial development is associated with 0.31% reduction in income inequality at 5% significant level. This suggest that enhance access to financial service reduces income inequality in low-income countries in Africa. Similarly, institutional quality, when included as an independent variable, exhibits significant negative effect on income inequality, by reducing income inequality to approximately 0.21% at the 5% significant level. Furthermore, the interaction between financial development and institutional quality is associated with 0.084% reduction in income inequality at 5% significant level, indicating that a strong institution enhances the reduction effect of income inequality by financial development among the low-income African countries. This study provides a valuable empirical contribution to existing literature on finance-inequality nexus in the low-income African countries by examining the moderating role of institutional quality. The study recommends policies that promote the expansion of financial development and improving the quality of governance and strengthening institutional framework.

Keywords

Income Inequality; Financial Development; Institutional Quality; Low-Income Countries; Interaction Term

1. INTRODUCTION

Inequality income is one of the greatest socio-economic problems in West Africa, particularly among the low-income countries where financial development growth remains underdeveloped (Pollacko, 2021). Income inequality is the extent at which income among the population are distributed unevenly, creating a disparity between individuals at higher and lower income level (Gonzales et al. 2015). Income disparity among the low-income countries have persisted, despite the recent improvement in solving the problem. A larger portion of the population live below the poverty line in West Africa, as a result of limited financial opportunities (Hugues et al. 2022). Africa have an income inequality index of 45 countries, which if higher than 40 of the Gini index of inequality (World Bank,2024).

Despite, articulation of United Nation (UN) sustainable development goals of achieving a reduction in poverty, the problem continues to persist among the low-income countries in West Africa leading to limited opportunities for low-income individual and small businesses (Mbona, 2022). In recent time, studies on income inequality have gain relevance in the literature as a result of its treat to the development agenda of many countries. Financial development is closely related to distribution of wealth, by lowering income disparities among individuals and businesses

Financial development can be a potential strategy for capital redistribution, thereby allowing many segments of the individual and businesses to have access to financial services for productive uses, which may in a way reduce income-inequality in the society. According to the early researchers on financial development and income inequality such as Demirgüç-Kunt et al. (2017), people who are likely to be poor are the ones that are not participating in the financial system. The opportunity for them to obtain capital to finance their business from the formal financial system is difficult. World Bank (2021), also emphasis that inclusivity of individuals and businesses in the financial system can lead to growth and decline income inequality through the mobilization of savings and capital accumulation in the country.

Numerous empirical research supports the financial development effect in reducing income inequality (e.g., Okafor et al., 2023, Mbona, 2022; Shamsuddeen & Tiri, 2024). Conversely, other studies suggest that financial development increases income inequality. These studies suggest that the higher the level of financial development attained the more inequality, because individuals at the higher income ladder benefits more due to access to financial service (eg., Cong & Nam, 2023; Chi-Yang & Mingming, 2021; Bezemer & Samarina (2019).

Furthermore, studies on role institutional quality in reducing income inequality provide evidence of complimentary role of institutional quality between financial development and income inequality reduction (eg., Bime & Christian, 2026; Zubair, 2025; Almounsor & Mensi, 2024; Sumbola et al., 2024; Mansour, 2023; Olumuyiwa et al., 2020). Contrary, other empirical studies claimed that institutional quality have does not compliment financial

development in reducing income inequality. These studies suggest that the quality of institutions such as control of corruption does not affect the relationship between financial development and income inequality (eg., Uzar, 2023; Olalekan & Mbaya, 2023).

This study investigates how financial development affect income inequality in 19 low-income countries in Africa from 2020 to 2023, using institutional quality as a moderator. Specifically, the paper investigates (i) the effect of financial development on income inequality among the low-income countries in Africa. (ii) how institutional quality influence the effect of financial development on income inequality among the low-income countries in Africa. This study is organized into five sections, section one is the introduction; literature review in the second section; the third section is the methodology which comprises theoretical justification, data sources, techniques of estimation, model specification analysis; sector four is the result interpretation and discussion; and finally, the study make some conclusion, points out the theoretical implication, emphasis on policy implication and finally make recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the several studies that found a significant negative relationship between financial development and income inequality is the work of Bimé and Christian (2026) who examined the role of institutional quality in financial development and income inequality among 33 Sub-Saharan Africa countries. The study utilized System-GMM on a panel data for the selected countries. The findings revealed that institutional quality significantly influence the relationship between financial development and income inequality among selected Sub-Saharan Africa countries. Indicating that a strong institution enhances the reducing effect of financial development on income inequality. The study recommends the creation of program in order to strengthen the quality of institution in the Sub-Saharan African countries. Similarly, Zubair (2025) study the how institutional quality impact on financial inclusion among some selected countries in Africa for the period of 2015 to 2021. Pooled mean group was employed for the data estimation and the result show that a stable institution increases the level of financial inclusion. The study concludes that significant negative impact exists between institutional quality and financial inclusion among the selected West African countries. Moreover, Almounsor and Mensi (2024). investigate the hypothesis that financial development has a positive effect on income inequality, which also improve with a quality institutional framework. The study utilized GMM using a panel data for 48 Sub-Saharan African countries for the period of 1980 to 218. The finding show financial development reduces income inequality. The study conclude that financial development reduces income inequality, with institutional quality complimenting the effect.

Furthermore, Sumbola et al. (2024) investigated the link among financial development, institutional quality and poverty reduction in Nigeria from 1987 to 2022. The study utilized time series data and utilized vector error correction model (VECM) for the short run and long

run relationship, while ARDL bound tests to estimate the long-run effect through the error correction term. The findings indicate a significant positive relationship between financial inclusion in the short run, institutional quality and poverty reduction long run result show an insignificant relationship. The study conclude that financial inclusion and institution quality are importance only in the short. In addition, Cong and Nam (2023) studied multi-dimensional effect of financial development on income inequality among 30 Asian countries for a period of 19 years (2000-2019). The finding from the study indicate that financial development reduces income inequality significantly among the Asian countries. In a similar study, Okafor et al. (2023). Financial development is found to reduce income inequality among the African countries through financial stability, financial access and financial efficiency.

Moreover, Mansour (2023) studied effect of institutional quality on financial development in the middle-income countries in central American. The study utilized panel regression analysis using data for the period of 2007 to 2020. The findings indicate that a weak institutional quality has significant negative effect of financial development among the middle-income countries. Therefore, recommend reforming the institutional framework with the support of the World Bank, International Monetary fund and United Nation with a view to improve the institution, education and employment level. In addition, Mbona (2022) studies on 120 countries in the World using index of financial development, financial institution indices and financial market indices discovered financial development lower income inequality among the countries. Similarly, Olumuyiwa et al (2020) investigate the relationship among institutional quality, financial development and exclusive growth in Nigeria for the period of 19984 to 2017. Asymmetric cointegration test was employed used time series data. The finding of the study exhibits long-run relationship among institutional quality, financial development and economic growth in Nigeria, with asymmetric adjustment in equilibrium among the variable. Therefore, the study concludes that institutional quality, financial development is important for economic growth.

However, other studies reported a contrasting finding. For instance, Shamsuddeen and Tiri (2024) used financial Kuznets curve to study the impact financial development on income inequality in Nigeria for 36 years (1986-2022). The study employed ARDL Bound test and Toda-Yamamoto test. The result indicated that financial development increases income inequality before lowering it in a later stage. This exhibits the consistency of the finding with the Kuznets U-shape curve. Similarly, Cong et al. (2023) examined financial development impact on income inequality among the African countries. The study analyzes the data using the system generalized method of moment (GMM). The finding indicate that financial depth increases income inequality among the African countries, while other dimension of financial development such as financial accessibility and financial stability dimensions reduces income inequality among the countries. Additionally, Uzar (2023) examined the causal link between financial development and institutional quality on four different categories of income groups such as high-income, upper-middle income, lower-middle income and low-income. The study utilized countries specific panel regression, the result show that there is a bi-directional

relationship between institutional quality and financial development in the upper-middle income and high-income. Similarly, the result insignificant relationship in countries with low-income and lower-middle income. Policy implication suggests utilization of this outcome to guide the promotion of policy intervention.

In addition, Chi-Yang and Mingming (2021) studied nexus of finance-inequality and the process of transition period between every stage of the transition in China. The finding indicates that financial depth accounted for 11-28% change in Urban income inequality and the changes occur with the changes in the credit restriction. Similarly, Olalekan and Mbaya (2023) in their study explore the link of financial development and economic growth relation by institutional quality. The study used a used a system generalized method of moment (SGMM) with a panel data between 1995 to 2020. The study discovers a weak institutional framework, which reduces the capacity of financial sector to promote economic growth. Therefore, the study recommended that African countries to design better plan for institutional quality framework to maximize the benefits of financial development and inclusive economic growth. In addition, Bezemer & Samarina (2019) examined financial development and income-inequality relationship in Indonesia over seven years period (2009-2015). Using System-GMM, the study found mortgage credit significantly increased income inequality, while the control variables such as shares and investment were statistically insignificant.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Theoretical Justification

This study hinge on the Kuznets curve theory, originally proposed by (Kuznets, 1955), which proposed inverted U-shaped for economic growth and income inequality, where initial stage income inequality increases at the early stage of economic development and later decline as economic continue to grow. The idea extended to financial system, becoming the financial Kuznets Curve (FKC), which argued that financial development benefits the wealth generating and reduce in income inequality through financial inclusion. Among the scholars that supports that idea is Greenwood & Jovanovic (1990) who emphasis that nations transit from slow economic growth to a fast economic growth, thereby distribute income from the rich to poor. This resembles the similarity to that of the inverted U-shaped relationship between economic growth and financial development. Later Levine et al. (2007) emphasis financial development increases income among the poor countries and reduces income inequality, where the impact on financial development on the income growth is as a result of reduction in income inequality. Additionally, Beck et al. (2008) emphasis that a well-developed financial system promote participation to all segment of society through access to banking services, digital banking and mobile banking. They explained that an improvement in the provision of financial services allow households and small businesses opportunity to

get access to credit, savings and entrepreneurial activities which promote equitable distribution of resources.

Furthermore, Greenwood and Jovanovic (1990); and Law and Tan (2009) also provided a theoretical model, which explained the development of financial system from small to a more sophisticated. They argued that at the initial stage only wealthy individual participate in the financial system due difficulty in entering and institutional barrier. After its expansion lower and small businesses joint. Similarly, Levine (2005) argued that financial development promotes economic growth through saving mobilization, credit allocation and improvement in capital allocation.

However, the relationship between financial development and income inequality has been contested by Beck et al. (2008) who argued that financial development distribute income unequally, by allocative more to the poor than the wealthy, thereby contribute to the reduction of income inequality. Additionally, Minsky (1992) in his financial instability hypothesis suggests that financial services access lead economic inequality. Kuznets curve suggest that income inequality could be as a result of expansion of financial services at the initial stage of financial development which in the later stage will reduce the income disparities.

3.2. Data and Source

The study utilized quantitative analysis using panel data to study the effect of financial development on income inequality, with institutional quality as a moderator in low-income African countries for the period of 23 years between 2000 to 2023. The study included a sample of 19 low-income African countries, as identified according to World Bank (2024): are Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Burundi, Chad, Eritrea, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Liberia, Mali, Madagascar, Mozambique, Rwanda, Niger, Sierra Leone, Togo, Somalia and Uganda. Although there is revision of the income classification many times by the World Bank due to changes in the gross national income of the countries (GNI), the study maintained the classification of the counties throughout the study period (2000 to 2023) to ensure consistency of the sample study for the data analysis.

Panel Secondary data were obtained from recognized international databases. Gini coefficient is used as an indicator of income inequality, which was obtained from World Inequality Database (2024). Financial development proxied by domestic private sector credit as a percentage of GDP, sourced from World Bank Global Findex Database (World Bank, 2024). Institutional quality was proxied by governance quality, obtained from the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators of the World Bank (2024). Control variables such as employment, inflation and trade openness were source from the world bank development indicators (WDI) of the World Bank (2024).

3.3. *Estimation Techniques*

The paper utilized different statistical techniques for analyzing the data such as descriptive statistics which provide an overview of the variables' distribution, central tendencies and variability (Gujarati & Porter, 2009). Similarly, correlation analysis was explored to test the strength and direction among the variables (Wooldridge, 2010). The study estimated pooled Ordinary Least Square through the fixed and random effect model. However, the decision on the appropriateness of fixed effect and random effect was carried out by the use Breusch Pagan Test and Hausman test. Hausman (1978), select of appropriate model of fixed or random effect is on the bases of whether there is correlation between individual effect and independent variables, in the case of this study a fixed effect model was selected by the Hausman test.

The Fixed effect model is a suitable choice for the estimation because it accounts for observed country characteristics, ensuring consistent and unbiased estimation (Hausman, 1978; Woodrdge, 2010; Baltagi, 2021). Additionally, the study utilized a dataset for 19 low-income countries over 23 years period, representing small panel dataset, which is well suited by the FE approach. This model captures internal variation and unobserved factor in the model (Hsiao, 2022). While the System and difference GMM approaches are often used in dynamic panel data estimation, they tend to be more appropriate in estimating large panel dataset and small timeframe (Arellano & Bond, 1991; Blundell & Bond, 1998). Since the data in this study is a static panel without lagged variable, FE estimation is the most appropriate approach for this study.

For the preliminary tests, descriptive and correlation analysis were conducted and both the tests give an overview of the variables according to Gujarati & Porter (2009); Wooldridge, (2010) respectively. The diagnostic tests ensure that the result of the finding is reliable, some of test include Breusch and Pagan test of collinearity among variables (Breusch & Pagan, 1979) and test of variance inflation factor for multicollinearity (O'Brien, 2007). Finally, autocorrelation test was conducted in accordance with Wooldridge (2010).

3.3.1. *Model Specification*

The empirical model is presented in models. Model 1 which serves as the baseline, established a direct relationship between financial development and income inequality. Meanwhile, model 2 is augmented by incorporating the interaction between financial development and institutional quality. The two functional models are specified as:

$$LGNI_{ijt} = F(LFD + INF + LEMP + LOPN) \quad \text{.....(1)}$$

$$LGNI_{ijt} = F(LFD + LFD * GQI + INF + LEMP + LOPN) \quad \text{.....(2)}$$

The Panel Econometric regression models specified as:

$$LGNI_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LFD_{ijt} + \beta_2 INF_{ijt} + \beta_3 LEMP_{ijt} + \beta_4 LOPN_{ijt} + \varepsilon_{ijt} \quad \text{.....} (3)$$

To explore how interactive financial development and institutional quality affect income inequality, model 4 is specified as:

$$LGNI_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LFD_{ijt} + \beta_2 GQI_{ijt} + \beta_3 (LFID_{ijt} * GQI_{ijt}) + \beta_4 INF_{ijt} + \beta_5 LEMP_{ijt} + \beta_6 LOPN_{ijt} + \varepsilon_{ijt} \quad \text{.....} (4)$$

Where, LGNI_{it} is the logarithm of Gini coefficient, LFD_{it} is the logarithm of domestic private sector credit as a percentage of GDP, GQI_{it} is the governance quality index, $LFD_{it} * GQI_{it}$ is the interaction between FD and GQI, INF_{it} is the consumer price index, $LEMP_{it}$ is the logarithm of employment in service sector, $LOPN_{it}$ is the logarithm of trade openness. Moreso, β_0 is the intercept, $\beta_1 - \beta_6$ are the coefficients of the independent variables 1 to 6, ε_{it} is the denote the unobserved effect between the countries, $i - j$ are the cross-sectional measurement between country i and j, and t is the is the time series from $1\ to\ T$. The control variable for the study is inflation, employment and trade openness.

4. RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL ESTIMATION

4.1. *Descriptive Statistics*

The summary statistics of the variables is presented in this sub-section of the paper. It presents a summary of all the variables of the study.

Table 1 - Descriptive Analysis

Variables	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
GNI	400	3.6821	0.1453	3.3524	4.0128
FD	400	-2.8875	0.6842	-4.3210	-0.8124
GQI	380	-0.5234	0.7126	-1.9872	1.1654
INF	395	9.2145	14.8732	-.54321	38.5402
EMP	384	4.7213	0.1024	4.4821	5.2764
OPN	395	2.8627	0.5418	1.5230	3.9421

Source: Author's Computation by Stata, 2024.

Table 1 provide a summary of the statistics for the variables, showing an unbalanced panel data structure. As noted by Baltagi (2021) and Woodridge (2019), the presence variation in panel dataset does not raise any methodological concern if the missing data comprised only a small portion of the overall data, as it also does not affect the reliability of the estimations.

The result indicated that the mean value of the dependent variable income inequality (GINI coefficient) 3.6821 indicate a moderate inequality in income among the West African countries and the standard deviation 0.1453 suggest a stability in income within the period of the study. The mean of the financial development (FD) -2.4875 shows a lower financial development in underdeveloped countries such West African countries, while the standard deviation indicates a moderate variation among the countries. The mean value of institutional quality (GQI) -0.5234 indicate a weak governance quality indicator across the West African countries, but the in varies across the countries. Inflation (INF) which represent the macroeconomic stability showed to be highly varied, having a mean of 9.2145 with an extreme outlier, and the standard deviation of 14.8732, suggesting macroeconomies instability. Employment (EMP) and Openness (OPN) revealed a relatively steady distribution, with a mean of 4.7213 and 2.8627 respectively, both having a lower standard deviation, suggesting a smooth trends across all the sample variables.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

This sub-section presents the result of correlation analysis to show the association between the variables.

Table 2 - Correlation Analysis

Variables	GNI	FD	GQI	INF	EMP	OPN
GNI	1.0000					
FD	0.2415* (0.038)	1.0000				
GQI	-0.3128** (0.006)	0.3564** (0.002)	1.0000			
INF	-0.0184 (0.874)	0.1287 (0.201)	-0.1421 (0.164)	1.0000		
EMP	0.2546* (0.041)	-0.1627 (0.148)	-0.2874* (0.022)	-0.1965 (0.102)	1.0000	
OPN	0.1095 (0.286)	0.4182** (0.001)	0.2319* (0.047)	-0.0275 (0.812)	-0.3418** (0.008)	1.0000

Source: Author's Computation by Stata, 2024.
Note: (*) and (**) is significance at 1% and 5% p-values in parenthesis

Table 2 present a pairwise correlation analysis of the study variables. The correlation suggests significant positive correlation between financial development (FD) and income inequality (GINI) with correlation value of 0.2415 at 5% significant level, indicating that higher FD led to rising GINI which is consistent with the increase in financial development in the early stage of financial development. Nevertheless, institutional quality indicator which represent institutional quality has a significant negative correlation with income inequality (GINI) with a value of -0.3128 at 1% significant level, suggesting that quality institutions led to equality in income distribution.

In addition, institutional quality is positively correlation with financial development with a value of 0.3564 at 1% significant level. This indicates that higher quality of institutions promotes an increase in financial development. Moreover, employment has a significant positive correlation with income inequality. Similarly, trade openness correlate with financial development with a value of 0.4182 at 1% significant level, indicating the importance of trade openness in increasing financial development among the low-income countries in West Africa. All the variables indicate a correlation below 7%, suggesting a moderate correlation among the variables which indicate less occurrence of multicollinearity in the regression model.

4.3. *Diagnostic Tests*

The diagnostic sub-section provides an evaluation of the different tests conducted for the reliability and validity of the results. This paper conducted tests such as heteroskedasticity, multicollinearity test and model specification test. The tests provide accuracy and robustness for the estimated results, so that accurate inferences can be drawn from the analysis.

Table 3 - Diagnostics Tests

Baseline Model				
Test Description	**Null Hypothesis (H_0)**	**Statistic**	**Value**	**p-value**
Breusch-Pagan / Cook-Weisberg for Heteroskedasticity	Residuals have constant variance (homoscedasticity).	$\chi^2(1)$	0.03	0.5621
Multicollinearity test and Variance Inflation Factors	No multicollinearity among independent variables.	Mean VIF	1.72	-
Hausman Test	The coefficients Fixed and random are systematic difference	$\chi^2(5)$	16.23	0.0019
Augmented Model with Institutional Quality				

Heteroskedasticity test of Breusch-Pagan / Cook-Weisberg.	Residuals have constant variance (homoscedasticity).	$\chi^2(1)$	0.41	0.5213
Multicollinearity test and Variance Inflation Factors	No multicollinearity among independent variables.	Mean VIF	1.68	-
Hausman Test	The coefficients Fixed and random are systematic difference	$\chi^2(5)$	15.87	0.0026

Source: Author's Computation by Stata, 2024.

The Heteroskedasticity test for heteroskedasticity shows a chi-square statistic of 0.03 and probability value of 0.5621 suggesting that null hypothesis of homoskedasticity is accepted that the variance in the residuals is constant. In addition, multicollinearity test by the variance inflation factor of 1.72 suggest no multicollinearity among the variables. Finally, Hausman test for fixed and random effect suggest that the null hypothesis is rejected, suggesting fixed effect model as more appropriate model for the estimation as indicated by the p-value of 0.0019 which is less than 5% significant level. The results of the diagnostic test confirmed that the model is free from heteroskedasticity and multicollinearity, which require a fixed-effects estimation for a more reliable result.

4.4. Fixed Effects Panel Estimations

This estimation is presented to compare the effects, magnitudes and variations of the variables on income inequality. The Hausman test selects fixed effects as the appropriate estimation for both the baseline model and the augmented model:

Table 4 - Baseline Fixed Effect Estimation with Cluster Robust Standard Error

Variables	**Baseline Fixed Effect Estimation with Cluster Robust Standard Error**			
LGINI	**Coefficients.**	**Cluste Std. Err.**	**t-values**	**P>t**
LFD	-0.3186***	0.0954	-3.34	0.004
LEMP	-0.4873**	0.1916	-2.54	0.020
INF	-0.0026	0.0031	-0.84	0.411
LOPN	0.0081	0.0584	0.14	0.891
Cons	0.9124	1.0238	0.89	0.384
Within R^2	0.4251	No. of Countries 19	F (4,19)	27.18

Between R^2	0.5487	No. of Observations 400		
R^2 (Overall)	0.6725		Prob >F	0.0000

Source: Author's Computation by Stata, 2024.
Notes: *** and ** indicate significance at 1% and 5% respectively.

Table 4 present the baseline result for fixed effects estimation, indicating the outcome without the institutional quality (GQI). Financial development has a significant negative effect on income inequality at 1% significant level, indicating that 1% increasing in financial development decrease income inequality by 0.31%. Similarly, employment show 5% significant negative effect on income inequality, suggesting that 1% increase employment decrease income inequality by approximately 0.49%, indicating that increase employment level led to the reduction in income inequality in the low-income countries in Africa. Conversely, inflation and trade openness indicate a statistically insignificant effect on income inequality, suggesting that the two variables do not exhibit income inequality among the low-income African countries.

The model stability indicators such as overall R^2 0.6725, which show that income inequality variation is explained by the regression model. Where, within R^2 0.4251, indicate that 43% of the variation within the countries is captured by the model. The between R^2 0.5487, show the strength of explanatory variables within the countries is moderate. Similarly, adjusted R^2 of 0.4123 indicate that the degree of freedom of the model is well explained. Finally, the chi-square of 27.18 indicate that the explanatory variables are jointly significant at 1% significant level.

Table 5 - Augmented Fixed Effect Estimation with Cluster Robust Standard Error

Variables	**Augmented Fixed Effects with Country-Cluster Robust Standard Error**			
LGNI	**Coefficients.**	**Cluster Std. Err.**	**t-Value**	**P>t**
LFD	-0.3274***	0.1013	-3.23	0.005
GQI	-0.2146**	0.1048	-2.05	0.048
LFD * GQI	-0.0837**	0.0398	-2.10	0.044
LEMP	-0.4987	0.1962	-2.54	0.021
INF	-0.0025	0.0031	-0.81	0.426
LOPN	0.0068	0.0597	0.11	0.910
Cons	0.9124	1.0415	0.88	0.387
Within R^2	0.4179	No. of Countries 19	Robust F(6,18)	15.84
Between R^2	0.5623	No. of Observation 400		

Overall R^2	0.6834	Prob >F	0.0000

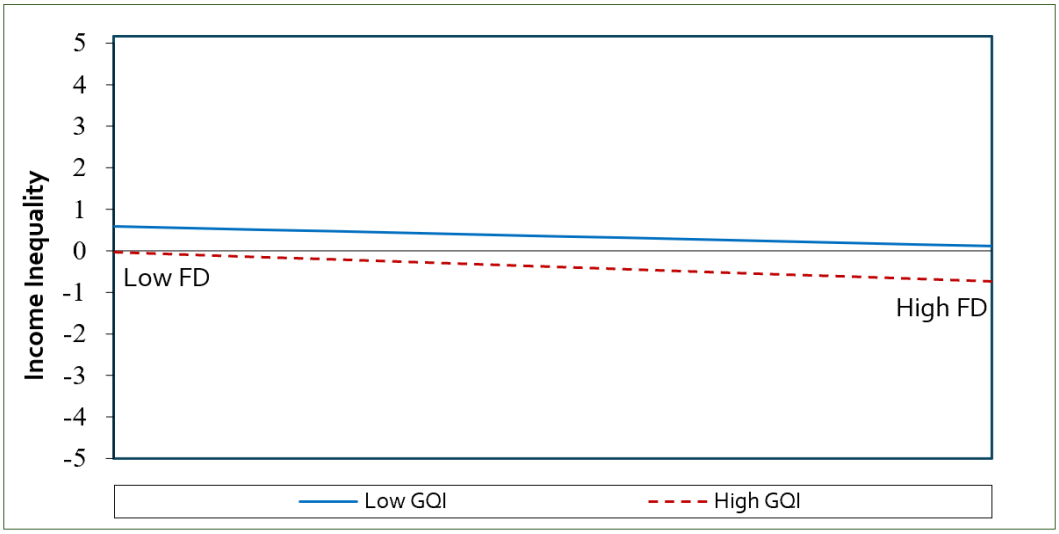
Source: Author's Computation by Stata, 2024.
Notes: *** and ** indicate significance at 5% and 10% respectively.

Table 5 presents the result from augmented fixed effects estimation, which shows a significant negative relationship between of financial development and on income inequality (GNI). Specifically, 1% increase in financial development accompanying with 0.32% reduction in income inequality at 5% significant level. Similarly, institutional quality (GQI) also indicates significant negative effect on income inequality, with 1% increase in financial development leading to a reduction in income inequality by 0.21%. This demonstrates that quality institutions and good governance promote equitable income distribution among the low-income countries in Africa.

Furthermore, the interaction between financial development and institutional quality (FD * GQI) shows a significant negative effect on income inequality, indicating that 1% increase in the interaction term reduces income inequality by 0.084% at 5% significant level. On the other hand, employment (EMP) has a significant negative effect on income inequality, 1% increase in employment leads to 0.49% decrease in income inequality, suggesting that higher employment level leads to a lower income inequality among the low-income countries in Africa. However, both inflation (INF) and trade openness (OPN) are statistically insignificant, suggesting that these variables do not have any meaningful effect in income inequality.

The model stability indicators such as overall R^2 0.68.34, which show that income inequality variation is explained by the regression model. Where, within R^2 0.4179, indicate that approximately 42% of the variation within the countries is captured by the model. The between R^2 0.5632, show the strength of explanatory variables within the countries is moderate. Similarly, adjusted R^2 of 0.5623 indicate that the degree of freedom of the model is well explained. Finally, the chi-square of 28.73 indicate that the explanatory variables are jointly significant at 1% significant level.

Figure 1 – Interaction Plot of Institutional Quality on Financial Development and Income Inequality



Source: Author Computation from the fixed effect estimation result using Microsoft Excel, 2026.

The interaction graph illustrates how institutional quality moderates the relationship between financial development and income inequality. The solid line represents countries with lower institutional quality, while the dotted line represents countries with higher institutional quality. Both lines indicate negative trend, indicating that financial development tend to lower income inequality, regardless of the level of institutional quality. However, the dotted line is steeper than the thick line, indicating that reduction in income inequality is greater in countries with higher level of institutional quality. While the graph shows no evidence of intersection, it still indicates evidence of positive moderating effect of institutional quality, but without a strong effect. The graph provide evidence that greater institutional quality contributes more to reduction in income inequality than financial development alone.

4.5. *Discussion of Result*

Findings from this study highlight negative effect of financial development on income inequality, suggesting that increase in financial development lower income inequality among the low-income African countries. The finding from the result is consistent some of the empirical findings from the literature, in particular Cong and Nam (2023) finds that financial development significantly reduces income inequality in Asian countries. Similarly, Mbona (2022) conduct a cross-country examination of financial development characterized by financial accessibility, efficiency and stability reduces income inequality among the African countries. Additionally, A study by Adel (2021) supports the idea that financial development lower income inequality level. The finding indicates that financial development as measured by private sector credit lower income inequality.

However, other empirical studies found a contrary finding as discover by Shamsuddeen and Tari (2024) indicate that financial development may initially increase income inequality

before reversing it the future. In addition, studies that found financial development to increase income inequality are Chi-Yang and Mingming (2021) and Bezemer and Samarina (2019) studies show that financial development increase income inequality in China and Indonesia respectively.

Furthermore, the finding of this study revealed significant negative effect of institutional quality on income inequality, suggesting the role of institutional quality in moderating financial development. The finding supports Bimé and Christian (2023) and Zubair (2025), which show that institutional quality enhances financial development effect on income inequality. Additionally, Almounsor and Mensi (2024) discover that quality of institutions compliments the influence of financial development on income inequality.

Contrary, Uzar (2023) and Olalekan and Mbaya (2020) find a significant positive effect of institutional quality and interaction term on financial development, suggesting that strong institutions increase the ability of financial development to promote more income inequality in low-income countries in Africa. This study provides valuable insight to the body of knowledge on financial development and how institutional quality moderate the outcome income inequality in the context of low-income countries in Africa.

5. CONCLUSION, THEORETICAL IMPLICATION, POLICY IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. *Conclusion*

This study examined how financial development affect income inequality, with a particular focus on the role institutional quality in low-income countries in Africa. Panel data spanning period between 2000 to 2023 were employed, which were analyzed through the used pooled ordinary least square with fixed effects models, as suggested by Hausman test.

The finding indicates a significant negative effect of financial development on income inequality, implying that advance financial system contribute to reduction in income inequality among the low-income countries in Africa. Similarly, the quality of institutional shows a negative effect on income inequality, indicating institutions facilitate the reduction of income inequality. Additionally, the interaction between financial development and income inequality also indicates a significant negative relationship, reaffirming the notion that financial development reduces income inequality. One notable one of the control variable, employment, show significant negative effect on income inequality in the low-income countries in Africa, indicating that increase the labor employment in the market reduces on income inequality.

Conversely, inflation and trade openness are statistically insignificant, indicating no effect on income inequality. Generally, this study shows the important of financial development on income inequality with the support of quality institutions among the low-income African countries.

5.2. *Theoretical Implication*

This study offered an important contribution to the relationship between financial development and income inequality with institutional quality as a moderator. It providing an empirical insight on the Kuznets hypothesis, which proposes a U-shape relationship where income inequality increases at the early stage and decrease as the economy mature. This study extended the hypothesis to financial development, indicating that financial development expansion benefit only the wealthy with access to financial services at the early stage of its development, as financial development increase the financial services benefit the low-income groups, thereby reducing the income inequality. Additionally, this study introduces institutional quality as a moderating, demonstrating that the relationship between financial development and income inequality become stronger when supported by quality institutions. This study highlights the need for complimenting financial growth with a strong institutional quality framework for a greater income equality in low-income countries in Africa.

5.3. *Policy Implication*

The finding from this study provides an important insight for policymakers in the financial sector, particularly in promoting income equality in the low-income Africa countries. The finding also shows financial development significant role in mitigating income inequality within these countries. Many African countries struggle in providing access to financial services due to lack of financial development. By enhancing financial development through financial access, greater financial inclusion and advancement of digital financial among the low-income households and business in the financial system income inequality can be reduce to the barest minimum. Additionally, establishing a strong institutional framework is important for achievement of equitable income distribution through financial development. This agenda aligns with the African Union's agenda 2068 for inclusive growth as well as United Nation Sustainable Goals for reducing poverty, inequality and inclusive growth.

5.4. *Recommendations*

Policy makers and regulatory agency should provide an avenue for the expansions of financial services through digital financial innovation, mobile banking, and agent banking, along with the provision of financial literacy, cost reduction and financial infrastructure to strengthen financial system for inclusive growth and reduce income inequality. Similarly, priority should also be given to institutional quality through strengthening of governance structure, regulatory framework, rule of law and transparency in policy, control of corruption and policy effectiveness in order to compliment the financial service for equitable distribution of income and inclusive growth. Further, labor employment should be given priorities through recruitment more people in the economy as a way of enhancing the level of financial

development for income inequality reduction among the low-income countries in Africa.

Declaration on the Use of AI: The author used ChatGPT -5.5 and Quillbot for editing to enhance clarity and readability. All outputs were verified, reviewed, and revised. The Author take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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Appendix A1: List of Low-African Countries Included in the Study

S/N	Country
1	Burkina Faso
2	Burundi
3	Central African Republic
4	Chad
5	Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo)
6	Eritrea
7	Ethiopia
8	The Gambia
9	Guinea-Bissau
10	Liberia
11	Madagascar

12	Mali
13	Mozambique
14	Niger
15	Rwanda
16	Sierra Leone
17	Somalia
18	Togo
19	Uganda

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the World Bank country classification

Note: The study maintained the classification of the counties throughout the study period (2000 to 2023) to ensure consistency of the sample study for the data analysis.

ARTICLE

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COGNITIVE LOAD AND SCAFFOLDING IN URDU LITERACY INSTRUCTION: A SCRIPT-SENSITIVE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Learning to read and write in Urdu involves script-related demands that can burden working memory, especially for novice learners. How much load these demands create depends on the learner's prior knowledge, the task, and the instructional context. The cursive, ligature-based Nastaliq orthography right-to-left directionality, the absence of short vowel markers, morphological complexity, and the gap between spoken and formal written Urdu all place demands on working memory that generic literacy instruction is not designed to address. Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) offers a useful theoretical lens for understanding these demands. Yet CLT has been developed almost entirely around language-neutral or alphabetic-language contexts. It does not offer a principled account of how script-specific properties generate cognitive load or how instructional scaffolding should respond to those properties. This article addresses that gap. It introduces the concept of Script Complexity Load (SCL), a theoretically derived, Urdu-specific construct that proposes five sub-dimensions of script-linked load, drawn from the Urdu writing system and the language demands it makes visible in print: orthographic complexity, directional load, inferential load, morphological load, and register load. The core of each sub-dimension is treated as intrinsic load, while directional and register load also have a design-induced, extraneous component. Building on this construct, the article presents a three-phase scaffolded instructional design framework that translates SCL into actionable design decisions. Each phase includes a structured audit mechanism that prompts designers to verify load conditions before progressing. The framework bridges CLT, scaffolding theory, and Urdu linguistics into a proposed design model. It is intended for researchers, curriculum designers, and educators working in Urdu literacy instruction, and it generates testable propositions for future

empirical work. The article is conceptual in nature. The framework is theory-derived and requires empirical testing before it can be treated as a validated model.

Keywords
cognitive load theory; Nastaliq; scaffolding; script complexity; Urdu literacy; working memory

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is not a single skill. It is a cluster of abilities that depend on each other. These abilities include recognizing letters, decoding words, understanding morphology, and holding meaning in mind long enough to construct a sentence, a paragraph, or a text (Ne'eman & Shaul, 2023). All of this happens in working memory, which is limited in capacity and easily overwhelmed.

This is why cognitive load matters in literacy instruction. When the demands of reading or writing exceed what working memory can handle, learning breaks down. A learner who is struggling to recognize letter forms has no capacity left for understanding words (Acha et al., 2023). A learner who is unsure whether to read left-to-right or right-to-left loses cognitive resources to spatial confusion before a single word is decoded. These problems are not purely abstract, and teachers often observe them in classrooms, although their severity differs from learner to learner.

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) has given educators and researchers a powerful set of tools for thinking about these problems (Sweller, 2011; Sweller, 2023). CLT categorizes cognitive demands into three groups: intrinsic cognitive load (ICL) (from the content itself), extraneous cognitive load (ECL) (from how content is presented), and germane cognitive load (GCL) (the productive effort that builds understanding). CLT has shaped instructional design across many domains. Its influence on literacy instruction has been meaningful. But the application of CLT has been mostly limited to alphabetic languages, particularly English.

Urdu presents a distinct set of demands. It is written in the Nastaliq script, a cursive, ligature-based orthographic system with right-to-left directionality, no obligatory short vowel markers, and substantial morphological complexity (Naz et al., 2017). Formal written Urdu also differs significantly from everyday spoken Urdu, creating a register gap that learners must bridge without explicit instruction (Ambreen & To, 2024). These features are not incidental. These features are structural properties of the writing system and the language, and they are likely to create specific cognitive demands that generic CLT-based frameworks do not address. How strongly they affect a given learner depends on other factors as well, including prior literacy experience, oral language proficiency, the quality of instruction, and the print environment (McBride et al., 2022).

Scaffolding theory offers a complementary perspective. Rooted in Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding refers to the temporary, adjustable support that enables learners to accomplish tasks they could not manage independently (Wood et al., 1976; Vygotsky, 1978). In literacy instruction, scaffolding has most often been operationalized through strategies like modeling, guided practice, and gradual release of responsibility. But scaffolding theory has not been systematically integrated with CLT, and neither has been applied to the specific script-level demands of Urdu.

This article attempts to close these gaps. It makes three contributions. First, it introduces the construct of Script Complexity Load (SCL), a theoretically derived account of how the structural properties of Urdu may generate distinct sub-dimensions of cognitive load. Second, it integrates SCL into a three-phase instructional design framework that combines CLT and scaffolding theory into a proposed design model. Third, it embeds a structured audit mechanism within each phase, enabling designers to verify that load conditions have been addressed before advancing. This audit mechanism, adapted from quality assurance thinking in instructional systems design, is intended to turn theoretical principles into explicit, checkable design decisions.

The framework is intended as a theoretical model and a principled foundation for designing and studying Urdu literacy instruction rather than a validated intervention. Its propositions require empirical testing, and the article concludes by outlining a research agenda to support that work. Throughout the article, statements about the framework's effects are presented as theoretically derived propositions, not as established findings.

2. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

2.1 Nature of the Approach

This article uses a conceptual synthesis methodology. More precisely, it is a theoretical synthesis, not a systematic or scoping review, because its aim is to develop a construct and a design logic and not to summarize all available studies. It does not report new empirical data. Instead, it draws on three bodies of established knowledge, including CLT, scaffolding theory, and Urdu linguistics and literacy research. It integrates them into a proposed theoretical framework. This approach is appropriate when substantial knowledge exists across separate domains that have not been systematically connected (Grames et al., 2022). CLT and Urdu literacy research are both well-developed fields; what is missing is the theoretical bridge between them. Sources were selected purposively for their relevance to the working memory demands of reading and writing in Urdu, with priority given to peer-reviewed and recent work. No systematic search protocol was applied, so the selection should not be read as exhaustive.

2.2 Sources of Integration

The framework draws from three primary sources. The first is CLT, including its three-load model and the instructional principles it has generated (Sweller & Chandler, 1991; Paas et al., 2003; Sweller, 2020). The second is scaffolding theory, specifically the ZPD-based account of supported learning and the conditions under which scaffolding should be provided and withdrawn (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976; van de Pol et al., 2010). The third is research on Urdu script, orthography, and literacy development, including psycholinguistic studies of Urdu reading and pedagogical analyses of Urdu literacy instruction (Rehman, 2011).

2.3 *The Central Theoretical Move*

The central theoretical move in this article is the introduction of Script Complexity Load (SCL). This construct arises from a straightforward observation: the cognitive demands of learning to read and write in Urdu are not fully captured by existing CLT categories. ICL refers to the complexity of the content or task. But in Urdu literacy, a substantial portion of that complexity may originate not in the ideas being communicated but in the properties of the script used to communicate them. SCL names this portion explicitly and disaggregates it into theoretically distinct sub-dimensions. This disaggregation is what makes scaffolding prescriptions possible because different sub-dimensions of SCL require different instructional responses. SCL is not proposed as a fourth type of cognitive load. It is an analytic lens for tracing particular sources of intrinsic load, and some design-induced extraneous load, to the writing system. As CLT holds, whether a given feature actually imposes load depends on learner expertise, element interactivity, and task demands, so script features are treated here as likely, not automatic, sources of load.

2.4 *Scope and Intended Use*

The framework is designed primarily for researchers and instructional designers working in Urdu literacy contexts, whether in Pakistan, diaspora communities, or Urdu-medium educational settings globally. It is also relevant for curriculum developers and teacher educators. The framework is not a teaching script or a lesson plan. It is a design logic for thinking through instructional decisions that is principled, systematic, and responsive to the specific cognitive demands of the Urdu script.

2.5 *Limitations of the Approach*

As a conceptual model, the framework has not been empirically tested (Wang et al., 2023). Its claims about SCL sub-dimensions and their instructional implications are theoretically derived, not empirically validated. Alternative interpretations of the evidence are possible, and the framework does not account for the full range of factors that shape Urdu literacy

development, e.g., motivation, sociolinguistic attitudes toward Urdu, access to print environments, and the influence of prior literacy in other languages. Further limitations concern construct validity, the role of learner expertise, the absence of established measures of SCL, and the difficulty of separating script demands from wider linguistic demands (see Limitations and Future Directions). These limitations define the boundaries of the framework's claims, not its irrelevance.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1 Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)

CLT was originally proposed by Sweller (1988). It begins with the architecture of human cognition. Working memory is a system we use to hold and manipulate information but is limited (Chandler & Sweller, 1991). It can hold only a few pieces of information at once, and those pieces are lost quickly unless they are actively maintained or transferred to long-term memory (Baddeley, 2020; Sweller, 2011). When instruction places too many demands on working memory simultaneously, the system becomes overloaded and learning breaks down (Castro-Alonso et al. 2021).

CLT categorizes these demands into three types (Chang et al., 2021). ICL comes from the content itself, how complex the material is, and how many elements must be understood in relation to each other (Endres et al., 2023). ECL comes from how the content is presented; poorly designed materials, split-attention layouts, redundant information, and visual clutter all add to ECL without contributing to learning (Çakıroğlu & Aksoy, 2017). GCL reflects the productive cognitive effort that builds understanding, connections, and schemas that can be retrieved and applied later. Consistent with current theoretical developments, this framework treats GCL not as a fixed additive quantity but as the productive use of whatever working memory capacity remains once ICL and ECL have been managed (Greenberg & Zheng, 2023; Sweller, 2010).

These distinctions have generated a rich set of instructional principles: worked examples, sequential task design, split-attention reduction, modality effects, the expertise reversal effect, and others (Fraser et al., 2015; Kirschner et al., 2018). But these principles have been developed almost exclusively in the context of alphabetic or logographic languages, primarily English, German, and Chinese. Their application to Urdu requires theoretical work that has not yet been done.

3.2 Scaffolding Theory

Scaffolding theory originates in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development. ZPD refers to the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with skilled support (Bozhovich, 2009). Instruction that operates within ZPD challenges learners without overwhelming them (Margolis, 2020). Scaffolding is the

mechanism through which this is achieved: temporary, adjustable support that enables learners to accomplish tasks they cannot yet manage alone and that is progressively withdrawn as competence develops (Wood et al., 1976).

The ZPD is especially relevant to literacy acquisition because literacy is built cumulatively. Early skills such as letter recognition and letter-sound mapping must become reasonably automatic before learners can devote working memory to word meaning and text comprehension (Lambright, 2024). At any point, the skills that sit just beyond a learner's independent reach define the zone in which guided support is most useful, for example when an adult models a ligature, points out the reading direction, or reads a word aloud before the learner attempts it. Common scaffolding practices in literacy classrooms, such as modeling, guided practice, and gradual release of responsibility, match support to the learner's next step in this sequence (Taylor et al., 2026). In Urdu, many of these early steps are script-level skills, which is why scaffolding decisions need to be tied to specific script demands.

The relationship between scaffolding and cognitive load is intuitive but has rarely been made explicit (van Nooijen et al., 2024). Scaffolding reduces cognitive load by taking over the parts of a task that exceed the learner's current capacity. Thus, it allows working memory to focus on the parts that are within reach. As the learner's knowledge and skill grow and more operations become automatic and less demanding of working memory, the scaffold is faded, and the learner takes over progressively more of the task. This is consistent with the logic of CLT's expertise reversal effect: what supports novices can impede experts, because the support itself consumes working memory capacity that experts no longer need to offload (Kalyuga et al., 2003). In this framework, scaffolding acts mainly on ICL and ECL. It reduces intrinsic load by taking over parts of the task, and it reduces extraneous load by removing unnecessary processing. Its link to GCL is indirect. By freeing capacity, scaffolding allows learners to invest effort in schema construction, so scaffolds that are withdrawn too early or kept too long can both limit the capacity available for germane processing.

For Urdu literacy, this relationship has direct implications. Scaffolding decisions in Urdu cannot be made generically; they must be calibrated to the specific cognitive demands created by the script. Different sub-dimensions of script complexity require different scaffolding strategies and different fading trajectories. This is the core design insight that the SCL construct is intended to support.

3.3 *Urdu Script: Structural Properties and Cognitive Demands*

Urdu is written in a modified form of the Perso-Arabic script, rendered in the Nastaliq calligraphic style (Murtaza & Khanum, 2023). Understanding what makes Urdu literacy cognitively demanding requires understanding the structural properties of this script, not just describing them but theorizing why each property creates a specific type of cognitive load.

Nastaliq orthography is ligature-based. Individual letters change form depending on their position within a word, i.e., initial, medial, final, or isolated. A learner must simultaneously recognize the abstract letter identity and its positional variant while also parsing the ligature connections between adjacent letters (Wali & Hussain, 2007). This places concurrent demands on visual pattern recognition and working memory that may be greater than those imposed by non-cursive alphabetic scripts, although this comparison has not been directly tested.

Urdu is written right-to-left. For learners whose prior experience with print is left-to-right, this directional conflict may add to cognitive load, whereas learners who already read other right-to-left scripts, such as Arabic or Persian, may experience little or none. For learners who do experience the conflict, attention must be directed against a default spatial orientation, consuming working memory resources that would otherwise be available for decoding (Khan et al., 2025).

Short vowels in Urdu are represented by diacritical marks (erabs) that are typically omitted in standard written texts. Skilled readers infer vowel sounds from context, morphological knowledge, and familiarity with lexical patterns (Ambreen & To, 2025; Niazi et al., 2023). Novice readers lack this knowledge base and must therefore hold multiple possible vowel interpretations in working memory simultaneously while attempting to decode (Rehman, 2011). It is a form of sustained inferential processing that adds to ICL.

Urdu morphology is root-based and productive. Many words are derived from shared roots through systematic patterns of affixation and internal change (Safdar & Mangrio, 2021). Reading and writing in Urdu require learners to track these morphological relationships, recognizing not just individual words but the morphemic components within them (Batool & Saleem, 2023). This adds a layer of simultaneous processing that compounds the demands already created by the script (Benmamoun et al., 2013).

Finally, formal written Urdu differs from the informal spoken Urdu that most learners already know (Akhtar et al., 2025). Vocabulary, syntax, and register all shift between the spoken and written forms (Aftab et al., 2023). This means that literacy instruction in Urdu cannot simply build on existing oral language knowledge; it must also bridge the register gap, which creates an additional source of ICL that is absent in languages where the spoken and written forms are more closely aligned (Rahman, 2011).

3.4 Introducing Script Complexity Load (SCL)

The five structural properties described above are not simply aspects of Urdu that make it difficult to learn. They are proposed here as theoretically distinct sources of cognitive load that can be named, categorized, and addressed through targeted instructional design. This is the insight behind the SCL construct.

SCL is defined as the working memory demand generated specifically by the structural properties of the Urdu script, as distinct from the conceptual or communicative demands of

the content being read or written. Its core is a category of ICL, but unlike generic ICL, but unlike generic ICL, which reflects the complexity of ideas, SCL reflects the complexity of the orthographic, directional, inferential, morphological, and register demands embedded in the written system.

SCL is organized into five sub-dimensions, each corresponding to one of the structural properties described above: orthographic complexity (Nastaliq letter forms and ligatures), directional load (right-to-left processing), inferential load (absent erabs), morphological load (root-based derivational complexity), and register load (spoken-written register gap). Table 1 summarizes these sub-dimensions, their nature, their load type, and their relationship to existing CLT categories.

SCL is not proposed as a fourth type of cognitive load, and it does not replace ICL or ECL. It is an analytic lens that helps designers trace particular sources of load to the writing system. In CLT terms, the core of each sub-dimension is intrinsic, because it reflects element interactivity that a novice must process while learning to read and write Urdu, such as holding a letter's shape, position, and ligature links in mind at once. Because intrinsic load depends on expertise, this core is expected to shrink as skills become automatic, and it may differ across learners with different prior experience of Perso-Arabic scripts. Directional and register load also have a design-induced component. Mixed-direction layouts, or formal texts presented without any bridge to spoken forms, add demands that do not belong to the script itself and can be removed by better design. That component is extraneous. Phase 1 therefore addresses the intrinsic core, and Phase 2 addresses the design-induced component.

Morphological and register load deserve a further note, because they are partly linguistic and not purely orthographic. They are included in SCL because, in Urdu, the writing system shapes how learners meet them. Unmarked short vowels may obscure the root-and-pattern structure of words, and the formal written register is the form that learners meet mainly in print (Ambreen & To, 2025). Even so, the boundary between script demands and wider language demands is not sharp. It is treated here as a conceptual limitation of the framework and is returned to in the limitations section.

Table 1 – Script-Specific Cognitive Load Sources in Urdu

Script Feature	Nature of Load	Load Type	SCL Sub-Dimension
Nastaliq orthography	Ligature-based letter forms require simultaneous recognition of shape and position.	ICL	Orthographic complexity

Right-to-left directionality	Conflicts with default left-to-right spatial processing; increases directional confusion	ICL (core) + ECL (design-induced)	Directional load
Absent short vowels (erabs)	Readers must infer vowel sounds from context and morphological knowledge.	ICL	Inferential load
Morphological complexity	Root-based derivations require tracking multiple meaning-bearing units simultaneously.	ICL	Morphological load
Spoken-written register gap	Formal written Urdu differs substantially from everyday spoken forms.	ICL (core) + ECL (design-induced)	Register load

Source: Author

The value of this disaggregation is practical as well as theoretical. Each sub-dimension of SCL is expected to call for a different scaffolding response. A designer who knows that a learner is struggling with inferential load (absent errors) should respond differently than one who knows the learner is struggling with directional load (right-to-left processing). Generic CLT guidance does not offer this level of precision. SCL is intended to.

4. POSITIONING WITHIN EXISTING FRAMEWORKS

Several theoretical frameworks are relevant to Urdu literacy instruction. Each offers something useful, but none provides the combination of cognitive load specificity and script sensitivity that the present framework aims to deliver.

CLT in its general form provides the foundational theoretical architecture. Its three-load model and instructional principles are well supported empirically and have broad applicability. But CLT treats the language medium as essentially transparent: a neutral vehicle for content. It does not theorize how the properties of a specific script generate cognitive load, and it does not offer design guidance calibrated to orthographic, directional, or morphological complexity. The SCL construct is intended to extend CLT into this territory.

Scaffolding theory provides a developmental rationale for adjustable instructional support. It is sensitive to learner differences and responsive to growth over time. But scaffolding theory does not come with a cognitive load mechanism. It tells us that support should match the learner's current capacity, but it does not tell us how to measure or analyze that capacity in terms of specific script demands. Integrating scaffolding theory with SCL provides that mechanism.

The Simple View of Reading (SVR) offers a parsimonious model of reading as the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). It has been influential in literacy research and instruction. But SVR is language- and script-neutral. It treats decoding as a unitary process, without accounting for the script-specific cognitive demands that make decoding in Urdu qualitatively different from decoding in English. The present framework seeks to extend SVR by proposing what decoding in Urdu may involve at the cognitive level.

Urdu literacy research has generated valuable descriptive accounts of how children and adults learn to read and write in Urdu (Rehman, 2011). These studies document the challenges learners face and identify the features of Urdu that make literacy acquisition difficult. But they have rarely theorized these challenges through a cognitive load lens, and they have not produced a design framework that translates their findings into instructional prescriptions. The present framework attempts to do this.

ZPD-based scaffolding research in second language acquisition has explored how support can be calibrated to learner need in language learning contexts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van de Pol et al., 2010). But this work has focused primarily on oral language development and grammatical acquisition, not on script-level literacy challenges. The present framework addresses a gap that L2 scaffolding research has not engaged with directly. Table 2 summarizes this positioning.

Table 2 - Positioning of the Present Framework

Framework	Primary Focus	Strength	Limitation	Contribution of Present Framework
CLT (general)	Cognitive load in learning	Strong theoretical base	Language-neutral; no script-specific theory	Adds script-specific load construct (SCL) for Urdu
Scaffolding theory (ZPD)	Supported learning progression	Developmental sensitivity	No cognitive load mechanism	Provides cognitive load rationale for scaffolding decisions
Simple View of Reading	Reading = decoding × comprehension	Parsimonious model	Language- and script-neutral	Extends SVR by specifying script-level cognitive demands in Urdu
Urdu literacy research	Descriptive accounts of Urdu reading	Language-specific insight	Rarely theorized through a cognitive load lens	Integrates Urdu-specific findings into a designable framework
ZPD-based L2 scaffolding	Second language acquisition support	Interaction-centered	Not applicable to script-level challenges	Addresses the script as a distinct cognitive domain requiring targeted scaffolding.

Source: Author

5. A SCRIPT-SENSITIVE FRAMEWORK FOR URDU LITERACY INSTRUCTION

5.1 *Overview*

The framework organizes instructional design for Urdu literacy into three sequential phases. Phase 1 addresses Script Complexity Load: the identification and sequencing of script-specific cognitive demands. Phase 2 addresses ECL: the reduction of unnecessary cognitive demands from material design. Phase 3 addresses GCL: the creation of conditions for deep processing and schema formation.

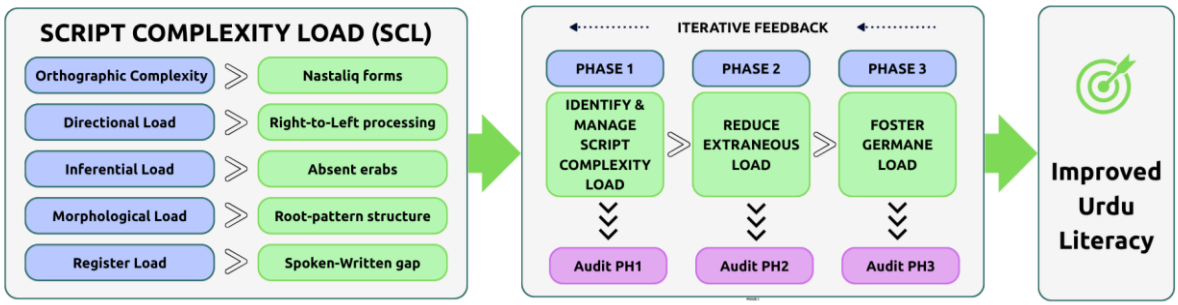
Within each phase, designers make specific decisions about task structure, material design, or learning activity. At the end of each phase, a structured SCL audit prompts the designer to verify that the phase's objectives have been met before advancing. This audit mechanism is what distinguishes the framework from general CLT guidance: it is intended to turn principles into explicit checkpoints, which may make the design process more systematic and transparent.

In this framework, the SCL audit is a structured self-check completed by the designer or teacher at the end of each phase. Each audit question is paired with an indicator that can be recorded as evidence, such as a learner error analysis, a short accuracy check on letter forms or reading direction, a materials review, or a brief teacher observation record. A phase is treated as complete when the evidence for each question meets a criterion that the designer sets in advance for the target learners. If it does not, the designer returns to the relevant phase and revises. The indicators and criteria suggested in this article are illustrative. Because SCL has not been validated, they should be read as a starting structure for local piloting and not as standardized measures (Boateng et al., 2018). The audit is called the SCL audit in all three phases because each phase uses it to check how well the SCL profile from Phase 1 has been respected.

The three phases are presented sequentially, but the framework is iterative. Evidence of difficulty during Phase 3 activities may indicate unresolved issues in Phase 1 or 2, and designers should return to earlier phases as needed.

Some strategies appear in more than one phase because they serve a different purpose in each. For example, directional cues are chosen in Phase 1 as a scaffold for directional load and are built into the layout of materials in Phase 2 so that they do not clash with other cues. The phases are therefore distinguished by the question each one asks, namely what demands are present, which demands come from the design, and how support should be withdrawn, and not by the strategies they use.

Figure 1 – The Script-Sensitive CLT-Scaffolding Framework for Urdu Literacy



Source: Author

5.2 *Core Assumptions*

The framework rests on four assumptions. First, the structural properties of Urdu are likely to generate categorizable cognitive demands that can be identified in advance and addressed through design. Second, scaffolding decisions must be calibrated to specific SCL sub-dimensions, not to generic difficulty. Third, the three phases of the framework address different types of cognitive load and are best worked through in order when a new design is being developed, although learners' needs may require moving between phases. ECL is difficult to reduce meaningfully before script-specific demands have been identified, and GCL is unlikely to be fostered effectively before the first two have been addressed. The order follows CLT's logic. Intrinsic demands set the baseline load that materials and tasks must respect, extraneous load is the part of that load which design can remove once the baseline is known, and germane processing draws on whatever capacity remains. Fourth, the framework is iterative: design decisions made in one phase may need to be revised in light of what is learned in subsequent phases or through piloting.

5.3 *Phase 1: Identifying and Managing Script Complexity Load*

The first phase is the one that distinguishes this framework most clearly from general CLT applications. Before any other design decisions can be made, the designer must understand what specific script-level demands the learner will face and in what order those demands should be introduced.

This phase begins with an SCL profile. The designer works through each of the five sub-dimensions—orthographic complexity, directional load, inferential load, morphological load, and register load—and assesses how demanding each sub-dimension is likely to be for the target learner population. This assessment draws on knowledge of the learners' prior literacy experiences, their familiarity with the Perso-Arabic script, their morphological awareness in Urdu, and their exposure to formal written Urdu. In practice, the profile can rate each sub-dimension as low, moderate, or high for the target group, using simple evidence such as a

short diagnostic task, a review of learners' reading errors, and information about prior literacy in other languages or scripts. Because prior experience changes the load, the same sub-dimension may be rated differently for learners who already read Arabic or Persian than for learners who do not.

Based on this profile, the designer sequences the introduction of script-level demands from lower to higher complexity. Orthographic and directional demands are typically addressed first, since they affect the most fundamental operations, e.g., letter recognition and reading direction, without which other decoding processes cannot proceed. Inferential and morphological demands are introduced progressively as the learner develops foundational script knowledge. Register demands are typically addressed later, once learners have established basic fluency with the script itself.

Figure 2 summarizes this sequencing. It shows the proposed prominence of each sub-dimension across early, middle, and later stages of Urdu literacy development. Orthographic and directional demands are expected to be most prominent at the start. Inferential and morphological demands are expected to become more prominent as learners begin to process unmarked text and morphologically complex words, and register demands are expected to be most salient as learners move toward formal written Urdu. The figure is conceptual. It reflects the framework's proposed developmental ordering and is not a measure of effect size or predictive strength. Whether the ordering holds, and how it varies with learners' prior experience of the script, is an empirical question.

Figure 2 – Proposed Conceptual Prominence of SCL Sub-Dimensions Across Urdu Literacy Development

	Stage of Urdu literacy development			
	Early	**Middle**	**Later**	**Proposed tier**
Orthographic complexity	Highest	Moderate	Lower	*Foundational*
Directional load	Highest	Moderate	Lower	*Foundational*
Inferential load	Lower	Highest	Moderate	*Developing*
Morphological load	Lower	Highest	Moderate	*Developing*
Register load	Lower	Moderate	Highest	*Later*

Conceptual, theory-based ordering of prominence. Not an empirical measure of effect size or strength of association.

Source: Author

Scaffolding within this phase is script-specific. For orthographic complexity, this means beginning with isolated letter forms before introducing positional variants and ligatures and using materials that systematically expose learners to the full set of Nastaliq forms in a controlled sequence. For directional load, it means explicit directional cuing, e.g., consistent right-to-left layout, spatial anchor prompts, and activities that build directional automaticity. For inferential load, it means beginning with erabs-marked texts and progressively removing diacritics as morphological knowledge develops. For morphological load, it means explicit root-and-pattern instruction that builds morphological awareness before expecting learners to handle complex derived forms independently. For register load, it means using bridge texts that draw on familiar spoken vocabulary before introducing formal written Urdu.

SCL Audit for Phase 1: Before moving to Phase 2, the designer should verify the following: Have all five SCL sub-dimensions been assessed for the target population? Is the introduction sequence ordered from lower to higher complexity? Is there a clear scaffolding strategy for each sub-dimension? Are the scaffolds specific to each sub-dimension's demands, not generic? If any of these questions cannot be answered affirmatively, Phase 1 should be revisited. Illustrative indicators include a completed SCL profile with a low, moderate, or high rating for each sub-dimension, supported by a short diagnostic (for example, accuracy in identifying positional letter forms, tracking reading direction, and reading erabs-marked and unmarked words) scored against a criterion that the designer sets in advance. These indicators are untested.

5.4 *Phase 2: Reducing ECL in Urdu Materials*

Once the script-specific demands have been identified and sequenced, the designer turns to the materials themselves. ECL in Urdu literacy materials takes forms that are specific to the script and do not appear in alphabetic language materials. These must be understood and minimized before learners can direct their cognitive resources toward actual learning.

Typography is a primary source of ECL in Urdu. Nastaliq is a complex calligraphic style. Using complex calligraphy styles creates unnecessary variability in letter forms.

Layout is another important source. Right-to-left text placement, paragraph direction, and page orientation must all be consistent and unambiguous. Materials that mix left-to-right and right-to-left elements, as sometimes happens in bilingual or digitally formatted materials, create directional confusion that falls squarely in the ECL category.

Vocabulary support should be embedded, not separated. In many Urdu literacy materials, unfamiliar words are explained in a glossary at the end of the text or in a separate panel on the opposite page. This forces learners to divide their attention between the text and the support, creating split-attention effects that consume working memory. Integrating vocabulary support through in-text glosses, illustrations adjacent to the relevant word, or margin notes positioned alongside the relevant line eliminates this problem.

Worked examples are valuable in this phase. For Urdu reading, this might mean fully annotated texts in which letter forms are explicitly labeled, directional arrows indicate reading direction, and erabs are provided. For writing, it might mean step-by-step demonstrations of letter formation in Nastaliq. These examples reduce the inferential demands placed on novice learners and allow working memory to focus on the target skill.

SCL Audit for Phase 2: Before moving to Phase 3, the designer should verify: Is a single, consistent Nastaliq font used throughout? Is the layout consistently right-to-left, with no conflicting directional cues? Is vocabulary support embedded adjacent to the relevant text, not separated? Have worked examples been provided for the most demanding script operations? Are materials free of visual clutter, e.g., decorative elements, competing graphics, or dense text blocks that would consume working memory without contributing to learning? If not, revise before proceeding. Illustrative indicators include a materials review in which two reviewers rate each item as met or not met, with their agreement noted, and a brief learner rating of mental effort on revised materials using an adapted rating scale (Barth et al., 2017). These indicators are untested.

5.5 *Phase 3: Fostering GCL in Urdu Literacy*

The third phase creates the conditions for deep, lasting learning. It is likely to be effective only once Phases 1 and 2 have been at least partly addressed, once the script-specific demands have been scaffolded and the materials have been cleaned of ECL. At that point, learners have sufficient cognitive capacity to engage in the kind of active processing that builds transferable understanding.

Scaffold fading is the central mechanism of this phase. Supports introduced in Phase 1 (erabs marking, directional cues, and morphological glosses) are progressively withdrawn as the learner demonstrates competence. This withdrawal is not arbitrary; it is guided by evidence of the learner's growing independence on specific SCL sub-dimensions. A learner who no longer needs directional cuing may still need erabs support. Fading should be sub-dimension-specific, not global. In this way, scaffold fading is where scaffolding and GCL meet: as supports are withdrawn, capacity freed earlier is gradually redirected to schema-building tasks such as morphological sorting and self-explanation.

Morphological awareness activities form a crucial component of this phase. Tasks that ask learners to identify roots in unfamiliar words, generate derived forms from known roots, or sort words by morphological family push learners to engage actively with the structural logic of Urdu. This kind of engagement builds the morphological knowledge that, once automatized, is expected to reduce the inferential and morphological load of future reading.

Self-explanation is particularly valuable in the Urdu context. When learners articulate why a word is read a certain way, why a particular vowel is implied, and why a root is identified where it is. They deepen their processing of the script's underlying logic. This kind of

metacognitive engagement is harder to achieve in Urdu than in languages with transparent orthographies, because the implicit rules of the script are not obvious. Making them explicit through self-explanation tasks may speed their internalization.

Varied text types matter too. Learners who have only encountered instructional texts may struggle when faced with narrative prose, poetry, or functional texts (forms, signs, notices). Exposing learners to varied text types (progressively and with appropriate support) builds the flexible reading skill that transfers beyond the classroom.

SCL Audit for Phase 3: After designing learning activities, the designer should verify the following: Is scaffold fading sub-dimension-specific, not global? Do activities require active engagement with script structure and morphology, not just passive reading? Is there a clear progression from supported to independent practice? Are varied text types included? Do activities prompt learners to articulate and reflect on the rules they are applying? Revise as needed before finalizing. Illustrative indicators include the proportion of tasks that learners complete independently, the number of scaffolds withdrawn for each sub-dimension, and accuracy on unmarked text and morphologically complex words against a preset criterion. These indicators are untested.

5.6 *The Iterative Nature of the Framework*

The three phases are sequential in logic but iterative in practice. During Phase 3, if learners struggle with activities that should be within their reach, the designer should ask whether Phases 1 or 2 have been fully addressed. Perhaps the SCL profile in Phase 1 underestimated the demands of morphological complexity. Perhaps a typographic inconsistency in Phase 2 is still creating ECL. The audit questions are designed to surface these problems, but they may not catch everything on the first pass. Iteration can take two forms. Design-level iteration occurs when audit evidence shows that a phase has not been met and the designer revisits it before moving on. Learner-level iteration occurs when a learner's performance shows that one sub-dimension needs more support, in which case the teacher returns to the Phase 1 or Phase 2 supports for that sub-dimension without restarting the whole sequence. Phases can also overlap for the same learner, with one sub-dimension at the fading stage while another is still being scaffolded.

The framework should be thought of as a design cycle. Initial implementation generates evidence through learner performance, engagement, and difficulty patterns that feeds back into earlier design decisions. This iterative quality is not a weakness; it is a feature. It means the framework supports continuous improvement, not just one-time design. To keep the status of claims clear, the content of the framework can be read at three levels. Its descriptions of Urdu script properties draw on existing linguistic and psycholinguistic literature. Its links between those properties and cognitive load are theoretical inferences

from CLT. Its scaffolding prescriptions, audit indicators, and phase sequence are design proposals and hypotheses that have not been tested.

Table 3 - Summary of the Script-Sensitive Framework for Urdu Literacy Instruction

Phase	Focus	Primary Goal	Key Design Actions	SCL Audit Question
1	Script Complexity Load	Identify and sequence script-specific demands	SCL profiling, sub-dimension ranking, progressive script exposure, and erabs scaffolding	Have all five SCL sub-dimensions been assessed? Is exposure sequenced from lowest to highest demand?
2	ECL	Eliminate unnecessary cognitive demands from material design	Consistent Nastaliq typography; right-to-left layout cues; redundancy removal; integrated vocabulary support	Are materials free of conflicting spatial and typographic cues? Is vocabulary support embedded, not separate?
3	GCL	Support schema formation for Urdu script and morphology.	Progressive scaffold fading; morphological awareness tasks; self-explanation; varied text types	Do activities require active engagement with the script and meaning? Is there a progression toward independent reading?

Source: Author

6. SCAFFOLDING CALIBRATION

One of the practical contributions of the SCL construct is that it makes scaffolding calibration explicit. Rather than deciding on scaffolding supports in general terms, e.g., 'provide more support for struggling learners,' designers can ask a more precise question: Which sub-dimension of SCL is generating difficulty, and what specific scaffold addresses that sub-dimension?

Table 4 maps each SCL sub-dimension to the scaffolding strategies that target it, with brief explanations of the cognitive mechanism through which each strategy works.

Table 4 - SCL Sub-Dimensions and Targeted Scaffolding Strategies

SCL Sub-Dimension	Primary Load Type	Scaffolding Strategy	Mechanism
Orthographic complexity	ICL	Letter-in-isolation practice before ligature recognition; progressive form exposure	Reduces simultaneous processing demands on letter-position combinations
Directional load	ICL (core) + ECL (design-induced)	Explicit directional cuing; spatial anchoring prompts; consistent right-to-left layout	Builds directional automaticity; removes conflicting spatial cues

Inferential load	ICL	Erabs-marked texts initially; progressive removal as morphological knowledge develops	Reduces inferential demands until the reader has a sufficient knowledge base.
Morphological load	ICL	Root-and-pattern instruction; explicit morpheme identification tasks	Builds morphological awareness, reducing working memory demand during reading
Register load	ICL (core) + ECL (design-induced)	Bridge texts using familiar spoken vocabulary before formal register: explicit register comparison.	Reduces the gap between what the learner knows and what the text demands.

Source: Author

This mapping is not exhaustive. Teachers and designers will encounter learners who need scaffolding combinations that are not listed here, and the specific form of any scaffold will vary with context, age, and prior knowledge. But the mapping provides a principled starting point, i.e., one that is grounded in the cognitive structure of the task, not in general notions of 'difficulty' or 'support.'

The fading of each scaffold should also be calibrated to the sub-dimension it addresses. Directional scaffolds (arrows, layout cues) should be faded as the learner demonstrates consistent right-to-left tracking without prompting. Erabs should be removed progressively, beginning with high-frequency words where morphological patterns are well established. Morphological glosses should be withdrawn as the learner's root-recognition accuracy improves. Register scaffolds (bridge texts) should be faded as the learner demonstrates understanding of formal written vocabulary in context.

7. TESTABLE PROPOSITIONS

The framework generates a set of testable predictions. These propositions are the empirical face of the theoretical model, the claims that future research should investigate.

To make these propositions testable, each sub-dimension needs a working operational definition. The following are proposed as starting points. Orthographic complexity could be indexed by accuracy and speed in identifying letters in their positional forms and in ligatures. Directional load could be indexed by right-to-left tracking errors, such as reversals or skipped words, during reading and writing tasks. Inferential load could be indexed by the difference in reading accuracy and speed between texts with and without erabs. Morphological load could be indexed by performance on root identification and derived-form generation tasks. Register load could be indexed by the difference in comprehension between matched spoken-style and formal written-style texts. A subjective mental effort rating adapted for

Urdu could be added for each sub-dimension. These indicators are proposals. Their reliability and validity would need to be established before SCL can be measured with confidence.

First, instruction that explicitly addresses all five SCL sub-dimensions should produce better Urdu literacy outcomes than instruction that treats script demands generically. Learners who receive sub-dimension-specific scaffolding should show faster progress in letter recognition, directional fluency, vowel inference, morphological awareness, and register comprehension than those who receive undifferentiated support.

Second, the SCL sub-dimensions should differentially predict reading and writing performance. Orthographic and directional load should be stronger predictors of early decoding accuracy. Inferential and morphological load should be stronger predictors of reading fluency and comprehension. Register load should be a stronger predictor of performance on formal written tasks. These differential predictions can be tested through psychometric studies that measure each sub-dimension independently.

Third, materials designed according to Phase 2 principles, i.e., consistent Nastaliq typography, integrated vocabulary support, right-to-left layout clarity, and worked examples, should produce lower subjective cognitive load ratings and higher performance than materials that violate these principles. This can be tested through materials comparison studies using validated cognitive load rating scales.

Fourth, the scaffold fading trajectories specified in Phase 3 should be sub-dimension-specific. Learners who have mastered orthographic recognition should not need continued letter-form scaffolding, even if they still need erabs support. Premature removal of scaffolding on one sub-dimension should impair performance on that sub-dimension without affecting others. This prediction has direct implications for the design of responsive instruction and formative assessment tools.

Fifth, the SCL audit mechanism should improve design quality compared to frameworks that apply CLT principles without explicit verification. Designers who use the audit questions should produce materials with lower ECL and more precisely calibrated ICL than those who work from general CLT guidance. This can be tested through design process studies that compare audit and non-audit conditions.

Sixth, the framework's effects should be moderated by learners' prior literacy experience. Learners with prior literacy in another Perso-Arabic script language should show lower baseline SCL on orthographic and directional subdimensions and should require less intensive scaffolding in those areas. This prediction follows from CLT's expertise reversal principle and provides a basis for differentiating instruction by learner background.

8. DISCUSSION

8.1 Theoretical Contributions

The primary theoretical contribution of this article is the SCL construct. By disaggregating the cognitive demands of Urdu literacy into five theoretically distinct sub-dimensions, SCL is intended to provide a level of specificity that general CLT does not currently offer. This specificity is what makes design prescriptions possible and what makes the framework testable. A framework that tells designers to 'reduce ICL' is useful as a reminder; a framework that tells them to reduce orthographic complexity by sequencing Nastaliq forms from isolated to ligature, or to reduce inferential load by providing erabs-marked texts, may be useful as a tool.

The integration of CLT and scaffolding theory is also a contribution, though a more modest one. These two frameworks have been used in parallel for decades without being systematically connected. The present framework makes their relationship explicit: scaffolding decisions are the operational expression of CLT's design principles, calibrated to the learner's current working memory capacity on each specific sub-dimension. This connection may help clarify why scaffolding works and offers a principled basis for deciding when and how to fade it.

The audit mechanism extends a contribution first introduced in the CLT phase-based framework for learning disabilities (Hussain, 2025). Adapting it to the Urdu literacy context suggests that the audit logic may not be domain-specific; it could be applied wherever CLT principles need to be translated into explicit, checkable design decisions.

8.2 Implications for Research

The most immediate research priority is empirical testing of the SCL construct itself. Do the five sub-dimensions operate as theoretically distinct sources of cognitive load? Can they be measured independently? Do they predict literacy outcomes differentially? Psychometric studies that develop and validate SCL measurement instruments would be a valuable first step, both for testing the framework and for providing formative assessment tools that practitioners can use.

Beyond validation of the construct, comparative intervention studies are needed. Do learners who receive instruction designed according to this framework achieve better outcomes than those who receive standard Urdu literacy instruction? Within framework studies, does addressing all three phases produce better outcomes than addressing one or two? These questions require experimental or quasi-experimental designs with adequate sample sizes and validated outcome measures.

The framework also raises questions about the relationship between Urdu literacy and literacy in other Perso-Arabic script languages. Do learners with Arabic or Persian literacy backgrounds show lower SCL on orthographic and directional sub-dimensions? If so, how should their instruction differ from that of learners with no prior script knowledge? These questions have practical implications for Urdu instruction in multilingual settings.

8.3 *Implications for Practice*

For curriculum designers and teachers, the framework offers something that general literacy guidance does not: a script-specific lens for analyzing why Urdu literacy may be hard and a structured process for addressing that difficulty through design. The SCL profile in Phase 1 is particularly useful. It gives designers a way to analyze instructional materials not just for content difficulty but for the specific cognitive demands that the script places on learners, something that standard readability measures and difficulty indices do not capture.

The scaffolding calibration table (Table 4) can function as a practical decision support tool. The audit questions at each phase can be used not only in initial design but also in materials review as a checklist for evaluating existing Urdu literacy materials against the framework's principles. This has obvious utility for teacher professional development and for the review of published Urdu textbooks and resources.

8.4 *Relationship to Related Frameworks*

This framework is designed to complement existing approaches to Urdu literacy instruction. It does not displace methods like explicit phonics instruction, shared reading, or language experience approaches. Rather, it provides a cognitive design logic that can strengthen any of these methods by making their relationship to cognitive load explicit and verifiable.

The framework also connects forward to research on Urdu literacy for learners with specific learning disabilities. The CLT phase-based framework for LD students (Hussain, 2025) established the general logic of phase-based, auditable CLT design. The present framework applies and extends that logic to the script-specific demands of Urdu. A third framework addressing the intersection of Urdu literacy, CLT, and learning disabilities will be needed to close this gap fully. That framework builds on both this article and its predecessor.

8.5 *Summary*

The framework presented here offers a principled, script-sensitive approach to designing Urdu literacy instruction. Its key contributions are the SCL construct, the integration of CLT and scaffolding theory through a structured phase-based process, and the embedded audit mechanism that is intended to make design decisions more explicit and checkable. It is a theoretical model that requires empirical testing, but it provides both a research agenda and a proposed design tool for those working in Urdu literacy now.

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The SCL construct is theoretically derived, not empirically validated. The five sub-dimensions are grounded in the linguistic and cognitive literature, but their independence as cognitive constructs has not been demonstrated

through psychometric research. It is possible that some sub-dimensions are more correlated than theorized, e.g., orthographic and directional load may be closely linked in early literacy, operating as a single perceptual challenge rather than two distinct ones. Empirical testing is essential. A related limitation is the boundary between script demands and wider language demands. Morphological and register load in particular may be better described as language-related than script-related, and future work should test whether they belong under SCL or should be treated as a separate language-demand construct. Because intrinsic load also depends on learner expertise, the same feature may impose little load on a learner with prior experience of a Perso-Arabic script.

The framework does not account for individual differences in cognitive architecture. Working memory capacity varies across individuals, and this variation interacts with SCL in ways the framework does not specify. Learners with greater working memory capacity may navigate SCL demands more easily, even without scaffolding. Learners with specific cognitive profiles (including those with learning disabilities) may face SCL demands in ways that require modification of the framework's standard scaffolding trajectories. In practice, this means that the SCL profile should be repeated for individual learners and that fading decisions should follow each learner's evidence and not a fixed schedule.

The framework assumes that Urdu is the primary or target literacy language. Many learners in Pakistan and in diaspora communities are developing literacy in Urdu alongside literacy in another language, e.g., English, Sindhi, Punjabi, or others. Cross-linguistic transfer effects, both facilitative and interfering, are not addressed in this framework. They should be. Until they are, the SCL profile in Phase 1 should record learners' literacy in other languages and scripts, since transfer may lower some demands, as with Arabic or Persian literacy, and may raise others, such as left-to-right reading habits.

The illustrative examples and scaffolding strategies described in the framework have not been field-tested. They are derived from theoretical principles and practitioner knowledge, but their effectiveness in actual classrooms remains to be demonstrated.

Future research should prioritize, first, the development and validation of SCL measurement instruments (both self-report cognitive load scales adapted for Urdu literacy contexts and performance-based measures that can index load on each sub-dimension independently). Second, comparative studies that test the framework against standard Urdu literacy instruction are needed. Third, research on the framework's applicability across different learner populations, e.g., young children, adult learners, heritage language learners, and learners with disabilities. This will establish its generalizability and identify where it needs to be adapted. These priorities are ordered by dependency. Without validated measures of the sub-dimensions, comparative intervention studies cannot show which parts of the framework drive any effects, and applicability across populations cannot be judged.

The framework should also be translated into practical design tools: SCL profiling checklists, audit forms, materials review rubrics, and scaffolding decision trees. These tools

are what will make the framework useful to teachers who are not researchers. Developing and field-testing them is an important next step.

10. CONCLUSION

Urdu literacy instruction has received comparatively little attention from cognitive science (Ikhlaque & Yousaf, 2025). The structural properties of the Urdu script (its Nastaliq orthography, right-to-left directionality, absent short vowels, morphological depth, and register complexity) are likely to create cognitive demands that matter for instruction Yet these demands have not been theorized in a way that connects to instructional design.

This article has attempted to build that connection. The Script Complexity Load construct names the cognitive demands of Urdu literacy at the level of specificity needed for design. The three-phase framework translates CLT and scaffolding theory into a process that designers can follow, check, and improve. The SCL audit mechanism is intended to make that process checkable.

The framework is a beginning. It offers a theoretical foundation for a body of empirical work that has not yet been done, i.e., studies that measure SCL, test the framework's predictions, and refine the scaffolding calibrations it proposes. That work is needed. Urdu is spoken by over 70 million people as a first language (Britannica Editors, 2026) and by many more as a second or additional language. Improving the quality of Urdu literacy instruction on principled, theoretically grounded foundations matters for a significant portion of the world's learners. Early literacy is the gateway to the rest of the curriculum. Where Urdu is the national language or a medium of instruction, learners who struggle to decode and write Urdu are likely to fall behind in other subjects as well, and weak foundational literacy is associated with lower school progression and attainment and with fewer opportunities for later study, employment, and civic participation. For learners with disabilities and other learning difficulties, who are already at risk of exclusion, instruction designed with cognitive demands in mind may make the difference between access and exclusion (Dutt & Ahuja, 2025). A framework that helps designers see where the difficulty lies, and what support to provide, is therefore of practical value once it has been tested.

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MISSING GENDER: A STUDY OF NEWSPAPER PORTRAYAL OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN KASHMIR

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Abstract

There are diverse academic discourses on the representation of transgender individuals in the media. Some studies show that transgender representation has shown an upward trend in recent years, while other studies argue that media coverage still needs substantial improvement. Nevertheless, most of these studies remain focused on the Global North or on urban cities in the Global South. This study focuses on Kashmir, India, a socially conservative and politically unstable region where transgender people face entrenched social exclusion, daily discrimination, and a lack of institutional support. The region has never seen pride marches or advocacy groups fighting for transgender rights, and the implementation of protective laws remains weak. This study examines the extent of newspaper coverage of transgender individuals in Kashmir and the use of delegitimizing language during the period 2017 to 2021. The timeframe surrounds the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. Using quantitative content analysis of the top three English dailies, the research finds that transgender people are almost completely ignored in newspaper coverage in Kashmir. In the few stories that appeared, delegitimizing terminology was present, and the coverage was limited to government announcements.

Keywords

Transgender; Representation; Newspapers; Kashmir; Underrepresentation; Symbolic Annihilation; Misrepresentation; LGBTQ; India

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, studies show that the representation of transgender individuals in the media has increased over time (Capuzza and Spencer, 2016; Bracco et al., 2024; McInroy and Craig, 2015; Mocarski et al., 2019; Jacobs and Meeusen, 2020). These studies are largely conducted within Global North contexts or in urban metropolitan cities of the Global South. While these studies advance understanding of the media visibility of transgender individuals, a gap remains regarding how media portray them in regional contexts of the Global South, particularly in regions that are politically unstable and socially conservative.

This study addresses that gap by examining the newspaper portrayal of the transgender individuals in Kashmir, a longstanding conflict and socially conservative Himalayan region of India (Zia 2019, Bose 2003). According to the existing literature, transgender individuals in Kashmir have experienced entrenched social isolation, daily discrimination, and lack of support. Consequently, they deserve a meaningful and sustained media coverage to recognize their lived realities, amplify their voices, and challenge exclusionary social attitudes.

This study examines if three English-language newspapers in Kashmir gave coverage to transgender individuals between 2017 and 2021 and whether they used any terminology that is deemed delegitimizing by established media guidelines in covering transgender communities. In Kashmir, newspapers have long remained a dominant source of information due to the absence of television news channels and frequent internet shutdowns resulting from political control over the media (Hassan, 2022; Showkat, 2020). Therefore, this study adds to global discussions on transgender visibility in the media from regions with limited media freedom.

The analysis in this study is limited to newspaper coverage published between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2021. Its findings therefore describe media representation during this defined period and should not be taken as evidence of the current state of transgender representation in Kashmir.

1.1 Status of transgender community in Kashmir

This section draws on the cited literature to provide background. The conditions described reflect the situation reported in that literature, much of it published up to the early 2020s, and are not findings from the newspaper dataset analyzed in this study.

Kashmir, a Himalayan region in northern India, is one of the two divisions of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the other being Jammu. The erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir was bifurcated into two Union Territories, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh, after Article 370 and Article 35A of the Indian Constitution, which granted the region special status, were abrogated by the central government of India in August 2019 (Deva, 2020). With a

distinct socio-cultural and political context, the region is highly conservative, where entrenched gender norms shape everyday life (Azam et al., 2020; Bhan, 2018).

The longstanding conflict in Kashmir has caused decades of violence, political instability, and human suffering (de Jong et al., 2008; Rai, 2014). While gender discrimination within the binary gender system in Kashmir has received scholarly attention (Mir & Ganai, 2021; Brännlund, 2018; Sarvesh, 2022; Raghuvanshi, 2024), the challenges faced by the transgender community remain largely overlooked. According to the 2011 Census of India, Jammu and Kashmir has 4,137 transgender population. This number has often been considered an undercount as many transgender individuals in the region refrain from disclosing gender identity due to the fear of being identified (Census of India, 2011). Moreover, since no national census has been conducted after 2011, the actual number may have changed since.

India, in the recent past, passed some legal judgments that granted rights and recognition to the transgender community. In 2014, the Supreme Court of India, in National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India, recognized transgender people as third-gender and affirmed their right to self-identify their gender (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). In 2017, in Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India, the Supreme Court recognized the constitutional right to privacy and affirmed that sexual orientation and gender identity are integral to an individual's personal autonomy, dignity, and identity. The judgment therefore provided an important constitutional basis for protecting the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Agarwal, 2023). Again, in 2018, the Supreme Court, in Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, struck down the colonial-era Section 377, thereby decriminalizing consensual same-sex relationships between adults (Berg, 2022). These landmark decisions were followed by the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act or TG Act in 2019, which aimed to eliminate discrimination and guarantee access to education, healthcare, and employment (Bhattacharya et al., 2022).

While these legal reforms have somehow improved the lives of transgender individuals in some parts of India (Bhargava et al., 2024), the literature suggests they had little impact in Kashmir. Studies published during and shortly after the study period report that transgender individuals in the region continued to face discrimination and lived marginalized lives (Bhat, 2023). These studies report that the region had never seen any pride marches and had no organized support system for transgender people (Bhat, 2024). They were reported to struggle for basic recognition, acceptance, and space to exist safely within society (Zahoo, 2020; Mohsin et al., 2025). Mental and physical abuse was reported to often start within their own families once they began expressing their gender (Hassan et al., 2025).

They were reported to be deprived of basic rights such as education, healthcare, housing, employment, and sometimes even space in graveyards (Rather, 2018; Iqbal, 2017). The lack of access to education, due to bullying, verbal abuse, and physical intimidation, limited their employment opportunities in both the government and private sectors (Ahmad, 2022; Wani, 2021). Therefore, according to this literature, this community in Kashmir mostly relied on

socially stigmatized and economically insecure occupations such as matchmaking, singing, or dancing at weddings (Bund, 2013).

To escape physical and mental abuse at home, many transgender individuals were reported to leave their homes and live in rented accommodation. However, in broader society they were often seen as lurid and sleazy and were subjected to hateful looks from the general public when they went outside. This constant pressure was linked to mental health conditions within the community, such as depression, anxiety, panic disorders, suicidal ideation, obsessive compulsive behaviour, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bund, 2017; Masoodi, 2018). Moreover, the lack of access to proper health care was reported to lead to untreated illnesses and deteriorating conditions, some of which resulted in premature deaths (Ahmad, 2017; Ashraf, 2018; Sidiq, 2022). The transgender individuals in Kashmir mostly stayed silent on their experiences and held back in seeking professional help due to the fear of stigma and discrimination (Rafiqi, 2021).

In the region, the community was referred to by the derogatory slang Laanch — a loose Kashmiri term for those who fall outside conventional gender norms. It reflects deep rooted discrimination. Beyond referring to transgender individuals, the term was also used by men in Kashmir as an insult to ridicule men who advocate for gender equality, are perceived as physically less masculine, or are considered emotionally weak (Stewart, 2020; Bund, 2017). These details provide background drawn from the cited literature and are not findings from the newspaper dataset analysed in this study.

This study builds on a theoretical framework that explores the relationship between media and marginalized communities, with a focus on transgender representation in newspapers. It examines to what extent transgender community was portrayed in newspapers in socially conservative and politically unstable regions and whether their coverage followed guidelines given by different institutions in covering transgender individuals. The study draws evidence from Kashmir, where limited research exists on transgender individuals. It analyses newspaper coverage published before, during, and after the passage of the TG Act in 2019 in India, within the 2017 to 2021 period.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Symbolic Annihilation

The exclusion and misrepresentation of marginalized communities by media have long been documented in academic research. Introduced by Gerner and Gross (1976), Symbolic Annihilation, is an important concept in this discourse. It states that "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence, and absence means symbolic annihilation" (Pp. 172-199). They found the near total absence of those who belong to the lower level of social hierarchy.

Later, scholars used Symbolic Annihilation to examine the media's treatment of minority communities in the society and describe the concept in their own interpretation. While working on depiction of women is mass media, Tuchman (2000) described it as a process wherein media omit, trivialize, or ignore certain groups in a society. Similarly, Merskin (1998) and Ohye and Daniel (1999) describe it as a pattern in which media coverage either sideline certain groups or downplay them by portraying them in dismissive ways.

Why does mass media engage in Symbolic Annihilation? Scholars argue that media give limited coverage to some groups in a society to uphold dominant narrative and to marginalize these groups from the broader cultural narrative (Yücel, 2021; Andalibi, 2021). In the case of transgender individuals, media omit or trivialize them to sustain the rigid gender binary norm (Mocarski et al., 2019). When media exclude marginalized groups from their coverage, they send a message to audience that these groups are insignificant to society or less important than their heterosexual counterparts (Klein and Shiffman, 2009).

Though journalism is expected to uphold fairness and accuracy, some studies show that media frequently exhibit bias and lack impartiality when covering gender related issues (Swert and Hooghe, 2010; Armstrong, 2006; Byerly, 2013; Van Zoonen, 1988). There is persisted "cycle of ignorance and hatred toward transgender individuals," in media portrayals (Billard, 2016) and the information regarding them is often inaccurate, incomplete, or stripped of historical context (Shelley, 2008). As noted by Capuzza and Spencer (2016), media have the capacity to shape social understanding by providing fair coverage to transgender individuals, yet such proper coverage is often lacking.

These patterns of exclusion limit public understanding of gender diversity and reinforce negative perceptions. They produce what Muñoz (1999) terms disidentification — a sense of not feeling included in dominant culture, which results in forming identities outside mainstream social spaces.

2.2 Misrepresentation

In addition to the underrepresentation of transgender individuals, studies show that mass media coverage often misrepresents them. The most common misrepresentation of transgender individuals in the media has been misidentification and misgendering (Barker Plummer, 2013; Squires and Brouwer, 2002; MacKenzie and Marcel, 2009). Moreover, they have been depicted as tricksters who change their gender to deceive heterosexuals (Sloop, 2000) and also as criminals, sex workers, mentally ill, or unsociable individuals (Shelley, 2008). Among other common stereotypes of transgender individuals has been their framing as monsters or exaggerated maternal figures (Ryan, 2009).

The representation of transgender individuals has shown an upward trend in the recent past, mostly due to the emergence of new communication technologies and due to legal reforms and advocacy efforts (Richard, 2014; Ekins and King, 2006). However, transgender individuals often express dissatisfaction with these portrayals, as misrepresentation persists

(Humphrey, 2016; Morrison, 2010, Pham et al., 2020). The coverage still remains riddled with incorrect terminology, such as misgendering and deadnaming, across both Global North and Global South contexts.

In the United States, Avalos et al. (2023) found that news coverage of gender non-conforming homicide victims used past tense references and misapplied gender labels. Similarly, Khan et al. (2025) found that newspapers in Pakistan use negative terminology when covering transgender individuals. The misrepresentation of transgender individuals in the media remains consistent across cultures and time periods (Birchmore and Kettrey, 2021). Such portrayals are mostly influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which they emerge (Arendt, 2013).

While the existing studies have shown to what extent transgender individuals are portrayed in media and how patterns of misrepresentation persist, it is important to examine if they receive fair media attention in socially conservative and politically unstable regional contexts of Global South. In such contexts, transgender individuals have still had to fight for social recognition and have been subjected to severe discrimination and harassment.

Moreover, given the fact that there was political control over the mass media in Kashmir and newspapers were the main source of information, it is important to explore how such newspapers portrayed transgender people in such contexts. Also, India has introduced legal reforms in recent years to uplift transgender individuals. It is important to examine whether these reforms were reflected in fair and accurate media coverage of transgender people in regional contexts, and this study does so for the 2017 to 2021 period.
Based on the above discussion, the study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: Do Newspapers in Kashmir symbolically annihilate the transgender community?
RQ2: Do newspapers in Kashmir use terminology for transgender people that media guidelines classify as delegitimizing?

3. METHODOLOGY

The findings in this study draw on quantitative content analysis of the top three English language newspapers in Kashmir. This approach fits the aims of the study because it measures two explicit features: the number of stories about transgender individuals and the use of delegitimizing terminology in those stories. This method is appropriate when research requires objectivity, frequency counts, and replicable coding procedures (Neuendorf, 2017; Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Potter and Levine Donnerstein, 1999). It allows the researcher to count what is explicitly present in the content rather than interpret hidden meanings, which strengthens transparency, reliability, and replicability (Krippendorff, 2019; Schreier, 2012).

The three sample newspapers include *Greater Kashmir (GK), Rising Kashmir (RK)* and *Kashmir Observer (KO).* They were selected based on their circulation, popularity and historical significance in Kashmir. *GK* is one of the oldest and most widely circulated newspapers in Kashmir (Nadaf, 2018; Showkat, 2017). *RK*, founded in 2008, has become a

major competitor to GK and is among the largest circulated English dailies in Kashmir (Ganai, 2024; Noor and Ahmad, 2015; Joseph and Barclay, 2018). *KO*, established in 1996, is one of the oldest newspapers in the region and has become a key source of news and opinion for readers (Baneen et al., 2023; Showkat, 2020). Furthermore, the selected newspapers were most popular on social media platforms in Kashmir.

The units of analysis include news articles, editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. The quantitative content analysis involved counting the number of units published by the selected newspapers. The researcher also created a dictionary of discriminatory terms to identify delegitimizing terminology. This dictionary was compiled from guidelines of three trusted organizations, including GLAAD, Trans Journalists Association (TJA), and Press Council of India (PCI).

GLAAD publishes detailed guidelines to promote fair and accurate reporting on transgender issues (GLAAD, 2022). The TJA provides a style guide aimed at improving newsroom coverage of transgender communities (TJA, 2024). The PCI, which works to ensure ethical, accurate, and responsible print media journalism in India, released its first national guidelines for reporting on transgender people in 2023 (Press Council of India, 2023). The dictionary was then used to search newspaper archives to measure how often delegitimizing terminology appeared.

The study covers the period from January 1, 2017, to December 31, 2021. This period was chosen because it spans the key legal developments in transgender rights in India that followed the 2014 NALSA judgment: the 2017 Puttaswamy judgment, the 2018 Navtej Singh Johar judgment, and the 2019 TG Act, which came into force in January 2020 (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). The NALSA judgment falls before the window and is treated as background. The window begins in 2017 to capture coverage before these developments, and ends in 2021 to include two years of coverage after the Act's passage. This allows newspaper coverage to be examined before, during, and after these legal developments, which made the period well suited to asking whether legal change was reflected in newspaper coverage.

All daily editions of the three newspapers were examined for this period, except those dated between August 5, 2019, and September 30, 2019. These editions were missing from the archives both offline and online. This interruption resulted from the complete communication blackout and clampdown in Kashmir following the abrogation of the region's semi-autonomous status on August 5, 2019 (Murthy and Seshu, 2019; Peerzada et al., 2025). The shutdown made newsgathering impossible and therefore, newspapers suspended publication for this period (Free Speech Collective, 2024; Maqbool, 2019).

Because the dataset ends on 31 December 2021, the findings reflect newspaper coverage within the 2017–2021 study period only. They should not be interpreted as describing the present state of transgender representation in Kashmir. This temporal limitation is also acknowledged in the Limitations section.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 *Pattern of coverage in Greater Kashmir* (GK)

As shown in table 1, *GK* published 13 units on the transgender community between 2017 and 2021. The units include 8 news reports and 5 opinion articles. The publication pattern shows irregular and low visibility. The newspaper did not publish any editorials or letters to the editor on the transgender community during the five-year period.

The year wise distribution shows small clusters rather than consistent coverage. In 2017, *GK* published one news report in November and one opinion article in December. In 2018, the paper carried one news report in December and two opinion pieces in May and June. In 2019, the paper published one unit, a news story in July. In 2020, the paper published one news report in May and two in July. In 2021, the paper published one news story in May and one in October, along with two opinion pieces in January and October.

Most months across five years show zero coverage. This pattern shows the absence of routine reporting and indicates event driven coverage rather than sustained editorial interest.

4.2. *Pattern of coverage in Rising Kashmir* (RK)

RK showed very limited engagement with transgender issues across the five-year period. The data in table 2 shows a total of two units. The paper published one opinion article in February 2019 and one news story in July 2020. The paper did not publish any editorials or letters to the editor.

Coverage remained absent in 2017, 2018, and 2021. Except for the two months that carried a single unit, all other months recorded zero coverage

4.3 *Pattern of coverage in Kashmir Observer* (KO)

KO also showed limited and uneven coverage across the five-year period. Table 3 shows that the paper published six units, five news stories and one opinion article.

In 2017, the paper carried one news story in December. In 2018, it published two news stories, one in January and one in February. In 2019, the paper carried no units. In 2020, it published two news stories in May. In 2021, it carried one opinion article in January.

Most months recorded zero coverage, which shows the low visibility of transgender related issues in the paper throughout these years.

Table 1 - Coverage of Transgender Community in GK from 2017 to 2021

Years	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2017	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
2018	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1

2019	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
2020	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
2021	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0

Source: Author

Table 2 - Coverage of Transgender Community in RK from 2017 to 2021

Years	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2017	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2018	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2019	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2020	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
2021	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Author

Table 3 - Coverage of Transgender Community in KO from 2017 to 2021

Years	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2017	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
2018	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2019	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2020	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2021	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Author

4.4 *Use of Delegitimizing Terminology across Newspapers*

As shown in Table 4, all three newspapers used delegitimizing terminology despite the very low volume of coverage. This pattern appears in news reports and opinion articles across the five-year period.

GK used the term "transgenders" in every news story and opinion article. Media guidelines recommend terms like "transgender people" or "transgender persons". The table also shows one instance of "misgendering", where the story used pronouns that did not match the person's gender identity. The paper also used one instance of "dead-naming", where it mentioned the person's former name along with their self-chosen name. The paper used the phrase "caught between two sexes" in one unit. This phrase reflects outdated biological thinking and dismisses gender identity.

RK published only two units in five years, but still used delegitimizing terminology. Both units used the term "transgenders". The news story used misgendering and also the phrase "caught between two sexes".

Among the six units published by *KO*, it used the term "transgenders" in five of them. The newspaper also used "misgendering" in one story and "dead-naming" in one story. In the "dead-naming" case, the story mentioned both the birth name and the chosen name of the transgender person.

The presence of delegitimizing terminology, even in such a small amount of coverage, shows that newspapers in Kashmir do not follow guidelines issued by the PCI, GLAAD, and TJA when covering transgender individuals.

Table 4 - Delegitimizing Terminology used by GK, RK and KO in coverage of transgender people from 2017 to 2021

Year	GK Trangenders	GK Misgendering	GK Dead-Naming	GK "Caught between two sexes"	RK Trangenders	RK Misgendering	RK "Caught between two sexes"	KO Transgenders	KO Misgendering	KO Dead-Naming
2017	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
2018	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
2019	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
2020	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	1
2021	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0

Source: Author

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study found a near total absence of transgender individuals in newspaper coverage in Kashmir between 2017 and 2021, a socially conservative and politically unstable region. This absence persists despite the community's precarious social, economic, and political conditions. Therefore, the findings of this study align with Gerbner and Gross's (1976) concept of symbolic annihilation, which says that media ignore marginalized groups in society.

Transgender individuals in Kashmir were among the most marginalized and were reported to be subjected to physical and emotional abuse even by their own families. According to the literature, the region had no advocacy groups that could fight for them and had never seen any pride marches, unlike other parts of the world. The prejudice against the

community was reported to be so deep that even lawyers refused to take their cases, doctors hesitated to treat them, and employers hesitated to offer them employment (Rafiq & Imroz, 2018; Andrabi & Amin, 2021; Suliman, 2022).

In such an environment, the media play an important role in highlighting the vulnerabilities of oppressed communities. When the transgender community is missing from newspaper coverage, it may contribute to what Coleman and Yochim (2008) describe as social disempowerment – a situation in which media ignorance of certain groups erases them from public consciousness. Describing this as a form of subtle violence, Bourdieu (2001) argues that such exclusion denies the community's presence in society.

The results also show differences in coverage among the three newspapers. While *GK* published 13 units in the five-year period, *RK* published only two and *KO* six. Most of these stories focused on government announcements or opinion pieces by external writers. None of the newspapers published investigative reports or in-depth features on the lived experiences of transgender people.

More importantly, none of the newspapers published a single editorial or letter to the editor on the transgender community over five years. Editorials reflect a newspaper's policy and indicate which issues a paper finds important. Scholars such as van Dijk (1995) and Riffe et al. (2019) explain that editorials express the ideological stance of a newspaper, guide a newspaper's agenda, and influence how readers interpret events. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue that editorials perform gatekeeping by selecting issues for attention, while Rust (2018) adds that good editorials aim to educate readers and stimulate thought. Therefore, the absence of editorials on transgender issues across all three newspapers during the study period shows that the community and its challenges were not part of editorial priorities. This contradicts journalism's stated aim of giving "voice to voiceless" groups in society (Buttry, 2016; Freeman et al., 2011).

Similarly, letters to the editor remain a space in newspapers where ordinary citizens, including those who feel marginalized, can write about their concerns and bring their issues into the public domain (Hayek et al., 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). Again, the absence of letters to the editor and editorials on transgender issues in all three newspapers shows how the sampled newspapers symbolically annihilated the transgender community in Kashmir during 2017 to 2021.

The selected timeframe for the study from 2017 to 2021 is important. In 2017, the Supreme Court recognized the right to privacy, in 2018 it decriminalized same sex relations, and the TG Act was enacted in 2019 and came into force in January 2020. These were important legal milestones in the history of transgender people in India, and the media had a responsibility to inform the public about them. However, the sample newspapers did not publish any editorial or news report on these legal developments.

Since newspapers were the primary source of information in Kashmir during this period, rights cannot exist in practice if they are not publicly recognized. Without visibility in the media, such rights lose their force, because individuals cannot claim or exercise protections

that society does not acknowledge. This silence reflects what Sedgwick (1990) terms willful ignorance in her Epistemology of the Closet, where institutions actively choose not to know about queer lives in order to sustain dominant norms. This underscores the crucial link between legal rights, their reporting, and their impact on lived realities.

Moreover, the findings of this study show that all the sample newspapers flouted established media guidelines while covering transgender individuals and used delegitimizing terminology in their coverage, including the use of the term "transgenders", and instances of dead naming and misgendering. Media guidelines for covering transgender individuals identify the term "transgenders" as delegitimizing because it reduces people to a category instead of recognizing them as individuals and turns transgender individuals into a noun label.

Such linguist framing of marginalized groups shape public attitudes towards them. As noted by Carnaghi et al. (2008), noun labels affect how people judge others. When a social group is described using a noun label, audiences are more likely to see that trait as fixed and ignore other explanations. Similarly, Graf et al. (2023) state that the labels applied to social groups influence how the public evaluates them. Furthermore, the use of phrase "caught between two sexes" in newspaper coverage is a clear example of stigmatizing language. It denies transgender people their gender identity and presents them as alien and put them in in-between labels. Such language use is clear discrimination and it can reinforce marginalization (Ansara and Hegarty, 2011).

In contemporary scholarship, some recent studies show that media representation of transgender individuals has increased over time (McInroy and Craig, 2015; Jacobs and Meeusen, 2020). However, this study shows that this trend did not apply in every context. In regions like Kashmir, which is socially conservative and politically unstable, transgender people were largely ignored by the sampled newspapers between 2017 and 2021, despite their precarious social, political, and economic conditions.

This exclusion reflects Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics, where institutions such as the media decide whose lives are visible and whose are erased. By excluding the transgender community from coverage, the sampled newspapers treated them as unimportant and outside accepted social norms. This silence sustained unequal social structures, where the challenges, rights, and dignity of one community remain outside public concern. Because the analysis ends in 2021, whether this pattern has continued, changed, or reversed since then remains a question for future research.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. It is limited to English-language newspapers in Kashmir, excluding Urdu and regional-language media that may represent transgender issues differently and reach different audiences.The content examined spans 2017 to 2021 and does not capture developments in media practices, public discourse, or legal debates that have emerged since, limiting the contemporary relevance of some findings.The study also

examines media texts alone, without investigating how transgender people themselves perceive or are affected by this coverage. Finally, given Kashmir's distinctive political, social, and media environment, the findings should not be generalized to other regions of India without accounting for differing media systems and social contexts.

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APPENDIX

Dictionary of delegitimizing terminology drawn from the guidelines for covering transgender individuals given by PCI, GLAAD and Trans Media Watch

Delegitimizing Terminology	Explanation
Hijra	In India transgender people are commonly called Hijra which as per PCI guidelines is an insult or stereotype.
Chhakka	Used as a slur for gender diverse people in India.
Meetha	Used as a mocking label for gender non - conforming individuals in India.
Laanch	A derogatory slang term used locally in Kashmir to call transgender people.
Shemale	A pornographic slur that sexualizes and objectifies transgender women.
Transsexual	Used in ways that pathologize transgender identity.
Sex-Change Surgery" or Sex Reassignment Surgery"	Frames gender as a procedure instead of identity, preferred term is gender affirmative surgery.
Alleged transgender person	Suggests gender identity is unverified or doubtful.
Homosexual, Sexual Preference, and Special Rights,"	These terms carry stigma and suggest deviance, rather than equal identity and rights.
He was a She and She was He	This practice reduces a person to their medical history rather than their identity.
Tranny	A slur that dehumanizes transgender people and reduces them to a stereotype.
It	A dehumanizing label that treats a transgender person as non-human.
Shim	A mocking term used to insult transgender people by combining male and female labels.
Trap	A term that frames transgender people as deceptive, which reinforces harmful stereotypes.
Deceive, Pretend, Pose, or Masquerade	These phrases portray transgender identities as fake, which increases stigma.
A Transgender or Transgenders	This reduces people to a category instead of recognizing them as individuals.
Transgendered	This incorrect form suggests something happened to the person, which misrepresents transgender identity.
Biologically Male or Female, Genetically Male or Female, Born a Man or Woman, Caught Between Two Sexes	These reinforce outdated biological essentialism and ignore gender identity.
Sex Change, Pre Op, Post Op, Male to Female and Female to Male	These overemphasize medical processes and reduce transgender people to surgery, which misrepresents lived identity.
Dead-Naming	Using a transgender person's former name after they have changed it. This denies their identity and causes harm.

Using Names in Quotation Marks	Putting a transgender person's chosen name in quotes suggests it is not real or legitimate.
Calling a Chosen Name a Nickname	This implies the name is temporary or not valid.
Misgendering	Using pronouns that do not match the person's gender identity. This signals disrespect and invalidates identity.
Formerly a Man or Formerly a Woman	This frames their identity as deceptive or temporary.
Now Identifies as or Claims to be a Man or Woman	These phrases cast doubt on the authenticity of the person's gender.
Born a Boy or Born a Girl	These reinforce biological essentialism and undermine gender identity.
Cross Dressers or Impersonators	These terms misrepresent identity as performance.

ARTICLE

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THE POLITICS OF CONSTRUCTING EDUCATION INDICES IN INDIA

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, India has witnessed a surge in the use of indicator systems to manage its various social sectors. However, translating complex social realities into simplified, comparable numbers, removes important context about how these indicator systems are developed. The article draws on existing literature in the anthropology of policy, anthropology of state, sociology of measurement, neoliberalism, governance in India, audit culture, analysis of existing policy documents, thirteen semi-structured interviews with eight policy actors, and the author's positionality as a former state officer to argue that education indices are political technologies of the state. The research employs a single-case (embedded) study design where the overarching case is the politics involved in developing education indices in India and the embedded units of analysis are PGI and SEQI 2019—indices developed by the Indian state between 2016 and 2024. The article argues that education indices developed by the state are not neutral tools; rather, education indices are constructed by policyE actors as political technologies that enable the ruling-state to operationalize political governance in India and promote political advantage for the party in power. In addition, policy concepts and vision statements that guide the development of education indices inject neoliberal agenda into education governance.

Keywords

index; politics; measurement; neoliberalism; education

1. INTRODUCTION

Education governance in India operates through a complex relationship between the central and state institutions. Two central institutions that are in the forefront of

formulation, implementation, and evaluation of education programs in India are the Ministry of Education (MoE) and NITI Aayog. The MoE is responsible for the development and implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. NITI Aayog, erstwhile Planning Commission of India, redefined as a government think-tank by the Narendra Modi government in 2015, evaluates the state's various government policies and programs.

The MoE's digital platform, Unified District Information for School Education (UDISE), captures education data on over 247 million students, 1.2 million teachers, and 1.47 million schools in India. This data is further processed into indicators and packaged as grades and ranks that enable the evaluation and comparison of education outcomes for the 28 States and 8 Union Territories (UT) of India. These ranks and grades are published as large-scale state assessment reports namely, Performance Grading Index (PGI) developed by MoE and the School Education Quality Index (SEQI) developed by NITI Aayog.

Scholarship has examined the rise of state regimes through quantification and the development of governing through numbers strategies (Fontdevila, 2023; Merry, 2016; Samdub, 2022; Sinha, 2018, 2020). However, less attention has been paid to the institutional and political processes through which large scale education assessment tools are developed by the state. The article addresses this gap and answers how the state formulates the concepts underlying these indices, and how the process unfolds from gathering data from these digital platforms to validating the data points through external agencies.

The article argues that education indices developed by the state are not neutral tools; rather, education indices are constructed by policy actors as political technologies that enable the state to operationalize political governance in India and promote state narratives that support the ruling party's political discourse. This article provides an empirical account of how measurement functions as statecraft in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ruled contemporary India and how data generated through education indices becomes a means to recentralize federal authority without formally changing the constitution.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE POLITICS OF RENAMING STATE AGENCIES

In this section the article discusses how both the left and right leaning political parties in India have changed institutional names of central government agencies as a strategy to advance political agendas. This section discusses the nomenclature history of the government agencies known today as the Ministry of Education (MoE) and National Institute for Transforming India (NITI Aayog).

The MoE and NITI Aayog have a long history of organizational restructuring and nomenclature changes that affect their positioning and their power. Of the two, MoE is the older federal institute, established in 1947 after India's independence. Between 1985-2020, under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, MoE was renamed as the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). This change was justified by emphasizing a human-capital centered approach to development. However, in 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government reverted the MHRD name to MoE again, under the rationale that this move re-emphasizes the focus on education and learning (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 60). It's noteworthy that Rajiv

Gandhi was a member of the left-wing political party, the Indian National Congress (INC), and Narendra Modi is a member of the right leaning political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The renaming of MHRD to MoE legitimized the BJP led state as the primary authority on what federal level education mandates should mean in India. This renaming created an order in which the MoE asserts itself as a principal site for formulating education. Renaming as Palonen (2004) suggests, is in itself a form of rhetorical redescription which indicates both that the old name has given rise to misleading associations and that a new page in history has been turned.

Institutional renaming of state agencies can also be understood as the beginning of a broader set of processes unfolding, through which political visions promised by elected leaders or expressed in party manifestos can later be translated as education programs of the state. In the case of MHRD being renamed to MoE, the BJP led state justified the change as a means to refocus the national attention on human-capital centered education. This justification was expressed using the NEP 2020, an education policy developed by the BJP state. This is what Scott (1998) explains is the state falling in love with its own map. The state's use of policy documents developed by it to legitimize its own actions and reinforce itself at the center of education governance, places renaming as a strategic governance tool that helps the BJP led state to construct the narrative it wants to produce.

Looking closely at MoE's website reveals that policy documents further help in strengthening operationalization of centralized power by actively reconstructing the ministry's purpose. For instance, following the name change, one of the objectives of MoE was to, "formulate a National Education Policy and ensure its implementation in letter and spirit" (MoE, 2020). This framing enables the NEP policy document to frame its position as the formulating agency for education governance and also construct a roadmap where the MoE is responsible to implement education for the state. The NEP helps centralize the state power and MoE emerges with the power to operationalize education, as a formulating and implementing state agency.

Similarly, while still young, NITI Aayog carries the institutional DNA of the Planning Commission of India (1950-2014). The Planning Commission came into effect under the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, who at the time was a member of the left-leaning INC political party. The commission was responsible for formulating Five-Year Plans and wielded power over budgetary decisions and resource allocation to States and UTs. In 2015, the BJP led government dissolved the Planning Commission, arguing that it had become a redundant organization, as the 'one size fits all' solution would not apply to contemporary India. The commission was rebranded as NITI Aayog and described as the premier think-tank of the Government of India. Samdub (2022) writes, the BJP:

> transposed the work of [global] indices to the federal domain within India, creating alignments between actors, interests, and infrastructures at global, national, and regional scales. The rescaling of the global technology of the index to the domestic sphere attempts to give Modi's new public policy organ, NITI Aayog, a hold over the territories of this very large country in a way this is somewhat analogous to the World Bank's sway over nation-states, displacing existent institutional power structures while promoting competitive and entrepreneurial forms of development. (p. 474).

Between 2015 and 2022 NITI Aayog was led by the government of India bureaucrat Amitabh Kant, who is best known for leading branding initiatives like the "Incredible India!" tourism campaign. During this time, indices that "arbitrarily rank administrative units and place them in a competitive relationship with each other," became "one of NITI Aayog's key tools for influencing policy" (Samdub, 2022, p. 474). The policies that allowed:

> states and districts to improve their ranking on these indices tended to be deregulatory, promoting increased data capture and entrepreneurship in the work of development. Though they promise to actualize Modi's slogans of 'minimum government' and 'competitive federalism,' NITI Aayog's indices in fact empower the central government and weaken Indian federalism, realigning channels of authority as part of the BJP's broader moves to restructure power in the Indian state. (Samdub, 2022, p. 474)

After being formed, NITI went through many administrative changes. One that affected its programs the most was the frequent change in its Chief Executive Officer (CEO). During the development of SEQI 2019 Amitabh Kant was the CEO of NITI; however, Parameswaran Iyer served as the CEO from July 2022 to February 2023, during SEQI 2.0. BVR Subrahmanyam, former Chief Secretary of Jammu and Kashmir, succeeded as CEO from February 2023 till February 2026. This frequent change in leadership resulted in many programs at NITI being either redesigned or cancelled. Some programs started by the former CEO Amitabh Kant, such as SEQI, found themselves in the latter category.

NITI Aayog's renaming was followed by organizational restructuring which embedded neoliberal logics such as competitive and cooperative federalism as its mandate—the article discusses this further in the finding section. Foucault (1977, p. 168) argues that the state uses logical concepts to carry out political tactics and control individuals and institutions. NITI Aayog adopted competitive and cooperative Federalism as approaches to govern the States and UTs and formalized these approaches through the production of the SEQI education index. However, this new framing of NITI Aayog as a state think-tank with neoliberal mandates doesn't clarify what NITI has formal authority over, as its once held budgetary power is diffused by renaming it. Here, renaming works as a strategy to discipline former powerful institutions like the Planning Commission to be reduced to a think-tank where the authority of the institute is dependent on mandates framed by the BJP led state.

As the political guards change at the center, strategic renaming of MoE and NITI Aayog restructures the hierarchy that these institutes follow. Renaming legitimizes the MoE as the primary formulating and implementing power for education in India. Renaming also creates another layer of bureaucratic management for NITI, as its education projects and programs now require the approval of the MoE. This leads to the MoE functioning as a disciplining agency as it regulates the actions of NITI.

Tracing this nomenclature change through the history of these agencies showcases that renaming government agencies as political parties change at the center, is a political strategy of the state. The political strategy of renaming institutes creates disciplinary power. One agency, MoE, has power to formulate and implement policy in the country through NEP 2020. The other agency, NITI, has the mandate to follow states' governance framework of neoliberal

logics. By consolidating power in the agency of its choosing, the state is able to strategically advance its political agenda and centralize the authority in itself to formulate and implement education in India.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1990s, India has witnessed a surge in the use of indicator systems to manage its various social sectors. In school education, the government has been increasingly collecting data that are available in raw forms as well as descriptive reports (Bhatnagar et al., 2022). These data points are further processed through indicator systems which are statistical measures used to consolidate complex data into simple numbers or ranks that are meaningful to policy makers and the public (Merry, 2011, p. S86). However, translating the realities of social life into neat indicators involves decision and meaning-making about what should be measured, how it should be measured, and what aspect of the social phenomena being measured can be excluded from the measurement (Merry, 2016). The sociology of measurement therefore positions measurement as not simply technical processes representing reality, but as a social and political practice.

Anthropologists of policy have discussed the development of state measurement tools as a social practice of power. These large-scale indices hide the negotiations of complex meanings and understandings that policy makers engage with to construct them (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 769). The construction of an index—a collection of indicators—is itself a site of governance where decisions are made about what counts as evidence, whose knowledge is incorporated, and what the state wants to make visible to the public. Samdub's (2022) analysis in "Governance Interface: The Index in Modi's India" illustrates this by showing how state-produced indices do more than evaluate performance. They reorganize bureaucratic priorities, incentivize competition among states, and align local governance with centrally defined metrics of success. By translating complex social realities into simplified, comparable numbers, these indices create an appearance of transparency and objectivity while privileging what can be quantified. He writes that indices "combine the bland managerialism of World Bank – style good governance with Modi's narratives of an aspirational, innovative, and transforming nation" (p. 473). Further, "by pitting administrative units against each other, they render development as competition, centralizing state power and promoting entrepreneurship as the answer to poverty" (ibid). These indices in turn also eliminate teachers, students, and education communities from the formulation and decision-making process and scrutinize their outcomes through the indicators. As Levinson (2009) argues, for policy to reach its full potential its development needs to be democratized. Policy democratization needs to pay attention to not only who implements the policy but also to those who participate in constructing the categories through which policy problems are defined.

The political significance of measurement becomes important when understood through the literature on neoliberal governance. Neoliberalism measures minimize the obligation of the state to provide for the welfare of its citizens (Harvey, 2009). In education, indicator systems can function as technologies through which the central government's responsibilities can be

reduced by emphasizing performance, competitions, measurable outcomes and accountability. Lall and Anand (2022) demonstrate how the involvement of state agencies positions measurements as socially constructed technical tools through which the state creates, constructs, executes, and narrates education. Sinha (2018, 2020) highlights how benchmarking and comparative metrics are used to discipline subnational units and steer development agendas. Aiyar (2020) and Kapur (2020) argue that the BJP's expansion of rankings, dashboards, and performance indices intensifies centralization and redefines accountability through data. These arguments suggest that education measurements reorganise state responsibility as authority to define large-scale education measurements remains centralized while the responsibility to achieve the outcomes is distributed downwards to the State and UT departments, teachers, and students. The redistribution of the states' education responsibility is closely related to the emergence of an audit culture. Power (1997) states this rise of auditing has its roots in political demands for accountability and control. Shore & Wright (2024) argue audit culture aims to rationalize the use of measurements, indices, and rankings to define success. These indicators then reshape how organizations and individuals are expected to operate, with unexpected effects.

Literature on the anthropology of the state further demonstrates that these measurement technologies actively participate in constructing the image of the state itself. Gupta and Sharma (2006, p. 5) situate state assessments within neoliberal discourse of good governance that works to hide political rationality. By presenting measurements as objective and transparent, governments remove important historical, institutional and political context within which performance is produced. Sharma (2013) argues that this technocratic casting of transparency paradoxically reinforces state opacity because the processes through which categories and measures are produced remain hidden. Mathur (2019) demonstrates how bureaucratic regimes of documentation and evaluation produce new forms of state authority and distance the citizen from the state. This "everyday state" perspective reveals how governance is uneven and contingent, shaped as much by local negotiations and bureaucratic practices as by top-down policy.

Although audit culture, neoliberalism, and technocratic narratives have discussed how the state develops tools to concentrate its power, there is limited empirical evidence on how this operates in India through educational indices. By studying the development of SEQI and PGI, two indices developed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state, this research discusses how education indices are developed in India as political technologies for governance.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 – Theoretical Framework



Source: Fieldwork, 2025

This study draws on theory in the sociology of measurement, anthropology of the state, anthropology of policy, neoliberalism, governance in India, and audit culture to understand how the epistemic community of state officers leverage education indices to influence policy in India, politically. These theories are brought together to understand how the Indian state develops the education indices, PGI and SEQI. The article looks into what the process of developing indices entails, how policy actors interact with the state directives, and how the state uses the indices in education governance.

Scholarship in the sociology of measurement places indicator systems as statistical measures that are used to consolidate and translate complex data into a simple number or rank that is meaningful to policy makers and the public (Merry, 2011, p. S86). Coupled with Harvey's (2005) argument of neoliberalism, the doctrine that market exchange is an ethic in itself capable of acting as a guide for all human action, measurements have become dominant in both thought and practice around the world. This neoliberal agenda of assessing through data further depends upon a reconstitution of state powers that emphasize privatization, finance, and market processes. Neoliberal logic embedded in developing measurements become a means to move the scrutiny away from the ruling-state onto its state departments, who further pass the blame on to the districts, and the districts on to the teachers and students.

Moreover, these large-scale indices hide the negotiations of complex meanings and understandings that policy makers engage with to construct them (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 769). The state becomes the supreme narrative, keeping the policy process from truly ever

being democratized creating a narrative of who can and cannot form policy. Levinson (2009) argues, for policy to reach its full potential its development needs to be democratized and it needs to pay attention to not only who implements the policy but also to those who participate in constructing the categories through which policy problems are defined. This concentration of power through policy further reshapes how decisions are carried out across and within state departments.

Anthropologists of the state have situated the conversation around state assessments as a neoliberal discourse of good governance that works to hide political rationality (Gupta & Sharma, 2006, p. 5). This technocratic casting of transparency and good governance under neoliberalism lends the procedure to enable fundamental changes in democratic governance and, paradoxically, reinforces state opacity (Sharma, 2013). Opacity around the process of constructing these measurement tools challenges their portrayal as neutral instruments. In contrast it positions these tools as political technologies that determine which states can be constructed as successful and which as lagging. Scott's (1998) argument shows that measurements create an oversimplified explanation of what is a good state and bad state, removing the very important context of how these measurements come to be. Compliance with this culture is equated with effective governance of education by the state departments. These comparative ranks make states legible and thus governable (Scott, 1998, p. 80). Legibility produced by the BJP led Indian state, to govern through education indices, introduces auditing as a measure of control. As Power (1997) states, this rise of auditing has its roots in political demands for accountability and control. Shore & Wright (2024) argue, audit culture aims to rationalize the use of measurements, indices, and rankings to define success. These indicators then reshape how organizations and individuals are expected to operate, with unexpected effects. The process of developing indicator systems justified by neoliberal concepts, creates an audit culture that renders the measurement process as political.

The BJP government has undertaken controversial policies and programs which have been interpreted as flowing from its ideology of aggressive Hindu nationalism (Chowdhury, 2023). According to scholars, this Hindu nationalism ideology has resulted in the Modi government pursuing policies that are not neutral but aimed at strengthening the BJP's grasp in India through political governance (Lall and Anand, 2022). This dominance of the BJP party, made possible through Modi's government, in the Indian political landscape also finds its way into education governance. In education, particularly when it comes to national assessments, the BJP's political governance emerges through the construction of large scale measurement tools. Most notably, Mila Samdub (2022) shows in "Governance Interface: The Index in Modi's India" that state-produced rankings do more than evaluate performance. They reorganize bureaucratic priorities, incentivize competition among states, and align local governance with centrally defined metrics of success. By translating complex social realities into simplified, comparable numbers, these indices create an appearance of transparency and objectivity while privileging what can be quantified. A growing body of scholarship argues that education indices in India function not as neutral instruments of measurement but as political technologies that actively shape governance. Together, these studies suggest that indices are

embedded in broader "audit cultures" that transform how governance is imagined and enacted.

Taken together, existing scholarship highlights how national education indices are not neutral but rather concentrate state power, exclude participation of teachers and students, and enforce an audit culture to justify the actions of the state. However, there is limited empirical evidence on how this operates in India through educational indices. This article delves into the interpretations that state officers undertake as they execute state's assessment directives, and engages in the document analysis of crucial Indian policy documents that construct the necessities for education measurements. In addition, I draw on my positionality as a former state officer who worked on the development of an education index within the Government of India. This article provides empirical evidence on the politics of constructing education indices in India by looking at the process of developing indices and understanding how the state in India constructs these large-scale measurement tools.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 *Research Design*

A single-case (embedded) research design choice has been made for the study (Yin, 2018). The overarching case is the politics of constructing education indices in India and the embedded subunits of analysis are the education indices PGI and SEQI 2019. This research design is best suited for the study as it captures in detail the circumstances and conditions of India's indices construction situation. Through this design the study examines the subunits within the larger case in detail and supports the development of an emergent design grounded in data and leading to theory (Ozcan et al, 2017). This design helps understand how the construction of education indices unfolds within institutional and political contexts in India while looking, in detail, at the development process of the SEQI and PGI indices.

The two embedded units are examined through different combinations of data sources. For SEQI, the design draws on interviews, document analysis, and my positionality as a former state officer. For PGI, the design draws primarily on document analysis and interviews. For the study interviews purposive sampling of state officers and one private actor, who have an understanding of the development process of SEQI and PGI was undertaken. The first eight interviews took place in India in the summer of 2025, over zoom and the telephone, and were scheduled through in-person and online appointments in New Delhi, India. The methods of document analysis, and thirteen semi-structured interviews (five of these interviews are follow-up interviews) with eight state and private actors—involved in the development of education indices—has been employed to understand the politics around educational index construction in India.

Acknowledging the emergent design of qualitative research, interview protocols were modified in October 2025. Follow-up interviews with five of the eight study participants was undertaken in the winter of 2025. Pseudonyms have been used for the names of the participants and in one particular case the organization name has been changed to ensure confidentiality of the interviewee. New pseudonyms have been applied for the five follow-

up interviews conducted in the winter of 2025 (between 15th November and 15th January, 2026) in order to ensure confidentiality is maintained. In total, more than 9 hours of interview was conducted for this article. Participants' details for the semi-structured interviews, carried out for the study, are detailed in Table 1. Participants' details for the follow-up semi-structured interviews carried out for the study, are detailed in Table 2. The pseudonym employed for the organization is in Table 3.

Table 1 – Overview of Participants for the First Round of Interviews

Sr. No.	Participant Name	Participant Role	Date of Interview	Interview Duration (Hours HH:Minutes MM:Seconds SS)	Interview Medium
1	Niraj	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	29th May, 2025	30:50 (MM:SS)	Telephonic- New Delhi, India
2	Mridul	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	2nd June, 2025	58:37 (MM:SS)	Telephonic- New Delhi, India
3	Mira	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	4th June, 2025	32:51 (MM:SS)	Telephonic- New Delhi, India
4	Damini	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	6th June, 2025	01:27:54 (HH:MM:SS)	Telephonic- New Delhi, India
5	Prerna	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	7th June, 2025	55:54 (MM:SS)	Telephonic- New Delhi, India
6	Kiran	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	14th June, 2025	19:33 (MM:SS)	Telephonic- New Delhi, India
7	Madhu	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	28th June, 2025	10:51 (MM:SS)	Telephonic- New Delhi, India
8	Manoj	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	15th January, 2026	16:17 (MM:SS)	Zoom- Madison, USA

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 2 – Overview of Participants for the Follow-up Interviews

Sr. No.	Participant Name	Participant Role	Date of Interview	Interview Duration (Hours HH:Minutes MM:Seconds SS)	Interview Medium
1	Fatima	Current state officer at NITI Aayog	8th November, 2025	01:04:25 (MM:SS)	Zoom- Madison, Wisconsin, USA
2	Gandharv	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	15th November, 2025	41:00 (MM:SS)	Zoom- Madison, Wisconsin, USA
3	Tanmay	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	16th November, 2025	23:38 (MM:SS)	Zoom- Madison, Wisconsin, USA
4	Jagdish	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	16th November, 2025	48:27 (MM:SS)	Zoom- Madison, Wisconsin, USA
5	Pratik	Former state officer at NITI Aayog	18th November, 2025	01:35:00 (HH:MM:SS)	Zoom- Madison, Wisconsin, USA

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 3 – Organization Pseudonyms

Sr. No.	Supporting Name	Supporting Information
1	Agency 1	The third party organization hired by NITI Aayog to support in the development of its education index, SEQI 2019

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

5.2 *Document Analysis*

Document analysis of the education indices, SEQI 2019, PGI 2017, SATHe 2022, and NEP 2020 have been undertaken. Analysis of PGI 2017 and SEQI 2019 helped identify who develops the index and the nouns, verbs, sentences and adjectives used to legitimize the index as a governance tool. Furthermore, critical analysis of development discourses in the PGI and SEQI reports revealed the importance of education key concepts. Examination of the SATHe 2022 report helped understand how large-scale programs use indicator values from SEQI to legitimize state tools.

In addition, the SATHe also helped to understand how State and UT departments develop programs such as District Scorecards that replicate the state index framework as district rankings. Furthermore, analysis of the NEP 2020 enabled the understanding on how the Ministry of Education's mandate is declared through the policy document. NEP 2020 also shows how nomenclature changes are justified through federal policy documents. The details on the documents analyzed are provided in Table 4 below.

Table 4 – Documents Analyzed

Sr. No.	Documents Analyzed	Year of Publishing	Pages	Unit of Analysis
1	'Performance Grading Index (PGI)	2017	29	1) Who develops the index. 2) Nouns, verbs, sentences and adjectives used to legitimize the index as a governance tool. 3) Critically analyzing the discourse in PGI through theory in state, policy, and measurement.
2	School Education Quality Index (SEQI)	2019	153	) Who develops the index and which policy concepts are used to justify SEQI. 2) Nouns, verbs and adjectives used to legitimize the index as a governance tool. 3) Critically analyzing the discourse in SEQI through theory in state, policy, and measurement.

3	Project SATHe - Learnings for Large-scale Transformation in School Education	2022	139	Analysis of how large scale programs use indicator values from SEQI to legitimize state tools as neutral governance mechanisms.
4	National Education Policy (NEP)	2020	66	Analysis of how Ministry of Education mandates and nomenclature changes are justified through policy documents.

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

5.3 *Analysis*

Saldana's (2016, p. 14) streamlined code-to-theory model for qualitative analysis has been employed. All interview data has been coded abductively. Inductive coding has been done by creating themes, employing observational analysis and positionality of the author as a former state officer, teacher, and community member of the Indian education policy landscape. Deductive codes have been drawn out through the conceptual framework by critical analysis of theory on state, education policy and measurements. This abductive qualitative analysis has generated 87 codes, 23 categories and 3 themes.

Content analysis of SEQI, and PGI reports by identifying the nouns and verbs in the syntax has enabled a critical analysis of the reports. Deliberations with peers and scholars through formal and informal meetings have critically informed the process of understanding how education indices are developed in the Indian state. To manage the tracking of all the data that has been analyzed, an excel repository has been maintained along with a data information sheet containing participant details, demographics, professional role, years of experience, site information, and relevant attributes.

The article draws on the document analysis of the indices, policy documents, and interviews with the policy actors involved in developing them. Undertaking the above-mentioned analysis mechanism this article examines—how the education indices development process evolves within the Indian state.

5.4 *Positionality*

I understand my identity as fragmented, shaped by both my experiences and the categories through which I am publicly understood. A similar tension informs my research where my external experience of a researcher trying to understand development of state assessments in India, is interacting with my internal experience of being a former state officer who worked with the state to develop an education index. While carrying out this research I have reflected on my social identities, my citizenship, caste, religion, political ideology, age, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, parent's education, physical ability, family background, and marital status. This reflexivity has made me realise how deeply the state is embedded in the self. The categories through which the state renders individuals legible simplifies them on paper, but at

the same time this simplification leaves out important context about who they are socially, politically, and culturally beyond their labels.

When I began to work as a Young Professional in the education vertical at NITI Aayog, Government of India, I had already engaged with the state as a community organizer and state-teacher. I transitioned to the education vertical of NITI, hoping that the state's education policy formulation and implementation mechanisms would actualize the potential of education as a human right. I worked on a school-assessment project called the School Education Quality Index (SEQI). While I initially believed in SEQI's promise, my experiences there led me to seriously question the idea embedded in competitive federalism that state rankings would improve government educational services. Witnessing data being used to construct narratives that support political motivations made me re-evaluate my belief in state systems as I interacted with a 'governance through numbers' regime. As a former state officer who worked on the development of an education index, SEQI 2.0, which was later cancelled, I draw on this complicated relationship with education where I have witnessed it being used as a tool of control.

During interviews with my study participants—most of whom were former or current state officers from NITI Aayog—I often empathized with their experiences and also felt challenged in my assumptions. During the interviews and also while transcribing, I often found myself reflecting on my days in NITI. As a state officer I executed whatever the vertical needed for the day–whether it was appraising policies, writing state briefs, making talking points for policy actors, or engaging in the experiment of measurements. As a state employee I understood how state directives were executed through instructions provided by bureaucrats and policy actors. I wondered about the importance placed on compliance through bureaucratic hierarchy and the "Yes Sir" and "Yes Ma'am" responses I gave to the bureaucrats on their directives. I sometimes felt that the only acceptable response, regardless of what was required of me, always had to be "Yes". Looking back, I realise how rarely I said no or admitted that something was not possible.

As I listened to my study participants, read critical theory, engaged in document analysis of the policy documents, and reflected on my experiences with the state, I confronted the toll that my motivation had suffered in my journey to actualize education as a human right. I acknowledge that the motivation to do this research stems from my experiences of developing the state tool SEQI and this in turn has played a role in how I understood my study participants and approached the document analysis. Through this article I want to examine empirically the realities behind constructing large scale education measurements in India. I believe education is a basic human right and the state justification through numbers of what entails a good or bad education removes important social, political, and cultural context about the process of constructing these numbers. My prior experiences with the state predisposed me to critically look at the construction of indices. I have come to understand that developing education numbers is not a neutral act, and through this article I aim to challenge the neutrality narrative that the state constructs by rationalizing the complex phenomena of education through number production.

5.5 *Limitations*

The study is not without methodological limitations. The purposive sampling in the study led to most of the participants being former or current state officers from NITI Aayog who have experienced the process of developing and interacting with SEQI 2019, SEQI 2.0 and PGI 2017. This informed the development of SEQI through an interaction of interviews and document analysis. However, the author has not interviewed people who worked on PGI; instead has relied mostly on the document analysis of the reports and recollection of the study participants on their interactions with PGI. As the study depends on participants who were involved in the development of SEQI it doesn't take into consideration the conversations around other indices that the state agencies, NITI Aayog and MoE, have developed.

6. FINDINGS

In the historical context section, the article discussed how nomenclature changes as a strategic political tool has been used by the ruling-state in India since independence. The ruling-state in this regard emerges as a form of political governance in which the state's actions are strategically aligned to ensure political success for the party in power. This strategic alignment of state action to ensure the construction of successful state narratives supports the ruling party's political discourses. The sections elaborates on the two findings of this article, education indices introduce neoliberal logic, and education indices are constructed as political technologies of the ruling-state.

6.1 *Indices introduce neoliberal logic into education*

In the 1950's, the Planning Commission (presently NITI Aayog) was a central vehicle to get state departments to adopt federal plans. In the 1990s however, with the liberalization of the economy and restoration of power of the state departments, the states with a ruling coalition came to wield considerable power in the union government (Bagchi, 2003, p. 26). Seeking a new governing tactic in contemporary India, the central government today uses indices to measure how different states performed on key services. Policy concepts were developed to support the development of the indices. In the below section the article discusses how policy concepts and vision statements play a central role in enabling state measurement tools to be justified as education tools.

6.1.1 SEQI's Competitive Federalism

After the Indian general elections of 2014, which the BJP led coalition won, on January 1st 2015 NITI Aayog was rebranded as the 'premier think-tank' of India. NITI leaned into index development and adopted competitive and cooperative federalism as its institutional grammar. The concepts became the theme on which various measurement tools, such as the water index, health index, SEQI, and others were developed. A former state officer, Niraj, interviewed for the study mentioned.

> When NITI was formed, competitive and cooperative Federalism became a theme of the institution. There had been other indexes, [like] water index, and along with that came the idea of an education index, SEQI.

The World Bank became the technical partner for NITI's health index and later for its education index, SEQI. Niraj's explanation hints that the decision for developing SEQI was understood as a logical move to be followed by the NITI team, as the water index was scheduled to be published in 2018, and the health index was scheduled for 2019. As gathered from the interviews the basic discussion among the education vertical team members was, "why not an education index".

These indices require a logical grounding to justify their production. Policy concepts, developed to legitimize the need for these measures, become essential to produce this logically grounded state image. For NITI, competitive federalism was that justifiable logical foundation, "facilitat[es] improved performance of States/UTs" by "encourag[ing] healthy competition among states through transparent rankings, in various sectors, along with a hand-holding approach" (NITI Aayog, n.d.). The state positioned itself, through competitive federalism, as a supportive institution by using language like 'encourages,' while also introducing the ideas of 'competition' and surveillance of the state departments. Current state officer, Damini, described it as:

> Competitive federalism is basically, you push the states to do better by showcasing how if you don't do better the other state can take those opportunities from you. A very healthy competition to get investments from foreign players.

Damini goes on to use language such as "push", "do better", "take opportunities", "get investment from foreign players", "healthy competition" to justify why the 'states' should participate in SEQI. If the States and UTs do not participate (as the State of West Bengal didn't in SEQI 2019), they do not get a ranking and are not able to use the index outcome in their deliberations while requesting funds from the federal government. Damini's articulation of 'investments from foreign players' raises questions about whether these measurements solely focus on national funds or are they about getting investments from international organizations too. The involvement of the World Bank in the development of SEQI and UNICEF in developing the PGI report also raises questions about the motivations of these international organizations in developing India's domestic indices.

While framed as healthy, competitive federalism pits the States and UTs against each other as they compete for the limited opportunities and investments available. The policy concept competitive federalism, helps insert and institutionalize the neoliberal logic of ranking which is aimed at creating inter-state competition while placing NITI as an overseeing state institute.

6.1.2 SEQI's Cooperative Federalism

As per the state website, NITI Aayog also promotes cooperative federalism, which aims at "fostering structured support initiatives and engagement with the states/UTs on a continuous basis" (NITI Aayog, n.d.). In practice it translates as NITI scheduling meetings between the State and UTs, Cabinet Ministers, Chief Secretaries and the Prime Minister. This also extends to developing programs that enable the sharing of best practices. NITI's webpage states that, "NITI Aayog has been constituted to actualise the important goal of cooperative federalism and to enable good governance in India" (NITI Aayog, n.d.). Furthermore, on the state webpage cooperative federalism is used to justify the operationalization of large-scale education programs of the state such as Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital-education (SATHe). The policy concept is also mentioned in the foreword, however the concept is not used beyond the foreword.

SATHe was an educational reform in three states, between 2017-2022, that aimed to improve learning outcomes in the states of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand—two of the 3 states led by BJP—through a variety of interventions. One such intervention, district scorecards, was aimed at producing district rankings on education. The SATHe report states, "Extensive research was carried out to finalize metrics for district scorecards and rankings which utilized data from Aspirational District Metrics, PGI metrics, SEQI metrics and other metrics from extensive internal discussions" (NITI Aayog, 2023). SATHe appears to promote cooperative federalism through best practices that State and UTs can execute. Samdub (2022) states, "Cooperative and competitive federalism is celebrated as devolution in economic policy. In fact, under the garb of federalism it allows the central government to bolster its hold over the states" (p. 480). Furthermore, through the SATHe programs district scorecards the State and UT education departments scrutinize the district education bodies. Just as the central government avoids blame by scrutinizing State and UTs through SEQI and PGI, the State and UT departments can do the same through district scorecards, which blame the district governance for educational outcomes. This process of pushing the blame forward to the subordinate governing body is actualized with the help of the neoliberal concept, cooperative federalism.

6.1.3 PGI's Vision Statement

SEQI is not the only educational index used in India; working with UNICEF, the MoE developed their own index, PGI. This set up a bit of a power struggle between MoE and NITI. As one of the study participants, Jagdish, mentioned, "Unlike the health and water index, where NITI was the only assessing agency, for SEQI, NITI got into a bit of a challenge because the MoE also came up with their index". This power struggle hints at how two state agencies mandated to develop education indices by the center, develop these measurements with different mechanisms. While SEQI follows a ranking system, PGI develops a grading system. While the ranking system is grounded in policy concepts, the grading system is grounded in vision statements. MoE's PGI positions grading, not ranking, as a more equitable and less stigmatizing form of assessment. The PGI 2017 report clarified why it uses grading instead of ranking

> PGI grades states and UTs, as opposed to ranking, allowing several states and UTs to be considered at the same level. Eliminating the phenomenon of one improving at the cost of others, thereby casting a stigma of underperformance (UNICEF, 2017, p. 1)

PGI extends a critical lens on ranking methodology, stating that it casts a 'stigma of underperformance' and encourages 'improvement of State and UTs at the cost of others.' The difference in approaches followed by PGI and SEQI hints at how federal institutions create measurement tools with different frameworks while assessing the same set of State and UTs. This difference in measurement mechanisms also becomes a means to legitimize bureaucratic turf. The MoE considers PGI as the superior tool, the MoE-PGI report states that PGI eliminates underperformance stigma through its grading mechanism.

Vision statements can be used by the ruling-state as a mechanism to govern states from a distance, maintaining its control, without provoking the political instability that rankings might generate. Measurement tools that allow all States and UTs to shine are encouraged by the ruling-state, as in the case of PGI (which went on to have six iterations to date). However, if the tool produces ranks giving a State or UT a higher rank than the other, there is a possibility that the ruling-state cancels the index as it did for SEQI 2.0 (cancelled after its 2019 report).

By using language like 'as opposed to ranking' and 'allowing several states and UTs to be considered at the same level," PGI declares itself the superior index. PGI is a non-controversial tool of the ruling-state as it doesn't produce backlash from the state and UTs; instead, all of them can aspire to share the same grade. While the ranking mechanism may create backlash and discontent among the State and UT departments as only one rank can be held by each of them constructing the idea of a good rank and a bad rank. As PGI grades, it removes the idea of competition and allows states to be at the same grade level.

The PGI grades are discussed in the Project Approval Board (PAB) meetings where states present the status of their education systems to the ministry. The minutes of the PAB meetings capture these departments' discussions, and on these meetings basis central funds are dispersed to the States and UTs. Analysis of the PAB minutes 2023-24 of the state Uttar Pradesh (UP), a major political state with BJP majority, shows how PGI is used to assess the 'Review of performance during 2022-23' for UP.

6.1.4 Review of performance during 2022–23

PGI State for 2021–22 was opened for data entry in January 2022. Although the State initiated the process, only a limited number of entries had been submitted. The State secured a score of 851 in the Performance Grading Index (PGI), placing it in Grade I. The domain-wise performance gaps for 2020–21, compared with those recorded in 2019–20, 2018–19 and 2017–18, are presented below (see Table 5).

Table 5 – PGI reference in Uttar Pradesh's PAB Minute 2023-2024

Year	Category 1 – Domain 1 (180)	Category 1 – Domain 2 (80)	Category 1 – Domain 3 (150)	Category 1 – Domain 4 (230)	Category 2 – Domain 1 (360)	Total – All Domains (1000)
2017–18	132	62	73	202	134	603
GAP	48	18	77	28	226	397
2018–19	114	64	109	207	214	708
GAP	66	16	41	23	146	292
2019–20	132	65	113	213	281	804
GAP	48	15	37	17	79	196
2020–21	132	67	132	211	309	851
GAP	48	13	18	19	51	149

Source: (Department of School Education & Literacy, 2023)

The PAB minute shows that UP initiated the PGI for 2021-22 but has not yet completed it; however, it had good improvement over several years. PGI is used here by the UP-state government to construct a narrative of improvement.

Institutionalization of PAB guides federal fund allocation to the state departments. In the PAB meeting, referenced in the figure above, UPs education department was directed to fill up the educator faculty positions, as that number directly impacted its PGI indicator score. This creates pressure on the state department to fill the position even though it might mean compromising the quality of the recruitment. This simple example also reveals the extensive interpretive work that goes into the construction of these numbers. The measurement tools become a medium through which the state enacts its power, making visible only that which serves its narrative of efficient administration while making other narratives irrelevant.

One of the participants, Fatima, noted that states often reference SEQI on electronic (e) files when they request funds from the MoE. These e-files travel across MoE, NITI, Ministry of finance and other counterparts, collecting comments on the request of the states for funds. Fatima, a current NITI officer stated, "A lot of these [e]files refer to SEQI, how they have been ranked and what SEQI says about it. They use SEQI 2019 data to back [educational] proposals". These (e)files transform SEQI from simply a measurement tool into a strategic instrument, enabling and encouraging states to participate and leverage their reported outcomes.

These measurements, coupled with tools such as PAB and e-file, create a circular logic as information flows from the state departments through these assessment tools, only to be fed back into the system to determine which state/UT is doing well. These indices introduce neoliberal logics, such as competitive and cooperative federalism, and vision statements justifying the ruling-state mechanisms and distribute federal funds to the State and UTs on the basis of ranks and grades.

6.2 Constructing education indices as political technologies

In this section the article discusses how education indices are developed. The section looks at the process of developing the index and also draws from theory to argue the construction of the indices as political technologies of the ruling-state.

6.2.1 Constructing PGI as a digitocratic report

Examining the construction of PGI 2017 in depth was beyond the scope of this article. However, the document analysis revealed that to construct PGI, the MoE drew from existing, Department of School Education and Literacy (DoSEL), department data platforms such as UDISE, National Achievement Survey (NAS), Public Finance Management System (PFMS), Mid Day Meal (MDM) and Shagun portal.

> The information on the indicators are drawn from data available with the DoSEL from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE), National Achievement Survey (NAS) of NCERT, Mid Day Meal (MDM) website, Public Financial Management System (PFMS) and the information uploaded by the States and UTs on the Shagun portal of DoSEL (MoE, 2017, p. 2).

PGI 2017 also prides itself on being a tool that is independent of human interaction in its index development process. The 2017 PGI report states, "The PGI weights and final scores were obtained through programmed software and no human interface was involved" (MoE, 2017, p. 2). Through PGI the ruling-state facilitates a digitocratic governance, where there is a reliance on digital tools and platforms to accelerate the pace at which governance judgements can be made by the ruling-state. "Digitocracy" describes a structural transformation whereby political judgment is increasingly shaped through continuous, platform-mediated data rather than deliberation and accountable decision-making (Coppack, 2026). The absence of human interface suggests an apolitical process and hides the work that many humans did to collect, store, and transfer the data and to construct the index.

PGI didn't require permission to use the data from the existing data portals, as the MoE owns the education data that PGI uses. This reduces the bureaucratic delays, in addition the ministry's unprecedented access to education data facilitates the speedy annual production of PGI reports. The 2017 report states that, "It is for the first time that there is a reliable tool" (p. 10). PGI is described as a 'reliable' tool that helps justify the ruling-state's education 'grading' or leveling of state performance, which is not as controversial as ranking. The report states

> Grading, in an ideal situation, allows all the States and UTs to be construed as star performers. (MoE, 2017, p. 1)

The removal of human interaction in the PGI tool coupled with the heavy reliance on digital data constructs the PGI as a reliable and ideal tool. PGI 'allows all the State and UTs' to compete and become 'star performers' by their measures. There is also a strong focus on "teachers", "students", "schools" and "States and UTs" in the report, revealed by looking at the list of indicators that PGI uses to generate its grades: all 70 indicators are about assessing the performance of the 'teachers', 'students', 'schools' and the 'State and UT' departments. The tool becomes a means to surveil the schools and education actors in the State and UTs.

While PGI is implemented as a measurement tool that is used to assess the teachers, schools and students, the digitocratic process of developing this index doesn't consult these

actors in the process of developing the tool, nor are their perspectives captured by it. The exclusion of teacher and students' narratives, and the development of digitocratic reports, renders these assessments as means to consolidate the ruling-states' authority while hiding the indices political nature.

6.2.2 Constructing SEQI 2019 as a technical process

SEQI 2019 report mentions that before the index development started, there were five "State/UT consultation workshops" from the year 2017 till March 2018. During these workshops nodal officers for SEQI from all 35 States and UTs (the state of West Bengal didn't participate in SEQI) were briefed on how they need to calculate the values of the indicators and from where they need to source the data. These instructions were important to form the index, as the data points received from the nodal officers would generate the ranks. Interviews of the study participants revealed that the development of SEQI was executed as a process of data collection and data validation.

6.2.3 Data Collection

The data collection process for SEQI 2019 started in April 2018 and continued till December 2018. The development and finalization of SEQI indicators were facilitated by MHRD (presently known as MoE) (NITI Aayog, 2019, p. 20). On comparing the indicator lists for SEQI and PGI it was noticed that there was a significant overlap, 92.31%, in the indicators listed in the two reports. Niraj clarifies this further and states, "PGI has a whole host of indicators, I don't know, they have far too many and SEQI took the subset". Niraj shares that the significant overlap was because SEQI was a subset of PGI, except for a marginal difference in its indicators in the equity, learning outcomes, access and infrastructure domains.

The SEQI 2019 report further states that MoE provided the data from existing technical platforms such as NAS, Shagun, and UDISE, for SEQI. This dependence on using existing digital data further legitimizes digitocracy as a part of the report generation mechanism. The report further states, "States and UTs appointed nodal officers for collating and submitting the data required for SEQI" (NITI Aayog, 2019, p. 21). MoE also provided access to the Shagun portal, which the NITI team used to get the State and UTs data. MoE was the central agency that 'allowed' NITI to access the education data, something that NITI wouldn't have been able to do on its own.

The report states, "Data was submitted online through the Ministry of Education's ShaGun portal and extracted into NITI Aayog's online portal" (NITI Aayog, 2019, p. 21). The use of language such as, "submitted", "through", "Ministry of Education", "extracted", "into NITI Aayog's online portal" further explains that NITI's SEQI 2019 report completely relied on the MoE. One of my interview participants recall

> We had 35 States, we had a Ministry, we had NITI and it's, it's like working and it's not easy, it's a lot of effort. Must understand that convergence is something people can talk about on paper but to actually get it done is [pauses] not easy.

Niraj uses the word 'convergence' to justify the technical process that was involved in developing SEQI. The bureaucratic appointments for NITI and MoE are all carried out by the central government, and these agencies are led by Modi's cabinet ministers. It is also interesting to note that the chairperson of NITI is the prime minister himself. Convergence here emerges as a means to justify the production of indices by bringing all the ruling-state appointed bureaucrats and political actors to agree on the development of SEQI. Even though the SEQI report was created by NITI, the report states that the main role of NITI was to develop SEQI in close partnership with MoE, manage and facilitate communication between the states/UTs and the validation agency, and write and disseminate the report. This information suggests that even though the report was developed by NITI, NITI's role was limited to being the mediator between States and UTs, MoE, and the third-party validation agency.

Speaking with Mridul, a former officer of the state, about how the data collection decisions were made revealed that:

> How decisions are being made, who gets to decide what is done, those are still things that we [NITI team] don't know. Even then [during SEQI], I think it was something that we decided that needed to be done and then we told the States, we need this data.

Mridul's use of words like, "don't know", "don't think", shows uncertainty about the decisions that were taken on the indicators. The use of "we told", " we decided", "we need" hints at the top down approach the ruling-state takes to develop the index. Mridul further speaks about the 'internal politics' that the team experienced while developing SEQI. They speak about how, "as long as the larger person in charge wasn't being questioned on the report, we weren't constantly being asked to defend our work so that he would have to defend it to someone else." However, Mridul also mentioned that changed

> Things started getting questioned, we were being put on the spot a lot with, why are you doing things a certain way? How will I… answer to the people above me? He would have very strong opinions about certain states saying that they are sending you any numbers, and you are believing it.

The standardization of the process for all States and UTs to feed the number into a ruling-state orchestrated data platform like Shagun enables MoE to produce a "govern by numbers" narrative (Fontdevilla, 2023). While this was done to depoliticize data by feeding numbers through a standardized platform, the senior state officer involved struggled to 'believe' the numbers from some states. This process of depoliticizing data collection, in turn politicized the process as data from some States and UTs were accepted, while others were questioned.

6.2.4 Data Validation

The bureaucrat's belief on data from some states while scrutiny for others also influenced how state officers working on SEQI felt about the report development. One of the study participants stated

> As much as I... have my own political beliefs, it colored the process in a way where I felt like, oh, maybe this state is more efficient as opposed to that one. I mean, it shouldn't be that way. It's sort of... it is like the center then harassing states based on political preferences.

The state officers observed that the political preference of bureaucrats shaped how States and UTs data was either accepted or scrutinized. This also raises the question on how did the States and UTs prove their data to NITI. One of my study participants revealed that, "We made sure that there were signed copies of paperwork, there was proof of evidence". The above transcript suggests that 'signed copies of paperwork', were the 'proof of evidence' for the States and UTs data. These signatures from the state departments hold the power to legitimize the data as proof, without addressing how the State and UT developed or collected the data points.

For data validation, NITI also employed a 3rd party independent validation agency, Agency1. The Director for Education & Skill Development for Agency1, Manoj, explained, "To avoid all those geopolitical problems, NITI Aayog ensured that all the documentation is available". The geopolitical problems that Manoj states, the author recalls from her conversations with her peers at NITI when she worked in the education vertical, were about the queries that States and UTs sent in to NITI stating that their data was not captured properly and the ranks were not justified. Mohan shares that NITI appointed Agency1 to 'avoid' these 'geopolitical problems'. NITI 'ensured' that all documents were made 'available' to Agency 1 to 'avoid' these 'problems'.

On asking Manoj, how politics interacts with the development of education indices, he Said:

> Pushpa, we have never seen an instance where we had looked at it from that point of view. Having said that, I would say some states, or the opposition states, always, because it's a federal system, the government of India has a different party ruling, and in other states, when you have a position [rank] downward? They would always see it like we will always be down. With us, they meant business.

As Manoj explains, states led by the opposition party suspected that their ranks would 'always be down'. For that reason, Agency1 was contracted as an independent agency who would validate the ranks of SEQI 2019. Agency1 is appointed by NITI to ensure that questions from the states and UTs on data and ranks are deflected and managed. Manoj, however, did not agree that the process was political, he explained:

> There were different stakeholders at every stage. Even before the data was being prepared, all these states, without any, any, you know, political alignment, were all trained in the same group. They were all, you know, all the data was shared in the same group with everyone, and that's how the index was generated.

Manoj stresses that there were 'different stakeholders' involved at 'every stage' of the index process. Here, having different stakeholders, as per Manoj, renders the process of developing indices apolitical. They further state that 'all states' were trained in the 'same group' and 'all data' was shared with 'everyone,' which he feels renders the process apolitical. One of the former officers also contested the claim of political favoritism, "We mapped it out by political party, we mapped it out by every different dimension and showed them [SEQI 2019] is representative, it had accuracy". This suggests that the team developing the index in NITI knew that the results could have political implications. The team 'mapped' the ranking out by 'political party' to show that the ranks 'had accuracy'. The mapping out of ranks to identify which political party is represented by the states shows the political awareness with which SEQI was constructed.

7. DISCUSSIONS

This study has demonstrated that educational indices such as PGI and SEQI are political technologies of the ruling-state, helping the state extend governance through a seemingly objective set of tools. Indices inject neoliberal logics into education, suggesting friendly competition as a mechanism for improvement while shifting responsibility away from the central government and toward the states and, later, districts. The sense that indices are objective and credible is carefully cultivated through data collection, data validation, and external auditors. Nonetheless, party politics inevitably influence the construction of the indices, the collection and analysis of the data. Education governance by the ruling-state relies heavily on the construction of a process and digitocracy to maintain the power of the ruling-state. Measurement tools emerge as a form of statecraft to monitor the state departments while masking surveillance by the center as performance measurement.

This study contributes an education case to the burgeoning literature on how indices in India function as political technologies that actively shape governance. State-produced education rankings do more than evaluate performance; they promote a distinct brand of neoliberal federalism, and they align State and UT governance with centrally defined metrics of success. Furthermore, by translating complex social realities into selective, simplified, and comparable numbers, these indices create an appearance of transparency and objectivity while privileging what can be easily quantified and what the governing coalition prioritizes. As the article shows, indices allow the ruling party to portray themselves as successful, shoring up legitimacy. Indices are embedded in broader "audit cultures" that transform how governance is imagined and enacted. This article provides empirical evidence on state and audit culture, particularly in the context of India and political governance. It critiques the political governance enacted by the BJP ruling-state in India and contributes to literature in the sociology of measurement by proving that SEQI and PGI are not neutral tools but political technologies of the state. Finally, the study provides an empirically grounded account of how measurement functions as statecraft in the BJP ruled contemporary India and how data

generated through indices becomes a means to recentralize federal authority without formally changing the constitution.

8. CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that the development of education indices in India is a form of governance that produces political technologies to maintain the power of the ruling-state. This article also identified how interview participants expressed repeatedly that the state measurements scrutinize teachers but exclude them from participating in the formulation of policy. One participant noted that, "If this data is about teachers, why are we not talking to teachers? I really question if bureaucracy is just getting in the way of development instead of aiding it". Future research needs to advance towards a bolder critique of the state and explore the perspectives and experiential wisdom of teachers. Levinson (2009) argues that rarely does policy research question the nature of policy as a social practice of power, a web of socially constructed practices that is constantly negotiating meaning and understanding. However, often policy research excludes the teachers' experiences, as is evident in SEQI and PGI. To democratize policy research, the narratives of the actors who have been silenced must be brought to the forefront. Future research needs to employ ethnographic methods to investigate how teachers interpret the policy mandates of the state, how they negotiate the meanings of what the state asks them to do, and how they resist or remake the mandates through their classrooms.

Statements

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ARTICLE

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THE EVOLUTION OF AUTHORITARIAN STATE FEMINISM IN THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY: WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION FROM MAO TO XI

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Abstract

Since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921, women's liberation has been ideologically central to its revolutionary agenda, revealing a persistent gender paradox in Chinese socialist governance. This paper examines the extent to which authoritarian state feminism has expanded women's descriptive representation in China's legislative institutions while their access to elite political power has remained limited from the Mao era to the Xi era. Theoretically, it conceptualizes Chinese state feminism as an authoritarian model that instrumentalizes gender equality for national development and stability, subordinating it to class priorities under Mao and increasingly to Confucian family norms and demographic imperatives under Xi. It examines how the relationship between gender inclusion and political power has developed across the Mao era, the reform period, and the Xi era. Empirically, the study compiles and analyzes longitudinal data on women's membership in the Politburo, Central Committee, and NPC from 1954 to 2023. Key findings highlight elite-level exclusion despite gains in legislative representation. Drawing on existing scholarship and qualitative evidence, the paper also discusses gendered portfolio segregation and coalition-based lobbying through the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) as relevant dimensions of women's political participation under authoritarian governance. By comparing women's representation in legislative and elite Party institutions over time, the study contributes to scholarship on authoritarian state feminism by highlighting the limits of state-led gender inclusion and the distinction between women's numerical presence and their access to elite political power.

Keywords
Authoritarian state feminism; China; Chinese Communist Party (CCP); Women's political representation; Gender and authoritarianism

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has positioned women's liberation as a crucial component of its revolutionary and state-building agenda. Drawing heavily on the Soviet experience, CCP feminists identified women's oppression as part of a larger struggle to topple the "Three Big Mountains": imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. The question of women's political participation and gender equality has occupied a central yet contested position in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (W. Zheng, 2017).

A key institutional development came in April 1949 with the establishment of the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACWF, later renamed the All-China Women's Federation). Designed to extend the Party's reach into rural villages and urban neighborhoods, the ACWF became the primary vehicle for implementing state-led women's policies, institutionally separating women's policy machinery from the core executive and Party decision-making bodies while also limiting women's access to the core of state power (Zheng, 2017). In Maoist discourse, gender was never a standalone category of analysis; it was always subordinate to class (Dongchao, 2011). The CCP has maintained a long-standing practice of training women cadres and implementing gender quotas within the state administration. As a result, women held 22% of the parliamentary seats in the 1970s, while their presence in the CCP Politburo has never exceeded 10% and stood at zero. Because women are restrained from the core of power, successful lobbying requires a coalition of state agency allies to navigate the different legislative and Party-affiliated bodies (Jiang & Zhou, 2022).

The post-1978 economic reforms produced unanticipated gendered effects. Initially framed as gender-blind, marketization dismantled many Mao-era quota systems and appointment mechanisms. Scholars describe the 1980s as a "dark age" for women's political representation (Dongchao, 2011; Zhong, 2025). This study adopts a focused comparative framework that privileges the Mao Zedong era (1949–1976) and the Xi Jinping era (2012–present) as the principal periods for examining the descriptive evolution of women's political representation within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The reform era is treated as a distinct and analytically important period during which mandatory quotas eroded, meritocratic and patronage-based selection processes intensified gendered disadvantages, and elite female representation declined sharply. Empirical data, however, span all eras and cover the Politburo, the Central Committee (CC), and National People's Congress (NPC), thus

ensuring that conclusions are grounded in a full historical dataset rather than in selective periods.

In the current Xi Jinping era, the Maoist spirit of gender equality has experienced a conservative retreat (MERICS, 2024). Party-state discourse has increasingly invoked Confucian principles of family order, presenting women's domestic contributions, including caregiving and child-rearing as foundational to social cohesion and national rejuvenation (Evans, 2021). The PSC, typically consisting of 5–9 members (currently seven), is the highest decision-making body within the CCP, effectively controlling China's political direction. All listed leaders (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping) were male top leaders, with no exceptions (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023). The Politburo currently has no female members, and women hold no full ministerial positions in the State Council. This creates a gender discrepancy in which women are present in the larger legislative body but excluded from the core decision-making organs.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study primarily examines descriptive representation. It draws on existing data and secondary sources on female membership in three key institutions: (1) the Politburo (full members only, as the apex decision-making body below the Politburo Standing Committee); (2) the Central Committee (full and alternate members); and (3) the National People's Congress (NPC) deputies. The study uses published membership figures and statistics from existing sources to examine women's political representation across these institutions and historical periods.

Data for 1954–1997 were drawn primarily from historical research of Rosen (1995) and cross-verified against official CCP announcements in Xinhua archives, *People's Daily* reports, and secondary sources including, Li (2022) leadership analyses. For the post-1997 period (15th–20th Central Committees and 9th–14th NPCs), membership lists were manually compiled from primary official sources: Xinhua News Agency releases, the Central People's Government portal (gov.cn), the National People's Congress website (npc.gov.cn), CCP communiqués on Intra-Party Statistics released around June 30 each year by the Central Organization Department, and State Council Information Office summaries. These sources were triangulated with independent institutional reporting and scholarly works (Cai, 2023a; Li, 2022; MERICS, 2024; Reddy & Bhole, 2022; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023) to mitigate potential presentational bias in Party sources. Visualization was performed using Python (pandas for data cleaning and standardization and matplotlib for time-series plots) to facilitate direct temporal and cross-institutional comparison.

3. THEORIZING FEMINISM IN MODERN CHINA

State feminism, commonly studied in liberal democratic contexts, operates differently in authoritarian political systems. The concept of state feminism was originally developed by Helga Hernes in the 1980s to describe the institutionalization of feminist goals within the state apparatus. In democratic welfare states, state feminism typically combines two dynamics: "feminism from above," implemented through gender-equitable social policies and institutional reforms, and "feminization from below," referring to political and cultural mobilization by women's movements (Borchorst & Siim, 2008).

Unlike in capitalist democracies, where women actively engage with and shape state policy, in postsocialist China, state feminism refers to a state-sanctioned model characterized by a monopoly over women's affairs, with the state acting as the ultimate benefactor of women's rights (Dong, 2023; Sun, 2026; To, 2016). Based on socialist ideals, the ACWF tends to carefully distinguish Marxist women's liberation theory from Western bourgeois feminism (Q. Huang, 2023). In a May 2017 speech to Women's Federation officials titled *"Integrate political awareness throughout the entire process of women's federation reform and work of the Women's Federation System"* (把讲政治贯穿于妇联改革和工作全过程), ACWF Party Secretary Song Xiuyan warned that Western hostile forces were stepping up their Westernization and divisive strategy against China. She stated that these actors attacked the Marxist theory on women and "our fundamental state policy of equality between men and women," and actively promoted Western feminism and feminist supremacy to interfere in domestic affairs and undermine state policies (Song, 2017).

This brings us to a core debate in scholarship on Chinese gender politics: scholars examine the three-faceted relationship between the Party-state, the state-sponsored Women's Federation, and feminist movements, but they disagree on whether China should be viewed as a form of state feminism at all (Zhou, 2023). Zhou (2023) distinguishes between authoritarian and illiberal state feminism. Authoritarian state feminism refers to state feminism tied to specific non-democratic regimes, while illiberal state feminism describes a political environment that counters the premises of liberal scripts, which include an emphasis on individual freedom and rights, limitation on state intervention, the protection of minority rights, and the defence of pluralism. Zhou argues that illiberal is a more relevant term because illiberal tendencies and actors are on the rise globally and can exist even within liberal or hybrid democracies, not just in overtly non-democratic regimes.

3.1. *Defining Features of Authoritarian State Feminism*

Building on Dong (2023), Luo (2026) and Sun (2026) this paper identifies two central dimensions of authoritarian state feminism. These dimensions generate observable expectations about women's descriptive representation, which the empirical sections examine.

3.1.1. Top-Down Institutional Control and Institutional Containment

In China, the resilience of authoritarianism lies in the state's capacity to transform and selectively incorporate certain politically safe feminist discourses while marginalizing autonomous feminist activism (Sun, 2026). The state adopts the language of gender equality and women's empowerment from global discourse, particularly following the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference. Official discourse shifted from the longstanding formulation of "equality between men and women" (nannü pingdeng 男女平等) toward "social equality between men and women" (shehui xingbie pingdeng 社会性别平等) (Yang, 2022). The state selectively appropriates feminist successes, codifying issues such as domestic violence into law while suppressing the activists who campaigned for them (Dong, 2023).

The ACWF is increasingly viewed as "the 'good daughter of the Party,' meaning that its agenda" is strictly secondary to the CCP's priorities of societal stabilization and power consolidation. This institutional structure necessitates what Jiang and Zhou (2022) term coalition-based gender lobbying: to advance any initiative, gender advocates must build strategic alliances with powerful Party and state actors across legislative and executive bodies. The Xi era is marked by increasingly strict political control, which has redefined the safe limits for gender-based political action. Gender issues that were previously neutral have become sensitized due to their associations with international movements (such as #MeToo) or digital activism.

3.1.2. Ideological and Performative Legitimation

State feminism in China advances a strictly heteronormative ideal that prioritizes marriage, motherhood, and reproduction. State-controlled media play a central role in enacting this gendered logic, acting as mouthpieces of the Party and producers of gendered knowledge (Luo et al., 2026). Under Mao, women's liberation was subordinated to class struggle and mobilized for socialist construction. Mao mobilized women into social production with the iconic slogan "women hold up half the sky," redefining them as revolutionary subjects essential to nation-building (Shen, 2016). Even as the state promotes Wolf Warrior masculinity, the regime invokes the role of women in national liberation wars to portray the ruling party as the sole guarantor of the nation (Dong, 2023; Lorch & Bunk, 2016).

On the international stage, the regime employs autocratic genderwashing: adopting women's rights reforms to distract from authoritarian practices and burnish its reputation (Bush & Zetterberg, 2024; Johnson, 2023). Chen and Lu (2025) refer to this as *discursive state feminism*, in which progressive rhetoric serves as a strategic tool to enhance international prestige and maintain domestic control without genuine commitment to women's rights. A central part of this genderwashing strategy involves highlighting the perceived failures of Western democracies to legitimize China's own model. By promoting Chinese wisdom and a

Chinese model, the regime positions itself as an international leader offering a state-led alternative to Western liberal approaches. Globally, the state promotes a Chinese model of gender equality to act as a rule-maker in international discourse (Bush & Zetterberg, 2024; Chen & Lu, 2025; Johnson, 2023).

The ACWF is organizationally embedded within the Party-state apparatus and lacks autonomous decision-making power. Its leadership is appointed by the Party, its budget controlled by the state, and its agenda subordinate to Party priorities (Cai, 2023b; Cheng, 2026; Jiang & Zhou, 2022). Chinese gender politics is best understood as authoritarian state feminism, in which the Party-state institutionalizes gender equality not as a response to feminist pressure but as an instrument for achieving national development, social stability, and demographic control (Luo et al., 2026). As discussed above, scholars and feminists have criticized the Mao-era approach to women's liberation for prioritizing state needs over women's autonomy (Shen, 2016). Under Xi Jinping, this state-centered approach to gender has increasingly foregrounded the traditional Confucian construct of *jia guo tianxia* (家国天下) (Cai, 2023a), often translated as family-state-all under heaven or family, nation, and the world. The state tolerates pink feminists only when their advocacy aligns with nationalism and patriotism, using them to reinforce regime legitimacy (Sun, 2026). At the same time, independent feminist movements are repressed or stigmatized as Western hostile forces by the state (Cui, 1998).

3.2. The Historical Construction of Gender in Chinese Discourse

Modern authoritarian gender governance in China is the culmination of a century-long ideological battle over the shifting definitions of femininity and emancipation. Theorizing feminism is described as one of several ideologies adopted by educated Chinese individuals who were seeking modernity and the rejection of the ancient dynastic system. The term *nüquan* first appeared around 1900 in Chinese translations of foreign texts, primarily Japanese translations that utilized the neologism to represent the concepts of women's rights or power. This new terminology challenged the traditional *nannü* system, specifically opposing Confucian ideals such as gender differentiation (*nannü youbie*) and segregation (*nannü shoushou buqin*). Following the rise of the New Culture Movement in 1915, the term *nüquan zhuyi* became the standard Chinese rendition for feminism, associating the movement directly with the pursuit of women's power and rights (W. Zheng, 2017).

Early twentieth-century reformers and revolutionaries recognized that transforming gender practices was essential for national revival and combating feudalism *(fengjian zhuyi)*. Chinese intellectuals adapted feminism through a process of Sinicization, integrating it into the nation's quest for modernization and power rather than adopting it as a mere Western import (X. Huang, 2018; W. Zheng, 2017). This process of national transformation was also reflected in the changing meanings of *funü* and *nüxing*, both referring to women and pointing

to Chinese notions of gender. Historically, funü signified women within the kinship structures under Confucian doctrine, a collective identity tied to traditional familial roles. In the 1920s, the term nüxing (female sex) emerged as a challenge to this Confucian kinship model. When the Communist Party-state redefined funü to designate a new political entity, it reshaped women's gender roles and repositioned them within guojia (国家, the state, production) and jiating (家庭, the family, reproduction). Women were transformed from members of the family/kin to citizens of the nation/family. Class identity was deliberately prioritized over gender, and Western feminist notions were denounced as bourgeois and individualist (X. Huang, 2018). The triumph of totalitarian ideology in China precludes individual subjectivity, leading to a literary and social world where the emphasis on class struggle obscures gender differences. State feminism is defined as the advocacy of women's movement demands from within the state (Cui, 1998).

The term *funü jiefang* (women's liberation) gained rapid ascendance during the May Fourth Movement, led by educated women and men advocating equal educational and employment opportunities as the foundation for women's liberation. Many of these activists later joined the CCP and became key figures in China's political and cultural transformation. The term *nüquan zhuyi* lost favor within the Party due to its association with Western socialist movements, which viewed feminism as a bourgeois concept emerging from early 20th-century rivalries between radical suffragists and socialist women (Dongchao, 2011; W. Zheng, 2017). To continue the feminist agenda within Party ideology, CCP feminists replaced *nüquan* with *funü quanli* (women's rights) (W. Zheng, 2017), popularizing women's liberation as a revolutionary slogan advocating gender equality in labor (Chen & Lu, 2025).

Since the 1980s, the term "feminine-ism" has increasingly replaced "feminism" in official narratives to depoliticize feminist language. Since 2012, the term "gender equality" has appeared more frequently in *People's Daily* than the other three terms (Chen & Lu, 2025). To analyze women's political participation systematically, this study draws on the classic typology of political representation (Pitkin, 1967):

Table 1 - Pitkin's Typology of Political Representation Applied to China

Type	Definition	Application to China
Descriptive representation	Descriptive representation is defined simply as who holds office. It refers to the physical or numerical presence of a specific group, such as women, within elected assemblies. Descriptive representation is a form of standing for the represented based on resemblance rather than action (Childs & Krook, 2009; Dovi, 2018).	In the Chinese context, this is measured through women's membership in the NPC, CC, and Politburo.

Substantive representation	The articulation and advancement of women's interests through policy outcomes; acting for women by representing their needs and promoting women-friendly policy change (Childs & Krook, 2009; Wängnerud, 2009).	Women disproportionately assigned to feminine portfolios (health, education, ACWF) and the Women's Federation which typically offer fewer resources and promotion opportunities than masculine portfolios (finance or security). Executive posts are more difficult for women to reach than legislative seats (Jiang et al., 2022).
Symbolic representation	The symbolic significance and legitimizing function of women's presence; how it shapes citizens beliefs about inclusion and regime legitmacy (Celis et al., 2014; Ferree, 2015).	State uses descriptive gains to signal gender commitment internationally; absence from top bodies undermines domestic credibility

Source: Author

3.3. *StateFeminism under Mao and* Xi

3.3.1 *Mao Era* (1949–1976): *The Socialist Legacy* (1949–*Late*1970s)

Under Mao Zedong's leadership, the CCP framed women's emancipation as an integral component of the grand proletariat class emancipation. Women could only achieve genuine liberation once the proletariat seized power (Tian, 2021). Class was an alien concept in pre-revolutionary China. Following the Marxist-Leninist tradition, the CCP analyzed Chinese society and politics as a struggle, defining the revolution as the overthrow of the old society and the creation of a new egalitarian order free from class exploitation (Roberts, 2019). The theoretical foundations were laid before the PRC's founding. At its Second National Congress in July 1922, the CCP adopted the *Resolution on Women*, China's first official document on women's rights. It articulated a proletarian path to women's liberation that rejected bourgeois feminism. After 1949, gender equality was institutionalized through successive constitutions. "Article 48 of the 1954 Constitution redefined women as state assets rather than mere family members, granting formal equality in political, economic, cultural, and family life." Some researchers describe this liberation as passive or pseudo, serving socialist objectives rather than arising from a distinct feminine consciousness (Gammons, 2014; Shen, 2016).

Central to the Maoist gender project was the large-scale integration of women into productive labor. Women were expected to take on tasks traditionally reserved for men, including farming, mining, and combat. Iconic imagery of the female tractor driver symbolized the new socialist woman and the masculine strength *(yang)* of the nation (Roberts, 2019). By the 1950s, 70% of villages had at least one female head or director

(Dongchao, 2011). During the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), millions of women entered productive labor in agriculture to replace men moved to industrial projects (Johns, 2010).

Scholars argue that Mao did not merely desexualize women but actively masculinized them (Yang, 2022). The Seventeen-Year Period (1949–1966) brought notable descriptive gains through top-down cadre policies and mandatory gender considerations in appointments. In the early years (1954–1964), women's presence in the central power structure was modest but established. There were 20 women in positions at or above the vice-ministerial level (4%), and one of the six national vice presidents was female (Y. Zheng et al., 2009). Implementation succeeded more in the workplace than in transforming domestic gender relations. Women continued to bear a double burden of productive and reproductive labor, and state feminism stayed rooted in a patriarchal revolutionary system (X. Huang, 2018; Yang, 2022).

3.3.2 Feminism in Chinese Communism (Xi Era of National Rejuvenation)

When Xi Jinping took office in 2012, China entered a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, but for women in politics, progress has been uneven. The PSC has never included a woman since 1949. At the Politburo level, at least one and at times two women served continuously from 1997 until the 2022 leadership reshuffle, when the 20th Party Congress resulted in an entirely male leadership, ending this two-decade precedent (Graham-Harrison, 2022; Monti, 2024).

Confronted with fertility rates below 1.09 births per woman and ongoing population shrinkage, Xi has framed marriage and childbearing as national duties, drawing selectively from both Mao and Deng to reinforce CCP supremacy. At the 2023 National Women's Congress, he urged a renewed culture of marriage and family, reinforcing a conservative turn that sidelines feminist demands (Bloomberg News, 2023; Impiombato & Grünberg, 2025; Stevenson, 2023; Yang, 2022). China's family planning policies—one-child (1979), two-child (2016), and three-child (2021)—have yielded only modest increases in birth rates (Zhong, 2025). Lower-level quotas have not offset a conservative reorientation emphasizing stability, family roles, and ideological conformity (TIME, 2023).

At the same time, the state has codified certain gender-related protections into law, most notably through the 2016 Anti-Domestic Violence Law. It has also introduced quotas in certain civil service sectors and advanced successive national policy frameworks for women's development, including the 2011–2020 program and the most recent Outline for the Development of Women (2021–2030) (Dong, 2023; Gillezeau, 2019). In October 2025, President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote address at the Global Leaders Meeting on Women in Beijing, pledging USD 10 million to UN Women, USD 100 million from the China Global Development Fund for gender initiatives, and training opportunities for 50,000 women worldwide (CGTN, 2025; Xinhua, 2025b).

Women's descriptive representation in bodies such as the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) has grown modestly, accompanied by the introduction of new legal frameworks targeting women's rights and workplace discrimination (Xinhua, 2025b). Nevertheless, these discursive and symbolic efforts remain largely decoupled from substantive institutional reforms. China's approach reveals major policy gaps, including limited support for educated women's human capital utilization, insufficient attention to women's demand for economic independence, and the unintended consequences of demographic policies (Zhong, 2025). In diplomacy, women's representation is modest: the 2023 Women in Diplomacy Index reported that only 9 percent of fambassadors were women, although new appointments between 2021 and 2023 reached around 12 percent. Official data from the 2015 State Council white paper showed that women comprised of 30.7 percent of diplomatic personnel overall, but far fewer held senior roles (Chehab, 2023; Rana, 2023; *White Paper: Gender Equality and Women's Development in China (Full Text)*, 2015).

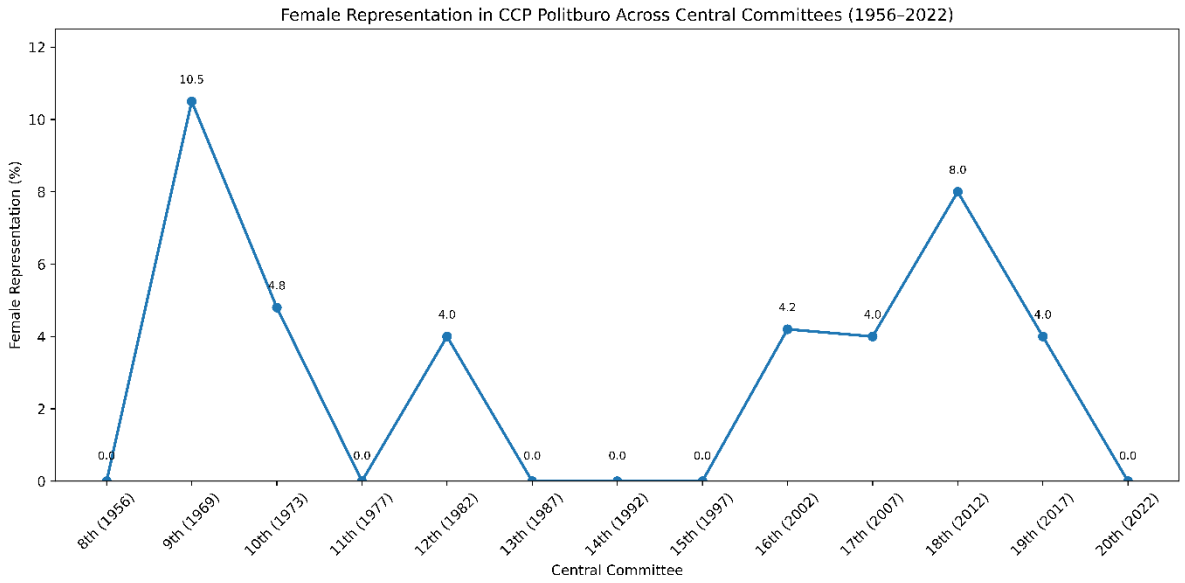
Elite bodies show little to no progress, and independent feminist NGOs have faced closure or restriction since 2015. The CCP retains a controlling backstage role, bifurcating the gender advocacy landscape into sanctioned institutional channels and increasingly repressed activist efforts (Jiang & Zhou, 2022; Reuters, 2025; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023; Zhong, 2025).

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Elite-Level Exclusion: Female Full Members in the CCP Politburo

This section examines women's representation among full members of the Politburo (Political Bureau of the Central Committee), a small elite Party body below the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), typically composed of 14–26 full members, that participates in major policy decisions. Across the CCP's history, only six women have ever served as full Politburo members: Ye Qun (1969–1971), Jiang Qing (1969–1976), Deng Yingchao (1978–1985), Wu Yi (2002–2007), Liu Yandong (2007–2017), and Sun Chunlan (2012–2022), with the latter three rising through career paths rather than direct spousal ties (Cai, 2023a).

Figure 1 - Female Full Members of the CCP Politburo Across Central Committees (1956-2022)



Source: Author

Note: Data for 1956–1992 are from "Women and Political Participation in China" by S. Rosen (1995), Pacific Affairs, 68(3), 315–341. Data for 1997–2022 were compiled by the author from official CCP announcements (Xinhua and gov.cn), Politburo membership lists cross-referenced with primary sources, and secondary analyses, including The China Story (2023), U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission reports (2023), and MERICS briefs. All figures were cross-verified as of early 2026.

Women were absent from the full membership of the Politburo during the early post-revolutionary period (1956–1960s). Although the 1950 Marriage Law and the 1954 Constitution codified formal gender equality, the Constitution functioned primarily as a declaratory instrument of socialist ideology rather than a mechanism for substantive gender inclusion, and the Politburo elected by the 8th Central Committee in 1956 remained exclusively male (0 of 17 members). The Mao era's peak female representation in the Politburo reached 10.5 percent in 1969, with Jiang Qing and Ye Qun as the two female members, followed by 4.8 percent in 1973 with Jiang Qing alone.

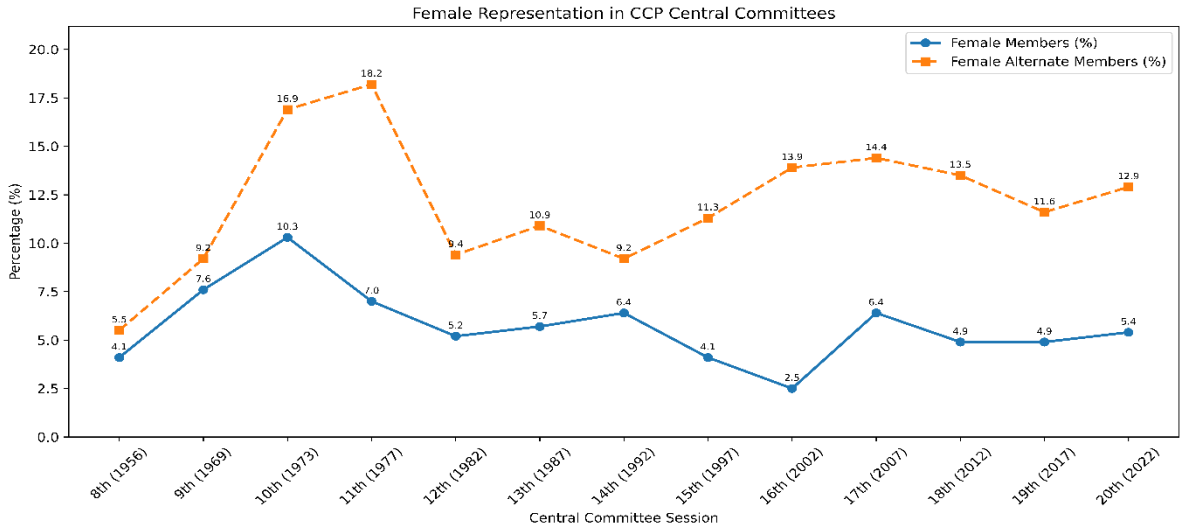
The post-Mao transition and early reform period (1977–1997) witnessed a marked regression in female representation. The Politburo of the 11th Central Committee (elected 1977) reverted to 0% female full members (0 out of 26), erasing the modest gains of the late Mao era. Deng Yingchao, who joined the Politburo at the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 rather than at the 1977 Congress, accounted for 4 percent representation in the 1982 Politburo (1 of 25 full members) (北京组工整理自中国共产党新闻网, 2021). Deng's reforms prioritized economic modernization, merit-based selection, competence criteria, and administrative efficiency over ideological imperatives like class struggle or gender balancing.

Departing from earlier patterns in which elite women's political advancement was linked to spousal connections with top leaders, Wu Yi became the first woman in the reform-era Politburo without marital affiliation to Party or state elites. She served as Vice Premier (2003–2007), overseeing foreign commerce, trade, and health affairs. Modest recoveries in female Politburo representation occurred post-reform, including 4.2 percent in 2002 with Wu Yi, the first post-reform woman without direct spousal ties, and 8 percent in 2012 with Liu Yandong and Sun Chunlan, who were assigned portfolios often coded as "feminine" such as education, health, and sports. Female representation then declined to 4 percent in 2017 with Sun Chunlan as the sole member and fell to 0 percent in 2022, marking the first all-male leadership in nearly a quarter-century (Cai, 2023a).

4.2. Female Representation in the CCP Central Committee

The Central Committee is the party's key leadership pool, responsible for electing the Politburo and overseeing major policy directions. It typically comprises 97–210 full members (with voting rights), non-voting alternates. This analysis covers 13 sessions, from the 8th (1956) to the 20th (2022).

Figure 2. Female Members of the CCP Central Committee (Full and Alternate) Across Sessions (1956–2022)



Source: Author

Note: Data for 1956–1992 from Rosen (1995). Data for 1997–2017 from Li (2022). Data for the 20th Central Committee (2022) from the official CCP membership announcement as reported by Xinhua News Agency (2022) and compiled by the Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA, 2022).

In the early PRC and buildup period (1956–1969), women's presence grew gradually: full members increased from 4.1 percent to 7.6 percent, and alternates from 5.5 percent to 9.2 percent. This growth signaled the early phase of state feminism, driven by the ACWF. Mao-

era peaks emerged in the 1970s through deliberate state interventions: in 1973, women comprised 10.3 percent of full members, and in 1977, they reached 7.0 percent of full members alongside 18.2 percent of alternates. Party-promoted imagery of female tractor drivers, prominently featuring Liang Jun as a model worker in posters from the 1950s–1970s and on the 1962 one-yuan banknote helped redefine women as equal revolutionary subjects integrated into mechanized labor (*New China's First Female Tractor Driver: Greatest Wish Is to Attend National Day Parade*, 2009).

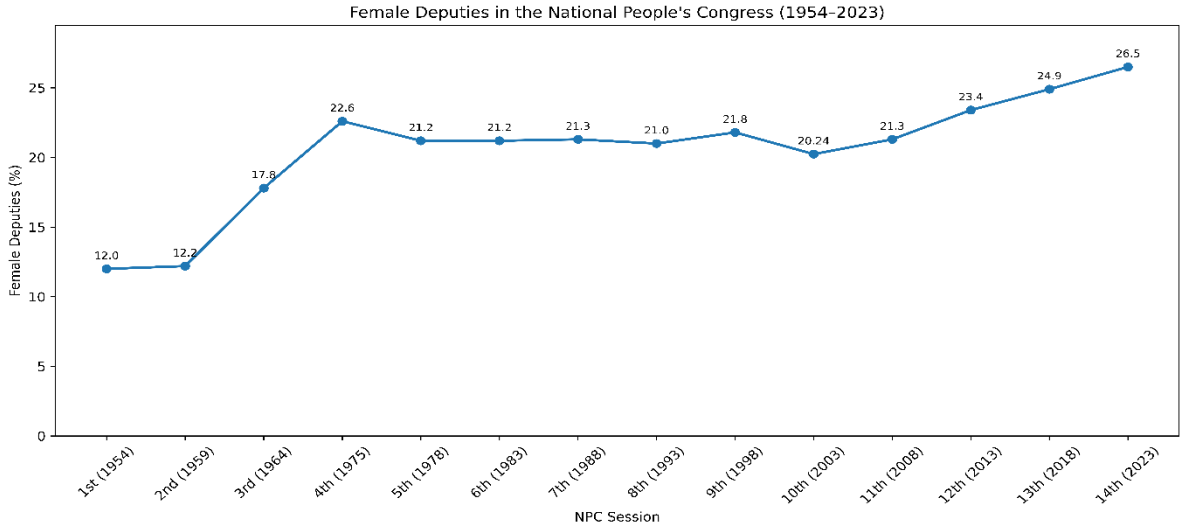
Post-Mao declines were pronounced following the 1978 reforms. The proportion of women among full members fell to 5.2 percent in 1982 and reached a low of 2.5 percent by 2002. Alternate member representation remained higher than full-member representation during the early reform period but did not show consistent growth. Scholars note that market reforms removed mandatory quotas, increasing gender wage gaps and disadvantaging women in criteria such as education and party tenure.

According to the Communiqué on Intra-Party Statistics (June 30, 2025), women accounted for 30.9 percent of the CCP's total membership as of December 31, 2024 (中共中央组织部, 2025). Under Xi, nominal lower-level quotas have not offset a conservative reorientation that emphasizes stability and family roles. After the low point of 2.5 percent for full members in 2002, female representation in the Central Committee experienced a temporary increase to 6.4 percent in 2007, followed by a decline and then modest levels between 4.9 and 5.4 percent from 2012 to 2022. Alternate member representation peaked at 14.4 percent in 2007, then fluctuated between 13.5 and 11.6 percent during the 2012–2022 period, settling at 12.9 percent in 2022.

4.3. *Female Deputies in the National People's Congress*

The NPC, China's apex legislative organ with roughly 3,000 deputies, is indirectly elected every five years through a CCP-controlled, multi-tiered process. Theoretically, it is the highest organ of state power, with authority to enact laws, amend the constitution, and elect central state officials (Cai, 2023a). In practice, real decision-making lies with Party elites; the NPC meets annually in March during the "Two Sessions" to formally approve laws, budgets, and leadership appointments.

Figure 3 - Female Deputies in the National People's Congress (NPC) Across Sessions (1954-2023)



Source: Author

Note: Data for 1954-1993 are from Rosen (1995). Data for 1998-2008 are from the official National Bureau of Statistics. Data for the 12th-14th NPCs were compiled by the author from official NPC Standing Committee reports on deputy qualifications and election results (via npc.gov.cn and gov.cn announcements), cross-verified with Xinhua News Agency releases and State Council Information Office summaries.

Table 2 - Female Deputies in the National People's Congress by Session (1954-2023)

NPC Session	Total Deputies	Female Deputies	% Female Deputies
1st (1954)	1,226	147	12.0%
2nd (1959)	1,226	150	12.2%
3rd (1964)	3,040	542	17.8%
4th (1975)	2,885	653	22.6%
5th (1978)	3,497	740	21.2%
6th (1983)	2,978	632	21.2%
7th (1988)	2,970	634	21.3%
8th (1993)	2,978	626	21.0%
9th (1998)	2,979	650	21.8%
10th (2003)	2984	604	20.24%
11th (2008)	2987	637	21.3%
12th (2013)	2,987	699	23.4%
13th (2018)	2980	742	24.9%
14th (2023)	2977	790	26.5%

Source: Author

Female representation among NPC deputies has shown a long-term upward trajectory, rising from 12.0 percent in the 1st NPC (1954) to a record high of 26.5 percent in the 14th NPC (2023), an increase of 14.5 percentage points over nearly seven decades. The figure rose modestly to 12.2 percent in 1959 and jumped to 17.8 percent in 1964. Female deputies reached their historical peak in the Fourth National People's Congress convened in 1975, comprising 22.6 percent of the total (653 women out of 2,885 deputies). After a brief levelling near 21.2 percent in the late 1970s and early 1980s, representation remained relatively stable, punctuated by slight regressions during the 1990s and early 2000s, falling to 21.0 percent in 1993 and 20.24 percent in 2003.

This plateau reflected a structural constraint rooted in the socialist era: the enduring "double burden" of productive and reproductive labor. As Evans (2021) documents, Mao-era policies mobilized women into the workforce but did not transform the domestic division of labor, leaving women to shoulder disproportionate household responsibilities even as they entered public life. The gradual uptick from the 11th NPC onward rising to 23.4 percent in 2013, 24.9 percent in 2018, and 26.5 percent in 2023, can be attributed to a combination of international and domestic factors. At the international level, China's hosting of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 played a pivotal role in introducing global norms of "gender equality" into official policy discourse.

At 26.5 percent, women's representation in China's legislature aligns closely with the global parliamentary average (about 27.2 percent in 2025) and approximates levels observed in the U.S. House of Representatives (Jackson, 2025). However, the NPC is characterized as a "rubber-stamp" institution where the Party maintains high female quotas (consistently above 20%) to demonstrate a commitment to equality without ceding actual power (Su, 2006). In addition, the 13th National Committee of the CPPCC included 440 women, accounting for 20.3 percent of members, an increase from 17.8 percent in the previous term. Among ethnic minority deputies to the 13th NPC, 42 percent were women (Cao, 2019).

4.4. China's Gender Paradox: Women's Mobilization and the CCP's Elite Bottleneck and Comparative Evolution

Women's underrepresentation in China is most pronounced at the apex of political and military power. As of August 2025, women account for two of the 26 ministerial appointments in the central government. In the People's Liberation Army, senior gender parity remains elusive: no woman has ever attained full general rank, only two have reached lieutenant general historically, and current data show just eight female major generals, none holding senior roles across the five theatre commands (Lin et al., 2018). This rhetorical-progress gap is evident in updated metrics. In 2025, China ranked 103rd out of 148 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index, with a score of 68.6 percent (Voronoi, 2025). Globally, these figures place China below the 2025 parliamentary average of 27% female representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

Elite selection is central to understanding how the CCP's appointment system shapes access to China's top political bodies and sustains authoritarian rule (Yao, 2018). This system is institutionalized through the nomenklatura (职务名称表) under the principle "the Party manages cadres" (党管干部) (Manion, 2023). Internally, the system incentivizes the formation of patron-client relationships, where career advancement depends on cultivating relationships with powerful patrons within the Party hierarchy (Rozman, 1989).

Since the late 1990s, the CCP has implemented quotas requiring at least one woman in subnational government leadership positions. The Party targets four specific marginalized identities through these quotas: women, ethnic minorities, non-CCP members, and intellectuals. However, the CCP often utilizes triple-dipping strategies, appointing women who also satisfy other diversity requirements, such as being an ethnic minority or a non-CCP member, thereby protecting the career paths of Han men (Jiang et al., 2022). These leaders are colloquially labeled *wu zhi shao nu* (ignorant young girls), a phrase highlighting the powerlessness of those selected primarily to improve statistics for multiple categories while preserving the majority of seats for Han male CCP members (Su, 2006).

Despite these institutional barriers embedded in the nomenklatura system, the Party-state projects an alternative narrative of progress. Based on the 2025 White Paper, *China's Achievements in Women's Well-Rounded Development in the New Era*, China's monitoring systems address the glass ceiling in leadership by transforming gender representation into a quantifiable metric of state governance. The 2022 revision of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests added a system for collecting and publishing gender statistics, integrating gender into national censuses and time-use surveys. The new era, which began with the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, redefined gender equality as an integral component of Chinese modernization (Xinhua, 2025a).

Article 14 of China's revised Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (2022) requires an appropriate number of women deputies in the National People's Congress and local people's congresses, and directs the state to take measures to gradually increase their proportion. This provision establishes a formal legal commitment to expanding women's descriptive representation in legislative institutions. (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The NPC is the only national-level political institution in China to have adopted a gender quota, mandating that the number of female delegates in any given term must not fall below the level of the previous term. Although this requirement allows the NPC to claim record levels of female participation, the resulting growth in representation has been painstakingly slow, rising by only 6.3 percentage points over the two decades between 2003 and 2023 (Sharma, 2024).

In 2023, the United Nations, through the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), expressed serious concern over the absence of women among China's top leadership. To address this, the UN recommended that China implement statutory quotas and a gender parity system to accelerate the equal representation of women

in government (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2023; Reuters, 2025).

5. CONCLUSIONS

For regime legitimacy, the absence of women at the apex creates a credibility gap between the CCP's ideological commitment to equality and its empirical reality, a gap increasingly noted by international bodies such as CEDAW. Across three eras, a consistent pattern emerges. Women were valorized as productive labourers, while domestic hierarchies and reproductive burdens remained largely intact. Maoist liberation produced high levels of participation without dismantling patriarchal power. The post-Mao reform era marked a significant regression in women's elite political representation. Market reforms dismantled quota-based appointment systems, prioritized meritocratic and technocratic criteria, and widened gender inequalities in education, career trajectories, and promotion opportunities. The Xi era, despite integrating gender metrics into state governance and codifying feminist demands into law, has reinforced women's primary identification with family and reproduction amid a demographic crisis.

Chinese political elites are selected and promoted according to meritocratic criteria and *guanxi*-based patronage (Jia et al., 2015). Women face institutional disadvantages in political advancement, as decision-makers may use a single appointment to satisfy multiple representational quotas for ethnic minorities, non-CCP members, women, and intellectuals, a practice known as "triple-dipping" that generates the misleading impression that female politicians in China are predominantly non-CCP ethnic minorities (Jiang et al., 2025, pp. 68–69). Overall, the Chinese case represents a distinctive form of "state feminism" in which limited descriptive representation coexists with women's continued underrepresentation in the CCP's highest decision-making institutions. Future research could extend this study beyond national-level institutions to examine subnational variations in women's political representation and assess whether women's appointment to less powerful portfolios nevertheless produce incremental policy gains.

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOB SATISFACTION AND JOB PERFORMANCE AMONG EMPLOYEES IN GREECE

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relationship between job satisfaction and individual performance at work in a sample of Greek employees. A quantitative correlational cross-sectional design was applied. Data were collected from 96 working adults (38 men, 58 women; M age = 36.30, SD = 9.72) via an electronic questionnaire. Job satisfaction was measured with the nine-dimensional Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS), while individual performance was assessed with the Greek-validated version of the Individual Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ). Both instruments showed excellent internal reliability (JSS: $\alpha = .913$; IWPQ: $\alpha = .934$). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant strong positive relationship between overall job satisfaction and job performance, $r(94) = .504$, $p < .001$, exceeding the expected moderate correlation of previous meta-analyses. Simple linear regression confirmed that job satisfaction is statistically significant correlated to individual performance, $F(1, 94) = 32.1$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .255$, $\beta = .504$, with a medium effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = .342$). At the subscale level, the strongest correlations with performance were observed

for Contingent Rewards, Pay, Coworkers and Fringe Benefits. The findings are discussed in the context of the Greek labor market and practical applications for human resource management are derived.

Keywords
Job satisfaction; Job performance; Job Satisfaction Survey; Individual Performance Questionnaire; Greece

1. INTRODUCTION

The proposition that satisfied employees perform better is one of the most enduring and critical questions in organizational psychology (Judge et al., 2001). Despite decades of empirical research, the nature and magnitude of this relationship continue to preoccupy the contemporary scientific community, with recent meta-analyses and empirical studies reporting average adjusted correlations of ρ = .30–.40 across heterogeneous samples (Riketta, 2008; Yang et al., 2024). This body of evidence has established the satisfaction–performance link as an indisputable empirical phenomenon, but questions about the boundary factors—the contexts, cultures, and dimensions that enhance or attenuate the relationship—remain unanswered (Gazi et al., 2024).

Understanding this relationship has important practical implications for organizations worldwide. Employees are the primary source of competitive advantage, and their motivation, engagement, and performance directly shape business outcomes (Koopmans et al., 2011). Organizations that can identify which dimensions of satisfaction are most related to performance are in an advantageous position to design targeted, evidence-based interventions that simultaneously enhance employee well-being and organizational productivity (Lee & Jo, 2023). From this perspective, examining the satisfaction–performance link is not just an academic pursuit, but a necessary prerequisite for effective human resource management.

The Greek labor market provides a particularly attractive and under-researched context for this investigation. Successive economic crises since 2008 have fundamentally reshaped working conditions in Greece, resulting in widespread wage compression, increased job insecurity, reduced career prospects, and depressed morale in the public sector (Karaferis et al., 2022; Kitsios & Kamariotou, 2021). These structural changes have created significant uncertainty about how traditional job satisfaction–performance dynamics operate under economic stress. While global evidence consistently supports the positive direction of the relationship, empirical research specifically on the Greek workforce remains comparatively limited, with most studies focusing on narrow occupational groups—mainly health workers and civil servants (Gazi et al., 2024).

The present study addresses this gap by investigating, in a heterogeneous Greek work sample, the extent to which job satisfaction—as conceptualized by Spector (1985) through nine occupationally relevant dimensions—is associated with self-reported individual performance at work. The use of validated Greek-language instruments for both satisfaction (Tsounis & Sarafis, 2018) and performance (Galanis et al., 2024) ensures linguistic and psychometric suitability. The study also extends previous research by testing whether job satisfaction presents a significant association with performance through simple linear regression, providing evidence regarding theoretical interpretations of the relationship as well as practical interventions to improve performance in the Greek labor market.

1.1. Job Satisfaction: Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Framework

Job satisfaction is broadly defined as the extent to which an employee holds a positive evaluative attitude toward their job and its individual aspects (Locke, 1976; Spector, 1997). This evaluative attitude includes both cognitive appraisals—such as judgments about the fairness of pay or the adequacy of promotion opportunities—and emotional reactions, including the pleasure or frustration that arise from everyday work experiences (Spector, 1985). The construct is widely recognized as multidimensional, with empirical evidence consistently demonstrating that employees hold differentiated evaluations of distinct aspects of their work environment that are not necessarily covariate (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Theoretical explanations of the factors that cause job satisfaction draw from a rich tradition of motivation research. Herzberg et al.'s two-factor theory (1959) proposed a fundamental distinction between hygiene factors—external conditions such as pay, supervision, and the physical work environment—and motivators, which are internal sources of satisfaction, such as achievement, recognition, and the inherent challenge of work tasks. Although later research has questioned the strictness of this dichotomy, the conceptual distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic sources of satisfaction retains substantial theoretical value (Yang et al., 2024). Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory complements this framework by arguing that satisfaction arises when employees perceive that their efforts lead to expected outcomes, directly linking satisfaction to performance-related motivational processes. More modern integrated models, such as the Job Demands–Resources Model (JD-R), place satisfaction within a broader framework of organizational resources and demands, emphasizing that satisfying job characteristics act as psychological resources that protect against the exhausting effects of job demands (Lee & Jo, 2023).

The most widely used multidimensional instrumentalization of job satisfaction in the literature is Spector's (1985) Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS), which describes nine empirically derived dimensions: Pay, Promotional Opportunities, Quality of Supervision, Benefits, Working Conditions, Coworker Relations, Nature of Work, and Organizational Communication. This taxonomy reflects the proposition that employees simultaneously

evaluate multiple, relatively independent dimensions of their work environment (Spector, 1997). The Greek validated adaptation of the tool by Tsounis and Sarafis (2018) confirmed acceptable reliability and factorial validity in a Greek professional sample, making the tool suitable for cross-cultural research in the Greek context.

In the Greek work context, relevant research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of supervision quality, interpersonal relationships and perceived communication fairness as primary determinants of job satisfaction (Kitsios & Kamariotou, 2021). Studies in Greek public hospitals report that satisfaction with supervision and support from colleagues is more strongly related to work motivation and commitment (Karaferis et al., 2022). These findings indicate that the relational dimensions of the work environment carry particular motivational weight in the Greek cultural context, which is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance and a strong emphasis on intra-group relations (Gazi et al., 2024).

1.2. *Individual Performance at Work: Conceptual Delineation and Measurement*

Individual work performance is conceptualized as the set of behaviors and achievements through which employees contribute to the goals of their organization (Campbell, 1990). Contemporary theoretical frameworks distinguish three conceptually and empirically distinct components of performance: (a) executive performance, which refers to the competent fulfillment of basic job tasks defined in the formal job description; (b) contextual performance, which includes discrete behaviors that support the organizational and social fabric—such as helping colleagues, showing initiative, and adhering to organizational rules—beyond those formally required; and (c) counterproductive work behaviors, which represent intentional acts that harm organizational interests (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Koopmans et al., 2011).

The Individual Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ; Koopmans et al., 2011) instrumentalizes this framework into a validated, self-report instrument designed for use in various professional sectors and cultural contexts. The Greek adaptation of the IWPQ by Galanis et al. (2024)—used in the present study—confirmed excellent internal reliability ($\alpha > .90$) and conceptual validity in a Greek sample of health professionals. The use of self-reported performance reflects a growing recognition that employees themselves possess unique information about the quality and scope of their work behaviors, capturing motivational, cognitive, and interpersonal dimensions that may be partially invisible to external observers (Koopmans et al., 2011). In correlational research designs where access to supervisor ratings is not feasible, self-reported performance is a methodologically appropriate choice (Lee & Jo, 2023).

1.3. *The Relationship Between Job Satisfaction and Work Performance*

The proposition that satisfied employees perform better—known in the literature as the "happy-productive employee" thesis—has a long intellectual history in organizational psychology (Riketta, 2008). The landmark meta-analysis by Judge et al. (2001), which synthesized 312 independent studies with over 54,000 participants, provided strong evidence for a significant positive relationship (mean true correlation p = .30), definitively establishing the satisfaction–performance link as a recurring empirical phenomenon. Subsequent meta-analyses have confirmed this assessment, with more recent evidence from Yang et al. (2024) reporting effect sizes in the range of p = .35–.55 depending on the performance criterion, occupational context, and cultural environment.

Several theoretical mechanisms have been proposed to explain why satisfied employees perform better. From a motivational perspective, employees who derive satisfaction from their work tend to exert greater discretionary effort, persevere more in the face of difficulties, and engage creatively with complex issues (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Emotional event theory posits that positive work experiences generate momentary positive emotion that facilitates task focus, cognitive flexibility, and social cooperation—elements that contribute to performance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012). Research on psychological capital has also highlighted the role of psychological capital—comprised of hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy—as a mediating mechanism through which satisfaction translates into performance (Jung & Yoon, 2015). Lee and Jo (2023) extended this evidence by showing that job commitment fully mediates the satisfaction–performance pathway, underscoring the importance of motivational states as proximate drivers of performance.

Evidence from the Greek work context adds important nuance. Studies in Greek public hospitals and public administration organizations consistently record positive satisfaction–performance associations, with quality of supervision and peer support emerging as the strongest factors of performance outcomes (Karaferis et al., 2022; Kitsios & Kamariotou, 2021). Given the Greek economic context—characterized by wage pressure and limited career development opportunities—satisfaction with intrinsic and relational aspects of work may carry disproportionate motivational weight relative to extrinsic factors (Gazi et al., 2024; Kitsios & Kamariotou, 2021).

1.4. Study Purpose and Research Hypothesis

The present study aimed to examine the association between overall job satisfaction and its nine dimensions—as assessed by the JSS—and individual job performance in a heterogeneous Greek work sample, as well as to test whether job satisfaction is significantly correlated to performance in a regression framework. Based on the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence reviewed, the following research hypothesis was formulated:

H1: Overall job satisfaction will be positively and statistically significantly related to individual job performance among employees in Greece.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

A quantitative correlational cross-sectional design was applied. This design is appropriate for investigating associations between psychometrically measured constructs in natural settings without experimental manipulation (Tabachnick et al., 2007). The cross-sectional approach is suitable for initial investigation of the satisfaction–performance link in the Greek context, although it does not allow for causal inferences.

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from professional networks and social networking platforms, including LinkedIn and professional Facebook groups. Inclusion criteria were: (a) age 18 years and older; (b) active employment in Greece; (c) knowledge of the Greek language. Individuals who were unemployed, retired, or students without parallel employment were excluded.

The final sample consisted of N = 96 employees. The gender distribution was 38 men (39.6%) and 58 women (60.4%). Age ranged from 19 to 67 years (M = 36.30, SD = 9.72). Regarding marital status, 54 participants (56.3%) were single, 36 (37.5%) were married, 5 (5.2%) were divorced, and 1 (1.0%) was widowed. The educational level was high: 5 (5.2%) high school graduates, 22 (22.9%) IEK/Technical School graduates, 38 (39.6%) University graduates, 29 (30.2%) Master's degree graduates and 2 (2.1%) PhD graduates.

Regarding employment status, the majority worked full-time (n = 71, 74.0%), 12 (12.5%) part-time and 13 (13.5%) as self-employed. The total years of professional experience were distributed as follows: 3 (3.1%) less than 1 year, 20 (20.8%) 1–5 years, 24 (25.0%) 6–10 years, 33 (34.4%) 11–20 years and 16 (16.7%) over 20 years. In terms of job position, 58 (60.4%) were employees, 19 (19.8%) were supervisors, 16 (16.7%) were freelancers, and 3 (3.1%) were managers.

An a priori power analysis based on Cohen's (2016) criteria indicated that a minimum sample size of N = 84 was required to detect a moderate effect size (r = .30) at α = .05 with a power of .80. The resulting sample size of N = 96 exceeded this threshold, providing sufficient statistical power for all planned analyses.

2.3. Questionnaires

Job satisfaction was measured with the Greek validated Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS; Spector, 1985; Tsounis & Sarafis, 2018). These are 36 self-report questions that assess satisfaction in nine four-item dimensions: Pay, Promotion, Supervision, Fringe Benefits, Contingent Rewards, Operating Conditions, Coworkers, Nature of Work and Organizational Communication. Each question is rated on a six-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree)

to 6 (strongly agree). Nineteen questions are reverse-coded before the summative scoring, according to the tool's instructions (Spector, 1985), with an additional reversal of question 15 in the Greek version due to a translational change in the semantic dynamics of the sentence (Tsounis & Sarafis, 2018). The score of each subscale is calculated as the average of its four questions (range: 1–6), while the total JSS score (JSS Total) is obtained as the average of all 36 questions. Higher scores indicate greater satisfaction.

Individual performance was assessed with the Greek validated version of the Individual Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ; Galanis et al., 2024; Koopmans et al., 2011). The Greek version of the IWPQ used in this study includes four questions rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), according to the validated adaptation of Galanis et al. (2024). One question is reverse coded. The IWPQ Total score is calculated as the average of the four questions (range: 1–5), with higher scores reflecting greater self-reported performance. The Greek adaptation demonstrated excellent internal reliability (α = .934 in this study).

A structured demographic questionnaire collected information on gender, age, marital status, education level, type of employment, total years of work experience, years in current position, and level of job hierarchy.

2.4. Procedure

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the SCG Scientific College. The online survey was distributed via a secure link to professional networks and social networking platforms. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants read an information sheet describing the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the anonymous confidential processing of the data. Informed consent was provided digitally before the start of the completion. Data collection took place over a period of approximately eight weeks. No personally identifiable information was collected. The data were stored on password-protected servers accessible only to the research team. The procedures complied with the Code of Ethics of the Hellenic Psychological Society and the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013).

2.5. Statistical analysis

All analyses were conducted with jamovi (Version 2.6; The jamovi project, 2024). The analytical design involved four sequential steps.

First, internal reliability was assessed for all JSS subscales and for the JSS and IWPQ total scales using Cronbach's α. According to George and Mallery (2003), $\alpha \geq .70$ was considered acceptable and $\alpha \geq .90$ was considered excellent.

Second, distributional conditions were examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test in combination with skewness and kurtosis indices, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010). Given the known sensitivity of Shapiro–Wilk to medium-sized samples, decisions regarding normality were based on the convergent assessment of all three indices, with practical acceptance thresholds of |skewness| < 1 and |kurtosis| < 2 (Tabachnick et al., 2007). Descriptive statistics (M, SD, minimum, maximum, skewness, kurtosis) were also calculated for all continuous variables.

Third, the research hypothesis was tested with the parametric Pearson correlation coefficient (r). The strength of the correlations was interpreted using Cohen's (2013) criteria: small (|r| = .10–.29), moderate (|r| = .30–.49) and large (|r| ≥ .50).

Fourth, a simple linear regression was performed with the IWPQ Total as the dependent variable and the JSS Total as the independent variable. Regression assumptions were verified by Q-Q plot (normality of residuals), residual plot (linearity and homoscedasticity), Durbin–Watson statistic (independence of errors; acceptable range 1.5–2.5), and Cook distance (points of excessive influence; threshold < 1.0). Effect size was expressed as Cohen's f^2 (small = .02, medium = .15, large = .35; Cohen, 2013).

3. RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the statistical analysis in four consecutive stages: (a) internal reliability of the psychometric tools, (b) normality testing, (c) descriptive statistics and (d) inductive analyses to test the research hypothesis.

3.1. *Reliability Check*

Internal reliability analysis using Cronbach's α was performed for all JSS subscales as well as for the JSS and IWPQ total scales. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Internal reliability indices (Cronbach's α) for the JSS and IWPQ scales (N = 96)

Κλίμακα	*k*	*α*
JSS — Total score	**36**	**.913**
Pay	4	.778
Promotion	4	.480
Supervision	4	.797
Fringe Benefits	4	.628
Contingent Rewards	4	.813
Operating Conditions	4	.348
Coworkers	4	.746
Nature of Work	4	.780
Communication	4	.743

IWPQ — Total score	**4**	**.934**

Note: k = number of questions; α ≥ .70 = acceptable reliability; α ≥ .80 = very good; α ≥ .90 = excellent (George & Mallery, 1999)

The total JSS scale (α = .913) and the IWPQ (α = .934) showed excellent internal reliability. Six of the nine JSS subscales showed acceptable to very good levels of reliability (α = .743–.813). Given the excellent reliability of the total scales, further analyses were based on the JSS Total and IWPQ Total scores.

3.2. *Normality Check*

Normality was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test in combination with skewness and kurtosis indices, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010). Although the Shapiro–Wilk test revealed statistically significant deviations from normality for several variables (W = .958–.988, p = .003–.518), the skewness (range: −0.44 to 0.48) and kurtosis (range: −1.00 to 0.50) indices remained well within acceptable limits for all variables. Critically, the JSS Total exhibited almost perfect normality (W = .991, p = .768, skewness = −0.04, kurtosis = −0.20), while the IWPQ Total, despite a statistically significant Shapiro–Wilk result (W = .957, p = .003), exhibited a flat-convex distribution without skewness (skewness = −0.11, kurtosis = −1.00). The parametric Pearson coefficient and linear regression were therefore applied.

3.3. *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 2 presents the descriptive indices for the JSS subscales, the JSS Total, and the IWPQ Total.

Table 2 - Descriptive indices for the JSS, JSS Total and IWPQ Total subscales (N = 96)

Μεταβλητή	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Skew	Kurt
JSS (range 1–6)							
Pay	96	3,07	1,18	1,00	5,50	−0,15	−0,79
Promotion	96	3,02	0,94	1,00	5,75	0,18	0,03
Supervision	96	4,21	1,19	1,50	6,00	−0,23	−0,96
Fringe Benefits	96	2,98	1,05	1,00	5,50	0,01	−0,59
Contingent Rewards	96	3,26	1,23	1,00	6,00	0,01	−0,63
Operating Conditions	96	2,96	0,90	1,00	5,75	0,48	0,50
Coworkers	96	3,97	1,11	1,25	6,00	−0,38	−0,35
Nature of Work	96	3,98	1,20	1,00	6,00	−0,44	−0,26
Communication	96	3,65	1,16	1,00	6,00	0,12	−0,45
Total	**96**	**3,45**	**0,76**	**1,39**	**5,33**	**−0,04**	**−0,20**
IWPQ Total (range 1–5)	**96**	**3,09**	**1,09**	**1,00**	**5,00**	**−0,11**	**−1,00**

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Skew = skewness; Kurt = kurtosis

Regarding job satisfaction, the Supervision subscale recorded the highest mean (M = 4.21, SD = 1.19), indicating relative satisfaction with the immediate supervisor. Lower satisfaction was observed for Working Conditions (M = 2.96), Benefits (M = 2.98), and Promotion (M = 3.02), reflecting dissatisfaction with the structural and external aspects of the employment relationship—a finding consistent with the documented effects of economic pressure on Greek work life (Karaferis et al., 2022). The JSS Total score (M = 3.45, SD = 0.76, on a scale of 1–6) corresponds to moderate overall job satisfaction. The IWPQ Total score (M = 3.09, SD = 1.09, on a scale of 1–5) indicates moderate self-reported performance with significant individual variation (range: 1.00–5.00).

3.4. *Inductive Statistics*

Pearson correlations were calculated between all nine JSS subscales, the JSS Total, and the IWPQ Total. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 - Table of bivariate Pearson correlations for the JSS and IWPQ Total subscales (N = 96)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Pay	—										
2. Promotion	.66***	—									
3. Supervision	.46***	.33**	—								
4. Fringe Benefits	.74***	.64***	.42***	—							
5. Contingent Rewards	.76***	.61***	.56***	.64***	—						
6. Operating Conditions	.16	−.01	.02	.21*	.17	—					
7. Coworkers	.38***	.36***	.65***	.37***	.49***	.07	—				
8. Nature of Work	.26**	.35***	.44***	.23*	.31**	−.07	.42***	—			
9. Communication	.43***	.35***	.59***	.41***	.52***	.09	.53***	.40***	—		
10. JSS Total	.80***	.70***	.75***	.76***	.84***	.24*	.71***	.56***	.72***	—	
11. IWPQ Total	**.44*** **	**.35*** **	**.36*** **	**.41*** **	**.46*** **	**.17**	**.43*** **	**.19**	**.27****	**.50*** **	—

Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

The research hypothesis was confirmed. The JSS Total showed a statistically significant strong positive correlation with the IWPQ Total, r(94) = .504, p < .001, exceeding the expected moderate correlation (r ≈ .30–.40; Judge et al., 2001; Yang et al., 2024). Seven of the nine JSS subscales showed statistically significant positive correlations with performance: Pay (r =

.455, p < .001), Contingent Rewards (r = .443, p < .001), Coworkers (r = .429, p < .001), Benefits (r = .409, p < .001), Supervision (r = .356, p < .001), Promotion (r = .350, p < .001), and Communication (r = .272, p = .007). In contrast, the Nature of Work (r = .193, p = .059) and Working Conditions (r = .171, p = .095) subscales were not statistically significantly associated with performance.

A simple linear regression was performed with IWPQ Total as dependent variable and JSS Total as independent variable. The four assumptions were tested: (a) satisfactory normality of residuals (Q-Q plot), (b) linearity and homoscedasticity (residuals plot), (c) absence of autocorrelation (Durbin–Watson = 1.85, p = .474, within the acceptable range of 1.5–2.5), and (d) absence of outliers (max Cook's distance = .122 < 1.0). The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 - Simple Linear Regression Results: Association with IWPQ Total from JSS Total (N = 96)

	B	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Constant	0,579	0,453	—	1,28	.205	[−0,321, 1,479]
JSS Total	**0,726**	**0,128**	**.504**	**5,66**	**< .001**	**[0,472, 0,981]**

Note. B = unweighted regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = weighted coefficient; CI = confidence interval. R = .504; R^2 = .255; Adjusted R^2 = .247; F (1, 94) = 32.1, p < .001

The regression model was found to be statistically significant, F(1, 94) = 32.1, p < .001, explaining 25.5% of the variability in individual performance (R^2 = .255, Adjusted R^2 = .247). The effect size was calculated as medium (Cohen's f^2 = .342). Job satisfaction was statistically significant and positively correlated to individual performance, B = 0.726, SE = 0.128, β = .504, t(94) = 5.66, p < .001, 95% CI [0.472, 0.981]. For every one-unit increase in JSS Total, an increase of 0.726 units in IWPQ Total is expected. The research hypothesis was fully confirmed: job satisfaction presents a statistically significant and practically essential association with individual professional performance among employees in Greece.

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationship between job satisfaction and individual job performance in 96 Greek employees, testing whether satisfaction is correlated to performance. The main finding—a strong positive correlation (r = .504) and a significant regression result (R^2 = .255)—confirmed and exceeded the research hypothesis. The following sections interpret these results in relation to theoretical frameworks and prior empirical evidence, address non-significant findings, identify methodological limitations, and present practical and scientific implications.

The size of the satisfaction–performance correlation (r = .504) substantially exceeds the mean true correlation mean effect reported by Judge et al. (2001; ρ = .30) and the expected

range of r ≈ .30–.40 from more recent meta-analyses and empirical studies (Riketta, 2008; Yang et al., 2024). This stronger-than-expected effect may be attributable to several factors. First, the use of self-reports for the criterion may have inflated the observed correlation through common method variance (Koopmans et al., 2011). Second, the Greek socioeconomic context may reinforce the satisfaction–performance relationship: in an environment characterized by compressed wages, reduced career prospects, and persistent job insecurity, the motivating effect of satisfaction on performance may be proportionally stronger than in more economically stable work contexts (Gazi et al., 2024; Kitsios & Kamariotou, 2021).

Regression results support this interpretation: job satisfaction alone explains 25.5% of the variance in individual performance ($R^2 = .255$), a level of power remarkable for a univariate model and consistent with recent findings from multinational samples (Yang et al., 2024). The unweighted regression coefficient (B = .726) implies that each one-unit increase in overall job satisfaction corresponds, on average, to a 0.726-unit increase in self-reported performance—a substantial relationship of practical interest for organizational interventions.

The subscale-level correlations provide theoretically eloquent nuance. Pay, Contingent rewards, Coworkers, and Benefits were the four strongest subscales. The dominance of Pay (r = .455) aligns with Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory: employees who perceive that good performance is recognized and rewarded are more motivated to invest effort, creating a virtuous cycle between satisfaction and performance. The strength of Reward (r = .443) reflects the driving force of perceived reward justice, especially in a context in which many Greek workers have experienced real wage cuts (Karaferis et al., 2022). The emergence of coworkers (r = .429) is consistent with relational theories of motivation: positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace create emotional resources that enhance task engagement and discretionary effort (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012).

Two subscales did not show statistically significant correlations with performance: Nature of Work (r = .193, p = .059) and Working Conditions (r = .171, p = .095). The absence of a significant correlation for Working Conditions is partly attributable to the extremely low internal reliability of this subscale ($\alpha = .348$), which substantially reduces its ability to correlate with external criteria through measurement error (Tsounis & Sarafis, 2018). Scores on this subscale should not be interpreted as valid measures of the underlying construct in the present sample.

All the above research findings could be possibly explained by relevant theories. The non-significant finding for Nature of Work is theoretically more problematic, given the classic claim of Herzberg et al. (1959) that intrinsic job characteristics are primary motivators. One interpretation suggests that under conditions of economic stress, employees' cognitive capacity may be disproportionately directed toward external concerns—pay adequacy, job security, recognition—leaving less psychological space for internal sources of motivation to function as performance drivers (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Gazi et al., 2024).

The present findings are consistent with the established meta-analytic literature documenting a positive satisfaction–performance relationship (Judge et al., 2001; Riketta, 2008). The positive direction and statistical significance of the main finding are consistent with previous evidence, while the pattern at the subscale level—with Pay, Contingent rewards, and Social Dimensions showing the strongest associations—is consistent with evidence from multiple national contexts (Yang et al., 2024). In the Greek context, the results extend the findings of Kitsios and Kamariotou (2021) and Karaferis et al. (2022) by providing evidence from a diverse occupational sample—covering the private sector, the public sector, and self-employment—rather than focusing exclusively on health or public administration workers.

Several limitations limit the interpretation and generalizability of the present findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. The regression model presents the association of satisfaction with performance, but the reverse direction—in which successful performance creates satisfaction—is equally theoretically plausible and cannot be ruled out based on the present data (Riketta, 2008). Determining temporal priority would require longitudinal designs.

Second, convenience sampling via online platforms may overrepresent educated, digitally active professionals. Third, the use of exclusively self-reports for the criterion introduces common methodological variance that may have artificially inflated the observed associations (Koopmans et al., 2011). Fourth, the achieved sample size (N = 96) falls short of the initially targeted N = 150, potentially reducing the statistical power to detect smaller effect sizes. Fifth, the low reliability of the Working Conditions (α = .348) and Promotion (α = .480) subscales suggests that findings concerning these dimensions require particular interpretive caution.

Finally, a limitation of the present study is the increased risk of Type I error (false positives) due to multiple testing, as nine separate correlations were calculated between the JSS subscales and the IWPQ Total without statistical correction. These analyses were exploratory, intended to generate hypotheses regarding specific subscale relationships. Consequently, the unadjusted p-values should be interpreted with caution, and future confirmatory studies are required to validate these specific associations.

Despite the above limitations, the present findings have important implications for human resource management in Greek organizations. The strong relationship between job satisfaction and performance (R^2 = .255) suggests that investments in satisfaction yield measurable job performance. Subscale-level evidence suggests that the greatest job performance may be achieved through initiatives targeting Pay, Coworker Relations, and Benefits (Koopmans et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2024).

In the Greek organizational context, where financial constraints have eroded many traditional incentives, team and supervisor support emerges as a cost-effective lever for improving performance. Team development programs, peer mentoring, and transparent

recognition systems may offer a better cost-effectiveness ratio for Greek organizations operating under budgetary constraints (Karaferis et al., 2022; Lee & Jo, 2023).

Future research should address the identified limitations by implementing longitudinal designs to clarify the causal direction (Riketta, 2008) and multilevel performance assessments to mitigate common methodological variance. Mediation analyses examining psychological capitalization (Jung & Yoon, 2015), work engagement (Lee & Jo, 2023), or organizational commitment as intermediate variables would advance the theoretical understanding of the mechanisms through which satisfaction influences performance in the Greek context. Finally, a psychometrically revised Greek translation of the Working Conditions subscale would address the identified reliability problem, allowing for a more valid assessment of this theoretically important dimension of work life.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study provides strong evidence that job satisfaction is positively and significantly related to individual job performance among Greek workers, with an effect size exceeding previous meta-analytic estimates. Simple linear regression confirmed that job satisfaction has a significant association with performance, explaining approximately one-quarter of the variance in self-reported performance ($R^2 = .255$). Among the nine JSS dimensions, Pay, Contingent rewards, Coworker Relations, and Benefits showed the strongest associations with performance, suggesting that both material and relational dimensions of the work relationship drive the motivational process in the Greek population. These findings enrich the body of evidence on the satisfaction–performance relationship in non-English-speaking and economically disadvantaged national contexts, providing an empirical basis for effective, evidence-based human resource management strategies in Greek organizations.

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ARTICLE

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN THE JULY UPRISING IN BANGLADESH: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THEIR ROLES

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Abstract

Although the media constitute a pillar of democratic societies, deviations from their normative role can have significant repercussions. The July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh, which culminated in the fall of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, exposed sharply contrasting roles of social media and mainstream media during political upheaval. This study systematically compares how each shaped public opinion and mobilized citizens. Using a comparative case study design informed by the logic of Most Similar Systems comparison, it analyzes two cases, social media platforms and mainstream media, through qualitative methods grounded in framing theory. The data are secondary sources: published news coverage, press-freedom and NGO reports, official statements, and prior empirical studies documenting the uprising. These were synthesized through thematic analysis of the frames each media type produced. The findings indicate that social media was more effective in catalyzing real-time mobilization, whereas mainstream media, constrained by self-censorship and alignment with state narratives, played a more limited role, though with notable variation across outlets. The paper therefore recommends that policy seek a balance between digital media regulation and transparency and accountability within mainstream media in Bangladesh.

Keywords
July Uprising; comparative analysis; social media; mainstream media; Bangladesh

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The media are valuable in public discourse, especially during political turmoil (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The media should act as a fourth estate in democracies, offering citizens accurate and balanced information needed for meaningful participation in governance (Curran, 2011). However, how well different media types play this role during crises varies greatly. Failing to meet this role can have major implications for social movements and political transitions.

Bangladesh, a South Asian country, has a population of about 170 million. In 2024, the country experienced a historic political change. The movement began as a student-led call for rational quota reform in government jobs in early July. It quickly turned into a mass movement. The fifteen-year Awami League government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was toppled on August 5, 2024. The movement—also known as the July Uprising, Gen Z Revolution, or Monsoon Revolution—is described by Rahman (2025) as the first successful Gen Z-led revolution globally. Demonstrations, organized by the Students Against Discrimination coalition, marked a tectonic shift in Bangladeshi politics. Young citizens used digital technology to confront a long-established authoritarian regime.

The July Uprising was organized against the backdrop of the weakening of press freedom and growing governmental pressure on the flow of information. In 2024, Bangladesh ranked 165th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index (Prothom Alo, 2025). According to Human Rights Watch (2023), at least 339 cases against journalists have been initiated since the adoption of the Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018. Media ownership was largely concentrated in the hands of the pro Awami League conglomerates, establishing an institutionalized system of pro-Awami League propaganda.

The functions of social media and mainstream media varied significantly during this critical period. Facebook, in particular, which had 52.90 million users in Bangladesh in early 2024 (The Daily Star, 2024), became the main instrument for organizing protests, sharing real-time information, and uniting the population. Conversely, because of pro-Awami League ownership, the threat of prosecution, and direct state pressure, mainstream media mostly had to engage in self-censorship or report in line with state narratives (Ali, 2025; Kumar, 2024).

1.2 Problem Statement

The contradictory functions of social media and mainstream media during the July Uprising in Bangladesh warrant systematic scholarly attention. Social media played a vital role in democratic empowerment by enabling decentralized, real-time mobilization. Mainstream media, on the other hand, did not fulfill its potential as a watchdog. Instead, it became a tool for disseminating state narratives. These dynamics raise key questions about media ecology in authoritarian contexts and how information power is balanced in times of political crisis. The growing literature covers social media and political mobilization worldwide (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci, 2017), but the specific processes of the July Uprising in Bangladesh remain under-examined in academic research. To the authors' knowledge, no study has systematically compared how the two media types operated during the same crisis.

1.3 Research Objectives

This research aims primarily to contrast and assess the roles of social media and mainstream media in shaping public opinion and motivating the masses to participate in the July Uprising in Bangladesh. The specific objectives are:

a) To explore the mobilization and dissemination of information in real time during the July Uprising using social media.

b) To explore how mainstream media conceptualized the uprising and how it aligned with or diverged from state narratives.

c) To make a comparison between the effects and roles of social media and mainstream media on movement dynamics.

d) To develop evidence-based policy suggestions on media governance in Bangladesh.

1.4 Research Questions

a) How was social media utilized to organize and mobilize the July Uprising?

b) To what extent did mainstream media practice self-censorship and frame the uprising in line with government narratives?

c) How did social media and mainstream media differ in influencing the masses and the course of the movement?

1.5 Importance of the Study

The research paper contributes to the growing body of literature on digital media and political mobilization within South Asia, which is relatively under-researched in this regard as compared with the Middle East and North Africa. The paper analyzes the July Uprising as a

comparative case of two media systems operating under the same political conditions, showing how different media platforms can serve both as tools of democratic empowerment and as instruments of state control. The results have practical implications for media policy in Bangladesh and other nations grappling with the challenging relationship between digital freedom and government regulation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory*

This study is based on framing theory, one of the most developed paradigms in media and communication studies. The concept of framing was introduced by Goffman (1974), who defined it as mental constructions that allow individuals to structure their experiences. Goffman believed that individuals use primary frameworks, both natural and social, to interpret events and direct behavior.

The concept was later adapted by Robert Entman (Entman, 1993) to media studies and provided the most quoted definition. Entman described framing as choosing certain elements of apparent reality and salience in a communicating text to facilitate a specific definition of a problem, causal explanation, moral judgment, and/or course of action. Entman identified four functions of frames: (1) problem definition, (2) causal diagnosis, (3) moral judgment, and (4) remedy. Frames operate at four locations in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture.

Framing theory is well suited to this research because it provides an analytical lens for examining how social media and mainstream media created divergent narratives about the July Uprising. Media frames are not only about what is being discussed, but the way it is discussed, who is foregrounded and who gives causal explanation, as well as what people consider appropriate as a response (Scheufele, 1999). The frames adopted by the social media platforms, i.e. the focus on state violence, democratic rights, and collective opposition, were in sharp contrast to those adopted by most of the mainstream media sources, which focused on law and order, national stability, and government powers.

Iyengar (1991) also identified the presence of episodic and thematic framing. Episodic frames present issues in terms of concrete events or individual cases, whereas thematic frames put issues in the context of a wider social or political context. This difference applies to the case of Bangladesh, especially episodic frames like viral videos of particular acts of police brutality were predominantly used on social media. Conversely, mainstream media were inclined towards thematic frames that were consistent with the governmental rhetoric on national stability and perceived interferences by foreign forces.

2.2 A *Global View of Media and Political Mobilization*

The interplay of media and political mobilization has been a major issue in communication and political science literature. Historically, the traditional media have been considered as potent tools of political opinion and behavioral control (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) explains how the concentration of ownership, dependence on advertising, reliance on official sources, and the use of ideological filters restrict media coverage to content that serves elite interests.

The advent of social and digital media has radically changed the political communication and mobilization landscape. The network society was theorized by Castells (2012), who believed that digital communication technologies provided new spaces of autonomous political communication where traditional gatekeepers cannot control it. Social media enables what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) call connective action, in which people coordinate by sharing individualized content rather than relying on shared identities or organizations.

The most thoroughly researched case of the influence of social media on political mobilization is the Arab Spring of 2010-2011. Research found that social media in Tunisia and Egypt had key roles in the organization of protests, spreading information, and going around state-controlled media (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Also, about nine out of every ten Egyptian and Tunisian respondents used social media to mobilize or organize protest events (Huang, 2011). Moreover, the sites led to the creation of mediated communities and networks that helped in changing the discourse of the people in the civil society (Brym et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, a number of scholars have cautioned against technological determinism. Tufekci (2017) contends that although social media allows mass mobilization to take place rapidly, it may also lead to a 'tactical freeze': movements that gain momentum quickly but struggle to sustain political action. Likewise, Morozov (2011) cautions against slacktivism, in which online interactions replace more meaningful political involvement.

2.3 Media in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a complicated media setting that is rapidly becoming digitalized and has continued to experience limitations on freedom of the press. The number of Facebook users in the country was about 52.90 million (30.4% of the population), 33.60 million YouTube users, and 37.36 million TikTok users as of early 2024 (The Daily Star, 2024). The age group (18-24 years) that was the most active on Facebook was the front line of the July Uprising, indicating the high level of penetration of these platforms among the youth of Bangladesh.

The mainstream media industry consists of about 3,000 print media, 30 radio stations, 30 television stations, and hundreds of news websites (Bhandari, 2024). Although this is numerically vast, editorial freedom has been grossly impaired. The Hasina government concentrated media ownership on business conglomerates that were strongly allied to the ruling party. Television channel licenses were given to those outlets with a predisposition to

enhance government stories, and those that were critical outlets were suppressed in one way or another (Alam, 2024).

2.3.1 Ownership Landscape: Mainstream Media versus Social Media

The ownership structures underlying mainstream and social media in Bangladesh differ fundamentally, and this difference is central to the comparison developed later in the paper. Bangladesh's television and print sector is dominated by a small number of business conglomerates with commercial and political ties to the ruling establishment; broadcast licensing has historically functioned as a lever of government influence, with license renewal and advertising revenue used to reward compliant outlets and discipline critical ones (Alam, 2024; Bhandari, 2024). This produces a media system in which editorial decisions are filtered through a small number of owner-gatekeepers whose commercial interests are entwined with the political establishment—closely matching the concentration-of-ownership mechanism described in Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model (Section 2.2). Social media platforms present a structurally different ownership arrangement. Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram are owned by foreign technology companies with no direct business interests in Bangladeshi politics. Under normal circumstances, anyone can use these platforms to organize or share content without needing a licence. This does not make social media ownership neutral—platform-level content moderation, algorithmic curation, and the platforms' own commercial incentives shape what circulates—but it removes the direct, domestically controlled ownership lever that operates over mainstream broadcasters and print outlets. This ownership contrast is the structural foundation for the divergent institutional constraints analyzed in Sections 4 and 5.

The Digital Security Act, 2018, turned out to be the main instrument of curbing critical journalism and online dissent. The law legalized huge fines and jail terms for crimes vaguely defined, allowed arrests without warrants and authorized the government to command the take down of online content (Human Rights Watch, 2023). As of early 2023, there were at least 339 DSA cases against journalists. Kumar (2024) indicated that most of the Bangladeshi journalists engaged in self-censorship because of the fear of losing their jobs, and their personal safety.

2.4 Political Movements on Social Media in Bangladesh

Social media and political mobilization have a close relationship in Bangladesh. One of the first examples of Facebook-enabled mobilization was the 2013 Shahbagh protests, which demanded harsher sentences for war criminals. The use of social media was also useful in organizing the 2018 quota reform movement (Khan, 2018). These precedents established the digital platforms as a valid and efficient means of political expression and collective action, which contributed to the even greater political mobilization through social media in 2024.

Empirical studies have already reported the strategic use of Facebook by Gen Z protesters in 2024. The protesters created Facebook pages and groups spread across geographical locations under the movement's name, Baishammo Birodhi Chhatra Andolan (Anti-Discrimination Student Movement). Through these groups and pages, they organized activities, shared movement updates, and shared photographs and video evidence of protests. Hushen (2024) found that 95 percent of the participants surveyed were inspired to take part in the protests via Facebook, 4 percent via YouTube, and 1 percent via other media. Planning was done through private Messenger groups, and decisions were publicized through public Facebook groups.

2.5 *Research Gap*

Although the available literature offers valuable insights into the relationship between media and political mobilization worldwide, several gaps remain regarding the July Uprising in Bangladesh. To begin with, the majority of comparative studies of social and mainstream media during political crisis have focused on the Middle East, North Africa, or Southeast Asia, though South Asia is a relatively rare target of such studies. Secondly, the contextual factors unique to the July Uprising in Bangladesh, such as the internet blackout, direct government control over the mainstream media, and the particular role of Gen Z digital activists, are analytical challenges that are not fully addressed. Thirdly, the comparative analysis of how both types of media operated in the same crisis situation, rather than independently, has not been properly conducted. This paper addresses these gaps using a comparative case study methodology grounded in framing theory.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Research Design*

This study used a qualitative design to explore context-specific issues such as media framing and political mobilization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach is well suited to examining how media texts construct meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

3.2 *Comparative Case Study Approach*

This research used a comparative case study methodology in which two cases are analyzed: (1) social media platforms and (2) mainstream media during the July Uprising. The comparison is informed by the logic of Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), a strategy derived from John Stuart Mill's Method of Difference and most commonly applied to compare political or national systems (Mill, 1843; Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Here the design is adapted rather than applied in its classical form: the two "cases" are communication channels operating within a single political system rather than distinct systems in the

comparative-politics sense, and the study borrows MSSD's underlying logic—holding context constant to isolate the sources of divergent outcomes—rather than claiming a strict MSSD application. This adaptation is made explicit to avoid overstating the design's formal pedigree; the study is more accurately described as a comparative case study of two media channels sharing the same political and temporal context.

The MSSD is the comparison of cases which have several common features but are different in the outcome variable of interest. Both the social media and mainstream media in this study operate within the same political context (Bangladesh during the July Uprising), with the same overall purpose (information dissemination), and target the same general audience. The most important distinguishing variable is the structural nature of each type of media: a decentralized, user-generated architecture of social media and a centralized, institutional structure of mainstream media, which serves as the independent variable to explain divergent roles in the crisis.

This design allows the authors to hold constant the possible confounding factors, such as political context, nature of uprising, and target audience. Further, it isolates the variables which explain varying outcomes in terms of media framing and mobilization ability (Landman, 2008).

3.3 *Data Collection*

This study is based entirely on secondary data. Rather than directly harvesting and coding an original corpus of raw posts, videos, or broadcasts, the authors compiled and synthesized documentary evidence about the content and use of both media types from published sources: peer-reviewed and working-paper studies of the uprising (notably Hushen, 2024; Hossain, 2026; Arman et al., 2025; and Taieba et al., 2026), the United Nations fact-finding report (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2025), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2024), press-freedom and human-rights reports, journalistic investigations and news archives, NGO and research-institute reports, official testimony (e.g., before the International Crimes Tribunal), and government or press-agency statements. Data were compiled in light of framing theory, with a specific focus on how each source characterized the framing of major events, actors, and issues in the July Uprising by social media and by mainstream media.

Because the analysis works from what these secondary sources already report and quote, rather than from an original coded corpus, no claim is made regarding intercoder reliability or a fixed sample size in the sense used for primary content analysis; this is addressed further as a limitation in Section 6.3. Moreover, individual news stories, posts, and broadcasts mentioned in Section 4 are cited through the relevant secondary sources. The authors did not independently sample or code these materials.

The secondary sources documenting social media activity comprised the following:

a) Published accounts, screenshots, and analyses of Facebook pages and groups run by Baishammo Birodhi Chhatra Andolan (Anti-Discrimination Student Movement), as reported in Hushen (2024) and contemporaneous journalism.

b) News reports and secondary descriptions of specific viral videos and posts documenting protests, police responses, and mobilization actions (e.g., the Abu Sayed and Mir Mugdho videos), as covered in outlets cited throughout Section 4.

c) Reporting on citizen-journalism YouTube content, protest livestreams, and diaspora-press coverage, drawn from press and NGO accounts rather than direct video review.

d) Documentation of Telegram-based protest coordination, as reported by Raso et al. (2025) and Nazrul (2024).

The secondary sources documenting mainstream media coverage covered the following:

a) Reports, testimony, and secondary studies describing the content of television broadcasts by BTV (state broadcaster), Somoy TV, Ekattor TV, DBC News, Jamuna TV and Channel 24, including sworn testimony on editorial interference (The Business Standard, 2025) and prior framing research (Taieba et al., 2026).

b) Published news stories and coverage analyses from eight English-language outlets (*The Daily Star*, *Dhaka Tribune*, *The Business Standard*, *New Age*, *The Asian Age*, *Daily Sun*, *The Daily Observer*, and *The Bangladesh Today*), as examined by Taieba et al. (2026). Other news reports and analyses cited in Section 4 were also consulted. The authors relied on how these materials were reported, quoted, and analyzed in secondary sources. They did not independently sample or code the original news content.

c) Records of press conferences and official press releases by the government, as reported by news and human-rights organizations.

The events analyzed span July 1 to August 5, 2024, covering the entire arc of the uprising, while the secondary sources documenting these events were published between 2024 and 2026 as journalistic, academic, and human-rights reporting on the uprising accumulated.

3.4 *Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to interpret the compiled secondary data. Thematic analysis, rather than content or textual analysis, was chosen because the material under review is heterogeneous—spanning journalistic reports, testimony, NGO documentation, and prior empirical findings rather than a single uniform text corpus—and because its flexibility and theoretical compatibility with framing theory make it well suited to identifying recurring patterns of meaning across such varied secondary sources. Content or textual analysis, which typically presuppose a bounded,

directly coded corpus of primary texts, were judged less appropriate given the nature of the data described in Section 3.3. Because the units under analysis are the claims and evidence already reported in secondary sources rather than an original corpus coded line-by-line by the authors, the six phases below describe a synthesis process rather than a primary-data coding exercise with intercoder-reliability statistics; this distinction, and its limitations, is revisited in Section 6.3.

These six phases were adopted in the following way:

Phase 1 Familiarization with the data: The authors undertook repeated readings of the compiled secondary sources—news articles, reports, and prior studies—coming up with initial notes and discerning early patterns across accounts of the two media types.

Phase 2 Generating initial codes: Descriptive codes were applied across the compiled sources to capture recurring characteristics relevant to the research questions, including mobilization calls, state-violence documentation, government-narrative alignment, self-censorship indicators, and real-time reporting.

Phase 3 Searching for themes: Codes were clustered into candidate themes of more general patterns of meaning, first grouped by the divergent functions of social and mainstream media at various points in the uprising.

Phase 4 Reviewing themes: Themes have been checked against the coded data as well as the entire data to check internal consistency and uniqueness. This was a repetitive process of combining, narrowing down, and eliminating the themes where needed.

Phase 5 Defining and naming themes: The themes were distinctly outlined, and each of them had a main organizing idea that created a logical story on the research questions.

Phase 6 Writing the report: The up-write analysis was done with a description of each theme in the analysis, with illustrations of data examples and discussion.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of secondary sources documenting social media and mainstream media content during the July Uprising in Bangladesh revealed four major themes: (1) Real-Time Mobilization and Grassroots Coordination; (2) Documentation and Dissemination of State Violence; (3) Self-Censorship and State Narrative Alignment; and (4) Information Control and Counter-Narratives. The themes are discussed in more detail below with proper evidence.

4.1 Theme 1: Real-Time Mobilization and Grassroots Coordination

4.1.1 Social Media as the Central Medium of Mobilization

Facebook was the major means of organizing and mobilizing the July Uprising. Since the movement began, student demonstrators created Facebook pages and groups named

Baishammo Birodhi Chhatra Andolan (Anti-Discrimination Student Movement) across different geographical locations in Bangladesh. A third-year international relations student at Dhaka University, one of the protesters, explained the protests to have been organized through Facebook without the support of any political organization (Hushen 2024).

There were multiple levels in the coordination structure. Central coordinators set strategy in private Messenger groups and announced decisions in public Facebook groups (Hushen 2024). This two-level strategy ensured strategic cohesion and made it possible to reach out to the masses.

The mobilizing power of social media was particularly felt during decisive moments. After Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's controversial comment on July 14, 2024, which linked protesters to collaborators during wartime, the agitated protesters used social media networks to mobilize and respond to the remark. The protest in a female hall at the University of Dhaka was organized through social media, enabling female students to break their dorm gate in protest (Mahi, 2024). By July 18, the movement had grown exponentially, with students of private universities participating in coordinated actions throughout the capital with the support of social media (Raso et al., 2025).

Despite the government's efforts to shut down internet access, the social media appeals resulted in the Long March to Dhaka on August 5 brought millions of demonstrators into the streets during a nationwide curfew (Farid, 2026; Nazrul, 2024). It is what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe as connective action: decentralized, personalized mobilization that is not based on the traditional organizational frameworks.

Independent survey findings support this argument. In an online survey of 398 respondents conducted in June–July 2025, Hossain (2026) found that 97.7% followed uprising updates on social media. Another 77.4% mainly relied on Facebook and X for real-time updates, while only 8.5% relied on online news portals. Additionally, 76.4% considered social media crucial to organizing and mobilizing the uprising.

However, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The survey used a non-probability sample, mostly comprising young and urban respondents (60.8% aged 18–24 and 93.7% urban). Data were also collected a year after the events. Therefore, the results reflect respondents' perceptions rather than population-wide estimates. Despite these limitations, they are consistent with Hushen's (2024) findings from a separate sample.

4.1.2 Mobilization through the Constrained Mainstream Media

In comparison, the mainstream media did little to mobilize the movement. Organizational system, pro-Awami League ownership patterns, governmental directives and a culture of self-censorship were all barriers that barred the mainstream media as a mobilizing platform. As the movement was gaining momentum, the government exerted more pressure on media houses. Even the television stations were reported to have their news dictated by the

intelligence officers and the government was ordered not to broadcast the nine-point demands of the movement (Bhandari, 2024; The Business Standard, 2025).

One of the key organizers of the anti-discrimination student movement, Hasnat Abdullah, gave testimony in the International Crimes Tribunal that the intelligence officers ordered what to broadcast on television at specific times when he was detained. He testified that the officers allegedly dictated the scroll content, which was then aired by the television stations verbatim (The Business Standard, 2025). Such a high degree of direct state control over the content of broadcasts essentially neutralized any possible mobilization role of mainstream media.

The UN fact-finding report provides independent support for these accounts. It documents how officials from the Ministry of Information and intelligence agencies DGFI and NSI pressured editors and journalists to change their reporting. Officials contacted them and visited their offices and homes. Journalists also reported pressure from media owners close to the Awami League, which restricted independent coverage of the protests and the use of force (OHCHR, 2025).

Public perceptions reflected these concerns. In Hossain's (2026) survey, 45.5% of respondents viewed traditional media as biased toward the government, while 53.3% considered it less effective than social media. Unlike traditional media, social media allowed movement coordinators to communicate decisions directly to their followers (Hushen, 2024). Television coverage faced greater restrictions. Bhandari (2024) reported that the movement's nine-point demands were kept off air. Abdullah also testified that intelligence officers dictated television news scrolls, naming Somoy TV, DBC News, and Ekattor TV in this context (The Business Standard, 2025).

4.2 *Theme 2: The Documentation and Dissemination of State Violence*

4.2.1 The Social Media as Witness and Amplifier

Social media was a key tool for recording and sharing evidence of state violence. One of the climaxes of the movement was the killing of Abu Sayed, a 25-year-old student at Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur on July 16, 2024. Video recordings of his last moments, when he stood with his arms outstretched and the police fired on him, became viral on social media platforms (Chowdhury, 2024). The footage functioned as a 'moral shock' (Jasper, 1997), crystallizing public anger and helping turn a student-led protest into a mass movement.

Documentation was also a participatory process. In Hossain's (2026) survey, 72.8% of respondents had shared protest-related posts and videos, while 17.4% had livestreamed or recorded protests themselves. A qualitative study of public Facebook posts from July to early August 2024 found similar patterns. User-recorded footage of attacks on students challenged state media accounts. The widely shared image of Abu Sayed facing riot police also became a symbol of courage, with many users adopting it as their profile picture (Abir et al., 2025).

The testimonies of the participants emphasize the power of social media documentation on an emotional level. Individuals who saw the process of torture and murder of students on Facebook and YouTube needed to speak up to help (Hushen, 2024). The personal stories - like the one about Mir Mugdho, a student who was shot helping others - went viral and energized popular activism (Nazrul, 2024).

Social media's capacity to document was particularly crucial during internet blackouts. When the biggest internet blackout (July 18-23 and once again on August 5, 2024) was in effect, information flows were maintained by diaspora networks, VPN users, and foreign reporters. According to Nazrul (2024), even with government restrictions, social media platforms, such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Telegram, still enabled quick communication with the help of VPNs and international journalistic networks.

Social media documentation played a crucial role in accountability during the movement. The publicity surrounding the movement was created by camera shots of assaults on female students by Chhatra League members in university campuses, which were sent through Facebook, and this anger was not restricted to the original student base of the movement (Hushen, 2024).

4.2.2 Mainstream Media Documentation

Although the mainstream media coverage was generally limited, it would be a simplistic generalization to describe it as being consistently subservient to government narratives. Media houses and some journalists showed a lot of bravery in reporting on the rebellion at a high level of personal risk.

During the internet blackout of July 18–23, mainstream media were the only source of information for many citizens. This coverage, however, was rather different in terms of quality and independence.

Reporters who reported about the uprising faced severe physical threats: security forces assaulted and fired at journalists, destroyed equipment and cameras, and raided media offices. The Committee to Protect Journalists confirmed that three journalists had been killed and fourteen attacked by 26 July 2024, by police, Chhatra League members, and protesters alike; those attacked included reporters from *Prothom Alo*, *The Business Standard*, *The Daily Star*, Somoy TV, and Jamuna Television (CPJ, 2024). The UN fact-finding report later documented at least six journalists killed and about 200 injured between 15 July and 5 August 2024, with photojournalists particularly targeted (OHCHR, 2025).

However, some mainstream outlets played a significant role in documentation. In the case of the Daily Star, it was maintaining sustained coverage with critical reporting, whereas Al Jazeera's English-language service was maintaining heavy on-the-ground coverage that was available to both local and international readerships. These instances of principled journalism deserve recognition in the wider sense of institutional constraint and ubiquitous self-censorship.

4.3 Theme 3: Self-Censorship and State Narrative Alignment

4.3.1 Patterns of Self-Censorship

One of the most widely used and far-reaching aspects of the mainstream media reporting in the July Uprising was self-censorship. Although not specific to the crisis period, the systematic institutional pressures that had built up over the years were very evident under the conditions of the crisis. Studies by the University of Oslo in 2020 showed that widespread self-censorship was prevalent among the Bangladeshi journalists (Kumar, 2024), offer valuable contextual background to media action in the uprising.

Self-censorship took various forms: systematic underreporting of police and security force violence on protesters; the use of government framing and language in reporting about the movement; not airing the nine-point demands of the students; laying too much stress on property damage and issues of law and order rather than the substantive issues that led to the movement.

4.3.2 State Narrative Alignment

The convergence of the mainstream media content and state narratives during the July Uprising is an example of structural forces outlined in the propaganda model by Herman and Chomsky (1988). In Bangladesh, these forces were carried out by means of the concentration of media ownership, the control over licensing by the government, the threat of legal prosecution under the Digital Security Act, and the actual physical presence of intelligence agents in newsrooms.

The implications of such alignment for public trust were serious. Mainstream narratives lacked credibility among student protesters, who turned to social media as their primary source of information (Alam, 2024). Alam quotes a student who said, "We don't trust mainstream media, nor do we trust journalists." The storming and burning of the Bangladesh Television (BTV) headquarters in Dhaka on July 18 can be read as a symbolic rejection of an institution many viewed as a propaganda tool. Protesters set the building on fire after riot police retreated inside (CPJ, 2024; Shawon, 2024).

A content analysis of the Bangla-language press shows that coverage varied by outlet and ownership. Arman et al. (2025) examined a systematic random sample of 539 front-page articles from five national dailies published between 6 June and 6 August 2024. They found that *Bangladesh Pratidin*, whose owner they describe as closely linked to the Awami League, used delegitimizing frames in 66% of its articles. It portrayed protesters negatively in 58% and blamed them for unrest in 59%. In contrast, *Manabzamin* portrayed protesters sympathetically in 71% of its articles and blamed the government, police, or military in 56%. These findings contrast with the counter-hegemonic narratives circulating on social media (Section 4.3.4).

4.3.3 Government Control Mechanisms

To censor the mainstream media content during the uprising, the Hasina government used several mechanisms:

Direct editorial orders: The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the intelligence services issued a directive to ban the broadcasting of the nine-point demands of the students (Bhandari, 2024).

Live-broadcast restrictions: The government barred channels from live coverage of the street protests. (Bhandari, 2024).

Intelligence interference: Intelligence officers were reportedly present in, or in direct contact with, television newsrooms, dictating the content of news scrolls. (The Business Standard, 2025).

Legal coercion: The constant fear of being prosecuted under the Digital Security Act was an effective deterrent to critical coverage.

Ownership leverage: The government used its power over media owners to compel the media to comply with its editorial directives.

4.3.4 Social Media as Counter-Hegemonic Space

With the limitation of mainstream media, the social media platforms played the role of a counter-hegemonic public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Dahlgren, 2005). Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram are structured in a decentralized form, which prevents one actor from controlling the narrative. Sharing and creation of content by the users was a direct contradiction of official government claims.

The symbolic act of adopting red profile pictures (which symbolized the blood of the protesters killed) was a kind of group symbolic action that mainstream media could neither replicate nor control (Hushen, 2024). Such revolutionary mottos as "Tumi ke? Ami ke? Razakar, Razakar" ("Who are you? Who am I? Razakar, Razakar") spread quickly on social media, strengthening the sense of identity and mobilizing solidarity (Hushen, 2024).

4.4 Theme 4: Information Control and Counter-Narratives

4.4.1 Internet Shutdowns and Information Control

The government of Bangladesh reacted to the uprising by the longest and most geographically extensive internet shutdown in the history of Bangladesh (Raso et al., 2025). Between July 15 and August 5, 2024, the government used a multi-layered system of information control measures, such as nationwide outage of mobile communications,

blocking of broadband, selective blocking of social media sites, restriction of messaging apps, and interference with VPNs.

The timeline of shutdowns coincides with the escalation of the uprising and of lethal violence:

July 15-17: Blocking and throttling of mobile internet; selective blocking of Facebook around universities.

July 18-23: Nationwide blackout of the internet (media-reported at least 143 deaths).

July 24-31: Internet slowdowns; blocking of social media and VPNs.

August 1-3: Reduced mobile connectivity; intermittent blocks to platforms.

Aug 4: 4G suspended and Meta platforms blocked on broadband (media-reported at least 114 deaths).

Aug 5: about 3.5 hours of nationwide blackout (media-reported at least 109 deaths).

The implementation was characterized by what Raso et al. (2025) describes as opacity and decentralized control, conducted largely through informal government agency communications, leaving citizens and journalists unable to anticipate or respond to restrictions in real time.

4.4.2 Resilience of Social Media Networks

Social media networks proved to be resilient even after massive efforts were put in place by the government to shut down their operations. The Diaspora communities were instrumental in ensuring continuity of information, informing international audiences about ground-level information. Media houses and international outlets, such as Al Jazeera, BBC and The New York Times, amplified content that was initially spread via social media, before and during the shutdowns.

OONI's measurements recorded fewer anomalies for Telegram than for Facebook, WhatsApp, or Messenger, although Telegram was also formally blocked. VPN services were likewise reportedly blocked, though OONI could not determine who ordered the blocks. As noted by Raso et al. (2025), users simultaneously shared real-time reports of service disruptions on social media, creating a parallel documentation record of the shutdown itself.

The failure of internet blackouts to stop the movement highlights one of the core findings: the mobilization through social media had reached critical mass. This suggests that, once social media–driven mobilization reaches that point, technical countermeasures alone are unlikely to suppress it. According to a movement organizer, the government failed to suppress the movement by suspending internet access after the uprising had already gained a mass momentum through social media, especially Facebook, and the people were no longer divided over the demand of the resignation of the Sheikh Hasina (Hushen, 2024).

4.4.3 Mainstream Media Frame in the Crisis

The mainstream media's framing of the uprising varied along a continuum rather than reflecting a single standpoint. A study analyzing 98 news reports from eight English-language newspapers published between July 14 and August 14, 2024, found that coverage did not fall cleanly into peace or war journalism but showed a hybrid pattern the authors call "mixed framing" (Taieba et al., 2026). Its outlet-level findings are used below to illustrate variation among mainstream sources and are presented alongside the independently sourced material in Section 4.3. Coverage differed markedly between outlets:

> Peace-oriented sources: Both The Daily Star and Dhaka Tribune were more concerned with the context, accountability, and structural problems (Taieba et al., 2026).
>
> War-oriented sources: The Business Standard, Daily Sun, New Age and The Asian Age had more conflict-escalatory dynamics, and the frames focused on governmental power and security threats (Taieba et al., 2026).
>
> Mixed-framing sources: Daily Observer and the Bangladesh Today were characterized by a mixture of people-oriented and elite-oriented reporting (Taieba et al., 2026).

That second analysis reaches a compatible conclusion. Arman et al. (2025) found that frames differed significantly by outlet ($p < .001$). Spectacle frames dominated overall (58% of articles) but ranged from 87% in *Ittefaq* to 30% in *Naya Diganta*, and delegitimizing frames ranged from 66% in *Bangladesh Pratidin* to 14% in *Naya Diganta*, while *Prothom Alo* was divided (48% delegitimizing, 31% legitimizing). Taken together, the English-language sample of Taieba et al. (2026) and the Bangla-language sample of Arman et al. (2025) indicate that mainstream coverage varied with editorial and ownership position rather than following a single state line. All these differences indicate that, despite state pressure, the decisions of individual editors and journalistic ethics still played an important role in coverage, complicating simplistic dichotomizations of compliant versus independent media.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Comparative Media roles

The results of this research expose the stark differences in the contributions of social media and mainstream media to the July Uprising in Bangladesh, justifying the theoretical forecasts of the framing theory and add to the current research on media and political mobilization.

Table 1 - Comparative analysis of the social media and mainstream media roles

Dimension	Social Media	Mainstream Media
Mobilization capacity	High: served as primary tool for organizing protests, coordinating actions, and calling for mass participation	Low: structural constraints prevented mobilization role; some outlets actively discouraged protest
Information dissemination	Real-time, decentralized, user-generated content; resistant to single-point control	Delayed, centralized, gatekept; subject to government directives and editorial interference
Documentation of violence	Extensive citizen journalism; viral content of state violence served as moral shocks driving participation	Some courageous journalism, but constrained by physical threats, legal intimidation, and ownership pressures
Framing orientation	Counter-hegemonic frames emphasizing democratic rights, state violence, and collective resistance	Predominantly state-aligned frames emphasizing law and order, with notable variation across outlets
Resilience to state control	High: decentralized architecture, VPN circumvention, diaspora networks maintained flows despite shutdowns	Low: direct editorial control, intelligence oversight, and legal threats effectively shaped content
Public trust	High among protesters and youth; perceived as authentic, grassroots source of information	Low among protesters; some outlets perceived as government propaganda instruments

Source: Compiled by the authors. Supporting evidence for each row is discussed in Section 4: mobilization capacity (4.1), documentation of violence (4.2), framing orientation (4.3, 5.2), resilience to state control (4.4), and public trust (4.3.2, 5.1).

The pattern in Table 1 is supported by independent evidence of different kinds. Survey data show that respondents relied far more on social media than on news portals for real-time updates (77.4% versus 8.5%; Hossain, 2026). In addition, content analyses show that mainstream framing split along ownership and editorial lines (Arman et al., 2025; Taieba et al., 2026). Further, the UN fact-finding report documents the state pressure behind the constraints on mainstream outlets (OHCHR, 2025).

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The results support and extend the framing theory of Entman (1993) as the frames adopted by various media platforms are influenced and replicated by the structural peculiarities of these platforms. The decentralized nature of social media facilitated the circulation of counter-hegemonic frames opposing the state discourse while the centralized nature of

mainstream media made it vulnerable to frame manipulation by the state. Entman's four locations of framing (communicator, text, receiver, and culture) are thus differentially mediated by media platforms, and that social media are able to confer communicative power to ordinary citizens in a manner that traditional media cannot.

The results also echo the ideas of Castells (2012) about mass self-communication that suggests that users of social media act as both consumers and producers of information on a multilateral level, creating systems of meaning that circumvent the traditional media gatekeepers. This phenomenon was exemplified at large scale with millions of Bangladeshis participating in personalized connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), a digitally mediated political participation without the use of traditional organizational infrastructure.

In addition, the findings corroborate the hypothesis of the hybrid media system by Chadwick (2017), which asserts that political communication is more likely to take place at the convergence between the old and new media logic. The July Uprising was not an isolated event of the social media and mainstream media; instead, both media worked with each other in intricate manners. The content created on social media was sometimes enhanced by the mainstream sources, such as the Abu Sayed video, and the inability of the mainstream media to cover some events led viewers to social media, thus empowering the latter as the source of information.

5.2.1 *Critical Considerations: Applying Tufekci and Morozov*

The literature review (Section 2.2) raised Tufekci's (2017) warning about "tactical freeze"—the tendency of digitally coordinated movements to mobilize quickly but struggle to sustain strategic direction once initial goals are met—and Morozov's (2011) caution about slacktivism, in which online participation substitutes for costlier forms of engagement. The findings reported here do not straightforwardly support an uncritical reading of social media's role, and applying these frameworks surfaces genuine tensions in the evidence. The very features that made Facebook effective for rapid, decentralized mobilization—the absence of centralized leadership and reliance on loosely coordinated Messenger and Facebook groups (Section 4.1.1)—are the features Tufekci identifies as risks to a movement's capacity for sustained strategic adaptation once its immediate goal (the government's fall) was achieved; the secondary sources reviewed here document the mobilization itself but say little about the coordination challenges the movement may have faced afterward, which this study's design cannot speak to.

Similarly, the red-profile-picture campaign and viral slogans documented in Section 4.3.4, while functioning as effective symbolic mobilization, also fit the pattern of low-cost, expressive participation that Morozov associates with slacktivism; that these symbolic acts coincided with, rather than substituted for, large-scale street mobilization and the eventual toppling of the government suggests slacktivism dynamics were not dominant in this case, but the secondary sources this study draws on were not designed to distinguish participants

who limited their involvement to online expression from those who also mobilized offline. A further limitation, noted in Section 6.3, is that the secondary sources underlying this analysis were themselves produced largely after the uprising's success, which may selectively emphasize social media's effective, mobilizing uses over less visible failures, dead ends, or online misinformation that did not contribute to the movement's outcome. Reading the results through these critical lenses tempers, without overturning, the paper's overall finding that social media substantially outperformed mainstream media as a mobilizing and documentary tool.

5.3 *Comparison with International Cases*

The July Uprising in Bangladesh has many significant similarities with the Arab Spring, especially in the application of social media as an organizing tool and the ensuing inability of the state-controlled media to control the narrative. In line with Egyptian and Tunisian examples, the social media in Bangladesh served as an information utility – a fundamental infrastructure of organization and articulation of political action, as defined by Howard and Hussain (2013). The finding that Facebook influenced 95% of surveyed protesters to join the movement (Hushen, 2024) closely parallels the 88–94% of Arab Spring protesters who reported organizing or publicizing protest activities via social media (Huang, 2011).

Nevertheless, there are unique characteristics to the case of Bangladesh. The internet shutdown policy used by the government was more technologically advanced than those that were used in the Arab Spring. In fact, the government used a multi-layered approach that integrated complete outages, platform-based blocking, bandwidth throttling, and VPN interference (Raso et al., 2025). However, despite this increased repressive action, the movement went on to fulfil its primary goal, the overthrow of the government. This indicates that once social media-enabled mobilization is at the point of critical mass, even technical countermeasures may be unable to suppress it.

Another aspect that is worthy of attention is the generational aspect of the Bangladesh uprising. The Arab Spring was a broad-based event, involving a wide range of socio-economic groups. But the July Uprising was, by contrast, a predominantly Gen Z-led phenomenon, consistent with the age profile identified in the data (Section 2.3; Rahman, 2025), for whom social media functions as an integral part of social and political life rather than simply a communication tool. This generational dimension carries implications for political mobilization elsewhere as the share of digital natives within politically active populations continues to grow.

5.4 *Implications for Media Governance in Bangladesh*

The conflicting functions of social media and mainstream media during the July Uprising have important implications for media policy in Bangladesh. The results point at some key areas of concern in the policies:

Regulation of digital media: The government is facing the difficulty of balancing the democratic benefit of social media that has been manifested in enabling proper political representation and accountability with issues of misinformation, hate speech and the dissemination of information that may fuel violence. The July Uprising showed that authoritarian internet controls cannot prevent political mobilization and undermine fundamental rights. Therefore, a rights-based approach to digital governance, with multi-stakeholder processes and in line with international human rights standards, would be more suitable and effective.

Mainstream media reform: The results highlight the urgency of structural reform to enhance the independence and credibility of mainstream media in Bangladesh. These reforms ought to deal with the concentration of media ownership, reinforce the editorial independence, revise or abolish repressive laws (such as the Cyber Security Act and similar acts), and create autonomous regulatory procedures that are not influenced by politics.

Transparency and accountability: There is a need to increase transparency and accountability mechanisms in the media in both sectors. In the case of social media, they need strong collaboration with fact-checkers and increased openness in the content moderation process. In the case of mainstream media, it is imperative that ownership structures, political affiliations, as well as editorial policies, be disclosed.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Findings

This paper provided a comparative study of how social media and mainstream media played their role throughout the July Uprising in Bangladesh (July 1-August 5, 2024). The study used a comparative case study approach based on the framing theory, which revealed four major themes: (1) Real-Time Mobilization and Grassroots Coordination; (2) Documentation and Dissemination of State Violence; (3) Self-Censorship and State Narrative Alignment; and (4) Information Control and Counter-Narratives.

Social media, particularly Facebook, played a major role in real-time mobilization. In Hushen's (2024) survey, 95% of surveyed protesters identified Facebook as a source of inspiration for joining the movement. This finding is broadly consistent with Hossain's (2026) survey, in which 77.4% of respondents relied mainly on Facebook and X for real-time updates. Social media also helped document state violence and spread the movement beyond its original student base.

Mainstream media, by contrast, were more constrained by self-censorship and more closely aligned with state discourse, although outlet-level variation (for example, The Daily Star and Dhaka Tribune) complicates a uniform picture. The mechanisms of state control,

such as direct editorial dictates by intelligence services, legal force under the Digital Security Act, and the use of ownership connections, played a big role in limiting the ability of the mainstream media to perform its democratic watchdog role.

The government's extensive internet blackouts, while representing a significant escalation in information control, ultimately failed to suppress the movement. The latter result suggests that purely technical approaches to controlling information flows are unlikely to succeed once social media–based mobilization has reached critical mass.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

This paper makes the following policy recommendations based on the findings:

Regulation of digital media: The government ought to come up with a regulatory framework of digital media that safeguard freedom of expression and also deal with justifiable issues of misinformation and harmful content. Any framework should be made with multi-stakeholder consultation and in line with international human rights standards. Politically motivated internet shutdowns should be prohibited.

Mainstream media reform: Structural reforms must come first in order to enhance the independence and credibility of mainstream media. These should include transparent ownership requirements, strong protection of editorial autonomy, and an independent media regulator.

Transparency and accountability: There should be enhanced transparency in the media sectors. The social media platforms ought to be obliged to collaborate with fact checking partners and supply transparency in content moderation. The media houses that are in the mainstream must also reveal ownership and political affiliations.

Media literacy education: Media literacy education should be prioritized to provide citizens with critical skills to assess information provided by both social and mainstream sources of media, as well as to strengthen the information ecosystem and reduce vulnerability to manipulation.

Protection of journalists: Well-developed legal and institutional frameworks should be in place to prevent physical assaults, legal persecution as well as economic coercion of journalists. The security of journalists in times of political crisis should be considered one of the key principles of democratic government.

6.3 Limitations of the Research

This research focused on the main events of the uprising, from July 1 to August 5, 2024, beginning with the first student protests and culminating in the overthrow of the Awami League regime. Three limitations in particular constrain the findings. First, the study relies entirely on secondary sources describing activity on Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram, as well as television and national newspapers, rather than on an original corpus of posts,

broadcasts, or articles collected and coded directly by the authors; this was a deliberate choice given the practical difficulty of accessing extensive primary media content during a period of internet blackout and government censorship, but it means the analysis is bounded by what secondary sources chose to report and cannot independently verify claims about exact prevalence. Second, several key findings rely heavily on the study of Hushen (2024). These include the widely cited finding that 95% of surveyed protesters were inspired to join the movement through Facebook, as well as details of its coordination structure and symbolism. Hossain (2026), using a separate non-probability sample, reports similar patterns. However, both studies rely on retrospective surveys with samples skewed toward young respondents. Future research using independent, probability-based samples could help verify these findings. Third, the study's largely affirmative account of social media's mobilizing role should be read alongside the cautions raised by Tufekci (2017) and Morozov (2011) discussed in Section 5.2; the empirical record here documents successful mobilization but cannot rule out that some of the enthusiasm captured in secondary sources reflects post-hoc narrative construction rather than the full complexity of participants' experience at the time.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

This work provides a platform on which there are a number of avenues of future inquiry that are fruitful. The qualitative results here might be supplemented with quantitative content analysis of social media and mainstream media reports about the July Uprising. Surveys that focus on the more lasting implications of the uprising on media control and the freedom of the press in Bangladesh would also be useful. Lastly, comparative studies of the usefulness of internet shutdown measures in modern political crises, incorporating the Bangladesh experience and other recent experiences, could inform both scholarship and policy.

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ARTICLE

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WECHAT AND MIGRATION: THREE ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES OF WECHAT USAGE AMONG CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

This article examines how WeChat use shifts for Chinese international students at analytical categories of their migration to Melbourne, Australia. Existing research has widely recognised WeChat as an essential platform for communication, academic engagement, and transnational family connections. However, Chinese international students are often treated as a homogeneous population, with limited attention being paid to how their platform practices change or may be influenced by such things as their migration trajectories. Drawing on nine months of digital ethnographic fieldwork conducted between February and November 2023, this study combines 19 participant observations, 27 semi-structured interviews, and survey data from 62 Chinese international students to investigate their changing patterns of WeChat use. The findings identify three analytically distinct analytical migration categories of WeChat use: newcomers, aspiring-to-be, and settled residents. Newcomers demonstrated intensive engagement with WeChat for information seeking, social networking, and maintaining close contact with family in China. In the aspiring-to-be group, students that had progressed towards graduation and either had or had considered long-term employment and settlement in Australia found that their WeChat use became increasingly selective and was shaped by such things as career planning, expanding professional networks, privacy concerns, and family expectations. Among the settled residents group, WeChat had gradually shifted from being a multifunctional social media platform to a linear communication tool primarily used for maintaining cross-border relationships with family and close friends. By conceptualising WeChat use as a dynamic process embedded within migration and settlement, rather than as a fixed pattern of social media engagement, this study contributes to research on digital migration, platform studies, and Chinese diaspora media.

Keywords
Chinese social media; diaspora study; international students; WeChat; Australia

1. INTRODUCTION

WeChat is a multi-function social media application and one of the most popular Chinese social media choices. It is often described as China's "app for everything" due to its integration of messaging, social networking, payment systems, and everyday services. For Chinese international students studying overseas, WeChat is not merely a communication tool: It is a central platform through which social relationships, information flows, and senses of belonging are organised and maintained (Meng & Lisahunter, 2025). Yet despite its widespread adoption by this group, Chinese international students are not uniform: they represent multiple education and life stages, cultures, economic situations, social identities, and orientations towards study and work. Findings showed that, beyond being students, participants occupied a wide range of social roles, from baristas to fashion models to financial analysts, challenging normative representations of Chinese international students as a homogeneous group whose mobility and selves are defined solely by time-limited educational trajectories (Pan, 2015). With this diversity in mind, the study set out to discover how often current and former Chinese international students in Melbourne used WeChat and how they used it. Analysis of their accounts of their media practices and the ethnographic data revealed that participants' educational, occupational, and settlement circumstances intersected with their social identities, social media, and perceived privacy. The study thus considers how transnational relationships sustain particular forms of media use even when engagement with some platform functions becomes less central.

The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. To begin with, predominantly quantitative survey data obtained from 62 young adult (>18 years) Chinese international student participants was used to create an outline of the cohort's overall perceptions of their WeChat use (i.e., how they used it and how often). The survey was also partly used to source participants for the interview and ethnographic research phases that followed. Following the survey, continuous ethnographic fieldwork was conducted from February to November 2023 and comprised 19 participant observations that were conducted in key social spaces where young Chinese students regularly interact, including clubs and restaurants, and in Melbourne suburbs with a predominantly Mandarin-speaking Chinese population (SBS/Reuters, 2022). After English, Chinese is the most commonly spoken language in Australia (Yu & Yeung, 2023), highlighting the importance of Chinese communities for these students. Visiting these places thus facilitated a more concrete understanding of the target groups and the participants. Digital ethnography (e.g., screenshots of usage/messages, etc.) also formed part of the 10-months of fieldwork. Further qualitative data were acquired during this time from 27 semi-structured interviews.

Data suggest that WeChat plays a crucial role in the lives of Chinese international students in Melbourne, with their patterns of usage noticably varying according to their length of stay and migration/transitional life choices. These factors shaped how their social identities were constructed and maintained in three analytically distinct analytical categories of WeChat use, characterised in this paper as newcomers (high sharing), aspiring-to-be (selective sharing), and settled residents (increasingly linear forms of connection). Against the broader backdrop of the post-COVID era, China's slowing economic growth (Steele, 2024; The Economist, 2023), and its strained diplomatic relations with Western countries such as Australia, the US, and the UK, this paper examines how participants' WeChat practices varied in relation to their social identities, educational and occupational roles, and migration and settlement experiences. Additionally, as the study was conducted in the post-COVID era, data emerged that it had also shaped these international students' social media practices and collective behaviour, a finding that has received in-depth investigation elsewhere (e.g., Bailey & Tanoos, 2025).

1.1. Chinese International Students in Australia

This study utilises "Chinese international students" as a key concept that must be clarified at the outset. A Chinese international student can be considered to be an adult over the age of 18 who holds a relevant study visa; however, they can also be understood as both an extension and a projection of Chinese culture that emerges alongside existent social phenomena in the host country. These students will extend traditional Chinese customs, such as the concept of family, into their lives overseas, and their social media practices will be used to maintain communication with Chinese family, friends, and colleagues as they share their life and study experiences in Melbourne, highlighting the influence of social networks and online platforms for this group. Social media research in this area considers how Chinese students blend their native culture with that of the host country, often along a continuum that ranges from assimilation to marginalisation (Fu, 2015). However, even within related scholarship, research has not yet defined a deeper and more diverse understanding of the Chinese international student community in Australia (Fu, 2015; Heng, 2020; Sun & Yu, 2022).

As of 2026, Australia was one of the most popular destinations for Chinese migrants, which make up its second-largest cohort of international tertiary students (27%). The number of Chinese international students in Australia reached 192,225 in 2026, putting them in the top three nationalities of international students (Department of Education, 2026). Chinese students thus comprise a substantial proportion of Australia's international student population. Critically, in examining Chinese international students' academic engagement and adaptation to their social environment, research suggests WeChat use among Chinese international students originates in the contexts of academic engagement and cross-border communication.

1.2. WeChat Usage Among Chinese International Students

Having clarified this concept, the discussion now turns to the literature on these students' cross-border usage of WeChat. This research area can be broadly organised into three strands. The first examines the cultural and psychological dimensions of WeChat use among Chinese international students, while the second focuses on behavioural engagement, including patterns of platform use, motivations, and user practices. The third explores the cultural significance of WeChat, particularly its role in sustaining notions of home, belonging, and transnational connectedness through what scholars have described as a digital or electronic bridge between migrants and their places of origin.

In the first area, international students often encounter difficulties during the acculturation process when residing in unfamiliar environments (Billedo et al., 2019; Ding, 2016). Acculturation is a two-way process of cultural and psychological change that results from contact between two or more cultural groups (Berry, 2005). Cao et al. (2024) examined WeChat usage in regards to intensity, behavioural engagement, and cross-cultural adjustment among international students in China through a three-wave longitudinal study. These authors found that WeChat's integrated software allowed international students to share the emotional ups and downs of their personal feelings during the complex life events brought on by acculturation (e.g., cultural adaptation, lack of acceptance by mainstream society, and academic barriers), leading to an increasing number of Western host countries adopting the WeChat platform. Other studies have noted that its adaptability to the unique needs of international students is a key aspect of WeChat; Plantin and De Seta (2019), for example, demonstrate that these students leverage WeChat's versatile functionalities, such as public accounts, groups, and Moments (like a mini Instagram) to access both formal and informal sources. These features enable students to navigate unfamiliar environments, from finding housing and employment opportunities to understanding local customs and policies. Moreover, WeChat serves as an information hub where students can engage with real-time news and updates that are often tailored to their linguistic and cultural preferences (Huang, 2019).

In the second strand of cross border research, international students' academic life and social media engagement have been extensively examined through behavioural engagement studies. For example, in academic communities, social media platforms such as WeChat have been employed as an academic resource to foster active and collaborative learning, such as sharing information and resources, holding group discussions, receiving support, and managing academic issues (Al-Rahmi et al., 2022; Hou et al., 2021), thereby potentially increasing academic engagement. Cao et al. (2024) identify that social media facilitate and coordinate learning in the processes of use, which in turn enhances international students' academic competence (Reeve, 2012). Meanwhile, Rasheed et al. (2020) reveal that Chinese postgraduates' use of social media platforms such as WeChat positively predicted academic engagement and research creativity; in particular, WeChat emerged as an essential tool for

international students, particularly those from China, offering a multifaceted platform for facilitating communication, social networking, and access to information in cross-border contexts.

The third area of literature suggests that a prominent characteristic of WeChat usage among international students is its function as a bridge for cross-border communication with "home". Studies such as those by Zhou (2020) and Chen et al. (2019) highlight that WeChat enables students to maintain close ties with family and friends in China while also connecting them with local communities in the host country. This dual role makes WeChat a critical tool for providing emotional support and cultural continuity. For instance, the platform's messaging, voice call, and video call features allow users to overcome geographical barriers and sustain a sense of belonging, even when physically distant from their social networks.

Thus, the cross-border literature suggests that WeChat practices need to be understood through the connections between students' migration circumstances, social identity and roles, and their platform use. *Migration circumstances* include participants' education, employment, and settlement plans; *social identity* concerns how they understand themselves in relation to the various social groups they inhabit (Brown, 2000), while their roles as students, workers, and family members bring different expectations that connect to these and other developing audiences. The concept of *audience composition* refers to the family, friends, and/or professional or educational contacts that social media users address or expect to encounter their posts. These audiences are seen to matter for self-presentation: What participants choose to share is connected to how they wish to be seen and how much control they feel they have over personal disclosure (i.e., audience management). This sense of control is understood here as *perceived privacy* (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Further to this, however, the platform's technical features must be distinguished from their possibilities for use and their social meanings. Features such as Moments and audience controls, for example, enable possibilities for sharing and managing visibility in relation to users' circumstances. These possibilities are understood as *affordances* (Evans et al., 2017) and their use may acquire many meanings, including intimacy, family obligation, or professional exposure. Transnational relationships could, therefore, be sustained through WeChat even when participants become more selective about sharing. Social identities and WeChat practices are thus understood here as potentially *mutually shaping*: participants' roles inform their communication choices, while selective sharing, audience management, and continued contact may also help them negotiate those roles and sustain their relationships.

This framework connects the study's questions about how participants used WeChat and how often they used it with the comparisons made in the analysis across the three sharing analytical categories: newcomers, aspiring-to-be, and settled residents.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used three methods for gathering data about the research questions. Ethnography formed the overarching research approach, and both fieldwork and digital ethnography undergirded and supported the other methods. During the research time frame, for example, I maintained contact with Chinese international students through the RMIT student union, university tutorials, and a Chinese gaming club. Initial data was obtained through an online survey, while 27 semi-structured interviews enriched the investigation across the research period.

First, data was obtained through an online survey from 62 participants recruited via online and offline methods (a research website and LinkedIn research, and posters around universities, respectively) who responded to questions such as, *How would you describe your life in Melbourne?* and *How long have you been in Melbourne?* A survey can be defined as a collection of information from a sample of individuals (Check & Schutt, 2011) and is useful for obtaining information that may be concurrently linked to their characteristics, including in response to a specific phenomenon. Researchers often use surveys to gather information on specific questions, including matters of frequency, behaviour, and/or contributing factors. A survey was selected as the initial research method because it was well suited to investigating the different aspects of WeChat in use among young international Chinese students. The data that emerged provided a larger textual background that assisted in creating a foundation for how the participant group used WeChat and in selecting participants for the other two research methods. Participants' daily WeChat use was measured through a question that asked them to estimate how much time they spent on the platform each day. The figures presented in this paper therefore represent approximate self-reported use and the quantitative comparisons are considered descriptive and concern differences within the study sample.

The survey findings also provided descriptive context and investigative prompting for the interview and ethnographic research data that were gathered in turn. For example, reported differences in daily use were considered alongside participants' accounts of information seeking, sharing, audience management, and communication with family and other contacts. The second method involved semi-structured interviews (including two group interviews) with a subset of 27 participants sourced through the surveys and the ongoing fieldwork. The semi-structured interviews involved 27 participants recruited through multiple routes. Selected survey respondents were invited to participate where their answers raised issues concerning WeChat practices that warranted further qualitative exploration. Recruitment also took place through separate interview advertisements and ongoing fieldwork contacts. Interview recruitment was therefore not restricted to follow-up with survey respondents. These allowed deeper insights into participants' personal experiences and challenges, including rich and nuanced understandings of such things as the social and cultural adjustments faced by newcomers, and the changes in patterns of use that emerged across the identified analytical categories in relation to participants' migration and settlement circumstances. Interviews occurred in places suitable to the research participants,

such as research precinct office in RMIT University. All were audio-recorded, with each interview lasting no longer than 45 minutes. The recordings were transcribed using iFlytek (Xunfei) speech transcription software. Interview excerpts originally provided in Chinese were translated into English by the author.

The third research method was participant observations. "An immersive method [that uses] the ethnographer's participation to build a multi-faceted portrayal of the research setting" (Hine, 2015, p. 55), the fieldwork was conducted from February 2023 to November 2023. As part of this phase of the research, 19 participant observations were completed, including following and observing their real-life usage within various scenarios such as shopping or dining. In order to deepen my understanding of Chinese students generally, I set out to travel to various areas in Melbourne to explore where the participants lived, ate, studied, and entertained themselves, as well as to learn more about and contextualise the connections between WeChat and their current lives. Records of these activities were compiled after the observations and subsequently organised for analysis. A summary database of the research data is stored at RMIT University. This aspect of the fieldwork covered a few key suburbs in Melbourne such as the CBD, Box Hill, and Glen Waverley, as well as some considered relevant through their attraction for Chinese investors, such as Mentone. During my travels, I made contact with a number of official, recreational, religious, and/or ceremonial organisations, including student unions, a murder mystery game club, a local vigilante group, the Buddhist temples, and some Chinese Christian churches. The digital ethnographic method that augmented the fieldwork involved digital data gathering, such as screen shots of participants' specific WeChat interactions and their usage data.

The research was approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, and all participants gave informed consent that explicitly covered digital observation, screenshot collection, and the reproduction of screenshots in research publications. Names used in this paper and displayed in screenshots are pseudonyms. Further, in screenshots reproduced in this article, identifying information relating to individuals who were not research participants was removed or obscured, including names, profile images, and recognisable faces where present. These measures reduced the risk of identifying third parties while preserving the posting dates and sequences relevant to the analysis. Consent forms were retained in a dedicated secure database and digital research materials were stored in the RMIT Data Centre with password protection. Since pseudonyms alone cannot eliminate the possibility of recognition through images, contextual details, or social connections, particularly within a closely connected community, further efforts have been made to anonymise the interview data.

Consistent with the digital ethnographic approach, I analysed the qualitative material through keyword-based coding, using the tagging practices discussed by Postill and Pink (2012, pp. 129–130). I organised interview transcripts, fieldwork records, and screenshots into separate databases, labelling the material by keywords, events, and dates. These data were iteratively cross-compared to identify recurring themes. During the interviews, I noted words

and ideas raised by participants and subsequently compared their recurrence across interviews. I grouped related interview material into topics and used coloured highlighting to mark keywords and relevant content in the observational records. I then returned to the material, comparing interview accounts with related fieldnotes and screenshots to develop and contextualise these topics. The analysis presented in this paper focuses on data concerning participants' migration and settlement circumstances and their everyday WeChat practices. By combining quantitative data from the surveys with qualitative insights from the interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and digital data gathering, this study aims to provide a comprehensive view of the effects on WeChat use of the migration process in Melbourne.

It is important to note that this article presents a primarily cross-sectional comparison within a digital ethnographic study, supplemented by retrospective accounts and selected participant temporal comparisons. Survey responses and qualitative materials are therefore used to compare participants occupying different migration and settlement positions. Interviews also include participants' recollections of earlier WeChat practices, while dated digital materials allow comparisons within particular cases, such as Lorna's posts from February and August 2023 and Maxine's earlier posts alongside her subsequent account of reduced posting. These data provide evidence of changes in individual cases, but do not establish that the same cohort progressed through all three analytical categories.

The criteria for the three categories are specified at the beginning of Findings and Discussion. Classification concerns participants' educational circumstances, post-study plans, and residency or citizenship status; residence duration alone is not treated as equivalent to category membership. The findings therefore distinguish between differences across participants, and changes documented or recalled within individual cases.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

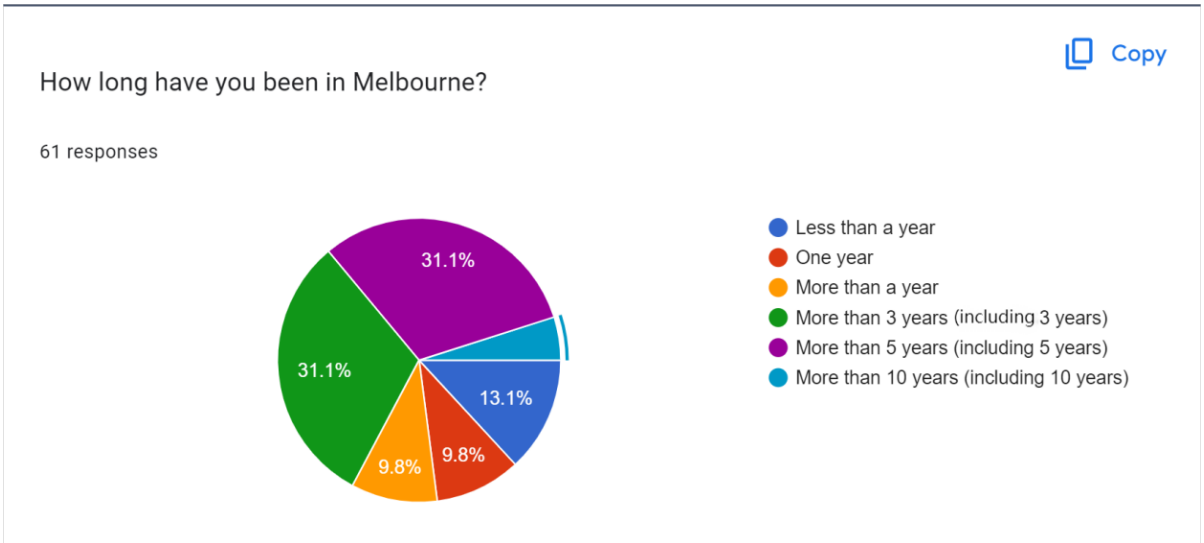
This article distinguishes three analytical categories of migration and settlement position among current and former Chinese international students in Melbourne: "newcomers", "aspiring-to-be", and "settled participants". These categories were developed through engagement with the fieldwork data and existing literature on international student experiences. Their formulation considers three interrelated dimensions: length of residence in Melbourne, progress towards or completion of educational qualifications, and participants' circumstances and intentions concerning post-study life.

"Newcomers" refers to participants in the initial period of establishing their lives in Melbourne after arriving for study. "Aspiring-to-be" refers to participants approaching or having completed their qualifications who were seeking to remain in Australia and were negotiating the transition towards post-study employment and residence. "Settled residents" refers to those who had initially come to Australia as international students and had subsequently established an ongoing life in Melbourne following an earlier period of

study, including participants who held permanent residency. Further study did not exclude a participant from this latter category.

These categories describe participants' social and settlement circumstances rather than equivalent legal statuses or levels of cultural integration. Permanent residency and citizenship are distinct statuses, and neither is inferred from employment or length of residence alone. The categories therefore primarily provide a framework for comparing WeChat practices without assuming that everyone within a category uses the platform in the same way. They are not proposed as universal or necessarily sequential analytical categories through which all Chinese international students pass; participants' circumstances may overlap or change in different directions.

Figure 1 – Pie Chart of the Question, "How Long Have You Been in Melbourne?"



Source: Author

3.1. *The "Newcomer": The High Sharing Stage*

The "newcomer" category refers to students who had just arrived in Melbourne to begin their student journey or those who had just started a course in Melbourne ("less than a year"—see Figure 1). These students had a firm desire to share or post, and their information input and output was likely to be high frequency. As such, their WeChat practices tended to be more active; they exhibited a desire to share their experiences almost totally, which can be directly linked to their overseas life beginnings and sense of unfamiliarity, as well as a freshness towards a new country and the host society (Cao et al 2024).

Of the 61 respondents who answered the question about how long they had been in Melbourne, 13.1% (8 participants) chose "less than a year" (see Figure 1). The average WeChat

usage of this group was a duration of 4 (3.97) hours per day[1], with the highest being 10 hours per day. Next, on a scale of 1 to 10 for the importance of WeChat, with 1 being low importance and 10 being most important, these 8 participants averaged a result of 8, emphasising a strong connection between their freshly begun overseas lives and the platform itself.

There were 12 participants in the two groups "one year" and "more than a year". The average WeChat usage times for these two groups were 5.9 hours per day and 4 hours per day for "one year" and "more than a year", respectively, with a maximum usage time of 8 hours per day. Table 1 provides a comparison of the usage results of the three "newcomer" groups. WeChat Moments dominates their use, and most of their life sharing is completed through this function, which also includes life updates and reporting to family members.

Table 1 – Comparison of the Three Categories

Less than a year	hr/day	One year	hr/day	More than a year	hr/day
Dongli	3	Yuting	1	Lily	6
Treasa	4	Daphny	4	Sophia	2
Lyra	5	Fan	2	Lorna	4
Bell	2	Maxine	8	Zoey	2
Savannah	2	Yubi	8	Angela	5
Hazel	2	Karl	1.5	Regina	5
Vicky	3.5				
Phoebe	10				
Averages	3.97		5.9		4

Source: Author

The qualitative ethnographic research regarding "newcomers'" online practice confirmed that the more active WeChat dynamics of this group were often attributed to the new social environment; their posting behaviour especially favoured particular WeChat features such as WeChat Moments. Semi-structured interview data indicated considerable enthusiasm from Nikki as she recollected her first time living in Melbourne:

[1] Frequency of usage results for all groups should be understood as being at a "non-stop" frequency.

> First of all, it's true that newcomers (international students) have a strong desire to share, and it's true that there are a lot of new things; life itself is very fresh, and often they may post some things they haven't seen before. Then later (frequency) may be with the passage of time, people will post less and less. I remember when I first came here, there were very new things indeed.

The desire to share was not limited to sharing on WeChat Moments; it also manifested in ordinary chatting at a communicative frequency, such as with loved ones. While Rina had been studying abroad for four years, she clearly recalled her life as a new arrival in Melbourne as a "newcomer". She said,"For me, in the first few years, maybe when I first came here, WeChat communication was more frequent; every day a phone call to my mum". This was echoed by another participant, Wendy, who had been in Melbourne for 8 years. When recalling her arrival in Australia, Wendy said:

> When I first arrived, I was like, everything was so new. So much exploring, it was so different from my prior context, right? So it was like all this fresh new things. I post on daily basis… I literally call them through WeChat (family and husband) every day.

This "newcomer" stage of student life appeared to require access to information about necessities, matters that were very intensive in this early stage, and participants indicated that the WeChat group function was invaluable in providing access to essentials such as renting an apartment or purchasing groceries (Cao et al., 2024). The size of these WeChat chat groups generally ranges from about a dozen to as many as 500 people, with a baseline of 12 being considered a large group. Discussions tend to centre around a core event—that is, information or goods exchange; students need to communicate and receive crucial information so they can stay updated, making WeChat an important and irreplaceable channel for them at this stage. The "newcomers" not only communicated with family back home to maintain support but also with the Chinese community in Melbourne, forming their own "life bubble" around them as they did so. (The term life bubble is used descriptively here to refer to the family and local Chinese community networks through which participants accessed support and practical information via WeChat, without implying isolation from wider Australian society.)

Deborah mentioned that when she first arrived in Melbourne, she would be active in WeChat's group chats, and that her interaction was focused on acquiring better living conditions and cheaper rent, as well as informational discussions about her PhD studies: "People just post in the group, for example, selling alcohol… and WeChat groups for renting houses. They were both essential when I first arrived in Melbourne, and I would check them (chatting groups) daily".

In summary, the "newcomer" was especially active on WeChat as part of their new arrival to the host society. Both the survey data and the ethnographic research indicate that the

Chinese students used WeChat more frequently and more actively during this change to their geographical/social environment in order to create and strengthen their "life bubble". Demonstrating a considerable desire to share and receive information through WeChat, they used it to post their experiences to family and friends back home, as well as to chat and form a new community through WeChat's different functions.

3.2. *The "Aspiring-to-Be": The Selective Sharing Stage*

The category "aspiring-to-be" refers to Chinese international students who had either completed or were about to complete their principal goal of finishing their studies in Melbourne and who had decided to stay in Australia afterwards. In the semi-structured interviews, almost all respondents expressed a clear desire to stay in Melbourne after finishing their studies. Distinctions in WeChat practice between this category and that of "newcomers" were readily discernible. There was a decline in WeChat usage that separated the "aspiring-to-be" group, as core WeChat functionality (such as WeChat Moments) started to become less vital for supporting these students' lives. Literature suggests that Chinese international students at this stage are often trying to figure out how to change their social identity from student to resident, as they may not want to go home due to the high-pressure social environment and employment pressure they will face there. They are thus aiming to remain longer in the host community if they can (Yan, 2017). The study data indicated that students in this category tended to see their new life in Melbourne as a way forward for the future, with some noting the rapidly deteriorating economic and intense political environment in China (Kapetas, 2023; Perkins, 2023). Participants repeatedly mentioned two significant reasons for using WeChat during this time: the expansion of social networks and family factors.

The first reason stemmed from the unavoidable expansion of the student's social circles, a process that included people from non-Chinese backgrounds; this shift is a direct result of the change and growth of their overseas identity over the period of study. Brown's (2000) concept of expanding social identities suggests that an individual's identity spreads rapidly within their community until a consensus is formed about them. In addition to this enlarged identity, objective matters such as the reality that international graduates are on temporary graduate visas mean that these students can have "temporary residency rights in Australia for 2–4 years after their study" (Tran et al., 2022, p. 3). This pathway can present as the preferred option for these students, who may wish to stay in Australia for a longer term (Australia Here We Come [AHWC], 2023).

Most participants mentioned that, as they engaged in this change to their visa and looked for work so that they were able to manage a longer stay, they found themselves adding a large number of new contacts (such as workmates, bosses, or clients) to their WeChat in a short period of time. While overseas work experience can thus help Chinese international students build further social connections (Sun & Yu, 2022; Yan, 2017), they may

become more conscious of what they are posting because of the work-related affiliations that are being added into their WeChat network. Wu and Wall (2019) also make this point, noting that WeChat was conceived as a social media platform with a foundation of intimacy, but that, in recent years, a clear trend has emerged towards more complex social relationships on the platform, changing that foundation. These authors observe that "guanxi (relationships) are often connected through offline social and professional networks" (p. 1714). Data show that aspiring-to-be participants were aware of the effects of this change in audience composition, and that it affected their engagement with WeChat.

The second reason the "aspiring-to-be" group found themselves using WeChat was they were beginning to experience increased affection from their families; this occurred because their parents needed them to return to China to participate in the work they had been offered by family, or they wanted students to start mainland life afresh with their overseas degree. This contradiction is referred to as the "family push-and-pull", an idea that emerged in research from Australian scholars Mazzarol and Soutar (2002, p. 1). These authors use the term "push-and-pull" to describe the forces acting on the international student community, who are attracted (or "pulled") by the resources in the host country to stay, which comprises the same "push" that made their family send them overseas to study there in the first place. The term also suggests that environmental factors in society such as war or economic decline not only influence families' decisions about their children's study abroad but also act as a counter factor that compels the children to return to their home country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The quantitative data provided by the research survey showed that 19 out of 61 respondents (31%) answered "more than 3 years (including 3 years)" to the question, *How long have you been in Melbourne?* (see Figure 1). The average daily WeChat usage for this group was only 3.9 hours, with the lowest amount of usage time reported being only 10 minutes per day, less than the average WeChat usage of those who had just arrived in Melbourne and who had been there for a year or less. While these figures do not measure changes in the same respondents over time, and residence duration alone does not establish their educational or settlement circumstances, the data comparison between respondents grouped by reported residence duration offers impetus for further investigation.

The ethnographic research provided a deeper understanding of the dilemmas and choices that were facing this "aspiring-to-be" group, including decisions surrounding career development, post-study employment, permanent residency, and whether to remain in Australia or return to China. In addition, various questions in the semi-structured interviews enquired into the participants' personal growth and family backgrounds, and these allowed confirmation of why and how this diminished use of WeChat had come about. Moreover, it appeared that the decline in the frequency of their WeChat practice was mostly reflected in the frequency of WeChat Moments postings, and that they had almost stopped using WeChat core functions other than WeChat chat, video, or Moments. The overall data suggest they had gradually "detached" from WeChat usage.

However, these respondents' use of other social media platforms was not total. In the course of the interviews, emotional keywords such as "pressure", "fear", or "life being arranged (by their parents)" often appeared. One of the respondents in this category had applied for her working visa after completing her studies in Australia, successfully changing her identity and social attributes from that of a Chinese international student to that of a senior consultant in a Melbourne firm. Despite having the support of her family in her decision to stay in Australia for the long term, Emma had dropped the frequency of her WeChat Moments posting. On the topic of identity shifts and their corresponding changes in the use of WeChat, she said:

> December 2021, I began to work, and it has been a year and half of working… Because [I am] now in Australia, I do not have to care too much about those in China, it is up to them to send details of their own lives; and then [about] work—I am basically not a person who likes to post on WeChat, because I do not particularly want people to understand my work too much … If that is the case in China, basically I don't post anymore. If I really want to share to friends and family, that will be a certain category of friends.

Emma admitted that her online expression had been affected as she expanded her social circle and added various working relationships into her WeChat contact groups, saying the impact was "quite significant". She further explained, "Because my workmates are also not added to my WeChat, (because my colleagues) are all Australians and they don't (use) WeChat, so the WeChat (content) that I posted is basically about my life".

These viewpoints were very similar to those of Ruby, who expressed similar concerns, such as having a reduced desire to express herself and confide in others as a further result of work–life conflicts. She discussed her WeChat Moments as an example:

> Nowadays, maybe it's because I'm in the accounting profession and then I'm more protective of my privacy, I'm more aware of what I should be posting online. I don't really like to post some content of my own stuff on WeChat.

This change of social identity and corresponding decrease in frequency of online behaviour related to perceived privacy and audience composition that had come about through the impact of the respondent's increased work identity and relationships was also relevant for Ivy, who was trying to stay in Melbourne, but the pressure she felt was immense. It was clear that the four years she had been living in Melbourne had given her a yearning to remain in her Melbourne life; she used the words "vitality" and "comfort" to describe it, and admitted she felt "confused" about the current dilemma of returning home. In this personal context, in terms of the frequency of her WeChat usage, she clearly expressed a decline in the desire to confide over that medium. When I enquired about the difference between how she felt on first arriving and the current time, she replied:

> Huge differences! I think it is quite big, because I maybe more like to post on Instagram, and then maybe WeChat Moments… I think you can tell the WeChat Moments posting by people getting less and less, and some because people advertise too much—it causes people to get tired of the whole WeChat Moments thing.

In regards to how her WeChat postings may have interacted with her working relationships, she said:

> A lot of people's work relations are still on WeChat; a lot of things will not be able to be posted… like my friend, he will block all his colleagues, for example, he went out to have fun, he would not want his colleagues to see, so that's why you'll be posting less.

At the same time, family factors were also particularly evident in the responses of the participants in this group. As most had completed their degrees and were about to enter the next stage of their life journey, the family "push-and-pull" phenomenon had become quite obvious. In some interview conversations it seemed to be generally recognised as pertaining to these students needing to select their future under the influence of parental, economic, and social pressures from both the home and host countries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). These kinds of family pressures and influences, which often also stem from geopolitics, play a crucial role in the stabilisation of international students' lives, including their employment (Yan, 2017). Maxine told me:

> Like I said, if I can't find a job over here, one of the consequences I face is going back to China, because if I don't have an income here to support my life, I don't have a voice in terms of this issue, and then I just have to listen to them [her parents]. My father told me he could find me an efficient job back home, like a teacher… I post very little anymore because I no longer feel the feelings I did when I first got here.

In Ivy's case, it seems likely that the impact of parental influence was being felt through the ideas and systems that were implicit in her upbringing; yet, once overseas, she felt the intake of information, observations, and/or feelings from and about the host society. Parental influence will have an impact on students' processing of this information, and parental beliefs or behaviour will shape students' online practice (Hammer et al., 2021). This dilemma of self-development under parental influence was also present in my interview with Yubi, who was about to finish her studies in Australia. I noticed throughout the conversation that she seemed to be influenced by her parents' decisions as she recalled her upbringing as a child, where everything was a "set-routine". This kind of structured framework usually results in the parents' decisions being paramount; parents will often decide on their child's future employment and even dictate their personal choices (Wang, 2023). Yubi's WeChat practice had been influenced to some extent by her family factors and as a result of the inbuilt pressure of being examined. She described her upbringing this way:

> I grew up in a very by-the-book environment, schooling, taking exams, normal going abroad like everyone else did. Because my parents wanted me to go to graduate school, but I didn't think I could get into Tsinghua University, they sent me abroad. I think most of them (my classmates) want to hurry up with overseas life to get a graduate degree so that they can go back to their home country for employment. Although I can feel their confusion.

In regards to her WeChat practices, she described how they were mitigated by audience management: "There will be a lot of coworkers and teachers in the WeChat Moments, and to a certain extent it will hinder your expression. That's why my WeChat has groupings and I don't post that much". Yubi further observed that if teachers and colleagues were added to her WeChat, she felt it was no longer a private social media space, but was instead more of a public communicating platform; as such she did not feel able to express her ideas on WeChat Moments freely:

> My expression is hindered because the social circle (between me and my teachers) isn't quite the same, and some teachers you know at school might not think that what you posted is quite the same as how they pictured you.

A slightly different group also appeared in the "aspiring to be" category; these were considering a future in Melbourne but had the support of their parents. Yet this group were also concerned with similar matters. Yubi's account connects audience composition with perceived privacy and self-presentation. Her concern centred on how teachers and colleagues might interpret personal posts. The term *context collapse* describes the convergence of otherwise distinct social audiences within a shared communicative setting (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In this regard, Yubi described using groupings to manage visibility, linking a platform feature to the practical possibility of selective disclosure. In this context, groupings acquire the social meaning of maintaining boundaries between relationships. Reduced posting can therefore be interpreted as audience management, rather than simply as declining interest in the platform.

Vivian was about to graduate from a local university; she explained her background this way:

> My father is a member of the Party; two days ago [before the interview], he even told me that I should never come back to China, because the employment environment is horrible, and this kind of thing was all said by a Party member to me, so I think he brought me a way of looking at the world not only from my father's point of view, also from another dimension as a Party member. He gives me a better idea of what the world, the world I live in, and even [what] my country is like.

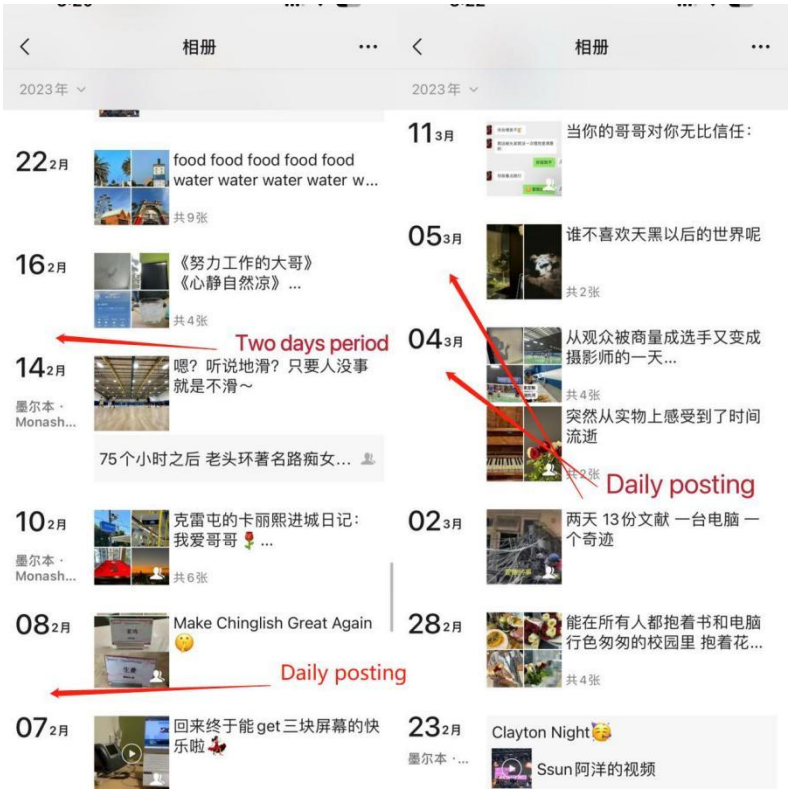
Regarding the use and posting of WeChat Moments, she replied:

> Some content I hope to post, it involves the company's privacy, but maybe before I post, I need to try to send [to] a circle of friends to see if it can be posted… This is a qualitative change to how I post.

3.3. *Comparing "Newcomers" and "Aspiring-to-Be"*

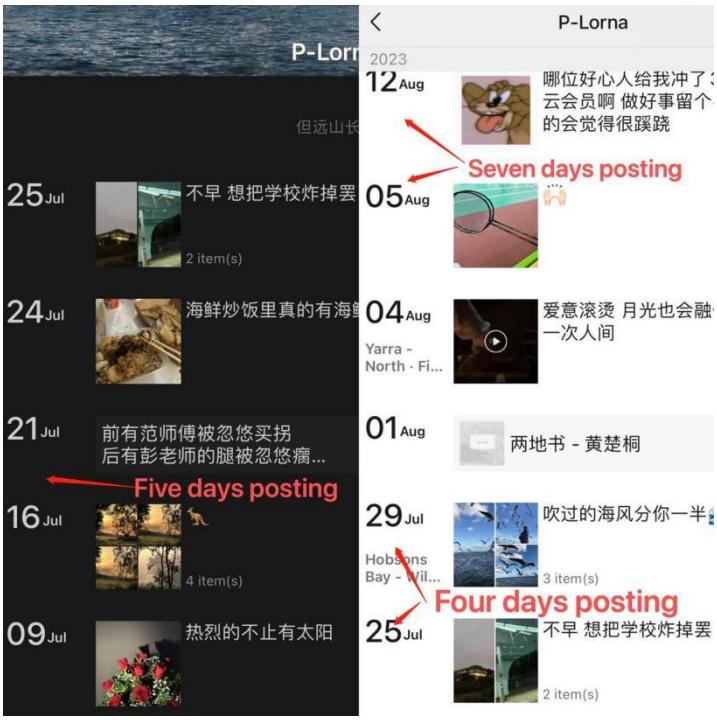
While various participants mentioned a change or decline in their WeChat usage between education or employment stages in the interviews, the digital ethnographic data allow selected comparison of certain participants' WeChat practices at different times in their individual education and migration trajectories. These individual cases complement the comparison between migration and settlement categories by showing changes in posting practices within particular personal and educational circumstances. Most of the younger participants who had arrived in Melbourne less than 12 months earlier were posting on WeChat Moments quite frequently. For example, 20-year-old Lorna was completing the first year of her Master of Arts in Linguistics at Monash University. The two images in Figure 2 and Figure 3 offer a brief comparison of two time periods, between February 2023, when Lorna was still in the middle of her degree, and August 2023, when she was about to graduate.

Figure 2 – Lorna's Posting in February 2023, as a student



Source: Author

Figure 3 - Lorna's Posting in August 2023, as She Was About to Graduate



Source: Author

These two screenshots obtained from Lorna show that her postings were updated almost daily when she was still enrolled as a student in February 2023. However, as the later image indicates, this had changed by the time she was about to complete her degree around August of 2023. The frequency of her postings had shifted from daily updates to updates over a longer period of time, even weekly. This data was consistent with what she described in her interview: "I'm busier now, and then I don't have as much energy to edit my moments and share something, but it's more Zen now—I just randomly post if I want!".

This phenomenon was also prominent in the case of Maxine. Figure 4 presents Maxine's earlier Moments posts (top) alongside a later conversation in which she reported that she had not posted since 11 July 2023 (bottom). In Maxine's case, reduced posting around degree completion was consistent with her account of having less time available for WeChat, something Lorna also mentioned. This illustrates a change within particular circumstances without establishing a necessary "transition" shared by all participants.

Maxine's interview offered further insight into her changed use of WeChat, which need not necessarily be seen through the frame of quantity (i.e., merely incremental or decreasing). Instead, Maxine's remarks highlight that frequency of practice may be interrupted by social identities or the occurrence of specific events. She said, "I don't have time to read Moments or post".

Figure 4 – (Top) Maxine's WeChat Posting Frequency When She First Arrived in Australia in Early 2022; (bottom) A Text Conversation I Had With Maxine About Her Posting Frequency



Source: Author

In sum, in the category "aspiring-to-be", Chinese international students appeared to be dealing with various impacts such as social identity transformation and family influences, and their online practices were affected by these and related factors, including their spare time. Decline of WeChat usage was another feature of this group as their use or investment in WeChat functionality became linear; for example, it shifted from general chat to the occasional use of WeChat Moments.

3.4. *The "Settled Residents": The Linear Connection Stage*

The category "settled residents" refers to participants who initially came to Australia as international students and held either Australian permanent residency or Australian citizenship at the time of fieldwork. Inclusion in this group rests on their study-related migration background and their residency or citizenship status, rather than on a fixed number of years spent in Melbourne. Participants who continued or returned to higher education were included within this category.

Permanent residency and citizenship are treated as distinct legal statuses. Grouping these participants together identifies a shared settlement position following international student migration; it does not imply equivalent legal rights, a uniform degree of cultural integration, or identical WeChat practices, nor does it assume that permanent residents intend to naturalise. Patterns of platform use are examined as empirical findings rather than as conditions for inclusion. Together with "newcomers" and "aspiring-to-be", this category enables comparison across different migration and settlement circumstances without proposing a universal or necessarily sequential pathway.

The research survey data indicate that 19 people (31% of the sample) had stayed in Melbourne for "more than 5 years (including 5 years)", which was the same number as the "more than 3 years (including 3 years)" group (see Figure 1). Furthermore, regarding the survey question, *How many hours do you spend on WeChat every day, roughly?*, the results showed that "settled residents" spent an average of 2.1 hours each day on WeChat. Comparing this result to the usage data from the "aspiring-to-be" category, which had an average daily WeChat usage of 3.9 hours, demonstrates that usage in the "more than 5 years (including 5 years)" category had dropped by 46.2%. In a similar vein, three of the online survey participants had been in Melbourne for "more than 10 years (including 10 years)"; in this group, the average time spent on WeChat had dropped to 0.5 hours . Comparison of the daily usage hours of the "more than 3 years (including 3 years)" group and the "more than 5 years (including 5 years)" group indicates that, as well as the diminished average daily use, the highest number of daily hours of use fell from 12 hours of non-stop usage for "more than 3 years (including 3 years)" to 4 hours for "more than 5 years (including 5 years)".

Both quantitative and qualitative research data indicate that participants in the "settled residents" category displayed a completely different perspective and attitude towards living abroad than those in the previous two categories. In interviews with these individuals, as we discussed their usage and interest in WeChat generally, I noticed a sense of fatigue about both WeChat and what their overseas life had brought them. In some dialogues, participants in this category recalled the beauty of their life as students on campus. During fieldwork at the murder mystery club (a tabletop game), where participants from the three categories mixed, the "settled residents" appeared to see the group activity as an opportunity to release life pressure, relax, and speak Chinese. The clearest feature of comparison between these

and those in the other categories of Chinese students at the same gaming venue was that they picked up their mobile phones less frequently.

I interviewed several Chinese students in the "settled residents" category who had come to study but had stayed in Melbourne on a long-term basis; we discussed their feelings about life and the orientation of the international student community, especially the use of WeChat. Ella had been in Melbourne for almost 10 years and her dialogue was very different from that of an international student still engaged in completing their studies. She demonstrated strong conversational skills in her spoken English, which we used mostly throughout the conversation. In our discussion of her transition of identity at the end of her studies and its social attributes (including WeChat use) she said:

> I don't use WeChat Pay and Moments, just chat and video calling my mum… I don't post anything on WeChat anymore. So it's kind of like I just leave it there. I noticed I am much more active on Instagram for, like, I'll still keep WeChat because, like, I still need it sometimes. Just for family and friends.

While discussing the difficulty of getting off the platform because of its many affordances, Ella agreed that this situation no longer applied to her WeChat practice. Scarlett had similar views; she had acquired her permanent residency in 2016, and expressed resistance to constant WeChat usage. Like some other Chinese international student users who expressed hating being captive to WeChat and not wanting to bother about some of the limitations that WeChat imposes, Scarlett noted that its attraction for her had declined once she had successfully completed her status change to citizen:

> I don't post much after my first job; I stop posting, because I added colleagues into my WeChat. The only reason I am using it is because of my mum and dad… Yeah, I think I am inclined to share things face to face rather than posting.

Respondents in the "settled residents" category had a deep knowledge of the gradual formation of WeChat as a digital bridge for them; for example, most only retained this communication channel in order to maintain communication with family and friends that use the platform. As Ruby said:

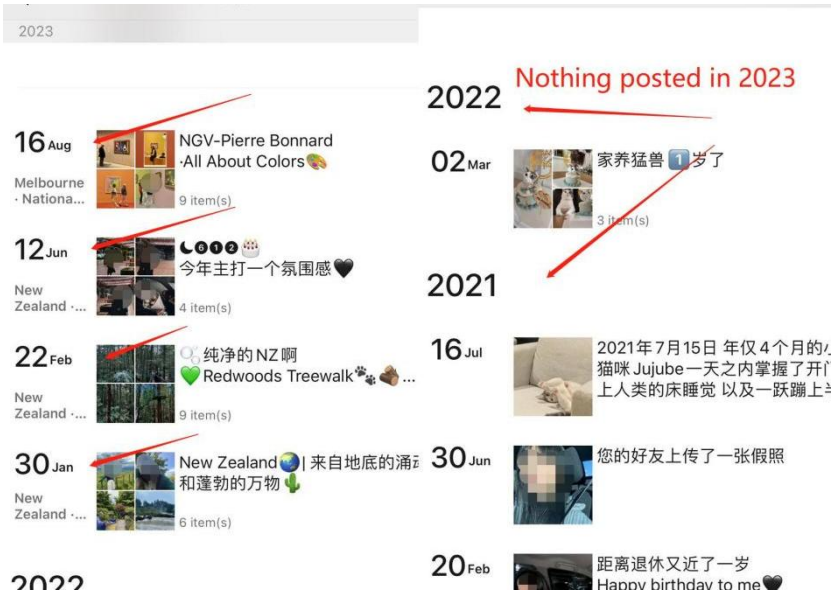
> WeChat for me, because like, [my] parents also use it… Everyone is using this thing, and then you have to use this thing, has such a kind of a concept, otherwise how do I contact with my parents?

These accounts indicate that the significance of WeChat for family relationships cannot be inferred from daily usage hours or Moments posting frequency alone. Ella described retaining chat and video calls with her mother despite no longer posting on Moments, while Scarlett and Ruby also identified parental contact as a reason for continued use. Hepp (2010, p. 7)

argues that "patterns of thinking", "patterns of discourse", and "patterns of practices" or *doing*, will have an impact on cultural patterns, and that media practices should be responsive to the linkages between the three. The shifting of these activities contributed to the fracturing of the links between them for the "settled residents" group, affecting the appeal of WeChat for this group.

Documentation of the research respondents' WeChat usage patterns from the digital research ethnography offered data about how often participants were active on WeChat. It emerged that "settled residents" almost never posted content, or else posted rarely. Figure 5 shows the posting behaviour of two participants, Vicki (in the left-hand column) and Scarlett (on the right). Vicki was a permanent resident in Melbourne; she posted content very infrequently, around every six or even 10 months, while Scarlett had not posted content at all that year.

Figure 5 – Frequency of WeChat Posts of Two "Settled Residents" in 2022–2023



Source: Author

Across the cases discussed, the three categories identify different emphases in WeChat practice. Accounts of newcomer experiences foregrounded practical information seeking and frequent sharing. Deborah recalled using groups for housing and study information, while Wendy described sharing new experiences and calling family daily. Among the aspiring-to-be participants, Yubi linked selective sharing to the presence of teachers and colleagues and described using groupings to manage visibility. Among settled residents, Ella reported retaining chat and video calls for family and friends while no longer posting on Moments. These accounts illustrate high sharing, selective sharing, and linear connection, with the latter referring to communication centred on particular relationships.

These practices were not exclusive to individual categories. Yubi and Scarlett both linked restricted posting to professional contacts, despite their different settlement positions. Ivy's preference for Instagram and Ella's greater activity on that platform also show that alternative platform use occurred across categories. Scarlett additionally preferred sharing face to face, while Lorna and Maxine referred to having less time for posting. The comparison therefore concerns how communication purposes, audiences, privacy concerns, and personal preferences combine within different migration and settlement circumstances.

4. CONCLUSION

The comparison between newcomers, aspiring-to-be, and settled residents identifies differences in the intensity, range, and social purposes of their WeChat use. Extensive information seeking and sharing were prominent among newcomers, while more selective sharing and communication centred on particular relationships featured in accounts from the other two categories. Retrospective accounts and selected digital records also indicate changes within individual cases. These findings suggest that WeChat can lose some of its centrality in participants' everyday lives while remaining important for specific relationships. For some participants, alternative platforms accommodated activities previously associated with WeChat, while family and friendship ties sustained their use of its communication functions.

These differences should not be attributed to migration duration alone. Participants' accounts also highlight work demands, privacy concerns, family relationships, and platform substitution, which may intersect with their migration and settlement circumstances. Age may contribute to differences in usage, although its independent influence is not established by this study. Retrospective accounts and selected digital records provide partial views of individual histories, and the comparison does not isolate the effects of these factors. The findings therefore identify patterns associated with migration and settlement positions, together with evidence of change in particular cases, without establishing a universal three-stage trajectory.

Moreover, these findings are situated within the experiences of current and former Chinese international students in Melbourne. Their transferability to other Australian cities, destination countries, age groups, or educational populations requires consideration of differences in employment, settlement circumstances, and the communication platforms used within family and professional networks. Recruitment and fieldwork access through university, professional, and community networks may have favoured people more connected to those networks, while voluntary participation may have attracted those particularly interested in discussing WeChat. The extent of these possible selection effects was not established. The findings therefore offer a contextual basis for comparison, without assuming that the same patterns will occur in other populations or settings.

Statements

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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WHAT COUNTS AS INFIDELITY? EXPLORING PERCEIVED MARITAL INFIDELITY IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Infidelity is a multidimensional and culturally shaped construct, and its conceptualization is different across cultures. The objective of this study was to understand perceptions of infidelity among married and committed people in Pakistan. Qualitative method was employed, with semi-structured interviews 8 married and 7 committed individuals from the major cities of Pakistan, uisng purposive sampling methid. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, and four major themes were identified: violation of boundaries of marriage, multimodal relational involvement, behavioural cues of infidelity, and boundaries of infidelity. Physical, emotional, and virtual infidelity were recognized as forms of infidelity, and decreased attention, withdrawal, and lack of communication were described as possible indicators. Perceived infidelity differed with the intention, context, partner expectations, and was grounded in the social, moral, and religious values. Findings indicate that perceived infidelity is not merely a function of actual behaviour, but of the interpretation of behaviour in relational and sociocultural contexts. The findings provided a culturally valid account of infidelity in Pakistan and can serve as a baseline for further studies and development of culturally appropriate assessment measures and interventions targeting marital satisfaction.

Keywords

Perceived infidelity; emotional infidelity; sexual infidelity; semi-structured interviews; cultural context; Pakistani culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The family is a fundamental social institution, with marriage forming the basis of the family across cultures (Brown, 2013). The transgression in marriage can have significant consequences for the relationship, leading to conflicts, separation, or, in serious cases, divorce. Infidelity is considered one of the strongest predictors for divorce as it significantly influences the quality of the relationship (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Conley et al., 2018). Infidelity, both extramarital and extradyadic, is a significant problem that seriously affects many relationships (Thornton, & Nagurney, 2011). Although the seriousness of affairs is widely recognized, there is no universal definition of infidelity. Increasing attention has, therefore, been given to the conceptualization of infidelity and its correlates within the evolving framework of mating psychology (Garza, 2020).

Infidelity, in any romantic relationship, is defined as the covert or overt physical or emotional relationships with someone other than his partner, whether he is married or in a committed relationship (Salzman, 1972). Similarly, Lusterman (1998) described it as one partner being faithful while another secretly violates the trust between the two. Weeks et al (2003) have defined infidelity as "a violation of a couple's assumed or stated contract regarding emotional/sexual exclusivity." Pittman & Wager (2005) included breach of trust and betrayal in the definition. White (1998) included a cognitive aspect in the definition and described infidelity as "a complex set of thoughts, feelings and actions that follow a threat to self-esteem and/or threaten the existence or quality of the relationship" (White, 1998 as cited in Dupree et al, 2007). These differing conceptualizations demonstrate that infidelity extends beyond a single behavioural definition but overall reflect violations of trust, commitment, and emotional or sexual exclusivity within an intimate relationship.

Various perspectives have been proposed to explain infidelity, highlighting the role of individual, relational, cultural, and normative factors. Evolutionary theories suggest that differences in mating strategies may contribute to infidelity (Symons, 1994), while attachment perspectives emphasize the role of early attachment patterns and insecurity in later relationship behaviours and trust (Altınok & Kılıc, 2020; Platt et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2000). Investment and commitment models further suggest that commitment, relationship investment, and perceived alternatives influence infidelity-related behaviours and perceptions (Glass & Wright, 1992; Rusbult et al., 1994; Drigotas et al., 1999). Descriptive and normative theories of infidelity highlight the influence of demographic characteristics and social norms, while religious perspectives emphasize the role of religious beliefs regarding extramarital relationships (Buunk & Bakker, 1995; DeMaris, 2013). All these theories suggest that infidelity is a complex phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual, relational, cultural, and religious factors.

The perception of infidelity is considered concerning, as person's own judgment of their situations, behaviours, and instances can significantly influence relationship trust and responses, even when there is no actual infidelity. (Walters & Valenzuela, 2019; Pazhoohi et

al., 2019). Perceived infidelity refers to the degree or extent to which one perceives his partner can engage in infidelity (Walters, & Valenzuela, 2019). Mattingly et al (2010) stated that there are some ambiguous behaviors, which are considered infidelity by some, and not by others, such as talking, chatting, or hugging. The perception plays a significant role in reactions to infidelity, as the imagined infidelity was found to be more painful to people compared to the actual cheating by the spouse (Pazhoohi et al, 2019), and a constant fear of betrayal from a partner can undermine trust, affecting relationship satisfaction and emotional well-being. This complexity is further demonstrated in research on dating relationships, such as Wilson et al. (2011) and Watkins & Boon (2016) suggested that perceptions of fidelity are related to expectations that individuals form in their relationships, and these expectations vary based on type and phase of relationship.

Culture plays a significant role in shaping the perception of infidelity, with differences observed across Western and Asian cultures in emotional reactions, gender patterns, and responses to relationship dissolution (Tsapelas et al., 2011; Geary et al., 1995). However, despite cultural variations, infidelity tends to evoke negative responses in general according to most of the studies (Zhang et al., 2012). In Pakistan, perception of marital infidelity stems from the interaction of Islamic values, collectivistic social norms and culturally defined expectations of marriage, which are different from Western cultures. Marital commitment, mutual rights and responsibilities, and the prohibition of extramarital sexual relationships are all emphasized in Islam, allowing polygamy under certain conditions (Dawood, 2014; Al-Saidi, 2014; Ahmed & Ahmed, 2021). Over time, the changing role of women, their growing involvement in the economy, technological progress, and growing global cultural influences have evolved the views of marital expectations and boundaries (Brand et al., 2007). Thus, marital boundaries are continuously renegotiated as evolving social and digital interactions and the meaning of marital fidelity should be understood within those cultural and relational contexts.

As culture shapes people's lives, affecting their perceptions, views, values, ways of interaction, hopes, loyalties, worries, and fears (Taghi et al, 2019), the Western conceptualizations of infidelity, largely focusing on sexual, emotional, or extradyadic involvement, might not fully cover culturally specific meanings, conceptualizations and behavioural boundaries surrounding marriage in Pakistan. Due to differences in cultures of Western and Eastern societies, in terms of gender differences, familial relations, and economic imbalance between men and women, the dynamics of marital relationships and thus infidelity are very different (Pazoohi, 2022). This increasingly suggests that categories created in the framework of Western culture, ideas of marital roles, family relations, gender, and boundaries of relationships with others should not be implemented in Pakistani context.

Since infidelity is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, with its definition and implications differing from one culture and social context to another, the construct is conceptually complex and inconsistently defined (Morrissey, et al, 2019). Therefore, the dimensions of infidelity, along with their cultural and religious implications, need to be

explored within specific cultural contexts. However, literature on marital infidelity paricularly, qualitative studies on conceptualization, boundaries, and modes of infidelity are limited within cultural contexts (Urooj & Anjum, 2015). Though much research has been conducted on perceived marital infidelity in the Western world, Pakistani perspective is still lacking in the literature.

Not only do the cultural and religious perspectives differ, but the individual perception of marital infidelity also varies across individuals. The perception might not truly represent the actual likelihood or frequency of infidelity by a partner (Logue et al., 2010). Very often, the individual has only a perception of infidelity by a partner, which may or may not be based on facts leading to serious manifestations of marital discord, conflicts, and even divorce (Thornton, & Nagurney, 2011). Grounded in these gaps, this study has been conducted to understand different dimensions and aspects of the term "perceived marital infidelity" in the cultural context of Pakistan, contextual factors that shape their perceptions of what constitutes infidelity, how they establish and negotiate its boundaries.

The present study aimed to qualitatively explore how married individuals in Pakistan understand and conceptualize marital infidelity and to identify the behaviours, interactions, and contextual characteristics that lead individuals to perceive a spouse's behaviour as infidelity. The study intends to address following research questions:

RQ1. How do married individuals in Pakistan understand and conceptualize marital infidelity?

RQ2. What behaviours and interactions are perceived as constituting marital infidelity and what contextual factors shape those perceptions?

RQ3. How do individuals establish and negotiate the boundaries between acceptable behaviour and infidelity within their marital relationships?

1. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design that seeks to understand how married individuals in Pakistan understand and perceive marital infidelity (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2018). A qualitative exploratory approach is appropriate, as infidelity is a subjective and culturally bound construct that could have multiple meanings, depending on the person and context. A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted to gain insight into participants' perceptions, experiences, and opinions about infidelity, its indicators and boundaries. The interviews were thematically analyzed to find out the pattern, meaning, and dimension of perceived infidelity in marriage from a Pakistani perspective.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

The recruitment and selection of the sample was guided by purposive maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015), which allowed capturing the widest range of experiences and diverse understanding of the construct with predetermined inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria was that participants were: (i) adults, (ii) married or engaged in a romantic relationship, (iii) Pakistani residents, and (iv) willing to discuss perceptions of marital infidelity. Those not fulfilling any of the criteria were excluded from the study. The sample consisted of 15 people: eight were married, seven were in committed relationships. Committed individuals were also included to explore perceptions of infidelity and relationship boundaries across different stages of romantic relationships. There were 8 female and 7 male participants. The respondents were selected from major cities of Pakistan including Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Lahore, Multan, Bahawalpur and Karachi. The level of education of the participants varied from undergraduate to post-graduate. The demographic information of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 – Demographic Characteristics of Sample (N=15).

Variable	*Categories*	*f*	*%*
Gender	Female	8	53.3%
	Male	7	46.7%
Relationship status	Married	8	53.3%
	In relationship	4	26.6%
	Engaged	3	20%
Education level	Undergraduate	6	40%
	Graduate	6	40%
	Post-graduate	3	20%

Source: Author

2.3. Data Collection Instrument

The data were gathered using semi-structured interview guides, which were drawn out from the literature. Two forms of the interview guide were created, one for the married participants and another for those in committed relationships. The core questions were consistent across both versions, while references to "spouse" or "marriage" were adapted to "partner" or "committed relationship" for participants who were not married. The interview guide contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions, with prompts where needed. The sample questions include "What is your perception towards being unfaithful to your partner?" "What comes to your mind when you hear the word infidelity?" and "What behaviors do you consider as indicating infidelity by your partner?" For clarity, relevance, and

suitability with the objective of the study, the guides were reviewed by three psychology faculty members of COMSATS University Islamabad. Both instruments were developed in Urdu, the native language of Pakistan, and were piloted with three participants to refine clarity and cultural appropriateness. The participants used Urdu language with which they felt more comfortable.

2.4. *Data Collection Procedure*

Individual semi-structured interviews were done to gather data. The interviews were either physical or conducted on video calls and zoom as per convenience of the participant. The duration of each interview were 20-25 minutes, and all participants were kept informed of the purpose and voluntary participation of the study prior to interviews. Participants' consent to record the interview was also obtained beforehand. Where appropriate, open-ended questions were followed by probes to encourage participants to give more detail to their views and experiences. The interviews were held in Urdu, and participants were allowed to use Urdu along with English language.

Recordings were then completely transcribed for analysis. Audio recordings were replayed repeatedly with transcriptions checked against verbatim. Pauses and laughter were included when these helped to communicate the meaning of participants' responses. The transcriptions were checked independently against the original recordings by the second researcher to improve the accuracy of the transcripts. Each participant was given an ID to ensure confidentiality.

2.5. *Data analysis*

The data analysis was done using thematic analysis, following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen to identify, organize and interpret patterns of meaning from qualitative data through a systematic approach. It enabled the researchers to cluster the themes around participants' perceptions, behaviours, boundaries and contextual understandings of marital infidelity.

There were six phases of the process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Once the audios were transcribed, the transcripts were read and re-read, and initial codes were manually applied to segments of text. Responses were clustered and participants' original context for their responses was kept as it was. The analysis was an iterative process, and the codes were repeatedly compared with emerging themes. Specifically, the similarities and differences in participants' interpretations of ambiguous behaviours such as lying, opposite-gender interactions, social media communication, secrecy, and emotional involvement were emphasized.

The themes were reviewed by the research supervisor and content expert for coherence and relevance of the themes to the participants' accounts. The themes were reviewed, firstly, against the coded data extracts to check for internal coherence; and secondly, against the entire data set to make sure each theme captured the range of relevant data.

2.6. *Credibility and Ethical considerations*

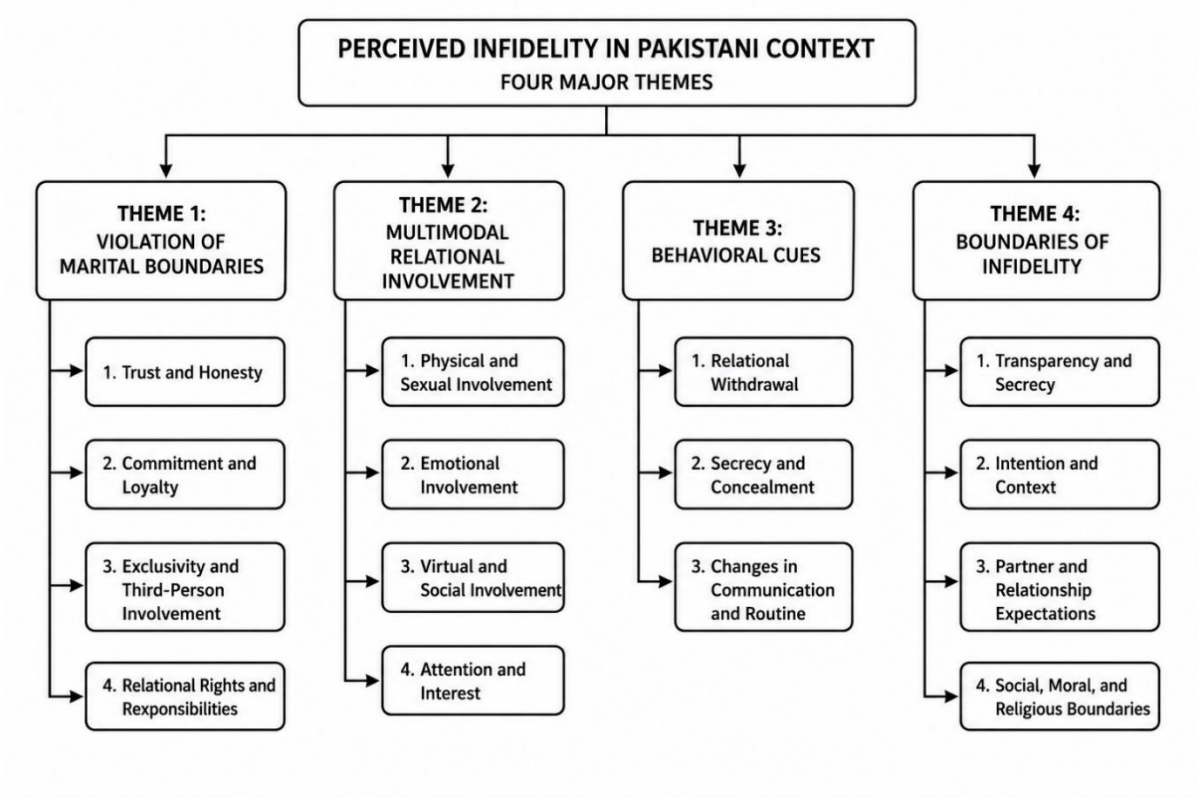
To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, interview guides were pre-tested by psychology experts before data collection and pre-tested with a pilot interview to evaluate the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. Furthermore, triangulation was achieved through expert review of the interview guides, independent cross-checking of transcripts by the researchers, and review of the coding and emerging themes by the research supervisor and subject experts.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from CUI- Humanities Ethics Review Committee before data collection commenced. Due to the sensitive nature of marital and relationship experiences, participants were informed of the study's purpose, that participation was voluntary, and that their responses would be kept confidential. All participants signed informed consent before audio recording and interviews. Also, identification codes (R1, R2, R3...) were used to protect participant identities, and the interview data were only used for research purposes.

3. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis showed four major themes, which were developed from interview transcripts and supported by participants' verbatim. The direct quotations were translated from Urdu to Engslish for reporting, while preseving their meaning and essence. The hierarchical representation of the themes is given below.

Figure 1 - Hierarchical representation of themes



Source: Author

3.1. *Theme 1: Violation of marital boundaries*

Table 2 – sub-themes of Violation of marital boundaries

Sub-themes	*Codes*
Trust and Honesty	Hiding information; dishonesty; betrayal; broken trust
Commitment and Loyalty	Breaking promises; commitment violation; abandoning commitment
Exclusivity	Third-person involvement; giving partner's place to another; sharing what is exclusive to the couple
Relational Rights and Responsibilities	Partner's rights; meeting relational needs; responsibility

Source: Author

This was foundational theme that described how participants viewed infidelity, and the theme clustered around four sub-themes. For most participants, the infidelity was seen as a threat to the limits set within a committed relationship. Throughout the interviews, trust, honesty, commitment, loyalty, and exclusivity were put forward as key elements to a faithful relationship. The betrayal of expectations and commitments by the partner was described rather than merely sexual involvement.

The participants reported withholding information and keeping secrets from the partner as part of infidelity in marriage. It was also described as being "*unfaithful and dishonest*" by one participant. Another participant said that they believe that if someone lies to or keeps secrets from their partner, it is considered infidelity. Although some interviewees felt that lying was infidelity, others felt it was infidelity only if it was linked to an inappropriate relationship or activity. This distinction implies that the meaning of dishonesty and betrayal depended on the relational context.

Infidelity was also defined by participants as the failing to keep a promise or to be faithful once the promise was made. R2 mentioned "*Mere khayal me bewafai is breaking of promise*. [In my view, unfaithfulness means breaking a promise]." Another participant stated that "*disregarding the agreement that is agreed upon with the person who you are involved with*." So, commitment played an important role as a boundary between acceptable interactions and infidelity.

Exclusivity was highlighted by many participants as violation of marital commitment. For instance, one participant explained the first association with infidelity as being with a "*third person*" and another person said it was "*giving one's heart and soul*" (R1) to someone else. This exclusivity was not limited to sexual involvement; the participants also mentioned feelings, emotional attachments, talking about intimate details, paying attention to or discussing special issues that should only stay between partners. As stated by R6 "*Kisi insan ko uski jaga dene ki koshish karna ya kisi or sath waqt guzari karny k lye bat cheet karna or personal conversation karna* [to give someone else their place, or engaging in conversation and personal discussions with another person to spend time with them]"

The final sub-theme saw marital boundaries as relational rights/responsibilities. One of the participants defined cheating as "giving up the rights of the partner" be its social rights, personal rights, spiritual rights. R7 stated that "*Ap agr apny partner ki basic needs ko understand na karo or nazar andaz karo to ye dhoka h*. [If you fail to understand or ignore your partner's basic needs, that is betrayal]." This implies that faithfulness meant not only refraining from engaging in extra-marital relationships with others, but also assuming their duties to their partner.

So, the theme indicated that the participants recognized infidelity as a violation of the relational contract between partners, which is based on trust, commitment, loyalty, exclusivity, and rights and responsibilities of the relationship. This serves as a foundation that describes the conditions under which specific behaviours are seen as transgressive or acceptable.

3.2. Theme 2: Multi-modal relational involvement

Table 3 – sub-themes of Multi-modal relational involvement

Sub-themes	*Codes*
Physical/Sexual Involvement	Sexual relationship; physical contact; small acts of romance
Emotional Involvement	Emotional attachment; romantic feelings; emotional connection; thinking about another person
Virtual Involvement	Private chatting; sexting; sharing photographs; hiding chats and passwords;
Attention and Interest	Giving excessive attention; increased interest in another person; time and energy; special Favors; reduced attention to partner

Source: Author

The second theme clustered around different forms that extra-marital involvement can take. This theme reflects participants' perception of infidelity taking place in several ways other than sexual or physical involvement. Physical and/or sexual involvement, emotional attachment, virtual or social media interactions, and shifting of attention, time, or interest to another person were described as sub-themes.

The most explicit type of infidelity in the participants' reports was physical and sexual involvement. Participants considered sexual relationships, physical relationships, and a romantic connection with someone other than the partner as distinct types of infidelity. However, most of the respondents viewed it as much more than sexual involvement. As stated by R6, "*Tamam ghair-ikhlaqi taluqat, jismani ruwabit aur bat cheet infidelity mai shumar hoga.* [All inappropriate relationships, physical relations, and communication involving sexting are considered infidelity]." One participant made it clear that infidelity may be "*small acts*." The codes of meeting with someone else, getting dressed up for someone's attention, and finding someone else attractive as forms of infidelity.

Emotional attachment, developing feelings for someone, or focusing emotional energy on someone outside of the relationship were seen as violations even with no physical involvement. Participants explained it as "*give one's heart and soul*" "*thinking about someone else*" to another person but not to the partner was considered as infidelity. As R13 said "*Kisi se emotional attachments b bewafai ki hi form hai or mere khayal se to kisi or k bary me sochna or apny partner k ilawa kisi or ko is nazar se dekhna b bewafai ki hi 1 form hai chahy minor hi sahi*. [Emotional attachment to someone else is also a form of unfaithfulness. In my view, thinking about someone else or looking at someone other than one's partner in that way is also a form of unfaithfulness, even if it is minor]."

Further, virtual and social media involvement, especially in terms of communication via social media, emerged. Digital communication was identified as another potential form of infidelity. The participants referred to online communication with someone outside the relationship, which included private chatting, calls, and sharing pictures. But the descriptions of these behaviours differed greatly. For some, ordinary or work-related communication was

not infidelity, while private, concealed, excessive, or inappropriate communication was more likely to be considered infidelity. Participants also mentioned that concealing information, or a password, and hiding a phone was also indicative of infidelity.

Interestingly, participants defined attention and interest as another way of relational involvement. Participants reported that being more interested in somebody else, more attentive towards someone, or spending time and energy on another person. R5 mentioned "*... like wo utna interested ni hai, wo phone shone pe zada laga hua hai ya kaam k extra hours lag rahy hain .... avoid kiya jae tw yh ek factor hu sakta hai.* [as if he is not as interested, may be spending more time on their phone or working extra hours... avoiding your partner could also be a factor]. Likewise, when partners' attention was reduced, it was sometimes interpreted as an indication that attention was elsewhere.

This theme indicated that participants did not view infidelity as a single sexual event. Rather, it was recognized that infidelity as spectrum of engagement, from changes of focus and feelings of attachment to virtual interactions and finally physical or sexual interactions. The behaviours described by participants were not consistently similar, but rather partially dependent upon the relational boundaries and contexts of these behaviours, which is explored in greater detail in next theme.

3.3. *Theme 3: Behavioural cues of infidelity*

The thematic analysis showed that there are several observable changes in a partner's behavior that could raise suspicion of infidelity, thus leading to higher perceived infidelity of the partner. These cues were generally not treated as definitive evidence of infidelity; rather, they were interpreted as signals that something may have changed in the relationship.

Table 4 – sub-themes of Behavioural cues of infidelity

Sub-themes	***Codes***
Relational Withdrawal	Reduced attention; reduced time; ignoring partner; emotional distance; lack of interest; withdrawal
Secrecy and Concealment	Hiding phone; hiding activities; unexplained secrecy; lying; concealed interactions; withholding information
Changes in Communication and Routine	Communication gap; reduced communication; coming home late; unexplained absence; changes in behavior; unusual routines

Source: Author

One significant behavioural cue was related to relational withdrawal which led participants to suspect infidelity. The participants highlighted lack of attention, less time together, ignoring the partner, emotional distance, and withdrawal were all conceptualized as potential changes in partner involvement and might create a higher perception of partner's infidelity. A specific clue in feelings of infidelity that one participant pointed out was "*not*

giving adequate time or attention" to the partner. A few participants also highlighted that decreased communication and attention can raise suspicion. As stated by R9, "*ap se zada kisi aur me interest lena.... kisi aur se zada gappy lagana aur mujhy ignore karna*. [Taking more interest in someone else .. talking more with another person and ignoring me]." These narratives indicated that the participants were also assessing fidelity in how their partners engaged in the relationship, rather than in explicit interactions with another person.

Further, participants highlighted secrecy as an important factor that causes a person to be suspicious. "cell phone was being hidden, that conversations were being hidden, meeting was kept secret, lying, hiding phone, deleting history or chats" were reproted by many participants. Such behavioural cues might serve as red flags for suspicion. R3 stated, "Jhoot bolna, baten chupana,....sab se pehly stages hain jin se apko pta chalta hai k kuch difference hai. [Lying and hiding things are the first signs through which you notice that something has changed]. This distinction was especially evident among those who indicated lying was a potential "first step" for infidelity.

Many participants highlighted that changes in communication and daily routines can be potential cues, leading to perceptions of a partner being infidel. These ranged from communication difficulties, decreased interactions, and significant changes in overall behavior. R8 stated "hmary drmyan communication gap ana shuru ho jae. [when the communication gap develops between us], as important sign and behavioural cue for infidelity. R6 highlighted "*lack of communication, keeping the phone out of sight and being home late*" as some of the warning signs that may raise suspicion of infidelity.

The meaning of these changes seemed to be related to whether they were notable changes in behaviour from the partner's typical behaviour. So, it may be possible for a person to have higher perceived infidelity by a partner even if there is no real evidence of an affair, based on the way he or she interprets changes in the other person's apparent actions.

3.4. *Theme 4: Boundaries of infidelity*

Table 5 – sub-themes of Boundaries of infidelity

Sub-themes	***Codes***
Transparency and Secrecy	Lying; hiding; concealment; undisclosed activities; keeping secrets; openness
Intention and Context	Purpose of interaction; legitimate reason; unnecessary interaction; romantic intention; circumstances; repeated behavior
Partner and Relationship Expectations	Partner's knowledge; informing partner; permission/consent; agreed boundaries; partner's preferences; mutual expectations
Social, Moral, and Religious Boundaries	Gender expectations; social norms; cultural values; gunah; na-jaiz; namehram; moral limits; religious prohibition; self-control; marital sanctity

Source: Author

The last theme is boundaries of infidelity, and responses show that the perception is heavily dependent on contextual factors. There is no set of fixed behaviours which are considered as infidel acts. The responses imply that the same behavior could be interpreted differently, depending on intentions, expectations formed in the relationship, and the values and beliefs associated with the behaviour from a moral, religious, and social perspective.

Alot of respondents highlighted transparency and secrecy as an important criterion for determining when a behaviour became infidelity. Several participants linked lying, concealing information, and not sharing activities with unfaithfulness. R12 highlighted "*secrets or lying to a spouse would be a form of infidelity as they are supposed to be transparent.*" R10 mentioned, "*Mere khayal se Lying is the root cause and the frist step towards infidelity qk agr ap koi ghalat kam nhi kar rhy to jhoot bolny ka koi maqsad nhi*. [In my opinion, lying is the root cause and the first step towards infidelity because if you are not doing anything wrong, there is no reason to lie]." So participants asserted that lying can be "*first step*" to infidelity, as it creates suspicion, and might indicate something is happening. Other respondents distinguished between dishonesty in general, and lying about actions that could harm the relationship.

Overall, the participants repeatedly stressed the reason and context of behaviour, noticeable in their reaction to meetings and interaction with opposite sex. Not all participants thought such interactions were necessarily unfaithful. For a few participants, it was acceptable if the meeting is professional and for a legitimate reason, while for some, such meetings were still considered infidelity. R3 stated "*Depends on how you define casual interaction, agar normal conversation hai to its not cheating...aaa....it depends on your intentions basically*. [It depends on how you define casual interaction,if its normal conversation, it is not cheating.... It basically depends on your intentions]." However, "*interaction with no clear purpose, excessive communication, flirting, or actions related to romantic intentions*" were more likely to be interpreted as infidelity. Consequently, participants' reports suggest that they could not judge whether an act was considered infidelity by looking at the behaviour. The reasons and context behind the action were important determinants.

The expectations in relationship emerged as another sub-theme, and it was mentioned that interactions with others need to be communicated to the partner, especially with the opposite gender. A few participants clearly highlighted that if a professional or official meeting is required, the partner should be told where and with whom I am going, he or she has a right to know. Hiding such an interaction may lead to a "*feeling of suspicion and a loss of trust*." However, the relationship-specific expectations affected these perceptions. Respondents reported that the meaning of some actions was subjective in nature and would vary depending on expectations of the partner. As stated by R15 "*Agar mere partner ko nhi pasand or me phir bhi woi karti hon to that will be cheating* [If my partner does not like it, but I still do it anyway, that would be considered cheating]." The partners' knowledge,

expectations, tolerances, or view of what is unique to their relationship were part of the perceived boundary of fidelity.

Finally, the perception was deeply rooted in participants' social norms, moral and religious beliefs as reference points in assessing infidelity. Moral and religious issues were especially prominent in the discussions about interaction with the other gender. The participants often mentioned terms like "*na-jaiz, namehram, gunah*" and self-control (R7). One participant reported sharing pictures against "*Pardah and Haya*," (R13) deeply rooted in Islamic values. One of the participants noted the need to have personal boundaries when engaging with the opposite gender, which cannot be avoided, and to be disciplined in one's feelings and actions. The evaluation also differed according to gender, with the same behaviours being evaluated through culturally defined expectations of conduct for men and women. These reports suggest that the participants used their religious and moral convictions as a guideline for recognizing infidelity.

4. DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to understand the conceptualization of marital infidelity in the Pakistani cultural context, focusing on perceptions and meanings, contextual factors, and boundaries of infidelity. Using a qualitative method, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 married and committed individuals in Pakistan, revealing four themes: violation of marital boundaries, multimodal relational involvement, behavioural cues, and boundaries of infidelity. In general, the results suggest that participants' understandings of infidelity as a multidimensional construct were more contextual. Physical, emotional, and virtual involvement were identified. The boundaries of infidelity were different for everyone and created by partner expectations, intention, and level of secrecy, while the perceptions were grounded in social, moral, and religious values. The results offer a culturally specific perspective on the nature and perception of marital infidelity in Pakistan.

The findings of the study show that people in Pakistan also define infidelity as extra-marital affairs, mis-commitment, being unfaithful and breaking promises, deceiving a partner, and taking interest in someone else. However, its manifestations and tolerance level differ, rooted in cultural and religious values. According to Garza (2020) the definitions of infidelity are diverse, and they exist in different forms among different cultures. Although there are cultural differences in the perception and conceptualization of the term "infidelity," it is mainly linked with physical, emotional, and sexual involvement with someone other than your romantic partner, which is usually described as deception, extra-marital relations, and sexual relations with others (Taghi, et al, 2019), which aligned to our findings in broader context.

Yuan & Weiser, (2019) mentioned that perception towards infidelity differs greatly. One act can be infidelity in one culture and can be unacceptable. However, other cultures have tolerance to it. This is because perception is assumed to play a significant role, as people

characterize it and analyse it in different ways. Since Asian countries like Pakistan have very different cultural values compared to the West, the impacts of religion and collectivistic culture served as the core element in the interpretive process of infidelity. Participants often use moral, religious, and socially shared expectations to interpret ambiguous interpersonal behaviors and determine whether those behaviours crossed the boundary of fidelity.

The findings suggest that individuals differed in their interpretation of behaviours such as lying, opposite-gender interactions, and private communication. These differences suggest that perceived infidelity is shaped not only by the behaviour itself but also by how individuals interpret its meaning within their relationship. This distinction is found in the study of Walters and Valenzuela (2019), which highlighted that individuals may differ in their perceptions of a partner's infidelity, such that perceived infidelity may not necessarily correspond to the partner's actual involvement in an infidelity act. Perceptions of a partner's availability and responsiveness may influence how ambiguous behaviours are interpreted within a relationship (Mattingly, 2010). Recent research by Salavati et al. (2024) found that secrecy, frequency of interaction, and familiarity with the third person shaped judgments of whether mundane extradyadic behaviours were considered cheating. Consistent with this, participants in the present study identified reduced attention, lack of concern, secrecy and hiding information, and lack of transparency as potential indicators of infidelity, while participants in the current study also described failure to fulfil relational needs as another potential indicator of infidelity.

Conclusively, present findings highlighted that the boundaries of fidelity are not universally fixed but are interpreted within relational and sociocultural contexts. In this regard, the participants' perceptions can be understood through descriptive and normative perspectives, which emphasize the influence of individual attitudes and social norms on judgments of infidelity (Buunk & Bakker, 1995; DeMaris, 2013). The influence of moral, religious, and social expectations observed in participants' accounts further support the importance of culturally grounded approaches to understanding perceived marital infidelity in Pakistan.

4.1 *Implications and clinical relevance*

The current study is theoretically significant as it serves as the basis for research to develop a conceptual understanding of perceived infidelity. People who have experienced marital infidelity have to go through various negative outcomes (Buss & Abrams, 2017). They need subtle attention to be able to rebuild the relationship and gain their self-esteem (Beniwal, & Sharma, 2021), and thus a comprehensive conceptualization within our local culture is necessary. Any therapeutic intervention would require a simple understanding of the construct, and the current study is one of those few attempts. This study is the stepping stone for further studies on infidelity and will help us get a better understanding of how the issues related to infidelity can be resolved.

The findings of the present study may have practical implications for marital counselling, couple therapy, and relationship-focused interventions in Pakistan. Understanding how individuals perceive different behaviours as infidelity can help psychologists and counsellors identify sources of mistrust, conflict, and relationship distress more effectively (Buss & Abrams, 2017). The findings may also help practitioners distinguish between actual infidelity and behaviours that are perceived as threatening to marital trust, allowing interventions to address misunderstandings, communication difficulties, and differences in relationship boundaries. In addition, identifying culturally and religiously relevant perceptions of infidelity may support the development of culturally appropriate counselling approaches and psychoeducational programs for married couples, leading to improved marital satisfaction, better relationship quality, and emotional well-being.

4.2 Limitations and future recommendations

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The primary limitation was the sample size, which was quite small, and mainly comprised educated people from major Pakistani cities. The sample might not represent Pakistan's cultural and socioeconomic diversity, and thus findings are not generalizable to all married people or subcultures in Pakistan. Further research is needed that incorporates larger and more heterogeneous samples from smaller cities, rural communities, various socioeconomic statuses, and broader age ranges for increased variance in perception of marital infidelity.

Secondly, the findings are based on participants' self-reported perceptions and accounts instead of experiences verified by actual cases of infidelity. Infidelity is a sensitive subject, and participants may have been affected by social desirability or may not have opened up about their personal experiences. The responses may be limited due to denial of experiences to avoid being socially divergent. In future, further studies could be conducted in the local context based upon real infidelity cases through snowball sampling to develop even better perspective on marital infidelity through first-hand experiences.

Third, the present study has identified the influence of social, moral, religious and relational factors, but further studies are required to investigate the social, moral, religious and relational factors according to gender, age, socioeconomic status and cultural norms in Pakistan. Cross-cultural and cross-demographic comparative investigation can yield a better understanding of how the boundaries are created and are influenced by cultural and demographic factors.

Lastly, the present results serve as a foundation for the development and validation of a culturally sensitive measure of perceived marital infidelity. A reliable and valid instrument based on these qualitative findings should be developed in the future to explore its application in various Pakistani populations. A valid measurement scale for perceived marital infidelity might serve as a foundation for future research on perceived infidelity and its

correlates in relation to marital functioning, marital satisfaction, and guiding appropriate assessment and intervention for couples in Pakistan.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study explored how individuals in Pakistan conceptualize marital infidelity and their understanding of its boundaries. The findings of the study highlighted that marital infidelity is a multidimensional and context-dependent construct in Pakistan, and participants understood infidelity through various forms of involvement and behavioral cues. Physical, emotional, and virtual infidelity were recognized as forms of infidelity, and decreased attention, withdrawal, and lack of communication were described as possible indicators. The perceived infidelity differed with the intention, context, partner expectations, and was grounded in the social, moral, and religious values.

Findings indicate that perceived infidelity is not merely a function of actual behaviour, but of the interpretation of behaviour in relational and sociocultural contexts. The findings provided a culturally valid account of infidelity in Pakistan and can serve as a baseline for further studies and development of culturally appropriate assessment measures and interventions targeting marital satisfaction

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AI, Sacred Violence, and War—The Case of Gaza

Chris Hables Gray

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Artificial Intelligence and the Sacralization of Israel's War in Gaza

Most debates about artificial intelligence in warfare get stuck on the same questions: How smart are the algorithms? Can a drone make its own decisions? Is the technology efficient? These questions dominate policy and defense panels, treating AI as an unstoppable force that will inevitably change the rules of war. Chris Hables Gray's AI, Sacred Violence, and War—The Case of Gaza breaks this pattern. Instead of treating AI as a neutral tool or a rogue actor, he argues that we need to look at the politics behind the code. Focusing on Israel's war in Gaza, he shows that AI is a political instrument that operationalizes pre-existing doctrines of warfare, historical narratives, and structures of power, that does not replace human agency or political decision-making.

The strength of the book is how it shifts the focus from what technology can do to what it is used to do. The author moves AI out of the engineering department and places it in the realm of political power. As he bluntly puts it early on, "policies determine practices, not technologies" (pp. 5-6). He builds on this by introducing the concept of sacred violence. The text argues that you cannot understand Israel's use of algorithmic warfare without understanding the religious and nationalist myths the state uses to justify its violence. This is an important angle because it cuts through the confusing tech talk that usually protects military AI from moral questions. By designating this violence as sacred, this framing shows how the state treats it as completely justified; like it is above normal laws and ethics. In Gray's view, AI is not a radical break from the past; it is just the latest iteration of a long history of politically motivated conflict.

This ideological framework feeds into military doctrine. The analysis explains how interpretations of legal concepts like "distinction" and "proportionality" (pp. 57-58 & p. 60) developed over time to create a permissive environment for high-tech warfare. When the book gets into the actual tech—systems like Gospel, Lavender, Where's Daddy, and Project Nimbus, it avoids the trap of treating them as isolated, sci-fi weapons. Instead, the book maps out a massive, interconnected infrastructure of cloud computing, surveillance, and data sharing. AI, in this context, is just the glue holding a much larger military apparatus together. The software itself is not the weapon; the digital infrastructure; from intercepted phone calls to satellite imagery processed in the cloud, is the actual weapon system.

The book also succeeds when it looks at the business of war. Drawing on the idea of the "Palestine Laboratory" (pp. 93-94), we see how Israel's prolonged conflict has facilitated the development and real-world testing of surveillance and military AI technologies. Because Israel has maintained a prolonged state of occupation and conflict, tech companies have been able to test their products on live populations under the guise of national security. These systems are then packaged and sold on the global market by tech giants and defense contractors. This pushes the book beyond a regional case study, connecting the occupation to the broader global spread of surveillance capitalism. It forces the reader to ask uncomfortable questions about how military technologies tested during conflict are later adapted for civilian policing and border control.

Pulling together political theology, science and technology studies, and military history is a difficult task, but the author handles it well. The chapters build on each other logically, moving smoothly from historical justification to military doctrine, and finally to the software itself. Because the book maintains a clear focus, it actually offers a broader theory of how AI is used by states in the exercise of state power, and moving beyond just a narrow look at the Israeli military. Although the book draws on a wide range of theoretical perspectives, it does not lose sight of its central argument. Each framework contributes to the broader analysis of how power uses technology to legitimize violence. However, the empirical discussion is constrained by the limited public availability of evidence on military AI systems. Gray therefore relies on investigative journalism and whistleblower accounts. While this is unavoidable, yet it leaves some empirical claims floating without a way to independently verify them. Military algorithms are strictly classified, meaning researchers are always one step behind, relying on leaks that the military can dismiss as outdated or inaccurate. A more honest discussion of these methodological limits would have helped.

Furthermore, because the book is so focused on ideology, it downplays other factors that also influence military innovation. Bureaucratic inertia, operational requirements, and strategic calculation do not get as much attention as they probably should. A fuller discussion of these perspectives would have made the analysis more comprehensive.

There is also a slight issue with conceptual clarity. Terms like "late postmodern war" and "singularity fantasy" (p. 13 & p. 35) set an interesting mood, but the book does not always explain how they apply to the cases discussed. Readers who are not well-versed in critical

theory may wish for a clearer explanation of these concepts to understand exactly where the postmodern ends and the algorithmic begins. Additionally, the book also uses the Israeli case to reflect on the future of global warfare, which is understandable and commended. Yet, even a brief comparison to how the US or China approaches military AI would have helped separate what is unique to Israel from what is a global trend.

Finally, the book convincingly shows how politics shapes technology, but he spends less time on the reverse: how having access to these tools might change military doctrine or political decision-making in return. When commanders have a system that can generate hundreds of targets in an hour, does the volume of targets change how they judge what constitutes a proportionate military response? Exploring that feedback loop would not undermine the book's central thesis; to the contrary, it would have rounded out the argument, illuminating the complex relationship between technology and political power.

Despite these limitations, AI, Sacred Violence, and War—The Case of Gaza is a necessary corrective to the current literature. It is a significant contribution to Critical Security Studies and the literature on AI and warfare. Although some arguments would benefit from stronger empirical substantiation and more engagement with competing scholarly perspectives, the book urges readers to reconsider military AI as a political phenomenon that cannot be separated from state violence, ideology, and doctrine. It refuses to let the tech industry and military public relations departments dictate the terms of the debate. By reminding us that algorithms do not pull the trigger; political institutions do, Gray cuts through the hype surrounding AI warfare. At a time when news headlines often reduce the destruction in Gaza to a simplistic story about smart bombs, this book is a reminder to keep our eyes on the humans giving the orders. For scholars of security studies, international relations, and tech governance, it is a challenging and rewarding read.

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Assembling India's Constitution: A New Democratic History

Rohit De & Ornit Shani

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Rohit De and Ornit Shani's *Assembling India's Constitution: A New Democratic History* intervenes decisively in the historiography of Indian constitution-making. Granville Austin's classic account (1966) treated the Constitution as the product of elite deliberation within the Constituent Assembly, and even critical responses have tended to oscillate between reading it as a top-down nationalist project or a continuation of colonial institutional frameworks. Building on their own earlier essay (De and Shani 2023), the authors mobilise a dense archive of petitions, memoranda, and civic campaigns to relocate constitution-making within a wider political society, presenting the Indian state as assembled through negotiation between institutional actors and "diverse publics" (De and Shani 2025, Introduction). The book thereby unsettles the canonical narrative of a lawyerly founding and reframes the Constitution as the outcome of sustained democratic engagement, a project that extends, to the level of the state as a whole, the individual contributions each author has already made through De's *A People's Constitution* (2018) and Shani's *How India Became Democratic* (2018).

The book unfolds across five chapters and an introduction. Chapter 1, "Our Constitution," recovers alternative constitutional visions produced outside the Assembly: the Balkan-ji-Bari's Charter of Indian Children's Rights, the Deaf and Dumb Society's disability-rights proposals, and the All-India Dharma Sangh's theocratic counter-vision grounded in religious rather than popular authority. Chapter 2, "Making the Constitution a Public Affair," follows the Constituent Assembly Secretariat as it catalogued, translated, and circulated public petitions, and recounts how the February 1948 draft Constitution became, strikingly, a "surprise bestseller." Chapter 3, "Competing Constitutionalism," turns to the princely states, Rewa, Ratlam, Mysore, where pressure from Praja Mandals tied integration into the Union to

democratic aspiration rather than coercion alone. Chapter 4, "The Emerging State and the Constitution," examines intra-institutional contests, from High Court judges lobbying for judicial autonomy to provincial legislatures protesting their reduction to administrative "dummies." The final chapters extend the story outward, from the Chittagong Hill Tracts to diasporic communities in Stockton, California, tracing constitution-making as a process that unfolded well beyond Delhi. Throughout, the method is archival rather than doctrinal: petitions, correspondence, and organisational memoranda are read alongside, rather than subordinated to, the published Assembly Debates.

This review argues that the book's central achievement is this methodological reorientation, even as its theoretical restraint leaves open harder questions about constituent power, sovereignty, and the limits of democratic incorporation. The discussion below considers, first, how the book reconceives the state as a negotiated formation rather than a pre-constituted sovereign authority; second, what the archival method gains and forecloses; and third, the conceptual tension between participation and authorship that the book documents but does not resolve.

The State as an Assembled Political Formation

One of the book's most important moves is to displace the idea of the Indian state as a pre-constituted sovereign authority, presenting it instead as assembled through layered negotiations between institutional actors and politically mobilised constituencies (De and Shani 2025, chap. 1). Rather than treating the Constituent Assembly as the exclusive site of state formation, the book situates it within a wider field of claims-making: the Assembly appears, in the authors' words, "not as an isolated chamber of elite design but as a nodal institution within a broader ecology of claims-making." The Secretariat functioned as a permeable membrane between elite drafters and public actors, petitions were catalogued, translated, and circulated across committees, revealing a state already capable of rendering dispersed claims legible in constitutional language.

Yet the book also complicates any singular idea of "the state" by showing it internally fragmented, High Court judges wrote their own institutional autonomy into the text even as provincial legislatures protested their marginalisation, so that state formation appears as much a settlement among competing organs of governance as a response to public pressure. The state that emerges is simultaneously responsive and sovereign, participatory in its openness to consultation, yet authoritative in fixing the boundaries of inclusion. The dismissal of Delhi's demand for popular rule as a "dangerous innovation," and the confinement of tribal aspirations within administratively controlled schedules inherited from colonial premises, both suggest a sovereign anxiety about devolved authority that consultation alone does not dissolve.

This raises an analytical question the book does not fully resolve: is the state here primarily a mechanism that absorbs social pressure, or does it remain a sovereign

consolidator that determines the limits of permissible incorporation? The evidence supports both readings, but the structural asymmetry between petitioners and decision-makers is less interrogated than the fact of engagement itself.

Archival Transformation and the Rewriting of Constitutional History

Methodologically, the book's most transformative contribution lies in its archival expansion. Rather than confining constitutional history to published Assembly Debates, De and Shani mobilise petitions, correspondence, civic resolutions, and organisational memoranda (De and Shani 2025, Introduction). This shift fundamentally alters the terrain of analysis.

The historiographical implications are significant. First, it displaces the "founding fathers" narrative by redistributing agency across a wider political field. Figures such as B.N. Rau are reinterpreted not as detached technocrats but as practitioners of "technocratic cosmopolitanism," engaged in translation rather than mimicry (chap. 5). Second, constitutional provisions on minority safeguards, representation, and federal balance appear less as purely intellectual constructs and more as responses to sustained political pressures.

The book is equally attentive to the strategic uses of constitutional language. Upper-caste groups appropriated minority discourse to defend privilege, while backward classes campaigned for recognition as political minorities. Constitution-making thus appears as a competitive field in which categories were actively contested.

Importantly, the book does not romanticise participation. Chapter 4 ("The Emerging State and the Constitution") reveals that state-building involved institutional turf wars. High Court judges lobbied to insulate the judiciary from executive control, effectively writing their own autonomy into the constitutional text. Provincial legislatures complained of being reduced to "dummies", exposing centralising tendencies within the Union framework.

However, while the archival evidence persuasively demonstrates engagement, the analytical question of translation remains underdeveloped. Through what mechanisms did petitions become provisions? When did consultation become authorship, and when did it remain symbolic inclusion? Radical proposals such as the right to recall or explicit disability protections were sidelined. The unanimous recommendation for popular rule in Delhi was dismissed as a "dangerous innovation". Tribal aspirations were ultimately embedded within schedules shaped by colonial assumptions of backwardness. These outcomes suggest that democratic participation did not necessarily displace elite sovereignty.

If participation does not relocate constituent authority, then what the book documents may be democratic consultation rather than co-equal authorship. The distinction is theoretically subtle but decisive.

Political Concerns, Democratic Assumptions, and Conceptual Limits

Normatively, the book is animated by a clear political concern, that is, the democratic legitimacy of India's founding. In a contemporary moment in which constitutional meaning is fiercely contested, whether in debates over citizenship or electoral mobilisation, the reconstruction of participatory founding acquires renewed relevance.

De and Shani implicitly argue that legitimacy derives not only from nationalist leadership or institutional design but from dispersed processes of claim-making. The Constitution becomes, in their account, an "open site of struggle". Its subsequent amendments are presented as evidence of continuing public ownership.

Yet this move raises conceptual questions. If the archive of dissent is "at best partial", and if many foundational demands were diluted or deferred, can one speak of co-equal authorship at the founding moment? Or does sovereignty remain concentrated within the Assembly, with public engagement functioning as structured consultation within boundaries determined by elite mediation?

The book deliberately privileges historical recovery over abstract theorisation. This restraint avoids imposing rigid conceptual schemas on complex postcolonial processes. At the same time, it leaves open a foundational question, how does democratic participation intersect with constituent power? Participation may generate legitimacy, but it does not automatically redistribute sovereignty.

Conclusion

Assembling India's Constitution transforms the historiography of Indian constitution-making by expanding its archive and decentring its authorship. De and Shani demonstrate, with rich empirical detail, that constitution-making unfolded as a socially embedded and nationally dispersed process, and that the Indian state emerged not as a monolithic imposition but as a formation assembled through negotiation. At the same time, the book reveals, perhaps inadvertently, the structural limits of democratic incorporation in postcolonial state-building: participation was extensive, but authority remained asymmetrical; the Assembly was permeable, but it stayed sovereign. The book does not resolve this tension so much as render it historically visible — and in doing so, it leaves any future theory of Indian constitutionalism to confront the question it poses but does not answer: whether democratic engagement at the founding amounted to shared authorship, or operated within the bounded horizon of institutional sovereignty.

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Everyday Encounters with State and Capitalism

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For Bhabani, the term 'encounter' locates the abstractions of state and capitalism not as distant structural forces but as phenomena lived through daily existence, in the spirit of what phenomenology calls the taken-for-granted structures of everyday life. The book offers a descriptive and often incisive account (general in its structural claims, specific in its empirical grounding) of the exploitative tendencies that arise from capitalism's own contradictions and conflicts, and of its entanglement with the state and institutionalised religion in any given territory. This makes it germane to several social-science subfields like political economy, political sociology, and gender studies. Its ambitions extend further, drawing on a wide span of critical theory that moves fluidly between macro-structural analysis and its sedimentation in individual psychology echoing C. Wright Mills's classic injunction to read personal troubles as public issues. As Bhabani mentions that "in modern capitalist societies, the notion of loneliness is not solely a product of individual disposition but rather a consequence of broader capitalist structures and processes shaped by new forms of digital capitalism" (p. 25). In addition to this, the book also echoes Bourdieu's account of how structural domination is internalised as habitus, becoming legible in the individual's dispositions, anxieties, and self-understanding rather than remaining an external imposition alone. According to Bhabani, entitlement and narcissism are "not organically innate" but rather are ingrained through capitalism socialisation, which makes people prioritise competitiveness and self-interest over the welfare of the community (p. 52).

Methodologically, the book is grounded in critical political economy and mobilises a Decolonial/postcolonial lens to trace the relationship between macro-structures (state,

capitalism) and micro-interactions (the texture of everyday life). For Bhabani, everyday governance enacted through law, courts, policing, and the coercive apparatus of the state secures and sustains capitalism while manufacturing "a cohesive culture of mass socialisation and acceptance" (p. 18), which makes the state appear to represent the people's interests rather than capitals. I find the book's underlying premise is a civilisational shift from one form of society, and one form of human nature, to a more regimented and pessimistic social order. This theme mirrors Ferdinand Tonnies's classic distinction between Gemeinschaft (organic, kinship-based community) and Gesellschaft (contractual, self-interested society), where society is characterised by 'capitalism'; as the most regressive economic as well as cultural form, one that erodes communal capacity through the very processes of territorialisation the book theorises. Further, Bhabani argues that multinational expansion overshadows local customs with standardised "global consumerist trends" (p. 23). Bhabani connects this process to Ritzer's McDonaldisation, which is characterised by efficiency, calculability, predictability, and non-human control (p. 23), providing his diffuse homogenization claims with a tangible theoretical foundation.

The book interprets the current 'social order' as sedimented history, treating it as the result of colonialism, territorialisation, and the subsequent globalisation of these same extractive logics. This is structured as a reactionary chain in which each social/economic process is simultaneously the effect of prior dispossession and the cause of the next. It is comparable with David Harvey's Accumulation by Dispossession which treats primitive accumulation not as a one-time historical event but as a continuously re-enacted feature of capitalist expansion. Bhabani's Odisha case study operationalises this concept by explaining how BJD-BJP alliance consolidates state power to transfer the state's mining and marine resources to the corporate class "without any form of democratic scrutiny" (p. 116). Bhabani has given strong emphasis on the process of territorialisation and asks how has territorialisation historically accelerated the emergence of individualist and exclusionary societies? How people derived their power and social status from the ownership of land. He writes that territorialisation "often aligns with the interests of those in power, who use it as a tool to maintain control over resources and populations" (p. 17). This assertion is consistent with both Weber's observation that material authority frequently justifies itself as status and honour rather than declaring itself just as dominance and Bourdieu's explanation of capital (in this case, landed wealth) as convertible into social and symbolic power. This process of territorialisation is extended from the material to the ideational register by Bhabani's concurrent emphasis on the cultures of capitalism and patriarchy, analysis of loneliness (pp. 25–26) and rape culture, as systemic rather than incidental (pp. 39–41). These are the processes for Bhabani which colonise not only land but consciousness. This is best understood considering Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which holds that dominance is established by consent rather than coercion.

Jonathan Turner writes that "the great problem with critical theory is not so much the critical dimension, but the theory part. Theory in their hand becomes a license to criticise everything and anything about the social world" (2001, p. 9). This book follows the tendency of critical theory to flatten variance over geography and time by collapsing multiple, historically layered causes into a single explanatory origin: 'Economy'. This work adheres to the tradition of linking all social issues, whether directly or indirectly, to broader structures of capitalist economy. For instance, rather than having solely economic roots, the justification for the public and private division of women's visibility has several variations, such as kinship rules/restrictions. Andre Beteille also argues that because social settings are so varying, so are the ways in which power is held and used.

I particularly enjoyed how the book covered a wide range of subject matter, including the fundamental ways in which individuals behave and act in the capitalist system. The analysis of Individual loneliness, rape culture, and poor mental health are examples of how capitalist society not only modifies tangible facts but also offers superficial solutions for the problems that capitalism created itself. Most significantly, Bhabani emphasised that these processes cannot be viewed as isolated occurrences but rather as the outcome of social malaise brought about by capitalism and its close allies, state and religion. By connecting territorialization, gender, disinformation, and electoral politics into a single, comprehensible framework, the book primarily advances critical social science through synthesis rather than originality. It extends the Frankfurt School and Gramscian tradition into the empirical domain. The book connects with readers who are interested in alternatives to the capitalistic order and the book finds it through equitable access to resources, working class control over technology, promoting the culture of pluralism, emancipatory politics, reclaiming identities as global citizens and forming transnational solidarities.

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Genetics and the Politics of Security: A Social Science Perspective

Joëlle Vailly

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Joëlle Vailly's *Genetics and the Politics of Security: A Social Science Perspective* is a significant contribution to understanding how genetic technologies are reforming notions of identity, suspicion, and social control within criminal justice systems. As biometric and genetic data become integral to state security measures, this book critically questions the social, political, and legal implications of such developments. It provides a detailed analysis of how DNA, once a biological marker, now operates as a social and political tool both as an extension of suspicion and as a means of constructing new categories of bioidentity.

Vailly's work is placed at the intersection of social science, law, and biological sciences, providing a nuanced perspective on the contemporary "biopolitics" of security. The central argument posits that genetic technologies are not merely scientific advancements but are embedded within broader processes of governance, which involve the transformation of social categories and the expansion of police powers. This perspective is especially relevant in an era marked by rapid technological change, securitization, and the erosion of privacy.

Joëlle Vailly is a distinguished French sociologist, anthropologist, and biologist, serving as Director of Research at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). Her interdisciplinary background uniquely equips her to analyze the social ramifications of scientific innovations. Her engagement with both scientific and social dimensions lends credibility and depth to her analysis, positioning her as a leading voice in the social science of genetics and security.

Vailly's thesis is that genetic technologies, particularly DNA databases used by police forces, have transformed the social and legal construction of suspects, shifting from traditional notions rooted in behavior and evidence to categories defined by biological

markers. She argues that these practices extend suspicion over long periods, generate new bioidentities, and reinforce a securitarian logic that blurs boundaries between innocence and guilt, suspect and perpetrator. Her work critically explores how these bioidentities are socially constructed, institutionally managed, and politically contested, emphasizing that DNA acts as both a biological fact and a social symbol of identity and difference.

Vailly's innovative methodology draws upon Foucauldian concepts of biopower and governmentality, integrating sociological, anthropological, and legal analyses. She employs ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews with police officers, legal practitioners, and activists, along with case studies of French and international practices (pp. 9-16). Her approach emphasizes the micro-level practices of police and judicial agents, revealing how discourses and routines shape the social categories of suspects and offenders. This bottom-up perspective is complemented by a macro-level analysis of legislation, policy debates, and international comparisons (pp. 137-184). Her cross-national insights from France, UK, US, and other countries underscore the global spread of genetic security practices and their local adaptations.

This interdisciplinary and ethnographic approach represents an important contribution, bridging the gap between scientific possibilities and social realities. It underscores how technical tools are embedded within social institutions and political rationalities an implication that broadens the scope of research in criminology, sociology, law, and science studies (pp. 9-16).

Vailly's work excels in its detailed ethnographic evidence, analytical depth, and theoretical rigor. Notably, three chapters stand out for their originality: Chapter 1: *Genetic Profiling as the Extension of Suspicion* (pp. 25-58) explores the police rationales behind genetic databases. It reveals how DNA is embedded within a logic of recidivism and risk management, transforming suspects into long-term bioidentities. The chapter critically examines how police discourses justify the broad inclusion of individuals questioned but not convicted into the FNAEG (French DNA database), blurring the lines between suspicion and certainty.

Chapter 3: *Predicting the Appearance of Suspects* (pp. 89-112) discusses phenotyping technologies used to infer physical traits and biogeographical origin from DNA. This chapter provides a pioneering analysis of how such techniques, authorized in France in 2014, reinforce biological stereotypes and social perceptions of identity, raising ethical and political questions about stigmatization and racial profiling.

Chapter 5: *DNA Evidence and Its New Regimes of Practice* (pp. 139-164) offers a comprehensive account of how DNA evidence is integrated into European police cooperation under the Prüm system. It demonstrates how genetic data circulation across borders extends suspicion continent-wide, consolidating a transnational security regime that reshapes sovereignty and individual rights. These chapters collectively demonstrate Vailly's originality in linking scientific practices to social and political processes, revealing how DNA functions as a material and symbolic form of governance.

While the book's analytical depth is impressive, some limitations merit mention. Although Chapter 2 (pp. 58–87) discusses opposition to genetic databases, the treatment of resistance movements remains relatively descriptive. A more detailed ethnography of grassroots activism, particularly across different socio-political contexts, would provide a fuller understanding of how genetic surveillance practices are challenged and contested. In addition, while the French case provides rich empirical detail, the comparative analysis with other countries could be developed further. The experiences of the United States and the United Kingdom are incorporated into the discussion but not explored with the same depth as the French context, making it difficult to assess the broader applicability of some conclusions. The discussion of genetic techniques, including STR markers and phenotyping, is informative but may be challenging for readers without a background in genetics. Finally, although the book raises important questions concerning privacy, discrimination, and surveillance, broader ethical debates particularly those relating to racial profiling, eugenics, and the long-term implications of genetic categorization could have been examined more systematically. These observations do not diminish the value of the book, but rather point to productive avenues for future research and scholarly debate.

Vailly's work makes an important contribution to the social science understanding of genetics in security contexts. It demonstrates that DNA is not merely a biological fact but a social and political construct that produces new categories of identity, suspicion, and exclusion. Her analysis reveals how scientific practices are co-produced with legal norms and institutional routines, contributing to the sociological literature on governance, surveillance, and biopolitics (Foucault, 1979; Deleuze, 1992). Moreover, her cross-national perspective underscores the global diffusion of genetic security practices, contributing to debates on transnational governance and the politics of biometric data. Her insights are relevant to fields beyond criminology, including human rights, bioethics, and international law.

This book will be of considerable interest to scholars and students of sociology, anthropology, criminology, law, and science and technology studies. It also appeals to policymakers, legal practitioners, and activists interested in the societal implications of genetic technologies. Its interdisciplinary approach makes it particularly valuable for those seeking a nuanced understanding of how scientific tools are embedded within social and political contexts.

Joëlle Vailly's Genetics and the Politics of Security offers an important analysis of how DNA technologies are shaping contemporary social orders. By revealing the fluidity of categories such as suspect and perpetrator, and the construction of bioidentities, the book challenges simplistic notions of scientific neutrality. Its detailed ethnographic and theoretical insights contribute significantly to social science debates on biopolitics, security, and governance.

While some areas could be expanded particularly on resistance and ethical debates—the book's core contribution lies in demonstrating that genetic practices are deeply political, producing new forms of social categorization and control. As biometric and genetic

technologies continue to expand globally, Vailly's work provides a crucial framework for understanding their societal implications.

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Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory in Action

Oliver Lovell

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Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), originally proposed by Sweller (1988) is one of the most important theories in educational psychology, but its key resources are written for researchers rather than teachers. The foundational literature by Sweller and his colleagues (e.g., Pass et al., 2003; Sweller, 1994; Sweller et al., 2011; Sweller et al., 2019) is thorough but difficult to follow by practitioners. Most practitioners do not have the time and training needed to engage with the primary research. Oliver Lovell's book attempts to directly address this concern. The book has been reviewed line-by-line by John Sweller himself, and it also includes a short foreword written by him (Lovell, 2020). The book is a translation of 30 years of research integrated in a way that a working teacher could use it on a Monday morning. Being faithful to theory while still being usable in a classroom is not an easy task. It is worth asking how well the book achieves this dual mandate.

The book largely succeeds in this aim, though not without certain trade-offs. The book is ordered into three parts. Part I is what Lovell calls the "ABCDE of CLT". It introduces the architecture of human memory, the difference between biologically primary and secondary knowledge, the difference between intrinsic and extraneous load, the contrast between domain-general and domain-specific skills, and element interactivity as the root cause of cognitive load (Lovell, 2020, pp. 17-34) . This mnemonic device is more than a memory aid. It provides a mental map before the theory becomes complex. It is important since CLT often includes multiple related constructs simultaneously, which can leave newcomers behind in the process. Parts II and III apply this map to practice. Strategies such as pre-teaching, segmentation, and sequencing are discussed in Part II (Lovell, 2020, pp. 35-60). Classic cognitive load effects, e.g., redundancy, split attention, transient information, modality,

worked examples, self-explanation, and goal-free effect are discussed in Part III (Lovell, 2020, pp. 61-146). All effects are discussed using a similar structure: what it is, how it occurs cognitively, and how it looks in actual lessons. The diagrams by Oliver Caviglioli are particularly effective here. One example that stands out is the bar model illustrating the trade-off between intrinsic and extraneous load, which offers one of the clearest visual representations of working memory limits in the literature (Lovell, 2020, p. 37).

The book is commendable for treating mechanism and technique together, rather than presenting one without the other. Most teacher-friendly summaries of psychological research contain simply a list of dos and don'ts. Lovell, on the other hand, tries to provide reasons for each of the recommendations before advising it to readers. This choice has a practical payoff. A teacher who understands what split attention is and how it interferes in learning will be more likely to detect split attention in their own materials than a teacher who only has a rule. This is not a small feat in a field where findings from research regularly get stripped of their justification as they enter classroom practice.

It is important to point out the limitations of the book, as these dictate the ways in which it may be read—and not whether a reader should read it at all. First, this is a synthesis, not an original contribution. Lovell's insights are based almost exclusively on Sweller's own research and the work of his close collaborators. The book makes no attempt to address the more controversial aspects of CLT, e.g., whether or not the concept of germane load is a valid claim to begin with, or the boundary conditions for when the expertise reversal effect becomes invalid. The reader who would expect a critical and comparative analysis of these debates will be disappointed to not find it here. The book appears largely accepting of CLT's internal coherence and does not test it against other perspectives on learning and memory.

Second, for readers who are working outside mainstream general education, the worked examples provided in the book come almost exclusively from typical secondary classrooms. The content of subjects varies widely, from mathematics, science, and chemistry to music and physical education, but the learners in these examples are always assumed to have typical working memory capacity and cognitive processing demands. There is no discussion about learners with intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, or sensory impairments. These are the populations for which working memory constraints do not arise incidentally but are central to how instruction needs to be designed. It is not a trivial gap; it is a real one. CLT's fundamental arguments about memory architecture would appear to be even more applicable to learners, whose memory functioning is already burdened. This gap provides an opportunity for those working in special and inclusive education to further develop Lovell's framework, not to copy it, and this is one of the more significant pathways the book opens for others to pursue.

Third, the last chapter focuses on the concept of self-management effect, in which learners learn to manage their own cognitive load, and not only through instructional design. Lovell is transparent about this limitation, acknowledging that the field of research is still emerging, which is commendable. Despite this, the chapter is more confident than the

evidence that underlies it. Practitioners should not assume that these recommendations are as credible as those for well-documented effects discussed earlier in this book.

None of these limitations should be interpreted as an excuse not to read the book. Rather, they are to be interpreted as explanations of what this book is and what it is not. It is not a critical review of CLT research, nor is it a book that addresses the limits and unsolved questions of CLT. Instead, what it provides is something that is less common, and possibly more useful for those it promises to offer: a reliable and well-informed description of theory and what to do about it in a classroom. Part I offers a ready-made structure for teacher educators introducing cognitive architecture to new teachers. Parts II and III are useful for the practitioner as a standby reference when planning a lesson, as each effect is self-contained and can be referred to independently.

For researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of CLT and special education, the book is more of a starting point than a complete blueprint. The absence of reference to learners with additional support needs is no criticism of the execution; it would not have been within the scope of the book. It does, however, indicate where the next contributions from the field should be made. Extending Lovell's simple but effective mechanism-first approach to individuals with intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, or sensory impairments is not simply filling a void. It would serve as a trial of CLT's fundamental assertions in environments in which it had not been theorized.

Overall, it is a well-constructed and well-reasoned introduction to CLT that accomplishes its stated aim and does so more effectively than many comparable texts in the field. Its value lies less in breaking new theoretical ground and more in making genuinely difficult research accessible without distorting it. This is a more difficult task than it appears, and Lovell accomplishes it well, with Sweller's oversight lending it further credibility.

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Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology

Neil Postman

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Revisiting Postman's Technopoly in the Algorithmic age

Returning to Technopoly more than three decades after its publication invites an unhelpful question and conceals a harder one. The unhelpful question asks how much of the present Postman foresaw: whether a book published in 1992, before "the internet" entered ordinary speech, anticipated platforms, networks, or the machinery now sorting human attention. That standard asks too little of a theory and too much of prophecy. The harder question is whether the apparatus Postman built to describe his own moment still explains anything once that moment has changed underneath it. A theory survives not by prophecy but by portability, by whether its categories transpose onto conditions their author never observed without losing their grip. That is the question pursued here.

Postman names his own creditors early, citing Mumford and Ellul among those who had already argued that technology could turn dangerous rather than useful (Postman, 1993, p. xii). From Ellul he takes the premise that technique, the drive toward standardized efficiency, tends toward autonomy (Ellul, 1964): a rationalized method presses toward its own adoption regardless of intention. From Mumford, whose earlier taxonomies of technological ages he invokes before proposing his own, he takes the distinction between technics that concentrate authority and technics that disperse it (Mumford, 1964). From Innis comes the monopoly of knowledge (Innis, 1951): a class whose command of a medium becomes the operative form of social power. What Postman adds is a shift in register, from process and monopoly to

something closer to conversion: a culture that stops asking what technology is for and treats the answer as self-evident.

The taxonomy that follows, cultures classified into tool-using cultures, technocracies, and Technopolies, is more defensible read as a proposition than a chronicle: a claim about what changes in the status of judgment as a society's dependence on its tools intensifies. A tool-using culture lets invention answer to an existing cosmology; a technocracy lets it compete with cosmology as authority, producing a split between an older moral vocabulary and a newer one built around efficiency, neither strong enough to dissolve the other. Technopoly names the point at which efficiency becomes, in Postman's own description, a culture that seeks its authorization in technology and takes its orders from it. Treated this way the taxonomy is testable: it predicts institutions will redescribe themselves in the vocabulary of optimization even where their content does not require it, checkable against how education and governance now present themselves.

This is where the account grows vulnerable, and the usual charge of determinism is too blunt to locate the problem. Postman's formulations sometimes assign historical change to technology itself: Technopoly, he writes, "is totalitarian technocracy" (Postman, 1993, p. 48), closer to autonomy than determinism, since it locates coercion in a stage of culture rather than a single cause. Determinism proper holds that technology dictates outcomes irrespective of choice; autonomy, weaker, holds only that technique escapes the purposes it was built to serve. His own argument sits closer to mediation: media ecology, his governing metaphor, describes technology changing culture relationally, through many variables, not unilaterally. What mediation leaves underdeveloped is the political and institutional construction of these systems, the terrain Winner's account of artifacts and politics was built to cover (Winner, 1980): who builds them, under what incentive, with what alternatives foreclosed. Winner's point was never that technology is autonomous, only that design choices harden into arrangements that look natural once forgotten. A totalizing technocracy reads as though efficiency arrives on its own; a fuller account treats who benefits from its arrival as internal to the diagnosis.

A parallel charge, that Postman is merely nostalgic for print culture, deserves a more careful hearing, and the book supplies its own test. By narrative he means a story that gives meaning to the past, explains the present, and guides the future; no culture, he holds, flourishes without one (p. 172), and the book is explicitly an account of how Technopoly overwhelms these earlier, meaning-making stories, anchored in the trivialization of shared symbols, elevating a technological divinity by demoting every other one. Read this way the conservatism is about narrative collapse, not an aesthetic preference for the page. It grows vulnerable in what it takes for granted: his paradigm cases, the Constitution as civic Genesis, the Statue of Liberty as key symbol, are pointedly American, leaving open whether the loss, or its remedy, travels to other founding stories.

That order was mass-mediated, organized around experts a citizen could name; it now operates inside a second order Postman lacked words for. Quantification was once

something institutions did to populations through testing; it is now something platforms do to individuals continuously, turning daily behavior into input for prediction. Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism describes an order built on extracting behavioral data as raw material, used not merely to predict conduct but to shape it. Couldry and Mejias (2019) model the appropriation of human life for data on historical colonialism rather than a new economic sector: dispossession, not intensification. Van Dijck (2014) supplies a more cautious term for the belief underwriting both, dataism, the largely unargued conviction that data offers purer access to reality than other observation, ideology rather than settled advance. The claim is not that inference is unreliable, but that its authority has outrun the argument for it, the same unearned authority Technopoly described, now attached elsewhere.

Postman's framework meets its most serious difficulty here: his Technopoly still had a shape, identifiable experts and institutions a critic could locate. Contemporary technical power is not simply more decentralized: diffuse at the level of interaction, spread across interfaces most people never see, while concentrated at the level of infrastructure, capital, data, and computing resources most people never own. This raises a question his vocabulary cannot pose: if authority is this diffuse, what is culture surrendering to? Pasquale's (2015) black box society captures the opacity; Noble (2018) and Benjamin (2019) supply the rest, showing that systems presenting themselves as neutral routinely encode and launder existing hierarchies. Chun's (2021) work on correlation adds that pattern-recognition systems naturalize the categories they were trained on, returning historical discrimination as statistical regularity. The problem has not softened; it has become harder to locate while its consequences sharpen.

Artificial intelligence sharpens this difficulty rather than extending it, and deserves treatment as the argument's most demanding test. Postman worried about a culture ceding judgment to technical systems it could not fully evaluate. Generative and predictive systems intensify that worry by changing what technology does with information: earlier systems distributed, sorted, or filtered information humans had produced, while contemporary systems generate the material being evaluated, summarize and rank it, and participate in producing the account of reality a person reasons from. Postman's Technopoly still assumed a division, however eroded, between infrastructure and judgment; the infrastructure could distort what people saw, but people still supplied the seeing. When a system produces the description a person consults to decide what to think, that line stops being one a reader can draw with confidence.

Postman's proposal for resistance needs rereading, since the text narrows what sounds like a general disposition: to be a loving resistance fighter, in his own term, means keeping faith with a nation's founding narratives, illustrated by the Constitution and the Statue of Liberty, patriotic before philosophical. In 1992 this could be imagined as a choice open to a reasonably situated citizen: revere the right stories, cultivate historical literacy, stand apart from what one criticizes. That assumes a stable narrative worth returning to and systems optional enough to refuse; neither holds now, and for readers outside the story he defends,

the remedy offers little purchase. This does not make resistance incoherent, only harder to locate in individual conviction: it must be redistributed across registers Postman treats as background, from regulation to infrastructural design to collective refusal, since near-universal participation cannot be declined one person at a time.

What survives is not Postman's inventory of technologies, nor his taxonomy in literal form, but the claim that letting technical efficiency arbitrate questions it was never designed to answer is a cultural transformation before a technical one, proceeding without any single actor intending it. What does not survive is the picture of where authority resides: a visible technocracy a critic could name, or a national story loving enough to withstand it, replaced by infrastructure without a clear address, generating the material judgment is formed from, unevenly, along lines his analysis never examined. Technopoly is worth reading in 2026 not because its predictions held, most did not need to, but because it isolated a transformation in judgment that has only deepened. Postman asked what a culture becomes when it surrenders authority to technology from outside itself. The harder question, which he cannot answer but helps make legible, is what to call a culture whose technology no longer only governs it from outside, but has begun producing the judgments through which that culture recognizes its own surrender.

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The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It

Yascha Mounk

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Introduction

The crisis of liberal democracy has become a central concern in contemporary political science, particularly in relation to institutional weakening, declining public trust, and the erosion of democratic norms, a process widely described as democratic backsliding. Within this broader debate, Yascha Mounk's *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* provides an important contribution to understanding the contemporary challenges facing liberal democracy. Mounk argues that this crisis is not merely the result of rising populism but emerges from the growing separation between democracy and liberalism, the two foundational principles of the modern political order (Mounk, 2018, pp. 25–27). This review critically examines Mounk's central argument, his explanation of democratic backsliding, and the strengths and limitations of his analytical framework.

Mounk's Diagnosis of the Liberal Democratic Crisis and the Roots of Democratic Backsliding

Mounk argues that the crisis of liberal democracy originates from the increasing separation between its two foundational principles: democracy and liberalism. He interprets Donald Trump's election in 2016 not merely as a normal transfer of political power but as an indication of a deeper crisis within constitutional democracy, as his presidency challenged

informal democratic norms and established constraints on political authority (Mounk, 2018, pp. 2–3). However, Mounk emphasizes that democratic backsliding is not limited to the United States. He identifies similar developments in countries such as Russia, Turkey, Hungary, and Poland, where elected leaders have weakened independent institutions, restricted media freedom, and reduced the space for political competition (Mounk, 2018, p. 2).

Mounk's theoretical framework is based on the distinction between democracy and liberalism. Democracy refers to popular sovereignty expressed through free and competitive elections, whereas liberalism concerns the protection of fundamental rights, the rule of law, and institutional constraints on political power (Mounk, 2018, pp. 25–27). Based on this distinction, he identifies four political conditions: liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, undemocratic liberalism, and dictatorship.

Liberal democracy represents a system in which popular sovereignty is combined with the protection of individual rights, the rule of law, and independent institutions. Illiberal democracy describes systems where elections continue to exist, but fundamental freedoms, judicial independence, minority rights, and institutional checks on political power are weakened. Undemocratic liberalism refers to situations in which liberal institutions remain strong, but citizens perceive that major political decisions are increasingly made beyond democratic participation and accountability. Finally, dictatorship represents a system in which neither meaningful popular sovereignty nor effective protection of individual freedoms exists. According to Mounk, liberal democracy becomes vulnerable when the balance between democratic participation and liberal constraints is disrupted, allowing political systems to move toward either illiberal democracy or undemocratic liberalism (Mounk, 2018, pp. 27, 35–36).

To explain the rise of illiberal democracy, Mounk focuses on the populist claim to represent the "real people." He argues that populism should be understood through the distinction between its democratic origins and its potential consequences. While populist movements may express genuine social grievances and demands for political representation, they become a threat to liberal democracy when leaders claim exclusive authority to represent the people and portray opponents, minorities, independent institutions, and critical media as illegitimate obstacles. In this sense, populism may respond to genuine societal concerns while simultaneously weakening the institutional foundations that protect pluralism and individual rights (Mounk, 2018, pp. 28–36).

Mounk further connects the growth of populism to broader social and economic transformations, including globalization, technological change, and rising inequality. He argues that perceptions of exclusion from economic and political benefits have weakened trust in established elites and created favourable conditions for populist mobilization. Because many contemporary challenges require complex and long-term responses, populist leaders often gain support by offering simple and emotionally appealing solutions. Trump's

proposal to build a border wall illustrates this strategy by transforming a complex policy challenge into a symbolic and seemingly straightforward response (Mounk, 2018, pp. 37–43).

Alongside illiberal democracy, Mounk introduces the concept of undemocratic liberalism as another dimension of the crisis of liberal democracy. He argues that although constitutional courts, independent agencies, professional bureaucracies, and international organizations are essential for protecting rights and maintaining the rule of law, their expanding authority may create perceptions that important political decisions are increasingly removed from direct democratic control. At the international level, this tension appears in the distance between popular sovereignty and policymaking conducted through international institutions. While these institutions are necessary for governing an interconnected world, they may also contribute to perceptions of democratic disconnection and political alienation (Mounk, 2018, pp. 63–74, 92–97).

Overall, Mounk's central argument is that democratic backsliding cannot be understood solely as the result of authoritarian leaders or populist movements. Rather, it emerges from the erosion of balance between the two pillars of liberal democracy: popular sovereignty and institutional constraints on political power. When either principle dominates the other, liberal democracy gradually moves toward illiberal democracy or undemocratic liberalism, weakening democratic institutions and norms (Mounk, 2018, pp. 92–98). Nevertheless, the applicability of Mounk's framework varies across political contexts. While his analysis provides a strong explanation of democratic crises in consolidated liberal democracies, democratic erosion in fragile states is also shaped by factors such as weak state capacity, political polarization, and institutional fragility, highlighting the need for further comparative research.

Critical Assessment and Conclusion

One of the major strengths of *The People vs. Democracy* lies in its coherent theoretical framework for explaining the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy. Unlike approaches that attribute democratic decline primarily to the rise of populist leaders, Mounk argues that democratic erosion results from the growing tension between the two foundational principles of the modern political order: democracy and liberalism. His distinction between liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, undemocratic liberalism, and dictatorship provides a valuable framework for understanding different trajectories of democratic backsliding (Mounk, 2018, pp. 27, 36). Recent empirical evidence, including the *V-Dem Democracy Report 2026*, further confirms Mounk's concerns by demonstrating that democratic erosion has become a global phenomenon, reflected in increasing authoritarian tendencies, restrictions on civic space, and growing pressure on institutional checks and balances (V-Dem Institute, 2026, pp. 4–5). These developments reinforce Mounk's argument that the stability of liberal democracy depends on maintaining a balance between popular sovereignty and liberal institutional constraints.

Mounk also identifies declining public trust in democracy, particularly among younger generations, as an important indicator of weakening democratic legitimacy. He argues that dissatisfaction with democratic performance can gradually reduce confidence in democratic institutions and increase the appeal of populist alternatives (Mounk, 2018, p. 108). However, Torres-Adán and Buzogány (2025), drawing on David Easton's distinction between *specific support* and *diffuse support*, argue that dissatisfaction with government performance does not necessarily imply declining democratic legitimacy, as democratic systems may remain stable as long as citizens maintain their normative commitment to democratic values (Torres-Adán & Buzogány, 2025, p. 3).

Despite the explanatory strength of Mounk's framework, it also faces important limitations. His analysis is primarily grounded in the experience of consolidated democracies in the United States and Europe, whereas democratic erosion in developing countries and fragile states is shaped not only by cultural and social factors but also by political polarization, corruption, weak state capacity, and institutional fragility, suggesting that Mounk pays comparatively less attention to the mechanisms of democratic resilience. In this regard, Levitsky and Ziblatt's emphasis on democratic norms and elite responsibility highlights the role of political actors in protecting democratic institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 25–26). Likewise, Keman argues that democratic backsliding extends beyond institutional erosion to include declining public trust and weakening governmental legitimacy (Keman, 2024, pp. 17–18). Furthermore, Goddard and Newman's concept of *neo-royalism* identifies a dimension of democratic crisis that receives less attention in Mounk's framework. They argue that the transfer of authority from formal institutions to personal networks and personalized forms of power reveals a dimension of democratic crisis with both domestic and international consequences for liberal democracy and the liberal international order (Goddard & Newman, 2025, p. 20). Therefore, although Mounk's framework provides a powerful explanation of the vulnerabilities of liberal democracy, its broader applicability requires greater attention to state capacity, institutional resilience, and the personalization of political authority across different political contexts.

Overall, *The People vs. Democracy* makes an important contribution to contemporary debates on liberal democracy, populism, and democratic backsliding. Mounk convincingly demonstrates that the survival of liberal democracy depends not only on free and competitive elections but also on maintaining a balance between popular sovereignty, individual rights, the rule of law, and institutional constraints on political power (Mounk, 2018, pp. 25–27, 254–255). Nevertheless, comparative experience suggests that this balance cannot be sustained without effective state institutions and capable governance. One dimension that receives insufficient attention in Mounk's theoretical framework is the role of state capacity and governmental effectiveness. Democratic stability depends not only on elections and the protection of rights but also on institutions capable of implementing laws, delivering public services, maintaining security, and responding to citizens' expectations. Experience from fragile states and developing countries further demonstrates that weak

state capacity can undermine democratic legitimacy and create favourable conditions for populist mobilisation or authoritarian alternatives. Therefore, although Mounk provides a valuable framework for understanding the vulnerabilities of liberal democracy, a more systematic examination of the interaction between democracy, liberal values, political legitimacy, and state capacity across diverse historical and political contexts could further enrich this analytical framework.

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