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LEAD ARTICLE

How young consumers in China perceive femvertising: A qualitative study

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Abstract

“Femvertising”, advertising that adopts the perspective of females, has become a popular global marketing strategy. Some Chinese brands are adopting it in their marketing communication. However, studies on audience response to femvertising mainly focus on Western consumers. Relevant research studies, particularly those with young consumers, are still scarce in China. This qualitative study aims to fill the research gap and examine young consumers’ responses to femvertising and its perceived effectiveness. Focus group interviews were conducted in March 2023 with three groups comprising female university students, male university students, and working females aged 20 to 25. The results showed that participants paid much attention to the advertising execution style and storytelling skills of femvertising. Liking of a specific feminist advertisement would enhance the brand image. However, a brand’s historical portrayal of female influences the communication effectiveness of its femvertising. An abrupt adoption of femvertising creates doubts and reservations. Female and male participants had different attitudes toward femvertising. As expected, female participants showed more appreciation of femvertising than male participants.

Keywords

Advertising strategy, consumer perception, advertising effectiveness, branding strategy, focus group study.

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Introduction

Since Dove's Real Beauty campaign was launched in 2004 as a pioneer of femvertising (Dan, 2017), femvertising has become a globally applied marketing strategy (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2020; Pérez, & Gutiérrez, 2017). Most femvertising targets the youth market segment. Yoon and Lee (2023) observed that young people are more likely to discuss pro-female or female-empowerment-related messages online. Overall, the use of femvertising can improve target consumers' attitudes toward a campaign (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2016) and their purchase intention for the advertised products (Jinah, 2022).

Several femvertising campaigns launched in China have stirred up much societal impact. Zeng, He, and Liu (2022) postulated that SK-II's 2016 "Marriage Market Takeover" advertisement was considered as the representative of femvertising in China. After the advertisement was released, it generated over 120,000 views within a few days on China's social media platforms, including Sina Weibo and WeChat (Rapp, 2017). This advertisement addressed the controversial social topic of "leftover women" and encouraged females to be autonomous and strong. After the launch of the campaign in China, sales of SK-II products were boosted by over 50 percent (Zeng, He & Liu, 2022). Although brands in China are increasingly turning to femvertising (Teng et al., 2021), extant studies, such as Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) qualitative study of young consumers, mainly focus on Western countries. Relevant research studies, particularly those with young consumers as the study focus, are still scarce in China. Furthermore, in-depth analysis of the similarities and differences among young consumers with different demographic backgrounds is limited. To fill this research gap, a focus group interview study was designed to examine young consumers' responses to femvertising and its perceived effectiveness among different demographic groups in China. The results will be of use to global and local brands that are considering femvertising in developing an inclusive brand image among young consumers.

Literature review

Femvertising and its development in the global context

Scholars commonly use the terms "femvertising" and "women-empowering advertising" to describe advertising that promotes gender equality and women empowerment (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2020; Skey, 2015). Femvertising challenges the public stereotype of what females should look like and what kind of social roles they should play (Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017).

Due to the growing popularity of femvertising, scholars conducted various studies to examine its advertising effectiveness (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2016; Åkestam et al., 2017; Drake, 2017) and corporate social responsibility/brand-cause fit (Champlin et al., 2019; Pankiw, Phillips, & Williams, 2021; Sterbenk et al., 2022). Specifically, Åkestam et al.'s (2017) experimental study proved that consumers generally appreciate femvertising more than other more traditional forms of advertising. Jinah's (2022) survey study of young consumers aged 18 to 29 found that consumers show positive attitudes toward femvertising, and that their intention to purchase the advertised products is boosted if the femvertising relates to their personal experience. Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) interview study found femvertising to be effective among young female consumers, whose optimistic evaluation of it results in an improved attitude toward advertised brands. Similar findings were spotted by Drake's (2017) experimental design. Yin et al.'s (2020) experimental study highlighted that female consumers show more preference to advertisements presenting female endorsers in a smart way. In terms of critiques of femvertising, scholars generally see femvertising as an extension of commodity feminism and consumerism, while Nosheen (2016) sees femvertising as a brand's exploitation of feminist ideas and the packaging of some feminist concepts with products sold to consumers as essentially commercial hype. Besides, scholars do not just discuss gender-related topics in advertising. They also have raised concerns regarding the media's overall treatment of gender-related issues. For instance, in a study conducted by Bamezai et al. (2020), cross-sectional surveys and semi-structured interviews were employed to examine the landscape of journalism education in India. The media industry exhibits a dualistic nature in its approach and practices, as it tends to adopt a reactive stance towards the representation of women, often portraying them in sexualized and stereotypical ways, while simultaneously rejecting any biased portrayal when it comes to women's empowerment.

Although many extant studies show that consumers appreciate femvertising, different voices on the application of femvertising have also been recorded. For example, Kapoor and Munjal's (2019) study of female consumers challenges the effectiveness of femvertising. They postulated that although self-consciousness and emotional needs improve the attitudes of female consumers toward femvertising, such positive evaluation does not contribute to their purchase intentions. Ng and Chan's (2014) study used qualitative interviews to investigate the responses of adolescents to three types of female images in advertising, including an elegant woman, a strong woman, and a sophisticated

urban woman. The study found that male interviewees reject the strong woman image and imagine her as making them uncomfortable. They appreciate the urban sophisticated woman and imagine her as charming and approachable. Femvertising and related themes have become prominent in online and social media (Rodrigues, 2016). When incorporating femvertising into the practice of corporate social responsibility, brand-cause fit significantly influences how brands develop their advertising messages. Champlin et al.'s (2019) analysis of awarded femvertising found different messaging themes in high brand-cause fit and low brand-cause fit contexts. When brands have a high fit/ congruence with advertised social cause, the messages highlight key themes such as overt femininity. However, themes such as breaking gender stereotype are mainly used in femvertising when brands have a low fit/congruence with the advertised social cause.

In summary, femvertising is a commercial product that blends with feminism and social culture. Existing studies mainly use surveys (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2020; Jinah, 2022), experiments (Åkestam et al., 2017; Drake, 2017), or content analysis (Champlin et al., 2019; Pankiw et al., 2021) to analyze the phenomenon of femvertising. Only a limited number of studies, such as Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) study of American youth, explore the topic via focus group interviews. Therefore, to enrich the understanding of femvertising among consumers, our study adopts focus group interview methodology to investigate how consumers perceive femvertising.

Femvertising in China

It is not uncommon for advertising in China that highlights female characters to demonstrate gender stereotype (Teng et al., 2021). Traditional female beauty images frequently appear in Chinese advertising (Chan, & Cheng, 2012; Qiao, & Wang, 2022). However, this trend starts to fade due to the glocalization of pro-female campaigns (Teng et al., 2021). In recent years, scholars have extended their study focus to femvertising. Case studies were mainly conducted to analyze femvertising from the perspective of semiotic analysis (Qiao, & Wang, 2022), textual analysis (Duan, 2020), critical discourse analysis (Guo et al., 2022), and the like. However, these studies failed to measure audience responses to femvertising. It is necessary to apply other research methods such as focus group interviews and sample surveys to extend the breadth and depth of the study of femvertising by examining audience perceptions and responses to it.

Even though there is a relative lack of literature on femvertising research in China compared with foreign studies, some significant research findings can

still be deduced. First, the gender discourse delivered in femvertising is often contradictory. Qiao and Wang's (2022) symbol analysis identified that although the analyzed femvertising from a global cosmetic brand verbally promotes female independence, the meaning of the verbal symbols is contradictory to that of the applied visual symbols highlighting the stereotyped female images. Guo et al.'s (2022) case study on sanitary napkin products also interpreted the struggle between female liberation and constraint. Second, because of the commercial function of advertising, femvertising generates conflicting feelings among audiences. Duan's (2020) textual analysis of 2,975 Weibo comments from femvertising vlogs found that the majority of Weibo users appreciate femvertising, while a small number dislike it because of the superficial messages delivered in the advertisements. Such contradictory feelings about femvertising were also explained by Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead (2016). Due to their commercial purpose, the feminist views reflected in femvertising are seen as politically shallow. Third, whether femvertising is an overall effective advertising strategy is controversial. Li and Kim's (2021) survey study of 583 Chinese consumers, ranging from teenagers to the elderly, found that femvertising that is female-oriented and breaks gender stereotype has a positive impact on consumers' attitudes toward advertising and their purchase intentions. Wang's (2021) experimental study showed that consumers are more emotionally responsive to femvertising from gender-oriented brands than non-gender-oriented brands. However, the advertising effectiveness of femvertising from non-gender-oriented brands is better than that of gender-oriented brands. Contradicting the previous two studies, Zeng, He, and Liu's (2022) content analysis of 5,000 Weibo comments concluded that audiences have quite different views on gender discrimination and stereotype. They do not fully accept the femvertising message and are wary of the ideology promoted in femvertising.

Femvertising and young consumers

Existing studies frequently analyze the femvertising phenomenon and its impact on young generations. This might be explained by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001). Media are effective in developing role models or representations for audiences to observe, learn, and imitate. Such impacts are more significant among young generations as their value systems are not solidly developed (Levine & Harrison, 2009). Femvertising as a media phenomenon may also be influential among younger generations in the long run.

Overall, young people actively participate in conversations about supportive representation of female empowerment. Yoon and Lee's (2023) content analysis of 343 YouTube videos related to a femvertising campaign found that the young generation, particularly females, are more willing to spread pro-female messages online. Furthermore, the impact of femvertising is significant among the youth. After young consumers are exposed to a brand's femvertising, their attitudes toward the advertised products and intention to buy them are enhanced (Teng et al., 2021).

Apart from the overall femvertising effect, some limited studies also explored demographic differences mainly through quantitative research methods. However, their research findings are to some extent inconsistent. Specifically, Wang's (2021) experimental design argued that there is no significant difference between female and male participants in terms of femvertising effect. Teng et al.'s (2021) experimental study with college students in China extended the impact of female empowerment to their male counterparts by analyzing young consumers' attitudes with regard to sexism/gender. Their study found that as with female consumers, young male consumers with low sexism/gender hostility also show feelings supportive of femvertising. On the other hand, femvertising may not always boost young male consumers' purchase intention toward the advertised products. In other words, whether demographic factors such as gender make a difference in femvertising effect is not clear. Continuous studies are necessary.

Moreover, extant studies on femvertising and demographic differences seldom apply qualitative research methods to collect young consumers' in-depth views. Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) focus group study compared female and male youngsters' views on femvertising, and concluded that young female consumers show more support for femvertising on the affective and behavioral levels than their male counterparts. In addition, both female and male young consumers appreciate the perceived fit/consistency between brand and the advertised social cause in femvertising. Although Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) study used qualitative research method to collect young consumers' views about femvertising, the interview participants were recruited from one university in the United States. Whether their views are representative in Asian countries such as China is unclear. Further explorations are required.

To summarize, although many brands employing femvertising in China made a success of it (Teng et al., 2021), existing literature shows that femvertising-related studies are limited in the country. As one of the most important consumer

markets (Caballero & Fengler, 2023), China cannot be ignored in femvertising studies. Further studies need to be conducted. Furthermore, young consumers are the focus in the existing femvertising studies. Even though some researches such as Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) tested how demographic factors like gender influence young consumers' views on femvertising, they mainly focus on Western countries. Whether such demographic differences exist in the China market is unknown. Therefore, the following two research questions are addressed in this study to explore the femvertising phenomenon among young Chinese consumers:

RQ1: How do young consumers perceive femvertising and its effectiveness?

RQ2: Do young consumers of different demographic backgrounds respond to femvertising differently?

Methodology

To answer the aforementioned research questions, focus group interviews were conducted in March 2023. The focus group interview is one of the most commonly used research methods in advertising studies (Stewart, & Shamdasani, 2017). It generates fruitful data and produces more fully articulated views from the participants (Wilkinson, 1998). The focus group interview is commonly conducted when researchers would like to collect interviewees' feelings about one specific topic, or figure out perception and attitude differences between groups, such as differences between females and males (Rabiee, 2004). The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the university at which the second author was studying.

Sampling

Convenience sampling was used in the study. All interviewees were recruited online from various social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and Douban. They were aged 20 to 25. All of them came from the first-tier and second-tier cities in mainland China. Three focus group interviews with 15 young interviewees were conducted. Each group consisted of five participants, which is a reasonable sample size for a focus group interview (Krueger, & Casey, 2002). To address the proposed RQ2, focus group interviews were conducted with different demographic groups. The first focus group interview was conducted with young female college students, the second one with young female employees, and the last one with young male college students. Since femvertising is a heavily gendered topic, participants with the same demographic profile such as gender were grouped together for

interview. Among the three groups, the young female employee group reported more frequent exposure to femvertising. Male college students, however, reported that they seldom paid attention to advertising in general, including femvertising.

The procedure

Prior to conducting the interviews, the corresponding author as the interview moderator provided the participants with an informed consent form and a brief introduction to the background of the research project. Following this, three advertisements were used as prompts because the content of video-based advertisements is easy to understand and can convey feminist ideas more directly (Zeng, He, & Liu, 2022).

Three selected television advertisements featuring both international and Chinese brands were shown. These advertisements shared some similarities in order to form a representative sample of femvertising. For example, the selected advertisements featured nontraditional female roles or activities as well as demonstrating female empowerment and autonomy. The duration of each advertisement was around 30 seconds to one minute. Femvertising clips promoting beauty and skincare products were selected because these products mainly target female consumers, and the beauty and skincare product industry has a responsibility to represent females in the media context (Sterbenk et al., 2022). Based on the aforementioned criteria, femvertising from two Chinese brands, PROYA and Watson's, and the global brand Olay were selected. The first advertisement, from PROYA, highlights how a teenage girl lion dance team strives to break down gender bias, and eventually win in the competition. The second one, from Watson's, tells the story of a young girl who plans to study abroad but is put down by her relatives. Eventually her mother encouraged her to pursue her dreams. The third advertisement, from Olay, features five successful Indian women asserting that individuals, including females, can overcome any challenge as long as they have the courage to follow their heart and can "grin at what they see in the mirror".

After showing the three advertisements, the interview moderator followed the interview protocol in the Appendix to raise questions relating to female images in the advertisements, participants' responses to the images, and the perceived effectiveness of the advertisements. Participants were encouraged to exchange their views openly. The focus group interviews lasted from one hour for the female student group to two hours for the young female employee group.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were written in Chinese. The second author prepared the transcripts and verbatim. Grounded theory was used to analyze the interview transcripts. After reading the interview transcripts several times, the authors used NVIVO to code and explore important content themes from the transcripts and keywords frequently reported by the interviewees. First, open coding was used to identify keywords and views that were frequently mentioned by interviewees. Second, selective coding was undertaken to explore potential links between the open codes. Third, axial coding was carried out to summarize the core categories and themes that emerged from the textual data. Here is an example of the coding procedure. When coding young consumers' perceptions of the female images portrayed in the femvertising, keywords and phrases such as "not influenced by stereotype", "break through the prejudice", "independent", "strong", "powerful", "brave to hold on when being challenged", "persistence", and "sincere" were identified from the interview transcript. After highlighting these keywords and phrases, selective coding was conducted to categorize these open codes. Regarding the examples mentioned above, the first five open codes were categorized to "autonomous/empowered"; codes of "brave to hold on when being challenged" and "persistence" were grouped to "resilient"; and the code of "sincere" was categorized to "sincere". After that, all selective codes relating to young consumers' perceptions of female images portrayed in the femvertising were compared in terms of their importance among the interviewees. The following theme emerged from the axial coding: autonomy is the most significant characteristic shared among females in perceiving femvertising.

Results

To answer the proposed research questions, thematic analysis was conducted. Overall, participants showed a positive attitude toward femvertising, as such advertising portrays females in an optimistic and independent way. They believed that the promotion of female empowerment and autonomy reflected the advertised brands' corporate social responsibility and representation of the disadvantaged, which effectively improved the advertised brands' images. However, young consumers from different demographic groups had different views on femvertising strategy. Gender difference was significant.

Theme 1: Young consumers appreciate femvertising due to its superior advertising execution and storytelling about female empowerment and autonomy

When participants were asked to indicate their impressions of the females featured in the femvertising and whether their images were desirable, they mainly used terms such as autonomous and resilient to describe the female characters highlighted in the advertisements and to show their appreciation. Most of the participants believed that the females in the advertisements were brave enough to challenge gender stereotypes and show gender diversity. The majority of participants held a positive view of the women portrayed in the three advertisements under study. The sense of appreciation was demonstrated strongly among female participants. Some female participants even admitted that the female characters in these advertisements were exactly who they wanted to be. Here are some representative quotes about participants' views of female characters featured in the femvertising and their attitudes toward them.

“Overall, ladies in the advertisements are open-minded, and not constrained by gender stereotype and how others evaluate them. They are very brave” (Male college student);

“The women in the Olay advertisement are the ideal female images in my view. I wish I could be as successful as the women in the Olay advertisement. I also wish I could be at least as successful as those in the PROYA advertisement” (Young female employees).

Overall, participants showed positive attitudes toward the selected femvertising. Most participants liked the advertisements due to their excellent advertising execution and storytelling. Specifically, the application of slice-of-life execution style allowed the participants to relate the advertising scenario to reality, easily generating resonance with the audience. The young interviewees also mentioned frequently that the femvertising clips, particularly the one about a lion dance team, were able to generate empathy because of strong storytelling. Some explained that good storytelling and appropriate pacing allowed the audience to stay focused and even forget they were watching advertisements. The two selected quotes are about advertising execution style and storytelling.

“The scenarios or problems faced by the female characters in the advertisements are close to reality. When females grow up, they somehow need to deal with the problems mentioned in the advertisements. When advertising applies such scenarios to communicate with a female audience, it's much easier to resonate with it” (Female college student);

“The strength of the PROYA advertisement is that it has strong storytelling. It doesn't feel like you're watching a commercial and there are few mentions

of the features of the brand. This indicates that the brand is serious and attentive to women's concerns. I think it is somehow a success" (Young female employee).

Although most participants appreciated the femvertising, some also mentioned their concerns or the disadvantages of the femvertising, particularly with regard to the Olay advertisement. Their concerns focused on the depth of the message relating to feminism. These participants did not like its slogan-shouting style of advertising, because it was fast-paced and highly ad-hominem, and the message was shallow. The following quote is a proof.

"The Olay advertisement just recorded a few successful women saying something, which I didn't really like... They just say something in the advertisement, and it's more like chicken soup for the soul. It didn't work for me" (Male college student).

Participants also discussed their feelings about femvertising in comparison with historical advertisements showing female images in China. Most of them agreed that, although uncommon, femvertising in China was witnessing an increasing trend. According to the observations of some participants from the young female employees' group, social media platforms present femvertising more frequently than traditional media. Some male participants reported that these advertisements usually appear during special holidays and events related to women such as Women's Day.

Theme 2: The effectiveness of femvertising among young consumers depends on the use of ideal female images and brands' previous images

The majority of participants admitted that femvertising could help brands improve their image, because the use of autonomous females in femvertising broke down the prejudices of females in the market and allowed the female voice to be heard. It made them believe that the advertised brands were genuinely respectful to women and spoke out on behalf of the disadvantaged. However, some participants from both the male and the female college student groups also pointed out a perceived gender difference in advertising effectiveness. They assumed that although feminism is on the social issues agenda, femvertising is more acceptable to female than male consumers. They also perceived that femvertising would not work for certain brands that previously featured female images in a traditional and sexy way, but suddenly changed advertising style to promote independent and autonomous female images. The following are two selected quotes, the first one highlighting the majority's view about how femvertising helps brands develop images and the second one showing

the minority's view about different advertising impacts on female and male consumers.

“Adopting this type of femvertising shows that the brand is working to eliminate prejudice against women. So, it can help build the brand's image” (Male college student);

“Some brands have a relatively consistent brand image by featuring sexy ladies in their advertisements in the past. All of a sudden, if they change the image from sexy ladies to strong and independent women, I think male consumers would not buy it” (Female college student).

Theme 3: Significant gender difference in how brands portray female images in advertising and whether brands should use femvertising as their communication strategy

When comparing results among different focus groups, it is clear that female participants showed different views than their male counterparts. First, female and male participants' perceptions varied in terms of how brands use female images in advertising. Female participants showed more particular concern for whether brands portray females appropriately in femvertising. In other words, they were more interested in whether the femvertising describes the female characters optimistically, and whether they present women's images in a negative and stereotyped way. When sharing their concerns, female participants more frequently referred to the Watson's advertisement as they felt that this advertisement did not present female images in an ideal and confident way. Most of the female participants complained that such advertisements show the negative side of women. Some participants also found that they might deepen the perceived conflict between traditional older females with gender stereotyped traits and nontraditional younger females. The following is one of the representative quotes:

“Regarding the Watson's advertisement, the plot of the advertisement sets up a conflict between women. But in real life, when relatives convince girls not to study for higher degrees, those words mainly come from males, rather than females. The advertisement actually exacerbates the conflict between females to a certain extent” (Female college student).

When comparing historical advertising with femvertising, the majority of female participants claimed that women in advertisements in the past were mostly portrayed in gender stereotyped roles such as virtuous wives and mothers, or beautiful ladies who met societal expectations of physical appearance. Overall, the images of women in femvertising are more diverse.

However, few male participants mentioned this. In addition, around half of the female participants found that the value of altruism, always thinking about people around and taking care of them, was commonly linked to female characters in past advertisements. In other words, the advertisements relating to females, previously, were others-focused. They seldom portrayed females' individual interests and personal dreams. However, femvertising emphasizes self-development and growth of females. Here is one representative quote:

“Previously, advertisements delivered messages about how females met social expectations. Ladies were expected to be physically attractive and beautiful. However, advertisements nowadays are more likely to consider females as individuals and pay attention to their inner needs” (Young female employee).

As with female participants, male participants also paid attention to the storytelling strategy of the advertisements. However, differences exist. Some male participants were more concerned about how female images portrayed in advertising contribute to advertising effectiveness. They claimed that how to present a female image in an advertisement was all about marketing. If femvertising targets female consumers, it would be more successful and even increase the sales performance of the advertised products. Here is a selected quote:

“How to construct female images in advertisements should consider the objectives and functions of the advertising” (Male college student).

Second, male participants showed a different level of appreciation of femvertising, compared with female participants. Specifically, some female participants from the young employee group admitted that they want to become strong women like those presented in the femvertising, while some male participants clearly pointed out their aversion to such female images as shown in the femvertising. In their view, the choice of subject matter and the way in which women are portrayed in femvertising are contradictory to the ideal type of female. Besides, male participants even questioned if femvertising is a wise choice for brands to use. In their view, the advantage of portraying autonomous women in femvertising is to win favor with the consumer base and thus lead to an increase in sales. But the disadvantage is also obvious. Male participants perceived that this type of femvertising would make some audiences feel uncomfortable. The followings are two quotes from male participants:

“Brands make profits. In China, few brands or advertisements portray females in this way. If brands promoted femvertising, it could become their selling point” (Male college student);

“When a brand makes a feminist advertisement, it is placed in a position to be judged by others. Men and women will make their own judgments about the advertisement. People who have the traditional idea of what a woman should be like may feel uncomfortable and they will criticize the brand” (Male college student).

Discussion

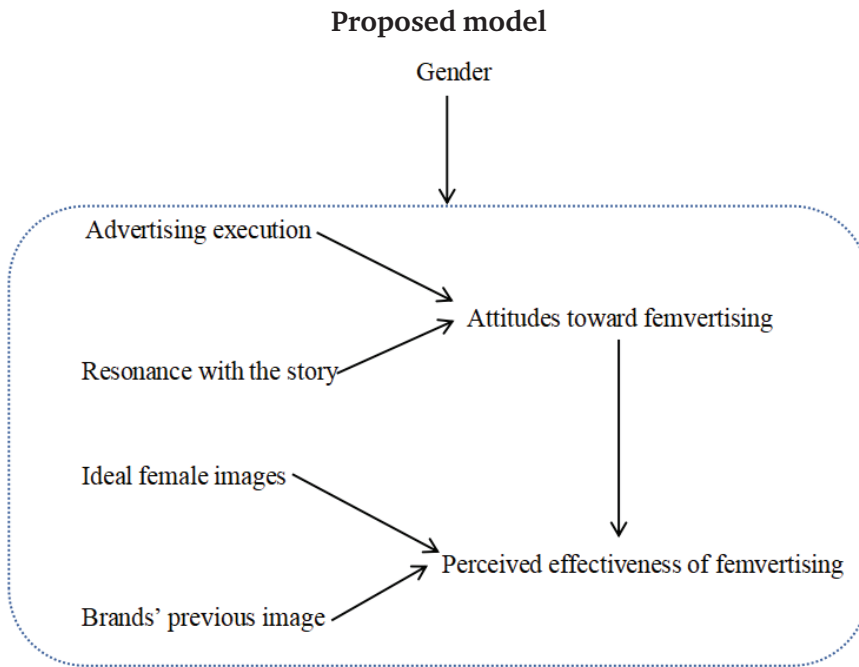
Three focus group interviews were conducted in March 2023 to figure out young consumers’ responses to femvertising and how they may differ. The results of this study, showing an overall supportive attitude toward femvertising, are consistent with Åkestam et al.’s (2017) experimental study of European females, Jinah’s (2022) survey study of young Japanese consumers, and Teng et al.’s (2021) experimental study about youth in China. Our focus group study also concurs with Duan’s (2020) finding about femvertising vlogs, namely that superficial messages delivered in femvertising work to its disadvantage. Although young participants in our study generally showed positive feelings about femvertising, not all of them admitted such advertising is beneficial to the brands. Some participants pointed out that the shallow messages presented in the advertising limit the femvertising effect. In addition, this study shows gender difference in how consumers perceive female images and femvertising. Echoing Abitbol and Sternadori’s (2016) focus group study and Yoon and Lee’s (2023) content analysis of femvertising videos, female participants were more accepting of femvertising. Moreover, among some male participants, fear of the strong woman image and preference for the gentle and traditional female are similar to findings in Ng and Chan’s (2014) study. Chen’s (2023) study also reported that the strong woman image was not widely accepted.

Theoretical contributions

A theoretical model, visualized in *Figure 1*, was developed from the results. This exploratory study confirms that young consumers’ attitudes toward femvertising are positively affected by the advertising execution style used in the advertising. Meanwhile, whether the storytelling in femvertising resonates with young consumers plays a significant role in attitudes toward

femvertising. If young consumers appreciate a feminist advertisement, they also believe it will enhance brand image. In other words, young consumers' attitudes toward femvertising have a positive impact on the perceived advertising effectiveness. In addition, how brands portray female images in femvertising and the consistency of these images before and after a campaign significantly influence the perceived effectiveness of femvertising. In this model, gender effect was considered. Through comparison of the views of different demographic groups, gender difference was found to be outstanding in terms of young consumers' attitudes toward femvertising and its perceived advertising effectiveness.

Figure 1



To summarize, the main theoretical contribution of this study is to propose a model to explain what factors contribute to the communication effectiveness of femvertising among young consumers. Previous studies on femvertising in China mainly applied quantitative methods such as experiment (e.g. Wang, 2021) and content analysis (e.g. Zeng, He, & Liu, 2022). This study provides empirical evidence of young consumers' views about femvertising in contemporary China.

In addition, this exploratory study extends the application of social learning theory in femvertising among the youth in a qualitative context. Bandura (1971) developed social learning theory to explain how children learn from direct experience and modelling. It is suggested that media is effective to develop role models for children to observe, learn and later model the expected behaviors (Bandura, 2001). Advertising as a type of media texts is no exception (Varghese, & Kumar, 2020). In line with this logic, previous studies such as Varghese and Kumar's (2020) study about India youth have examined social learning theory in the femvertising context through experiment. They found that femvertising about female empowerment could effectively limit the gender bias and grow the youth's self-esteem. Our study applies qualitative approach as an alternative to discuss how symbolic communication happens in femvertising and to what extent it helps youth socialize in terms of gender equality. Some of the female interviewees admitted that their self-esteem grew, and they would like to become the female role models portrayed in femvertising in the future. In other words, social learning theory works among female youth. However, male interviewees in our study held a different attitude toward use of femvertising in marketing communication. Future studies are suggested to use qualitative interview approach to continue analyzing what causes the gender difference in social learning about femvertising's advocacy to women empowerment.

Marketing implications

This study generates some insightful marketing communication suggestions. First, if femvertising is used as part of a brand's social marketing strategy, it is suggested that practitioners develop stories based on real-life experience, struggles, and resolutions, rather than just featuring successful female characters. Our study found that young consumers care about the resonance emerging from the femvertising. Advertisements using slice-of-life or testimonial advertising executions more easily generate emotional response and empathy. Jinah's (2022) survey study about youth in Japan also supported such a view. This quantitative study found that the positive attitude of youngsters toward femvertising and their purchase intention for the advertised products could be enhanced when stories presented in the femvertising are relevant to their individual life/experience. Second, when a brand utilizes femvertising to attract young consumers, it should consider the fit between the brand's previous images and the advertised social cause. More specifically, it should consider the portrayal of females in its previous campaigns. If a brand wants to update

or even change its image in the long term, it should be done gradually and not abruptly. A pilot study of target consumers' acceptance of the re-branded images should be conducted before the execution. This suggestion is supported by our research findings. In the focus group interviews, some participants pointed out the sudden image change for certain brands as being undesirable. Many studies have also proved that a salient fit/congruence between brand and advertised social cause contributes to positive consumer evaluation of a campaign (Aaker, & Keller 1990; Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2019; Champlin et al., 2019).

Limitations and future studies

Although this study provides some significant insights for brand communication, it has some limitations to be addressed in future studies. First, employing the focus group interview limits the sample size of the study. Altogether, the views of 15 participants across three groups cannot comprehensively reflect how youngsters in China respond to the strategy of femvertising. It is suggested that future studies employ quantitative methods such as cross-sectional survey to generalize the views of youngsters on the effectiveness of femvertising. Besides, the participants in this study are living in the cities and are well-educated. They have high exposure to advertising messages. Therefore, their response to femvertising cannot fully represent less-educated young persons or persons residing in the rural areas. As a result, the findings are limited in generalizability. It is recommended that future studies can be conducted in rural part of China where participants may be less-educated or are less familiar with symbolic advertising images. Second, the selected femvertising clips are all from beauty- and skincare-related brands, which mainly target female consumers. To more accurately learn about youngsters' overall perceptions of femvertising strategy, future studies should select advertisements from gender-neutral brands and compare female and male youngsters' responses on the femvertising strategy. Third, focus group interview is not as effective as experimental design to test the cause-effect relationship about factors contributing to youngsters' review about femvertising and the persuasiveness of femvertising. Future studies can employ experimental study to accurately explore femvertising-related cause-effect relationship. Besides, longitudinal studies might be considered to study the evolving femvertising trends in the long run and changes of youngsters' perception.

Conclusion

A qualitative study was conducted to explore consumers' perceptions and perceived effectiveness of femvertising. The results showed that participants paid much attention to the advertising execution style and storytelling skills of femvertising. The utilization of storytelling techniques in femvertising is anticipated to resonate with the participants. The narratives employed in this study are genuine and pertinent to the experiences of the general public. The extent to which consumers establish a connection between advertising content and their personal encounters and recollections proves to be a crucial factor influencing the effects of femvertising (Jinah, 2022). When the characters depicted in the advertisements express their true identities in everyday life, devoid of the distance imposed by celebrity endorsements or the commercialization of product information, the authenticity showcased in the advertisements can more effectively resonate with the audience, thereby augmenting the empathetic impact (Li, & Fan, 2018). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that femvertising may encounter criticism when it fails to convey a clear message.

Although some female participants showed appreciation of femvertising, considering these advertisements touching and speaking for them, some participants found these advertisements shallow and unauthentic. Male participants did not show as much appreciation of femvertising as female participants. A previous investigation delved into the individual comprehension of gender roles beyond childhood found that within traditional households, the emphasis on fostering interdependence and self-identity tends to be directed towards girls, whereas boys are encouraged to explore their autonomy and self-identity. In an environment characterized by fixed gender norms, emotional bonds among women give rise to a wide-ranging "sisterhood" (Liu, 2005). Consequently, when confronted with depictions of women's experiences and expressions in feminist advertisements, women are more prone to exhibit emotional inclinations, cognitive responses, and behavioral intentions.

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Appendix

Interview protocol

- 1.Can you use three phrases to describe the female character in this advertisement?
- 2.What are the advantages of portraying the female character in this way in the advertisement?
- 3.What are the disadvantages of portraying the female character in this way in the advertisement?
- 4.What do you like and dislike about the female characters in these advertisements?
- 5.Are the female characters in these advertisements the ideal female image for you? Why or why not?
- 6.How are the female characters in these advertisements different from the ones you have seen in previous advertisements?
- 7.Are advertisements that feature this type of female image common in China?
- 8.Can advertisements that use this type of female image helps to establish the brand image? Why?

ARTICLES

Monitoring the development of community radio: A comprehensive bibliometric analysis (2000–2024)

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Abstract

In order to promote cultural variety, encourage local involvement, and provide a voice to underrepresented groups, community radio stations (CRS) have become essential venues. Using information from 339 publications in the English language indexed in the Scopus database between 2000 and 2024, this bibliometric analysis attempts to map the research landscape on CRS methodically over the previous 20 years. This timeframe was chosen to capture significant developments in community radio stations, including policy shifts, technological advancements, and the rise of CRS movements in regions like South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The analysis pinpoints important patterns in the field's publication output, research hotspots, significant writers, and foundational publications. The data shows a consistent rise in scholarly interest, especially concerning the contribution of CRS to media democratization, community empowerment, and social transformation. A thematic analysis reveals recurrent research themes, such as CRS's role as an alternative medium, how it affects local development, and the difficulties it faces in maintaining operations. Citation analysis reveals patterns of scholarly collaboration by highlighting the

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most significant publications and the growth of research networks. This study highlights how CRS has influenced the media environment and how they might support community-based projects. This work advances theoretical knowledge of CRS's development and continued significance by thoroughly analyzing the scholarly discourse on the subject.

Keywords

Community radio stations, bibliometric analysis, media democratization, social change, marginalized voices, community empowerment.

Introduction

In the past few decades, community radio has become a potent vehicle for grassroots communication, local empowerment, and social transformation (Howley, 2005). According to Pavarala and Malik (2007), community radio stations have been essential in amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals, conserving cultural heritage, and promoting democratic discourse. They prioritize community engagement and focus on topics distinctive to one's community. Community radio has evolved from its early experimental beginnings to become a recognized and regulated sector in many national media landscapes; this growth indicates broader changes in the paradigms of participatory development, media democratization, and technology accessibility (Gordon, 2012). Dugin (2024) suggests that a study of how media communication and journalism have changed over time shows that computing and digital, as well as information and communication, are impacting the growth of modern media communication and journalism theory.

The origins of community radio may be found in the middle of the 20th century when pioneers first appeared in the US, Bolivia, and Colombia (Girard, 2001). These early community-based broadcasting projects established the foundation for a worldwide movement that now includes thousands of stations in a wide range of cultural, political, and economic situations (AMARC, 2007). Several factors have contributed to the rise of community radio, such as the acknowledgement of the right to free speech, the democratization of media, and the expansion of accessible and reasonably priced broadcasting technologies (Rennie, 2006).

Academic interest in this topic has increased dramatically along with the maturity of the community radio sector. Numerous academic fields, such as media studies, sociology, anthropology, and development communication, have produced a wealth of literature delving into community radio's possibilities,

difficulties, and effects (Rodríguez, 2020). This interdisciplinary approach has produced insightful information about how community radio might support political engagement, social inclusion, and cultural expression (Carpentier et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, a thorough assessment of community radio studies research is still required, even with the growing interest from academics. A study of this kind can offer insightful information about the changing areas of emphasis, methodology, and theoretical frameworks that have influenced how we view this dynamic topic (Jankowski, 2002). A thorough literature review can also pinpoint knowledge gaps and recommend exciting new lines of inquiry for future studies.

Community radio has faced opportunities and challenges due to the rapid technological advancements over the last twenty years. Community radio stations can now interact and reach a wider audience using digital broadcasting, internet streaming, and mobile technologies, allowing them to reach listeners outside their specific locations (Scifo, 2015). In addition, these technological changes have sparked concerns about whether traditional FM broadcasting will remain viable and if community radio can continue to focus on the local community in an increasingly globalized media landscape (Moyo, 2013).

Legislative and regulatory frameworks have significantly influenced the evolution of community radio. In many nations, community broadcasting's acceptance as a separate media tier alongside public and commercial media has been a major turning point (Buckley et al., 2008). However, implementing supportive policies and allocating broadcasting frequencies to neighbourhood projects is challenging in many situations (Pavarala, & Malik, 2007). Evaluating community radio's existing and future possibilities requires understanding the interactions between regulatory contexts and the sector's growth.

A major issue in a large portion of the material now in publication is the effect of community radio on social development and community empowerment. Several case studies have shown how community radio can help with health awareness campaigns, education programs, and disaster planning and response (Myers, 2011). Reaching underprivileged and illiterate communities has proven to be very successful for the media because of its capacity to transmit in regional tongues and handle challenges unique to specific cultures (Jallof, 2012). Longitudinal research and creative methodological techniques are necessary to fully assess the long-term social benefits of community radio, which is still a difficult task.

Another crucial area of investigation has become the sustainability of community radio stations. As opposed to their commercial counterparts,

community broadcasters frequently depend primarily on volunteer efforts and have little funding (Lush, & Urgoiti, 2012). Building organizational capability, creating sustainable funding models, and sustaining community participation over time are ongoing issues that many stations encounter (Fairbairn, 2009). The sector's sustained expansion and significance depend on investigating effective ways to achieve sustainability and the elements contributing to community radio ventures' longevity.

Scholars have also examined the connection between more significant social movements and community radio. Community radio stations have frequently sprung from and been closely associated with grassroots associations, social justice initiatives, and fights for the rights of indigenous people (Rodríguez, 2011). Because of this relationship, community radio can now be an advocacy vehicle and inspire group action. Studying how community broadcasting and social movements interact dynamically can shed light on how participatory media functions in social change and political transformation processes (Downing, 2000).

New research areas are emerging as the community radio sector continues to change. There are now more opportunities for audience involvement and content creation thanks to combining digital technologies and social media platforms with conventional broadcasting methods (Gaynor, & O'Brien, 2017). Community radio's ability to help peace-building initiatives in conflict-affected areas and facilitate reconciliation in post-conflict communities is becoming more widely acknowledged (Brisset-Foucault, 2011). Furthermore, research is increasingly focussing on the function of community radio in tackling global issues like sustainable development and climate change (Bassar, 2022; Abdulai, 2021; Harvey, 2011). Dunas et al (2024) suggest that online communities under examination serve as a platform for Russians from Generation Z, also known as "digital youth", to connect. While not always typical of Russian culture, the traditional spiritual values of the Russian people contribute to this idea of shared similarities.

A thorough bibliometric examination of the state of community radio studies research is the goal of the present work. Researchers aim to map the intellectual structure of the discipline and identify important areas of scholarly attention by looking at publication trends, citation patterns, and topic clusters within the literature. This report will provide an overview of community radio research today and highlight any knowledge gaps and new trends that may be developing. Using this systematic review, we intend to add to a more sophisticated comprehension of community radio's development as a practice and a topic of

scholarly study. This study will include insights into methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and the evolution of research issues in community radio studies in the following parts. This analysis also discusses how these trends affect potential future avenues for research and policy issues. This paper is a valuable resource for academics, practitioners, and policymakers involved in community radio's continuous development and research by combining insights from many disciplinary perspectives and geographic locations.

Literature review

The past few decades have seen a major evolution in the study of community radio, spanning a broad spectrum of theoretical perspectives and empirical investigations. This literature overview emphasizes the various viewpoints that add to our comprehension of the function and significance of community radio by focusing on major topics that have surfaced in current research. Many people in any country share a common language, history, culture, and traditions, and the media plays a crucial role in safeguarding this group. Information security puts into action the idea of national security when people's lives are at risk. It implies the suppression of freedom of speech, respect for diverse viewpoints, and open discussions (Vartanova et al, 2023).

Participatory communication and empowerment

The ability of community radio research to promote democratic communication and strengthen local communities is one of its central tenets. Academics have investigated how community radio stations function as venues for civic involvement and democratic participation (Atton, 2015; Tacchi, 2003). Research has demonstrated that community radio can improve social capital and encourage group action on neighbourhood problems (Mhagama, 2015; Oso, 2011). In this regard, voice has been a fundamental concept. Scholars have studied how marginalized groups can express themselves and shape public opinion through community radio (Couldry, 2010; Pettit et al., 2009). This feature of community radio has proven particularly significant in situations where the mainstream media falls short of fairly representing a range of viewpoints.

Cultural preservation and identity formation

The importance of community radio in maintaining cultural legacy and promoting identity development is another recurring issue in the literature. Studies (Meadows et al, 2002; Pietikäinen, 2008) have shown how indigenous

groups use radio to preserve language vitality and convey traditional knowledge. Other investigations have examined how diaspora communities use community radio to stay in touch with their cultural heritage and manage their hybrid identities in new social settings (Georgiou, 2005; Moylan, 2013). The local media in Antalya, along with the government, want to help improve relations between Turkey and Russia from the point of view of the tourism business. This point of view needs to be more practical than emotional (Atabek, & Atabek, 2023).

Technological adaptation and convergence

Research on the effects of digital technology on community radio has been expanding. According to Dunaway (2014) and Gazi et al (2011), researchers have looked into how community broadcasters adjust to the digital age by integrating social media, podcasting, and internet streaming into their daily operations. Studies have examined how mobile technology might improve listener engagement and increase community radio's reach (Moyo, 2013; Willems, 2013). However, studies have also brought attention to the problems caused by the digital divide and the necessity for community radio to strike a balance between technological innovation and accessibility for a range of listeners (Mudhai, 2011; Pavarala, 2007).

Policy and regulatory frameworks

One of the most important research areas has been the regulatory environment for community radio, where scholars have looked at how legislative frameworks affect the industry's growth. Comparative studies have examined how various national regulatory frameworks affect community radio's expansion and long-term viability (Buckley, 2011; Siemering, & Fairbairn, 2007). Research has also examined community broadcasters' licensing and spectrum allocation difficulties, especially in areas where state and commercial media predominate the airways (Ali, 2012; Ramos et al., 2009). Media and information education is crucial in this digital age, mainly because individuals are increasingly susceptible to the impact of fake news, hate speech, and other digital threats. A new generation of technology-savvy individuals is emerging in Egypt. As broadband speeds improve and more ICTs become available, more Egyptians can go online (Jamil, & Alazrak, 2023).

Sustainability and organizational dynamics

There is a growing corpus of scholarship on funding strategies, organizational

structures, and volunteer management, all of which highlight how important it is to keep community radio stations sustainable. Scholars have investigated novel strategies for achieving financial sustainability, such as hybrid models that integrate several revenue streams (Pettit, Salazar, & Dagon, 2009; Lush, & Urgoiti, 2012). The internal workings of community radio stations have also been studied (Foxwell et al, 2017; Gordon, 2015). Topics covered include governance, decision-making procedures, and balancing professionalization and community involvement.

Practical frameworks for evaluating CRS's long-term community impact

One noteworthy case study is the community radio station Radio La Voz de Nandayure in Costa Rica, which caters to rural and indigenous communities. The station has been instrumental in fostering cultural identity and local growth over the years and offering vital information on health, education, and local government. Through implementing participatory programs, the radio station improved local advocacy for social and environmental issues and supported community-led decision-making. The station's impact was especially evident during a drought crisis, when it served as a vital informational resource on water conservation and relief initiatives, resulting in noticeable increases in community collaboration and resilience (Monge, 2017).

In a different instance, the Kachin Development Networking Group (KNG) in Myanmar used a community radio platform to deliver vital news and educational information, particularly to isolated ethnic populations who were marginalized. KNG's radio station promoted social inclusion and gave local voices more clout by reaching groups usually shut out of mainstream media. Because of their broadcasts, which addressed issues like health awareness, ethnic rights, and education for girls, local literacy rates rose, and the population became more knowledgeable about local governance (Grove, 2020).

Radio Nzé in Gabon is another example of how community radio may be used to promote indigenous cultural rebirth. By incorporating cultural history into contemporary media formats, the radio station started educational programs targeting youth to conserve regional customs and languages. Over ten years, these initiatives have generated a renewed interest in Gabonese music and folklore, which has led to the preservation of indigenous knowledge and a resurgence of local pride. Participatory radio programming allowed the community to integrate cultural traditions into the broader socio-economic framework while preserving them (Ngoma, 2018).

The Voice of Kalangala community radio station in Uganda is another noteworthy example. It has played a significant role in advancing women's

rights and providing agricultural expertise to rural areas. Voice of Kalangala was instrumental in improving the socio-economic status of women in the area by airing programs that addressed issues such as women's health, legal rights, and economic autonomy. Gender equality and local government significantly improved because it became a crucial forum for rural women to express their experiences and fight for their rights (Nabulo, & Nakibuuka, 2020).

Impact assessment and evaluation

Researchers have continuously faced the difficulty of creating sound approaches for evaluating the impact of community radio. Although case studies have yielded significant insights into certain circumstances, there is an increasing focus on creating more methodical evaluation techniques (Jallov, 2012; Lennie, & Tacchi, 2013). According to some academics (Pavarala, & Malik, 2008; Van Vuuren, 2006), participatory evaluation frameworks can capture outcomes that traditional measures could miss and align with the philosophy of community media.

Emerging research directions

Novel facets of community radio have been the subject of recent literature (Ong'ong'a, 2024; Abdulai, 2021; Shivakoti, 2021). These facets include the medium's application to environmental communication and climate change adaptation. Notably, post-conflict countries have shown a special interest in the possibilities of community radio in conflict resolution and peace-building processes (Brisset-Foucault, 2011; Olorunnisola, 2002). In addition, the relationship between community radio and larger media ecosystems and information networks is becoming more productive as scholars look into how community broadcasters function in and contribute to increasingly complex media environments (Malik, 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2014). Personal commitment to an idea or attitude is crucial to Defense Motivation. Researchers have identified several factors contributing to motivated skepticism, including confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, the previous attitude effect, attitude polarization, and a sophistication effect (Pandey, 2023).

These literary works demonstrate the extensive and varied knowledge surrounding community radio. Although much progress has been made in understanding different facets of this medium, there are still plenty of prospects for additional research to expand our understanding and address new problems in the field.

Method

The bibliometric analysis method was applied to comprehend the present status of community radio research. To find patterns and trends in the literature, bibliographic data, such as publication records, are analyzed and interpreted using the bibliometric assessment method (Moed, 2005). We selected this method to determine the most researched subjects, the most productive nations/organizations, and the most cited literature.

The Scopus database, popular among bibliometric researchers, was used for the analysis. The search used the terms “community radio broadcasting” and “community radio” to be restricted to papers released between 2000 and 2024. The 20 years (2000–2024) were chosen to capture the pivotal changes in community radio driven by digital transformation, evolving regulatory frameworks, and its growing role in socio-political advocacy. Starting from 2000, when digital broadcasting began to expand, it allowed for a clear view of how community radio adapted to technological shifts, gained policy recognition, and became a tool for social empowerment and local governance. This timeframe thus encapsulates key trends that define community radio’s modern evolution and impact.

A total of 339 articles from the search results were used in the analysis. Utilizing the Biblioshiny program, which is popular among bibliometric researchers, the bibliometric analysis was carried out. To illustrate the connections between the terms and phrases used in the articles, the program was utilized to generate visualizations like co-word maps. Along with identifying the most referenced publications, the software was also utilized to identify the top productive countries/institutions.

A keyword analysis determined the subjects most often researched on community radio. Keywords were retrieved using Biblioshiny, and the keyword analysis was based on the abstracts and titles of the publications. The frequency of various subjects was then computed after the keywords were divided into groups. A productivity analysis was carried out to determine which countries/institutions fell under this research topic. The productivity analysis computed the number of publications for each nation or institution based on the authors’ affiliations.

A citation analysis was conducted to determine which articles in the field were the most cited. The citation analysis was conducted based on the articles’ total citations. Based on the quantity of citations, articles were ranked. Understanding the most influential articles in the field of community radio research is possible through the findings of the citation analysis. The study’s approach is intended

to offer a thorough grasp of the present status of community radio research. This research aims to identify the major areas of research, productive nations/institutions, and significant articles in the field of community radio through an established database and bibliometric analysis software, as well as a comprehensive search strategy incorporating particular keywords and a time constraint (*Table 1*).

Table 1

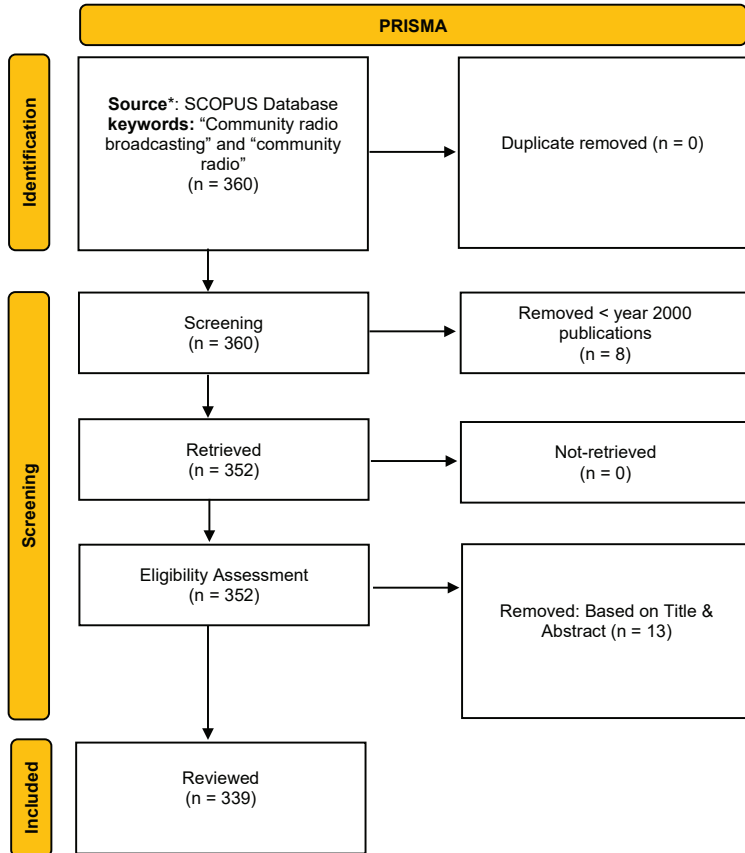
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time period	2000–2024	Studies before 2000 or after 2024
Language	English, with consideration for regional publications, if relevant	Non-English without translations
Document type	Research articles, reviews, and conference papers	Editorials, book reviews, commentaries, and non-research items
Subject area	Focus on community radio, media studies, and communication	Studies unrelated to media or communication
Geographical scope	Global, with emphasis on community radio in various regions	Studies focused solely on commercial or government radio
Data source	Indexed in databases (mainly Scopus).	Non-indexed publications or inaccessible sources
Relevance to topic	Directly related to community radio progression or impact analysis	Peripheral mention of community radio without focus

Below is a PRISMA diagram that explains the research process (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1

PRISMA for search selection of articles for bibliometric analysis



Results

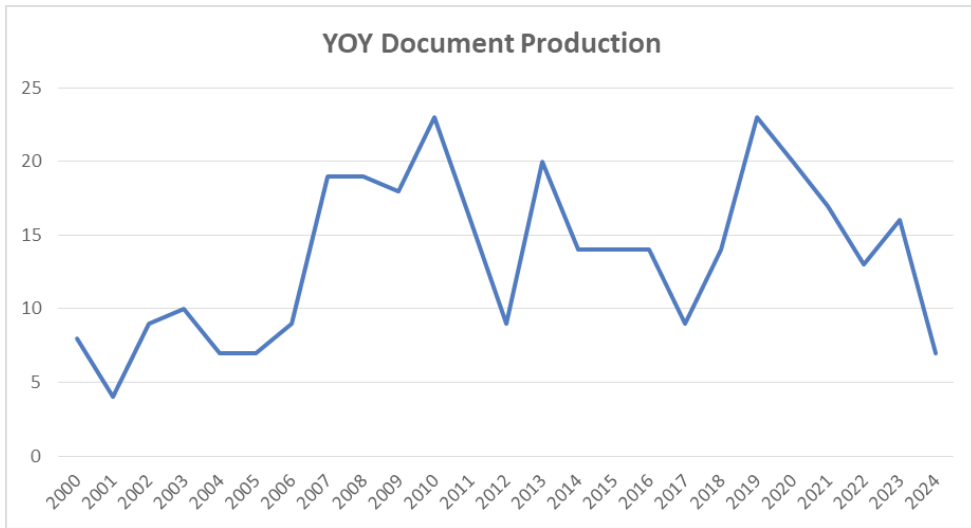
Annual document distribution

Between 2000 and 2024, there have been a variety of trends in the number of publications (*Figure 2*) that concentrate on community radio stations. The early 2000s saw varying levels of attention, peaking in 2007 with the publication of 19 articles, signalling a rising understanding of community radio's significance. Twenty-three articles were published in 2010 and 2019, the two peaks of this trend that show the ongoing scholarly interest in the topic. A steady number of publications was noted between 2011 and 2018, with some variations. There has been a minor fall in recent years, with 2024 exhibiting a considerable

decline to seven articles. This loss may indicate a change in the research focus or other influencing variables that impact the publication trends in this field. The evidence demonstrates an evolving pattern of focus shifts and instances of heightened scholarly contribution with community radio stations over time.

Figure 2

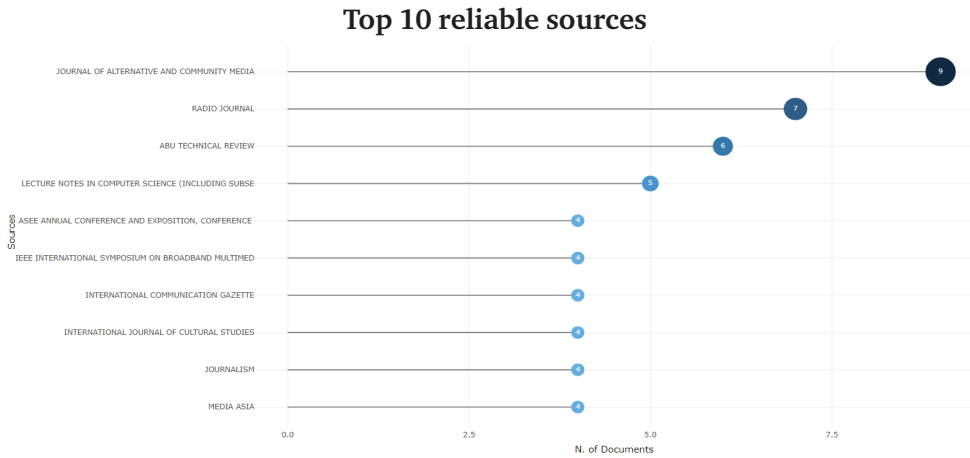
Annual document distribution



Top 10 reliable sources

As shown in Figure 3, out of all the publications on community radio stations, *Journal of Alternative and Community Media* stands out as the most authoritative source (with nine publications). *ABU Technical Review* has six articles, and *Radio Journal* has seven articles that trail closely behind. These sites are probably important forums for discussing different facets of community media, like how community radio affects social change, local development, and media democratization. These publications' prominence in influencing scholarly debate and expanding knowledge in community radio studies is demonstrated by the numerous articles published.

Figure 3



Top 10 most reliable authors

With six publications, Backhaus B. is the most referenced author on community radio studies (Table 2, Figure 4), according to the fractionalized count of articles. Closely behind with four articles apiece are Anderson H., Bedford C., and Meadows M. These authors, who most likely studied community radio’s function in media democratization, local empowerment, and social engagement, have made important contributions to the academic literature. Their work sheds light on important problems and trends in the community radio industry, highlighting their impact in promoting knowledge and influencing the conversation in this niche of media studies.

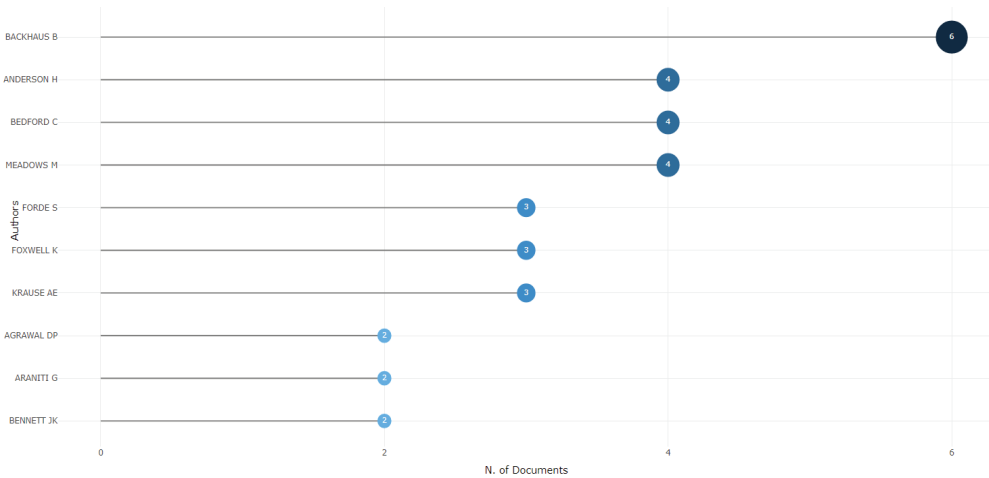
Table 2

Top 10 most reliable authors

Authors	Number of articles	Articles fractionalized
BACKHAUS B.	6	3.92
ANDERSON H.	4	1.42
BEDFORD C.	4	2.08
MEADOWS M.	4	1.92
FORDE S.	3	0.92
FOXWELL K.	3	0.92
KRAUSE A. E.	3	1.03
AGRAWAL D. P.	2	0.53
ARANITI G.	2	0.4
BENNETT J. K.	2	0.67

Figure 4

Top 10 most reliable authors



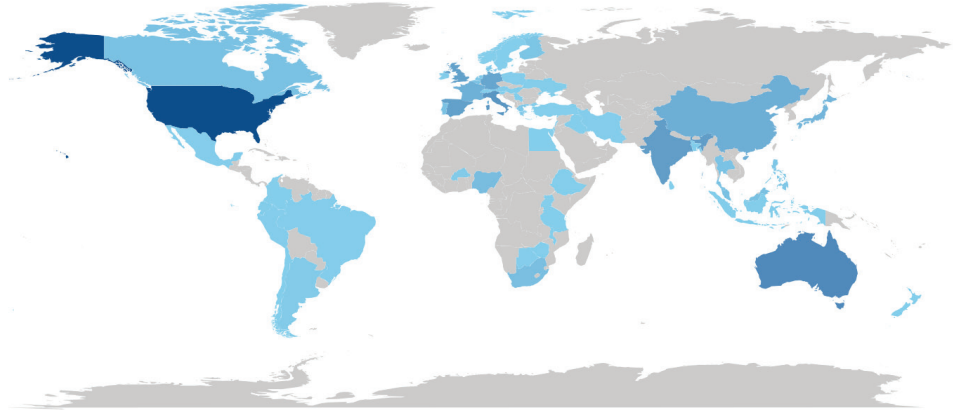
Country-wise document production

Each country has a very different process for producing documentation on community radio (Figure 5). The United States of America has the most papers (167), suggesting that community radio is a topic of great interest to researchers. Australia comes in second place with 85 documents, demonstrating its active participation. With 69 and 60 documents, respectively, Italy and India also make substantial contributions. The UK and Spain produced 55 documents demonstrating their participation in community radio studies. Notable participation was shown by Germany (49 documents), China (37 documents), and France (36 documents).

As evidence of the significance of community radio in these areas, Nigeria and South Africa have provided 22 and 19 documents, respectively, while Japan has given 30. There are about 15 documents in each of Portugal, Canada, and Malaysia. Finland contributed 12 documents, Belgium 14 documents, and Thailand 14 documents. These are the other countries that stand out for their contributions. India, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Philippines, Netherlands, Denmark, Greece, Argentina, Burkina Faso, Brazil, Iran, Lebanon, Mexico, Peru, Poland, Switzerland, Chile, Ethiopia, Malawi, New Zealand, Serbia, Singapore, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Zimbabwe are among the other nations that have contributed between ten and two documents.

Figure 5

Top 10 country wise document production



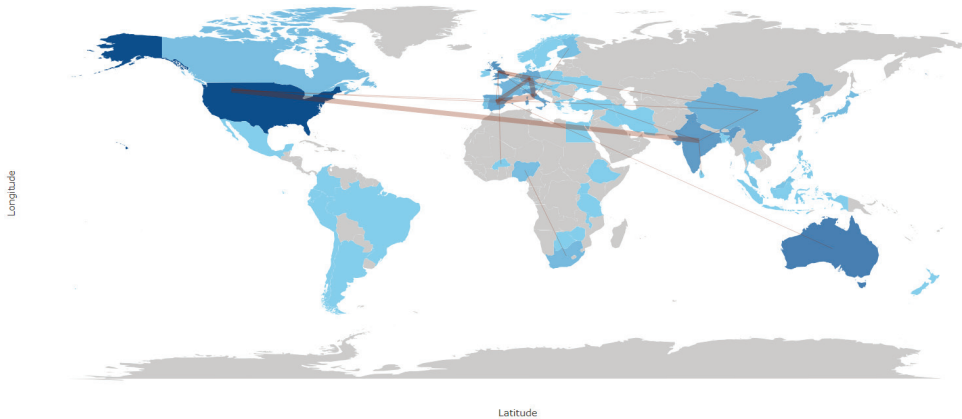
Country-wise collaboration

The data shows the global interconnection of research efforts, demonstrating a wide range of international cooperation in community radio studies (Figure 6). Strong academic linkages within Europe are demonstrated by notable partnerships, such as the numerous collaborations between Italy, Germany (4), and Spain (5). Cross-continental academic exchanges are reflected in the USA's notable collaborative engagement, especially with India (4). In addition to its two partnerships with France, Australia has cooperatively worked with the Philippines and Finland. China's wide-ranging global influence is demonstrated by the multiple alliances it has formed, such as those with Israel, Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore, and Norway. The UK is another vital actor, working with nations such as Burkina Faso (2), China (2), Germany (3), and Hungary (2), to name a few. China (2), Malaysia, Nigeria, Portugal, Singapore, Sri Lanka (2), and the United Kingdom (2) are among the nations with whom India collaborates. Nigeria collaborates internationally with countries such as Ethiopia, Canada, Finland, Malaysia, and South Africa (2). Finland's global and European participation is evidenced by its collaborations with Ethiopia, Greece, the Netherlands, and the Philippines. The UK's partnership with China (2), Spain's partnerships with Japan and Germany (3), and Germany's partnerships with France (2) and Hungary are among the other noteworthy collaborations. Through these partnerships, the study of community radio in many cultural and

geographic contexts is being advanced, and ideas are being shared, illustrating a rich tapestry of worldwide academic cooperation.

Figure 6

Country-wise collaboration



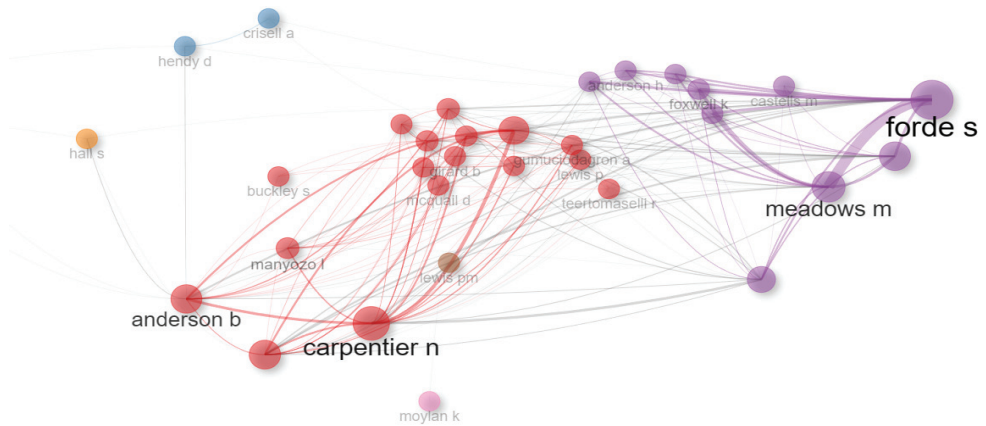
Network of co-citation

A community of authors who have collaborated on pieces concerning virtual reality, augmented reality, and the metaverse. In the diagram (*Figure 7*) below, the names of many researchers are displayed; some are related to each other, while others are not. The scholars' connections are visually represented by clusters of complementary hues and connecting lines between their names. These clusters' formation indicates that there may be specialized regions or sub-domains within the more prominent topic these groups are investigating.

The highest level of collaboration was seen among seven groups of authors. The largest cluster is Cluster 1, which is indicated in red. This cluster of researchers is closely networked and has substantially contributed to community radio studies. This cluster has eminent academics like Downing J., Pavarala V., and Carpentier N., among others. Another significant cluster in the field is Cluster 4 (highlighted in purple), which includes essential authors such as Forde S., Meadows M., and Rodriguez C. The smaller size and fewer affiliated researchers in other clusters, such as 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7, suggest more specialized or infrequent collaboration patterns.

Figure 7

Network of co-citation

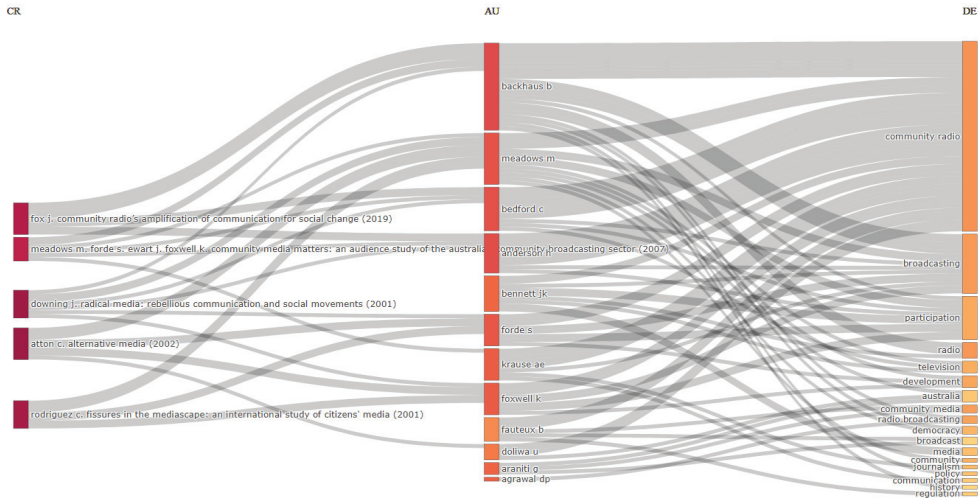


3-filed plot

The Sankey diagram (Figure 8), a visual aid used in bibliometrics for scholarly literature analysis, is similar to the three-field plot. The topic of communication studies is the subject of this specific diagram, which also examines the relationships between various authors, keywords, and publication sources. The diagram's left field displays many academics in the field, the middle field displays keywords from their research, and the right field displays the particular subject of study. The width of the lines indicates the strength of the relationships between the fields. For instance, the academic journal *Fox 1, Community Radio's Amplification of Communication for Social Change* (2019) by scholar Backhaus B. is associated with the terms "community radio" and "communication for social change". Backhaus' study focuses on how community radio can effectively promote social change, as seen by the publication's connections to important topics like "community radio" and "communication for social change". In order to contribute to transformative societal outcomes, the study examines how community radio empowers marginalized communities, amplifies voices, and encourages participatory communication. In line with a major concentration in the media studies field, Backhaus' work emphasizes the vital role that community radio plays in fostering inclusive communication and accelerating social change.

Figure 8

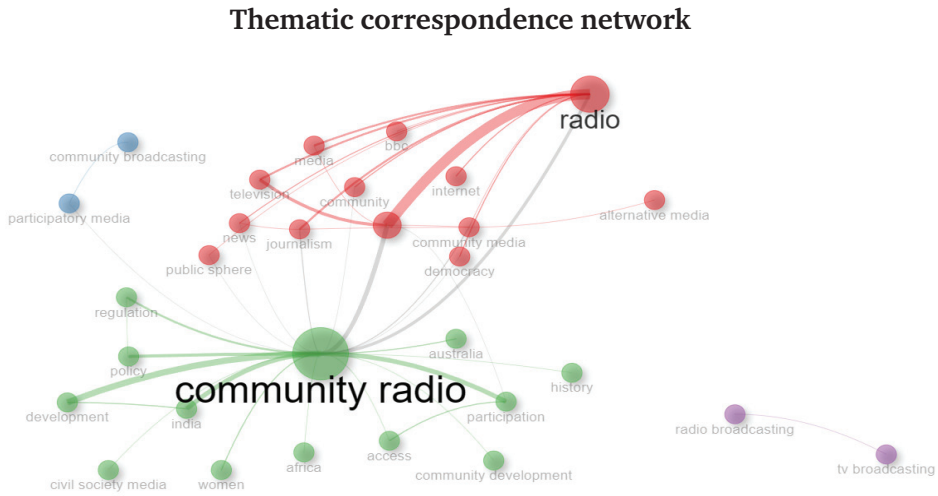
3-filed plot



Thematic correspondence network

The following concept map (Figure 9) is centred around “community radio,” a type of broadcasting that gives the neighbourhood a voice. Outward-pointing textual branches highlight the several facets and relationships associated with community radio. A division on the left combines “alternative media” and “participatory media” under one heading. Community radio is an alternative to conventional media by giving the community a platform to express itself. Another branch that links community radio to the “public sphere,” the arena of public discussion and debate on issues of general interest, is also readily apparent. This suggests that democratic processes are fostered by community radio. Another component of community radio is regulation and policy. This suggests that laws and policies govern community radio broadcasting. The concept map’s right side depicts a link between community radio and development. Typographic entries such as “Africa,” “India,” and “access” suggest that community radio is considered a means of enhancing the quality of life for people in developing nations. The idea map presents community radio as a multifunctional media platform that fulfils a range of functions inside a community. It provides a forum for alternative and participatory media, augments democracy, and encourages development.

Figure 9



Discussion and conclusion

The bibliometric analysis results highlight that community radio stations are receiving increasing scholarly attention and have diverse effects on local communities and media environments worldwide. A thorough analysis of 339 publications in the Scopus database between 2000 and 2024 yields numerous essential conclusions.

First and foremost, there has been a steady rise in the amount of research done on CRS, indicative of growing interest in their contribution to social transformation, media democratization, and community empowerment. This is consistent with earlier research, such as Pavarala and Malik (2007) and Carpentier et al (2017), which emphasize the importance of CRS platforms for raising the voices of the marginalized and promoting cultural diversity. Regional research results show that regions with active community radio movements, notably South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, have made major contributions. These results support Atton;s (2003) and Manyozo's (2012) study, highlighting the distinctive sociocultural settings in which CRS function and their influence on regional development. The analysis highlights recurring research issues on a thematic level, such as the function of CRS as alternative media, their impact on community identity and involvement, and the funding and sustainability challenges they confront. Girard et al (2015) and Anderson (2011) have also examined related themes, highlighting the importance of CRS dynamics on a global and local level.

In the future, several paths present interesting opportunities for CRS study. First, longitudinal studies are required to follow the development of CRS effects over time. These studies should expand on the knowledge gained from previous research, such as Lewis et al (2020) and Hendy (2018), which examine how community dynamics and media consumption habits change over time. Further research into how CRS adapts and flourishes in the face of shifting legal and technological environments could come from comparative studies conducted in various socio-political contexts. Initial frameworks for these kinds of comparison analyses are provided by studies conducted by Tacchi and Foxwell (2014) and Ewart (2017).

Another worthwhile topic for future investigation is integrating social media and digital technology into CRS operations. Digital convergence may present new chances for audience contact and community involvement, but it may also present difficulties with digital literacy and access, according to studies by Hall and Moylan (2021) and Lewis (2018). Furthermore, our comprehension of the broader societal effects of CRS can be enhanced by multidisciplinary approaches that integrate knowledge from political science, sociology, development studies, and communication studies. Innovative insights on the role of CRS in achieving social justice and participatory democracy could be produced through collaborative efforts similar to those shown in research by Castells (2009) and Cottle (2013).

This study offers several theoretical implications for the field of community radio studies. Firstly, it contributes to theoretical frameworks surrounding media democratization by highlighting the pivotal role of community radio stations in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering cultural diversity. The findings underscore CRS as an alternative media platform that challenges dominant media structures and empowers local communities to participate actively in media production and dissemination. Secondly, the study enriches theoretical discussions on communication for social change by demonstrating how CRS contributes to social transformation through enhanced community engagement and empowerment.

The study improves theoretical knowledge of the difficulties in maintaining community-driven media efforts by highlighting recurring themes, such as the role of CRS in local development and its practical challenges. Finally, the study's citation analysis and identification of key authors aid theoretical discussions on scholarly collaboration and knowledge generation within community radio studies. In doing so, it advances theoretical understanding of academic impact and collaboration dynamics by highlighting the development of research

networks and sharing essential concepts and discoveries among academic circles.

This study presents practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders engaged in community radio initiatives. First, it emphasizes how crucial it is to support CRS as an essential venue for encouraging local involvement, fostering cultural variety, and providing a voice to marginalized communities. With the help of these results, policymakers can push for funding sources and supportive legislative frameworks that maintain CRS's operational sustainability. Second, practitioners working in places like South Asia, Africa, and Latin America with active community radio movements can benefit from the study's regional analysis, which offers valuable insights. Offering helpful advice for enhancing programming efficacy and community involvement tactics, it outlines the obstacles and successful tactics that CRS has faced in various situations. The study also provides a practical approach to improving sustainability and resilience by critically examining CRS's operational problems, including financial limitations and technology adjustments. With these findings, practitioners can create creative strategies for community outreach, fundraising, and digital integration in CRS activities.

Future studies on community radio stations could explore several exciting directions. The effectiveness and sustainability of CRS in promoting social change could be better understood through longitudinal studies that monitor the changing effects of CRS over time. Comparative investigations across various socio-political scenarios enhance our knowledge of how CRS adapts and flourishes in regulatory frameworks and technology environments. Another area of research that could be very beneficial is incorporating digital technology and social media platforms into CRS operations. We can identify new opportunities and difficulties in the digital age by comprehending how digital convergence affects CRS's audience interaction, media sustainability, and community participation.

We could better comprehend the broader societal effects of CRS by utilizing interdisciplinary techniques that incorporate insights from political science, sociology, development studies, and communication studies. New insights into the contribution of CRS to the advancement of social justice, participatory democracy, and community resilience may be obtained through cooperative initiatives. Several obstacles must be overcome to pursue these research directions, including the necessity for extensive databases that include grey literature and non-English publications and linguistic biases in academic literature. By addressing these constraints, forthcoming research endeavours

can enhance our comprehension of the profound capacity of CRS to effect change and its sustained significance in cultivating inclusive and collaborative media spaces across the globe.

This study has several limitations. First, relying solely on the Scopus database limited the analysis's comprehensiveness by excluding pertinent papers indexed in other databases or non-indexed sources. More extensive searches using several databases and grey literature sources might benefit future research. Bibliometric assessments may overlook subtle facets of CRS effects and community dynamics because they naturally favour quantitative metrics over qualitative findings. An integrated view of the societal relevance of CRS may be possible by integrating bibliometric data with qualitative approaches. Finally, since English is not the primary academic language in areas where CRS is expected, the study's emphasis on English-language publications may have missed essential contributions written in other languages. Addressing these linguistic biases would improve the study's inclusivity and global perspective. This research provides insight into how CRS is developing. However, future efforts must overcome these limitations to fully realize its revolutionary potential and maintain its relevance in promoting inclusive and participatory media environments worldwide.

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Examining the influence of avatar identification on sharing intention in the metaverse: The mediating role of immersion and moderating effect of perceived social distance

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of avatar identification on the intention to share by examining the mediating role of user immersion and the moderating effect of perceived social distance. For this, we collected 228 higher education students in South Korea through a survey and used hierarchical regression with SPSS 24.0. In the results, first, it showed that participants who perceived higher levels of similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence in their avatars in the metaverse platform were more immersed in their avatars. Second, participants who perceived greater embodied presence in their avatars had a stronger intention to share their avatars through immersion. Finally, the positive relationship between perceived embodied presence and immersion was more significant for participants in metaverse platforms with higher perceived social distance compared to those with lower perceived social distance. This study is the first to examine the integral model of avatar identification factors in the metaverse platform. And, this study's results show the mechanism by which avatar identification enhances the intention to share.

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Keywords

Avatar identification, similarity identification, wishful identification, embodied presence, immersion, intention to share.

Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 has deeply embedded the concept of “untact” or non-face-to-face interactions into daily life. As education transitioned to online classes and companies adopted remote work, various untact technologies became an essential part of everyday routines. In particular, Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, have enabled sophisticated non-face-to-face environments, ushering in the era of the metaverse – a transcendent 3D virtual space where users can engage in daily and economic activities through avatars (Feng et al, 2022). The metaverse can be described as a three-dimensional virtual space where avatars are used to participate in creative, economic, and interactive activities, offering a 3D virtual space in which users, represented by avatars, can engage in diverse activities and interactions (Kozinets, 2023). Within this environment, users perceive avatars as extensions of themselves, a perception that strengthens their identification with their avatars.

Avatars play a central role in facilitating user interactions within the metaverse, especially through game and communication mechanisms. Users express individuality by consuming fashion items, interact with others, and form virtual communities, which fosters a sense of belonging and blurs the boundaries between the virtual and real, ultimately enhancing user experience (Hirsch, 2022; Chetoui, 2020; Haji et al, 2021). This unique environment has led companies to devise strategies that heighten brand awareness by offering distinct experiences within the metaverse, encouraging users to make real-world purchases and share their experiences with others (Kozinets, 2023; Carson et al, 2019).

Accordingly, the need to study the relationship between avatar identification and the intention to share has intensified. The COVID-19 pandemic has entrenched untact interactions in everyday life, creating a new reality where users engage in personal and economic activities through avatars in 3D virtual spaces like the metaverse. Structured as an extension of the real world, the metaverse allows users to express themselves through avatars, interact with others, and form virtual communities, enhancing their sense of belonging. These dynamics foster a strengthened identification with their avatars, which can ultimately increase user immersion and positively impact the intention to share experiences.

However, understanding user immersion and avatar identification within the metaverse remains limited. From the user's perspective, it is crucial to comprehend the potential and practical applications of the metaverse. As primary elements of the metaverse, avatars play a significant role in shaping users' immersion and attitudes toward the platform (Habil et al, 2023). Yet, prior studies have generally focused on user reactions to avatars or treated avatar identification as a single dimension, revealing limitations in understanding the influence of avatar identification on user immersion (Cowan et al, 2019; Teng, 2021). Additionally, research emphasizing personal characteristics and social functions within the metaverse is limited, leaving the influence of avatar identification on immersion insufficiently explained.

This study draws on the theoretical frameworks of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and intersectionality to explore the dynamics of social identities in digital environments. Social Identity Theory offers a basis for predicting in-group and intergroup behavior, positing that an individual's belonging to a social group shapes interaction with both members and non-members (Hogg, 2006). This study expands on the concept that individuals' interactions are contingent on identifications with social groups, particularly recognizing that online identities can significantly diverge from real-life identities. This phenomenon of adaptable digital identities intersects with the concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes the role of multiple, intersecting identities, such as gender and ethnicity, in shaping social inclusion or exclusion (Dill, & Zambrana, 2009).

Beyond simply contextualizing the mechanisms of social privilege or oppression arising from demographic intersections, intersectionality also serves as a framework for promoting political change across national and global contexts (Ngan-Ling Chow, Texler Segal, & Tan, 2011). Social Identity Theory and intersectionality are rarely linked due to epistemological and methodological differences; SIT emphasizes cognitive processes governing group relations, while intersectionality often focuses on social and political statuses from a feminist perspective (Warner, 2008; Taksa, Powell, & Jayasinghe, 2015). However, this combined framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of social identities, examining self-identification and autonomy alongside group identification and social influence.

Based on this theoretical background, this study seeks to address these limitations by analyzing the effects of avatar identification on user immersion and perceived social distance among users who utilize branded items in the metaverse. Specifically, this study investigates how detailed factors of avatar identification influence the intention to share by examining the mediating

role of user immersion and the moderating effect of perceived social distance.

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Social identity theory for avatar in metaverse

In internet-based communities, online identities are integral in shaping group memberships and influencing group-related attitudes. Online identities may exhibit varying degrees of alignment with offline identities, and discrepancies can arise due to the social structure of online communities, the technical affordances of platforms, or individual choices, such as the decision to disclose or conceal specific demographic markers (AltspaceVR, 2020). Interactions in social VR environments are typically mediated through avatars, which vary in fidelity, detail, and communicative capability according to each platform's design principles and intended purpose. For example, Virbela, a professional virtual reality platform, encourages users to present themselves in business-appropriate avatars, disclose their real names, and identify professional affiliations. In contrast, AltspaceVR, which hosts popular culture events and leisure activities, allows for greater personal freedom in avatar representation, facilitating expressions of social identities through "imaginative combinations" by providing diverse body types, accessories, and skin tones, including unconventional colors such as pink and green (AltspaceVR, 2020).

Constructed personas or "technoselves" in online spaces, as Luppicini (2012) notes, incorporate both visual elements and a range of verbal and textual attributes, such as names or pseudonyms, enabling users to experiment with identities in ways that may complement, alter, or obscure their offline identities (Marciano, 2014). For instance, an avatar may reflect gender or ethnic identifiers different from the user's offline characteristics, potentially leading to a decoupling from offline identity and facilitating a more flexible navigation across social groups (Taksa et al, 2015). This flexibility of digital identities diverges from traditionally static conceptions shaped by external social, geopolitical, and cultural forces and underscores the role of context in identity formation.

The contextual nature of identity, pivotal in both individual and collective identity formation, aligns virtual identities with an intersectional approach. Social Identity Theory (SIT) contends that individuals may hold multiple social identities simultaneously, which may become more or less salient depending on the social context (Hogg, 2006). While SIT is effective in explaining the cognitive processes that shape an individual's perception of social relations within groups,

it does not address the overlapping social categories and power structures that can shape group dynamics. Intersectionality, however, provides a framework for examining how apparent demographic characteristics influence privileges and disadvantages within online spaces (Dill, & Zambrana, 2009).

In particular, intersectionality, rooted in feminist and Black feminist theories, emphasizes how multiple intersecting social identities can amplify discrimination (Davis, 2008). For example, women from minority backgrounds may experience discrimination based on both gender and race. Attempts have been made to integrate SIT and intersectionality; the concept of identity salience, for instance, has been applied to contexts of inclusion and discrimination, suggesting that in certain contexts, the most salient identity, such as race or gender, may drive social behaviors more than other characteristics (Holvino, 2012). Integrating SIT and intersectionality offers a more nuanced understanding of the self, transcending the atomistic view of identities as isolated elements that emerge only under specific triggers (Taksa et al, 2015).

Goffman's theory of context-dependent identity presentation, where individuals adapt their behaviors to different social scenarios, also informs this discussion (Goffman, 1986). Identity presentation in digital contexts extends beyond behavior to include decisions around avatar appearance and interactions that align or contrast with the platform's social expectations and technical affordances (AltSpaceVR, 2020). The freedom for avatar customization in VR platforms like AltSpaceVR, where users can alter body shape, skin color, and other visual features, serves as an example of how such platforms encourage identity expression within a safe and comfortable environment, potentially reducing biases tied to real-life characteristics. This example illustrates how online platforms' technical structures, from avatar design to communication mechanisms, shape social behaviors and the visibility of identity markers, thus influencing users' social interactions within digital communities (Marwick, 2013).

As advanced information and communication technology and virtual implementation technology are integrated into the metaverse, it is transforming into a space for consumers' daily, economic, and cultural activities, enabling innovative driving forces. Retail companies have sought to understand the metaverse to secure future competitiveness, and research that was limited to the initial concept of the metaverse has expanded to explore new conceptualization, case studies, and marketing application possibilities based on technological advancements. In today's highly developed technology and industry, the metaverse is presented as a complementary space to reality that can play an

important role in our daily lives as its ecosystem expands. In modern times, the metaverse can be defined as an expansive fusion world that mediates and combines real and virtual spaces through realistic technology (Batat, & Hammedi, 2023), and is dealt with as a concept that is distinct from the comprehensive cyberspace reflecting the entirety of online activity, given that it enables value creation through users' social, economic, and cultural activities (Dionisio et al, 2013). In other words, the metaverse can be described as a three-dimensional virtual space where avatars are used to engage in creation, economic, and interactive activities (Buhalis et al, 2023).

In the early days of avatars, they were represented in various forms such as animals, humans, and abstract shapes. However, as online interactions became more diverse and to facilitate smooth communication between people, avatars became popularized in a more human-like form (Forster, 2022). In other words, the initial definition of an avatar can be described as a computer-generated image that represents a user in online interactions (Nowak, & Rauh, 2005). Users of metaverse platforms decorate their avatars to reflect their physical appearance as well as fashion style (Batat, & Hammedi, 2023), as there is a tendency to express themselves in a way that can garner favor through the appearance and fashion style of their avatars (Gabrielli et al, 2013). The appearance of an avatar may reflect the user's actual appearance, but it can also be represented differently from reality, allowing users to enjoy deviation or experience vicarious satisfaction (Li et al, 2018). For example, the metaverse platform, Zepeto, provides a service that recognizes the user's face through a camera and creates an avatar that is similar to the user's actual appearance but also allows users to modify features such as appearance, gestures, and fashion to create their unique avatars. Users with positive emotions about themselves tend to create avatars that reflect their actual appearance and consider them as mascots that reflect themselves (Fuschillo et al, 2022). On the other hand, users who want to escape from the monotony of daily life tend to express their avatars in an idealized form, as mascots that represent their hopeful self-image. Avatars are thus utilized as a presence that satisfies both the desire to remain anonymous in cyberspace and the expression of the desire to reveal oneself (Batat, & Hammedi, 2023), and users form a deep attachment to their avatars, considering them as a part of themselves and experiencing a sense of identity with them (Jin et al, 2019).

Hypothesis development

Identification refers to understanding and sympathizing with a situation from another person's perspective (Endacott, & Brooks, 2013). People

experience identification by forming a cognitive and emotional connection with a specific object, creating a sense of identification (Cohen, 2001), and perceiving themselves as participating in the situation faced by the object, thereby becoming fully engaged in the object's situation (Poncin, & Garnier, 2012). Previous research on identification in the media indicates that the factors contributing to users' perception of identification can be divided into similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence (Green et al, 2021; Takano, & Taka, 2022). These factors not only trigger users' enjoyment but also serve as a key factor in empathizing with the object's situation and achieving full immersion (Li et al, 2021).

Regarding the influence of similarity identification on immersion, it is noted that virtual environment users who empathize with objects similar to themselves become more fully immersed in the object's situation. The physical similarity between avatars and users induces homogeneity, enhances self-perception, and promotes immersion (Van Pinxteren et al, 2020). Paleczna et al (2022) examined the user's similarity with the avatar and the user's reaction and found that the more the avatar resembled the user, the more likely the user was to become immersed in the game. When metaverse avatars reflected users' real-life images, users felt more familiarity and increased immersion in the metaverse (Buhalis et al, 2023).

When examining the impact of wishful identification with avatars on immersion, it can be seen that users who strongly identify with attractive avatars enjoy participating in activities as someone else in the virtual world and becoming completely immersed in the virtual world (Yee, 2006). Tawaira & Ivanov (2023) divided the perceived avatar images of users into realistic and idealized images, and as a result of their research, they found that users experience satisfaction and enhanced immersion in virtual spaces not only when the avatar's image is similar to their own, but also when it reflects an idealized image. According to Przybylski et al (2012), who investigated the perceptions of video game users, users become more immersed in video games when they use avatars with idealized appearances.

It was hypothesized that embodied presence, which is the feeling of being present and embodied within a virtual environment, would enhance immersion. According to prior research, individuals tend to feel a sense of ownership over objects that they can control (Flavián et al, 2019) and can become immersed in virtual environments by mistakenly believing that they are in the same situation as the virtual object (Tea et al, 2022). The factors that contribute to immersion in MMORPG game users found that the most influential factor was a sense of

unity with the virtual avatar, which suggests that a sense of unity with the avatar is an important factor in improving users' immersion (Jin et al, 2017). The high level of interaction between avatars and users in metaverse environments is considered a key factor in users feeling embodied presence, and previous studies suggest that immersion can be enhanced through the experience of feeling as if the avatar and the user are one entity (Klimmt, & Hartmann, 2006). Therefore, this study hypothesized that similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence of avatar identification would influence immersion based on empathy and positive reactions.

H1: Similarity identification will have a positive (+) effect on immersion.

H2: Wishful identification will have a positive (+) effect on immersion.

H3: Embodied presence will have a positive (+) effect on immersion.

According to Zhang et al (2021), individuals tend to share positive or negative aspects of their purchasing experiences with friends and acquaintances. With the increasing variety of communication channels such as social media, people are now able to share information more easily than before (De Bruyn, & Lilien, 2008). This behavior of sharing information that has a significant influence on other people's purchasing decisions has been continuously studied in the fields of IT and marketing (Prasad et al, 2019). The objective of this research is to examine how avatar identification impacts the intention to share. Previously, a hypothesis was posited that the identification of avatars would enhance the level of immersion. The present study aims to investigate whether immersion mediates the relationship between avatar identification and intention to share.

Immersion can be described as a dimension of positive affect that occurs when using interactive media (Thompson et al, 2021). By experiencing immersion in online shopping malls, users feel pleasure and have a stronger desire to share it with others, and the user's virtual environment immersion can become a key factor in determining their word-of-mouth behavior (Bao, & Yang, 2022). Online game flow has a significant impact on user loyalty and word-of-mouth behavior (Triantafillidou, & Siomkos, 2014). Dehghani et al (2020) suggest that satisfaction through immersion can have a positive impact on the intention to recommend to others, emphasizing the importance of immersion in mixed reality platforms. Investigating the factors that affect future behavioral intentions in augmented reality and virtual reality, when users feel a sense of reality in a virtual environment, it leads to positive attitudes such as continued use through immersion experience (Shiau, & Huang, 2023). The factors that

influence word-of-mouth intentions in metaverse services verified that the flow perceived by users in metaverse services has a significant impact on word-of-mouth intentions (Habil et al, 2023). Therefore, in this study, it is argued that immersion based on empathy and positive response will affect positive intention to share. This study previously hypothesized that avatar identification would have a positive effect on immersion. Furthermore, the study contends that immersion would positively influence the intent to share. Considering the foregoing discussion, this paper suggests that immersion will serve as a mediator between avatar identification and the intention to share.

H4: Immersion will have a mediating effect on the relationship between similarity identification and the intention to share.

H5: Immersion will have a mediating effect on the relationship between wishful identification and the intention to share.

H6: Immersion will have a mediating effect on the relationship between embodied presence and the intention to share.

Furthermore, the objective of this research is to examine the potential variations in the impact of avatar identification on the intention to share among individuals. To achieve this goal, we focused on immersion as a mediating factor that influences the connection between avatar identification and intention to share. Consequently, this study endeavors to explore the possibility of diverse effects of avatar identification on immersion, contingent on the degree of social distance perceived by individuals, through an exploratory investigation. Baumeister & Learly (1995) proposed that the need to belong, which refers to the necessity for human beings to form and sustain at least a minimum number of interpersonal relationships, is an innate characteristic. This feature can differ among individuals, and much research has been carried out to develop an effective method of measuring interpersonal differences (Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008). Differences in the need to establish human connections can be based on traits, such as interdependent self-view, or may arise from one's immediate environment. Social exclusion is an environmental construct that addresses a person's sensitivity to social connections, as it is a situational response stemming from some form of rejection or prohibition from joining a social group of some kind (Lakin et al, 2008; Scorgie, & Forlin, 2019), rather than an individual trait. The desire to immerse oneself in avatars or virtual worlds may be related to experiences of social exclusion. Social exclusion refers to experiences where individuals are excluded or marginalized from interactions with others, which

can lead to a decrease in self-confidence, self-esteem, loneliness, depression, and other negative outcomes. In such situations, virtual worlds offer individuals the ability to manipulate their appearance and surroundings, allowing them to avoid the negative experiences of social interaction. Therefore, the strong desire for virtual worlds or avatars can be understood as an attempt to escape from experiences of social exclusion in the real world.

Socially excluded individuals may exhibit high levels of metaverse experience in virtual worlds. This experience is accentuated when avatars resemble the users themselves. Such experiences suggest a connection with social exclusion experienced in real life, which can lead to anxiety, confusion, and physical and mental distress. Consequently, individuals who have experienced social exclusion can restore their confidence and reduce anxiety in social interactions by using avatars that resemble them. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that socially excluded individuals can play an active role in the metaverse. Therefore, research and development of the metaverse represent an important factor in promoting self-realization and social integration for socially excluded individuals.

Social exclusion can impose a significant burden on individuals' lives. People who have experienced social exclusion tend to form an idealized self-image in an attempt to compensate for their negative experiences in the real world. This tendency can become even stronger in virtual worlds such as the metaverse, where individuals have the possibility of fully controlling their appearance. Therefore, expressing oneself in the metaverse by portraying an idealized self-image can serve as a means of fulfilling the desire to overcome negative experiences felt in the real world. However, this phenomenon is not limited to the metaverse. People who have experienced social exclusion tend to form idealized images of themselves in the real world as well, and this tendency only influences their behavior in the metaverse. Thus, it is important to emphasize that expressing oneself in virtual worlds such as the metaverse is associated with the development of one's self-image in the real world. Consequently, virtual worlds such as the metaverse can become useful tools for individuals who have experienced social exclusion to develop their self-image.

In recent years, the metaverse has become a popular virtual space worldwide. Experiences in the metaverse are very different from those in reality because activities in the metaverse occur in a virtual form. Anyone can have experiences in the metaverse. However, there is an argument that these experiences can play a more important role for people who have experienced social exclusion. Those who experience social exclusion often find it difficult to reveal their identities

in reality. In such situations, the metaverse provides them with a new way to express themselves and communicate. These experiences make them more actively utilize their avatars in the metaverse. In other words, feeling oneself as an avatar in the metaverse becomes an easier way to reveal oneself than in reality. These experiences increase the sense of immersion in the metaverse, making the time spent in the metaverse longer. Additionally, experiences in the metaverse can be recognized as an alternative to real life, making them even more important. Therefore, when people who have experienced social exclusion feel like avatars in the metaverse, this has greater meaning for them. This makes experiences in the metaverse more enjoyable and leads to greater immersion in their activities. These results will contribute to the increasing popularity of the metaverse and enhance the confidence of people who have experienced social exclusion.

H7: Social exclusion positively moderates the relationship between similarity identification and immersion.

H8: Social exclusion positively moderates the relationship between wishful identification and immersion.

H9: Social exclusion positively moderates the relationship between embodied presence and immersion.

Methodology

Sample

This study sample consists of 228 higher education students with previous experience engaging in metaverse platforms. The sample consists of undergraduate and graduate students in business, social science, and engineering programs in Korea. The criteria for participation in the study include past engagement in the metaverse and a minimum age of 18 years. Though the sample is considered one of convenience, high education students represent a significant subset of a major participant's segment that focuses on active users.

Data collection and instrumentation

The study's objective was to investigate the impact of avatar identification on the intention to share by examining the mediating role of user immersion and the moderating effect of perceived social distance. These factors can be identified by measuring the participants' perceptions of metaverse platforms. The survey research method is very useful in collecting data from many individuals in a relatively short period and at a lower cost. Hence, for the current study, the

questionnaire survey was used for data collection. This study used a professional survey company to conduct the survey. The survey company provided each participant with a paper questionnaire along with an information letter explaining the purpose of the survey, emphasizing voluntary participation, and ensuring confidentiality. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and place it back in an envelope for the survey company to collect. The survey period was from May 1 to May 31, 2024, and each participant was allotted 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire employed psychometric measurement (Nunnally, 1978). Similarity identification was measured using six items from the scale developed by Van Looy et al (2012). For example, "The appearance and behavior of my Zepeto avatar seem to be similar to that of my real-life self". Wishful identification was measured using six items from the scale developed by Van Looy et al (2012). For example, "It would be desirable if I could become like my Zepeto avatar in appearance". Embodied presence was measured using five items from the scale developed by Van Looy et al (2012). For example, "I feel as if I have become my own avatar within the world of Jeju Island". Social exclusion was measured using three items from the scale developed by Mead et al (2011). For example, "I felt excluded". Immersion was measured using five items from the scale developed by Dehghani et al (2020) and Yim et al (2017). For example, "When I decorated my avatar with fashion brand A items within Zepeto, it felt as if I was present in that world". Intention to share was measured using five items from the scale developed by Zhang et al (2021). For example, "I am planning to share my Zepeto avatar, which is adorned with fashion brand items, on social media".

The control variables included Gender, Age, and Educational Level. Gender was coded as a dummy variable, with male respondents coded as 1 and female respondents as 0. Age was recorded as a continuous variable, representing the respondent's age at the time of the survey. Educational Level was also coded as a dummy variable, where respondents with a college-level education or lower were coded as 0, and those with a master's degree or higher were coded as 1.

Verification of reliability and validity

The validity of variables was verified through the principal component method and factor analysis with the varimax method. The criteria for determining the number of factors is defined as a 1.0 eigenvalue. This study applied factors for analysis only if the factor loading was greater than 0.5 (factor loading represents the correlation scale between a factor and other variables). The reliability of variables was judged by internal consistency as assessed by

Cronbach's alpha. This study used surveys and regarded each as one measure only if their Cronbach's alpha values were 0.7 or higher.

Common method bias

As with all self-reported data, there is the potential for the occurrence of common method variance (CMV) (MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012; Podsakoff et al, 2003). To alleviate and assess the magnitude of common method bias, this study adopted several procedural and statistical remedies that Podsakoff et al (2003) suggest. First, during the survey, respondents were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality to reduce the evaluation apprehension. Further, we paid careful attention to the items' wording and carefully developed our questionnaire to reduce the item ambiguity. These procedures would make them less likely to edit their responses to be more socially desirable, acquiescent, and consistent with how they think the researcher wants them to respond when answering the questionnaire (Podsakoff et al, 2003; Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). Second, this study conducted a Harman's one-factor test on all of the items. A principal component factor analysis revealed that the first factor only explained 34.9 percent of the variance. Thus, no single factor emerged, nor did one-factor account for most of the variance.

Furthermore, the measurement model was reassessed with the addition of a latent common method variance factor (Podsakoff et al, 2003). All indicator variables in the measurement model were loaded on this factor. The common variance factor's addition did not improve the fit over the measurement model without that factor with all indicators still remaining significant. These results do suggest that common method variance is not of great concern in this study.

Results

Relationship between variables

Table 1 summarizes the Pearson correlation test results between variables and reports the degree of multi-collinearity between independent variables. The minimum tolerance of 0.823 and the maximum variance inflation factor of 1.215 show that the data analysis's statistical significance was not compromised by multi-collinearity.

Table 1

Variables' correlation coefficient

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Similarity identification	1	-	-	-	-
Wishful identification	-.051	1	-	-	-
Embodied presence	.071	.039	1	-	-
Social exclusion	.072	.044	.018	1	-
Immersion	.017**	.025**	.015**	.041*	1
Intention to share	.014*	.042*	.027**	.041**	.023**

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

According to Table 1, similarity identification, wishful identification, embodied presence, and social exclusion all have a positive relationship with immersion. The results of this correlation analysis show that the independent and control variables will have a positive effect on the mediating variable. And, similarity identification, wishful identification, embodied presence, social exclusion, and immersion all have a positive relationship with Intention to share. Additionally, it shows that independent variables, control variables, and mediator variables will all have a positive effect on the dependent variable.

Hypothesis testing

This research utilized hierarchical multiple regression analyses with three stages to examine the hypotheses. First, the effect of avatar identification on immersion was analyzed. As shown in Table 2, as a result of first introducing demographic variables, it was found that gender is negatively related to immersion ($\beta = -.055, p < .01$). In this study, gender was coded as 1 for men, so the analysis results show that women are more likely to fall into immersion than men. Second, as a result of inputting three variables of avatar identification, it was found that all three variables of similarity identification ($\beta = .082, p < .01$), wishful identification ($\beta = .055, p < .01$), and embodied presence ($\beta = .039, p < .01$) had a positive effect on immersion. Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported.

Table 2

Analysis of the effect of independent variables on parameters

Variables	Immersion	
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender	-.055*	-.043*
Age	-.023	-.016
Educational level	.043	.031
Similarity identification	-	.082**
Wishful identification	-	.055**
Embodied presence	-	.039**
Adj. R^2	.103	.148
F	4.653**	8.991**

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

Second, to ensure that immersion mediates the relationship between each of the variables of avatar identification, Baron & Kenny's (1986) steps for establishing mediation were followed. First, all three variables of avatar identification should be correlated to share. As a result of the analysis, similarity identification ($\beta = .061$, $p < .01$), wishful identification ($\beta = .044$, $p < .01$), and embodied presence ($\beta = .053$, $p < .01$) have a positive effect on the intention to share. Second, it was determined that all three variables of avatar identification are related to immersion. This relationship is shown by the analysis results for the verification of hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 above. Third, when similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence were then entered into the model, immersion was found to be positively related to the intention to share and some paths were statistically insignificant or other path coefficients decreased. As a result of the analysis, immersion ($\beta = .012$, $p < .01$) was found to have a positive effect on intention to share. Among the variables of avatar identification, the effect coefficient and significance level of embodied presence decreased after immersion was introduced ($\beta = .028$, $p < .05$). Thus, as shown in Table 3, there is sufficient empirical support to conclude that immersion mediates the relationship between avatar identification variables and intention to share. On the other hand, immersion did not mediate the relationship between other variables of avatar identification and intention to share. Therefore, only H6 was supported.

Table 3

Analysis of the effect of mediating variables in the influence relationship between independent variables and dependent variables

Variables	Intention to share		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	-.077*	-.055*	-.039*
Age	-.062	-.058	-.043
Educational level	.074	.051	.043
Similarity identification	-	.061**	.032
Wishful identification	-	.044**	.028
Embodied presence	-	.053**	.028*
Immersion	-	-	.012*
Adj. R ²	.098	.121	.151
F	4.101**	7.441**	9.825**

Lastly, model 3 of Table 4, consisting of moderators, shows the interactions between avatar identification variables and social exclusion on immersion. Social exclusion positively affected the relationship between embodied presence and immersion ($\beta = .031, p < .01$). Social exclusion was found to have no significance in the relationship between other variables of avatar identification and intention to share (see Figure 1). Therefore, only H9 was supported. Table 5 shows the summary of results.

Figure 1

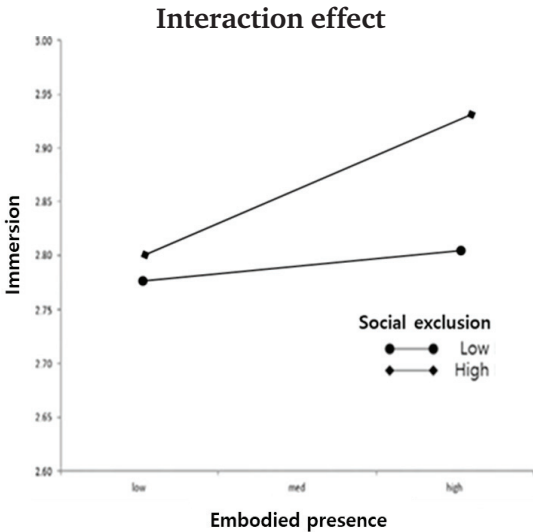


Table 4

Analysis of the effect of moderators on the influence relationship between independent variables on mediators

Variables	Immersion		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	-.055*	-.043*	-.027*
Age	-.023	-.016	-.003
Educational level	.043	.031	.020
Similarity identification	-	.082**	.065**
Wishful identification	-	.055**	.041**
Embodied presence	-	.039**	.021**
Social exclusion	-	-	.019**
Similarity identification* Social exclusion	-	-	.021
Wishful identification* Social exclusion	-	-	.010
Embodied presence* Social exclusion	-	-	.031*
Adj. R^2	.103	.148	.192
F	4.653**	8.991**	12.545**

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

Table 5

Results

Hypotheses	Results
H1: Similarity identification will have a positive (+) effect on immersion.	Supported
H2: Wishful identification will have a positive (+) effect on immersion.	Supported
H3: Embodied presence will have a positive (+) effect on immersion.	Supported
H4: Immersion will have a mediating effect on the relationship between similarity identification and the intention to share.	-
H5: Immersion will have a mediating effect on the relationship between wishful identification and the intention to share.	-
H6: Immersion will have a mediating effect on the relationship between embodied presence and the intention to share.	Supported
H7: Social exclusion positively moderates the relationship between similarity identification and immersion.	-
H8: Social exclusion positively moderates the relationship between wishful identification and immersion.	-
H9: Social exclusion positively moderates the relationship between embodied presence and immersion.	Supported

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of avatar identification on the intention to share. To identify this relationship of influence, this study analyzed whether immersion mediated the relationship between avatar identification and intention to share and whether social exclusion regulated the relationship between avatar identification and immersion. As a result of the analysis, first, when metaverse avatars reflected users' real-life images, users felt more familiarity and increased immersion in the metaverse (Buhalis et al, 2023). The results show that similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence, which represent avatar identification, all had a positive relationship with immersion. That is, as expected, the more the user is similar to the avatar, wants to resemble the avatar, or has a greater sense of reality through the avatar, the more immersed the user is in the avatar.

Second, according to Przybylski et al (2012), who investigated the perceptions of video game users, users become more immersed in video games when they use avatars with idealized appearances. The results show that among sub-variables representing avatar identification, only embodied presence increased the intention to share through immersion. On the other hand, the other two sub-variables had no mediating effect of immersion for the intention to share. "Embodied presence" means that the user has direct control over their avatar, and their movements and actions are transmitted to the avatar. This makes the user's avatar feel more real, thus helping the user feel a real presence in the virtual world. This promotes "immersion", which makes the user more immersed in the virtual world. Thus, "embodied presence" can help increase users' intention to share their avatars. On the other hand, "similarity identification" and "wishful identification" mean that the user feels similar to their avatar, or that the avatar represents the state they would like to be. These variables can strengthen the emotional connection between users and their avatars but do not directly influence users to increase their intention to share in the virtual world. The reason for this is that "similarity identification" and "wishful identification" are related to the user's personal needs and self-identification. This may not be appropriate material to share with other users. On the other hand, an "embodied presence" is better for interacting more directly with other users, so it can be material that can be easily shared with other users.

Lastly, the high level of interaction between avatars and users in metaverse environments is considered a key factor in users feeling embodied presence, and previous studies suggest that immersion can be enhanced through the experience of feeling as if the avatar and the user are one entity

(Klimmt, & Hartmann, 2006). The results show that social exclusion positively modulates the influence relationship between embodied presence and immersion among variables representing avatar identification. In other words, the more socially excluded people are, the more immersed they are in the realism of the avatar. Because people with high levels of “social exclusion” often feel unconnected to others, it becomes more important to feel more connected to others through their characters in the virtual world. On the other hand, “similarity identification” and “wishful identification” are elements that allow you to be more immersed in the virtual world through a character that is similar to you or wants to be you. Thus, these factors do not change their impact on immersion in virtual worlds regardless of social exclusion. These results show that the various factors that increase immersion in virtual worlds can act in different ways.

For research contribution, this study is the first to examine the integral model of avatar identification factors in the metaverse platform. Despite growing practical importance, few quantitative studies on avatar identification factors affect participants’ intentions to share. Given this situation, this study focused on participants’ immersion in the relationship between avatar identification and intention to share. This study shows that people who feel an embodied presence with an avatar want to share their avatars through their immersion.

Second, this study is the first to investigate the moderating effect of perceived social distance in the metaverse. The results show that since people who experience more social exclusion feel a more embodied presence through their avatar in the metaverse platform than any others, they are more immersed in their avatar. Therefore, this study extends the metaverse study’s scope by suggesting the study of the moderating effect on the relationship between avatar identification factors and immersion.

For practical implications, first, this study’s results show the mechanism by which avatar identification enhances the intention to share. Therefore, metaverse platform managers need to make the metaverse participants perceive that they can feel similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence. For example, it would be good to build a reputation by giving points to active participants in the metaverse platform, such as evaluation.

Second, this study’s results show that the participants’ perceived social distance enhances the impact of embodied presence on immersion. Therefore, metaverse platform managers need to be aware of their propensity through evaluation records of participants. For example, participants who exhibit high activities when evaluating avatars perceive high social exclusion, so it is

necessary to provide them with a way to provide embodied presence rather than other avatar identification factors.

By this research results, the present study could have several insights into participants' avatar identification in the metaverse. However, it should also acknowledge the following limitations of this research. First, the present study collected responses from university students in South Korea. There may exist some national cultural issues in the research context. Future studies should re-test this in other countries to assure these results' reliability. Second, as the variables were all measured simultaneously, it cannot be sure that their relationships are constant. Although the survey questions occurred in reverse order of the analysis model to prevent additional issues, the existence of causal relationships between variables is possible. Therefore, future studies need to consider longitudinal studies. Finally, this study uses perceived similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence as avatar identification factors and explores immersion as a mediator and social distance as a moderator. However, considering the characteristics of the metaverse, future studies may find other factors. For example, the metaverse platform's sustainability as an intrinsic motivation factor, or economic benefits as extrinsic motivation factors may be considered. The social identity, such as the interdependent self-view felt by the platform participants, can be considered a moderating factor.

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Blogosphere and virtual society: Exploring new areas of research¹

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Abstract

The article aims to outline bloggings as a complex social phenomenon and identify the current role of blogs in virtual reality. The literature review revealed that the evolving paradigm of civilizational growth has led to a hybrid environment, which combines the aspects of physical world and virtual reality artefacts, resulting in a unique media landscape, significantly impacting socio-cultural and communicative dynamics. However, the field lacks studies on typical features of blogosphere, such as its inherent openness, fostering informal communication, intention to both monetization and self-expression. To address the study's objectives the research adopts an integrative interdisciplinary approach, including socio-philosophical and semiotic cultural studies, theory of computer communication, network and Internet discourse studies to use data from various fields of humanitarian knowledge. It is concluded that originally created as online diaries, currently blogs as a diverse media platform demonstrate several unique features, including high personalization, audience feedback capabilities, constant user engagement with various types of information (verbal, audial, visual). These characteristics positioned blogs as key contributors to the growth of virtual sociality, leading to the emergence of a new type of society characterized by heightened human sensory experiences and the development of new empathetic models and behavioral attitudes.

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A notable sign of these changes is that the audience's attention has shifted from professional media institutions to individual bloggers, who are increasingly adopting media-like behaviors. The current research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, merging socio-philosophical and semiotic cultural studies, as well as with theory of computer communication, network and Internet discourse studies. It also employs methods of Internet linguistics and the principles of pragmalinguistics; the axiological method helps to identify value-based socio-cultural guidelines within the framework of globalization.

Keywords

Blog, blogging, blogosphere, virtual media sphere, modern Russian media landscape.

Introduction

The changing paradigm of civilizational development has given rise to a hybrid environment where the tangible realities of the physical world are intricately synthesized with the boundless constructs of virtual reality, resulting in a unique media landscape. This networked communication space, emerging within the virtual realm, serves as a catalyst for contemporary social advancement, profoundly influencing our socio-cultural and communicative spheres. Nowadays being online has become a fundamental necessity for individuals; public institutions risk becoming outcasts from the community if they lack a virtual twin.

The new digital reality has affected the already existing digital inequality between societies and social groups within countries, sparked a heated discussion about the new dimensions of this phenomenon. Education is one of the fields facing digital inequality, which got especially aggravated in emerging countries. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the global closure of schools and higher education institutions, forcing a move to distance learning (Jamil et al, 2022; Abu-Kishk, & Mendels, 2024), as well as professional journalistic practices turning more to remote formats (Msimanga, Tshuma, & Matsilele, 2022; Escudero, 2023). This change significantly affected working conditions, education, the economy, and the environment. Having access to infrastructure, information and communication technologies became essential for students to pursue their academic studies (Dunas et al, 2023). To address the challenges posed by the digital divide in higher education, suggest implementing the so-called 'digital upgrades', which aim to create equal opportunities to access education (Vartanova, Gladkova, & Ragnedda, 2022). The following key

issues are to be focused upon: 1) national digital infrastructure (to enhance connectivity); 2) digital platforms (devices used by teachers and students); 3) digital platforms (to facilitate effective teaching delivery); 4) digital training (provided for students, teachers, and administrative staff).

Another relevant issue is digital inequality in functioning of media organizations. Various approaches are compared to coping with this problem, among which there is a suggestion that creating direct landscape of exchange could reduce the digital divide, so that the readers' requirements and priorities were met. Such an interaction is claimed to presuppose connecting to another wave of the digital divide, grounded upon socio-cultural, economic, educational, and political factors (Mansoori, & Musa, 2024).

Thus, the digital tools that come to the limelight today enable the mobile, one-click transmission of information and the receipt of instant feedback – the *blog* is becoming the most popular among them. Likewise, its derivatives *blogging* and *blogosphere* have become part and parcel of modern discourse. A *blog* (shortened version of *weblog* – online event log or diary) is a web page or platform featuring regularly updated content. It is hosted on a website (*blog hosting*) and includes various materials (known as *posts*), such as texts, photos and videos, typically arranged in reverse chronological order. Though blogs are often compared to personal diaries, they stand apart due to publicity and wide opportunities they provide for reader through commenting (Lukina (ed.), 2010: 277).

Theoretical approaches and methodology

The blogosphere is frequently compared to the media, highlighting their similarities and differences. A notable similarity lies in the entertainment nature of blogs: to attract attention bloggers alter the way of presenting factual information up to inventing news and passing off fake news as if it were real. Thus, offering the audience a wide range of information, blogs prove themselves to serve as news media for everyone. Hence, a critical attitude is vital towards those blogs that claim to be legitimate news sources (Elshahed, & Tayie, 2019). The question is to be posed to define a qualified journalist in the virtual world, as well as to evaluate the impact on the journalistic sphere a blogger might produce (Karamatdinova, 2020; Baychik, 2023). Equating blogs with mass media brings new challenges to the professional journalism. Blogs have signs of periodicity, have an audience and disseminate mass information. But the difference between blogs and the media lies primarily in self-identification. Mass media are social institutions that inform, entertain, educate, which cannot be said about blogs. The media also have a social mission to society, and any

blog is created and developed in the interests of the author (Karamatdinova, 2020). Currently the following issues concerning blogging are being in focus of studies:

- *the emergence of blogging and its evolution through various stages.* Originally appeared as a personal or family diary for self-expression, over the decades blogs have evolved into a distinct system guided by specific rules and standards. Today blogs function as essential tools for building and enhancing reputation, effectively promoting individuals as brands. No longer are they mere platforms for information exchange, but comprehensive digital ecosystems. Currently, blogs are gaining key importance, particularly due to the potential for content monetization and their integration with content marketing and influencer marketing (Chechulin, 2023 et al: 88);
- *classification of blogs and blogosphere segments.* Blogs could be divided into several types, including personal, business, professional, partner, media, freelance and niche blogs that focus on specific topics: food, lifestyle, health, home decor, parenting. Some blogs operate as open and vibrant communities, while other could be closed themed communities or channels centered around specific ideas, values, and opinion leaders (ibid: 90);
- *genre and thematic features of blogs.* The genre and thematic content of the blogosphere is observed to be leaning towards personal narratives, while journalism seems to occupy only a marginal position in social networks (Kolesnichenko, 2021: 68);
- *interaction between blogs and their audience.* Since maintaining the interest of the audience is crucial for bloggers, among their key tasks are communicating with other users, consistently publishing content, short- and long-term posts planning. The blogging process includes direct creation, introspection, reflective monologues, reflective dialogues, knowledge artifact curation (Rettberg, 2014; Sahil et al, 2021);
- *promotion and monetization of blogs, features of digital marketing in social networks* (Obraztsova, & Serdotetsky, 2021; Chechulin et al, 2023). Among key advantages of blogging are its ability to influence public opinion, offering an accessible communication platform to everyone, its enhancing writing skills, as well as creating opportunities for monetization. To be noted, however, that along with providing avenues for connection, self-expression, and support, social media also comes with risks like social comparison, cyberbullying, and the fear of

missing out (Shen et al, 2006; Ursula, 2024);

- *legal and ethical aspects of blogging, privacy and security issues associated with blogs* (McCullagh, 2008; Zhang et al, 2010). Several studies explore why bloggers choose to expose their private lives publicly, despite being aware of the potential risks to their privacy. Researchers report bloggers to have indicated their prioritizing virtue and ethical principles. This first large-scale survey on blogging ethics refutes the notion on lacking in ethics in bloggers' practices (Elshahed, & Tayie, 2019: 33).
- *the impact that the blogosphere produces on social processes*, including public communication styles of politicians and officials; communicative strategies for addressing daily and interpersonal issues; the development of civic responsibility; the forming of ideas, opinions, and values (Elshahed, & Tayie, 2019). Today launching a successful blog demands a carefully crafted strategy, which triggers the need for blogging agencies, also known as influencer agencies (Iovva, & Mokrichuk, 2022). The growing focus on blogging is largely due to the influence bloggers produce on social practices and the potential abilities of blogging to change in contemporary society.

Methods

The current research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, merging socio-philosophical and semiotic cultural studies, as well as with theory of computer communication, network and Internet discourse studies. It employs methods of Internet linguistics and the principles of pragmalinguistics; the axiological method helps to identify value-based socio-cultural guidelines within the framework of globalization. Central to this work is the principle of consistency, which is the basis of the work, has determined a set of relevant research methods. The integrative method allows for the use of data from various fields of humanitarian studies to address the study's objectives.

Literature review has revealed that an essential research problem remains beyond the current studies in the field: it is the inherent openness of the blogosphere and informal communication, coupled with individuals' desire to monetize their self-realization needs. This trend raises serious concerns about socio-cultural degradation of a significant segment of the blog audience; it also poses questions regarding shifts in behavioral attitudes and changes in the typical features of the current communicative landscape. The blogosphere contributes to shaping a new society; it exposes the users to constant deep immersion and produces complex sensory effects to shape novel empathic models and

behavioral tendencies; thus, the resultants individuals experience heightened sensory modalities. These transformations need being examined, since blogging activities are giving rise to a new dimension of social reality – virtual sociality.

Thus, the study aims to outline bloggings as a complex social phenomenon. It seeks to identify the role of blogs in virtual reality, describe the main stages and mechanisms of blogging evolution, explore social topics typically addressed in blogs and uncover the prerequisites that shaping blogging.

Results

The main stages of blog evolution

Blogs originated as traditional news diaries: this was the format of the Internet page that Tim Berners-Lee – now regarded as the first blogger – launched in 1992. They quickly evolved into a dynamic tool for self-expression, gaining widespread popularity. Blog writers start to identify themselves as ‘journalists’, ‘publicists’, ‘diarists’ and ‘describers’ and position themselves as representatives of media or literature, thereby claiming public authority.

The rapid advancement of technology simplified the creating and maintaining of personal websites and blogs, making them more accessible to a broad audience of Internet users. Creating a blog or posting content no longer required specialized knowledge, so this form of online expression was increasingly winning interest. In a decade blogs have amassed a multi-million audience, transforming from a mere hobby and medium for self-expression into a significant segment of the virtual media landscape. As blogs expanded into the realms of politics and journalism, they started to gain increasing attention to finally evolve into vital tools for disseminating information and communicating key news to the public. Moreover, bloggers became influential users in shaping public opinion, whose comments on events go beyond personal preferences and get a socially significant meaning, so that not infrequently they triggered political scandals and reshaped the agenda.

The development of social communities has given rise to blogging, a new phenomenon in virtual spaces, which managed to merge novel social practices driven by individuals’ desires for self-expression and e-commercialization of these activities. While blogs may be regarded as one of the earliest forms of Internet communication, it was the surge of e-commerce that sparked a revival of blogging, transforming it into a highly popular activity and one of the most sought-after professions today.

In this context, we can pinpoint several key events that occurred almost simultaneously and marked a turning point in the evolution of blogging.

The first event is related to the issue of freedom of speech in blogs. The first event pertains to the dynamics of relationships, particularly the A notable case is a series of posts featured by an American blogger Heather Brooke about her colleagues in 2001, which resulted in her dismissal; it triggered public outcry and widespread discussions on the ethical implications of the issue. Later the motto “My blog, my rules” marked blogs transforming into free platforms enabling to express the writers’ opinions without constraint.

The second event took place a year later, in 2002, when Google launched AdSense, a service that enabled integrating a personal diary and targeted advertising. The era of blogging has started; many bloggers became ‘opinion ambassadors’ having signed contracts with corporations and brands.

The third event, dated back to the early 2000s, concerns the expansion of the media landscape, namely, the rise of cyber journalism and political blogging development driven by political figures and media-savvy politicians. Thus, the key events, such as escalation of military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East, received immediate coverage and commentary through blogs.

The blog, as a tool, and blogging, as a form of social practice, have unlocked a wide range of opportunities that go beyond utilizing users’ and social communities’ private capitals. This shift empowers individual members to express their opinions, their personal preferences and desires. In contrast to the conflict and instability often seen within social communities, blogs were considered as an alternative platform. They provide a toolkit that not only fulfills personal aspirations but also opens avenues for monetising social practices. Furthermore, blogs allowed for influencing public opinion, broadening the audience and boosting the blog’s visibility and credibility, which ultimately enhance the blogger’s self-esteem.

Currently, the statistics clearly shows a significant ‘commercialization effect’ of blogging, though, to the best of our knowledge, literature review reveals an obvious insufficiency of research on this segment. According to *HypeAyditor* agency, the value of the traditional global market stands at \$5.9 billion, while the global blogger market, as reported by *Influencer Marketing Hub* (tracking the segment of online promotion of goods, brands and services), has reached \$9.7 billion, with the growth rates of 40-60% depending on the segment (Kiuru, 2014; Ulyanova, 2014; Goroshko, & Polyakova, 2015; Kolesnichenko, 2021). The Russian blog market is also witnessing robust expansion, with growth rates of 20-35% across different segments, and its volume for 2024 is estimated to be between 24-43 billion rubles, compared to 45 billion rubles in 2023. The income of the leading influencer bloggers ranges from 3 to 38 million rubles (Pil’ka, 2023).

The phenomenon of blogging in Russia dates back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the Internet became widely accessible to a broader audience. While Russian blogging evolved alongside global trends, it developed unique characteristics shaped by the country's cultural and social context. The following key stages of blogging development in Russia are to be mentioned:

The origins of blogging in Russia. In the early 2000s blogging was about to start in this country. The first blogs were launched on foreign platforms, such as *LiveJournal*, which became the most popular option among Russian-speaking users. Founded in 1999, by the early 2000s *LiveJournal* has evolved into a vibrant space for communication, self-expression, and opinion exchange. During this period blogs were primarily written by IT specialists, journalists, writers and other members of the intellectual elite (Ignatiev, 2024).

The rise of LiveJournal. In the mid 2000s, *LiveJournal* transformed into an influential cultural and social platform in Russia. It became a hub for discussions on political, social, and cultural issues, allowing users to express their civic views. Politicians, writers and activists began blogging, which attracted a wide and diverse audience. Between 2005 and 2007 *LiveJournal* played a crucial role in organizing protests and civic initiatives. Researchers note that the popularity of bloggers on *LiveJournal* could be estimated using two key metrics: the number of subscribers (also known as “friends”) and the number of visitors. The latter parameter is highly dynamic and most often reflects the popularity of specific posts; the former tends to be more stable, requiring longer observation periods to detect significant changes.

Platform competition. In the 2020s alternative Russian projects began to appear, such as *Ya.ru* (literary ‘me.ru’) by Yandex. Social networks such as *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* (literary ‘classmates’) started to rival blogs by offering simpler and user-friendly ways to communicate and share content. Nevertheless, *LiveJournal* remained a vital platform for political and social discussions.

Switch to social media and video blogging. During the 2010s the popularity of traditional text blogs started to wane, as users were increasingly switching to social media platforms like *Vkontakte* and *Twitter*. Simultaneously, video blogging began to actively develop. *YouTube* quickly became popular among Russian-speaking users, leading many bloggers to focus on video content. In this period the first major Russian YouTube bloggers started their carrier, such as *EeOneGuy*, *Kate Clapp*, among others.

New formats. In the 2020s short videos became a dominant format, especially on *Tik Tok*, which gained immense popularity among younger audience for

content creation. Blogging has become increasingly commercialized: bloggers collaborate with brands, promote products and services, turning blogging into a legitimate profession.

Redistribution of spheres of influence. After several foreign social networks were banned in Russia in 2022, the number of users visiting these platforms has sharply declined and the reach of popular accounts has significantly dropped. With the exit of major foreign advertisers from the Russian market and ceasing the possibility of monetization for Russian YouTube users, many bloggers have turned to online donation services to cover their content creation costs. Likewise, the geopolitical climate has influenced blog content, focusing on political topics including Russian special operation, the country's future, emigration and patriotism. Topics related to everyday life, lifestyle, fashion, design, among others have also gained attention in blogs and channels. In contrast, the popularity of entertainment content has waned. Blogging has also seen the tightening of content control on the part of the government (Lukina (ed.), 2010: 277). This redistribution of influence has reinforced the transformation of social networks into digital ecosystems; the integration of the platforms *Zen* and *Vkontakte* has resulted into a monopoly on content production within the latter platform (Chechulin et al, 2023).

The popularity of blogging in Russia is underscored by statistics: in March 2024 the number of active bloggers surged to an all-time high of over 69 million authors, while the total number of posts reached an impressive 1.9 billion, reflecting robust growth. Compared to 2023 the average month volume of blogging content increased by 29%, with active authors rising by 9%; totally, in 2023 64.6 million authors and 1.55 billion posts were recorded (TASS, 2021).

Notably, a 2021 survey revealed that 80% of Russians expressed a desire to leave their jobs to become bloggers; this interest was particularly pronounced among younger people aged 18-24 (73% female); to be noted, however, that 30% of the respondents were aged over 45, with men representing 55% (TASS, 2021). Interestingly, among professional bloggers only 16% are in the 18-24 age range, whereas the majority of professional bloggers fall into older age groups: 25-34 years old (35%) and 35-44 (25%). For 70% of the surveyed bloggers managing a blog is a hobby that provides supplementary income, while the other 30% regard blogging as their main profession and primary source of earnings (Protsenko, 2021). These data illustrate significant structural changes within the virtual sphere. However, these developments have led to troubling outcomes, as the blogosphere faced a decline in the trust it once had during its early years. Fake news, offensive jokes, racist remarks, and other inappropriate information

that undermine the dignity of others have diminished the popularity of blogs. Statistics shows that 31% of Russians consider information received from blogs as false, while only 16% believe it to be accurate; about 20% think that blogs provide equally reliable and false information (Romanova, 2024).

In recent years, restricted governmental regulations and self-regulation within the blogosphere have changed the situation. Administrators are increasingly blocking irresponsible users; both law enforcement agencies and the public are promptly auditing content to removal the negative one, as well as block its creators. Having surveyed 5,500 respondents across 43 regions of Russia, researchers found that over 53% of participants trust the opinions of bloggers, which indicates a positive trend in public perception (Romanova, 2024).

The role of blogs in the development of virtual sociality

The outlined stages and vectors of blogging development illustrate that society faced a fundamentally new form of activity, linked to the expanding possibilities of virtual space. The evolution of blogs signifies their transition from informal communication channels to a multifunctional media landscape, viewed as an independent realm of intricate and multidimensional network interactions. Blogs have emerged as a distinctive form of modern existence, characterized by information mobility and dynamism. Their daily practices have developed a specific structure, principles, rules, and genres that used to be typical of institutionalized media. This evolution has fostered the formation of a new culture, marked by diverse semantic and behavioral attitudes and network interactions. Consequently, we are witnessing the restructuring of human thought, perception of the world and self-identity; new constructs have emerged within social architecture. The virtual space has quantitatively and qualitatively transformed “the Gutenberg Galaxy”, integrating into human life, society, and governance. Immersive and interactive technologies are increasingly blurring the lines between the real and virtual worlds, merging a comprehensive set of interactions into a cohesive social field. This new social field has a well-defined structure and active participants, giving rise to new social groups and strata that contribute to a fresh dimension of social reality – virtual sociality. A key characteristic of virtual sociality is its ontological framework, which highlights the transformation of the social paradigm in real reality. This framework intertwines the experiences of social action with the unique organization of virtual social formations, underscoring the profound changes occurring in our social landscape (Rykov, 2013).

Viewed as a form of communicative social action, virtual reality can be viewed as a collection of network models for user interaction that facilitate both formal and informal communication through various channels and tools, such as email, corporate portal feedback channels, and social networks – “communication for communication’s sake”. Viewed as a purposeful social action, virtual reality represents a complex of models aimed at organizing social groups in both real and digital formats. It has effectively transformed the Internet into a contemporary media platform, enabling online media to emerge as a vital resource for political, economic, and socio-cultural processes. It also engages the users as active participants and ideologists, who start shaping and implementing strategies across various spheres of modern life, creating norms and social standards that define contemporary digital culture.

To create broader opportunities and expand communication potentials provided for users, the integration of following aspects should be ensured: *social aspect*, i.e. the way users define the notion of sociality (or produce social associations, according to B. Latour); *material aspect* as a collection of technologies, including artificial intelligence, neural networks, the Internet of Things, and other digital technologies; *meaningful aspect* as models of interpretive meanings and sign-symbolic meta-messages, manipulating natural reflexes of cognition and critical thinking abilities. The digital transformation of the individual is determined by the transformation of their social capabilities, a new social reality presented as a synthesis of two systems – physical and digital. For the individual the transformation into a ‘multi-self’ means changing their social action (regardless of the forms it takes) from the Aristotelian ‘matter-form’ system into Luhmann’s system of procedural and operational structures. This transformation might aim to alter the social space and create new models by establishing new logical associations and transforming the content.

The emergence of blogs was one of the notable transformations of the range of virtual social actions. This phenomenon can be viewed not merely as an alternative solution, but as a transformative force within online communities. These web pages aim to tackle various challenges, be it within professional field or for purposes of daily communication, entertainment, or knowledge-sharing. Blogs facilitate open and dynamic interpersonal interactions among individuals with shared interests, establishing clear boundaries for community membership. Additionally, the virtual integration matrices, whether focused on personal connections or broader audience engagement, have influenced the structural and social stratification in these communities.

The goals of blog users, as well as factors underlying social and digital inequality, affect the structural differentiation and hierarchy of the virtual community. The following categories of users tend to be clearly distinguished (Table 1):

Table 1

Classification of users in blogs

	Blog user category	Characteristics
1	Moderators	The dominant group, which has power, authority and control over the virtual community
2	The “elite”	Assistant moderators, who implement the policy of the social community; like moderators they have the rights to block other users
3	Common community members	Virtual community participants with certain rights, including participating in discussions, leaving comments, etc. Their activity contributes to the community’s popularity
4	Users	Non-members of the community and thus not having participation rights. Normally, they belong to the external audience, which only has the right to view public posts, news, etc.

Structural differentiation and inequality within virtual communities have given rise to new communication platforms – *social networks*. The primary distinction of these platforms is the opportunity of self-presentation provided for users. The popularity of social networks stems from their ability to unite individuals with shared interests, while also allowing users to leave the group or to change their role in the community (transforming from a common member, whose abilities are often restricted by community guidelines, into a moderator with a broader range of rights and relative independence). Social networks empower each user to create their own profile and post content, such as information, photos, graphics, and texts; at that, post sharing is not confined by any rigid rules or templates. Social networks facilitate connections with friends, interactions with other users, the exchange of messages, which enable individuals to navigate their ‘virtual lives’ according to their own preferences.

Hence, the modern blogosphere has developed a relatively stable structure, identifiable by its most popular and sustainable segments. Studies of the Russian blogosphere reveal that 68% of respondents prefer political blogs; other notable segments include information analytics at 47%, entertainment and humor at 32%, science at 30%, and travel and lifestyle at 28% (Habermas, 2022). This

structural differentiation reflects the evolving dynamics of public opinion within the blogosphere: the claimed 79% of users following news in blogs prove a growing trust in their reliability.

Moreover, the concept of blogging has undergone significant transformation. Initially viewed as personal diaries or individual websites, early bloggers focused on self-expression rather than audience engagement, often participating in auto-communication. In contrast, today's bloggers actively seek the audience's feedback and tailor their content to meet the audience's expectations. Otherwise stated, they organise their blogs in coordination with few selected memes that most resonate their style and create "memeplexes", i.t. collections of identical memes. This shift has positioned blogs as tools for shaping public opinion, employing manipulative tool not only to influence "blogosphere dwellers", but also to go beyond it, entering real society. Today, blog writers tend to become esteemed figures at national forums, conferences, and business meetings. Their lives attract considerable attention from both a wide audience and the media, with their behaviour, opinion, and lifestyles serving as role models for millions of users, particularly the youth.

These changes shift our understanding of virtual space from a mass social perspective to the one emphasizing social individualization. This shift highlights not only group social practices but also the personality of the blogger, along with the psychological motives and needs that condition their behaviour in the virtual realm.

To summarize the above stated, several *motivating factors* underling the desire of a contemporary individual to become a blogger can be singled out:

- *the first motivating factor* is the accessibility of the platform. Any Internet user, regardless of special skills, education or life experience can easily become a blogger just by creating and publishing content online. The subject matter of this content is largely unregulated, which leads many novice bloggers to gravitate toward lifestyle topics. This seemingly easy entry point for content creation presupposes sharing aspects of personal life, hobbies, social outings and daily routine. Lifestyle blogging enables bloggers to build a sense of loyalty among their subscribers, while high personalization of the blogger's image (i.e. sharing personal stories) elicit emotional responses from the audience and enhance its engagement. This strategy may ultimately ensure the blog's and thus the blogger's popularity.
- *the second motivating factor* is the individual's inclination towards conformism (the so-called 'crowd effect'). From this perspective, blogs

can be viewed as a virtual product of mass consumer culture, rooted in socialization algorithms shaped by popular culture and reinforced by the individuals' desire to "be on trend". Applied to media blogs, the crowd's collective mind leads individuals to engage in actions driven by societal obsessions and fashion trends, even if these actions conflict with their internal desires or motivations. Thus, striving at popularity, many young bloggers become notorious in search of appreciation and fame. Their spontaneous and sometimes outrageous behaviour, captured on camera or expressed through provocative posts, frequently lacks any clear purpose, but rather subconsciously justified by the crowd effect principle.

- *the third motivating factor* is conditioned by Machiavellianism and desire for money and power. This driver act as the leading for a relatively small group of influential bloggers (genuine 'opinion leaders'), having a significant amount of followers, getting substantial incomes, and producing an enormous impact on the audience. Some of these bloggers have an appropriate professional background, while the majority boast their unique talents, creativity, and artistic flair to discover unconventional content solutions.

Comprehending these factors could provoke better understanding of the blogosphere structure and differentiate between the elements it is comprised of, i.e. distinct social groups with specific social characteristics, behavioral patterns, lifestyles and worldviews. This deeper understanding will enable us to identify and analyze the various dynamics and influences within these online communities more clearly.

Conclusion

Modern goal-oriented practices have cultivated a new form of social action: a user-network social action provided in digital format. Its uniqueness lies in its being executed within an artificial space filled with digital images, often devoid of a real counterpart, and sometimes even generated by neural networks and bots.

Blogs have emerged as a distinct form of contemporary existence, where daily practices have developed into structured principles, rules, and genres typically associated with institutionalized media. This evolution has fostered the creation of a new culture. Currently, we witness the ongoing process of blogs transforming from informal communication channels into a multifunctional media environment. The distinctive characteristics of blogs have positioned

them as crucial players in the development of virtual sociality. Hence, a new society is emerging, characterized by enhanced human sensory modalities; likewise, new empathetic models and behavioral attitudes are being formed.

A significant indicator of these changes is the shift in audience focus from professional institutions (media) to a regular individual (blogger), who has been actively acquiring the patterns of media behaviour. Such characteristics as personal nature of blogs, their using as tools for self-expression and self-presentation foster alternative approaches to socio-cultural actions, information dissemination, and communicative interactions.

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The manuscript should be typed in 1,5-spacing on one side of the paper only, using Times New Roman 14 font. Margins are 2 cm on all sides. Tables and figures (illustrations) should be embedded into the text.

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