Policy Framing and Branding in Times of Constant Crisis

Edited by Vasiliki Tsagkroni and George Dikaios

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Editorial: Policy Framing and Branding in Times of Constant Crisis

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Abstract

This editorial serves as an introduction to *Media and Communication*'s thematic issue Policy Framing and Branding in Times of Constant Crisis. Crises cast challenges for political actors and concurrently create opportunities for policymaking, public reflections, and political competition. In times of crisis, when it comes to communicating policymaking but also framing the crisis itself, issues close to political communication (including political marketing and political branding) become of paramount relevance. The eight articles of this issue cover a broad array of subjects, expanding the understanding of the relevance of communication when it comes to policymaking in times of crisis, through the lens of policy framing and policy branding.

1. Introduction

In a seminal definition that has endured over time, Rosenthal et al. (1989) articulated crisis as a "serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions" (p. 10). The notions of threat, urgency, and uncertainty underscore two crucial aspects: (a) the perception of crisis as a collective construct, and (b) its capacity to engender conditions conducive to subsequent action, what Kingdon (1984) calls a "window of opportunity." This conceptualization of both shared perception and crisis-induced opportunities serves to galvanize policymakers and politicians to capitalize on crises as avenues for effecting modifications that would be unattainable within a stable environment (Boin et al., 2016). Additionally, in what can be described as a form of "frame contests" (Boin et al., 2009), contestants engage in strategic maneuvers and

deliberate efforts to assert their position/frame as the prevailing narrative, employing various tactics to ensure the acceptance of their perspective within the public discourse.

Keeping this in mind, and following Entman's (1993) theory on framing, in times of crisis, policy framing entails the strategic selection and presentation of specific crisis-related aspects (while excluding others) to direct public perceptions, elicit backing for proposed interventions, and shape decision-making processes. Since crisis scenarios typically involve intricate and multifaceted challenges, the framing thereof holds significant sway over public perceptions of the crisis and the appropriate avenues of response. Furthermore, as crises commonly manifest the notions of uncertainty, urgency, and threat and accentuate an imperative for effective framing, policymakers are compelled to meticulously deliberate on how to frame the crisis in a manner that fosters confidence, stimulates collective mobilization, and mitigates potential disarray or consternation.

Additionally, in the policymaking process, another aspect also plays a significant role: policy branding. Policy branding during periods of crisis entails the creation and dissemination of a unique identity or portrayal for the policies and measures formulated to tackle the crisis. This branding endeavor can serve multiple objectives, e.g., from indicating to the public the implementation of specialized measures to address a pressing and exceptional circumstance, to fostering trust and confidence in the proposed measures by assuring the public of the competence and capability of authorities in managing the situation, to galvanize support and resource mobilization for crisis response initiatives by fostering a sense of unity and collective purpose among stakeholders.

During periods of crisis, the effectiveness of policy framing and branding necessitates meticulous consideration of both the substance and communication of policy propositions. Policymakers are tasked not only with formulating evidence-based strategies to address the crisis but also with articulating these strategies in a manner that aligns with public sentiments, instills assurance, and cultivates cooperation. By framing the crisis in a manner that underscores common values and objectives, and branding crisis response initiatives in a way that engenders trust and unity, policymakers can facilitate resilience, facilitate efficient responses, and alleviate the crisis's repercussions on individuals and communities.

This thematic issue on Policy Framing and Branding in Times of Constant Crisis focuses on ways international organizations, European institutions, national governments, and other fora utilize, frame, and brand crises to make policy or pursue political change. The integrated study of communication and crisis provides a critical perspective for analyzing various aspects, such as policymaking, branding, framing, governance, representation, and communication processes. The eclectic selected contributions expand the understanding of the relevance of communication when it comes to policymaking in times of crisis, through the lens of policy framing and policy branding. Exploring further policymaking via these communication lenses is essential to understand further how public perceptions are shaped, what guides the decision-making process, and ultimately determines the effectiveness of policy responses in times of crisis.

2. Presentation of the Contributions in This Thematic Issue

Dikaios (2024) presents an analytical framework that elucidates policy branding as a potent mechanism for shaping policy narratives, leading to policy framing. Employing the International Maritime Organization

as an example, the article addresses how entities utilize social media platforms, particularly X, to position themselves as advocates for climate action within their respective sectors and to cultivate a climate-conscious image. The author's findings underscore the imperative of contextualizing the study of policy framing and policy branding, within the realms of communication and political science, to ensure the avoidance of erroneous conclusions.

Karlsson (2024) explores the implementation of foreign policy through communication, focusing on the legitimization of foreign policy branding. Employing Sweden's feminist foreign policy as a case study and drawing on van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation theory, the article posits that legitimacy constitutes a fundamental element in shaping a convincing and credible representation of a nation and its foreign policy initiatives. The study proposes that a branding logic within the context of the attention economy accelerates foreign policy communication that tends to prioritize the marketability or "sellability" of foreign policy objectives over substantive goals, thereby legitimizing policy in a manner conducive to broader audience appeal.

Sengul and McSwiney (2024) explore communicative and policy-framing state responses to the increasing crisis of far-right extremism. Focusing as a case study on the Andrews-Allan Labour governments of the State of Victoria in Australia during the period from 2021 to 2023, the authors argue that the Andrews-Allan administrations utilized a spectrum of communicative, discursive, and legitimization tactics to justify the implementation of policies aimed at prohibiting Nazi symbols and gestures, to reinforce Victoria's identity as an inclusive and multicultural liberal democracy. Their findings contribute to a deeper empirical understanding of the crucial role played by political and crisis communication in tackling extremism and offer a framework for policy framing contending with the global rise of far-right extremism.

Tsagkroni (2024) emphasizes the pivotal role of branding in policymaking. The author concentrates on the case of Portugal, seeking to contextualize historical discourses surrounding migration and examine how perceptions and branding of migration policies evolved during the Covid-19 crisis through a framing lens. More specifically, the author explores the branding and framing strategies employed within Portuguese immigration policy discourse in parliamentary debates, to assess the role of branding in shaping migration policy responses, particularly within crisis contexts.

Kenix and Gibbins (2024) investigate the framing of refugees in crisis in both home and destination countries, to elucidate how each attribute of refugees was portrayed in media agendas, subsequently influencing policymaking across nations. The authors identify a consistent pattern of negative framing and clustering of negative attributes of refugees across all nations and reveal a trend towards increasingly negative and emotive content. They suggest that immigration debates are likely to intensify as political and cultural battlegrounds and discuss the risk of the impact of such negative portrayals of refugees to more nationalistic and xenophobic immigration policies.

Cmeciu et al. (2024) address the significance of public health branding and promotional communication strategies concerning the Covid-19 vaccine within the context of governance strategy, reflecting the evolving expansion of marketing concepts beyond commercial domains. They specifically underline the endeavors of national authorities to tailor communication strategies and vaccine policies from the World Health Organization to suit their respective domestic contexts while maintaining public trust. Employing the

Romanian government's communication campaign on Facebook as a case study, the research investigates the role of (de)legitimation in the processes of policy transfer and branding.

Vincze and Balaban (2024) investigate the utilization of the concept of crisis within the EU, drawing upon historical narratives that recurrently underscore crisis as a defining or organizing principle. The study focuses on the discursive utilization of crisis by the European Commission and scrutinizes crisis as a form of political discourse and its practical applications across different times, regions, and policy domains. Through this inquiry, the study contributes to a deeper comprehension of the dynamics of EU policy framing during periods of crisis.

Hayek (2024) explores the reception of governmental press briefings by newspapers during the nascent stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. It investigates a potential "rally-around-the-flag" effect among journalists amidst the Covid-19 crisis and examines how governmental press conferences influenced the prominence and sentiment expressed in newspaper opinion pieces. The study explores the longevity of these effects throughout the Covid-19 crisis and identifies which rhetorical strategies employed by political figures garnered the most media attention. The findings illuminate the influence of several on the portrayal of governmental agendas in media discourse and framing during periods of crisis.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the scholarly contributions within this thematic issue provide a thorough comprehensive examination of the intricate dynamics encompassing policy framing, branding, and crisis communication. Through an array of diverse empirical studies ranging from climate change to far-right extremism and the Covid-19 pandemic, the authors delineate the pivotal significance of communication strategies in configuring public perceptions, legitimizing policy initiatives, and steering decision-making frameworks amid periods of crisis. The collective findings underscore the nuanced nature of crisis communication, emphasizing not merely the formulation of empirically grounded policies, but also the strategic crafting and branding thereof to instill confidence, ensure cohesion, and solicit collective endorsement. By delving into the subtleties of policy framing and branding within contexts of crisis, this thematic issue contributes invaluable perspectives on the mechanisms through which communication shapes the dynamics of policymaking, governance paradigms and strategies, and societal responses within an era marked by constant crises.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Policy Framing Through Policy Branding: International Maritime Organization, Climate Change, and Twitter/X

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Abstract

Climate change, which nowadays is frequently framed as climate crisis in order to highlight the urgent need to take action to tackle it, has been studied extensively both in communication and political science disciplines. This contribution uses as an example the International Maritime Organization to highlight the utilization of its social media, and in particular its Twitter/X account, to frame that it supports climate action in the shipping sector and to brand itself as a green organization. The article offers an analytical framework which illustrates that policy branding is one of the most accurate tools to perform policy framing. It continues by showcasing that this is a procedure that governance institutions use to promote a deliberate message, even if this is not on track with what the institution is expected to do. The empirical data gathered, and processed through content analysis, paints a clear image of how this happens in the era of social media and leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to study policy framing and policy branding within the context they take place; otherwise, wrong conclusions might be drawn.

Keywords

climate change; climate crisis; International Maritime Organization; policy branding; policy framing; Twitter; X

1. Introduction and Context

In July 2023, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, in his opening remarks at a press conference on climate change, said that "the era of global warming has ended; the era of global boiling has arrived" (Guterres, 2023). A couple of years earlier, he had used the terms "climate crisis" and "climate emergency" to showcase the urgency for action to be taken by everyone in order to combat climate change.

Today, it is undeniable that climate change is a result of each and every anthropogenic activity that emits greenhouse gas emissions. This means that almost all human actions in the world, through the emissions produced, contribute to the problems caused by climate change, e.g., temperature rise, sea-level rise, and extreme weather events. One of the actions that has been attracting more and more attention during the past years, regarding its contribution to the problem, as well as to its solution, is transport. While transport includes all the modes of transportation (cars, bicycles, airplanes, ships, trains, etc.), some of those have been at the forefront of international discussions, mentioned usually separately from all the others. One of those is shipping.

The reason behind this distinction is simple: the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the international organization responsible for regulating all matters that concern shipping, in 1992, got an exemption from the international institutional framework for tackling climate change, i.e., the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (and its complements Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement). This exemption means that the emissions coming from all shipping activities are not taken into account in each country's emissions which include all other emissions coming from anthropogenic activities. For several years, therefore, shipping was expanding its activities without any of the rules that had been gradually starting to appear regarding emissions mitigation in several countries. However, when the timing was favorable, the international community achieved a deal and concluded the Paris Agreement in 2015 (which posed legal obligations to all states around the world to contribute their fair share in the efforts of emissions mitigation), and heavy pressures were finally put on the IMO to develop systems that would allow for emissions reduction from ships.

Although, and after heated negotiations, the IMO did adopt the *Initial Strategy on Reduction of Greenhous Gas Emissions From Ships* in 2018, the progress that has been made, namely the emissions reduction, is still limited (Dikaios, in press; Dikaios & Blavoukos, 2023). Conversely, the projections for shipping emissions seem to be heading towards a surge in the coming years, first, as it is expected that the transportation of goods will be expanded and, second, as no agreement on legally binding rules or technological developments on how the transition will take place has been put in place. Further, the International Energy Agency classifies international shipping as "not on track" regarding its progress in mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, showing that significant changes are needed in order to hit the target (International Energy Agency, n.d.).

Nevertheless, the announcements of the IMO on its official website show a somewhat different picture. For example, the first paragraph on the IMO's website says: "IMO continues to contribute to the global fight against climate change, in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 13, to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts" (IMO, n.d.-a). Further down, it reads: "Although shipping was not included in the final text of the Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, IMO has set itself a long-standing mandate to contribute to the fight against climate change by addressing greenhouse gas emissions from ships" (IMO, n.d.-a).

Having the above as starting points, this article explores whether the IMO is/appears to be an avid supporter of climate action through using X (formerly Twitter); a medium that has been the subject of analysis of other studies regarding climate policy and international organizations (e.g., Goritz et al., 2022). It applies theoretical approaches that fall within the spectrum of policy framing and policy (or political) branding. The goal is to underline how the IMO depicts itself publicly about its climate action and, as a broader problematization, whether this picture aligns with what the IMO ought to do and what it actually does. By doing so, the article

introduces an unexplored case study in the literature and intertwines adjacent concepts that can better analytically explore and explain how actors frame their actions through branding them. Besides, climate change policy framing has attracted measurable scholarly attention (e.g., Bernauer & McGrath, 2016; Chen et al., 2023; Rossa-Roccor et al., 2021; Wendler, 2022). Climate change has been identified—already for a decade now—as an issue that is being framed in a particular way in order to influence the direction the climate policy debate will take (Nisbet, 2014), and recent studies have examined how climate change is framed in social media (Vu et al., 2021). Thus, this article falls also within this strand of literature.

Accordingly, and taking a step back to have a helicopter view of how social media is reshaping the era of information in unprecedented ways, research has delved into the subject showcasing how X has been shaping the agenda and how it has contributed to presenting actors as leaders in a large array of fields and policies (Collins et al., 2019; Rehm et al., 2019; Shapiro & Hemphill, 2016). Furthermore, X presents a unique tool to explore framing and branding as the limited characters per post make its users write in a concise and condensed manner and offers to the researchers abundant information for analysis.

This introductory part is followed by the theoretical underpinnings of policy framing and policy branding approaches and their combination. After that, the empirical part is presented, followed by the discussion and the conclusion.

2. Policy Framing

Policy framing is an issue of interest in several policy-related studies. The reason is that the way an issue is framed can influence how it is perceived or dealt with in the political arena. A seminal research agenda article by Daviter (2007) assembles a large part of the literature regarding policy framing and offers an interesting observation, on which several studies follow (either referencing Daviter or not, e.g., Eising et al., 2015; Nisbet, 2014; Princen, 2018). Daviter, as well as a volume of literature that revolves around framing, gives emphasis on the complexity of the issues that usually need framing. This complexity allows involved actors in the framing process to *select*, *emphasize*, and *organize aspects* of it in order to define how an issue will appear in the public sphere and ensure that it will contribute to their end goal. Thus, a policy framing process can betray the preferences of the framing actor (Vu et al., 2021).

Another pivotal work by van Hulst and Yanow (2014), based on the work of Rein and Schön that is also used extensively by Daviter (2007), attempts to create a concrete theoretical framework of policy framing. They complement what Daviter proposes by stressing the need to create narratives around the issue to be framed. More precisely, and apart from selecting the issue, they highlight what they call *sense-making* and *storytelling*. Sense-making is defined as the action of "collecting, analyzing and sharing information on the causes, dynamics and effects of a [situation], and its potential solution" (Boin et al., 2014, p. 119). Storytelling, similar to meaning-making, is the process where the viewpoint of the prevailing frame leads to the way an issue will be dealt with (Blondin & Boin, 2018). Through these terms, they attempt to show that in order to frame an issue (at the political level), a broader picture needs to be present and serve as the underlying logic of why the issue is framed in a specific manner and what will be the results of such framing.

Additionally to the above, a rather new strand of the literature has started to emerge. This strand has to do with policy framing on social media during crises, such as environmental disasters, climate change, and

health-related issues. This shows that the growing use of social media has consequences on how the public (and the public sector) perceives policy messages and what might this mean for policymaking.

In studies that come from a more political communication point of view, the prevailing definition used to a great extent for framing is this of Entman who states:

> Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

The above coincides significantly with what Daviter supports. Although Daviter (2007) refers to the EU, the increasing impact of immediate communication has affected policymaking through framing in all policy fields (Calnan, 2020), as in order for a decision to be taken it has to be framed—often publicly—in a way that it allows this decision to be made. Building on that, Thistlethwaite et al. (2019) claim that policymakers decide how they will approach a policy issue based on how urgently it appears in the media or they will choose a solution that seems more acceptable. They argue, further, that media with essential narratives can have more impact on policymaking.

Figure 1 assembles the process showing how a (policy) issue is framed. At first, one selects an issue that needs framing according to the actor's will; then the actor emphasizes specific aspects of the issue and organizes it in a manner that serves their goals; following, the actor creates one or more narratives (through sense-making and storytelling) in order to give the necessary context and the broader picture within which the policy issue is framed.
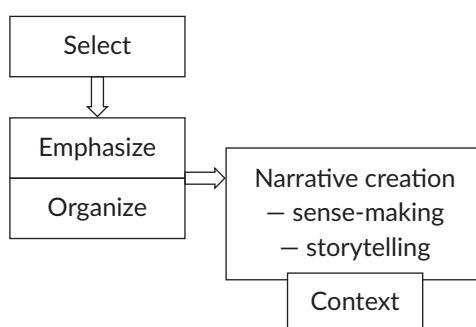
Figure 1. The process of policy framing. Source: Daviter (2007) and van Hulst and Yanow (2014).

3. Policy Branding

Policy branding refers to the "way political messages are communicated...and engages with methods of exploiting images and symbolism" (Tsagkroni, 2015, p. 240). Therefore, policy branding is the means to create a convincing narrative by using specific descriptions and ciphers. Branding, in the broader sphere of governance, is a premeditated and on-purpose selected "strategy that introduces calculated calm to the tsunami of competing stimuli" (Marland et al., 2017, p. 125). Thus, branding in policymaking is utilized (mainly) in order to help governments, key stakeholders, and actors to deal with crises.

Two scholarly articles have set the foundations for researching branding in governance and policymaking. In chronological order, the first is titled "Branding, Politics and Democracy" by Marsh and Fawcett (2011) and the second is "Governance in the Age of Digital Media and Branding" by Marland et al. (2017). Both articles attempt to consistently read the literature around policy branding and understand how it affects governance and policymaking, while developing some factors or mechanisms to explain how branding functions in their respective fields. Both articles also mention that there is a need for more empirical or exploratory research to take place in order to have a better understanding of how branding permeates (and possibly rules) governance and policymaking in a world of constant crises.

Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that policy branding and political branding have been mostly applied as concepts in investigating parliamentarians, prime ministers, and parties' actions in an attempt to create a specific image that is attractive to their consumers (or the public; e.g., Armannsdottir et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2018; Needham, 2006; Needham & Smith, 2015; Pich et al., 2020; Tsagkroni, 2015). This strand of the literature, pinpointing as well that policy branding is a rather under-researched topic, works as an initial basis of empirical research and offers some methodological tools. There are also scarce pieces of literature that approach policy branding from different perspectives, and reflect, e.g., on public branding (Karens et al., 2015) or nation branding (Anzera et al., 2019). As expected, the definitions and rationale used in this literature coincide, in rough lines, with what Marsh and Fawcett (2011) and Marland et al. (2017) assemble, allowing us to apply the latter's concepts to build our analytical framework.

The most interesting observation of Marsh and Fawcett (2011) and Marland et al. (2017) is that branding is used to give the impression that the person or institution in charge has control over the issue they brand; or, in other words, that the brand user has solutions to the crises and the challenges the public has to deal with. Marland et al. (2017, p. 125) claim that this is the result of the "real-time media and image management," which leads people in governmental positions to manage social media in a way that draws a picture of authority through "simplicity and consistency." The ultimate goal, according to Marsh and Fawcett (2011) is to persuade the public about the value and the eminence of the policy (or the political message) promoted. Nevertheless, they highlight that branding seems to be "less a way of improving the quality of a product and more a way of marketing it to consumers" (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011, p. 516).

Additionally, the image that branding creates (or the brand that the respective stakeholders develop) aims to mitigate the noise around a topic and the possible tension surrounding it. This way, the message receiver gets information that is easier to absorb, forms a specific point of view, and decides on how to approach or deal with the subject at hand (Marland et al., 2017). Figure 2 shows how policy branding is performed.
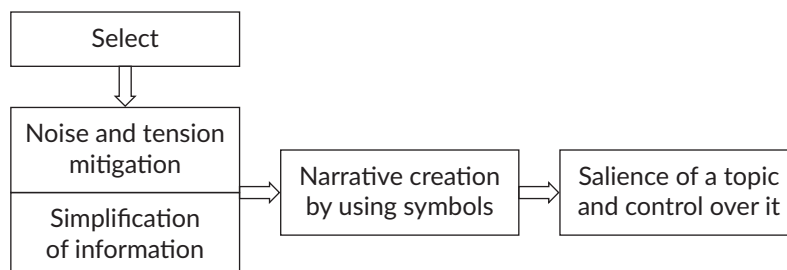

Figure 2. The process of policy branding. Source: Adapted from Marsh and Fawcett (2011) and Marland et al. (2017).

4. Policy Framing Through Policy Branding on the IMO's X Account

X—and in general social media—have opened a whole new world to policy framing, as the messenger can directly construct the information that wishes that its audience receive (Hemphill et al., 2013). As X is one of the main social media platforms that government institutions use to publicly communicate their strategies, policies, decisions, etc. (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012), this article explores how the IMO frames climate change action by branding it in a certain way.

Methodologically, X has been largely associated with content analysis, since its early years and up until today. This is apparent through an online search where voluminous articles apply this kind of method when researching X. Moreover, it is also associated with the analysis of specific crises, such as the appearance of posts (formerly tweets) during and after, e.g., bushfires, floods, and pandemics (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010; De Bussy & Paterson, 2012; De Falco et al., 2021; Small, 2011; Willson et al., 2021). Content analysis allows for the examination of bulk information retrieved from texts, especially from online sources, according to the literature, and concludes with valid research outcomes.

This article performs manual content analysis of all the posts that deal with climate change—and more generally with environmental protection (as IMO classifies climate change as an environmental challenge), that the IMO uploaded from August 1, 2022, until July 31, 2023. The selection of the date was made with three factors taken into consideration: First, July 2023 was the month that Guterres announced the era of global boiling; second, July 2023 was the month which the IMO adopted a revision of the aforementioned *Initial Strategy*, the *2023 IMO Strategy on Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships* (IMO 2023 Strategy), which again does not include biding measures but rather lukewarm developments with uncertain implementation (IMO, n.d.-a); and, third, the period of time that X nowadays allows users to go back in time and find posts through scrolling. Nevertheless, a whole year of posts can provide rich data on how an organization approaches a topic and extract—at least—some trends, making general observations about policy framing and policy branding.

The mechanisms of policy framing and policy branding take place concurrently. While this cannot be depicted in a single figure, as the combination of the figures above would be on top of each other, Figure 3 can offer the closest portrayal of the mechanisms to be examined, when the subject of analysis is the ways a policy is framed through branding. To test the plausibility of this scheme, the case study of climate change at the IMO is going to be examined next.
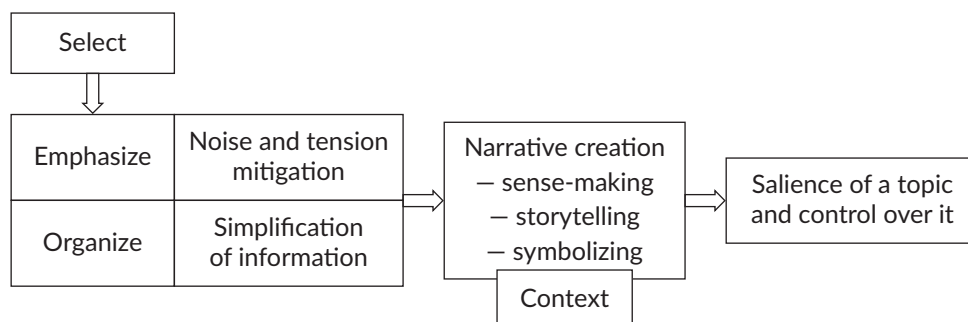

Figure 3. Composite model for policy framing through policy branding.

5. Results and Discussion

The data consists of 361 posts that the IMO uploaded between August 2022 and July 2023, that are directly related to environmental protection and climate change combatting (all the posts used for this article can be found in the Supplementary File). The reason for collecting posts that referred to both themes is that, sometimes, environmental action is interconnected with climate action. Going through the posts, nine terms were identified to showcase how often the IMO opted to refer to climate change. These terms are, in alphabetical order, Biofouling, Climate Change, COP, Decarbonization, Emissions, GHG, Glofouling, Green, Temperature. From these terms, three can be characterized as mega-terms, meaning that they consist of not only the term as is, but adjacent terminology as well. For example, GHG also represents the terms CO_2 and Greenhouse Gas. Respectively, Decarbonization also stands for Carbon and several derivatives, while Green is usually accompanied by a field that is supposed to become greener (e.g., Green Shipping, Green Technology).

One initial remark: In the list of terms, two terms that do not seem to have a direct relation with the tackling of climate change from shipping are included. These terms are Biofouling and Glofouling, which have to do with the purification of ships. According to the IMO, activities related to them are interrelated with the greening of the shipping sector and the climate efficiency of the ships, as their combatting will contribute to the mitigation of GHG emissions (IMO, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). Thus, one could also account for these terms belonging to the broader efforts of the IMO to tackle the challenges climate change poses.

It has to be mentioned here that it was purposefully decided to exclude the encompassing of terms related to Energy (although very close to decarbonization), because it can be argued that the focus on energy transition does not necessarily entail the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions (Dupont & Oberthür, 2012; Peterson & Rose, 2006), as solutions that are not entirely green (e.g., dual fuel engines) may be promoted under the umbrella of the so-called energy transition. Accordingly, terms such as Environment, Sustainable Development, and Biodiversity are not included in the analysis list as they refer to broader or different aspects of IMO's action. Thus, from the total of 361 posts, the terms of this analysis appear in 235 posts, i.e., 65.1%—a significant number (see Figure 4). If we also exclude the terms Biofouling and Glofouling as not directly related to climate change, what remains is 199 posts which represent 55.1% of the total number. Both percentages highlight a systematic *decision* on behalf of the IMO X account to showcase the organization's action that relates to climate change ("selection").

For the record, an analogous image to Figure 4 is depicted in Figure 5, where the appearance number of each term is counted. Within the posts, all the terms (except Temperature) pop up more frequently. This is to be expected as posts often contain more than one sentence or a series of hashtags. Respectively, they often contain more than one of the keywords.

Apart from the numbers which show that the IMO pays a lot of attention to climate action, a closer look at the content of the posts intensifies this impression. Two good examples are the periods of significant negotiations. The first has to do with the cornerstone of the international climate negotiations, the so-called Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, an annual meeting of all the countries around the world. During the period under examination, COP27 took place in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, between 6 and 18 November 2022. Although, as mentioned in Section 1, shipping emissions are not part of the formal negotiations, the last few years are always on the table of side negotiations. Thus, the IMO is present in COPs
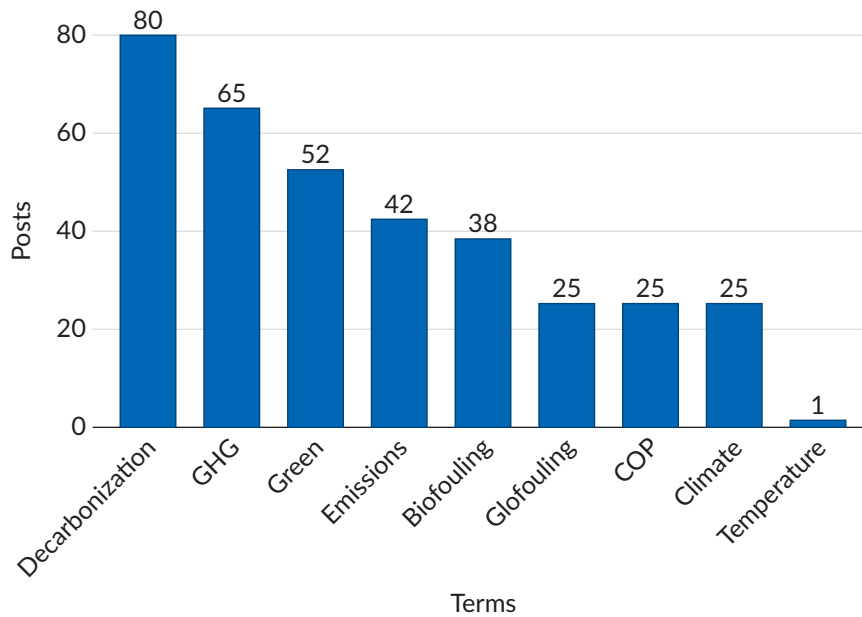
Figure 4. Number of IMO posts including terms relevant to climate change. Note: Some of the 235 posts include more than one term.
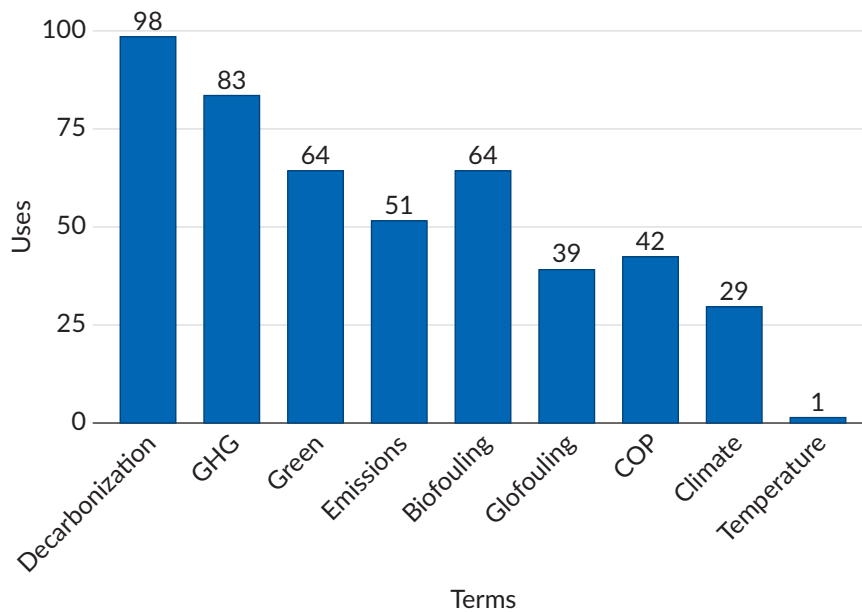
Figure 5. Number of terms' appearance in the IMO posts concerning climate change.

and its X account focuses almost only on that subject. At COP27, from 2 to 18 November, 25 out of 27 IMO posts referred directly to the COP.

The second example has to do with the period around the adoption of the 2023 IMO Strategy, i.e., from 26 June to 12 July 2023. In this case, the density of the posts referred on this subject is less compact, as in the Marine Environment Protection Committee (which discusses also emissions reduction) several other

environmental issues concerning maritime affairs are also discussed. Therefore, 19 out of 35 refer directly to the 2023 IMO Strategy, which—nevertheless—is still above 50%.

Taking stock of these two examples, what one can extract out of the "organization" of the themes entailed in those posts and the "emphasis" given to them—in combination with the numbers presented at the beginning of this section—is that the IMO attempts to present itself as an institution with climate change high on its agenda. The posts of the two examples used here present a differentiation in their approach. While in the first example, the IMO posts are mostly informative, concentrating on procedural aspects (such as the announcement of events) and on what key people announced during the COP27, in the second one the posts are characterized by more in-depth and to-the-point information content-wise, concentrating on the new edition of the 2023 IMO Strategy.

For instance, during COP27, the IMO wrote on X:

> Happening today: #MTCCAfricaAtCOP27 side event on 'Mobilizing global support for #green maritime transition in #Africa' in collaboration with @IMOHQ, @OceanHubAfrica, @AfDB_Group & @MaritimeKE. Live from 16:00 (Egypt time): [link] #COP27 #shipping. (on 16.11.2022)

> Join us today at 6:30pm @COP27P time or (4:30pm London Time) for an exciting event: Producing Future Marine Fuels. You can also livestream the event. All details can be found here: [link] #COP27. (on 11.11.2022)

> Today #IMOatCOP27 IMO Secretary-General provided opening remarks at the 'Just Transition in Global Shipping' event, saying that "Climate change is a global issue that requires a global response. We must use every tool available to decarbonize the maritime sector." #COP27. (on 09.11.2022)

> "Decarbonizing international shipping is a priority for IMO, and all of us involved in this sector are committed to act together in achieving the highest possible level of ambition." Said IMO SG during #IMOatCOP27 event. (on 10.11.2022)

> Speaking at #COP27 IMO's Gyorgyi Gurban said: "Many developing countries have abundant access to renewable energy sources, so there is a lot of potential for these countries to play a key role in the production and supply side of renewable fuels for the global shipping industry." (on 15.11.2022)

During the meeting that adopted the 2023 IMO Strategy, the style remains similar, but the posts have more essence:

> #MEPC80 adopts historic 2023 IMO #GHG Strategy to reduce GHG emissions from international shipping. Details to follow.

> VISION—IMO remains committed to reducing #GHG emissions from international shipping and, as a matter of urgency, aims to phase them out as soon as possible, while promoting, in the context of this Strategy, a just and equitable transition. #MEPC80

Levels of ambition: carbon intensity of the ship to decline through further improvement of the energy efficiency for new ships.

Ambition: to reduce CO2 emissions per transport work, as an average across international shipping, by at least 40% by 2030, compared to 2008.

Ambition: uptake of zero or near-zero #GHG emission technologies, fuels and/or energy sources to represent at least 5%, striving for 10% of the energy used by international shipping by 2030.

Ambition: #GHG emissions from international shipping to reach net zero to peak GHG emissions from international shipping as soon as possible and to reach net-zero GHG emissions by or around, i.e., close to 2050, taking into account different national circumstances...

...whilst pursuing efforts towards phasing them out as called for in the Vision consistent with the long-term temperature goal set out in Article 2 of the Paris Agreement. (this and the above on 07.07.2023)

Quotes from key people were also included in the posts:

«This is a historic moment in which all of you have a role to play. The 2023 IMO GHG Strategy will be your legacy, for your children and grandchildren. The time for IMO to demonstrate its global leadership is now.» Said IMO SG. Full remarks: [link] #GHG #MEPC. (on 03.07.2023)

"It is a monumental development that I believe opens a new chapter towards maritime #decarbonization." Said IMO Secretary-General in his closing remarks at IMO Marine Environment Protection Committee #MEPC80 Read full speech here: [link]. (on 07.07.2023)

The majority of the 361 posts follow a similar rationale. Thus, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the research goal of the article, i.e., whether the IMO appears to be an avid supporter of climate action by using X, based on the analytical framework unwrapped in the previous parts.

The IMO posts that refer to climate change show a consistent occupation of the international organization with the role of shipping in combating climate crisis. This can be attributed to "noise and tension mitigation" as in the last few years there have been several voices calling for the IMO to put forward a more stringent agenda on greening the shipping sector (Bach & Hansen, 2023). Therefore, utilizing X as the means of public communication, the IMO attempts to convince its audience that its environmental actions entail a significant part that is dedicated to climate change. Moreover, the language used in the posts is mostly simple and easy to understand by everyone. There are some acronyms and technical terminology that are used, but usually are accompanied by a link that leads to a webpage with all the relevant information. Nevertheless, the majority of the posts "simplify the information" distributed, either by presenting the main points of an agreement or by quoting simple and general phrases that highlight the work done and its significance.

The goal, as might be expected, is to transfer a simple message to the followers: the IMO does everything possible to mitigate GHG emissions from ships. To make sure that this goes through, there is a coherent

"narrative" unfolding, which attempts to create the "context" within which all actions take place. It is observed that through the posts, the IMO attempts to underline its broader collaborations either with other international institutions or specific initiatives that strive for the same cause. By "telling the story" that the IMO is not alone in these efforts or by "selecting to emphasize" that these efforts are for the greater good ("The 2023 IMO GHG Strategy will be your legacy, for your children and grandchildren"; see penultimate posts above), it attempts to brand its actions as essential in a common goal and give the impression that what it does will contribute to the solution of the problem ("sense-making"). A post on 05.05.2023 read: "2023 is the year in which IMO has to demonstrate to the world its global leadership by defining the pathway for international shipping to phase out their greenhouse gas emissions."

Having done the above, the IMO makes clear that it is the most competent organization to work on the mitigation of GHG emissions from shipping. This comes as a necessity, as within the context in which these efforts take place, the IMO is considered relatively slow and incapable of adopting effective policies and regulations to combat climate change (Bach & Hansen, 2023). By pursuing a relatively active presence on its official social media account, it attempts to, first, be the one that makes the issue of greening the shipping sector "salient" and, second, (and interrelated to the first) to show that it "has control over" that matter. In that way, the IMO tries to maintain the image that its framework is still relevant and has to be taken into account when negotiating international measures to mitigate GHG emissions from ships. The goal is for the IMO to remain the institution under whose auspices all climate developments concerning shipping take place and leave no space for other international actors to interfere with its operation and alleged competence. As another post characteristically stated, during COP27, on 10.11.2022: "Live from #COP27 IMO' Secretary-General: 'IMO is the leading global forum for shipping and will support the energy transition, leaving no one behind.'"

Nevertheless, a closer reading of the IMO decisions also makes clear that the measures that are adopted at the IMO level are insufficient and inadequate to contribute effectively to reducing GHG emissions; that might be also the reason for intertwining "energy transition" with climate action. Thus, one can make the hypothesis that the IMO on purpose channels information that frames the issue of climate change as something that has to be dealt with within its framework and brands this framework as the most appropriate of such action. Consequently, the analytical framework developed in this article to explain whether the IMO uses X to highlight its position as an avid supporter of climate action accomplishes its purpose and explains how a governmental institution frames a policy issue by using (policy) branding techniques. It might make one, who may not be aware of the context, to believe that the IMO successfully promotes policies and regulations to reduce GHG emissions from ships.

6. Concluding Remarks

The composite model for policy framing through policy branding employed in this article comes in a straightforward and simple manner to unbox additional perspectives of the existing knowledge in political/policy agenda-setting and (crisis) communication. While policy framing is inextricably interrelated with the latter concepts, policy branding has remained rather unexplored, both in terms of theorization and empirically. Today, when the image—or images in general—dominate the public sphere, and social media play a crucial role in communicating those images, branding has become a tactic utilized at the political level, as well as the policymaking process level, playing an important role in policy framing and—consequently—in policy development. Thus, the model proposed here, entangling policy framing with policy branding,

contributes to further research in the abovementioned scholarly fields, in which additional nuances of its parts can be examined.

Moreover, the article covers a part of the empirical gap pinpointed in the relevant studies presented earlier. Based on that, future research can also include the stance of other international organizations, governments, and/or (non)governmental actors regarding climate change, in an attempt to unpack their goals and possible greenwashing or best practices. Through the above exercise, results aspire to lead to more efficient challenging of poor or misleading actions and highlight implementable solutions. The model can also be applied to other policies that are subject to framing and branding, as well as to examine private sector and business activities, as nowadays, they increasingly influence policymaking (especially for climate change).

In conclusion, in the early 2010s, Jaeger et al. argued that "government agencies have begun using social media without sufficient consideration of this larger policy environment" (2012, p. 11). It might be fair to say that today those agencies have understood very well how branding functions and, through it, they attempt to frame their work as significant, especially within a world of constant crises and information overload. Policy branding, which is a more frivolous way compared to policy framing (as its goal is more superficial), is utilized in order for a specific goal to be achieved. Policy branding is one of the tools to perform policy framing, and this is a procedure that governance institutions use to promote a deliberate image or message, even if this image/message is not on track with what the institution is expected to do. That is why it is necessary to study policy framing and policy branding within the context they take place; otherwise, wrong conclusions might be drawn.

The IMO uses X to frame its action as climate-friendly and brand itself as a climate actor. The problem in this case is that the IMO's progress towards tackling climate change is—at its best—lukewarm and insufficient. The IMO has been traditionally characterized as an "unfriendly" institution regarding climate measures (Oberthür, 2006) and recent literature shows that IMO's action is not moving in an effective direction (Dikaios, in press; Doelle & Chircop, 2019). Thus, conjuring up convincing climate action through social media, seems a convenient way for the IMO to perform the fine art of stalling in order to avoid implementing a—for the time being—dead letter. Through policy branding, thus, the IMO performs a kind of greenwashing of its action. As put eloquently by the UN Secretary-General, for example:

> Humanity is in dangerous waters on climate change. [The IMO] must move much faster. (Corbett, 2023)

> Let's be honest. While member states have made some initial steps through…the International Maritime Organization to address emissions from shipping…current commitments are not aligned with the 1.5-degree goal of the Paris Agreement. In fact, they are more consistent with warming way above 3 degrees. (Lo, 2021)

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All the posts used for this article can be found in the Supplementary File.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Legitimating Policy Branding: Constructing "Sellability" of Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This article examines how foreign policy branding is legitimated as a response to human rights crises. Drawing on legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007), this study takes a discourse perspective with a focus on the enactment of foreign policy in communication and argues that legitimacy is the foundation for constructing a convincing and credible image of a country and its foreign policy. Building on the example of Sweden's feminist foreign policy and an analysis of relevant policy documents, three themes were formulated. These illustrate that Sweden's feminist foreign policy branding was legitimated by framing the policy as a form of "good" activism, creating a knowledge brand of the policy, and aligning the policy branding with established discourses of solidarity. Thus, the study suggests that a branding logic imposed by the attention economy leads foreign policy communication to focus on constructing "sellability" of foreign policy, legitimating it in ways that make it relatable to wider publics. This article contributes to foreign policy communication research through the conceptual development of foreign policy branding.

Keywords

branding logic; discourse; feminist foreign policy; foreign policy branding; government communication; legitimation; Sweden

1. Introduction

This study builds on and problematizes previous literature on nation branding and international relations by arguing that foreign policy, the extension of a nation's interests abroad (Roselle, 2019), needs to be studied from a dynamic communication perspective. Going beyond the view of foreign policy communication as a projection of narratives (e.g., Miskimmon et al., 2013), this study proposes that foreign policy be investigated as

a discursive practice that needs to be "sold." This is a consequence of globalization and the attention economy (e.g., Jansen, 2008; Kaefer, 2020; Zulli, 2018), which increasingly pressures states to position themselves and to compete with others. Furthermore, a shifting global security agenda prompts countries to work with their reputation for their security (e.g., Cull, 2022), which leads to increased demand for countries to "do good." To "sell" foreign policy and their "doing good," states engage in branding practices. This extends to the branding of foreign policy—a practice and phenomenon that has scarcely been addressed in the literature.

Examining the empirical case in point of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, this study aims to gain an understanding of how policy branding, as an indicator of what a country can bring to the world (Browning, 2021), is legitimated as a response to global human rights crises. Sweden has for several decades sought to position itself as a progressive frontrunner and thus a role model for other countries to follow (e.g., Jezierska & Towns, 2021; Marklund, 2017; Towns, 2002) and expressed a sense of moral superiority (e.g., Nylund et al., 2023), of which its feminist foreign policy, introduced in 2014, can be seen as a continuation. Several other countries have since followed the Swedish example by including feminist perspectives and approaches in their foreign policy. There has, however, also been "a marginal, yet growing (inter)national discussion" on whether Sweden lives up to its reputation of being a "good," "open," and "safe" society (Marklund, 2017, p. 624). Browning (2021, p. 26) also noted that branding the foreign policy as feminist "raised some interesting questions, in particular with regard to the distinction between 'doing good' and the imperative to 'be seen to be doing good.'" The policy was abolished in 2022 by the newly elected government with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Tobias Billström, stating that the feminist terminology tended to obscure the policy's content (Julin, 2022, para. 8). These examples of skepticism illustrate that publics abroad and at home must be convinced of a policy's usefulness, rightfulness, and efficacy. In this vein, the article assumes that government communication strategically works by formulating answers to the publics' "spoken or unspoken 'why' question" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94).

Inspired by Dolea (2018) and Kaneva (2014) and based on the notion that foreign policy is enacted and brought to life through communication, this study takes a discourse perspective on foreign policy. It zooms in on the making, hence, the discursive enactment of foreign policy branding at an early "point" in the communication process, that is, constructing legitimation of foreign policy. Such legitimation, the article argues, lays the ground for constructing a convincing and credible image of the country and its foreign policy. To explore this, the study employs a framework based on legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007) and conducts a discourse analysis of action plans as the key official communication documents for the policy, asking the following research question: How was Sweden's feminist foreign policy legitimated in government communication?

2. Foreign Policy in a Branding Logic

The overarching concept of this study is foreign policy communication, which entails foreign policy branding as a way of communicating a country's values to various publics, with the goal of "selling" foreign policy. Embracing both the notion of the "brand"—a construct—and of "branding"—a construction process—the article will discuss an overarching branding logic that guides foreign policy enactment in communication. Foreign policy communication has been described as a tool for states to "declare their intentions and prime concerns, which both aid their internal policy integrity and international perception as a consistent actor" (Sheludiakova et al., 2021, p. 1). International relations literature tends to focus on foreign policy as a reality with linear communication processes, which is mirrored in the concept of strategic narrative (e.g., Miskimmon et al., 2013,

2017; Roselle et al., 2014; Zhukova et al., 2022); or it views communication as a tool to extend foreign policy and thus generate soft power (e.g., Chitty, 2017; Nye, 2008). In other words, foreign policy communication is under-researched in terms of how it discursively enacts policy.

It has been proposed that "policy formulation should take account of how the policy could be sold later" (Riordan, 2005, p. 187), as it will be easier to implement if key stakeholders buy into it. This, in turn, is intended to positively impact countries' international standing. The policy must also be sold at home, both to increase the support of domestic audiences (as, for example, in the war on terrorism in the US; e.g., Zaharna, 2010) and of practitioners in relevant organizations (see, for example, in the legitimation of conflicting targets in organizations; Rahm & Thelander, 2021).

Branding is "about showing others what we consider to be desirable, in the hope (and expectation) that it will be emulated" (van Ham, 2014, p. 22), for example, by providing "an emotional dimension with which people can identify" (Gilboa, 2008, p. 67). It is about using strategic communication practices to influence "a customer's idea about a product" (van Ham, 2001, p. 2), in this case, various domestic and international publics' understanding of the usefulness, rightfulness, and efficacy of a certain foreign policy.

In international relations, branding logic implies the competition for political power through "mind share and market share" (van Ham, 2008, p. 129). One aspect of this is the increasing pressure to "sell" foreign policy (see Riordan, 2005; van Ham, 2008), which is linked to countries' identity, status, loyalty, reputation, and recognition in the global attention economy (e.g., Jansen, 2008; Kaefer, 2020; Zulli, 2018), "where a lack of visibility is seen as inherently problematic" (Browning, 2015, p. 196). Thus, branding can be seen as the production of information, which tends to rely "on the ability to appropriate, enclose or otherwise valorize a socially produced surplus" (Arvidsson, 2007, p. 7), like the attractiveness of an authentic, solidaric foreign policy.

Anholt (2015, p. 190) argued that "countries are judged by what they do, not by what they say," which is why he finds the "promise that the images of countries can be directly manipulated using the techniques of commercial marketing communications" to be a "dangerously misleading phrase." However, it seems that "showing" might weigh heavier than "doing" in the sense that nation branding is not about what countries actually do; instead, nation brands seem to be "best understood as simulacra of the nation—that is, copies without an original—rather than as genuine representations or expressions of nations" (Kaneva, 2023, p. 164). Foreign policy, then, is discursively constructed in communication for the purpose of securing "a place on the high ground of the global imagination" (Cull, 2019, p. 29). Simultaneously, however, countries such as Sweden have to walk a tightrope so as not to "appear as self-righteous in the quest for moral status, as that would usurp the moral superiority crown" (Jezierska & Towns, 2021, p. 57).

As a form of strategic communication, country and foreign policy brands express a "logic of control" (Arvidsson, 2007, p. 26). This is imposed by the attention economy and illustrates an inherent sense of superiority of the country engaging in branding. Following this logic, some norms and values—constructed as "belonging to a country"—are made more desirable than others (for the Swedish context, see Jezierska & Towns, 2018; Karlsson, 2022) via foreign policy. In other words, states want to form "the way we see the world" (van Ham, 2014, p. 19), and they do so by proposing certain frames in communication and thus limiting the range of interpretive possibilities of, for example, the legitimacy of their foreign policy. This aspect of the branding logic

highlights perhaps its most important and, at the same time, most problematic characteristic. Not only does it contribute to constructing social hierarchies, which then "situate actors in a pecking order of superordination and subordination" (Towns & Rumelili, 2017, p. 764), but it also incentivizes the selection, simplification, and deployment (Jansen, 2008) of only aspects of a country's values and political agenda in foreign policy that enhance their marketability.

An illustrative example of this is norm advocacy, or norm entrepreneurship, as exemplified by Sweden's approach (see Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Davies & True, 2017). Norm entrepreneurs are actors with "strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior" in the global community (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 896). They "engage in frame competition, trying to persuade relevant audiences and actors to see things their way" (van Ham, 2014, p. 20), often constructing new visions of reality (Jansen, 2008). From these, some actors, i.e., the initiating country, tend to benefit more than others. The norms and values that are extended beyond national borders are usually those that "fit rather coherently within the status quo," as these "are generally considered less threatening…more legitimate" (van Ham, 2014, p. 20), and more likely to be accepted by intended publics (see Rosén Sundström et al., 2021). And, as it is the publics who judge (policy) branding efforts, legitimizing foreign policy in their eyes is crucial (van Ham, 2014).

This article proposes that foreign policy branding is a discourse in which some aspects of a state's interests and policy agenda are emphasized, and others are marginalized. Thus, it reproduces power relations and contributes to the construction of a worldview in which it is accepted as an organizing principle of international relations. However, while foreign policy is enacted in a branding logic and should be critically interrogated, the relationship between branding and foreign policy has so far not been explored extensively. Providing a first glimpse into the phenomenon, this study, therefore, focuses on authorities engaging in the legitimation of foreign policy branding.

3. Foreign Policy Branding Through a Legitimation Theory Lens

In branding logic, foreign policy must be legitimated to become more "sellable." To understand how legitimation practices around foreign policy play out, this study employs a framework based on legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007), which is embedded in the field of discourse theory. Discourse establishes, consolidates, and implements power relations, which in turn permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body and are more profitable for some actors than others (Foucault, 1980; Miskimmon et al., 2013). Discourse "defines and produces the objects of our knowledge" through language, constructs topics, and governs how they "can be meaningfully talked…and reasoned about" (Hall, 1997, p. 44). It constitutes social practices and adds to them purposes and legitimations—"an answer to the spoken or unspoken 'why' question" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94).

The construction of legitimacy enables the linking of social practices and "discourses of value" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 109). Thus, communication "produces and reproduces (i.e., legitimates) a particular structure of power relations (i.e., system of interests) to the arbitrary exclusion of other possible configurations of interests" (Deetz & Mumby, 1990, p. 42)—which, in the context of foreign policy, can happen through norm entrepreneurship. "Legitimacy is a power reality," and "competitive struggles over legitimacy are part of enhancing or depriving actors of soft power" (Nye, 2013, p. 568). However, going beyond the notion of soft power, power can also be seen as "the ability to set standards and create norms and values that are deemed

legitimate and desirable" (van Ham, 2014, p. 19). Power is thus viewed here as "fluid and non-linear," moving through relationships and communication (van Ham, 2014, p. 18).

The following is a selective account of the key categories of legitimation suggested by van Leeuwen (2007). These forms of legitimation, he argues, can occur separately or in combination; "they can be used to legitimize, but also to de-legitimize, to critique"; they can be explicit or subtle; and they all manifest in language (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92).

Authorization means "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). There are several sub-forms, such as: expert authority, where legitimacy is provided by expertise; role model authority, where legitimacy is provided by role models or opinion leaders; and impersonal authority, where legitimacy is provided through laws, rules, policies, or guidelines. Another sub-form is the authority of tradition, where legitimacy is proved because it has always been like that.

Moral evaluation means "legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). Here, legitimation is "linked to specific discourses of moral value" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 97). Usually, however, these discourses are only hinted at. One sub-form is evaluation through "naturalization"; another sub-form is abstraction, where moral evaluation is expressed by "referring to practices…in abstract ways that 'moralize' them by distilling from them a quality that links them to discourses of moral values" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 99). In other words, it is about using abstractions to foreground the desired and legitimate qualities of an action.

Rationalization means "legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). One sub-form is instrumental rationalization, meaning "reference to…goals, uses and effects" containing an element of moralization (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101). Types of instrumentality are goal-, means-, and effect-orientation. The other sub-form is theoretical rationalization, meaning legitimation "by reference to a natural order of things," that is, "the way things are" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 103). Relying on generalization, this sub-form can be expressed by defining an activity in terms of another moralized activity, by explaining one or more actors involved in the practice, or by providing predictions based on expertise.

Mythopoesis means "legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). It can take the form of either moral tales or cautionary tales.

The legitimation theory framework informed the coding of the empirical material. Van Leeuwen (2018, p. 144) argues that "critical discourse analysis must go beyond linguistic analysis if it is to convincingly identify misrepresentations." Consequently, attention will also be paid to silences, that is, aspects that are not highlighted in the branding discourse but that could have been expected to emerge given the previous literature and human rights discourse.

4. Methodology

To explore an empirical example of how foreign policy branding is being enacted in a particular setting, the study focuses on Sweden's feminist foreign policy and the government communication thereof.

Since the 1990s, when Sweden entered the EU, gender equality has been a priority area for the country (Towns, 2002). In 2014, the left-green coalition government introduced Sweden's feminist foreign policy, which was in force until 2022, when the newly elected liberal-right coalition government announced that the country's foreign policy would no longer be called "feminist." In the last decades, Sweden also increasingly turned from its conception of cosmopolitan duty, as mirrored, for example, in international aid, multilateralism, and a form of general activism beyond national borders towards Europe and even more so to the closer neighborhood (Bergman, 2007; Brommesson, 2018).

Sweden's feminist foreign policy was "embedded in the broader global efforts to promote gender equality in the international arena" following the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 323), with Sweden playing a leading role in the implementation of the resolution (Rosén Sundström & Elgström, 2020). Thus, it could be seen as a response to an ongoing global human and especially women's rights crisis, understood in broader terms as a systematic subordination of women and girls. The feminist foreign policy was part of Sweden's overall branding as a feminist nation at the time (see Bergman Rosamond & Hedling, 2022) and an example of how gender-friendly norms could act as an "identity marker," describing who a country is and "how it intends to conduct itself in the world" (Lee-Koo, 2020, p. 240). Sweden thus exemplified a small country striving to make its voice heard by carving out a reputational niche (Jansen, 2008; van Ham, 2001). This suggested a strategy aimed at greater global influence and increased security through branding (Aggestam & True, 2020; Bergman Rosamond, 2020; Zhukova et al., 2022).

Being a form of strategic government communication, the empirical material for this study consists of action plans on Swedish feminist foreign policy published by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs annually from 2015 to 2021. The action plans are a platform on which the meaning of the policy is constructed and are therefore considered artifacts of strategic communication that offer "insight into the key nodal points employed in discursive constructions of the contents, normative ambitions, and potential pitfalls of [feminist foreign policy]" (Bergman Rosamond, 2020, p. 226). From 2017 onwards, the action plans even formed part of the Foreign Service's operational planning and resource allocation process (see action plans since 2017) in that they specify "approaches, starting points, tools, and actors" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 1). They furthermore constituted a written rationale and a strategy for understanding and communicating the policy. This study argues that the action plans can also be seen as branding strategy papers that proposed certain interpretative frames with the purpose not only to inform and to indicate a standpoint but also to persuade publics of the policy's legitimacy.

The material is analyzed by means of discourse analysis, following an iterative, abductive approach in which van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation categories inspired the coding.

5. Legitimating the Feminist Branding of Sweden's Foreign Policy

5.1. Framing the Policy as a Form of "Good" Activism

The first theme emerges from legitimation practices such as mythopoesis, especially in the form of moral tales (van Leeuwen, 2007). Only the beginning of these tales is spelled out, implying that the reader can finish them in their mind: If Sweden gets it right, a feminist foreign policy will make the world a better place.

Mythopoesis is in the material frequently linked to other categories of legitimation, such as theoretical rationalization (van Leeuwen, 2007). In the form of cautionary tales, this form of legitimation can also be seen as a twisted form of "negative" naturalization in that the "natural" order of things, if there were no feminist foreign policy, is shown. This helps frame the policy as a part of the solution. It also implies that the reader understands what would happen if the story continued—namely, a bad world—as exemplified in the following quote:

> Around the world, gender equality has improved. The proportion of women in parliaments is increasing. More girls go to school. And yet the commitments made at the World Conference on Women in 1995 are far from being fulfilled. Violence, oppression and systematic subordination still mark the daily lives of countless women and girls. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 4)

Another example of a cautionary tale, or parts thereof, is the following: "Opportunities for people to achieve their full potential and contribute to positive social development are hindered by discriminatory gender norms" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 11). These two examples can also be seen as legitimation by prediction based on expertise as a form of theoretical rationalization. The latter can also be seen as an example of "negative" naturalization.

In general terms, addressing issues of gender equality can, in international relations, be considered radical, unfamiliar, and untested (Rosén Sundström et al., 2021). Considering, however, that "the most successful brands target powerful ideological contradictions produced by society" (Melki & Jabado, 2016, p. 99), Sweden's foreign policy was legitimated through a policy branding that evokes an activist notion. In other words, by attempting to legitimate the meaningfulness of its purpose to the international community, the discursive enactment performed in the action plans activated the feminist foreign policy as a "good" brand practice.

5.2. Creating a Knowledge Brand of the Policy

The second theme emerges, among others, from authorization, frequently in the form of "policy authority" and expert authority, linked to moral evaluation and abstraction (van Leeuwen, 2007). Policies established by supranational authorities and frameworks serve as grounds for legitimating Sweden's feminist foreign policy. For example, reference is made to the still unfulfilled commitments made at the World Conference on Women in 1995, adherence to the 2030 Agenda, linkages to the framework of the Human Rights Council, and the work of the World Humanitarian Summit. Other examples are the adherence to the Istanbul Convention, the EU guidelines, and the regulatory framework within the EU internal market. All of these could also be considered examples of moral evaluation in the form of abstraction. Some could also be considered expert authority. Sweden's membership of the UN Security Council in 2017 and 2018, as an example of role model authority, adds to this dynamic.

The policy is also discursively legitimated through notions of expert authority (van Leeuwen, 2007), for example, when Sweden implies its expertise by arguing for its excellent monitoring skills: "Like the rest of the operational plan, the action plan will be monitored....This will enable us to learn from experience" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 4). Another example is the highlighting of collaborations, for example, with the Red Cross, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, the International Criminal Court, the

UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, UN Women, and many others, which implies legitimacy by hinting towards endorsement by already established "experts." This can also be seen as an example of role model authority and moral evaluation. Legitimation by role model authority can furthermore be found in the omnipresent notions of uniqueness and firstness around Sweden's feminist foreign policy. However, this is only mentioned in the summary and foreword of the action plans of the first years (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, 2016, 2017), indicating a shift in the narrative after 2017.

Further, by building on the "natural" discourse that ensuring gender equality is important, legitimation by naturalization (van Leeuwen, 2007) happens on different levels in the text. One way is by referring to "our" feminist foreign policy several times throughout the action plans. This way, Sweden presented feminism "as a self-evident Swedish value" (Nylund et al., 2023, p. 269) and used pro-gender norms to suggest that it is a progressive country (Thomson, 2020). Thus, Sweden was portrayed as a natural leader and expert endorsed by other experts, which helped to legitimate the feminist foreign policy as part of a Swedish "knowledge brand" (Browning, 2021).

5.3. Aligning the Policy Branding With Established Discourses of Solidarity

The third theme emerges from legitimation practices such as constructing law-based authority (van Leeuwen, 2007), for example, by highlighting how the policy "is based on international law and international and EU agreements" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 13). In general, legitimation through moral evaluation, abstraction, and authorization (van Leeuwen, 2007) can be found when actions are located within wider regulatory frameworks or in the context of organizations that are considered to do "the right thing," thus distilling qualities of moral value that links them to discourses of morality. Examples are links to UN Women, the Red Cross, and others, as also illustrated in the previous theme.

The following two quotes can be seen as examples both of legitimation by moral evaluation and by goal-oriented rationalization: "Sweden wants this discrimination to end" and it will "intensify efforts to guarantee the sexual and reproductive rights of all people" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 3, p. 1). Thus, strategic efforts are constructed as following a "morally sound" direction.

Examples of legitimation through goal orientation as a form of instrumental rationalization can be found in the following quote, which also appears in slightly different forms in other action plans: "Gender equality is a goal in itself. But it is also essential for the achievement of the Government's other overall objectives, such as peace, security and sustainable development. This is why gender equality and human rights efforts must continue unabated" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 2). Another example of legitimation by goal orientation can be found in the following quote:

> Throughout our foreign policy, including in peace and security efforts, we will apply a systematic gender perspective. In so doing, we can contribute to real progress. And in so doing, we will become the strongest global voice for gender equality and the full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 3)

This can also be seen as an example of naturalization, as well as expert authority and even some aspects of role model authority that legitimate the policy branding.

In some instances, legitimation by rationalization, both in terms of goal and means orientation, can also be found, as this example shows: "By applying this deeper, broader and more systematic approach, the feminist foreign policy will develop to achieve results that strengthen the rights, representation and resources of all women and girls" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 2). At several points, Sweden's monitoring and evaluation work is highlighted, indicating legitimation by rationalization through effect orientation. An example of means orientation is the highlighting of Sweden's membership of the UN Security Council in 2017 and 2018, which provides "an additional platform" for Sweden's gender equality work (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 3). In terms of means orientation, the following quote provides another example, which also appears in slightly different forms in the other action plans:

> The Foreign Service will use its Sweden promotion activities to advance gender equality and the rights of women and girls, both as a separate agenda and when promoting the image of Sweden abroad. As part of this, the annual work on promotion plans will be used to map gender equality promotion by the missions abroad. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 18)

Theoretical rationalization can be found throughout the text when the activities of the policy are defined in terms of other moralized activities, such as adhering to the law, Agenda 2023, or human rights. This is often linked to legitimation by authorization.

Sweden enacted narratives of "broader global problems (for example, poverty, international insecurity, migration, etc.) to be solved by addressing gender inequality" (Zhukova et al., 2022, p. 200). Against this backdrop, linking the policy to already established frameworks was an attempt to align the policy branding with recognized efforts to tackle sociopolitical issues, thus legitimating it as part of a broader global solidarity discourse.

5.4. Discussion

The analysis suggests three themes that illustrate how Sweden's feminist foreign policy branding was legitimated: by framing the policy as a form of "good" activism, by creating a knowledge brand of the policy, and by aligning the policy branding with established discourses of solidarity. However, these three themes reveal tensions in the discourse. On the one hand, the feminist foreign policy is committed to provoking and implementing change. On the other hand, foreign policy needs to serve a country by making it recognizable and securing an advantageous (security) position. This tension is mirrored in a potential contradiction of the first and the third themes, with the first proposing an activist position and the third proposing a seamless insertion into an established paradigm.

However, both themes indicate discursively constructed performances that contribute to legitimating the feminist foreign policy branding as "doing good." To this end, the activist positioning and the embedding, together with the strategy of creating a knowledge brand, ultimately tapped into and utilized the momentum of (hegemonic) human rights discourse, albeit from different angles.

Furthermore, the action plans embrace a certain degree of vagueness insofar as they are kept quite general, which is a contributing factor in concealing these tensions. This indicates that—in accordance with branding logic—in the making, the formulation, and especially the legitimation of foreign policy, the professionals

responsible for it probably consider its appeal to broad publics. It also mirrors practical issues with communicating a polarizing branding such as that of the feminist foreign policy, which, at the end of the day, individual public diplomacy practitioners had to handle.

This interpretation suggests that Sweden, when seen as following a branding logic, discursively legitimated and enacted foreign policy in a way that also commodified, to some extent, the societal issue of gender (in)equality. This dynamic may perhaps have been inevitable considering the competition for attention among states. However, it challenged Sweden to balance authenticity in pursuing political ambitions to address human rights crises and self-exposure to the potential critique of disconnecting activist messages and actual practice (see Vredenburg et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Sweden's feminist foreign policy is an example of foreign policy branding, which was legitimated on different grounds as a response to and part of the solution to human rights crises. This can be seen as a reaction to pressures from globalization and the attention economy, which increasingly tie countries' security to reputation and thus (self)promotion (see Pamment et al., 2023). Consequently, government communication of the feminist foreign policy, beyond making meaning of its content and objectives, focused on constructing relatability and "sellability." This suggests that when foreign policy is being branded—even if that branding can be seen as provocative, like in the case of Sweden's feminist foreign policy—a higher degree of relatability, allowing as many people as possible to accept it, comes at the price of edginess and possibly also precision. Thus, the attention economy permeates international relations with a branding logic governed by consumer orientation, that is, giving consumers what they want. For Sweden's feminist foreign policy, that meant support from some and opposition from others (see Towns et al., 2023), and ultimately an ending eight years after its launch.

Following a branding logic, crises can be seen as a catalyst for both the introduction and—perhaps paradoxically—the abolition of Sweden's feminist foreign policy. The prospect of being able to contribute with a response to human rights and especially women's rights crises has made the launch of a feminist foreign policy interesting for Sweden. However, domestic political polarization, war in Europe, a general political shift to the right, and a changing security agenda seem to motivate a change of priorities in this regard. One can also conclude that the reason that a "good cause" needed convincing is that it perhaps was more activist than the world could handle—which in turn could be an indicator that it actually hit a (too) sore spot of the global community.

On the one hand, for foreign policy more generally, the findings of this article suggest that the dynamics of the attention economy, as well as the current developments in the world, unfortunately, do not seem to encourage activist and progressive foreign policy approaches (see Rosén Sundström & Elgström, 2020). Part of the reasons are that the attention economy incentivizes relatability and "sellability" of policy branding and that the current developments—including the increase of (gender-)conservative forces—make the legitimation of such policy branding harder because of increasing contestation. On the other hand, several countries have, in recent years, followed Sweden's lead in adopting feminist approaches to their foreign policy. In this sense, Sweden has succeeded in its (former) quest of being a progressive frontrunner and role model. It furthermore indicates an increase of interest in gender-related issues and in adopting a respective lens when addressing

topics of societal concern globally. This may also be credited to Sweden's feminist foreign policy branding and its capability to appeal to a big crowd.

This study contributes insight into and conceptual development of the phenomenon of foreign policy branding—a practice that will probably see an increase but that has so far only been touched superficially in the literature. It encourages the consideration that foreign policy branding—despite its challenges and pitfalls—holds the potential to promote and implement change, not least because "looking good" ultimately only works if a country actually "does good." Since foreign policy positions countries in the global (geo)political landscape, it cannot escape public expectations. However, it also has the potential to raise awareness of societal problems at a global level, which may, in turn, raise public expectations of state "activism." On a more critical note, however, it must be noted that highlighting one issue necessarily goes hand in hand with obscuring others. Foreign policy branding, therefore, goes beyond differentiating a country from other countries and their foreign policies: it can be a way of defining a standpoint, as it involves deciding and showing who and what issues a country stands for—something that is essential for today's crisis-ridden world.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Cogitatio

"Nazis Aren't Welcome Here": Selling Democracy in the Age of Far-Right Extremism

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Abstract

This article critically examines the communicative and policy-framing response of Australia's Victorian government to the state's growing crisis of far-right extremism. Through a critical discourse analysis of the Victorian Andrews and Allan Labor governments' political communication from 2021 to 2023, we explain how the government discursively responded to the rise of far-right extremism. We found the Andrews and Allan governments employed a range of communicative, discursive, and legitimisation strategies to both legitimise the government's policy to ban Nazi symbols and gestures and to (re)establish Victoria's reputation as an inclusive and multicultural liberal democracy. The findings of this article broaden our empirical understanding of the central role of political and crisis communication in responding to extremism and may provide a template for other governments to respond to the global crisis of far-right extremism.

1. Introduction

Around the world, the far right is emboldened and has become increasingly mainstreamed and normalised, ushering in a "new normal of anti-and-post-democratic action" (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023, p. 2). The proliferation of extreme-right parties and movements has necessitated responses from democratic governments. In this article, we critically examine the communicative response of the Victorian government to the state's emerging *crisis* of far-right extremism. The Australian state of Victoria has been the epicentre of far-right extremism in recent years in the country, with a visible rise of White supremacist and neo-Nazi

activity in the state, including several high-profile incidents such as neo-Nazi demonstrations on the steps of Victoria's parliament house. In response, the nominally centre-left Victorian Labor government—led by Premiers Daniel Andrews (2014–2023) and Jacinta Allan (2023–)—ushered in new laws to prohibit the display of Nazi symbolism and gestures.

We draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse a range of political communication activities from 2021–2023 in response to the state's far-right extremism crisis. We found that the Andrews and Allan governments employed a strategic and deliberate communication plan to discursively legitimise their policies to prohibit Nazi symbolism, to de-legitimise extreme-right actors, and to reinforce Victoria's reputation as a multicultural democracy. Specifically, we found the Victorian government's communicative response encompassed five key aims: to position the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis; to (re)establish Victoria's reputation as an inclusive, vibrant, and harmonious liberal state democracy; to provide reassurance to multicultural and marginalised communities; to legitimise the government's policies to ban Nazi symbols and salutes; and to re-emphasise the government's commitment to public safety and a vibrant public sphere.

The Victorian government's communication and policy-framing response highlights the key role of political and crisis communication in dealing with the threat of violent and non-violent extremism. While this article focuses on an Australian case study, we believe our findings have currency for international scholars, media practitioners, and democratic actors. The crisis of far-right extremism in Victoria echoes the experience of jurisdictions globally as the threat of far-right extremism spreads. The response, therefore, may provide a blueprint for other democracies in responding to far-right extremism.

2. Far-Right Extremism: From the Global to the Local

The resurgence of far-right politics has stretched and stressed liberal democracies around the world. Far-right ideologies are inherently exclusionary and "establish clear lines of superiority and inferiority according to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion and sexuality" (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. 12). In this article, we use "far right" as an umbrella term that covers a variety of parties, movements, and activists that are broadly united in their authoritarianism, exclusionary radical nationalism, and racism (Pirro, 2023). Within the far right, it is possible to distinguish between two interconnected groups: the *extreme right* and the *radical right*. The radical right is said to be nominally in favour of democracy, but opposed to fundamental elements of *liberal* democracy (Mudde, 2007). The radical right operates within—even as it may denigrate and challenge—the institutions and practices of democracy, broadly adhering to constitutional parameters and seeking to gain representation through elections (Mudde, 2007; Pirro, 2023). The extreme right—the focus of our study—outright rejects democracy in principle, liberal or otherwise, and is commonly associated with fascist ideologies such as neo-Nazism (Mudde, 2007). However, the boundaries between the radical and extreme right have become increasingly porous as radical right parties and movements increasingly embrace anti-democratic policies and rhetoric (Brown et al., 2021; Pirro, 2023). Indeed, as Mondon and Winter (2020, p. 151) note, many far-right actors today "espouse a racist ideology, but do so in an indirect, coded or even covert manner, by focusing notably on culture and/or occupying the space between illiberal and liberal racisms, between the extreme and the mainstream."

The far right has become increasingly mainstream. Referring to this phenomenon as the *fourth wave of the far right*, Mudde (2019, p. 2) suggests that the far right is now "closely connected to the mainstream; and in more

and more countries it is becoming the mainstream." As a result of the far right's normalisation, hitherto taboo ideas and discourses have permeated into the mainstream resulting in an increase in hate speech, racism, queerphobia, conspiracy theories, and misogyny (Wodak, 2021). These ideas are anathema to the core values and principles underpinning pluralist democracies, such as media freedoms, individual rights and liberties, the rule of law, and free and fair elections (Miller-Idriss, 2020; Mudde, 2019) and pose a threat to the wellbeing and safety of those deemed Other (Mondon & Winter, 2021; Sengul, 2022b).

Australia has not been immune from the surge of radical and extreme right politics (McSwiney, 2024; Moffitt & Sengul, 2023; Sengul, 2022a). A number of heterogeneous far-right groups emerged throughout the 2010s, principally driven by Islamophobia and opposition to immigration and multiculturalism (Fleming & Mondon, 2018). Since 2020, Australia has witnessed a significant rise in the visibility of extreme right activities. At its peak, far-right extremism made up nearly half of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's (ASIO) domestic counter-terrorism caseload (Dziedzic, 2023). This has since declined to about 30% in 2023 (Dziedzic, 2023), but marks a significant increase from just 10–15% in 2015–2016 (Karp, 2020). Since the 1990s, there has been a substantial increase in the visibility of far-right extremist actors in Australia (Harris-Hogan, 2023). However, incidents of severe far-right motivated violence—understood as acts which inflicted or had the potential to inflict significant physical injury, the kind of activity that organisations like ASIO would consider violent extremism—have declined in Australia over this same 30-year period (Harris-Hogan, 2023). Recently, there has also been a significant increase in reports of racist harassment, intimidation, and vandalism in Australia, with spikes in anti-Asian racism following the outbreak of Covid-19 (Chiu, 2020) and Islamophobic and antisemitic incidents coinciding with Israeli military operations in Gaza following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 (Dumas, 2023). However, such incidents are not necessarily perpetrated by far-right extremists, and a lack of systematic national data also makes longitudinal measurement of such incidents difficult (Harris-Hogan, 2023). This speaks to a broader point outlined by Mondon and Winter (2020) on the distinction between liberal and illiberal articulations of racism. While the extreme right typically engages in illiberal forms of racist activity, we note that liberal forms of racism are increasingly found within the mainstream. Thus, we see the far right as playing one role, albeit a particularly violent and overt role, in the broader project of White supremacy and settler colonialism.

The state of Victoria has been at the centre of this recent resurgence of far-right extremist activity, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Parliament of Victoria, 2022b). The impact of the pandemic was felt particularly hard in Victoria, which experienced some of the longest public health lockdowns in the world. The Parliament of Victoria's (2022b) *Inquiry Into Extremism*, which considered far right and other forms of extremism, found that the government's public health measures "heightened and accelerated some of the trends that have contributed to a rise in extremism in recent years" (p. 63) such as an erosion of trust in government and institutions and social and economic disruption. This is consistent with research critically examining the role of neoliberal government pandemic responses in fostering fertile conditions for far-right actors to exploit (e.g., Richards, 2022). Overall, the pandemic and aspects of the response resulted in "an increase in potential opportunities for recruitment by far-right extremism groups and individuals" (Parliament of Victoria, 2022b, p. 63). Several "anti-lockdown" and so-called "freedom" rallies were held Australia-wide throughout 2020–2021, most prominently in Victoria's capital city Melbourne. These rallies had strong links to several far-right and vaccine conspiracy groups who used social media platforms like Telegram to organise and coordinate the rallies (Knaus & McGowan, 2021). The November 2021 demonstrations drew international attention and condemnation as protesters marched through the Melbourne Central Business District chanting

"Hang Dan Andrews" and displaying violent props outside the Victorian parliament, including a gallow and nooses (Wahlquist & McGowan, 2021).

To date, the uptick in far-right extremist activity in Victoria has largely been free of severe violence, though a bomb plot by far-right activist Phillip Galea was foiled when he was arrested in 2016 (Tran, 2020). Since 2016, there have been several incidents of neo-Nazi and other far-right groups violently clashing with police and anti-fascist activists in the state, mostly in the capital of Melbourne and the regional city Bendigo, as well as two assaults by neo-Nazi activist and leader of the National Socialist Network (NSN) Thomas Sewell in 2021.

Of course, White supremacy and the hostility towards other marginalised groups (like the LGBTQIA+ community) at the core of far-right extremism make it a fundamentally violent phenomenon, even when far-right extremists are not engaging in physically violent actions. However, as ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess has made clear, organisations like ASIO are not concerned with extremist ideology until it translates into physical violence or criminality (e.g., Hurst, 2022). This presents a dilemma for Australian governments wanting to address the rise in far-right extremist activity that does not cross this threshold, as they are unable to respond through usual law enforcement measures.

Incidents such as the above, as well as several widely reported stunts by the NSN, including a cross burning in the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park, promoted calls for a decisive response from the Victorian government, resulting in two pieces of legislation aimed at curtailing far-right extremist expression. The Summary Offences Amendment (Nazi Symbol Prohibition) Bill was passed in June 2022 and made it a criminal offence for a person to intentionally display the Nazi swastika (Hakenkreuz) in public. Yet, several further far-right incidents followed, most notably when in March 2023 approximately 30 members of the NSN held a rally on the steps of the Victorian Parliament where they repeatedly performed the Nazi salute. This particular action engendered a further response from the Victorian government, condemning the neo-Nazi protesters and vowing to introduce legislation to ban the gesture. In 2023, the Summary Offences (Nazi Salute Prohibition) Bill was made into law, which makes it an offence to intentionally display or perform a "broad range of symbols and gestures used by the historic Nazi Party and its paramilitary organisations…including anything which closely resembles a Nazi symbol or gesture" (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

3. Democracy, Crisis, and the Public Sphere

At the heart of a healthy democracy is a vibrant and open public sphere, a space where citizens communicate about issues of common concern (Habermas, 1996). The public sphere constitutes the totality of deliberation in public life, including government, media, and civil society (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Not only a site of deliberation and opinion formation, the public sphere is also a cultural and performative space where collective identities are constructed, articulated, and validated or challenged through both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (Mendonça et al., 2022). Habermas's idea of the public sphere is not without criticism, particularly with regard to its "bourgeois masculinist" character and marginalisation of subaltern publics (Fraser, 1990). Today, such criticisms are "relatively established in the standard discourse of deliberative democracy" (Mansbridge, 2017, p. 101), as deliberative scholars examine questions of power, participation, and inclusion in the public sphere(s) in developing democratic theory and practice. A well-functioning democratic public sphere facilitates free and equal communication, mediates between

the state and civil society, and enables the formation of identities and solidarities across differences (Hendriks et al., 2020).

Far-right extremism, both violent and non-violent, threatens the democratic functioning of the public sphere (and by extension, democracy), by sowing distrust and division, distorting processes of opinion formation, and most obviously, through the spread of exclusionary and anti-democratic ideals, like White supremacy (Ercan et al., 2022). In this article, we focus on the acts of two key public sphere actors: political leaders and government. What governments and political leaders say about violent extremist attacks has a significant effect on the public's perception of these events (Hajer, 2005), shapes media coverage and policy debates (Reese & Lewis, 2009), and invites or foreclosing engagement from civil society actors and the general public (Vatnoey, 2015). The way political leaders and government engage with the challenge of extremism can have long-lasting effects, such as increasing community tensions or fostering and legitimising the marginalisation of minority groups. For example, in Australia, the rhetoric surrounding government responses to ISIS and so-called jihadist violent extremism subjected Muslims to greater racist stigmatisation (Abdel-Fattah, 2019). However, what is less clear is how governments and political leaders respond to *non-physically violent* acts of extremism and whether these responses encourage or undermine democracy.

In this research, we draw from the crisis communication and crisis management scholarship (e.g., Coombs, 2019) to analyse the Victorian government's response to the rise of far-right extremism as an act of crisis communication. Crises are characterised by heightened levels of uncertainty and thus require direction, action, clear information, and accountability. Crisis communication and management scholarship describes and explains societal actions in response to situations where there is a threat to core values, urgency to act, and uncertainty concerning the situation and course of action (Coombs & Holladay, 2023; Gephart et al., 2019). We treat far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis for several reasons, namely that the Victorian government treats it this way in their communicative response, but also the increased volume of far-right incidents that have occurred within the state over the past five years. Moreover, a heightened fear and anxiety in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the establishment of several parliamentary inquiries set up to investigate extremism in Victoria, and high levels of media interest is indicative of the uncertainty that defines crisis events (Boin et al., 2016). Additionally, the literature also notes the potential political utility of crises for political leaders. Coombs (2019) suggests crises often present political advantages for leaders by creating fear and the need for new policies. As a result, political leaders may strategically engage and promote a sense of crisis to achieve a particular political victory or goal. Understanding this is important in critically evaluating whether governments are exploiting or manufacturing crises for their political advantage.

4. Research Design

To examine the Victorian government's discursive response to the state's far-right extremism crisis, we employed CDA to analyse a range of political communication activities from 2021 to 2023. CDA is principally concerned with "the way social power-abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the political context" (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). We deemed a discourse-analytical approach appropriate for this study for two key reasons: First, we were interested in how the Victorian government discursively responded to the rise of far-right extremist activities in the state. In this sense, we were concerned with how the state's political leaders resisted the "social power-abuse"

(van Dijk, 2015, p. 466) promulgated by the extreme right on behalf of racialised and marginalised communities who bear the brunt of exclusionary far-right politics. Second, we were also interested in the government's discursive legitimation of policies to ban Nazi symbols and gestures. As Wodak (2008, p. 56) explains, discourses can be employed to "legitimise the processes and decisions of the politically powerful and/or the state." Taken together, CDA allows us to critically examine how power is both *wielded* and *resisted* by the Victorian government in response to far-right extremism.

We drew from CDA's extensive suite of analytical tools, frameworks, and strategies in this study. Specifically, we employed the typologies of legitimisation strategies set out by Reyes (2011) and van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999). Legitimisation refers to the process of attaining the support/approval for a particular social action, idea, policy, or course of action (Reyes, 2011). Reyes (2011) proposes five key strategies of discursive legitimisation: (a) emotions (particularly fear), (b) hypothetical future, (c) rationality, (d) voices of experience, and (e) altruism. Additionally, we supplemented Reyes' typology with those developed by van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), including authorisation legitimation, rationalisation legitimation, and moral evaluation legitimation. Concurrently, we employed the range of discursive strategies and rhetorical and linguistic devices associated with the discourse-historical approach, including positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, strategies of intensification and mitigation, strategies of justification, as well as rhetorical devices such as metaphors and topoi (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Sengul, 2023). Topoi are strategies of argumentation that serve as warrants that support the transition from argument to conclusion (Wodak, 2021).

The dataset for this study comprises a diverse range of publicly accessible political communication from the Victorian government from 1 September 2021 to 19 August 2023 relating to the introduction and passage of the two legislative measures to combat far-right extremism in the public sphere—the Summary Offences Amendment (Nazi Symbol Prohibition) Bill 2022 and the Summary Offences (Nazi Salute Prohibition) Bill 2023—and key events leading to the formulation of this legislation. This includes Victorian parliamentary Hansard, Australian news articles, government media releases, and a selection of social media posts by former Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews. Five media releases were collected via the Media Centre on the Premier of Victoria website. A total of 116 articles relating to the bills were analysed and collected via Factiva. Debates relating to either bill were accessed via the Victorian Parliament Hansard. Lastly, seven tweets from Premier Daniel Andrews relating to the legislation and the incidents which promoted them were manually collected by the researchers. The gathered data represents the entirety of the political communication released by the Andrews and Allan governments in response to the crisis of far-right extremism during the period. Moreover, our dataset is consistent with the preferred sampling strategy of CDA which tends to privilege "only a small number of texts" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 27) in order to allow for in-depth examination.

The data was analysed recursively, first identifying macro discourses and then proceeding to a deeper reading of the texts. We identified and coded a range of legitimising strategies, discursive and argumentation strategies, as well as a number of rhetorical and linguistic devices.

5. Findings and Analysis

The Victorian government's communicative response to the crisis of far-right extremism had five key goals: to position the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis; to (re)establish Victoria's reputation as an

inclusive, vibrant, and harmonious liberal democracy; to provide reassurance to multicultural and marginalised communities; to legitimise the government's policy response to ban Nazi symbols and salutes; and to re-emphasise the government's commitment to public safety and a vibrant public sphere. These goals are achieved through four overarching discursive themes and five legitimisation strategies that emerged from the dataset, representing the government's crisis response. The four themes were: (a) Nazis are not welcome, (b) responsive government, (c) inclusive Victoria, and (d) protecting the public sphere. Additionally, we identified five legitimising strategies: (a) legitimisation through emotions, (b) legitimisation through a hypothetical future, (b) legitimisation through rationality and voices of expertise, (d) moral evaluation, and (e) legitimisation through altruism.

5.1. Discursive Themes

The first and most prominent theme is "Nazis are not welcome." This theme is orientated around a firm condemnation of far-right extremism in general, and (neo-)Nazism in particular, which is positioned as an unwelcome intrusion into an otherwise inclusive community. Neo-Nazis have "absolutely no place in Victoria" according to then-Deputy Premier Jacinta Allan (Placella, 2023). Victoria "does not want and will not tolerate antisemitism—not now and not ever," said Ros Spence (Parliament of Victoria, 2022a, p. 2117), nor will "Nazi ideology and the hatred it represents" be tolerated according to Minister for Police and Crime Prevention Anthony Carbines (Parliament of Victoria, 2023, p. 3216). As Victoria's Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes describes it, the ban on Nazi symbols and salutes "sends a clear message that the dissemination of Nazi and neo-Nazi ideology…has no place in Victoria" (Premier of Victoria, 2022c) and likewise that "all forms of hate are unacceptable" (Premier of Victoria, 2021). The theme is repeatedly deployed by then-Premier Daniel Andrews, especially on social media. In response to the various stunts by the NSN, Andrews reiterates that "Nazis and their hateful ideology aren't welcome here" (Andrews, 2023c), "Not on parliament's steps. Not anywhere" (Andrews, 2023a), and that the "hateful ideology they represent have no place in our state" (Andrews, 2023d).

The second theme is "inclusive Victoria." Here, the state of Victoria is constructed as a safe and inclusive community where all have the right "to be free from racism, vilification and hatred" and "feel welcome and accepted" according to Minister for Multicultural Affairs Ros Spence (Premier of Victoria, 2022b). As the attorney-general makes clear, Nazi symbols like the swastika are "being used to incite hatred not just towards Jewish people but our LGBTIQ community and other minority groups.…Victorians have zero tolerance of this behaviour and so do we" (Clarke, 2023). Premier Andrews likewise reaffirms this message of inclusivity on behalf of his government in the aftermath of an NSN anti-trans rally on 18 March 2023: "To every trans Victorian, I say this: Our government will always support you. And we'll always respect you. Because your rights are not negotiable" (Andrews, 2023b). The public display of Nazi symbols is described as undermining social cohesion: It "threatens the viability and success of our democratic, multicultural and multi-faith society" and so the ban is necessary "to ensure all Victorians feel welcome and accepted," argued Jaclyn Symes (Parliament of Victoria, 2022b, p. 1721). In enacting the two pieces of legislation, the Victorian government affirms itself as the steward of a tolerant, multicultural society: "We will always tackle antisemitism, hatred and racism head-on—because all Victorians deserve to feel accepted, safe and included" (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

The third theme is "responsive government." This focuses on constructing the Andrews and Allan Labor governments as actively working to counter the crisis of far-right extremism in the state while also

addressing the concerns of affected communities. The government's response is of course not limited only to bans on symbols and gestures, with increased funding for policing and countering violent extremism programs as part of an "ongoing focus on preventing emerging issues such as violent extremism" (Premier of Victoria, 2022a). However, the ban on the public display of the swastika, and later the Nazi salute and other associated symbols, forms a key part of the Andrews and Allan governments' "unwavering commitment to challenge antisemitism and hatred whenever it occurs" (Premier of Victoria, 2023). In announcing the swastika ban, Attorney-General Symes explains that "as a government we want to do all we can to stamp out hate and give it no room to grow" (Ryan & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, listening forms a key part of the responsiveness framing, wherein the Victorian government is presented as attentive to the concerns of minorities and actively seeking out and taking on feedback from affected communities. For example, Minister for Multicultural Affairs Colin Brooks explains that the government has "worked closely with our multicultural communities on this reform and heard how deeply hurtful recent incidents have been to them" (Premier of Victoria, 2023)

The fourth and final theme is "protecting the public sphere." This theme centres on identifying and articulating the various threats posed by neo-Nazi symbols and gestures that play out in the public sphere. Namely, these symbols and gestures function to "harass, intimidate and incite hate" (Premier of Victoria, 2023), and so their circulation in the public sphere must be contained and counteracted. For example, in outlining the importance of the initial swastika ban, Minister for Crime Prevention, Corrections, Youth Justice, and Victim Support Natalie Hutchins spoke to the issues of inclusion and participation: "The harm caused by hate conduct and vilification can be profound, affecting the physical and psychological wellbeing of individuals and often preventing them from feeling comfortable participating in their community" (Parliament of Victoria, 2022a, p. 1721).

5.2. Legitimisation Strategies

We further identified several legitimisation strategies employed to justify and legitimise the government's legislation to ban Nazi symbols and gestures in Victoria, identifying five distinct strategies of legitimisation in the Victorian government's political communication:

Legitimisation through emotions occurs, according to Reyes (2011), mostly through fear and allows social actors to know the opinion of their interlocutors or audience regarding a specific matter. Multiple emotional appeals were present in the data that most frequently manifested around the feelings and safety of Victoria's multicultural communities in the face of rising extremism and racial hatred. Premier Daniel Andrews invoked the distress that Nazi symbolism causes for racialised and marginalised communities: "Its public display does nothing but cause further pain and division" (Premier of Victoria, 2022b). Indeed, emotions of fear and security were extensively employed to legitimise the government's policy position. Through the topos of threat and danger, Premier Andrews emphasised the exceptional nature of far-right extremism: "Nazi symbols glorify one of the most hateful ideologies in history" (Premier of Victoria, 2021). Moreover, through the discursive strategy of negative-other presentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), the government frequently sought to tie the safety and (in)security of Victorians to the presence of neo-Nazi actors and symbols, for example, "We're making sure people who use these symbols and gestures to harass, intimidate and incite hate are held accountable for their cowardly behaviour" (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

Legitimisation through a hypothetical future refers to the need for imminent action due to the possibility/risk of future threats (Reyes, 2011). This legitimisation strategy appeared several times throughout the data and was tied to notions of security and threat. Key to this strategy was the warning that far-right extremism will only get worse in Victoria, justifying the need for the government's Nazi symbol ban. This was clearly evident in Police Minister Lisa Neville's remarks that banning Nazi symbols and salutes was necessary for "preventing emerging issues such as violent extremism" (Premier of Victoria, 2022b). This legitimising strategy was often articulated and realised through the topos of threat and danger and the topos of the consequential (Wodak, 2021).

Legitimisation through rationality and voices of expertise is attained when political actors present policies or ideas as having the support of experts in a specific field and decision-making that have gone through proper consultation and due process (Reyes, 2011). Connected to the theme of responsive government, this legitimising strategy was prominent in the data as both Premier Andrews and Attorney-General Symes sought to emphasise the extensive consultation processes surrounding the legislation. For example, Premier Andrews made reference to the community consultation that informed the design of the policy: "The government undertook extensive consultation with religious, legal and community groups...we will make sure we consult widely with the community and impacted groups to get the settings right before making legislative changes" (Premier of Victoria, 2022a). This was echoed by the attorney-general to stress the government's thorough consultation with multicultural and multi-faith stakeholders: "We have worked closely with our multicultural communities on this reform...the bill has been informed by feedback from the Jewish community, Holocaust survivors, Victoria police, and the Ethnic Community Council of Victoria" (Premier of Victoria, 2023). These legitimising strategies served an important function for the Victorian government in demonstrating both the widespread support of the policy by key stakeholders and highlighting the rational design and implementation of the policy. This was particularly important given the significant scepticism from experts and community organisations about the design and efficacy of the bans (Roose, 2023). Strategies of rationality and voices of expertise allowed the Victorian government to try and allay these concerns, and through the topos of numbers (if the numbers prove a specific position, a specific position should be performed/carried out; Wodak, 2021), demonstrates community support.

Moral evaluation refers to the values and morality of a particular position or proposition and was, unsurprisingly, extensively used by the Victorian government. As previously mentioned, throu*gh strategies of positive-self presentation and negative other-presentation*, multiple actors in the Victorian government constructed an us–them binary with far-right extremists on the one hand, and the government and Victorian community on the other. This was done to emphasise the exceptional threat of far-right extremism in the state. For example, the topos of people (if the people favour/refuse a specific action, the action should be performed/not performed; Wodak, 2021) and topos of numbers were used to position far-right extremists as a minority on the opposite side of ordinary Victorians: "Victorians, clearly, have demonstrated that they don't have any tolerance for this sort of behaviour. The government has absolutely no tolerance for this sort of behaviour" (Allan, 2023, as cited in Ore & Beazley, 2023). In further highlighting the exceptional nature of the neo-Nazi's "evil ideology" (Andrews, 2023a), government actors employed the discursive strategies of mitigation/intensification in their rhetoric. On the one hand, strategies of intensification were used when condemning Nazis and far-right extremism as "one of the most hateful ideologies in history" (Andrews, 2023b). On the other, strategies of mitigation were effectively used to limit the circulation of far-right symbols, and so deny extremists the attention they seek. For example "I won't share the photo because they simply don't deserve the attention" (Andrews, 2023d).

Finally, in legitimisation through altruism, government actors sought to position their response as serving marginalised communities by delivering "a common good that will improve the conditions of a particular community" (Reyes, 2011, p. 788). One way the government achieved this was through the discursive strategies of positive self-presentation, constructing an image of a responsive, proactive, and moral government, and via the strategy of justification to emphasise that the government had no choice but to implement their policy: "While we wish making these laws wasn't necessary, we will always tackle antisemitism. Because all Victorians deserve to feel safe, accepted, and included" (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the Victorian government employed a variety of discursive, semiotic, and rhetorical strategies in response to the state's crisis of far-right extremism. These discursive activities and strategies serve to legitimise the government's policy response to combating the rise of far-right extremism while attempting to (re)position Victoria as a safe, inclusive, multicultural liberal democracy.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

How governments and political leaders respond to extremism matters. Their responses set the tone for news media coverage and future policy interventions (Hajer, 2005; Hajer & Uitermark, 2008). However, much of the research on how political leaders and governments respond to extremism focuses on the responses to *violent* extremism, such as terror attacks (e.g., Hajer & Uitermark, 2008; Rafoss, 2019; Vatnoey, 2015). What is less clear is how governments should respond to non-violent acts of extremism, which nevertheless threaten the safety of minority groups and challenge the norms and functions of the democratic public sphere. Turning our attention to non-violent acts of far-right extremism and the discursive interventions to protect (and potentially deepen) the democratic quality of the public sphere by governments and political leaders, we analysed the Andrews and Allan Labor governments' response to neo-Nazi activity in the Australian state of Victoria and the range of communicative and discursive strategies surrounding them. We found that interventions sought to affirm the government's support for an inclusive and multicultural democracy and legitimise the government's policies banning Nazi symbols and gestures.

Our findings reveal that the Victorian government employed a deliberate political communication and policy framing response to the crisis. We identified a suite of communicative, discursive, and legitimisation strategies, as well as several rhetorical and linguistic devices which served to realise the government's political and rhetorical goals. Our CDA uncovered four macro discursive themes which were aimed at positioning Victoria as an inclusive state with a responsive government. Neo-Nazis were discursively constructed as anathema to the core values of the state. Likewise, legitimising strategies were employed to justify and legitimate the government's policy response to the crisis. These strategies were particularly important for the government in balancing the views of different stakeholders. On the one hand, the government needed to reassure concerned citizens and marginalised communities that they were doing enough to tackle the rise of far-right extremism. On the other hand, the government was also trying to manage stakeholders concerned that policies to ban Nazi symbols and gestures would lack efficaciousness or go too far in limiting freedom of expression. Thus, we saw several legitimising strategies designed to speak to different stakeholders simultaneously throughout the government's communication.

Moreover, we found that the Andrews and Allan governments made a concerted effort to construct the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis. We know from the literature that political leaders find strategic utility

in constructing events in crisis terms (e.g., Coombs, 2019). According to Boin et al. (2016, p. 5), crisis events are *threatening*, *urgent*, and *uncertain*, posing a risk or disturbance to society and the status quo, including "the core values...of a system." The uptick in far-right extremist activity in Victoria meets this criteria. As the epicentre of far-right extremism in Australia, the growth of primarily non-physically violent far-right extremism poses a distinct threat to the state's multicultural and pluralistic democratic values. Moreover, the presence of neo-Nazi actors threatens the safety of the racialised and marginalised communities who bear the brunt of far-right violence and rhetoric. A secondary, but nevertheless important consideration from the perspective of the Victorian government is the reputational damage that far-right extremism poses for the state. Victoria— and particularly its capital city of Melbourne—has an international reputation as a vibrant, cosmopolitan city. The increasingly visible presence of organised neo-Nazis on the streets of Melbourne put this reputation at risk, a consideration that was evident in the government's response.

The response of the Andrews and Allan governments to the states' extremism crisis aligns with best practices and principles outlined in the crisis communication literature (Coombs & Holladay, 2023; Kim, 2015) and research on the far right (Mudde, 2019). In responding to the rise of far-right populist and extremist politics, scholars point to the need to restore and revitalise the principles of liberal democracy. Mudde (2019, p. 178), for example, argues that "only fighting the far-right does not necessarily strengthen liberal democracy, but strengthening liberal democracy will, by definition, weaken the far right." This is echoed by Khalil (2022, p. 203) who suggests that: "To counter right-wing extremism, we cannot rely on counter-terrorism operations. We need to address democratic decline and renew our commitment to upholding multicultural, liberal, egalitarian societies. Countering right-wing extremism requires nothing short of a renewal of global democracy."

The communicative response of the Victorian government reflected this democracy-enriching strategy by placing emphasis on the resilience of Victoria's pluralist democracy, rather than exclusively condemning the far-right extremists. The findings of this article highlight the need for governments to engage in communicative responses to far-right extremism that are grounded in promotion of democratic values like inclusion, as enforcement-based solutions on their own seldom work.

While the scope of this article was limited to the communicative and policy-framing response of the Victorian government to the crisis of far-right extremism, we remain sceptical about the efficacy of the Nazi Symbol Prohibition Bill. Indeed, the continued activity of far-right extremist organisations like the NSN, including several public demonstrations following the introduction of the legislation, underlines the paucity of criminalising symbols and gestures in curtailing public activism by such groups. While it is important that governments communicate that such actors and actions are unwelcome in the community, the bans themselves have done little to actually make far-right extremist organising more difficult. The multiplicity of other far-right symbols and gestures (see, for example, McSwiney et al., 2021) means far-right extremists can (and will) simply use other symbols to circumvent bans. Furthermore, the role of other public sphere actors, such as news media or federal political leaders, in reproducing and legitimising racist and anti-immigrant discourses undermines the aims of the bans in so far as they are intended to reduce, or at least make more difficult, the expression, legitimation, and spread and of far-right extremism.

Future scholarship should examine the government's emphasis on criminal justice and carceral solutions to the state's rise of extremism. The Andrews and Allan governments leaned heavily into police enforcement as part

of their countering violent extremism framework, committing funding for an additional 502 police officers in the 2022–2023 budget (Premier of Victoria, 2022a). Here we can observe a tension between the rhetorical position of the Victorian government in promoting multiculturalism and "official anti-racism" (Lentin, 2004) and the expansion of the security state. The impetus to empower colonial and White supremacist institutions, such as the police force, presents significant implications for those peoples and communities who bear the brunt of state violence. In the Australian context, this is most evident in the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous peoples, including deaths in custody at the hands of the state (Whittaker, 2021). A policy response to far-right extremism that privileges criminal justice and enforcement is doomed to fail, serving to augment rather than dismantle colonialism and White supremacy. As Smith (2022, p. 280) suggests:

> The far and extreme right in all their forms are driven by many of the same racist and settler colonialist ideas that underpin the institutions of the state...a broader fight against racism in all its forms is needed for combating the far-right.

While a communicative defence of democracy is vital in the fight against far-right extremism, this must be coupled with policies that reduce inequality and work towards racial justice.

Although this article focused on the Australian context, we expect the findings will have currency in other jurisdictions given the global challenge of far-right extremism. The rise of far-right extremism is not likely to recede in the short-to-medium term as far-right politics has become increasingly mainstreamed and normalised. Far-right actors have become emboldened and have made effective use of the contemporary hybrid media system (McSwiney & Sengul, 2023). Krzyżanowski et al. (2023, p. 2) refer to this as the "new normal" of anti- and post-democratic action, characterised by the "dismantling or at least profound undermining of the core ideas of democratically-funded, inclusive community and liberal democracy." Those concerned with protecting (and deepening) pluralism, multiculturalism, and democracy from the far right increasingly have to formulate responses to both violent and non-violent far-right extremism. The findings of this article may provide a communicative roadmap for other government actors in addressing these challenges.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Shaping and Branding Migration Policy: A Retrospective Analysis of Portugal's Contemporary Model

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Abstract

Migrant populations have been consistently more vulnerable than others, with their vulnerability being exacerbated in crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In the meantime, in their effort to "flatten the curve," governments have been adopting policies that have significantly impacted migration in various ways. The effect of these policies has found migrants suffering disproportionately from the social and economic consequences of the pandemic crisis. Mobility restrictions have stranded them in the host countries, often without decent housing conditions, exacerbating xenophobic and discriminatory treatment of migrants. The study focuses on the case of Portugal and, more specifically, aims to provide a contextual feature of historical discussions of migration in Portugal and explore the perceptions and branding of migration policies in a crisis environment during the Covid-19 pandemic through the framing lens. Using empirical evidence from a frame analysis of parliamentary debates, the article investigates how immigration policies are branded and framed within Portugal, while it also evaluates the role of branding in migration policy-making, particularly in crisis scenarios. Overall, the article underscores the importance of branding in shaping migration policies, emphasising its significance in policy making.

Keywords

branding; crisis; framing; immigration dynamics; immigration narratives; immigration policy; Portugal

1. Introduction

In the country's long migration history, intertwined with its colonial past, geopolitical changes, and evolving economic and social landscapes, Portugal's migration policies have undergone various transformations. Portugal's migration narrative spans from its colonial era, where movements of people aimed to address colonial administration, trade, and labour needs, to the decolonisation period, which ushered in new

migration dynamics. Following the Carnation Revolution in 1974, the country embraced democratic reforms, leading to increased migration flows due to political, economic, and social changes. Upon EU accession in 1986, Portugal aligned its national migration policies with EU regulations. Subsequently, it adopted an explicit accommodating model to tackle labour shortages, demographic challenges, and stimulate economic growth through immigration management. This approach encompasses various measures such as managing migration flows, issuing residence permits, facilitating family reunification, conducting asylum procedures, and implementing integration programs. In other words, the migration narrative in Portugal is multifaced and is in a constant reshaping mode. On the other hand, in politics, branding has been embraced by political parties in terms of policies (Needham, 2005), strengthening the visibility of an issue and formulating the way the electorate relates to that issue and forms its sense of identity. This article aims to retrospectively explore the immigration dynamics in Portugal, apply branding as an essential part of the migration policy process and examine it in a crisis scenario, in order to identify how migration is framed to construct an up-to-date country model. What makes Portugal an interesting case is that it has experienced both emigration and immigration waves, influencing its societal, cultural, and economic landscapes through its long history, creating unique comparative opportunities for research.

This article begins with an extensive overview of immigration attitudes in Portugal, tracing the evolution of migration discourse, policy transformations, and prevailing narratives from the late 20th century to the present day. Subsequently, Section 3 delves into the concept of political branding, contending that it offers numerous advantages in policy-making, encompassing aspects such as legitimacy, trust, recognition, identity, agenda setting, and electoral success. Following this, Section 4 presents empirical findings from a frame analysis of parliamentary debates aimed at elucidating the branding of immigration policies and the associated frames within Portugal. Finally, the article seeks to evaluate the role of branding in migration policy-making, particularly within crisis environments, though not exclusively. The overarching objective is to underscore the significance of branding in comprehending diverse facets of politics, ranging from ideological stances to public perceptions and electoral strategies and from cultural and societal contexts to issues of identity and differentiation. Ultimately, the article highlights branding as a serving tool for elucidating the intricacies of power dynamics within political systems and processes.

2. A Retrospective Analysis of Portugal's Immigration Dynamics: Policies, Colonial Legacies, and Media Framing

At the terminus of the 20th century, Portuguese society found itself immersed in unprecedented societal discussions framed as "us versus them" within its domestic sphere. The escalation of immigration resulted in a demographic surge, with official data pointing that at the end of the 2000s, the migrant population was approximately 5%, exceeding 10% of the active population after 2015. This phenomenon engendered a novel societal paradigm, encapsulated by the concept termed "the other, within us." It supplanted the historical frameworks of either being categorised as the "other" in the context of mass emigration or grappling with the realities associated with the "other" stemming from the empire or colonies (Cunha, 1997). The actuality of heightened immigration from former colonies was, however, disregarded until 1992. This influx was often dismissed as an "extension" or an undesirable by-product of the decolonisation process, grounded in the perception of the incoming migration as a negligible social consequence. Nevertheless, the shift in the perception of the "other" led to mounting pressures compelling policymakers to realign immigration policies in harmony with prevailing European norms and standards.

Portugal's migration history can be unfolded in six evolving distinct phases. First, the 1960s witnessed substantial labour demands in France and Germany, leading to mass emigration, accompanied by Cape Verdean immigration to fill labour shortages; second, the aftermath of the empire's dissolution and the Carnation Revolution in 1974 mobilised the decolonisation process and saw the repatriation of nearly 800,000 individuals from former colonies (see Ovalle-Bahamón, 2003); third, the 1980s were marked by significant political, social, and economic upheavals in newly liberated territories like Angola, Cape Verde, and Guiné-Bissau, and Portugal's entry into the European Economic Community in 1986, which made it an attractive country for migrants (see Baganha & Góis, 1998); fourth, a pivotal change unfolded in the 1990s with a reversal in Portuguese-Brazilian migration patterns, resulting in increased immigration from diverse origins, e.g., Eastern European countries (see Baganha et al., 2004); fifth, the economic recession of 2008 resulted in a period of a notable decrease in the immigrant population, reflecting the impact of the economic crisis, which lasted until 2015; sixth, since then, a new phase of Portuguese migration has been signified along with a new-fangled significant growth in the migrant population—including from Asian countries. This period, characterised by a process of diversification of diversity (see Padilla et al., 2015), has lasted since the present day. These societal shifts were closely entwined with migration policies and media portrayals, prompting a re-evaluation of Portugal's immigration landscape.

2.1. Evolving Frames: The Phases of Migration Discourse in Late 20th Century Portugal

In Cunha's (2003) work, he delineated three distinct stages of framing migration, reflecting migration phases as discussed in Section 2. First, "Between the Empire and Europe (1992–1995)" marked tensions between colonial and European political matrices, coinciding with the ratification of the Schengen Accord and the reshaping of immigration and residence frameworks. A prominent focus of this period involved implementing public works and construction endeavours aimed at stimulating the economy. Despite these changes, the immigrant population primarily comprised individuals from Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) and Lusophone countries. Brazilian immigrants, for instance, were perceived as occupying a higher social status, maintaining their position at the apex of the social hierarchy. Notably, this period witnessed a discernible shift in discourse from an ex-colonial perspective that emphasised integration within the national identity ("us") to a European institutional discourse, with a newer narrative tended to spotlight ("them") in criminality terms often associating it with ethnic minorities, making it a focal point in discussions surrounding immigration.

Second, the "European Convergence (1995–1998)" showcased the alignment with European immigration perspectives, juxtaposing official discourse with practical employment practices for unregistered immigrants. During this phase, European immigration policies began to take shape, primarily aiming to address labour shortages stemming from a focus on domestic public works and construction-based economic development (see Corkill & Eaton, 1998). The state, especially under the leadership of António Guterres (PM from 1995–2002) from the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista [PS]), increasingly embraced a European perspective on the "other," aligning institutionally and politically with European views on non-European migrants, with key policy implementations including the initiation of a second process of "extraordinary regularisation" and the establishment of a High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (see Baganha & Marques, 2001), both labelled as pro-integration tools. However, there existed a disparity between the official discourse advocating control of immigration and the lenient practices allowing the employment of non-registered immigrants in manual labour. As Cunha's (2003) research underlines, media

structures predominantly depicted the "other" in a victimised or criminalised manner, echoing the EU's policies and reinforcing the concept of European identity that led to a more pragmatic discourse acknowledging the necessity of the "other" within the local community, albeit within determined parameters of national interest.

Moreover, during this period, public discourse frequently conflated race and nationality, particularly in impoverished neighbourhoods, disregarding nationality while associating entire communities of impoverished Portuguese citizens of PALOP descent with African immigrants (see Baganha et al., 2009). The late 1990s witnessed a shift in institutional discourse, marked by the decline of the public-works-centred economic model and the rise of communitarian policies focused on integration. This transition revealed a dual challenge in immigration policy—while PALOP and Brazilian immigration appeared manageable, there was a noted increase in immigration from Eastern Europe (see Baganha et al., 2004), posing new complexities and limitations for the existing immigration strategy.

Third, the "Route of Globalization (1999–2003)" witnessed further policy adjustments, including labour-contingent systems and extraordinary regularisation based on work contracts, amid socioeconomic changes and political transitions (Carvalho, 2018). Politically, 2001 marked a shift from a socialist to a centre-right coalition government, accompanied by neoliberal economic policies focusing on labour laws and immigration (Carvalho & Duarte, 2020). The societal landscape was influenced by events such as 9/11 and the Seville European Council meeting of June 2002, leading to stricter immigration restrictions and reshaping of public discourse towards migrants while also associating ethnic groups with migration, e.g., PALOP and the Roma population. In sum, in the late 20th century, the discourse surrounding immigration and ethnic groups evolved significantly, aligning with European integration policies and impacting political discussions with a primary focus on three main objectives: controlling human migration and limiting European entry, ensuring an inexpensive workforce for unskilled/non-qualified work, and retardation of ageing European population's effect on social protection and welfare.

2.2. Navigating Migration: The Transformation of Immigration Policies in Portugal

Despite the long migration history in Portugal, it was only in the 1990s that immigration emerged on the political agendas. During this period, migration policies mainly focused on regulations of migrant flows and migrants in irregular situations, e.g., entrance and stay, as evidenced by laws such as nº 264-B/81, September 3 established by the Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata [PSD]) in 1981. Subsequently, in 1993, PSD introduced a new law (nº 59/1993, March 3) to address immigration flows and integration processes, including regulations on entry, stay, and exit of foreigners, with both laws however aiming to avoid a permanent stay of migrants (Baganha, 2005). Nevertheless, as Peixoto et al. (2009) highlight, it was only during the PS government period (1995–2002) that signified progress on migration issues, marking notable advancements, e.g., the 1996's second regularisation process (nº 17/1996, May 24) or the 1998's family reunification as a right (nº 244/1998, August 8). In the years that followed, there was a series of new regulations on migration, e.g., stay permits, a quota system for migrant labour market recruitment, and irregular migration (nº 4/2001, January 10), addressing issues like migration flows, e.g., Eastern Europe and Brazil and employment shortages (Peixoto et al., 2009). In their work exploring Portuguese migration from a systemic perspective, Góis and Marques (2009) highlight that migration policies up to 2001 included measures of positive discrimination towards specific groups of migrants, giving

preference to those with whom Portugal has close linguistic, social, and cultural ties, an approach was interrupted by n° 4/2001, January 10, that allowed legalisation of migrants irrespective of their nationalities. This shift away from privileging migrants from Lusophone countries echoed the emerging variety of nationalities of newly arrived migrants.

In 2007, a new migration law was presented (n° 23/2007, July 4), the so-called "foreigners' law," introducing a new system called "global contingent" that reflects the custom employment prospects and labour requirements in the country. Since 2007, the newly proposed regulations have aimed to take a position against illegal migration and human trafficking while also targeting terrorist practices and dealing with the challenge of Portugal's ageing population. In 2012, an update of the "foreigners' law" from 2007 was passed, expanding its scope to cover both the migration and border law of Portugal (n° 154/2012, August 9), while in 2014 (n° 85/2014, May 5), regulations focused on establishing the conditions and procedures for refugees, asylum seekers, and subsidiary protection.

From 2015 to 2019, further adjustments to the "foreigners' law" are framed as promoting legal migration channels, developing an intercultural society, and deepening integration while promoting and proposing revision of international deals regarding social security, aiming to strengthen the social protection of migrant workers and their families (see República Portuguesa, 2015). More recently, the XXII Constitutional Government aimed to adopt a less bureaucratic and more humane approach, aiming to facilitate drawing in regular and orderly labour to carry out tasks in many areas of activity, by introducing an organic separation between police functions and the administrative functions of the authorisation and documentation of immigrants, e.g., the disband of Agency of Foreigners and Borders (n°73/2021, November 12).

2.3. Steering Migration Narratives in Crisis and Stability in Portugal

The analysis in the previous sub-section reveals that until 2019, when examining previous migration policies, there was a notable emphasis on regularisation. However, there wasn't a distinct branding evident, as the framing accompanying the policies was often neutral, following conventional legal semantics. At times, migration was portrayed positively, with some exceptions such as positive discrimination in favour of migrants from Lusophone countries and security concerns following events like 9/11. While there is a world of academic interest and literature that has studied the evolution of migration and migration policies in Portugal (see Baganha et al., 2010; Costa, 2016; Góis & Marques, 2012; Marques & Góis, 2005), migration has, until recently, been considered a low politicised issue in Portugal (Carvalho & Duarte, 2020). This can be explained by the implementation of sensible immigration laws and cultivating very upbeat political narratives on immigration, civil society-focused policymaking with a strong integration orientation (see Maeso & Araújo, 2013), along a long-standing consensus among political actors to avoid politicising immigration. This innovative perspective in the case of Portugal is mainly based on an understanding of the critical role that migrants play in bridging employment shortages, particularly in light of an ageing and declining population (Mazzilli & Lowe, 2023).

The country's attempts at migration policies through the years have been acknowledged consistently by the Migrant Integration Policy Index since 2004, which recognises Portugal as a leading country when it comes to best practices and favourable policies towards migrants. Migrant Integration Policy Index data covers various policy areas related to migrant integration processes. According to Citron and Gowan (2004),

Portugal surpasses the European average in migration policy indicators, while Niessen et al. (2007) note that Portugal has room for improvement in labour market access, family reunion, and anti-discrimination measures but is generally doing well. Moreover, during the 2008 crisis, Portugal treated migrants as equal victims of the recession rather than scapegoats (Huddleston et al., 2011), but despite economic challenges, Portugal maintained highly positive attitudes toward migrants both before and during the crisis (Huddleston et al., 2015). Additionally, Solano and Huddleston (2020) observe that Portugal has consistently improved over the years, maintaining a comprehensive approach to integration.

To sum up, as a former colonial power, Portugal's historical connection with its former colonies profoundly influences its migration policies and societal dynamics, with integration efforts post-colonialism to include exceptions for immigrants from ex-colonial countries, reflecting the nation's ties and the need for smoother transitions for these populations. Furthermore, although recent immigration to Portugal predominantly originates from outside its colonial or post-colonial context, the perception of populations from former colonies still significantly influences social attitudes. Distinctions between immigrant groups based on their historical connections with Portugal persist in public discourse and policymaking, shaping integration approaches. Additionally, while one would expect that the constant crisis environment since 2008 resulted in failing perceptions of migration because of the economic impact of the crisis on the native population, Migrant Integration Policy Index evidence, as discussed earlier, suggests otherwise for the case of Portugal.

The latest crisis of Covid-19, as in other countries, forced Portugal to swiftly adapt its policies involving border control measures and healthcare exploration while also altering attitudes towards health, but also brought forth new challenges for migrants in Portugal, revealing vulnerabilities in access to healthcare, economic stability, and housing, while also highlighting the essential contributions of migrant labour in critical sectors. Having said that, for Mazzilli (2022, p. 4756), the Portuguese government narratives during Covid-19, through discourses of "threat," "fragile," and "sympathetic society" managed to locate its regulation policy in a framework of crisis and emergency, "following a common topos in the European narratives of migration." Additionally, in their work on Portugal's response to Covid-19, Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2020) highlights the role of social justice in the Portuguese approach to the pandemic, with the government emphasising inclusiveness and protecting the most socio-economically vulnerable population, including migrants, e.g., full citizenship rights for illegal migrants, access to the national healthcare system.

Following extensive literature that associates crisis and migration (see Lindley, 2014) and informed by the information provided that contextualises migration narratives and policies over time in Portugal, this article uses Covid-19 to examine how migration policies are branded in a crisis scenario. The evident debate on how the pandemic apprised migration policies, e.g., regularisation measures and labour-informed measures, applicable also to migrants (irregular or not), provides an interesting opportunity to explore and test the claimed Portuguese "positive migration attitudes" with the country's overtime migration discourses in order to identify how migration policies are branded, what instructs the up-to-date model and political debate on this topic, and how/if the crisis has influenced the way migration is branded.

3. Branding in a Political Context

Brands are recognised as a critical element in marketing and are increasingly seen as central to political parties' appeals to the electorate. The role of marketing and branding, from, i.e., political parties to

governments to political actors to policymaking (Lloyd, 2005), has been occupying increasing importance when it comes to politics; in other words, they "intersect" (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011). The significance of brands lies in their capacity to establish a distinction between competing products and identify segments in society with which to establish a relationship (Tsagkroni, 2014). In that sense, brands can significantly influence consumer preferences and decisions, which can be understood as a system of identification (Basu & Wang, 2009; Lloyd, 2006; McDivitt, 2003; Wingard, 2013) while creating a distinction between different policies, politics, and ideologies among political parties. Similar to branding in marketing, policy branding is the deliberate act of creating and advancing policies or projects in a way that forges a distinctive and identifiable identity enduing a cultural exchange. In their work on branding of public policy, Basu and Wang (2009, pp. 84–86) identify three aspects of brand strategy, which include brand definition (identity of the brand), brand communication (means to identify, express, and share the product), and brand management (promote, protect, and sustain the brand). These entail framing in a way that effectively conveys their purpose and advantages to the target audience, aligns them with specific values or aims, and transmits messages that are clear and appealing. At the same time, political brands, in a way, simplify the process for voters to digest information, reduce the likelihood that they would make poor judgements, and, in the end, produce sentimental benefits by fostering a sense of belonging and identity (Schneider, 2004).

By building resonance and trust among stakeholders, policy branding seeks to improve the legitimacy and perceived worth of the policies while swaying public opinion and garnering support. For Raev and Minkman (2020), policy branding increases the legitimacy and visibility of newly implemented or revised policies in order to engender favourable feelings in them and win over important stakeholders and, ultimately, voters, built on the perception and enactment of the experience of the "product" and its "value."

To summarise, branding in policymaking involves crafting a unique and recognisable identity for a policy to promote its objectives and build support. To achieve this, the process revolves around creating a cohesive and consistent brand image that resonates with the target audience, aiming to increase awareness, understanding, and positive perception of the policy. On the other hand, framing refers to strategic presentation of policy issues and ideas to shape public perception and influence decision-making and involves carefully selecting and emphasising certain aspects of a policy or issue to influence how it is perceived by the audience in order to influence public opinion, shape policy debates, and ultimately, drive policy outcomes. By strategically framing policy issues within the context of a well-defined policy brand, political actors can enhance the likelihood of successful implementation of their goals.

Finally, the integration of a brand in a political context can be explored in line with political objectives (Zenker & Braun, 2017) and ideologies. When it comes to immigration policies and branding, Wingard (2013) also builds on the idea of identification that stimulates a national identity that accommodates migrants as others. For Wingard (2013, p. 5), "others" are individuals to whom the country might extend "benevolence" or "salve" by integrating them into the national economy and culture. Conversely, the "other-other" is the individual who is inextricably linked to no particular culture. Expulsion, deportation, or sending away is necessary for the country to define and envision its boundaries, citizens, and itself. Deliberating on the idea of national unity, branding for Wingard (2013, p. IX) "redirects the anxieties that the material conditions of neoliberal capital' produced through unemployment, economic disenfranchisement and changing demographics."

4. Methodology and Data

The article employs a qualitative frame analysis to identify the structure of the policy frame in parliamentary debates regarding policies addressing migration in Portugal during the pandemic crisis of Covid-19. Frames offer the opportunity for a coherent narrative that constitutes the diagnosis of the problem and its prognosis, respectively (Entman, 1993), in a process that socially constructs problem definitions and guides policy decision-making. Based on Goffman's (1975) concept of frames, which refer to the cognitive structures that shape individuals' interpretation of events and experiences, Entman's (1993) approach to framing functions, involving notions of selection and salience, contributes to identifying holistic reasoning behind frames, that include a definition of the problem, diagnosis of the causes, moral judgements on the problem but also suggestions of treatment. As Rein and Schön (1993, p. 146) phrase it, policy frames are ways of "selecting, organising, interpreting and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading and acting," built on the idea that people structure a reality of an issue and attach meaning to it, adhering a particular perspective of reality (Dekker, 2017).

The aim is to explore how framing migration is formed and utilises features provided by the qualitative analysis software ALTAS.ti to look at the codes that stand for ideas, topics, and arguments with regard to policy frame. While a deductive approach is more common in framing research, this article follows an inductive strategy of open coding to identify frame elements without preconceived categories or predetermined coding structures. The research material consists of transcripts of all parliamentary debates concerning legislation on migration between December 2019 and December 2021. A total of 94 parliamentary debates were monitored and analysed, and four frames were identified as most frequently associated with migration in those debates.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1. Economic Opportunity Frame

This frame emphasises the positive economic effects of immigration by presenting immigrants as essential members of the labour force and the economy while it advocates for inclusive immigration policies to stimulate economic growth. Namely, the PS narrative emphasises how legal immigration can help with Portugal's ageing population and economy. The argument around this frame is that legal migration balance is a positive economic variable and beneficial for demographic stability and sustainability, which can benefit from the active management of the migration flows and provide opportunities to revive rural areas in the country. Interventions from Costa's government related to migrants include, among others, arguments that stress how reinforcement of social support and combating precariousness assist the integration of migrants and create favourable conditions for the "evolution" of demography, conceive migration as a "strategic potential" to achieve demographic sustainability through "active management" of migration flows, and that positive migration balance results from the convergence with the EU.

The positive economic impact of migrants frequently appears in the narrative of several other parties, e.g., the Left Block (Bloco de Esquerda [BE]) emphasises the contributions of migrants to social security and the wealth they bring to the country, and the Portuguese Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português [PCP]), e.g., suggesting that migration is not a "menace" but an "unavoidable social phenomenon" from which Portugal can benefit from. During the pandemic crisis, the narrative becomes more specific, with the PS government

arguing that allowing migrants through borders could be "essential" for agriculture to compensate for the absence of local workers.

In contrast to this portrait of the positive contribution of migrants, Chega!, the rising radical right party, defines migrants as hurting the economy. The party argues in favour of a nativist approach, e.g., Portuguese first, while describing migrants as an economic burden or even a "demographic substitution" that augmented during the pandemic and that requires immediate attention. Chega! also targets the EU migration policy at the expense of the native Portuguese population, highlighting that migrants shouldn't be "prioritised" over natives while accusing the government of putting "too much focus on migration and racism" and ignoring the big problems, e.g., unemployment rates in the local population.

An additional debate under this frame is the "golden visas" issue in exchange for buyers of over 500k in property. BE and PCP speak against this criterion and favour more "human" criteria, while PSD, Christian Democrats (Centro Democrático Social-Partido Popular [CDS-PP]), and PS defend the policy for its power to attract investment, pointing out that Portugal needs all types of migrants, since they contribute in various and numerous ways to the economic growth of the country.

5.2. Humanitarian Concern Frame

This frame underscores the moral obligation to provide refuge to vulnerable migrants, especially refugees and asylum seekers. It promotes humane and compassionate immigration policies that prioritise human rights. The narrative of "victimhood" is also evident in Costa's government discourse, emphasising the significance of accepting refugees and acknowledging the risks individuals take in pursuit of a better life. The government highlights the importance of human rights in migration, particularly regarding the protection of victims of human trafficking and breaches of human rights. Within the context of Portugal's EU Council presidency in 2021, the PS government advocates for a solidarity-based approach towards migrants, which entails greater responsibilities under international law and humanitarian law for regulating immigration at the EU level. This stand is also supported by BE, which expresses its support for defending EU cooperation and strengthening the Union's mechanisms to combat illegal human trafficking, condemning any radical views that impede legitimate humanitarian aid and underlining that EU immigration laws need to be humanised. However, when it comes to the role of the EU, not all parties share this notion. CDS-PP targets the EU and identifies migration as a "symbol of the failures" of the EU from the point of view of the principle of solidarity among the member states, with the party emphasising the importance of distinguishing between supporting refugees in situations of illegal migration and just supporting illegal migration while PCP also points out how the EU has largely contributed to the "catastrophic" humanitarian situation with its irresponsible migration policies.

The notion of human rights in line with migration is extensively discussed in line with the pandemic crisis. More specifically, as pointed out on various occasions by PS, BE, and PCP, the pandemic has affected narratives and human rights negatively, similar to the narratives that were taking place in the migration and refugee crisis of 2015, while stressing that accepting refugees and migrants during a crisis, is an international obligation for countries, calling for a more coherent and effective response both domestically and internationally.

Following up on the situation in the agricultural area of Odemira, in the Alentejo region in Southern Portugal, where fruit farms are highly concentrated by migrant farmhands, mainly from South Asia, and the

additional complications due to the pandemic, along with the similar situation in the region of Tejo where clams are cultivated, human rights and social exploitation of migrants, are often described as forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking. From the Greens to the People Animals and Nature (Pessoas–Animais–Natureza [PAN]), the CDS-PP, the BE, and the PS, all parties underline throughout the pandemic crisis that it is necessary to grant rights and proper attention to migrants while addressing issues of, e.g., "inhuman, undignified, and shocking" living conditions and access public services including healthcare and social protection while at the same time being exploited when it comes to labour. For PS, the pandemic crisis brought a "tsunami of suffering" that has hit the most vulnerable and exposed structural inequalities, i.e., migrants and refugees. Because of this, Portugal is witnessing violations of human rights and threats to freedoms and guarantees following the growth of populist and authoritarian drifts in various places, with migrants and refugees being, in particular, the preferred victims of these narratives. Finally, the Portuguese "ombudsman" as a "national prevention mechanism" in defence of the human rights of refugees and migrants is also pointed as a positive example of good practices on the subject for the international community, reflecting on the extent of the attention and commitment of Portugal given on migration.

5.3. National Security Frame

This frame emphasises the importance of border security and portrays migrants as potential threats to a nation's safety and interests. It calls for stricter immigration policies to protect national security, following up on the "foreigners' law" of 2015 (see Section 2), which speaks of the possibility of refusing VISAs to potentially dangerous individuals. Under this frame, for BE, the world is perceived as unstable and rich in crisis, leading to a necessary adaptation of armed forces, whereas for PSD, migration per se is a matter of security problem on its own. For Chega!, immigration vandalises Portuguese identity and fosters terrorism, with the party inviting for a reflection on the internal security of Portuguese borders. During the pandemic, migrants were also perceived by Chega! as a cause of outbreaks and spreading of the virus, with migrants being framed as a threat and dangerous to the public health.

However, this frame is often criticised and debated, especially by the PS and the PSD, with the PS arguing that the issue of migration is more complicated than being able to be stopped by only border control and with the government explicitly inviting citizens not to perceive migrants as "suspects" and promoting the fight against discrimination and the importance of equality and inclusion discourse when referring to migrants. For PS, the disbandment of Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (Foreigners and Borders Service) and the transfer of its administrative responsibilities to a non-policial force is an example attempt to move away from the frame of immigration as being a police matter and threat to national security, framing migration as a human matter and not a security one. Additionally, PAN condemns Chega's! "ultra-security" discourse claiming it aims to morally divide between the good natives and the bad migrants along with an encouraging logic feeding minority persecution. Similarly, PS and BE make various claims that the frame of migration as a matter of security is used to create a narrative of fear by radical right/ultra-liberals to attract the attention of the electorate, and that is also related to general fear in the pandemic. Both parties urge against any securitisation discourse of migration, with PS speaking in favour of a concept of "human security" rather than a "national" one, a concept that reflects Portugal as a country of humanitarian principles.

5.4. Climate Frame

Interestingly, an additional frame is spotted, structured on the effect of climate change on migration. More specifically, BE, PAN, PSD, and PS point out the migratory pressure due to CO_2 emission and fossil fuels consumption while discussing the flaws of the system of production and consumption, which causes, among other things, a depletion of the environment, leading to mass migration, climate refugees, worsening of inequalities, and overall, a great degree of suffering. While PS argues in favour of the term "climate-refugees" and that Portugal should accept such refugees under international humanitarian law, PSD points out climate change as a challenge due to causing uncontrolled migration. Nevertheless, in the context of the importance of environmental politics, the effect that desertification could have on the subsequent large global migration and their effects on inequality within societies and between countries are stressed in the Portuguese parliament as an increasing concern.

In summation, the examination of parliamentary deliberations elucidates a nuanced depiction of immigration policies across various conceptual frameworks. The economic opportunity frame accentuates the beneficial contributions of immigrants to both the labour force and the economy, advocating for inclusive immigration policies. Conversely, the ascendant radical right faction, exemplified by Chega!, characterises migrants as an economic liability, advocating for policies rooted in nativism. The humanitarian concern frame underscores the ethical imperative to extend refuge to vulnerable migrants, in stark contrast to the national security frame, which portrays migrants as potential security risks. Furthermore, the climate frame underscores the intricate nexus between climate change and migration, emphasizing the necessity for proactive environmental measures to confront impending challenges. Throughout these deliberations, political parties such as the PS, BE, and PCP champion human rights-centered approaches to migration, while also confronting issues of social exploitation and inequality. In sum, the parliamentary discourse reflects a sophisticated interplay of economic, humanitarian, security, and environmental considerations in shaping immigration policies within the Portuguese context.

6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This article delves into the evolution of immigration policies and the parliamentary debates on immigration during the Covid-19 period. Through the lens of policy branding, it resorts to frame analysis to determine the structure of the discussions concerning migration policies within the parliamentary in Portugal throughout the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

As suggested by the literature, policy branding and framing are critical aspects of how political actors communicate, influence, and shape public perception and political discourse regarding their approaches and ideologies to specific issues. Policy branding involves deliberately constructing a narrative around policies. For migration policies, this can encompass humanitarian, economically strategic, or security-oriented angles, depending on their objectives. On the other hand, framing pertains to how political actors present and emphasise specific aspects of the topic, thereby shaping the understanding of the issue. For instance, migration may be framed, among others, as necessary for economic growth, emphasising the contribution of migrants to the labour market (see Peri, 2012) through a security lens, highlighting measures to control borders and protect native interests (see Koser, 2005), through climate, recognising the role of environmental factors in driving migration patterns (see Martin, 2010) or through

development, exploring how migration affects the development of both origin and destination countries (see de Haas, 2010).

The analysis of parliamentary debates provides a comprehensive view of the branding strategies associated with immigration policies in Portugal, focusing on distinct frames on immigration policies, ranging from economic considerations to humanitarian concerns, national security, and the impact of climate change on migration, used by various political parties. The analysis shows that political parties, including the PS, the BE, and the PCP, emphasise the positive contributions of legal immigration to Portugal's economy and demographics, with the PS government, during the pandemic crisis highlighting the need for migrant labour, especially in agriculture, to address workforce shortages, whereas in contrast, the rising radical right party, Chega!, perceives migrants as an economic burden and advocates for a nativist approach. Moreover, based on a humanitarian concern, there is a moral obligation to offer refuge to vulnerable migrants, especially refugees, and asylum seekers, with multiple parties, such as PS, BE, and PCP, advocating for solidarity with migrants and upholding human rights in migration policies. On the other hand, Chega! views immigration as a threat to national security, fostering narratives that link migrants to terrorism and public health risks, especially during the pandemic. However, PS and other parties criticise this stance, encouraging citizens to avoid stereotyping migrants and advocating for equality and inclusion. BE, PAN, PSD, and PS highlight the impact of climate change on migration, emphasising the need for environmental policies to address climate refugees, inequalities, and global migration resulting from the environmental crisis.

The aforementioned data indicates a moderate shift in Portugal's views about migration. However, comparing earlier viewpoints and current discussions on migration indicates that modern migration is progressively approached and consistently branded according to opportunity and humanitarian considerations. Therefore, the nation has adopted regularisation programmes, particularly during periods of economic boom, to incorporate illegal immigrants into the official sector and has also adjusted its immigration rules to accommodate shifting migratory trends and meeting labour market demands, highlighting the financial contributions made by immigrants, particularly in fields where there is a workforce shortage and demographic uncertainty. Additionally, Portugal has demonstrated its support for humanitarian causes and human rights in the context of migration, with the government and several political parties highlighting the significance of welcoming refugees and providing a haven and inclusive environment. Despite these notable approaches, though, the notion of securitisation of migration is also present in Portugal, with a notable increasing salience of this discourse in the political debate, along with an increase of racist and xenophobic discrimination phenomena based on ethnic and racial origin. Additionally, the pandemic crisis contributed to uncovering and aggravating narratives of inequality and discrimination towards migrant and Roma communities in the country (see Casquilho-Martins et al., 2022), adopting the "othering" discourse, challenging the portrayal of Portugal as a best-practice progressive model.

Reflecting on the acuity that policy branding contributes to creating trusting relationships between political parties and the electorate, the combination of the inclusive, progressive anatomy can be seen as a consistent characteristic brand for migration in Portugal. The empirical evidence of parliamentary debates supports this consistency in all three aspects of branding, definition, communication and management, as defined by Basu and Wang (2009). However, by acknowledging the need and reminding oneself that the electorate is not steady but can change its preferences and develop new skills, the future of migration branding relies on the capabilities of political parties to adapt and customise a future migration brand that could continue to serve

as a system of identification. For Needham (2005), brands motivate aspiration among the electorate and appear to be dedicated to a commitment to a better future, symbolising the values and principles of a political party. Overall, there has been a consistent set of supporting frames among various parties through time when it comes to accommodating pro-migration policies and narratives, creating a national dynamic of a unique Portuguese brand of migration, in contrast to many other EU countries. Keeping in mind that the success of migration policies often depends on the alignment between the chosen branding, framing strategies, and the prevailing societal attitudes, due to the increase of the radical right support to Chega! and the increase in racial, nationalistic, anti-immigration, and discrimination narratives, this best-practice inclusive progressive model of Portugal is no longer guaranteed.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

Data Availability

Research data associated with this article are publicly available at the official websites of the Assembleia da República (Portuguese Parliament) and the Diário da República (Journal of the Republic).

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About the Author

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A Transnational Network Analysis of Refugees in Crisis

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Abstract

Over 3,000 articles from 2012–2022 in Spanish and English across the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras were manually coded to better understand how refugees in crisis were framed in both home and destination countries. This study uses a detailed frame analysis and a broad transnational network analysis to highlight each refugee attribute on the media agenda that then informs policy across nations. While there is wide variation in the immigration policies of the countries sampled, there was nearly uniform negative framing and clustering of identical negative attributes across all countries sampled. This negative transnational homogenization of news content problematises the idea of unique journalism norms and may have profound "real world" consequences that can further stigmatize refugees throughout the Americas. This research also found that the valence of content became more negative and emotive over time. This suggests that the debate around immigration will continue and even escalate as a battleground of politics and culture—and that refugees may be portrayed even more negatively across media in the future. Given this increasing negativity and emotionality in coverage, societies may see more nationalistic—and xenophobic—immigration policies throughout the Americas and a less empathetic focus on the human rights of refugees.

Keywords

immigration policy; media; media framing; negative attributes; news coverage; policy branding; refugees

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the media coverage surrounding refugees coming into the US from Central America (CA) and Mexico (Hickerson & Dunsmore, 2016). The Remain in Mexico policy was enacted during the Trump presidency, which requires certain asylum seekers arriving by land at the US–Mexico border to

return to Mexico to await their asylum hearing. The Biden administration (2021–present) largely continues to implement these policies. These asylum hearings decide whether an individual can be classified as a migrant (someone who chooses to move) or a refugee (someone who has been forced out because of war or persecution). In analysing media content, this study will use the term "refugee" for two reasons: (a) their eventual legal status is unknown at the time of media coverage and (b) media coverage often conflates or misuses the two terms when discussing specific US government policies. While these terms have specific legal meanings, they are often used interchangeably in colloquial usage. However, this research privileges the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees distinction in terminology that argues for the use of "refugee" (rather than migrants) because using the term "migrant" ignores the need that many have for protection. As noted, this study privileges the term "refugee," but "migrant" was also used as a search term to encapsulate as much media coverage as possible. Some research (e.g., Chattopadhyay, 2019) use the term "migrant," while others (e.g., Hickerson & Dunsmore, 2016) rely on the term "refugee," and some research (e.g., Parrott et al., 2019) use the two terms interchangeably. It must be noted that mediated discourses on migrants as well as discourses surrounding asylum seekers tend to be more negative than mediated discourses surrounding refugees (Muytjens & Ball, 2016). These linguistic choices influence how societies feel towards those entering and leaving a country, "who is deserving of humanitarian protection, what governments are obligated to offer, and the merits of a diverse society" (Hamlin, 2022, Evolving Terms section). This relative positivity toward refugees (rather than migrants or asylum seekers) is discussed further when contextualising findings of the media representation of refugees in the Section 8.

Most of the research examining refugees coming into the US is published in English and has originated exclusively from a North American perspective (Ehmer & Kothari, 2016) without any analysis of media in the origin country of refugees. The strong relationship between media framing and political power in global societies (Entman, 2003) strongly suggests that how an individual or group is framed in the media has "real world" effects (McCombs, 2020). Thus, media can shape how refugees interpret their home country; how those in their home country and new country view their migration to the US (Liu, 2023; Parrott et al., 2019); how refugees are viewed when they arrive (Kenix & Lopez, 2021; Llewellyn et al., 2021); and resultant policies toward refugees and migrants (Chattopadhyay, 2019).

This research explores how news media in six different countries throughout CA, Mexico, and the US portrayed refugees through a continued period of interlocking crises from 2012–2022: political instability, repression, natural disasters, climate change, gang conflicts, and economic collapse. The level of migrants and refugees surged at a number of points across the span of this study, which is demonstrated by asylum application numbers both in the US and Mexico. For example, within the ten-month period from January to October 2021, Mexico received 108,000 asylum requests; 80% more than were received during the entire six-year term of the previous Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto (BBC News, 2021).

This study investigates the attributes of refugees in media coverage across several nation-states to help understand if there are networked connections of specific attributes constructed by journalists in countries with different political stances on refugees. In doing so, this research questions the strength of journalistic norms throughout different nations. To what extent are attribute networks similar, reflecting global norms of journalism? Alternatively, to what extent do attribute networks differ, reflecting the diverse political stances and cultures within US border states as well as all of the countries that these refugees travel through?

While there is wide variation in the immigration policies of the countries sampled, this research found nearly uniform negative framing and clustering of identical negative attributes. Further, the valence of content became more negative and emotive over time. This negative transnational homogenization of news content problematises the idea of unique journalism norms and may have profound "real world" consequences that could further stigmatize refugees throughout the Americas. Examining how refugees are covered in the media contextualizes any understanding of how immigration policy is branded in news content. This contextualisation is essential if societies are to better understand the role of media in the refugee crisis.

2. Policy Branding, the Migration Crisis, and the Role of the Media

Even when issues are not directly relevant to individual citizens, governments can influence public opinion across their populations (Alon-Barkat, 2020). Political branding attempts to facilitate trust with citizens and influence behaviour like voting for a particular party (Karens et al., 2016). Clever branding can influence an individual's perspectives on a policy even for those not emotionally invested (Alon-Barkat, 2020). In Europe and North America, media coverage of immigration and refugee issues has been particularly potent, but interestingly the media has presented the issue in different ways depending on preferred narratives about national identity (Dolea et al., 2021). Countries which have traditionally presented themselves as having liberal asylum laws often shift media narratives of immigration policy through a branded populist reliance on national identity (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). This has been the case in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (Pamment et al., 2017), as well as in Canada (Bhuyan et al., 2017).

Shifting how immigration policies are branded can happen through various media channels. The current president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, issues presidential directives and executive orders via X (formerly Twitter) to help shape the branding of governmental policies. He is hoping to appeal to young Salvadorans to convince them of his earnest desire to improve the country and deter their outmigration from El Salvador (Ruiz-Alba & Mancinas-Chávez, 2020). El Salvador has historically had an outright dominance of traditional media by business groups that have propped up successive governments and failed to root out corruption and other public scandals, despite some successes (Wolf, 2019). Bukele has instead used social media to brand his policies in an effort to sidestep mainstream media. Wolf (2019) argues that journalistic practices in El Salvador are relatively unsophisticated and struggling to adjust to the rise of independent media and social media.

The media landscape in Nicaragua is shaped by the history of dictatorship, revolution, further subsequent dictatorship, and the role of radio in promoting socialism to the rural working class and indigenous populations (Artz, 2016). The strict media controls imposed in Nicaragua today make it difficult for journalists to cover issues outside of the government's preferred branded framing of policy. Young Guatemalan men are often stereotyped by other Guatemalans as being inculcated into gang culture during their migration to, and often deportation from the US (England, 2018). Yet, much of this content surrounding immigration is ignored in place of Guatemalan newspapers preferring a sensationalist tone, with little verification of facts and a reliance on large headlines and photographs (England, 2018).

In contrast, Mexico has found that its migration policy is more dependent on the policies of the US, and brands policies through nationalist media with this added emphasis. Mexico increasingly lacks the ability to regulate migration without input or pressure from the US government (FitzGerald, 2009). This makes it difficult for the

Mexican government to brand its policies as uniquely their own and bridge the gap in expectations from its citizens (FitzGerald, 2009). However, all governments, through national and social media, aim to reassure the public that they are in control of any threats to society and the economy (Bhuyan et al., 2017). Some have gone so far as to state that government branding and media framing has become more important in politics than actual policy (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011).

3. Global Media Frames and Journalism Norms

The degree to which media are shaped by globalization or decided by domestic cultural or political influences is still a source of debate. "Networks" of media suggest that media across countries will follow other media that set an interpretation of an event (Guo et al., 2015). For example, media coverage of irregular migration has proved polarising across several disparate nations (Australia, Indonesia, Iran, the Netherlands, Sri Lanka, and Switzerland) and resulted in a networked representation that focuses on crime and border protection (McAuliffe & Koser, 2017). Yet, there are geopolitical and cultural aspects to this network effect, where countries that are culturally or politically aligned are more likely to have aligned media. Those countries which are geopolitical rivals or which are culturally dissimilar are likely to have rival interpretations, suggesting that governments have considerable ability to influence media framing of policies.

These geopolitical differences in coverage can also be due to the proximity of an issue. For example, CA newspapers were more likely to present a human interest frame if they had close proximity to migrant caravans, and an economic frame if they had more distance (Kenix & Lopez, 2021). However, other research has found that the closer refugees are in proximity, the more negative the consequences (Parrott et al., 2019). If an issue is outside the borders of a nation, news coverage in different countries frames those issues unique to local cultural and political concerns and "domesticate" international news to make content more relevant to their audience (Hafez, 2009).

Contrary to geopolitical differences in news reporting, other research posits a "universal stock of professional beliefs" (Donsbach & Klett, 1993, p. 79), which creates global similarities in media framing. Universal journalistic values include public service, objectivity, immediacy, and ethics, which then shape a normative universal journalistic practice (Brennen, 2000) over long periods of time (Karlsson et al., 2023). News coverage can extend beyond local viewpoints and follow a global template (Ehmer & Kothari, 2016). This high level of agreement on the agendas of frames and attributes in the news is advanced by the habit of journalists observing these shared norms and imitating others (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2010).

4. Transnational Network Analysis

Media outlets transmit impressions or frames to an audience by assigning attributes. "Attribute priming" connects public opinion with news, as the presentation of certain attributes in connection with individuals or groups guides audience opinion (Kim & McCombs, 2007). Issues and attributes connect in networks that reinforce and build off each other to shape the audience's perspective (Jiang et al., 2021). People naturally connect frames that reinforce a pre-established image, such as terrorism in general and 9/11 specifically (Jiang et al., 2021). The network analysis model assumes that the salience of objects and attributes moves together from the media to the consumer and conveys network attributes according to a similar dynamic (Vu et al., 2014).

Thus, network analysis provides the overall picture that the audience draws between objects and attributes across different countries. Researchers can identify the issue with the most salience, based on how attributes connect and cluster (McCombs, 2020). The emergence of network analysis makes additional cross-national studies important. Even in recent years, there remains a consistent gap in cross-national studies (Mohammed & McCombs, 2021). This research offers an important contribution to the field by bringing together a comparison of media attributes for refugees in the US with those of Mexico and CA, which are often overlooked in English language research.

5. Research Questions

Media have the power to build a specific image of the migrant crisis that then informs policy (Bleich et al., 2015). Christoph (2012) argued that negative media coverage leads the host country to be unsympathetic and less likely to absorb migrants and refugees into their community. Yet, Malkki (1996) argued that because of homogenization within media, there is widespread dehumanization and de-historicization of refugees in mediated content. This research is interested in first ascertaining if there is any difference between the portrayal of refugees across countries:

RQ1: What are the differences, if any, between the CA portrayal of refugees, their representation in Mexico, and the representation of refugees in the US?

Chattopadhyay (2019) examined CA migrant coverage in *The New York Times* and saw mention of progressively stricter policies for unauthorised immigrants who apply for refugee status over time. When examining content over time, Chattopadhyay (2019) found that *The New York Times* increasingly referred to a new kind of migrant—consisting of families, unlike lone Mexican males from the past. This research is interested in exploring differences in coverage over time:

RQ2: What are the differences, if any, in the representation of refugees over time across all of the newspapers sampled?

Other transnational research has shown that by emphasizing certain attributes of a subject, the media influence how the public views an issue (McCombs, 1994). Framing scholars have charged that by examining attributes of an issue, one can uncover how the qualities (Jasperson et al., 1998) of an issue help create the "reality-definition function of the media" (Takeshita, 1997, p. 15) that then creates policy:

RQ3: What are the most salient attributes of refugees in the newspaper coverage of the US, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala?

RQ4: How closely will the attribute agendas of refugees in the newspapers sampled from the US (Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico), the Mexican newspaper, and the newspapers sampled from CA (Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala) correlate with one another?

Transnational network analysis theorizes that attributes can be transferred simultaneously in bundles through networks of attributes that connect with other attributes over time (Vu et al., 2014). Thus, the media tell us what and how to associate attributes together (Guo, 2013). Transnational network agenda setting argues that

the salience of interrelationships between attributes can be transferred from the media to the public:

> RQ5: How closely will the attribute agendas of refugees in the newspapers sampled from the US (Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico), the Mexican newspaper, and the newspapers sampled from CA (Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala) pair with other attributes of the same valence, suggesting a strong homophily of frames?

6. Methodology

In the US, large circulation newspapers in states that border Mexico were sampled: *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Arizona Daily Star*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and *The San Antonio Express News*. This sampling was important as these states have strong interaction with refugees as they arrive. In terms of content from Mexico and the CA countries of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, this research drew from the largest circulation news outlet accessible through Factiva or an online edition. It is important to note that due to political instability in some of these countries, some news outlets were closed down during this sample period. Therefore, in some instances, multiple outlets from these countries were sampled to draw from the entire timeframe.

The *N* per newspaper for the content included in this study was dependent on the total number of articles found that contained the terms "migrant" or "refugee" in the headlines or lead paragraph. Although this article relies on the term "refugee," these lexical choices in search terms allowed for capturing all content about those leaving their homeland. The total number of articles within each newspaper that met these criteria was used to determine a sample size with 95% accuracy and a 5% margin of error. The randomly selected number of articles chosen in each newspaper depended on the total number in the original universal sample.

Two coders were utilised for this study, with the primary coder going through all 3,007 articles and coding them, and the second coder examining 10% of content (300 randomized articles) to ensure intercoder reliability. Media content from Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras was translated from Spanish into English with Google Translate for both coders. A further 10% of the articles that were in Spanish were coded by a Spanish speaker to ensure the reliability of the coding with the translated articles.

The coding was carried out under the definitions described in a full coding sheet. There were three sections in the coding sheet. The first section contained manifest variables examining details of the article: newspaper, region of publication, and whether the article in question was an op-ed or news report. The second section had more latent variables: overall valence of refugees, cause for immigration/refugees, responsibility for immigration/refugees, effects of immigration/refugees, article frame, use of emotive language, reasons for immigration, as well as mention of refugee valence toward home and new nation. The third section of the coding sheet contained an examination of refugee attributes and attributes of the home nation and the new nation. The coded attributes were used for the network analysis. In coding these attributes, if the given attribute was present in the article it was marked with a simple 1, and if not, as a 0.

In network analysis, "degree centrality" refers to the number of ties that a node has (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In other words, the more connections an attribute has with other attributes, the more central it is in the network. Thus, the degree of the attributes in this research refers to how connective attributes are in

the network or how often an attribute is paired with another attribute. The connection with other attributes that are of the same valence (e.g., negative attributes with negative attributes) suggests a strong homophily of attributes.

Cohen's Kappa inter-coder reliability coefficient was used to provide an indication of the coding scheme's reliability. The overall intercoder Cohen's Kappa was 0.703, suggesting a highly robust coding scheme (Krippendorff, 2004). Scott's Pi was computed at 0.734 for manifest variables, 0.642 for latent variables, and 0.687 for attributes. The Spanish speaker who coded 10% of the second coder's content also had a strong level of reliability with the non-Spanish speaker (Cohen's Kappa = 0.786), which suggested a highly robust coding scheme (Krippendorff, 2004) and gave assurances that what English-speaking coders were coding in content from Google Translate was reliable.

7. Results

In total, 45.3% of newspaper articles sampled were from the US southern border, and an almost equal 43.4% were from the countries of Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala; the remaining 11.3% of articles were from Mexico. The US southern border region sampled four newspapers: 12.4% of articles from the *Albuquerque Journal*, 12% from the *Los Angeles Times*, 9.8% from the *Arizona Daily Star*, and 11.1% from the *San Antonio Express-News*. The CA region was similar with four sampled newspapers: 11.6% of articles from Guatemala (*Prensa Libre*), 12.5% from El Salvador (*El Mundo*, *El Faro*), 12.3% from Honduras (*La Prensa*), and 7% from Nicaragua (*La Prensa*, *Article 66*, *La Jornada*, *Nueva Ya*). A total of 11.3% of articles were from Mexico (*El Financiero*).

Chi-square correlations (χ^2), one-way ANOVAS, t tests, Spearman rank correlations, expected values, adjusted residual scores (ASR), simple percentages, and frequencies were used to answer the stated research questions concerning differences among specific regions. Adjusted residuals, or the difference between expected and observed counts, were used to demonstrate the actual influences of any given relationship. Strong influences of a particular case of one variable on a particular case of another variable were found if adjusted residuals were +/−2 points. Cramer's V was relied upon to determine the strength of associations between two nominal variables. It ranges from 0 to 1 where 0 indicates no association between the two variables and 1 indicates a perfect association between the two variables.

7.1. RQ1

In general, newspaper articles tended to treat refugees negatively (46.9%) and only 27.3% of articles presented refugees positively (Table 1). Even though there was a general tendency towards negativity, there was a significant relationship between the region of publication and the overall valence of refugees/immigration [χ^2(6, $N = 3,007$) = 65.252, Cramer's $V = 0.104$, $p \leq 0.001$]. The US was positive toward refugees more than would be expected by chance (ASR = 6.2), whereas CA was generally more negative than would be expected (−4.9).

The cause for refugees was principally seen to be the government (32.4%). Thus, coders found that nearly a third of the content presented the actions or failures of the government as being the primary contributors to the decision of the refugees to leave their home country. This could either mean that government policy was

Table 1. Region of publication.

Frame	Most frequent value overall	p-value	US	CA	Mexico
Overall valence	Negative (46.9%)	<0.001	Positive (6.2)	Negative (−4.9)	Unsure (3.7)
Cause of refugees/ immigration	Government (32.4%); Individuals (29.2%)	<0.001	Government (−13.7); Individuals (−8.0)	Government (8.7); Individuals (8.2)	Government (7.8)
Responsible for refugees/ immigration	Government (62.4%)	<0.001	Individuals (−7.2)	Individuals (8.5)	Government (3.2)
Effect of refugees/ immigration	Negative effect (41.4%)	<0.001	Neutral (−6.7)	Neutral (5.5)	−
Article frame	Attribution of responsibility (49.6%)	<0.001	Attribution of responsibility (−10); Legality (7.9)	Attribution of responsibility (7); Legality (−5.2)	Attribution of responsibility (4.8); Legality (−4.3)
Reasons for immigration	Reasons not mentioned (40.7%)	<0.001	Need to leave violence (7.3)	Need to leave violence (−4.5); Need to leave poverty (4.1)	Need to leave violence (−4.3)
Use of emotive language	Use of emotive language (68.1%)	<0.001	Use of emotive language (2.5)	Use of emotive language (−3.0)	−
Mention of refugee valence toward the home nation	No mention of refugee valence toward the home Nation (43.6%)	<0.001	No mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (13.9)	No mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (−5.7)	No mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (−12.8)
Mention of refugee valence toward the new nation	Refugees are sad to arrive in the new nation (39.8%)	<0.001	No mention of refugee valence toward the new nation (6.6)	Refugees are sad to arrive in the new nation (4.4)	No mention of refugee valence toward the new nation (−7.4)

Note: − = Much less than would be expected by chance alone; + = much more than would be expected by chance alone.

causing instability, poverty, or violence that made people want to flee, or that governments had failed to secure their borders and encouraged the refugees to enter the country. The US presented government (ASR = −13.7) as the cause for immigration much less than would be expected by chance, whereas CA (ASR = 8.7) and Mexico (ASR = 7.8) presented government as the cause for immigration much more than would be expected $[\chi^2(10, N = 3007) = 589.03$, Cramer's $V = 0.313$, $p =< 0.001]$.

The government was largely seen as responsible for immigration in a commanding 62.4% of content. Therefore, coders found that the majority of content presented the government as needing to be the ones to take care of the refugees. This is opposed to refugees being responsible for themselves or private individuals or organisations such as charities, activists, churches, or civil society being expected to help refugees on arrival. The US papers stated that individuals were responsible for immigration much less than would be expected (ASR = −7.2), whereas CA newspapers stated that individuals were responsible (ASR = 8.5) and Mexican newspapers stated that the government was responsible {3.2; $[\chi^2(10, N = 3,007) = 98.087]$, Cramer's $V = 0.128$, $p =< 0.001$}. The overwhelming article frame was "attribution of responsibility" at

49.6%. The frame was used in the US less than one would expect (-10.0) and more than expected in CA (7) and Mexico {4.8; [χ^2(12, $N = 3,007$) = 178.82], Cramer's $V = 0.172$, $p \leq 0.001$}.

The effect of immigration across the sample was seen to be negative at 41.4% but was less neutral than would be expected by chance in the US (-6.7) and more neutral than expected in CA {5.5; [χ^2(10, $N = 3,007$) = 75.266], Cramer's $V = 0.112$, $p \leq 0.001$}. It was very likely that there was no mention of the reasons for immigration given in the article 40.7% of articles). However, a need to leave violence was much more likely to be in US papers (7.3) than CA (-4.5) or Mexican (-4.3) newspapers [χ2(10, $N = 3,007$) = 90.867, Cramer's $V = 0.123$, $p \leq 0.001$]. Most of the articles used emotive language to discuss refugees (68.1%). While this relationship was significant, there was no strong directionality [χ^2(4, $N = 3,007$) = 73.908, Cramer's $V = 0.111$, $p \leq 0.001$].

None of the articles showed a clear direction in terms of balance towards the home nation (43.6%), but it seemed clear that refugees were sad to arrive in their new nation (39.8%). The relationships among both values were strong—home nation: χ^2(6, $N = 3,007$) = 689.036, Cramer's $V = 0.339$, $p \leq 0.001$; and new nation: χ^2(6, $N = 3,007$) = 212.652, Cramer's $V = 0.188$, $p \leq 0.001$. The US was more likely to not mention any valence at all toward the home nation (13.9) or the new nation (6.6) whereas the sentiment in Mexico was the opposite (-12.8 and -7.4). CA newspapers in this sample were less likely to not mention any valence toward the home nation (-5.7) and were more likely to state that refugees were sad to arrive in the new nation (4.4). These differences between regions were significant but moderate. The variable of being sad to arrive was determined by whether the article mentioned that migrants expressed a sense of despair at their situation when they arrived at the US border due to their treatment by border agents, the asylum process, or general living conditions while they were awaiting their asylum hearing.

Most of the inter-relationships measured between the region of publication and the frames measured were found to be moderate. The only outlier was a mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (Cramer's $V = 0.339$) and the causes for immigration (Cramer's $V = 0.313$).

7.2. RQ2

Every chi-square test was significant between time and how refugees were framed throughout the time measured (2012–2022; Table 2). One-way ANOVA tests were conducted for variables that were ordered for means testing. Overall valence, use of emotive language, and the time of publication were all found to be significant at <0.001. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean overall valence of coverage (negative to positive) between at least two groups over time (F(1,2996) = [20.215], $p \leq 0.001$); it also revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean emotive language coverage (no use to use) between at least two groups over time (F(1,2996) = [9.550], $p = 0.002$). The ANOVA means plots demonstrated that media coverage of refugees became more negative (lower score) over the 11-year sample period (Figure 1) and more emotive (higher score) over time (Figure 2).

Table 2. Refugee framing over time.

Frame	*p*-value	Cramer's *V*	Pearson chi-square value	Degrees of freedom
Overall valence	<0.001	0.137	56.241	6
Cause of refugees/immigration	<0.001	0.115	79.941	10
Responsible for refugees/immigration	0.003	0.095	26.865	10
Effect of refugees/immigration	<0.001	0.121	87.853	10
Article frame	<0.001	0.123	90.874	12
Reasons for immigration	<0.001	0.097	56.138	10
Use of emotive language	<0.001	0.100	60.230	4
Mention of refugee valence toward the home nation	<0.001	0.195	229.441	6
Mention of refugee valence toward the new nation	<0.001	0.108	70.382	6
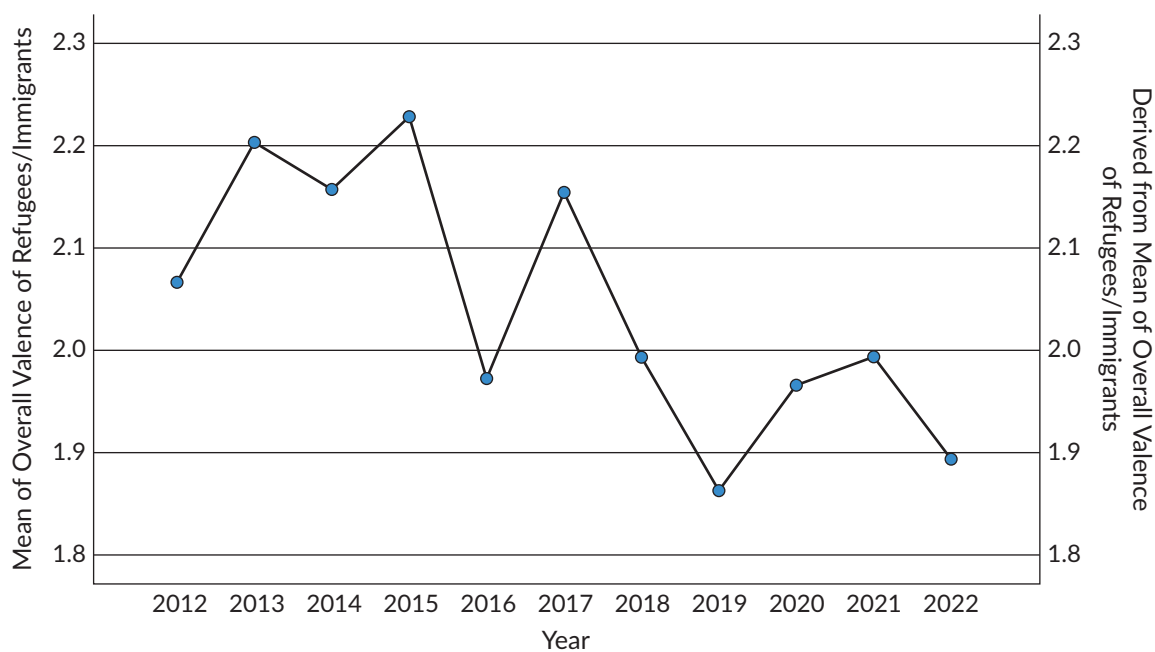
Figure 1. Mean of the overall valence of refugees over time.
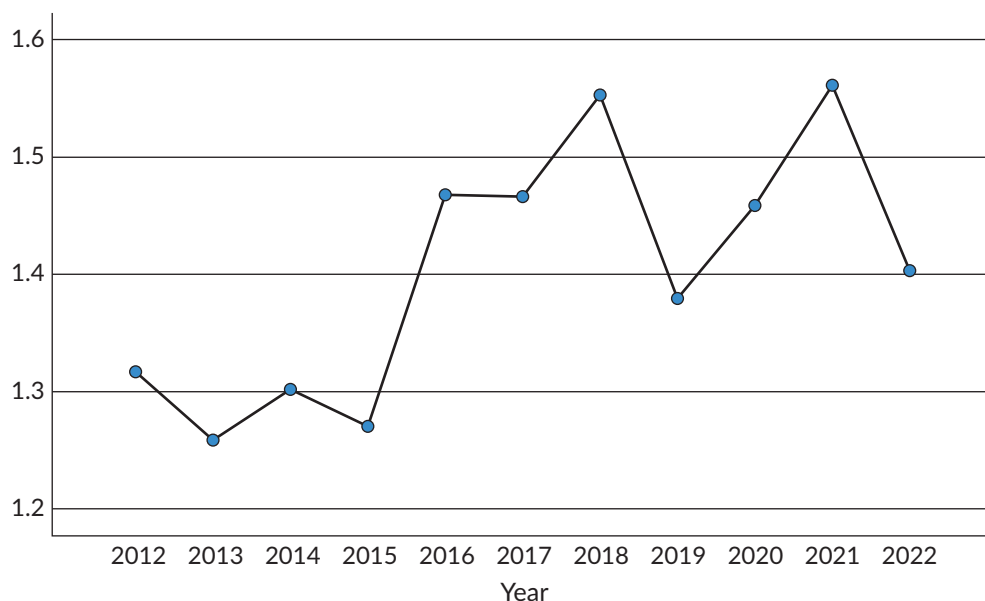
Figure 2. Mean of use of emotive language over time.

7.3. RQ3

The top three attributes (from 30 possible attributes) were found to be exactly the same across the three regions sampled. Refugees were described with the attributes "targeted by authorities," "biased leadership," and "safety" (Tables 3, 4, and 5). An article was coded with the attribute "targeted by authorities" if there was mention of the authorities deliberately or disproportionately targeting refugees. If the article discussed political leaders as having a biased perspective against refugees more broadly and already taking a position against refugees, then the article was coded as "biased leadership." An article was coded with the attribute "safety" if there was mention of a situation that threatened the safety of the refugees or if safety was mentioned as a motivating factor for refugees to move.

7.4. RQ4

Spearman's rank correlation was computed to assess the relationship between attribute rankings of the US newspapers, the Mexican newspapers, and the CA newspapers (Table 3). There was a positive and significant correlation between the US and CA, $r(11) = (0.76984037)$, $p = (0.002)$. The relationship between the attribute rankings in the US newspapers and the attribute rankings from Mexico was moderately strong, but not significant $r(11) = (0.53343534)$, $p = (0.060)$. Finally, the relationship between attribute rankings of Mexican newspapers and the attributes of the Central American newspapers was positive and significant, $r(11) = (0.71664008)$, $p = (0.005)$.

Table 3. Most salient attributes and their ranks in all three regions.

Attributes	US southern border		CA		Mexico	
	Rank	N	Rank	N	Rank	N
Targeted by authorities***	1	916	1	744	1	189
Biased leadership***	2	878	2	669	2	184
Safety*	3	723	3	575	3	143
Looking out for family*	4	634	5	451	4	89
Traumatized***	5	557	4	517	6	73
Desperate***	6	524	8	241	15	28
Discriminated***	7	465	6	317	9	66
Asylum*	8	450	12	184	11	53
Bargaining chip***	9	375	10	219	7	56
Profiled***	10	338	13	135	12	32
Legal status**	11	311	9	232	10	54
Better wages/more opportunities**	14	209	7	265	8	61
Human rights*	12	236	11	218	5	75

Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute.

7.5. RQ5

One can see that the coordinates for refugees' attributes are predominantly negative (Tables 4 and 6). Indeed, 66% of the most paired refugee attributes found were negative. The attribute with the highest degree was the negative attribute of "biased leadership" (degree = 7), followed by another negative attribute of "targeted

Table 4. The highest refugee attribute correlates.

N	Attributes	
1,381	Targeted by authorities***	Biased leadership***
891	Targeted by authorities***	Safety*
783	Traumatized***	Safety*
780	Biased leadership***	Safety*
717	Biased leadership***	Looking out for family*
714	Targeted by authorities***	Looking out for family*
708	Biased leadership***	Discriminated***
702	Safety*	Looking out for family*
676	Targeted by authorities***	Discriminated***
610	Targeted by authorities***	Traumatized***
591	Biased leadership***	Bargaining chip***
562	Biased leadership***	Traumatized***
519	Traumatized***	Desperate***
512	Biased leadership***	Asylum*
509	Targeted by authorities***	Desperate***

Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute.

by authorities" (degree = 6; Tables 5 and 6). The negative attributes of "biased leadership" and "targeted by authorities" were the most commonly paired in this sample (1,381 times). There is a strong homophily of frames (Table 3) in each geographical region, which demonstrates that negative attributes are very commonly paired with other negative attributes throughout this sample (Figure 3).

Table 5. Degree of frames: Most paired refugee attributes.

Attributes	N
Biased leadership***	7
Targeted by authorities***	6
Safety*	4
Traumatized***	4
Looking out for family*	3
Discriminated***	2
Desperate***	2
Asylum*	1
Bargaining chip***	1

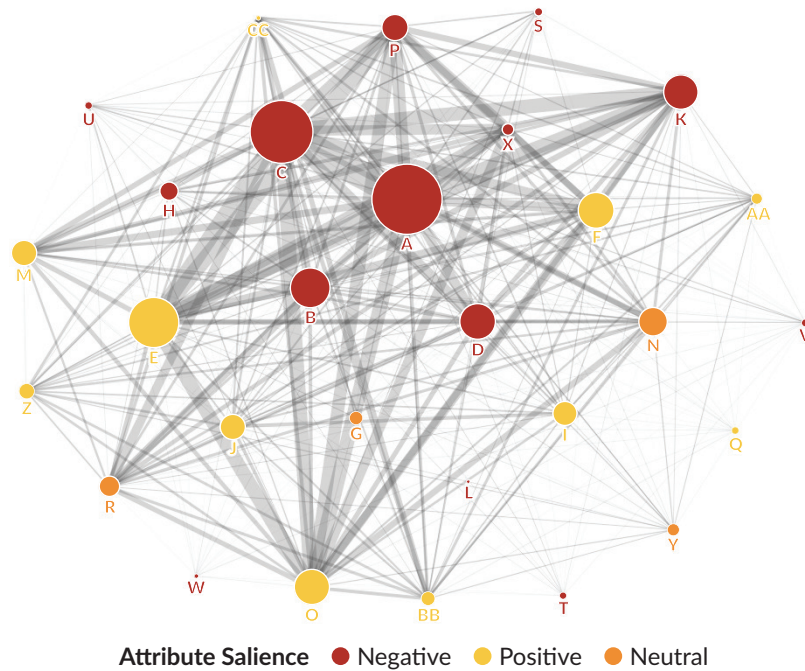Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute.

Figure 3. Network analysis of refugee attributes.

Table 6. Media agenda of refugee attributes in media coverage from the US southern border (New Mexico, California, Arizona, Texas), CA (Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala), and Mexico.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	BB	CC	DD
A***																														
B***	453																													
C***	1,381	446																												
D***	473	142	591																											
E*	891	212	780	270																										
F*	490	115	512	206	432																									
G**	61	29	58	15	41	15																								
H***	118	87	132	30	65	38	5																							
I*	73	29	86	28	90	52	15	9																						
J*	93	35	120	40	91	51	15	10	167																					
K***	676	304	708	237	421	242	33	145	50	61																				
L***	6	6	7	2	4	1	1	7	0	0	7																			
M*	363	101	355	133	252	173	7	30	17	15	155	0																		
N**	257	75	288	120	213	86	12	32	58	102	158	1	70																	
O*	714	181	717	246	702	410	24	64	125	165	370	5	217	318																
P***	610	142	562	165	783	346	14	50	75	80	313	4	271	158	636															
Q*	14	9	21	8	9	6	2	4	14	16	15	0	1	12	14	2														
R**	400	164	451	191	195	133	32	33	42	63	218	1	112	148	254	134	15													
S***	76	22	66	30	62	34	0	7	1	1	21	0	63	10	48	77	0	16												
T***	35	19	38	14	19	10	1	6	2	3	21	0	4	9	10	6	0	6	1											
U***	76	23	65	24	78	32	1	11	3	5	32	0	7	27	43	41	1	20	1	31										
V***	41	23	51	18	23	7	1	10	2	5	29	0	10	18	22	10	2	17	1	16	18									
W***	21	14	24	10	13	5	0	7	3	4	12	0	4	10	13	4	2	8	0	10	13	24								
X***	509	151	500	171	477	300	12	37	55	54	250	2	234	156	485	519	3	134	70	9	26	10	3							
Y**	42	31	58	17	25	6	6	7	29	34	31	0	16	57	54	19	5	42	0	1	6	10	2	23						
Z*	89	55	130	49	68	26	9	29	79	113	78	1	20	121	133	50	7	80	1	2	3	8	6	32	49					
AA*	72	41	82	33	66	29	12	15	86	95	44	0	21	56	106	56	10	49	4	1	2	7	3	49	46	98				
BB*	165	85	215	85	102	39	21	34	72	95	146	3	23	108	167	69	23	157	2	2	5	10	6	38	50	133	83			
CC*	174	92	229	91	116	55	21	35	73	95	142	3	29	118	179	82	22	165	2	2	8	12	8	56	60	138	86	266		
DD*	15	9	15	3	17	6	1	7	26	27	16	0	3	19	31	12	6	17	2	0	1	2	0	6	18	23	27	32	34	

Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute; A = Targeted by authorities; B = Profiled; C = Biased leadership; D = Bargaining chip; E = Safety; F = Asylum; G = Sanctuary; H = Racism; I = Charitable; J = Generous; K = Discriminated; L = Colourism; M = Human rights; N = Better wages/more opportunities; O = Looking out for family; P = Traumatized; Q = Open-minded; R = Legal status; S = Passive and deprived of agency; T = Takers and not givers; U = Opportunities; V = Outside local culture; W = Unwilling to join local culture; X = Desperate; Y = Active and with agency; Z = Givers and not takers; AA = Altruistic; BB = Inside local culture; CC = Willing to join local culture; DD = Jovial.

8. Discussion

Over the course of this study, more than 3,000 articles from the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras were coded over 11 years, from 2012–2022. The number of articles coded over time demonstrates the consistency with which migration appears as a topic of crisis in media outlets in the US, Mexico, and CA. Indeed, the only time the coverage slowed in more recent years was during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which a much greater crisis dominated the attention of the entire world. This research project makes important contributions to the study of immigration policy perspectives outside the confines of the US, an omission of much of the English-speaking research that could be found.

As discussed, there is wide variation in the branding of immigration policies in national media across the nations sampled for this research. This variation mirrors the difference in the immigration policies of the countries sampled. Honduras has the most restrictive immigration policy as it does not issue work permits for asylum seekers (Human Rights First, 2020). Over the sample period, it appeared that neither Guatemala nor Honduras granted resettlement to refugees and El Salvador for only 14 individuals (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). Mexico naturalised a relatively scant 217 individuals, while the US resettled 504,870 individuals from 2012–2022. At first glance, these divergent policies combined with the homophily of frames may suggest that there is little relationship between media coverage of refugees and government policies towards them.

The extensive data in this study demonstrated that refugees generally received negative coverage, that the most salient (negative) attributes were common across all the countries in the study, and that these negative attributes were overwhelmingly clustered together. Of the negative attributes, 66% of those were paired together with other negative attributes. For the most part, news media across countries shared these negative attributes of refugees. The general portrait of refugees was people being targeted by authorities and fearing for their safety while being used for political purposes by biased leaders. Taken together, the clustered attributes suggest that coverage was not only negative, but refugees were at the whim of biased authorities throughout all of the geographical areas sampled. If the study used only the search term "migrant" to collect articles for analysis, rather than "migrant" and "refugee" as search terms, previous research (Muytjens & Ball, 2016) suggests that the representation found in this study would have been even more negative. This is striking given the majority of articles already presenting refugees negatively. This type of negative framing can have profound "real world" consequences that can stigmatize refugees: victimization, dehumanization, and marginalization (Pandir, 2020). Negative portrayals of migrants have been demonstrated to generate physiological and emotional hostility (Conzo et al., 2021). A lack of empathy toward refugees in media coverage can move societal discussions away from human rights and toward xenophobia.

The most common frame that emerged in this study was the attribution of blame and the attribution of responsibility. This implies that media coverage of refugees assumes that refugees are problems for whom someone is responsible, either for driving them out or for looking after them. Therefore, it should be little wonder that the coverage tends to be negative, as the starting point of the coverage is a source of problems. There were, however, subtle differences in coverage between media in US border states, Mexico, and CA, which do correlate to refugee policies in these countries. At a more granular level, the Central American papers were more likely to blame governments and individuals together, while US papers focused blame on

the government. This makes sense if one considers that refugees generally originate in CA—thus, individuals are more responsible as it is individuals who are emigrating. Conversely, refugees generally enter the US so governmental policy dictates how refugees are treated. Thus, even though there was a marked difference here between regions, this difference was based on specific differences in refugee behaviour in each region, differences which also account for different policies.

Another insight is that US papers were more likely to say that refugees' reason for leaving their home country was to flee violence. In contrast, Central American papers had a wider variety of stated reasons for the refugees to leave. This is a key difference as far as the policy discussion is concerned. For audiences in the US, violence was a more compelling reason to accept refugees than other reasons such as poverty or economic disadvantage. Central American news outlets discussed these other reasons for refugees, and generally have much more restrictive policies. If one presumes that governments are solely willing to accept those people fleeing violence, and not those wanting to escape poverty, there is a clear reason for Central American outlets to discuss a wide range of motivations, reflecting comparatively tougher policies. This disparity across regions could also be the result of relative proximity. As Mohammed and McCombs (2021) suggest, the prestige media of the Global North tend to report on "peripheral" countries in terms of disaster and catastrophe, as opposed to a variety of events which may include disasters but also mundane occurrences, such as young people from poorer countries wanting to pursue wealth or exciting careers. In truth, the human experience runs along a whole spectrum of disaster and triumph, and those news outlets which are closer to human stories are more likely to capture that aspect of human nature. This might mean that the citizens of Central American countries are more critical of the reasons refugees or migrants are making their journey because they have a closer understanding of why people choose to leave, rather than purely through the lens of catastrophe.

Future research should continue to ascertain the effects of proximity on a mediated issue in framing or public opinion. Although there appears to be comparatively scarce public opinion data for the Central American countries, the results of this research suggest that the movement of refugees across CA and Mexico was presented as somewhat controversial in those countries' media outlets. The fact that all newspapers generally had negative valence towards refugees is indicative of this fact. This would be one clear area for further research in order to gain insights into Latin American perspectives on a perennial topic of concern for politicians and voters across Mexico, the US, and CA.

Overall, media outlets in this research attempted to humanize the refugees, but the perspectives differed, which made it difficult to measure the resulting data. For example, newspapers in both the US and CA often mentioned refugees being victims of human trafficking, through the infamous practice of "coyote" smugglers. However, US-based papers tended to focus on the victims and their plight, whereas when Central American papers documented this phenomenon, they presented a sense of outrage at the perpetrators. This also suggests a harder line in terms of policy among Central American countries, where anger or deterrence may matter more than sympathy from US audiences. However these subtle variations were difficult to convey across a study of more than 3,000 articles, and this was a clear limitation of the methodology. Future research should qualitatively examine transnational content with more specificity in frames.

Although slight differences across countries were found, this research found widespread homophily in media attributes and framing across all countries sampled. Future research should examine why there was little

balance found between positive and negative attributes. For example, asylum, charitableness, and human rights were almost never found in the sample and were very rarely paired with another attribute. These disparities point to an imbalanced journalism that portrayed refugees negatively across nation-states with profoundly different aims of immigration policies. Refugees were portrayed uniformly as a "problem" that needed to be solved by governments. These "problems" require specific policy solutions, as branded, communicated, and framed by different local media to the unique immigration situations in each nation. Yet, that was not the case in this study. Refugees were largely seen as a negative influence on societies throughout the countries sampled. The 11-year time scale of this study revealed two interesting trends: first, the valence became more negative over time, and second, emotive language became more common. This suggests that the debate around immigration will continue and even escalate as a battleground of politics and culture—and that refugees will be portrayed even more negatively across media in CA, Mexico, and the US. Given this increasing negativity and emotionality in coverage, societies may see more nationalistic—and xenophobic—immigration policies throughout the Americas.

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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(De)Legitimation in Policy Transfer and Branding: A Dialogical View of the Romanian Covid-19 Vaccination Policy

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Abstract

With the growth of marketing's influence extending from the commercial domain into governance strategy, public health branding and promotional communication relating to the Covid-19 vaccine were essential for national authorities trying to transfer the WHO communication strategy and vaccine policies to their domestic contexts while maintaining public trust. This study explores the role of (de)legitimation in the Covid-19 vaccine communication (#ROVaccinare/ROVaccination) policy transfer and branding conducted by the Romanian government on Facebook. Adopting a top-down and bottom-up approach to the meaning-making process of the message strategy promotion, we employed a mixed-methods approach. We drew on categorizations of message tailoring related to health communication and operationalizations of discursive (de)legitimation. The main findings showed a preference for rationalization legitimation through the usage of fact-based posts and a clear integration of authorization and narrativization into the message strategy promotion of the ROVaccination page. However, despite the prevalence of fact-based posts, legitimation through personal and medical stories was a positive predictor of engagement, unlike legitimation through facts. The bottom-up approach revealed polarized attitudes towards healthcare professionals as sources of the campaign, the Romanian medical system, and past and present vaccination. The dominance of polarization in online users' comments emphasizes their role as agents of conversion, contesting either the message sources employed in the campaign or other commenters as personal authorities.

Keywords

Facebook; health messages; legitimation; message tailoring; narratives; policy; vaccination

1. Introduction

The public health domain is considered one of the fields closely related to branded policies (Ogden et al., 2003; Raev & Minkman, 2020). Policy branding allows policymakers to "enhance visibility as well as the legitimacy of new or reformed policies" in order to gain stakeholders' support for public policy campaigns that are "infused with brand attributes" (Raev & Minkman, 2020, p. 3). This need for policy branding was also visible when Covid-19 vaccination was promoted as a solution to the pandemic. Hence, promotional communication was an essential part of the marketing mix for Covid-19 vaccine communication (Hong, 2023). Domestic authorities tried to adapt the "grand strategy" (Botan, 2021) of the WHO developed in the *Covid-19 Vaccines: Safety Surveillance Manual* to their national socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts. These contextual aspects were closely related to trust in policymakers and health experts (Dubé et al., 2013; Larson et al., 2018).

The transnational communication policy transfer also took place in Romania, with the government adopting a vaccination strategy against Covid-19 on December 3, 2020, implemented under the form of an online campaign entitled #ROVaccinare/ROVaccination. The aim of this study is to explore the role of (de)legitimation in the transfer and branding of Covid-19 vaccine communication (#ROVaccinare/ ROVaccination policy) deployed by the Romanian government on Facebook (the most used social media platform in the country; Manafu, 2021).

The legitimation capacity of governments comprising trust in the political and socio-economic spheres is essential for policy effectiveness (Woo et al., 2015). Socio-political drivers played a significant role in increasing East European citizens' distrust of health specialists (Wellcome, 2020). Bohle and Eihmanis (2022) consider that many governments from this region put financial interests ahead of health interests during the Covid-19 pandemic. The East Europeans' distrust of national authorities and experts could also be linked to the legacy of their communist past (Mishler & Rose, 1997), the rise of populism (Mihelj et al., 2022), or the growth of corruption (Haerpfer et al., 2022) in this area. The results of Flash Eurobarometer 505 (European Commission, 2022) showed that Romanians were not satisfied with the national government's handling of the vaccination strategy: a 20% drop in trust was reported between May 2021 and February 2022. One explanation for this distrust in authorities could be linked to the constant political instability in Romania (Gherghina & Soare, 2016), with seven ministers running the Ministry of Health within one year (December 2020–December 2021).

This macro-contextual level may have played a crucial part in Romania's low Covid-19 vaccination uptake. Only 30% of the population had been immunized by September 2021, the lowest rate in the EU by the end of 2022 (OECD & European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023, p. 17). However, it is important to acknowledge that vaccination rates in Romania were "below both European averages and WHO recommended targets of 95%" even before the Covid-19 pandemic (OECD & European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2019, p. 14).

At the same time, contextual factors are of paramount importance in a micro-oriented analysis of "legitimacy constructions in social media" (Holmgreen, 2021, p. 3). The hybrid media ecology (Ihlen et al., 2021, p. 6) has facilitated the development of the postmodern medical paradigm, elevating "subjective experience" and raising "skepticism towards objective bases for knowledge" (Bricker & Justice, 2019, p. 6), and questioning authority and science (Kata, 2012). It is essential to acknowledge that legitimacy in the online environment

should go beyond a top-down perspective; it should be coproduced between (health) organizations and stakeholders (online users). The emphasis on multiple voices and potential counter-discourses (Vestergaard & Uldam, 2022) brings forth a dialogical view (Glozer et al., 2019) on the (organizational) authority which is related to "perceived legitimacy" (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 263).

In this study, we adopted a top-down and bottom-up approach to the meaning-making process of the message strategy promotion in order to (a) identify how the Romanian authority legitimized its message strategy promotion, (b) determine how (de)legitimation was coproduced in comments, and (c) explore how the Romanian authority managed (de)legitimation as a policy branding mechanism.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Policy Branding and Health Communication

The branding of public policy is a somewhat late arrival to political marketing in general and to government marketing in particular. In their heuristic identification of four different areas in which branding and politics intersect, Marsh and Fawcett (2011) point to, among others, branded products and services used by governments and public policies, particularly in the area of public health. WHO is highlighted as an international agency that is often engaged in branding practices and interacting with governments and government agencies, particularly in relation to policy transfers. In this context, policy branding can create contestation and debate, but at the same time, it can also raise the issue's public profile (Ogden et al., 2003), engaging new target groups. In health communication, policy branding is used to convince citizens of the quality of the "product" being produced while also legitimizing policy decisions taken in expert networks (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011, p. 525). Therefore, irrespective of whether branding the policy legitimizes or delegitimizes it in the eyes of a very polarized public sphere, it fulfills two core communication requirements for any campaign run in an increasingly digitalized environment: visibility through message strategy promotion and engagement of stakeholders.

Embedding brand attributes into public health policies enables citizens to see them as "products" and interact with the communication campaigns developed by government agencies in order to promote the policies and the behaviors associated with them. According to Basu and Wang (2009), in adopting a branding approach to public health policy and communication campaign development, governmental agencies and departments can anchor the process in core concepts such as brand definition, brand communication, and brand management (Karens et al., 2016). A branded public health campaign can achieve a high degree of brand resonance (Keller, 2007) by enabling the adoption of a certain behavior, transforming the target group into "agents of conversion," converting non-practitioners of the health behavior (Basu & Wang, 2009, p. 82), and by planning the communication campaign as a coproduction endeavor.

Defined as setting out policies, treaties, and goals, grand strategies pertain to high government bodies or to high management of organizations, and they act as directives for other subordinate (inter)national bodies (Botan, 2021). The tangible part of grand strategies takes the form of a campaign that implies planning and strategic implementation (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2021). In health communication campaigns, sources and messages are two strategic elements of paramount importance since they can trigger behavioral changes. Yaqub et al. (2014) consider that legitimacy and trust play a significant role in understanding the

recontextualized information on vaccination supplied by various sources. Gilpin et al. (2010) add the authority component. However, within the context of the postmodern paradigm where online users are empowered, authority is no longer associated only with experts: Ordinary individuals have become reliable sources for others, with direct consequences on health message tailoring.

A great challenge for (inter)national bodies setting out the message strategy promotion in a vaccination policy is linked to the type of content to be embedded in these messages. Research suggests that narrative communication fosters identification with the characters and immersion into the story, which reduces message resistance, whereas factual information focuses on motivation to learn or cognitive appeals to logic and reason (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Nan et al., 2015). However, when it comes to strategic communication planning, researchers make a plea for a hybrid usage of narrative and statistical evidence in health messages (Betsch et al., 2011; Dahlstrom, 2014; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2021) in order to increase the chances of attitudinal and behavioral change.

Similarly, in its *Covid-19 Vaccines: Safety Surveillance Manual*, the WHO (2021) advised a blended approach to tailor Covid-19 vaccination message strategy promotion in order to raise the effectiveness and acceptability of these messages. Whereas an evidence-based approach is considered to be suited for the communication of potential risks, personal stories about vaccination—messages that elicit emotions—are preferred to address vaccine safety (Loft et al., 2020), and they "can be part of an authentic, personal approach to communicating via social media" (WHO, 2021, p. 180).

In Romania, the initial vaccination strategy against Covid-19 in December 2020 (Official Gazette, 2020), developed by a liberal government, only referred to the usage of correct and factual information without making any clear reference to the employment of narratives as a content strategy. Later on, in April 2021, the government headed by USR-PLUS (Progressive, Liberal, and Centrist Political Alliance) implemented a communication strategy that also embedded narratives. This new communication campaign entitled #povestidelavaccinare (#storiesfromvaccination) was awarded the first prize for "the best use of user-generated content" at Webstock, a national social media competition.

Therefore, in our analysis of legitimation discursive categories, we will consider both narratives and facts as the main parts of the promotion of the Covid-19 message strategy. Besides the usage of a personal and authentic approach to communication about the Covid-19 vaccine, WHO (2021) stipulates that user involvement and interaction should be part of building a strong social media presence for national bodies. In the methodology section, the coding scheme is developed, taking into account these three content strategies: stories, facts, and user involvement.

2.2. Towards Socially Mediated (De)Legitimation and the Study of Policies

Defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), legitimation has been a key focus in organizational studies. Related to politics and political economy, the concept of promissory legitimacy has been developed. Avigur-Eshel (2023) considers this type of legitimacy appropriate to the analysis of policies related to Covid-19 since national bodies have transferred and adapted these international policies at the country level.

The social media ecology has brought a new perspective on legitimation. It is not only organizational legitimacy as a social construct deriving from "managerial efforts to achieve societal support for the organization's existence" (Holmgreen, 2021, p. 2) that matters, but also the constituents' perception of organizational actions. Therefore, since the legitimacy of authority "must be socially agreed on among those communicating" (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 262), it is also essential to talk about delegitimation. Associated with "destructive legitimation" (Vestergaard & Uldam, 2022, p. 233), delegitimation implies legitimizing a social group's discourse by undermining the opposing group's social practices (van Dijk, 2000). The new mediascape, where a multitude of voices are engaged in "instant and real-time communication" (Holmgreen, 2021, p. 2), urged scholars to study both legitimacy-as-process and legitimacy-as-perception (Suddaby et al., 2017) or to provide "a dialogical view of discursive legitimation in organization-led social media settings" (Glozer et al., 2019, p. 626).

Various operationalizations of legitimation categories are present in research studies. One of the most well-known typologies of legitimation categories belongs to van Leeuwen (2008): authorization (reference to authority), rationalization (reference to goals and uses of organizational social action), moral evaluation (reference to values), and mythopoesis (reference to narratives). Closely related to these legitimation functions, Vaara et al. (2006) underlined the importance of normalization as a discursive strategy since it makes reference to exemplarity. Examining organizational discourse in dialogic interaction, Glozer et al. (2019, pp. 638–641) developed three interrelated functions of discursive legitimation: discursive authorization (reference to personal and mythic authorization); discursive validation (reference to normative, moral, and rational evidence); and discursive finalization (reference to instances of antagonism and/or co-option). Vestergaard and Uldam (2022) propose the following analytical categories: constructive legitimation (systemic rationalization and agentic rationalization) and destructive legitimation (deauthorization and demoralization).

The present study will expand on some of the legitimation categories presented above and will propose new ones, associating them with elements of health message strategy promotion in the social media environment. The following types of discursive legitimation will be employed in this study: legitimation through (a) stories, (b) facts, (c) events, and (d) user involvement.

Legitimation through stories (a) embeds two types of discursive strategies: mythopoesis (van Leeuwen, 2008) or narrativization (Vaara et al., 2006) with authorization (Vaara et al., 2006; van Leeuwen, 2008). The type of authority telling the stories is of paramount importance. Research has found that legitimization through elites' quotations was one of the top three discursive strategies employed in official media discourse on vaccination in China (Wang, 2020). However, both experts and laypersons are considered relevant sources to be used in effective vaccination communication messages (Motta et al., 2021). Glozer et al. (2019) identify mythic authorization as a form of organizational commitment to a certain social practice.

Legitimation through facts (b) coincides with van Leeuwen's (2008) theoretical rationalization with its three forms (definitions, explanations, and predictions). The enactment of this legitimation is closely related to the evidence-based approach to health messages (Loft et al., 2020).

Legitimation through events (c) coincides with what Wang (2020) identified as a discursive strategy emphasizing the government's positive actions, and the findings of her research revealed that such a strategy set the tone for an authoritarian official discourse.

Legitimation through user involvement (d): The social media environment implies a shift in how organizations relate with stakeholders, from offline to online involvement. Therefore, "the need for engagement in authentic online communication" is important in socially mediated interaction (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 266).

3. Methodology

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What legitimation categories were present in the message strategy of the Romanian authority in the Covid-19 vaccination communication policy transfer?

RQ2: What type of legitimation strategy triggered the highest engagement?

RQ3: What relationships are present between legitimation strategies and Facebook behavior?

RQ4: What (de)legitimizing topics were visible in the comments to the top three most salient message strategies?

We used CrowdTangle, an online tool developed by Meta, to collect all Facebook posts from the ROVaccinare/ROVaccination Facebook page from December 20, 2020, to March 8, 2022. This timeframe encompasses the period from the beginning of the vaccination campaign in European countries up to the date when all the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted in Romania. The corpus consisted of 2,106 Facebook posts, and after curating the data, the final data included 2,060 posts.

The first stage of the research (RQ1) focused on establishing the codebook in order to analyze the Facebook posts. Following various categorizations on legitimation strategies and efficient health message strategies presented above, the following categories were included in the codebook. Legitimization through stories will include (a) legitimation through personal stories (stories about vaccination or topics related to vaccination, told by laypersons or role models); (b) legitimation through medical stories (stories told by health professionals about their work experience related to the Covid-19 virus and vaccination); (c) legitimation through organizational stories (stories about organizations or other groups showing their support of Covid-19 vaccination).

Legitimation through facts makes reference to factual (scientific) information about Covid-19 vaccination, vaccination in general, fake news debunking (arguments to show the opposite), reports from national organizations (National Institute of Statistics, etc.) and international organizations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or WHO).

Legitimation through events refers to information about events organized by the Romanian authority (National Coordinating Committee for Covid-19 Vaccination Activities), for example, caravans and media events.

Legitimation through user involvement refers to mobilizing posts inviting online users to participate in online and/or offline activities related to Covid-19 vaccination. For example, the National Coordinating Committee for Covid-19 Vaccination Activities tried to mobilize online users to employ the #storiesfromvaccination

hashtag, urging them to post their experiences in the PROVaccination Facebook group. Some of these stories were then posted on the ROVaccinare/ROVaccination Facebook page.

The second stage of the analysis (RQ2) focused on assessing the relationship between engagement and post-type by employing simple and multiple linear regressions. The engagement rate was calculated using Bonsón and Ratkai's formula (2013). CrowdTangle provided insights into the interactions of each post (likes, reactions, comments, shares) and the number of likes and followers at the time of posting. Based on the engagement rate, we selected the top five posts with the highest engagement rate from each of the legitimation strategies.

We set the regression model with post type as an independent variable and various categories of engagements collected from the ROVaccination Facebook page as dependent variables. As the post-type variable was measured categorically, we used the dummy coding system, turning it into a series of dichotomous variables. The software used was PASW Statistics 18, the applied regression type was linear, and the variable selection method was entered. The estimation method used was ordinary least squares. The model's goodness-of-fit was assessed through adjusted R2.

In the third stage of the analysis (RQ3), we started with Muntinga et al.'s findings (2011) that contributing (commenting) alongside consuming (liking) and creating (sharing) are indicative of active participation in online conversations. Therefore, we wanted to assess the comments on the 15 posts based on the three types of legitimation strategies with the highest engagement rate. The comments (both primary and replies) were extracted using ExportComments.com. The dataset included 58,512 comments. We imported them into WordStat 7.1.19, and topic modeling was performed. Using two statistical methods (factor analysis and non-negative matrix factorization), topic modeling obtained via WordStat extracts topics from co-occurrence matrices (Péladeau, 2021) based on word similarities. The conditions set were as follows: segmentation was performed by document, including comments and replies. The number of topics extracted was 30, and the loading was 0.30. Since WordStat allows researchers to change the generated topic names, we adapted these topics, taking into account the (de)legitimizing strategies, and we presented the first five topics for the legitimation strategies with the highest engagement rate.

4. Results

4.1. Message Strategy Promotion: Types of Legitimation, Engagement Rate, and Facebook Behavior

The post distribution based on legitimation strategies employed in messages on Covid-19 vaccination (Table 1) points to (a) a preference for rationalization legitimation through the usage of fact-based posts, and (b) a clear integration of authorization and narrativization into the message strategy promotion of the ROVaccination page. Personal, medical, and organizational stories represent 31.11%, second to facts (47.38%), underlining a storytelling approach to content production. A dialogic communication approach to content creation appears to be a missed opportunity, as content primarily focuses on online/offline user involvement and registers a relatively low post count.

Table 1. Types of legitimation strategies in message promotion: ROVaccination/ROVaccinare Facebook page.

Type of legitimation strategy	Post distribution (N = 2,060)	Post distribution %	Engagement rate (ER) average of top 5 posts
Legitimation through personal stories	430	20.87%	10.18%
Legitimation through medical stories	143	6.94%	16.36%
Legitimation through organizational stories	68	3.30%	3.06%
Legitimation through facts	976	47.38%	6.12%
Legitimation through events	262	12.72%	4.02%
Legitimation through online user involvement	85	4.13%	2.47%
Legitimation through offline user involvement	72	3.50%	3.43%
No connection to vaccination	24	1.17%	1.73%

Although evidence-based messages were mostly employed by the Romanian authority, they were outperformed in terms of engagement rate by messages including legitimation through personal and healthcare expert authority (Table 1). When looking at the engagement rate averages of the top five posts in each category, we observe a reversal of the quantity pyramid, pointing to source authority as a salient factor in engagement generation. Medical story posts had a 16.36% engagement rate (ER) average, even though they registered a much lower count (n = 143) than factual posts (n = 976), with a 6.12% ER average.

Table 2 shows the five posts with the highest engagement rate. As observed, posts embedding stories were the best-performing five posts on the ROVaccination Facebook page. In the first four stories, four Romanian experts were present. They expressed their authority by providing arguments for the benefits of (Covid-19) vaccination (posts 1 and 2) and by talking about their experiences with Covid-19 patients in hospitals (posts 3 and 4). Employing an analogy between the approval of the Covid-19 vaccine and paracetamol, a Romanian doctor (post 1) instructed online users how to discuss with vaccine skeptics using common-knowledge medical information in order to debunk the opinions about the experimental serum associated with the Covid-19 vaccine ("Covid-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer/BioNTech has FDA's full authorization. Therefore, in terms of approval, there is no difference between this vaccine and paracetamol," August 26, 2021). A comparison between previous outbreaks (scarlet fever or polio) and the Covid-19 pandemic was used by an elderly Romanian doctor (post 2) who emphasized the benefits of vaccination. Posts 3 and 4 focused on intensive care unit and emergency room doctors, and both stories embedded the healthcare experts during their latest day on-call: "My latest night shift at the COVID unit, 23 patients: 20 unvaccinated patients and three vaccinated persons" (September 20, 2021); "On September 10, I finished my on-call day. There were 12 patients at the intensive care unit and only one person got the Johnson shot...and he had other diseases as well" (September 16, 2021). Janssen and Jansen (2018, p. 65) consider that "numeral markers...play a role in systemic central processing" by influencing "the extent to which readers are inclined to elaborate on the text." The usage of numerals as lexical choices in the two posts highlights two important aspects. On the one hand, a fear appeal was closely linked to the presence of unvaccinated persons in intensive care units even after nine months since Covid-19 vaccination started. On the other hand, the low numbers (23 patients and 12 patients) may implicitly show the benefits of vaccination. A personal story was among the five Facebook posts with the highest ER and focused on an elderly woman's vaccination experience: "My niece, a doctor, convinced me that the vaccine is the only way out of the pandemic." (March 28, 2021). This choice of personal experiences told by laypersons legitimizing

vaccination aligns with previous research (Motta et al., 2021) that emphasized the importance of having laypersons alongside healthcare experts as sources when tailoring health messages.

Table 2. Type of legitimation strategy, content of the Facebook posts with the highest ER (ROVaccination/ ROVaccinare Facebook page).

Post	Type of legitimation strategy	Content of the Facebook post	Engagement rate (ER)
1	Legitimation through medical stories	A Romanian doctor tries to debunk misinformation about the experimental Covid-19 vaccine	23.70%
2	Legitimation through medical stories	A video with an elderly Romanian doctor talking about his experiences throughout various epidemics	18.67%
3	Legitimation through medical stories	A Romanian doctor working in an intensive care unit talking about his experience during his latest on-call day	14.12%
4	Legitimation through medical stories	A Romanian doctor working in a County Emergency Hospital talking about his experience with unvaccinated patients	13.85%
5	Legitimation through personal stories	Picture of an elderly woman getting the second Covid-19 shot	12.15%

RQ3 addressed the relationship between legitimation strategies and Facebook behavior (Table 3). The frequency analysis showed that liking was the most frequent Facebook behavior associated with all types of legitimation strategies. Commenting was the second Facebook behavior for five legitimation strategies, whereas sharing was the second most employed behavior for legitimation through organizational stories and online user involvement.

The regression analysis showed that whereas legitimation through personal stories ($\beta = 0.094$, $p < 0.01$) and medical stories ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.01$) positively predicted engagement rate, legitimation through facts ($\beta = -0.181$, $p < 0.01$) was negatively related to engagement rate. As observed in Table 3, while posts embedding legitimation through facts had a negative correlation with almost all Facebook behavior, legitimation through medical expert authority positively correlated with all types of Facebook behavior, with medical stories being the best message type to explain variation. This suggests that posts embedding medical stories are more likely to trigger online users to have all types of reactions on Facebook.

Three legitimation strategies were significantly related to post liking: while personal stories ($\beta = 0.173$, $p < 0.01$) and medical stories ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.01$) displayed a positive correlation, facts ($\beta = -0.227$, $p < 0.01$) had a medium negative correlation with liking. Messages embedding legitimation through medical stories were more likely to encourage online users to comment and share posts. In contrast, evidence-based messages and posts, including events, were negatively related to these two types of Facebook behavior.

In terms of reactions, the frequency analysis showed that love was the most frequent type of reaction for legitimation through personal stories (6.02%), events (4.23%), and organizational stories (4.01%). Sadness was the most used reaction for the posts embedding legitimation through medical stories (4.97%) and facts (4.50%). The regression analysis highlighted that medical stories were positively correlated with both

Table 3. Frequency and regression analysis of Facebook engagement behavior.

	Legitimation strategy						
	Legitimation through personal stories $n = 969.443$ (100%)	Legitimation through medical stories $n = 707.051$ (100%)	Legitimation through facts $n = 1,012.204$ (100%)	Legitimation through events $n = 333.847$ (100%)	Legitimation through organizational stories $n = 112.820$ (100%)	Legitimation through online user involvement $n = 104.476$ (100%)	Legitimation through offline user involvement $n = 122.109$ (100%)
ER	0.094**	0.228**	−0.181**	−0.022	0.023	−0.011	0.001
Likes	65.44% (0.173**)	47.48% (0.254**)	60.60% (−0.227**)	64.81% (−0.040)	67.37% (0.017)	57.89% (−0.038)	54.23% (−0.008)
Comments	14.20% (0.039)	20.60% (0.269**)	15.14% (−0.129**)	12.66% (−0.050*)	11.15% (−0.018)	23.05% (0.006)	17.94% (0.011)
Shares	7.52% (−0.026)	20.15% (0.226**)	14.10% (−0.071**)	13.51% (−0.018)	12.66% (−0.001)	9.61% (−0.022)	13.69% (0.003)
Love	6.02% (0.271**)	2.32% (0.106**)	1.91% (−0.243**)	4.23% (−0.010)	4.01% (0.011)	1.66% (−0.052*)	2.70% (−0.015)
Wow	0.20% (−0.019)	0.29% (0.143**)	0.53% (0.015)	0.19% (−0.060**)	0.18% (−0.023)	0.17% (−0.037)	0.26% (−0.009)
Haha	2.07% (0.027)	2.36% (0.140**)	1.98% (−0.112**)	1.35% (−0.053*)	3.09% (0.015)	6.46% (0.055*)	6.05% (0.080**)
Sad	2.49% (0.000)	4.97% (0.239**)	4.50% (−0.041)	1.78% (−0.059**)	0.11% (−0.046*)	0.34% (−0.050*)	3.05% (−0.004)
Angry	0.69% (0.025)	0.95% (0.176**)	0.73% (−0.096**)	0.81% (−0.018)	1.03% (0.015)	0.53% (−0.025)	1.12% (0.022)
Care	1.39% (0.139**)	0.86% (0.123**)	0.52% (−0.132**)	0.66% (−0.035)	0.40% (−0.022)	0.28% (−0.035)	0.95% (0.006)

Notes: Standardized, list-wise; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

positive and negative reactions. While personal stories were positively correlated with the number of loves and cares, facts triggered a negative correlation with both positive and negative reactions. As a reaction, Haha showed statistical relevance with five types of legitimation strategies present in the Facebook posts: legitimation through medical stories, online user involvement, and offline user involvement (medium and weak positive correlations); legitimation through facts and events (medium and weak negative correlations). As observed in Table 3, although the percentages associated with Haha reactions were not high, they were more frequently associated with posts embedding legitimation through online user involvement (6.46%) and offline user involvement (6.05%). A humorous tone was present in two posts focusing on user involvement with the highest number of Haha reactions. One post had the following message: "D4C4 P0T1 24 C1T32T1 4STA 1N2E4MN4 C4 T3 P0T1 V4CC1N4" ("If you can read this, it means that you can get the jab," September 12, 2021). The Romanian authority employed numbers instead of letters (4 for A, 0 for O, 1 for I) to flatter the online users for their cognitive capacity to read the message, and it implicitly urged them to get vaccinated at various vaccination centers mentioned in the Facebook post. "I have the feeling that night does not exist. It is just part of the conspiracy of those who want to sell us light bulbs!" (January 8, 2022) was the humorous message in another post where online users were invited to get informed from trusted online sources. Besides laughter, the Haha reaction was also associated with ridicule. For example, when showing behavior towards Facebook posts focusing on medical stories, some online users displayed contempt for a doctor telling her story from a Clinical Hospital of Infectious and Tropical Diseases in Romania.

4.2. (De)Legitimizing Topics Present in Comments

Although topic modeling showed an overlap of topics, some of these topics had a higher Eigenvalue in the comments to the posts focusing on personal stories (Table 4), medical stories (Table 5), and facts (Table 6). When commenting on personal story posts, Romanian users focused on freedom of choice, Covid-19 vaccination risks and benefits, and personal experience. A polarization between Romanian online users could be observed. On the one hand, those who delegitimized vaccination seemed to dominate the debate by emphasizing their lack of freedom. On the other hand, other commenters employed personal authority as a way of legitimizing Covid-19 vaccination, but at the same time, they discussed the potential risks and benefits of vaccination. In the case of medical story posts, polarization was also present, but this time, it was related to legitimizing past vaccination and delegitimizing Covid-19 vaccination. Words such as "years; many years; after years" versus "in a year" indicate a temporal argument employed as an instance of explanation associated with theoretical rationalization. Comments to posts on facts also embedded this topic, but negative-laden moral evaluation ("experimental serum") was used to delegitimize Covid-19 vaccination.

Deauthorization was found both in the comments to posts focusing on medical and personal stories. It was mainly combined with depreciative adjectives ("idiot," "stupid"), sarcasm ("so-called," "expert," "doctor"), and illiteracy ("not know Romanian"), thus emphasizing a negative-other presentation. Although personal experience as authority was present only in the comments to posts embedding personal stories and facts, the presence of the Predictions topic in comments to medical stories also suggests Romanian users' tendency to assume a role of authority, but this time associated with an expert-like voice. This emphasizes what Breeze (2021, p. 5) labels as a "first-hand experience" of "a potential source of trustworthy information." Advice Giving dominated the topics found in the comments on posts focusing on facts. Considered a normal thing to be followed (Glozer et al., 2019), Advice Giving ("should" or imperative forms of verbs) acts as an instance of "prospective exemplarity" (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 798), emphasizing a future normality.

A polarization of attitudes towards the medical system was observed in the comments to posts focusing on personal and medical stories. The online users accused the Romanian medical system of corruption and ROVaccination of vaccination campaign mismanagement ("money," "post," "sell for," "campaign"). When commenting on the posts of healthcare experts, a dichotomy can be observed between positive moral evaluation associated with doctors ("trust," "good doctor," "respect") and deauthorization of doctors as corrupted sources ("money," "received," "how much money," "politics"). The commenters' appeal to corruption related to Romanian healthcare experts was also present in other studies on the analysis of comments on the Covid-19 vaccination campaign in Romania (Cmeciu, 2023; Obreja, 2022).

Table 4. Topics in comments to Facebook posts embedding legitimation through personal stories (topic modeling—WordStat 7.1.19).

Topic	Keywords	Eigenvalue
Freedom of choice	each; everyone; his/her life; want; do; make; whatever; free; freedom; allow; us; if (you) want; do not want; vaccinate yourself	11.52
Covid-19 vaccination efficacy	vaccinated; unvaccinated; may; virus; can transmit; as long; got infected; virus; form; mild; severe; those vaccinated; those unvaccinated	10.37
Personal experience	days; first dose; side-effects; fever; booster dose; absolutely nothing; days; two; disease; my opinion; gone through the disease	9.46
Medical system delegitimation—mismanagement	diseases; people; die; died; who died; other diseases; ROVaccination; money; post; sell for; campaign	9.28
Commenter deauthorization	you (nominative, accusative cases); believe; so-called; your; yours; are; yourself; expert; idiot; shame; shame on you	5.22

Table 5. Topics in comments to Facebook posts embedding legitimation through medical stories (topic modeling—WordStat 7.1.19).

Topic	Keywords	Eigenvalue
Past versus present vaccination	adverse; reactions; effects; severe reactions; long term; years; many years; after years; years ago; in a year; thousands of people; immune; immune system; RNA messenger; RNA	9.76
Commenter deauthorization	you; are; stupid; mind your business; you rock; you are a doctor; your head; not know Romanian; Romanian language	5.49
Predictions	develop; form; severe; severe form; mild; mild cases; if; you; disease; catch; virus; dose; vaccinated	3.71
(De)legitimation of medical experts as sources	Doctor; experts; trust; academician; good doctor; respect; thank you; bad doctor; liars; money; received; how much money; politics	3.29
Freedom of choice	do; make; whatever you want; get vaccinated; my own life; should be	1.60

Table 6. Topics in comments to Facebook posts embedding legitimation through facts (topic modeling—WordStat 7.1.19).

Topic	Keywords	Eigenvalue
Advice giving	do not get the vaccine; please; get the shot; get informed; official sources; Gates; Bill; should; might; green certificate; should + verbs.	14.28
Past vs. present vaccination	severe; reactions; effects; experimental; serum; experimental serum; vaccine; were; tested; serums; vaccines were; were tested; RNA; messenger; lives; saves; own responsibility.	13.48
Personal experience	I; me; mine; as a child; 7 months old; certificate; mild form; get the shot; form; mild; severe	6.6
Collective authority (de)legitimation	we; vaccines; are; a lot; many; have (+ past participle of verbs); we got the shot; we should + verbs	2.14
(De)legitimation of AstraZeneca	astra; zeneca; astrazeneca; vaccine; Europa; EMA; COVID; Facebook groups.	3.92

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on vaccination policy transfer in the context of a postmodern medical paradigm where a coproduction mechanism on (de)legitimation prevails as a brand resonance trigger. As mentioned, policy branding enhances visibility and legitimacy (Raev & Minkman, 2020). Thus, the first part of our analysis focused on a top-down perspective of the meaning-making process of the message strategy promotion related to Covid-19 vaccination. We acknowledged the important role of the WHO as a policy branding element in setting out the global brand communication for national governments, in our case, Romania. However, at the same time, we emphasized the role of stakeholders as "agents of conversion" (Basu & Wang, 2009) in a branded public health campaign, as was the case of the #ROVaccinare/ ROVaccination campaign in Romania. Thus, we acknowledged that meaning-making should also be tackled from a bottom-up perspective since the empowerment of online users is a feature characteristic of the postmodern medical paradigm.

The discussion will focus on these two important aspects of policy branding in public health campaigns: visibility through message strategy promotion and engagement of Romanian online users. The top-down perspective on the message strategy promotion showed a hybrid usage of stories and facts as legitimation strategies in the ROVaccination Facebook posts, thus reinforcing WHO's content policy embedding a blended approach to Covid-19 vaccination message tailoring. This result aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of leveraging narratives and statistical evidence in health messages to increase message efficiency and acceptance (Dahlstrom, 2014; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2021). The frequency analysis showed that the Romanian authority scarcely employed a dialogic communication approach to content creation. The engagement rate analysis revealed that the ROVaccination posts embedding legitimation through user involvement did not trigger a high engagement. Thus, the Romanian authority did not make full use of the WHO's recommendations (2021) on building a strong social media presence through user involvement as a means of promotion.

Related to engagement, the second requirement of any campaign, the analysis of the relationship between Facebook behaviors and legitimation strategies, showed that legitimation through personal and medical stories was a positive predictor of engagement, unlike legitimation through facts. One significant finding showed that messages embedding legitimation through medical stories were more likely to increase sharing and commenting. Therefore, we may conclude that Romanian online users accept medical stories on their Facebook walls as a means of "self-presentation" since sharing implies "more cognitive effort" than commenting (Kim & Yang, 2017, p. 442).

The bottom-up approach to the Romanian authority's message strategy promotion revealed polarized attitudes towards healthcare professionals as sources of the campaign, towards the Romanian medical system, and towards past and present vaccination. The dominance of polarization in online users' comments emphasizes their role as agents of conversion, contesting either the message sources employed in the campaign or other commenters as personal authorities. Delegitimation through deauthorization of medical experts shows that the macro-contextual element of corruption plays a significant role in (de)legitimizing the message sources. As mentioned above, Romanian online users will likely share medical stories on Facebook. However, the analysis of the comments showed that these experts are considered legitimate sources if they are not corrupt and not involved in politics. Previous research (Mihelj et al., 2022; Walkowiak et al., 2021)

revealed that medical expertise politicization in Eastern Europe could not function as an efficient content strategy to increase vaccination rates. Commenter deauthorization by leveraging sarcasm and depreciative evaluation is consistent with previous research (Breeze, 2021), showing that these rhetorical devices are present in the echo chambers of both vaccine supporters and opponents.

This study proposed a twofold approach to health policy transfer and branding. Although the analysis focused only on one country, we consider that the methodological and analytical approach developed in this study could serve as a starting point for future research on the implementation of health message strategy promotion in other countries. The study also has some practical implications: Communication professionals should consider that legitimation through story-based posts is more engaging than legitimation through fact-based posts. Second, although medical stories are more likely to encourage online users to comment and share posts, the message sources of these posts should not be related to politics in East European countries (Cmeciu, 2023; Mihelj et al., 2022). Lastly, communication specialists should address the online users' polarized concerns expressed in the comments since commenters act as agents of conversion (Basu & Wang, 2009) in the postmodern medical paradigm where their voices are more powerful.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The Evolution of Crisis Frames in the European Commission's Institutional Communication (2003–2022)

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Abstract

Historical accounts of the EU recurrently turn to crisis as a periodizing or structuring concept, reflecting the observation made by scholars that crisis has become a permanent feature of the social construction of our social and political reality. The concept of crisis can also be exploited for strategic purposes by political actors pursuing various policy agendas. Our article analyzes the discursive uses of crises by one of the central institutions of the EU, the European Commission, based on a corpus of press releases that referred to crisis ($N = 4,414$) going back two decades (2003–2022). Thus, our article examines crisis as a political language and its discursive uses. We ask: (a) how salient is the topic of "crisis" in the European Commission's communication; (b) what are the main domains in which the crisis frame has been activated, from geographical scope to policy areas; (c) how did the deployment of crisis frames change in time along major policy areas like economy, migration, or climate change; and (d) in what terms has the crisis-frame been activated, and how does crisis word use vary by region and policy area. Methodologically, we pursue these research questions using text-as-data methods, combining natural language processing tools for identifying geographical scopes, actors, and policy areas with corpus methods for identifying keywords and collocates and manually coding the latter, relying on qualitative and quantitative reasoning. Our research contributes to understanding the dynamics of EU policy framing in times of crisis.

Keywords

crisis communication; crisis framing; crisis policy framing; European Union; policy areas; policy framing; public communication; public diplomacy

1. Introduction

The last two decades in the history of the EU were marked by a series of crises, denoting pivotal moments or periods marked by disruption of the course of events, demanding immediate attention and action. Financial, migration, and health were some of the most salient crises confronting the EU in the last 20 years. Moreover, the climate crisis has been a major topic of discussion in EU member states.

Given that the crises mentioned above transcend geographical boundaries, the crisis communication of EU institutions is a critical subject of research. Thus, a comprehensive analysis of how relevant EU institutions such as the European Commission (EC) developed their communication responses to crises, or presented their policies to the public in terms of crisis helps us understand the multifaceted concept of crisis in the EU context. Responses to crises in the EU are shaped not only by the characteristics of the crises themselves, but also by the complex institutional framework and governance structures of the EU, where supranational governance occurs in complex organizations, adding layers of complexity to crisis management and communication (Olsson & Larsson, 2009). Besides, the EU is a relevant international political actor. Therefore, frequently, official communication encompasses not only communicating on internal affairs but also international topics (Song & Fanoulis, 2023). The present research aims to investigate the public communication employed by the EC as the executive body of the EU in the long term and hence capture the dynamics of navigating and responding to the financial challenges, migration surges, and unprecedented health challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, humanitarian crises, and climate emergencies (Butros et al., 2021).

Most of the previous research on crisis communication of the EU institutions focused on a specific crisis such as the financial (e.g., Baden & Springer, 2014; Jessop, 2015; Joris et al., 2014; Michaelides et al., 2014; Pagoulatos, 2020), the refugee and migration (e.g., Dalakoglou, 2016; Dines et al., 2018), and the health crisis (e.g., Butros et al., 2021). Studies investigating how EU institutions communicated about crises from a longitudinal perspective looked at the period before the EU enlargement in 2004 (Krzyżanowski, 2009), and longitudinal studies encompassing the last years are scarce. Moreover, most of the studies focused on the media coverage of the EU crises, and less on the EU institutions as sources of information and policy framing (e.g., Corner, 2016).

Given the complexity of the EU as a transnational organization, this study's theoretical framework combines both internal and external perspectives of crisis communication research. It contributes to crisis communication theory by looking at crisis as a political language and its discursive uses in framing policies. Moreover, when analyzing crisis communication in the EU, we also look at the official communication of the EC about crises that reflect public diplomacy efforts. Press releases are instruments of public communication that reflect the perspective of an organization, in our case of the EC, on specific topics. Apart from enhancing the transparency of the decision-making processes, press releases are public relations instruments and reflect the organization's "picture of the world" and how the organization responds to crises, including its policies (Pieczka, 2002). Hence, our approach maps the way crises were framed in the official communication of the EU.

We rely on the strengths of a computational methodological approach (Guo et al., 2016; Lazer et al., 2020) to analyze the press releases of the EC over the last two eventful decades since the most extensive

enlargement in 2004, which presents an opportunity to address several gaps in the existing research on crisis communication and the EC. While previous studies on the crisis communication of the EU institutions used a qualitative methodological approach, a computational approach allows us to unveil from a large-scale perspective the prevalence and the significance of the term "crisis" as used in the official communication of the EC. Moreover, it allows us to identify crisis communication patterns and track the evolution of crisis communication strategies within the EC by identifying potential shifts over time.

The present article first outlines the historical context in which crisis discourses of the EC were articulated. After offering a brief overview of the crisis events that shaped the past two decades, it outlines the major theories in crisis communication that serve as a foundation of the argument, leading up to research questions referring to crisis as a political language and its discursive uses in policy framing. Section 3 presents the way these were operationalized. Sections 4 and 5 present the salience of crisis, the geographic and policy areas the crisis frame was activated in, and its changes in time and in terms of word use. Section 6 highlights both continuities and changes in crisis discourses.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Context

Understanding the recent historical backdrop is crucial to comprehend how the EC, as a central institution within the EU, has navigated the terrain of multifaceted crises. The past two decades have been a dynamic and transformative period in the history of the EU. Regarding EU membership, the most extensive enlargement took place in 2004, and included Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In 2007, Romania and Bulgaria became EU member states as well. However, in 2020, after a referendum held in 2016, the United Kingdom left the EU.

Historical accounts of the EU recurrently turn to "crisis" as a periodizing or structuring concept, reflecting the observation made by several analysts that crisis has increasingly become a permanent feature of the social construction of our social and political reality (Vincze, 2014). At the same time, the concept of crisis can also be exploited for strategic purposes by political actors pursuing various policy agendas. Concerning the EU, literature has claimed that EU actors have increasingly positioned the Union as a "crisis manager," with member states having transferred authority and capacity to the EU to respond to crises (Boin & Rhinard, 2013; Boin et al., 2014).

An enlarged EU was confronted with a series of crises that tested its resilience and provided critical insights into its capacity to adapt and respond. The financial crisis originated in the United States in 2008 and spread globally, affecting EU member states in areas like banking instability, economic downturns, and rising unemployment. Furthermore, a subsequent crisis in Greece threatened the stability of the Economic and Monetary Union (Touri & Rogers, 2013), determining a reevaluation of the EU financial policies and the establishment of the European Stability Mechanism (Pagoulatos, 2020). However, debates on the limitations of national public debts persisted, given the differences in the opinion mostly between Northern and Central European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands that advocated strict fiscal discipline (Macmillan, 2014), and crisis narratives are still used for the purpose of limiting debts (Kutter, 2020).

In the last decade, the EU faced an unprecedented refugee crisis, with a peak in 2015 driven by conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, challenging the ability of EU institutions and member states to manage humanitarian issues. Mandatory quotas, measures to secure EU external borders effectively, cooperation with countries of origin and transit, and efforts to reform the Common European Asylum System were subjects of discussion within EU institutions and member states. Moreover, populist parties benefited from anti-immigrant sentiments and became part of governmental coalitions in several countries (Stoica, 2017). Scholarship highlighted that the reforms that were discussed amid the financial and refugee crises have yet to be adopted and implemented. For example, some countries with less migratory pressure are reluctant to support a common asylum policy. Thus, a complex institution, such as the EU, faces major challenges in learning from crises (Biermann et al., 2019).

Aiming for international leadership on the issue of climate change, the EU built up consensus and developed a climate strategy (Oberthür & von Homeyer, 2023). Thus, in 2019, the EU launched the European Green Deal to mitigate the climate crisis, aiming for carbon neutrality in a sustainable economy. Concerning the relevance of climate change for public opinion and political actors, previous studies pointed to differences between countries (Tønnesen et al., 2023). While in Western European countries like Germany, environmental policy is prevalent in campaigns for the European Parliament and national elections, in Central Eastern European countries like Hungary, the topic remains marginal. In the case of the financial and refugee crises, country differences might be an obstacle to the consistent implementation of EU public policy regarding climate change.

The ambitious plans of the EC to address environmental issues met a significant challenge due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Čavoški, 2020; Dupont et al., 2020). The global health crisis unfolded between 2020 and 2022, testing EU institutions and governments of member states in unprecedented ways, from the scale of health-related misinformation (Matthes et al., 2022) to the polarization of public opinion (Ares et al., 2021).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, significantly impacted the common security and defense policy of the EU (Fernández et al., 2023; Genschel et al., 2023). Fiott (2023) highlighted that Russia's invasion of Ukraine determined a security and defense crisis for the EU and its member states. Scholars stressed that the reactions of the EU institutions to this security threat contributed to EU integration and the strength of external projection of geopolitical objectives (Orenstein, 2023). Hence, crises such as the recent health crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed that the EU is a "sui generis multi-level, multi-faceted actor that can change shape in response to events" (Anghel & Jones, 2023, p. 766).

2.2. Crisis Communication

The EC does not provide an official, standalone definition of "crisis" in its documents and addresses specific crises or situations as they occur. Thus, it has no crises-related taxonomy either. Definitions and descriptions are typically embedded within the documents addressing crises and crisis policies (EC, 2022). To understand how the EC communicates about crises, an interdisciplinary approach is needed that encompasses knowledge from both organizational and crisis communication, but also the perspective of public diplomacy.

Crisis communication is a multifaceted field shaped by various theoretical frameworks that help us understand how organizations and institutions respond to and communicate during times of crisis (Bundy

et al., 2017; Marsen, 2020). These theories provide valuable insights into the dynamics of crisis communication, and the strategies and decision-making processes that organizations employ before, during, and after crises. In communication research, a crisis is defined "as an event perceived by managers and stakeholders to be highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive" (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 1663). Since crises are sources of uncertainty, they are considered harmful or threatening to organizations and their stakeholders (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Kahn et al., 2013). As crises unfold, organizations make efforts to prevent crises, efforts to deal with crises, and take post-crisis measures. Moreover, scholars stressed that there are different types of crises, such as preventable versus unpreventable and internal versus external (Marsen, 2020). Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) classify crises into performance, disaster, and attack. However, previous research highlighted that crises should be seen as elements of more extensive processes and not only as events (Bundy et al., 2017; Jaques, 2009; Roux-Dufort, 2007). Crisis communication focuses on how organizations investigate the causes of crises, communicate their knowledge of the events, work to minimize image damage, and communicate their actions to the public (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Kahn et al., 2013; Marsen, 2020), and existing literature on crisis communication distinguished between issue and reputation management.

In a systematic literature review on crisis communication, Bundy et al. (2017) highlighted two major theoretical perspectives in crisis communication: internal and external. The first focuses more on the within-organization dynamics, while the second focuses more on the organization's interaction with external stakeholders. Both approaches see the crisis stages as pre-crisis prevention, crisis management, and post-crisis outcomes. (Bundy et al., 2017).

Given the complexity of the EU as a supranational institution, internal and external perspectives toward understanding crisis communication must be employed to map implications for organizations and stakeholders. Internal dynamics in this complex environment, such as organization governance, is a major factor that influences crisis communication (Haunschild et al., 2015; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015), given the constant efforts invested in the decision-making processes. Hence, crisis communication by the EC frequently involves close coordination with member states. Regarding financial, migration, and health crises, the EC fosters cooperation among EU countries, seeking a unified response. This coordination is often articulated in its communication efforts, emphasizing the collective nature of EU actions. However, there are internal challenges for crisis communication, such as complex decision-making that leads to delays and difficulties in conveying a cohesive and timely response.

Coombs (2007) introduced the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), one of the pivotal theories of the field, employing an external perspective. SCCT focuses on stakeholders and emphasizes the importance of aligning communication strategies with the nature and severity of a crisis and organizational responses. Communication is crucial in crisis, and crisis communication is the way to achieve specific outcomes and prevent reputational damages (Coombs, 2021). According to SCCT, factors such as attributions of crisis responsibility, crisis history, and organizational reputation must be considered for crisis management. Hence, Coombs (2015) sees four perspectives in crisis communication: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and consolidation.

Previous studies also stressed that high-reliability organizations are more capable of preventing crises as they stand for accountability and transparency (Bundy et al., 2017). The EC also often emphasizes transparency as

a critical communication strategy to keep the public informed (Kelbel et al., 2021) about an unfolding crisis, the EU's response, and measures to mitigate the impact. This transparency is critical for maintaining public trust (Marx & Van der Loo, 2021). These efforts are, however, compounded by what has been recurrently referred to as the EU's communication deficit (Touri & Rogers, 2013), and the low visibility of EU actors and policies in national public spheres. Furthermore, disinformation and misinformation often flourish during crises, the latest prominent example being the Covid-19 pandemic (Matthes et al., 2022). This challenge underscores the need for effective communication to counter false narratives.

Besides rapid and appropriate responses, attention to diversity and local cultures are crucial crisis communication response elements (Marsen, 2020). The official communication of the EC is also part of the EU's public diplomacy, defined as the favorable opinion of foreign audiences (Cull, 2009; Dolea, 2018). Moreover, the official communication of the EC reflects the EU's efforts to build self-image and normative liberal values in the international arena to inform and influence (Song & Fanoulis, 2023). For example, during the Covid-19 crisis, the EU contributed to vaccination efforts in African countries (Langan, 2023).

2.3. Policy Frames in Times of Crisis

Over the last decades, framing has been one of the prevalent theories in political communication (Cacciatore et al., 2016). The role of frames in shaping public opinion is crucial (Entman, 1993). Thus, "framing is the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue to its audiences" (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 221). Political frames often evolve in time, suffering sense changes at the ideational level (Olivas Osuna et al., 2023). In crisis communication, narratives are relevant in influencing people's interpretation of crises that are often complex and multifaceted. Framing contributes to simplifying complex situations (Entman, 1993). Framing a crisis in a political context not only sets the narrative surrounding events but also contributes to policy responses.

Press releases of the EC represent the official communication of the EU, reflect the decision-making processes in times of crisis, and carry specific perspectives on crisis-related issues and policies. Therefore, we asked the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** How does the salience of crisis change in time (2003–2022) in the discourse of the EC as articulated in the press releases?

> **RQ2:** What are the main domains in which the crisis frame has been activated, from geographical scope to policy areas?

> **RQ3:** How did the deployment of crisis frames change in time along the above dimensions, including some major policy areas like finance, migration, or climate change?

> **RQ4:** In what terms has the crisis frame been activated, and how does the crisis word use vary by region and policy area?

3. Method

Our article analyses the discursive use of crisis by one of the central EU institutions, the EC, based on a corpus of press releases ($N = 27,272$) going back two decades (2003–2022), accessible at the EC's Press Corner website (EC, n.d.-a). The site contains various types of documents: weekly activities, weekly meetings, country insights, daily news, factsheets, infringement decisions, news, press releases, questions and answers, read-outs, speeches, and statements. These texts represent different genres belonging to different "fields of action" in discourse-analytical terms, understood as different functions of discursive practices (Reisigl & Wodak, 2015), like, for example, expressing dissent, legislation, or self-presentation. Of the different types of texts made available to the public on the website, we chose press releases to concentrate on the self-presentation of the EC as a field of discursive action.

We searched the corpus of press releases for references to crises by searching for the terms "crisis" and "crises," resulting in a corpus of $N = 4,414$ items spanning the two decades investigated. For this research, these represent the crisis corpus. This corpus was processed using text-as-data methods, combining natural language processing tools for the identification of geographical scopes and actors with corpus methods for identifying patterns of usage of the term crisis, as well as manual coding to identify policy areas and types of crisis word use. Thus, we relied on both qualitative and quantitative reasoning.

The corpus was first processed using spaCy's English language model to extract geographic entities and organizations (spaCy, 2022). The extracted geographic entities were manually categorized into the following regions: Africa, Asia, Caribbean, EU, non-EU Middle East, North America, Central America, South America, and Oceania. The non-EU category includes Russia and other non-EU member European countries. The geographic entities were also used to build a dictionary for these categories used in Wordstat 8.0 (2018) to code the regions referenced by the press releases.

Our codebook for policy areas was based on the "Areas of EU action" listed as such on the EC website (EC, n.d.-b). The EC groups significant areas of action based on its level of competence in the specific fields, i.e., whether it can legislate independently, legislate along with the countries, or complement national-level action. For our research, we grouped these into policy areas as presented in Table 1.

To operationalize our questions regarding the framing of policy areas in terms of crisis, we identified the collocates of the "crisis" lemma using SketchEngine, a corpus linguistic software (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). Collocates are words that co-occur with a node, in our case, the lemma "crisis," with a frequency that is higher than what can be expected based on their individual frequencies, and thus "can provide a helpful sketch of the meaning/function of the node within the particular discourse" (Baker et al., 2008, p. 278). Such collocates included modifiers like "financial and economic crisis," "the current crisis," "the refugee crisis," nouns modified by crisis like "crisis management" or "crisis situation," verbs with crisis as object like "manage the crisis" or "fight the crisis," verbs with crisis as subject like "crisis has hit" or "crisis has shown," and further grammatical structures. We have analyzed the collocates that functioned as modifiers of crisis, e.g., "economic" or "current," grouping them into more significant categories and using them again to build a Wordstat dictionary to code their presence in the documents of the corpus automatically. For this research, these collocation patterns are also indicators of and activate crisis frames. Our approach, combining natural language processing and corpus linguistic methods with computer-based content analysis tools, allowed us

Table 1. Areas of EU action as defined by the EC and their corresponding policy categories in the codebook.

Areas of EU action (as defined by the EC)	Coded as
Administrative cooperation	Administrative
Agriculture	Economy
Civil protection	Safety and security
Competition rules	Economy
Consumer protection	Justice and rights
Culture	Culture
Customs union	Economy
Development cooperation and humanitarian aid	Development and humanitarian aid
Economic and employment policies	Economy
Economic, social, and territorial cohesion	Social
Education and training, youth and sport	Education
Employment and social affairs	Social
Energy	Energy
Environment	Environment
Fisheries	Economy
Foreign and security policy	Foreign relations
Industry	Economy
Justice and fundamental rights	Justice and rights
Marine plants and animals	Environment
Migration and home affairs	Migration
Monetary policy for the eurozone	Economy
Public health	Health
Research and space	Research
Single market	Economy
Tourism	Tourism
Trade and international agreements	Economy
Trans-European networks	Transport
Transport	Transport
—	General EU affairs (added after the first round of coding)

to maintain the data structure of the corpus, including the temporal sequence of the documents, which is often lost in text-as-data methods.

4. Results

To respond to our RQ1, in the time frame we analyzed, the salience of crisis in press releases of the EC increased continually. As indicated in Section 3, out of 27,272 press releases published between 2003–2022, $N = 4,414$ mentioned the term "crisis." Moreover, we observed an increase in the EC's official communication on the topic of crisis. The frequency of press releases referencing crisis started at 4.8% of

overall communication in 2003, and hovered between 3.2% and 4.8% until 2007. From late 2008, this ratio increased to at least triple, reaching 25% in 2009 and again 24.8% in 2015, but stayed above 14% until 2019. In 2020, more than half of the press releases mentioned crisis (54%), and the ratio remained above 30% in the next two years. Figure 1 shows the salience of crisis over the years.
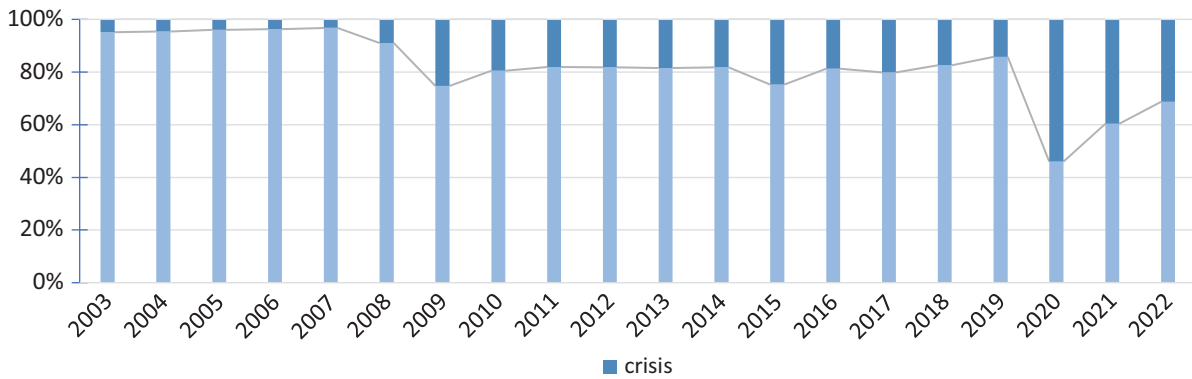

Figure 1. Yearly percentage of EC press releases referencing crises.

These dates correspond with significant events of the recent past: the financial and economic crisis (2008–2011), the refugee crisis (2015–2016), the health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic (2019–2022), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). However, we also observe that once crisis becomes a salient concept, its salience tends to stabilize at higher than previous levels.

To investigate the geopolitical focus of the EC's crisis discourses (RQ2), we divided the corpus along the lines defined by the changes in the frequency of references to crises identified above. We calculated the term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) values of the geopolitical entities (GPE) coded based on the named entity recognition performed in the data processing steps described above, a measure used in information extraction to express the relevance of a term in a collection of documents by weighting frequencies against the number of documents in which it occurs. Table 2 shows the prevalence of GPE in the EC press releases.

Table 2. Top GPE and their TF-IDF values.

2003--2007		2008--2014		2015--2019		2020--2022	
GPE	TF-IDF	GPE	TF-IDF	GPE	TF-IDF	GPE	TF-IDF
Darfur	169.6	Spain	636.1	Turkey	906.8	Ukraine	1,178.7
Russia	162.1	Syria	623.5	Greece	671.1	Russia	562.3
Sudan	125.6	Italy	565.8	Jordan	472.3	Moldova	362.8
Lebanon	125.6	Greece	555.3	Ukraine	432	France	347.6
Gaza	125.4	Ireland	519.3	Italy	429.4	Germany	342.7
Iraq	119.8	China	514.3	Syria	342.6	Italy	318.9
Chechnya	105.2	Germany	510.4	Tunisia	326.8	Spain	282
Myanmar	103	France	506	Iraq	264.9	Greece	269
France	96.3	UK	502.2	Lebanon	262.7	Croatia	268.4
Canada	94.5	Portugal	496.3	Georgia	257.9	Syria	258.5

As we expected, the changes in the geopolitical gaze reflect the main crises defining the periods under investigation: while in 2003–2007 the most salient GPE were located in the Middle East and Russia–Chechnya, after 2008, the countries of the EU took center stage, along with Syria, and China. From 2015, the attention turned towards Turkey and Greece, whereas from 2020, in particular in 2022, Ukraine, Russia, and the major EU countries are the most emphatically present. Despite these changes in the importance of particular areas, we also observed that the regional geopolitical gaze is relatively constant in time, as shown in Figure 2.
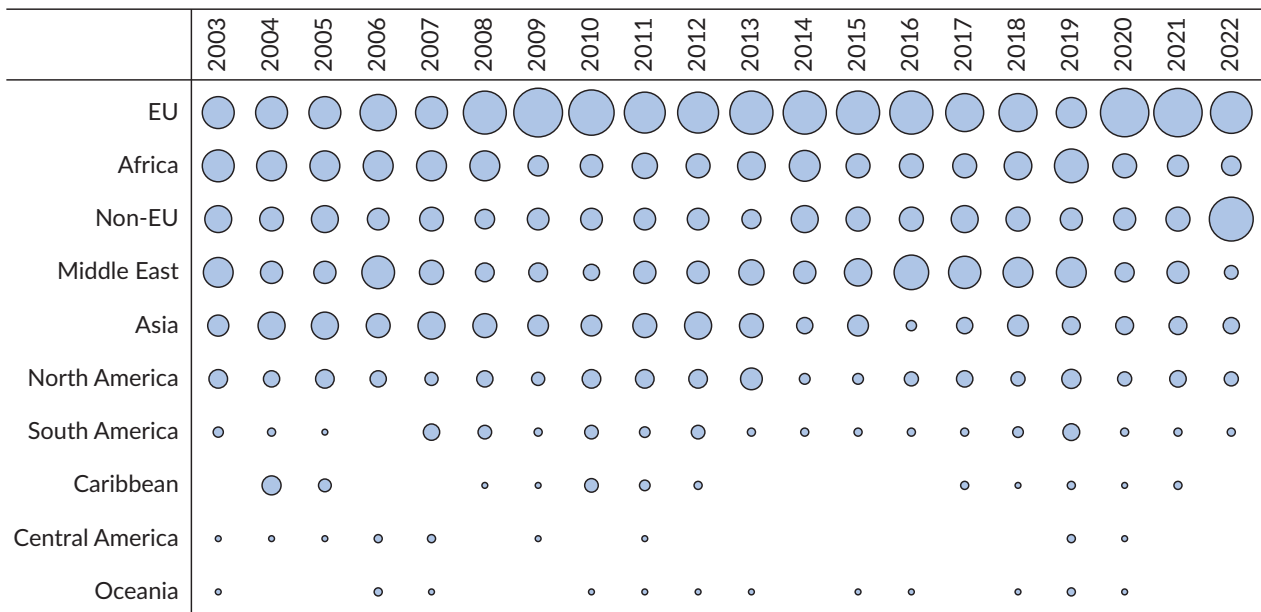

Figure 2. Regional references in the crisis corpus: percentage of case occurrence by years.

These results show that even though the nature of the crises facing the EU, along with their particular locations, change in time, the main regions covered by these discourses are constant. The frequencies of GPE designate the following main areas where crisis discourses and policies are focused: the EU, Africa, the Middle East, and Non-EU countries from the continent.

Policy areas were coded as the domains in which actions were taken by the EC or other EU actors, according to the titles of the press releases, which index the primary or most emphatic domain, in line with the purposes of the self-presentation on the EC. Policy action can also originate in one domain and impact another, for example an economic measure meant to tackle unemployment. In such cases, we coded the domain where the impact was indexed, in this case, the social domain.

The areas where the EU crisis discourses offered interventions were the economy (34% of cases), development and humanitarian aid (19.4%), foreign relations (8.6%), social (8.2%), general EU affairs (6.3%), migration (4.8), safety and security (4.3%), health (3.7%), environment (1.8%), justice and rights (1.8%), research (1.8%), energy (1.6%), education (1.1%), transport (1%), culture (0.7%), and tourism (0.2%). We note that there is no direct correspondence between the crises in our introductory periodization, i.e., the economic crisis, the refugee crisis, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and these domains of action. Instead, the economy's weight as a crisis intervention domain has been constant throughout the two decades. In crisis discourses, press releases

of the EC primarily posit the EU as an economic actor. Figure 3 shows the evolution of the weight (percentage of cases by year) of the two main crisis policy areas: economy and development and humanitarian aid.
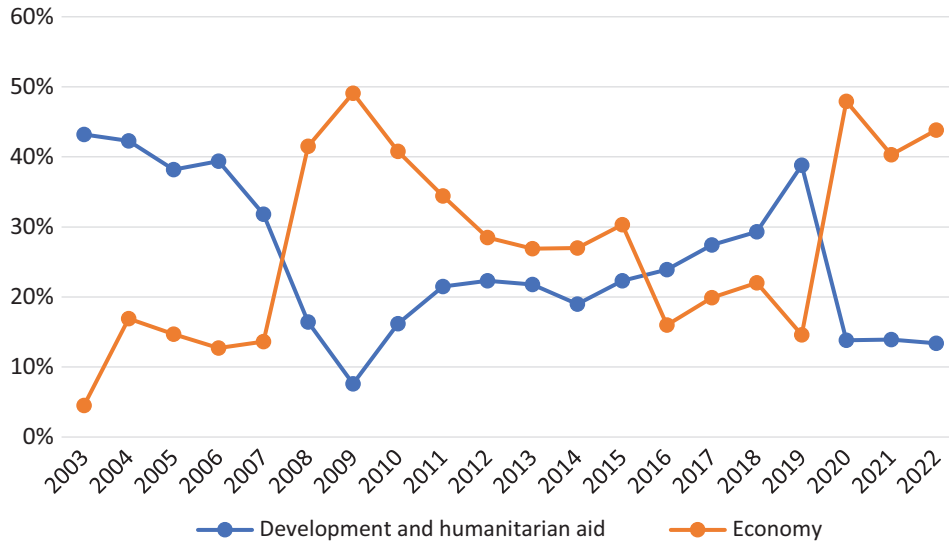

Figure 3. Evolution of the policy areas of development and humanitarian aid and economy (percentage of cases by years).

Regarding the changes in time of domains in which the crisis frame was activated (RQ3), we did not find compelling evidence that these became more varied over time. Instead, the crisis frames were activated in all the policy areas coded based on the areas of action claimed by the EC throughout the investigated period studied, as shown in Figure 4.
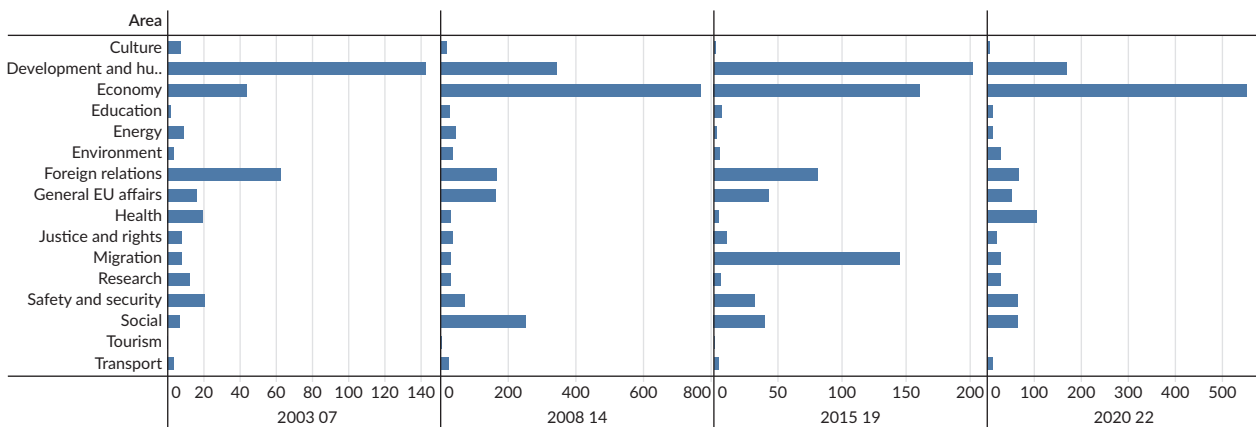

Figure 4. Policy areas by periods (case frequencies).

To answer our RQ4, the term "crisis" occurred in recurrent linguistic patterns made up of "crisis" as a node and words that co-occurred with it, like nouns modified by it, as in "crisis management," or verbs having "crisis" as an object, as in "trigger a crisis." For our analysis, we categorized the collocates of "crisis" that function as its modifiers, thus narrowing, complementing, and specifying its meaning. The main such collocates of "crisis," with a frequency of at least five occurrences in a two-word window in our corpus, are summarized in Table 3. Grouping them into geopolitical, temporal, scale, and manifestation categories was developed inductively.

Table 3. Categorized collocates of the node "crisis" in the crisis-corpus.

Category	Crisis collocates
Geopolitical	Syrian, global, geopolitical, Rohingya, Sahel, Darfur, regional, Middle East, Libyan, Lebanon, Burundi, Mali, Afghan, Sudan
Temporality	current, ongoing, protracted, future, immediate, present, first, last, continuing, month, long
Scale	unprecedented, bad, exceptional, severe, major, serious, biggest, complex, acute, large, chronic, deep, systemic, massive, large-scale, dire, dramatic
Manifestation	Gas, security, politics, debt, energy, climate, migration, nutrition, public health, social, supply, banking, waste, Ebola, economy, market, bird flu, hunger, E-coli, volcanic ash, BSE, displacement, oil, avian influenza, dairy, food price, migratory, biodiversity, bank, liquidity, Covid-19, Coronavirus, budgetary, credit, fiscal

Collocates in the geopolitical category indicate the regions that are prone to be framed in terms of crisis, even though, as we have seen, not all of these are among the most frequent GPE present in the crisis corpus, and there are other regions, including EU-member states, where crises have been prominent: "EU announces €78 million for South Sudan crisis," "Darfur crisis: Commissioner Michel visits refugee camps in Chad," "EU regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis."

Collocates in the temporality, scale, and manifestation categories have been used to build a dictionary to code the corpus automatically and explore relationships with the geographic and policy areas discussed above.

Regarding frequencies, the most salient crisis types, as indexed by the collocation patterns, are economic, financial, Covid-19, refugee, and humanitarian crises. The various crisis types were addressed in different policy areas, as summarized in Table 4. The table presents the most salient crisis collocates in each policy area, which cover at least 10% of the cases in the respective area.

The above-presented collocation patterns showed that the economic crisis was addressed in almost all policy areas and that the defining crises of entire domains like social or tourism were the economic ones. At the same time, the climate crisis only appeared to be salient in environmental policy. In contrast, for example, the refugee crisis appears salient in the respective policy domain and in foreign relations, education or safety, and security.

Crisis framing also differed by policy areas in terms of temporality and scale. Mapping our crisis word use dictionary built from the modifier collocates over the cases coded by policy areas showed that the scale of the crisis is predominantly indexed in the development and humanitarian aid and energy areas, with a particularly low salience in the economy, where temporality is more prominent, as shown in Figure 5.

Framing patterns also differed in terms of geography: The scale of the crisis is indexed most prominently in Africa, whereas temporality is indexed most prominently in the EU, as shown in Table 5.

In the policy frames employed by the EC, crises in Africa tended to be "unprecedented," "forgotten," "major," "complex," and "severe:" "Democratic Republic of Congo: Commissioner Georgieva announces increased humanitarian aid for 'forgotten crisis,'" "Somalia is going through a severe humanitarian crisis," "This unprecedented crisis in the Horn of Africa calls for an unprecedented response." Crises in Europe, on the

Table 4. The most salient crisis collocates by policy areas (modifiers present in at least 10% of the cases, manifestations only).

| Policy area	Crisis collocates (manifestations)
Culture	economic, financial
Development and humanitarian aid	economic, food, humanitarian
Economy	covid19, economic, financial, health
Education	covid19, economic, financial, refugee
Energy	economic, energy, gas, supply
Environment	climate, financial
Foreign relations	economic, financial, food, humanitarian, refugee
General EU affairs	coronavirus, economic, financial, refugee
Health	avian flu, covid19, health
Justice and rights	covid19, economic, financial, volcanic ash
Migration	migration, refugee
Research	covid19, economic, financial
Safety and Security	covid19, economic, humanitarian, political, refugee
Social	economic, financial
Tourism	economic, financial
Transport	economic, financial, volcanic ash
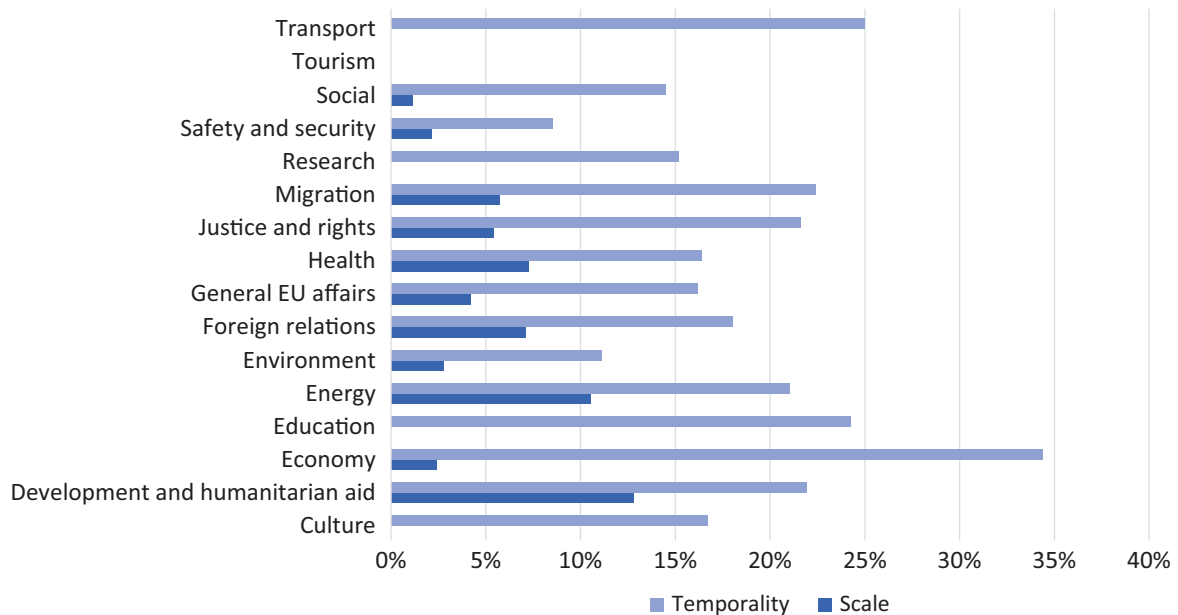
Figure 5. References to temporality and scale of crisis in policy areas (percentage of cases).

Table 5. Frequencies of scale and temporality collocates by regions.

	Africa	Asia	Caribbean	Central America	EU	Middle East	Non-EU	North America	Oceania	South America
Scale	68	8	0	0	30	19	22	4	0	0
Temporality	135	30	5	0	360	38	140	20	0	1

other hand, were "current," "ongoing," "recent," "new," and with a less frequency "severe": "The drive for greater efficiency began long before the current crisis," "The recent crisis and the severe turbulences in world trade have drawn the attention to the role of the external sector in propagating shocks," "We continue to work closely together with Member States to mitigate the economic effects of the ongoing crisis and enable the European economy to bounce back."

5. Discussion

Our findings show that the salience of crisis in the EU official communication observed by previous research conducted before the time frame of our analysis (Krzyżanowski, 2009) continued in the past decades. Findings also aligned with previous studies that highlighted the preoccupation of the EC to deal with the financial (Joris et al., 2014; Michaelides et al., 2014), migration (Dalakoglou, 2016; Dines et al., 2018), and health crises (Ares et al., 2021). Peaks in crisis references in 2009, 2015, and 2020 correspond to the financial, refugee, and health crises emerging at these times. At the same time, our findings also show an increase in the salience of crisis, and also that after each peak, its salience stabilized at higher levels than previously. That the EC increasingly framed its discursive self-presentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2015) in terms of crisis provides further evidence to the claim that the EU is increasingly being positioned as a "crisis manager" (Boin & Rhinard, 2013; Boin et al., 2014).

In times of crisis, the EU communicated predominantly regarding the economy, followed by development and humanitarian aid. Over time, these two crisis narratives showed an opposite dynamic. From 2009–2015, the main domains where EU policies were framed in terms of crisis were the economy, development, and humanitarian aid; the latter gained momentum between 2015–2020. During the Covid-19 pandemic and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the topic of the economy was again prevalent.

The language in which crises were addressed and crisis policies framed differ by region and policy area. Some regions like Syria, the Middle East, Libya, Lebanon, Afghanistan, or Sudan appear as salient collocates of "crisis," i.e., they are mostly discussed in terms of crisis, even when they are not the most frequent geopolitical references in the corpus. Crises were also framed in terms of temporality and scale, with geographically differentiated patterns: References to scale like "unprecedented" or "severe" co-occurred most frequently with Africa, while references to the temporality of crisis co-occurred most frequently with EU countries. Similarly, when looking at policy areas, we note that two major crisis collocates can function as framing terms for almost all policy areas: "economic" and "financial," whereas humanitarian crises were mainly addressed in the fields of foreign relations and safety and security.

6. Conclusion

Our study is a data-driven analysis of the EC's crisis communication, contributing to a deeper understanding of how a supranational institution such as the EU communicated on the topic of crisis over the last two decades. Hence, our research contributes to a better understanding of policy framing in times of crisis. The main takeaways of our study are as follows. First, we observed that the topic of crisis has become increasingly salient over the last two decades. Second, from the geographical perspective, we observed that despite the changes in the salience of particular geographical areas related to particular crises, the regional geopolitical gaze is relatively constant in time. However, the EC's communication on the topic of crisis

focused more on areas outside the EU in the first decade of our analysis and shifted toward the EU member states in the last decade. Geographical areas from the Middle East, Africa, and Ukraine were the focus of the EC communication. Third, economic, development, and humanitarian aid were the main crisis-related policy areas. The climate crisis was not salient compared to other crises and was mentioned only in recent years. Finally, the language of the "crises" differed by region, with reference to EU member states or African countries.

Our study comes with limitations. We identified patterns of EU official communication about crises in the past two decades. Thus, our findings are limited to this time frame. Hence, EU responses to the defense and security crisis posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine are only partially covered, as the war in Ukraine was an unfolding event at the end of 2022. Therefore, our sample reflected only briefly this crisis compared to others (e.g., the financial and health crises).

Computational approaches are limited in capturing the nuanced contextual elements that contribute to framing crisis communication. Hence, future research must consider the use of different methodologies, such as manual content analysis, to validate and complement our findings. Moreover, our analysis focused on the official communication of the EU in the form of press releases that usually frame the perspective of the institution in a curated and concise way. Therefore, our sample does not reflect the complexity of the decision-making process in the EU. Future research should also investigate the official communication of the EU and its reflection in the media from an integrative perspective, so that that policymakers and communication experts involved in crisis communication in the EU could optimize communication strategies during crises based on collaborative work between researchers and practitioners (Jin et al., 2020). Analyzing wider public discourses on the crises the EU faced in the last decades could show the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies, and allow for setting out practical implications for communications specialists and policy makers.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Media Framing of Government Crisis Communication During Covid-19

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Abstract

During the early phase of the Covid-19 crisis, televised speeches and press conferences were one of the preferred means of government communication. They emphasized the urgency and severity of the situation and allowed actors to lead news coverage. While in the immediate phase of the crisis these press conferences were also directed at the general public, their original function was, of course, to inform and influence media coverage. The article investigates how government press conferences were received in newspapers in the first phase of Covid-19, answering two research questions: Did a rally-around-the-flag effect occur among journalists during Covid-19? And how did government press conferences influence salience and sentiment in newspaper opinion pieces? To answer these questions, I draw on a unique dataset, including transcripts of all Covid-19 press conferences in five European countries between January and July 2020, as well as opinion pieces from tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. Based on a mix of automated and manual content analysis, the results reveal how factors such as country context, newspaper type, and the progress of a pandemic can influence how the government agenda is reflected in the media in times of crisis.

Keywords

agenda setting; crisis communication; Covid-19; media framing; political communication; political journalism

1. Introduction

The first phase of Covid-19 was not only a health crisis, but also a global communication "event"—one that led to an unexpected increase in the use of two seemingly old-fashioned communication instruments: government press conferences and legacy mass media (Kjeldsen, 2023). Mass media acted as a bridge between government actors and their publics, being involved in a constant negotiation of frames and meanings, and ultimately

joining governments in shaping the narrative of the crisis (Coman et al., 2021, pp. 4–5). This study examines the agenda-setting relationship between government crisis communication and newspaper journalism in the high-density communication environment of the very first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spring 2020.

During the early phase of the Covid-19 crisis, government press conferences received unprecedented attention. Many governments used these (almost always televised) press conferences and speeches as their main means of communication, emphasizing the urgency and severity of the situation (Craig, 2016; Ekström & Eriksson, 2017). In some countries, the heads of governments used these press conferences to guide their citizens through the crisis, while in others, public health officials became the figureheads of the fight against the pandemic. Millions of citizens around the globe were glued to their TVs to watch governments handle the crisis and to gain practical information about the development of the crisis and how things would unfold in the days to follow. However, press conferences' main and foremost function remained to inform journalists and influence media coverage (Carpenter et al., 2019; Pollard, 1951). Governments in any phase strive to set the media agenda (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2016). However, in times of severe crisis, it seems even more important for them to get their message across—not only to outline the government's position but also to call the public to action and inform them of crisis measures. Televised speeches during the first phase of Covid-19 have been shown to effectively influence distress and risk perception in the population (Teufel et al., 2020).

While governments use strategic communication to inform the public and frame the crisis, it is the media's duty to contextualize and evaluate the government's performance. The well-researched agenda-setting power of the media (e.g., McCombs & Guo, 2014) becomes even more important in times of imminent crisis. Legacy media are not the only source at the center of the agenda-setting process anymore (Dalton et al., 1998), but they do remain significant agenda-setters, even in a high-choice media environment (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017). The crisis even showed a resurgence of classical media: During the first phase of the pandemic, more people turned to traditional news outlets for reliable sources of information (Tejedor et al., 2020).

Around Europe, there has been a common downward trend in newspaper sales and circulation (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2023). Circulation of newspapers is steadily declining, economic pressure on publishers is high, news dissemination now also happens through social media, and in future years, artificial intelligence will play an increasing role in news production. A journalist's traditional role as the discoverer and producer of news has transformed into multiple roles, such as a "harvester" or "curator" of information (Bakker, 2014). However, newspapers and print journalists remain an important source for understanding and interpreting events or issues (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017) and "continue to play an important agenda-setting role in raising debate about the stories they select and editorially frame" (Cushion et al., 2018, p. 163). In times of crisis, particularly high-profile political commentators can gain extra leverage (Opperhuizen et al., 2021), as they play an important part in contextualizing and explaining the government's actions to the public.

This article empirically brings together government crisis communication and newspaper commentary coverage of the crisis, trying to establish communicative links between the two. It investigates how government press conferences were received in newspapers in the first phase of Covid-19, answering two research questions:

RQ1: Did a rally-around-the-flag effect occur among journalists during Covid-19?

RQ2: How did government press conferences influence salience and sentiment in newspaper opinion pieces?

To answer these questions, I draw on two unique datasets. First, a collection of 176 transcripts of government press conferences in five European OECD countries (Austria, France, Germany, Spain, and the UK) between January and July 2020; second, opinion pieces from one tabloid and one quality newspaper in each of these countries to reflect the media's take on government communication. Quality newspapers are broadsheet newspapers providing longer articles and more in-depth analysis, while tabloids try to catch readers' attention, e.g., through sensational headlines and a high degree of visualization with large and colored pictures (see, e.g., Magin & Stark, 2015).

The results show that the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic was a particularly elite-centered phase of political communication and agenda-setting in the public discourse. In the comment sections of some newspapers, we can establish a rally-around-the-flag effect towards the government. Generally, commentary writers seemed to be responsive to what happens in government press conferences; however, no clear pattern emerges. The study contributes to the literature on government crisis communication and media agenda-setting and establishes a link between the two, shedding light on leading journalists' role in shaping the crisis narrative and evaluating the governments' crisis management performance.

2. Covid-19 Crisis Communication Between Press Conferences and Opinion Pieces

In this article, I analyze data from government press conferences and opinion pieces in newspapers—two formats used to express (policy) stances and influence public opinion.

2.1. Opinion Pieces to Capture Framing

Editorial pieces (allowing members of the editorial board of a newspaper to express a personal stance on an issue) and op-eds (the page "opposite the editorial," which is used as a platform for guest authors and experts) are important agenda-setters in shaping public discourse. Opinion pieces (in this study, I summarize editorials and op-eds under this term) serve as an indicator of frames and opinions present in the public discourse at a certain time (Drewski, 2015). They can be very powerful agenda-setters (Savage, 2014), allowing alternative perspectives and new voices in addition to regular news reporting. The tone of opinion pieces and the selection of issues they take up play an important role in setting the agenda in public discourse (Golan & Munno, 2014).

During a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, regular everyday news coverage was dominated by one topic, the pandemic—an issue that touched upon many aspects of individuals' and society's daily business. Most parts of a newspaper, from the front pages to local news reporting or the sports and culture pages (if there were any), dealt with the implications of the pandemic and its countermeasures (Crabu et al., 2021). This number of news articles would be impossible to analyze within the scope of this study. Therefore, rather than drawing on news coverage as a reflection of public discourse, this study relies on opinion pieces (editorials, commentaries, op-eds) to capture the assessment of the crisis and, more specifically, the government's performance during this crisis.

Research on the content and sentiment of opinion pieces during the Covid-19 crisis is scarce. Natow (2022) analyzed op-eds published by college presidents in various US newspapers to highlight the topic of higher education during the pandemic, finding that they "not only communicated this way during a time of crisis but have also used op-eds to express leadership priorities and to confirm their own organization's important role within the community" (Natow, 2022, p. 1461). Capurro et al. (2022) analyzed the opinion discourse in Canadian newspapers on people who were not following the public health guidelines ("covidiots"). They state that this opinion discourse "contributed to the creation of a moral panic around the use of facemasks, safe physical distancing, quarantine, and isolation" (Capurro et al., 2022, p. 12). Both papers emphasized the importance of opinion pieces for shaping public discourse during the crisis.

2.2. The "Rally-Around-the-Flag" Effect in Times of Crisis

It is crucial for leaders in times of crisis to achieve a "'permissive consensus' to effectuate their policies and bolster their reputation" (Boin et al., 2016, p. 70). To achieve this goal, they need solidarity from many different parts of society. In severe crises, governments can receive support from actors that are usually much more critical towards them. This is called a "rally-around-the-flag effect"—government actors become more popular if they steer their country through a crisis (Mueller, 1970). Very often, this goes for public opinion, which shows rising levels of trust in governments (e.g., Hegewald & Schraff, 2022; Kritzinger et al., 2021) or support for government measures, as in the case of the pandemic (Kittel et al., 2021). However, this newly won popularity can quickly decrease (Lee, 1977). Sometimes, if the crisis seems particularly threatening, such as after terrorist attacks, even opposition parties root for the government (Chowanietz, 2011).

The same effect can be shown for journalists, as Barnett and Roselle (2008) did for the time after the September 11 attacks. In an article on media attention concerning earthquake risks, Opperhuizen et al. (2021) showed that regarding specific risks, the media served as strategic instruments for network actor communication.

A number of articles have already investigated the role of the media during the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit not explicitly the rally-around-the-flag effect. Fonn and Hyde-Clarke (2023) showed, for the second phase of Covid-19 in Norway, that the national crisis policy was rarely questioned by the media, as they supposedly contributed to the act of national solidarity that the government had asked for (Fonn & Hyde-Clarke, 2023, p. 1478). Ghersetti et al. (2023, p. 237) found in a comparative study of pandemic media coverage in Sweden and Iceland that "much emphasis [was] placed on supporting authorities' strategies, and little room was given to outside voices and criticism." Lu et al. (2023, p. 301) pointed towards what they call a "herd behavior of the news media" during the first phase of the pandemic, which also increased the media's agenda-setting power during that phase.

During the very early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, we experienced a rally-around-the-flag effect among voters in all countries included in the study (Cardenal et al., 2021; Kritzinger et al., 2021). With this study, I want to show whether this was also true for opinion leaders in the media, as "the focus of coverage is expected to shift across different stages of the crisis" (Coman et al., 2021, p. 4). The first hypothesis, therefore, reads

> **H1:** Sentiment in the media towards the government increased and then decreased over the course of the first phase of the crisis (inverse U-shaped effect).

2.3. The Influence of Press Conferences on Media Coverage

Generally, press conferences are used by politicians as an opportunity to lead public opinion (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2003, 2013a; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2010). As a unique event in which politicians can directly interact with journalists, they get the opportunity to justify their policy decisions directly and, therefore, influence media coverage.

Government press conferences, in particular, are an effective tool for leading news coverage. Eshbaugh-Soha (2013a, 2013b) found that press conferences held by US President George W. Bush had a high probability of being covered on the evening news, and the president's opening remarks dictated a solid percentage of news coverage. Televised press conferences were particularly effective in attracting short-term media attention (Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). When the government is considered the most important and relevant source of information, such as on the progress of (international) crises, it is more likely that they lead news coverage, as Wanta and Foote (1994) showed in an analysis of President George H. W. Bush's press coverage.

Research shows that government actors are likely to lead news coverage through their press conferences and that topics of high relevance amplify these effects. Given the very particular situation of the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis, governments chose press conferences as their main means of communication for these reasons. During the first phase of Covid-19, it is probably not accurate to look for evidence of agenda setting (McCombs, 1997), as the media agenda was dominated by the progression of the crisis. However, it is noteworthy to see whether the messages that governments extensively tried to communicate came across and were received in the newspapers. Hart et al. (2020) found that newspaper coverage in the early phase of the pandemic was highly politicized, so political actors were highly visible in newspapers. We expect that the likelihood of government press conference appearances and messages being reflected in short-term media coverage also holds for opinion pieces in newspapers, arguing that:

H2a: Opinion pieces were more likely to reference the government the day after a press conference.

In addition to leading news coverage in the first place, governments also have an interest in influencing the sentiment of opinion pieces. Outside of crisis periods, governments usually aim to generate positive media coverage (Liu et al., 2012) by informing the public about their achievements and having a positive outlook. In an acute crisis, however, governments might sometimes be interested in more negative coverage to help convince the public of the seriousness of the situation. In the early days of Covid-19, governments faced the possible collapse of the healthcare system, as hospitals were overwhelmed with patients (Woods et al., 2020). Political executives likely believed that conveying negative messages, which evoke a sense of fear and alarm, could help them raise awareness of the crisis among the public (Eisele et al., 2022; Stolow et al., 2020).

Research shows that at the beginning of the crisis, at least parts of the media coverage matched the tone of the government's press conferences (Krupenkin et al., 2020). Comparative empirical evidence for sentiment in newspapers on Covid-19 is still scarce; however, some country examples show that the variation of tone in newspapers over time was considerable (e.g., Basch et al., 2020; Ghasiya & Okamura, 2021; Šķestere & Darģis, 2022). As such, I hypothesize that:

H2b: Sentiment in opinion pieces was positively influenced by sentiment in press conferences (t-1).

3. Case Selection, Data, and Methods

3.1. Case Selection

This study draws on two unique datasets containing transcripts of press conferences from government press conferences and op-eds from two newspapers in Austria, France, Germany, Spain, and the UK. These five European countries were hit by the pandemic at a similar time and had similar responses. All five went into lockdown (or a "delay phase," as it was called in the UK) on very similar dates (between March 11 and 23; Secco & Conte, 2022) and were therefore confronted with similar communicative challenges during the timeframe used in this analysis.

In all five countries, governments relied heavily on press conferences to inform the public about Covid-19 developments and countermeasures. While all of these press conferences were orchestrated by the governments, the setting differed between countries (Dingler et al., 2024). In Austria, 75% of statements were made by members of the government, with the rest being spread across civil servants, NGO representatives, and other experts from various fields (Bates & Hayek, 2021). In Germany, France, and the UK, government members were present at about half the press conferences—spokespeople and civil servants took over for the other half. In Spain, only 22% of press conference statements were delivered by members of the government. The main communicators were the chief health epidemiologist Fernando Simón and General José Santiago; the prime minister only addressed the public every Saturday (Castaños & Rodríguez, 2021, p. 147).

For every country, I selected one quality newspaper and one tabloid newspaper (Austria—*Der Standard* and *Kronen Zeitung*; France—*Liberation* and *Le Figaro*; Germany—*Sueddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bild Zeitung*; Spain—*El País* and *El Mundo*; UK—*The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*). The newspapers were selected according to their daily reach, newspaper type, political leaning, and availability in the Lexis-Nexis database. The country selection includes different types of traditional media systems: Germany and Austria have a democratic-corporatist media system with a high newspaper circulation, while the UK has a liberal model with medium circulation and a commercially-orientated press. France and Spain are categorized into the polarized pluralist model with low newspaper circulation and a high degree of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). While the media systems of the five countries are fairly different, commentary-oriented journalism is widely present in all of the selected newspapers.

The time frame for the analysis includes the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, from January 21 to July 31, 2020. This timespan extends from the first detected case of Covid-19 in one of the five countries (Spain) until the lifting of the measures in the first wave (end of "first lockdown"). While the pandemic as a whole lasted much longer (the WHO declared an end to the pandemic on May 5, 2023), this first, unprecedented phase of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020 is considered an immediate crisis in terms of crisis management and crisis communication (see e.g., Fasth et al., 2022).

3.2. Data Collection

First, to assess government crisis communication in these countries, I draw on transcripts of all televised speeches and press conferences of governments during the immediate phase of the Covid-19 crisis (Hayek

et al., 2024). For each country, the sampling period spans from the first public address held on Covid-19 up to the first public address in which a government announced a relaxation of the restrictive measures put in place to contain the virus. Since this study focuses on this initial phase of the crisis, which is crucial for crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2022), rather than the whole period of the pandemic, I do not restrict the analysis to singular events but to all televised government speeches and press conferences during the initial phase. These press conferences usually consisted of one or more introductory speeches, followed by a question-and-answer session with journalists (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017). Video recordings of press conferences were downloaded and then transcribed using a combination of automatic speech recognition software and manual transcription proofreading (for a more detailed description of the data, see Dingler et al., 2024).

Second, I draw on editorials and opinion pieces to measure the reflection of these government press conferences in the media. Rather than regular daily news coverage, which during this initial phase of the crisis focused mainly on reporting the progression of the pandemic and explaining the implications of crisis measures for the public, opinion pieces are written to frame current political events and offer an opinion on, in this case, the government's management of the crisis. Editorials and opinion pieces "published in high-circulation quality newspapers can significantly shape the agenda-setting and opinion-making process in the public sphere" (Drewski, 2015, p. 267).

The opinion pieces were collected from the LexisNexis Academic Database (https://advance.lexis.com/bisacademicresearchhome) for all newspapers except *Kronen Zeitung* (Austria) and *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany), for which the data was collected from APA DeFacto (http://www.campus.defacto.at/act/psp/welcome.htm). Depending on the filter and search options provided by the databases and based on the unique structure of each newspaper, a set of keywords was used to collect only those articles featured in the newspaper's opinion or editorial sections. After the initial data collection, the data was processed using a script programmed to extract information from the articles to record the publication date, author, title, section, and subsection (where applicable). The resulting data set was then filtered further to include only those articles that were confirmed to be opinion pieces (based on the extracted section) and featured the topic of Covid-19, as confirmed by a dictionary-based search. In the final round of data cleaning, the remaining opinion pieces were assessed manually, which made it possible to fill any gaps in contextual information not provided by the database. The final data set comprises 2,744 opinion pieces in total.

An overview of the data is provided in Table 1. Over 193 days (January to July 2020), the five governments held between 18 (France) and 52 (UK) Covid-19-related press conferences. Quality newspaper opinion pieces were fairly evenly distributed across France, Germany, and Austria, with more opinion pieces published in the UK and Spain. Among tabloid newspapers, *Liberation* and *El Mundo* stand out, having published more than two opinion pieces a day on average. This is in line with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) categorization of the two media systems as having a high degree of commentary-oriented journalism. Guigo (2021, p. 95) even identified an "obsessive media coverage" for the case of France.

3.3. Methodological Approach

The article focuses on single news articles as the units of analysis. To assess the tone of opinion pieces, I used automated sentiment analysis in four languages, employing the NRCsentiment dictionary that was

Table 1. Data: Press conferences and newspaper opinion pieces.

Country	# of press conferences	Tabloid newspapers	Political alignment (tabloids)	# of articles (tabloid)	Quality newspapers	Political alignment (quality)	# of articles (quality)
Austria	42	*Kronen Zeitung*	Right-wing populism/ conservativism	66	*Der Standard*	Social liberalism	166
France	18	*Liberation*	Center-left	417	*Le Figaro*	Center-right/ conservativism	129
Germany	24	*Bild Zeitung*	Center-right to right-wing populism/ conservativism	99	*Sueddeutsche Zeitung*	Progressive liberalism	173
Spain	42	*El Mundo*	Center-right	381	*El País*	Center-left	536
UK	52	*Daily Mail*	Right-wing	155	*The Guardian*	Center-left	709

built through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The sentiment lexicon covers a number of emotions; however, I focused only on negative and positive emotions (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). Negative or positive sentiment scores were calculated for those opinion pieces that directly dealt with the government, i.e., included terms like "government" (*gouvernement*, *Regierung*, *gobierno*) or "president/prime minister" (*président*, *Bundeskanzler*, *presidente del gobierno*), or the names of leading members of government, or if there was a direct reference to a press conference. Opinion pieces that did not include these references to the government were coded as neutral. Sentiment scores were computed using log-odds ratios (Lowe et al., 2011).

As control variables, I include publicly available information on the epidemiological situation in the country, expressed through Covid-19 death rates per 100,000 inhabitants, based on the death rates reported by the WHO (OECD, 2021; WHO, 2021). These indicators were measured on a daily basis.

To test the hypotheses, I rely on panel data analysis with lagged independent variables. I draw on the approach developed by Wanta and Foote (1994), who "examined the relationship between the President and press through an agenda-setting framework that suggests that the President could be an important determinant of the issues the press covers" (Wanta & Foote, 1994, p. 439).

The panel data set comprises 725 observations across five countries and 193 days. If more than one opinion piece appeared on one day (238 cases for tabloid newspapers, 375 for quality newspapers), mean sentiment scores for each day were calculated.

4. Results

First, I examine whether journalists "sided" with governments in the initial weeks of the pandemic. For the rally-around-the-flag effect (H1), the analyses return mixed results. In quality newspapers (Figure 1), we can observe an inversed U-shaped effect for the sentiment scores in Austria (*Der Standard*) and Germany (*Sueddeutsche Zeitung*). Quality newspapers in France, Spain, and the UK generally seem to show much less

variation in sentiment over time. The most positive opinion piece in a quality newspaper appeared in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* on April 29, a succinct hymn at the end of the first lockdown in Austria:

> Austria is opening up and breathing a sigh of relief. After the first stores reopened two weeks ago, the lockdown restrictions have now been lifted after seven long weeks: People are allowed out on May 1st. There is also a timetable for the opening of schools, restaurants, and hotels until the end of May. This is not yet normality with compulsory masks and social distancing rules. But it is a success story in times of the coronavirus pandemic, at least in chapter one.
>
> The government and the population have done a lot of things right in this crisis, and this success at this stage should now give the strength to look in two directions at once: boldly forward and critically back. (Münch, 2020, p. 4, translation by the author)

For tabloid newspapers (Figure 2), I have to reject H1. Apart from the German *BILD*, no significant quadratic effects can be observed. However, sentiment in opinion pieces on Covid-19 varied a lot more in tabloid media—which also speaks to the nature of the newspaper type. The most negative opinion piece in a tabloid newspaper appeared in *El Mundo* on February 24—an alarmist piece criticizing journalists and health officials for not taking the pandemic seriously enough:

> Some journalists who minimize the potential seriousness of the Covid-19 epidemic with the false mantra that its mortality rate (around 3% in the confined area of China) is much lower than that of seasonal influenza (between 0.1% and 0.3% in first world countries) are embarrassing, but it is alarming that specialists do the same, such as Amparo Larrauri, Epidemiological Coordinator of the Carlos III Hospital in Madrid, who stated that the coronavirus "is a virus that is within the normal range." (Tadeu, 2020)

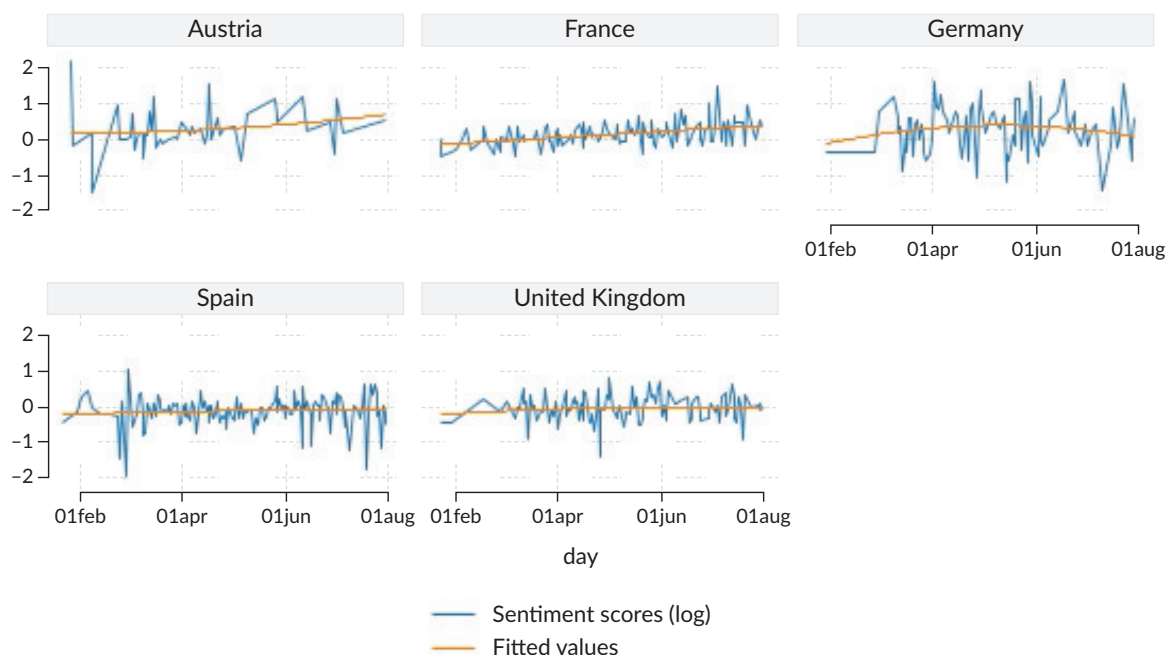**Figure 1.** Sentiment on Covid-19 in quality newspapers, 2020.

Figure 2. Sentiment on Covid-19 in tabloid newspapers, 2020.

In H2a, I expected that opinion pieces would be more likely to reference the government the day after a press conference. Governments' presence in this case was measured as the occurrence of the name of the head of government, health minister, or the word for "government" in the respective language. This varies considerably across countries: In Austria (34%) and Germany (44.7%), governments were only mentioned in less than half the opinion pieces, while in Spain (77.8%), France (85.1%), and the UK (93.6%), the government was almost always at the center of political commentators' attention.

Table 2 shows the results of a logistic regression model with the government's presence in an opinion piece as the dependent variable, the first lag of whether a press conference was held or not as an independent variable, and time, Covid-19 death rates, and country fixed effects as controls. The results in Table 2 show that this hypothesis can be confirmed. The government was 1.5 times more likely to be referenced in opinion pieces the day after a press conference. This indicates the strong relationship between legacy mass media and government actors during the first phase of the crisis, where they interacted at these press conferences almost daily. The effect is strongly driven by the UK and, in particular, by the comments section of *The Guardian*, where Boris Johnson alone was mentioned in 92.6% of the opinion pieces and amplified by the fact that Johnson was absent from the daily press briefings for almost a month because he himself fell ill with the virus (Garland & Lilleker, 2021).

In H2b, I expected sentiment in opinion pieces to vary with the sentiment on the press conferences from the day before. Table 3 shows the results of a linear regression model with sentiment in opinion pieces as the dependent variable, sentiment in press conferences (lagged) as an independent variable, and time, Covid-19 death rates, and country fixed effects as controls.

This hypothesis has to be rejected. None of the effects in the model are significant. Other studies show that governments showed very little variation in their communication strategies throughout the first phase of the

Table 2. Logistic regression: Governments' presence in opinion pieces.

Dependent variable: Presence of government in opinion pieces	Odds ratio	Standard error
Pressconf (lagged)	2.500***	0.797
Day	1.072***	0.016
Day^2	0.999***	0.000
Deaths.L1	0.998	0.012
Country fixed effects (baseline: Austria)		
France	15.477***	7.050
Germany	1.929	0.681
Spain	13.792***	7.340
UK	82.380***	50.848
Constant	0.110	0.009

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; number of observations—593; pseudo $R^2 = 0.295$.

Table 3. Linear regression: Sentiment in opinion pieces.

Dependent variable: Sentiment (log) in opinion pieces	Coefficient	Standard error
Sentiment_Pressconf.L1	0.141	0.098
Day	0.012	0.007
Day^2	0.000	0.000
Deaths.L1	0.000	0.003
Country fixed effects (baseline: Austria)		
France	0.112	0.106
Germany	0.034	0.094
Spain	−0.097	0.103
UK	−0.277***	0.088
Constant	−0.511	0.356

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; number of observations—158; $R^2 = 0.143$.

pandemic. Once they had adopted a certain tone and communication style, they went through with it for the rest of that crisis phase (e.g., Dingler et al., 2024; Kjeldsen, 2023). This is in line with the tests for H1, which show us that in most newspapers, sentiment varied slightly over the examination period—sentiment in government press conferences, however, followed a very different pattern (see Figure 1 in the Supplementary File).

5. Conclusions

In this article, I sought to examine the empirical relationship between government press conferences and newspaper opinion pieces during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. A time of crisis is also a time of intensified political communication for both political actors and journalists. First, I examined whether opinion-leading journalists engaged in a rallying-around-the-flag effect, i.e., sided with the government in the initial phase of the crisis. While the results are mixed, this effect could be observed for opinion pieces in

some newspapers during the first phase of the pandemic. This is particularly interesting for tabloid newspapers such as the German *Bild Zeitung*, whose commentators usually show a critical, even cynical, stance towards the government and politics in general. Overall, the results are in line with country-case studies of the first phase of the pandemic (Bates & Hayek, 2021; Borucki & Klinger, 2021; Castaños & Rodríguez, 2021; Garland & Lilleker, 2021; Guigo, 2021), which found that after fairly firm and conclusive first responses, confusion and early forms of resistance against the measures set in. This seems to be reflected in the media's contextualization of unfolding events.

Press conferences in times of crisis seem to be a very effective way of leading news coverage and editorial pages. Opinion-leading journalists readily talk about (heads of) governments the day after they hold their press conferences, particularly in the UK, where Boris Johnson dominated the government communication strategy and also seemed to be omnipresent in newspaper commentaries. However, the sentiment of press conferences did not translate into opinion pieces. Here, government communication and journalistic classification diverged more than expected—from a perspective of media diversity and democracy in public discourse, this is obviously a good thing.

This study sheds some exploratory light on the agenda-setting relationship between government crisis communication and newspaper journalism: Further research into the topic, particularly on the rally-around-the-flag effect, will be appreciated. A more detailed qualitative analysis might help uncover some patterns between the two forms of communication, e.g., some phrases or symbolic expressions that were created and used only during the pandemic.

Looking back and summing up, the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was still actually called a crisis, was a great communication challenge for political actors and journalists. Politicians found themselves in the role of caretakers or managers rather than competing actors; journalists had to find a balance between critical assessment and support for containing the health crisis.

Generally, one can probably characterize this first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic as a particularly elite-centered phase of political communication and agenda-setting in the public discourse. During a time of confusion, complexity, and new, unexpected developments every day, with citizens being somewhat limited as to cross-checking information "with their own eyes," government actors and elite journalists got together on an almost daily basis to craft a crisis narrative. While the biggest "agenda-setter" at the time was the virus, both legacy media and governments found themselves in an unprecedented agenda-setting power position.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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