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LEAD ARTICLE

China's poverty alleviation in the media: Analyzing the television series *Minning Town* from a cultural discourse perspective[1]

Shi-xu[2],
Hangzhou Normal University,
Communication University of Zhejiang, China

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Chinese poverty alleviation has largely proceeded from institutional or economic perspectives, paying insufficient attention to the role of cultural discourse in understanding this new campaign of China. The present study adopts Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS) as methodology to examine the television series *Minning Town*, aiming to reveal the discursive strategies reconstructing the emergence, methodologies, and underlying logic of the Minning poverty alleviation efforts. It makes the following argument. Firstly, the success of the township's alleviation poverty efforts is made possible by such forces as state policy initiatives, relocational migration, technological assistance, the nation's East-West collaboration, industrial development, the unity between the Party and the masses, the awakening of human agency, and dialectical synthesis of ecological modernization. Secondly and most crucially, these motivating factors are rendered present through a diversity of Chinese discursive-cinematic techniques: Chinese-specific parole and narratives, particular types of personages, dialectal dialogue, polyphonic soundscapes, and contrast montage. This study demonstrates that Chinese cinematic discourse provides an effective way of understanding Chinese poverty alleviation efforts.

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[2] **Corresponding author:**
Shi-xu, Hangzhou Normal University, Communication University of Zhejiang, China.
E-mail: xshi@zju.edu.cn

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Introduction
In recent years, research on China's poverty alleviation has drawn widespread academic attention both domestically and internationally. Domestic scholarship primarily focuses on the institutional strengths and policy efficacy of the poverty alleviation campaign. Scholars have systematically elaborated on dimensions such as the targeted poverty alleviation strategy, the East-West pairing-off collaboration mechanism, and the effective transition from poverty alleviation to rural revitalization. Rich academic outputs have emerged around topics like poverty reduction achievement evaluations and long-term mechanisms for addressing relative poverty. In 2020, "Poverty Alleviation and Rural Revitalization" was named one of China's top ten academic hotspots, marking this field's transition into a phase of deep theoretical construction. Meanwhile, international scholarship predominantly examines China's poverty reduction practices through the lens of development economics, alongside systematic literature reviews on China's rural revitalization policies in recent years. However, existing research largely favors policy text analysis, economic data statistics, and institutional mechanism interpretation, leaving the discursive construction, emotional mobilization, and production of meaning embedded within cultural texts (such as film and television works) under-analyzed (Chen, 2021; Fan, 2024; Lei, Teo, & Candida, 2024).

A Cultural Discourse Studies perspective
Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS) is an interdisciplinary research paradigm devloped by Shi-xu (2025, 2014, 2022) in the early 21st century. Integrating cultural studies with discourse analysis, CDS emphasizes that discourse is not merely a vehicle for transmitting information, but an arena for constructing cultural meanings, power relations, and identities. Its central concern lies in unraveling how specific discursive practices are produced, circulated, and received within particular historical and cultural contexts, as well as how discourse participates in the construction and reproduction of social reality. Moving beyond traditional discourse analysis's exclusive focus on linguistic forms, CDS contextualizes texts within broader cultural traditions, ideologies, and social practices.

Introducing CDS into the analysis of poverty alleviation provides two crucial new avenues for scholarly inquiry:

How discourse constructs the reality of poverty alleviation: It illuminates how cultural texts like TV series translate abstract policy language into concrete, palpable stories of individual destiny through narrative strategies, visual rhetoric, and emotional mobilization, thereby constructing audience resonance and institutional legitimacy for the cause.

Discourse-power dynamics: It enables an examination of the discursive negotiations and power dynamics among diverse actors (state, local governments, and citizens) within poverty alleviation narratives. By examining who speaks, how they speak, and how speech shapes action, this perspective deepens our understanding of the underlying cultural logic of China's poverty alleviation.

Below, we examine media representations of a landmark Chinese poverty alleviation case to uncover the underlying drivers of these initiatives, while delineating the discursive communication strategies used to depict them.

Causes driving the poverty alleviation effort in Minning

Extreme natural survival imperatives: Situated in the arid belt of Northwest China, the Xihaigu region suffers from an extremely harsh natural environment. The opening scenes of *Minning Town* establish this existential predicament through highly realistic visual language: a monochromatic color palette of ochre yellows and dusty browns dominates the frame, conveying the tactile sterility of the Gobi Desert (Lu, 2022; Hu, 2021). Continuous howling winds and the abrasive impact of windblown sand construct a distinct "auditory desert". Sharp, jagged mountain silhouettes lack soft gradients, creating an intense sense of visual oppression. This state of "absolute poverty" and "ecological dead end" serves as the foundational impetus for poverty alleviation—when natural environments push human existence to the edge, external intervention becomes imperative.

The series employs specific discursive communication techniques to present and heighten these drivers:

Color codes: The opening scenes utilize a monochromatic palette dominated by yellow-browns and warm dark grays, visually signaling an ecology of drought and barrenness. This high-sensory modality color choice allows audiences to intuitively feel the survival struggles of Xihaigu prior to any textual exposition.

Extreme long-shot composition: Shots of the Gobi Desert position the horizon along the upper two-thirds of the frame, letting desolate hills occupy the main visual space. The sharp, fragmented outlines of the mountains lack soft transitions, intensifying environmental severity.

Ambient sound design: Pervasive wind noise and sand impacts, paired with extended auditory silences, construct a stark "auditory desert". Natural sound

functions not merely as background noise, but as an active narrative element metaphorizing the tense relationship between humanity and nature.

Survival narratives in monologues and dialogues: Old Man Ma squats on a dry field ridge, gazing at the cracked earth and muttering: *"This cursed place! God hasn't fired a shot [rained] in three years. Nothing grows, so how are folks supposed to survive?"* Delivered in unvarnished Northwest dialect, this monologue condenses ecological desperation into everyday vernacular, granting abstract drought an embodied emotional expression. Captured from a low-angle medium close-up, his hunched figure is juxtaposed against the vast, barren backdrop, reinforcing individual vulnerability before environmental adversity.

Historical impetus of state policy: Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, poverty eradication has been established as a core governance task. The "Minning Collaboration" model portrayed in *Minning Town* represents the concrete execution of this macro-policy on the Northwest Loess Plateau. The narrative is grounded in the historical trajectory of East-West pairing-off poverty alleviation efforts established since the 1990s. State policies provided institutional frameworks and resource guarantees for Minning collaboration, enabling large-scale relocation, industrial support, and ecological restoration.

The series conveys and reinforces these institutional drivers through specific discursive choices:

Authoritative tonalities of standard Mandarin: Reporting at a county committee meeting, Magistrate Yang speaks in clear, measured Standard Mandarin with balanced rhythm and formal vocabulary. This linguistic choice aligns policy discourse with official authority, allowing audiences to audibly register the top-down communication of state will.

Visual staging in meeting scenes: During county committee scenes, eye-level, frontal camera angles capture symmetrically arranged figures against backgrounds featuring the Party flag and national emblem. This setup creates a solemn political ritualism that reinforces the policy's institutional authority.

Flashback narratives: The series uses flashbacks to intermingle historical context, such as news broadcasts and close-ups of official documents giving the policy narrative historical depth and avoiding empty sloganizing.

Policy communication via monologue and dialogue: Magistrate Yang reads from a document during a county meeting: *"The Central Committee has made it clear: in the battle against poverty, no one is to be left behind!"* Delivered firmly in Standard Mandarin, his voice translates state will into palpable

linguistic momentum. A frontal eye-level medium shot contrasts the cadre's formal demeanor with the attentive expressions of listening villagers, grounding abstract policy within concrete commitments.

Deep friction of cultural attachment to ancestral land (***An Tu Zhong Qian***): The poverty alleviation campaign required proactive implementation because of the local peasantry's deeply rooted tradition of *an tu zhong qian* (attachment to ancestral land). Villagers in the series resist relocation, interpreting movement as abandonment. This cultural-psychological friction meant poverty alleviation could not remain a matter of physical development; it required a transformation of mindsets. The unfolding of the Minning collaboration represents a continuous effort to strike a balance between state policy goals and the populace's actual needs (Huang, & Cheng 2021).

The series portrays this cultural dynamic through distinct discursive practices:

Confrontational dialogue design: Villagers vehemently oppose relocation during meetings, relying on Northwest dialect, colloquialisms, and idioms like *"If you don't go, I won't go, either".* Dialect serves here not merely as a communication medium, but as the carrier of a distinct cultural psychology.

Body language and facial expressions: When resisting relocation, villagers exhibit defensive body postures – crossed arms, furrowed brows, and leaned-back stances, paired with resistant facial expressions, visually capturing the psychological inertia of land attachment.

Contrast montage: Cross-cutting between warm memories of life in their ancestral village (old houses, ancestral graves, familiar landscapes) and the unfamiliar environment of the new settlement heightens the emotional rupture caused by leaving home.

Homeland attachments in monologues and dialogues: When Ma Defu tried to persuade the Yongquan villagers to emigrate, Commisar Li came in deep night to him and said, *"The root of us Li family is in this village. Who would agree if you were to uproot it?!"* Delivered in unpretentious local dialect, this monologue transforms abstract cultural resistance into an ethical dilemma. A tracking shot circles from the ancestral graves toward the villager's bowed head before zooming into a close-up of his clenched fist, granting cultural friction a tactile emotional weight.

Methodological tools employed in poverty alleviation

Relocational migration (diaozhuang yimin): Spatial reconstruction: Relocational migration (*diaozhuang yimin*) served as a primary strategy in the

Minning poverty alleviation drive. The series documents the migration from Xihaigu to the Ningxia Plains, highlighted by scenes of Li Shuihua pulling a handcart with her disabled husband and child over hundreds of kilometers. This initiative aimed to break the "ecological dead end" through spatial displacement, relocating populations from uninhabitable areas to zones with economic potential, thereby establishing conditions for industrial support and infrastructure (Wei, 2021; Wu, 2021).

Discursive communication strategies:

Long-take tracking shots: Li Shuihua's migration pull-cart scene uses tracking long takes that remain positioned behind her shoulder. Capturing her strained back, taut muscles, and dirt-caked feet, the documentary-like texture emphasizes the physical trial of migration.

Silhouettes and backlighting: Backlit photography during the journey turns figures into dark silhouettes, while sunlight filtering through dust clouds creates halo effects. This approach conveys the environmental difficulty while bestowing a tragic aesthetic quality onto the scene.

Spatial contrast editing: Cross-cutting between the yellow gullies of Xihaigu and the flat terrain of the new Minning site highlights the contrast in landscape, illustrating the spatial rationale behind relocation.

Migration declarations in dialogue: Pulling her cart, Li Shuihua calls back to her husband: *"Keep moving. What else can we do? Better to die searching for a way out than stay here and perish".* Spoken plainly in local dialect, the succinct dialogue compresses hardship and survival instinct into an everyday phrasing. The camera tracks her from behind to maintain focus on her strained posture, giving spatial reconstruction a grounded, human dimension.

Technological transfer: Intellectuals represented by Professor Ling brought mushroom cultivation technologies to the Minning region. The series details the villagers' shift from initial skepticism toward mushroom cultivation to lining up overnight to learn techniques and build growing sheds after early harvests fetched high prices. Technological poverty alleviation relied on decentralizing modern agricultural methods to the grassroots level, providing farmers with sustainable income sources (Yuan, 2021; Yue, & Pu, 2021; Zhang, & Wang, 2022).

Discursive communication strategies:

Detailed close-up shots: As Professor Ling demonstrates mushroom spawn cultivation in the fields, close-up shots highlight the spawn bags, mycelium growth, and hand movements. This visual focus translates abstract technology into clear physical details, grounding the instructional scenes.

Sequenced facial transitions: The series captures a sequence of changing facial expressions across the village: initial cynical smirks and head-shaking give way to wide-eyed surprise upon seeing full-grown mushrooms, culminating in excited expressions as villagers queue up to learn.

Accelerated editing rhythms: Following the profitable sale of the first mushroom yield, the editing tempo quickens. Rapid cuts showing villagers constructing sheds, transporting spawn bags, and loading trucks, set to upbeat background music, convey a sense of momentum.

Technological icebreaking in dialogue: Squatting near a mushroom shed, Professor Ling explains to curious onlookers: *"These spawn bags are like little babies. Care for them properly, and they'll lay golden eggs for you".* Villager Ma Defu asks hesitantly: *"Can these small things really put food on the table?"* Ling nods: *"Give it a try. If it doesn't work, we'll try another way".* Using plain metaphors and pragmatic questioning, this exchange depicts the transition from skepticism to initial trial. Alternating over-the-shoulder shots track their expressions from doubt to agreement, capturing the local adoption of new techniques.

East-West pairing: Institutional collaboration: Cadres from Fujian Province served as the institutional carriers of the Minning pairing initiative. Characters like Party Secretary Chen Jinshan, speaking Mandarin with a heavy Fujian accent ("Min-Pu"), are audibly marked as outside assistance. They introduced financial capital, project development, management practices, and operational experience. Initial communication hurdles, such as local villagers mistaking the Fujian pronunciation of "sand control" (*zhisha*) for "suicide" (*zisha*) gradually gave way to mutual understanding, reflecting the evolution of East-West relations from unfamiliarity to integration.

Discursive communication strategies:

Dialectal comedic effects: Misunderstandings stemming from Secretary Chen's accent create lighthearted comedic beats. Alternating two-shots capture Northwest villagers transitioning from shock to suppressed laughter, softening cross-cultural friction through humor.

Progressive accent blending: As the narrative progresses, Northwest villagers begin imitating and banteringly incorporating "Min-Pu" terms into their speech. This gradual acoustic shift, highlighted across shared scenes, reflects the integration between the two regions.

Juxtaposed editing: Alternating cuts between Fujian cadres analyzing planning blueprints in meeting rooms and Northwest farmers working in the fields establish a dialogue between macro planning and local labor, giving visual expression to institutionalized assistance.

Environmental transformation: Sand control and afforestation form another primary narrative line in Minning's development. The shift from wind-blown Gobi wastelands in early episodes to green oases by the conclusion traces the process of ecological restoration. Aerial and high-angle shots present neatly planted forest belts, illustrating deliberate human planning and scientific management in alignment with Chinese ecological values emphasizing harmony between humanity and nature.

Discursive communication strategies:

Color transition narrative: The visual arc moves from early monochromatic yellows and dusty grays to vibrant greens and bright blues. This shift functions as a visual metaphor for ecological modernization.

Aerial and overhead angles: High-angle aerial shots in the final episodes depict the structured forest lines from an elevated perspective, allowing viewers to see the scale of environmental remediation and encouraging a sense of accomplishment.

Contrast montage: Flashback edits contrast early views of barren desert landscapes with later footage of green shelterbelts across the same locations, using temporal progression within shared spaces to illustrate environmental outcomes.

Ecological progression in dialogue: Standing on a hillside once prone to sandstorms, Ma Defu looks out over rows of saplings and tells his child: *"Look, the wind has calmed down and the trees have grown tall. Our roots are finally set here".* Delivered softly in local dialect, this monologue captures long-term ecological effort within a quiet moment between father and child. Framing the saplings and open sky from behind Defu's shoulder connects broader environmental themes with personal continuity.

Educational and cultural literacy: Grassroots educators like Principal Bai played a central role in breaking generational poverty cycles by raising literacy and practical skills among the youth. Concurrently, the inclusion of Northwest *Hua'er* folk songs and local dialects functions as a form of cultural agency, placing rural voices at the center of the narrative rather than portraying them as passive subjects.

Discursive communication strategies:

Inclusion of Northwest Hua'er folk music: Characterized by simple rhythms and resonant melodies, *Hua'er* music accompanies labor scenes, travel sequences, and emotional climaxes. Li Shuihua softly humming *Teardrops Drown My Heart* during her migration conveys both hardship and perseverance through traditional musical forms.

***Opening theme song (Don't Drink Cold Water When Thirsty*):** Sung in Northwest dialect, the theme song's direct lyrics paired with imagery of cracked soil establish the regional atmosphere across visual and auditory channels.

Consistent use of dialect: Villagers speak Xihaigu dialect across informal settings, including home life, field work, and neighborhood interactions using frequent regional expressions like *"Zha Lie?"* (What's wrong?), *"Biao Pao!"* (Don't run!), and *"Mei De Hen!"* (Wonderful!). This choice preserves narrative authenticity while foregrounding regional voices within the broader story.

Educational commitment in monologues: Standing in an empty classroom, Principal Bai tells a local official: *"If these kids don't get an education, we'll never pull up these roots of poverty. I've stood here for twenty years; if I fall, someone else must step up".* Spoken quietly in regional dialect, the statement highlights the long-term focus of educational support. A slow push-in shot moves from the doorway to a close-up of his face, emphasizing his personal dedication.

Industrial development: From relief aid to sustainable growth: Later episodes portray the emergence of local industries, such as wine production. By the series conclusion, Ma Defu, now serving as a county leader, delivers a promotional address for the local wine industry in Standard Mandarin, marking a transition from early relief assistance to self-sustaining economic development. Industrial growth served as the foundation for long-term economic stability.

Discursive communication strategies:

Multimodal identity shifts: In the finale, Ma Defu wears a dark, fitted suit and speaks Standard Mandarin at an industrial expo. The combination of tailored attire and standard speech visually and audibly marks his transition from a rural youth to an administrator.

Production value upgrades in setting: Early environments feature rammed-earth homes and modest hearths rendered in muted tones. Later scenes introduce structured processing facilities, modern machinery, and packaged wine bottles lit with warmer, brighter lighting, reflecting regional development.

Collective labor scenes: Group sequences capture villagers assembling mushroom sheds and tending vineyards. Multi-angle framing, ranging from wide shots of work sites to medium shots of group tasks and close-ups of manual labor, conveys collective effort through rhythmic editing.

Industrial declarations in public addresses: Addressing visiting merchants at the wine expo, Ma Defu presents the product in Standard Mandarin: *"Our Minning wine is crafted with the sunshine and dew of Mount Helan; it carries the taste of sweet rewards earned through bitter struggles".* The language shift from dialect to Mandarin, paired with clear product displays, underscores the focus

on economic self-reliance. A zoom-out shot transitions from his speech to the wider expo floor, showing the broader scope of the local industry.

Soft tools for consensus: Through the integrated use of local dialect, regional music, and ambient soundscapes, *Minning Town* functions as a narrative tool for cultural identity and shared understanding. Xihaigu dialect provides a regional audio marker, Fujian-accented Mandarin tempers initial cultural differences, and Standard Mandarin conveys official policy contexts. This combination of voices acts as an audio framework for building consensus and encouraging local initiative.

Discursive communication strategies:

Layered soundscapes: The series incorporates three distinct audio layers: Xihaigu dialect (regional identity), Fujian-accented Mandarin (outside support), and Standard Mandarin (administrative contexts). These speech patterns alternate across scenes, presenting interactions among varied participants.

Narrative roles of sound design: Early episodes rely on environmental sounds, such as wind and empty quiet to establish a desolate setting. Later episodes introduce industrial sounds, machinery, traffic, and community activity, using auditory changes to trace development over time.

Code-switching and role negotiation: Ma Defu uses local dialect when speaking with villagers in the fields and switches to Standard Mandarin during official reporting. This shift illustrates his movement between personal community ties and administrative responsibilities.

Visual tracking of language shifts: Scenes of Ma Defu chatting casually with villagers in dialect (*"Don't worry, I'm here"*) alternate with scenes of him delivering structured updates in standard Mandarin at county meetings (*"Relocation progress remains on track with positive feedback"*). Similar camera compositions across both settings highlight his adaptation to different functional roles through speech choices alone.

Success factors of the Minning poverty alleviation

Unity between Party and masses: Characterizing grassroots cadres as developing subjects: Ma Defu represents the practical experiences of grassroots cadres within the Minning project. Rather than being presented as an idealized figure, he encounters initial skepticism from villagers, faces procedural setbacks, and is shown experiencing moments of deep frustration. Portraying these vulnerabilities constructs a grounded character who perseveres despite obstacles, illustrating how policy implementation depends on sustained effort at the local level.

Discursive communication strategies:

Grounded characterization: The series depicts Ma Defu experiencing setbacks, being challenged by villagers in public meetings, and dealing with moments of self-doubt. Handheld camera movement and natural lighting lend these scenes an unpolished quality that contrasts with idealized portrayals of officials.

Close-up facial detail: During moments of vulnerability, close-up shots capture subtle facial details, accompanied by quiet ambient audio that focuses attention on his internal resolve during challenging situations.

Grassroots perspectives: By portraying the everyday difficulties of local administration, the series avoids simplified success narratives. Ma Defu's progress develops through trial, error, and persistent adjustment, offering a multi-dimensional view of community work.

Reflective monologues and public directness: Alone at night, Ma Defu reflects: *"I belong to Yongquan Village; its roots are mine. But no matter how deep those roots go, they can't draw water anymore"*. This admission reveals his internal burden when facing harsh environmental realities. Later, at a community meeting, he tells residents: *"A person has two sets of roots, one with our ancestors, and one with our children. Wherever our children settle, our roots can take hold again"*. Delivered plainly in local dialect, the statement reframes relocation as a way to sustain future generations. Fixed medium framing with side lighting visually balances his personal doubts against his outward determination.

From passive recipients to active participants: A key outcome shown in the series is the development of individual agency among local residents. Changing visual presentation reflects this progression: early in the series, Ma Defu wears loose, faded earth-toned shirts associated with rural hardship; later, he wears fitted attire suitable for administrative duties. Similarly, Li Shuihua shifts from the physical strain of pulling a handcart during relocation to running her own bright shop, reflecting a transition from surviving hardship to managing her own livelihood. Her story illustrates how support initiatives can foster personal initiative alongside material improvements.

Discursive communication strategies:

Wardrobe and visual framing: Ma Defu's early loose, worn clothing reflects the difficult living conditions of the region. His later formal attire marks his transition into a structured management role over time.

Physical expression in narrative: Li Shuihua's movement during her relocation sequence, captured through side profile framing, emphasizes her physical effort. Later scenes in her lit shop feature warm expressions and clear eye lighting, charting an emotional shift toward personal stability.

Lighting and visual tone: Backlighting during early travel scenes emphasizes environmental difficulties, while steady framing focuses on her resolve. Later scenes use softer, brighter lighting to convey a sense of security and forward momentum.

Personal declarations in dialogue: During her journey, Li Shuihua tells Ma Defu: *"Things in this world aren't as simple as you think. You can't just choose how everything turns out".* She later adds: *"I won't accept this as my fate. I want to build a better future for my child with my own hands".* Delivered in direct Northwest dialect, these statements express her determination to shape her own circumstances. Alternating close-up and medium shots against the broad desert landscape emphasize her personal resolve within a challenging environment.

East-West pairing: The success of the Minning pairing model rested on establishing respectful working relationships across regional differences. The Fujian cadres' distinct accents are presented as part of their background rather than a deficiency; over time, initial communication hurdles evolved into shared familiarity as villagers adapted to and occasionally mimicked their speech patterns. This gradual adaptation reflects a process of mutual adjustment rather than one-sided assimilation.

Discursive communication strategies:

Acoustic progression from hurdles to rapport: Initial linguistic misunderstandings involving Fujian cadres, such as misinterpreting "sand control" as "suicide" highlight initial cultural distance through light humor. Over time, villagers begin adopting and lightheartedly using Fujian phrases, signaling growing familiarity through everyday speech choices.

Balanced camera framing: Conversations between Fujian cadres and local villagers rely on balanced two-shots and alternating over-the-shoulder cuts, framing both parties equally without emphasizing hierarchy.

Parallel scene construction: Alternating scenes show Fujian cadres drafting plans alongside villagers working in the fields, presenting both practical administrative work and local agricultural experience as essential components of the project.

Addressing communication differences: Early dialogue sequences highlight speech differences, such as a Fujian cadre explaining "sand control" while villagers react with momentary confusion before seeking clarification. As interactions continue, shared terms emerge across conversations. Alternating over-the-shoulder shots trace their facial expressions from initial uncertainty to clear understanding, illustrating the transition toward working trust.

Dialect and local music as connective elements: Regional dialect and traditional music provide emotional grounding within the narrative. The consistent use of the Xihaigu dialect keeps local perspectives central to the story. Concurrently, the resonant melodies of Northwest *Hua'er* folk songs express the endurance of local communities under hard conditions, strengthening a sense of shared regional identity. This cultural continuity helps turn external assistance into active local participation.

Discursive communication strategies:

Authentic dialect integration: The series relies predominantly on Xihaigu dialect during daily interactions, home scenes, and community labor. This linguistic choice foregrounds regional experience throughout the narrative.

Musical resonance of Hua'er: The high-pitched *Hua'er* folk melodies accompany labor sequences and travel scenes at key emotional moments. The closing theme, *Spring Arrives Everywhere as Hua'er Is Sung*, connects regional music traditions with long-term community effort.

Interwoven dialectical voices: Alternating between local dialect, Fujian-accented speech, and Standard Mandarin creates a multi-voiced auditory setting that presents diverse perspectives working together.

Family responsibility and personal endeavor: *Minning Town* connects policy narratives with widely recognized human experiences. Li Shuihua's decision to relocate is driven primarily by her commitment to her child's future and her family's well-being – motivations that center on universal parental care. Similarly, the villagers' shift from hesitant reliance to managing their own farms aligns with broader values of self-determination and personal effort. Framed this way, the story translates regional development efforts into a human-centered narrative about overcoming adversity.

Discursive communication strategies:

Visual focus on family bonds: Li Shuihua's relocation sequence centers on her holding her young daughter while guiding her family's cart across difficult terrain. Her choices stem from personal care for her child's future, grounding the broader migration story in recognizable family motives.

Realistic character details: Unvarnished details, such as three brothers sharing a single pair of decent trousers or hungry villagers taking poultry from assistance shipments, portray the harsh reality of extreme scarcity. These elements show characters responding to severe physical needs rather than acting as ideal abstractions.

Focus on individual effort: The sequence showing villagers initially doubting mushroom farming before staying up overnight to learn techniques highlights

their drive to improve their circumstances. This transition from uncertainty to active work emphasizes personal initiative.

Statements of parental commitment: Holding her daughter, Li Shuihua tells Ma Defu: *"I'm not afraid of hard work; I just don't want my child to suffer like this. If she can go to school and wear clean clothes, pulling this cart for the rest of my life is worth it."* Spoken directly in local dialect, her words place parental care at the center of her decisions. A close-up framing her daughter against her shoulder captures the personal motivations driving her effort.

Ecological modernization: Balancing planned growth and historical memory: The development depicted in Minning integrates deliberate planning with respect for historical context. The emergence of cultivated land demonstrates effective environmental management, while memories of earlier hardships are preserved as a reference point for progress. Through targeted flashbacks and spatial comparisons, the new landscape retains its connection to past trials, offering a realistic view of long-term environmental improvement.

Discursive communication strategies:

Visual traces of environmental shift: Visual adjustments – moving from monochromatic yellow tones to vibrant greens, and shifting from constrained framing to wide overhead perspectives – reflect the landscape's physical changes alongside the evolving relationship between the local community and their environment.

Flashbacks and comparative editing: Flashbacks recall earlier dry conditions within the same geographical locations now covered by shelterbelts, keeping the memory of past trials present within current scenes.

Depicting environmental balance: Even as modern machinery and green landscapes appear in later episodes, natural sounds like wind and bird calls remain present in the audio mix, reflecting a balance between human activity and natural surroundings.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the Minning poverty alleviation initiative emerged from interconnected factors: state policy provided administrative structure, relocational migration and technological support established practical avenues for growth, East-West collaboration provided resources, ecological management improved land conditions, and shared cultural values supported local initiative.

Through its visual and auditory design, including color shifts, camera composition, local dialects, traditional music, ambient sound, and comparative

editing *Minning Town* presents macro policy development through individual human stories. The series demonstrates that long-term poverty alleviation involves not only physical and economic development, but also the growth of personal agency, the preservation of cultural identity, and a balanced relationship between communities and their environment.

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ARTICLES

Social media communities as cultural-code spaces for constructing the lifestyle of Russian youth[1]

Denis Dunas[2],
Anna Gladkova,
Dariana Babyna,
Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia

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Abstract
In the current context of geopolitical turbulence, characterized by value clashes among other things, the younger generation in Russia is becoming a crucial audience for fostering national interests. The nature of the content young individuals independently consume has the potential to shape their worldview and lifestyle, while also serving as a vehicle for transmitting cultural codes. This is where social media content takes center stage, as media consumption serves as both a lifestyle practice and a means of gaining insights into preferred lifestyles. The present study aims to explore the analysis of youth communities' content on social media platforms in order to understand how it influences their lifestyle choices. To this end, a methodical approach combines content analysis of young people's communities with comparative analysis of values expressed on social media in relation to cultural codes embedded in national folklore. It has been shown that social media content effectively incorporates most of these designated cultural codes and values. However, it fails to recognize the significance of Orthodox faith, which is also an important aspect of many young people's lives.

Keywords
Media usage, lifestyle, Gen Z, social media, cultural codes.

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[2] **Corresponding author:**
Denis Dunas, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia.
E-mail: dunasdv@my.msu.ru

Introduction

In 2024, approximately 106 million people in Russia used social media, accounting for 73,5% of the population. Among young people under 24 years old, Telegram and VKontakte were the most popular platforms, with 85% and 37% (among 18-24 y.o.), respectively. Within these platforms, various communities were formed, serving as paramount sites for the creation, reproduction, and dissemination of collective identities, values, and behaviors. These communities act as specific cultural code spaces where unique linguistic forms, visual aesthetics, behavioral patterns, and social norms emerge. The combination of all these elements forms a distinct lifestyle for their members. Understanding this phenomenon is essential for comprehending the mechanisms of cultural identity formation among young Russians in the context of ongoing digitalization and media-driven society.

The emergence of social media as primary spaces of youth socialization has fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which collective identity is formed in contemporary society. Previous generations developed their worldviews largely through face-to-face interactions within relatively stable institutional frameworks such as family, school, state-controlled media. Today's young Russians, by contrast, encounter value systems, behavioral norms, and lifestyle models primarily through curated digital content produced and circulated within online communities. This shift is not merely technological but ontological, changing the very nature of how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and internalized. The content young people consume daily on platforms such as VKontakte and Telegram does not simply reflect pre-existing values but actively participates in their formation, offering cognitive and emotional templates for interpreting reality and navigating social life. Despite the scale and significance of this phenomenon, we have remarkably limited empirical knowledge about what these templates actually contain – what stories are being told, what ideals promoted, what vision of "the good life" constructed within the digital spaces where Russian youth now spend a substantial portion of their waking hours.

This gap in understanding becomes particularly consequential in the contemporary Russian context, characterized by geopolitical turbulence, value contestation, and explicit state emphasis on cultural sovereignty. Presidential Decree No. 809 of 2022, which codified a list of "traditional spiritual and moral values", represents an explicit attempt to articulate a normative value framework in response to perceived challenges to national identity. However, the relationship between these officially designated values and the actual content environment

of young Russians' media consumption remains empirically unexamined. Do the values promoted in the decree find reflection in the material young people voluntarily engage with? Or does the digital media landscape operate according to a different logic—one shaped by platform affordances, attention economy dynamics, and the vernacular creativity of content creators and their audiences? Moreover, how do contemporary value expressions in youth-oriented communities relate to deeper historical strata of Russian culture—specifically, to the folk wisdom systematized in Vladimir Dahl's proverbial collection and subsequently analyzed by Svitich (2012) as a coherent hierarchical system of traditional values? The question at stake is not whether tradition simply persists or vanishes in digital modernity, but rather how it is transformed, reinterpreted, and selectively mobilized within new communicative environments.

Approaching thematic social media communities as "cultural code spaces" provides a productive analytical framework for investigating these questions. Cultural codes, understood not as fixed symbolic inventories but as dynamic meaning-making systems that integrate individuals into collectivities, operate across multiple dimensions simultaneously: the linguistic (what can legitimately be said), the aesthetic (what can appropriately be shown), the normative (what ought to be valued), and the practical (what should be done). In large subscription-based communities that aggregate content for millions of young users, these codes are perpetually produced, tested, and stabilized through continuous cycles of posting, responding, commenting, and sharing. Such communities effectively function as laboratories of collective sense-making, bringing diverse and often conflicting value propositions – traditional and modern, national and transnational, official and vernacular – into sustained contact and thereby generating a complex, multilayered, and potentially contradictory symbolic environment. Determining what actually emerges from this process demands rigorous empirical investigation rather than normative speculation: not assumptions about what youth values should be according to institutional actors or adult observers, but systematic documentation of which narratives demonstrably circulate within these spaces, what values they encode and transmit, and how these patterns relate both to historical tradition and to contemporary official value discourse.

The relevance of this research is driven by the increasing importance of social media as a significant socio-cultural space (Smirnova, Denisova, & Mamedov, 2025), a crucial segment of the media landscape (Tyshetskaya, Vartanov, & Kalachikova, 2026), and their predominance in media consumption patterns, particularly among young people (Fan, Luo, & Chan, 2025; Hai, & Xiong, 2026).

This research focuses on the content of thematic youth communities on social media platforms VKontakte and Telegram. Specifically, it examines their role as cultural code spaces that shape the lifestyle of modern Russian youth.

Thus, the objective of this study was to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Do the traditional, indigenous Russian values (the Dahl–Svitich values) find reflection in the social media agenda of contemporary youth?

RQ2: Does the content produced by social media communities align with the modern list of traditional values outlined in Presidential Decree No. 809?

RQ3: Is there a meaningful correlation between these two sets of values?

RQ4: Which values are *de facto* characteristic of the contemporary youth agenda on social media, irrespective of their presence or absence in the aforementioned official lists?

Lifestyle construction in the digital environment: Theoretical and methodological foundations

Cultural codes as a symbolic framework for lifestyle formation

Social media have been studied in relation to various aspects, including the formation of new forms of sociality (Jenkins, 2006), digital citizenship (Mossberger, Tolbert, McNeal, 2008), consumer practices (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021), and the emergence of new types of agendas (Vargo, Guo, Shaw, & McCombs, 2014).

The study of social media from the perspective of the meaning and cultural codes production draws on the tradition of semiotics and cultural media studies. This approach sees platforms not as neutral tools but as cultural environments where collective meanings are continuously created and challenged (Vartanova, 2025). The concepts of so-called collective intelligence (Levy, 1994) and distributed knowledge (Jenkins, 2006) explain how communities in social networks work together to create and maintain complex symbolic systems called cultural codes that define norms, identities, and practices of group membership. These codes are manifested in the form of memes (Shifman, 2014), viral narratives, and digital rituals that can be seen as modern "texts of culture" (Lotman, 1992).

Bourdieu's works (2005) on symbolic capital and habitus have found new applications in studies of digital inequality and preferences (Hills, 2015) showing how social media have become a site for the struggle over symbolic power and the legitimacy of certain cultural practices. These social media appear to be a dynamic "cultural production field", where the meanings of

modernity are created and reinforced (Bourdieu, 1993). At the same time, the analysis of communities as cultural coding spaces, where lifestyles act not just as sets of consumer choices but as systems of symbols and meanings that integrate individuals into groups, requires further exploration.

Sociological perspectives on the lifestyle concept

In modern scientific discourse, lifestyle is interpreted as a resultant form embodying values, worldviews, the level of material security and the social status of an individual (Chaney, 1996). Despite the fact that the phenomenon of lifestyle has been an object of philosophical reflection throughout the history of human thought, it was institutionalized as a scientific category only in the 1970s by Soviet sociologists. This concept emerged in opposition to the bourgeois concept of "quality of life", interpreted as a purely economic indicator (Pilyushenko, 2015). Within the framework of Soviet tradition, lifestyle was seen as the product of a set of social, legal, and cultural factors that influenced an individual (ibid: 50).

The sociological understanding of lifestyle is mainly related to the concepts of leisure, free time, and the influence of entertainment and media on these aspects (Bourdieu, 1980; Rojek, 1985). The sociological understanding of lifestyle is primarily concerned with the concepts of leisure and free time, as well as the impact of images created by the entertainment and media industries (Bourdieu, 1987). Lifestyle attributes, on the one hand, are the results of an individual's efforts, representing their symbolic capital. On the other hand, they can also act as elements of the aestheticization of everyday life, showcasing a person's desire to belong to a particular social group and align their lifestyle with the desired one (Chaney, 1996).

The mediation of lifestyle: A channel-centric perspective

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, television had a significant impact on the formation of ideas about lifestyles, broadcasting normative models of socially approved life, appearance, and behavioral patterns in family life, social circles, sports, leisure, recreation, and work (Fiske, & Hartley, 2003). The effectiveness of using cinema and television as channels for disseminating preferred values, viewpoints, and models of organizing everyday life has led political actors to actively utilize them in promoting certain ideas (Shapiro, 2011). Commercial structures followed a similar strategy: brands conveyed via advertising not so much a specific product as a value system and lifestyle, the attribute of which was the promoted product (Marcus, 2019: 156; Vodanovic, 2020).

If, in the middle of the 20th century, housewives who spent a significant amount of time watching TV content were considered to be the most relevant audience for lifestyle models (Fiske, & Hartley, 2003), then in the 21st century, the focus has shifted towards the younger generation. Today's youth demonstrate the highest level of media activity in the digital space, especially on social media platforms (Dunas, 2021).

The Internet has become a crucial platform for disseminating ideas and worldviews, both from established media organizations and non-institutional actors outside the traditional media ecosystem (Vyrkovsky, & Makeenko, 2021). These non-institutional players, mainly in the entertainment industry, mediatize the lives of popular Internet personalities who share their personal values and demonstrate lifestyles that serve as reference models for young people (Khamis et al., 2016; Giles, 2018). The latter function mainly in the field of entertainment and mediatization of everyday life of Internet celebrities, who share personal values with the audience, demonstrate attributes of their own lifestyle and thereby form reference models for young people (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016; Giles, 2018).

The communities on social media platforms do not merely serve as passive repositories of information. Instead, they actively engage in the production of meaning. Within these communities, the lifestyle is shaped through a continuous cycle of creating, consuming, and internalizing specific cultural codes. This process results in the development of consistent patterns of perception and behavior among participants, leading to a sense of habitualization (Bourdieu, 2001).

In the era of social media proliferation, the rise of opinion leaders in the digital realm has emerged as a new phenomenon. These are Internet celebrities whose popularity is rooted in the widespread sharing of their personal and public experiences, and they are admired by younger audiences as role models (Morrison, 2020). Thus, ideas about lifestyle among contemporary youth are formed under a dual influence: on the one hand, these are the attributes of success demonstrated by public figures (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016; Vodanovic, 2020; Morrison, 2020), and on the other hand, there are narratives circulating within online communities on social media (Dunas, Salikhova, & Babyna, 2023).

The theoretical foundation for comprehending these phenomena lies in the concept of media socialization as a process whereby media are integrated on all levels, acting as an agent of primary socialization (shaping fundamental values), serving as the central environment of secondary socialization (establishing

group identities), and functioning as a pivotal resource for lifelong tertiary socialization. This is due to the fact that media practices pervade every stage of the contemporary individual's life journey, manifesting themselves through media consumption, which has evolved into a prevalent social practice (Dunas, 2022).

Social media platforms constitute a potent agent of socialization, particularly during the primary stage. This is owing to their capacity not only to convey information and facilitate communication but also to shape social interactions, operating as a sophisticated social system that simultaneously serves as a space and a place.

Cultural codes as a foundation of audience lifestyle formation

Dmitriy Likhachev emphasized the connection between cultural space, territory, and values shared by the community: "By space, I mean in this case not just a certain geographical territory, but primarily the space of the environment, which has not only extent but also depth" (Likhachev, 2022: 21). Yurii Lotman pointed to the dialectical nature of culture, existing in the tension between the past (real or mythologized) and the future (predicted), but always actualizing in the present: "it always contains what we need now, today" (Lotman, 2023: 13).

Summarizing existing interpretations, Elena Vartanova understands a cultural code in media as an informal or partially formalized system of values, significant historical narratives, traditions, and collective representations shared by social groups and serving as the basis of their identity. It is a kind of "collective intelligence" or "collective unconscious" of a community, manifested in similar emotional reactions and interpretations of phenomena, processes, and institutions (Vartanova, 2025). In media studies, cultural codes are studied at two levels: the representational (how media reflect and transmit values shared by the community) and the deep (cultural codes as fundamental national determinants conditioned by language, history, and territory) (ibid). Media, being a crucial infrastructure for creating and disseminating collective meanings (Innis, 2024; Castells, 2000; McQuail, 2005), are one of the main spaces where the cultural code is not only transmitted but also reproduced.

Thus, the lifestyle of modern youth is formed under the complex influence of media consumption, where social networks act as a crucial agent of socialization and inculturation. They function as full-fledged social systems, not only broadcasting ready-made behaviors, but also actively producing cultural codes

through communities and opinion leaders. These codes, which are systems of values, symbols, and narratives, integrate an individual into a group and become the basis for identity formation. Unlike traditional media, which mainly broadcast normative patterns, social media create an interactive environment for the joint construction of a lifestyle through continuous practices of production and consumption of meanings. This requires further study precisely as cultural code spaces, where lifestyle appears not as a set of consumer choices, but as a deep result of media socialization.

Empirical research: Narratives – cultural codes – values

The formation of the sample of communities was based on data from Brand Analytics and TGStat, taking into account the audience aged 12-22. For content analysis, a random week in 2022, not marked by holidays or other anomalous events, was selected. A total of 1134 publications from six communities were analyzed: *Topor 18+* – 163 posts, *Ne Morgenshtern* – 164 posts, *Krovavaya barynya* – 142 posts, *Leonardo Dayvinchik* – 96 posts, *Rifmy i panchi* – 283 posts, *Ovsyanka, sir!* – 286 posts. Publications were also analyzed for the topics covered, among which were distinguished international, political, economic, social, lifestyle, army/military, incidents, sports, cultural, medical, religious, ecological, interpersonal / family / gender, and the category "other topics". One publication could represent several topics at once, covering multi-problem events or phenomena. The lifestyle theme was most widely represented – 16% (302 posts) of publications were dedicated specifically to lifestyle topics.

For each publication, narrativization was performed – transforming each publication into a narrative with the identification of thematic topics. As a result, 26 narratives were identified (see *Table 1*). The narratives were correlated with the value codifier by Vladimir Dahl – Louisa Svitich (Svitich, 2012), based on the systematization of over 30 thousand Russian proverbs, representing a hierarchical system of folk values and behavioral models (see *Table 2*), that is, essentially cultural codes. Finally, the identified narratives were correlated with the list of traditional spiritual and moral values approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 809 dated November 9, 2022 (see *Table 3*).

Table 1

Correlation of narratives identified in social media content with traditional values

№	Narrative	Value according to Dahl-Svitich	Traditional spiritual and moral value	Correlation
1	Russia is a strong country that defends its sovereignty. The basis of its power is a strong leader, a stable ruble, law, order, and security	Patriotism, respect for righteous authority, law-abidingness	Patriotism, citizenship, service to the fatherland	Direct
2	Family and having children are a great happiness for a person	Value of family, love, fidelity, respect for elders	Strong family	Direct
3	Russia is surrounded by enemies. Its enemies are primarily the United States and the West. China is not an enemy, but it should be treated with caution. Belarus is a friend	Patriotism, peacefulness, but readiness to defend a just cause	Patriotism, unity of the peoples of Russia	**Indirect.** Actualized through the construction of an enemy image
4	Russia has a rich culture, both historically and today	Respect for traditions, respect for intelligence, reasonableness, striving for learning, sciences	Historical memory and continuity of generations	Direct
5	Contemporary popular culture is global. Russian youth are well acquainted with top American bloggers and celebrities, films and music, as well as global brands	Contradicts condemnation of external dandyism	Contradicts priority of the spiritual over the material	**Non-conformity.** The narrative reflects contemporary reality but is in tension with values of distinctiveness and priority of the spiritual
6	Of course, Russia faces its own problems: for example, corruption in the regions and imperfect legislation. Additionally, there are some unscrupulous business people	Condemnation of extortion, sins, vices	Justice, Responsibility for the fate of the fatherland	**Indirect.** Actualized through values of justice and condemnation of vice

№	Narrative	Value according to Dahl-Svitich	Traditional spiritual and moral value	Correlation
7	Russia has a rich history that must be remembered. Above all, we must preserve the memory of the Great Patriotic War	Respect for traditions	Historical memory and continuity of generations	Direct
8	The "little man" often gets into trouble. Either big business exploits him, or a natural disaster occurs. The little man needs the protection of the state and society	Mutual aid, hospitality, condemnation of evil, sins	Mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual aid	Direct
9	Rap and hip-hop are the most progressive musical direction in Russia today, represented by talented musicians and bloggers	Creativity, ability to have fun, humor	Priority of the spiritual over the material	**Partial.** Corresponds to values of creativity and dynamism but may conflict with values of humility and non-fussiness
10	Childhood is a period of a person's life that evokes warm associations	Love of life	Life, high moral ideals	**Indirect**. Values are actualized through love of life and the value of life
11	Nature and the animal world amaze with their beauty and are endearing	Closeness to the land, nature, "universality"	Implied in creative labor and humanism	Direct
12	It is always important in relationships with people to remain a decent person: be respectful, behave with dignity, be a good friend	Good fame, friendliness, honor	Dignity, human rights and freedoms, mutual respect	Direct
13	A person's death is a great sorrow, but the deceased live on in our memory	Christian attitude towards death, condemnation of murder	Life, dignity	Direct

№	Narrative	Value according to Dahl-Svitich	Traditional spiritual and moral value	Correlation
14	It is important to lead a healthy lifestyle, which includes active recreation, sports, proper nutrition, and avoiding alcohol and drugs	Good health, moderation, condemnation of drunkenness	Life, dignity	Direct
15	Alcohol consumption and smoking are acceptable. Especially on special days / holidays	Conflict: condemnation of drunkenness vs. hospitality and ability to have fun	Conflict with life and dignity	**Non-conformity.** The narrative reflects cultural dualism between condemnation of vice and the tradition of festive feasting
16	Outstanding athletes are people worthy of admiration	Courage, bravery, perseverance	Creative labor	**Indirect.** Actualized through the lens of labor and perseverance as a form of creation
17	The current authorities in Ukraine are an enemy of Russia, but this does not apply to Ukrainians as a people, who remain fraternal for Russians	Peacefulness, unity in diversity, patriotism	Unity of the peoples of Russia, patriotism	**Indirect.** Actualized through the value of brotherhood of peoples and by constructing an enemy image
18	Bloggers remind us that everyone can achieve success, fame, and money	Love of labor, craft, striving for learning, hope for happiness	Creative labor, human rights and freedoms	**Partial.** Corresponds to the value of labor and perseverance but may conflict with values of humility and condemnation of idleness
19	Domestic violence is unacceptable	Condemnation of evil, sins, vices, respect for life	Dignity, human rights and freedoms, life	Direct

№	Narrative	Value according to Dahl-Svitich	Traditional spiritual and moral value	Correlation
20	Expressing your opinion and being able to speak freely about what you think are both important aspects of freedom of expression.	No equivalent	Human rights and freedoms	**Non-conformity.** The narrative reflects a liberal value, weakly represented in the traditional hierarchy
21	Traditional patriarchal values are outdated	Direct conflict: value of family, respect for elders, humility	Strong family, service to the fatherland	**Non-conformity.** This narrative is a counter-narrative aimed at revising traditional value
22	Cryptocurrencies will not bring anything good	Thrift, resourcefulness, condemnation of wastefulness	Priority of the spiritual over the material	**Partial.** The narrative reflects a cautious attitude towards speculative financial instruments
23	Education, self-development, and progress are important both for the individual and for the whole society	Striving for learning, sciences, enlightenment	Creative labor	Direct
24	Perfect democracy does not exist in the West	Patriotism, respect for righteous authority	Patriotism, citizenship, service to the fatherland	**Indirect.** Actualized by constructing an enemy image
25	Foreign agents remain a significant part of Russian cultural and public life	Conflict: law-abidingness vs. creativity	Conflict: unity of peoples vs. human rights and freedoms	**Non-conformity.** The narrative is in tension between the value of law-abidingness and the values of creative freedom
26	Elders must be respected	Respect for elders	Strong family, historical memory and continuity of generations	Direct

Source: Authors.

Table 2

Traditional values of the Russian people according to Dahl-Svitich

№	Values
1	Values of community
2	Value of family, love, fidelity, respect for elders
3	Communality, collective spirit, unity in diversity, respect for traditions
4	Patriotism, respect for homeland, kin, people, language
5	Person as a member of the community
6	Values of economy, labor and its fruits
7	Domesticity, closeness to the land, nature
8	Respect for property, labor sufficiency, condemnation of theft
9	Love of labor, craft, condemnation of idleness
10	Beliefs, faith in higher powers
11	Fear of God, punishment for sins
12	Belief in the unusual, miracles, omens, fortune-telling
13	Orthodox faith
14	"Universality", awareness of one's place in the Universe, subordination to the elements
15	Virtues — vices
16	Good fame, condemnation of evil, sins, vices (drunkenness, debauchery, gambling)
17	Mutual aid, hospitality, generosity
18	Hope for happiness, patience towards suffering
19	Respect for intelligence, reasonableness, condemnation of stupidity
20	Striving for essence, use of essential concepts in language
21	Thrift, resourcefulness, moderation, condemnation of wastefulness, greed
22	Striving for learning, sciences, enlightenment
23	Courage, bravery, perseverance, condemnation of cowardice
24	Friendliness
25	Love of life, Christian attitude towards death, condemnation of murder
26	Respect for righteous authority
27	Creativity, concentration, non-fussiness
28	Peacefulness, condemnation of aggressiveness, but readiness to defend a just cause
29	Sense of measure
30	Good health
31	Humility as opposed to pride, meekness
32	Ability to have fun, humor, joke
33	Dynamism, movement, journey
34	Caution
35	Neatness, condemnation of external dandyism
36	Law-abidingness, judgment, condemnation of crimes and extortion
37	Honor as a value

Source: Authors.

Table 3

Traditional spiritual and moral values, approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 809 dated November 9, 2022

№	Values
1	Life
2	Dignity
3	Human rights and freedoms
4	Patriotism
5	Citizenship
6	Service to the fatherland and responsibility for its fate
7	High moral ideals
8	Strong family
9	Creative labor
10	Priority of the spiritual over the material
11	Humanism
12	Mercy
13	Justice
14	Collectivism
15	Mutual aid and mutual respect
16	Historical memory and continuity of generations
17	Unity of the peoples of Russia

Source: Authors.

The conducted comparison allows us to identify several crucial patterns in the relationship between modern media narratives and traditional value systems. To start with, twelve narratives represent a direct projection of traditional values into the modern media space. They foster social solidarity, promote national identity, and transmit unchanging cultural codes such as respect for family, history, and protection of the weak. Six narratives are actualized indirectly, through related values. Some narratives use values (patriotism, unity) to consolidate society not around a positive ideal but around the image of an external threat. This does not negate the value itself but changes its emotional coloring from constructive to defensive. Three narratives show partial conformity, confirming the evolution and adaptation of value sets. Several narratives represent traditional values (creativity, labor, perseverance) and apply them to new, often individualistic phenomena (rap, blogging). This creates tension between the traditional understanding of labor and success and their contemporary, often mercantile interpretation.

Finally, five narratives demonstrate non-conformity with traditional values, reflecting internal value conflicts. Such narratives demonstrate an existing internal

schism in the culture, and media reflect this dualism without offering its resolution. They clearly indicate the presence in the media space of attitudes alien or directly hostile to the traditional value system. These are either liberal values (individual freedom), consumer globalism, or direct calls to revise the traditional way of life. Their presence demonstrates that the Russian media field is a battleground between different value systems, rather than a monolithic promoter of any one of them.

Several crucial traditional values are completely absent from media narratives aimed at a young audience. For example, humility (in a religious or moral sense) is not present. Modern media culture, especially in the blogging and rap scene, is built around self-presentation and self-promotion. Narratives often encourage the display of success, confidence, and even pride, which are the exact opposite of humility. Additionally, there is no mention of the fear of God or the consequences of sin. The secular nature of most young people's social media communities and public pages and general media environment do not include references to religious concepts such as sin and punishment. Orthodoxy (as a specific religious value) is also not present.

Discussion and conclusion

Thus, we can identify a uniformity of values in Russian youth discourse on social media, one that aligns with two distinct value sets simultaneously. This finding, in itself, provides a direct answer to research questions RQ1–RQ4. The traditional values outlined in Presidential Decree No. 809 closely correlate with those identified in Russian folklore by Vladimir Dahl and later Luiza Svitich. Essentially, these modern expressions represent a synthesis and adaptation of the original folklore values to a contemporary context (RQ3).

The values embedded within the metanarratives promoted by these social media communities almost entirely reflect both the historical and the officially designated value sets, likely without conflicting with the values held by Russian youth themselves. The subscriber counts of the studied communities demonstrate rapid growth. For instance, the Telegram channel *Topor 18+* tripled its audience (from 3 million to 9 million subscribers) between June 2022 and December 2025 and spawned satellite channels dedicated to breaking news, economics, and technology. The follower counts for the channels *Ne Morgenshtern* and *Krovavaya barynya* remained stable. The VK community *Rifmy i panchi* grew from 4 to 5 million people, *Leonardo Dayvinchik* from 14 to 16,5 million, while the subscriber base for *Ovsyanka, sir!* stayed the same. All listed communities and Telegram channels maintained their leading positions among youth in terms of engagement, reach, and subscriber numbers.

By December 2025, the combined audience of all these communities reached 38,257,000. Notably, this figure even exceeds the total estimated number of Russian youth, which constitutes roughly a quarter of the country's population. Although this study did not aim to directly analyze the audience of these online communities, the data presented strongly suggests their positive reception of the values being promoted.

Despite the declining role of traditional religious practices, the lifestyle portrayed by Russian youth on social media platforms cannot be characterized as completely devoid of spiritual elements. In the face of geopolitical turbulence and Western sanctions, the everyday lives of young Russians have undergone substantial transformations. The departure of numerous familiar foreign brands, including those offering clothing, accessories, and food, as well as the withdrawal of streaming services and social media platforms, have served as catalysts for the emergence of novel practices.

The response was the construction of a new lifestyle, which is manifested in the following trends: support for personal initiative highlighted by the development of design talents, the desire to aestheticize everyday life, and also the manifestation of ingenuity and entrepreneurship. Appeal to national and nostalgic aesthetics is represented by the struggle for support in national culture and visual traditions. The rejection of false values is also relevant for young people, which consists in strengthening the importance of spirituality, education, culture, and the manifestation of humanistic qualities instead of consumer-driven behaviors.

It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the postulates about the obsolescence of traditional institutions, the family remains an essential component of the contemporary lifestyle. In media discourse, there is a focus on the distinctive role of shared hobbies, joint activities, and travel experiences, often exemplified by the portrayal of young "celebrity families". Moreover, children and childhood become an integral part of this narrative. Contemporary media culture promotes the idea of childhood as a time of freedom, play, and interaction with nature, drawing inspiration from the idealized experiences of pre-digital Russian millennials (Gen Y). Representations of youth lifestyles on social media are multifaceted, incorporating both material and spiritual dimensions. This discourse upholds values such as personal creativity, moderation, amicability, and openness to positive change.

Despite some contradictions and tensions, the overall picture does not suggest a crisis or disintegration of values, but rather a dynamic balance and stability within individual digital communities and society as a whole. This balance is

evident in several aspects. To begin with, we can discuss the prevalence of the core principles of traditional values. A vast majority of identified narratives, such as respect for the family, reverence for history, adherence to the state, upholding decency in personal interactions, and fostering mutual assistance, exhibit a direct and unwavering conformity with both the value code proposed by Dahl and Svitich and the officially sanctioned spiritual and moral tenets. This suggests that the traditional bedrock of values remains a potent foundation and conceptual framework for media discourse targeted at the youth.

Secondly, it is necessary to take into account the adaptive potential of tradition. The traditional value system is not static. The analysis showed that such topical issues as the protection of the "little man", a healthy lifestyle, and the environmental agenda are successfully articulated through existing values (unity, good health, proximity to nature). This demonstrates the ability of tradition to adapt and integrate new social challenges without losing its essence.

Thirdly, it is possible to observe a relatively manageable nature of value conflicts. The presence of conflicting narratives, such as those regarding global culture, patriarchy, or alcohol consumption, does not destroy the overall system. Rather, it reflects internal discussions that are historically inherent in society. For example, we can recall the opposition between Slavophilism and Westernism in Russian culture. These conflicts are not absolute in nature and exist on the periphery of the core values, reflecting the pluralism of opinions within the media.

The contemporary discourse of Russian social media platforms aimed at the youth is neither a straightforward continuation nor a total rejection of traditional values. It constitutes a multifaceted, dynamic, and multifarious amalgamation, with the fundamental principles of traditional values, such as patriotism, familial bonds, justice, and collectivism, serving as the bedrock of most narratives. However, on the peripheries of this foundation, there exists a constant tension between the traditional ways of living, liberal perspectives, and the influence of global consumer culture.

Thus, values (both as defined by Dahl and Svitich, and in accordance with the Presidential Decree) serve as a reliable guide for decoding and understanding the deeper meanings of most media messages. However, their application requires considering the complex and ambiguous nature of modern society.

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Towards Pakistan's sustainable future: Understanding the impacts of first and second levels of digital divide on the country's sustainable development

Sadia Jamil[1],
University of Nottingham Ningbo, China
Gifty Appiah Adjei,
University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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Abstract

Although equitable digitalization has been stressed ever since the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals have been launched, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the digital divide as a key issue affecting the achievement of UN's SDGs in many countries. Particularly, the situation in the developing countries, is apprehensive because a lack of ICTs continues to effect education, social and commercial activities, and people's routine life even in the post-pandemic world. This study specifically reflects upon the case of Pakistan, a developing country, which was ranked 91 out of 100 in the Inclusive Internet Index of 2025. Pakistan's digital divide is increasing that can affect the country's capacity to achieve the UN's sustainable development goals. Therefore, informed by the theory of digital divide, this study aims to explore the impacts of the first and second levels of digital divide on the achievement of sustainable development goals in Pakistan. This study employs a deductive inductive thematic analysis to analyze the interview data. Findings suggests that Pakistan's first and second levels of digital divide affect key areas related to SDGs including: industrial innovation (i.e., SDG 9) and sectoral development (i.e., SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15); technological and social equity in terms of equal access to technology, education, employment, health, and well-being services (i.e., SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8); education regardless of gender disparity (i.e., SDGs 4 and 5); equal employment opportunities (i.e., SDGs 5 and 8); public's engagement through ensuring their well-being, peace, and justice (i.e., SDG 16).

[1] **Corresponding author:**
Sadia Jamil, University of Nottingham Ningbo, China.
E-mail: Sadia.jamil@ymail.com

Keywords
Digitalization, Sustainable Development Goals, digital poverty, Pakistan's digital ecology.

Introduction
Digital technologies are transforming and interrupting industries, economies, and societies. The concept of sustainable development becomes more relevant with technological advancements. As enablers, digital technologies such as the Internet, artificial intelligence, big data, and cloud computing can assist in bridging the gaps between developed and developing countries, tackle global challenges such as poverty, hunger, and climate change, to name a few, and accelerate human well-being (Sharma, 2019). Amid technological developments, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched in 2015. The UN's SDGs reflect an aspiring global initiative that classifies diverse development-related issues into 17 goals, clearly explaining each goal with specific targets. The primary motivation to devise these goals is to improve people's lives in a unified manner, ensuring that no one is left behind within the national boundaries and at the regional levels (ibid). While the UN's Global Agenda 2030 envisaging these SDGs have been welcomed as a shared commitment by the national governments and development agencies, advancements in digital technologies have posed a significant challenge to the achievement of sustainable development goals in many parts of the world (Hoque, 2020). Now it is being recognized that digitalization is indispensable to building sustainable societies. "Closing the global digital divide could play a central role in allowing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be realized" (Microsoft, 2024, para. 4). However, the widening digital divide in developing countries is alarming and indicates a deadlock in attaining the SDGs (Microsoft, 2024).

There are shocking disparities between those who have and those who have no access to the Internet and digital technologies (such as smartphones, laptops, and computers), especially in the developing countries of the Global South. For example, the situation in South Asia is apprehensive because the region reflects a gender imbalance regarding Internet and mobile phone usage. India and Pakistan are two major economies in South Asia. While India indicates a faster-paced digitalization, with 50 per cent of its population accessing the Internet, Pakistan still falls in the last quartile of the Inclusive Internet Index (2025), ranking 91 out of 100 (UNESCO, 2025).

When looking specifically at the case of Pakistan, the country's government has put rigorous efforts into digitalization and the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the past fifteen years. In this regard, some

notable initiatives taken by Pakistan's government include the Next Generation Mobile Spectrum Auctions (NGMSA) in 2013 and 2014 for high-speed 3G/4G connectivity across Pakistan; Telecom Policy (2015) and Digital Pakistan Policy (2018) to provide high-speed 3G/4G broadband connectivity to the Pakistani citizens (Jamil, 2021; Digital Policy, 2020; Ministry of Information Technology & Telecom, 2017; Stryjak, & James, 2016). In addition, "Pakistan 2025 One Nation – One Vision", has been drafted by the country's Planning Commission of Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform (2014), which highlights the key priority areas of country's development including: "people first, inclusive growth, governance, security (water, energy, food), entrepreneurship, knowledge economy, and regional connectivity" (Planning Commission of Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2014: 8–10). Pakistan's vision 2025 policy document accentuates digital technologies as the main enabler for the national government to achieve sustainable development. While the policy document highlights the necessity and urgency of digitalization in sectors including education, health, business and commerce, agriculture, energy and other public service areas (Stryjak, & James, 2016), Pakistan's digital divide continues to manifest itself in terms of a lack of access to ICTs, and the people's abilities to use and take benefit of digital technologies across the country. This indicates the need for fostering digital connectivity to advance the achievement of SDGs, continuing education, social and commercial activities, and enabling Pakistani citizens to participate in society, democracy, and the economy during the crises. This invokes an investigation of how these forms of digital inequalities impact the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Research into digitalization and the digital divide is a growing area of research in Pakistan, given many local scholars have studied the digital divide in the country from various perspectives, such as journalism practice and the digital divide (Jamil, 2022); digital inclusion (Jamil, 2021); digital divide, democracy and social inequalities (Jamil, 2020); digital divide and the operation of National Database and Registration Authority in Pakistan (Hassan et al., 2019); digital divide and e-learning (Jamil, & Muschert, 2023); digital divide and caste in Pakistan (Abdullah, 2015); first-level of digital divide among the Pakistani teaching faculty (Soomro, 2015); Pakistan's digital divide and mobile telecommunication services (Mir, & Dangerfield, 2013); digitalization developments in Pakistan (Ahsan, 2009); gender digital divide (Siegmann, 2009); and digital opportunities in Pakistan (Mujahid, 2002).

Moreover, several local studies address sustainable development in Pakistan, to mention a few: news editorial judgment and sustainable development (Kamboh,

Ittefaq, & Jamil, 2025); renewable energy barriers for sustainable development in Pakistan (Solangi, Longsheng, & Shah, 2021); Pakistan's climate change policy and sustainable development (Ahmed et al., 2020); the role of education in Pakistan's sustainable development (Awan, & Hussain, 2020); the concept of sustainable development in Pakistan (Khan, Awan, & Khan, 2013); poverty, environmental degradation and sustainable development (Alam, 2010); sustainable development, energy consumption and environmental degradation (Alam, Fatima, & Butt, 2007); environmental impact assessment for sustainable development (Saeed et al., 2012).

While it is widely recognized that digitalization is central to the achievement of the UN's SDGs (Mondejar et al., 2021), research into this area is not well-developed in Pakistan. Yet no qualitative study has been carried out that explores how digital divide (in terms of access, usage and skills) impact on sustainable development in Pakistan. Informed by the framework of the theory of the digital divide, this study seeks to explore how digital inequalities are affecting the achievement of the SDGs in Pakistan.

Literature review

Conceptual framework of digital divide

The concept of the digital divide "emerged in the 1990s to define inequalities in access to the Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), framing it as a matter of having or not having access to ICTs" (Compaine, as cited in Ragnedda, 2019: 27). Thus, it originally bordered on "how some specific socio-demographic variables, such as employment status, income, education level, geographic location, ethnicity, age, gender and family structure, influenced the access to the ICTs, creating a digital gap or divide among citizens (domestic digital divide) or countries (global digital divide)" (ibid). Thus, it was originally considered as the binary distinction between haves and have-nots from the tangent of technological adoption (Scheerder et al., 2017) but it was later realized that this consideration reduced the concept "to a simple technological and economic issue, underestimating the social consequences associated with the rise of the digital divide" (Compaine as cited by Ragnedda, 2019: 29). Hence, the evolution of research and policy over the years has established additional divides that keep changing (van Dijk, 2020).

Digital divide is now seen a multidisciplinary concept closely affiliated with the political, economic and cultural development of a society (Vartanova et al., 2021). It considers Internet expansion, penetration and use of technology between individuals, groups or countries (Qureshi, 2012; Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2019). Thus, inequality exists between individuals, households, companies and geographical areas at different socio-economic levels concerning their

opportunities for access to information and communication technologies and the use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities. The differences in ICT access and use have resulted in digital inclusion (the haves / digitally developed) and digital exclusion (the have-nots / digitally under-developed) with accompanying implications for the human, social and economic developments between and within countries. As a result, various dimensions of the phenomenon have been reconsidered. In literature, van Deursen and van Dijk (2019) have advanced three levels of the digital divide, namely:

- The first level of digital divide: physical access to technology;
- The second level of digital divide: digital skills to use technology;
- The third level of digital divide: benefits that can be gained through access to ICTs.

Besides focusing on access to and usage of technology, other forms of the digital divide have also been identified in the literature: age divide, economic divide, educational divide, geographic divide and disability divide (Nguyen, 2020). The age divide looks digital divide through the lens of generations X and Z. Digital natives grew up living in a world of digital technologies and the Internet. Hence, they have a natural ability to adapt ICTs (Ragnedda, & Gladkova, 2020), unlike digitally excluded adults who are vulnerable and struggle to use ICT to access information and other relevant services (Nguyen, 2020). The economic divide considers digital divide from the tangent of affordability. Many individuals do not have access to ICTs and the Internet since they cannot afford them (Borg et al., 2019); hence, they lose out on unprecedented economic growth and development opportunities and vice versa for those who can afford them (Qureshi, 2012). Literature on the education divide submits that individuals with higher education have high digital literacy skills, are active users of ICTs and are aware of the potential opportunities that come with ICT usage (Borg et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020). The geographical divide cogitates the digital divide across and within locations. In developed than developing countries, many individuals are more likely to have access to and use ICTs to improve the quality of their lives than developing countries vis-à-vis individuals in urban locations in both developed developing countries and rural ones (Nwokedi, 2020). Various physical or cognitive disabilities may socially exclude individuals from the digital society. People with disabilities (PWDs) are digitally disadvantaged. The nature of a disability determines the kind of technology adoption barrier because an intellectual disability may not be a barrier to physical access to ICTs but to the usage of ICTs. In contrast, physical disability may be a barrier to both access and usage of ICT, especially when assistive technologies are unavailable (Borg et al., 2019).

The imperative of bridging digital divide for sustainable development

Digital connectivity remains central to a country's economic and social progress by connecting people, government, and business altogether in real time to achieve sustainable development in diverse sectors (United Nations, 2025). The United Nations 2030 sustainable development agenda lists 17 goals in diverse sectors that necessitates digital connectivity in various forms. *Table 1* explains UN's SDGs:

Table 1

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Number	SDGs	Aim(s)
1	No Poverty	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2	Zero Hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
3	Good Health and Well-being	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4	Quality Education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5	Gender Equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all
9	Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
10	Reduced Inequality	Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13	Climate Action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14	Life Below Water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development
15	Life on Land	Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt biodiversity loss
16	Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels
17	Partnerships for the Goals	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Source: United Nations (2026).

Heeks (2022) posit that in a digitally developed context, ICTs enable individuals to develop and use their financial, human, social, physical and informational capital to better their lives. This aligns with insights from research (e.g. Gelb, & Metz, 2018; Masiero, & Bailur, 2021) which avow that ICTs afford opportunities for individuals to be part of digital identity systems and digital engagements that offer the need for authentication and right to access technologically empowered opportunities in the area of universal services like access to digital health and welfare services (SDG 3), educational opportunities (SDG 4) as well as business opportunities in the digital job markets (SDG 8). The foregoing suggests that access and efficient use of ICTs ensure full participation in the digitally mediated society and access to the full spectrum of opportunities that positively enhance the quality of life (Heeks, 2022; Qureshi, 2012; Robinson et al., 2015).

Socially valuable resources and knowledge gained from the Internet or an information-based society are crucial to developing societies and attaining agenda 2030, especially when Mehr (2017) notes that technological innovation has become essential to governments in adopting and implementing policies. Besides, the Internet and ICTs not only give people the voice to participate in political, cultural, economic and social life but also to interact with one another. This makes digital skills and capabilities essential survival skills in contemporary societies because they ensure complete, adequate and equal participation in opportunities that have the potential to improve human lives. This closely intertwines with the attainment of several SDGs and is in sync with Sen's (1999) definition of human development. For these reasons, evidence submits that improvement in the internet and ICTs access, usage and skills influence human development. In a four-year study that used the panel dataset of 38 countries to examine human development through the lens of digital literacy, Nipo et al. (2020: 212) established through regression analysis that not only are high "Internet usage and digital literacy are individually significant in influencing human development, but their interaction effect also yielded statistically significant and positive relationship with human development".

Studies have shown that bridging digital divide is crucial for human and economic developments (Cohen et al., 2018; Yukubi et al., 2022). This is because it promotes the digital economy which integrates with the real economy to offer new job opportunities suitable for the unemployed or the inactive as well. It affords small businesses the power to access new markets, acquires new skills and improve known skills needed to adopt more efficient means of cultivation of crops as well as enable them to offer better goods and services that increase their

competitiveness. Also, it enhances the efficiency in task completion and increase in productivity at work, which leads to higher earnings. As employers benefit from the boost in production, so will governments benefit from an increase in tax revenues (Chakpitak et al., 2018).

It is equally important to note that digital divide heightens digital exclusion and several significant deteriorations in other jurisdictions (Macau, 2021). Hence, regarding the opportunities and benefits ICT offers contemporary societies, the reverse is the case in digitally under-developed societies characterized by an information gap due to low digital literacy and a high digital divide (Chohan, & Hu, 2022). The main reason for the information gap in such societies is digital inaccessibility which may manifest in the absence of material access, skills access, and usage access (Nguyen et al., 2020). Whereas lack of material access is to the first level divide, skills and usage access, have to do with the second and third levels of the digital divide, respectively (van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2018). There is also the issue of motivation access which may bother on the nature of an individual's education, culture, trust, and confidence levels (Nguyen, 2020). These mean that poor access, lack of means and opportunities to have physical access and skills deficit in the use of ICT prevent usage of ICTs and deny access to the benefits that come with digital literacy (Nguyen, 2020). This entrenches digital exclusion, especially in developing countries like Pakistan.

European Commission (2019) identified financial challenges as one of the fundamental factors responsible for digital inaccessibility in some societies. The Commission notes that the affordability challenge prevents many individuals from accessing ICTs and the Internet. This affirms an assertion by Alam and Imran (2015) that deprivation is a central challenge to digital inclusion. Nguyen (2020: 8) explains this situation by noting that "financial barriers to digital technologies can be encountered at any level from individuals, communities to governments". At the individual level, the barrier pertains to the low purchasing power of individuals that prevents them from purchasing digital devices, digital tools and subscriptions needed to satisfy the first level of the digital divide. This leads to the deprivation of educational opportunities that restrain the acquisition and growth of high digital literacy skills. At community and government levels, inadequate support or lack of investments needed to provide necessary digital foundations for digital inclusion and poor coverage of Internet infrastructure may affect all three levels of the digital divide (Nguyen, 2020). The high cost of digital tools and devices and broadband may demotivate individuals from purchasing and using digital devices and widen the digital literacy gap.

Digital exclusion denies the less privileged in the divided access to the information-driven economy and the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the socially valuable resources and knowledge gained from the Internet or an information-based society (Ragnedda, & Gladkova, 2020). This denial has negative implications for individuals' social, human and economic development and the achievement of Agenda 2030. In furtherance, Ragnedda and Mutsvairo (2018) aver that digital exclusion has profound implications in developing societies because the three levels of the digital divide heighten the risk of social exclusion and intensify social inequalities. This necessitates the need for digital inclusion because addressing digital exclusion establishes a fair society and fosters economic growth and social development within and across countries (Nguyen, 2020). While the scholarship indicates the importance addressing all three levels of digital divide to ensure sustainable development, this study focuses on the impacts of first and second levels of digital divide on Pakistan's sustainable development.

Methodology

The main research question is the following one: how do the first and second levels of digital divide impact the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in Pakistan? To investigate this research question, this study uses the qualitative method of in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Using purposive sampling, the researchers have carried-out 23 interviews of ICT professionals (i.e., 16 male and 7 female) from Pakistan telecom industry. These professionals are full-time employees of Pakistan Telecommunication Limited (PTCL) and local mobile companies including *Jazz-Warid*, *Ufone*, *Telenor* and *Zong*. The purpose of selecting interviewees from these telecom-sector organizations is bi-fold. First, these organizations operate across Pakistan's four provinces for the provision of Internet and other telecommunication services. Second, these are the organizations that have played a key role in supporting the government of Pakistan in building a digital landscape in the past decade. Thus, interviewees' feedback from these organizations have been included to shed light upon Pakistan's divide and its impacts on the country's sustainable development.

All interviews were conducted online using Zoom. As far as the duration of interview is concerned, each interviewee has been interviewed for around 60–75 mins. All interviewees have been interviewed in Urdu language (i.e., mother tongue in Pakistan) and then all interview transcripts have been transcribed in English language and in verbatim. Moreover, this study employs a deductive inductive thematic analysis to analyze the interview data under two key themes

that have emerged deductively from the conceptual framework of digital divide, including:

- Impacts of the first level of digital divide on the achievement of SDGs;
- Impacts of the second level of digital divide on the achievement of SDGS

In deductive thematic analysis, themes emerge from the theory or conceptual framework (see Jamil, 2021; Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Deductive thematic analysis, in this study, was performed in three steps. First, the researchers listed up useful statements of interviewees that are relevant to each research question. Secondly, these listed statements were segmented as per the interviewees' responses to each research question. Segments (i.e., research-related transcribed text) can either be a single word or a paragraph (Boyatzis, 1998). In this study, segments include the interviewees' responses to each research question (including follow-up interview questions.

Lastly, interviewees' responses were coded in a manual coding book by the lead researcher (i.e., the first author) and a second coder. All interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Meaningful statements and text segments relevant to the research objectives were assigned initial codes. Similar codes were then grouped into categories, which were subsequently reviewed and refined into broader themes through an iterative process. Throughout the analysis, codes and themes were compared across transcripts to ensure consistency and coherence. This manual coding approach facilitated the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns within the qualitative data and followed established qualitative data analysis procedures (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, the purpose of using a second coder is to ensure the consistency of coded data, which has been created based on the keywords and short phrases in the interviewees' responses to interview questions. Finally, the findings were presented under two key themes that emerged from the coded data of research questions one and two.

To comply with ethics' protocols, all interviewees have been provided a project information sheet that explains about the objectives of this study, research method, definitions of key terms used in this study, interviewees' voluntary participation, confidentiality of their names and access to research findings. As mentioned in project information sheet, names of all interviewees were removed while quoting the data and replaced with pseudonyms (such as WXZ).

Results and discussion

This study reveals that Pakistan's digital divide is largely underpinned by a lack of adequate digital infrastructure, people's digital incompetence to use the

Internet and ICTs (i.e., digital capabilities), restrained access to commodities (i.e., digital devices), and the country's weak digital governance. This implies that Pakistan lags in all key areas of digitalization that are necessary to ensure the achievement of UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, this study unpacks that the first and second levels of digital divide are affecting some key areas of SDGs in Pakistan including:

- Industrial innovation (i.e., SDG 9) and sectoral development (i.e., SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15);
- Technological and social equity in terms of equal access to technology, education, employment, health, and well-being services (i.e., SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8);
- Education regardless of gender disparity (i.e., SDGs 4 and 5);
- Employment opportunities regardless of gender disparity (i.e., SDGs 5 and 8);
- Public's engagement through ensuring their well-being, peace, and justice (i.e., SDG 16).

Impacts of the first level of digital divide on the achievement of SDGs

This study unpacks the impacts of the first level of digital divide on Pakistan's industrial innovation (SDG 9) and sectoral development (i.e., SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15). Interviews data unpacks the apprehension of interviewed ICT professionals regarding the achievement of SDGs without addressing Pakistan's pervasive digital divide. For example, an interviewee states:

Pakistan has progressed in terms of its ICT infrastructure. Nevertheless, the country lacks a widespread digital infrastructure and proper digital governance that are necessary to achieve sustainable development. We cannot build smart cities until we really have a robust digital infrastructure and digital-savvy public that is skilled enough to drive their lives using latest digital technologies. Industrial and sectoral innovation is slow in Pakistan because the country's rural and remote areas lack proper digital infrastructure and people still find it difficult to access digital commodities. We mostly talk about economic poverty, but digital poverty is manifesting itself even among those who can afford or access the Internet. There is a wide range of Pakistani population that can access and afford the Internet and digital devices, but still many are deprived of reliable internet access due to different reasons. I think the most affected areas of SDGs by Pakistan's first level of digital divide are industrial innovation, social equity, education, employment, human well-being, and public's engagement (Interviewee ADH).

When talking about how Pakistan's first level of digital divide impacts on industrial and sectoral innovations, a senior representative of Pakistan Telecommunication Limited, mentions:

What is apprehensive for me is the poor digitalization in manufacturing, education and health sectors that have resulted in millions of Pakistanis being affected right now. Computer control and machine-to-machine communication through cyber-physical systems can help in optimizing manufacturing outcomes, resulting in better economic growth. Besides, access to the Internet and digital devices (like laptops and smart phones) are so crucial in times when students must rely on remote education and people need health services while respecting social distancing measures. Telemedicine has been essential to bring solutions to consumers regardless of their location and income. Digital tools play a vital role in promoting people's well-being and improving their quality of life through facilitating access to health care. The problem is even if people have access to the Internet and digital devices, they lack knowledge to use it effectively for varied purposes (Interviewee LMN).

This study further reveals that Pakistan's digital governance is still not too strong enough to ensure effective policies that can facilitate the building of digital infrastructure, ensuring to meet the requirements of diverse sustainable development goals. Almost all interviewed professionals, from the local mobile companies, suggest that Pakistan's Telcom sector needs the government's support to incorporate their role towards sustainable development initiatives. According to a *Jazz-Warid* staff member:

I agree that Pakistan has progressed in terms of ICT infrastructure considering its current economic condition. People have now access to digital facilities, such as NADRA. However, there is no regulatory mechanism that review the quality of digital infrastructure, people's digital competencies, access and usage of commodities and the government's digital reforms in different sectors. Consequently, we do not see technological and social equity, affecting equal provision of education and employment opportunities. Also, we need the government's support to ensure the Internet freedom that is essential for improving people's digital connectivity in Pakistan (Interviewee SDK).

Internet freedom remains a topic of debate in Pakistan when it comes to ensuring people's digital connectivity. It is crucial to regulate ICT sector in a way that does not affect people's essential need of digital connectivity and their online activities, which is important to avoid status quo in achievement of sustainable development goals in diverse sectors.

Moreover, this study highlights an increase in smartphone penetration coupled with improving 3G and 4G access across Pakistan. This can be considered as the key enablers to allow the country to digitalize at least in terms of improved digital infrastructure that can help to progress towards the achievement of UN's SDGs. For example, Pakistan's telecom companies, like *Jazz-Warid* and *Telenor*, are undertaking initiatives by bringing innovative products and digital solutions to masses such as offering digital learning solutions, digital agricultural mobile apps, mobile financial services, and digital birth registration services (Telenor, 2021; Digital Pakistan, 2018). These initiatives deliver some tangible positive outcomes. However, all these initiatives are fragmented in nature because of factors affecting the public's digital access to the internet. According to an interviewee:

Digital access is affected first at the micro level. A lot of people, even in urban areas, do not have access to reliable Internet connection. The cost of Internet services is very high for low income or middle-income segments of the society. Electricity failure or constant load shedding adds another layer of difficulty not only for individuals, but also for industries' operation. Women then face cultural barriers as many families still have different normative standards for accessing and using Internet and ICT devices. Nevertheless, Pakistan has progressed a lot socially in recent years, resulting in a more socially inclusive environment (Interviewee TYM)

Considering the highlighted challenges by the interviewees, a need for a holistic approach towards a digital vision and governance, and an overall policy and execution framework for digitalization in Pakistan that covers material access, skills access and usage access all together at micro (i.e., individual level) and macro (i.e., institutional, industrial and sectoral levels) should be emphasized. There is a pressing need for bringing together all stakeholders under one roof for the common agenda of improving the life of masses and attain SDGs in Pakistan. Mitigating the first level of digital divide and improving access to technologies can positively impact the achievement of SDGs. In Asia, like Europe, digitalization is viewed as a key enabler to achieve sustainability in different sectors. This is evident with the growth of digital finance, e-commerce, and e-governance in Pakistan's neighboring countries, such as China and Bangladesh. In both countries, the key drivers of digitalization (i.e., infrastructure, capabilities, commodities, and governance) empower local populations, despite a growing divide between urban and rural access to technologies in these countries. To help Pakistan achieve SDGs, it is the responsibility of all individuals of the society, all institutions, and all political parties to participate in the process of policy formulation and execution. Every sector of the society, public or private, has a role to play and every role is significant to the agenda of achieving SDGs.

Impacts of the second level of digital divide on the achievement of SDGs

When analyzing the digitally incompetent segments of Pakistan, this study suggests that digital divide is not mere the issue of accessing an adequate digital infrastructure. Rather a large segment of the country's population lacks digital skills, which is affecting different sectoral growth. For instance, an interviewee highlights, *"we are not able to revolutionize our manufacturing process across different industries as we do not have enough digitally competent workers who are aware with the concept of smart manufacturing that integrates the use of computer and the Internet to optimize industrial yield".* Similarly, an interviewee from *Telenor* asserts:

Digitalization is central to sustainable development; however unfortunately, we are a digitally poor nation and continue to struggle hard in the development process. A considerable population of Pakistan may claim that it has access to the Internet and digital devices (such as smart phones, computers, and laptops), but their usage is limited due to a lack of digital skills to meaningfully use these technologies in education, employment and using e-services. Our people lack digital skills to use the Internet and digital technologies (Interviewee DCL).

Digital divide, in terms of a lack of people's digital competencies to use digital tools (such as hardwares and softwares), affects the achievement of SDGs in many ways, for instance: reduced employment opportunities (i.e., SDG 8), less industry innovation (i.e., SDG 9), limitation to use technological solutions to address issues related to energy, water and sanitation, and environmental degradation. Energy and water management strategies based on digitalization tools can contribute to managing with high accuracy supply and demand for a more efficient and sustainable generation and use of energy. For example, an interviewee suggests, *"Pakistan is an agricultural country. The use of mobile application software gives unique opportunities for connectivity with agricultural stakeholders and cultivators while ensuring better ways of agricultural productivity and economic gains that hence helps to reduce poverty" (Interviewee RSF).*

Factors such as gender, age, education level, attitudes towards the adoption of technology, all together affect the Pakistani people's digital skills and competencies to use ICTs and the Internet – even if they can access the Internet and afford digital commodities. For example, another interviewee highlights:

People of diverse age groups, gender and educational levels, lack digital skills to use the Internet, and digital gadgets and that can affect the country's progress towards sustainable development. This is the situation in urban areas. In rural areas, people may use some basic features of smart phones, but you cannot literally consider them as digitally skilled to use the Internet and ICT devices at work (Interviewee JKM).

Likewise, another interviewee from *Jazz-Warid*, says:

Artificial Intelligence is emerging as the backbone of technology-related solutions. People's digital competencies and their awareness related to AI-enabled devices and software is very important because we are heading towards the era of AI technology that shall affect the achievement of sustainable development across all sectors. (Interviewee WMO).

This study clearly manifests that Pakistan lacks the key drivers of digitization that are necessary for the attainment of UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Despite Pakistan's commitment to adopt these goals, the country has fallen behind on delivering the key targets for different goals. Strong digital infrastructure, to connect people online and offline, is very crucial for better operationalization of society and the public's life. Digital infrastructure is the need of every society today to achieve the holistic goal of reducing societal disparities and poverty, aligning with the need to provide digital education to the final users (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2019). Nevertheless, a large proportion of the Pakistani population, especially those living in remote and rural areas, experience double restriction of access and skills to use the Internet and digital technologies (Raza et al., 2026). It directly impacts the key areas of SDGs including technological and social equity, education, employment, and public's engagement.

In recent years, an increase in smartphone penetration coupled with improving 3G and 4G access can be considered as the key enablers to allow the country to digitalize at least in terms of improved digital infrastructure that can help to progress towards the achievement of UN's SDGs. Pakistan's telecom companies, like *Jazz-Warid* and *Telenor*, are undertaking initiatives by bringing innovative products and digital solutions to masses such as offering digital learning solutions, digital agricultural mobile apps, mobile financial services, and digital birth registration services (Telenor, 2021; Digital Pakistan, 2018). However, all these initiatives are fragmented in nature because Telcom companies do not consider the Pakistani people's digital capabilities strong enough, suggesting these initiatives may not ensure sustainability in the long run. It is crucial to consider diverse segments of digitally incompetent people to addressing the UN's 17 SDGs at sectoral and industry levels.

Conclusion

The advancements in information and communication technologies have considerably altered the way we live, work, learn and communicate. These ICT-led transformations have facilitated the distribution of information and the delivery of services at an unprecedented speed and scale, enhanced

productivity across diverse sectors, and prompted innovations that address important development challenges. While advancements in ICTs have brought many positive outcomes, they are also creating new layers of inequalities. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Agenda (2030) emphasizes equitable digitalization. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that digital divide is undermining the achievement of the UN's SDGs. This study reflects upon the situation of Pakistan and reveals that the country is not just going through economic crises, but also it confronts the challenge of digital divide when applying the Western concept of sustainable development. The country has its specific socio-cultural, political, and economic challenges that do affect its capacity to use technology as a potential solution for sustainable development.

Drawing on the framework of digital divide, this study reveals that Pakistan's first and second levels of digital divide affect key areas related to SDGs including: industrial innovation (i.e., SDG 9) and sectoral development (i.e., SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15); technological and social equity in terms of equal access to technology, education, employment, health, and well-being services (i.e., SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8); education regardless of gender disparity (i.e., SDGs 4 and 5); equal employment opportunities (i.e., SDGs 5 and 8); public's engagement through ensuring their well-being, peace, and justice (i.e., SDG 16). This study further reveals that the country's digital governance is weak enough to ensure effective policies that can facilitate the development of digital infrastructure and capabilities, ensuring to meet the requirements of diverse sustainable development goals.

These findings are not unique to Pakistan, which is a developing country. Many first world countries, like UK, struggle to combat digital divide for sustainable economic growth and development. Nevertheless, governments in the developed or First World countries, do pay attention to introducing policies and reforms that can help to mitigate digital inequalities for equitable and sustainable development. The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) also strongly positions ICTs as an enabler to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. However, in the case of Pakistan, digitalization and ICT innovations can create both opportunities and disruptions, and their outcomes will depend on how effectively the Pakistani government introduce uniform policies and reforms across all four provinces of the country, how the central government ensure provincial and political consensus on digitalization initiative for the achievement of SDGs, and how the government creates synergy of the public and private-sector companies and stakeholders to address the issue of digital poverty for sustainable development.

Moreover, to ensure that no one is left behind, it is necessary to identify and understand the characteristics of the Pakistani population groups that are left behind in their access to and use of ICTs. This can inform inclusive policies and priorities that enable disadvantaged groups to fully gain benefits of ICTs for socioeconomic progress. Finally, offering digital capabilities, technology, infrastructure, and governance will not ensure an equitable distribution of these drivers for the achievement of SDGs in Pakistan. Further research is needed to evaluate the equitable provision of digital infrastructure, capabilities, commodities and governance across sectors, different segments of Pakistani society, as well as across the country's four provinces. This shall help to better understand how the key drivers of digitalization can help in the uniform achievement of sustainable development goals across Pakistan.

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‘Becoming a better version of oneself’: Performative discourse of self-disclosure in social media

Andrey Deryabin[1],
Novosibirsk State Technical University, Russia

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Abstract

The study investigates performative self-disclosure in a Russian-language online self-development community. A corpus of 4,032 participant texts – spanning forum posts, blog entries, and short essays – was examined using topic modelling in conjunction with discourse analysis, yielding ten thematic clusters that reveal a primarily instrumental understanding of self-improvement: one centred on self-management, efficiency, and the use of psychological or digital tools to align the Self with the existing socio-economic order. The analysis demonstrates that individuals’ disclosures about their self-development experiences are predominantly performative acts aimed at signalling self-regulatory capacity. The study explicates the rhetorical features of such performative self-disclosures and shows how confessional and didactic utterances intertwine with self-presentational tactics. It further demonstrates that archaic, quasi-magical “creational” speech remains embedded in these performances in the form of affirmations of achievements and future success. Drawing on speech-act theory and prior work on emotive performativity in online communication, we argue that performers and their audiences mutually reproduce a shared worldview, thereby constructing normalised subjects consistent with prevailing cultural norms. In this setting, not only are users’ emotional states commodified; the transformative “care of the Self” becomes subject to market logics, reinforcing a mode of self-constitution geared toward normalization.

Keywords

Social media, online community, technologies of the self, performativity, self-development, subjectivation, natural language processing.

[1] **Corresponding author:**
Andrey Deryabin, Novosibirsk State Technical University, Russia
E-mail: andred@yandex.com

Introduction

The rhetoric of self-development is central to the discourse of market-driven individualism, in which the subject is constructed as a free, autonomous, and self-reliant actor, responsible for all personal successes and failures (Rose, 1999; Weidner, 2009; Foucault, 2010). As a commodity in the labour market, such subject is expected to constantly enhance and sustain his or her value. Consequently, this framework demands relentless self-regulation and self-reworking (Walkerdine, 2006). At the same time, the modern digital environment makes personal existence dependent on the public demonstration of acquired social competencies, particularly the ability to self-regulate. Life becomes a process of constant tinkering with oneself through subjectivizing practices and continuous psychological exercises. It promises autonomy and success while producing constant self-doubt, since social existence is influenced by media images of happiness, style and productivity read as evidence of self-regulation. In this context, self-knowledge and self-improvement in the modern media environment are carried out in a performative mode through strategies of self-presentation, driven by the desire to manage impressions or meet social expectations.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how participants in online self-improvement communities discursively construct and communicate their experiences of self-development. Specifically, we analyze the thematic spectrum of self-development discourse and investigate the performative character of self-disclosure within the corresponding narratives. We hypothesize that participants' communications about their self-improvement experiences are predominantly performative acts oriented toward self-presentation and impression management rather than straightforward accounts of personal transformation.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section situates the study within work on governmentality, technologies of the self, and performativity. We then describe the corpus and the mixed computational–interpretive design, present the thematic structure of the corpus and the discursive features of self-disclosure, and discuss what these findings imply for how platform-mediated self-disclosure constitutes the subject.

Theoretical framework

Forms of social control that let people individualise and govern themselves gain importance in the 20th century with the rise of secular, rational technologies of state governance (Foucault, 2010), and it is in this period that the rhetoric

of self-development and the interest in psychology spread. Rose (1996) argues that psychology acquires its professional standing because it is effective at measuring and steering the desires of the subject in line with the goals of the state. This style of governance constitutes a person as a participant in the market economy (Madsen, 2014) whose leading mode of existence is making the right investments, economic and others. Competitive mechanisms are internalised by each individual, which makes the general regulation of society by the market an achievable goal (Foucault, 2010: 145).

As psychological assistance turned into a market, the 'disease-treatment' model was supplemented with 'lifelong learning' paradigm (Olssen, 2006), in which the individual becomes a project of continuous improvement – not changing one's model of the Self but optimizing within the existing model. As Cabanas and Sánchez González (2012: 173-174) observe, this requires constant self-work to achieve inner perfection and improved living conditions, rather than changing external conditions. Such improvement is oriented not toward knowledge that might reveal personal and social limitations but toward practices delivering well-being and success. The pursuit of happiness becomes not only a right but a moral imperative.

Where the ancient philosophical model of self-knowledge offered access to truth as moral duty, the contemporary psychotechnical "care of the Self" promises direct access to happiness. The problem arises when this care becomes preoccupation with Self in a precarious competitive environment, and self-improvement takes the form of skilful performance. In digital media environments, this tendency intensifies: the Self becomes an object of reflexive, objectifying gaze aimed at imitating simulacra of style, happiness, and achievement presented in influencer content, advertising, and social media (Rose, 1999: 242).

Manifestations of the Self and identity in modern society have been taken online. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, conceptualizing social interactions as theatrical performances (Goffman, 1959), is widely applied to analyze behavior within social networks, wherein individuals meticulously manage their public persona through strategic disclosures and concealments. Research confirms that digital spaces constitute environments of highly controlled and strategically optimized self-presentation (Papacharissi, 2002: 644) and demonstrate that users consciously curate their online personas into distinct roles: public diary, influencer, professional and educational identity, hobbies, and entertainment (Merunková, & Šlerka, 2019). Marwick and Boyd (2011) show how influencers cultivate particular forms of intimacy, authenticity

and affiliation in their dealings with audiences, and such performances can supply those audiences with models for acting, relating and transforming themselves, especially where a reader identifies with the performer (Kresovich, & Noar, 2020) or finds usable well-being advice in what is shared (Cui et al., 2024).

Judith Butler's conception of performativity significantly deepens the dramaturgical understanding by extending J. L. Austin's linguistic theory of speech acts into the realm of subject construction. Butler (1990) argues that identity is constituted through repeated performative acts, wherein subjects emerge as effects of reiterative practices rather than as inherent essences, thus extending and specifying the broader anti-essentialist perspective on subjectivity previously articulated by theorists such as Michel Foucault. Crucially, Butler distinguishes performativity from mere performance by emphasizing that performativity "must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993: 2). Thus, performativity is not voluntary or theatrical but a compelled repetition within a regulatory framework of norms shaping the subject. Further aligning with Foucault, Butler thereby reinforces Foucault's notion of the subject as constituted through participation in normative practices.

Analyzing textual self-descriptions of subjects engaged in self-development practices, this study examines the discursive dimension of performative self-disclosure. We argue that subjects' disclosures on social media about their efforts toward self-transformation and the application of psychological techniques function as performative acts. These acts participate in broader normative discourses, reinforcing the production and maintenance of normalized subjectivities, thereby highlighting deeper implications beyond superficial self-presentation.

Methods

We collected texts – forum posts, blog entries and short essays – authored by participants of the international Russian-speaking self-development community *Interesno.co*, and applied natural language processing techniques to them. The site publishes 'stories of change based on personal experience' and asks its authors to 'share techniques, skills, and experiences'; it also sells '100-day challenges' – marathons aimed at achieving personal goals that provide mentoring, tools 'for purposeful action' and channels for participant communication. A total of 5077 texts dated 2013 to 2024 were processed; user profiles, service pages and site

announcements were removed, leaving 4032 documents; the total number of words in the corpus was 4216075.

To determine the spectrum of statements by community participants about their self-development experiences, exploratory topic modeling was undertaken. Analysis used standard Python libraries (pandas, numpy, nltk, Matplotlib, Gensim, scikit-learn). Texts were tokenised, lemmatised and stripped of common vocabulary. For topic modeling, LDA was applied first with coherence diagnostics across k = 2–20 but it performed poorly: the best model reached *c_v* coherence of 0.33, with several topics dominated by high-frequency general vocabulary. Consequently we used a Word2Vec vector representation model with KMeans clustering algorithm: three factors influenced the choice of this design; training Word2Vec on the corpus itself captures platform-specific vocabulary for which no pretrained representation exists; mean pooling normalises for document length, which ranges here from under 200 to over 9000 words; and KMeans returns a hard partition rather than a topic mixture – clusters served as a sampling frame for close reading, not as a model of latent structure.

The number of clusters was selected with reference to silhouette diagnostics computed across k = 5–20. Values were uniformly low (0.077–0.103), as expected for mean-pooled word embeddings of prose varying widely in genre and length: documents occupy a continuous rather than sharply partitioned semantic space. The coefficient nonetheless peaks at k = 10 and falls by roughly 13% at k = 11, remaining lower for all larger values; inertia declines smoothly and yields no elbow. The diagnostics are therefore consistent with k = 10. For visualization of the topic modeling results the t-distributed Stochastic Neighbor Embedding (t-SNE) method was used. Cluster labels were assigned by reading ten documents nearest the centroid and proposing a label describing what the accounts are about.

Following the computational clustering, we employed discourse analysis to interpret the thematic structure of the corpus and examine the discursive practices through which participants constitute themselves as self-developing subjects. This methodological choice is warranted by the study's focus on the discourses of self-development, making the analysis of discursive patterns, subject positions, and rhetorical strategies essential to understanding how self-development communities produce and reproduce particular modes of selfhood (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, & Meyer, 2009).

For qualitative analysis we drew a proportional random sample of 7% from each of the ten clusters, yielding between 3 and 58 texts per cluster (N = 282). This sample size proved sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation

– the point at which additional texts yielded no new discursive patterns or subject positions (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Topic 9 contributed three texts, too few to interpret, and we do not discuss it separately below. After reading the texts it was decided to filter out first-person accounts of the author's own experience from instructional, expert-commentary, editorial, review, and translated material; only self-disclosures were coded further (n = 139), since the hypothesis concerns this genre. The topic model describes the community's discourse as a whole, while the coding findings are applicable to self-disclosures subsample as a residue of proportional sampling (49.3% of 4032 documents); we do not report coding results broken down by cluster.

The analysis proceeded through three iterative stages. Holistic reading identified recurring discursive patterns, rhetorical structures and subject positions, and yielded four binary self-presentational features. *Personal growth through technique* (F4) records whether a change in the self is attributed to a named practice – a 100-day challenge, freewriting, a habit tracker, etc. *Status assertion* (F2) records whether professional position, credential, or achievement as a ground of authority is claimed within the narrative body or byline derived from user profile. The features F1 (*Rupture with wage labour*) and F3 (*Mobility*) occur only in 6.5% and 12.2% of texts and almost always alongside the features F2 and F4 rather than instead of them; they are reported in Table 2 but are not analysed further.

A performative utterance was defined here by two properties: the speaker enacts rather than reports, and the utterance is oriented towards uptake – it constructs an addressee and offers something for that addressee to take up. The second property concerns the design of the utterance, not the response it received; whether uptake occurred is outside the scope of this design. Two further variables, one for each property, were scored on a three-point scale. This graded design was adopted because binary coding could not separate performative from non-performative self-description in this corpus: a present/absent coding assigns almost every text to the same value and discriminates nothing. *Declarative self-predication* (P1) captures three degrees of completion in changes to the author's property of Self, capacity or identity. *Audience appeal* (P2) records the second property: whether the text constructs an addressee, and whether it hands that addressee a practice. Alongside the coding, the texts were systematically annotated for self-presentational tactics; performative speech acts (declarations, affirmations); markers of instrumental rationality (goal-orientation, efficiency language, self-optimization vocabulary). In the

theoretical integration stage, coded patterns were interpreted through the lens of Foucauldian governmentality and Rose's (1996, 1999) framework of "governing the soul".

Consistent with interpretive methodology, validity was established through systematic coding, theoretical triangulation, and attention to negative cases. The Results section provides the coding frequencies and extensive quotation from primary sources, making the evidentiary basis for interpretive claims.

The corpus consists of texts published openly and collected in accordance with the site's terms of use. Individual consent was not sought, since the study concerns discursive patterns rather than individuals; we recognise that public availability does not by itself settle participants' contextual expectations. Authors and third parties are replaced by initials to limit re-identification, quoted passages are translated from Russian, and no usernames, profile links or contact details are reported.

Results

As a result of data processing and modeling, 10 themes were clustered, as depicted in *Figure 1* and presented in *Table 1* below:

Table 1

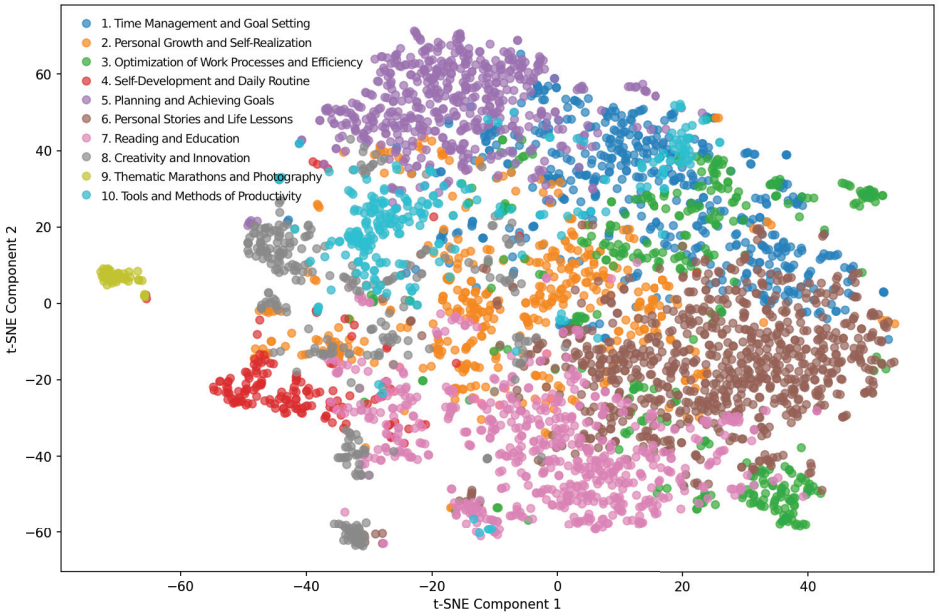
Topics derived from the corpus with correspondent number of documents

Topic	Number of documents
1. Time Management and Goal Setting	515
2. Personal Growth and Self-Realization	434
3. Optimization of Work Processes and Efficiency	368
4. Self-Development and Daily Routine	154
5. Planning and Achieving Goals	517
6. Personal Stories and Life Lessons	832
7. Reading and Education	601
8. Creativity and Innovation	311
9. Thematic Marathons and Photography	43
10. Tools and Methods of Productivity	257
Total	4032

Source: Author.

Figure 1

Thematic clusters of the online community texts



Source: Author.

The analysis yields two principal findings. Our *first* conclusion concerns the instrumental character of self-development discourse: participants in this community predominantly understand ‘self-development’ as mastering tools and techniques to align the Self with existing socio-economic demands. This reductionist attitude aligns with the broader critique of instrumental rationality associated with the names of M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno within critical theory and related philosophical traditions, where individuals are valued primarily for their utility in economic and social systems rather than their intrinsic human qualities. Themes such as ‘1. Time Management and Goal Setting’, ‘3. Optimization of Work Processes and Efficiency’, ‘5. Planning and Achieving Goals’, and ‘10. Tools and Methods of Productivity’ focus on self-management, which perfectly aligns with the ideal of the self-constituting economic subject.

Topics 2, 4 and 8 illustrate the strengthening of one’s existing virtues and abilities: healthy lifestyle and daily rituals in topic 2, routines for personal efficiency in topic 4, techniques for releasing creative potential including the use of digital platforms in topic 8. Topic 7 contains texts about techniques of reading, and book selection in the service of professional and personal goals.

The second conclusion is that the texts of self-disclosure in this corpus are predominantly performative. Performative communicative actions are speech acts in which the speaker enacts an action through the utterance itself rather than describing or narrating it; the speaker is not a witness to an event or a narrator but performs the action by the very act of speaking. It makes little sense to ask whether the speaker accurately depicts her psychological reality; the value of the performance is measured by the success of the utterance – whether a declaration, assertion, commitment, etc. is successfully performed (Searle, 1976: 10–13). In the corpus examined here the labour of social media performance is pursued through a further move, described by Romanov and Romanova (2019) as the transition from I-media to We-media, in which the audience is invited to join the author's transformation and to be transformed likewise.

Self-disclosure is not confined to any one cluster: it accounts for 49.3% of the sampled texts and occurs in nine of the ten. Topic 6, the largest cluster, is where it is densest. In the following text, we observe how confessional and didactic utterances are combined with vivid elements of self-presentation. The self-disclosures are frequently manifested as dramatic narratives of personal transformation, carefully crafted to demonstrate one's acquisition of competencies such as emotional resilience, effective communication skills, productivity optimization, and self-regulation, which lead to the attainment of enviable lifestyles and success. For instance, M. writes on October 12, 2021 (*Interesno.co*):

"In April 2017, I wrote an article for Living Is Interesting titled 'Things Are Just Things', where I explained how and why, at 37, I left my excellent job at a bank, took a year off, and moved to New York to pursue my dream of writing a book. I greeted J.N. and J.L. (Hey Jude) at book presentations, got caught by the police with a fashion model from Russia, and had heart-to-heart conversations with a New York rock guitarist from the seventies. Jumping out of a warm nest and flying across the ocean is, in a way, a 'leap of faith'; if you get scared halfway, that's it. But you also have the chance to change your fate and start living on a new level: to become better, to find new meanings, like-minded people, and friends, all while preserving the most important and precious things from your past life. For example, I was a lawyer at a bank; now I write essays for Snob magazine. Ahead of me are raising children, lots of work, and a world without borders".

This and other accounts, though differing in specific motifs, exhibit the following self-presentational features inherent to the entire topic:

(1) Declaration of the courage to forsake daily wage labor. This involves pursuing existentially important values, quitting a prestigious high-paying job

for a journey in search of meaning while implying the possession of the financial means that make such a step possible.

(2) Assertion of status, without which self-presentation loses meaning: a lawyer in a bank; a high-profile professional, mother, wife, and property owner – in other words, successfully performing often prestigious social roles.

(3) Emphasizing the status of a frequent international business traveler and tourist *('I met my future husband in Sri Lanka. We decided to make our first joint trip to Madagascar, simultaneously visiting Burma and Thailand')*.

(4) The motif of personal growth and subjectivation resulting from the application of special skills or overcoming previously existing social predeterminations *('I overcame burnout and I set off on a road trip through the endless pampas… without that overwhelming guilt towards my clients or fear for my reputation')*.

Across all four features, the underlying demonstration is one of self-regulatory capacity: the ability to make consequential life decisions (feature 1), to successfully manage multiple demanding social roles (feature 2), to navigate complex logistical and financial arrangements (feature 3), and to apply psychological techniques for emotional and behavioral self-management (feature 4). In other words, not merely success or status is performed but the competence to govern oneself, precisely the capacity valorized within neoliberal rationality (Rose, 1996). *Table 2* reports the number of documents each coded property occurs across the self-disclosure subsample.

Table 2

Coding results for the self-disclosure subsample (n = 139), n (%)

Feature	Score 0 (absent)	Score 1	Score 2	Of these (score 2), transmitting a practice (P2 = 2)
F1 Rupture with wage labour	130 (93.5)	9 (6.5)	–	1 (11.1)
F2 Status assertion in the narrative in the byline	104 (74.8) 25 (18.0)	35 (25.2) 114 (82.0)	–	9 (25.7) 36 (31.6)
F3 Mobility	122 (87.8)	17 (12.2)	–	2 (11.8)
F4 Personal growth through named technique	13 (9.4)	126 (90.6)	–	45 (35.7)
P1 Declarative self-predication	2 (1.4)	57 (41.0)	80 (57.6)	21 (26.2)
P2 Audience appeal	19 (13.7)	73 (52.5)	47 (33.8)	47 (100)

Source: Author.

No text in the subsample carries all four features. The M.'s account quoted above is therefore a maximal case rather than typical instance, and the list derived from it describes an idealisation that no single text fully realises.

Creating an emotional backdrop that makes the self-presentational event attractive plays a crucial role in this process. The text is built to be recognised and endorsed: it positions the reader to understand the speaker's intentions and to respond in kind. The culmination of this performative discursive interaction is exemplified by the following call to action: 'Subscribe to me – follow my example – do as I do – stand out like me – achieve success as I have!' (Romanov, & Romanova, 2019). Such calls are captured by the feature P2, summarized with P1 in *Table 3:*

Table 3

Cross-classification of performativity features (n = 139)

P1 Declarative self-predication	P2 Audience appeal			
	0 – No addressee	1 – Reader addressed	2 – Practice transmitted	Total
2 – Change in Self declared as accomplished	8	51	21	80 (57.6)
1 – Result claimed with qualification	9	22	26	57 (41.0)
0 – No result claimed	2	0	0	2 (1.4)
Total	19 (13.7)	73 (52.5)	47 (33.8)	139 (100)

Source: Author.

Both performativity properties are met at least minimally by 120 texts of self-disclosure (86.3%) and fully by only 21 (15.1%); just two texts (1.4%) meet neither (Table 3). A named practice appears in 126 of 139 disclosures (90.6%), but only 45 of those (35.7%) hand it to the reader in usable form (Table 2). The dominant form in the subsample is therefore a declared completion of self-transformation addressed to a reader, with the practice that produced it withheld more often than passed on. This form is dominant rather than obligatory, and the residual documentary register survives in a specific shape – the serial log published in instalments.

Seven authors position themselves against a norm operating in this discourse – against motivational content, the cult of early rising, the demand to settle on one calling, the norm of extraversion. Nevertheless, six of the seven are coded as highly performative, and each closes by transmitting something to the reader: a numbered list of exercises, a reading list, an invitation to join a

group, etc. Dissent is available here as a game position, and occupying it leaves the performative form intact. For example:

"Hi everyone, my name is A., and I'm a motivation-holic. […] It may be "off-format" for this site, since Interesno.co inspires people to change, but I'm going to write about the harm motivators do […] A positivity overdose had happened. I began to notice that I couldn't concentrate, […] I had to achieve success at any cost, become stronger, higher, faster. Build a global company, get in shape by summer, write a novel, learn to draw, travel, master yoga and meditation, become enlightened, invent a smartphone, launch a startup, run a seminar, play with the kids, love my wife. And the motivators kept shouting that I must, must, must be successful, driven, ambitious, and hurry up and live […] A great deal of anxiety had accumulated inside me because of this […] Have you felt anything like this? Motivators are a very good thing, but when there are too many of them, they do harm. If you're tired of them too, I'd like to offer a few recommendations. Take action – without real action, motivators are useless […] You need to set a goal, your own goal […] Take a motivational break – use your willpower to close the motivational pages in your feed […] Take care of yourself […] Divide motivators into "practical" and "empty" […] Love yourself!"

A. narrates a decade of engagement with motivational literature as having produced not competence but neurosis, and opens by warning that the text may not suit the site. He rejects not self-development but its heteronomous form: the incoming stream of injunctions, the obligation to be improving, the reaction to whatever call arrives next. What he installs instead is the same practice conducted autonomously listen to yourself, identify your own goal, act deliberately rather than in response. This is the transition liberal governance prefers, narrated by a subject who was worn out and has repaired himself through a self-regulation circle he then prescribes to others. A. enters the text as a consumer of motivational material and leaves it as a producer, with a list of recommendations and a final affirmation, transmitting a disposition towards being governed. Thus, the demarche of the 'motivation-holic' is not a counter-conduct, quite opposite – it is quintessential for the neoliberal self-governance cultivating a subject as entrepreneur of himself.

Genealogically, as Tyupa (2012) notes, the performative is among the most ancient forms of speech, resting on a belief in the world-making power of the word – oaths, blessings, curses, prayers. Its descendants in these texts are affirmations, positive statements that take speaker and audience as their joint object:

a) *'You have a chance to change your destiny and start living on a new level';*

b)*'Almost all problems can be solved, difficulties overcome, and complex situations exited from; the main thing is to do it deliberately, consistently, with a cool head and a warm heart';*

c) *'I simply have no right to be unhappy! My dream has come true – I am married, I have a wonderful husband and a beautiful child; millions of women dream of what I already have';*

d)*'I feel myself in the 'flow': moving toward my goals, albeit slowly, stumbling, with stops and slips, stepping on the throat of my innate procrastination – but I keep on moving*'.

Performative discourse also works to reproduce a worldview shared by the speaker and the audience. Romanov and Romanova (2019: 175) stress that the author and the reader are not only united as 'We-media': by joining together and declaring their transformation, the two then collectively circulate their shared values to the wider audience.

Discussion

The findings reveal a discursive field in which self-development is framed almost exclusively in instrumental terms, and where self-disclosure operates performatively to signal self-regulatory capacity. Theoretically, we can distinguish two modes of subjectivation: normalizing practices that reproduce subjects aligned with prevailing demands, and counter-practices that foster agency and new forms of action (Foucault, 1982; Horkheimer, 1975). The empirical material examined here falls decisively within the first category. The thematic structure of the corpus supports this reading: the four clusters devoted to time management, efficiency, goal achievement and productivity tools comprise 41% of the documents, and the clusters that appear oriented to personal growth turn out to describe not radical self-transformation but incremental optimisation within existing frameworks. Read through Rose's (1996, 1999) account of "governing the soul", what participants experience as personal growth is a form of self-regulation that reproduces rather than challenges existing structures of power, and that leaves unaddressed the class exclusions and blocked opportunities such discourse renders invisible (Smail, 2009).

The Butlerian-Foucauldian reading suggests that the subject is produced through the reiteration of practices, within a regulatory frame that determines which utterances are legible at all. From that perspective, what matters for one's self-constitution is the range of self-description that the platform makes available and rewards. The author is not pretending: the author speaks the only

language this site makes expected, supported and approved. Sincerity is not the operative axis: the declarative, reader-directed form is a condition of appearing in this discourse at all, and it shapes what can be said about Self here largely independently of what any author intends.

Platform-mediated environment give self-disclosure a specific character. Research on digital self-presentation has shown that online spaces are environments of highly controlled and strategically optimised identity performance (Papacharissi, 2002), in which users curate their personas into distinct roles (Merunková, & Šlerka, 2019). Digital technologies tempt individuals with the idea that they can individualise themselves by staging a socially approved yet unique Self (Nygren, & Gidlund, 2012: 514), and under the business logic of platform capitalism the choice is between showing an imperfect actual Self and staging one that performs better. Under these conditions, not only manifestations of self and identity but the very intentions toward subjectivation and practices of self-transformation, however intimate they may appear, become objects of staging and self-disclosure in a performative mode.

The staging of practice does not, however, put practice into circulation. The platform asks its authors to share techniques and experience, and the genre is nonetheless not predominantly instructional. The proof of self-work, rather than the means of doing it, circulates in this discourse. The platform thus pre-formats the range of legible self-narration: some accounts of oneself are readily sayable here, while others find no available shape. This is a claim about generic legibility rather than about editorial selection, and the subsample bounds it – two texts meet neither performativity criterion and were published nonetheless. The analysis shows that not every utterance here is performative, which would be unfalsifiable, and that one narrative form is strongly institutionalised, to the point where even a critique of self-optimisation is articulated through it.

Conclusion

This study yielded two principal findings. First, participants frame self-development in predominantly instrumental terms. The thematic structure of the corpus – dominated by topics such as time management, productivity optimization, and goal achievement – reveals an understanding of self-improvement as adaptation to existing socio-economic demands rather than critical self-transformation. Second, self-disclosure within this community operates primarily performatively: an author declares a change in Self, and the utterance is built for readers – though far more often to be read than to be acted on.

These findings refine rather than confirm the accounts from which the study sets out. Studies of digital self-presentation treat the staging of the self as the construction of a role model. The notion carries an assumption inherited from social learning theory that showing a way of acting makes it available to be taken up. Public exhibition of a transformed Self and the transmission of knowledge about how to arrive at it are thereby held together in a single term. Our study suggests that this assumption does not hold for the genre of self-disclosure in the social media. Approaching the sharing of Self through the concepts of performativity rather than through the sociology of role models, we find that staging and the circulation of knowledge about self-transformation come apart. Nearly every account is organised around a particular technique, yet only a third hand that technique over: the capacity for self-regulation is displayed as self-attestation rather than passed on for others to take up – exhibited as an asset, not shared as a method. The study thus shows that the intimate practice of "care of the Self" becomes commodified within platform-mediated environment.

For journalism and media studies, this analysis suggests that self-development content circulating on social media should be understood not merely as user-generated self-expression but as a discursive regime that reproduces subjectivity in particular political and economic contexts. This has implications for research on influencer culture, lifestyle media, and the platformization of everyday life, where similar performative logics may operate.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The topic modeling was exploratory, and the sample is drawn from a single Russian-language community, limiting generalizability. The coded subsample is a residue of proportional sampling rather than a designed one, and the design does not observe the audience's response to the performative discourse. Future research could refine thematic clustering, compare self-development discourse across cultural and linguistic contexts, and trace longitudinal shifts in subjectivation discourse in relation to evolving socio-political conditions.

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Aims & Scope

The journal *World of Media. Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies* appears on a quaterly basis (4 times a year).

World of Media represents a collection of original research in the field ofmedia and journalism studies conducted by authors from diverse cities and institutions. The journal is aimed at promoting the development of media and journalism studies in both national and global contexts, and stimulating a wider public interest in the journalism theories, methods, findings and applications generated by research in communication and allied fields.

The journal seeks to publish original research articles of the highest standard in the fields of:

Media studies
Journalism studies
Communication theories
Intercultural communication
International communication
Media policy and regulation
Media sociology
Media psychology
Regional studies
Digital media
Media communication

While the manuscript is open to all methodological approaches, all submissions are expected to be theoretically grounded.

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The editors of *World of Media* are now inviting submissions. Submitted papers should be no longer than 5 000 words, accompanied by a short abstract, up to 200 words, and contain 5-7 key words. The title page should include the title of the paper, the name of the author(s), full title and the affiliation of the author(s) (full name of the institution and department, city, country, e-mail address).

List of references should include only publications cited in the article. Citations in the text should be accompanied by round brackets containing last name(s) of the author(s), year of publication and page(s). Example: (Johnes, 2008: 115).

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.

The paper should contains the following parts: abstract (230+ words), keywords (5-7 words), main text (4000-5000 words) and references.

For more information, check *For Authors* section at www.worldofmedia.ru

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