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Gender discourses in political campaigns and their impact on the perception of voters

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of gender discourses in political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden to identify their impact on media representation and voter perception. The study was based on a qualitative methodology of critical discourse analysis, which examined a targeted sample of materials that included articles from leading media outlets, social media posts, and debate videos. The main results showed that, despite differences in national contexts, women politicians continue to face persistent discursive challenges. In the United States, Hillary Clinton's campaign showed that the combination of narratives about "inauthenticity", belonging to the establishment, and external cyber interference created a uniquely toxic environment that made it much more difficult to communicate her own political agenda. An analysis of the coverage of Kamala Harris' candidacy in the British media demonstrated the key role of intersectionality, where her image was formed at the intersection of gender, racial, and political biases, forcing her to simultaneously resist various forms of stereotyping. The Swedish case has revealed the paradox of a society with a high level of formal equality, where women leaders such as Anna Lööf face informal but highly destructive barriers in the form of threats and systemic online harassment, which calls into question the effectiveness of only formal mechanisms for achieving equality. The study proved that problems for women in politics have evolved from formal obstacles to complex discursive traps, which requires the development of new communication strategies to counteract hidden forms of bias

Keywords: female leaders; stereotypes; sexist images; media representation; career

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of this study is conditioned by the growing role of women in world politics and the simultaneous increasing polarisation of societies where gender issues often become the central element of ideological "culture wars". In an environment where every election campaign becomes a battleground not only for votes, but also for social norms, the analysis of gender discourses takes on special weight. Despite significant progress in achieving formal equality and increasing the number of women in elected office, their participation and success in politics remain a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Contemporary political campaigns are unfolding in an increasingly complex environment characterised by a decline and deep polarisation of confidence in electoral institutions. C. Stewart III (2022) analysed the state of trust in electoral institutions, noting its significant decline and deep party polarisation, which is noticeable in the political context of the United States. In parallel with the

institutional crisis, there is a technological complication of methods of influencing voters. M. Abouei Mehrizi *et al.* (2022) investigated the mechanisms of election control through social influence, proving that these processes lend themselves to precise mathematical modelling in conditions of voter uncertainty. In this technologically rich and polarised context, gender discourses become an influential tool that can both promote and hinder political careers. The team of authors by J. Dolan *et al.* (2021), analysing women's paths to power, noted that despite decades of research, the question of the impact of gender perceptions on election results remains relevant, as old stereotypes adapt to new political realities, forcing women leaders to develop new strategies of influence.

Global scientific research actively studies the impact of gender stereotypes on electoral processes, gradually moving away from general surveys to the analysis of real voter behaviour. Thus, S.F. Anzia & R. Bernhard (2022),

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using the example of local elections in the United States, demonstrated that the success of female candidates largely depends on the context and compliance of the role with gender stereotypes: women are more likely to win school board elections, but less likely to win mayoral elections, especially in conservative districts. However, research by S. Saha & A.C. Weeks (2022) was complicated by the widespread perception that voters systematically “punish” ambitious women. Their experiments showed that the response to ambition depends on the party affiliation of voters and is more pronounced in non-partisan elections, where party markers cannot serve as a guide. The problem lies not only in the perception of voters, but also in the so-called “ambition gap”. The study by E. Mourelatos *et al.* (2024) focused on the gender gap in political ambitions and how the competitive nature of the political environment influences the decision of men and women to run for election. It has been experimentally confirmed that the competitive nature of politics is more likely to deter women from participating in elections than men, which is one of the main factors of their underrepresentation.

The impact of gender dynamics is largely determined by the specifics of the national political landscape, which is confirmed by a number of comparative studies. In particular, N. Aylott & N. Bolin (2023), examining the 2022 parliamentary elections, found that the country’s political system has become significantly fragmented due to the growing influence of the right-wing populist Swedish Democrats party, which led to the historic defeat of the social democrats. In the context of the UK, J. Mellon (2021) analysed electoral behaviour during the 2019 election and concluded that the deep public divide over Brexit significantly limited the effectiveness of tactical voting and cross-party agreements, creating specific barriers for candidates. This analysis of scientific evidence suggests that differences in political systems shape fundamentally different conditions in which women politicians are forced to build their strategies. K. Aggestam & J. True (2021) in their study shifted the focus from the passive role of women as objects of stereotyping to their active agency. The researchers proved that women leaders play a complex strategic game on several levels, consciously using and adapting gender norms as an effective tool for promoting their own interests in the areas of domestic and foreign policy.

Despite a significant amount of research on gender stereotypes and electoral systems in individual countries, there is a gap in comparative studies that would analyse exactly the discursive practices that shape images of women politicians in different national contexts. The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative discourse analysis of political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden to identify and compare specific gender discourses that shape the media representation and public perception of female politicians, and to analyse how these discourses affect their electoral prospects. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set: to conduct a comparative analysis of the discursive construction of images and

challenges faced by women politicians during election campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden; to assess the causal impact of frame types on the assessment of competence, leadership and “selectivity” of women politicians, considering the moderators of the platform and audience characteristics; to check the mediation mechanism by which content frames affect the intention to vote through the perception of competence and leadership, and to determine the conditions under which counter-framing removes the “double trap”.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the course of the study, a qualitative methodology based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied, which allowed considering language not only as a means of communication, but as a tool for implementing power and constructing social hierarchies. The source base for the analysis was an exhaustive body of materials formed on the principle of a target sample to ensure the representativeness of various types of political communication: from the direct appeal of politicians to the electorate to the media interpretation of their actions. The chronological framework of the study covered three key periods corresponding to the peak moments of electoral activity and political crises in the countries studied: the United States during Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign in 2015-2016; the United Kingdom during the current election cycle with Kamala Harris in 2024; Sweden during the period of political activity and Anna Löf’s resignation in 2018-2022. The criteria for selecting materials were a high level of public response (*viral content*), the authorship of key political figures or leading media outlets with a large audience and the presence of explicit or implicit gender markers in the texts.

For Hillary Clinton’s case, her key programme speeches were selected (CNN Staff, 2015), official social media posts (Clinton, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2016d; 2016e; 2016f), video recordings of the debate (Presidential debate highlights..., 2016), and a speech admitting defeat (Hillary Clinton full..., 2016). The media context was reconstructed based on analytical articles from leading publications, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Bryant, 2016; Zurcher, 2016; Prasad, 2019), The New York Times (Lipton *et al.*, 2016) and National Public Radio (NPR) (Jensen, 2016), and video recordings of her opponent’s statements (Trump on Clinton..., 2016) and advertising materials (Mirrors|Hillary Clinton, 2016). The theoretical framework for this case was formed by biographical data (Hillary Clinton, *biografia*, 2021).

To explore the discourse surrounding Kamala Harris, the sample included her public appearances (Kamala Harris vs. Donald Trump..., 2024; Highlights from the..., 2024; ‘I’m not perfect’..., 2024) and communication in social networks (Harris, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; 2024e). The perception of her candidacy in the UK was studied based on materials from the BBC publications (Subramanian, 2024; Smith, 2024) and The Guardian (Freedland, 2024; Gambino, 2024).

The Swedish case was based on an analysis of social media posts by leading politicians A. Löf (2022a, 2022b; 2022c) and A. Löf Hedh (2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d; 2018e). The context was supplemented by analytical articles from Svenska Dagbladet (Female politicians have..., 2022; Arenander & Nilsson, 2022; Thurfjell, 2022) and government documents (Sweden's feminist foreign policy, 2019).

The analysis procedure was carried out in three stages: primary encoding of texts to identify key thematic blocks; microanalysis of language tools (metaphors, epithets, euphemisms); macroanalysis of social context and power relations. The analysis framework included the identification of discursive strategies (legitimation, delegitimation, victimisation), media frames (e.g., the "competence" frame versus the "authenticity" frame), and rhetorical topoi (the topos of "threat", the topos of "glass ceiling", the topos of "double standards") used to represent women politicians. At the final stage, a comparative analysis of three cases was carried out to identify common patterns and national features in the construction of gender discourses.

RESULTS

Discursive construction of gender in the 2016 US presidential campaign

At the start of the campaign, Hillary Clinton's rhetorical strategy was carefully focused on promoting ideas of economic justice and inclusive social inclusivity. In her keynote speech on Roosevelt Island on June 13, 2015, she positioned herself as a defender of the interests of the middle class, purposefully contrasting her vision with Republican politics (CNN Staff, 2015). This communication line was maintained in the final stage of the campaign, as can be seen from the analysis of its activity in social networks. In the last weeks before the election, her Facebook page actively promoted several key narratives. First, the emphasis was placed on her experience and competence. Posts were published recalling her work as secretary of state and her ability to counter global threats (Clinton, 2016c; 2016d). Second, positive reviews from reputable and popular personalities were used, such as Michelle Obama and Beyonce (Clinton, 2016b; 2016e). Third, attempts were made to humanise her image by publishing information about her long-term human rights work (Clinton, 2016a). Ultimately, key ideological theses were actively promoted, such as the slogan "Women's rights are human rights", and direct mobilisation of voters was conducted (Clinton, 2016f). This social media strategy was aimed at creating a positive, multi-faceted image of a candidate who is both an experienced leader, a moral authority, and a compassionate person.

However, this carefully constructed positive narrative has undergone significant deformation under the influence of both internal and external factors. Clinton's candidacy became a clear personification of the political establishment, against which a significant part of the electorate was protested (Bryant, 2016). Her own reckless comment about the "basket of deplorables" instantly reinforced this image (Hillary Clinton, biografia, 2021). Academic research

has confirmed that Hillary Clinton is described more in male than female terms, with a higher frequency of gender insults (Conroy *et al.*, 2020). In parallel, her opponent actively used gender stereotypes, questioning her physical ability to serve as president (Trump on Clinton..., 2016). In response, the Clinton campaign tried to reverse her opponent's misogynistic rhetoric against Donald Trump. A number of advertising materials were created to demonstrate the incompatibility of Trump's views with the values of contemporary society. An illustrative example of such a delegitimation strategy is a television advertisement during the primaries, which focused on the candidate's dubious business practices and questioned his integrity (Fig. 1).

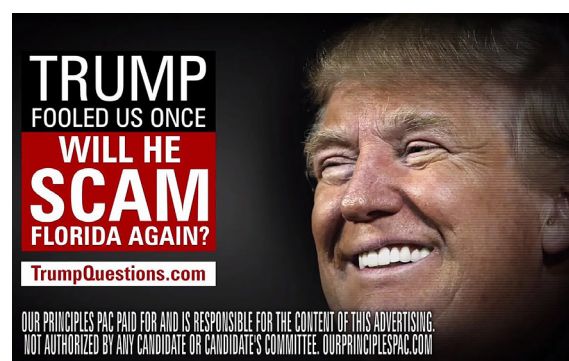


Figure 1. Footage from an anti-Trump advertisement broadcast before the Florida primary

Source: L. Vavreck (2016)

One of the most famous videos called "mirrors" showed young girls looking at themselves in the mirror, while Trump's real derogatory statements about women are heard behind the scenes (Mirrors|Hillary Clinton, 2016). The video ended with the rhetorical question "Do we want such a president for our daughters?", which directly appealed to the emotions of voters and positioned the choice not as political, but as moral. Other materials that were distributed online were direct compilations of Trump's most outrageous quotes, where he called women "fat pigs," "dogs," and "disgusting animals" (Prasad, 2019). This strategy was to use the opponent's own words as a weapon to demonstrate his inconsistency with the position of president and mobilise the female electorate. During the presidential debate, a key stage of the campaign, Clinton consistently presented her economic agenda, emphasising the need for investment in jobs, fair taxation, and empowerment for the middle class. She tried to focus on specific policy proposals, while Trump often turned to personal attacks and general accusations, which were also interpreted through the prism of gender expectations for candidates (Presidential debate highlights..., 2016).

The discrediting campaign culminated in an unprecedented intervention by the Russian Federation, which turned ordinary intelligence gathering into a full-scale operation of influence. According to an investigation published in the New York Times (Lipton *et al.*, 2016), this operation

began back in 2015, when hackers linked to the Russian government gained access to the computer networks of the Democratic National Committee. Despite early warnings from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which were ignored, hackers spent almost seven months without hindrance studying internal documentation. The attacks subsequently spread to the personal mailboxes of key figures in the Clinton campaign, including her campaign manager John Podesta. The investigation revealed the activities of two different groups of Russian hackers, known as Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear, which indicated the scale and state support for the operation (Lipton *et al.*, 2016). The purpose of the operation was not just espionage, but political sabotage. Since the summer of 2016, stolen documents and emails have been systematically published through front persons such as Guccifer 2.0 and platforms such as WikiLeaks. These leaks were planned in such a way as to cause maximum damage to the Clinton campaign at key moments. For example, the publication of the letters on the eve of the Democratic National Convention provoked an internal split and reinforced the narrative of “dishonesty” of Democrats and Clinton personally, actualising the gender stereotype of “deceit” and “duplicity” of women seeking power (Lipton *et al.*, 2016). The publication of Podesta’s personal emails during the last month of the campaign created new negative information drives every day, diverting attention from her political agenda and forcing her staff to constantly be on the defensive (Zurcher, 2016; Jensen, 2016). This shifted the focus from her professional competence (a masculine trait) to the scandals and gossip traditionally used to trivialise female politicians. The mass media, including leading media outlets, have played a mixed role in covering the contents of the stolen emails extensively, often ignoring the fact that the source of the information was a foreign intelligence operation aimed at undermining the democratic process (Lipton *et al.*, 2016). Thus, external interference was a catalyst that reinforced already existing negative gender and political narratives about the candidate’s “inauthenticity” and “secrecy”, creating a toxic information environment in which the Clinton campaign’s positive communication strategy and its attempts to expose the opponent’s misogyny proved ineffective. In her speech after the election results were announced, Hillary Clinton addressed her supporters expressing disappointment, but emphasising the importance of continuing to fight for the values of democracy and inclusivity. She explicitly mentioned the “glass ceiling” that she could not break through, but stressed that one day another woman would do it. Her speech was imbued with messages of support and hope for young girls, encouraging them to believe in themselves and not give up despite obstacles (Hillary Clinton full..., 2016). This has become an element of post-campaign discourse aimed at rethinking the gender role in politics and maintaining the desire for equality, even in spite of defeat.

Deep discourse analysis of media materials allowed identifying specific lexical markers and strategies that formed this negative background. In the lyrics of the BBC (Bryant, 2016; Prasad, 2019; Zurcher, 2016) and The New

York Times (Lipton *et al.*, 2016) were dominated by two key frames: (1) the “inauthentic” frame, which was constructed through evaluative adjectives with negative connotations (“cautious”, “inauthentic”, “calculated”); and (2) the “establishment” frame, which was fixed through repeated tokens “establishment”, “old politics”, “corrupt”. But in relation to Donald Trump, despite criticism, masculine tokens were often used (“tough”, “strong leader”, “fighter”), which created a discursive opposition to “true man determination” against “false female symbolism”. The media used strategies of delegitimisation (emphasis on the mail scandal) and emotional feminisation (doubts about “strength” and “endurance”), where the candidate’s femininity acted not as a resource for renewal, but as a marker of weakness and belonging to the old system.

Thus, the results of the study of gender discourses in the framework of Hillary Clinton’s political campaign in the United States in 2016 showed a deep contradiction between the candidate’s rhetorical self-presentation and her perception in the media space and among voters. This campaign was launched against the backdrop of unprecedented political polarisation and a wave of populist anti-elite protests, which set the stage for increased gender attacks. An analysis of key programmatic speeches, media coverage, social media communication strategy, and outside interference revealed that Clinton’s attempts to position her gender as a historical advantage and an integral part of an inclusive political agenda faced well-established stereotypes and cultural biases. These stereotypes were actively used by both her political opponents and external actors to systematically discredit her. This process took place through the construction and replication of a complex image in the media, which combined the features of a corrupt political establishment, a fundamental lack of authenticity, and a blatant discrepancy with traditional gender roles. Such discursive framing, reinforced by unprecedented cyber operations on the part of a foreign state, affected the final electoral results.

Intersectional challenges and strategic dilemmas in British media discourse on Kamala Harris

An analysis of the coverage of Kamala Harris’ candidacy by leading British media, particularly the Guardian and the BBC, during the 2024 presidential campaign reveals a complex and multidimensional discourse that goes beyond simple gender analysis and brings the concept of intersectionality to the fore. Unlike Hillary Clinton’s campaign, where a central element of criticism was her status as a woman in the establishment, in Harris’ case, the narrative was formed at the intersection of her gender, racial, and political identities as vice president in an unpopular administration. British sources have described a campaign that, despite initial enthusiasm, faced fundamental strategic dilemmas and failed to overcome deep-rooted cultural and economic anxieties in American society (Subramanian, 2024; Freedland, 2024; Smith, 2024). This analysis demonstrated how the globalised media space translates and interprets the challenges faced by women politicians at the highest level.

One of the central themes in British coverage was the problem of continuity and Harris' inability to distance herself from President Joe Biden. Sources repeatedly recall her response in interviews to the question of what she would have done differently from Biden: "Nothing comes to mind" (Subramanian, 2024). The phrase instantly became a tool for Republican attacks and, as the BBC notes, highlighted the political obstacles that her campaign could not overcome. The Guardian noted in its analysis that in an environment where only 28% of Americans believed that the country was moving in the right direction, any candidate from the current government faced huge difficulties. By refusing to draw a clear line between herself and Biden, Harris effectively stripped herself of the mantle of "change," confirming Trump's key message: "Vote for Harris, get Biden 2" (Freedland, 2024). To counter this narrative, her social media campaign actively promoted the idea of a "new generation of leadership" (Harris, 2024c). She directly contrasted her approach with that of her opponent, saying that in the Oval Office, she would work on her "to-do list" for the American people, while Trump would be busy "planning revenge from his list of enemies" (Harris, 2024d). This rebranding attempt was aimed at presenting her as the future and her opponent as a representative of a chaotic and vindictive past.

Another important aspect of the analysis was her intersectional identity as a woman of African-American and South Asian descent. The Guardian emphasised that Harris was the "perfect opponent" for Trump: "a liberal, successful, rich woman from California, an avatar of the same cultural elite that he and millions of others despise" (Freedland, 2024). However, sources noted that Harris, as the first woman and woman of colour in such a high position, faced double standards. Michelle Obama, speaking in support of her, bluntly stated that critics set a higher standard for Harris than for Trump, ignoring his incompetence, but demanding that she "impress at every turn" (Gambino, 2024).

Harris' campaign was also accompanied by a flood of racist and sexist insults, including from her opponent, who called her "dumb as a rock" (Gambino, 2024). In response, her own communication strategy consistently built up the

image of a wrestler. In her posts, she noted that all her life she fought for people who were offended (Harris, 2024b). This narrative was supported by concrete examples, in particular, her struggle for the reproductive rights of women, who, according to her, were deprived of rights and protection because of Donald Trump (Harris, 2024e). She promised voters that if given a chance, "nothing in the world will stand in her way" (Harris, 2024a), positioning herself as a determined and uncompromising defender of the interests of the people.

The strategic dilemma of her campaign has also been the focus of British analysts' attention. The BBC noted that the initial positive message and attempt to position itself as a unifier with a list of cases (to-do list) has changed to a much more negative tone in the final weeks of the campaign. Faced with a tense pre-election campaign, Harris launched a direct attack on Trump, calling him a "petty tyrant" in her final address ('I'm not perfect', but..., 2024) and "fascist" (Smith, 2024), and warning of the danger of his second term. This change in tactics was evident during the presidential debate, which became a key battleground for narratives. During the debate, Harris tried to present herself as a representative of a "new generation of leadership," while simultaneously attacking Trump for his economic policies, which she called a "sales tax for the middle class," and his role in undermining democratic institutions (Kamala Harris vs. Donald Trump..., 2024). She repeatedly tried to catch him in a lie and provoke him to emotional, unrestrained responses, which was partly successful, namely when the discussion concerned issues of his presidential term and attitude to the law (Highlights from the..., 2024). However, as the BBC notes in its analysis, this tactical turn could have been a mistake, because, according to Republican sociologist Frank Luntz, voters who already knew everything about Trump wanted to hear more about Harris' own plans for the future (Subramanian, 2024). This inability to articulate own vision amid economic concerns and concerns about immigration was one of the key reasons for its defeat. Table 1 provides general information on a comparative analysis of communication strategies and discursive challenges.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of communication strategies and discursive challenges

Analysis criteria	Hillary Clinton (USA, 2016)	Kamala Harris (USA, 2024)
Main message of the campaign	Economic justice, experience, and continued progress in the Obama administration	"A new generation of leadership", protecting freedoms (in particular, the right to abortion), countering Trump's "chaos"
Gender framing	A historic opportunity to elect the first female president, "breaking the glass ceiling"	Defender of women's rights, in particular reproductive ones; personification of intersectional identity (woman of colour)
Main vulnerability in discourse	The epitome of the political establishment, the lack of "authenticity", the email scandal	An indissoluble connection to the unpopular Biden administration, criticism for "insincerity" and "excessive caution"
Type of attacks from the opponent	Issues of endurance and health, accusations of corruption, personal insults	Direct racist and sexist images ("stupid as a rock"), accusations of incompetence
External influence factor	Massive Russian intervention through cyber attacks and strategic information leaks through WikiLeaks	Broadcast attacks through a globalised media space; no external interference of the same scale as in 2016

Source: developed by the author based on the analysis of sources CNN Staff (2015), N. Bryant (2016), C. Subramanian (2024), J. Freedland (2024), L. Gambino (2024)

Despite these concerns, the British media recorded one asset of Harris' campaign, namely support for women. The Guardian and the BBC agreed that her electoral strategy was based on mobilising women who were outraged by the abolition of the constitutional right to abortion (Freedland, 2024). This factor created a striking gender gap, in which women mostly supported Harris, while men leaned towards Trump (Gambino, 2024). However, as analysts warned, this support may not be enough. The BBC pointed out that even among those who support the right to abortion, a significant proportion, up to one in five voters in Arizona, still planned to vote for Trump (Smith, 2024). Post-election analysis confirmed these concerns: although 54% of women voted for Harris, this figure was lower than the 57% who supported Biden in 2020. In addition, she failed to hold on to the coalition that led Biden to victory, losing support among black and Latino voters, and among young people (Subramanian, 2024). A unique challenge was the stance on the war in Gaza, which alienated a significant portion of Arab-American voters in the key state of Michigan (Smith, 2024).

An analysis of the British media field showed that the discourse around Harris was built at the intersection of two restrictive frameworks. The first is the "double bind" frame, when the candidate was presented simultaneously as insufficiently dissociated from Biden's policy and not "strong enough" for independent leadership. The second is the "intersectional load" frame, where her gender and racial background were described through the vocabulary of vulnerability rather than strength. The British media actively used contrasting markers ("perfect opponent for Trump", "liberal elite woman", "California progressive"), positioning it as "different", disconnected from "real America". Moreover, publications used various rhetorical strategies: the BBC (Subramanian, 2024; Smith, 2024) tended to dramatise, describing Harris' changing rhetoric as a sign of a "campaign losing control", whereas The Guardian (Freedland, 2024; Gambino, 2024) used a moralising strategy, highlighting the unfairly inflated standards (the "higher barrier") that society and the media apply to female leaders of colour. Thus, British media discourse portrays Kamala Harris as a historical figure whose campaign was burdened with the legacy of her predecessor, strategic miscalculations, and the unique challenges of her intersectional identity. Despite attempts to mobilise women around the idea of protecting freedoms and presenting themselves as a determined fighter for the future, she failed to overcome the general desire of voters for change and economic stability, which led to her defeat.

Discursive pitfalls in the Swedish political context: Between gender equality and media reality

The analysis of gender discourses in Swedish political campaigns presents a unique case that contrasts with the American and British contexts. Sweden, which has long positioned itself as a global leader in gender equality and has even proclaimed a feminist foreign policy (Sweden's

feminist foreign policy, 2019), should have theoretically demonstrated a more egalitarian political discourse. However, research on coverage of women politicians' debates in leading media outlets such as Svenska Dagbladet and analysis of social media communication reveals the persistence of hidden and explicit gender stereotypes that pose significant obstacles to women in politics. One example of this problem is the case of Anna Lööf, a former leader of the Centre Party. As Sandra Hokansson, a doctoral student in political science, noted in her paper, sexist attitudes in society lead to women in power becoming targets for attacks much more often than men in similar positions (Female politicians have..., 2022). When Anna Lööf announced her resignation, she spoke openly about the relief that she managed to avoid physical harm during the election campaign. She confirmed that the threats she received as party leader were one of the good reasons for her decision to retire from politics.

Her case is not unique, but only one of many, illustrating how the hostile environment created in particular and on social media can directly affect the careers of female politicians, forcing them to leave their posts for their own safety (Female politicians have..., 2022). Her public discourse during the 2022 election campaign and at the time of her resignation focused on ideological and political issues, rather than personal attacks. In her resignation speech, she proudly recounted the achievements of her party during her eleven years of leadership, including tax cuts, emissions cuts, increased use of solar energy, and the fight against violence against women, mentioning the breaking of the "glass ceiling" (Lööf, 2022a). Despite the threats, her communication was filled with determination and ideological struggle. For example, she took a tough stance against the right-wing extremist Swedish Democrats (SD) party, explicitly stating that this party "grew out of Nazism" and that "Sweden still does not fit in brown" (Lööf, 2022b). In addition, she was not afraid to take complex and pragmatic positions, such as advocating restricting the right to demonstrate for extremists like Rasmus Paludan to prevent violence (Årenander & Nilsson, 2022). She faced political challenges, in particular, according to Svenska Dagbladet, her party lost support among young women, which Lööf herself partly explained by the fact that a female prime minister appeared in the country for the first time, and in times of crisis, voters tend to rally around the largest government party (Thurfjell, 2022). In her post-election address, she acknowledged that the result was not what she had hoped for, but expressed pride in the way her team "stood up for what we believe in" (Lööf, 2022c).

Despite this hostile environment, an analysis of the public communication of Anna Lööf Hedh, a representative of the Social Democratic Party, showed her active participation in a meaningful political struggle. Her social media activities during the 2018 election campaign demonstrated several key areas of work. First, it explicitly articulated the importance of gender equality as the foundation of a safer society (Lööf Hedh, 2018e) and pointed

to specific imbalances in representation, noting that in the municipality of Kalmar, where women make up 50.32%, some parties have up to 72.5% of men on the ballot papers (Löf Hedh, 2018d). Second, her communication was aimed at directly mobilising supporters and organising work on the ground, in particular, through the involvement of the women's wing of the S-Kvinnor party (Löf Hedh, 2018c). Third, much of her discourse was devoted to criticising political opponents, in particular the Swedish Democrats (SD) party. She called Sweden's potential exit from the EU, or "Swexit" promoted by the SD, "a disaster for Sweden" (Löf Hedh, 2018a) and analysed their budget proposals to demonstrate their antisocial focus (Löf Hedh, 2018b). Thus, her work illustrated how women

politicians, despite systemic pressure, continue to conduct active ideological and organisational work, focusing on the key programme principles of their party. The analysis identified repetitive discursive patterns that are common to different media environments, but manifest with different intensity in the United States and Sweden. To systematise the results obtained, the main discourses of gender delegitimisation, which reproduce media through lexical markers, rhetorical strategies and frame constructions, were classified. Table 2 provides a comparative analysis of these discursive strategies, demonstrating how media texts shape the "image of a female politician" in two different political cultures – from direct verbal practices to structural forms of discrimination.

Table 2. Typology of gender issues in political discourse: a comparative analysis of the United States and Sweden

Type of gender challenge	USA (Hillary Clinton – 2016)	Sweden (Anna Löf – 2022)
Direct verbal attacks	Use of misogynistic vocabulary ("disgusting animals", "fat pigs"), public doubts about endurance	Less common in public debates, but present in the online space
Media focus on style	Excessive attention to "authenticity", tone of voice, emotionality, and appearance	Similar attention is paid to the style of conducting debates ("aggressive" or "weak"), appearance and clothing
"Double standard"	Criticism for showing both "masculine" (too ambitious) and "feminine" (too emotional) traits	A similar dilemma: criticism for "rigidity" in the debate or for "softness" and lack of determination
Online harassment and threats	Spread of disinformation and offensive content, reinforced by external interference	Systematic threats of violence, which became a direct reason for the resignation of the party leader
Relationship to the political context	Hyperpolarised environment where gender was used as a weapon in the "culture wars"	Paradox of an "egalitarian society", where formal equality coexists with informal pressure and threats

Source: developed by the author based on the analysis of sources N. Bryant (2016), R. Prasad (2019), *Female politicians have...* (2022), K. Thurfjell (2022)

The specificity of Swedish media discourse lies in the paradoxical formation of the frame of "dangerous politics", where a female leader appears not as a subject of power, but as an object of constant threat. Lexical analysis of publications in *Svenska Dagbladet* (*Female politicians have...*, 2022; Arenander & Nilsson, 2022; Thurfjell, 2022) found a high frequency of words with the semantics of victim and danger ("hotad" – threatened, "uthängd" – exposed, "angripen" – attacked), which are almost not used in descriptions of the careers of male politicians. The media coverage of Löf's activities clearly shows a combination of personalisation strategies (shifting the focus from the political programme to the issue of personal security) and political delegitimisation, when its ideological confrontation with right-wing populists was described not as a struggle of values, but as a "conflict of personalities". This shows that in Sweden, gender discourse has taken the form of hidden structures of violence, where a female politician is forced to constantly overcome the discursive barrier of "vulnerability".

Thus, the Swedish political context, considered using the examples of Anna Löf and Anna Löf Hedh, reveals a deep paradox. On the one hand, the Löf case clearly illustrates the high price women have to pay for participating in power, because real threats and a hostile environment become factors that can end even the most successful political career. This proves that in a society that is considered a leader in gender equality, there are powerful forces

trying to push women out of the public space. On the other hand, an analysis of public communication between both politicians shows that they are not passive victims. Their discourse focuses on ideology, political achievements, and specific programmatic frameworks, from combating extremism at the national level to promoting gender equality at the local level. Thus, this unit demonstrates that women in Swedish politics are forced to fight simultaneously on two fronts: to defend their right to participate safely in politics and to perform the meaningful ideological and organisational work that voters expect them to do. Comparative analysis has shown that structurally similar discursive mechanisms appear in the United States and Sweden, although their forms differ significantly. The United States is dominated by a mediatised framework of confrontational politics, where gender is used as a tool of attacks through direct lexical aggression and hyperpolarised markers ("disgusting animals", "too weak", "incompetent"). In Sweden, on the contrary, gender delegitimisation manifests itself more subtly, through a discourse of vulnerability, where a female politician is framed as a target of attacks, which undermines her authority not by direct insult, but by creating an image of the "object of threat". All these patterns demonstrate that even in formally equal societies, the media continues to reproduce persistent gender oppositions that position women as "others" in relation to the normative image of a political leader.

DISCUSSION

The study of gender discourses in political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden has identified persistent patterns that indicate the systematic use of gender as a tool for shaping the perception and delegitimisation of women politicians. The results, which demonstrate the challenges faced by Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, and Swedish women leaders, are consistent with broader academic research and simultaneously add important nuances to understanding current political processes. The main conclusion is that despite significant progress in women's political representation, discursive practices in the media and public sphere continue to reproduce stereotypes and create unique obstacles that require women politicians to develop complex and often contradictory communication strategies. This dynamic is part of a complex relationship between media, voters and campaigns, the analysis of which is key to understanding current electoral processes, as shown in comprehensive studies of recent UK elections (Jackson *et al.*, 2024).

The central theme that runs through all three cases is the constant presence of gender stereotypes, although their manifestations and intensity vary. Meta-analysis conducted by S. Banducci *et al.* (2025), confirmed that for forty years there has been a weak but consistent tendency to associate female candidates with “feminine” traits and areas of competence. The results of this study are consistent with this finding, showing how Clinton, Harris, and Swedish politicians have faced double standards. Research by E. DuBosar (2022) made a clarification: during the 2016 campaign, there were few differences in purely personal coverage of Clinton and Trump, which indicates a possible weakening of the most obvious stereotypes in the leading media. However, gender bias has manifested itself on a more subtle level, in particular, in the coverage of strategies and problematic issues. This echoes the study by I. Tischner *et al.* (2021) on the British media, which identified three main ways to construct the image of female leaders: as “traditionally feminine”, as forced to “balance” between masculinity and femininity, or as “exceptional but prone to failure”. The Swedish context, where, according to J. Erikson & C. Josefsson (2023), a dominant female ideal of leadership but preserved masculine practices, illustrates this constant balancing act. Women are forced to meet conflicting expectations, which creates additional obstacles for them, forcing them to constantly prove their compliance with unwritten, often androcentric norms.

The main one is an analysis of discursive strategies used to undermine the legitimacy of women politicians. The results of the Hillary Clinton campaign study find a theoretical explanation in the study by J. Sorrentino *et al.* (2022), which identified two key discursive repertoires: “meritocracy” and “outdated feminism.” The former devalued the gender aspect by filing any appeal against it as a requirement for special treatment, while the latter portrayed Clinton's feminism as irrelevant. These repertoires effectively created her image as one that did not resonate with the

female electorate. These processes are taking place within the framework of broader “culture wars” around gender and gender issues. From the standpoint of discourse theory, these phenomena can be viewed through the prism of Foucault's concepts, as suggested by C. Melis & D. Chambers (2021). The establishment of certain ideas about women politicians is a manifestation of the power/knowledge dichotomy, where media and political opponents create and normalise discursive fields that limit women's agency and determine “acceptable” ways of behaving. Thus, gender becomes not just a characteristic of the candidate, but a field of ideological struggle, where certain versions of femininity and leadership are labelled as legitimate, and others, as in the case of Clinton, are considered deviant or outdated. This mechanism works not only through direct criticism, but also through silence and ignoring, creating a situation in which it is more difficult for women to convey their ideas to voters, as their voices are drowned out by the noise of gender-coloured discussions.

Language analysis of pre-election debates and speeches has added another dimension to understanding gender discourses. The study by F. Kashif *et al.* (2022) confirmed the results of this analysis, showing that Clinton and Trump used different language processes: Clinton was more likely to appeal to cognitive and emotional aspects, while Trump dominated material and verbal processes, which created an image of a pragmatic and active politician. This was supplemented by hedging analysis by A.G. Assiaka & M. J.D. Ibo (2021), which showed that Trump was more likely to use the modal verb “will”, which projected confidence, while Clinton used the word “can”, which indicated possibility. These linguistic differences, while not exclusively gender-specific, can unconsciously activate stereotypical ideas about male determination and women's tendency to compromise. Interestingly, the study by L. Hargrave & J. Blumenau (2022) showed that in the British Parliament, women are increasingly adopting “masculine” communication traits over time, which may indicate a gradual weakening of gender differences in political rhetoric, at least within certain institutional frameworks. This raises the question of whether such a change in style is a form of adaptation to masculine norms, or evidence of a real evolution of political style regardless of gender.

The results of the analysis of the Kamala Harris case, where the media narrative was formed at the intersection of racial and gender biases, empirically confirm the theoretical provisions of V. Sapiro (2022) on the critical significance of intersectionality. This study proved that, as the author argued, a combination of social factors (race, gender) forms a unique, more challenging experience for female politicians than one-dimensional gender models predict. In the Swedish context, the fact established by this study that Anna Lööf's high political visibility led to an escalation of threats directly correlates with the conclusions of S. Håkansson (2021). The data from this study confirm the author's thesis that women in higher positions pay a “higher price” for power, since it was recorded how

discursive violence transformed into a real factor in the end of a political career. In addition, the role of social networks in spreading misogynistic narratives revealed in the analysis is consistent with the concept of C. Vaccari *et al.* (2024) on the “disinformation gap”. The results obtained in this study demonstrate in practice how online platforms become a medium of radicalisation, which confirms the conclusions of these researchers about the difference in the dynamics of traditional and new media. In addition, the results of this discourse analysis, which revealed mechanisms for artificially constructing the image of “inauthenticity” (on the example of Clinton), echo the approach of S. Aboim (2023), who viewed gender identity as a fluid discursive construct. This study showed that political images are constructed by the media in dynamics that correspond to the theoretical framework of the scientist. Simultaneously, the recorded strategies for adapting politicians to masculine norms find parallels in the paper by K. Celis & S. Childs (2024). The analysis confirmed their view that women, regardless of ideology, are forced not so much to change the nature of representation as to adapt to existing patriarchal structures in order to survive politically. Thus, the discussion of the results of the study in the light of contemporary scientific literature confirms that the challenges facing women in politics have transformed from formal obstacles to complex discursive traps. Analysis of campaigns in the US, UK, and Sweden has shown that gender stereotypes, while becoming less explicit, continue to be effectively used to undermine the legitimacy of female leaders through subtle media frameworks, language strategies, and ideological narratives. Understanding these discursive mechanisms is key to achieving not only formal, but also real gender equality in the political sphere.

CONCLUSIONS

A study of gender discourses in political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden found that, despite differences in political cultures and levels of formal gender equality, women politicians continue to face persistent and multifaceted discursive challenges that affect the perception of their voters. It has been confirmed that media and social media play a key role in creating and spreading

gender biases that function as a tool for delegitimisation. The analysis revealed three different but interrelated patterns of gender discourse. In the United States, the Hillary Clinton campaign demonstrated how the combination of traditional stereotypes, the narrative of “inauthenticity” and external interference created a unique toxic environment. Coverage of Kamala Harris’ candidacy in the British media revealed the key role of intersectionality, where discourse was formed at the intersection of gender, racial, and political biases. The Swedish case showed the paradox of a society with high formal equality, where female politicians such as Anna Lööf faced informal but extremely destructive barriers in the form of threats and systemic online harassment. In particular, it revealed how the discourse of “outdated feminism” was used to delegitimise Hillary Clinton, how intersectional biases created a “higher standard” for Kamala Harris compared to her opponent, and how real threats became a significant factor in Anna Lööf’s political career.

It should be noted that this study had certain methodological limitations. The research was qualitative in nature and is based on the analysis of three specific cases, so its conclusions cannot be fully generalised to all political campaigns and cultural contexts. The source base was limited to publicly available content, not including internal campaign documents or direct interviews with politicians and their teams, which could provide a deeper understanding of their strategies and motivations. Promising areas are testing the universality of the identified patterns in non-Western democracies and experimentally studying the influence of gender frames on various electoral groups. An in-depth analysis of intersectionality was also required, considering the wide range of social factors that shape political discourse.

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Activist discourse and its influence on social change

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Abstract. The study aimed to determine how discursive formulas, visual codes, and networked practices structured protest movements and contributed to social change across three national contexts: the United States, Brazil, and Turkey. The research was conducted on the basis of open sources, archival media materials, images and videos, as well as corpora of social media publications. Sequential stages included a historical-comparative review of the concept of activism, discursive analysis of slogans, content analysis of visual objects, and a comparison of media representations, followed by an assessment of social outcomes. The principal findings indicated that short, rhythmic formulas in the United States and Brazil functioned as markers of collective identity and as interpretive frames, consolidating meanings around demands for justice, bodily autonomy, and institutional accountability. Visual elements – such as the raised fist and contrasting black, white, and yellow compositions in American cities, as well as pink-violet palettes and memes in the Brazilian social media segment – served as low-threshold carriers of meaning and enabled rapid replication in both offline and online environments. In Turkey, the combination of slogans, ironic cartoons, and graffiti created an alternative informational ecosystem. Analysis of news formats demonstrated a systematic divergence between fast-paced television reporting and analytical newspaper coverage: the former tended to emphasise conflictual episodes, whereas the latter concentrated on structural causes and legal consequences. The social effects included the intensification of political debates on law-enforcement practices in the United States, the activation of women's networks and the incorporation of equality issues into party platforms in Brazil, as well as the emergence of new civic initiatives and a rise in political awareness among young people in Turkey. The practical value of the study lies in the applicability of the proposed analytical framework for planning communications of civic initiatives, assessing media strategies, and developing an evidence base for public policy

Keywords: political consciousness; collective identity; civic resistance; slogans; feminism; satire

INTRODUCTION

Activism is understood as a purposeful form of social participation that entails organised actions aimed at achieving social or political change beyond the bounds of routine civic engagement. In contrast to volunteering or lobbying, it has a more persistent and often confrontational character, combining mass demonstrations, digital campaigns, and other modes of mobilisation. In scholarly discourse, activism is conceptualised as a means of collective influence on institutions and norms through coordinated actions and the generation of public pressure. The study of digital activism has gained prominence because political and social movements since the mid-2000s have increasingly used

digital media as a primary channel for mobilisation, communication, and representation. Protest events in different countries have demonstrated that networked platforms not only transmit information but also generate distinctive discursive frames within which collective identity, symbols, and the meaning of resistance were constructed. In many instances, activists' visual, linguistic, and digital strategies shaped not only public perceptions of protests but also subsequent political transformations. This underscores the need to examine the discursive nature of activist movements through the prism of slogans, visual materials, social media, and media representations.

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L. Schlogl's (2022) study demonstrated that digital activism was closely associated with the emergence of the so-called "hashtag generation". The author emphasised that middle-class groups in different countries used social media as a space for self-identification and political participation. The research found that digital practices became a key instrument of transnational mobilisation, enabling the alignment of local demands with global issues. This indicated that activism extended beyond the boundaries of individual states and acquired the characteristics of a global communication network. The study by M.M. Imran & N.U.A. Raza (2023) focused on the role of social-media discourse as a driver of social change. The authors established that digital platforms created conditions for new models of communication, in which short formulas, hashtags, and visual symbols performed a mobilising function. Their findings showed that online discourse mattered not only as a reflection of protest but as a factor shaping its intensity and its capacity to influence institutional processes.

The analysis by M. Eilert & A. Nappier Cherup (2020) examined a different dimension – corporate activism. The authors demonstrated that companies positioning themselves as participants in social change could play a dual role: on the one hand, supporting the demands of social movements, and on the other, using activist discourse as a component of institutional image-building. The study showed that, under conditions of global publicity, commercial entities were compelled to respond to societal expectations, creating new challenges for delineating the boundaries between genuine activism and strategic branding. The research conducted by M. Schulte *et al.* (2020) focused on the concept of social identity in relation to environmental activism. The authors concluded that a sense of belonging to a particular social group constituted the primary driver of transformative change. The findings revealed that individual practices acquired significance only when embedded within a collective context, explaining why digital campaigns succeeded in cases where they produced an effect of group solidarity.

The study by A. Cortés-Ramos *et al.* (2021) established that digital platforms provided youth movements with new forms of participation in political and social life. The authors demonstrated that young people used social media not only as a channel of communication but also as a medium for forming political subjectivity. It was found that communication practices on digital platforms created mechanisms for integrating local initiatives into a broader context, thereby strengthening the impact of youth activism. The publication by H. Zur & T. Hatuka (2023) introduced an important dimension of locality into the study of digital activism. The researchers demonstrated that protest practices were not detached from specific spaces; on the contrary, they combined digital tools with bodily presence in urban environments. The authors concluded that space, social media, and corporeality interacted as an integrated complex that shaped the character of local protests. This helped to explain why certain actions generated stronger resonance when digital and physical activity intersected.

The study by G. Sorce & D. Dumitrica (2022) highlighted the transnational dimensions of digital activism. The authors demonstrated that protest movements increasingly assumed a global character, with symbols, slogans, and hashtags circulating across countries and adapting to local contexts. It was established that digital activism functioned as a field of cultural transfer, in which local movements gained additional visibility through the international dissemination of their messages. The article by C. Barter & S. Koulu (2021) showed that digital technologies played a critical role in countering gender-based violence. The authors found that online platforms were used both as a space for exposing cases of discrimination and as a channel for forming communities of solidarity and recovery. The research demonstrated that digital tools could function not only as mechanisms of mobilisation but also as an infrastructure for healing after traumatic experiences.

Despite the substantial body of existing research, several gaps remained that required further analysis. Previous studies largely concentrated on individual dimensions of activism – global diffusion, social identity, corporate strategies, or local-digital intersections. However, insufficient attention was paid to how specific discursive strategies – slogans, visual imagery, digital networks, and media representations – were combined into an integrated system that shaped the field of protest movements within particular countries and, simultaneously, from a transnational perspective. Particular attention was required to determine how these strategies influenced the formation of political consciousness and the social outcomes of protests. This study aimed to identify how the discursive strategies of activist movements were enacted in different countries, and how linguistic, visual, digital, and media components were combined in processes of mobilisation and social change. The research tasks encompassed several directions: identifying the linguistic formulas of protest; examining visual materials – graffiti, posters, photographs – as instruments of symbolic communication; determining the significance of social media for organising and disseminating protest discourse; and establishing the social effects of protests, including their influence on the formation of new movements and the transformation of political consciousness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted from March to June 2025 on the basis of open sources, archival media publications, visual materials, and content from social media. The objective was to identify discursive and visual strategies of protest movements in the USA, Brazil, and Turkey. The selection of these countries was determined by their representation of three political models – democratic, transitional, and authoritarian – which enabled an examination of protest discourse under varying levels of institutional constraint. This comparison makes it possible to analyse three types of interaction among linguistic, visual, and digital strategies that shape the mechanisms of collective mobilisation and the articulation of demands. Sources were selected

according to the principle of representativeness and included materials reflecting protest activity in the USA, Brazil, and Turkey, with an emphasis on textual, visual, and digital content. The inclusion criteria comprised peak periods of mobilisation, clearly identifiable communication strategies, and source originality, excluding duplicates, unattributed materials, and content lacking protest-related meaning.

In the first stage of the study, which focused on the analysis of the concept of activism and its historical origins, a historical-comparative method was applied. It drew upon descriptions of workers' strikes and the formation of trade unions (Nyiramukama, 2024); materials on the suffragist movements and their first convention in Seneca Falls (Johnston, n.d.); and curated collections on pacifist, liberal, and socialist movements of the early twentieth century (Special collections..., n.d.). The analysis of slogans in the USA included the formulas "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) and "No Justice – No Peace", documented in posters and social media publications during the protest waves of 2013–2020 (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021; Hogan *et al.*, 2021). In Brazil, the expressions "Meu corpo, minhas regras" (My body, my rules) and related variations were examined, as recorded in protest actions and digital campaigns against gender-based violence (Loureiro, 2023). In Turkey, the material consisted of the slogan "Her yer Taksim, her yer direniş", widely represented in protest posters, graffiti, and networked publications in 2013 (Gruber, 2017). A discursive analysis was applied to this material, enabling the identification of the semantic frames of protest speech, the detection of recurrent structures, and the clarification of how short formulas fulfilled mobilising and identity-forming functions.

The next stage concerned the study of the visual culture of protests. The material consisted of posters, murals, graffiti, satirical drawings, and photographs and videos from protest sites. In the USA, the analysis focused on images of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the raised-fist symbol, which had become a marker of collective solidarity (Jackson, 2020; Lohan, 2020). In Brazil, attention was given to the use of colour codes in posters and to Facebook (n.d.) memes that mocked patriarchal stereotypes. In Turkey, the material included satirical graffiti and cartoons, as well as public exhibitions of humorous magazine covers ("the museum of the revolution") (Altay, 2013). A content-analysis method was applied for this stage, involving the classification of images by theme, colour palette, symbolic repertoire, and types of graphic techniques.

Subsequently, an analysis of digital platforms was conducted. In the USA, the primary focus was on X (Twitter) (n.d.) and Instagram (n.d.), where large waves of posts were recorded using hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and others. In Brazil, Facebook groups were examined, particularly Mulheres Unidas Contra Bolsonaro (n.d.), which contained personal testimonies of violence. In Turkey, the material consisted of a corpus of tweets related to the Gezi Park protests, as well as YouTube videos (Bosphorus Jazz Choir at Gezi Park, 2013; The new

Gezi Park..., 2014; This is life after Gezi..., 2014), which served as evidence of police violence. A method of digital content analysis was applied to these sources, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. On the one hand, the dynamics of hashtag dissemination and the volume of publications were examined; on the other, the substantive content of posts, the functions of memes, and the types of video materials were analysed.

The final stage focused on the social effects of the protests. In the USA, attention centred on political reforms (Bill of the United States Congress No. H.R.7120, 2020) was discussed following the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly the introduction of body cameras, revisions to search procedures, and strengthened police accountability. In Brazil, the analysis addressed the outcomes of women's campaigns, which contributed to the emergence of new policies supporting women, the development of shelters, and the establishment of psychological assistance programmes. In Turkey, the study examined the rise of civic engagement after Gezi Park, the formation of environmental movements, and the increase in political awareness among young people (Kirişçi, 2013; Taştan, 2013; Uzun, 2019). This stage employed a method of secondary analysis based on data from civil society reports, academic publications, and media sources.

RESULTS

Historical origins of activism. The dynamics of activist movements are delineated through the interplay of deliberate influence on social structures, practical action, and coordinated interaction among participants. These parameters define the characteristics of protest processes in different countries and provide a foundation for analysing their discursive and visual manifestations (Piatak & Mikelsen, 2021). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, labour movements were of particular significance, encompassing strikes, the formation of trade unions, and demands for improved working conditions. These movements demonstrated the logic of activist engagement: groups organised to demand changes in legislation, working conditions, and social policy (Nyiramukama, 2024). In parallel, women's suffrage movements developed, particularly in the United Kingdom and the USA, where activists demanded voting rights for women through petitions, rallies, and symbolic actions. For example, the first women's rights convention in the USA took place in Seneca Falls in 1848, initiating a prolonged struggle for women's suffrage (Johnston, n.d.). From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, pacifist movements and various liberal and socialist groups also emerged, advocating for peace, social reforms, press freedom, educational initiatives, and other forms of change (Special collections..., n.d.). The activist logic of these movements was expressed through public gatherings, organised campaigns, the distribution of leaflets, and educational activities. In the twentieth century, activism underwent intensified institutional and media transformation. In the 1960s and 1970s in the USA, the

civil rights movement became a central example. Activists organised boycotts, marches, and sit-ins, demonstrating civil disobedience in response to racial laws. The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956) and the March on Washington (1963) (Fig. 1) became symbols of a mass movement and of the use of street action as a form of political pressure (Cook, 2023; Milkis & Rader, 2024).



Figure 1. Participants in the March on Washington holding placards with slogans, 28 August 1963; photograph by Cecil Stoughton

Source: S.F. Chandler (2020)

In Europe, student movements in France in 1968 protested against the university system and authoritarianism, forming part of the broader “global protest year” of 1968 (Young, 2020). In the second half of the twentieth century, women’s rights movements, anti-war movements (particularly against the Vietnam War) (Price, 2025), and environmental movements (including campaigns for ecological protection) extended the logic of activism across multiple spheres. These movements operated not only through traditional media but also via printed leaflets, posters, and alternative media outlets. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, the development of information and communication technologies ushered in a new phase: the transition to digital activism. Activists employ social media, blogs, platforms for collective action (such as online petitions), hashtags, and other tools (Treré & Kaun, 2021). This format enables faster mobilisation, broader audience reach, and the integration of local initiatives. For instance, the Zapatista movement in Mexico in 1998 used networked communications to coordinate international support and to establish the “People’s Global Action” (PGA) network in protest against the World Trade Organisation (Maison, 2022). Digital activism is characterised by several features: a lowered threshold for participation (allowing individuals to join without significant resource investment), rapid dissemination of messages through sharing mechanisms (reposts, hashtags), and the combination of emotional and visual content to attract attention (memes, infographics). At the same time, there are limitations: algorithmic visibility, censorship, and asymmetries in resources between activists and media or state actors (Kirk, 2024).

Overall, the development of activism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries demonstrates a gradual transformation from centralised movements focused on street protest to hybrid models in which offline and online actions interact. This evolution allows activist discourse to permeate social media, influence the information environment, and engage with media publishers, creating new pathways for shaping public opinion.

USA: Black Lives Matter movement. The protest movement that emerged in the USA under the banner of Black Lives Matter arose in response to systematic instances of police violence against African Americans and the lack of effective judicial mechanisms in such cases. Its inception in 2013 was linked to the acquittal in the case of the death of teenager Trayvon Martin, and it gained further momentum following the highly publicised deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and George Floyd (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021). The movement focused attention on structural racism, discrimination, and unequal access to legal and social institutions. It rapidly evolved into a platform for articulating collective demands, encompassing not only police reform but broader issues of social equality. The movement’s mobilisation potential was strengthened through the use of digital communication channels, primarily social media, which facilitated wide visibility and the engagement of diverse population groups.

In the discourse of the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, several slogans occupy a central position, serving as mobilising formulas and markers of the movement’s identity. The most well-known slogan, “Black Lives Matter”, initially emerged in response to instances of violent deaths of African Americans during police interventions. It asserts that “black lives matter” in a society where, historically and systematically, the value of these lives has been ignored or diminished. Scholarly studies emphasise that the slogan does not have a single interpretative meaning – its semantics vary according to the speaking context, audience, and media mediation (Hogan *et al.*, 2021). Another key slogan, “No Justice, No Peace”, functions as a demand: without justice, there can be no peace. It expresses a causal relationship, indicating that the absence of justice for victims of racial violence generates social tension and protest (Corrias, 2023). Both slogans are short, rhythmic, and easily repeatable, which facilitates memorability and dissemination. They operate as signals of group identity and solidarity among activists and supporters of the movement. The lack of complex syntactic structures enhances their universality and accessibility. Furthermore, the discourse frequently includes variations of these formulas or their combination with the names of victims of police violence (for example, “Black Lives Matter – George Floyd”) or with other protest-related phrases (for example, “I Can’t Breathe”) (Carney & Kelekay, 2022). Short slogans also serve as the core of metaphorical constructions that create symbolic dichotomies such as “us/them” and “justice/injustice”. Through the repetition of these formulas, the movement consolidates a

linguistic frame in which violence, discrimination, and racial injustice are presented as systemic phenomena rather than isolated incidents.

The visual components of the movement's protest discourse play a significant role in communicating meaning beyond language. One of the most prominent iconographic forms is the raised fist, often depicted in outline or solid form, associated with resistance, solidarity, and defiance. The raised fist, combined with a minimalist style and high contrast, frequently appears in posters, stencils, stickers, and murals. Colours also carry symbolic weight. The predominant use of black – representing African American identity and the historical experience of racial oppression – is often combined with bright accents of yellow or white to create contrast and enhance visibility. For example, in many murals and street posters in 2020, white text on a black background or a black silhouette with yellow lines was employed to maximise contrast and legibility (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Work by the collective Trust Your Struggle, Oakland, USA

Source: C. Jackson (2020)

Posters at street demonstrations often featured portraits of victims of police violence (for example, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner), accompanied by slogans or hashtags (Fig. 3). In the case of memes on platforms such as Instagram (n.d.), simplified graphics or photomontages were used, emphasising the subject's face, a phrase, and an archival background. In urban spaces, graffiti and stencils featuring slogans or the movement's name appeared on building façades, fences, and bridges, effectively transforming the city into an open display of protest symbolism.



Figure 3. Portrait of Breonna Taylor on activists' posters

Source: D. Lovan (2020)

These visual elements serve multiple functions. Firstly, they provide immediate recognition of the movement within the visual field. Secondly, they act as an “easy entry point” for audiences who do not engage with or read lengthy texts. Thirdly, visual symbols can be replicated in digital spaces (screenshots, reposts, avatars), amplifying their informational impact. Social media has become a key communication platform for the movement. X (formerly Twitter) (n.d.) was one of the first channels for the mass dissemination of hashtag activism: the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has been used since 2013 to structure discussions, mark thematic threads, and centralise protest discourse. Analyses indicate that hashtag usage spiked on specific days associated with significant events, such as the announcements of police acquittals in the cases of Michael Brown or George Floyd (Bestvater *et al.*, 2023). Research covering 2014–2020 recorded tens of millions of tweets using hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter, and #BlueLivesMatter. Analytics showed that activists are more effective at mobilising short-term attention, whereas opposing or reactive accounts tend to exhibit more stable activity over time (Klein *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the study Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media notes that X (Twitter) functions as a new public sphere where discussions about race, policing, and racial justice take place (Dunivin *et al.*, 2022).

The portrayal of the protest movement in American national media significantly shaped how the broader public perceived its goals, tactics, and legitimacy. Traditional news outlets employed varied approaches to coverage: some emphasised civic solidarity and the largely peaceful nature of the demonstrations, while others focused on chaotic episodes, confrontations with police, and contentious moments during protests. This variation reflects editorial framing choices: certain publications sought to highlight the structural causes of mass mobilisation, whereas others concentrated on localised incidents, creating an impression of instability. In many cases, news stories were built around confrontational headlines and dramatic visual imagery, emphasising scenes of clashes or damage to private and public property (Palmer, 2021). Such an approach shifted attention away from the protesters' primary demands – investigations into deaths caused by police violence and the implementation of systemic law enforcement reforms – towards issues of public order and control. Rather than analysing the substance of activist demands, coverage often centred on official responses, calls to restore “peace” and “stability”, thereby projecting the institutional perspective and altering the balance between explaining the causes of the protests and presenting their consequences. In parallel, some publications emphasised the scale of the movement, the largely peaceful nature of most demonstrations, and the symbolic role of key slogans. Such coverage conveyed that the protests were not merely reactions to isolated incidents but also reflections of deeper social issues related to

racial inequality. Analytical articles paid greater attention to historical context, legal aspects, and participants' testimonies, providing a multidimensional picture of the protest process (Cox, 2022).

In the realm of political debate, the movement acted as a catalyst for discussions on police reform, including the introduction of bias training, the use of body-worn cameras, and the limitation of so-called no-knock warrants (executed without prior judicial authorisation) (Ray, 2022). This led to the emergence of legislative initiatives at the federal level, notably Bill of the United States Congress No. H.R.7120 (2020), demonstrating the transformation of protest discourse into formal political proposals. Moreover, the movement stimulated changes in data collection practices, political accountability, and the activation of local political actors. For example, it drew increased attention to racial disparities in criminal justice, education, and healthcare. In this sense, the movement functions not only as a protest force but also as an agent of change within policy and administrative practices. Another significant effect has been the international spread of the movement. The ideas, symbols, slogans, and strategic tactics of BLM have been imported and adapted in other countries – through changes in names, local hashtags, and contextual adaptations – in 2023, creating a multiplier effect in discursive influence (Strong *et al.*, 2023). Thus, the BLM movement in the USA demonstrates how discourse – through slogans, visual symbols, networked content, and media representation – can shape social perceptions, mobilise audiences, and drive tangible changes in political and legal spheres.

Brazil: Activism for women's rights. A key feature of the Brazilian women's movement is the use of short, rhythmic slogans that condense demands into easily comprehensible formulas. The central slogan, "Meu corpo, minhas regras" ("My body, my rules"), became widely recognisable during campaigns against restrictions on reproductive rights and in initiatives opposing violence against women. It articulates women's right to bodily autonomy and resists social and political control over female bodies. Other messages appearing in these protests include "Meu corpo não é público" ("My body is not public property"), "Liberdade para decidir" ("Freedom to decide"), and "Contra o machismo, estamos juntas" ("Against machismo, we stand together") (Loureiro, 2023). These slogans not only express political positions but also foster the formation of collective identity. A notable feature is the combination of general slogans with local narratives. Posters often included the names of victims of femicide or domestic violence, giving the demands a personalised dimension. By individualising these issues, the slogans acquire emotional and political resonance, extending beyond abstract notions of equality. Visual elements have become an integral part of mobilisation practices. Posters, banners, and street graffiti frequently employ shades of pink and purple (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Annual women's rights march, 8 March 2023, Brazil

Source: M. Osava (2024)

In the Brazilian context, purple is associated with the fight against violence towards women, while pink is used to highlight messages and create visual contrast. This colour coding is easily recognisable by audiences and links to the international traditions of the feminist movement. Meme culture on Facebook also exerts a significant influence. As a form of digital protest artefact, memes are characterised by simple graphic solutions: silhouette images, photomontages, and concise text (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Popular Portuguese-language feminist meme

Note: Não dependo de um homem (I don't depend on a man); Me banco sozinha (I support myself); Sou empoderada (I'm empowered); Sou independente (I'm independent); Se morde macho, kk (Bite your elbows, mate, lol); Quer dividir a conta? (Fancy splitting the bill?); Pagar tudo é obrigação do homem!!!! (Paying for everything is a man's duty!!!!)

Source: Feminista (2025)

Within Brazilian activist circles, memes often mock patriarchal stereotypes, such as the notions that "a woman should remain silent" or "her place is at home". Transforming these narratives into a sarcastic form generates a sense of collective resistance. Such visual elements are circulated through reposts and comments, creating a digital space for critiquing machismo. Online platforms play a key role in mobilising and disseminating feminist discourse. In Brazil, Facebook is particularly significant, with activist groups functioning as coordination hubs. One notable example is the group Mulheres Unidas Contra Bolsonaro (n.d.)

(“Women United Against Bolsonaro”), which in 2018 launched the #EleNão campaign. The hashtag quickly spread and became a marker of protest mobilisation, engaging over a million users within a few days. Facebook groups are used not only to organise protests but also for internal training and the dissemination of safety instructions. They function as digital headquarters, where activists coordinate actions, share resources, and analyse informational content. Local activist blogs play an important role, publishing personal testimonies from women who have experienced violence or discrimination. These blogs create alternative archives of experience that are often absent from mainstream media. They serve as valuable sources of data for researchers and help foster horizontal networks of solidarity.

National media, notably the newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo* (n.d.), regularly cover women’s protest actions and debates on women’s rights. Publications include interviews with activists, reports on domestic violence, femicide, and public campaigns against discriminatory statements by politicians. However, a tension exists between mainstream media and alternative platforms: large editorial outlets often present events as short news items, emphasising conflictual elements, whereas blogs and independent publications provide more context and depth (Carvalho, 2025). Mainstream media frequently reduce complex demands to a few quotations or dramatic images, which risks delegitimising the movement. In contrast, alternative platforms, including independent women’s collectives, seek to fill these gaps by offering a more systematic analysis. This divide between different communication channels creates a two-layered media space: on one side, major news brands; on the other, a network of activist resources.

Women’s activism in Brazil has produced tangible social effects. Firstly, the institutional visibility of gender inequality issues has increased. Under the pressure of protest campaigns, political parties were compelled to integrate gender equality into their agendas. The #EleNão campaign influenced the public agenda by demonstrating the scale of women’s mobilisation and its capacity to affect electoral processes (Fagundes-Ausani, 2025). Secondly, activism fostered the creation of horizontal networks of solidarity among women from diverse social and ethnic groups. An example is the *Marcha das Margaridas* (n.d.), which unites women farmers and highlights issues of agrarian justice, food security, and rural women’s rights. This movement combines feminist demands with class and socio-economic concerns, producing an intersectional form of activism. In several municipalities, public initiatives led to the adoption of policies supporting women, including funding for shelters, the development of psychological support services, and educational programmes on gender equality. These developments indicate that activist discourse can translate into concrete political measures.

Turkey: Protests in Gezi Park. The protests in Gezi Park, Istanbul, during the summer of 2013 began as a local initiative to protect green spaces and urban areas from

planned development. They soon evolved into a largescale socio-political movement, as the issue of preserving public space gained broader significance within debates on citizens’ right to the city and participation in decision-making processes (Farro & Demirhisar, 2014). The mobilisation of diverse social groups was driven by dissatisfaction with government policies, particularly the tightening control over the media, restrictions on freedom of expression, and interference in citizens’ daily lives. A notable feature of the protests was interclass and intergenerational interaction, reflected in the creation of horizontal networks of cooperation among participants (Taştan, 2013). The protests also responded to the increasing use of force by the police to disperse peaceful gatherings, sparking debates on the limits of legitimacy for state institutions. The events in Gezi demonstrated a shift from a local environmental issue to a multidimensional movement that intertwined urban development, civil liberties, and democratic participation. In this context, Gezi Park became not only a physical site of conflict but also a symbol of broader societal mobilisation.

One of the most recognised slogans during the Gezi Park protests was “Her yer Taksim, her yer direniş” (Turkish: “Everywhere Taksim, everywhere resistance”). Originating in Istanbul, it quickly spread throughout Turkey, symbolising that the protest was not confined to the geographic space of the park but metaphorically extended across the country’s public sphere. In this sense, the slogan conveyed the idea that all of Taksim – as the epicentre of protest – could exist everywhere if the spirit of resistance was mobilised (Gruber, 2017). Additionally, protesters actively employed humour, irony, and satire as elements of strategic resistance. For example, protesters interpreted images of penguins in the Turkish media as a symbol of censorship – when a national television channel broadcast a documentary about penguins instead of reporting on events in Gezi Park, protesters declared “we are the penguins”, emphasising the absurdity of the authorities’ information nihilism (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Satirical graffiti of a penguin wearing a gas mask, symbolising the protesters

Source: Occupy Gezi Images... (2013)

Other humorous elements included parodies of websites or brands with altered names; for instance, the popular marketplace site *sahibinden.com* was satirically

transformed into *tayyibinden.com* (a wordplay on President Erdoğan's name) (Sabral & Erdim, 2013). Such slogans and humour served a dual purpose: combining mobilising power with a discursive challenge to authority through parody, where sarcasm and symbolism became forms of political expression. In confrontations, visual representation became a central element of protest discourse. YouTube videos and photographs from the scene documented direct clashes, blockades, activist speeches, and the use of tear gas (Bosphorus Jazz Choir at Gezi Park, 2013; The new Gezi Park..., 2014; This is life after Gezi..., 2014). These recordings were subsequently shared online as evidence of resistance and a strategic record of the confrontations. Analyses of video activism during Gezi note that participants used smartphones, handheld cameras, and drones to produce footage that contrasted sharply with official media coverage (Doganay & Kara, 2025). Photographs from the protest scenes – clashes with police, street blockades, and the occupation of temporary protest camps – served as visual documentation that could be disseminated through both local and international media.

In addition, cartoons and graffiti became a form of localised discursive resistance. Images of politicians' faces, distorted portraits, graphic parodies, and slogans appeared on city walls and in periodicals (Fig. 7). These visuals often combined ironic text with protest symbols, such as stylised fists or masked faces. Street art functioned as a visual form of protest expression, conveying messages beyond the immediate site of the events.



Figure 7. Cover pages of satirical publications, “Museum of the Revolution”, Istanbul, 2013

Source: C. Altay (2013)

The image shows a wall displaying covers of satirical magazines exhibited in a temporary “Museum of the Revolution” during the Istanbul protests. Caricatures of political figures, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, operated as a form of visual resistance, employing irony and exaggeration to delegitimise authority. This mode of protest combined humour with a critique of state decisions, creating an alternative space for political expression. The presence of these magazines in the public sphere of the protests demonstrates how popular culture and media satire were integrated into the discourse of civic resistance. Such visual materials helped shape an alternative political field, circulating both in the physical urban environment

and online through reposts, screenshots, and archival collections. Thus, visual codes functioned as markers of collective identity and served as a means of rapidly conveying protest meanings in public spaces. They structured audience attention through recurring symbols, colour schemes, and recognisable graphic motifs, endowing protest messages with visual consistency and reproducibility. Moreover, these codes enhanced the mobilisation effect, allowing participants to position themselves as part of a broader movement, regardless of their geographical or social background. Visual elements also helped overcome informational barriers, acting as an alternative communication channel when media coverage was limited.

X (Twitter) (n.d.) emerged as a key communication channel during the Gezi Park protests. Analysts recorded that participants actively tweeted information about protest locations, movements of security forces, alerts, and safety advice. Studies note that, due to the lack of independent media coverage in Turkey, protesters themselves broadcast news via X (Twitter) and live-streaming of events (Barbera & Metzger, 2013). Researchers analysed over 54 million tweets related to Gezi Park to trace themes, temporal dynamics, and network connections among users (Ozturkcan *et al.*, 2017). This analysis revealed which messages mobilised participants, how the activists' communication infrastructure developed, and how information was exchanged across regions. In this context, X (Twitter) not only transmitted information but also became a symbolic part of the protest itself – a kind of digital public space. YouTube also played a significant role. The protests became visible to an international audience through videos showing the harsh suppression of demonstrations by security forces or scenes of mass resistance. Video documentation served as a tool to challenge the official discourse: activists uploaded reports, interviews, and footage of clashes to extend the narrative beyond the domestic media sphere (Doganay & Kara, 2025). These live-streamed videos and archival recordings increased the visibility of the protests and became a media resource for analysis, evaluation, and memetic use.

During the Gezi Park protests, notable differences in tone were observed between state-aligned or pro-government media and independent or alternative outlets (Oz, 2016). Some leading media in Turkey largely ignored the events or presented them as a localised conflict, downplaying their scale or emphasising “disorder”. As a result, protesters and the public were critical of the incomplete coverage. In contrast, alternative portals, bloggers, and online publications documented instances of force, arrests, and citizen testimonies. Many participants considered traditional media unreliable due to censorship or biased reporting, relying instead on alternative communication channels. Moreover, authorities employed strategies of censorship and counter-discourse: journalists were arrested, live streams blocked, and pressure exerted on media organisations. In some cases, state prosecutors petitioned courts to determine which television channels or online platforms

were broadcasting protest “propaganda” (Turkish prosecutors..., 2025). As a result, Turkey’s media landscape in the context of Gezi was highly fragmented: official channels sought to neutralise or marginalise the protest discourse, while independent and digital platforms functioned as signalling networks for the dissemination of information.

One of the key outcomes of the Gezi protests was the emergence of new civic movements and the strengthening of citizen activism. Following the events in the park, environmental initiatives, urban movements for the preservation of public spaces, campaigns against urban redevelopment, and efforts to protect freedom of expression and reduce police brutality gained momentum (Acar & Uluğ, 2025). The Gezi protest acted as a catalyst for the formation of local groups, which subsequently operated in their own neighbourhoods based on the logic of protest. The protest discourse also influenced the political consciousness of young people (Kirişci, 2013). Many participants in Gezi had limited prior experience in political organisation. The protests served as practical training in mobilisation, communication, and strategic thinking,

leading to a noticeable increase in youth participation in subsequent elections, civic initiatives, and activist campaigns across various cities in Turkey (Uzun, 2019). Moreover, the energy of the Gezi protests continued to impact cultural practices, including music, art, street culture, and the blogosphere. Song lyrics, visual artworks, and poems created in the context of the protests became enduring symbols of the movement’s memory and legacy.

Integrated strategies of protest movements. In the protest movements of the USA, Brazil, and Turkey, there was a notable interaction between linguistic formulas, visual representations, digital communication channels, and media interpretations, which established the logic of collective mobilisation (Table 1). The combination of these elements created an integrated system in which each component reinforced the others: slogans provided the semantic core of the protest, visual symbols made it recognisable, digital platforms ensured rapid circulation of content, and media discourse shaped public perception of the movements.

Table 1. Comparison of protest strategies in the USA, Brazil, and Turkey

Parameter	USA (BLM)	Brazil (Women’s Activism)	Turkey (Gezi Park)
Linguistic strategies	Short slogans (“Black Lives Matter”, “No Justice, No Peace”); personalisation through victims’ names	Concise slogans (“Meu corpo, minhas regras”); names of femicide victims	Slogans of territorial solidarity (“Her yer Taksim, her yer direniş”)
Visual codes	Fist of resistance; portraits of victims; high-contrast compositions	Purple-pink palettes; personalised posters; memes	Humour, caricatures, penguins; satirical magazines; graffiti
Digital platforms	X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube	Facebook groups, blogs, meme platforms	X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, livestreams, smartphone videos
Media interaction	Polarisation between support and criticism; varied framing	Gap between mainstream and alternative media	Open censorship, broadcast restrictions, alternative event archives
Collective identity	Solidarity around structural racial injustice	Solidarity among women of diverse groups against gender-based violence	Solidarity of “urban citizens” for freedom of space and expression
Social outcomes	Police reforms, reframing of racial inequality discourse, global diffusion	Changes in political agendas, local women-support policies, #EleNão	Urban movements, youth mobilisation, transformation of cultural practices
Type of strategy interaction	Mutual reinforcement of linguistic and visual symbols via digital networks	Visual-emotional codes + Facebook-based mobilisation	Humour + visual codes + digital protest archive in response to media censorship

Source: created by the authors

Linguistic strategies established the primary interpretive frameworks for events. Short, rhythmic, and emotionally charged formulas not only condensed key demands but also served a unifying function: their repetition reinforced a shared semantic space within which participants identified themselves. Visual codes – such as colour schemes, symbols of resistance, graffiti, or portraits of victims – transformed protest into a recognisable public practice and added an emotional dimension that could not be conveyed through words alone. Digital platforms acted as arenas for rapid mobilisation and alternative sources of information, allowing movements to disseminate their own interpretations of events. Through social media, protest symbols circulated on a global scale, creating a multiplier effect: local movements achieved transnational visibility, and their slogans and visual formulas became part of a global protest

lexicon. Media, in turn, shaped external perceptions of the protests: depending on editorial policy, movements could be represented as legitimate civic initiatives or as sources of conflict, influencing public support and the subsequent course of events. Collectively, these strategies enabled the construction of a collective identity in which participants perceived themselves as part of broader transformational processes. The integration of linguistic, visual, digital, and media mechanisms allowed protests to move from local incidents to wider social change, impacting legislative initiatives, public discourse, and cultural practices.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrated that slogans functioned not only as a tool for mobilisation but also as a mechanism for structuring the public discourse of protests. The study by

G.M. Sainz & A. Hanna (2023) showed that Fridays for Future employed concise formulas such as “There is no Planet B”, which combined informational content with an emotional impetus. Comparisons indicated that, although the subject matter of the slogans differed – climate issues versus structural racism – the logic of their use was similar: they created an educational effect while simultaneously prompting action. In the case of BLM, the focus was on issues of safety and justice, whereas the climate movement emphasised long-term environmental responsibility. This suggests that slogans possess a universal character as a communicative technology of protest, yet acquire specific significance depending on social context and audience. The study also revealed that visual resources in protest movements served to amplify the impact of slogans and enhance their recognisability. Y. Wang & G. Tavmen (2025), in their research on the Chinese movement #SeeFemaleWorkers, similarly highlighted the importance of visual symbolism, where imagery underscored female presence in the workforce. Comparative analysis indicated that in China, images were more codified and cautious due to state oversight, whereas in Brazil and the USA, they circulated freely and achieved prominent public resonance. This demonstrated that visual resources functioned not merely as communication tools but also as spaces for negotiating state-imposed constraints: in more open media environments, they became central elements of protest aesthetics, whereas under controlled regimes, they remained more hidden and symbolically cautious. Particular attention in the findings was drawn to the use of humour and irony as forms of resistance. A similar logic was observed in P. Pain’s (2020) analysis, where digital feminist activism in India employed irony and personal narratives to transform private stories into a collective protest discourse. In both cases, humour acted as a mediator between the personal and the public, creating a symbolic space in which authority was stripped of its aura of inviolability. In Turkey, humour tended to be collective and street-based, whereas in India it emphasised personalised narratives. These differences indicate that irony constitutes a universal strategy of resistance, though its expression varies – from individual stories in digital environments to collective satirical gestures in urban spaces.

The findings also highlighted the significant role of digital platforms, which served as essential infrastructures for protest. This aligns with the conclusions of S.J. Vachhani (2024), who demonstrated that networked platforms generate new forms of interdependence and vulnerability that can be mobilised as resources. In the Gezi and BLM protests, digital media facilitated horizontal communication and rapid information exchange, whereas in feminist networks in China and Brazil, they additionally provided functions of safety and support. This indicated that digital environments constitute multifunctional spaces: simultaneously channels for information, platforms for learning, and arenas for solidarity. The analysis showed that hashtags functioned not merely as tools for marking discussions but also as crucial mechanisms for integrating online and

offline actions. In Poland, #BlackProtest evolved from a digital space into the streets and then back into the online sphere. A. Nacher (2020) emphasised that such hashtags possess narrative potential, enabling protest movements to construct a collective story that unites individual experiences. Comparative research revealed a shared logic in the use of hashtags as “digital flags”; however, in the USA and Brazil, they spread rapidly on a global scale, whereas in Poland, they remained more localised. This confirmed that the scope of dissemination was directly dependent on access to international media infrastructure and on whether the issues addressed had a universal resonance or remained confined within national boundaries.

The findings also demonstrated that digital activism can translate into tangible change, extending beyond symbolic practices. Similar conclusions were drawn by Y. Li *et al.* (2021), who studied the Sleeping Giants movement and showed that digital activism is effective when it can combine online actions with offline outcomes, particularly in the realm of economic pressure. Although the mechanisms of influence differed across these cases – from boycotts to reforms and local initiatives – the success in both instances depended on the capacity to integrate digital protest into real socio-political structures. The findings indicated that digital environments are employed not only by progressive movements but also by right-wing political forces. For instance, in Latin America, women’s movements mobilised solidarity through digital networks, whereas right-wing movements, as noted by T. Gold & A.M. Peña (2021), developed their own strategies of digital mediation to advance conservative ideas. This demonstrates that digital spaces are not monopolised by a single political force; rather, they serve as a universal tool for all forms of activism. The differences lay in tactics: women’s movements emphasised the creation of horizontal networks, while right-wing movements relied on strategies to build vertical media chains. This underscores that the digital ecosystem functions as an open arena for competition among diverse ideological projects. A key feature of these protests was the significance of allyship and intergroup solidarity. Similar observations were made by S. Jolly *et al.* (2021), who studied allyship in sports, where alliances facilitated the promotion of social change. Comparisons revealed that, although the contexts differed – political protests in the USA versus global sports – the underlying logic was the same: allies helped broaden the discourse and increase its visibility. This suggests that allyship is a universal resource for activism, capable of sustaining long-term support for movements and fostering multi-voiced coalitions.

The results also demonstrated that in the USA, Brazil, and Turkey, digital campaigns were not limited to symbolic gestures but produced tangible outcomes, ranging from legislative reforms to the emergence of new movements. N. Madison & M. Klang (2020) also argued that digital activism possesses significant potential that should not be underestimated. A comparison of their findings with the results of this study indicates that examples from

different regions support this claim: even when initial actions appeared as simple “clicks” or the sharing of a post, they could develop into substantial social processes. This reflects a transformation in the nature of political participation in the twentyfirst century, where digital gestures often constitute the first step towards broader structural change. The study demonstrated that activism in the USA, Brazil, and Turkey unfolded in diverse contexts yet shared common features: the use of slogans, visual symbols, digital networks, and forms of allyship. Comparisons with other research confirmed that these elements recur across different regions and thematic areas, although they vary in scale, content, and political constraints. This underscores the universality of key activist strategies while also highlighting their adaptability to specific circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the research established that activist discourse functions as a multi-level instrument of social mobilisation, combining linguistic formulas, visual symbols, digital platforms, and media representation. Analysis revealed that while protest practices take distinct forms in the USA, Brazil, and Turkey, they maintain a shared logic in employing communicative strategies to construct collective identity and influence social change. The findings of the study confirmed that slogans constitute a key element of protest discourse. Slogans functioned as universal mobilisation tools, enabling complex social demands to be condensed into accessible and rhythmic phrases. In the USA, the raised fist symbol and contrasting colour schemes facilitated rapid recognition of the movement. In Brazil, the pink and purple colour code emphasised the feminist character of the actions and their focus on combating violence against women. In Turkey, caricatures and graffiti became a discursive form of resistance, combining humour with critique of authority. The study also confirmed the decisive role of digital platforms in shaping activist discourse. In the USA, X (Twitter) was used to centralise discussions and structure information flows; in Turkey, it compensated for the lack of independent media coverage and provided a means of circumventing censorship; in Brazil, Facebook groups acted as digital command centres for coordinating protests and disseminating safety instructions. It was established that

media coverage of protests significantly influences public perceptions of their legitimacy.

Protests in the USA, Brazil, and Turkey demonstrated that the combination of linguistic formulas, visual codes, and digital channels can transform local conflicts into large-scale processes of social mobilisation. In the USA, this was reflected in political shifts related to reforms of police accountability practices; in Brazil, in increased institutional attention to gender-based violence and the formation of horizontal networks of women's solidarity; and in Turkey, in the rise of youth civic engagement and the emergence of local movements that continued the logic of Gezi after the protests ended. The cumulative effects demonstrated the capacity of protest movements to generate long-term social change through the integration of diverse communicative strategies.

At the same time, the study had certain limitations. Firstly, the analysis focused primarily on three countries, highlighting the need to expand the geographical scope for a more comprehensive comparison of protest practices. Secondly, quantitative indicators in the realm of digital activism – such as data on audience reach and the dynamics of hashtag circulation – relied on publicly available statistics, which do not always provide a complete picture of information flows. Further research in this area should focus on quantitative analyses of the interaction between online and offline activism, as well as the long-term effects of protest movements on political culture and institutional change. A promising avenue is the comparison of activist practices under democratic and authoritarian regimes, which would reveal the role of structural constraints in shaping discursive strategies. It is also important to study the cross-cultural transfer of protest symbols and tactics, as this would help to understand how local movements acquire a global dimension.

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The metaphor of sovereignty in Brexit campaign discourse and the mobilisation of national identity

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Abstract. The relevance of the study was determined by the intensification of metaphor-based political mobilisation in agitational campaigns aimed at altering a state's existing sovereignty arrangements. The purpose of the study was to demonstrate the role of linguistic strategies in political mobilisation. The methodology was based on a combination of the conceptual method for establishing the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor theory, critical metaphor analysis of campaign posters and leaflets, and normative-institutional analysis of official Central Asian discourse. As a result, it was established that the Brexit metaphorical field was organised around mutually reinforcing clusters: "Sovereignty was an object of possession", "The EU was a limitation", and "Immigrants were an unrivalled flood", whose mobilising effectiveness was confirmed by independent voter-motivation data, in which state autonomy was the single most frequently cited reason for voting Leave. Three new metaphoric frames were proposed for Central Asia: "The region was a common home", "Cooperation was a road", and "Regional cooperation was a shared dastarkhan", each grounded in documented material already in the region's own institutional and cultural discourse and each constructed to encode sovereign authority as intrinsic to national identity rather than as a transferable commodity diminished by cooperation. An isolation-orientated metaphorical field, however cognitively efficient, appears to be associated with the material costs documented in the Brexit case, whereas an integration-orientated field grounded in a population's own discursive resources can mobilise cooperation without requiring the surrender of national identity. The practical significance of the study lies in the development of a comparative matrix of metaphorical clusters and a matrix of proposed integration frames, which can be used by political communicators and policymakers in Central Asia to diagnose the discursive resources available for constructing a sovereignty-preserving narrative of regional cooperation

Keywords: linguistic strategies; cognitive frames; referendum; conceptual mapping; regional cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of political discourses in the context of regional integration leads to the collision between different models of conceptualising the notion of sovereignty, which has traditionally been understood in the context of international relations theory as a concept that exclusively relates to the state. The shift in the understanding of sovereign authority from a classical to a socially constructed concept, however, gives rise to new demands upon the analysis of political discourses.

The study of the role of linguistic strategies in the construction of sovereignty examines the relationship between the role of the state within the international arena and the reflection of that role within the political discourse. The constructions of the nature of and the value of the concept

of state sovereignty emerge within the context of role contestation within a nation, as has been described by authors such as R.K. Beasley *et al.* (2021). More generally, though, the instruments that were used by a nation to both gain and maintain its role within the international system were often insufficient in the face of the need to gain support for the alterations to that role within the domestic political communication. The findings of the study by M. Donoghue & M. Kuisma (2022), for instance, indicate that the discourse of the necessity of "taking back control" can often be utilised within other areas of policy, such as those related to welfare policy.

Furthermore, the role of visual media in the construction of concepts of sovereignty within a political discourse

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had been investigated by authors such as H.W. Lennon & L. Kilby (2020). During this investigation, the authors had concluded that political cartoons often served to banally reproduce the concepts of national identity, otherness, and belonging within the political communication. A similar form of construction of the political discourse through metaphorical language regarding the threat of external actors to the internal sovereignty of a nation had been investigated by authors such as A.S. Ross & A. Bhatia (2021), who had revealed that the campaign posters produced by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) were effective in utilising such metaphorical discourse to construct the European Union as positioned in opposition to the nation's interests. A similar discussion of the role of metaphorical language within political communication had been presented by author A. Musolff (2023), though in relation to the suggestion that metaphorical language was only decisive within political rhetoric in relation to the integration of new concepts into already established concepts within that political discourse.

The regional and postcolonial dimension of the construction of national sovereignty in Central Asia had been investigated by T. Dadabaev (2023) and S.A. Avcu (2025). T. Dadabaev had established that the relations between the neighbouring states of Central Asia were based on the notion of brotherhood and shared principles of water governance within the region. The lack of shared understanding of the notion of regional identity between the states of Central Asia results in the decline of the effectiveness of regional integration institutions within the region in a non-linear fashion. S.A. Avcu had systematised the elements of the interaction between nationalism and regionalism in the region in the context of the principle of preserving state sovereignty. A key factor identified in the study was the fear of losing state sovereignty that individual states of the region exhibit, which impacts the effectiveness of regional integration in those states. J.B. Park *et al.* (2023) had established the connection between the still-developing institutional foundations of Central Asia as a region and the region's dependence on competing external multilateralisms. The absence of an independent institutional infrastructure in the region results in the dominance of regionalism influenced by external actors. The deeper historical roots of this tension between national identity and regional belonging in Central Asia were examined by M. Laruelle (2021), who had traced the construction of national storytelling across the region back to its Soviet-era origins. M. Laruelle had established that the diversity of each state's national narrative, rather than constituting an obstacle to regional cohesion, instead reflects a genuinely hybrid and multidisciplinary process of nation-building that cannot be reduced to a single regional template.

Despite a substantial body of research, the existing scholarly literature has, as a rule, examined the mechanisms of sovereignty construction and regional integration in isolation: either through the lens of the British case without an analysis of its applicability to other regions or

through the lens of Central Asian regionalism without an assessment of the linguistic-cognitive mechanisms underlying successful or failed mobilisation. Studies of the metaphorical dimension of political mobilisation have predominantly concentrated on the analysis of individual campaigns or regions, without a comparative assessment of the systemic differences between discursive models. As a result, an integrated analytical framework linking critical metaphor analysis of Brexit campaign discourse with the justification of new integration-orientated metaphors for Central Asia through verified structural dimensions has remained insufficiently developed, which determined the subject and purpose of the study.

The purpose of the study was to establish how linguistic strategies function as instruments of political mobilisation. Within the scope of the study, the following tasks were set: to operationalise the concept of the metaphorical field of sovereignty within the framework of critical discourse analysis; to analyse the metaphorical clusters of the Leave agitational campaign across four dimensions; and to construct a comparative matrix of the proposed integration metaphors for Central Asia according to key theoretical criteria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in the format of a comparative theoretical-empirical analysis with elements of conceptual and normative-institutional analysis. Two cases were selected for comparative analysis: the campaign communication of the Leave campaign within the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union and the contemporary political discourse of regional integration among the five Central Asian states. The selection of these two cases was justified by three criteria of analytical representativeness. First, each case realises a qualitatively distinct model of deploying the metaphor of sovereignty – an isolationist model in the case of Brexit and an integrationist model in the case of Central Asia – which creates the conditions for a substantively informative comparative analysis. Second, the British case possesses a completed observational cycle, allowing the rhetorical construction to be compared against subsequently measurable institutional and economic outcomes. The temporal scope of the study of 2015 until 2025 was determined by two considerations. The dates for the British case were determined by the starting of the Vote Leave campaign website in 2015 and the publication date of the Office for Budget Responsibility's current analysis of the consequences of Brexit in 2025. For the Central Asian case, the timeframe was determined by the formation of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia in 2018 and the publication date of the most up-to-date source materials on the topic in the years 2024 until 2025.

The study was carried out through four sequential methods. The conceptual method was applied to form the theoretical framework of the study, distinguishing metaphor as a stylistic device from metaphor as a cognitive

mechanism that structures political thought and electoral behaviour. The source base for this conceptualisation consisted of the foundational works on conceptual metaphor theory: G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981), which formulates the theory of conceptual metaphor itself, and G. Lakoff (2004), which applies this theory to political framing and formulates the conditions for effective reframing of political discourse.

Critical Metaphor Analysis, as developed by J. Charteris-Black (2011), was applied to identify and classify the metaphorical clusters in the persuasive political discourse of the Leave campaign. The corpus subjected to this analysis comprised five archived campaign leaflets and posters (23rd June Independence..., 2016; Are you British or European ..., 2016; Notice to all immigrants, 2016), the archived official Vote Leave (2015) campaign website in its entirety, one reported campaign speech analysis (Goldsmith, 2017), three documented public statements by campaign-adjacent and opposition figures (EU referendum, 2015; Michael Gove “shuddered”..., 2016; Nigel Farage says..., 2018), and three independent voter-motivation datasets (Ashcroft, 2016; British Election Study Team, 2016; Taylor, 2018), yielding a combined corpus of thirteen primary textual and visual sources supplemented by three survey-based data sources.

A textual or visual unit was coded as ‘metaphoric’ where it satisfied two conditions: first, that a concrete, physically or spatially grounded source domain (an object, a bounded space, a body, or a natural force) was mapped onto the abstract target domain of sovereignty or national belonging; second, that this mapping was either lexically marked by an identifiable linguistic expression (a verb phrase, a noun phrase, or a caption) or visually marked by a discrete pictorial element (an image, a composition, or a juxtaposition) carrying the same source-domain content. Each coded unit was assigned to one of four clusters according to the specific source domain it instantiated: units mapping sovereign authority onto an object capable of being held, lost, or recovered were coded as possession; units mapping the European Union onto a structure of physical confinement or coercive restriction were coded as constraint; units mapping the post-referendum condition onto a state of liberation or autonomous nationhood were coded as independence; and units mapping immigration onto a natural force exceeding a bounded capacity were coded as flow. Where a unit was ambiguous between two clusters, it was assigned to the cluster supported by the immediately surrounding co-text (the accompanying caption or speech segment) and only included in the final corpus once this assignment could be made unambiguously. Specifically analysed was the lexical and visual content of each source, classified by type of conceptual mapping (possession, constraint, independence, and threatening flow) and by the corresponding cognitive frame activated by that mapping.

Normative-institutional analysis was applied to examine the official discourse of Central Asian regional integration and to assess the extent to which existing institutional

language already approximates the metaphoric frames proposed in this article. This case was selected because it represents a region actively engaged in constructing a regional cooperation discourse under conditions of acute sovereignty sensitivity, making it a substantively appropriate test of whether the metaphoric frames identified in the Brexit case can be inverted to support integration rather than isolation, and because the existence of a documented, decade-long institutional record provides a sufficient body of official material against which to assess the degree of correspondence between existing rhetoric and the frames proposed here. The source base consisted of academic research on the discourse of the “Silk Road” in the foreign policies of Japan, China, and South Korea toward Central Asia (Dadabaev, 2018), an analytical article on the terminological avoidance of the concept of “integration” in the joint documents of the Consultative Meetings (Tolipov, 2024), and an authored publication by the President of Uzbekistan, reflecting the institutional rhetoric of the region (Mirziyoyev, 2025). Specifically analysed was the presence or deliberate absence of particular lexical items in official documents, as well as the institutional context in which alternative formulations were used, which made it possible to establish which of the proposed metaphoric frames constitute an extension of already existing institutional language and which represent an original theoretical proposal. This stage of analysis served to identify the discursive resources already available within Central Asian institutional communication, that is, to establish, prior to any classificatory work, which lexical and rhetorical elements existed in the region’s own official language and could therefore serve as the raw material from which the proposed metaphoric frames might be constructed or to which they might be compared.

The discursive resources identified through this normative-institutional analysis were subsequently organised through matrix analysis, applied to systematise the dispersed material into two analytical matrixes structured around consistent comparative parameters. Matrix analysis was applied to construct two analytical matrixes. The first matrix was built as a comparative matrix of the metaphorical field of sovereignty in the discourse of the Leave campaign, structured around four parameters: metaphorical cluster, conceptual mapping, documented instances, and the cognitive frame activated. Classification by the parameter of documentation was carried out according to a criterion of verifiability: only clusters for which a documented textual or visual instance was identified in archival or journalistic sources were included in the table. The second matrix was built as a comparative matrix of the proposed metaphorical field for Central Asian regional integration, structured around four parameters: the proposed metaphor, source material, theoretical justification, and proposed cognitive entailments. Whereas the normative-institutional analysis had identified which discursive resources existed and in what institutional context, the matrix analysis converted this

dispersed evidence into a systematic classification, carried out according to a criterion of prior institutional formulation: metaphors extending an already documented official formulation were classified separately from metaphors introduced as original theoretical proposals justified by structural or cultural evidence. The source base for both matrix consisted of the combined set of sources used in the preceding methods. A limitation of this study was its reliance on documented campaign artefacts and official statements, which do not capture real-time public reception of these frames.

RESULTS

The foundational premise of this analysis was established through the theories of metaphor developed by G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981). These linguists demonstrated that metaphor was not just an aspect of language and speech but was actually a foundational concept of human cognition. Furthermore, G. Lakoff & M. Johnson argued that the human conceptual system as a whole, which was responsible for both thought and action, was actually metaphorical in its nature. Concepts like “Argument was War”, for instance, indicate the way that individuals understand the concept of argument and its elements. The political significance of these findings was developed by G. Lakoff (2004). G. Lakoff’s analysis suggests that political debates can be understood as contests over which cognitive frames were established for the audience. A frame, according to G. Lakoff, was a cognitive understanding of the world that creates a dismissal of any information that does not support that frame for the individuals that hold that frame. Therefore, if a politician was able to successfully install a frame in the minds of the audience members, the politician does not have to win the debate and argue the points for the audience to believe in the politician’s viewpoints. J. Charteris-Black (2011) expanded upon G. Lakoff’s theories through the development of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA). According to J. Charteris-Black, metaphors used in political rhetoric work to convey three main ideas to the audience for political purposes: the legitimisation of a political worldview, the creation of political myths to support that political worldview, and the activation of specific emotions within the audience that have an impact upon the attitudes and behaviours of those audience members during the election and beyond.

The concept of a metaphorical field, as applied in the article, refers to the group of metaphors that share the same target domain and that help to define the concept of a political idea for the people. In the case of the Brexit referendum of 2016, the target domain was the concept of sovereignty. The metaphorical field constructed by Vote Leave (2015) encompassed concepts from the domains of possession, constraint, health, and disaster, all of which helped to suggest the relationship of the U.K. to the European Union.

The most pervasive and analytically significant metaphorical cluster in the Vote Leave campaign organised

itself around the conceptual mapping “Sovereignty was a Possessed Object”. This mapping positioned political authority not as a distributed, institutionally negotiated property of governance but as a discrete, transferable entity that had been taken from the British people and could be physically recovered. The internal report produced from research, obtained by journalist P. Goldsmith (2017) and analysed by UK in a Changing Europe, recorded the word “control” 37 times and the phrase “take back control” five times, alongside direct voter statements such as “We’ve lost control – because of Europe”. The slogan therefore instantiated this conceptual mapping with remarkable cognitive efficiency precisely because it crystallised pre-existing possessive schemas already in public discourse. The verb phrase “take back” presupposes both that the speaker was supposed to be the owner of something prior to the establishment of a grievance against the speaker. The slogan was derived from focus groups of voters, who mentioned the concepts of control, borders, and laws in the context of discussing European Union (EU) membership. Thus, the speaker of the slogan indicates that the slogan has an origin in the minds of the voters themselves and that it was developed to maximise its emotional and motivational power over those voters.

According to a L. Ashcroft (2016) exit poll conducted on the day of the referendum among 12,369 voters who had just cast their ballots, those who voted Leave most frequently identified “the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK” as their primary reason for voting as they did. The British Election Study Internet Panel, which collected data across multiple waves including a pre-referendum wave, reported that sovereignty and immigration were the two most frequently cited motivations among Leave-leaning respondents (British Election Study Team, 2016). These figures establish that the “Sovereignty was a possessed object” frame was not merely rhetorical; it mapped onto genuine voter cognition.

Thus, the metaphorical field of sovereignty constructed by the Vote Leave campaign around the conceptual mapping of “Sovereignty was a Possessed Object” demonstrates a key pattern: the most effective political metaphors were not imposed on the electorate from the outside but crystallise possessive schemes already in the mass consciousness. The slogan “take back control” gained mobilising power precisely because its linguistic form came directly from the language of focus groups, rather than from the rhetorical ingenuity of the campaign. Empirical data from the Lord Ashcroft Polls and the British Election Study confirm that this frame did not remain a purely discursive phenomenon: it directly correlated with the declared motives of voters, the vast majority of whom explained their decision in terms of the categories of regaining control and national self-determination. This allows qualifying the metaphor of possession not as a stylistic device but as a cognitive mechanism that structured the real electoral decision.

The second of the major metaphors that was constructed within the text was that of the European Union as a structure that the Leave campaign's discourse constructed as a form of physical confinement from which Britain needed to be liberated. This was both logically and systematically entailed by the first metaphor of Britain's sovereignty being taken from the nation altogether – within this discursive logic, the structure through which sovereign authority was said to have been taken was represented as a cage, a chain, or a prison. The lexical items attested in campaign materials and speeches included “chained to a failing project”, “trapped”, “shackles of Brussels”, and “breaking free”. The metaphor of constraint was particularly effective at generating emotional responses because it framed the status quo, continued EU membership, as an ongoing condition of unfreedom, which required no future act of aggression to be objectionable. The possessive logic of the sovereignty frame extended into identity-based formulations as well. A leaflet distributed by the pressure group Better Off Out posed the binary question, “Are you British or European?” (2016), constructing British and European identity as mutually exclusive categories rather than as compatible or overlapping affiliations, an entailment consistent with the zero-sum logic of the possession metaphor identified above. This leaflet performed a distinct discursive function within the broader metaphorical field: where “take back control” supplied the grievance structure and the constraint cluster supplied the urgency, the British/European binary supplied the identity register through which that grievance and urgency were rendered personal rather than constitutional. By framing British and European identity as a forced choice rather than as a layered or compatible affiliation, the leaflet constructed national identity itself as a possession under the same threat of dispossession that structured the sovereignty-as-object mapping: just as control had been “taken” by Europe, the implicit claim was that British identity was similarly at risk of dilution or replacement should the audience fail to assert it through the binary choice presented. This identity-based extension of the possession schema was analytically significant because it demonstrates that the metaphorical field did not remain confined to the formal register of constitutional sovereign authority; it was actively translated into the register of personal belonging, which was a considerably more emotionally accessible domain for a mass electorate than questions of parliamentary competence or trade jurisdiction.

The Remain campaign, officially titled Britain Stronger in Europe, advocated for continued UK membership in the European Union (EU referendum, 2015). Its economic arguments, by contrast, offered a defence of the status quo, couched in probabilistic predictions about future outcomes, a discursive strategy that G. Lakoff (2004) has identified as systematically disadvantageous in competition with an established system of discontent. The cluster of captivity was reinforced by the Remain campaign's

own rhetoric. The Remain campaign's characterisation of economic warnings reframed factual warnings as instruments of coercive control, effectively positioning Remain as the party of constraint and Leave as the party of liberation (Office for Budget Responsibility, n.d.). This rhetorical struggle, which transformed opponents' arguments into evidence in favour of the system of captivity, illustrates what J. Charteris-Black (2011) has described as the myth-making function of political metaphor: constructing a narrative in which one's own side represents freedom and the other represents oppression, regardless of the underlying political essence.

The third cluster, deployed primarily by United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Nigel Farage's Leave. The EU, rather than the official Vote Leave campaign, extended the metaphorical field of sovereignty into the domain of immigration through the mapping “immigrants were an overwhelming flood”. The “Breaking Point” billboard depicted a photograph of refugees with the caption “breaking point” and “the EU has failed us all” (Michael Gove “shuddered” ..., 2016). The poster instantiated the threshold-and-rupture entailments of the flood metaphor: a natural force has overwhelmed the containing structures, and the system was depicted as having reached its breaking point. The flood metaphor was not confined to the “Breaking Point” billboard. A Better Off Out leaflet posed the question, “Is Britain getting too crowded?” (Notice to all immigrants, 2016), employing the same density-and-capacity entailments, a bounded national space approaching its physical limit, that structured the more visually explicit “Breaking Point” imagery.

Farage defended the poster by stating that “the point of that poster was to say that Europe isn't working” and that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to admit Syrian refugees represented “one of the biggest political failures of modern times” (Michael Gove “shuddered”..., 2016). In a later interview, Farage credited the poster with having “won us the referendum because it kept us focused on the danger of open borders” (Nigel Farage says..., 2018). The poster was condemned across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, its appearance in the final week of campaigning secured extensive media coverage, amplifying the sovereignty-as-possession and constraint-as-EU frames through an affective register of national vulnerability. The independence frame extended into campaign leaflet material distributed by Leave.EU, one of which was titled “23rd June Independence Day” (2016) and urged supporters to “leave the EU. Join the fight”.

The metaphorical field of sovereign authority constructed during the 2016 referendum campaign drew together three distinct conceptual clusters, each grounded in a separate source domain yet jointly orientated toward the same target concept of sovereignty. Table 1 summarises this metaphorical field as it had been attested in the documented record of the Vote Leave and Leave EU campaigns (Table 1).

Table 1. Metaphorical field of sovereignty in vote leave campaign discourse

Metaphorical cluster	Conceptual mapping (CMT)	Attested instances	Cognitive frame activated
Sovereignty was a possessed object	Abstract political authority; tangible, transferable commodity	“Take back control” and “We’ve lost control – because of Europe”	Loss/Recovery Grievance schema presupposing prior ownership and illegitimate dispossession, generating a restitutive rather than aspirational motivation for action
Eu was constraint	EU membership: a coercive restriction on national decision-making	“Break free of the EU”; “Vassal state...”; “Breaking Point” billboard; “the EU has failed us all”	Imprisonment/Freedom Reversal of the constraint -versus- protection axis, recasting the opponent’s risk-based argumentation as evidence of an existing condition of unfreedom
Immigrants were an overwhelming flood	Migration was a natural force exceeding structural capacity		Crisis/Threshold Threshold-and-rupture schema that displaces deliberative reasoning in favour of an urgency response to perceived imminent systemic failure

Source: compiled by the authors based on G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981), G. Lakoff (2004), J. Charteris-Black (2011), Vote Leave (2015), 23rd June Independence Day (2016), L. Ashcroft (2016), British Election Study Team (2016), Michael Gove “shuddered” at UKIP migrants poster (2016), Notice to all immigrants: Regarding the “Vote Leave” campaign (2016), Are you British or European? (2016), P. Goldsmith (2017), V. Prabhakaran *et al.* (2021)

The analysis of the data presented in Table 1 allows to identify the general architecture of the metaphorical field of sovereignty that underpinned the Vote Leave campaign. All three clusters, despite their different source areas, relied on a common deep structure: the presence of a lost good, a guilty external agent, and an accessible path to recovery through a single political act. This structural uniformity explains why the metaphors operated not as separate rhetorical devices but as a mutually reinforcing system: the activation of one metaphor (e.g., loss of control) automatically prepared the cognitive ground for the adoption of a related one (e.g., the image of the EU as a prison or a threatening flow). It was also noticeable that the rhetorical power of these metaphors, as constructed within the campaign’s own discourse, did not appear to depend primarily on their factual accuracy but on their capacity to transform complex institutional issues into direct, personally tangible states of loss, limitation, and threat. It was this property, and not the substantive validity of the arguments, that determined their mobilisation effectiveness, which was confirmed by the very fact of the integration of thematically opposite plots (economic, migration, and constitutional) into a single emotionally coherent narrative structure.

The mobilising efficacy of the Brexit metaphorical field cannot be attributed to any one slogan or visual artefact. Rather, as J. Charteris-Black (2011) explains of such fields in general, the field’s power derived from the interaction of several different metaphorical clusters within the same ideological structure. Each of the clusters (clusters of possession, captivity and flood) contributed to the power of the others through their use of the same general structure and concept: that Britain was losing something valuable to an external entity and that its recovery was possible through the exit of that external entity. The reason these specific themes (control, sovereignty, immigration, and borders) proved emotionally persuasive for Leave supporters, rather than other available themes such as trade regulation or institutional procedure, lies in the structural property they share: each maps an abstract, institutionally mediated

political relationship onto a concrete, bodily, or spatially bounded experience that requires no specialised knowledge to process emotionally. A voter does not need to understand the legislative competence of the European Parliament to feel the force of “taking back control”; they need only possess the ordinary human experience of having something taken and wanting it returned. The same holds for borders and immigration: a voter does not need to evaluate net migration statistics to respond to the image of a bounded space approaching its physical capacity, because the flood and threshold schema draws on a pre-linguistic, embodied understanding of containment and overflow. This was precisely the mechanism G. Lakoff (2004) identifies as central to political framing: effective frames bypass deliberative, fact-based reasoning by activating schemas that were already cognitively available to the audience, and the four themes identified in this study (control, sovereignty, immigration, and borders) were rhetorically effective specifically because each could be mapped onto such a pre-existing embodied schema (possession, captivity, identity, and flood, respectively) without requiring the audience to first acquire new factual or institutional knowledge.

The legitimating function of this mobilisation extended beyond the immediate act of voting. Because the metaphorical field constructed the referendum outcome not as a policy choice subject to revision in light of subsequent evidence, but as the restitution of something rightfully owned, it supplied a durable legitimating frame for the management decisions and policy course that followed the vote: any subsequent government action consistent with exit could be represented as fulfilling a moral debt of restitution, while any action that appeared to compromise on the terms of exit could be represented as a renewed act of dispossession. This explains why the post-referendum economic evidence reviewed below, despite its consistency and source authority, proved insufficient to revise public support for the underlying frame: a possession-and-recovery schema, once activated, evaluates subsequent decisions according to whether they honour the restitution rather

than according to their independent economic merit. The same mechanism carries a direct implication for the comparative argument of this article: where an integration-orientated metaphorical field was successfully established prior to a formal decision point for Central Asia, it would be expected to perform the same legitimating function in reverse, evaluating subsequent integration or isolation decisions according to whether they honour shared belonging rather than according to whether they recover a contested possession.

The cognitive-affective mechanism described by G. Lakoff (2004) worked as follows: the activation of the frame that “sovereignty was a possessed object” leads to the feeling of indignation at a grievance – the frame that the “EU was captivity” creates a sense of urgency regarding that feeling of indignation. Consequently, abstract arguments regarding the competence of Parliament to pass legislation on a certain topic were replaced with emotionally charged arguments about the personal stake that each individual has in the outcome of that debate.

The empirical record of voter motivation confirms the affective reach of this structure. Independent surveys conducted at the time of the referendum identified sovereignty and immigration as the two most frequently cited reasons for voting Leave, with sovereign authority alone accounting for approximately 45 per cent of the Leave vote in the exit poll. Among those who intended to vote Leave pre-referendum data showed “sovereignty/EU bureaucracy” and “immigration” were each cited by approximately 26 per cent of respondents (Taylor, 2018). These figures indicate that the metaphorical field of state autonomy, as constructed by the Leave campaign, succeeded in organising voter cognition around a coherent set of grievance frames.

The post-referendum record provides an empirical basis for assessing claims encoded in the Brexit metaphorical field, in particular the claim that national sovereignty, once “returned”, will lead to improved outcomes for the British polity. The reviewed evidence indicates a consistent pattern across several macroeconomic measures. The Office for Budget Responsibility (n.d.), in its October 2021 Economic and Fiscal Review, estimated that Brexit would reduce the UK’s long-term productivity by 4 per cent compared to remaining in the EU, with the Trade and Cooperation Agreement resulting in a roughly 15 per cent reduction in both imports and exports compared to the counterfactual. These findings were analytically significant not for their political valence but for what they reveal about the relationship between metaphorical language and material outcomes. The metaphor of “Sovereignty was an object owned”, by constructing the restoration of state autonomy as an event with immediate positive consequences for the national organism, has generated expectations that institutional and economic experience has not borne out. The idea of the organism metaphor has run into the empirical constraint that isolation from an integrated single market entails measurable costs in productivity, trade intensity and foreign direct investment.

The Brexit case can accordingly be considered an illustrative case of isolationist political metaphors within this analysis. The results of the study suggest that metaphors that organise sovereignty around the structure of possession-captivity-liberation, while demonstrably effective in mobilising electoral behaviour, encode a model of national self-sufficiency that does not correspond to the structural conditions of the 21st-century political economy. The implications for Central Asian political discourse were straightforward: the cognitive accessibility of the Brexit model as a template for asserting state autonomy may be interpreted as a discursive consideration relevant to regional political communication, and the construction of alternative, integration-compatible metaphorical frames was accordingly a task that has both theoretical and practical dimensions.

The five Central Asian republics share a distinctive discursive challenge that has no direct parallel in the Brexit context. Whereas the Vote Leave campaign’s discourse constructed continued EU membership as a form of constraint in order to support withdrawal from an existing supranational arrangement, the governments of Central Asia were engaged in the opposite project: building regional cooperation from a baseline of post-Soviet fragmentation, while ensuring that the discourse of integration does not trigger the sovereignty anxieties that proved mobilising in the British case. The analytical literature on the Consultative Meetings of Heads of State of Central Asia (CMHS) documents a deliberate rhetorical strategy of “consolidation without integration”. All joint statements produced at the CMHS consistently emphasised equality, mutual respect, the voluntary nature of commitments, and respect for different modes of development, codifying Central Asia as “a pluralistic, diverse yet egalitarian space” (Tolipov, 2024). This presentation was analytically revealing: the institutional actors most directly involved in Central Asian regionalism appear to have developed discursive practices that diverge from the Brexit-style frame of possession and release, although a fully articulated positive metaphorical field has not yet emerged at the level of mass political communication that could support these practices at the level of mass political communication.

G. Lakoff (2004) has established principles that were directly relevant to the construction of an alternative metaphorical field for Central Asia. The first: negating an opponent’s frame only reinforces it. This suggests that attempting to argue directly against the possession-and-recovery framing associated with the Leave campaign’s discourse was unlikely to produce an effective alternative argument. An entirely new set of arguments, built independently of and not in opposition to the arguments of the Brexit movement, must be constructed. This establishes the first of the conditions for the construction of an alternative metaphorical field for the nations of Central Asia: that the alternative metaphorical field must activate positive frames cognitively, independently of and in opposition to the grievance-based metaphorical field of the Central Asian nations.

Second, G. Lakoff (2004) argues that the frames that succeed in promoting a particular view of the world were those that cohere with a general morality and set of concepts; in his words, while the facts of an issue do matter enormously, the facts must be framed in terms of their moral importance for the frames to be successful, and any frame that does not cohere with the values of the system that emerges from those facts will fail as a frame despite its availability. The concept of frames thus creates a second condition for successful frames in the discussion of Central Asia: the frames should cohere with the principle of sovereign equality of nations that has already been established in the discourse of the CMHS to date; frames that imply a zero-sum relationship between national and resource equality would be expected, according to G. Lakoff's criteria, to be less effective for the success of communicative frames.

Finally, G. Lakoff (2004) argues that reframing only works if one finds an idea that the audience already believes

unconsciously, making it conscious, rather than introducing the idea of something entirely unfamiliar to the audience. Thus, another condition for reframing arguments was that the domains used in the proposed metaphors must be domains that were experienced and understood by the populations of each of the five republics. Based on these three conditions for effective reframing, as discussed by G. Lakoff, and upon the limited but existing discourse of regional cooperation found in the statements of the nations of Central Asia, three new metaphors were proposed that can extend existing discussions of Central Asia's integration of its indigenous nationalities into a systematic argument for integration of those nations into the region as a whole.

Having derived the three conditions that any effective integration frame must satisfy, the article turns to the construction of the frames themselves (Table 2). Each metaphor was grounded in statements from the Central Asian countries or from academic literature on the topic of integration itself.

Table 2. Proposed metaphorical field for Central Asian integration discourse

New proposed metaphor	Source material/Documented basis	Theoretical justification	Proposed cognitive entailments
A region was a common home	"in the same boat as equal partners"; "borders that once divided us have turned into bridges of friendship and cooperation"; "shared destiny"; "sovereign equality, mutual support and shared responsibility for the future of the region"	Extends existing navigational and kinship-based imagery already in official discourse into an explicit home/dwelling domain, which more directly encodes both shared space and individual autonomy	Domestic security; voluntary association; enhancement rather than erosion of individual identity through shared habitation
Cooperation was a road/path	Silk Road frame documented in external foreign policy discourse toward Central Asia; "regional interconnectedness"; explicit avoidance of the term "integration" across all CMHS joint documents since 2018	Proposes redeploying an externally used frame as an internal discursive resource, directional without being teleological, avoiding implication of sovereignty surrender	Movement and progress without a fixed destination; connectivity without loss of autonomous starting point
Regional cooperation was a shared dastarkhan	The dastarkhan was a documented hospitality practice common to all five republics, in which refusal of the offered share was considered a breach of social obligation	Satisfies the third condition directly: the source domain was not imported from an external tradition but was already part of the lived, daily experience of the regional population	Participation as moral obligation rather than optional courtesy; coexistence of distinct national dishes on a single shared surface; equality of those seated at the table regardless of status

Source: compiled by the authors based on G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981), G. Lakoff (2004), J. Charteris-Black (2011), T. Dadabaev (2018), F. Tolipov (2024), S. Mirziyoyev (2025)

The pattern that emerges across the three proposed frames illustrates, at the level of discourse construction, a principle consistent with what the reviewed evidence indicates at the level of material outcome: the documented case suggests that isolation was not associated with measurable progress, whereas integration, when it was permitted to retain rather than erase national distinctiveness, appears more likely to support it. The power of the metaphors that were constructed in relation to Brexit had a material outcome in the economic records of the nation after the decision to leave; the same analytical approach can be applied to propose that an alternative construction of these metaphors may more accurately reflect the cooperative dimension of regional alignment. The metaphors indicate that cooperation was only possible through the preservation of distinct national identities; a home was only a home due to the individuals that live within it, roads only become

connecting roads due to the existence of the distinct destinations that it connects, and a dastarkhan becomes sustenance for a nation due to the variety of its dishes. Thus, if frames exist that were capable of motivating a population towards isolation despite the documented economic costs reviewed above, it may be argued that frames of an opposite construction could similarly support integration without requiring the abandonment of national identity.

The contrast between the attested Brexit metaphorical field and the metaphorical field proposed here for Central Asia illuminates the broader theoretical argument of this article. The concept of sovereignty in the Brexit debate was constructed as a concept of something that had been lost and which had to be taken back from the European Union. There was a zero-sum concept at play: the gaining of state autonomy from the EU represented the losing of sovereignty to the EU. The metaphorical field proposed here

for Central Asia was constructed in such a way that sovereign authority was understood as a concept that cannot be diminished through the establishment of cooperative relationships with others. The home cannot become less one's own because others' neighbouring homes were becoming well-off. Roads cannot erase the starting point of a journey just by establishing a direction of travel. These were the cognitive entailments of the metaphorical field proposed here for Central Asia; the construction of an integration metaphorical field was proposed as a discursive resource that may address potential vulnerabilities such rhetoric could pose to regional stability. Explains that one of the major challenges for constructing affirmative political frames was to make them as cognitively and emotionally efficient as the frames of grievances against the political adversary. In the same way that the framework of sovereignty as a concept that can be lost to external partners like the European Union has proven to be effective in motivating regional political actors, the construction of an integration metaphorical field was proposed as a means of countering the threat that such rhetoric poses to the region's stability. Currently, such a metaphorical field has not been developed within the region of Central Asia in the literature that exists on the topic.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study demonstrate that the construction of sovereignty within agitational political discourse was a differentiated process, wherein the cognitive structure of the discourse, the institutional setting in which it emerges, and the ability to construct alternative discourses all interact in a way that any deficit in any component element will undermine the effectiveness of the others. The analysis conducted on these case studies demonstrates that the power of the metaphoric constructions within political agitation was determined not by the rhetoric of the agitators alone, but by the cognitive structure of the agitated population, the institutional structure of the nation in question, and the extent to which the population was receptive to the cognitive structure of the agitation – factors that differ between the isolationist movement of Brexit and the integration elements of the Central Asian countries analysed.

The results of this study were correlated with the conceptual conclusions of M.M. Anber (2023) and K. Chahbane & H. Zrizi (2023), who established those conceptual metaphors in political discourse function not as rhetorical embellishment but as a structuring mechanism through which complex political realities were rendered intelligible and emotionally actionable for mass audiences. The analysis conducted extended the applicability of this approach: the metaphorical clusters identified in Vote Leave and Leave.EU corpus operates exactly as M.M. Anber and K. Chahbane & H. Zrizi's framework predicts, transforming an abstract constitutional question into a directly graspable narrative of loss and recovery. At the same time, in contrast to these authors' largely descriptive emphasis on metaphor identification, the results of the study extended the argument further: the comparative matrix

developed in this article did not merely catalogue metaphorical clusters but evaluated their differential cognitive entailments against a documented record of subsequent material outcomes, a dimension largely absent from the reviewed conceptual literature. This extension finds further support in V. Prabhakaran *et al.*'s (2021) large-scale, topic-agnostic computational study, which demonstrated that metaphor density in political discourse correlates measurably with topic salience and audience engagement independently of the specific political content involved, a finding that corroborates the study's claim that the mobilising power of the Brexit metaphorical field derived from its structural properties rather than from the factual accuracy of its underlying claims.

The results of this study can be correlated with the conclusions of E. Gibson-Morgan (2024), who established that the Brexit referendum led to the development of several different conceptions of the sovereignty of the United Kingdom and its relationship to the EU through the process of role contestation. The analysis conducted in this study helps to confirm and clarify the conclusions of the researchers: the "Sovereignty was a possessed object" cluster indicates one of the conceptions of sovereign authority that was proposed by the U.K. and its leaders after the Brexit referendum and that such conceptions were made of both the nation as a trading state with the EU and its historical sovereignty as a nation. However, the results of this study also indicate that such role-contestation within the U.K. and its leaders after the referendum was actually resolved by the use of the metaphor before the referendum itself, which helps to explain the lack of negative impacts that such role-contestation had upon the underlying concept of the value of the state autonomy of the U.K. These conclusions were in agreement with the findings of E. Bescotti & J.-W. Matlack (2024), who established through theoretical analysis of the concept of sovereignty within practice theory that the concept was one that was constructed in a nation through the practices of its people, supporting its consideration as a concept that could be replaced with another metaphor within the Central Asian nation. This practice-theoretic account directly supports the study's central claim regarding Central Asia: if sovereign authority was constituted by practice rather than fixed by law, then the metaphors through which a population was encouraged to practise and understand sovereignty become a legitimate object of deliberate discursive intervention, rather than a given that political communication must simply describe. This was precisely the warrant on which the study's proposed "Home, Road, Dastarkhan" frames rest: because sovereign authority in the Central Asian republics is, on E. Bescotti & J.-W. Matlack's account, still being actively constructed through ongoing practice rather than settled by historical precedent, it remains open to being practised through an integration-compatible metaphor rather than through the possession-based, zero-sum metaphor that the Brexit case demonstrates can otherwise dominate such discourse.

The significance of another of the conclusions of the researchers that relates to the topic of Brexit and its aftermath was the conclusion of M. Keating (2022), who determined that the “take back control” slogan that was utilised during the referendum led to the development of different and often competing territorial claims to the concept of sovereignty within the United Kingdom. The analysis of the “Sovereignty was a possessed object” metaphor helped to reveal that such a metaphor was developed at the level of the U.K. as a nation, and that it does not relate to the claims to sovereign authority that developed within each of the nations within the U.K. However, it does help to explain those territorial claims in relation to the inherent susceptibility of the idea of possession to different and mutually exclusive claims to that possession. The alternative metaphors for sovereignty within the Central Asian nation, however, were not associated with such risks. The conclusions of the researcher that were similar to those of this study were those of D. MacShane (2021), who determined that the lack of a suitable alternative concept to the concept of “take back control” has led to the continued undermining of the U.K.’s diplomatic relationships with the remainder of the European Union.

The results of the study were also correlated with the findings of L. Suckert (2023) and S. Mohindar (2025). S. Mohindar established that the concerns regarding immigration continued to be felt even after the Brexit referendum took place, indicating that the metaphorical field identified within the Brexit movement continued to have power even after 23 June 2016. Furthermore, L. Suckert’s concept of “economic nostalgia” revealed that the desire of the Brexit movement to associate with the country’s pre-industrial economy was one of the main motivations for the movement’s participants, supporting the findings of the study regarding the significance of the “take back control” movement related to the economy. These findings corresponded with the analysis conducted for the study, which identified the applicability of both findings within the metaphorical clusters identified within Section 3 of this paper. Furthermore, the analysis conducted for the study revealed new findings regarding the ability of each of these concepts to relate to the manner in which such metaphors were constructed within the Brexit movement.

In analysing the cross-national applicability of such enemy-construction metaphors, studies by J. Roch (2021), F.L. Janodet (2020), and A. Vogiatzis (2025) helped to reveal the applicability of such findings outside of the context of the Brexit movement. J. Roch found that other populist political movements constructed the European Union in the same manner within other nations across Europe. Furthermore, F.L. Janodet established through his study of other European nations the similarity within the construction of metaphors of the European Union used within those countries. Finally, A. Vogiatzis established the use of such metaphors on social media platforms within those same countries, indicating the cross-media applicability of such findings. Each of these findings was extended in

the analysis conducted for the study, which recognised the cross-national and cross-media applicability of the metaphors identified within this paper. However, the findings of J. Roch, F.L. Janodet, and A. Vogiatzis relate to the construction of metaphors within already integrated European Union nations, whereas the study identified that some nations in Central Asia were constructing positive metaphors for an integration process that has yet to be established and opposed within their nations, indicating a different opportunity within those nations than exists within the cross-national movements that have been examined in each of these studies.

The mobilising power of the Brexit metaphorical field was also established through analysis of the leaflets and posters that were created during this period. These advertisements incorporated the metaphors of possession, constraint, and flood, as well as elements of persuasion beyond the use of metaphor alone, such as imperative grammatical constructions and direct addressing of the reader. These findings were in agreement with the findings of T. Harasym (2024) regarding the study of persuasiveness within British political discourse, wherein she found that persuasiveness was rarely achieved through the use of a single rhetorical device within British politics and government but often emerges through the combination of metaphors with devices like modality, repetition, and direct address of the reader.

The argument that the lack of an integration metaphorical field within Central Asia was corroborated by the analyses of regionalism by S. Mayer (2021) and A. Tskhay & F.C. Buranelli (2020). S. Mayer indicated that the regionalism that developed within Central Asia was established from outside the region and without the effort of the countries that exist within the region itself. The existence of such a form of regionalism outside of Central Asia indicates the lack of a discourse that developed within the region itself of Central Asia – one of the elements that should be filled by the establishment of a metaphorical field that was related to the region’s discussions of integration. Furthermore, A. Tskhay & F.C. Buranelli’s discussions of the concept of “balancing regionalism” within Central Asia, wherein the region works with both Russia and China to balance the power between the two without creating the same level of zero-sum diplomacy between the two nations as witnessed in the Brexit negotiations, corroborates the findings of the study. While A. Tskhay & F.C. Buranelli discussed the diplomatic solutions to the issues that emerged within Central Asia, the metaphorical field that was proposed within this study would provide the means of addressing those same issues within the region’s discussions of their regional policy.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study demonstrate that the metaphorical construction of sovereignty in campaigning political discourse was indeed differentiated. The Brexit movement was based on the following elements: “Sovereignty was an

object of possession”, “The EU was a limitation”, and “Immigrants were an unrivalled flood”. These three frames mobilised national identity by activating, respectively, a grievance schema of loss and recovery, a schema of imprisonment and overdue liberation, and a schema of imminent threat to a bounded national space; together, they converted an abstract constitutional question into a narrative in which the nation itself was cast as dispossessed, confined, and endangered, with the act of voting Leave offered as the singular means of restoring control, securing freedom, and averting crisis. These elements were effective because of how they were linked to each other. The study confirmed that these statements were a driving force for Brexit voters: state autonomy and immigration were cited as the dominant reasons for voting for Brexit in the British Election Survey, and voting Leave was the most common reason for voting Leave. A systemic pattern emerged: there was no direct correspondence between a metaphor’s rhetorical power and the material outcome it justifies. The Brexit field encoded sovereign authority as a finite, transferable possession in a zero-sum relationship with the EU; the empirical record shows its promised gains did not materialise. The proposed Central Asian field, “Region was a common home”, “Cooperation was a road”, and “Regional cooperation was a shared dastarkhan”, was constructed to encode the inverse logic: sovereignty as intrinsic to national identity and undiminished by cooperation since it was not framed as a transferable commodity. Rather than mobilising national identity through dispossession and confinement, these proposed frames were designed to mobilise it through belonging, shared direction, and shared sustenance, offering Central Asian political communication a discursive alternative through which regional cooperation can be understood as compatible with, rather than a threat to, the identity of each republic.

It was also established through the discussion of these concepts that the construction of such a field was a discursive and institutional problem, rather than simply a rhetorical problem. Even the construction of such a field was necessary to create a mechanism by which the two concepts can be united, but that does not ensure their conceptual reconciliation unless the cognitive structure proposed actually integrates with the nation’s concept of itself and its identity. Thus, the alignment of these two concepts was ensured through the development of G. Lakoff’s concept of conceptual metaphor, indicating that the political outcomes of a nation were based upon the conceptual structure that was presented to its citizens for consideration, not through the consideration of the arguments and evidence for each possible outcome. “Brexit”, therefore, demonstrates the outcome of a nation whose citizens were provided with a conceptual structure that considered integration a threat to its national identity. The metaphors that were proposed for the Central Asian nations, though, were constructed through the concepts that those nations themselves employ in their own structures and institutions, indicating that integration was a condition of national sovereignty, rather than the loss of that sovereignty through closer regional alignment.

Future research should empirically test the proposed frames through survey or focus-group methods across the five republics.

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The construction of digital well-being in corporate discourse: The case of Google and Microsoft

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to identify the linguistic and communicative mechanisms involved in the construction of digital well-being within the corporate discourse of Google and Microsoft, and to examine their impact on organisational norms, professional roles and corporate culture. The methodological framework consisted of a combination of theoretical, institutional, comparative, functional, discursive and normative analysis, supplemented by methods of systematisation and typologisation. This made it possible to trace the evolution of the concept of digital well-being, examine the normative foundations of its development and compare the corporate practices of the two international technology companies. The analysis confirmed that digital well-being had attained the status of a strategic element of corporate governance. An examination of the regulatory framework revealed that the disclosure of information regarding employee mental health had become an integral part of corporate accountability and management policy. A functional analysis of corporate documents enabled the identification of informational, integrative, regulatory, legitimising and representational functions, which were combined within a single communicative message. In corporate discourse, the normative language of values, positive framing of organisational change, the construction of collective identity and narratives of success were identified as the leading mechanisms for shaping digital well-being. A comparison of corporate policies revealed the dominance of a cultural-behavioural model at Google, based on psychological safety, whilst Microsoft employed a managerial-analytical model prioritising the measurement of digital workload, productivity and work patterns. Despite their different communication approaches, both companies had integrated digital well-being into their human capital development strategies, combining it with policies on sustainable development, inclusivity, digital transformation and leadership development. The findings could be utilised by HR professionals, executives of multinational companies and digital well-being policymakers developing strategies to support employees in the digital environment

Keywords: employee engagement; inclusivity; information overload; psychological safety; technostress; facilitator

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of hybrid working models and digital communication channels has significantly altered the nature of work processes, exacerbating the challenge of striking a balance between employees' productivity and their mental health. In an environment of information overload and constant connectivity, digital well-being has ceased to be solely a matter of personal concern, becoming instead a strategic institutional resource for human capital management. This gives rise to a scholarly need to investigate the mechanisms of discursive construction and representation of digital well-being in the corporate communications of leading international technology companies.

The theoretical understanding of digital well-being was further developed in the work of K. Hall (2025). The

author formulated a comprehensive socio-technical concept that integrated information systems, psychology, philosophy and public administration into a single analytical model. This synthesis made it possible to identify digital social connections, digital education and occupational health as fundamental components of digital well-being, whilst the proposed definition formed the theoretical basis for further research into the interaction between humans and digital technologies.

This line of research was further developed in studies focusing on the role of the organisational environment in supporting employee well-being. A.M. Pisarska *et al.* (2025) found that organisational trust was one of the predictors of digital and eudaimonic well-being among

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employees in the IT sector. The authors confirmed that transparent communication, psychological safety and support for professional development enhanced the sense of self-actualisation whilst simultaneously reducing the negative impact of digital workload. A comparison between Poland and Italy also demonstrated that the cultural context determined the strength of the relationship between trust and well-being. A similar issue was explored by R. Ranga-*rajan et al.* (2024), who presented digital transformation as a process with dual consequences for employees. The authors showed that technological development simultaneously expanded employees' professional opportunities and created additional sources of psychological strain. The proposed strategic directions demonstrated that transforming organisational culture, supporting digital health and developing a supportive working environment had become necessary conditions for the effective use of technology. The human dimension of the digital environment was explored further in the study by R. Sode *et al.* (2024). The authors confirmed the positive effects of workplace spirituality and mindfulness on employees' psychological well-being. At the same time, the findings showed that intensive use of digital technologies weakened this positive effect, acting as a moderator of the relationship between employees' internal psychological resources and their level of well-being. The practical recommendations focused on combining digital technologies with mindful management practices.

Another perspective on the development of the topic was proposed by J. Zheng *et al.* (2025), who linked digital well-being to human resource management practices in the healthcare sector. The authors established that mindfulness, emotional intelligence and overall well-being had a positive impact on the mental health of healthcare workers. The findings also demonstrated that digital leadership strengthened this effect through the mechanism of job satisfaction, which acted as a mediator between organisational factors and employees' psychological well-being. The macro-level aspects of this issue were examined in the work by D. Kleina-Šnipke & K. Krēsliņš (2025). The authors summarised global trends in employee engagement and confirmed that it remained critically low in most European countries. The analysis revealed a positive impact of engagement on productivity, innovation, organisational effectiveness and customer satisfaction. The findings also highlighted the need to develop Human Resources strategies focused on psychological well-being, generational diversity and employee support in the context of digital transformation. A. Jorge *et al.* (2025) analysed the digital well-being tools offered by leading technology companies and concluded that most of them focused solely on the quantitative monitoring of screen time. The researchers demonstrated that declarations of ethics and freedom of choice did not ensure genuine empowerment of users, whilst the concept of "useful time" effectively limits the understanding of digital well-being to technical means of regulating behaviour. This approach has cast doubt on the adequacy of existing corporate solutions and highlighted the need for a deeper

understanding of the social and communicative mechanisms of digital interaction.

Existing academic works have examined in detail the psychological, organisational, managerial and socio-technical factors of digital well-being; however, the specific features of its discursive construction in the corporate communications of global technology companies have not been sufficiently explored. The aim of the study was to analyse the characteristics of the construction of digital well-being in the corporate discourse of Google and Microsoft through the prism of communicative models that shape perceptions of employee well-being in the digital environment. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: to conduct a theoretical analysis of the evolution of the concept of digital well-being and approaches to its interpretation; to investigate the functions, linguistic mechanisms and discursive strategies used to represent digital well-being in the corporate documents of Google and Microsoft; to conduct a comparative analysis of the two companies' communicative models and identify the characteristics of the integration of digital well-being into human capital management strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological framework of the study was based on a qualitative design utilising theoretical, comparative and discursive analysis. The work was of a review and analytical nature and combined a conceptual synthesis of academic approaches with a comparison of corporate digital well-being practices. The chronological scope covered the period 2015-2025, which made it possible to trace the transformation of the concept of digital well-being following the spread of remote and hybrid working, as well as to assess the current stage of its integration into corporate management. In the first stage, a method of theoretical analysis and synthesis was applied to define the content of the category of digital well-being, the evolution of its academic interpretation and its place in contemporary organisational psychology. The data used were sourced from the International Labour Organization (2024) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024). These were utilised due to their high level of international representativeness, the systematic nature of their statistical data collection, and their focus on assessing the digital transformation of work. To characterise the psychosocial consequences of digitalisation, data from the World Health Organization (2024) were used, which enabled the integration of mental health indicators into the overall framework of the study on digital well-being. The analysis was carried out by comparing conceptual definitions, identifying common categories, grouping psychosocial risks, classifying organisational factors of digital well-being, and interpreting their interrelationships with human resource management models.

The study of the institutionalisation of digital well-being was carried out using institutional and normative analysis. The source materials were the Directive European

Union No. 2022/2464 (2022) and the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (2023). These materials were selected because they set out requirements for corporate reporting, human capital management and the disclosure of information on employees' mental health. The analysis identified interrelationships between the development of corporate responsibility standards and the integration of digital well-being into corporate strategy. Interpretation was carried out by comparing the content of regulatory documents with theoretical models of organisational psychology and corporate governance. Functional analysis of organisational communication was used to study corporate discourse. The source materials comprised corporate policies, codes of conduct and internal portals. The theoretical underpinnings of the structure of corporate discourse were established using concepts of corporate communication and organisational interaction, following which a functional grouping of communicative practices was carried out. The method of systematisation and typologisation was applied to construct a generalised model. The criteria for analysis were the function of corporate discourse, the primary communicative tool, practical manifestation in international companies, and the organisational outcome. In formulating the generalisation, materials by R. Breeze (2013), P. Catenaccio *et al.* (2021) and R.L. De Castilho Rossoni & M.C. Lima (2025) were utilised.

The empirical part of the study was structured as a comparative analysis of two multinational corporations. Google and Microsoft were selected for analysis, as both companies were global leaders in the digital economy, actively shaped standards for the organisation of digital labour, published a large body of open corporate materials, and systematically integrated issues of digital well-being into their human capital management policies. At the same time, they implemented different models of corporate communication, which provided a basis for a meaningful comparison. The research focused on publicly available corporate materials from Google and Microsoft, namely: corporate reports (ESG reports, diversity and inclusion reports), public platforms (Google re:Work, Microsoft WorkLab), corporate blogs, analytical materials (Work Trend Index reports, the "Breaking down the infinite workday" study), as well as guidance for managers and training materials on team development. These sources were selected because they represented official corporate communication, were publicly available and systematically addressed issues of employees' digital well-being. For the analysis, a source base comprising 10 publicly available materials from the period 2015-2025 was compiled, bringing together official documents and communication platforms from Google and Microsoft, as well as specialist academic and expert studies of their organisational practices. This included: Google (2015) – a platform with team assessment tools; A.C. Edmondson (2018) – a study on psychological safety; SOCAP Global (2020) – an analytical report on corporate practices; B. Poyton (2024) – an analysis of Project Aristotle; Microsoft (2024b) – Microsoft's report on diversity and inclusion;

Microsoft (2024a) – Work Trend Index Annual Report; Google (2025) – ESG report; Microsoft (2025a) – study "Breaking down the infinite workday"; Microsoft (2025b) – materials on Viva Insights; Microsoft (2025c) – description of Viva Insights' capabilities. The target audience for these materials comprised corporate employees, managers, HR professionals and external stakeholders (investors, researchers, the general public). The criteria for inclusion in the analysis were: being part of the official corporate discourse of Google or Microsoft; public availability; systematic coverage of issues relating to digital well-being, psychological safety, human capital management or organisational culture; and a timeframe of 2015-2025, covering the period from the launch of Project Aristotle to current ESG reports. The analysed excerpts comprised sections of documents relating to employee well-being, psychological safety, digital workload, corporate values, the roles of employees and managers, as well as psychological support programmes and digital well-being management tools (Microsoft Viva Insights, Google re:Work). It was noted that psychological support programmes (Employee Assistance Programmes, psychological counselling programmes, mental health resources) were mentioned in corporate documents and summarised in a comparative table; however, their actual presentation and communication to employees were not subject to systematic analysis due to a lack of access to internal communication materials. The comparative analysis of the documents was carried out using a unified set of parameters: the strategic objective of the policy, the conceptual framework, core principles, support tools, internal communication channels, the dominant discursive model, the role of the manager, the role of the employee, performance indicators, and the integration of digital well-being into corporate strategies. The unit of analysis consisted of excerpts from corporate documents representing approaches to the construction of digital well-being. The analysis focused on identifying dominant discursive strategies, the linguistic characteristics of corporate communications, the representation of the roles of employees and managers, as well as the ways in which digital well-being was legitimised in publicly available corporate materials from Google and Microsoft. The comparison was carried out by contrasting the content of the documents against common analytical criteria, which made it possible to identify differences in the communicative models of the two companies. A limitation of the study was that it analysed only publicly available corporate materials, without access to internal communication practices or data on the actual use of well-being programmes by employees.

RESULTS

Theoretical foundations for constructing digital well-being in corporate discourse

Digital well-being had emerged as an interdisciplinary category at the intersection of psychology, information technology, management and the ethics of digital environments. Early research focused on assessing the negative

consequences of excessive digital interaction, including information overload, technostress, digital addiction and an imbalance between work and personal life (Decataldo & Fiore, 2022). The rise of hybrid working, platform work and digital management systems had shifted the research focus. The analysis subsequently centred not only on mitigating the risks of digitalisation, but also on creating organisational conditions under which digital technologies supported psychological well-being, professional effectiveness and sustainable work (Avtalion *et al.*, 2025). Employees interacted not only with digital tools, but also with the rules governing their use, corporate expectations, accessibility standards and models of organisational behaviour. This was precisely why digital well-being was viewed as the result of managerial decisions, rather than merely personal digital hygiene skills. At a conceptual level, digital well-being was characterised as an optimal state of health, safety, social relationships and life satisfaction, achieved through the balanced use of digital technologies rather than by abstaining from them (Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2022). This approach had shifted the focus from quantitative measures of screen time to the quality of digital interaction, the level of employee autonomy and the ability to manage digital workload.

The development of the concept of digital well-being was directly linked to the transformation of the nature of work and the rapid digitalisation of the working environment following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2023. Remote and hybrid working had transformed digital platforms into the infrastructure for professional interaction. Email, corporate messaging apps, video conferencing systems and cloud services had ensured the continuity of organisational processes regardless of an employee's location. At the same time, the intensity of information flows had increased, the number of digital interactions during the working day had risen, and the boundaries between professional and private time had become increasingly blurred. Research by Eurofound showed that the digitalisation of work was accompanied by a blurring of the boundaries between work and non-working life, and that the issue of contact outside working hours remained a widespread phenomenon in European countries. One in five employees in the EU (European Union) reported having regular work-related contact after the end of the working day at least several times a month. Changes in the structure of work were accompanied by new psychosocial risks. The International Labour Organization (2024) characterised digitalisation as a process that simultaneously increased work efficiency and created the conditions for the emergence of "technostress" – stress associated with the need to constantly adapt to new technologies, digital systems and communication requirements. The risks cited included information overload, constant employee availability, the acceleration of work processes and an increase in cognitive load. Consequently, the issue of digital well-being was viewed not as an individual characteristic of technology users, but as a component of work organisation and corporate

governance. These trends were also confirmed by data from international institutions. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024) report documented a deterioration in a number of intangible well-being indicators following the pandemic. In 2023, nearly 30% of the population in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries reported physical pain or discomfort, whilst feelings of anxiety and sadness increased in many countries compared with the pre-pandemic period. The proportion of people who felt lonely ranged from 4% to 14%, depending on the country. At the same time, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development launched a dedicated Digital Well-being Hub, signalling the institutionalisation of digital well-being as a distinct area for assessing quality of life. Within the welfare paradigm, the digital environment was considered on a par with indicators of health, social integration and subjective life satisfaction. This issue was also confirmed by global assessments of employees' mental health. According to the World Health Organization (2024), around 15% of the world's working-age population lived with mental disorders, whilst depression and anxiety resulted in the loss of approximately 12 billion working days each year and caused economic losses of USD 1 trillion due to reduced labour productivity. Among the risk factors, the World Health Organization cited excessive workloads, insufficient control over work processes, long working hours and conflict between professional and personal responsibilities. In the digital environment, these factors took on new forms, as they were underpinned by technological capabilities enabling constant communication and continuous access to work.

The institutionalisation of digital well-being was directly linked to the development of organisational psychology. Psychological models of the working environment had traditionally analysed the impact of workload, autonomy, social support and leadership style on occupational health. The spread of digital technologies had introduced a new dimension into this framework – the digital organisation of work. The focus of analysis had shifted to phenomena that determined the quality of working life in the context of digitalisation: digital fatigue – a state of cognitive and emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged interaction with digital tools; techno-stress – psychological strain arising from the inability to adapt to constant change, information overload and the need for constant availability; cognitive overload – a state in which the volume of information and the number of decisions exceeded an employee's cognitive resources, leading to fragmented attention and a decline in the quality of task performance; as well as digital recovery after work – the process of restoring cognitive and emotional resources through psychological disengagement from work-related digital devices, which was critical for preventing chronic fatigue and burnout (Rahmi *et al.*, 2025). Techno-stress arose not so much from the use of technology as from the way it was integrated into organisational processes, monitoring systems and corporate expectations regarding employees' constant availability. Whereas traditional Corporate Social

Responsibility models focused on external stakeholders, environmental issues and engagement with communities, contemporary standards included employers' responsibility for employees' psychological safety. This transformation was evident in the European Sustainability Reporting Standards, which came into force under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (Directive European Union No. 2022/2464, 2022). The European Sustainability Reporting Standards S1 "Own Workforce" standard (European Financial Reporting Advisory Group, 2023) required the disclosure of information on working conditions, mental health, employee well-being, risks to the workforce and mechanisms for mitigating them, thereby shifting the issue of well-being from the sphere of voluntary initiatives to that of corporate accountability.

The ESG framework was also reshaping the management of digital well-being (Abbas, 2025). The social component of ESG encompassed issues of mental health, digital inclusion, safe digital interaction and the responsible use of artificial intelligence in relation to employees. Companies were also assessed on the quality of the environment that they created for their employees, and how well they avoided professional burnout and maintained healthy models of digital work. A similar trend was visible in the evolution of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion strategies within organisations. Many companies initially focused on providing equal opportunities to all individuals, regardless of their social groups. Following the growth of remote working, however, providing equal access to digital resources and support had become increasingly important for these organisations. Inclusivity was assessed not only through HR metrics but also through the quality of the digital experience of employees interacting with corporate platforms, support services and internal communication systems. The concept of employee well-being had also been expanded (Zolak Poljašević *et al.*, 2025). Traditional health or physical well-being programmes had gradually integrated digital components: guidance on digital hygiene, information overload management, psychological counselling via digital services, tools for monitoring working hours and preventing occupational burnout. Employees' psychological well-being was directly linked to levels of engagement and productivity, while organisations that invested in employee well-being tended to have lower levels of emotional exhaustion and staff turnover.

In addition to corporate initiatives, the digital well-being of employees was becoming a matter of government regulation. One such regulatory mechanism was the "right to disconnect", which enshrined the right not to respond to work-related messages, phone calls or emails outside working hours. France became the first country to enshrine this right in law through Law of France No. 2016-1088 "Relating to Work, the Modernisation of Social Dialogue, and the Securing of Professional Training Courses" (2016). Under Article L2242-17 of the French Labour Code, employers were obliged to negotiate the terms of use of digital communication tools to ensure rest periods, respect for employees'

private lives and the prevention of digital overload. A similar approach had been implemented in Italy through Law of Italy No. 81 "Measures for the Protection of Non-Entrepreneurial Self-Employment and Measures to Promote Flexible Work Schedules and Locations" (2017), which regulated remote (smart) working and provided for the establishment of mechanisms to implement the right to disconnect in individual employment contracts. In Portugal, Law No. 83/2021 (Ferraz, 2021) prohibited employers from contacting employees after working hours without a justified operational need, whilst in Belgium the right to disconnect was initially introduced for federal civil servants and subsequently extended to the private sector within the framework of collective labour agreements. The further development of this concept was also supported at European Union level, where the Resolution of the European Parliament No. 2021/2181(INL) "On the Right to Disconnect" (2021), called on Member States to ensure the effective implementation of employees' right to digital disconnection as part of occupational health and safety and mental health protection.

At the same time, state regulation covered the use of digital analytics in relation to employees. The key piece of European Union legislation was the General Data Protection Regulation (2016), which established the principles of lawfulness, fairness, transparency, data minimisation, purpose limitation, proportionality and accountability when processing employees' personal data. The practical application of these principles was set out in detail in Guidelines 3/2019 on the processing of personal data through video devices and Guidelines 2/2023 on the Technical Scope of Article 5(3) of the ePrivacy Directive, prepared by the European Data Protection Board (2019; 2023). These documents made it clear that the use of algorithms, video and digital monitoring technologies were permitted only if it could be demonstrated that such technologies were necessary, proportionate, and did not create excessive interference with the private lives of the employees. The regulation of the digital monitoring of employees was a separate area of focus for this discussion. In France, it was the responsibility of the employer to inform the employee of the use of any form of digital surveillance in advance. Furthermore, the National Commission for Information Technology and Civil Liberties (2023) stated that any use of digital monitoring technologies must be justified, must be proportionate to the reason for its implementation, must be communicated in advance to the employees, and should not lead to excessive restriction of the employee's right to privacy (National Commission for Information Technology and Civil Liberties, 2023). Thus, the European regulatory model was based on the principle that digital monitoring was permitted only where there was a legitimate management objective, the principle of proportionality was observed, and the transparency of personal data processing procedures was ensured.

International standards on psychosocial safety and health at work had become an integral part of regulatory policy. Occupational Safety and Health Convention of the International Labour Organization (1981), Promotional

Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention of the International Labour Organization (2006), as well as the World Health Organization Guidelines on Mental Health at Work (2022), defined mental health as a component of a safe working environment and recommended that employers implement systems for assessing psychosocial risks, preventing occupational burnout, managing digital workload and developing a supportive organisational culture. Furthermore, the international standard ISO 45003:2021 “Occupational Health and Safety Management – Psychological Health and Safety at Work – Guidelines for Managing Psychosocial Risks” (2021) became the first regulatory document to integrate the management of psychosocial risks into occupational health and safety management systems based on ISO 45001 and to establish practical recommendations for creating a psychologically safe working environment.

The elevation of digital well-being to the level of corporate strategy had transformed the nature of organisational communication. Psychological well-being took on a symbolic dimension through corporate policies, codes of conduct, presentations of well-being programmes, management addresses and other communication practices that shaped normative perceptions of the desired employee model. It was at this stage that digital well-being became the subject of corporate discourse, as its content was determined not only by management decisions but also by the linguistic constructs through which the organisation interpreted care for employees, professional responsibility and work culture. Corporate discourse was viewed as a system of texts, communicative practices, symbols and linguistic strategies through which a company defined its own values, interpreted professional roles and constructed acceptable models of interaction between employees (Breeze, 2013). Discourse was not limited to official documents. Its structure included corporate policies, internal portals, codes of ethics, management communications, training materials, presentations on employee support programmes, video messages, corporate blogs and digital platforms for internal communication (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). Beyond the decisions of the managers, the culture of an organisation developed through the reconstruction of the meanings that employees associated with the communications from the company. It was for this reason that discourse became the element that created the organisation itself. Such ideas were

reflected in the concept of the Communicative Constitution of Organisation, which stated that the rules, norms, values and identity of an organisation only had meaning through the communicative actions of its members (Nicotera, 2025).

Corporate communication served several purposes within the management of an organisation. The informational function of corporate communication was used to convey decisions, procedures, policies and rules of interaction within the organisation. The way in which information was communicated influenced the perception of that information by the employees. Additionally, the integrative function of corporate communication was used to communicate the values of the company to its employees. The regulatory function was used to communicate the standards that employees should follow in the workplace. These were not communicated as orders within corporate discourse. The legitimising function explained the decisions of the management to the employees of the company. Additionally, the representative function was used to shape the image of the company both within the company itself and in its interactions with external parties. These functions combined to form corporate discourse as a tool of social management within the company and effectively guided the behaviour of its employees and managers through voluntary adherence to the values of the company itself (Mumby & Kuhn, 2018; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019). Even beyond these functions, however, there were examples of corporate discourse in international companies fulfilling several of these functions within a single communication. For example, at SAP (2024) Global Health, messages about mental health were combined with an explanation of the business value of a healthy working environment, a description of the support services available, and the expected role of managers in creating psychologically safe teams. In the Unilever Well-being Framework, well-being was integrated into corporate culture through regular communication campaigns, manager training and leadership development programmes, transforming individual health care into an element of professional competence (Unilever, 2025). Such integration demonstrated that corporate discourse was gradually shifting from the transmission of information towards the construction of organisational norms within which employees themselves interpreted desirable models of behaviour. The implementation of corporate discourse functions in organisations was presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The implementation of corporate discourse functions in modern organisations

Function of corporate discourse	Main communicative tool	Forms of implementation	Potential organisational effect
Informative	Corporate policies, internal portals, codes of conduct	Publication of hybrid working policies, rules for using digital services, and well-being guidelines	A shared understanding of corporate rules and procedures
Integrative	Corporate values, success stories, communication campaigns	Wellbeing and belonging programmes, people first initiatives, mental health awareness weeks	The development of organisational identity and employee engagement
Regulatory	Guidance for managers, standards of conduct, codes of ethics	Models of inclusive leadership, guidelines for holding team meetings, and policies on respect in the workplace	The standardisation of professional conduct without administrative control

Table 1. Continued

Function of corporate discourse	Main communicative tool	Forms of implementation	Potential organisational effect
Legitimising	Management statements, ESG reports, human capital reports	Explanations of digital transformation, workflow reform and the implementation of artificial intelligence	Maintaining trust in management decisions and reducing organisational resistance
Representative	Corporate reports, careers websites, public communications	Presenting the company as an employer that supported well-being, inclusivity and sustainable development	Strengthening the employer brand and corporate reputation

Source: compiled by the author based on R. Breeze (2013), P. Catenaccio *et al.* (2021), R.L. De Castilho Rossoni & M.C. Lima (2025)

The data demonstrated that individual functions of corporate discourse did not operate in isolation. Most corporate documents combined informational, regulatory and legitimising elements within a single communication. This combination made it possible to simultaneously explain the reasons behind management decisions, define the expected behaviour of employees and foster a positive perception of organisational change. This was precisely why the effectiveness of corporate communication was assessed not by the volume of information conveyed, but by its ability to shape organisational culture, the level of trust and the willingness of employees to support the company's strategic objectives.

The linguistic influence of corporate discourse was realised through several interrelated mechanisms. The first mechanism related to prescriptive language, which used the vocabulary of corporate values rather than imperative constructions. This approach was employed in companies' codes of conduct, where behavioural expectations were framed as the organisation's shared values rather than as a list of an employee's duties. For example, Salesforce (n.d.) structured its Code of Conduct around five values: Trust, Customer Success, Innovation, Equality and Sustainability, emphasising that these were "a reflection of who we are and what we stand for". Accenture (n.d.) defined its Code of Business Ethics its core values as Stewardship, Best People, Client Value Creation, One Global Network, Respect for the Individual and Integrity, integrating them into HR processes and communications with employees. The second mechanism was based on positive framing. Organisational changes were interpreted through the lenses of professional development, innovation, flexibility or employee support, where digital transformation was described as an opportunity to create a more human-centred working environment, rather than merely as technological modernisation. The third mechanism was based on the formation of a collective identity through the active use of pronouns such as "we", "our" and "together", which reduced the symbolic distance between management and employees (Fladerer *et al.*, 2021). The fourth mechanism was implemented through success narratives. A study of an Australian financial institution found that multi-level storytelling, which conveyed stories of employees' successful adaptation to change, influenced their attitudes towards change and promoted active engagement, which in turn improved business performance (Nirmal, 2016). Such stories served a normative rather than an informational function, as they demonstrated socially approved

models of professional behaviour and helped to spread them amongst other employees.

Organisational psychology explained the effectiveness of such communication practices through the mechanism of social internalisation. The regular repetition of identical linguistic constructs helped to form stable cognitive schemas, which came to be perceived as a natural part of professional activity. Employees adapted their behaviour not only under the influence of managerial control, but also out of a desire to conform to corporate norms. This was precisely why companies invested resources in developing internal communications, viewing them as a tool for managing human capital. The effectiveness of internal communication was empirically demonstrated. According to Gallup's (2025) State of the Global Workplace report, the global level of employee engagement stood at just 21%, with 62% disengaged and 17% actively working against the company's goals, whilst productivity losses due to low engagement were estimated at USD 438 billion annually. Edelman (2024) confirmed that 77% of employees in Germany trust their employer – the highest level of trust among all social institutions.

In the digital environment, corporate communication extended beyond the transmission of work-related information. It shaped normative expectations regarding an employee's psychological well-being. The organisation determined which forms of digital interaction were considered healthy, which practices were supported by management, and which behavioural models aligned with corporate values. Through such communication, employees received not only information about support programmes, but also an understanding of their own professional role in the digital environment. The concept of psychological safety took on particular significance. Open exchange of views, the ability to report mistakes and seek help depended not only on leadership style but also on day-to-day communication that demonstrated the acceptability of such behaviour (Edmondson, 2018). Digital communication channels either reinforced or undermined such attitudes, depending on the messages the organisation conveyed to employees. If corporate discourse linked psychological well-being to professional effectiveness, the culture gradually integrated care for mental health into the system of organisational values. Digital well-being was integrated into organisational culture precisely through discursive mechanisms. Employee support policies gained practical significance through communication that explained their objectives, legitimised

management decisions and fostered a positive attitude among employees towards the use of relevant programmes.

The identified psychosocial risks of digitalisation were grouped according to the type of impact on the employee. Cognitive risks included information overload, fragmentation of attention and cognitive exhaustion; emotional risks included technostress, anxiety and emotional burnout; behavioural risks included an imbalance between work and personal life, constant availability and digital addiction. This classification distinguished between the levels of impact that digital workload had on employees and identified priority areas for corporate intervention: cognitive risks primarily required changes to the organisation of work processes; emotional risks required psychological support and the development of leadership skills; and behavioural risks required a review of corporate policies on availability and communication. This approach made it possible to move from universal well-being programmes towards differentiated strategies that took the nature of the risk into account. The institutionalisation of digital well-being occurred at three levels. At the global level, international organisations (International Labour Organization, World Health Organization, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) formulated recommendations that established general policy directions in the field of mental health in the workplace. At the regional level, the European Commission introduced regulatory requirements obliging companies to disclose information on working conditions, mental health and employee well-being, thereby transforming well-being from a voluntary initiative into an area of corporate accountability. These recommendations were implemented by the companies themselves, translating these recommendations into corporate policies. These policies existed within a chain of command, where the recommendations of the global level were translated into regional policies, and the policies of the companies were translated into the communication of these policies to the employees. This communication chain was what gave digital well-being its status as a corporate governance element. Through comparing the definitions of each of these categories, it became possible to determine the four basic categories within the field of study of digital well-being. These categories related to the workload that employees experienced digitally, the protection of those employees and their data from digital threats, the ability of the employees to have control over their digital interactions, and the incorporation of digital well-being practices into the organisational culture of the company. Beyond creating these categories, it was also possible to use these categories to compare the corporate policies of the companies along the same parameters. Structuring the study of digital well-being in this way provided a basis for the comparison of the communication models of Google and Microsoft.

The representation of the concept of digital well-being in the internal policies of Google and Microsoft indicated a shift from programmes aimed at providing traditional forms of social support for employees towards a model of

managing the company's human capital. The companies treated the well-being of their employees as a factor that contributed to the company's innovation and productivity. Such an approach to management corresponded to different approaches to corporate governance. Google included provisions in its corporate documents that considered the concept of well-being from the perspective of the integration of physical, psychological, social, and digital dimensions of well-being. The company's annual ESG Report highlighted that one of the components of employee development within Google was the creation of a safe and healthy working environment for employees (Google, 2025). This component of employee development included providing employees with access to mental health support programmes, psychological counselling, digital self-help tools, training for managers in relation to psychological issues in the workplace, and the creation of an inclusive working environment for all employees. The wording of the policy showed another characteristic of Google – the provision of psychological support to employees, as well as the development of their professional potential.

The concept of the well-being of Google employees was closely associated with the concept of psychological safety within the teams. The Aristotle project (Poyton, 2024), which was launched in 2012, played a key role in forming the management of Google's teams. The research demonstrated that the component of psychological safety was the most important component of the effectiveness of the teams, surpassing all other characteristics or elements of the employees within those teams. The study included over 180 teams from different departments across Google (2015), using more than 35 statistical models to analyse hundreds of variables within each team, from characteristics of each individual employee to the dynamics of the employees within the team. Although this study was somewhat dated, it remained the basis of many of Google's corporate practices and was applied within its corporate training programmes to team managers, such as those offered on the re:Work platform.

Microsoft's (2024b) policies demonstrated a different model of digital well-being. A central element of the company's corporate rhetoric was the concept of "thriving at work", which combined productivity, professional development and mental health. The company defined thriving as "being energised and empowered to do meaningful work" and measured this indicator across three dimensions: energy, empowerment and meaningful work. In the Microsoft Global Diversity & Inclusion Report 2024, the company defined psychological well-being as a prerequisite for an inclusive organisational culture, emphasising that diversity and inclusion were an integral part of Microsoft's mission – "to empower every person and every organisation on the planet to achieve more". The document focused on ensuring employees had access to mental health support services, developing empathetic leadership skills, supporting flexible working arrangements, and creating an environment in which employees could openly discuss mental health issues

without the risk of stigmatisation. Unlike Google, Microsoft (2025a) recognised digital workload as an organisational risk. The study “Breaking down the infinite workday” utilised anonymised Microsoft 365 data alongside a survey of over 31,000 employees from 31 countries. The results showed that the average employee received digital notifications approximately every two minutes during working hours (275 interruptions per day), and around half of all meetings took place between 09:00 and 11:00 and between 13:00 and 15:00, which reduced the duration of uninterrupted concentration. The authors of the report linked this pattern of digital interaction to an increase in cognitive load and recommended reviewing the organisation of internal communications, rather than merely training employees in individual time-management techniques. This interpretation shifted the responsibility for digital well-being from the individual to corporate management practices.

The language used in corporate documents from Google and Microsoft demonstrated a shared trend away from directive rhetoric in favour of a values-based model of communication. In Google’s (2015) materials, the core principle of effective team interaction was formulated as “Psychological safety: Team members feel safe to take risks in the face of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive”. It was further clarified: “In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members”. The wording did not contain verbs such as “must”, “shall” or other imperative constructions. Instead, the lexeme “safe” was repeated, which was used throughout the document as a normative benchmark for the desired organisational environment. The communicative focus shifted from controlling employee behaviour to the organisation’s responsibility for creating conditions in which openness became a socially acceptable model of interaction. Microsoft (2025a) employed a different method of legitimising a similar idea. In a special report entitled “Breaking down the infinite workday”, the issue of digital well-being was not presented as an abstract corporate value, but was introduced through quantitative evidence. Right at the start of the document, it was stated that “employees using Microsoft 365 are interrupted every 2 minutes by a meeting, email or notification”, which amounted to 275 interruptions per day for employees with a heavy communication workload. The authors went on to emphasise that 48% of employees reported that their work was chaotic and fragmented. Statistical argumentation replaced prescriptive directives: the need for digital well-being programmes was explained not by a corporate requirement, but by an objectively identified problem in the organisation of work.

Differences were also observed at the level of linguistic strategies. Google constructed an image of the desired organisational culture through a vocabulary of trust, mutual support and learning. Following the presentation of the results of Project Aristotle (Poyton, 2024), the document offered managers specific behavioural models. The recommendations included phrases such as “Acknowledge your own fallibility”, “Frame the work as a learning

problem, not an execution problem” and “Model curiosity by asking lots of questions”. The use of verbs such as “acknowledge”, “frame” and “model” shaped behavioural scenarios for managers, but did not give the impression of administrative control. The manager was portrayed as a facilitator of psychological safety, rather than a bearer of disciplinary authority. At Microsoft (2025a), the discourse centred on the concept of digital overload. Instead of employees’ psychological characteristics, the parameters of the digital working environment were analysed. The report stated that “60% of meetings are unscheduled or ad hoc, 40% of people online at 6 am are already checking their email, and meetings starting after 8 pm are up 16% year-on-year”. After presenting each indicator, the authors moved on to recommendations regarding changes to the organisation of work, the use of Microsoft Viva and artificial intelligence tools. Thus, corporate discourse framed the problem not as a consequence of employees’ insufficient stress resilience, but as the result of an overburdened digital infrastructure. A comparison of the lexical fields of the two companies confirmed their differing communicative logics. At Google, the categories “psychological safety, trust, meaning, impact, team effectiveness, belonging” recurred. Even in the description of the five factors of team effectiveness, it was emphasised that success depended “less on who is on the team, and more on how the team worked together”. At Microsoft, other concepts dominated: “focus, productivity, agent boss, employee experience, artificial intelligence, work patterns, meaningful work”. Thus, Google described well-being in terms of the quality of social interaction, whilst Microsoft described it in terms of the optimisation of digital work processes.

An analysis of the structure of corporate communications also revealed a common communication pattern. In Google’s documents, a management principle was first set out, followed by the empirical findings of Project Aristotle (Poyton, 2024), and then tools for team self-assessment were proposed. For example, employees were asked to rate the statements “If I make a mistake on our team, it is not held against me”, “Our team has an effective decision-making process” and “The work I do for our team is meaningful to me”. As Google researcher Julia Rozowski noted, teams that were able to answer “yes” to all five questions (psychological safety, reliability, structure and clarity, meaningfulness of work, and impact) were disproportionately more effective and generated higher revenue (Stillman, 2017). Microsoft (2024a; 2025b) used a similar framework, although it filled it with different content: statistical fact → interpretation of the problem → digital tool to solve it. For example, the Work Trend Index 2024 report stated that 75% of knowledge workers used artificial intelligence at work, whilst 60% of managers admitted to lacking a clear plan for its implementation. It then suggested using Viva Insights to analyse work habits and improve work-life balance, specifically as a digital tool for monitoring daily activity and comprehensively optimising the balance between professional and personal life. Neither company actually required

employees to use these support programmes. The discourse was structured in such a way that using well-being tools was perceived as rational and professionally responsible behaviour that aligned with corporate standards.

Another tool was the personalisation of communication. The Microsoft (2025c) Viva Insights platform clearly distinguished between analytical levels depending on the user's job role. For instance, through "Personal insights", ordinary employees received individual guidelines for behavioural hygiene: booking uninterrupted focus time for deep work, scheduling regular breaks throughout the day, and consciously winding down digital activity outside working hours. Managers, by contrast, had access to Team insights, which enabled them to identify potentially harmful working

patterns that might have contributed to burnout and stress, including excessive numbers of meetings, working outside normal hours or insufficient focus time, and to receive recommendations for developing a healthy team culture. Digital platforms also changed the nature of feedback. Whilst traditional corporate communications were predominantly one-way, internal services facilitated interactive engagement between employees and the organisation. Surveys, discussions, reactions and comments enabled the perception of well-being programmes to be assessed almost in real time. Communication became a cyclical process in which corporate messages were constantly adjusted in response to employee feedback. A comparison of Google's and Microsoft's policies on digital well-being was shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of Google and Microsoft policies on digital well-being

Comparison criterion	Google	Microsoft
Strategic objective of the policy	Fostering an organisational culture based on psychological safety, trust, inclusivity and effective team collaboration. Well-being was regarded as a prerequisite for innovation and productive collaboration	Supporting a sustainable digital working environment through the optimisation of the digital workload, the development of the employee experience, the responsible use of AI, and the enhancement of organisational resilience
Conceptual framework	Organisational Psychology; Psychological Safety; Team Effectiveness; Inclusion; People Analytics	Employee Experience; Human-Centred AI; Digital Well-being; Future of Work; Responsible AI; Workplace Analytics
Key principles	Psychological safety, open communication, mutual trust, learning from mistakes, inclusivity, collaboration	Employee well-being, digital balance, flexible working, empathetic leadership, responsible use of technology, support for hybrid working
Key support tools	re: Work, manager development programmes, internal training modules, recommendations on psychological safety for teams, Employee Assistance Programme (locally), programmes to foster an inclusive environment	Microsoft Viva (Insights, Learning, Engage), Employee Assistance Programme, WorkLab, Microsoft 365 Analytics, Copilot Dashboard, manager development programmes, mental health resources
Key internal communication channels	Internal portal, Google Workspace, corporate newsletters, training courses, re: Work, internal HR communications	Microsoft Teams, Viva Engage, Viva Connections, Viva Learning, corporate portal, WorkLab, internal communication campaigns
Dominant discursive model	Cultural and behavioural. Communication changed behaviour by fostering trust, psychological safety and shared responsibility within teams	Management and analytics. Organisational decisions were underpinned by statistics, digital analytics and research into working practices
Role of the manager	The manager acted as a facilitator of open communication, supported employees' right to express their ideas, acknowledged their own mistakes and encouraged team learning	Managers monitored their digital workload, promoted healthy working practices, and used Viva and WorkLab analytics tools to inform management decisions
Role of the employee	An active participant in team interaction who openly discussed issues, contributed to the development of a psychologically safe environment and fostered a culture of mutual trust	A responsible user of digital technologies who managed their own digital workload, utilised well-being tools and maintained a healthy balance between productivity and well-being
Key performance indicators	Quality of team interaction, psychological safety, level of trust, team effectiveness, employee engagement	Employee Experience, digital workload, productivity, staff engagement, hybrid working efficiency, use of Viva tools
Integration into corporate strategies	ESG (Social), Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Leadership Development, Learning & Development, Organisational Culture	ESG, Human Capital, Responsible AI, Future of Work, Employee Experience, Digital Transformation, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Source: compiled by the author based on Google (2015; 2025), A.C. Edmondson (2018), SOCAP Global (2020), B. Poyton (2024), and Microsoft (2024a; 2024b; 2025a; 2025b; 2025c)

A comparison of corporate policies showed that Google and Microsoft employed different models for fostering digital well-being, although their strategic objectives were aligned. Both companies viewed mental health and digital well-being as part of the long-term development of human capital, rather than as a separate area of corporate

social responsibility. At the same time, the methods used to achieve this goal differed. Google's policies were based on a socio-psychological model of organisational management. Central to this was the concept of "psychological safety", which emerged following the internal Project Aristotle study (Poyton, 2024). It was the findings of this project that

formed the basis for most of the recommendations in the re:Work platform. The company's documents focused on fostering interpersonal trust, open dialogue, and employees' right to report mistakes and participate in collective decision-making. Well-being was viewed as a characteristic of organisational culture that arose from high-quality team interaction, rather than merely individual psychological support programmes. Microsoft's policies followed a different logic. They integrated digital well-being into the concept of the employee experience and the organisation's digital transformation. The company made extensive use of aggregated Microsoft Graph data, the results of international surveys and behavioural analytics to inform management decisions. Well-being was interpreted as a factor in effective human interaction with artificial intelligence, digital services and hybrid working arrangements. Differences could also be seen in the organisation of corporate communications. Google drove behavioural change through cultural narratives that emphasised trust, inclusivity and team learning. Microsoft employed evidence-based management reasoning, where most recommendations were underpinned by statistical indicators of digital workload, productivity and the use of digital services. In the first case, corporate discourse served a culture-shaping function; in the second, a managerial and analytical one.

Google's cultural and behavioural model, which emphasised psychological safety and interpersonal trust, created the conditions for open communication, experimentation and innovation. At the same time, this model placed responsibility on managers as facilitators of a safe environment, which could be challenging within a large organisation with diverse teams. An excessive emphasis on team harmony could lead to groupthink, where employees avoided constructive criticism in order to maintain psychological comfort. There was also a risk of individualising responsibility for well-being, where the organisation delegated the responsibility for looking after one's own mental health to the employee, whilst ignoring the structural causes of digital overload – an excessive number of online meetings, the intensity of communication and a culture of constant availability. Microsoft's management and analytical model offered a structured approach to tackling the problem of digital overload. However, the excessive reliance upon analytical data could pose certain risks to the organisation as a whole. For instance, the use of such data to evaluate employees' well-being could lead to the reduction of complex issues to simple metrics. Furthermore, the instrumentalisation of the concept of well-being could lead to a focus on that aspect of employees as a means of increasing the productivity of the employees, rather than considering their well-being as a value of the company itself. Finally, the reliance upon analytical data could lead to the development of an illusion of objectivity within the company, ignoring aspects of the organisation that cannot be measured or quantified.

The practices of both Google and Microsoft were consistent with those of other nations in the regulation of the digital well-being of their employees. For instance, both

companies' approaches to asynchronous communication, focus time, and delayed messaging were aligned with the "right to disconnect", a measure supported by the European Parliament to protect the mental health of their employees. Finally, the use of Google Workspace and Microsoft Viva Insights was consistent with the General Data Protection Regulation (2016) governing employees' data. The analytical tools that the companies offered were based on aggregated metrics of the employees' activities, in line with the recommendations of the European Data Protection Board regarding the monitoring of employees' activities in the workplace without significantly interfering with their right to privacy. Although the companies offered a range of digital tools to enable the monitoring of employees' work processes, European Union requirements stipulated that such monitoring should be conducted in a way that was necessary, proportional to the aims of the monitoring, and notified to the employees in advance. The measures that Google and Microsoft took to manage their employees' workload and prevent occupational burnout and poor mental health were in line with the recommendations in the World Health Organization Guidelines on Mental Health at Work (2022) and ISO 45003:2021. Each of these models for managing employees' mental health could have been implemented within public sector organisations, provided that the requirements regarding the protection of their personal data were met. Google and Microsoft both included digital well-being as part of their management of employee mental health. Each company's mental health programmes were also integrated with policies regarding inclusivity, leadership development, digital transformation, ESG initiatives, and organisational culture. Thus, each company treated the well-being of its employees as one of the resources that determined its long-term competitiveness.

DISCUSSION

Expanding the understanding of the concept of digital well-being, the study demonstrated that its content was not determined solely by the degree of digitalisation of workplaces or the amount of use of technological devices in the workplace. The significance of the model discussed in the corporate world lay in determining norms of professional behaviour in the organisation, the assessment of the psychological health of employees, and the legitimising of managerial decisions. These aspects went beyond the traditional understanding of digital well-being. Digital well-being had become an element of human capital management in organisations and was incorporated into the corporate culture, communication, and organisational values. This conclusion was consistent with the study by X. Li *et al.* (2025), which also linked digital well-being with organisational characteristics of the working environment. At the same time, this study demonstrated a broader logic underlying the formation of digital well-being. Whereas the authors focused on technostress, digital culture, HR practices and digital leadership as factors affecting mental health, this analysis showed that the effectiveness of these elements

depended on the way in which they were discursively represented. The findings demonstrated that the same management tools could acquire different psychological meanings depending on the linguistic strategies through which an organisation explained the nature of digital transformation to its employees. This interpretation did not contradict the conclusions of X. Li *et al.* but extended them by incorporating the communicative dimension into the mechanisms through which digital well-being was formed.

The propositions put forward by O. Uslu (2025) were also consistent with the findings of this study. The author viewed digital well-being as a multidimensional construct combining digital literacy, mental health, work-life balance and the responsible use of technology. This study confirmed this multidimensionality, although the interpretation of its origins differed. An analysis of corporate documents from Google and Microsoft revealed that the various components of digital well-being did not exist in isolation but were integrated into corporate policies through a unified system of organisational communication. The findings demonstrated that digital literacy, psychological support, workload management tools and leadership development programmes functioned as interrelated elements of corporate strategy. This conclusion aligned with the conceptual framework proposed by O. Uslu, although this study shifted the focus from general models of digital well-being to the specific mechanisms through which they were institutionalised via corporate discourse.

A similar pattern was observed when comparing the results with the work of R. Singha & S. Singha (2025). The researchers focused on the behavioural mechanisms of digital addiction, the psychological characteristics of users and the need for early risk diagnosis. This study did not analyse internet addiction as a subject in its own right; however, it demonstrated that corporate policies were directed not at responding after psychological problems had arisen, but at creating an organisational environment capable of minimising the risks of their occurrence. An analysis of corporate documentation revealed that Google and Microsoft defined normative models of healthy digital behaviour even before the negative consequences of digital stress arose. This conclusion aligned with the researchers' recommendations, although it shifted the emphasis from the psychological diagnosis of the individual to the preventative function of corporate communication.

The findings of K. Silchenko (2025) represented one of the key points of comparison between the two studies. The author demonstrated how the digital well-being market had developed a model that was inherently contradictory, as the technologies were both the cause of the problems and the solution to those problems. While this study identified a contradiction in the digital world in general, the digital policies of companies such as Google and Microsoft showed the same contradictions. These companies did not deny the existence of digital workload. However, they used their platforms to promote the resolution of the issues created by their digital technologies. Microsoft

created Viva Insights to recognise digital overload. Google promoted the concept of psychological safety through its digital platforms. Through these platforms and the content published on them, the companies sought to validate the contradiction between the problems of digital overload and the solutions created through digital technologies.

A comparison of the results with the study by T. Kempainen & T.E. Paananen (2024) also revealed a high degree of conceptual similarity. The authors identified nine dualities of digital services, demonstrating that the very same technology could simultaneously support well-being and create psychological strain. This study confirmed this ambivalence of digital environments, although it explained it in a different way. An analysis of corporate discourse showed that the psychological significance of digital services was determined not only by their functional capabilities but also by the organisational interpretation of how they were used. Google described digital platforms as tools for fostering trust and team collaboration. Microsoft presented digital services as a means of optimising work processes and reducing cognitive load. This conclusion was consistent with the authors' findings, although the study demonstrated that the source of positive or negative impact was not only the technology itself, but also the system of corporate meanings that had developed around it.

The work of H. Honglei *et al.* (2025) was also closely aligned with the findings obtained in this study. The authors demonstrated the positive impact of digital transformation on employees' psychological well-being provided that a risk management culture was in place. This study confirmed the role of organisational factors, while providing a more detailed account of the structure of their interrelationships. An analysis of corporate materials showed that risk management culture was implemented through linguistic mechanisms for legitimising digital change, corporate psychological support policies, recommendations for managers, and internal communication campaigns. The findings demonstrated that the positive impact of digital transformation did not occur automatically, but depended on how the organisation explained the nature of digital reforms to employees, clarified expected behaviour, and defined the role of digital well-being in professional activity. A systematic review by L. Polanco-Diges *et al.* (2022) also confirmed the importance of human-centred management models for digital well-being. This study supported this approach, although it demonstrated a different mechanism for its implementation. An analysis of corporate policies revealed that a human-centred approach was not limited to the development of employee support programmes. It was shaped through everyday communication practices, corporate messaging, linguistic constructs, models of interaction between managers and teams, and the interpretation of psychological safety as an organisational norm. This conclusion was consistent with the views of academic researchers, although the analysis revealed that a human-centred strategy only acquired practical significance once it had been integrated into corporate discourse.

A comparison of the results with the findings of L. Buga & S. Mihailă (2025) also demonstrated a high degree of consistency. The authors described digital transformation as a process that simultaneously created new opportunities and new risks for employees. This study confirmed the dual nature of digitalisation, although it placed a different analytical emphasis. The results showed that the effectiveness of digital transformation was determined not only by the level of digital literacy, HR practices or the professional training of employees. Of decisive importance was how corporate discourse interpreted digital changes, explained their rationale, legitimised new requirements and determined employee readiness to support organisational reforms. The overall comparative picture confirmed a consistent pattern. Most studies had analysed digital well-being through psychological, behavioural, technological or organisational factors. This study revealed another dimension to the formation of this phenomenon. The findings demonstrated that digital well-being did not arise solely under the influence of digital services, psychological support or HR programmes. Its essence was determined by a system of corporate meanings, which were shaped through organisational communication, language strategies, corporate values, mechanisms for legitimising management decisions, and the representation of a desired model of professional behaviour. This explained why Google and Microsoft, whilst pursuing similar strategic goals, had developed fundamentally different models of digital well-being. Google had linked it to trust, psychological safety and the quality of team interaction. Microsoft, on the other hand, interpreted digital well-being through the lens of workflow analytics, digital behavioural patterns and the optimisation of organisational efficiency. This pattern complemented academic approaches to digital well-being and demonstrated that corporate discourse acted as one of the factors in its institutionalisation within organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

The study confirmed that digital well-being was conceived as a strategic management tool, the content of which was determined by the organisational communication model. Theoretical analysis demonstrated the evolution of the concept of digital well-being from an assessment of the negative consequences of digitalisation to an integrated model of human capital management, in which mental health, digital workload and organisational culture were regarded as interdependent elements. Institutional analysis showed that the European Sustainability Reporting Standards S1 requirements regarding the disclosure of information on employee mental health shifted the issue of well-being from the sphere of voluntary initiatives into the sphere of corporate accountability. A functional analysis of

corporate discourse enabled the identification of five functions – informational, integrative, regulatory, legitimising and representational – and established that corporate documents combined these functions within a single message, ensuring that they simultaneously informed, regulated behaviour and legitimised management decisions. Four discursive mechanisms for constructing well-being were identified: the normative language of corporate values, the positive framing of organisational change, the formation of collective identity through inclusive pronouns, and narratives of success that demonstrated socially approved models of professional behaviour.

A comparative analysis of Google's and Microsoft's policies revealed that Google was dominated by a cultural-behavioural model based on the concept of psychological safety, developed following the findings of Project Aristotle, which established that team effectiveness depended not on employees' individual characteristics but on the quality of interaction between them, primarily on psychological safety. In this model, the manager acted as a facilitator of open communication, acknowledging their own mistakes and encouraging team learning, whilst the employee was an active participant in team interaction, openly discussing problems and fostering a culture of mutual trust. Microsoft used a management and analytical model that legitimised decisions through statistical data: according to the company's internal research, the average employee experienced 275 digital interruptions per day, and 48% of employees reported that their work process was chaotic. Here, the manager monitored the digital workload, whilst the employee acted as a responsible user of digital technologies, maintaining a healthy balance between productivity and well-being. It was established that Google's lexical field was shaped by categories of psychological safety and trust, whilst Microsoft operated with concepts of focus, productivity and the analysis of work patterns. Both corporations integrated digital well-being into strategic human capital management, combining it with policies on ESG, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, leadership development and digital transformation. An empirical examination of the impact of various discursive models on the actual level of employees' digital well-being and their professional engagement was identified as a promising area for further research.

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Language in the political discourse on migration: How media constructs migrant identity

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to find out how language in political discourse shaped public perceptions of migrants through media coverage and what identity-building strategies were used. To achieve this goal, a qualitative methodology based on a comparative critical discourse analysis of media materials of leading publications and digital platforms in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom was applied during periods of acute migration challenges. The study focused on language practices, metaphors, visual codes, and methods of thematic framing, which allowed tracing how the media simultaneously reflected and transformed the public perception of migrants. The results showed that the German context was dominated by a strategy of dynamic image shift from “victim” to “threat”, a stable narrative of securitisation and criminalisation was established in Australian discourse, while the British media used a mechanism of conflict, combining different types of migration into a single negative image. Quantitative analysis of the frequency of key frames confirmed differences in national strategies and revealed a general tendency to present migration as a crisis, which reinforced the political legitimization of restrictive decisions and contributed to increased social polarisation. The results showed that the media not only reproduced political rhetoric, but also functioned as an independent actor in the process of forming the identity of migrants, creating discursive conditions for consolidating stereotypes and social ideas. The conclusions emphasised the importance of language as a tool for structuring public perception and demonstrated the need for further research on discursive mechanisms that determine the dynamics of migration representation in various socio-political contexts and their impact on public policy development

Keywords: media narrative; image of the “threat”; discursive strategies; public perception; economic crisis

INTRODUCTION

Migration is one of the most important and controversial phenomena, having a significant impact on the political landscape, social cohesion and the formation of national identities. 2015-2024 were marked by significant migration flows, which were often considered in public discourse not as a complex social process, but as an emergency “crisis”. Examples of such events were the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, the policy of keeping asylum seekers in Australia, and the use of the migration as a topic during the referendum on Britain’s exit from the EU (Brexit) in 2016. In these circumstances, the media not only inform the public, but also actively shape public reality, using language, visual images, and narratives to create ideas about migrants, their motives, and influence on host countries. Thus, media discourse

becomes an important tool in determining the identity of a migrant, challenging it and rethinking it, which directly affects public opinion and the legitimacy of political decisions.

Scientific research actively examines how the media covers the topic of migration. Systematic review conducted by S. Seo & S.B. Kavakli (2022), showed a sharp increase in the number of publications in this area since 2010, but also found significant gaps: in particular, a lack of comparative and longitudinal studies, and a lack of attention to countries hosting the largest number of refugees. Existing research mainly focuses on the analysis of framing and representation in individual national contexts. For example, study of the British media field during Brexit, conducted by K.O. Ashas (2022) and

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A. Islentyeva (2022), demonstrated how newspapers with different ideological positions used specific frames (economic, security, cultural) to form a positive or negative attitude towards migration and, accordingly, towards EU membership in their audience. M.M. Ciocoiu & R.V. Sandle (2021) went further, showing that these frameworks were based on neoliberal logic, which created a dichotomy between “desirable” and “undesirable” migrants depending on their economic benefits. In the German context, M. Beck (2021) analysed how the “refugee crisis” occurred through the securitisation process, when the arguments of right-wing populist forces about threats to security, economy, and culture were gradually assimilated by politicians across the ideological spectrum. In Australia, according to the dissertation study by I. Eyalama (2024), a government discourse has consistently constructed the image of asylum seekers as a security issue, using metaphors such as “war,” “natural disaster,” and “breaking the queue”.

These studies focused on a single national case, which limits the ability to identify transnational patterns and unique features in constructing the identity of migrants. There are studies that analyse the representation of asylum seekers in the British media (mass media), in particular, the paper by G. Cooper *et al.* (2021), who examined how in 2017, after the peak of the 2015 crisis, British newspapers and news sites covered asylum seekers differently depending on their region of origin, but found a common feature – the dominance of political elites as the main source of information. Other studies shifted the focus from media content to audience perception, as did A. Haw (2022) in the Australian context, who, based on in-depth interviews, found out how ordinary citizens interpret and evaluate media images of asylum seekers.

Research that focused on the visual dimension of the problem, such as by S. Dastgeer & D.N. Hill (2024), analysed nearly 2,000 photos of Afghan refugees in the Associated Press after the Taliban returned to power and concluded that, contrary to expectations, the visual frames were mostly positive and active, especially for women. However, there is a lack of comparative analysis that would compare the discursive strategies used during three different, but significant for Western democracies events related to migration. In addition, it is important not only to capture the dominant narratives, but also to pay attention to forms of resistance. The study by C. Wake (2023) demonstrated how asylum seekers in Australia use social media and theatre performances to challenge public discourse and humanise their experiences. This indicates that the discursive field is not monolithic, but rather a space of struggle where different versions of reality are constructed and challenged.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) of political and media materials in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom to identify and compare specific language

strategies used to construct the identity of migrants and analyse how these discourses affect public perception and integration processes. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set: firstly, to analyse the dynamic construction of migrant identity in German media discourse during the 2015 crisis; secondly, to investigate stable securitised discourse in Australia in the context of offshore retention policies; and thirdly, to investigate the strategy of conflict in British discourse during the Brexit campaign.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology was based on a comparative CDA of three case studies: migration crisis in Germany in 2015, offshore retention policies in Australia, and discussions about Brexit in the UK in 2016. The collection and analysis of materials was carried out during August–September 2025. The sample of materials was formed according to clear criteria. Firstly, three national contexts were identified (Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom), since it was in these countries that the events under study caused intense media discussions about migration. Secondly, a specific time range was outlined for each case, covering both peak crisis points and retrospective estimates:

- Germany: 2015–2016 (crisis deployment) and selected materials 2021;
- Australia: 2013–2025 in the context of long-term offshore retention policies;
- UK: 2016–2025 (from the Brexit campaign to its impact assessment).

Thirdly, a mixed source sample was used, which included: (1) qualitative media materials (for example, *The Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*), (2) tabloids (*BILD*, *The Sun* (*Sun says We...*, 2016)), (3) official statements of political actors, (4) visual materials, (5) online-discourses (Reddit). Fourthly, only those materials in which migrants or migration were the central or significant object of representation were included in the corpus. According to these criteria, a set of $N = 31$ materials was formed (10 – Germany; 11 – Australia; 10 – Great Britain). The source base for analysis was a diverse body of texts that covered all the material provided. The unit of analysis in the study was individual media reports: news headlines, lead paragraphs, full texts of analytical articles, direct quotes from political actors, and visual elements (photos, captions, and composition of frames from Instagram posts). The analysis was carried out by the CDA method with a focus on identifying linguistic markers (metaphors, euphemisms, nominations) and visual codes that construct the identity of migrants. Case studies were compared according to three criteria: (1) narrative dynamics (stable or variable), (2) dominant representation strategy (humanisation, securitisation, or conflict), and (3) the role of the official discourse of power in shaping of the media agenda. A detailed distribution of the source base by country, type, and object of analysis is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research source base

Country/ Case	Source type	Unit of analysis (what was taken)	Source name and links
Germany	Tabloid and qualitative media	Headlines, vocabulary of articles, narrative framework of the crisis	➤ BILD: The consequences for... (2016), N. Blome <i>et al.</i> (2016a; 2016b), Viktor Orbán writes to Merkel... (2021); ➤ Der Spiegel: A. Meiritz & C. Elmer (2015), Where the refugees... (2015)
	Official communication (Social networks)	Visual images, hashtags, and the tone of captions	➤ Angela Merkel's Instagram: A. Merkel (2015a; 2015b; 2015c)
	Analytical reports	Evaluation of media practices	➤ Ethical Journalism Network: M.M. Müller (2015)
Australia	Leading print media	Rhetoric of "Border Protection", terminology ("illegals")	➤ The Sydney Morning Herald: J. Holmes (2016), R. Quaadvlieg (2018), J. Massola & A. Thompson (2024)
	Alternative media	Critical discourses, human rights rhetoric	➤ The Guardian: O. Laughland (2013), B. Doherty (2021); ➤ New Matilda: M. Chalmers (2016)
	Government and legal documents	Official names of transactions and legal definitions	➤ Australian Government: Operation Sovereign Borders (2013); ➤ UN: The 1951 Refugee... (1951)
	Analytics and fact-checking	Statistical data, verification of politicians' statements	➤ Policy Briefs: Australia's Insular Approach... (2016), F. McKay (n.d.); ➤ The Conversation: S. Davies (2013)
United Kingdom	Qualitative press and international media	Arguments for and against Brexit, criticism of populism	➤ The Guardian: Brexit debate: The best... (2017), E. Addle (2017), The Guardian view... (2020); ➤ The New York Times: S. Castle (2016)
	Public broadcaster	Informational explanations of the consequences	➤ BBC: Brexit: What you... (2020)
	Academic analysis	Analysis of the impact of tabloids on the electorate	➤ UK in a Changing Europe: K. Simpson & N. Startin (2023)
	Social platforms (forums)	Informal narratives, emotional assessments of citizens	➤ Reddit: Brexit for me... (2025), I do not want... (2025), That being said... (2025), The problem with... (2025)

Source: created by the author

When analysing these materials, ethical aspects were taken into consideration: since discussions on Reddit are public, the main focus was on analysing discursive patterns, rather than identifying individual users, with all quotes used in anonymous form to protect the rights of those who participated in the discussions. According to this model, the study was conducted at three levels. At the micro level (textual analysis), key lexical means (choice of nominations, metaphors, euphemisms) and rhetorical strategies ("friend/foe" polarisation, legitimisation of political decisions, appeal to emotions) were identified, and the basic elements of visual framing were considered. At the meso-level (analysis of discursive practice), specific ways of producing and distributing narratives in the media space of each of the countries were studied. At the macro level (analysis of social practice), discursive events were interpreted in a broad socio-political context, in particular, it was analysed how media representations interact with the processes of state policy development, crisis phenomena in the economy, and the transformation of national identities. At the final stage, a comparative synthesis was carried out to identify common patterns and national differences in the construction of the migrant image.

RESULTS

Constructing the identity of migrants in the German media in 2015

An analysis of German media and political discourse during the 2015 migration crisis revealed a complex and contradictory process of constructing the identity of migrants, which has gone from an initial humanitarian narrative to deep ideological polarisation and securitisation. This process was driven by both real political miscalculations and the media's response to key events that changed public perception. The prerequisites for the crisis were laid back in late 2014 and early 2015 due to a number of ignored signals. Back in December 2014, the United Nations World Food Programme (2014) (WFP) warned of the threat of hunger in Syrian refugee camps due to underfunding, which created a "pushing" factor (Blome, 2016b). Simultaneously, German diplomats in Kosovo, such as Matthias Kiesler, warned of a "mass exodus of economic refugees" from the Balkans, but these reports did not receive proper attention at the highest level, and the report itself was marked as of low importance (Blome, 2016b). By August 2015, 152,777 asylum applications had already been approved in Germany, which is 94.2% more than in the same period of the previous year, and the average waiting time for a decision was

5.4 months (Where the refugees..., 2015). By September, the situation had become critical: approximately 577,000 refugees had arrived in Germany, with 164,000 new arrivals registered in September alone, forcing the government to adjust its forecast to 800,000 a year, figures approaching the 1992 record (Meiritz & Elmer, 2015). The largest group were Syrians, followed by asylum seekers from Albania, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Where the refugees..., 2015). This created a huge burden on the administrative system, where at the end of September more than 300,000 applications were waiting for consideration (Meiritz & Elmer, 2015). Against the background of these dramatic figures, the initial reaction of the German media and society was mostly positive, forming the narrative of a “culture of hospitality” (Willkommenskultur) (Müller, 2015). This approach was reflected in Chancellor Angela Merkel’s famous “We will manage” statement, which was picked up by leading media outlets. The Bild tabloid launched its own campaign “We help” (#refugeeswelcome), which actively contributed to the development of a positive image of refugees (Müller, 2015). The identity of migrants at that time was constructed mainly through the image of a victim in need

of help. However, the official communication of the authorities tried to project an image of stability. During the summer of 2015, when the crisis was rapidly unfolding, the Chancellor’s official Instagram account showed her participation in the usual events: she attended a women’s football festival, opened a new watch factory and attended a school project where she was greeted by children with German flags (Merkel, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). However, this humanitarian consensus suffered a radical breakdown after the events of New Year’s Eve 2015-2016 in Cologne. Mass cases of sexual harassment and robbery, which were suspected of being committed by men of North African and Arab origin, have become a catalyst for a sharp change in the media tone (Müller, 2015). The delay in publishing information in the mainstream media provoked a crisis of confidence and accusations that the press was covering up the facts (Lügenpresse), which gave rise to a narrative of danger. It was this incident that marked the line after which discourse shifted from empathy to security and control requirements. The dynamics of changes in key elements of media discourse during this period is clearly illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Transformation of media narratives about migration in Germany in 2015

Characteristics of discourse	Period of “Hospitality culture” (until the end of 2015)	“Securitisation” period (after the events in Cologne)
Dominant narrative	Humanitarian crisis, the need for assistance and solidarity, “We will manage”	Threat to public safety, cultural incompatibility, loss of control
Constructed identity of the migrant	Victim: refugee fleeing war; vulnerable family, woman, child	Threat: potential criminal, economic migrant, young aggressive male
Key vocabulary and metaphors	“Refugees”, “asylum seekers”, “help”, “solidarity”, “hospitality”	“Stream”, “wave”, “invasion”, “illegal immigrants”, “crime”, “border control”
Typical visual elements	Images of women and children, grateful refugees, volunteers helping	Crowds of young men, police operations, protests, blurred or hidden faces
Role of social networks	Distribution of the hashtag #refugeeswelcome, organisation of volunteer assistance	Spreading hate speech, disinformation, and popularising the term “Lügenpresse”

Source: developed by the author based on M.M. Müller (2015), N. Blome *et al.* (2016a; 2016b)

This table clearly demonstrates a radical shift in the construction of migrant identity in the German media space. It visualises how the dominant image has changed from positive (victim) to negative (threat) over the course of one year, and how this change has affected all levels of discourse, from word choice to visual accents. This highlights the fragility of the humanitarian narrative and its dependence on high-profile events.

However, behind the scenes of the humanitarian narrative, an internal political crisis was unfolding. According to a detailed BILD investigation, in early September 2015, the situation was perceived by many German officials as “getting out of control” (Blome *et al.*, 2016a). Under pressure from the Bavarian government led by Horst Seehofer, who faced a record arrival of refugees (13,050 people in one day), a plan was developed to actually close the borders. A previous order for the federal police contained a key phrase: “unauthorised third-country nationals should be denied entry, even in the case of applying for asylum” (Blome *et al.*, 2016a). However, on September

13, Angela Merkel personally changed the order at the last moment, removing the second part from it. This decision radically changed the situation: the police could exercise control, but were obliged to let anyone who declared their intention to apply for asylum pass, which effectively left the borders open. Her motivation, as BILD describes it, was twofold: on the one hand, the moral conviction that Germany, because of its history, has a duty to help, and on the other, the pragmatic calculation that trying to stop thousands of people by force would lead to “image that we cannot manage” and destroy European unity (Blome *et al.*, 2016a). This decision had far-reaching consequences. It led to a final break in relations between Merkel and Seehofer and marked the beginning of her most difficult political period, during which she even considered resigning her interior minister, Thomas de Maiziere (The consequences for..., 2016). In the international arena, this decision deepened the ideological split. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban later wrote that it was the 2015 crisis that “destroyed the unity” between Germany and

Central Europe, as Merkel chose a “post-Christian and post-national path” that contradicted Central European ideas about the importance of national and cultural identity (Viktor Orbán writes to Merkel..., 2021). The New Year’s Eve attacks in Cologne became a turning point for media discourse, radically changing its tone. As noted in a report by the Ethical Journalism Network, the positive attitude quickly turned into hostility. The image of the refugee as a victim began to transform into an image of a threat to public safety and cultural property (Müller, 2015). This shift was reinforced by stylistic means: the use of empathic vocabulary decreased (for example, “poor”, “vulnerable”) in favour of neutral or negative connotations (“arrivals”, “men of military age”). There was also an increase in the use of the passive state to describe attacks (“women were attacked”), which focused attention on the event rather than the identity of the attackers, while the active state was more often used to describe the actions of migrants in a negative context (“migrants violated the order”). Metaphors of the uncontrolled element (“stream”, “wave”), which used to have a neutral connotation, have now acquired a distinctly threatening meaning. The identity of the migrant was depersonalised: instead of individual stories, a generalised image of a young man from the Middle East as a potential criminal began to dominate. Social networks have become the main channel for spreading hate speech and disinformation. It was in the online space that the term “Lügenpresse” (false press), which was used by right-wing movements to discredit leading media outlets, became widespread (Müller, 2015). Thus, the German media discourse of 2015 underwent a complex transformation. The original humanitarian framework that constructed the identity of migrants as victims proved unstable and, under the pressure of the political crisis and high-profile events, was replaced by a narrative of threat. This change in discourse not only affected public opinion, but also forced the government to resort to tougher migration policies, including concluding an agreement with Turkey to reduce the number of arrivals (The consequences for..., 2016).

Thus, the German case of 2015 demonstrated how the identity of migrants is constructed not statically, but dynamically, at the intersection of political decisions, media framing, and public sentiment. The original humanitarian narrative of a “hospitality culture”, supported by both the government and the leading media, proved unable to withstand the pressures of a real political crisis and internal conflicts. Chancellor Merkel’s key decision to keep borders open to asylum seekers, while based on historical responsibility, created a deep ideological rift that the media later began to actively comprehend. The events in Cologne were a catalyst that allowed the media to quickly move from the image of a migrant victim to the image of a migrant threat, which, in turn, legitimised the further tightening of migration policy. This case is an example of how in the contemporary information society, media discourse not only reflects, but also actively forms political reality.

Australian discourse and constructing the image of an “illegal” migrant

An analysis of the Australian media discourse on migration, especially in the context of the policy of offshore retention of asylum seekers, known as the “Pacific solution”, demonstrates a consistent and purposeful construction of the identity of migrants through the prism of threat and illegitimacy. Unlike the German case, where there has been a dynamic shift in narrative from hospitality to fear, Australian discourse over the past two decades has been characterised by significant stability in the use of securitised vocabulary and dehumanising metaphors. This process, actively supported by both the government and leading media outlets, in particular, the Sydney Morning Herald, and reinforced through blogging platforms, was aimed at creating an image of “illegal maritime arrival” as an existential threat to national sovereignty, which helped to legitimise harsh and often inhumane deterrence measures (McKay, n.d.). The basis of this discourse was the construction of a dichotomy between “real”, “legitimate” refugees who are waiting in line in camps abroad, and “illegal”, “economic” migrants who are trying to “break the queue” by arriving by boat (Australia’s Insular Approach..., 2016). This framework, as the analysis showed, effectively excluded asylum seekers from the category of victims in need of compassion and turned them into violators who pose a danger. A central element of Australian discourse has been the use of militarised and criminalised vocabulary. Since the government’s Operation Sovereign Borders (2013) campaign, the language used to describe migration has been permeated with military terms. The arrival of the boats was described as an “invasion” and the government’s actions as “border protection”. Government ministers regularly reported on “intercepted” and “returned” boats, giving the impression of a constant struggle with an external enemy. This rhetoric was actively picked up and spread by the leading media. Articles in the Sydney Morning Herald and other publications often used terms such as “boat people”, “illegals”, and “people smugglers”, which consolidated the criminal status of asylum seekers even before their cases were considered (Holmes, 2016; Massola & Thompson, 2024). The key grammatical technique was the use of nominalisation, especially in official discourse – the term “illegal maritime arrivals” turns people into an abstract problem, depriving them of their individuality and agency. Lexical choice was consistently based on terms with the semantics of hostility and danger (“invasion”, “threat”, “illegal”). Impersonal constructions and the passive state were often used in government reports (“was intercepted”, “was returned”), which allowed presenting the actions of the authorities as an objective necessity, hiding the subject of the action and its potentially violent nature. The visual accompaniment in the media also played a key role: the most common images were overcrowded, dilapidated boats at sea, which created an image of chaos and uncontrolled flow, or photos of young men from the Middle East and South Asia, which increased prejudice against the terrorist threat. Images of

women and children, which could have evoked sympathy in the audience, were deliberately avoided, which is the direct opposite of the initial stage of coverage of the crisis in Germany. This visual strategy was aimed at dehumanising and generalising, turning individual stories into an anonymous mass that poses a threat.

An important part of the discourse was the creation of a narrative about “islands for migrants” – remote detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) – as a necessary and even humane measure. The official position of the government, broadcast through the media, was that this policy saves lives by preventing dangerous travel by sea (Holmes, 2016). Any criticism of the conditions of detention in these centres, which numerous human rights organisations and UN reports have called inhumane, was presented as undermining national security and encouraging smugglers (Doherty, 2021). The government imposed strict restrictions on journalists’ access to these centres, which effectively created an information blockade (Australia’s Insular Approach..., 2016). As a result, most of the reports were based on official press releases or controlled visits, which did not allow the public to see the full picture of what was happening. This information vacuum was partially filled by blogging platforms and social networks, where activists, lawyers, and asylum seekers themselves tried to convey an alternative point of view. Publications on platforms such as The Guardian Australia’s blog section or independent resources such as New Matilda often contained evidence of systematic human rights violations, appalling sanitation, lack of medical care, and psychological pressures that led to suicides and acts of self-harm (Laughland, 2013; Chalmers, 2016). However, these alternative narratives had much less coverage than the official position that dominated the mainstream media, and were often labelled as politically biased or “playing into the hands” of smugglers. Political discourse has also actively manipulated statistics to justify its policies. For example, during a debate in 2013, prime minister Kevin Rudd said that 70% of people sent to Nauru as part of the first version of the “Pacific Solution” were eventually resettled in Australia. However, as fact-checking conducted by the Conversation platform showed, this figure was incorrect: in fact, only 43% of the total number sent to Australia was resettled, while almost 30% returned home, and the rest were accepted by other countries (Davies, 2013). This case demonstrates how even proven facts can be distorted in public debates to create a false impression of the ineffectiveness of containment policies in the past.

Another important element of the discourse was the juxtaposition of “good” and “bad” migrants. While asylum seekers arriving by sea were demonised, the government and the media actively promoted a positive image of “legal” migrants arriving by plane on work or family visas. This dichotomy allowed creating the illusion that Australia is not an anti-migrant country as a whole, but only opposes “illegal” ways of entering. This narrative ignored key provisions of international law, in particular the 1951

Convention on the status of refugees (The 1951 Refugee..., 1951), which recognises the human right to seek asylum regardless of the way the border is crossed (Australia’s Insular Approach..., 2016). However, in public discourse, legal subtleties have been replaced by the simple and emotionally charged idea of “queue”, which is allegedly violated by “boat people”. This frame proved to be extremely effective, as it appealed to Australians’ ideas about justice and “fair go”, which are the main elements of national identity. The image of an asylum seeker as a “fraudster” trying to circumvent the system has become central to their delegitimisation. This policy, while presented as successful, eventually became a significant political problem for both leading parties, becoming “a mess for the Coalition and a point of division for Labour,” as the Sydney Morning Herald noted in 2018 (Quaedvlieg, 2018). Thus, an analysis of Australian media discourse shows how, through the consistent use of securitised vocabulary, dehumanising visual images, information blockade, and the construction of a false dichotomy between “legal” and “illegal” migrants, a sustained negative image of asylum seekers has been created. This discourse not only legitimised the strict policy of offshore detention, but also profoundly influenced public perception, making it difficult to humanise the problem and integrate refugees into society.

The role of British media in shaping anti-migrant narratives

An analysis of British media and political discourse during the 2016 Brexit campaign demonstrated how the topic of migration was used as a central tool for mobilising voters and constructing the identity of “the other”. Unlike the German case, where the narrative underwent a dynamic transformation, and the Australian case, where a consistent securitisation policy dominated, British discourse was characterised by a unique strategy of conflict, that is, the deliberate mixing and generalisation of different types of migration into a single, threatening image. The campaign for leaving the EU (Leave) and its allies in the leading media, especially tabloids, have successfully constructed the identity of the “migrant” as the main antagonist in a narrative of loss of national sovereignty, economic decline, and cultural erosion (Simpson & Startin, 2023). This process took place through emotionally charged vocabulary, powerful visual symbols, and the active use of both traditional media and new platforms to create and disseminate a simplified and often distorted image of the migrant.

The British tabloid press has played a key role in shaping public opinion, using its many years of experience of “hard Euroscepticism”. Unlike a referendum in 1975, when almost all the press was pro-European, in 2016 publications such as The Sun (Sun says We..., 2016), The Daily Mail (Daily Mail comment, 2016) and The Daily Express (Your country needs..., 2016) launched a campaign for leaving the EU (Castle, 2016). The analysis showed that in the last 25 days before the referendum, three leading tabloids supporting Brexit used the tactic of “bombing”, devoting 48 front pages

to this topic, while the pro-European edition of *The Daily Mirror* and the neutral *Daily Star* together – only seven (Simpson & Startin, 2023). This disparity was compounded by much greater coverage: the combined circulation of the three eurosceptic tabloids was four times higher than that of their main opponent. The central theme of this “spam” was immigration: 27 of the 48 front pages devoted to Brexit directly or indirectly concerned migrants. Tabloids used openly hostile language, publishing headlines such as “How to be a Pole on the Dole”, and creating sensational, often false stories about “social benefit tourism” or the threat to British culture (Castle, 2016). The conflict strategy was linguistically implemented through excessive generalisation – the use of collective nouns in the plural (“migrants”, “immigrants”, “they”) without distinguishing their status (EU citizens, refugees, labour migrants), which created a single, homogeneous image of a “stranger”. Stylistic oppositions were actively used using the pronouns “we” and “they” (“our jobs” – “their influx”, “our social benefits” – “their burden”), which increased the sense of conflict interests. The modality of statements in tabloid headlines was often affirmative and peremptory, presenting subjective assessments or even false information as indisputable fact, using simple sentences and categorical predicates. The biggest example of visually constructing the image of a migrant as a threat was a UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) campaign poster called “Tipping Point” (Tag Archives: Xenophobia, 2024), which depicted a queue of mostly non-white refugees who were not related to the free movement of EU citizens, but were used to incite fear.

This dominant anti-migrant discourse was not unquestionable and met significant resistance within parliament, which resulted in one of the most heated debates in contemporary British history (Brexit debate: The best..., 2017). One of the most consistent critics of Brexit in the Conservative Party was veteran parliamentarian Ken Clark, who explicitly called the promises of Brexit supporters “fantasies from Alice in Wonderland” and predicted that leaving the EU would be a “historic disaster” (Addle, 2017). Most importantly, Clark offered an alternative explanation for the reasons that led to the referendum result. In his opinion, the main driver was not so much concern about immigration, but growing resentment over economic inequality (Addle, 2017). Thus, according to his analysis, the identity of the migrant was artificially constructed as a convenient “scapegoat” for much deeper socio-economic problems. The consequences of this discourse and the decision taken in the referendum turned out to be long-term and contradictory. As the BBC notes, although the UK officially left the EU on January 31, 2020, a transition period continued until the end of the year,

after which freedom of movement ended and new trade rules appeared, which created significant bureaucratic obstacles for business (Brexit: What you..., 2020). Final trade agreement, according to *The Guardian*, was adopted by parliament in a “farce” mode, with minimal time for discussion, which undermined the very idea of restoring “Parliamentary sovereignty” (*The Guardian view...*, 2020).

Discussions about the consequences and causes of Brexit continue in the online space, in particular on the Reddit platform. Analysis of the comments showed that many supporters of leaving the EU still justify their decision by constructing the identity of the European Union as an undemocratic and bureaucratic superpower. One user explained their decision by saying that they did not like that the EU “had power... to cancel the results of the democratic vote if it did not like the result” (Brexit for me..., 2025). Another commentator expressed a similar opinion, saying that they see no reason why “the German, Bulgarian, or Portuguese electorate” should have a say on how the UK spends its money (I do not want..., 2025). These comments clearly trace the narrative of the loss of sovereignty and democratic control that has become central to the Leave campaign. The main thing is that many of these commentators simultaneously criticise their own British politicians, calling them a “bunch of infantile schoolchildren” who failed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Brexit, shifting the blame for the negative consequences from the decision to leave to its unsuccessful implementation (That being said..., 2025). Simultaneously, other Reddit users note that the very problem of Brexit was the lack of a clear plan, because it meant “nothing concrete, only vague ideas and no content” (The problem with..., 2025). Thus, the British case demonstrated how an emotionally charged discourse focused on the constructed, threatening identity of a “migrant” can not only win a referendum, but also lead to a chaotic political process with significant negative consequences.

Thus, the British case demonstrates how during the Brexit campaign, the identity of a migrant was purposefully constructed as the personification of all the problems faced by British society. Based on a conflict strategy that mixed different types of migration, the use of powerful visual symbols and the spread of radicalised narratives through social media, the campaign for leaving the EU managed to turn the migrant into a convenient “scapegoat”. This process helped to translate complex political and economic issues into a simple and emotionally understandable plane of the struggle for national identity and sovereignty, which was the decisive factor for the victory of Brexit supporters. A comparative analysis of the key discursive strategies used in all three countries is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of strategies for constructing a migrant’s identity

Discursive strategy	Germany (Crisis 2015)	Australia (“Pacific Solution”)	United Kingdom (Brexit)
Securitisation and militarisation of vocabulary	Appeared at the second stage (“waves”, “streams”)	Key strategy: “Operation Sovereign Borders”, “invasion”, “interception”	Used moderately, emphasis on loss of control

Table 3. Continued

Discursive strategy	Germany (Crisis 2015)	Australia (“Pacific Solution”)	United Kingdom (Brexit)
Constructing the “Friend/Foe” dichotomy	The distinction between “war refugees” and “economic migrants”	Key strategy: “legitimate” (in the queue) vs. “illegal” (boat people breaking the queue)	Key strategy: “British” vs. “EU migrants” who are taking resources
Visual representation	Dynamic: first women and children, then crowds of young men	Static: mostly dehumanised images of boats and anonymous men	Using the image of non-European refugees to fuel fear of migration from the EU
Role of official authority	Initial support for the humanitarian narrative, followed by policy tightening	Consistent support for tough anti-migrant discourse and information blockade	Active use of anti-migrant rhetoric as the main tool of the campaign for leaving the EU
Alternative discourses	Existed, but were marginalised after the events in Cologne	They existed on blogging platforms and in human rights reports, but had limited reach	Existed in the “qualitative” press and among Remain supporters, but lost out in emotional appeal

Source: developed by the author based on M.M. Müller (2015), Australia’s Insular Approach... (2016), K. Simpson & N. Startin (2023)

The comparative analysis presented in Table 3 allowed synthesising key differences and common patterns in the discursive practices of the three countries. A detailed review of the selected strategies shows that although the end result in all cases was increased “insuring” of migrants, the ways to achieve this effect varied significantly depending on political goals and context. Time dynamics proved to be a crucial factor in differentiation. The German case demonstrated the highest volatility of discourse. It has gone through a rapid evolution from humanisation and “hospitality culture” to drastic securitisation under the influence of widely publicised event in Cologne (Müller, 2015). This shows the fragility of positive narratives in a crisis environment. Instead, Australian discourse has been characterised by rigid stability and institutionalisation of terminology (such as “illegal sea arrivals”), which has turned the crisis into a permanent state to justify containment policies. Differences in the mechanisms of legitimisation were also found. In the UK, a key tool was the conflict strategy, which allowed political actors to manipulate fears of refugees to achieve a completely different goal – ending the free movement of EU citizens and leaving the Union. While in Australia, legitimisation was based on the dichotomy of “legality” (turn against the boat), which appealed to the national sense of justice. The common denominator for all three cases was the instrumentalisation of language and visual images by power elites and the media. Regardless of the national context, there was a tendency to depersonalise migrants: through metaphors of the elements (“flow”, “wave” in Germany), militarised vocabulary (“invasion”, “operation” in Australia), or generalising visual images of the crowd (in the British campaign). Thus, the results of the study confirm that media and political discourses do not just respond to migration processes, but actively construct their perception. The identified strategies – dynamic shift (Germany), stable securitisation (Australia) and political conflict (Great Britain) – prove that the identity of the migrant is a flexible construct that transforms depending on the needs of the political moment, serving as a tool for mobilising the electorate or justifying restrictive state measures.

DISCUSSION

The study of media discourses on migration in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom revealed that, despite significant differences in national contexts and the specifics of migration flows, there are common and stable patterns of constructing the identity of migrants. The results presented in the previous section demonstrate how the media, often in tandem with political elites, use language, metaphors, and visual elements to create simplistic, emotionally charged, and often negative images of migrants. The key conclusion is that media discourse does not just reflect reality, but actively constructs it, turning the complex social phenomenon of migration into a politicised “crisis”, and migrants themselves into symbolic “others”, which allows legitimising harsh political measures.

The central framework that unites all three cases considered is the concept of “migration as a crisis”, which was analysed in detail by C. Cantat *et al.* (2025). The results of this study are fully consistent with their thesis that the link between migration and the crisis is not so much an objective reality as a social construct activated by key actors, in particular, the media and politicians. The German case of 2015 illustrated this dynamic: the original humanitarian narrative of the “hospitality culture” was transformed into a discourse of crisis only after the events in Cologne, although objective indicators, such as the number of arrivals, were high before that. In Australia, the crisis discourse has been artificially maintained for decades to justify the “Pacific Solution” policy. In the UK, the crisis was designed around the free movement of EU citizens to mobilise the electorate in support of Brexit. As noted by C. Cantat *et al.*, this approach helped to denaturalise the idea of migration as a crisis and see it as a set of specific representations and management practices. Thus, the media does not just report on the crisis, they are active participants in its creation, selecting certain events, using alarmist vocabulary and visual images that increase the sense of threat and urgency.

This process of constructing a crisis is inextricably linked to the creation of the “circle of fear” as described by D. Forlenza (2023). According to researcher, the growing role of the nation-state and the redefinition of national

identity have contributed to the emergence of new forms of exclusion, where refugees and migrants are increasingly presented as “others”. The results of this study confirmed that media narratives in all three countries actively increased fear and frustration by spreading stereotypes about migrants. This process was based on a deep psychological division into groups of “friends” and “strangers”, which can provoke social and political instability, as pointed out by I. Rau *et al.* (2023) on the example of Germany. The media was becoming a tool for making this distinction. In Australia, this was reflected in the creation of a clear dichotomy between the “good” refugees who wait in camps and the “bad” ones who arrive by boat. This discourse of “deserving”, as analysed by S. Clark *et al.* (2024), forces even the refugees themselves to assimilate and reproduce these categories in accordance with the ideal of a “good refugee”. In the UK, tabloids have constructed an image of the EU migrant as an economic burden, contrasting it with the interests of “native” British workers. Even in Germany, according to M.A. Ayoub (2023), the media actively distinguished between those who are fleeing the war and those who allegedly abuse the asylum procedure, which was later reflected in legislative changes. S.J. Sarah Liu (2021), in her interregional comparison, which included the UK, concluded that the media, regardless of context, tend to use a limited number of frames that stereotype and simplify immigration, and the process of “insuring” is often complex and ambivalent.

To construct the image of the “other” and social fear, the media used linguistic and visual tools, in particular metaphors. Historical analysis by C. Taylor (2021) of the *Times* showed that some migration metaphors, such as “fluid” (flow, wave), are persistent and have been used for two centuries. The results of this study confirmed the active use of this metaphor in both German and British discourse, where it created the image of an uncontrolled element. C. Taylor (2021) also noted that new metaphors such as “invader” and “burden” have emerged over time, which have even more negative connotations. Australian discourse, with its militarised vocabulary (“invasion”, “operation”), is an example of the use of the invader metaphor. The ultimate manifestation of such discursive construction is dehumanisation, which was investigated by D.M. Markowitz & P. Slovic (2021). Their study found that dehumanising “illegal” immigrants negatively correlated with feelings of warmth towards them and perceptions of their suffering. The use of terms such as “illegal immigrants” in Australian discourse or anonymous images of crowds is a practical embodiment of this mechanism, which makes rigid policies more acceptable to society.

It is important to note that media discourse is not monolithic and often reflects hierarchical attitudes towards different groups of migrants. The study by N. Zawadzka-Palucktau (2023) showed that the Polish press portrayed Ukrainian refugees in 2022 mostly positively as victims of war, in stark contrast to the coverage of migration from the Middle East and North Africa. This conclusion resonates

with the paper by N.A.A. Aleessawi & L. Djaghrouri (2023), who also noted that Ukrainian refugees received significantly more positive coverage in the European press than refugees from Arab countries, who were often portrayed as a threat. This differentiation suggests that there are racial and cultural hierarchies in media perception, where culturally and geographically “close” migrants are constructed as more “acceptable” than those from more remote and stigmatised regions. This mechanism was also traced in the German and Australian cases, which created a distinction between “real” refugees and “economic” migrants.

Ultimately, the relationship between media discourse, economic realities, and politics should be considered. According to K. Hermele (2021), the current discourse on migration and development is controversial: on the one hand, there is concern about “brain drain”, on the other – the emigration of “excess” populations is welcome. In the end, migration policy often moves into the security sphere, becoming a matter of “protecting the North”. The results of this study confirm this thesis. In the UK, the Brexit campaign has directly linked migration to economic problems, although, according to M. Fernández-Reino & C. Rienzo (2022), migrants are an integral part of the British labour market, especially in the healthcare and hotel and restaurant industries. In Germany, according to M. Gehrsitz & M. Ungerer (2022), the influx of refugees has not had a negative impact on the labour market for local residents, but has led to increased support for anti-migrant parties, suggesting that media perceptions may be stronger than economic reality. A study of Italian media conducted by R. Scardigno *et al.* (2024), also confirmed that framing migration is a rhetorical tool that depends on editorial policies and emotional narratives, not just objective facts. Even in Germany, where politicians and journalists have tried to appeal to the historical memory of Germans’ own migrations to legitimise the open-door policy (Perron, 2021), this humanitarian narrative has proved unsustainable. This shows how strong the discourse of fear and threat is, especially when fuelled by the media (Alarcon, 2022). This creates significant obstacles to the integration and well-being of migrants themselves, who face numerous barriers and psychological difficulties.

Thus, comparison of the results of this study with a wider range of scientific papers confirmed that media discourse in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom played a key role in constructing the identity of migrants, often using strategies of securitisation, othering, and dehumanisation. The patterns identified – from dynamic image transformation in Germany to stable negative narratives in Australia and conflict in the UK – demonstrate how language and media practices not only reflect but actively shape public perception and political agenda. The link between dominant narratives, especially those that present migration as a “crisis” or “threat”, and the legitimisation of restrictive policy measures was evident in all three cases. This highlighted the fundamental role of the media as an independent actor in the political process and

indicated that discursive constructions have real consequences both for public policy development and for the social integration of migrants.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed key mechanisms for constructing the identity of migrants in the political and media discourse of three countries – Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom – during periods of complex migration challenges. All three cases demonstrated that the media and political actors not only reflect events, but also actively shape society's perception of migrants using language, metaphors, visual images, and narrative strategies. In the German context, it was found that the original humanitarian narrative quickly transformed into a crisis narrative after high-profile events, which revealed the vulnerability of the image of the “victim” to the displacement of the image of the “threat”. In Australia, the discourse was characterised by stability and consistent consolidation of negative stereotypes through securitisation and criminalisation of asylum seekers, which created a long-term negative image. In the UK, the key mechanism was conflict – the deliberate mixing of different types of migration into a single threatening image that helped mobilise the electorate during Brexit. Thus, the hypothesis of the variability of discursive strategies depending on the national and political context and the general tendency to reduce migration to the form of a “crisis” was confirmed. The qualitative result of the study is the identification of three dominant strategies: dynamic shift (Germany), stable securitisation (Australia), and conflict (Great Britain). Comparative analysis has shown that, despite the

differences, all strategies serve to legitimise political decisions and reinforce public fears. The practical result is the development of an analytical base that can be used to develop communication strategies aimed at countering hate speech and promoting integration processes.

However, the study revealed some limitations. Firstly, the corpus of texts was limited to a sample from individual media and online platforms, which did not allow fully covering the variety of discursive practices. Secondly, the study was of a qualitative nature, and therefore did not provide quantitative representativeness. Thirdly, the time frame focused on crisis periods, which made it impossible to trace the long-term evolution of discourse in calmer periods. The results obtained are of both theoretical and applied significance. Theoretically, they support the concept of migration as a social construct, and not a purely demographic or economic phenomenon. Prospects for further research include the use of mixed methods to analyse new contexts, in particular, coverage of migration from Ukraine after 2022. A deeper understanding of the identified discursive mechanisms will help to build a more inclusive public dialogue.

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