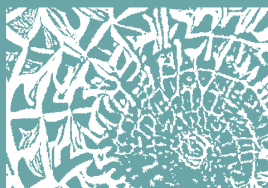
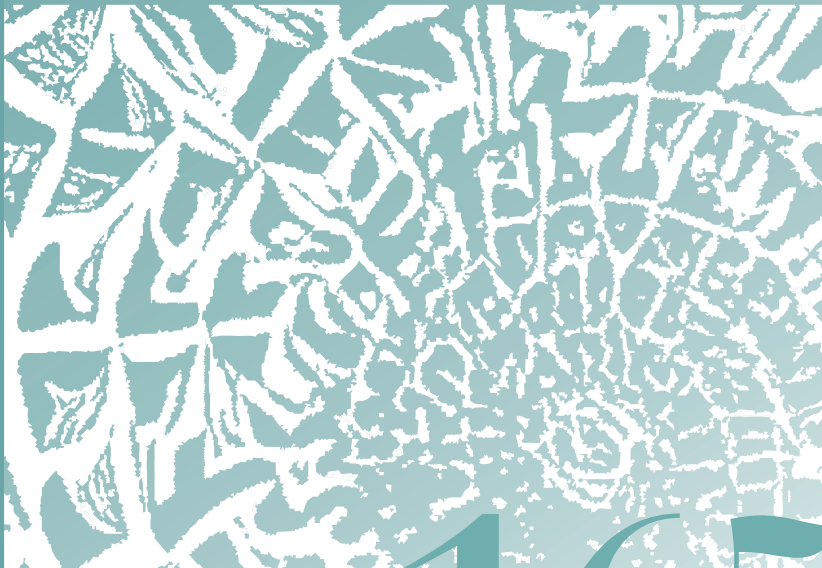


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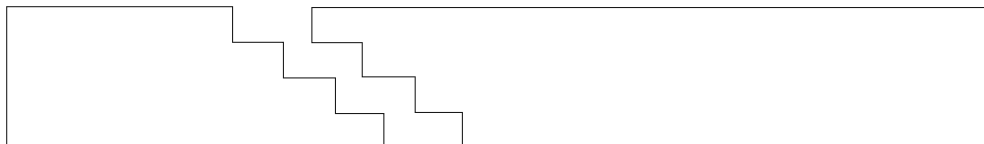
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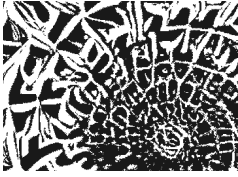
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# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL NORMS OF MAJORITY CHILDREN IN PREDICTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEE PEERS

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Norms have been shown to predict a variety of intergroup outcomes among children. A study with children in Croatia ( $N = 184$ ) who had no prior contact with refugee peers examined the role of social and personal norms in shaping intergroup outcomes with refugee peers. Regression analyses revealed that perceived teachers' and peers' norms, along with personal norms, predict general evaluation, social acceptance, and contact intentions towards refugee children. Social norms, especially those of teachers, were found to better predict attitudes, while peer norms more strongly influenced behavioural outcomes. These findings are important for educators and policy-makers, particularly in the context of Croatia's increasingly diverse classrooms.

Keywords: attitudes towards refugees, social norms, personal norm, intergroup relations, refugee children



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## INTRODUCTION

Social norms are among the strongest regulators of human behaviour. They could be defined as unwritten rules, standards and expectations of normal or appropriate attitudes and beha-

viours within a social group (Stok & de Ridder, 2019). Cialdini and colleagues (1991) distinguished between two types of norms: descriptive (what members of a social group are doing) and prescriptive or injunctive norm (what people should or should not do). Building on this distinction, Lapinski and Rimal (2005) added that norms can be observed as collective norms (code of conduct of a group, community or culture) and perceived norms (individual's understanding and perceptions of these collective norms).

Social norms have been shown to predict a variety of negative and positive intergroup outcomes. For example, Crandall and colleagues (2002) found that people are more likely to show prejudice towards different outgroups if members of their in-group approve it. On the brighter side, Meleady (2021) found that people were more likely to show intention for contact when they knew that a high proportion of their in-group members had contact with immigrants.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in social norms as predictors of children's attitudes toward their refugee peers. Therefore, we continue by briefly presenting research showing the role of social norms in intergroup attitudes of children, specifically towards refugee children.

Research on children and adolescents has focused primarily on normative sources from family, school and friends, often combining or comparing them together or along with additional sources of broader social context influences, such as media or socioeconomic background (Ata et al., 2009; Mähönen et al., 2010; Miklikowska, 2017). In this regard, research has found that norms are perceived as a dynamic process that can change with changes in context (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). Therefore, we will be focusing on norms in the school context, specifically on the normative sources within the classroom (i.e. peers and teachers), as this is the place where children have the opportunity for regular contact, once a refugee child joins the class. As integration is defined as a two-way process, to be successful, both refugee and host communities need to contribute and adapt in the process. The host community's responsibility is to ensure a friendly and welcoming atmosphere that helps prevent negative attitudes and behaviours, and implementation of preparatory activities is critical in the process of helping domicile students to adapt and welcome their refugee peers. School can thus be both a protective (ensures safety, motivation, relationships, and support) and a risk factor (rigid bureaucratic structures with harsh and exclusionary discipline) in the lives of both refugee and domicile children (Osher et al., 2014).

Research shows that the school environment, the relationship with teachers, peer norms and networks as well as the role of parents' and peer relationships outside of school are impor-

tant in developing interethnic acceptance (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). It was also shown that different aspects of school experiences, including those normative such as a cooperative classroom climate (Miklikowska et al., 2021), prevented the development of anti-immigrant attitudes in adolescents. Indeed, a democratic classroom climate and supportive relations to classmates can prevent the development of anti-immigrant attitudes even in a less diverse context (Eckstein et al., 2021).

Besides showing that various aspects of classroom characteristics can prevent anti-immigrant attitudes, research by Miklikowska and colleagues (2019) showed that classroom diversity, along with peer and parental anti-immigrant attitudes, predicts children's anti-immigrant attitudes. This longitudinal study identified that adolescents whose peers and parents showed more anti-immigrant attitudes showed themselves this kind of anti-immigrant attitudes. Interestingly, the changes in adolescents' anti-immigrant attitudes were positively related to peer but not parental anti-immigrant attitudes. Moreover, a diverse classroom can suppress parental anti-immigrant attitudes.

Similarly, Tropp and her colleagues (2016) compared simultaneously the role of peer and school norms in predicting intergroup outcomes in two studies with a cross-sectional and a longitudinal design. In both studies the perceived school norms (teachers and principal's) and peer norms were operationalised as the approval and value of intergroup friendship for four positive intergroup outcomes (comfort with out-group members, quality of interethnic contact, interest in cross-ethnic friendship and current cross-ethnic friendships). Results from the cross-sectional study showed that both peer and school norms significantly predicted comfort with out-group members, quality of interethnic contact and interest in cross-ethnic friendship. Additionally, peer norms also predicted current cross-group friendships. In the longitudinal study, however, school norms were significant predictors only for interest in cross-group friendship, while peer norms remained significant for all outcomes. Similarly, using the same measures of perceived peer and school norms, McKeown and Taylor (2018) tested a mediation model of quality and quantity of contact as mediators of the relationship between these norms and prosocial and sectarian antisocial behaviour in Northern Ireland. Results showed that peer norms had a direct effect on both mediators (quality and quantity of contact) and on the positive (prosocial behaviour) but not the negative outcome (sectarian antisocial behaviour). Furthermore, indirect effects of peer norms on prosocial behaviour (mediated by quality and quantity of contact and sectarian antisocial behaviour through quality of contact) were found. Nevertheless, school norms showed no direct or indirect effect on any of the outcomes. A recent study

in Croatia also confirmed different predictive power of different social norms (peer, parental and school) in predicting in-group bias, discrimination tendencies towards out-group members, social distance and prosocial behaviour (Pehar et al., 2020). While peer and parental norms were significant predictors of all measured outcomes, school norms significantly predicted behavioural tendencies (discrimination tendencies and prosocial behaviour), but not attitudes. The presented studies show that social norms predict various forms of attitudes and different behavioural outcomes. Moreover, they shed light on the relative contributions of different social norms and emphasise the significance of peer norms in the lives of children and adolescents, i.e., all the studies indicated that peer norms were more consistent predictors of intergroup outcomes compared to school norms.

The influence of others is significant not only in shaping attitudes and behaviours but also in shaping personal norms of how to behave or feel towards oneself and others. Schwartz (1977) defined personal norms as a sense of moral obligation or expectation that an individual has of himself/herself about how he/she should act in a particular situation. Therefore, personal norms are sometimes also referred to as moral norms.

Children try to internalise messages from their social environment, including the ones related to members of out-groups. This internalisation results from the child's understanding of how his/her group generally behaves, e.g. justly or unjustly, and therefore, what moral principles the group practises when it relates to others. Consequently, an indicator of the child's intergroup norm can be his/her norm of moral exclusion, i.e., a belief of whether it is morally acceptable to exclude out-group members based only on their group membership.

As suggested by the Social Reasoning Developmental perspective (SRD; Rutland et al., 2010), decision-making in children and adolescents is influenced by two mutually intertwined processes, i.e., morality principles and group processes. Previous research has shown that morality develops simultaneously with awareness of social identities and group identification, which makes understanding the phenomenon of social exclusion in children more complex (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Children consider group functioning and moral reasoning when making decisions about the social exclusion of others (Sims & Killen, 2020). Moreover, according to the SRD, group norms are heavily determined by contextual and cultural factors (Killen et al., 2015). An example of how different contextual factors can determine social exclusion and inclusion was shown in a study with German adolescents looking at willingness to include a German peer and a Syrian refugee in leisure-time

activities. The results showed that adolescents were equally prone to including a German peer and a Syrian refugee. However, they were less inclusive towards a Syrian refugee with poor language skills, highlighting that other reasons, such as language skills, could be more important than the other group identity features when making decisions about social inclusion and exclusion (Beißert et al., 2020). Furthermore, research showed that children who have contact with members of the out-group show less prejudice and use moral reasoning to justify the wrongfulness of intergroup social exclusion (Killen, 2007). Recent studies of moral exclusion have focused on peers that challenge group norms, showing that, in general, children prefer inclusion over exclusion as a normative behaviour. More specifically, children tend to exclude peers that promote exclusion of out-group peers, while challenging norms of exclusion and advocating inclusion is seen as acceptable behaviour (Hitti & Killen, 2022).

Overall, research suggests that various perceived social and personal norms have important roles in shaping intergroup attitudes, including those towards refugees and migrants. Perceived social norms may influence attitudes by providing a sense of what is socially acceptable or unacceptable, while personal norms may influence attitudes by reflecting an individual's own moral principles and values. Furthermore, when multiple norms are present in a context, the most salient norm will define the behaviour (Stok & de Ridder, 2019). Therefore, we wanted to explore the predictive power of social norms related to the school context and personal norm of exclusion for three intergroup outcomes related to refugee children in Croatia.

## STUDY AIM

---

This study aimed to examine the role of perceived social and personal norms in predicting intergroup outcomes towards refugee children. Specifically, we wanted to examine to what extent perceived teachers' and peer norms about contact with refugee peers, as well as personal norm about relations with refugee peers, predict three intergroup outcomes ranging from an overall attitude (of general evaluation of refugees) to more behavioural-oriented outcomes (e.g. social acceptance of refugees and contact intention with refugees), in a context where host-society children had no contact with refugee children. The novelty of this study is in simultaneously comparing the relative importance of two different sources of social norms and a personal norm in predicting three intergroup outcomes related to refugee children, i.e., attitudes and behavioural intentions.

## Social context of the study

During and after the Homeland War there were studies conducted on attitudes towards refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) from the neighbouring countries (Magdalenić, 1992; Bulat, 1995; Čolić & Sujoldžić, 1995), as well as the living conditions of these children in Croatia (Brčić & Dumančić, 1992).

However, since the closure of the Balkan route in 2016 and the start of refugee children attending Croatian schools, there is no available data on the attitudes of primary school children from the host-society of attitudes towards refugee peers. Until recently, only a few schools in Croatia had at least limited experience in integrating refugee children from other cultural backgrounds, and those schools were primarily in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. However, the situation with integrating refugees is changing and Croatian schools are becoming more diverse. To prevent potential negative attitudes of the majority towards refugees and to be able to implement preparation activities to welcome refugees, it is only a necessary step to learn about prevailing attitudes of domicile children in schools.

To our knowledge, this is the first quantitative study on attitudes towards refugees from other cultures conducted with children in Croatia. We wanted to choose a study site where children were aware of the presence of refugees in the country, but it was not likely that they had had any contact with refugees yet. Therefore, we conducted a study in April 2021 in a primary school in Osijek, Croatia. Though no refugees were settled in the city at the time, nor the city schools had experience in refugee children integration, topics on refugees and migrations had been present in the public discourse from the "migration crisis" in 2015 and hence among the children as well. Moreover, the region suffered tremendous destruction during the 1991–1995 war in Croatia, and many families had lived through the experience of being refugees themselves. Because of all these factors, Osijek was chosen as the city for conducting the present study.

## METHODS

---

### Participants

Participants in this study were 184 majority children enrolled in 2nd (28%), 3rd (33%), 4th (22%) and 6th (17%) grades in one public elementary school in Osijek. The pupils' age ranged from 8 to 13 years ( $M = 9.65$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). The sample was gender-balanced with 52% of girls participating in the study.

## Design and procedure

We conducted a survey in a classroom setting. The questionnaire addressing pupils' attitudes towards refugee children was administered during regular classes and required approximately 30 minutes. A joint instruction was given at the beginning to explain the study's aim in an age-appropriate manner. In our research, refugee children were defined as *children who had to leave their country because they were in danger because of war and this is why they are looking for protection in other safe countries, including Croatia*. To clarify potential misunderstandings, children were encouraged to ask questions after the definition of a refugee child was given.

Afterwards, the researchers continued to read through the questionnaire in lower grades (up to grade 4), leading the pupils from item to item to make sure everybody understood their task. Pupils in higher grades (in grade 6) read the questionnaire by themselves.

The IRB of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb approved the study. Written parental consent was obtained for all participants via letters sent through the school. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

## Measures

Children responded to items about three intergroup outcomes related to refugee children: general evaluation, social acceptance, and contact intentions. Social norms were defined as perceived teachers' and peer norm about approving and supporting contact with refugee children, while personal norm was defined as perceived "wrongfulness" of excluding a refugee child from a social event with peers.

### Three intergroup outcomes

A general evaluation of refugees was assessed using a single item, asking participants for their general opinion of refugee children on a scale from 0 (*very poor*) to 10 (*very good*). A higher score indicated a more positive attitude towards refugee children.

Social acceptance was derived from the social distance scale adapted from Maričić et al. (2012). Nine items were used, asking children to assess acceptability of different forms of relationships with refugee children (*I would accept a refugee child to live in my town, live in my street, go to my school, go to my class, sit next to me in class, work with me on a school task, hang out with me outside of school, visit me at home and be my best friend*). The total score was formed as a sum of items, with a higher score indicating greater social acceptance of refugee children.

Contact intention with refugee children was assessed using an adapted version of a 3-item scale previously used in similar research with children (Cameron et al., 2006; Vezzali et al., 2012). Participants assessed whether they would initiate contact (*introduce themselves, hang out and have ice cream*) with an unknown refugee child they had just met at the park (e.g. *I would approach that child and introduce myself*) from 1 (*not agree at all*) to 5 (*totally agree*). The total score is the average of all items on the scale. A higher result means a higher intention to achieve contact. The reliability of the scale was high ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

### Norms

Perceived social norms of contact with refugee children were assessed using subscales of teacher and peer norms adapted from study 1 of Tropp et al. (2016). Each subscale consisted of two items that assess the hypothetical expectations of teachers and peers about helping and making friends with refugee children (e.g. *If refugee children attended my school, a) it would be important for my teachers/my peers that we help them and b) my teachers/my peers would want us to become friends with them*). A higher score indicates a perception of a more positive norm of contact with refugee children. The Spearman-Brown coefficient showed a satisfactory reliability of the two-item subscale for teachers' ( $SB = 0.69$ ) and peer norms ( $SB = 0.88$ ). The Pearson's coefficient was statistically significant in both, peer ( $r = 0.789$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and teacher norms ( $r = 0.531$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

Personal norm was assessed with a newly constructed scale of moral exclusion. The measure consists of three statements in which children were asked to evaluate hypothetical situations where in-group peers excluded a refugee child from a social event (*if a refugee child was not invited to a) hang out after school, b) go to a birthday and c) join a group on social network, because he or she is a refugee*) on a scale from 1 (*very bad*) to 5 (*very good*). Children's reasoning about moral exclusion was considered as a proxy of personal norm about relations with refugee peers. The items were recoded so the lower result on moral exclusion indicated a more positive personal norm. Hence, a higher score indicated a more favourable personal norm towards refugees. The items form a reliable scale ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

We performed parallel analysis for all the multi-item scales except for the social acceptance as a binary scale where we applied the 'eigenvalue higher than one' rule. All the multi-item scales, including social acceptance, showed a unidimensional structure.

To ensure that the questionnaire is age-appropriate, we conducted four cognitive interviews with children from 2nd and 3rd grade.

## RESULTS

---

Three types of intergroup outcomes towards refugee children (general evaluation, social acceptance, and contact intention) were regressed on perceived social norms and personal norm relating to refugee peers while controlling the age and gender of the participants. Descriptive statistics of all the variables are presented in Table 1. The results on all outcome and predictor variables in our sample are in the upper part of the theoretical range showing that, in general, pupils positively evaluate refugee peers, accept social relations with them and are willing to engage in contact with them in the future. On the social acceptance scale, most of the children would accept all kinds of relationships with a refugee peer. The results show that 67,6% of the sample would accept a refugee child as their best friend, while 68,3% would accept sitting together in class, 69,7% visiting at home, 80,9% working together on a school task, 81,5% in the same class, 83,7% outside of school, 85,9% live in the same street, 89,1% in their school and 95,7% in their city. Furthermore, perceived social norms and personal norm are positive, indicating that children expect their teachers and peers to encourage and support contact with refugee peers. The children also consider it wrong to exclude a peer solely based on his or her refugee status.

Next, correlations between all variables are presented in Table 1. Although positive, the correlations among the three outcome variables are weak to moderate (ranging from  $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$  to  $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and have slightly different correlation patterns with the predictor variables. Therefore, it is justified to consider them as three distinct intergroup outcomes. Furthermore, all three types of intergroup outcomes positively correlate with the perceived social norms and personal norm. Children who perceive their teachers' and peer norms more positively and have a more positive personal norm, also evaluate refugee children more positively, are more open to having closer relationships with refugee children and more willing to initiate contact with a refugee child in the future. Looking into more detail, all three outcomes are only weakly correlated with personal norm (general evaluation:  $r = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , social acceptance:  $r = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and contact intention:  $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). On the contrary, the correlations of the outcomes with social norms are higher and show more variability. While the general evaluation is weakly correlated with both social norms (teachers:  $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and peer norms:  $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), social acceptance shows a moderate correlation with teachers' ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a weak correlation with peer norms ( $r = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while contact intentions show a moderate correlation with teachers' norms ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),

and a high correlation with peer norms ( $r = 0.61, p < 0.001$ ). As for the relationship between outcomes and control sociodemographic variables, age is only weakly correlated with contact intention ( $r = -0.18, p = 0.013$ ), indicating that younger children are more willing to engage in contact with refugee children in the future. The correlation of age with general evaluation ( $r = 0.02, p = 0.807$ ) and social acceptance ( $r = 0.07, p = 0.387$ ) was not significant.

In contrast, gender is weakly positively correlated with the general evaluation ( $r = 0.21, p = 0.004$ ) and social acceptance ( $r = 0.34, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that girls show a more positive general attitude and more social acceptance towards refugee peers than boys, while the correlation with contact intention ( $r = 0.15, p = 0.055$ ) was not statistically significant.

TABLE 1  
Correlations, means  
and standard  
deviations of  
measured variables

|                       | 1 | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7       | 8      | M   | SD  | N   |
|-----------------------|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 General evaluation  | - | 0.39** | 0.31** | 0.02   | 0.21** | 0.33** | 0.30**  | 0.26** | 7.4 | 2.3 | 183 |
| 2 Social acceptance   |   | -      | 0.47** | 0.07   | 0.34** | 0.41** | 0.36**  | 0.29** | 7.2 | 2.5 | 181 |
| 3 Contact intention   |   |        | -      | -0.18* | 0.15   | 0.43** | 0.61**  | 0.25** | 3.9 | 1.2 | 180 |
| 4 Age                 |   |        |        | -      | 0.05   | -0.06  | -0.28** | -0.01  | 9.7 | 1.4 | 181 |
| 5 Gender <sup>a</sup> |   |        |        |        | -      | 0.13   | 0.11    | 0.17*  | -   | -   | 179 |
| 6 Teachers' norm      |   |        |        |        |        | -      | 0.38**  | 0.17*  | 4.6 | 0.6 | 180 |
| 7 Peer norm           |   |        |        |        |        |        | -       | 0.17*  | 4.0 | 1.1 | 179 |
| 8 Personal norm       |   |        |        |        |        |        |         | -      | 4.6 | 0.8 | 177 |

<sup>a</sup>Male = 1 and Female = 2; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Furthermore, we conducted three separate two-step hierarchical regression analyses for each of the three outcomes (Table 2). We simultaneously regressed all predictor variables onto the outcome variables in step 2 to examine the unique contribution of each, while controlling the age and gender in step 1.

Firstly, the general evaluation was regressed on perceived social norms (teachers' and peer norms) and personal norm while controlling for age and gender. As shown in Table 2, the control variables explained 4% of the variance of general evaluation in step 1. Only gender ( $\beta = 0.21, p = 0.006$ ) predicted the general evaluation, indicating that girls have a more positive attitude towards refugees than boys, while age was not predictive ( $\beta = -0.02, p = 0.773$ ). The perceived social norms and personal norm that were added in step 2 explained an additional 16% of the variance of general evaluation. The final model explained 20% of the variance of general evaluation and the final regression equation was statistically significant  $F(5,167) = 8.34, p < 0.001$ . By introducing norms in the second step, age ( $\beta = 0.04, p = 0.612$ ) and gender ( $\beta = 0.13, p = 0.073$ )

were no longer significant predictors. The best predictor in explaining the general evaluation were the teachers' norms ( $\beta = 0.24, p = 0.002$ ), followed by equally predictive peer norms ( $\beta = 0.17, p = 0.031$ ) and personal norm ( $\beta = 0.17, p = 0.020$ ). More positive norms of relating to refugee children predicted more positive general evaluations of refugee children.

| Predictor variables |                     | Outcome variables             |                              |                              |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                     |                     | General evaluation<br>$\beta$ | Social acceptance<br>$\beta$ | Contact intention<br>$\beta$ |
| Step 1              | Age                 | -0.02                         | 0.02                         | -0.21**                      |
|                     | Gender (F > M)      | 0.21**                        | 0.35***                      | 0.16*                        |
|                     | $R^2$ (Adj. $R^2$ ) | 0.04* (0.03)                  | 0.12*** (0.11)               | 0.07** (0.06)                |
| Step 2              | Age                 | 0.04                          | 0.10                         | -0.07                        |
|                     | Gender (F > M)      | 0.13                          | 0.25***                      | 0.06                         |
|                     | Teachers' norms     | 0.24**                        | 0.27***                      | 0.22**                       |
|                     | Peer norms          | 0.17*                         | 0.23**                       | 0.47***                      |
|                     | Personal norm       | 0.17*                         | 0.16*                        | 0.11                         |
|                     | $R^2$ (Adj. $R^2$ ) | 0.20*** (0.18)                | 0.33*** (0.31)               | 0.43*** (0.41)               |
|                     | $\Delta R^2$        | 0.16***                       | 0.21***                      | 0.36***                      |

TABLE 2  
Summary results of three hierarchical regression analyses for variables predicting general evaluation, social acceptance and contact intention (N = 172)

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

To determine the extent to which the same predictors contribute to the variance of social acceptance, another hierarchical regression was performed. The results indicate that in step 1 age ( $\beta = 0.02, p = 0.762$ ) and gender ( $\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$ ) explained 12 % of the variance of social acceptance. Again, only gender was a significant predictor. The three norms added to the sociodemographic predictors in the second step, explaining an additional 21% of the variance of social acceptance. The final model was significant ( $F(5,166) = 16.51, p < 0.001$ ). Interestingly, gender remained a significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$ ) in step 2, and together with norms explained 33% of the variance of social acceptance. Teachers' norms were again the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$ ), followed by peer norms ( $\beta = 0.23, p = 0.002$ ), and personal norm ( $\beta = 0.16, p = 0.017$ ). Social norms and personal norm were positively associated with social acceptance, and girls were willing to engage in closer relationships with refugee children than their male peers.

Finally, a third hierarchical regression was performed to explore to what extent social norms and personal norm predict the intention of contact with refugee children when age and gender are controlled. In the first step, both age ( $\beta = -0.21, p = 0.005$ ) and gender ( $\beta = 0.16, p = 0.031$ ) were significant predictors, indicating that younger pupils and girls were more willing to engage in contact with refugee peers. The first step explained 7% of the variance of contact intention.

Adding norms in the second step again significantly improved the model by additional 36% of the variance explained. Overall, the model was significant ( $F(5,166) = 25.02, p < 0.001$ ) and explained a total amount of 43% of the variance of contact intention towards refugee children. As norms were added in the second step of the model, both of the sociodemographic variables became insignificant in predicting contact intentions (age:  $\beta = -0.07, p = 0.290$ , gender:  $\beta = 0.06, p = 0.354$ ). Perceived peer norms explain a large and significant amount of variance in contact intention ( $\beta = 0.47, p < 0.001$ ), followed by teachers' norms ( $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$ ), while personal norm does not make a unique predictive contribution ( $\beta = 0.11, p = 0.072$ ). Interestingly, the unique contributions of social norms for contact intentions are different compared to general evaluation and social acceptance, where teachers' norms were stronger predictors than peer norms. Peer norms seem to be the key predictor of contact intentions.

## DISCUSSION

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To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study on primary school children's attitudes towards refugee peers since Croatia joined the EU and became more attractive to third-country nationals. We were interested particularly in this age group as primary school is compulsory for refugee children and therefore a place with the greatest chance for direct and regular contact with the host society. In general, children show positive results on all measures, i.e., they hold positive norms about relating with refugees and perceive that significant others (i.e. peers and teachers) also have positive social norms about it. Additionally, children's general attitudes and contact intentions are also clearly positive. Children were also ready to accept different social relations with their refugee peers: the acceptance rate was high for all relations included. As expected, more children accept distant relations than more close ones; nevertheless, the acceptance rate is fairly high even for the closest relations. These positive results indicate that preparatory activities for majority children to welcome their refugee peers when they arrive to their school could fall on fertile ground. Though we may not rule out the possibility that children's attitudes may be the result of social desirability more than their true (positive) attitudes, these results are in line with the moral exclusion framework (Killen, 2007), which suggests that children generally have positive out-group attitudes and avoid excluding out-group peers, unless a negative social norm prevails. Besides, since there has not been much recent experience with refugees in our research context, it is hard to say

that children would know beforehand what the socially desirable answers were.

Interestingly, the correlations between the three outcome measures were weak to moderate, highlighting the importance of including different indicators in assessing intergroup outcomes. The necessity of considering diverse outcomes in the study of intergroup relations is underscored by research conducted during and after the Homeland War. On the island of Hvar, Croatia, Čolić and Sujodžić (1995) observed that host-community members who interacted with IDPs and refugees reported positive direct contact. However, attitudes towards the long-term stay of IDPs and refugees varied, often highlighting socio-economic challenges as reasons against long-term integration. While the hosts were willing to befriend the newcomers, they were less inclined to accept them as neighbours on the social distance scale.

Bulat (1995) further demonstrated that attitudes were more favourable towards IDPs and refugees from the same ethnic group (Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina), compared to those from different ethnic or religious groups, such as Muslims. This suggests that broader socio-economic variables significantly influence intergroup outcomes. Extending this research to children, future studies should consider factors such as perceived similarity with refugee children.

Magdalenić (1992) emphasised the importance of the timing of investigations, noting that initial interactions may differ from later ones as different intergroup concepts, such as solidarity fatigue, become more salient. This highlights the dynamic nature of intergroup relations and the need for longitudinal studies to capture these evolving perspectives.

Next, building on previous research on the relative contribution of norms to intergroup outcomes, we were interested in the extent to which perceived teachers' and peer norms as well as personal norm could explain the three intergroup outcomes of domicile children towards refugee children. To reiterate, the context of our study was such that children were not likely to have had any contact with refugees. Even in such a context, both perceived social norms contribute to the explained variance of all three intergroup outcomes, corroborating results of the cross-sectional study of Tropp et al. (2016), which showed that peer and school (teacher and principal) norms of contact were significant predictors of intergroup outcomes in children. However, when comparing the predictive power of social norms across outcomes, it seems they were not equally important. While teachers' norms explain equally the variance of all intergroup outcomes, peer norms seem differently important in determining different intergroup outcomes.

Peer norms were more predictive for more specific behavioural outcomes than for the general evaluation of refugees, suggesting that when it comes to more concrete behaviours, children turn to their peers and behave in line with their expectations. Hence, when comparing teacher and peer norms, it seems that teachers are more important for attitudinal, and peers for behavioural outcomes, indicating that peer pressure might be an important obstacle or indeed an important facilitator of willingness to initiate contact with refugee peers.

Second, unlike social norms, which were predictive for all the outcomes, personal norm was predictive for general evaluation and social acceptance but not for the intention to contact with refugee children. It is possible that children have internalised what would be morally correct, and their attitudes reflect these beliefs. However, more than internalisation is needed for contact intention. Therefore, our results may indicate that in a new situation demanding contact with an unknown refugee peer, children rely more on messages from their social environment than on their own norm of what is morally acceptable. This is a clear direction for possible school interventions – even when there are generally positive attitudes, children will be more confident in building relations with their refugee peers if their social environment supports and encourages them to do so.

In addition, the role of sociodemographic variables became irrelevant when the norms were included in the regression analysis models, except in the case of social acceptance. Here the results indicate that girls are more willing to accept closer relationships with refugee children than boys. Our results are in line with the study of Ata and colleagues (2009), showing that boys are more socially distant. It is possible that different socialisation practices for boys and girls are underlying mechanisms that produce such gender differences in accepting others. As previously shown, girls are usually more empathetic and are taught to be more inclusive and caring than boys (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2020).

Interestingly, focusing on the outcomes and comparing the percentage of explained variance, it seems that this set of norms is more predictive for behavioural than attitudinal outcomes altogether. Specifically, perceived teachers' and peer norms together with personal norm explain 20% of the variance of general evaluation, 33% of social acceptance and 43% of contact intention. Therefore, it is important to underline that norms seem to be the better predictors of behavioural outcomes than of general attitudes. Specifically, peer norms had the biggest unique contribution in predicting the contact intention as a proxy of behaviour. This finding may be well used

in planning preparation activities for children with no experience with refugee peers or in intervention programmes aimed to foster positive intergroup outcomes, e.g., by emphasising positive peer norms.

Unlike peer norms, teacher norms were more predictive of general evaluation and social acceptance. In the case of social acceptance, this finding holds true not only on the average results but also on the item level. We expand on this by investigating the relations between norms and social acceptance facets, showing that teachers are the most important normative sources for this variable, predicting even relationships outside the school context. Interestingly, these non-school-related relationships (city, street and best friends) were also predicted by the personal norm, indicating that personal norm (morality) aligns more with teachers' norms (authorities) than peer norms. In contrast, peer norms were predictive for one-on-one situations, which are relevant for peer context, regardless of location (both at home and at school).

Finally, we acknowledge that the format of the responses might also influence the results, as the theoretical variances were not equal on all measures. However, all the results were positive, regardless of the format. Furthermore, using single-item scales has become more acceptable in the last few years as their time efficacy and face validity is largely accepted by the participants (Allen et al., 2022).

### **Limitation and further research**

While we show that social and personal norms are quite good predictors of children's attitudes towards refugee peers, we acknowledge the limitations of our study design, since we conduct a cross-sectional study in a single school. Therefore, the results of our study, although being the first of this kind in the Croatian context, may be only indicative, and ask to include more participants and for more schools to answer the questions on what kind of attitudes children have towards their refugee peers. It is for further research to include bigger samples from various regions and contexts in the country (e.g., those more or less affected by the consequences of the Homeland war, including experiences with forced displacement, children with more opportunity for intergroup contact with refugees from other countries). Larger samples could also allow for using more advanced data analysis to control for clusterisation and other relevant contextual factors. Besides, including more schools is of the utmost importance, as the impact of the school climate on intergroup attitudes is well-known (Miklikowska et al., 2021; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). This holds true not only where children have no contact with refugee

children, but also in schools that already have experience with the integration of refugees. Research showed that contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), especially cross-group friendships (Davies et al., 2013), plays a significant role in intergroup relations and promoting intergroup attitudes. Moreover, intergroup contact can also moderate the effects of social norms on intergroup outcomes (Visintin et al., 2020). Despite the positive effects of intergroup contact, there is also a chance of its negative backlash, such as the occurrence of other types of negative intergroup contact. In this case, other factors might be more salient, for instance, different interests, endangered group functioning (Killen & Rutland, 2011), or perceived threat from the out-group (Nesdale, 2004).

We also call for longitudinal studies to further explore the nature of relations between different norms and attitudes. This is particularly important as previous research has shown that the relationships between norms and intergroup outcomes differ when observed longitudinally (Tropp et al., 2016). Even though we were focused on the school context, aligning with the previous studies (Miklikowska et al., 2019; Pehar et al., 2020), we suggest incorporating parental norms, as their overarching influence could lead to a better understanding of the unique contributions of different normative influences that determine children's attitudes and behaviours towards refugee peers. In the meantime, the situation in Croatia regarding refugees has changed and besides people from the Middle East, there are also newly arriving refugees from the Ukraine. These new circumstances, though challenging, may be considered as an opportunity for schools to prepare classes for the arrival of refugee peers, by taking into account the importance of norms, as suggested by our study.

Finally, in the present study it was impossible to measure descriptive or prescriptive social norms in a classical manner since there is no opportunity to witness or observe intergroup contact. However, children are generally very positive towards refugees, and they expect that their social environment would also act positively by supporting and encouraging them to socialise with refugee peers.

## **Practical implications**

Our results indicate that positive social norms in the school context may be a very important factor in creating a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom. The focus of preparatory activities and school interventions should be on fostering positive teacher and peer norms because they are the best predictor of contact intention.

Since integration is a two-way process, to be successful, the role of domicile peers and their readiness to accept refugee children is crucial. Social integration is essential in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural settings, and the school is seen as a social leverage that has enormous potential for instigating and implementing change (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2012).

However, when planning classroom interventions, depending on the outcome the intervention is aimed for, different norms should be considered as teachers' norms are more predictive of general attitudes and social acceptance, while peer norms are a stronger predictor of contact intentions.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In conclusion, the study shows how important social and personal norms are in predicting the three intergroup outcomes of domicile children towards refugee children, even if there had been no prior contact between them. The results indicate that social norms better predict these outcomes than personal norm. Furthermore, the relative importance of different norms for different outcomes is also highlighted, showing that the peer norms are more predictive for behavioural intentions, while teachers seem to play a more prominent role in the general evaluation and social acceptance. These findings should be considered when creating programmes aimed at helping integrate refugee children into schools. This study makes the first step in assessing children's attitudes towards refugee children in Croatia as the issue of migration and integration of refugee children becomes more and more relevant for Croatian schools and their classrooms become more and more diverse. There is a plethora of studies on refugee integration from more diverse countries; however, there are various contextual factors that can influence norms and attitudes, and hence it is of the utmost importance to explore these and other factors in newly receiving countries such as Croatia in order to better understand the process of integration itself, and to better respond to the needs of both refugee and domicile children.

## **Declaration of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Uloga socijalnih i osobnih normi domicilne djece u predviđanju stavova prema vršnjacima izbjeglicama

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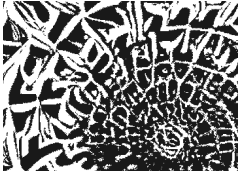
Dokazano je da norme predviđaju razne međugrupne ishode među djecom. Provedeno je kvantitativno istraživanje s domicilnom djecom u Hrvatskoj ( $N = 184$ ) koja prethodno nisu imala kontakt s vršnjacima izbjeglicama, kako bi se ispitala uloga percipiranih socijalnih normi i osobne norme u predviđanju međugrupnih ishoda. Rezultati regresijske analize pokazuju kako percipirane nastavničke i vršnjačke norme te osobna norma o kontaktu s vršnjacima izbjeglicama značajno predviđaju opću evaluaciju, socijalno prihvaćanje i namjeru kontakta s djecom izbjeglicama. Rezultati također pokazuju da učiteljske norme bolje predviđaju stavove, dok vršnjaci imaju važniju ulogu u predviđanju namjere ponašanja. Ovi nalazi imaju važne implikacije za nastavnike i kreatore politika, posebno s obzirom na sve veće raznolikosti u hrvatskim školama.

Ključne riječi: stavovi prema izbjeglicama, socijalne norme, osobna norma, međugrupni odnosi, djeca izbjeglice



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<https://doi.org/10.5559/di.33.3.02>

# TOWARDS A MORE DEMOCRATIC FORUM: SOURCE ANALYSIS OF NEWS REPORTING ON OLDER PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS IN *DELO* DURING THE SLOVENIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS FROM 2004 TO 2018

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While an increasing number of studies provide important insights into media construction of old age, the structure of news sources is seldom examined. The latter is especially important in democratic societies, during election years, when people elect representatives who tackle older people's social problems. Using content analysis, we examined the source structure of news articles reporting on older people's problems in the Slovenian newspaper *Delo* in five sequential parliamentary election years from 2004 to 2018. The findings showed that news coverage was predominantly constructed by elite sources rarely including representatives of older people. This characteristic strengthens the surveillance function of *Delo* but undermines its role as a democratic forum. However, during the last three observed election years, *Delo*'s news reporting showed signs of transitioning towards a more democratic forum, which holds potential for fostering older people's civic inclusion.

Keywords: population ageing, social problems, media representations, print media, news reporting



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## INTRODUCTION

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The population of the European Union is rapidly ageing. Ageing and related issues have been elevated to the fore of political and economic debates, in which older people are often considered a destructive force, ultimately leading to the collapse of the economy and the welfare state (Macnicol, 2015; Pickard, 2019; Phillipson, 2013). This may pose a serious issue, especially in the EU member states such as Croatia, Italy and Slovenia, which are located in the South of Europe, one of the global regions where population ageing has been most pronounced (Gerdina & Kurdija, 2024). In this study, we explore the source structure of media representations of social problems that directly affect older people in one such rapidly ageing country – Slovenia, during the parliamentary election years in the national quality newspaper *Delo*.

The media act as gatekeepers who select which issues and events are worth reporting (Parsons, 1995). As Shoemaker (2006, p. 108) has observed, the media's task is not to reflect reality but to direct public attention to problems and situations that need solutions. If the media alerts and sensitises the public to an issue, it creates a demand for policies addressing the problem. This demand in democratic societies determines the supply of policies (Parsons, 1995). Such a practice is pronounced in modern democracies, in which engaging in face-to-face deliberation is not feasible for all members; the media thus serves as the primary platform for shaping public opinion and facilitating decision making through public discussion and argumentation (Elster, 1998). Its role becomes even more important during election years, when the public needs to elect representatives who will address social challenges in the political arena (Mustapić & Balabanić, 2018; Vozab & Peruško, 2018). In this respect, quality newspapers may be especially important since unlike other media genres, the content of informative media is more likely to be perceived as factual and can have greater bearings on election outcomes (Lamza Posavec & Rihtar, 2003; Kovács et al., 2021). Moreover, quality newspapers set the agenda for other media types (Edström, 2018), as the information is distributed through electronic or other communication channels (Bright, 2016). In other words, informative print media remain very important for opinion formation and decision making through public discussion and argumentation (Elster, 1998), which is especially pertinent during the election years.

### **Media representations in light of population ageing**

The growth in the number of older people has increased interest in exploring the nature of media representations of old age in recent years (Bai, 2014; Ylänne, 2015). For example, a va-

riety of studies analysed quality newspapers and examined general media representations of old age (e.g., Ng & Indran, 2022; Jeong et al., 2022), or focused on a particular issue related to older people, such as retirement (Rudman, 2006; Ishikawa, 2022; Yang et al., 2022), dementia (Siiner, 2019) or care work (Torres & Lindbloom, 2020; Lindbloom & Torres, 2021).

While these studies give important insight into the construction of old age, ageing and related issues in the media, they seldom address the structure of the sources that construct these narratives. The investigation of source structure on news reporting regarding old age and ageing has been largely restricted to a series of studies of Australian and Malaysian news coverage (Harkin et al., 2018; Imran & Bowd, 2023; Thomson et al., 2023), and while there have been a few published studies examining the 'voice' of older people in Europe (e.g. Lepianka, 2015; Siiner, 2019; Meneses-Fernandez & Santana-Hernandez, 2024), they do not investigate the structure of sources in depth. By analysing the supply side of information (e.g. news sources), it is possible to gain important insights into who presents complex phenomena related to old age and population ageing to the public and how they might be received and understood by the public (Damstra & Vliegthart, 2018). Moreover, news sources, especially those appearing in quality newspapers, can help in shaping policy debates and public discourse, impacting the allocation of resources and the development of social policies aimed at addressing the needs of the society (Rudman, 2006). If older people's problems are not placed on the political agenda, the systemic solutions for them are less likely implemented (Gerdina, 2023).

Our aim is to analyse news articles reporting on social problems that directly affect older people (hereafter older people's problems) in the Slovene quality newspaper *Delo*, and to examine the diversity of news sources. By older people's problems, we mean socially-originated issues that are framed as undesirable and manageable through social means (Jamroznik & Nocella, 1998). We also intend to explore how the structure of sources within news reporting on older people's problems in *Delo* changed in the period 2004–2018. We chose Slovenia's accession to the EU in 2004 as the starting point for analysis, as the EU encourages its member states to address demographic issues, which include ageing and older people. This can be seen in various documents laid out by the EU (cf. Chapman, 1993). Within the Slovenian national context, old age and ageing, as well as older people's problems, have become increasingly important topics on the political agenda since the beginning of the 21st century, when the country began preparations to enter the EU. For example, Mali and Hrovatič (2015) find that social

care for older people started receiving attention since 2000, when several social policy documents that plan care for older people were adopted. Since then, ageing and older people's integration into society have been constant features in Slovenia following the EU's political agenda (Zimmermann, 2015).

### **The role of news source selection in media content creation**

Norris (2000) promotes the ideal of the media as a civic forum promoting public debate, providing a platform for diverse voices and fostering a sense of community. As a civic forum, the media should serve as a public space for political discourse. The media's role, as conceptualised in this context, necessitates the availability and balance of news in terms of both the volume of issue coverage and the way issues are presented. This balance can be achieved through external diversity among different media outlets with strong political leanings or internal diversity, in which outlets present multiple and contrasting perspectives on a certain issue. Norris (2000) argues that the media, in this role, can contribute to the strengthening of civil society and the democratic process. It determines which voices are deemed important within society, and the media's ability to disseminate these voices opens up opportunities for participation in democratic processes (Edwards, 2018). The latter is especially important for older people, as they are often denied opportunities to participate civically (Serrat et al., 2020). However, many scholars are sceptical of the idea of the media as a civic forum (e.g., Meyer, 2002; Koopmans, 2004). Shoemaker (2006, p. 108), for example, writes that news making is not a democratic process: "Although the term democratic implies that the relative importance of problems in the news is decided through an open process that involves many individual citizens, in fact news is more likely to be shaped by a relatively small number of people." This quote highlights that the media can act as gatekeepers of information and deny access to certain voices as much as it has the capacity to serve as a civic forum.

From this, we set our first two research questions: what sources are used to construct news on older people's problems in the daily quality newspaper *Delo* during the five sequential parliamentary election years, and what is the extent of representation accorded to the voices of older people and their representatives? We use source analysis to gain a deeper understanding of who shapes the public's perceptions of social problems in old age and to determine whether news reporting acts as a civic forum in this domain. As such, this study is situated within an emerging body of research that analyses news sources in print news media on old age and related issues (Siiner, 2019; Harkin et al., 2018; Imran & Bowd, 2023; Thomson et al., 2023).

While there are no universal standards of journalistic writing (despite numerous ethical codes of journalism), professional journalistic rules strive towards the ideal of objectivity which stresses that journalists' claims must be valid, meaning in practice that they must either be supported by facts or by reference to competent sources (Laban & Poler Kovačič, 2007). Furthermore, the latter are supposed to be balanced, which means that in mass media opposing groups should be given the same amount of space, and all interests in the community should have an equal chance of media coverage (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In practice, however, the choice of news sources is selective and depends on a range of factors (Kim et al., 2010; Tomanić Trivundža, 2016). Especially when deadlines are tight, journalists often rely on routine sources (Scheufele, 1999; Thomson et al., 2023).

According to Thomson et al. (2023), sources can be animate (people) or inanimate (e.g., policy submissions, reports and meeting minutes). They can exist in raw data or in already structured press releases. Some are based on materials from primary sources (e.g. interviewees), while others rely on already published content and reuse secondary source material. Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez (2016) provide a typology of sources which they divided between elite (these are official, expert) and non-elite (these are official, unofficial) sources. Elite official sources have the role of news makers and are at the top of the credibility hierarchy (e.g., political and state institutions, corporations and business organisations, major NGOs etc.), whereas non-elite official sources have the same role but have a lower status of legitimacy and credibility (e.g., small non-profit organisations, organised activities, pressure groups etc.), and they often challenge the status quo. Experts enjoy elite status because of their expertise, but they do not represent the views of institutions as elite official sources do and, accordingly, most often act as news shapers (e.g., scientists and academics, specialists, former public officials etc.). Similarly, non-elite unofficial sources act as news shapers, enjoying legitimacy because of their personal experiences of lived reality (e.g., vox populi, survey respondents, protestors etc.).

Indexing theory (Bennet, 1990; 2015) states that journalists rely on professional reporting norms that implicitly filter or routinely index sources and actors' views based on perceptions of power relations. Source selection and media content creation are especially important during parliamentary election years, when the public is called to elect representatives who will tackle rising political, economic and social problems. Politicians need access to the media to communicate and jus-

tify their political agenda to potential voters; in return, the media accesses politicians as constant and credible sources of stories (Bašić Hrvatin & Kučić, 2004). As such, questions regarding representation, absence and the dominance or neglect of certain voices in mass media remain critical concerns in both democratic theory and public debate (Cottle, 2003).

In our third research question, we determine whether the structure of news sources reporting on older people's problems in *Delo* differs across the five sequential parliamentary election years and, if so, in what ways.

## METHOD AND MATERIALS

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We conducted a study of the Slovene national daily newspaper *Delo*, focusing on five sequential parliamentary election years within a 15-year period; these are 2004, 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2018. We chose *Delo* because of its position in the Slovene media space as the central quality newspaper (European Press Roundup, 2023).

*Delo's* daily editions were chosen for the analysis as they contain a substantial number of articles directly affecting the social imaginary of old age, along with a large amount of news, "understood as the most important media genre for agenda-setting" (Edström, 2018, p. 84).

## Data collection and analysis

The articles for analysis were retrieved in two phases. First, an internal electronic search of the *Delo* newspaper archive was conducted. Two separate searches were performed in the electronic database, in which the presence of the root *old\** (original *star\**) and *retire\** (original *pokoj\**) was examined anywhere in the texts that were part of *Delo's* daily editions from Monday to Saturday, without supplements, in the selected years. Journalistic articles from the following categories were excluded: humour and anecdotes, black chronicles, artwork reviews, letters from readers, paid promotions, obituaries and non-textual material. The retrieved data were carefully read to exclude texts in which the key words did not relate to old age or older people (e.g. 'old continent'), and texts that did not have a substantial emphasis on old age or ageing. The cut-off was set at 50% of the article content on old age and age-related topics, which led to the inclusion of 1,243 articles.

In the second step, we read the collected material ( $N = 1243$ ) and determined whether the issue in each article was framed as a social problem. This was founded upon the premise that such framed issues can have considerable influence on the political agenda (Parsons, 1995). The criteria to determine a social problem were adopted from Jamroznik and Nocella (1998). The issue at hand had to

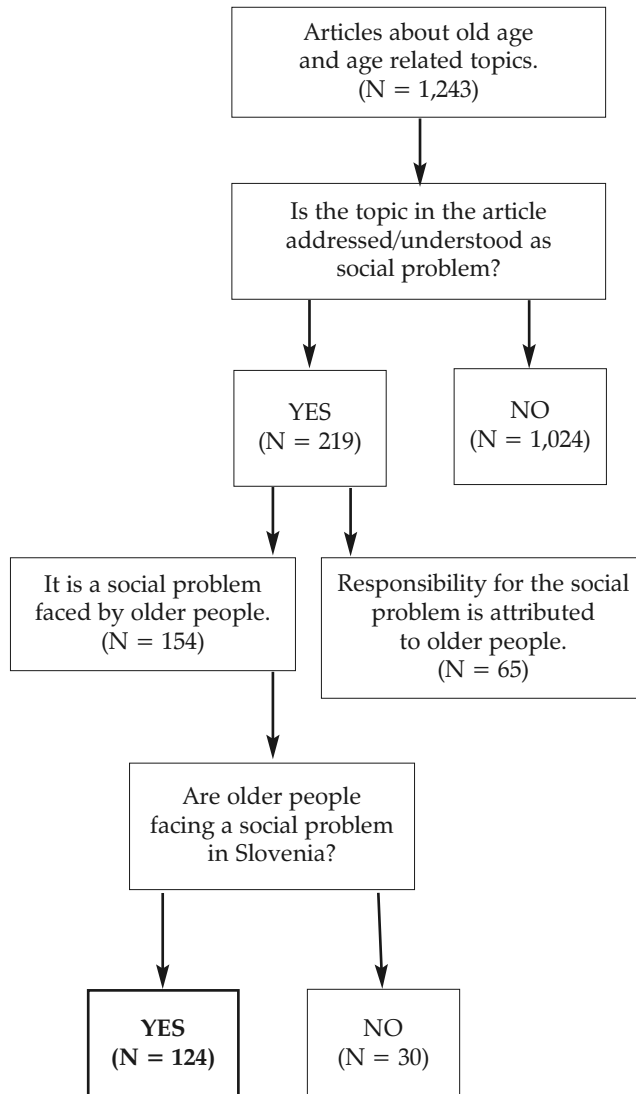
a. report on something deemed by the author of the text as undesirable, negative or threatening to important social values and interests, or is perceived as threatening to society;

b. concern something of social origin (e.g., a social circumstance, process, arrangement or attitude); and

c. be considered socially manageable and amenable to social control by the author of the text.

We further excluded contributions that addressed social problems for which older people, or an ageing population were blamed, as the present study is concerned with older people's problems. The final sample consisted of 124 news articles (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1  
Flowchart of  
newspaper article  
selection



Once the data were collected, we used content news source analysis to analyse all the newspaper texts that met the inclusion criteria. We extracted data on the newspaper article's basic information (these are title, publishing genre, section, date, region, and length of the text in number of words) and news sources (these are name and affiliation, number of sources, gender and number of words dedicated to the source). News source had to be explicitly stated and identified as the primary source of information in order to be extracted. Both authors were responsible for this step, and any dilemmas were discussed with a third expert person until agreement was reached.

Coding for news source and voice of older people was done by the second author using the taxonomy model of news sources by Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez (2016), which the authors turned into a codebook (see appendix A). Any coding uncertainties were discussed on an ongoing basis between the first and second authors until a final agreement was reached. The reliability of the coding was ascertained by calculating the inter-coder agreement at the conclusion of the coding process on a random sample of 39 sources, representing 10% of the total number of sources identified. The degree of agreement was determined using Scott's  $\pi$ , which demonstrated that the measurements in the study were reliable (Scott's  $\pi \geq 0.9$  for both news source type and older people's voice). Finally, we conducted a descriptive statistical analysis to compare the frequencies of the identified types of news sources across the five different years (considered as groups) and performed chi-square test of independence to check for statistical significance.

## RESULTS

**TABLE 1**  
Distribution of the number of newspaper articles on older people's problems, news sources and older people's voice across the selected years

We identified 378 news sources in 124 newspaper articles reporting on older people's problems, among which 22.8% represented older people's voice (for distribution across the parliamentary election years see Table 1). The analysed newspaper articles were 266,220 words long, of which 48,807 words accounted for the news sources, with an average of 129 words per news source type (see Table 2). In five articles, no news sources were identified.

| Years            | No. of articles on older people's problems | No. of news sources | No. of older people's voice | % of older people's voice |
|------------------|--|---------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2004             | 14   | 46                  | 8                           | 17.4                      |
| 2008             | 27   | 62                  | 11                          | 17.7                      |
| 2011             | 22   | 59                  | 15                          | 25.4                      |
| 2014             | 18   | 53                  | 7                           | 13.2                      |
| 2018             | 43   | 158                 | 45                          | 28.5                      |
| <i>All years</i> | 124  | 378                 | 86                          | 22.8                      |

TABLE 2  
News source type  
frequency and older  
people's voice distri-  
bution across new  
source type

Most news sources identified were elite, accounting for 73.5% of all 378 sources. Of these elite sources, 79.5% were official sources, and 20.5% were experts. Among elite sources, 13.3% were representatives of older people. Non-elite sources accounted for 25.1% of all sources, among which 51.6% represented older people's voice. Of non-elite sources, 49.5% were official sources, and 50.5% were unofficial sources (see Table 2).

| Source type  |            | No. of news sources | % of news source type | No. of older people's voice | % of older people's voice within news source type |
|--------------|------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Elite        | Official   | 221                 | 79.5                  | 28                          | 12.7  |
|              | Expert     | 57                  | 20.5                  | 9                           | 15.8  |
|              | Total      | 278                 | 73.5                  | 37                          | 13.3  |
| Non-elite    | Official   | 47                  | 49.5                  | 14                          | 29.8  |
|              | Unofficial | 48                  | 50.5                  | 35                          | 72.9  |
|              | Total      | 95                  | 25.1                  | 49                          | 51.6  |
| Unaccounted  |            | 5                   | 1.3                   | 0                           | 0   |
| <i>Total</i> |            | <i>378</i>          | <i>100.0</i>          | <i>86</i>                   | <i>22.8</i>                                       |

A more detailed analysis of news sources (see Appendix B) shows that within elite official sources, state institutions are most represented (53.8%). They include ministries, nursing homes, social services, state inspectorates, committees, institutes, councils, statistical offices, the Health Insurance Institute of Slovenia, the Pension and Disability Insurance Institute of Slovenia, the Ombudsman and the Advocate of the Principle of Equality, among other organisations. Less represented are political institutions (e.g., political parties or their representatives) at 14.9%, major non-government institutions (NGOs) or major unions at 12.7% (including the Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' Organisations and the Union of Pensioners of Slovenia, which are influential actors advocating for the rights of older people in Slovenia), also including the highest number of older people's voice among elite sources and municipal institutions (e.g., municipalities, mayors or representatives of mayor's offices) at 10.0%.

Specialists or professionals (e.g., doctors and health or social care workers) and academics or scientists (e.g., professors or researchers) were presented almost equally among experts, together making up 68.4% of expert sources.

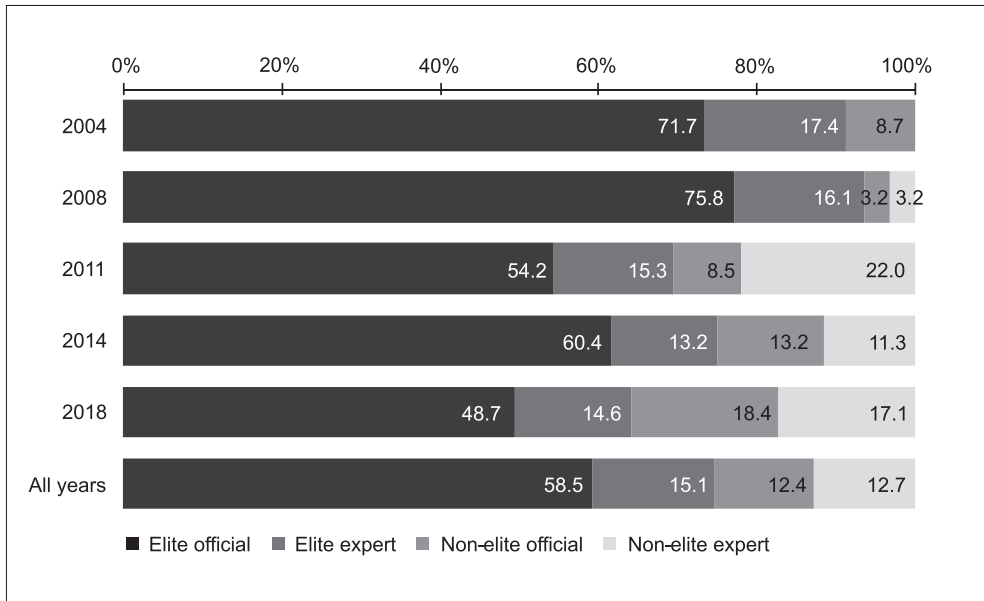
Within non-elite official sources, the most present are small NGOs or unions at 76.6%, among which 36.1% are representing older people. Within non-elite unofficial sources, the most present are vox populi (viz. voice of everyday people) at 52.5%, among which 84% constitute the voice of older people.

In all categories, there are generalised news sources, meaning the source is not specified (for example, 'in people's opinions' and 'experts say') the least of them being within elite official sources (1.8%) and the most among non-elite unofficial sources (16.7%). Five sources were unaccounted, meaning that the news source could not be defined (for example, 'the data show,' 'our sources say,' and 'unofficial rough estimates'), which were excluded from further analysis.

## News source type structure over the years

The analysis of the presence of news source types in each year (see Figure 2) showed that they differed in structure. We conducted further analysis (chi-square test) to verify the observed differences in news source type structure addressing older people's problems in the five selected years, which were found to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2(12, N = 373) = 34.445, p < 0.001, V = 0.175$ ).

**FIGURE 2**  
 Comparison of the representation of news source types across years



In 2004 and 2008, around 90% of all news sources were elite. In 2004, there was no voice of non-elite unofficial sources, and there was some presence of non-elite official sources; in 2008, the presence of the latter was lower, while the first non-elite unofficial sources appeared. In 2011, we observe substantially fewer elite sources, which accounted for around 70% of the total, together with more non-elite unofficial sources. Further enquiry revealed that the observed increase was caused by a study on an age-friendly city conducted in the Municipality of Ljubljana. In 2014, elite sources were still at

around 70%, and then in 2018 their number was the lowest compared to all selected years and accounted for 63% of all news sources. Meanwhile, during 2014 and 2018, both types of non-elite sources had more presence compared to previous selected years and became equally represented within their categories. Throughout all the years studied, we can observe that the share of experts within the elite category is somewhat the same (around 15%, varying from 13.2% to 17.4%), while the share of elite official sources has decreased from the first two measuring points (2004, 2008) to the last two (2014, 2018).

## DISCUSSION

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In the EU, due to population ageing, there is an expected increase in social security and health-care provision expenses (Harper, 2023a), fuelling debates regarding the distribution of resources among different age groups (Harper, 2023b). This makes population ageing an important contemporary issue that needs to be politically addressed by EU member states. The news media play a key role in how these issues will be thought about and dealt with in democratic societies. As Prodnik and Vobič (2024) explain: "Even in an age of online social networks and the Internet, institutional news media remain a vital amplifier of political opinions, with the choices made by journalists largely setting the contours of the public debate (p. 15)."

### The dominance of elite voices

The selection of news sources becomes of fundamental concern in democratic societies, especially during election years when people elect representatives who will tackle social problems affecting older people. It not only defines the diversity but also the visibility of voices (Prodnik & Vobič, 2024) addressing older people's problems in the public sphere.

Regarding our first research question, we found that elite sources were the most numerous. The dominance of elite voices mirrors the findings of other studies on newspaper media reporting on old age and ageing (see e.g., Imran & Bowd, 2023; Thomson et al., 2023; Meneses-Fernandez & Santana-Hernandez, 2024) and different topics (see e.g., Damstra & Vlienghart, 2018; Lindblom & Torres, 2021). For example, Thompson et al. (2023) found a similar distribution of 80/20 elite versus non-elite sources in four national Australian news outlets covering aged-care related news coverage during a 15-month period between October 2018 and June 2021. Our study further adds to the established consensus based on a diverse body of empirical research that the selection of sources has been highly unequal within society (Prodnik & Vobič, 2024). This

finding primarily indicates that the cultural assumptions about the credibility of elite sources are deeply embedded in society (Cottle, 2003; McNair, 1998), and that the inherent bias towards elite sources (Prodnik & Vobič, 2024) is ingrained in the main Slovene quality newspaper *Delo*.

Furthermore, the finding that the most numerous sources (not only within elite sources but all sources) were official elites, wherein 12.7% were representatives of older people, reveals that *Delo's* journalists most likely conform to normative journalistic professional practices (see indexing theory; Bennett, 2015), or that they may face known organisational barriers that prevent them from accessing certain sources (Scheufele, 1999). This further indicates that *Delo's* news reporting on older people's problems is biased and that representatives that are best suited to voice the concerns of older people are rarely consulted. Instead, the contours of the debate on older people's problems are shaped by other elite actors.

While experts were in the minority within the elite sources, their share in *Delo* remained quite unchanged throughout the years, which was around 15%. This could reflect the ongoing ambivalent relationship between journalists and experts, as explained by Peters (1995; 2013), in which journalists and experts differ in their respective roles in content creation and their preferred reporting styles. The consistent presence of experts' voices partially counteracts the dominance of elite official sources because experts tend to appear as neutral sources (Boyce, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Nevertheless, they are still in the minority compared with their elite counterparts, indicating that the debate on older people's problems remains largely biased towards the interest of the state or the political elites.

Regarding our second research question, our analysis showed that older people rarely get to voice their own problems in *Delo*, which is consistent with the existing body of literature on the underrepresentation of older people in printed newspapers (see e.g., Lepianka, 2015; Imran & Bowd, 2023; Meneses-Fernandez & Santana-Hernandez, 2024). The latter is also consistent with Edström's (2018) observation that working-age individuals (in the 15 to 44 age range) are most likely to be represented in the media. After the age of 45, one's affiliated age group becomes less visible (ibid). The results of our study indicate that older individuals are relatively voiceless in news articles focused on addressing their specific problems. This observation not only illustrates the existence of a societal power imbalance but also suggests that *Delo* is not providing a genuinely democratic platform where diverse perspectives

of older individuals can be represented. This is consistent with the observation that socially valued groups of people appear in the media frequently, while less valued groups are either negatively represented or ignored (Makita et al., 2021).

The finding that older people do not get to speak on their behalf in media texts has been interpreted as ageism in the media (Ylänne, 2015; Thomson et al., 2023). Since survey data shows that ageism is widespread among the Slovene general population (Gerdina & Kurdija, 2024), the media's inclusion of ordinary citizens' voices in discussions of matters of public concern would be a crucial step in combating ageism and for promoting a more active citizenry (Gamson, 2001; Lewis et al., 2005). Excluding older people from voicing their own problems limits the power of this group to shape political agenda on the issues they face. During election years, this particularly deprives them of the possibility of influencing issues on which political campaigns are centred, as it is the salience of social problems in the media that determines points of interest for the general public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972); this, in turn, increases the chance of the social problems becoming political issues (Mandič, 2002). As Thomson et al. (2023) posit, journalists bear the responsibility of ensuring that non-elite and vulnerable sources are afforded the opportunity to share their perspectives.

### **Changes in the voices who speak about older people's problems**

While the above findings paint a negative picture, the results of our third research question show that the structure of voices in articles on older people's problems in *Delo* is slowly becoming more diverse. In the first two parliamentary election years (2004 and 2008), elites were almost the only actors consulted regarding older people's problems; in 2011, this started to change. We observed a substantial increase in non-elite unofficial sources where the voice of older people was most concentrated. However, once established in the newspaper, such sources representing the voice of older people sustained a continued presence throughout the rest of the observed years. Non-elite official and unofficial sources balanced out in 2014 and further proportionately increased in 2018, when Generation+, a news section devoted to older people, ageing and related issues, was introduced. Given that newspapers, like other traditional media, have the potential to serve as crucial platforms in promoting political inclusion within society (Muscat, 2019), our findings regarding the change in source structure highlight the possible benefits of introducing a special section on old age and ageing.

Although our study of sources in news articles addressing older people's problems in *Delo* showed the dominance of elite sources in all the years examined, it also observed a slow decrease in elite sources, namely, official sources, throughout the five parliamentary years, with a parallel increase in non-elite sources starting in 2011. The trend of pluralisation of news sources identified in our study resonates with the study of voices in media reporting on dementia (Siiner, 2019). Despite the fact that non-elite sources still accounted for less than half of all sources used in newspaper reporting on older people's problems in 2018, the increase in the plurality of sources in the last three parliamentary election years may indicate that newspaper reporting on older people's problems in the main Slovene quality newspaper *Delo* is becoming more open and democratic in terms of enabling a space for diverse – even opposing – perspectives; it is also enabling different social groups to participate in a public democratic debate (Cottle, 2003; Norris, 2000). We believe that this represents a positive development, as it potentially supports more diverse social problems to be put on the newspaper's agenda and allows for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the challenges faced by older people. As newspapers are one of the key infrastructures for enabling political recognition (Muscat, 2019), this furthers the potential to foster older people's civic inclusion, which is important for people to remain socially connected and engaged in later life (Serrat et al. 2020).

## Limitations and future research

As the experience of old age depends on the society and historical period in which it is situated (Gibb & Holroyd, 1996), this research serves not only as a snapshot of the situation but also as an archaeological report for future research on news sources that appear in news coverage of older people's problems in a specific culture and at a specific historical time. More concretely, other researchers could build on the results of this study by including thematic supplements, in which interpretive media genres are usually more common. If we had included supplements in our study, we could have detected a different distribution of news sources, such as one with a higher representation of experts and non-elite official sources. Furthermore, since the analysis is based on a single, albeit significant newspaper, its editorial policy may not reflect news reporting in other media outlets. The findings can serve as a foundational reference for future studies comparing different daily newspapers. By highlighting the specific source structure within *Delo's* reporting on older people's problems, the pres-

ent study encourages future research to consider whether comparable trends can be discerned in other news media, or whether a similar source structure can be identified in the reporting on the problems faced by younger or middle-aged people.

In addition, the present study focused on published texts, which were the end products of complex news selection processes influenced at least by social norms and cultural values, organisational pressures and constraints, interest and political group pressures, and professional routines (Tewksburry & Scheufele, 2009). Future research would be needed to explore these influences in more detail and to determine the extent to which the media mimics the messages served to them by various news sources. Concretely, future studies could deepen our understanding of news source usage in newspapers by employing ethnographic interviews with news producers or participant observation (see e.g. Munnik, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

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The news media serves as a key platform for public discussion in democratic societies for opinion formation and decision making (Elster, 1998; Norris, 2000). This function becomes particularly important during parliamentary elections, which decide who will address the social change that population ageing brings.

Our analysis of the main Slovene daily newspaper *Delo*'s news coverage of older people's problems, including five sequential parliamentary election years (2004, 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2018), showed that news coverage of older people's problems was predominantly constructed by elite sources, which strengthens the surveillance function of the newspaper that helps make politicians more accountable but undermines the newspaper's role as a democratic forum (Norris, 2000; 2014). However, there has been an increase in the plurality of voices, especially in the last observed year (i.e. 2018). This suggests a move towards a more democratic news reporting, which holds potential for fostering older people's civic inclusion.

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# APPENDIX

## A Code book

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| News source type (code) | Detailed categorisation of news source (code)  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Elite                   | Official (1)<br><i>State institution</i> (including ministries and its representatives, nursing homes, social services, state inspectorates, committees, institutes, councils, statistical offices, the Health Insurance Institute of Slovenia, the Pension and Disability Insurance Institute of Slovenia, the Ombudsman and the Advocate of the Principle of Equality and similar) (1)<br><i>Political institution</i> (including government, president, prime minister, political parties or their representative) (2)<br><i>Municipal institution</i> (municipalities, mayors or representatives of mayor's offices) (3)<br><i>Major NGO or union</i> (including the Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' organisations, the Union of Pensioners of Slovenia, other major NGOs like Red Cross) (4)<br><i>Business</i> (including corporate, business and economic organisations) (5)<br><i>Insurance company</i> (6)<br><i>Bank</i> (7)<br><i>Media, press</i> (press agencies, TV shows etc.) (8)<br><i>General</i> (including general mentions of elite official sources, e.g. businessman) (991) |
|                         | Expert (2)<br><i>Specialist, professional</i> (including medical doctors and health or social care workers) (10)<br><i>Academic, social scientist</i> (including professors or researchers) (11)<br><i>Research or research institution</i> (including research results, indexes and research institutions, not including research participants) (12)<br><i>Ex-officio, ex-professional</i> (including former government representatives, politicians and other actors, who have specialist knowledge about social and political issues at hand) (13)<br><i>General</i> (including general mentions of expert sources like, e.g. experts, scientists) (992)  |
| Non-elite               | Official (3)<br><i>Small NGO, association, union</i> (including local NGOs, organisations and unions such as local pensioner unions or associations) (20)<br><i>Project, programme, organised activity, movement, pressure group</i> (including more 'opportunistic' projects, activities, groups that bring people together temporarily) (21)<br><i>General</i> (including general mentions of non-elite official sources, e.g. humanitarian organisations) (993)   |
|                         | Unofficial (4)<br><i>Vox populi</i> (including voice of everyday people, older people, citizens) (30)<br><i>Volunteer, community member, participant</i> (including people involved with projects, activities, communities) (31)<br><i>Study, survey participant</i> (including explicit mentions of study or survey participants unlike with research where emphasis is on survey results, not participants) (32)<br><i>Protestor, violator of the law</i> (33)<br><i>General</i> (including general mentions of non-elite unofficial sources, e.g. retirees, citizens) (994)   |
|                         | Unaccounted (5)<br>(999)   |
|                         | No source (0)<br><i>Represents older people</i> (voices of older people or their representatives)<br>Yes (1), No (2)   |

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## B News source type frequencies and older people's voice

|   | News source<br>type frequencies |               |              | Older people's voice |                  |              |
|---|---------------------------------|---------------|--------------|----------------------|------------------|--------------|
|   | No.                             | Within        | Overall<br>% | No.                  | Within           | Overall<br>% |
|   |                                 | category<br>% |              |                      | source type<br>% |              |
| All years   |                                 |               |              |                      |                  |              |
| <i>Elite official</i>   | 221                             | 100.0         | 58.5         | 28                   | 1.7              | 7.4          |
| State institution   | 119                             | 53.8          | 31.5         | 3                    | 2.5              | 0.8          |
| Political institution   | 33                              | 14.9          | 8.7          | 2                    | 6.1              | 0.5          |
| Municipal institution   | 22                              | 10.0          | 5.8          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| Major NGO, union  | 28                              | 12.7          | 7.4          | 23                   | 82.1             | 6.1          |
| Business, insurance company, bank                                   | 12                              | 5.4           | 3.2          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| Media, press  | 3                               | 1.4           | 0.8          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| General   | 4                               | 1.8           | 1.1          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| <i>Expert</i>   | 57                              | 100.0         | 15.1         | 9                    | 15.8             | 2.4          |
| Specialist, professional  | 20                              | 35.1          | 5.3          | 2                    | 10.0             | 0.5          |
| Academic, social scientist  | 19                              | 33.3          | 5.0          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| Research or research institution                                    | 6                               | 10.5          | 1.6          | 5                    | 83.3             | 1.3          |
| Ex-officio, ex-professional   | 4                               | 7.0           | 1.1          | 2                    | 50.0             | 0.5          |
| General   | 8                               | 14.0          | 2.1          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| <i>Non-elite official</i>   | 47                              | 100.0         | 12.4         | 14                   | 29.8             | 3.7          |
| Small NGO, association, union                                       | 36                              | 76.6          | 9.5          | 13                   | 36.1             | 3.4          |
| Project, programme, organised<br>activity, movement, pressure group | 9                               | 18.8          | 2.4          | 1                    | 11.1             | 0.3          |
| General   | 2                               | 4.2           | 0.5          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| <i>Non-elite unofficial</i>   | 48                              | 100.0         | 12.7         | 35                   | 72.9             | 9.3          |
| Vox populi  | 25                              | 52.1          | 6.6          | 21                   | 84.0             | 5.6          |
| Volunteer, community member,<br>participant                         | 6                               | 12.5          | 1.6          | 3                    | 50.0             | 0.8          |
| Study, survey participant   | 6                               | 12.5          | 1.6          | 5                    | 83.3             | 1.3          |
| Protestor, violator of the law                                      | 3                               | 6.3           | 0.8          | 1                    | 33.3             | 0.3          |
| General   | 8                               | 16.7          | 2.1          | 5                    | 62.5             | 1.3          |
| <i>Unaccounted</i>  | 5                               | 100.0         | 1.3          | 0                    | 0.0              | 0.0          |
| <i>Total</i>  | 378                             | 100.0         |              | 86                   | 22.8             |              |

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## Prema demokratičnijem forumu: analiza izvora novinskog izvještavanja o problemima starijih osoba u *Delu* tijekom slovenskih parlamentarnih izbora od 2004. do 2018. godine

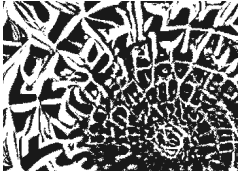
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Iako sve veći broj studija pruža važne uvide u medijsku konstrukciju starosti, struktura izvora vijesti rijetko se ispituje. Potonje je posebno važno u demokratskim društvima, tijekom izbornih godina, kada ljudi biraju predstavnike koji se bave socijalnim problemima starijih osoba. Koristeći se analizama sadržaja, ispitali smo strukturu medijskih izvora novinskih članaka koji su izvještavali o problemima starijih osoba u nacionalnim kvalitetnim slovenskim novinama *Delo* u pet uzastopnih parlamentarnih izbornih godina od 2004. do 2018. godine. Nalazi su pokazali da su vijesti uglavnom sastavljali elitni izvori koji rijetko uključuju predstavnike starijih osoba. Ova karakteristika jača nadzornu funkciju medija, ali potkopava ulogu medija kao demokratskoga foruma. Međutim, u zadnje tri promatrane izborne godine novinsko izvještavanje u *Delu* pokazalo je znakove prijelaza prema služenju kao demokratski forum, koji ima potencijal za poticanje građanske uključenosti starijih osoba.

Ključne riječi: starenje populacije, društveni problemi, medijski prikazi, tiskani mediji, novinsko izvještavanje



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# FROM CORPORATE MOTIVES TO THE IMPACTS OF SPORTS SPONSORSHIP ON EMPLOYEES: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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This paper reviews the common motives and major impacts of sports sponsorships undertaken by sponsoring organisations. Following a systematic review of 72 relevant articles, seven key motives for engaging in sports sponsorship were identified. Marketing, customer retention, and brand equity emerged as the most frequently studied, while the sponsorship of emerging sports associations for brand promotion was the least examined. Regarding impacts on employees, findings from 28 articles indicated that high retention and brand identification were the most researched topics, with no studies addressing potential negative effects. The study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting overlooked motives and effects of sports sponsorships. We recommend that future research focuses on the less-studied motives and investigates potential negative impacts on employees within sponsoring organisations.

Keywords: sports sponsorship, motives, impacts on employees, marketing, employee retention



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## INTRODUCTION

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Sports sponsorship is an age-old strategy applied by the corporate sector to achieve various objectives. In the 19th century, it was sponsorship by Evangelos Zappas that paved the way for the modern Olympic Games to be held in Greece (Kis-soudi, 2005). Some objectives of sponsorship inevitably influence the behaviour of the employees of sponsoring companies. Corporate sponsorship affects the attitudes and performance of such employees on different levels and in different ways (Khan & Stanton, 2010). The main focus of the study is examining the impact of companies' sports sponsorship on their employees. These impacts can be independent or an offshoot of the firms' sponsorship objectives. The review article hence also compares any possible impact on employees vis-à-vis the company's objectives while sponsoring sports.

Since sponsorship brings multiple benefits, companies pursue a variety of motives under the guise of sports sponsorship. While most of these motives are explicit, some are implicit. Sponsorship not only helps to put sporting events in the spotlight, but is also a source of considerable revenue and customer trust. It entails a symbiotic relationship where the sports industry receives financial support and the sponsoring company increases its brand awareness, which influences the attitude held by employees (internal audience) of the sponsoring companies. Brand promotion and customer loyalty, along with economic gains, are the obvious goals a company seeks to achieve with its sponsorship efforts (Cheong et al., 2019). By achieving the objective of such mega brand awareness and customer retention, the internal audience of the sponsoring firm is bound to become influenced.

Another important objective pursued by sports sponsorship is the sponsoring company's compliance with CSR (corporate social responsibility). Despite the diversity of emerging roles in an organisation's political, social and economic perspectives (Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010), the CSR approach mainly focuses on the strategy of sports sponsorship for establishing a quick and effective connection with the brand's customers since it is viewed as soft and sceptic-free marketing of the brand (Cornwell et al., 2005). A further focus of the approach is to influence employees' attitudes towards their employer and the level of their job performance (Plewa & Quester, 2011).

Some organisations pursue motives that are not apparent in their explicit sports sponsorship agenda. Such hidden goals can be important for understanding the relationship between organisational goals concerning sports sponsorship and its impact on the employees of the company doing the spon-

soring. Even though we have informally learned that some companies sell their name to the organisers of sporting events in order to increase the event's value, few studies address this fact. Another (unofficial) motive (of the sponsoring company) is to develop long-term business relationships with co-sponsoring organisations. All of these hidden motives are believed to influence employee perceptions of the employer/manager. However, even fewer studies focus exclusively on a company's implicit sponsorship motives and the associated impact on employees, creating the need for a more recent investigation of this topic.

A company that is popular with the public increases the social prestige of its employees and thus their job satisfaction, with such public popularity being easily achieved by sponsoring sporting events. Efforts to advertise to external consumers create results for internal branding (Hofer & Grohs, 2018). Sponsor-related internal marketing is also an important impact of sports sponsorship on the sponsoring company's internal audience (employees) and is linked to other motives pursued by that company.

The list of the independent impacts of a company's sports sponsorship on its employees is long. General effects include job satisfaction, employee retention, a change in how the employer is perceived, and general performance improvement (Hall, 2007). Employee engagement and their perception of both the employer and the company are improved through company sports sponsorship (Batt et al., 2021). Even though studies were conducted in past decades on the negative impacts on employees' cognitive abilities, newer studies regarding this aspect are missing. Recent studies have also not examined the development of relationships between employees of different sponsoring organisations. Anxiety, sociophobia, feeling that the work is stressful etc. are possible negative effects on the employees of the sponsoring company.

Although many studies explore companies' motives for sponsoring sports and the impact on their employees, few specifically address the relationship between these motives and the effects on employees within sponsoring companies. The implicit motives of companies and negative impacts of sports sponsorship on employees also have yet to be studied in detail. This lack of research results in an incomplete understanding of how sports sponsorship leads to key outcomes (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020), highlighting the need for further robust research to fill this gap. Against this background, an up-to-date study that provides a systematic literature review to determine which motives behind sponsorship are prevalent, how

they affect employees, and what is still missing in this regard is appropriate. The purpose of this comprehensive literature review is to identify the common areas of focus and research gaps, with the goal of proposing new avenues for examining the impact of sports sponsorship on a sponsoring company's employees.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

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For the systematic review presented here, we did not use PRISMA (preferred reporting items for systematic review and meta-analysis), given that it has been argued (Mishra & Mishra, 2023) that PRISMA is most suitable for reviewing articles reporting clinical studies due to its rigid structure focused on the reproducible quality of evidence for patient care and treatment. We followed the methodology developed by Durach et al. (2017), since it is more appropriate for our context. The flexibility of this approach, with its focus on managerial and operational insights, and adaptability to the time-sensitive and dynamic nature of corporate environments, were the key strengths considered. Regardless of the area of study, six steps (developing the research question, establishing inclusion/exclusion criteria – based on the required characteristics of primary studies, assembling the relevant literature, extracting the relevant literature, synthesising the information obtained, presenting the results/findings) are commonly followed by researchers while conducting an effective systematic literature review (Durach et al., 2017).

*Step 1. Development of the research questions.* Following a systematic review of the literature, this study seeks to find answers to three research questions:

- (1) *What are the common motives of organisations to engage in sports sponsorship?*
- (2) *What are the biggest impacts of sports sponsorship on the employees of the sponsoring organisation?*
- (3) *What is the possible relationship between the two motives of sports sponsorship and their impacts on the sponsoring organisation's employees?*

*Step 2. Inclusion/exclusion criteria.* Before reviewing the literature, the inclusion criteria were aligned with the above three research questions. Peer-reviewed articles from journals applying high academic standards were selected to ensure the validity of the data (Durach et al., 2017). Therefore, we used Web of Science (WoS) journals that exclude ethically questionable/

biased publishers, and all conference papers, book chapters and abstracts were excluded from the review framework (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). The timeframe of the publications spanned 20 years (2003–2022) in order to obtain the largest possible number of relevant articles. A detailed list of inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found in Table 1.

| Inclusion criteria   | Exclusion criteria  |
|--|---|
| In quantitative research, for RQ2, the sample size should equal or be above 25 individuals | Research published based on poor evidence was excluded                                |
| Year of publication should not be before 2003  | Research published as a poster presentation   |
| The crux of the publication should match the key words of our research paper               | Publications with very short (less than 5 pages) content                              |
| The variables of the published article and our study should match                          | Articles published in journals not mentioned in the Thomson Reuters Master Journal Li |
| To be published by internationally acceptable publishers                                   | Where the focus of the publication lies beyond the theme of the current study         |
| Having a complete conceptual background of hypothesis and methodology                      | Publications written in languages other than English                                  |

TABLE 1  
Inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting studies on corporate sponsorship and its effects on employees of the sponsoring company

*Step 3. Compilation of relevant literature to establish the baseline sample.* In this third step, following the guide (Durach et al., 2017), we searched for articles with different key terms, e.g., "corporate motives for sports sponsorship", "drivers of sports sponsorship by corporate sector" and "impact of sports sponsorship on corporate employees", which yielded 119 articles.

*Step 4. Extraction of relevant literature.* Following the inclusion/exclusion criteria, the sample was reduced to 72 journal articles (in step 3) from 119. Among these 72 articles, 44 dealt with the motives of sponsorship and 28 with the impacts of sponsorship on the employees of sponsoring companies. To keep the count simple, articles that addressed both RQs were only considered for one RQ based on the main topic of their research.

*Step 5. Synthesis of the information obtained.* A synthesis of the information obtained was created in relation to each research objective, and the primary motives and types of impact were carefully categorised. While synthesising the data, we attempted to establish a relationship between a company's motives and the impact they may have on its internal audiences. It was assumed that a single motive may have many types of impact on employees.

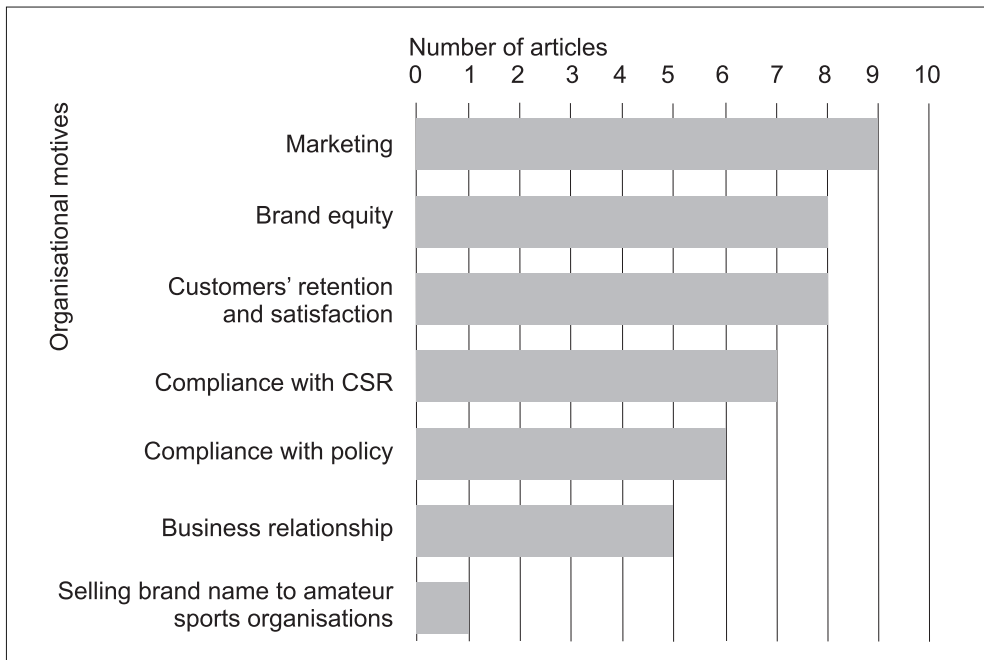
*Step 6. Presentation of the results.* The final step of the chosen research design is to present the results obtained and then discuss the findings. This step also helps to point out future areas for studies to fill the research gap by exploring the missing points concerning the general objectives of sports sponsorship as well as the prevailing effects on the internal audience of the sponsoring organisations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Generally prevailing motives for sports sponsoring (RQ1)

During the research, we categorised some of the main goals of sports sponsorship. The majority of the studies mentioned marketing as the leading objective, followed by customer satisfaction and brand equity. There were seven motives in total (Figure 1). No study examined the informally mentioned motive that companies sponsor sporting events only to build long-term business relationships with other sponsoring organisations. This motive is thus not included in the figure.

**FIGURE 1**  
Quantitative overview  
of the studies on  
corporate motives  
behind sponsorship



Another motive – the sale of brand names to small (amateur) sports organisations – was not directly investigated in any article reviewed. However, some articles reported indirectly on these two objectives, which led us to consider how this research gap could be filled. The general findings for each listed objective are presented below under relevant sub-headings.

### **(1) Marketing**

The aim behind sports sponsorship is to market the sponsoring company in order to boost its sales (Miragaia et al., 2017). Brand awareness in social networks and the media is a concern of a company behind sports sponsorship (Rupp et al., 2006). Some companies are guided by patriotism when deciding to sponsor events or teams, albeit their true goal is marketing to increase customer reach (Sudolska et al., 2020). Some companies sponsor sports to compensate for their negative impression in society. It has been observed that sponsored athletes are used successfully in corporate marketing (Penttinen & Lehtimäki, 2022). A study (Koronios et al., 2021) examining the strategic motivations for industry sports sponsorship finds that they impact informal marketing tools and purchase intent concerning the sponsored brand. The most frequently observed motives in an empirical study were "market", followed by "society", "clan" and "bonding" (Slåtten et al., 2017). Sports sponsorship is seen as an effective business strategy as it creates new platforms for marketing to event audiences (Maldonado-Erazo et al., 2019). Companies use sporting events as a medium to market their brand to the fans of a given sport (Grohs et al., 2004).

### **(2) Brand equity**

Brand image and brand equity are directly related to a brand's sports sponsorship (Bibby, 2009). A study that looked at the role of fit and sports sponsorship concluded that a significant relationship exists between the latter and brand equity (Henseler et al., 2007). After examining managers' views on brand equity, a unique study concluded that managers largely rely on sports sponsorship to achieve their company's goals, with brand equity featuring at the top of the list (Henseler et al., 2011). The constructs of a sponsor's brand equity are fully achieved through sports sponsorship (Cliffe & Motion, 2005; Lindgreen et al., 2010).

### **(3) Customer retention and satisfaction**

Customer satisfaction is a key concern of a company's sports sponsorship and was investigated in one study (Wagner et al., 2019). A more recent study found a direct link between sports sponsorship and customer loyalty to the sponsoring brand (Schönberner et al., 2021). To fill this gap, a study (Cornwell, 2019) was performed to show the actual benefits of sponsorship as a platform for customer loyalty for both sponsors and sponsored parties. A brand can be perceived to be altruistic when an individual's knowledge of the sport is linked to the sponsoring brand (Gwinner, 2005). Chinese and Korean companies also achieve customer loyalty and engagement via

sports sponsorship (Liu et al., 2015). Companies that engage in sports sponsorship pursue various goals, with one of the most important being to increase sales (Ameri & Bashiri, 2010). Nowadays, sports sponsorship is a high-value means of communication between the sponsoring brand and its customers (Dolphin, 2003). Companies invest in sports sponsorship to improve their business results by increasing customer satisfaction (Jensen & Hsu, 2011).

#### **(4) Compliance with CSR**

It is essential for companies to ensure CSR (Vaaland et al., 2008) as the number of socially conscious buyers in markets grows (Brooks, 2013). Since CSR holds an important role in a company's image in the market, companies are making efforts to provide for CSR, and sports sponsorship is an important step in this respect (Plewa et al., 2016). In order to maximise benefits, participant trust and purchase intention (Berger et al., 2007), companies engage in CSR by sponsoring sporting events (Plewa & Quester, 2011). CSR is the guiding factor for sports sponsorship initiatives (Cortsen & Marketing, 2014). In order to portray the brand's image as socially responsible, companies sponsor sports as part of CSR (Demirel & Sponsorship, 2020).

#### **(5) Compliance with policy**

Many organisations make sports sponsorship an important part of their policy. A study (Vance et al., 2016) reviewed the literature to determine the influence of corporate policy on sports sponsorship and the choice of sponsorship types (e.g., refreshment, entertainment/music). The goal of aligning corporate culture with existing policy prompted management to sponsor sports (Guiso et al., 2015). There are a few other studies that mention "corporate policy compliance in sports sponsorship" as the primary objective for corporate sports sponsorship (Hall, 2007; Daellenbach et al., 2013; Johnston & Paulsen, 2014).

#### **(6) Business relationship**

Companies prefer B2B (business-to-business) relationships over B2C (business-to-customer) ones, citing the long-term advantages that B2B has over competitors in the post-sponsorship market (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021). Another study finds the same B2B motive underlying sports sponsorship, but with the ultimate goal of brand marketing to customers (Clark et al., 2003). Some companies sponsor sports to build business relationships with the ultimate goal of improving profit opportunities (Weller et al., 2019). In research on sponsorship networks, companies sponsor sports to improve business rela-

**TABLE 2**  
Comprehensive  
classification of  
organisational motives  
for engaging in sports  
sponsorship

tionships with other network members (Wagner et al., 2017). B2B relationships exist between sponsoring organisations and sports companies, with these relationships being characterised by trust and commitment from sponsors (Farrelly & Quester, 2005).

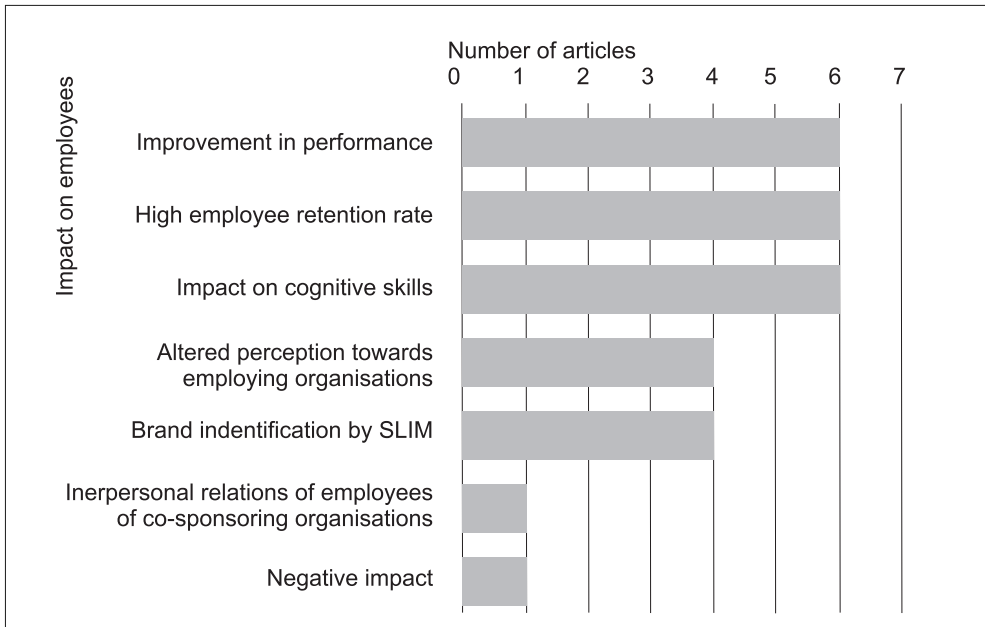
**(7) Selling brand names to amateur sports organisations**

According to the extensive review of the literature, no study conducted between 2003 and 2022 examined the benefits for companies of selling a brand name to small sporting events. Still, there is one study that looks at corporate profits arising from sponsoring amateur sports organisations (Seguin et al., 2005). All the motives for sports sponsorship studied, with numbers and references to the articles, may be found in Table 2.

| Motives                                       | No. of   |   |
|---|----------|---|
|   | articles | References  |
| Marketing                                     | 9        | (Miragaia et al., 2017; Rupp et al., 2006; Sudolska et al., 2020; Penttinen & Lehtimäki, 2022; Koronios et al., 2021; Slåtten et al., 2017; Maldonado-Erazo et al., 2019; Grohs et al., 2004; Close et al., 2006) |
| Brand equity                                  | 8        | (Keller et al., 2011; Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Bibby, 2009; Henseler et al., 2007; Henseler et al., 2011; Cliffe & Motion, 2005; Lindgreen et al., 2010; Tsordia et al., 2018)                                     |
| Customers' retention and satisfaction         | 8        | (Wagner et al., 2019; Schönberner et al., 2021; Cornwell, 2019; Gwinner, 2005; Liu et al., 2015; Ameri & Bashiri, 2010; Dolphin, 2003; Jensen & Hsu, 2011)  |
| Compliance with CSR                           | 7        | (Brooks, 2013; Plewa et al., 2016; Plewa & Quester, 2011; Berger et al., 2007; Cortsen & Marketing, 2014; Demirel & Sponsorship, 2020; Vaaland et al., 2008)  |
| Compliance with policy                        | 6        | (Vance et al., 2016; Guiso et al., 2015; Daellenbach et al., 2013; Hall, 2007; Johnston & Paulsen, 2014; West et al., 2014)   |
| Business relationship                         | 5        | (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; Clark et al., 2003; Weller et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2017; Farrelly & Quester, 2005)   |
| Selling a brand name to amateur organisations | 1        | (Seguin et al., 2005)   |

**Impacts of sponsorship on the employees of the sponsoring companies (RQ2)**

The review of the literature on how sponsorship affects the employees of the sponsoring company revealed that some types of impact are quite common in many studies, while others have hardly been studied. In total, seven types of impact were classified according to the number of articles reporting on them, with the details being shown in Figure 2.



**FIGURE 2**  
Quantitative overview of articles examining the impact of corporate sponsorship on the behaviour of sponsoring companies' employees

### (1) Improvement in performance

Employees of a company engaging in sports sponsorship report positive indicators of better overall performance in various aspects of work-related tasks and tend to collaborate with their teammates (Zarei et al., 2019). Employees participating in a sports sponsorship often establish a sense of teamwork amongst colleagues, which eventually leads to improved collaboration in the organisation. Although less studied, the impact of a company's sports sponsorship on the performance of its internal employees is very evident (Edwards, 2016). Through sports sponsorship, companies can improve the performance and engagement of their employees (Farrelly et al., 2012). Improved employee performance is one of the direct effects of corporate sports sponsorship (Hickman et al., 2005). A study (Khan & Stanton, 2010) which examined the relationship between sponsorship activities and the impact on employees concluded that employees develop better attitudes to improve their performance for their sponsor. Another study (Hofer & Grohs, 2018) established the same impact on employees. Via sports sponsorship, a positive organisational environment is generated, which enhances the performance of its internal audience.

### (2) High employee retention rate

More recent studies challenge the traditional relationship between employees and companies and stress that employee engagement contributes to better company performance. To

increase brand awareness, companies engage in internal marketing to their employees since they play an important role in the success of a brand (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006), and retaining these employees is key to success. Employer branding is achieved through sports sponsorship and becomes a solid source for attracting and retaining employees (Karjaluoto et al., 2019). Sports sponsorship of a company (engaged in CSR) and the rate of internal employee retention are positively related (Ali et al., 2010). One study (Demirel et al., 2018) successfully developed and tested a model that reveals a positive relationship between factors such as team selection, sponsorship activities and level of employee retention, as well as an increase in the productivity of sponsoring companies via employee sponsorship. One of these factors is also examined in another study, which concludes that team selection for sports sponsorship strongly influences employee commitment to the company (Hickman et al., 2005). Sports-related communication with internal employees leads to employee satisfaction, cohesion and, ultimately, retention (Farrelly & Greyser, 2007; Meenaghan et al., 2013). In a nutshell, sports sponsorship creates an environment of productive performances, new team building, better career mobilities, rewards, and social prestige for the internal employees of the firm sponsoring sports.

### **(3) Impacts on cognitive skills**

The quality and quantity of sponsorship have been found to be strongly related to employees' brand image. Employees' brand knowledge, engagement and commitment along with their cognitive activity (decision-making, grasping trends, general understanding) are increased by cultivating internal marketing parameters (Morhart et al., 2009; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Ngo et al., 2019). Through sports sponsorship, brands change the personal behaviour of their employees towards the brand and thereby make them fitter (Zepf, 2008). Other common cognitive skills of employees, which become influenced by the sports sponsorship of their employers, are conflict resolution, communication on the inter-organisational level, critical thinking, and management of time and stress. Although less studied, the cognitive skills of employees hold potential to be affected in depth, both positively and negatively.

### **(4) Altered perception of the employer organisation**

The way employees perceive their employer or company is extremely important for the company's success. Sports sponsorship by the employer changes the sponsoring company's image in the minds of employees (Ployhart, 2006; Theurer et al., 2018).

Involving employees in event-related sports sponsorship activities changed their perception of goodwill towards the employer (Inoue et al., 2016). Another study (Schönberner et al., 2021) concluded that sports sponsorship influences the organisation's image, especially the internal audience (employees). When a company sponsors a sports event, it adds to its image by demonstrating compliance with CSR, and changes the perception held by its employees towards it. Having found a productive work environment, social recognition and alignment with personal values, the employees of sports sponsoring firms tend to develop a better perception of their employer firms.

### **(5) Brand identification by SLIM**

Sponsorship-Linked-Internal-Marketing (SLIM) is another emerging strategy of an organisation behind its sports sponsorship. SLIM is analysed in an article (Batt et al., 2021) as a strong source of employee identification with the brand. Employees' involvement in sponsorship activities makes the employer's brand more vivid to them (Farrelly et al., 2012). Internal brand communication improves employees' knowledge and understanding of the brand and is positively linked to their comprehensive understanding of their employer company (Piehler et al., 2016). In general, we can state that there are enough data on "brand identification" as an impact of SLIM on the employees of sponsoring companies (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). SLIM invokes a deeper connection between employees and the brand, resulting in greater brand identification amongst employees. By setting channels of direct communication with employees, SLIM keeps employees informed and engaged with sponsorship activities.

### **(6) Interpersonal relationships with employees of co-sponsoring organisations**

A review paper identified a study on the interaction between the audience and the staff of event organisers as well as sponsoring organisations (Coppetti et al., 2009). Similarly, sponsorship can affect the interaction between the managers/staff of co-sponsoring organisations. Unfortunately, in this systematic review no study was found that identified this type of impact on employees. However, there are common assumptions about the positive impacts of co-sponsoring initiatives on the interpersonal relations of employees from different organisations. Once developed, these interpersonal relationships not only ensure the success of the co-sponsored initiatives, but also establish longer-lasting connections among the employees of co-sponsoring organisations.

**TABLE 3**  
Detailed classification  
of the various impacts  
of sports sponsorship  
on internal employees  
within the organisation

### (7) Negative impacts

One study (Richards et al., 2005) shows that a company's sponsorship activities (if it is a type of fundraising or manipulation) can produce a negative impact on its employees by revealing negative employer intentions or by having no impact at all. The possible negative impacts of sports sponsorship can create feelings of resentment or alienation among those employees who lack an interest in sports. Some employees may perceive this activity as a source of distraction from their main work. Many employees may find the pressure to participate in sponsorship activities to be burdensome.

| Impacts  | No. of articles | References  |
|--|-----------------|---|
| Improvement in performance   | 6               | (Edwards, 2016; Farrelly & Greyser, 2007; Hickman et al., 2005; Hofer & Grohs, 2018; Khan & Stanton, 2010; Zarei Mahmoudabadi et al., 2019)   |
| High employee retention rate   | 6               | (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006; Karjaluoto et al., 2019; Demirel et al., 2018; Meenaghan et al., 2013; Walraven et al., 2012; Ali et al., 2010) |
| Impact on cognitive skills   | 6               | (Morhart et al., 2009; Ngo et al., 2019; Piehler, 2018; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; King & Grace, 2008; Zepf, 2008)                      |
| Altered perception of the employer organisation                          | 4               | (Ployhart, 2006; Theurer et al., 2018; Inoue et al., 2016; Schönberner et al., 2021)  |
| Brand identification by SLIM   | 4               | (Batt et al., 2021; Farrelly et al., 2012; Piehler et al., 2016; Cornwell & Kwon, 2020)   |
| Interpersonal relationship with employees of co-sponsoring organisations | 1               | (Coppetti et al., 2009)   |
| Negative impacts   | 1               | (Richards et al., 2005)   |

### Assumed connection between the motives of companies and possible impacts on their employees

It appears from the two sub-results above that there may be a strong relationship between the objective of corporate sports sponsorship and its impact on the professional behaviour of their employees. Some correlations are derived and summarised in Table 4. The marketing and brand equity motives increase identification with the brand, which serves the SLIM cause on a broader level and influences employee performance on an individual level. In addition, these two motives can cause high employee retention. The impact on cognitive skills is most likely to be influenced by 5 of the 7 motives for sports sponsorship by an organisation.

| Serial number | Objectives   | Associated impacts on employees   |
|---------------|--|---|
| 1             | Marketing  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. SLIM</li> <li>ii. improved employee performance</li> <li>iii. altered perception of the sponsoring organisation</li> <li>iv. impact on cognitive skills</li> </ul>  |
| 2             | Brand equity   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. high employee retention rate</li> <li>ii. improved employee performance</li> <li>iii. impact on cognitive skills</li> </ul>   |
| 3             | Customers' retention and satisfaction                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. SLIM</li> <li>ii. high employee retention rate</li> <li>iii. altered perception of the sponsoring organisation</li> <li>iv. impact on cognitive skills</li> </ul>   |
| 4             | Compliance with CSR  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. altered perception of the sponsoring organisation</li> <li>ii. SLIM</li> <li>iii. improved employee performance</li> </ul>  |
| 5             | Compliance with policy   | No possible impact on employees   |
| 6             | Business relationship  | Negative impacts  |
| 7             | Selling a brand name to an amateur organisation                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. negative impacts at large</li> <li>ii. impact on cognitive skills</li> </ul>  |
| 8             | Development of a business relationship with a co-sponsoring organisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. negative impacts</li> <li>ii. interpersonal relationship with employees of co-sponsoring organisations</li> <li>iii. altered perception of the sponsoring organisation</li> <li>iv. impact on cognitive skills</li> </ul> |

**TABLE 4**  
Comprehensive summary of the relationship between organisational goals in sports sponsorship and their impacts on employee outcomes

Some studies have determined the impact of a company's motives on its employees. Our hypothesis about the impact of marketing on improving the employees' cognitive and personal skills is consistent with the findings of other studies. A company's motive for sponsorship is clearly brand equity, although it also influences employee performance and ensures employee retention.

Interestingly, the two least studied motives (selling the brand name to amateur sporting events and developing long-term relationships with other sponsors) hold the potential to produce a major negative impact on employees. These two motives can have the exact opposite effect of what CSR has on employees' perceptions of their employer. Cognitive abilities can be disrupted. Interpersonal relationships between co-sponsors' employees inevitably develop and may not always be beneficial to the employer in question. This gap in the literature opens up a field for future research.

## DISCUSSION

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The data from empirical and original research show that a relatively large amount of research has considered the corporate motives for sports sponsorship and the impact of sponsorship on the sponsoring companies' employees. Most of these studied motives include marketing, customer retention, brand equity, corporate social responsibility, and compliance with other corporate policies. This study identified a lack of research on two possible motives: first, that a company sells its name to increase the popularity of an amateur sports organisation or event and, second, that it builds long-term relationships with concurrent sponsoring organisations.

In this systematic study of the impact of sports sponsorship on the sponsoring organisation's employees, we established that improved performance, good employee retention, and improved employee cognitive skills were the most studied impacts. However, the negative (and mitigation) effects on employees' cognition have not even begun to be studied. For example, companies might leverage sports sponsorships to improve employee engagement, performance and cognitive skills by reducing potential negative effects like stress.

Our research extends the current body of knowledge by exposing overlooked motives and effects of sports sponsorship and proposing a more comprehensive approach to understanding its impact on both companies and their employees. We hope the presented review will motivate more primary and applied research to address these understudied phenomena, with the aim to investigate companies' implicit motives for sponsoring sporting events and their effects (independent of or related to the motives) on their employees.

The study findings imply that corporate sports sponsorship has untapped potential for influencing employee behaviour and they also highlight key gaps in the research on less studied motives, negative impacts on employees, and the implicit benefits for companies. The relatively modest volume of literature suggests that while we understand some positive impacts, much remains unexplored, calling for further comprehensive research to capture the full spectrum of sports sponsorship.

Our primary recommendation is to conduct a comprehensive study on the impact of sponsorship on the cognition of the sponsoring company's employees. Such a study would help us understand how the employees of a sports sponsor perceive the different levels of stress, excitement, new decisions and people they must deal with, changes in monotonous work routines, stress, anxiety, stressful new responsibilities and the area of new learning. The second recommendation is to conduct a study on the change in workers' percep-

tions of the company's sports sponsorship after knowing the cause of the sponsorship. While some studies conclude that companies gain legitimacy via sports sponsorship, no study shows the fiscal benefits a company can gain by selling its name as a sponsor to add to the prestige of a sporting event. Finally, it is recommended to investigate the impact of certain motives of sports sponsorship on employees' professional behaviour by doing more original, longitudinal studies examining employee behaviour in companies pursuing sports sponsorships.

## Declaration of interest statement

All authors declare that they have no competing interests in this research entitled "From corporate motives to the impact of sports sponsorship on employees: A systematic review".

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## Od korporativnih motiva do utjecaja sportskoga sponzoriranja na zaposlenike: sustavni pregled

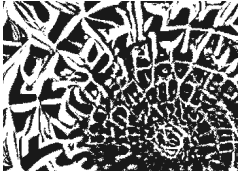
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Ovaj rad daje pregled uobičajenih motiva i glavnih učinaka sportskih sponzorstava koje poduzimaju sponzorske organizacije. Sustavnim pregledom 72 relevantna članka identificirano je sedam ključnih motiva za bavljenje sportskim sponzoriranjem. Marketing, zadržavanje kupaca i vrijednost robne marke najčešće su proučavani, dok je sponzorstvo novih sportskih udruga za promociju robne marke najmanje ispitivano. Što se tiče utjecaja na zaposlenike, nalazi iz 28 članaka pokazali su da su visoki stupanj zadržavanja i identifikacija brenda teme koje su se najviše istraživale, dok se ni jedna studija nije bavila mogućim negativnim učincima. Rad pridonosi postojećoj literaturi, ističući zanemarene motive i učinke sportskih sponzoriranja. Preporučujemo da se buduća istraživanja usredotoče na manje proučavane motive i da istražuju potencijalne negativne utjecaje na zaposlenike unutar sponzorskih organizacija.

Ključne riječi: sportsko sponzoriranje, motivi, utjecaj na zaposlenike, marketing, zadržavanje zaposlenika



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# POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BDSM PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC WORK: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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In the context of the frequent stigmatisation of BDSM practices, the aim of this review was to identify potential positive effects of BDSM practices on the psychological functioning of individuals. Additionally, the factors and mechanisms underlying these positive effects will be highlighted to guide improvements in psychological and psychotherapeutic practices. After a systematic review of 181 articles, 9 studies were identified that examined the positive effects of BDSM practices. It was found that these practices positively impact self-awareness, authenticity, and a departure from adult responsibilities. Additionally, they can improve partner relationships by enhancing communication skills, negotiation abilities, and trust. Positive effects are contributed by BDSM practices through physical touch, open communication, and the formation of a community that provides safety and well-being for its members. Furthermore, research reports the possibility of transcendental states of consciousness among participants, which bring positive effects on psychological, emotional, and physical levels.

Keywords: BDSM, kink, positive psychological effects, psychotherapeutic practices



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## INTRODUCTION

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Kink (i.e., sexual practices and behaviours that fall outside the boundaries of what is socially designated as "normal" sexual practice) and fetishes (sexual practices and behaviours that are outside the bounds of "normal" sexuality and are necessary for achieving sexual arousal, pleasure, or even orgasm) are quite prevalent in contemporary times. This prevalence is evidenced by the website FetLife, a social network focused on the BDSM, fetish, and kink communities, which currently boasts nearly 11 million members (The Social Network for the BDSM, Fetish & Kinky Community & FetLife, n.d.).

Among the most widespread kinks is BDSM. This overlapping acronym encompasses the terms "bondage and discipline", "dominance and submission", and "sadism and masochism". Bondage is a kink involving the physical restraint of partners, such as tying with ropes, chains, handcuffs, etc. Dominance and submission refer to power roles: the dominant is the one who takes control, leads the scene, and often assumes a more active/aggressive role, while the submissive is the one who relinquishes control. It is important to note that the submissive actually holds significant control as they can always end the scene prematurely, which is crucial since they are often in a more vulnerable position. Sadism and masochism are kinks that focus on physical or emotional pain (the sadist derives pleasure from inflicting pain, while the masochist derives pleasure from being subjected to pain; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023).

Participation in activities encompassed by this umbrella term was historically labelled as pathological and heavily stigmatised. This stigma emerged in the field of science during the Victorian era. Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1886; as cited in Turley, 2022), who is credited with coining the term "sadomasochism", classified such behaviours as abnormal.

For some individuals, BDSM may merely be a recreational activity, while for others, it may hold a more significant role in their lives (Barker et al., 2007), thus becoming a topic within the psychotherapeutic process. Cascalheira et al. (2021) and Lantto & Lundberg (2021) emphasise that psychotherapists must be prepared for this, as their own prejudices can negatively impact therapy outcomes. Conversely, therapists who understand the importance of such sexuality in their clients' lives (known as kink-aware therapists) can assist clients in exploring BDSM activities (Cascalheira et al., 2021; Domingue, 2019; Kleinplatz, 2006; Levand et al., 2019; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2014).

While BDSM practices can be risky due to the significant level of trust they require, which, in the wrong hands, can lead to re-traumatisation (Fernandez et al., 2015; Maltz & Boss, 2001; Van der Kolk, 1989), some researchers have already

pointed out the potential positive effects of BDSM practices, and many also highlight similarities between BDSM practices and psychotherapy. Levand et al. (2019) draw parallels between shadowplay (e.g., BDSM activities where individuals explore their darkest aspects, such as rape fantasies) and clinical/psychotherapeutic approaches for working with sexual trauma survivors. Shadowplay is associated with "strengths-based approaches" in therapy and has been likened to the therapeutic technique of "flooding" (Herman, 1992). It has been compared to the bottom-up approach to trauma processing, which allows the body to experience situations that counter feelings of helplessness, anger, and emotional collapse resulting from trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014). Through this process, participants can regain control over their bodies and sexual lives by engaging in "healthy risks" – activities that push them out of their comfort zones while remaining within their coping capacity (Haines, 2007). Crafting a shadowplay narrative involves identifying trauma triggers and incorporating them into an erotic scenario, offering an active way to cope with trauma. This method may be more effective than avoiding triggers, as many trauma survivors tend to do (Haines, 2007).

Stigma surrounding sexuality and "abnormal sexual practices" persists in various forms today, and as a result, this area remains relatively under-researched in science (Baker, 2016; Rogak & Connor, 2017). However, an increasing number of studies indicate positive, not merely sexual, effects of BDSM practices (Casalheira et al., 2021; Thomas, 2019; Turley, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on BDSM practices to identify potential positive effects on individuals' psychological functioning. Additionally, factors and mechanisms underlying these positive effects will be highlighted to inform improvements in psychological and psychotherapeutic practice.

## METHODS

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To ensure methodological rigour in the systematic review, we adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The search protocol was designed to address our research question: identifying the positive effects of BDSM practices on individuals' psychological functioning, along with the underlying factors and mechanisms. This approach focused solely on positive effects, excluding studies that reported negative outcomes.

The literature search was conducted on December 19, 2022, across four databases: Web of Science, PubMed, Scopus, and APA PsycArticles. The following keywords were used for the search: "BDSM therapy", "BDSM as therapy", "BDSM as a form of therapy", "therapeutic effects of BDSM", and "non-erotic outcomes of BDSM". Due to the small number of hits in all data-

bases, the time frame did not play a role in the inclusion and exclusion of studies.

The inclusion criteria for the literature search were primarily based on thematic relevance, specifically focusing on the positive or therapeutic effects of BDSM practices. Additionally, only studies with full-text availability and publications in English or Slovenian were included. Studies dealing with sexual orientation in general, issues faced in therapy by individuals participating in BDSM activities, and those published in other languages were excluded.

After duplicates were removed, studies were first evaluated based on the title and abstract, and in the next step, based on the full text. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. One author retrieved articles from the databases, while two authors assessed the suitability of individual articles for inclusion. Data from studies that met the inclusion criteria were collected by one author. The data collected included: authors' names and publication year, research design, sample and control group details, findings, and methodological limitations.

The quality of the studies was assessed using two marking checklists: the Newcastle Ottawa cohort scale for cross-sectional studies [NOS] (Herzog et al., 2013) for quantitative studies, and the Quality assessment for the systematic review of qualitative evidence [QASR] (Hawker et al., 2002). The NOS is an evaluation scale that assigns points to studies in three areas: selection, comparability, and outcome, with a maximum possible score of 10 points. The QASR is a scale with 9 questions, each awarded 1-4 points. The quality of the studies is assessed based on the final number of points on the scale: high quality (A), 30-36 points; medium quality (B), 29-24 points; low quality (C), 9-24 points. To ensure more accurate evaluations, the quality of the studies was independently reviewed and assessed by two authors.

## RESULTS

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A total of 181 articles were retrieved from the databases, and after removing duplicates, 59 remained. Following exclusions based on titles and abstracts, and subsequently full-text reviews, we excluded 7 non-scientific papers, 11 studies that focused on sexual orientation or identity in general, 14 studies that addressed negative issues in therapy for individuals involved in BDSM, and 18 studies that did not focus on BDSM or its psychological effects (e.g., studies on kink, intimate partner violence, reproductive success, etc.). The remaining 9 articles were retained for inclusion.

The initial process of article identification and selection is illustrated in Figure 1.

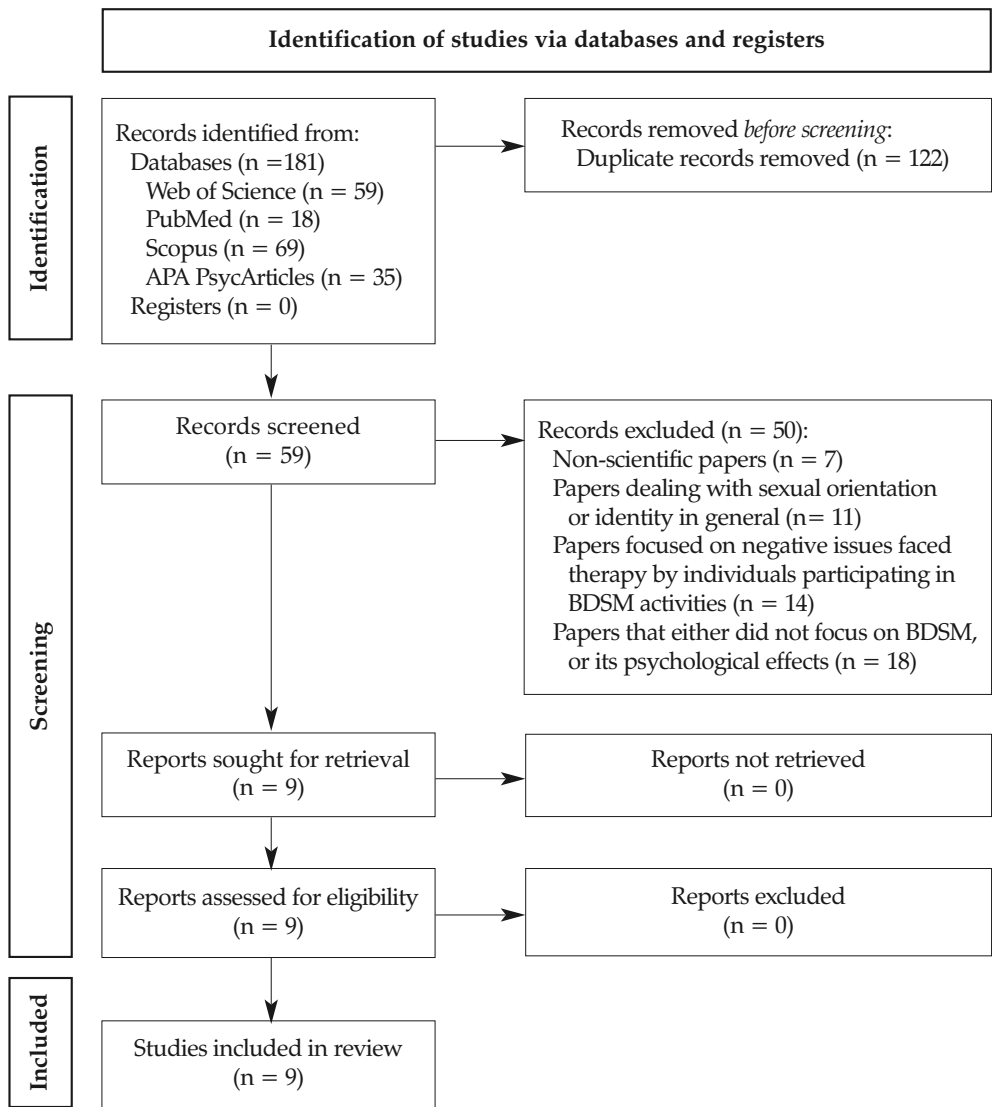


FIGURE 1  
PRISMA flow chart of  
article identification  
and selection

The included studies are presented in Table 1. They were published between 2006 and 2022. Among the 9 studies, one is an autoethnography, one is a quantitative study, two are case studies, and five are qualitative studies (three with a phenomenological approach and one with a descriptive phenomenological approach). Several studies focus on BDSM as a whole, while some focus only on certain branches of BDSM practices (e.g., traumaplay, puppyplay, etc.).

The evaluation of the studies is also presented in Table 1. The quantitative study was awarded 9/10 points based on the NOS. Six of the eight qualitative studies were rated as high quality, and two were rated as medium quality.

➔ TABLE 1  
Summary of included  
studies

| Study             | Research design      | Sample   | Findings   | Limitations  | Evaluation |
|-------------------|----------------------|--|--|--|------------|
| Lindemann (2011)  | Qualitative research | 66 professional dominatrices from the New York and San Francisco Bay areas | Professional dominatrices often view themselves as therapists and their work as a form of psychological healing for their clients. Sexual repression is a common issue today, which dominatrices help resolve, enabling clients to reclaim power over their trauma, experience transformational moments, atonement through shame, self-discovery, and authenticity.                              | The study focuses solely on professional dominatrices, thus professional BDSM practices, which may lead to difficulties in generalising to the entire population of BDSM participants.   | 30 (A)     |
| Kleinplatz (2006) | Case study           | 2 couples engaged in BDSM practices and attending sexual therapy           | Although "non-traditional sexual practices" are often labelled as pathological, there is much to learn from them. Partners who engage in such practices exhibit better communication skills, negotiation abilities, deeper knowledge of each other, and often achieve a higher level of intimacy. Such practices lead to increased satisfaction, trust, and can result in more than just orgasm. | A small sample size, and the study primarily addresses the sadomasochistic perspective of BDSM practices   | 25 (B)     |
| Thomas (2019)     | Autoethnography      | Author   | Trauma play is not merely re-enacting trauma but involves rewriting the script and reclaiming power over trauma, one's own body, and life.   | This is an autoethnographic study, where the sample consists solely of the author, which can be both beneficial and limiting. It provides firsthand data but these may be subjective and not representative. The study also focuses more on trauma play, which is just one part of BDSM practices. | 31 (A)     |

(Continues)

(Continued)

| Study                     | Research design                       | Sample          | Findings  | Limitations  | Evaluation |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---|--|------------|
| Rogak & Connor (2017)     | Quantitative research                 | 163 individuals | Couples who practice BDSM report satisfaction in their relationships.   | /  | 9/10       |
| Baker (2016)              | Descriptive phenomenological approach | 3 individuals   | The study touches on seven key themes: challenge; surrender; visionary experience; bodily sense of energy forces; sense of spiritual presence; heightened consciousness; and profound personal and enduring transformation.   | A relatively small sample.   | 36 (A)     |
| Langdrige & Lawson (2019) | Phenomenological approach             | 68 individuals  | Puppies in puppy play can temporarily shed the responsibilities of adulthood and live in the moment akin to child's play. Through their personas, they explore parts of themselves, becoming more authentic, and may integrate some aspects of their personas into the 'real world.'  | The study deals exclusively with puppy play, which is just a part of BDSM practices. | 36 (A)     |
| Cascalheira et al. (2021) | Qualitative research                  | 20 individuals  | Victims of early abuse and trauma can change their own perception of abuse through BDSM, becoming more confident and authentic, gaining more positive sexual schemas, improved self-awareness, etc. Through relationships in BDSM practices, they can gain power, competence in relationships, improve boundary-setting, etc., with the role of therapists being crucial. | /  | 36 (A)     |
| Domingue (2019)           | Case study                            | 1 individual    | BDSM allows for controlled exploration of personal limits and can change one's perception of their own trauma. This can lead to empowerment and better self-acceptance. Dominants can take on the role of therapist.  | /  | 28 (B)     |
| Turley (2022)             | Phenomenological approach             | 11 individuals  | BDSM has numerous non-sexual and non-erotic effects, which are less commonly represented in science. BDSM enables access to states of heightened consciousness, escapism from reality, and can lead to self-discovery and improved self-esteem.   | /  | 32 (A)     |

Upon reviewing the literature, several themes were identified in the studies, which can be categorised into six overarching topics: therapeutic effects of BDSM practices on individuals, therapeutic effects on romantic relationships, factors of positive changes, the role of the BDSM community, BDSM and therapy, and spirituality.

## Therapeutic effects of BDSM practices on individuals

Through the literature review, several positive effects of BDSM practices on individuals have been observed. One such effect is self-exploration and learning. Domingue (2019) writes about client Peter and his discovery of BDSM practices. In one example provided, Peter recounts an experience where he was bound and then had a *hood* (referred to as such in the BDSM world) placed over his entire head, noticing an immediate shift in focus. He realised that the hood took on the role of a "public face" for him, enabling him to more easily explore what was happening "beneath the surface", his own emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Turley (2022) emphasises that the journey of self-discovery in BDSM practices is not uniform for everyone but depends on the subjective experiences of each individual, as well as their role.

Self-discovery is important as it can lead to authenticity (Kleinplatz, 2006; Langdridge & Lawson, 2019; Lindemann, 2011). Often, parts of ourselves are closed off and hidden from others due to fear of consequences, which can require tremendous energy. Kleinplatz (2006) reports significant improvements in both sexual and other areas of life after clients allowed themselves to be authentic and stopped hiding parts of themselves from partners. Kleinplatz (2006) also notes people's fear once they acknowledge their desires or even try them, fearing they won't be able to resist them anymore. However, the reality is often the opposite. Hiding and isolation often only fuel fantasies, while disclosure, on the other hand, brings relief.

Langdridge & Lawson (2019), who explore the psychology of *puppyplay* (a BDSM activity where a person pretends to be a puppy or caretaker; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023), discuss how pretending to be puppies can allow people to temporarily relinquish the responsibilities of adulthood and instead embrace a playful exuberance, free from societal expectations of how adults should behave. They highlight the response received from one of the interviewees, emphasising that puppyplay serves solely as an escape from daily tasks, which can be very stressful. On the other hand, within puppyplay, there is the role of the handler, whose responsibility is to care for the puppy. This role does not offer an escape from responsibility but rather provides dominance, ownership, and care for the more vulnerable, playful, and typically

less responsible other (thus more of a support role). This too can have positive effects on the individual, as shown by the case of another interviewee, Benny, who explains that while his initial involvement in puppyplay revolved around sado-masochism, it evolved into an ability to help others, which brings him great satisfaction. BDSM is not just an escape from everyday life for individuals who engage in roles of puppies but also for participants in other branches of BDSM practices (Turley, 2022).

Several interviewees in the study by Langdridge & Lawson (2019) also discuss the positive effects of BDSM practices outside of sessions. They particularly report on how the persona of a puppy also benefits their "human persona". Initially distinct, these personas can begin to influence each other over time. For instance, Samson, one of the interviewees, noticed certain traits in his puppy persona that he liked, allowing him to incorporate them into his human persona as well. Consequently, he became "more confident and allowed himself to be bolder" outside of sessions (Langdridge & Lawson, 2019, p. 2210).

Therefore, BDSM may not only facilitate self-discovery but can also be transformative and lead to changes in one's personality, as reported by Lindemann (2011). These changes are often positive, as they require us to be honest with ourselves. Thus, they demand authenticity. This can lead to improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of self-worth, allowing participants to see themselves in a new light, as reported by Cascalheira et al. (2021).

## **Therapeutic effects on romantic relationships**

Cascalheira et al. (2021) emphasise that BDSM practices have therapeutic potentials by enabling participants to assume roles necessary for recovery. Therefore, it is not incorrect to consider that BDSM can also have positive effects on relationships, as confirmed by Cascalheira et al. (2021). They propose the idea of a "nurturing BDSM dyad" that helps participants develop competencies crucial for relationships, such as enhancing communication skills through better articulation of needs and desires, and overall improved communication. Domingue (2019) and Kleinplatz (2006) agree, emphasising that improved negotiation skills can also contribute to better communication. Developing these skills may also enhance an individual's ability to set personal boundaries. Additionally, Cascalheira et al. (2021) underscore the importance of *safewords*, specific words or phrases chosen by participants themselves, which partners respect, unlike abusers. Safewords are particularly crucial, as words such as "no" or "stop" could be used as part of a scene and therefore could have dubious meaning

which goes against the "Safe Sane and Consensual" rule of BDSM.

With improved communication, not only ourselves but also our partner may be better understood. Kleinplatz (2006) reports that people often describe a sense of synchrony between partners, which she explains as a mutual sense of "attunement" resulting in a strong mutual bond. For such partners, Kleinplatz (2006) reports that they know each other so intimately that they can almost predict each other's responses. The combination of anticipation, unpredictability, and empathy arising from this is said to strengthen and enhance the bond between partners. Considering all these effects, it is not surprising that Rogak & Connor (2017) found that people who engage in BDSM activities are often satisfied in their relationships.

### Factors of positive changes

Lindemann (2011) conducted interviews with 66 professional *dominatrices*, women who professionally engage in dominating clients for payment (Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023). She described various aspects of dominatrices' work, which they claim has therapeutic effects. In the interviews, dominatrices reported that many clients seek them out for intimate (not just erotic) physical contact. Lindemann (2011) speculates that the demand for such services is increasing due to growing technologisation and physical detachment in modern society.

Another aspect of BDSM practices believed to have positive effects is conversation. Interviewees in Lindemann's study (2011) spoke about how sometimes simply talking with clients is as important as actual physical touch. One dominatrix shared that clients often discuss their problems during sessions, which they cannot talk about with their partners at home, such as their interests and fantasies. This can lead to sexual repression, identified by interviewees as a cause of many clients' psychological issues. Dominatrices highlighted the negative consequences of hiding "parts of themselves" due to social unacceptability. Releasing these inhibitions and embracing BDSM practices can have therapeutic effects. Lindemann (2011) also argues that the concept of a *dungeon* (a space specialised for BDSM activities; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023) as a confessional (where the act of speaking alone is psychologically beneficial) correlates with other professions. Specifically, she mentions the profession of a bartender, who not only serves alcohol but also provides a "sympathetic ear".

Next is the aspect of *play*. Paasonen (2017) states that the concept of play has long been associated with BDSM practice. Stear (2009) compares role-playing in BDSM to childhood

imaginative play, where a person uses props, stories, and experiences "quasi-emotions" (belief and physiological response to stimulus without acting: for example, feeling genuine fear during a horror movie but not fleeing the theatre). Thomas (2019) further expands on this, stating that there is a common assumption in the literature that play has something inherently healing. He specifically focuses on what is known as *traumaplay*. Here, trauma becomes the object of play (Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023), allowing a person to gain some power over it. Traumaplay thus connects with "play therapy". This is particularly suitable for BDSM participants who struggle with verbal expression and with processing their traumas and abuses, as play enables individuals to enact emotions, thoughts, and experiences they may not otherwise articulate well enough with words (Bratton et al., 2005).

Several researchers hypothesise that one of the mechanisms through which BDSM practices have therapeutic effects is the concept of "rescripting". Thomas (2019) suggests that in traumaplay (where BDSM practices focus on the participant's trauma and their awareness of it), rescripting involves changing the scenario or revisiting traumatic experiences, potentially leading to retraumatisation. Weille (2002) argues that through repeated exposure to trauma, there is an opportunity for the scenario to change through a process of oscillating between repetition and "repair". Cascalheira et al. (2021) argue that people participating in BDSM or kink practices can often change their perception of early trauma or abuse. Hammers (2019) emphasises that the key role of fantasy lies in changing the scenario and consequently reforming trauma through BDSM, making it easier for individuals to cope. Additionally, Turley (2022) highlights that BDSM practices can facilitate this transformation through intense physical, psychological, and emotional states and feelings, potentially providing participants with a phenomenological opportunity to perceive and recognise things in their consciousness in a new, alternative way compared to facing them for the first time.

Power dynamics involve not only childhood traumatic experiences of participants but also extend to using these activities to gain power over more systemic traumas such as racism, through involvement in *raceplay*. As evident from its name, raceplay involves the use of race or stereotypes in BDSM sessions (Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023). Similar to childhood trauma, here individuals voluntarily gain control over systemic oppression. Interviewees in Lindemann's study (2011) discuss Black men who, through raceplay, establish scenes of slavery with White dominatrices. Participants often mentioned that Black men prefer to assume a dominant role with Black women in raceplay sessions. Lindemann (2011)

argues that raceplay can be therapeutic in two ways, both operating on the same principle – through voluntary reproduction of racial hierarchies under their own terms or by dismantling hierarchies (also under their own terms). Therefore, BDSM practices can have therapeutic effects not only for the submissive in the session but also for the dominant, as discussed by Cascalheira et al. (2021), citing the example of JB, who, through a dominant role in BDSM practice, ceased to view herself as a victim even outside of sessions.

In BDSM practice, trust between partners is crucial. Kleinplatz (2006) emphasises that the level of trust required in BDSM activities is very high compared to "ordinary" sexuality (e.g., vaginal penetration with a penis), such as in bondage. Trust must be mutual. It is often taken for granted that the submissive person must trust the dominant to be respectful, responsive to any changes in the submissive, and ensure a positive experience for all present. Conversely, it is equally important that the dominant person trusts that the submissive has sufficient self-knowledge and awareness of the risks and benefits of the activities they wish to engage in to fully give consent.

In terms of trust, it is essential for participants in BDSM sessions to recognise that it involves a "controlled scenario". BDSM is often depicted as the giving or taking of complete power over a person; however, it is crucial to note that these are agreements that have been pre-negotiated. Through BDSM, participants can transform feelings and emotions that would otherwise be uncomfortable into something positive. Thus, BDSM may allow individuals to access their physical and mental limits in a controlled manner. Bauer (2014) hypothesises that through BDSM practice, individuals can confront the "dark" aspects of their past by creating a similar but controlled scenario. Therefore, BDSM activities such as *rapeplay* (BDSM activities centred around the fantasy of rape) may operate cathartically because, unlike actual rape experiences, the submissive person has actual control over the outcome of the experience (which is planned in advance). Moreover, the experience can be terminated early using a safeword.

Kleinplatz (2006) states that by establishing a safeword, partners affirm their awareness that the intensity of the session may lead to conscious or unconscious ambivalent responses. Safewords allow participants to maintain immersion in the scene, thus enabling them to approach their own boundaries more effectively. BDSM activities can be associated with the psychological concept of "gradual exposure". Cascalheira et al. (2021) note that some participants in their study gradually approached distressing stimuli through kink, which previously triggered intense reactions. They also mention that certain kinks were initially challenging for some participants,

but through BDSM, they reprocessed behavioural or contextual stimuli to the point where they no longer triggered memories of abuse. They hypothesise that kink "disrupts" conditioned responses to environmental stimuli that were previously perceived as threats. Therefore, kink does not retraumatise (i.e., repeat traumatic experiences), but allows for the restructuring of elements of traumatic events.

Part of the BDSM practices involves various BDSM parties, which include exhibitionism. Domingue (2019) and Thomas (2019) emphasise the importance of considering the role of spectators in public and semi-public sessions. Hart (1998) suggests that having people witness one's trauma or abuse can be therapeutic compared to hiding and suppressing such events. Public performance and script-changing can thus provide a context for validation and recognition.

Another aspect of BDSM practice believed to have positive effects is *aftercare*. Lindemann (2011) provides an example of a dominatrix who discussed aftercare following "humiliation/degradation scenes" in an interview. The interviewee talks about how after such sessions, she tells clients involved in humiliation scenes to return to themselves, no longer seeing themselves as dogs or pigs, etc. Lindemann (2011) suggests that the process of humiliation and shame validates what the client is not. Thus, the client can find "redemption" in realising that this role was only "ephemeral".

Turley (2022) suggests that BDSM participants can experience transformative moments through intense physical, psychological, and emotional states. These moments may offer phenomenological opportunities for participants to acknowledge and recognise things occurring in their consciousness in alternative ways, beyond their initial recognition. Kleinplatz (2006) emphasises how many individuals seek to conceal themselves during sexual encounters, while "unusual lovers" deliberately seek out things that evoke anxious feelings. Mahrer (1996) theorises that things that create feelings of embarrassment, nervous laughter, curiosity, risk, and simultaneous excitement have the potential for personal growth. BDSM participants thus do not try to mitigate, change, or ignore such anxious feelings but can use them for personal development and erotic intimacy.

Thomas (2019) warns that certain elements of BDSM practice, such as the pervasive dynamics of power exchange, are significant for many people. Bauer (2014) particularly highlights relationship characteristics like trust, intimacy, and vulnerability. He also mentions that some conditions for achieving therapeutic effects depend on the individual and can vary greatly. Thomas (2019) points out physical pain as crucial for him, whereas for many others, it may not be necessary.

## **The role of the BDSM community**

BDSM practice is thus very widespread today, and an entire community has developed around it. This community plays an important role. One of the main tasks of the community is to inform and educate new members about norms, thereby keeping the community safe for all participants. This is why the community is often referred to as a safe space. Cascalheira et al. (2021) report on cultural safety and recovery because of the awareness of the seriousness of sexual abuse. They also describe the culture as a community that accepts various body types, fostering a sense of belonging and caring for its members even outside the BDSM scene. One participant in the study, who was dealing with drug addiction, even described the BDSM community as an unofficial twelve-step programme, where mentors were equated with sponsors and learning techniques with the steps.

The authors also report on "witness healing". Similar to how Domingue (2019) and Thomas (2019) emphasise exhibitionism during scenes, Cascalheira et al. (2021) highlight the importance of the community, as it is difficult to find someone within it who has never faced trauma. Hearing others' testimonies about their traumatic experiences can encourage the process of dealing with one's own (Cascalheira et al., 2021).

## **BDSM and therapy**

As reported in the introduction, there are several parallels that can be drawn between BDSM practice and psychotherapy. Thomas (2019), for example, states that experiences in BDSM practice rarely remain static and evolve over time, involving different kinks and fetishes that come into and out of focus. Similarly, in therapeutic practices, a single issue is seldom the sole focus.

Kleinplatz (2006) points out another similarity between BDSM practice and therapy. As an example, she describes a patient who enters the office of a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist and discloses intense and long-standing fantasies of being tied up and beaten, which make him feel distressed. With this information, the professional has enough to potentially diagnose him with a paraphilia (sexual masochism) according to the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). However, in both psychotherapy and BDSM practice, more important than the diagnosis itself is engaging in dialogue with the person to discover exactly what they are seeking. The author highlights that in the field of clinical mental health, there is often too much focus on labels and not enough on the uniqueness of the individual. Diagnostic labels can thus hinder the exploration of the individual's uniqueness before us.

These two concepts also differ significantly from each other. Due to some of these differences, BDSM can in some cases more easily address certain obstacles that psychotherapy faces. Above, it was reported on play that allows for nonverbal expression of thoughts and emotions, something clients in therapy (which is primarily verbal) may struggle with. Our bodies have their own stories and memories that may not always align with our thoughts and feelings (Spencer 2015; Young 1996). Through BDSM, this embodiment of trauma can possibly be "tapped into" by listening to our bodies, not just our minds (Thomas 2019).

It is crucial to emphasise that while the therapeutic effects of BDSM practices in this context have been reported on, this does not mean that BDSM can replace therapy. Lindemann (2011) cautions that BDSM participants are rarely sufficiently educated in psychology and psychotherapy. Thomas (2019) describes a session where he felt even more traumatised for several days afterwards, including a 24-hour period experiencing dissociative episodes. Therefore, in BDSM practice, especially in activities dealing with darker themes (shadowplay, traumaplay, etc.), there is always a risk. This risk can be mitigated with the help of a professional, thus maximising the benefits of such activities, as Carol and Dana did, as described by Kleinplatz (2006). It is essential, however, that the therapist is open to such experiences, as otherwise, it could have adverse consequences (Casalheira et al., 2021).

## Spirituality

Baker (2016) and Turley (2022) emphasise the possible occurrence of transcendent states of consciousness in BDSM activities. Turley (2022) describes these states as deeply relaxing and "pure", also noting feelings of calmness and tranquility. These states are described as achieving new psychological, emotional, and physical levels, offering participants feelings of peace and well-being that often persist beyond the session. Transcendent states of consciousness are said to differ based on the role in the scene (dominant and submissive), but similarities exist.

Several studies (Baker, 2016; Thomas, 2019; Turley, 2022) report on the concept of *subspace* (typically described as hypnotic and hazy) and *domspace* (typically described as intense and euphoric). Thomas (2019) has drawn parallels between the idea of subspace and the clinical concept of dissociation, noting several dissociative elements in his own experience but overall describing it as a positive one. Elements akin to mindfulness concepts, such as self-focus, bodily awareness, and being in the present moment, are frequently mentioned in this context (Domingue, 2019; Langdridge & Lawson, 2019; Thomas, 2019).

## DISCUSSION

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The stigma surrounding sexuality and "abnormal sexual practices" persists even in scientific discourse today, despite an increasing number of studies highlighting various positive effects of BDSM activities that extend beyond their purely sexual nature. Similarly, the societal pressure faced by BDSM practitioners can be compared to the minority stress described by Ferbežar et al. (2024), who emphasise the psychological toll of societal rejection and its impact on well-being. The purpose of this review article was to survey the literature on BDSM practices to identify potential positive effects and gain a better understanding of the factors and mechanisms behind these effects, thereby informing improvements in psychological and psychotherapeutic practices. In the following section, the findings are first summarised, followed by a discussion of the limitations of the research and this research area in general.

In BDSM practice, individuals often engage in self-exploration and self-discovery. This process varies for each individual and can be facilitated by various tools (such as a hood that, when worn over the face, represents a "public persona", enabling easier exploration of one's emotions, feelings, and thoughts). Deepening self-understanding can also lead to authenticity. Several authors have found that releasing hidden aspects of oneself and consequently achieving higher authenticity significantly may improve not only sexual life but also other areas of life. Simultaneously, BDSM play can allow participants to temporarily relinquish the responsibilities of adult life and societal expectations. These effects can often extend beyond the sessions themselves, indicating the transformative nature of BDSM practice, which can lead to greater self-respect, a more positive self-image, increased willingness to take risks, and other benefits.

Individuals practising BDSM must feel sufficiently safe within the relationship, which can positively impact their partnership. Researchers have found that a nurturing BDSM dyad can help develop competencies essential for relationships, such as better communication (enhanced ability to articulate one's needs and desires, improved negotiation skills, etc.), and easier establishment of personal boundaries. This can then lead to a better understanding of one's partner, which can result in "synchrony" or a mutual sense of "attunement" between partners. Consequently, a strong mutual bond may be formed.

BDSM can be beneficial as it involves physical touch, which is presumably increasingly lacking in modern society. In addition to physical touch, BDSM can offer participants the opportunity to establish a trusting and safe environment, which can facilitate honest communication, potentially helping them

to be authentic and open with others, as well as with themselves. This can lead to the resolution of tensions caused by hiding parts of oneself. BDSM often includes elements of role-playing, comparable to children's play, which is also the basis of play therapy. The literature frequently discusses the potential of trauma resolution through the use of BDSM (especially in the context of "trauma play"). Participants, by consciously relinquishing control to another person, can gain power, thereby possibly altering the narrative and perception of their trauma. This process addresses not only individual trauma but can also address systemic trauma (such as racism). The trust required in BDSM activities can allow participants to explore the "darker" aspects of their personality or past in a controlled and gradual manner, akin to the technique of "gradual exposure".

BDSM may also provide therapeutic effects through exhibitionism, where having witnesses to one's suffering and trauma can be therapeutic, contrasting with hiding one's suffering from others. Humiliation and verbal degradation can be therapeutic, especially with the use of "aftercare" (actions taken by partners to check in with each other, support each other, and conclude the BDSM session; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023), where the dominant partner reassures the submissive that the scene is over and does not view them in that way, affirming that the role is temporary and not reflective of "real life".

BDSM is already so widespread that an entire community has developed around it. This community plays an important role, one of its main functions being to alert and educate new members about norms and safeguards, thereby maintaining safety for all participants. This is why the community is often regarded as a safe space. The community welcomes all individuals who wish to join, regardless of their sexual orientation, body shape, etc. Additionally, many people within the community are dealing with their own trauma. Their stories can also serve as motivation for others to begin their own recovery.

In addition to the previously mentioned similarities between BDSM practice and therapy, it was also discovered that BDSM activities, like psychotherapy, are rarely static but evolve over time. Both are similar in that, unlike psychiatry or clinical psychology where diagnosis is often the end goal, BDSM practice and psychotherapy emphasise in-depth conversations and the forces behind various issues. However, BDSM and psychotherapy are not entirely the same. BDSM differs from psychotherapy in several aspects, with some even preferring it over psychotherapy. For example, BDSM practice in the form

of play allows for non-verbal expression of thoughts and emotions, which can be a limitation in primarily (but not exclusively) verbal psychotherapy.

Several studies have reported that participants experience transcendent states of consciousness during BDSM practices. These states are often described as deeply relaxing and pure, simultaneously offering new psychological, emotional, and physical levels. Participants may feel a sense of peace and well-being, along with an experience similar to mindfulness, characterised by a focus on oneself, one's body, and the present moment. However, unlike mindfulness, which is well-researched and has clear therapeutic protocols (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2003), BDSM headspaces have not been sufficiently researched to determine with certainty whether they lead to the same therapeutic effects (Holvoet et al., 2017).

The limitations of this research are as follows: The most obvious limitation is the small number of papers eligible for the PRISMA method. The topic is still in its early stages of research; however, it is possible that more papers could have been found if additional databases had been searched. A second limitation is that the identified articles primarily focused on the positive effects of BDSM activities, with significantly less emphasis on their negative impacts. This focus could create a perception of bias in the attempt to destigmatise BDSM activities and sexuality within scientific discourse.

Despite the possible positive effects discussed in this paper, it is important to acknowledge that BDSM practices can be risky activities that may lead to negative consequences for individuals if not used properly. In addition to the issues already reported in the Results section, which were raised by the authors of the papers included in this review, several important findings further emphasise the necessity of awareness regarding the risks involved in BDSM practices. For instance, a systematic review by Fernandez et al. (2015) revealed that flooding, a technique involving intense exposure to traumatic memories, can result in heightened PTSD, anxiety, and depression when not applied correctly. Similarly, Brown et al. (2020) caution that engaging in trauma work without the support of a trained professional, especially in intense contexts such as BDSM, may exacerbate trauma symptoms rather than alleviate them. Barker (2013) notes that while BDSM communities often prioritise safety and consent, this does not automatically guarantee therapeutic outcomes for everyone.

In general, the topic is not well-explored, and there are relatively few studies. But since existing research shows promising results, it would be beneficial for further exploration to continue with more rigorous research. Longitudinal and

controlled studies are needed, as the current literature primarily relies on self-reported data, which is susceptible to bias (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

Before concluding this paper, it is essential to reiterate that the purpose of this work is not to present BDSM practices as an alternative to psychotherapy or psychological counselling but to raise awareness of their potential therapeutic effects in a world where sexuality remains a taboo and is, in some contexts, even labelled as pathological. Although some authors (e.g., Cascalheira et al., 2021) suggest that a combination of traditional psychotherapy and BDSM practices has been found to be most effective, empirical evidence supporting this claim remains limited. Lastly, it is important to note that a therapist's disapproval of BDSM practices can negatively affect outcomes, while kink-aware therapists can enhance the benefits of BDSM by helping clients avoid pathologisation or stigmatisation (Pitagora, 2013).

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# Pozitivni psihološki učinci BDSM praksi i njihove implikacije za psihološki i psihoterapijski rad: sustavni pregled literature

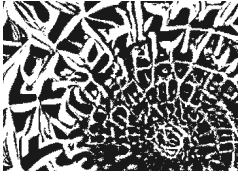
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U kontekstu česte stigmatizacije BDSM praksi, cilj ovog pregleda bio je identificirati potencijalne pozitivne učinke BDSM praksi na psihološko funkcioniranje pojedinaca. Dodatno, čimbenici i mehanizmi koji stoje iza ovih pozitivnih učinaka bit će istaknuti kako bi se usmjerila poboljšanja u psihološkoj i psihoterapijskoj praksi. Nakon sustavnoga pregleda 181 članka, identificirano je 9 studija koje su istraživale pozitivne učinke BDSM praksi. Utvrđeno je da ove prakse pozitivno utječu na samosvijest, autentičnost i udaljšavanje od odgovornosti odraslih. Ujedno mogu poboljšati partnerske odnose jačanjem vještina komunikacije, sposobnosti pregovaranja i povjerenja. Pozitivni učinci BDSM praksi pridonose fizičkom dodiru, otvorenoj komunikaciji i formiranju zajednice koja pruža sigurnost i dobrobit svojim članovima. Nadalje, istraživanja izvještavaju o mogućnosti transcendentnih stanja svijesti među sudionicima, što donosi pozitivne učinke na psihološkoj, emocionalnoj i fizičkoj razini.

Ključne riječi: BDSM, kink, pozitivni psihološki učinci, psihoterapeutske prakse



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# THE SENTIMENTS OF CROATIAN HOMELAND WAR VETERANS TOWARDS WARTIME COMRADES, FAMILIES, AND SOCIETY IN GENERAL, 30 YEARS AFTER THE WAR

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The reintegration of veterans into civil society after military experience presents a challenge for individuals and governments alike, with social ties and institutional support being key factors in facilitating this transition. To gain insight into how the Croatian Homeland War veterans coped with these challenges 30 years after the war, we conducted semi-structured focus groups ( $N = 17$ ). We explored how connected they feel to the different segments of society, such as their families, comrades, other Homeland War participants, and other citizens of Croatia and Europe, and the quality of communication with relevant institutions and decision-makers. The findings attest to lasting feelings of cohesion among veterans who have shared their warpath and experiences, the importance of veteran organisations, and the supportive effect of their families. Corrupt policies, resulting in a hyperinflated number of declared veterans who haven't been subject to wartime experiences, hinder a broader connection between veterans. The institutions mainly provide adequate support.

Keywords: Croatia, Homeland War, veterans, cohesion, focus group



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## INTRODUCTION

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After Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia at the end of June 1991, it entered its war of independence, or what is now called the Homeland War, which lasted until August 1995. It characterised and continues to influence the country's current social status. The exact date of the start of the war is still debated, as conflicts began a year earlier, after the first parliamentary elections in 1990 (Marijan, 2008), when a part of the population in areas with a Serbian ethnic majority began to rebel against the newly voted independence. During the summer of 1990, propped by the political leadership in Belgrade, the ethnic Serbian civilian population in the Lika and northern Dalmatia regions of Croatia took to arms and blocked road and railroad traffic connecting the Croatian mainland to the coast. This so-called log-revolution or *balvan revolucija* soon after led to a self-proclaimed Serbian autonomous proto-state called the Serbian National Territory Krajina, also known as SAO Krajina or the Republic of Srpska Krajina, which in March 1991 declared the secession from the newly founded Republic of Croatia (Marijan, 2008). By openly opposing the democratic processes that were taking place at the time and by creating and arming paramilitary organisations, this insurgent movement, propelled by Serbian leadership as well as the Yugoslav National Army, quickly escalated into a full-blown ethnic conflict with widespread Serbian violence against Croatia in an attempt to annex as much of Croatian territory as possible. The Yugoslav National Army supported the insurgence and was later held responsible by the international community for their impartial participation in the war, initiating conflicts, and aiding the insurgents in their aims (Marijan, 2008).

The cost of war was estimated to be 40 billion US dollars (Živić, 2001), but the biggest loss was that of lives. According to Goldstein (2010), over 13,000 people died and over 37,000 people were injured, including both civilians and soldiers, while Živić (2001) puts the number of killed soldiers and civilians at 14,433. The above number does not include the missing persons, many of whom have later been exhumated and identified in one of 125 mass murder gravesites (Živić, 2001). Official numbers from 2002 determined that 8,147 Croatian soldiers lost their lives either by being killed in conflict or as a consequence of war through injury, illness, or suicide, and 521 were still considered missing (Živić, 2005). Finally, throughout the war, almost 500,000 people were exiled and fled from their homes (Živić, 2001), and about 150,000 left Croatia, driven away by both Serbian aggression and the negative economic impacts of the war (Živić & Pokos, 2004).

## The Defenders

The term "Branitelji", which could be translated as "The Defenders" has become well-established in Croatia to emphasise that the Croatian war of independence was fought solely to defend Croatia from aggression, even though all who actively participated in the conflict can be referred to as veterans. This somewhat generic term encompasses all the persons who participated in the war as members of various police, military, and even militia units and formations, with a prominent distinction being made between the draftees and volunteers, or *dobrovoljci*, which is a term for people that willingly participated in the defense of Croatia in the period between 1990 and 1992 (Bečić et al., 2007).

Croatian Defenders differ from other veteran populations mostly due to the specific circumstances of both the war and the early military formation in Croatia. Croatia didn't have an army at the start of the war, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs took on the responsibility of the country's defense. The first armed units called the National Guard Assembly (*Zbor Narodne Garde*) were essentially a police-military hybrid, and they integrated most of the Homeland War volunteers at the time (Marijan, 2008). These early military units, created under police administration, had confronted numerous challenges, such as near-total shortage of appropriate weapons, infrastructure, and a lack of a well-established leadership structure. The disproportionality of the size and the military might of the two armies should not be neglected either. The Yugoslav army had over a million soldiers at the beginning of the Homeland War and was deemed one of the most powerful armies in the world at the time. The estimates of the size of the Croatian armed forces were around 35,000 people in the summer of 1991, which later grew to 200,000 (Živić, 2005).

This unforeseen and necessity-driven requirement for a fast and efficient organisation in the face of such a powerful foe is thought to have had a unique effect on fostering and sustaining cohesion in the Croatian veteran population.

## Social capital, institutional trust and support

Social capital, as an observable and measurable quality of societies with far-reaching consequences, has been extensively studied in the social sciences (i.e. Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999). Although there are numerous conceptualisations of this term, one of the most prominent was proposed by Putnam (1993, 2000), who refers to it broadly as an aggregate of features within the society that influence and direct cooperative actions of the members of the society to a mutually beneficial result.

Putnam (1993) initially posited the relationships among the members of a society as a primary generator of social capital production. However, he subsequently included policies and regulations as equally important additions to the former mentioned "bottom-up" principle of social capital creation. Indeed, one of the government's policies aims should be to create a healthy and productive society in which people will be able to utilise their abilities and promote the well-being of individuals, as outlined in the sustainable development goals of the Agenda 2030 by the United Nations General Assembly (2015). What we do know is that countries that are making the best progress in reaching those sustainable development goals are the countries that have the highest social capital (Sachs, 2019).

One of the moderating effects on the success of government policies is trust (i.e. Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). The decline of trust and social capital is shown to be linked also to corruption (i.e. Banerjee, 2016; Della Porta, 2000), and some researchers attribute the decline in social capital and institutional trust in Croatia explicitly to the overwhelming corruption in the period following the war of independence, resulting in feelings of loneliness and helplessness in the population (Budak, 2007; Štulhofer, 2004).

## **Reintegration and stigmatisation**

Reintegration can be conceptualised as an individual's return to the roles, functions, and responsibilities they previously held in a society (Dijkers, 1998; Resnik et al., 2012). The process can be deemed completed when a person becomes integrated into family, community, and society in a way that they can enjoy all the benefits that come from belonging to a group (i.e. Wilier et al., 1994). It should be noted that the challenges in post-military reintegration are not exclusive to Croatian Homeland Defenders. Studies in the US reveal that veterans often face difficulties in reintegrating into civilian life (i.e. Danish & Antonides, 2013; Sayer et al., 2014), encountering prejudice and struggling with the shift from a structured and collectivist military environment to a civilian setting (i.e. Atuel et al., 2016; Kleykamp, 2009; Rudstam et al., 2012).

However, all of the above-mentioned issues seem to have been even more prominent among Croatian Homeland veterans at the end of the war as has been shown from a poll indicating that most veterans felt they did not have the opportunity to openly share their experiences outside of their friend group nor did they feel the society has helped them adequately in returning to civilian life (Šetka, 1997). Begić et al. (2007) trace the specific issues of Croatian Homeland War veteran reintegration to the social transition that took place during and

right after the war with the abrupt end of the socialist regime and the crony privatisation process which left hundreds of thousands unemployed. Another significant number of Homeland War participants, troubled with medical issues and no prospect in the labour market, retired at a young age, placing themselves in a passive position in society.

Up until today, debates on veteran issues are a frequent topic in the public and political discourse and a subject on which there seems to be no consensus in the Croatian media and political sphere. With veterans being treated both with respect and considered heroes as well as being stigmatised, accused of enjoying or abusing various social privileges, and attributed with materialistic motives for their participation in the Homeland War, their status in Croatian society today remains a highly controversial subject (Rihtar et al., 2022).

Possibly the most persistent negative implications for Croatian Homeland War veteran reintegration originate from the irregularities within the Register of Defenders, which fostered a prevailing perception of veterans receiving undeserved privileges. The Register, designed to honour those involved in the Homeland War, has undergone a complex evolution over time, impacting the perception of veterans due to challenges related to inclusion criteria that allowed individuals without direct wartime participation to access veteran benefits. Early data from the Unified Register revealed 489,407 Homeland War participants (Dobrotić, 2008). In 2005, the benefits were extended to non-combatants, leading to discontent among veterans. Consequently, a prevalent public perception has emerged, characterising most war veterans as individuals who may not have actively engaged in combat but presently enjoy what is perceived as undeserved privileges. This sentiment has been echoed in protests by veterans themselves, vehemently opposing the granting of rights to those lacking direct wartime experience (Begić et al., 2007).

This evolving timeline underscores the complexities in accurately documenting and recognising those involved in the Homeland War. Due to these shortcomings, the term Defender underwent a transformation in the public and in the media, from being depicted extremely positively to extremely negatively (Soldić, 2009) and turned into a form of stigma for a large portion of the veteran population (Rihtar et al., 2022).

### **Social ties and the resilience of social cohesion**

A sense of purpose and positive close relationships are crucial in achieving happiness and life satisfaction (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Seligman, 2012), whilst the need to belong is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Group cohesion, defined as the sum of all the forces that bind individuals to a group (i.e., Festinger et al., 1950) proved to be one of

the factors protecting soldiers from the many negative effects of military stress and influencing many positive post-war and war experiences (i.e., Armistead-Jehle et al, 2011; Griffith, 2002, 2015). Unit cohesion (both vertical and horizontal) has thus been shown to serve as a protective factor post-deployment, reducing the likelihood of mental disorders including PTSD and depression (i.e. Anderson et al., 2019; Campbell-Sills et al., 2022).

This bond can be experienced mostly in close familial groups and environments. However, it is also possible to accomplish this feeling of oneness with a group with which we share no genetic or direct personal relationship by using a group identifier such as "war veteran" or member of a nation or a religion. This process of "identity fusion" can be triggered by stressful and dysphoric experiences such as those experienced in war-time settings (Swann et al., 2012; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015; Swann et al., 2014). Fused individuals can also turn into devoted actors willing to engage in acts of extreme parochial altruism to defend the group, its members, and values (Atran, 2016; Atran & Sheikh, 2015; Sheikh et al., 2014). In the veteran context, it has been found that viewing oneself primarily through one's military identity inhibits a broader sense of social connection and potentially hinders integration into civil society (Flack & Kite, 2021). However, the sense of connection and cohesion, although strongest within the combat and veteran groups, is not necessarily limited to them. According to research by Šućurović et al. (2017), cohesion within the Defender population still reliably predicts attitudes towards social involvement as well as social participation, even after accounting for the effects of confounding factors.

It was the aim of the study to explore in more detail the current state of these social bonds in the Defender population. Most notably, how far their circle of connection and support extends above the family and comrades to determine the level of integration in Croatian and European society. Our aim was also to explore the perception of trust and support from various institutions and political actors which can, in turn, affect the well-being and social capital of the veteran population.

## METHOD

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To achieve a comprehensive insight into the homeland veteran relations with groups and institutions and to be able to plot these relationships into a meaningful framework, we focused on using qualitative/exploratory focus group methodology. This methodology is extensively used in social sciences as a means of exploring people's experiences, understanding, and assigned meanings to various topics, events, or phenomena (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Conducted as a series of semi-structured focus groups or group interviews, they allow the moderator

to get an in-depth understanding of the target audience and explore the nature of the subject in detail without the need to impose any restrictions on the scope and context. It is especially powerful as a tool for creating new hypotheses and acquiring information about thoughts, experiences, motivations, and context, providing invaluable insight for revising and expanding our knowledge and theories.

There was a total of two focus groups conducted, one in December 2021 and the other in February 2022. The length was 1 h 46 min, and 1 h 31 min respectively. The focus group conducted in December 2021 had three and the one conducted in February 2022 had 14 participants.

## Participant recruitment

The study aimed to recruit Homeland War veterans and participants were reached out to and contacted with the help of the Assembly of Associations of Croatian War Veterans Guard Units (The Assembly). The researchers contacted The Assembly with the request for recruiting the participants for the study, and a trusted person within the organisation sent out the invitation to various veteran organisations within the Assembly. This was a formal invitation with a detailed explanation of the study goals and methodology and a request for volunteers to participate in the focus groups, to which 17 people responded. The volunteers were then instructed further to connect over the online video call platform at a certain time and date to participate. Some of the participants met in person at their veteran organisation facilities and joined the same call, whilst others joined from their homes.

## Sample

The sample consisted of 17 Croatian Homeland War veterans. All participants were members of at least one veteran organisation and had experienced combat during the Homeland War with some being wounded and/or captured in the war. The sample consisted of 16 males and one female, all of whom volunteered into service.

## Materials

The moderator guidelines during the Focus groups were as follows:

- 1) Can you describe to us in one sentence your connection, acceptance, relationship, or feelings and come up with an event or anecdote that best describes your relationship with or feelings towards:
  - your family
  - your comrades-in-arms
  - other participants in the Homeland War

- residents of war-affected areas
  - neighbours and fellow citizens
  - other citizens of Croatia
  - other citizens of Europe
- 2) Can you assess the quality of your communication so far and examples of positive or negative experiences and communication with:
- public institutions and services
  - the health system
  - the pension system
  - the education system
  - state, regional, and local governments
  - various political actors
  - bureaucracy in general
  - some other institutions that are important to you (specify which ones)

## Procedure

The focus group interviews were conducted by the lead researcher with previous experience in focus group moderation, and he was introduced to the participants by a veteran organisation coordinator, who enhanced participant trust and openness to communication. The focus groups were conducted online using the Zoom platform. For each focus group, an audio file was recorded which was later transcribed.

The discussion was being recorded, but it was made clear at the start of the focus group that the names and recordings would not be used in the presentation or dissemination of the results. All participants were thanked for taking part, and the focus group's purpose was presented as a brief discussion on the factors influencing veterans' relationships with various societal groups as well as an investigation into the effectiveness of communication with key decision-makers, including those in public institutions and services, state, regional, and local governments, among other pertinent factors. It was stressed that there are no right or wrong answers and that participants' truthful responses will determine whether this study is successful. The focus groups began with a repetition of these directives. Before taking part in the focus groups, everyone signed the informed consent forms.

## Analysis

The study goal was addressed through thematic analysis, a qualitative research methodology used to find and explain patterns or themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theory posits that a significant aspect of the qualitative data concerning the research topic can be captured by a theme, which denotes

a degree of patterning or significance in the given data source (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers went over the entire data set methodically and identified noteworthy elements in the data that served as the foundation for recurring patterns across the data set (themes). The formation of themes was then evaluated by comparing the codes to see how they would organically group or display opposing viewpoints.

Two of the researchers first conducted independent analyses of the focus group transcripts and created themes for each focus group after which they convened to compare and evaluate their distinct analyses and discussed their findings to help ensure a degree of confirmability of the findings and interpretations. During the comparison, an attempt was made to reach a consensus. To guarantee the veracity and trustworthiness of the themes and interpretations, verbatim quotes that perfectly reflected each subject were chosen.

## RESULTS

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Two major themes emerged following the application of the thematic analysis on the focus group transcripts. One related to the institutions and the other to the groups. Each of the themes had a positive and a negative pole, with institutions showing examples and cases of positive practices on the one hand and negative ones on the other. It is worth noting that some of the institutions were ambivalently assessed while others had unipolar positive or negative evaluations. The second theme was related to groups with each group loaded both with attractors and detractors, while some groups had no favourability preferences of emotional or cognitive value. For instance, reports of families consisted only of attractors, while relations with veterans had pronounced detractors as related to the existence of "false Defenders" and denoting the qualitative difference between those who were conscripted and those who volunteered.

## Themes

### Social ties

*Family.* As for the relationship with the family, all participants report that they get the most understanding from their families. Participants assess their relationship with the families closest to them. Primarily because of the communication and understanding they get from the family. The family accepts them as they are and helps and supports them in veterans-related activities. Some participants also assess that the war did not have a special impact on relationships within the family, which they consider to be strong and close and without any external factors, while some state how the family went through those difficult moments and how it further bound them.

*Defenders*. Following family, the highest closeness of ties was reported to be with other veterans with whom they can share experiences or have shared some part of the warpath. Defenders thus provide them with feelings of mutual respect and a sense that they can rely on each other. The connection with the veteran population is for some of the veterans the same as the one with the family. From veterans, as well as from the family, they report primarily gaining understanding. Especially in instances they call "dark minutes", when by conversing they help each other bridge difficult moments. Also, they estimate that they have not faced rejection from veterans like they have from the general population and report that they have more tolerance towards veterans in life situations. They believe that mutual understanding is a source of trust and connection between veterans. Some of them remained connected with the war veteran population through veteran associations or through the continuation of their professional careers in the army, which further emphasised this connection.

A significant number of participants are now working in veteran associations on various projects, jobs, and socially useful work and improving living conditions for the veterans who are struggling now. The participants report that working in veteran associations takes a lot of their time, which implies absence from home at the expense of the family, but the participants report that the families are aware of this and support them, which allows them to continue their engagement.

Some participants have a pronounced role of personal experience and acquaintanceship during the war and testify that even among families and veterans with whom they did not directly participate in the war, mistrust can occur. As one participant reports "Eighty percent (of people) do not believe anything that happened in the war. In the books today there are no reports of what the Defenders did. Two-three pages here and there... People who were there understand. Others all say that we are lying". They further emphasise a special connection with people with whom you went directly to war and that these are the people, as one participant notes, who you will "at some point ask for support, help" and with whom you will "share a story, share a problem, grieve or rejoice depending on the situation."

Also, there is a noticeable difference in the perception of those veterans who volunteered to go to war and who were on the front lines. They believe that the war was a specific and different experience for those Defenders and as one of the participants describes, the one "who was on the front line understands what happened on the front line, and the others do not understand." They note that such "true Defenders" love their homeland and continue to socialise and see each other,

go to each other's meetings, attend workshops, go to commemorations, etc., and that such Defenders understand each other and can distinguish themselves from others. Participants assess the socialising among those who were on the front lines as more positive, and feel that veterans who did not experience the battle on the front lines "trivialise the war, do not know how it was, do not know what we went through."

The above points to the problem of the status of veterans where they recognise how everyone is crammed "into the same basket". Both those who were volunteers and were on the battlefield from 1990–1992, and those who were only mobilised and engaged in the war for a few days.

They also address the problem of the existence of "false Defenders", who got the benefits of participating in the war without ever experiencing it and which have caused a lot of notoriety and stigmatisation of the term Defender. Their existence undermines the feeling of closeness and trust, but they note that such phenomena can also be a trigger for Defenders to want to harm themselves. They fight against such negative perceptions by getting involved in the work of the local community. They note that they are citizens of Croatia like everyone else and that they try to show with their work that they are not a privileged caste and that they can still contribute to the work of the community.

*Other groups.* Looking at the wider community within Croatia, they see that some people have full acceptance of veterans, while some people notice the disparagement of the veteran population and participation in the war. One participant estimates that 60% of the population accepts and understands (Defenders), while 40% deny their achievements or problems and do not support them in their efforts. Also, they believe that this resistance occurs mainly in people who were not in the war and estimate that 90% of the people who were in the war understand the sacrifice of this act.

By some of the participants' accounts, a gap is created between those who were not in the war and those who were, because of viewing Defenders as privileged members of society. They consider the media to be largely responsible for this change in Defenders' perceptions. They also look back at the difference between the public treatment they received after the end of the war when sentiment towards them was extremely positive and today when the status of Defenders is mentioned almost universally in a negative context. According to the participants, this effect of negative judgement and condemnation of Defenders is emphasised and aggravated on online social networks, online forums, and news outlet comment sections.

Some members further emphasise that they are sad and disappointed to see the direction the country they fought for is going in.

Part of the veterans who were in the prisoner of war camps or who were injured and disabled in the war state that there is more understanding for them and the feeling that people appreciate them, but they testify that the positive attitude and pride they felt and the gratitude that people expressed began to fade, and now the public view their pensions as a privilege, forgetting the disability which many have been living with ever since the war.

They report very good cooperation with members of other ethnic minorities, for instance, the Roma minority by veterans from the area of Međimurje.

Looking at the broader group membership, the Defenders have an overall positive view of the European Union and its influence. They considered themselves as part of that community and do not feel it to be a threat to sovereignty. Rather, they see Europe and European peoples as a group they belong to.

## **Institutional support and trust**

### **Positives**

Veterans report extremely positive experiences with the Ministry of Defenders, with an emphasis on responsiveness in solving problems and speed of responding to enquiries. They also praise the announcement of the Ministry that the construction of nursing homes is under way. They note, however, that projects from the Ministry that are transferred to the municipal level, such as the implementation of various veteran services, get delayed and veteran associations are forced to intervene.

Furthermore, among the positive examples, the participants note the beneficial effects of the digitalisation of bureaucratic processes, especially in the education system.

### **Negatives**

There were several negative examples of discrimination against veterans where health examinations were either neglected or in some way delayed due to the veteran status and diagnosis of PTSD. This has caused frustration and spilled over into other aspects of life.

In addition, as far as government at a local level is concerned, communication takes place mainly in the context of the construction of memorials, where cities, municipalities, and counties participated in financing the monuments.

However, according to the testimony of the focus group participants, the associations took over a large part of the work

of the institutions. Associations adapt to this and apply for project funding which they use to hire psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and lawyers. Part of the veterans' associations applied successfully to European funds. They consider these EU projects as some of their biggest achievements. Finally, they highlighted that the veteran associations dedicate a significant part of their funds to financially supporting a large number of veterans, some of whom have for various reasons been left out of the pension system.

Regarding the positive experiences, it can be inferred that the experience of quality, care, and connection with a particular institution – whether health, education, or public administration – depends primarily on relationships with individuals within that institution. In addition, some participants express apathy and believe that even if there were things that should change, they could not influence them.

### **Suggestions for improvement**

A recurring finding was that the quality of communication with various institutions varied and depended greatly on the individuals they came in contact with. The participants propose that the managers of these systems should work on educating their employees and make them aware of the importance of their work. Otherwise, when service users fall into these "bureaucratic nightmares" they withdraw and create resistance to contacting those services in the future, thus endangering their health and well-being. This dependence of the quality of service on the characteristics of individuals working in these services is most pronounced in the healthcare system, whose quality and responsiveness varies greatly and largely depends on individuals – doctors and nurses, and whether they will be engaged or non-cooperative.

Additionally, although veterans' experiences with the health and pension systems have witnessed an improvement in the quality of service recently, there is still a pronounced need for additional advice and assistance in navigating the "forest" of regulations and procedures. The desire was also expressed that educated and capable Defenders, with real experience of war, be placed in key positions in governance because they believe that with the integrity and zeal carried over from participating in their wartime roles, they could benefit the State. They believe that more work should be done to make the veterans' contribution more appreciated, although they point out that they do not ask to be exalted or praised excessively.

They also have the impression that there is a negative influence of the media, in a way that the veteran population is often humiliated, and that topics related to veterans do not have enough space in the media. They, however, express a de-

sire to improve that reputation through education and are willing to create and participate in projects to this end.

Finally, some participants conveniently quantified their connection with these groups, and the feeling of connection with family was rated as 10 (on a scale of 1–10), with veterans 7–8, community 4–5, while in this progression the institutions were rated lowest with 1–2. However, both the family and the Defenders fall basically into the same category that "must be respected, ... regardless of the circumstances".

## **DISCUSSION**

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Focus groups with 17 Croatian Homeland War veterans were held to learn how they handled the difficulties of reintegrating into society 30 years after the war. We investigated how connected to various societal groups individuals feel, including their families, fellow soldiers, other Homeland War combatants, and residents of Croatia and Europe, as well as the effectiveness of communication with pertinent organisations and policymakers. Focus group data were analysed by applying thematic analysis, and two major themes – social ties and institutional relations – were established.

According to the findings, veteran groups are essentially valuable for this population as they provide feelings of belonging and acceptance, and there are long-lasting feelings of cohesion among veterans who have shared their wartime experiences and paths. There is also a strong supportive influence of the families in veterans' lives.

On the topic of institutional support, their view is that the majority of the institutions offer acceptable support, but there is a strong impression that the quality of the services is largely influenced by the traits of the staff and not particularly by the organisational characteristics of that institution.

Furthermore, the veterans accept Croatia's position in the EU as a positive outcome and consider themselves to be a part of the European community and integrated into the community of citizens of Europe.

A major theme, however, is that of corrupt regulations and policies which have created an exaggerated number of Defenders, many of whom have not been in the war, and are enhancing distrust and harming a potentially deeper bond amongst a broader circle of veterans. Such events erode trust in institutions, which has a lot of downstream negative effects on society.

It is worth noting again that due to specific characteristics of the Croatian Homeland War, the population of Defenders differs somewhat from what would be considered a veteran population in countries that have professional armies and have not fought in a war in their country.

Those arduous and stressful times were the bedrock of the cohesion we see in the Defender population today. The relationships between people who have shared traumatic experiences make up some of the strongest bonds between individuals (Whitehouse et al., 2014), and affection for other members of one's group grows stronger as the difficulty increases. Individuals who participated in military activities were more likely to compare their relationships with their comrades to those with their own families, demonstrating once more the potential significance of traumatic and stressful experiences in forging strong bonds between people in military units (Murphy, 1957; Whitehouse et al., 2014).

Although affiliations and connections have a positive impact on people's willingness to give back to the society they live in, it has been shown that centralised military identity and extreme levels of cohesion might be inversely related to successful integration into civilian society and acceptance of the members of the outgroup (i.e. Sheikh et al., 2015; Flack & Kite, 2021).

However, there are numerous examples of the Defender population being at the forefront of non-inclusive altruistic and humanitarian efforts in Croatia. Whether through public service engagements reported in this study, or as the first respondents who provided help and organised collection and distribution of aid in natural disasters such as floods (Šućurović et al., 2017), the COVID crisis, and the Zagreb earthquake (Pavić, 2022). It has been shown that by participating in such communal efforts, the Defenders gained a sense of personal worth, they felt needed, discovered their personal strengths and capabilities, and forgot about their problems as well as felt more connected to the society and other Defenders (Pavić, 2022).

This need for active participation raises the possibility that a sense of national identity emerging from shared values may also have been a crucial emotion that enabled veteran cohesion to be converted into social capital at the national level, and it is encouraging to see that even with a deteriorated institutional trust and prevalent corruption, as well as long-lasting stigmatisation and prejudice, a sense of belonging and not various forms of parochialism persist in sentiments even towards the EU and its citizens.

## IMPLICATIONS

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This research highlights the capacity of the population of Defenders to support and serve not just other veterans but also Croatian and European society as a whole. It highlights the significance of further cultivating family cohesion and comrade solidarity in general. Peer mentoring programmes could be established to avoid potential veteran incredulity towards the

civilian population. This would utilise the exceptional connection and trust that veterans cultivate in one another to help with issues that the veteran population faces, from health to employment problems and other adjustment issues. Furthermore, institutional support and guidance for veteran organisations and individuals interested in providing services and aid in the public domain should be encouraged as it would benefit the society as well as all the Defenders engaged in such programmes.

## LIMITATIONS

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The limitations of this study fall in the general category of qualitative research, mainly the limited sample size, whereas the findings and issues we unveiled in our focus groups should be further explored by applying survey measures to a larger population of Croatian Homeland veterans. Also, it would be advisable to include veterans who were exposed to various levels of combat to see if cohesion and social ties are affected by it.

Finally, participants of these focus groups were all active members of a veteran organisation, and as such were more likely to have been volunteers and have participated actively in combat as well as being more likely to have been injured in the war (Bagić et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

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Veterans' active and adequate reintegration into normal civilian life is hampered by the lack of trust in the effectiveness of the institutions, the public's ignorance of the issues they are currently facing, a lack of awareness of this population's particular needs, stigmatisation, as well as some health issues. This hurts the veterans' quality of life and underutilises their potential to actively contribute to their communities. Marginalisation thus robs them of a sense of value and emphasises mistrust, which causes the war veteran population to withdraw into a small group of people with whom they share both post-war destinies and war experiences, closing the circle of dissatisfaction and alienation. Nevertheless, the veteran population still feels positive about engaging in helping both veteran and non-veteran populations, feels a strong bond with their comrades and families from whom they receive the most support, and although trust in institutions is damaged, they see themselves not only as veterans but as Croatians and as Europeans. By aiming at a better understanding of the connection structures, issues, and the social environment of Croatian Homeland Defenders and by actively combating trust issues that arise out of the perceptions of institutional corruption and inefficiency, both Croatian and European institutions and policymakers have the opportunity to create and carry out efficient programmes for integrating veterans into society and to build social cohesion. Even if 30 years after the war.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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## Osjećaji hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata prema ratnim suborcima, obiteljima i društvu općenito, 30 godina nakon rata

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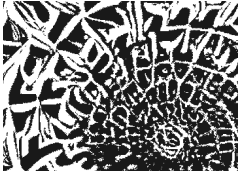
Reintegracija veterana u civilno društvo nakon vojnog iskustva predstavlja podjednak izazov i za pojedince i za vlade, pri čemu su društvene veze i institucionalna podrška ključni čimbenici u olakšavanju ove tranzicije. Kako bismo dobili uvid u to kako su se hrvatski branitelji nosili s ovim izazovima 30 godina nakon rata, proveli smo polustrukturirane fokus-grupe ( $N = 17$ ). Istraživali smo koliko se osjećaju povezanim s raznim segmentima društva – poput obitelji, suboraca, drugih sudionika Domovinskog rata i ostalih građana Hrvatske i Europe – te kvalitetu komunikacije s relevantnim institucijama i donositeljima odluka. Nalazi potvrđuju trajne osjećaje kohezije među veteranima koji dijele ratni put i iskustva, važnost veteranskih organizacija sa značajnim učinkom podrške njihovih obitelji. Korumpirane politike, koje rezultiraju iskrivljenim brojem deklariranih branitelja koji nisu sudjelovali u vojnim aktivnostima, otežavaju širu povezanost među braniteljima. Institucije uglavnom pružaju odgovarajuću podršku.

Ključne riječi: Hrvatska, Domovinski rat, branitelji, kohezija, fokus-grupe



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# INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE MEANING OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF DISASTER INFORMATION LITERACY BASED ON LOCAL WISDOM

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Indonesia is one of the countries that faces numerous disasters, with the recent increase largely attributed to the worsening effects of climate change. This study aimed to map out the experiences and meanings of indigenous communities regarding disaster information literacy based on local wisdom in facing the threat of global climate change. It uses an interpretive paradigm with a phenomenological approach. Data collection techniques comprised in-depth interviews, focused group discussions, and participatory observations. The results showed that the indigenous peoples have the capacity to maximise their cultural assets to reduce disaster risks. In disaster crisis situations, these indigenous communities use their local wisdom to strengthen their capacity to deal with various threats such as droughts and floods. Second, cultural aspects determine the preparedness of indigenous peoples to face various risks of climate change. Therefore, they build an understanding that one of the effective ways to mitigate disasters is to use culture-based local wisdom. They also perform traditional rituals as a form of prayer when the crisis intensifies.

Keywords: indigenous people, disaster information literacy, traditional knowledge, local wisdom, climate change adaptation

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## INTRODUCTION

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Earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, forest fires, hurricanes, droughts, and heat waves are natural events that occur with alarming frequency. The recent rise in the impact of these disasters is largely attributed to the worsening effects of climate change and the increasing complexity of the socio-ecological systems in the interconnected and globalised world (Global Risk Report, 2023; Rosselló et al., 2020).

Indonesia is highly susceptible to natural disaster (Beck et al., 2022) due to its tectonic location, and position at the convergence of three major tectonic plates, including Eurasia, Indo-Australia, and the Pacific. Geologically, this country is located along the Pacific Ring of Fire, known for its active volcanoes (Martire et al., 2023). The geological context gives rise to disaster consisting of earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. Additionally, hydroclimatic dynamics are affected by various phenomena, particularly El-Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and La Nina (Jayanti et al., 2020), which trigger natural events such as floods, landslides, droughts, and tornadoes (Messakh et al., 2018).

Natural disasters frequently occur in Indonesia, as evidenced by data from the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), which records an annual occurrence of up to 3,058 calamities (Adi et al., 2022). The East Nusa Tenggara province, specifically the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, falls within disaster-prone zones. Statistical records substantiate that this regency experiences recurrent disasters, including floods, earthquakes, and landslides (Statistics of Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, 2023). Furthermore, drought is one of the high vulnerability risks in the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency (Messakh & Punuf, 2020). One of the indigenous communities most threatened and vulnerable to drought disasters is the Oebelo and Noemuke villages in South Central Timor Regency, Indonesia. Based on preliminary research, communities in this region were found to be the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. One of these is drought, which leads to crop failure. According to Cajete (2020), indigenous peoples are one of the groups most vulnerable to the negative impacts of global climate change. In terms of disaster mitigation, one of the interesting things about indigenous communities in South Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia, in addition to government interventions, is that they use the potential of local wisdom to become an interesting instrument for disaster mitigation.

Numerous reviews have emphasised the substantial impact of local wisdom on climate change adaptation. However, there remains a gap in practical comprehension concerning

the integration and application of local wisdom in the context of climate change adaptation (Scally & Doberstein, 2022).

A study conducted in Kenya aimed to identify the factors influencing pastoralists' selection of adaptation strategies in response to climate change (Ndiritu, 2021). The results indicate that pastoralists' perceptions of climate change and associated risks play a crucial role in shaping their adaptation decision-making processes. Therefore, there is a need to enhance the understanding of the existing climatic conditions experienced by pastoralists (Ndiritu, 2021).

A subsequent investigation conducted in Bangladesh aimed to assess community participation and identify priority programmes capable of enhancing adaptive capacity in addressing climate change. Therefore, this study focuses on exemplifying beneficial adaptation initiatives designed to improve community capacity to respond to the adverse impacts of climatic conditions. It also shows the intervention potential and the need to prioritise adaptation options and strategies that corroborate with local context (Sultana & Luetz, 2022). Other reviews examined local wisdom with the primary goal of reducing vulnerability to disaster impacts.

Previous investigations showed that indigenous and local community knowledge could play a crucial role in detecting the impacts of climate change on biological and socio-economic systems. However, the collection of information concerning these impacts remains rare (García-del-Amo et al., 2020). The investigation shows the profound influence of disaster information literacy on community preparedness (Marlyono et al., 2016).

## **DISASTER INFORMATION LITERACY**

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Disaster literacy includes the ability of individuals, communities, and institutions to understand disaster risks and acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to address these impending threats. Disasters arise from natural events or sequences of these events, and their occurrence can be attributed to three factors, comprising natural, non-natural, and social/human factors (Adi et al., 2022). Previous explanations showed that Indonesia has a high level of disaster vulnerability (Beck et al., 2022). In 2021, Indonesia's World Risk Index (WRI) registered at 41.46 points, evidenced by the frequent encounters of the country with natural events. WRI consists of five facets, *firstly*, disaster exposure, scoring 39.89 points, is categorised as very high. *Secondly*, vulnerability, with a score of 43.10 points, is classified as high. This category considers the number of refugees, asylum seekers, and communities affected by natural disaster in the past five years. *Thirdly*, susceptibility, scoring

33.48 points, falls within the high category. *Fourthly*, the deficiency in coping capacities, scoring 50.67 points, is classified as very high. *Lastly*, the lack of adaptive capacities related to disaster, recording 47.19 points, is categorised as moderate (Beck et al., 2022).

A study conducted in West Java, Indonesia, shows that community disaster preparedness was strongly influenced by the level of disaster information literacy. Disaster information literacy consists of 4 indicators, namely the ability to identify and locate disaster information, the ability to evaluate disaster information, the ability to organise and integrate disaster information, and the ability to effectively use and communicate disaster information according to applicable ethics (Marlyono et al., 2016).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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A wide range of literature suggests that the resilience of indigenous peoples in the face of threats and disasters is closely linked to their local wisdom and culture. Bayrak et al said that cultural practices and cultural perceptions are critical in shaping indigenous households' responses to climate-related disasters (Bayrak et al., 2020). Other studies have concluded that one of the solutions used by indigenous peoples to mitigate disasters is cultural practices based on local wisdom (Eridiana et al., 2018) (Hos et al., 2021). Further research into disaster risk management that integrates cultural heritage or local wisdom is also confirmed to help reduce the vulnerability of indigenous peoples (Rosa et al., 2021) (Wardekker et al., 2023).

The role of cultural factors is not limited to the disaster mitigation phase. Research conducted in Zimbabwe found that one of the factors that can influence the success of post-disaster recovery is community culture (Ngulube et al., 2024). This is corroborated by research by Bayrak et al. that post-disaster recovery in indigenous communities can be more successful if their cultural aspects are taken into account (Bayrak et al., 2021).

The focus of this research is on the efforts of indigenous peoples in disaster mitigation. It is known that communities, including indigenous peoples, are one of the main pillars in all disaster management cycles (Mosurska et al., 2023). Various disaster mitigation efforts in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples often fail because they do not take into account the potential and capacity of indigenous peoples (Ali et al., 2021).

Based on these previous studies, it can be concluded that local wisdom as an integral part of indigenous culture plays an essential role in reducing vulnerability to disaster threats. Therefore, this research focuses on the experiences of indigenous peoples in using their local wisdom to mitigate climate

change-related disasters. The aim of the research is to map indigenous peoples' experiences and meanings of disaster information literacy based on local wisdom in the face of the threat of global climate change.

Indigenous people are generally defined as an ethnic group that inhabits a particular area, has been connected and settled for generations, and uses traditional knowledge as the basis of their daily life (Athayde et al., 2021). One of the salient features of indigenous life is local wisdom. Every indigenous community in the world, including Indonesia, has unique characteristics, which are derived from the customs, traditions, and local wisdom that exist in each region (Putri et al., 2022). However, with time, local wisdom in various indigenous communities faces increasing erosion due to the tide of modernisation.

Several experts stated that local wisdom summarised the worldview of communities in a particular region, showcasing the understanding of the natural environment where they reside. This worldview is deeply rooted and has persisted among communities for decades or even centuries. Considering its longstanding nature, local wisdom becomes deeply ingrained and inseparable from the communities inhabiting the region (Ndiritu, 2021).

The use of local wisdom for disaster mitigation aims to enhance comprehension of disaster by drawing upon the cultural heritage within communities, a legacy of ancestral thinking in dealing with natural calamities. Local wisdom is an invaluable component of disaster management system, including disaster preparedness. The presence of local wisdom enables communities to recognise and interpret natural signs signalling impending disasters such as floods, droughts, and earthquakes. Every region in Indonesia possesses its reservoir of local knowledge for disaster mitigation, and when integrated with a modern mitigation system, holds the potential to significantly diminish the impact of disaster across the country.

This research uses the Communication Crisis Theory developed by Timothy and Seeger, which emphasises that in a crisis or disaster situation, an ongoing process is needed to create shared meaning among and between groups, communities, individuals and institutions in order to prepare for, mitigate, contain and respond to threats and hazards (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). The mentioned theory is relevant to this research, in which the use of diverse local wisdom by indigenous peoples to reduce threats and vulnerabilities due to global climate change is one form of shared meaning.

This research aims to map out the experiences and meanings of indigenous communities regarding disaster information literacy based on local wisdom as an effort to adapt to climate change. The research questions to be addressed are:

- RQ1. What are the natural disaster mitigation efforts?
- RQ2. What are the best practices in natural disaster mitigation based on local wisdom?
- RQ3. What is the meaning of the construction of disaster information literacy?
- RQ4. How important is disaster information literacy based on local wisdom?

## **METHODOLOGY**

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### **Methods**

This study was situated within the interpretive paradigm, using a qualitative method. The chosen approach is phenomenology. The main focus of phenomenological research is to examine the meaning of a person's experience of the phenomena they live through (Burns et al., 2022). Phenomenology is defined as a scientific approach that highlights people's subjective experiences of the reality of their lives in the world (Lundh, 2020).

### **Data collection techniques**

The research was conducted in Oebelo and Noemuke villages, where indigenous communities live with the highest risk and vulnerability to drought disasters in South Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. Data collection was carried out for 4 months from 1 July to 1 November 2023. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a prepared questionnaire. The interview process was conducted by first explaining the purpose of the research and why the person had been selected as an informant. After obtaining consent, the interview was conducted for an average of 50-60 minutes. Participants were also informed that their names would not be included in the research report and manuscript to be published. Focus group discussions were conducted separately with women's groups and youth groups. The purpose of these discussions was to obtain the perspectives of their respective groups on the importance of disaster information literacy based on local wisdom. Meanwhile, daily observations throughout two weeks were also made at disaster-prone sites to see the mitigation efforts undertaken by the community, especially those based on local wisdom.

### **Participants**

The sampling technique, which uses maximum variation sampling as one of the sampling methods, aims to identify the participants. To ensure maximum variation, the participants in this study were selected taking into account gender, occupation,

TABLE 1  
The demographic  
characteristics of the  
participants

age, position in the community and level of education. There were 12 informants consisting of residents, community leaders, village disaster response teams, women's groups and youth groups. Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques with the following criteria: resident since birth, 18 years of age or older, and involved in natural disaster mitigation. The names of the informants were determined in consultation with the respective village leaders.

Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

| Code | Gender | Age (years) | Occupation | Position in the community                 | School level       |
|------|--------|-------------|------------|---|--------------------|
| P 1  | Male   | 57          | Farmer     | Community leader                          | Junior High School |
| P 2  | Male   | 57          | Farmer     | Community leader                          | Junior High School |
| P 3  | Female | 34          | Farmer     | Village apparatus                         | Senior High School |
| P 4  | Male   | 63          | Farmer     | Head of village                           | Senior High School |
| P 5  | Female | 37          | Farmer     | Community member                          | Senior High School |
| P 6  | Female | 25          | Farmer     | Youth member                              | Senior High School |
| P 7  | Male   | 58          | Farmer     | Community member                          | Primary School     |
| P 8  | Female | 37          | Farmer     | Village Disaster Preparedness Team Member | Senior High School |
| P 9  | Female | 44          | Farmer     | Community member                          | Primary School     |
| P 10 | Male   | 60          | Farmer     | Community leader                          | Junior High School |
| P 11 | Male   | 62          | Employee   | Community leader                          | Bachelor's degree  |
| P 12 | Female | 41          | Employee   | Community member                          | Bachelor's degree  |

## Data analysis

The collected data were subjected to analysis using a thematic analysis method, comprising six stages. The first stage consisted of data familiarisation, accomplished by listening to interview recordings and subsequently transcribing them in a non-verbatim manner. The second stage centred on coding, manifesting as specific abbreviations that served as summaries of the transcript content, elucidating the responses of the respondents. The theoretical coding was done by labelling words or phrases that represented important (and recurring) themes in each participant's responses in order to identify the different themes and the relationships between them. The third stage comprised the identification of themes related to the study topic. The fourth stage centred on reviewing the established themes to focus on the study objectives. In the fifth stage, themes were categorised and a visual mind map was constructed to show the interconnections between various themes. Finally, the sixth stage presented the results in the form of a qualitative narrative report (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

## Validity

To ensure the validity of this qualitative study, the researchers applied several strategies suggested by Creswell such as triangulation, member checking, the use of rich and thick descriptions, revealing the biases that the researcher brings to the study, presenting negative or contradictory information that goes against the themes of the qualitative research, spending extended time in the field, and using peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009). To avoid data collection biases, information triangulation was carried out in terms of data sources and method triangulation. The collected data was reviewed with informants, allowing for a reassessment of the accuracy of the gathered information. Additionally, the data was cross-checked with other sources knowledgeable about the analysed issues. Method triangulation was conducted to match information obtained from in-depth interviews with information gathered during observations.

## Ethics approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All guidelines and regulations stipulated by the Declaration of Helsinki were complied with. Before each interview, written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants after verbally explaining the purpose of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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### **The indigenous community's experience in implementing disaster mitigation based on local wisdom**

Indigenous communities in Oebelo and Noemuke, situated in the South Amanuban Sub-district of the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, were 2 villages annually plagued by drought disasters. The recurring water scarcity adversely affected a multitude of crops, both in gardens and fields, as expressed by P1 in Oebelo Village:

"Drought occurred nearly every year. Our garden crops consistently withered and perished" (Interview with P1).

P2 in Noemuke Village echoed a similar sentiment: "...last year, the rains arrived late, leading to extensive crop failures. Therefore, the Social Services of the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency extended food assistance to 396 households. ...the crop failure resulted from the delayed rainfall, which also caused farmers to sow their seeds late" (interview with P2).

Acknowledging the vulnerability of both villages in the South Amanuban Sub-district to drought threats, the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency government, through the Regional Disaster Management Agency, confirmed these recurring challenges. According to the Head of the Regional Disaster Management Agency, the primary cause were insufficient efforts in moderating the intensity of rainfall.

The most frequently encountered repercussions faced by the residents in Oebelo and Noemuke villages included decreased crop yields and limited water supply. However, these communities initiated commendable practices in responding to climate change.

In response to climatic irregularities that contributed to drought disaster, the indigenous communities of Oebelo and Noemuke took measures to adapt to climate change. The following is the community's experience in implementing disaster mitigation based on local wisdom for adapting to climate change to prevent the threat of drought disasters.

TABLE 2  
The experience of  
disaster mitigation  
based on local  
wisdom according to  
informants

| Category  | Interview statements of participants  |
|---|---|
| Protecting water sources                        | P 2 "To prevent drought, we usually cultivated trees capable of retaining water, such as banana, coconut, tamarind, and areca palm trees. Besides being beneficial for drought prevention, these plants were selected because their fruits were marketable."  |
|   | P 3 "As the village government, we continually counseled and prompted the communities to plant protective trees including coconut, kapok, banana, or tamarind trees."   |
| Not selling food products                       | P 4 "We, as representatives of the village government, directly provided guidance, ensuring that the communities were well-prepared for the dry season. We advised them not to sell food products such as corn or rice. This was to secure an adequate food supply during the dry season. Additionally, we sent letters to the church to relay the message through the pulpit. We also disseminated this message during community festivals or celebrations." |
|   | P 5 "The village government counseled us not to sell our harvests to prevent hunger. We only sold products from raising cattle for the school expenses of our children and other financial needs."  |
| Increasing the cultivation of leguminous plants | P 6 "We prepared the land well in advance of the rainy season to mitigate crop failures during the dry season. Additionally, we cultivated an increased quantity of green beans, ensuring that we were not solely reliant on maize. We also engaged in crop rotation with green beans, which resulted in substantial harvests."   |
|   | P 7 "We received green bean seedlings from the agriculture department and the village government."  |

(Continued)

| Category   | Interview statements of participants  |
|--|---|
| Establish customary rules that prohibit careless felling | <p>P 8 "In our village, traditional elders had enacted a strict prohibition against indiscriminate tree felling. Violators faced fines as penalties of trees for transgressions. These customary laws had proven highly effective, with no instances of indiscriminate tree felling to date. Furthermore, these customary sanctions played a crucial role in safeguarding our water sources from drying up. Even during the dry season, water flow remained undiminished."</p> <p>P 9 "the prohibition instated by traditional elders through customary law commanded unwavering obedience from all our community members. The residents also highly respected and obeyed customary laws because of their severe sanctions and consequences."</p>   |
| Performing the <i>Uis Pah Tuaf</i> customary ritual      | <p>P 10 "...there was a ritual to implore for rain. It was performed near a water source. When it failed to rain, traditional leaders ventured a water source to the spring to pray for rain. Typically, these leaders brought chickens, and sometimes even pigs, offering them as part of the ritual. This ceremony was called <i>Uis Pah Tuaf</i>, signifying a prayer ritual for rain from the landowner."</p> <p>P 11 "...community leaders, traditional elders, and most residents in Oebelo Village engaged in traditional rituals called <i>Uis Pah Tuaf</i> to prevent drought disaster. Typically organized by landowners with support from community leaders and select farmers, the ritual was conducted near a river. Offerings usually consisted of chickens or pigs. The core request transferred through this ritual was for rain, beseeching the ancestors for their intervention."</p> |
| Creating infiltration holes                              | <p>P 9 "...We instituted a rainwater harvesting system as a measure to mitigate the impacts of the drought. Therefore, we dug holes in every yard and garden to collect rainwater, which could be used during the dry season. When drought struck, this infiltration water served as an important resource for minimizing its impact."</p> <p>P 10 "The government, with a specific emphasis from the Agriculture Office, urged every community member to establish infiltration holes within their premises. These cavities accumulated water during the rainy season, which could be used when needed. During the dry season, these infiltration holes served as reservoirs of important groundwater."</p>  |

Table 2 is explained in more detail as follows:

**Protecting water sources.** Water sources such as springs and wells were crucial for the communities of Oebelo and Noemuke. Therefore, the two villages adopted a commendable practice of encircling these water sources with protective trees. During each rainy season, they proactively planted trees selected for water-retention qualities, including banana, coconut, kapok, tamarind, and areca palm trees.

This practice was consistent with the statement made by P2, who explained that safeguarding water sources incorporated planting protective trees.

"To prevent drought, we usually cultivated trees capable of retaining water, such as banana, coconut, tamarind, and areca palm trees. Besides being beneficial for drought prevention, these plants were selected because their fruits were marketable".

Information provided by P2 found further validation from the Noemuke Village authority (P3), indicating that the village government consistently urged and reminded the communities to plant trees around water sources such as springs and wells. This proactive measure aimed to prevent the drying up of water sources during the dry season.

"As the village government, we continually counselled and prompted the communities to plant protective trees including coconut, kapok, banana, or tamarind trees" (interview with Noemuke Village Authority, P3).

**Not selling food products.** Communities were subjected to another crucial measure to adapt to climate change by refraining from selling their harvests. As it was well-known, drought threats often led to limited food supplies, stemming from suboptimal harvests due to prolonged dry periods.

An interview with the Head of Oebelo Village (P4) showed that the government consistently engaged in persuading the communities to exercise prudence in managing their harvests. House visits and formal village meetings served as platforms for the village government to consistently deliver the message to communities about not selling their harvests. Additionally, the government collaborated with the church to disseminate this message to the congregation.

"We, as representatives of the village government, directly provided guidance, ensuring that the communities were well-prepared for the dry season. We advised them not to sell food products such as corn or rice. This was to secure an adequate food supply during the dry season. Additionally, we sent letters to the church to relay the message through the pulpit. We also disseminated this message during community festivals or celebrations" (interview with the Village Head, P4).

The residents of Oebelo Village attested to adhering to the advice from the village government. "The village government counselled us not to sell our harvests to prevent hunger. We only sold products from raising cattle for the school expenses of our children and other financial needs" (interview with P5).

**Increasing the cultivation of leguminous plants.** The residents of Oebelo and Noemuke villages embraced the cultivation of leguminous plants as an additional measure to adapt to climate change and confront drought threats. These communities predominantly cultivated maize and rice. However, owing to the annual variability in rainfall, both the government and communities recognised the necessity of expanding the cultivation of leguminous plants. P6, a respected member from Oebelo Village, commented on this method:

"We prepared the land well in advance of the rainy season to mitigate crop failures during the dry season. Additionally, we cultivated an increased quantity of green beans, ensuring that we were not solely reliant on maize. We also engaged in crop rotation with green beans, which resulted in substantial harvests" (interview with P6).

This sentiment was expressed by P7, a community member from Noemuke, who indicated their strategy for mitigating crop failures through an intensified cultivation of leguminous plants, particularly green beans. "We received green bean seedlings from the agriculture department and the village government" (interview with P7).

**Establishing customary rules that prohibit careless felling of trees.** In both Oebelo and Noemuke villages, the residents recognised the presence of traditional elders who had established customary and unwritten laws, regarding the prohibition of tree felling. These restrictions were specifically effective in areas along riverbanks, in proximity to water sources, and within forests. These rules were not merely in place, but they were diligently enforced and adhered to by the communities. Violations of these customary laws carried customary fines as sanctions.

Customary laws traced their origins through generations, passing from ancestors to the present day. These revered customs were considered highly beneficial by the communities, acting as a safeguard against prolonged drought and the anticipation of drought threats. P8 from Noemuke Village elaborated on this aspect:

"In our village, traditional elders had enacted a strict prohibition against indiscriminate tree felling. Violators faced fines as penalties for transgressions. These customary laws had proven highly effective, with no instances of indiscriminate tree felling to date. Furthermore, these customary sanctions played a crucial role in safeguarding our water sources from drying up.

Even during the dry season, water flow remained un-  
diminished" (interview with P8).

This sentiment was shared by other community mem-  
bers. The results of focused group discussions with women in  
Noemuke Village indicated the binding nature of these cus-  
tomary sanctions. In fact, the communities expressed a greater  
inclination to adhere to customary laws than formal laws en-  
forced by local government authorities. "...the prohibition in-  
stituted by traditional elders through customary law command-  
ed unwavering obedience from all our community members.  
The residents also highly respected and obeyed customary laws  
because of their severe sanctions and consequences" (FGD,  
statement from P9).

The emergence of customary rules, firmly upheld within  
these rural communities, served as an effective mechanism to  
prevent environmentally destructive behaviours. With cus-  
tomary sanctions firmly in place, they became a potent deter-  
rent against wrongdoing. Moreover, customary laws wielded  
a stronger binding force and invoked greater fear among in-  
digenous community members.

**Performing the *Uis Pah Tuaf* customary ritual.** In both Oebe-  
lo and Noemuke villages, an essential facet of local wisdom  
was the performance of customary ceremonies aimed at re-  
questing rain and seeking protection from drought threats.  
P7 expressed a unique tradition in Noemuke Village incorporat-  
ing a rain-requesting ritual conducted during prolonged dry  
seasons. This became an excerpt from the interview:

"...there was a ritual to implore for rain. It was per-  
formed near a water source. When it failed to rain,  
traditional leaders ventured to the spring to pray for  
rain. Typically, these leaders brought chickens, and  
sometimes even pigs, offering them as part of the rit-  
ual. This ceremony was called *Uis Pah Tuaf*, signify-  
ing a prayer ritual for rain from the landowner" (in-  
terview, P10).

A parallel ritual was observed in Oebelo Village. The *Uis  
Pah Tuaf* ceremony served as a form of transcendent commu-  
nication, uniting community members with their ancestral be-  
lief that they held the solutions to ongoing problems. The quote  
from the interview was shown below:

"...community leaders, traditional elders, and most  
residents in Oebelo Village engaged in traditional rit-  
uals called *Uis Pah Tuaf* to prevent drought disaster.  
Typically organised by landowners with support from

community leaders and select farmers, the ritual was conducted near a river. Offerings usually consisted of chickens or pigs. The core request transferred through this ritual was for rain, beseeching the ancestors for their intervention" (interview, P11).

Although this traditional ritual was rooted in ancestral beliefs, it served to show the communicative customs deeply ingrained within these communities. Through traditional practice of *Uis Pah Tuaf*, the communities established a channel to express the significance of environmental preservation as a means to avoid natural disaster.

**Creating infiltration holes.** Another commendable practice carried out by the communities to adapt to climate change was the creation of infiltration holes. This comprised the digging of holes in every household yard and garden, to capture and collect rainwater. The intention behind this practice was to preserve groundwater supplies, preventing them from flowing into rivers or the sea.

"...We instituted a rainwater harvesting system as a measure to mitigate the impacts of the drought. Therefore, we dug holes in every yard and garden to collect rainwater, which could be used during the dry season. When drought struck, this infiltration water served as an important resource for minimising its impact" (interview with P9).

The act of creating these infiltration holes garnered recognition from local government, particularly through the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency Agriculture Office. Field agricultural extension officers consistently engaged in educating and supporting communities in this endeavour.

"The government, with a specific emphasis from the Agriculture Office, urged every community member to establish infiltration holes within their premises. These cavities accumulated water during the rainy season, which could be used when needed. During the dry season, these infiltration holes served as reservoirs of important groundwater" (interview with P10).

The statements made by these two informants found resonance among other community members who attested to the positive impact of creating infiltration holes in every household. These infiltration holes were considered traditional technology, effectively aiding them in addressing the challenges and water crises that manifested during prolonged dry seasons.



generation to generation are related to the preservation of the environment, which is considered as local wisdom and traditional knowledge that is useful in suppressing various threats and potential disasters. Their habits of protecting springs, making absorption holes, and not selling their harvests are considered very useful in reducing the effects of drought (P2, P3, P4, and P7). Traditional knowledge is therefore interpreted as an effort to reduce the threat of drought disasters. According to the recognition of this indigenous community, by instilling these local wisdom values, the community can survive better when a drought occurs.

"Our ancestors taught us to plant many protective trees around springs. We have been practicing this for generations and it is very helpful for us when the dry season continues" (P4).

2) *The cultural ritual of asking for rain is interpreted as a form of prayer to avert disaster.* Indigenous communities in drought-prone areas also believe that, in addition to mitigating disasters by planting trees, it is necessary to perform special rituals to ask for rain. A prolonged dry season can bring the threat of famine. For this reason, indigenous peoples preserve the customs of their ancestors in the form of ceremonies to ask for prayers and blessings from the owner and ruler of the sky (the god they call *Uis Neno*). This cultural ritual is perceived as a form of ancestral tradition to preserve and protect against the threat of drought (P10 and P11).

3) *Local wisdom is one way to adapt to climate change.* Global climate changes such as rising geothermal temperatures, prolonged droughts, erratic rainy seasons, and the emergence of the threat of tropical cyclone Seroja, as experienced on the island of Timor, pose challenges and threats to indigenous communities. In addition, with limited economic capacity and power support, they are making greater use of the potential of local resources to adapt to climate change. Therefore, the traditional knowledge they possess is considered to be very effective capital in averting the negative impacts of the global climate change that is occurring. P11 shared the following:

"At present, the natural conditions are not friendly to us. The rainy season is shorter than usual. If we are not good at adapting to the climate that has started to change recently, we will not be able to survive. We start with what we can do. Don't wait for the government to tell you to do something" (P11).

Based on indigenous communities' experiences and meanings of local wisdom as an effort to mitigate drought disasters, Figure 2 presents a model of indigenous community disaster information literacy linked to crisis communication theory.

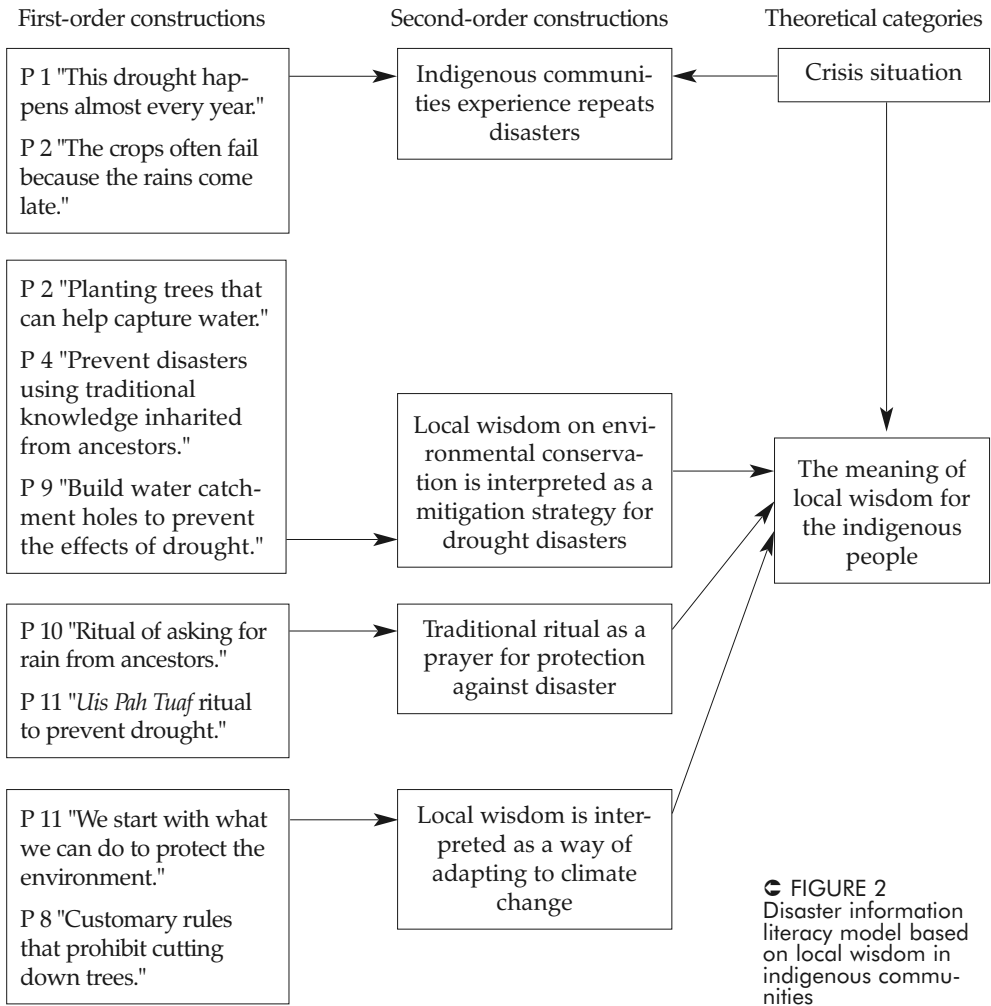


FIGURE 2  
Disaster information literacy model based on local wisdom in indigenous communities

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study prove that indigenous peoples have the ability to mitigate disasters in order to reduce their vulnerability to the effects of global climate change. By using local wisdom passed down from their ancestors, they have been able to increase their capacity to deal with various impacts of climate change, such as prolonged droughts, floods and landslides. Culturally appropriate best practices are essential to maintaining a sustainable environment. This is in line with the findings of Quinn et al, who argue that culturally responsive practices are essential in disaster-affected indigenous communities (Quinn et al., 2022).

From the perspective of crisis communication theory, it can be argued that indigenous peoples in crisis situations seek

to create shared meaning (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Various mitigation efforts, based on local cultural wisdom, are a form of shared meaning constructed by these indigenous peoples. This shared meaning is the basis for their actions to build resilience and preparedness for crisis situations.

Actions based on shared meaning have been passed down through generations. It thus becomes a local wisdom that is guarded and maintained as a common mitigation effort in the community. As the research by Santoso et al. shows, natural disaster preparedness based on local wisdom is very helpful for traditional communities in recognising the signs of natural disasters and then taking action to reduce the risk (Santoso et al., 2019). The use of local wisdom is very appropriate in the Indonesian context, where various indigenous communities live in remote areas and are vulnerable to various disasters.

Based on the previous explanation, Indonesia was susceptible to various disaster potentials in terms of intensities, quantities, types, impacts, and complex challenges. Effective disaster risk reduction necessitated the active participation of all stakeholders, including local communities residing in disaster-prone regions (Supartono et al., 2022). Global climate change had profound implications for communities, particularly farmers and their livelihoods (Singh et al., 2022). The resilience of these farmers in the face of climate change was based on three main dimensions, including their coping capacity (human, physical, financial, natural, and social resources), their ability to self-organise in response to climate change, as well as their knowledge and skills to construct a robust structure (Tohidmoghadam et al., 2023).

Disparities existed in the characteristics of community resilience between urban and rural areas when responding to the threats posed by climate change impacts. Urban community resilience leaned heavily on the strength of infrastructure and the resilience provided by their surroundings. Meanwhile, the resilience of rural communities in addressing climate change threats often relied on their economic capabilities and the degree to which local wisdom was implemented (Su et al., 2022).

In the context of Indonesia, the residents situated in Oebelo and Noemuke villages, the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, had embraced disaster mitigation literacy to confront threats, particularly the recurrent droughts. These communities leveraged their traditional knowledge as a form of local wisdom in executing climate change adaptation measures.

In these two villages, the efforts made represented proactive measures aimed at avoiding broader impacts on their neighbouring communities and the environment (Zulkafli et al., 2023). Traditional knowledge and local wisdom played a crucial role in detecting and reducing disaster risks resulting

from climate change (García-del-Amo et al., 2020; Scally & Doberstein, 2022; Putri et al., 2022). The best climate change adaptation strategies were those that corroborated with the unique characteristics and local context of the communities, including their local wisdom (Sultana & Luetz, 2022). Moreover, the choices and methods adopted by these two villages to adapt to climate change were heavily influenced by their understanding of the climatic conditions in their region (Ndiritu, 2021).

Efforts centred around leveraging traditional knowledge held by indigenous communities played a crucial role in reducing vulnerability and enhancing preparedness for climate change-related disaster (Sechi et al., 2022). The promotion of adequate environmental literacy elevated environmental awareness, further enhancing these efforts (Yusuf et al., 2022).

The community-based disaster mitigation efforts driven by local wisdom were intricately linked to the proactive engagement of local governments in disaster education. Furthermore, the active and participatory role of communities in development, particularly in preserving the environmental equilibrium, served as a hallmark of effective local governance (Sjuchro & Andung, 2020). The engagement of indigenous communities in disaster mitigation based on their local wisdom not only fostered a sense of ownership but also encouraged active contributions to community-based disaster risk reduction endeavours (Leal Filho et al., 2022).

To achieve a more comprehensive method to disaster mitigation, local government had to integrate traditional knowledge held by these communities with scientifically-based knowledge to formulate the most effective climate change adaptation strategies (Gbedemah, 2023). This was consistent with the idea presented by Zvobgo et al. (2022), emphasising that disaster risk reduction efforts within indigenous communities gained greater effectiveness when they incorporated local wisdom in responding to climatic conditions. A democratic and participatory environmental governance system influenced the active participation of communities in climate change adaptation (Albagli & Iwama, 2022). Moreover, efforts to maintain environmental sustainability cannot only be guaranteed by the enforcement of normative rules. New invasion strategies are needed, such as the involvement of local communities (Kacperczyk & Żulicki, 2022). One of the strategies is to create space for the active participation of young people in local community groups as pioneers in efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change (Wielk & Standlee, 2021; Cowan et al., 2023). Another strategy for ensuring environmental sustainability is to increase pro-environmental behaviour (Avci, 2023).

The limitations of the research are, firstly, that the research was conducted in only two sample villages with the same types of disaster threats, drought and flooding. The lo-

cation of these two villages is not too remote. If the research were extended to sample villages with different disaster threats, it would be possible to obtain more diverse and unique data. Further research should take into account the diversity of disaster threat types. Secondly, the indigenous people who are the subject of this research are the indigenous people of the periphery. Culturally based local wisdom in peripheral communities tends to be looser and changes considerably with time and technology. Further research should extend this study to traditional indigenous communities with intact cultural wealth.

## CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, this study yielded the following results: firstly, indigenous peoples have the capacity to maximise their cultural assets, such as traditional knowledge, in order to reduce disaster risks due to the effects of global climate change. In disaster crisis situations, these indigenous communities use their local wisdom to strengthen their capacity to deal with various threats such as droughts and floods. Secondly, cultural aspects determine the preparedness of indigenous peoples to face various risks of climate change. Therefore, they build an understanding that one of the effective ways to mitigate disasters is to use culture-based local wisdom. They also perform traditional rituals as a form of prayer when the crisis intensifies.

This research has academic implications in helping to expand the scientific repertoire in the field of disaster communication, particularly in the use of local wisdom based on the cultural assets of indigenous peoples as a disaster communication tool. Disaster communication studies need to broaden their scope in the area of traditional communication, which has been proven to be an effective tool in building community capacity to be better prepared for disasters.

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## Autohtono stanovništvo i značenje stvaranja informacijske pismenosti o katastrofama na temelju lokalne mudrosti

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Indonezija je jedna od zemalja koja se suočava s mnogim katastrofama, a njihov nedavni porast uglavnom se pripisuje pogoršanju učinaka klimatskih promjena. Ova je studija imala za cilj mapirati iskustva i značenja autohtonih zajednica u informacijskoj pismenosti o katastrofama na temelju lokalne mudrosti prilikom suočavanja s prijjetnjom globalnih klimatskih promjena. Ovo istraživanje koristi se interpretativnom paradigmatom s fenomenološkim pristupom.

Tehnike prikupljanja podataka uključivale su dubinske intervjue, rasprave u fokus-grupama i participativna promatranja. Rezultati su pokazali da autohtoni narodi imaju kapacitet maksimalno iskoristiti svoja kulturna dobra, poput tradicionalnoga znanja, kako bi smanjili rizike od katastrofa zbog učinaka globalnih klimatskih promjena. U kriznim situacijama katastrofa ove se autohtone zajednice koriste svojom lokalnom mudrošću kako bi ojačale svoje kapacitete za suočavanje s raznim prijetnjama, kakve su npr. suše i poplave. Drugo, kulturni aspekti određuju spremnost autohtonih naroda da se suoče s raznim rizicima klimatskih promjena. Stoga razvijaju shvaćanje da je jedan od učinkovitih načina ublažavanja katastrofa upotreba lokalne mudrosti utemeljene u kulturi, a zatim i izvođenje tradicionalnih rituala kao oblika molitve u trenucima pojačavanja krize.

Ključne riječi: autohtoni narodi, informacijska pismenost o katastrofama, tradicionalno znanje, lokalna mudrost, prilagodba klimatskim promjenama



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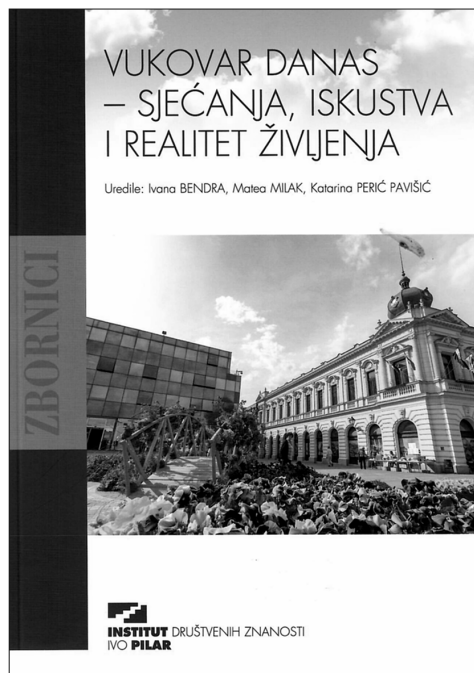
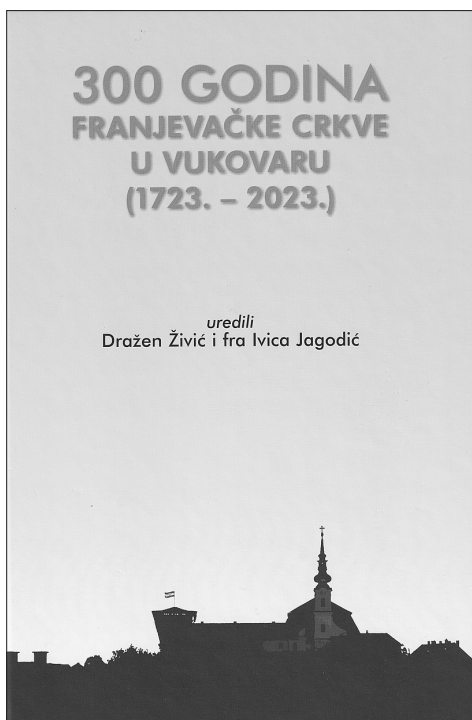
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