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Disability, Shame and Discrimination

Guest Editors:

Bronwen Hughes, University of Naples 'Parthenope', Italy
Maria Cristina Nisco, University of Naples 'Parthenope', Italy

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Mohammad Ali Salmani Nodoushan
Editor

International Journal of Language Studies
Volume 16, Number 4, October 2022

Pages	Title
1-16	**Editors' Introduction** Bronwen HUGHES & Maria Cristina NISCO
17-42	**"Her leg didn't fully load in": A digitally-mediated social-semiotic critical discourse analysis of disability hate speech on TikTok** Annalisa RAFFONE
43-64	**Shame, discrimination and disability: Unveiling narratives of obesity** Roxanne H. PADLEY
65-94	**Coping with dis/ableism in Twitter discourse: A corpus-based critical appraisal analysis of the hidden disabilities Sunflower Lanyard case** Katherine E. RUSSO & Arianna GRASSO
95-116	**Donna Williams' *Nobody nowhere* and *Somebody somewhere*: A corpus-based discourse analysis of the author's language as a tool to negotiate one's relationship with the world and the self** Alessia BATTISTA
117-136	**Mental disabilities: Fighting stigma and discrimination in public service announcements** Sole Alba ZOLLO
137-156	**Why hire disabled people? Corporate inclusive policies by three tech giants** Stefania D'AVANZO
157-177	**Investigating older persons' perceptions of ageist language and its use: Focus on Sindh, Pakistan** Maya Khemlani DAVID, Ameer ALI & Sardar Ali SHAH

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Editors' Introduction

Bronwen HUGHES, University of Naples 'Parthenope', Italy
Maria Cristina NISCO, University of Naples 'Parthenope', Italy

By virtue of a number of linguistic and discursive investigations, this special issue of the *IJLS* aims to map out different forms of knowledge concerning disability with a particular focus on the issues of shame and discrimination. The purpose the guest editors had in mind was not only to explore how the phenomenon of disability is portrayed in a series of relevant contexts, but also to tease out the social, moral, cultural, and political implications of such representations and discursive construals. If, as is widely agreed, there are inextricable relations between discourse, cognition, and society (van Dijk, 1996), then discourse structures can be said to express and mirror the structures of mental models. As these models are, in turn, related to permanent social representations such as knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, they consequently shape definitions, events, and identities. All the contributions included in this special issue explore the role that language and discourse play in the construction of disability, approaching it from a plurality of angles and perspectives. Discourse analysis, with its investigation of language in use (Fairclough, 2001), is the privileged lens adopted by contributors—in the form of Social-Semiotic Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Media Discourse Analysis, Corpus-based Discourse Analysis, Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. We hope that this Special Issue of the *IJLS* can serve to enhance awareness of the many existing inequalities that the more vulnerable segments of society still face on a daily basis. New ways of thinking about physical or mental impairments must emerge together with a focus shift away from the vilification of persons with disabilities, the deficiencies of a disabling society, and the fallacies of an ableist culture onto a reflection in terms of identity politics.

Keywords: Ableism; Critical Discourse Analysis; Discrimination; Hate Speech; Identity; Stigma

1. Disability: Society and stigma

In most post-industrial societies, the concept of disability has been radically transformed over the last forty years or so, with an acceleration in the last

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two decades. According to the WHO World Report on Disability 2011, one billion people or approximately 15% of the global population lives with some form of disability with 2-4% experiencing significant functional difficulties.[1] Although these figures must be interpreted with caution, they nevertheless provide key parameters regarding the phenomenon of impairment or disability which concerns an ever-growing portion of society, and not a meagre minority group.

Scholarship canonically distinguishes between a medical model that classifies disability as any form of physical or mental impairment leading to some form of functional limitation, and a social model whereby disability is defined in terms of socially and culturally imposed barriers and restrictions that curtail a disabled person's access to all aspects of personal, professional, or institutional life enjoyed by the able-bodied (Darling & Heckert, 2010).

More specifically, the traditional medical model stems from the assumption that any form of disability is inherently negative, and it thereby follows that in many cases the much-coveted aim for people with physical or mental impairments is to 'be fixed' and consequently achieve what they believe to be normalcy, although the terms 'normal' and 'normalcy' clearly refer to socially constructed phenomena and as Hyde and Shand (2013) state: "What is and is not normal is socially and culturally relative" (p. 209).

In the narrative of the medical model, disability is understood as an impairment of physical and/or mental functions. The disability becomes the defining characteristic of the individual and medical care is needed to allow the individual with a disability to function properly. Besides reducing persons with disabilities to the role of faulty goods, the medical model has, over the years, greatly contributed to the epistemic stance of the members of the health professions, granting them the role of gatekeepers able to monitor and dispense funds, services and benefits. Such categorizing procedures inevitably lead to the labelling of individuals on the basis of their diagnoses, thus turning them into numbers, increasing their dependency and severely limiting their options. The dichotomous deficit-based language employed within the medical model (healthy/unhealthy, fit/unfit, able-bodied/disabled) also affects the way society acts towards and interacts with individuals with disabilities.

The social model, on the other hand, aims to intervene upon any physical structure and environment, or legal and institutional policy that restricts access and consequently lead to forms of discrimination against those who fail to conform to normal standards of form and function (Shakespeare, 2006). This model was developed due to the many inadequacies of the medical model, and it therefore attempts to overlook the subjective cognitive,

physiological, and functional aspects related to disability, and to focus instead on the wider external environment, pointing to the fact that disability is a social construct rather than a subjective impediment. Although far from homogeneous across cultures and institutions, the social model claims that disability is in fact imposed upon individuals with impairments by society (for a general overview see Bingham et al., 2013). Along these lines, the term 'disability' stands to indicate the exclusionary or restrictive effects that society can inflict upon people with impairments. The word 'impairment', on the other hand, merely describes a flaw or malfunction of a given part of the body or mind. This terminological distinction is crucial as it indicates that it is not the bodily/mental functions that limit one's abilities and consequent inclusion/exclusion, rather, it is society itself (for a detailed overview of these issues see Blustein, 2012). Accordingly, were people's attitudes and expectations towards individuals with impairments to change on a personal, professional, social, cultural, legal, and institutional level, the many problems associated with disability could doubtless be tackled on a more level playing field.

Besides the historical, yet still ongoing, debate which opposes these canonical models, a further aspect worthy of note concerns our currently health-obsessed society. In recent decades, clearly as a further consequence of neoliberal policy making, our society has become increasingly body conscious; the politically correct 'physique' is now lean, powerful, and fit. Physical impairments, disabilities, or even mere ill-health are seen as a direct consequence of the individual's failure to eat the right food, practice the right sport, etc. Clearly when social fields (social media representations, beauty contests, professional sport) bestow value directly onto a specific bodily form, activity, or performance, they are effectively creating a category of physical capital (in Bourdieusian terms). As Fitzgerald and Hay (2014) state: "The performative culture of contemporary neoliberal systems has been particularly influential in positioning ability as a measurable entity with definable and discriminating properties" (p. 117). Ability is thus a yardstick imposed and legitimized by society which assumes that only "an 'able body' has the potential to achieve the optimal performance and secure valued *capitals*" (Fitzgerald & Hay, 2014, p. 118, italics in original). Disabled bodies lacking the required physical capital, and subsequently the social, economic, and cultural capitals which accrue thereof, continue to be susceptible to normative expectations about their abilities, and sadly rarely measure up. Indeed, from an economic point of view, individuals with some form of impairment are often seen as scroungers, a burden on the welfare state, standing in blatant opposition to those key neoliberal values of self-sufficiency and rampant productivity. This emphasis on disability as a form of economic dead weight serves to increase exclusion while tarring persons with

disabilities with the connotative brush of dishonesty, unworthiness, and uselessness.

Moving away briefly from the 'societal' point of view and looking out through the eyes of a disabled person, it must also be said that besides the physical discomfort and possible pain which can denote the presence of an impairment, there can also be a vast array of negative sentiments triggered by the 'condition of disability' itself—frustration, anger, feelings of impotence—or by the exclusion and stigmatization imposed by society. The dominant sentiment experienced by discriminated-against individuals is commonly one of shame, a feeling that can be perceived 'externally' as a form of stigma and ostracism, or 'internally', via emotions such as self-devaluation, inadequacy, and self-criticism.

> Self-criticism can be conceptualized as a harsh, judgmental relationship with oneself and way of relating to oneself. Theories of self-criticism suggest that its development is related to how others have treated us, typically in response to being shamed, criticized, and rejected by others. (Clapton et al., 2018, p. 353)

In terms of the 'internal perception' mentioned previously, in much the same way as many other victimised categories, individuals with disabilities are often vulnerable to the point of feeling responsible for their condition and turning their perpetrators' abhorrence inwards, against themselves. As Goffman (1963, p. 17) states:

> The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact . . . the standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing . . . . Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess . . . .

As is outlined by some of the contributors to this special issue, not all disabilities are immediately perceived by others. Indeed, Goffman, in his seminal work, further distinguishes between 'the discredited', those whose stigmatised characteristics are visible to others such as physical disability, gender or race, and those, 'the discreditable', who possess a stigma that is—at least initially—concealable and invisible to others, such as mental illness or HIV.

On a more positive note, over the years, especially with the birth of the Disability Rights Movement in the 1990s, which emerged after the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, followed, of course, by the United Nations

2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disabled people have also begun shaping their own cultures as acts of resistance, turning culture into a source of liberation and not only a wielder of oppression. As a scholar with disabilities himself, Shakespeare's emphasis on the exploration of disability and sexuality is a prime example of re-claiming previously denied cultural/social spaces—"For us, the personal is political and, while we understood that the priority had been to explore structural relations and social barriers in the public spheres of life, we felt it was high time to redress the balance" (Shakespeare, 1996, p. 179). It must be said that despite the strictures of the two models we have outlined above, and the dogmas imposed by neoliberal societies, resistance to social categorization and normative assumptions is clearly visible in many of the contributions which make up this special issue.

2. Disability: Language and representation

This special issue of the *IJLS* was conceived to reflect upon the ways of seeing, thinking about, and conceptualising disability. What kind of stories do we tell and read about disability? What stories circulate about people with impairments and chronic illnesses and their interaction with disabling and ableist societies? Stories serve to provide interpretive frames which then form the basis of moral judgement. To state the obvious, the manner in which disability is construed is of crucial significance, as the language used to describe individuals with disabilities will necessarily influence the expectations we nurture towards them and the way we interact with this particular social category. Language, thus, plays a pivotal role in the social construction of disability. If texts, whether oral or written, are coherent symbolic representations of the world, produced by social agents for social agents (Grue, 2020, p. 8), the study of language and discourse is tied in with the study of society and social phenomena. "To discuss social structures without examining the language, the signs, the images through which structures emerge is to suggest that structures exist as some form of social reality, some tangible product that can be seen and felt" (Watson, 2014, p. 35). Disability discourse, in particular, is intertwined with medical, political, economic, institutional, and cultural discourse (to name but a few). Our task, as researchers and analysts, is to recognise framing issues pertaining to disability as they cross (epistemological) boundaries, to gauge the extent to which they continue to signify difference and alterity—highlighting incapacities and failings—and to applaud when they are semiotically produced in terms of achievement, fulfilment, self-identity, and self-representation.

While identity, seen as fluid and dynamic, is a fertile—and contested—field of research (Watson, 2002), persons with disabilities have historically suffered

from fixed constructions enforced by regulatory regimes embodied in cultural and societal prejudices (Murugami, 2009). However, the identity of persons with disabilities is also informed by different temporal, social and cultural contexts, it does not develop in isolation: persons with disabilities must integrate their physical selves into the many roles, identities, and (self)-representations that we are all called to embody during our everyday lives. As such, an individual may not necessarily define disability as their master status (Goffman, 1963), and traits pertaining to gender, sexual orientation, race, religion or age may be deemed of greater importance in terms of self-representation. Even when a specific 'disabled' identity is developed, it might not be as salient as other identities, unless it is triggered by a relevant situation. Indeed, individuals are able to choose their identity and ignore or even reject identity traits fostered upon them as a result of ascribed characteristics. This is achieved by creating differing narratives about the self, self-identity and self-image. Persons with disabilities can construct their self-identity not by virtue of their impairment but rather by going beyond it, by sidestepping it, and gaining awareness of discriminatory societal attitudes, practices, and policies, as well as of the identity dynamics that reinforce their exclusion. By embracing their disabilities, they can consciously question socially assigned identities that are far removed from biomedical narratives presenting disability as a tragedy. In this context, the key point does not necessarily hinge upon celebrating difference, rather on defining disability identity in its own terms, under its own terms of reference (Watson, 2002, p. 521). While acknowledging that elusive boundaries may exist between having an impairment and being able-bodied, society should also acknowledge that "very few of us qualify as fully able-bodied along the dimensions of functioning throughout all of our lives. Hence, impairment should be seen as part of the human condition rather than a basis for setting someone apart, or a characteristic diminishing one's humanness" (Murugami, 2009).

Much as persons with disabilities go on striving to construe their identity, self-image and self-representation, some stumbling blocks still remain, and it is this aspect that the contributors to this special issue have focused upon. The key point that most of our contributors have tried to convey is that the way in which disability is talked about, written about, even thought about, will necessarily determine how persons with disabilities are treated, the challenges they face, and whether they are regarded as a discriminated against minority. "[D]isability has relatively rarely been a positive identity championed from within, compared to how frequently it has been a negative identity imposed from without" (Grue, 2020, p. 89). The pervasive nature of discrimination, misconceptions, and stereotypes can be detected in the use of demeaning language when addressing persons with disabilities, and this often places them in a pitiable position, signifying disability in terms of ugliness,

tragedy, asexuality, invalidity, and frailty, instead of beauty, hope, potency, vigour and strength (Murugami, 2009).

Interestingly, the valuation of difference in relation to disability (unlike other identity markers including ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so forth) can sometimes lead to an aporia, a knot, an inherent contradiction: "what is so good about disability? How, exactly, can it be valued?" (Grue, 2020, p. 99). While almost all social movements linked to the above-mentioned categories have advocated positive values connected, to a certain extent, to some form of essentialist difference—in the slogan-form of 'gay pride', 'black beauty' etc.—disability invariably implies essentialist differences connected to various types of impairment which are "overwhelmingly negative, that is why they are impairments in the first place" (Grue, 2020, p. 100). Positive valuations linked to the category of disability can, however, refer to "mutual affirmation of shared experience, and to the social and political potential that *can* be unleashed through such affirmation and consequent collective action" (Grue, 2020, p. 101, italics in original). Indeed, disability can appear to be a fuzzy concept, especially as it connotes stigma and social marginalization, but it can also be seen as a tool for activism and social change. For this purpose, the field of disability should be "replete with stories of steadily increasing awareness: awareness of the structures which produce disability, awareness of the situation of disabled people, awareness of the subtle nuances of disabled experience" (Grue, 2020, p. 101). This kind of awareness could be achieved by increasing people's familiarity with disability politics, theory, and experience, and by fostering the circulation of varying frames to encapsulate people's perceptions of disability.

'Disability studies' is not the disciplinary home of the editors of this edition of *IJLS*; however, we firmly believe that the bringing together of different backgrounds and approaches, both in terms of methodology and subject matter, can contribute to widening and promoting the debate around disability and the representation of bodies. The relationship between self-representation, representation, and the 'othering' of diverse bodies is the red thread running through this special issue, together with the way in which identity formation stems from how individuals see themselves in relation to others and subsequently use similarities and differences to build up their own identity. The field of identity politics is fraught with tensions and contradictory views, and placing emphasis on a shared attribute or experience, in this case disability, can lead to the lumping together of individuals who have very little in common: "The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the crosspull of their various affiliations" (Fraser, 2000, p. 112). Luckily, excluded and silenced bodies can always act upon and react to discrimination, hatred, threats,

trolling, and hate speech, thus engaging with new ways of conceptualizing and understanding disability. The individual case studies that the contributors present in this special issue each deal with different ways of promoting self-awareness and respect while combatting discrimination. Although the issue of disability, when linked to (self)-representation, diversity, equality, and performance culture, presents untold complexity and infinite ramifications, we feel that our contributors have gone a long way to open up novel fields of inquiry and present stimulating data.

3. Summary of contributions

By virtue of a number of linguistic and discursive investigations, this special issue of the *IJLS* aims to map out different forms of knowledge concerning disability with a particular focus on the issues of shame and discrimination. The purpose the guest editors had in mind was not only to explore how the phenomenon of disability is portrayed in a series of relevant contexts, but also to tease out the social, moral, cultural, and political implications of such representations and discursive construals. If, as is widely agreed, there are inextricable relations between discourse, cognition, and society (van Dijk, 1996), then discourse structures can be said to express and mirror the structures of mental models. As these models are, in turn, related to permanent social representations such as knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, they consequently shape definitions, events, and identities. All the contributions included in this special issue explore the role that language and discourse play in the construction of disability, approaching it from a plurality of angles and perspectives. Discourse analysis, with its investigation of language in use (Fairclough, 2001), is the privileged lens adopted by contributors—in the form of Social-Semiotic Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Media Discourse Analysis, Corpus-based Discourse Analysis, Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. Generally speaking, Critical Discourse Analysis has been concerned with ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and every social category characterised or afflicted by power relations of an asymmetrical nature. The wide-ranging theoretical and methodological frameworks adopted by contributors have disclosed the key topoi pertaining to disability, framing it as a particular kind of epistemological object. A topos is both a form of commonplace knowledge and a justification that can be invoked in discourse interpretation. In CDA, the concept of the topos has been developed in the main by Ruth Wodak (Wodak & Meyer, 2006; Wodak & Pelinka, 2002; Wodak & Van Dijk, 2000), who describes it as a form of 'warrant' which serves to link specific arguments to the reader's or speaker's background knowledge, and by Richardson (working along the same lines as Wodak) who describes topoi as "reservoirs of generalised key ideas from which specific statements or arguments can be

generated" (Richardson, 2004, p. 230). Both authors provide lengthy lists of common topoi—useful examples for the issue at stake are: usefulness, advantage/usefulness, disadvantage; justice; burdening, weighting; culture; abuse (Wodak & Meyer, 2006, p. 74)—and it is self-evident that both the medical and social discursive models which have been outlined previously exploit these argumentative devices when fashioning their objects.

Social media constitute a prime locus for commonplace motifs and humdrum clichés, and the discourses pertaining to Social Networking Sites constitute one of the major areas of investigation in this special issue of *IJLS*, illustrating how people communicate and interact, create content, and express their opinions regarding disability. Considering the amount of people using social media on a daily basis and freely expressing their thoughts online, social media discourse can unveil users' underlying assumptions, culturally based beliefs and mental models. This is the specific context to which the contributions by Annalisa Raffone, Roxanne H. Padley, Katherine E. Russo and Arianna Grasso, and Alessia Battista belong.

Annalisa Raffone starts from the assumption that the much-vaunted 'freedom of expression' often results in 'freedom for discrimination' and varied forms of Hate Speech Online (HSO) are amplified on social media due to anonymity, a tool users employ to exercise power and dominance over others. Despite the fact that the number of persons with disabilities has grown massively on a global scale, the community they form is regarded as one of the most marginalised in Western cultures. By focusing on Disability Hate Speech (DHS), the author examines how language is used to construct hateful discourses concerning disability by analysing a corpus of comments retrieved from the video of a renowned lower-limb amputee Tik Toker. Brooklynn, whose humorous claim is that 1 1/2 out of 2 legs are available, goes by the handle @lil_fin_brooklynn, and spreads awareness on disability to her 164.3K followers. The results of her analysis show that the discriminatory practices and intolerant attitudes of Tik Tok users towards people with impairments are based on deep-rooted mental models and beliefs. Annalisa illustrates how such models contribute to increasing stigmatisation, encouraging dehumanising practices, and perpetuating gender inequalities. The hateful comments posted by the Tik Tok users take on the form of offensive speech acts (namely negative metaphors, faux apologies, sarcasm, derogatory irony). They intentionally humiliate and ridicule Brooklynn by construing disability through the process of 'othering'.

Roxanne Padley tackles the issue of obesity, currently identified as an increasing area of health concern on a global scale both for adults and children. Although obesity is not usually considered a disability *per se*, it is surrounded by a great deal of stigma, to the extent that in 2014, the European

Court of Justice ruled that in cases of unfair dismissal, obesity could in fact be classified as a disability within the employment equality directive. The study explores how discrimination, stigma and disability related to obesity are represented through shared narratives in online support forums. Roxanne specifically examines the degree to which disability is framed within the context of obesity and how this is linked to shame and discrimination. The comments that the author investigates were selected from the websites of two comparable non-profit organisations located in the UK and the USA. They provide a discursive representation of obesity through the first-hand accounts posted in the forums. Results of analysis clearly indicate that people living with obesity are victims of weight discrimination and social stigma, often considered backboneless and held responsible for their own 'moral failings'. This 'blaming and shaming' attitude tends to lead society to view obesity as a (self-provoked) disease rather than a disability.

By examining a corpus extrapolated from Twitter, Katherine Russo and Arianna Grasso investigate how mask exemptions for people with hidden disabilities are appraised, with a focus on the use of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard. The authors seek to assess what kind of sentiments are quantitatively predominant in the corpus and whether they are connected to specific discourses emerging during the COVID-19 outbreak (e.g., the re-emergence of ableist and disablist discourses). In doing so, they also identify the lexical, grammatical, and communicative resources (i.e., hashtags and mentions) used to express discursive attitudes oriented to affect. Three main macro-discourses are exposed: discourses of disablism, through which Twitter users report offline instances of intolerance and social prejudice against people with disabilities wearing the Sunflower Lanyard; discourses of internalized ableism, whereby the external discriminatory and subordinating experiences endured by people with disabilities turn inwards and lead to self-deprecation; and discourses of hatred against abusers of the Sunflower Lanyard, that is to say those individuals who illegitimately sport the Sunflower Lanyard to avoid wearing face masks. Interestingly enough, Twitter appears to be exploited to make up for the absence of self-narratives in the news-based risk communication of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Hidden Disabilities Lanyard, while at the same time serving to counter the spread of false narratives regarding the distinctive neck tag.

Alessia Battista's contribution concentrates on issues of identity, diversity, disability, labelling and shame in relation to autism. The author investigates the manner in which Donna Williams, as a person initially deemed 'retarded' and 'mad', and subsequently autistic, used her written production as a tool to negotiate her identity. As a woman with autism (suffering from difficulties in communication and interaction) and a social activist, Williams shared her life experience through her personal website and a self-help platform to support

people with autism and their dear ones (Welcome to Auties.Org.). She regularly published mature contributions about her life, work, and diagnoses and also authored two international bestsellers, *Nobody Nowhere* (1992) and *Somebody Somewhere* (1994), covering the periods before and after being officially diagnosed with autism. The study features three separate threads of analysis (based on the three corpora collected from the above-mentioned resources) to provide a holistic view of Williams' growth as a person with autism. Considerable emphasis is granted by Alessia to Williams' use of metaphors and to the specific language she uses to describe her condition, her feelings, and her relationship with the world and herself.

The special issue's focus then shifts to discourses related to diversity and inclusion policies enacted within organisations belonging to both the public and private sectors. These particular contexts appear to be another major area of interest for investigation on disability. In recent years, the role of diversity and inclusion policies has gained increasing attention and visibility due to a widespread urge to improve minority representation and the management of diverse workforces. In both of these fields, the importance of inclusiveness has been endorsed and implemented on moral and legal grounds, with particular attention being paid to non-discrimination, participation, and equity. In an attempt to ensure such principles, a number of targeted approaches and policies have been developed to foster an inclusive mindset in public institutions and private organisations. Sole Alba Zollo and Stefania D'Avanzo's papers respectively take into account these contexts in relation to disability.

Sole Alba's research examines a sample of public service announcements (PSAs) regarding mental impairments collected from the websites of two non-profit organisations: the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and the Ad Council, USA. In recent years, PSAs have increasingly conveyed messages of social responsibility to an ever-wider audience, due to the fact that governments have adopted an approach to policymaking grounded in positive model promotion and education. The author, therefore, explores how non-profit organisations promote diversity and inclusion through verbal and visual argumentative-persuasive techniques. She further investigates to what extent multimodal argumentation contributes to fighting stigma and discrimination, changing public attitudes and behaviours towards mental disabilities, especially among the younger generations. Public communication campaigns have come to play a pivotal role in our societies, serving to influence people on a variety of issues ranging from the personal to the social (to name but a few: environment protection, health advice, anti-drug abuse, public security). The main purpose of these campaigns is clearly to change people's behaviour and attitudes through persuasive devices. Accordingly, the PSAs under investigation aim to render the younger generations more

sensitive to a wide range of issues pertaining to mental health (including suicidal thinking and unusual behavioural patterns).

As for Stefania D'Avanzo's contribution, it stems from the assumption that people with disabilities are still heavily disadvantaged when seeking out appropriate employment. This is mainly due to employers' negative prejudices and to the comparative yardstick they so often wield, considering persons with disabilities to be unable to perform as efficiently as non-disabled employees. In contrast with such views, some Information Technology companies—namely the three tech giants Apple, Microsoft, and Google—have homed in on the importance of hiring persons with impairments. Stefania's study addresses two main research questions: (1) How is disability represented in the promotion of hiring processes by the companies under scrutiny? (2) What kind of promotional identity related to corporate inclusion policies is conveyed by the companies? The website sections devoted to inclusion and disability of the above-mentioned companies were analysed in terms of corporate awareness relating to disability and the promotion of inclusiveness when offering job opportunities to individuals with disabilities. The results of the analysis revealed different strategies enacted by the three companies to bolster their own identity while also promoting favourable policies.

Moving now to a completely different context, the seventh and last contribution included in this special issue, written by Maya Khemlani David, Ameer Ali and Sardar Ali Shah, investigates a further (and as yet unresolved) issue concerning the nexus between ageing and disability. The authors investigate discrimination against older citizens in the Sindh province (in Pakistan), where specific laws and health care policies are being introduced to protect this segment of the population. In the Sindh province, object of the authors' investigation, but also elsewhere in Pakistan, ageing appears to pose social, economic, and cultural challenges since it is viewed as a threat to the wellbeing of society, and consequently triggers forms of age discrimination or ageism. Accordingly, age identity is negatively framed in a number of contexts, among them the medical and social ones. In their contribution, the authors examine the discrete language employed to convey attitudes and perceptions about and towards ageing and older adults. The research is based on a narrative inquiry conducted with older persons: participants were invited to share first-person accounts related to any form of age-based discrimination, recalling the exact wording of the ageist language used against them in both private and public domains. While results show that younger family members and friends are the main propagators of ageist terms and expressions, the use of ageist language continues to hinder a more inclusive and sustainable approach to the negative impact of ageing on people's health and mental wellbeing.

We hope that this Special Issue of the *IJLS* can serve to enhance awareness of the many existing inequalities that the more vulnerable segments of society still face on a daily basis. New ways of thinking about physical or mental impairments must emerge together with a focus shift away from the vilification of persons with disabilities, the deficiencies of a disabling society, and the fallacies of an ableist culture onto a reflection in terms of identity politics. The concept of disability cannot be used as "an objective ontological benchmark because disability is too contested a concept" (Beaudry, 2016), and the debate around disability often runs aground when it comes to deciding which problem, aspect, or ethical issue policy-makers, sociologists, activists, ethicists ought to be working upon or prioritizing. An open-ended view of disability based on identity-building endeavours (taking into account ethical and rhetorical issues) could doubtless prove more fruitful than any reductionist conceptual monopoly (Beaudry, 2016), ensuring respect for individuals whatever their abilities.

Note

1. https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability

Authors' Statement

Although the authors researched and wrote the Editors' Introduction in a collaborative manner, Bronwen Hughes is responsible for Section 1 'Disability: Society and Stigma', and Maria Cristina Nisco is responsible for Section 2 'Disability: Language and Representation'. The authors worked on Section 3 'Summary of Contributions' together.

The Authors

Bronwen Hughes (Email: bronwen.hughes@uniparthenope.it) is an Associate Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Naples, 'Parthenope'. She has taught extensively in the fields of English for Tourism, English for Law, Translation Studies and English for Professional Purposes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. She holds a PhD in Linguistics and Modern and Comparative Literature, and is a board member of the international PhD programme in 'Linguistic, Terminological, and Intercultural Studies'. Her research interests lie in the fields of translation as a tool for second language acquisition, cross-cultural media studies, gender diversity and 'computer mediated communication. In terms of methodological frameworks, she commonly employs the tools offered by CDA, Conversation

Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics. Her recent publications include "*Homing in on HATE: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age*" (co-edited with G. Balirano in 2020); "*Multilingual Perspectives from Europe and Beyond on Language Policy and Practice*" (co-edited with B. Di Sabato in 2022); "*Back to the Future? The Tradwives movement and the new forms of conservative consensus building*" (2022).

Maria Cristina Nisco (Email: mcristina.nisco@uniparthenope.it) PhD in English for Special Purposes, is an Associate Professor in English Language and Translation Studies at the University of Naples 'Parthenope', where she is also a Board member of the international PhD programme in 'Linguistic, Terminological, and Intercultural Studies'. Her current research areas include identity and diversity in news and legal discourse, through the lens offered by CDA and corpus linguistics. She has published extensively in edited volumes and refereed journals on the linguistic and discursive construal of ethnic and gender diversity, migration, and disability. Among her publications, "Online Abuse and Disability Hate Speech" (2020), "Disability in the Populist Press: An Investigation of British Tabloids" (2019), *Agency in the British Press: A Corpus-based Discourse Analysis of the 2011 UK Riots* (2016), *Languaging Diversity* (co-edited with G. Balirano, 2015). She is also the co-editor in chief of the international peer-reviewed *I-LanD Journal* (with G. Caliendo), and the Deputy Director of the I-LanD (Identity, Language, Diversity) Research Centre.

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"Her leg didn't fully load in": A digitally-mediated social-semiotic critical discourse analysis of disability hate speech on TikTok

Annalisa RAFFONE, University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy

Hate Speech Online (HSO) seems to be the result of the degeneration of the 'freedom of expression' into the 'freedom for discrimination' that finds its major amplification on social media where some people use anonymity as a tool to exercise power and dominance over other people. Drawing on a digitally-mediated Social-Semiotic Critical Discourse Analysis, this study investigates a specific, under-researched form of HSO, namely Disability Hate Speech (DHS) by analysing a corpus of comments retrieved from a video of a famous amputee TikToker spreading awareness on disability. The results unveil and explain that people's discriminatory practices and intolerant attitudes towards people with impairments are based on deep-rooted mental models and beliefs that contribute to increasing the stigmatisation against them, thus paving the way to intersectional hateful discourses that *create* disability through the process of 'othering' by naming what is normal/abnormal according to the dichotomy able-bodiedness/disability. Accordingly, this paper aims to contribute to the emerging literature of studies on disability discourse with a specific perspective on DHS.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Disability Discourse; Disability Hate Speech; Hate Speech Online; Social Media Studies; Social-Semiotic Approach; TikTok

1. Introduction

It is a universally acknowledged truth that technology and the internet have provided a breakthrough in how people communicate and interact, and the increasing rise of new social media has turned users from passive to active agents allowing them to create new content, express their opinions and contribute to what has been defined as *cyberculture* (Sacristán et al., 2013). Nevertheless, more frequently, the 'freedom of expression' results in the 'freedom for discrimination' leading to varied forms of Hate Speech Online (HSO) (Balirano & Hughes, 2020).

Controversies exist about the definition of HS(O). However, it is regarded as any act of denigration, vilification, stigmatisation, and a series of other threatening actions perpetrated (online) against people based on gender, sex,

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race, colour, religion, disability, and similar features (Council of Europe, 2016).

The construction of hatred seems to primarily affect these groupings and amplify on social media where some people use *anonymity* as a tool to exercise power and dominance over other people (Nisco, 2020). Among the various forms of discrimination, Disability Hate Speech (DHS) represents one of the most under-researched areas in discourse-focused studies since it was conceptualised as a 'social problem' towards the end of the 20th Century (Garland, 2011).

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022), over 1 billion people among the global population currently experience some forms of disability, an amount destined to increase due to the growing number of diseases emerging in today's world. People with disabilities are regarded among the most marginalised communities in Western cultures due to specific embedded mental models that are hard to be erase (Agmon et al., 2016) and that internet-based interactions contribute to strengthening.

Considering the number of people using social media every day, this research starts from the assumption that people freely express their thoughts when they are online, thus unveiling underlying assumptions, culturally-based beliefs, and mental models through language use. Diverse Social Media Sites (SMSs) (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) have been discursively investigated to analyse specific forms of HSO (e.g., gender, race, politics) (Balirano & Hughes, 2020; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted so far on DHS on today's most utilised social media platform, namely TikTok.

Against this backdrop, this paper will address a digitally-mediated Social-Semiotic Critical Discourse Analysis of DHS on the aforementioned social network, in the attempt to provide valuable insights on the way people use language to construct hateful intersectional discourses around disability on a daily basis and discursively create power relationships to distance themselves from 'Others' and exert dominance over them.

2. Background

2.1. The social stigmatisation of a medical condition

Four-hundred and thirty years have passed from the publication of Shakespeare's tragedies *Richard III* (1988/2010) and *Henry VI* (1999) in which the Bard of Avon depicts the cruel and ruthless Yorkist Duke of Gloucester as *stigmatic* to describe his physical deformity, giving rise to the idea of 'disability' as a metaphor for 'moral evil' upon which a cultural discourse on the meaning of the terms 'disability' and 'disabled' has arisen.

Nevertheless, despite the Lancastrian narration of Richard's physical nature directly sent by God as a sign of his evil soul, what the Duke highlights in his soliloquies within both plays is that he is a villain *due* to the fact that he is "rudely stamp'd . . ., deform'd, unfinish'd, . . . lamely and unfashionable" which leads him to weave plots and dangerous traps since "[he] cannot prove a lover" (Shakespeare, 1988/2010, pp. 6-9). In this way, Shakespeare chooses a dramatic strategy to transform the social meaning associated to deformity—an 'abnormal' nature that contrasts the 'normal' one—and satirises it by showing that morality is not linked to biology and that Richards' words do not make any sense since his evilness can only be ascribed to his narcissism, perversion, and craziness that he tries to justify through his deformity.

The modern discursive construction of disability stands in between the so-called 'medical' and 'social' models: the former, also called 'old model' (Mitra, 2006)—starting from the premise of the authority of the field in defining illnesses and their cures—connects disability to biology, conceiving it as a medical issue, i.e., the result of the *inability* of body parts and functions to work *normally* (Brittain, 2004; Forhan, 2009; Haegele & Hodge, 2016); the latter—that includes different models of disability discourse (Mitra, 2006)—draws a distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability', thus considering impairment as a body disfunction and disability as a social construct, i.e., a disadvantage created by society to people with impairments which excludes them from social life (Barney, 2012; Goodley, 2001; Roush & Sharby, 2011). Therefore, the social model suggests that to remove socio-cultural barriers to disability, changes should primarily address society rather than the individual (Bingham et al., 2013; Fisher & Purcal, 2016; Hästbacka et al., 2016).

To this end, the Council of Europe (2017) has released the so-called Council of Europe Disability Strategy 2017-2023 with the overall aim of helping people with disabilities achieve equal opportunities and be treated with dignity at both national and local levels. The main goal of the strategy is to grant disabled people the opportunity to take part in the social life of their communities, thus avoiding and overcoming any type of discriminatory acts. Nevertheless, with the growing spreading of user-friendly technologies and applications, stopping hate crimes towards minority groups seems more and more challenging. In particular, communication through SMSs can take both positive and negative aspects, namely by enhancing interpersonal relationships or enacting a war against 'Others' discursively constructing them as "distant, alien, deviant" people (Coupland, 1999, p. 5).

2.2. Social media sites: TikTok

Originally born in China under the name of Douyin in 2016, TikTok is an SMS for the creation, editing, and sharing of short (personal) videos usually

accompanied by the latest music trends. It was officially launched in 2017 and, in a few months, it became one of the fastest-growing apps worldwide reaching nearly 83 million active users in 2021 (Statista, 2022). It is considered to be a *Gen Z* app[1] even though people of all ages have started to use it for multiple purposes. TikTok allows for the publishing of varied types of content covering diverse fields of interest such as beauty and make-up, education, sports, politics, cooking, culture, history, and so forth. Nevertheless, it is also used to spread awareness on important social topics.

The app is mostly based on trends: this means that a particular video containing a hashtag (e.g., *#popculture*), a song, or a dance goes viral, and it starts to be used, 'dueted',[2] or reproduced in the app (usually for some weeks or even months) by other people who personalise it by adding, for instance, new elements.

The personal page of each TikTok account is divided into two sections: 'Following' (i.e., showing the videos of people you follow); 'For You' (i.e., recommended videos selected by the algorithm according to the user's interests). It is usually through the 'For You' page that common people who had never previously experienced the status of social media influencer/star start to be heavily followed (Anderson, 2020).

A TikTok user can also search for videos or people by using the searching bar on the top of the app. Interaction with other TikTokers and videos is allowed through a series of buttons placed at the right side of any video in a descending order: the symbol +, placed below the user's profile picture, allows following/unfollowing people; the heart icon means 'like' (when tapping it, its colour changes from white to red); the comment icon serves the purpose of posting comments; finally, the arrow icon means 'direct share' the content to someone on TikTok or through other SMSs.

According to the TikTok Community Guidelines (TikTok, 2022a), the mission of the app is to create a global, creative, inclusive, and happy community where diversity of any type is respected and hateful behaviour not allowed and removed. They (TikTok, 2022a) define hate speech as "content that attacks, threatens, incites violence against, or otherwise dehumanises an individual or a group on the basis of . . . race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, serious disease, disability, immigration status". Nevertheless, even though the Community Guidelines have been updated to further enhance safety and security and, according to the Community Guidelines Enforcement Report (TikTok, 2022b), published on February 8th, 2022, more than 91 million videos have been removed for violating them, hateful and discriminatory content continues to be published on the platform.

3. Method

3.1. Theoretical framework

This study mainly draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—in particular, Van Dijk's (2014) Socio-Cognitive Approach and the Social-Semiotic model developed by Logi and Zappavigna (2021) for the analysis of digital messages. Van Dijk (1996) claims that there exists an inextricable relationship between discourse, cognition, and society according to which "discourse structures express structures of mental models, which are related to more permanent social representations such as knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, which in turn are the shared ways groups and cultures represent their goals, interests, concerns, structures or institutions" (p. 122). The linguist also states that a specific aspect of ideologies is their *polarisation* between an in-group and out-group, namely that they manifest themselves through discourse structures that emphasise "*Our* good things . . . and *Their* bad things" (Van Dijk, 2014, p. 100). Nevertheless, discourse is not only oral and written but also multimodal, in the sense that it can be expressed through semiotic resources (e.g., images, sounds, pictograms, etc.) that represent the *semiotics* of discourse (Van Dijk, 2014). Van Leuween (2005) considers a semiotic resource as a tool for meaning-making and defines multimodality as the mixing of language and other semiotic resources in a communicative event. Emojis are semiotic resources able to both convey attitudinal meaning and play a pragmatic function within texts (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). Accordingly, the Social-Semiotic approach offers a framework based on the different levels of discourse semantics for analysing intermodal semiosis and unfolding the role played by emojis in construing discourses.

3.2. Corpus design: The *DisabiliTok* corpus

3.2.1. Participants

The *DisabiliTok Corpus* (as defined by the author) was retrieved from the TikTok platform. Specifically, the whole dataset belongs to a video posted by a famous amputee TikToker (@lil_fin_brooklynn is her TikTok handle where she has 164.3k followers), aged 18, and born with a rare defect called Proximal Focal Femoral Deficiency (PFFD) on her left side. The shortening of her femur, caused by the lack of a hip joint, made her knees of different lengths. Consequently, she underwent a rotationplasty surgery that made her left leg rotate 180 degrees, adjusting the length of her femur by creating a hip joint, while her foot now works as a base for her prosthetic. This surgery helped the girl perform activities she never did before, like running, walking up and down stairs, and playing soccer.

Her video was chosen for investigation among others because, at the time of

data collection, it showed the highest number of hearts and comments under the hashtag *#disabilityawareness* the researcher investigated through the searching bar.

The video, uploaded in October 2021, portrays the girl doing the so-called 'Little Lad Dance', a famous trend on TikTok at that time, derived from a series of Starburst[3] commercials, featuring a character called 'The Little Lad' who, in one of the commercials,[4] explains that when he was younger, and wanted berries and cream, his mother made him do the 'Little Lad Dance'.

The TikToker's video is evidently ironic and made with the purpose of raising awareness on disability issues, with the girl performing the dance without the prosthetic leg and a voluntary serious face, and her dog intruding in the room. The girl's profile is full of ironic TikToks on her condition, and there also are some videos telling her medical story. Indeed, on her bio, she describes herself as '1 ½ out of 2 legs are available 💪🤪', by using emojis as illocutionary force of the sentence they accompany, thus conveying what she really means: a strong (Flexed Biceps, 💪) girl who likes acting positive and having fun (Zany Face, 🤪) no matter the difficulties.

On the contrary, no demographic information could be gained from the writers of the hateful comments since, as already mentioned, *haters* tend to remain anonymous by using fake accounts and photos for their (often private) profiles.

3.2.2. Data collection

The data were collected from October to November 2021, constituting a total amount of 8,500 comments. Then, to make the data set ready for text processing, the researcher manually cleaned it by deleting those comments only mentioning a tag[5] (i.e., @blueflower). The outcome of this procedure is a multimodal corpus of a total amount of 4,032 comments (24,057 tokens) formed by: (a) text only, (b) text and emojis/emoticons, and (c) emojis only.

3.2.3. Data analysis

The corpus was then uploaded on *ATLAS.ti 22* to build a coding frame. *ATLAS.ti* is a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Content Analysis (CAQCAS) software that allows to graphically draw complex relations between data segments through coding. Qualitative data analysis requires skills and expertise being often a laborious process, especially when dealing with a large amount of data (Smith & Short, 2001). Accordingly, parents and child nodes were created while reading the content line-by-line through the bottom-up approach of inductive coding. This procedure for CAQCAS was chosen to provide a systematic, rigorous, and transparent analysis of data.

Through the coding analysis, the researcher created and developed the following axes of categories along which the author recognises DHS to move along in the *DisabiliTok Corpus*: (a) Dehumanisation, (b) Fauxapologies, (c) Gender interconnections and sexist-based issues, (d) Parental and religious stigmatisation, and (e) Comments about physical appearance. Apart from these, very few positive comments were coded under the category (f) Appreciation and similar stories.

During the coding process, the researcher took into account that the whole data set also comprises emoji-based comments. As a result, they were categorised according to the communicative purpose of the specific emoji based on the categories previously created.

After the identification of the themes, a CDA based on Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Discourse Studies (SCDA) (2014) was performed to analyse the linguistic and discursive structures that help highlight people's socio-culturally based assumptions, mental models, and ideologies towards disability displayed through the HSO directed to the TikToker. Moreover, Van Dijk's methodology was combined with basic corpus linguistics tools (e.g., word lists) (Baker et al., 2008) by using the corpus analysis toolkit *AntConc* (Anthony, 2005) and a Socio-Semiotic analysis of emojis drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) as proposed by Logi and Zappavigna (2021).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Dehumanisation

The majority of the hateful comments coded in *ATLAS.ti* are directed to the dehumanisation of the girl by metaphorically comparing her to diverse material and non-material elements. In particular, under the parent node 'dehumanisation', specific child nodes have been recognised that correspond to epithets haters used to refer to the TikToker, that is, 't-rex' (n = 1), 'flamingo' (n = 1), 'Deadpool' (n = 27), 'chicken heels/Royale High'[6] (n = 39), 'korblox (n = 293)/roblox (n = 136)', 'lepecorn' (n = 1), 'Lucifer' (n = 1), 'Titan' (n = 1), 'kickstand' (n = 3), 'tea pot' (n = 1), as in the following excerpts:

1. Lil lepercon
2. My little tea pot. Short and stout
3. She identifies as a flamingo. I thought i was away from berries and cream, but since a video brought me back im happy its this one. thank you. :)
4. half formed Titan things
5. hail lucifer

6. when you they spliced genes with a trex (jk)
7. It's a kickstand
8. Deadpool after Juggernaut ripped off his legs.
9. Looks like Deadpool with baby legs when his legs were trying to grow back
10. Totally gotta be half Deadpool
11. are you Deadpool?
12. The chicken heels from royal high?
13. Chicken heels in rh be like:
14. Chicken heels
15. Real life korblox
16. nice korblox!
17. Korblox
18. We love the korblox
19. dont worry, she just has korblox
20. Korblox 2.0

Even though some of these terms pertain to a negative semantic domain (e.g., Lucifer), others (e.g., flamingo, teapot) acquire a bad connotation according to their usage which unveil ascribed adverse features based on several stereotypes and representations. Accordingly, the general way in which haters employ them reflects the idea of the disabled person as an object to ridicule and make fun of, a still existing stereotype dating back to the 16th and 17th Centuries, especially during the Elizabethan era, when jestbooks were full of people with impairments portrayed as 'idiots' helpful to entertain the aristocracy (Korhonen, 2014).

The choice of words like 'teapot', 'kickstand', and 'chicken heels from Royale High' has the clear intention of degrading the girl by reducing her to an object without feelings while criticising her physical appearance: she is derogatorily defined as 'short and stout' like a teapot, her left feet compared to a kickstand through an exophoric reference with the pronoun 'it' (7), and her leg to a character customisation[7] that does not have a knee joint so that when walking the legs resemble the ones of a chicken.

The use of zoomorphic metaphors—a cognitive feature through which the image of an animal and its traits are assigned to a human being—such as 'chicken heels', 'flamingo', and 't-rex' reflects the connection between discourse, cognition, and society as they reinforce biases towards people who do not conform to the characteristics recognised as 'the normative': in this case, the dichotomy able-bodiedness/dis-abled represented through the thick legs of the animals. Indeed, the dominant ideology of our societies draws on the idea that human beings are superior to animals. Consequently, the comparison between the two acquires negative connotations, thus increasing

through language (i.e., animal metaphors) the gap between the in-group and the oppressed *Other* (Coviello & Borgerson, 1999).

Furthermore, in (3) the expressive speech act 'thank you :)' does not serve the purpose of positive greeting; instead, the smiley contributes to conveying a sarcastic attitudinal connotation (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021), whereas in (6) the writer uses the urban acronym 'jk' (i.e., just kidding) as a discourse structure to diminish the pragmatic force of the previous utterance, namely to mitigate its negative humour (Grant, 2011).

Apart from animals, another association enhancing and reinforcing the stigmatisation of disabled people is the connection to teratology, the study of the abnormal development of organisms. Indeed, since Greek and Roman times—when the standard of beauty was founded—people born with deformities were regarded as monsters (gr. τέρατα). For instance, Aristotle (1882) created a human/dwarf opposition considering dwarfs as creatures deviating from the extraordinary natural 'ability' of human beings and so perceived as inferior. This culturally-based assumption can be observed in the corpus through the association of the TikToker to a 'lil lepercorn' (1) (mythological short creatures resembling elves) or a 'half formed Titan' (4) by making reference to a deformed dreadful Manga character and reinforcing the idea of 'otherness' by adding the noun 'things', thus annihilating her human dignity.

Other references to abnormal creatures are 'korblox'[8] from 'roblox',[9] a magical, monstrous warrior whose right leg is artificial, and 'Deadpool' by indicating the homonym superhero designed by Marvel Comics alluding to the specific scene in which Deadpool's legs regenerate as 'baby legs'[10] after having been destroyed by another character.

The word 'korblox' shows the highest number of occurrences compared to the other child nodes, and it is often used in the corpus with an ironic tone by adding modifiers like 'real life' or creating oxymorons such as 'nice korblox'. As Logi and Zappavigna (2021) suggest, the use of semiotic resources like emojis often contributes to unfolding the meaning of the discourse: indeed, they enact at the same time "an ideational function of construing experience, an interpersonal function of enacting relationships and a textual function of organising discourse into a coherent text" (p. 6). In (17), the 'Flushed Face' and 'Pleading Face' encode interpersonal meaning through the discourse semantic system of 'attitude' by which evaluative meaning is displayed: the tone of the utterance is sarcastic and it is conveyed through the convergence of emojis and language where the two emojis show a positive appreciation for the ideational target 'korblox'.

This sarcastic appreciation is also exhibited in (18) by using the first-person

plural pronoun 'We' as a way to express identity (Fairclough, 1989) and create an opposition between in-groups and out-groups (i.e., *We* vs. *Them*) (Van Dijk, 2014). Throughout the corpus, speakers use the pronoun 'We' to create consensus, approval, and agreement with other users while distancing the target object (e.g., 'Can we see you with jeans on?'). Indeed, the discursive 'We' serves the double purpose of identifying the speaker with a specific community (e.g., the able-bodied) and contemporarily creating an identity for others (i.e., 'normal people') by excluding the target of the message (i.e., the disabled girl). In (18), by associating the able-bodied community ('We') with a verb pertaining to a positive semantic domain ('love'), the speaker mitigates the offense of comparing the girl to a 'korblox'. At the same time, the other users show consensus for this verbiage by *hearting*[11] the post and commenting on it with the internet slang expression 'LMFAO' (literally, Laughing My Fucking Ass Off)—meaning that they laughed so hard at the comment that their 'ass' fell off—to convey the highest degree of approval. Thus, the inclusive 'We' is employed to minimise the speaker's responsibility by pretending to be collaborating with the target of the message (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990). This use of pronouns reinforces stereotypes regarding the disabled person as different, lesser, and *Other* than *Us*.

The idea of the disabled as an evil creature and a villain is largely antecedent the Shakespearian portrayal of Richard III, and deeply rooted in the Mediaeval era when people with disabilities were subject of superstition and persecution. An utterance like 'hail lucifer' (5) can be understood only by placing it in the socio-cognitive dimension of the disabled as a Satan's product (an idea spread by the treatise *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486), the evident proof of his existence, and a punishment from God for having sinned, which made them the recipient of feelings of guilt and shame (Vincent-Connolly, 2021). Similar hateful utterances might still enact these types of emotions, especially if directed to vulnerable people with disabilities for not conforming to the standards of society.

4.2. Fauxapologies

Another discursive feature through which the author recognises HSO to unveil in the corpus is represented by *fauxapologies* or non-apologies or negative apologies. They are expressive speech acts presented as "face threatening for the speaker and face-saving for the addressee" (Wagner, 2004, p. 23), namely that even though they are constructed as apologies, they usually do not support the speaker's intentions (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Lee, 2021; Salmani Nodoushan, 2019), so that they are publicly perceived as insincere (Kampf, 2008). The TikToker received a high amount of fauxapologies (n = 92), among which:

1. Ok I'm sorry buh IM DEADDDDD ASGK 😭😭😭😭😭😭
2. Dude that looks so cool tho. sorry but everytime I see someone that is different than me is really so cool an you hear there stories on how an great 🥰
3. I'm sorry but this is so funny
4. Ok I'm sorry but sometimes it looks like a peg leg
5. i am so sorry but I laughed
6. I'm sorry for laughing
7. *Joke* she had the real korblox 🙄 sorry if offended
8. im so sorry that i laughed 😭😭
9. 😭😭😭
10. 😭😭😭😭

As the excerpts show, the addressers attempt to minimise their responsibility towards the addressee by manipulating the form of the apology through specific lexical choices such as the use of *sorry* instead of *apologise* that, conversely, would have marked the speakers' acceptance of their fault including a sense of regret about it (Bavelas, 2004). The choice of adding intensifiers like 'so' before *sorry* represents a type of modification of the apologetic strategy to further minimise the offence. Indeed, this negative politeness is reinforced through the use of prepositions (i.e., for), conjunctions (i.e., but, if), and that-clauses introducing an implicit (e.g., in 3) or explicit (e.g., in 4, the slang 'peg leg') insult in which the TikToker is blamed for the verbal abuses. Furthermore, capitalisation has been recognised as embedding a communicative function marking, for instance, prosodic features like intonation and volume or sentiments (Vandergriff, 2013). In (1), capital letters are used to emphasise the slang 'I'm dead', to convey the idea of the video to be extremely funny so that the speaker 'has died laughing'. Both in (1) and (8), the 'Loudly Crying Face' placed at the end of the sentences interacts with the verbiages 'sorry', 'dead', and 'laugh' pointing its attitudinal meaning by construing 'affect' (i.e., emotional states as described by Logi and Zappavigna (2021)), thus enhancing the intention of the speaker of minimising its guilt. The same occurs in (9) and (10), where attitude is constructed through the discourse semantic system of 'graduation' (which upscales/downscales attitude) (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021) through the repetition of the facial expression.

The use of fauxapologies shows the transition from 'free speech' to 'hate speech' and reveals the attitudes towards people with disabilities as the target of pitiable sentiments and derogatory humour, mostly lying on the taken-for-granted assumption and social belief of the superiority of the able-bodied (Tarvainen, 2019). In (7), the addresser employs the satirical defensive excuse '*joke*' at the beginning of the utterance as a way to further reinforce the non-

apology construction placed at its end, and avoid culpability for the negative humour of comparing the girl to a 'korblox'. Indeed, humour has been recognised (e.g., *The Superiority Theory of Humour* by Charles Gruner (2017)) as a strategy of aggression to stereotype communities by creating a distance between the sender and the receiver of the humorous instances and exerting power over them with the aim of feeling superior and stronger than them (Balirano, 2007).

4.3. Gender interconnections and sexist-based issues

Sexist hate speech is, unfortunately, a daily phenomenon that SMSs have contributed to amplifying (Council of Europe, 2022). Researchers (Balderston, 2013) have underlined that women belonging to minority groups are far more exposed to experiencing this type of violence than their able-bodied counterparts due to the interconnection between various forms of discrimination based on different stereotypes which lead to intersectional hateful discourses that perpetuate gender inequalities. Several offensive comments have been coded concerning this matter, among which:

1. I know the perfect fella for you . .
2. WAIT THERES A DUDE WITH A SIMILAR LEG DEFECT (sorry if thats the wrong say to say it) AND ITS SO COOL TO SEE SOMEONE ELSE
3. Dang. You're every guys type. Tall or short
4. I KNOW JUST THE GUY FOR YOU
5. There is a guy on here on tiktok that has the same thing.
6. there's this other guy on tiktok that I just know you'd love lmfao anyone else know who I'm talking about 💀
7. I actually got the perfect guy for you I see him on here all the time
8. Omg you and the other guy have the same tik tok! Have you guys met!? I forget his name
9. she already on her knee for u

All of these utterances unveil deep-rooted mental models about both women and disability. In particular, (3) and (9) are sexually evaluative comments construed through offensive sexist humor: the speakers sexually objectify the female body that has to be valued and used by men according to their desire. These utterances rely upon the idea (belonging to patriarchal societies) that women have an inferior status and priority of any type should be given to men. This belief can have a profound impact on women's lives since it may lead to inequality in relationships where the partner-objectification relegates the woman to the role of a physical object rather than a human being with feelings and emotions, which may also have negative outcomes on women's mental health with a consequent anxiety about their physical appearance

(Zurbriggen et al., 2011). When the 'objectification' viewpoint interconnects with taken-for-granted assumptions about disability, intersectional discriminatory discourses emerge: in (3), 'you're every guys type' is a sexist-based comment that might address any women. Nevertheless, by adding the adjectives 'tall or short', the speaker is making clear reference to the TikToker's leg, implicitly disclosing the belief according to which people with disabilities are sexually abnormal, unattractive, and undesirable (Dunn, 2019; Pazhoohi et al., 2021), thus far from the social standards of 'beauty' and what constitutes a 'real woman'. In this way, the body becomes the visible symbol of a society that has constructed and spread a narration of women and people with disabilities as inferior beings (Bauman & Briggs, 1990).

The other utterances, sometimes introduced by elements of surprise signalled by exclamations like 'omg' or 'wait', reveal the general idea of people with impairments as an out-group having the same needs and interests and that can only date and have sexual relationships with other people with disabilities: e.g., in (1), 'I know the perfect fella for you..'. To emphasise this concept, some speakers (e.g., 2 and 4) used capitalisation to get the audience's attention or phrases like '. . . you'd love' (6) (making reference to another disabled guy) by producing a persuasive speech act (Hardin, 2010).

These discriminatory behaviours only contribute to unconsciously naming what is 'normal' and 'abnormal', enhancing the discrepancy between *Us* and *Them* and the stigma that people with impairments have not full identities but can only be defined by their disability which prevents them from effective integration into a community's social life.

4.4. Parental and religious stigmatisation

The relationship between disability and religion has always been a problematic one since the latter is conceived, on one side, as the primary origin of ableism, whereas, on the other side, as a helpful tool to assist and comfort people with impairments (Idler & Kasl, 1997; Mitchell & Snyder, 2003). In the *DisabiliTok Corpus*, religious-based comments help to identify embodied viewpoints on disability issues:

1. Were your parents siblings?
2. Jesus loves you
3. So God just forgot to add a thigh? He must've been faded 😂😂
4. God put this one together with ikea instruction
5. Maybe God nerfed you for a reason 😳
6. Damn there was a paper jam when God printed you 🤐

As previously mentioned, disability is often connected to God for multiple

reasons. Indeed, in both the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*, it is portrayed as a disease and the result of God's punishment for having sinned or transgressed. For instance, in (5) the author of the comment uses the American-based informal verb 'nerfed' (generally associated to objects) to indicate that God has decided to 'deprive [the girl] from power' (thus, making her dis-abled) 'for some reason'. The 'Flushed Face' emoji is *cumulative*, being placed at the end of the utterance after linguistic resources, and it encompasses an attitudinal connotation, thus conveying interpersonal meaning. In particular, it does not serve its traditional purpose of realising positive shyness and timidity (Emojipedia, 2019) but embodies the negative polarity of shock and ironic embarrassment for the girl, through which the speaker also implies that she should not have posted a similar video. Nevertheless, the speaker tries to mitigate the offence by choosing a discourse marker of probability at the beginning of the utterance (i.e., 'maybe') in the attempt of sounding less direct and rude.

The concept of 'the perfect body' has always been prominent in Western cultures (Negrin, 2008) evoking the image of a free-from-defects, regular, 'normal' body. One common view is that our physical bodies are the symbol of God's glory and his manifestation through us: "So God created mankind in his own image | in the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1:27). This religious-based belief, when used as a hateful strategy, relegates people with impairments in a subordinate position, as if any type of congenital condition would denote that something is 'wrong' with the person, a God's mistake while creating the 'perfect' human being. In (6), the American curse word 'Damn' is used ironically to emphasise the sarcastic meaning of the utterance conveyed through the lexical choices 'paper jam' and 'printed'—belonging to the computer lexicon—to indicate that there must have been a 'malfunction' when God created the girl. The cumulative emoji 'Face with Hand Over Mouth' signals the attitude of the speaker to mislead the TikToker since it serves the function of a fauxapology, as it suggests a fake embarrassment mixed with a laughter.

The same viewpoint of the disabled body as a 'mistake' can be found in (3) in which the writer uses the slang term 'faded' to claim that God was so 'high or drunk' that he forgot to give the girl another leg. Also, the repetition of the 'Face with Tears of Joy' at the end of the utterance is meant to show the degree to which the author appreciates its own offensive irony (i.e., it upscales the written part of the utterance). Also, in (4) the writer uses the IKEA metaphor with a negative connotation to state that the girl's body was constructed by following IKEA instructions, thus meaning that when 'assembling' her something was missed. This offensive metaphor can be understood by making reference to IKEA assembly instructions that are

generally made up only by images, so that the buyer has to interpret them, and during the process some elements might be left aside.

Also, in (2) the slang expression 'Jesus loves you' does not serve its common function of salutation and greeting in everyday life as used in the USA context neither it conveys the affective and compassionate meaning of 'God is always by your side'. Instead, it represents a misleading statement carrying a sarcastic implicature. Indeed, often hate speech is silent, in the sense that it is not made explicit by the semantics of the content of an utterance and can be deciphered only through context-specific inference. In this case, the speaker means that Jesus loves the girl 'despite her differences', a type of HS that has already been directed, for instance, towards another minority group, namely homosexuals (Hitch, 2019).

Finally, the question in (1) helps to reveal another mental model about disability that contributes to its stigmatisation: that is, the belief according to which impairments are the result of consanguinity. As a matter of fact, medical investigations have often underlined that parental consanguinity can be linked to genetic diseases but scientific discoveries should not become the base for deprecatory behaviours. Nevertheless, in Western societies, where marriages between people having the same blood is not common, this view has led to the idea that people with disabilities are mistakes or the outcome of a mistake. These socio-religious-based prejudices contribute to enhancing discriminatory attitudes towards disabled people.

4.5. Comments about physical appearance

A considerable number of comments in the *DisabiliTok Corpus* consists of offensive sarcastic criticism specifically directed to the TikToker's leg which reveal how daily life can be difficult for people with disabilities due to stereotypes. The following excerpts have been chosen to exemplify the discourse identified by the author around physical disability:

1. You'd be a good ballerina
2. If you had a real leg you would be beautiful
3. "How tall are you?" "Sometimes"
4. "How tall are you?" "which side?"
5. "How tall are you?" "Well, on a good day . . ."
6. "How tall are you?" "Depends on my mood"
7. Wait . . . you have two different heights
8. When the game gives you the option to change your height in the game
9. Her leg didn't fully load in
10. Her leg stopped downloading at 20%

11. Her leg forgot the update
12. Parts are still updating
13. is this just me or does she have the cutest disability I have ever seen in my entire life
14. The small foot cute
15. You need a caregiver

Marginalisation of people with disabilities can be promoted in several ways, one of which is defining people for their disability, thus avoiding looking at them as human beings having feelings and emotions. Concerning physical disability, this view enhances the idea according to which people with disabilities not only have 'abnormal' bodies (i.e., deviating from the 'norm') but also, they are not 'able' to perform typical activities as able-bodied (Saltes, 2013). For instance, in (1) and (2) the writers choose the modality system to express their own opinions about the TikToker's disability: the use of 'would' reflects the speakers' underlying ideology of the disabled as a person *unable* to take part in social activities (1) (i.e., being a *ballerina*) and who is unattractive (2). In particular, in (1) the speech act comprises an implicature which is made explicit by the if-clause in (2) where the speaker also employs the adjective 'real' to communicate the idea of the 'natural' body as the sole expression of beauty.

Moreover, humour in the form of negative jokes is used by writers to criticise the girl's physical appearance and ridicule her on the basis of her impairment (e.g., from 3 to 8). The intention of these comments is to humiliate the TikToker by making clear reference to her height due to the shortening of her leg, treating her condition as a 'game', thus showing any kind of compassion for it being the result of a serious medical problem.

Sometimes, humour is employed by haters to enhance their own self-esteem, thus gaining a sense of superiority that grows by disparaging the targeted group. In the comments from (9) to (12), the semantic choices made by the writers pertain to the computer lexicon (i.e., load in, download, update) and are used negatively to metaphorically indicate the act of 'shaping up' the girl's leg. These semantic choices are a symbol of the power that some people exert through language over other people (Fairclough, 1989) that can, on one side, enhance existing stereotypes but, on the other side, have a serious impact on the development of people with impairments' self-image, self-consciousness, and ideas of inferiority.

Furthermore, comments from (13) to (15) reveal intrinsic attitudes and myths towards people with disabilities. One common ableist view is treating and considering them as 'eternal children'. The function of the adjective 'cute' (even in its superlative form) is not 'making a compliment' but a way of

perpetuating their *infantilisation*, increasing the viewpoint of the disabled as always deserving pity. The act of addressing the audience instead of the target of the message (14) represents another strategy of assuming the person with impairments having a lower cognitive development than the able-bodied. Also, the representative speech act in (15) expresses the view of the disabled as an *incapable* being. The writer employs the semi-modal *need* with the aim of mitigating the *necessity* for the girl to rely upon a 'caregiver'. This derogatory comment unveils the attitude of conceiving people with impairments as unable to take care for themselves and in the need of a continuous assistance which usually leads to exclusion and lack of access to social activities.

4.6. Appreciation and similar stories

During the analysis of the corpus, a surprising aspect was the incredibly high number of people sharing the same hateful attitudes and low number of comments supporting and/or appreciating the TikToker, thus understanding her primary aim of using a funny trend to raise awareness on disability issues:

1. Good on you being confident enough!! This is awesome! I hope you raise awareness!!
2. You have way way more confidence than me!! I got the same surgery in 2018!!
3. I respect you so much for this
4. You're beautiful
5. Much love
6. I love that u can laugh and make light of ur situation. I'm an amputee and I'm the same way. PPl can't take themselves so seriously all the time
7. You win this trend!!!
8. I love your vibe

Some people—e.g., those having the same impairment—compliment her for the 'courage' of being so confident to show herself in front of a wide audience with her disability. Indeed, they thank her for the attempt of raising awareness on the matter and describe her choice using positive adjectival expressions such as 'This is awesome' or 'Good on you', stative verbs of feelings and emotions like 'love', and lexical items belonging to the semantic domain of positive attitude as 'respect' and 'win'.

Despite their small occurrence rate in the corpus, these positive emotional responses to the TikToker's video contrast the discriminatory counterpart directly supporting the girl (e.g., 7 and 8) without the need of answering to, attacking, and degrading the authors of the hateful comments, thus playing a

part in challenging the still existing prejudices and hostility toward people with disabilities.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyse a particular form of HSO, namely Disability Hate Speech on SMSs to understand how people use language to exert power over other people, thus contributing to stigmatising people with disabilities. To this end, a corpus of online comments on the TikTok platform was collected and analysed by relying upon Van Dijk's (1996; 2014) Socio-Cognitive Studies and the Social-Semiotic approach by Logi and Zappavigna (2021) that provide consistent frameworks for the analysis of (digital) discourses at their intersection between the social and the cognitive dimension.

Despite few positive comments (i.e., the category the author called 'Appreciation and similar stories'), the results show that the majority of the language instances in the *DisabiliTok Corpus* are in the form of offensive speech acts. Within the categories recognised and developed by the researcher (i.e., Dehumanisation, Fauxapologies, Gender interconnections and sexist-based issues, Parental and Religious stigmatisation, Comments about physical appearance), the author also identified that people used, among other discursive structures, especially negative metaphors, fauxapologies, sarcasm, derogatory irony, and the attitudinal and semantic meaning of the semiotic resource of emojis towards the TikToker to intentionally humiliate and ridicule her, thus perpetuating negative behaviours against people with disabilities in general. The critical analysis of the specific lexical and verbal choices of the writers of the comments targeting the girl has unveiled their culturally-based hidden ideologies and attitudes that enhance the way in which societies perceive people with disabilities, consequently increasing the disparagement between what is considered to be 'normal', 'perfect', 'beautiful' and what is regarded as 'abnormal', 'imperfect', 'ugly'.

Even though SMSs guidelines (TikTok 2022a; 2022b) and European Regulations (Council of Europe, 2017) continuously attempt to limit the spreading of hate crimes both online and offline towards minority groups, much still needs to be done to contribute to arresting the phenomenon. To that end, linguistic research can provide insightful considerations for effective social practice. Nevertheless, researchers (Grue, 2011) have underlined the lack of investigations on disability in discourse-focused studies. As a consequence, this paper has hopefully aimed to shed new light on DHS in particular and discursive social-media analyses in general, and contribute to the emerging literature of studies on disability at its intersection between the discourse and social dimension.

Notes

1. *Gen Z* is one of the social media acronyms created to indicate what has been defined as Generation Z, a cohort of people born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s, known for devoting a great amount of time to the internet and SMSs in general.
2. *Duets* are one of TikTok features. If someone wishes to join a video they like, the only thing to do is tapping on the share button, then the 'duet' feature appears and once clicked on it, the screen is split in half and the two videos get combined.
3. A company selling Berries and Cream fruit candies.
4. For more information on 'The Little Lad' and his dance, please visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGGA74Ie0aQ
5. *Tagging* someone on SMSs means identifying a specific person in a post, image/photo, video, or status update to mention or share it with them.
6. *Royale High* is a fantasy high school role-playing game whose main characters are fairies and princesses and it is accessed through the Roblox platform.
7. *Royale High Chicken Heels* is the name given to a specific character customisation in the homonym game. An example can be seen at the following link: https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/royale-high/images/8/80/Wedges_In_Wonderland.png/revision/latest?cb=20200220010405
8. *Korblox* is the name of four magical Kingdoms on the Roblox platforms. In this case, the image of the Korblox character to which haters are referring to can be accessed at the following link: https://i.pinimg.com/originals/78/55/09/785509588037fc9f5d2175101ea73183.png
9. The aforementioned gaming platform where virtual worlds of different types can be created.
10. The image of Deadpool's baby legs can be accessed at the following link: https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DmiPFysW4AEJE0k.jpg
11. *Hearting* a comment on TikTok means liking it through the heart icon.

The Author

Annalisa Raffone (Email: araffone@unior.it) is currently adjunct professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and the University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli" (Italy). She received her Ph.D. *cum laude* and the title of *Doctor Europaeus* in *Digital Storytelling* and *Digital Gaming for EFL* at "L'Orientale". Her Ph.D. project was funded by MIUR (Italian Ministry of University and Research) under the PON Research and Innovation Program (PON R&I) 2014-2020 "Innovative Industrial Doctorates". Her

research work lies in the field of Digital Humanities, currently working on Critical Discourse Studies, social media, hate speech, disability discourse, TEFL, gamification, and digital learning environments. Among her recent publications, the book chapter *Digital Storytelling in Education and Second Language Acquisition: Towards a Theoretical Framework* edited by Peter Lang (2020), and the upcoming book *Digital Storytelling and Digital Gaming in the 21st Century: Narratives and Practices in today's EFL Classroom* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing).

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Shame, discrimination and disability: Unveiling narratives of obesity

Roxanne H. PADLEY, Department of Humanities, University of Salerno, Italy[1]

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) defines obesity as those who have a Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30. In 2016, the WHO registered more than 1.9 billion adults on a global scale as being obese (WHO, 2021). The consequences of obesity have a wide-reaching impact on the individual as well as healthcare systems. Many obese people develop greater and more serious physical pathologies not to mention psychological ones, and therefore obesity is classified as a disability in this case. Obese people often cannot work, are victims of online hate speech, are ill represented in the press and become ostracised by society. The aim of this study was to examine narratives of obesity, discrimination and disability using corpus-based discourse analysis. First-hand narratives were collected from online support forums over a ten-year period using the search terms obesity*, disability* discrimination*, stigma* and shame*. Results show the extent to which obesity is stigmatised by the general public as well as by some healthcare providers.

Keywords: Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis; Disability; Discrimination; Obesity; Stigma

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) provides a definition of obesity whereby adults who have a Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30 are classified as obese. Indeed, in 2016 1.9 billion adults were classified as being overweight and of these, 650 million adults were obese, accounting for approximately 13% of the world's adult population (WHO, 2021). It was also estimated that 38.2 million children under the age of 5 years were overweight or obese in 2019 indicating a gradual rise of overweightness and obesity in children (WHO, 2021). Nations with higher rates of obesity have mainly been located in developed countries with particularly high rates in the USA and UK. The USA registered 42.4% of adults as being obese (Centers for Disease

[1] Department of Medicine, Surgery and Dentistry, University of Salerno, Italy
Department of Agriculture, University of Sassari, Italy

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Control and Prevention, 2021) while in the UK, 28% of adults are registered as obese (Houses of Commons Library, 2021). While the issue continues to be of relevance in developed countries, overweightness and obesity are now also on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, particularly within urban settings (WHO, 2021).

The consequences of rising rates of obesity have a wide-reaching impact both on an individual level as well as on national healthcare systems, particularly due to the fact that obesity can lead to many other serious pathologies such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders and even some cancers (Apovian, 2016). For low- and middle-income countries this presents a double-ended crisis as, while on one hand, there are still many issues of infectious diseases and undernutrition, urban settings have also seen a significant rise in overweight and obesity rates (WHO, 2021). Therefore, challenges for the prevention of obesity are extensive and many nations are undertaking a variety of initiatives in order to encourage and foster healthier lifestyles (in the hope of reducing obesity). There is much argument that obesity is largely caused by individual choice and, on the whole, preventable (WHO, 2021). However, there is also much evidence that obesity is linked to genetic factors which (1) are much more challenging to deal with and (2) are not solely linked to healthy or unhealthy lifestyles (Thaker, 2017).

2. Background

2.1. Obesity and weight stigma

Obesity has been identified as an increasing area of health concern on a global scale both in adults and in children. While it is undeniable the importance that nations should place on promoting healthy lifestyles and providing physical and psychological support for overweight and obese individuals, it is also undisputable that there is a great deal of stigma which surrounds the topic of obesity. This stigma is not only limited to individual beliefs and households but can be found online, in the media and even within healthcare contexts (Puhl & Heuer, 2009) leading to wide-reaching consequences particularly connected to body shaming and/or fat shaming as well as alimenting feelings of isolation, loneliness and discrimination (Brewis et al., 2011).

Scientific studies have shown that the societal increase in weight stigma could be harmful to overweight and obese individuals' health overall (Tomiyama et al., 2018). Indeed, their study linked weight stigma to higher rates of mortality, chronic diseases and conditions and, ironically, it also appears to increase the risk of obesity through various obesogenic pathways. Weight stigma is defined as "social rejection and devaluation that accrues to those who do not comply with prevailing social norms of adequate body weight and shape" (Tomiyama et al., 2018, p. 1). Compliance with social norms and

appropriate body weight and shape is arguably debatable, as the media already promotes an "acceptable" image of body weight, shape and beauty. From a scientific perspective, this image could be considered as falling within the healthy BMI range, despite the fact that this would not entirely correspond to the body-image canons that society and the media currently promote (in many cases likely represented by underweight BMI ranges).

The question of an acceptable weight for society and therefore significant stigma related to overweight and obese individuals has a clear correlation to being overweight and being discriminated against. A classic study carried out in the USA in the 1950s demonstrated the probable beginnings of such discrimination when children were asked to classify who they would likely play with based on photographs, and the obese child always ranked last (Richardson et al., 1961). Such discrimination has been proven to continue within many social spheres in other studies (e.g., Andreyeva et al., 2008; Brewis et al., 2011) as well as being identified as more prevalent regarding women (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012) in terms of education, work and the media to name but a few. What is more, weight and obesity stigma has also been identified within the healthcare sector, with healthcare providers acknowledging an anti-fat bias within their working environment (Puhl & Heuer, 2009).

Therefore, while it is paramount that obese individuals, whose health is at risk, reduce their weight in order to improve their overall health, it would seem that ironically (at least in some cases) healthcare providers themselves may very well be contributing to weight issues. Indeed, Tomiyama et al. (2018) posit that the anti-fat bias that would appear to be present in healthcare systems is leading to patients receiving poorer care and worse outcomes on the whole. Furthermore, while it is believed by some that social pressure on obese individuals should encourage them to lose weight, other studies show that this very pressure likely leads to an increase in stigma, higher stress and increased eating (Major et al., 2014; Schvey et al., 2011). This very same weight stigma can also lead to serious effects on mental health (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009) impacting on successful weight loss and alimenting the vicious cycle already well engrained in an obese individual's treatment care plan.

2.2. Discursive representation of obesity in the public domain

A prolific arena for unveiling narratives surrounding obesity can undoubtedly be identified as being that of the media. Media outlets are instant, available online and constantly updated and evolving. The ways in which obesity has been framed discursively in the media have been investigated relatively extensively in literature (Baker et al., 2020; Brookes & Baker, 2021; Seale,

2003). Of particular note is a study by Atanasova et al. (2012) which identified three key areas of predominance in terms of obesity narratives. The first indicates that obesity is portrayed in the media through the bio-medical framework whereby obesity is identified as a disease with potential treatments and remedies (as with other diseases) that include clinical and/or surgical approaches. The second is narratives surrounding society's responsibility whereby institutional responsibility is foregrounded in the media (i.e., governments and manufacturers are those who enable conditions for the development of obesity). The third category includes discourses which are framed around individual responsibility, i.e., choices made by individuals regarding their diet and lifestyles are those which most heavily contribute to obesity. What was of note within the three categories is that the media placed the greatest dominance on the third category and therefore that obesity is first and foremost represented discursively as an individual "choice."

The power of the media is extensive and in many cases moulds societal opinion on certain topics and ideologies (Gerbner et al., 1986) and, while it must also reflect public opinion, repeated images and information dissemination throughout time can affect how an audience perceives a particular topic. The previous linguistic studies, which show that the press focus most on obesity as an individual choice and responsibility (Atanasova et al., 2012), mean that ultimately this is a powerful message which is likely to reach the general public and become ingrained within their sentiments. Arguably, this in turn augments feelings of resentment towards obese individuals who "are responsible" for their own physical state and likely discrimination which could be manifested in a number of ways.

Further investigation into the discourses which surround personal responsibility, as represented in the press, concluded that obesity has been framed as a moral failing by the individual (Baker et al., 2020; Brookes & Baker, 2021; Seale, 2003). The findings put forward by Brookes & Baker (2021), in particular, demonstrate that these discourses were particularly major in newspapers with a right political alignment (more so in tabloids) and stigmatising and jesting language were also frequently employed in such contexts. As previously mentioned, the power of the media is far-reaching (Fairclough, 1995) and the tendency to repeat concepts such as these is what likely leads to weight stigma (Puhl & Heuer, 2009) and in some cases adversely impacts on the lives of those who live with obesity.

The stigma surrounding individual representation in the press is also emphasised through the frequent declaration that individuals can simply address weight difficulties through adjusting their lifestyles and by undertaking healthy eating (Farrell et al., 2016). Therefore, the literature surrounding narratives on obesity in the press would seem to indicate there is

much shame being placed on the individual and that there is much less recognition of obesity as a disease, which requires medical treatment as any other disease would.

2.3. Obesity as a disability

From a medical and scientific perspective, obesity is a recognised pathology with appropriate treatment protocols and pathways that healthcare providers may undertake for the individual patient. While there are several pathologies which are classified as disabilities, the public realm (and to a certain extent the scientific field) have some difficulty recognising that, in some cases, obesity itself can also be considered as a disability.

However, in 2014, the European Court of Justice ruled that obesity can constitute a disability within the employment equality directive (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2014). Therefore, from a legal perspective, obesity can be considered as a disability when the health condition (i.e., obesity) impedes an individual from carrying out their job due to a physical impediment. From a medical perspective, as previously mentioned, obesity can lead to a variety of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes mellitus, coronary heart disease (heart attack), vascular diseases (stroke), hypertension, metabolic syndrome, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, certain types of cancers (endometrial cancer, colorectal cancer, kidney cancer, gallbladder cancer, prostate cancer and breast cancer), reproductive issues and also psychosocial problems. These can also lead to premature death. The comorbidities associated with obesity can be directly associated and classified as disabilities dependent on their gravity and appropriate evaluation of such. Indeed, overweight and obese people often have limitations in everyday functioning and one of the leading causes of disability is the impairment of the musculoskeletal system (Anandacoomarasamy et al., 2008) caused by excessive weight (e.g., chronic back pain). This can then lead to a vicious cycle whereby a sedentary lifestyle contributes to obesity and this in turn exacerbates disability (Piechota et al., 2005).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore how discrimination, stigma and disability related to obesity are represented through shared narratives in online support forums. The study investigates all of these topics by examining the extent to which disability is framed within the context of obesity and how this is linked to shame and discrimination.

3. Method

Corpus software analysis enables the researcher to adopt a more scientific and quantitative approach to analysis while also making it possible to analyse corpora on a large scale (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). This methodology of

quantitative linguistic analysis is often integrated with other methodological approaches, more recently resulting in a triangulated approach to analysis (Egbert & Baker, 2020). Combining discourse analysis and corpus analysis (i.e., corpus-based discourse analysis) makes it possible to adopt both a quantitative and qualitative approach to analysing language. Although Leech (2000, p. 678) indicates that there is a "cultural divide" between both approaches, as discourse analysis places greater focus on content expressed by language and corpus linguistics is more interested in language per se, Partington (2004) posits that the two methods together are indeed complementary.

Furthermore, as stated by Flowerdew (2012) through an adaptation of Hyland's (2009) proposed categories, corpus-based discourse analysis tends to be approached in three main veins (textual, critical, and contextual):

- Textual approaches tend to look at language choices, meaning and patterns including notions of genre (Swales, 2004)
- Critical approaches imply the adoption of criticality (as used in critical discourse analysis) as well as others
- Contextual analyses adopt more of a sociolinguistic approach drawing on situational factors (e.g., conversation analysis and pragmatics) [Flowerdew, 2012, p. 175]

Therefore, a more critical corpus-based discourse methodology was adopted for this analysis as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of the narratives and potential discourses of shame outlined in the corpus. Van Dijk (2015) suggests that in general terms, the majority of people have active control over their talk in their everyday lives whereas they are passive targets of public texts (i.e., mass media and other authorities). Furthermore, the interpretation of discourses regarding specific events (i.e., the social phenomena of obesity) consists in the construction of a subjective model regarding the situation (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 472) but the power of persuasion that mass media holds cannot be underestimated. Indeed, Fairclough (1995, p. 54) states that "the hidden power of media discourse and the capacity of . . . power-holders to exercise this power depend on systematic tendencies in news reporting and other media activities . . . the effects of media are cumulative." Therefore, critical discourse corpus-based analysis was selected for this study due to the multifaceted possibilities that it may reveal in terms of power balances, discrimination as well as information dissemination regarding obesity.

3.1. Participants

The support forums selected consist of one from the UK and one from the USA. The latter is Obesity UK, and the former is entitled Obesity Action

Coalition. During the timespan established, forum posts were collected on topics related to the abovementioned seed words (obesity, shame, stigma, discrimination, disability) spanning over a ten-year period (November 2011-November 2021). The forums were filtered using the available search functions in order to identify discourses of obesity in general and then the specific topic areas under scrutiny. All of the comments selected had to contain at least one of the seed words. The comments were extracted and cleaned for corpus analysis. The two websites were chosen as they are comparable non-profit organisations from both nations.

3.2. Corpus collection

The analysis was carried out using the corpus linguistic software programme *#LancsBox* (Brezina et al., 2020). The first function applied was that of searching for salient terms identified from a wordlist, creating a quantitative analysis and then extrapolating the corresponding concordance lines from the relevant keyword in context (KWIC) for qualitative analysis. An overview of the high salient terms was investigated in order to provide a snapshot of the main discursive features in the corpus, followed by a specific examination of the topics of discrimination, stigma and disability.

Searching for frequency within a corpus can be an indicator of markedness (Baker, 2010) and these frequency counts "can be used (with supporting contextual information or additional information) in order to uncover evidence for bias" (Baker, 2010, p. 127). The frequencies of the seed words obesity*, shame*, discrimination*, stigma* or disability* were analysed quantitatively, and collocation analysis was carried out. The co-occurrence of the KWIC within +/- 5 spaces of left and right alignment was analysed. These concordances made it possible to study the relevance of the context as well as the relevance of the recurrence. Indeed, Baker (2010, p. 132) states that "perhaps the most useful corpus-based analytical process for the computer-assisted analysis of discourse is the concordance or keyword in context."

4. Results and analysis

4.1. Corpus overview

The initial corpus analysis involved generating a wordlist with the frequency types and lemmas within the corpus. The benefit of this quantitative approach is that it provides an overview of the terms with the highest saliency, which may then indicate the direction to pursue in terms of analysis as guided by the corpus. Analysis revealed that the USA corpus was smaller than the UK corpus with a total of 6,697 word tokens for the former and 10,016 word tokens for the latter. This gave an overall word token count of 16,713. Therefore, the corpus itself can be considered as a relatively small and specialised corpus as

only two major forum websites were taken into consideration. However, further investigation into frequency of terms as well as collocation analysis led to intriguing findings.

4.2. Word frequency and key discourses

The absolute and relative dispersions of word frequencies were calculated for the two corpora combined. There were a total of 3,056 types and 2,818 lemmas. Table 1 shows the absolute and relative frequencies of the words as generated by *#LancsBox* 6.0, with the key topic areas highlighted in bold.

Table 1
Word Frequency for both UK and USA Corpora

Type	Absolute frequency (Relative frequency)	Dispersion (CV)
I	677 (405.074)	0.029
the	496 (296.775)	0.005
weight	135 (80.775)	0.234
people	78 (46.670)	0.007
health	50 (29.917)	0.121
body	49 (29.318)	0.299
food	43 (25.728)	0.490
feel	42 (25.130)	0.251
eat	31 (18.548)	0.637
obesity	30 (17.950)	0.813
surgery	29 (17.352)	0.953
take	29 (17.352)	0.119
work	29 (17.352)	0.231
diet	28 (16.753)	0.421
help	27 (16.155)	0.561
overweight	26 (15.557)	0.046
disability	24 (14.663)	0.258
shame	23 (14.534)	0.356
stigma	22 (14.256)	0.599
discrimination	21 (13.989)	0.764

Edited and reduced to demonstrate the key topic areas. The key terms for further investigation are highlighted in bold. (Table partially generated by *#LancsBox* Wizard Tool).

As can be seen in Table 1, the word with the highest frequency is the first-person pronoun 'I' (*n* = 677). Considering the origin of the corpora, this is not a surprising finding as the forums being investigated provide first-hand narratives through sharing individual stories and as such, these stories are told, on the whole, from a personal and first-person experience.

Other high-frequency terms of note (which were not the direct focus of this study but provide an overview of important discursive features) include 'weight' (*n* = 135), 'health' (*n* = 50) and 'body' (*n* = 49). The objective of these support forums is of course, as described in the title, that of providing community support to the members of the group through shared experiences. The high frequency of such terms was therefore expected, particularly as obesity is an issue of health as well as an issue of weight. Furthermore, how the participants engaged and viewed themselves within their own bodies was also of interest. In order to provide an overview of the ways in which these three terms were used within the forums, a keyword in context (KWIC) search reveals the following examples:

*Carrying excess body **weight** can increase the risk of serious health.*

*. . . prescription drugs for chronic **weight** management.*

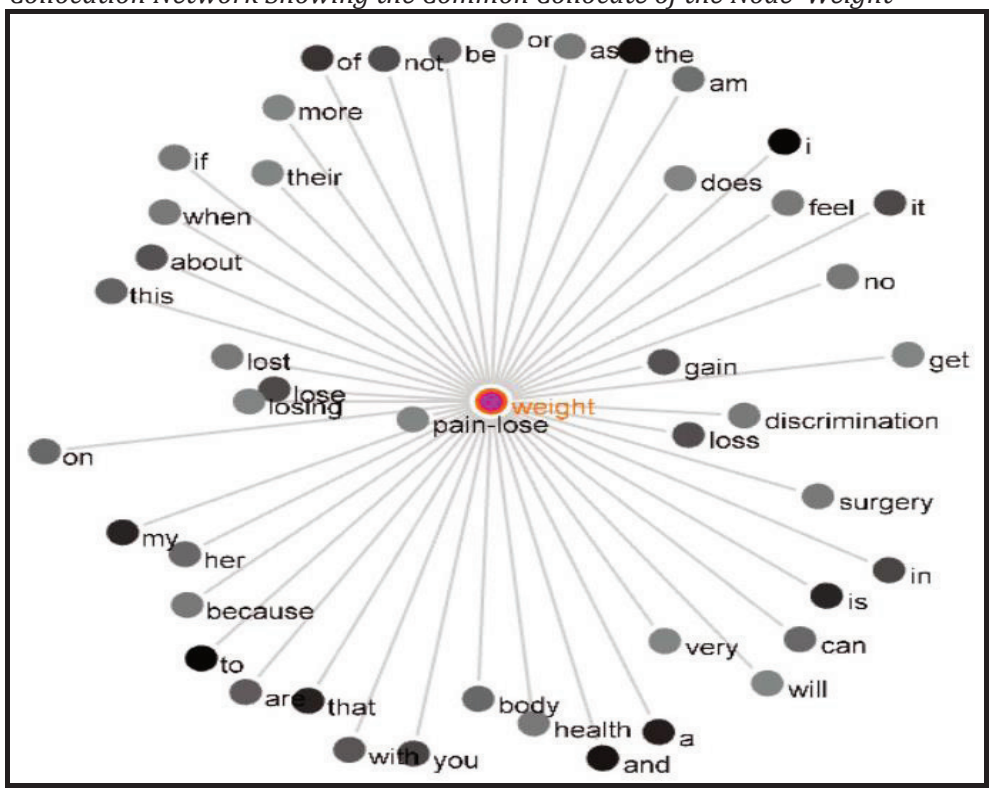
*Without these **weight** loss tools I feel my health will continue to be affected.*

*Certain **weight** loss strategies can target belly fat.*

What can be ascertained from these qualitative examples is the recognition by the forum members that weight is the issue which needs to be addressed either because it represents a risk to health (as in the first example whereby weight is qualified by the adjectival description of excess body which precedes it), or that it needs to be managed or maintained as illustrated in the second example. The collocation of 'weight loss', as shown in the final two examples, would appear to represent the greatest challenge represented by the forum members and which is extensively discussed. A collocation analysis of the term 'weight' produced the collocation network as illustrated in Figure 1.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the strongest collocates of the node 'weight' are that of lose/losing/loss as well as gain. The collocation network is representative of the recurring topic of discussion within the support forums in both nations and also includes the other key topics of 'body' and 'health' as can be seen at the bottom of Figure 1. Of further note, is the strong collocation with the term 'discrimination' i.e., weight discrimination, which is analysed in greater depth in section 4.3.

Figure 1
Collocation Network Showing the Common Collocate of the Node 'Weight'



The position of the collocates (e.g., to the left of the figure) indicates the positioning of the collocate in relation to the node. The distance of the term from the node illustrates the statistical strength of the collocation. (Collocation network produced by *#LancsBox* software).

Other salient terms relevant to the forum themes were identified as the terms 'obesity' (*n* = 30), one of the potential pathway treatments i.e., 'surgery' (*n* = 29) as well as terms related to food consumption in the form of the verb 'eat' (*n* = 31) and 'diet' (*n* = 28). Two excerpts have been extracted from the corpora with the terms 'obesity:'

Stereotypes . . . discrimination . . . lack of support or understanding . . . shaming . . . these are all consequences from spreading the wrong information about ***obesity****. Meanwhile, the evidence and science tell us that obesity is more complicated than most of us realize—so we shouldn't be so short-sighted or quick to draw conclusions about people with* ***obesity****.*

. . . as I've learned the relationship between cancer and ***obesity*** *can sometimes be closely linked.*

Obesity (and being overweight) is the main theme underlying these support groups and is the basis of many of their discussions. The two selected extracts above illustrate recurring themes found within the two corpora, that of the complexities surrounding obesity along with a profound lack of understanding from society on the whole. The first excerpt indicates how misinformation (unclassified as to the source) can be damaging to a person who is obese and the expression "quick to draw conclusions" reveals how the writer has most likely fallen victim to the stereotypes and discrimination that society (and the media) impose on overweight people as well as the judgement attached.

In contrast, the second example shows an awareness of obesity as an illness as well as an acknowledgement that being obese can lead to other more serious comorbidities or pathologies (as outlined in the literature review). What is noteworthy, is that the frequency of the term 'obesity' is significantly lower than 'weight.' This could simply be indicative of natural language in use and the higher use of the term 'weight' in general compared to that of 'obesity' (in the Spoken BNC-2014, 'weight' has a frequency of 510 and obesity has a frequency of 19). On the other hand, it could also be representative of how the forum discussants engage with the issue of obesity. It may be "easier" to face the topic of obesity through a discussion of weight rather than the disease itself or its official label according to a person's BMI.

The topic of 'surgery' is relatively well navigated by the discussants and in almost all cases is in reference to bariatric surgery in order to surgically address the clinical issue of obesity. Some extracts from the corpus are outlined below:

I know of ALOT of people that refuse to even tell their employer and co-workers they are even having/had the ***surgery****. Some have even gone so far as to tell them they had "gal-bladder"* ***surgery*** *instead as it's a more "socially" acceptable* ***surgery****.*

I would however like to add for anyone who stumbles across this, that weight loss ***surgery*** *is NOT a physical process. It seems like* ***surgery*** *would be a physical journey. They cut you open, that requires hospitalization, recovery, and ultimately leads to massive amounts of weight loss which physically changes the way you look. How can weight loss* ***surgery*** *NOT be a physical transformation?*

Well . . . simply put, the ***surgery*** *and recovery is done by about week 8. After that you are on a mental journey of learning to eat the right foods in the right portions. It's a year of not having to think about food which gives you a windows of time to hit reset on your life to re-learn all of what we have forgotten about nutrition and portion control.*

Surgery *doesn't fix your brain.*

While obesity is a recognised disease, the choice to undergo surgery is a personal one (in combination with medical advice and guidance). The sentiment regarding this personal choice is illustrated to a certain extent; however, what is more apparent in the corpus (see first example) is the feeling of shame and stigma surrounding the choice to undergo surgery. The discussant uses the term "socially" acceptable to indicate that many choose not to inform their employers about their forthcoming surgery. The fact that it is perceived as not being acceptable to society is reinforced by the fact that they may even lie about the actual surgery to avoid the potential judgement that may follow.

Another key narrative which emerges surrounding surgery concerns the psychological effects of undergoing such an operation. The discussant in the final excerpts describes how despite the fact that the patients undergo an operation, they state that very little of the experience is actually related to the physical change but rather the aftermath and the mental challenges that ensue. This is emphasised by the statement that "surgery doesn't fix your brain." There is therefore a great deal of awareness demonstrated connected to the psychological challenges involved in undergoing bariatric surgery (Kubik et al., 2013).

A further key area among discussants is that related to maintaining a 'diet' and the food which they 'eat'. The following excerpts illustrate some of the key findings related to these salient terms:

*Yes I am fine, but still battling with **diet**.*

*Many people start a **diet** and spend all their time trying to figure out how to get the benefits, while cheating on the **diet**.*

*You are all worth so much more than the belittling propaganda of the **diet** industry.*

*The part I'm reading today says not to **eat** unless you are hungry.*

*I love fruit too. But I won't **eat** it because I want to lose weight. You either want one thing, or the other.*

Narratives surrounding 'diet' indicate the struggle which discussants undertake when trying to lose weight and/or maintain a particular weight. Interestingly, war metaphors are seen frequently throughout the corpus as a collocate of diet (n = 12) and, as can be seen in the first example, a diet is portrayed as a struggle (in this case, a battle). War metaphors are repeatedly employed in healthcare discourse, particularly in terms of diseases and defeating them (Flusberg et al., 2018; Sabucedo et al., 2020), it is therefore revealing that a diet also takes on the same metaphorical representation as if

it were an illness in this case. It might be assumed that the discussants perceive a 'diet' as the same kind of challenge as another clinical pathology may be.

Other manifestations of the term 'diet' also represent internal struggle as shown in the second example. Here the term "cheating" indicates the difficulty in pursuing and maintaining the diet and the complexities involved in such a process. Finally, the term "propaganda" is used to describe the "diet industry," which clearly shows the pressure that the individuals feel under to select the correct diet and pursue it to the extent that their description evokes not only the sensation of publicity but also the strength of importance that pursuing a diet embodies.

Finally, the verb 'eat' is most frequently employed to demonstrate resistance and willpower. The first example is negated indicating that the discussant's diet plan suggests not to eat unless it is strictly necessary, implying a necessary level of self-control. The second excerpt instead illustrates the sensation of resisting temptation but demonstrating the intention not to eat the fruit in question. Again, the negation of the verb "won't" implies a promise of sorts to not concede and to hold a position of strength against the food in front of them. These excerpts are representative of much of the discussants' narratives and their clear ongoing and internal struggles with food intake.

4.3. Discrimination, stigma and shame

Weight 'stigma,' 'shame' and 'discrimination' related to obesity were clearly identifiable features of the corpus as hypothesised in section 2 of this paper. In terms of their saliency within the corpus, they appeared as follows: 'discrimination' (n = 21), 'stigma' (n = 22) and 'shame' (n = 23) as illustrated in Table 1. Some extracts of the KWIC can be seen below:

*I think that the **stigma** associated with mental health conditions (on top of the **stigma** around obesity and weight) is a combination that powerfully influences patients and providers' willingness to talk about the connection here.*

*There is a fine line between being rude and showing **stigma** or discrimination vs talking respectfully and carefully about the subject in a constructive way.*

*Oh absolutely and I concur that sometimes people can become outright hostile when faced with a dieting situation. I've met many people, some of my own family members, who have questioned me and undermined everything I've ever done on my road to health. It certainly does not feel good. But I do believe that ultimately these scenarios are frequent because of the **stigma** of fatness, outright disdain for fat people, and a harping of the dichotomy of good food vs. bad food.*

Practically speaking, I am glad the AMA made obesity a disease because it requires many insurances to cover procedures that are related to heavier weight status (e.g., gastric bypass surgery). I'm also glad that the disease "label" may help to remove some societal ***stigma****. However, we attribute way too much of the negative health correlates to BMI and weight status instead of considering other confounding factors.*

The first two extracts allude to the importance of obesity as a disease and the stigma which can be portrayed not only by the general public but also by healthcare providers. The first extract highlights that the stigma attached to discussing weight issues and the related mental health conditions may be avoided both by patients and by healthcare providers due to the judgement that a patient feels. This sentiment is echoed in the second extract but rather outlines how important it is to strike the correct balance when communicating on such issues and thinking carefully about the chosen terminology.

The third extract provides a personal account of how obese people or "fat people," as they put it, are victims of hate discourses (outright disdain). This discussant expresses a feeling of lack of support and understanding. Furthermore, in the final extract the discussant expresses a sense of relief and happiness that obesity has been recognised as a disease. In this case, it would appear to be an affirmation of a kind of "justice served" and recognition of a health problem rather than a personal choice and failure (Brookes & Baker, 2021). The hope of this discussant is that by labelling obesity as a disease, the stigma surrounding it will be reduced. This last statement is also important as it is a preceding concept to the recognition of obesity as a disability and the extent to which this is so (as elaborated in section 4.4).

Narratives related to 'shame' assume more of a metaphorical embodiment as illustrated and discussed in the extracts below:

It feels so much better to take care of a body that I love rather than fight myself and ***shame*** *myself all the time.*

God has helped me a lot to conquer negative ***shame****. I have committed my diet to Him, and He is true to help me keep on track.*

Shame *is something heavy people carry with them always. I don't carry* ***shame*** *anymore I lost it when I lost 250 lbs.*

The first extract expresses a sense of pride in taking the decision to take care of their own body. Once again, war metaphors are employed (fight), but in this case, in order to represent an ongoing internal battle regarding their body and health. This discussant rejects the need to battle with themselves or, indeed,

to shame themselves for their own body. The second extract cites God as a source of inspiration for overcoming body shame and therefore finds comfort in religion. Finally, the third example personifies shame turning it into an object that metaphorically weighs on an obese person's shoulders. This discussant states that by losing their physical weight, they have also been able to shed the metaphorical shame attached to it. These extracts provide an insight into the extent that shame is a huge factor for people living with obesity, which renders making their voices heard even more challenging.

'Discrimination' is the final topic which is clearly related to obesity and interlinked to shame, stigma and also disability. Within this context 'discrimination' frequently co-occurs with 'weight' (n = 8) signifying that the very reason the discussants are discriminated against is indeed due to their weight. Some qualitative excerpts have been selected for analysis below:

*Has anyone else had to deal with what is almost obvious **discrimination** when going to job interviews? I attended one interview where the woman was obviously taken a back that I was a big woman and it was almost like she was shocked that I even dared to apply for the job given my size.*

*I know weight **discrimination** is real. I experienced it myself before I lost weight and I hear the snide comments about larger people now that I am thin.*

*But unfortunately, weight **discrimination** is pretty much the last vestige of petty people who want to judge others arbitrarily.*

*Society judges us harshly. It's soooooooo allowed to judge overweight people. We are looked at with contempt, people look at us and make all kinds of judgments about our health, our food choices, our character, and our motivation. They even think we smell. There is no **discrimination** quite like it.*

The first three extracts highlight the extent to which weight (and being overweight) often creates disparities and discrimination towards those who have a "normal" BMI. The first example describes a workplace scenario where the person involved felt unwelcome and unwanted for a job interview. The second provides the narrative of a discussant who has lost weight (after previously being victim to discrimination) and now hears the same comments being used against other overweight people. The third extract highlights that weight discrimination is used almost to vindicate themselves as the discussant describes those who discriminate as "petty". The final comment further highlights the sentiment of hatred towards overweight people (contempt) and personalises the situation to the point that judgement is made also about the personal hygiene of the subjects.

4.4. Disability and obesity

Discussion of disability was slightly higher than the other key topic areas (discrimination, stigma and shame) in the corpus with a frequency of 24 but comparable in number to the other key areas of investigation on the whole. The co-occurrence of terms with disability revealed a propensity to declare one's status in terms of a disability (see examples below):

*I was granted **disability.***

*My driving record is clear, my background is clean, & I can pass any drug test given, yet after driving 18 wheelers, I can't even get a job delivering for Meals on Wheels. This has frustrated me to the point that I've given up looking and I have filed for **disability**.*

*I should say now that I don't qualify for **disability** because I have not worked enough or so I was told. Any help would be greatly appreciated.*

The verbs which precede 'disability' clarify the process that a person living with obesity must go through in order to be recognised not only as clinically obese but also as qualifying for disability due to other comorbidities connected to obesity (Apovian, 2016). The verb "granted" indicates that the disability has been recognised, while "I have filed for" and "I don't qualify for" show the necessary processes and eventual negation of the status of disabled person (as in the final example). These discourses are revealing as they demonstrate not only the necessary bureaucratic processes to be followed but also show how discrimination can force individuals to feel that their only option is to opt for (or file for) disability (as in the second example). The second excerpt describes how they were not considered for a driving position due to their physical size (despite having vast experience) as well as how the decision to apply for disabled status could be interpreted as being a product of desperation after having been through other similar experiences.

*These days I can't cook properly due to **disability**. I receive very little help and only feel judged by my neighbours and health workers who call by to assist. All I can really manage is buying frozen veg, soaking beans, and making things in the slow cooker.*

The feelings of desperation are further illustrated in the above excerpt as the discussant clearly outlines their difficulty with mobility due to their disability yet receives little help. Once again, the concept of judgement is put forward confirming the evident correlation between disability, obesity and weight stigma (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). The following example also further illustrates this last point:

*I just listen[ed] to the research that polled 57 formerly morbidly obese people who would choose any other **disability** (amputation, cancer, blindness) rather than not being normal weight.*

It is possible that the extent that these formerly morbidly obese individuals have been subject to weight stigma and prejudice means that they would prefer to exchange their own disability for another. The extremity of such a statement speaks volumes in terms of the way society has likely influenced their psychological state of health leading them to prefer any other kind of disability which is non-weight related.

*Your comment about the muumuu for men triggered a memory of an episode of The Simpsons where Homer decides to gain weight to become eligible for **disability** and to work from home. He needed new clothes because of his weight gain and opted for a muumuu.*

Another approach for dealing with the discrimination and weight stigma connected to obesity and disability can be identified in this final excerpt whereby the writer makes jest of being eligible for disability by making a reference to the famous cartoon character Homer Simpson. This kind of approach has been recognised as being a kind of coping strategy for dealing with obesity and disability (Mazurkiewicz et al., 2021). These strategies can be used as deflection strategies in order to make light of a more serious situation (i.e., reduced mobility due to obesity and the need to stay indoors).

Overall, the discourses regarding disability and obesity provide a preliminary overview of the discrimination and stigma related to obesity being recognised in itself as a disability. This sentiment falls in line with society's overall acceptance and recognition of obesity as a disability. Indeed, while many concede that obesity can be clinical and therefore recognised as a pathology, this same acceptance is much lower for obesity as a disability (Hilbert et al., 2021). Therefore, the information channels and dissemination of information (as discussed in section 2) have most likely also influenced the "doubt" that obesity can also be a disability.

5. Conclusion

This paper has provided a discursive representation of obesity through the narratives of obese discussion forums in first-hand accounts of their journeys and mutual support for one another. The creation of online groups and communities, particularly for marginalised members of society, is a relatively common phenomenon (Chayko, 2002) with the aim of sharing experiences and finding solace and motivation among those "like you."

It can therefore be assumed that a strength of this study is that the narratives shared within these forums are sources of natural and spontaneous language based on real-life experiences. The use of corpus linguistic methodologies to identify salient terms and frequencies also provide a twofold analysis that complements the qualitative one (Egbert & Baker, 2020). On the other hand, the limitations of this study are that the collected corpus is relatively small in size to be able to make overall generalisations regarding discursive patterns and future steps will include both expanding the corpus to other online forums as well as organising online focus groups for transcription and recording.

The narratives identified within the corpus clearly indicate that people living with obesity are victims of weight discrimination and stigma (in line with the hypothesis in section 2). Although rarely discussed in the forums, the impact of the mass media and effective information dissemination for such stigma is undeniably significant. The stigma related to disability through the first-hand accounts is also tangible and while it is illustrated less overtly by the discussants in terms of discrimination and/or stigma, the linguistic analysis revealed that the undertones are clearly apparent.

This paper also highlights that while society is more willing to recognise obesity as a disease, it is much less likely to do so as regards obesity as a disability (Hilbert et al., 2021). This is also likely related to the sentiment that obesity is a moral failing caused by the individual (Brookes & Baker, 2021). Therefore, further investigations into obesity and disability narratives would be beneficial for the scientific community in order to promote more accurate information dissemination in the media as well as helping to provide a voice for those living with obesity.

The Author

Roxanne Holly Padley (Email: rpadley@unisa.it) is PhD doctoral researcher in Linguistic Studies at the Department of Humanities and contract professor at the Department of Medicine (University of Salerno) along with the Department of Agriculture (University of Sassari). She is also academic tutor at the University of Oxford Language Centre as well as institutional translator and conference interpreter. Her research interests include English for specific purposes (medical, scientific and academic English), sociolinguistics and corpus-based discourse analysis. She has published and presented extensively and internationally on topics related to healthcare communication.

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Coping with dis/ableism in Twitter discourse: A corpus-based critical appraisal analysis of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard case

Katherine E. Russo, University of Naples L'Orientale, Italy[1]
Arianna Grasso, University of Naples L'Orientale, Italy

During the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, social media intensified their role as a channel for the sharing of opinions about health-related risk prevention measures (Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Yet, the latter arguably gave way to the promotion of a set of common values which resulted in verbal discrimination and hostility directed at specific groups of people. The article provides an analysis of the appraisal of risk communication discourse about mask exemptions in a specialised Twitter corpus, specifically compiled to represent the period March 2020-March 2021. The data are analysed according to an approach which draws upon findings in Critical Social Media Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Linguistics. Corpus Linguistics methodological tools are combined with the analysis of context and discourse structural evaluation through qualitative assessments (Baker, 2006; Zappavigna, 2017). The analysis focuses on the lexical and grammatical resources used to express attitude oriented to affect (Martin & White, 2015). It discusses findings related to negative/positive appraisal and adaptive/maladaptive responses, such as activism, solidarity and hate speech in relation to COVID-19 health-related measures and combines the findings on affect with the critical discourse analysis of disablist and ableist discourse. It hopes to contribute to the development of a digital culture of respect and peace and to foster awareness of the core values of inclusion and solidarity in online and offline communication.

Keywords: Ableism; COVID-19 Discourse; Disablism; Disability in Social Media; Hate Speech

1. Introduction

Risk communication discourse has the important function of informing the lay public about risks during health emergencies. As Fischhoff and Kadvani (2011) note, "one test of a society may be how it ensures that its weakest

[1] Corresponding Author (Email: kerusso@unior.it)

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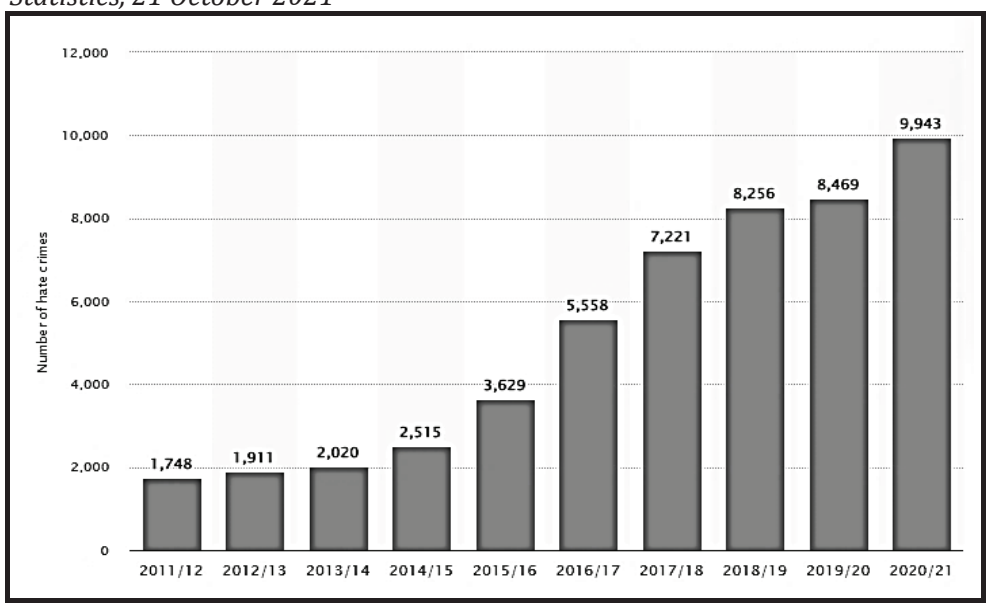
members receive needed information on risk" (p. 121). Yet, the purpose of risk communication is also to persuade the lay public to adopt certain behaviours and avoid risks. Thus, risk communication discourse also contributes to the construction of the meaning and values assigned to risks (Bednarek, 2006; Bednarek & Caple, 2012; Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin & White, 2005). During the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, online news media intensified their role as a channel for the communication of health-related risks and prevention measures in an attempt to bridge the information gap between scientists, experts and lay readers. Yet, the recontextualisation of scientific discourse (Bondi et al., 2015) also involved persuasion strategies, such as fear appeals. The use of the latter in risk communication is instrumental to the promotion of a set of common values and mobilisation against common enemies such as COVID-19 (Cap, 2017; Witte, 1992; Wodak, 2015). However, fear appeals engendered mal/adaptive responses such as online and offline hate, hostility, and closure towards specific groups of people, such as migrants and people with disabilities (Russo, 2020).

The remediation of COVID-19 health policies triggered heated offline and online discussions about the bio- and ethico-political meaning of risk-prevention measures and techniques and "the identification, treatment and administration of those risky individuals, groups, or localities where health and productivity appear[ed] to be compromised" (Goodley, 2017, p. 131; see also Cummings, 2021). More specifically, in the United Kingdom, many people with hidden disabilities reported disability-related discrimination due to mask-wearing exemptions. Numerous associations and spokespeople raised concerns about the rising tide of coronavirus-related disability online and offline hostility. As a former coordinator of the Disability Hate Crime Network reported, mask-exemptions were often met with discriminatory behaviour and verbal abuse "due to the added pressure of fear to an already difficult situation" (Pring, 2020). Discrimination against people with disabilities is not new and continues to rise in the face of the UK Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 1995) and the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2015). People with disabilities are more likely to be victims of hate crimes and hate speech. In England and Wales, the police recorded 9,943 disability hate crime incidents in the 2020/21 reporting year, compared with 8,469 in the previous year.

During the years 2020 and 2021, disability hate speech was especially reported in relation to the use of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard. In recent years, the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard has become a globally recognised "symbol for non-visible disabilities, also known as hidden disabilities or invisible disabilities."[1] The term 'hidden disabilities' was first

used by staff of the Gatwick Airport to discreetly identify people who "need support, help, or just a little more time in shops, transport, or public spaces."[2] It refers to people with disabilities such as autism, mental health conditions, speech and sight loss, hearing, or deafness impairments, respiratory conditions, and chronic conditions such as diabetes, chronic pain, and sleep disorders. During the first period of the pandemic, some people felt that the Sunflower Lanyard was a discreet way of letting people know that they had a hidden disability and were exempt from wearing a mask. Yet, it was met with suspicion during the pandemic and online discussions revealed blatant misunderstandings about its use and in some cases disablist and ableist discourse (Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Figure 1.
Number of Disability Hate Crimes in England and Wales in 2020-2021, Official Statistics, 21 October 2021



As numerous studies have found, people with disabilities are more likely to be the victims of hate crimes than non-disabled people (Balirano & Hughes, 2020; Nisco, 2020; Sherry et al., 2020). Yet, disability high-level and low-level hate speech "is far more common than the often-violent hate crimes which have captured the imagination of the public" (Sherry et al., 2020). Nonetheless, disability hate speech is an area that has been largely neglected in the linguistic field, especially if we consider its long and pervasive existence, the harms caused by it and the long history of disabled people's resistance to it (Sherry et al., 2020). Moreover, it may be argued that epidemics are predictable threats to social cohesion and, consequently, they

increase the possibility of online abuse and hate speech towards people who are more likely to be targets of discriminatory practices such as racism, disablism and sexism. Hence, the article tries to fill a gap in the research on hate speech by investigating whether Twitter discourse became a site of disability hate speech and/or solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to reach some conclusions on whether disability hate speech emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and how users responded to it in Twitter discourse, it provides an analysis of the appraisal of COVID-19 risk prevention measures in a specialised Twitter corpus. The data are analysed according to an approach which draws on findings in Critical Social Media Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Linguistics. Therefore, Corpus Linguistics methodological tools are combined with the analysis of context and discourse structural evaluation through qualitative assessments (Baker, 2006; Martin & White, 2005; Zappavigna, 2012). The analysis is narrowed from bulk data retrieval to identify the lexical and grammatical resources used to express attitude oriented to affect and combines the findings on affect with the critical discourse analysis of disablist and ableist discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). It hopes to contribute to the development of a digital culture of respect and peace and to foster awareness of the core values of inclusion and solidarity in online and offline communication.

2. Background

Appraisal Linguistics approaches have been an important focus of recent studies on social media discourse (Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Appraisal is dialogic and is related to the interpersonal in language, i.e., the expression and construction of communities of attitude, shared feelings, and values through the linguistic mechanisms for the sharing of emotions, tastes, and normative assessments (Martin & White, 2005; see also Björkén-Nyberg, 2020; Breeze & Azparren Legarre, 2021; Svensson, 2020). In terms of structure, interpersonal meaning is of a prosodic nature and cannot be easily expressed as a configuration of discrete elements. The realisation of attitude "tends to splash across a phase of discourse, irrespective of grammatical boundaries" and can be realised across a range of grammatical categories (Martin & White, 2005, p. 10). It is rather "strung throughout the clause as a continuous motif or colouring . . . . The effect is cumulative" (Halliday, 1979, pp. 66-67). Hence, the limited length of Twitter posts would seem to limit the possibility of analysis of appraisal since they must be limited to 280 characters. Yet, according to Zappavigna, appraisal can be realised in social media texts directly in the 'body' of a post, but also through semiotic resources that are more specific to social media, for example, forms of 're-posting' such as retweeting, and social tagging practices, such as hashtags (Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Hashtags have developed important interpersonal functions associated with the expression

of attitudinal stance and increased emotive denotative power (Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Moreover, Twitter discourse may be analysed in terms of the introduction and management of voices to whom these values are attributed through categories of engagement (Martin & White, 2005; Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Through hashtags and reference to other users via symbols such as @, it allows external voices to be managed within the discourse and speakers to align or disalign themselves with these voices, endorsing or disendorsing what other people say while forming ambient communities which coalesce around shared visions and meanings (Zappavigna, 2012). Recent research has pointed out that positive and negative feelings may be expressed in a stronger manner in online communication since users are placed in a protected and sometimes anonymous position (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Christopherson, 2007; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018; Waldron, 2012; White & Candrall, 2017). The downside of social media is that it enables people to express intolerant views and hate speech, which specifically refers to expressions that incite harm (particularly discrimination, hostility, or violence) towards a particular target based on the target's identification with a certain social or demographic group (UNESCO, 2015).

Disability hate speech pertains to society's verbal discriminatory response to disability, a phenomenon which may be related to disablement or disablism (Goodley, 2017, p. 2). Disablism was defined by Thomas (2007) as a "form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (p. 73). Disablement is the structural consequence of disablism. Yet, to be upheld, disablism relies on the ideology of the stable non-disabled body/mind, i.e., ableism (Campbell, 2009). As in the case of other ideologies, ableism is the invisible and shared norm, beliefs, and practices, against which all bodies function differently. The critical analysis of the ideology of ableism involves the contestation of ways in which particular formations of humanity become the norm (Goodley, 2017, p. 57). It therefore rests on taken-for-granted ideas about what it means to be normative individuals and is reproduced, operated, and maintained in discourse (Campbell, 2009). Yet ableism breeds paranoia, confusion, fear, and inadequacy because it is an ideal that no one can match up to. In this sense, discrimination against people with disabilities reflects affects such as fear and anxiety about being temporarily able-bodied (Ghai, 2006a). Ableism is the normative culture which promulgates its own precarious position, 'the species-typical individual citizen', through the discursive representation of people with disabilities as others.

With the aim to investigate the affect and discrimination nexus which lies at the basis of disability hate speech, the present study adopts a combined Critical Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Framework approach to social

media discourse (KhosraviNik, 2014, 2017; Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). It therefore analyses social media discourse from a combined quantitative and qualitative point of view (Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008). As Unger, Wodak and KhosraviNik (2016) propose, a critical discourse analysis approach must be applied to a topic-related body of social media linguistic data in relation to a given socio-political context and to a given genre-specific (institutional, media) background. Indeed, recent studies have used social media data to study people's opinions as they allow a greater opportunity of ideas and often unfiltered opinions to be available in the public sphere (Bouvier, 2017). From a Critical Discourse Studies viewpoint, social media platforms such as Twitter also provide an ideal and immediate window into how people appraise news and everyday experiences in relation to tacit mental categories, frames, schemata, and general propositions (van Dijk, 2016). Twitter discourse may be analysed in terms of the social construction of shared meanings and beliefs in discourse, and to reveal hidden and overt presuppositions, cultural stereotypes, and ideological inferences (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Moreover, it may be analysed in terms of (1) how power structures shape social media discourse (2) how social media discourse supports the interests of powerful groups by assuming a stable and invisible structure of ideological meanings. Its aim is to reveal the relationship between linguistic functions, forms and structures and everyday linguistic practices, making transparent the reciprocal relationship between discursive action and power structures (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

From this perspective, disability is not natural but socially constructed. Discourse constructs and reflects the relational, political, and socio-economic power structures which enable disability (Goodley, 2017). Yet, common misconceptions locate disability within the individual. While impairments are understood, felt, experienced materially and culturally, disability is society's reaction to cognitive, sensory, and psychological differences (Ghai, 2006b; Sherry, 2006). Stereotyping is an immediate example of the social construction of disability: diverse people are grouped together according to their impairment or to a limited repertoire of typifications (e.g., they are exceptional heroes, infantilised, helpless, asexual, etc.). As Goodley notes, the repertoire of shared typifications of people with disabilities relies on well-worn ideological frames such as disability as a moral condition (e.g., disability as sin going back to Ancient Greece and Mediaeval Europe; parental wrongdoing going back to the Renaissance period) and disability as a medical condition (e.g., disability as a pathology to be cured developed in modern times) (Goodley, 2013). The conceptualisation of disability as a property of the individual becomes evident in well-worn frames which represent disability as a personal tragedy requiring medical care and treatment. The latter medical frame places the burden of disability in the unproductive

flawed individual and shifts interventions towards individual treatment rather than context-changing interventions (Goodley, 2013, p. 6). Yet the socially shared discursive construction of people with disabilities changes over time, differentiating and marking bodies and minds through "empty" or "floating" signifiers (Delanty et al., 2008, p. 4). For instance, in relation to our study, people with hidden disabilities were subjected to an enormous amount of scrutiny during the pandemic as people sought to colonise the shared meaning of 'hidden disabilities.' People with disabilities are continuously redefined in the social world and certain aspects of their identity are foregrounded or backgrounded. Therefore, term choices related to people with disabilities manifest the arbitrariness and fluidity of such definitions and membership categories. Denominations are dereferentialised: they are removed from any direct relation to a specific person and operate as a 'empty signifiers', in which disablist attitudes and ingrained ableist ideologies are combined. In other words, denominations are not inherently disablist, but their analysis as a context-dependent linguistic realisation often reveal that the discursive construction of people with disabilities starts with the "labelling of social actors, proceeds through the generalisation of negative attributions and then elaborates arguments to justify the exclusion of many and inclusion of some" (Delanty et al. 2008, p. 4). As Sherry et al. (2020, p. 4) note:

> Simply by uttering certain words (such as the statement "you are retarded," "you are bipolar" or "you are crazy"), the speaker assumes both a position of superiority and labels, demeans and devalues the target. In the case of disablist hate speech, either the broad term "disability" or any specific diagnosis can be used to create a devalued subjectivity. The fact that a diagnosis itself may be sufficient to be weaponized in hate speech draws attention to the broader relationship between disability and medical power . . . . It draws on a long cultural repertoire of disability devaluation.

The construction of disability and its evaluation/devaluation in social media discourse depends on the opinions and beliefs that are shared by users according to criteria that are historically and culturally variable. Twitterers mainly resort to Twitter to express their feelings and attitudes, negotiate relationships, and adopt stances. As Zappavigna (2017) puts it, social media users "rarely present bald facts or narrate activities and events without adopting some kind of evaluative stance . . . sharing and contesting opinion and sentiment is central to social media discourse" (p. 437). Hence, the attitude which has been most studied in regard to Twitter is affect, i.e., "registering positive and negative feelings: do we feel happy or sad, confident or anxious, interested or bored?" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 42). As

Zappavigna (2017) notes, in microblogging, "it is not uncommon for users to devote an entire post to detailing their current emotional state" (p. 441). According to Zappavigna, affect is also related to ideational content and attitudinal stances may be associated with particular targets in order to construe value positions in discourse. Evaluations 'couple' with ideation, in our case 'risk' or 'masks', as people share values and form ambient communities (Zappavigna, 2018, pp. 122-125). Hence, the combination of Critical Discourse Studies Approaches to Social Media Discourse and Appraisal Linguistics is also particularly useful for this study, as the massive amount of data emanating from Twitter is informative of users' emotions towards a particular target or topic and may be used to detect mal/adaptive responses in times of social crisis (Zappavigna, 2018).

3. Method

In order to reach some conclusions on whether disability hate speech emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and how users responded to it in Twitter discourse, the study analysed a specialised corpus of Twitter data, which was compiled through the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API). Twitter API is an interface designed to track the activity of Twitter users and to capture tweets containing given keywords and/or hashtags. Given the data retrieval limits of Twitter API, the Premium Search Tweets: Full-Archive API was used to access Twitter data. The latter enabled the formulation of search queries in Twitter and the automatic scraping of matching tweets from the historical archive of Twitter.

The keyword 'sunflower lanyard' in combination with 'mask' or 'covid' were used as a complex search query to elicit users' posts about the usage of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard during the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the Premium Search Tweets: Full-Archive API retrieved matching tweets, these were further filtered according to geographical metadata (i.e., only tweets published from Twitter accounts located in the United Kingdom were considered for the study) and then collated into an Excel working file. The final corpus comprises 507 tweets, 19858 tokens and 3084 word types.

The temporal range considered for the study goes from March 1, 2020, which refers to the date of the coronavirus outbreak and the enforcement of national legislation to contain the spread of the virus, such as the UK Coronavirus Act 2020 (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2020), to March 31, 2021, when a new increase in the number of COVID-19 cases was globally reported, leading different countries to further extend emergency powers to handle the pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2021).

The Sunflower Lanyard Corpus (SLC hereafter) is thus a specialised corpus, in that it intends to analyse COVID-19 risk communication discourse regarding

mask exemption and disability; and a closed corpus, since no posts have been further added after the data collection took place, in February 2022 (Baker, 2006). Metadata were also collected, and for each post they provide information about the tweet ID, username, date and time of publication, number of likes and retweets, and URLs. The SLC includes only original tweets published in English, whereas it excludes retweets, replies, and tweets posted in other languages.

The study aims to investigate how mask exemptions for people with hidden disabilities are appraised in Twitter discourse with a focus on the use of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard. More specifically, the analysis seeks to assess what kind of sentiments are quantitatively predominant in the SLC and whether they are connected to specific discourses emerging during the covid-19 outbreak (e.g., the re-irruption of ableist and disablist discourses) (Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). In doing so, it also identifies the lexical, grammatical, and communicative resources (i.e., hashtags and mentions) used to express discursive attitudes oriented to affect (Martin & White, 2005; Zappavigna, 2012). In view of the above, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. What kind of sentiments can be predominantly identified in the SLC?

RQ2. What kind of discourses are associated with these sentiments?

RQ3. What kind of lexical, grammatical, and communicative resources are used to express such discourses?

The linguistic data are analysed according to an approach which draws upon findings in Critical Social Media Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Linguistics. Corpus Linguistics methodological tools are combined with the analysis of context and discourse structural evaluation through qualitative assessments (Baker, 2006; Martin & White, 2005; Thomson & White, 2008; Zappavigna, 2012).

The first stage of the analysis considered the preliminary assessment of the evaluative language used by Twitter users in the SLC. To quantitatively map out the evaluative content of the corpus, the SLC was loaded onto the language programming *R* and automatically annotated using the NRC Emotion Lexicon, also called *EmoLex*. *EmoLex* comprises a list of 14,182 unigrams (unique words) and several items-categories that include eight emotions—i.e., anger, fear, anticipation, trust, surprise, sadness, joy, and disgust—and two polarised sentiments, i.e., negative, and positive (Mohammad & Turney, 2010, 2013). Tweets were thus coded based on their association with basic emotions (Plutchik, 1980) as well as negative or positive polarity (i.e., whether they expressed a favourable or unfavourable sentiment). Association

strength ranged from 0, corresponding to "not associated", to 1, i.e., "associated" (Mohammad & Turney, 2010, 2013).

Once the SLC was annotated through the software *R*, the automatically assigned association scores were manually inspected by the researchers. To do so, a data structure was retrieved from *R* and converted into an Excel spreadsheet. For each tweet, the working file comprised ten columns, each representing a binary variable related to the presence and/or absence of the items-categories featuring in *EmoLex*. At this stage, manual tagging was carried out to observe the semantics of tweets in detail and correct potential erroneous tagging. Given that features such as emojis, figurative language, slang, punctuation marks, negations and context could be neglected by the automated annotation, this procedure ensured accuracy in the detection of emotional categories and annotation efficiency (Wankhade et al., 2022).

The second stage of the analysis involved the corpus-driven quantitative examination of the SLC. Hence, the corpus was explored through SketchEngine, a software tool developed by Kilgarriff et al. (2014) to identify and observe linguistic patterns in large collections of texts. A log-likelihood test was conducted to ascertain the frequency and statistically significant use of lexical items in the specialised corpus (the SLC) in comparison with the reference corpus, the enTenTen: Corpus of the English Web (enTenTen20 hereafter). The enTenTen20 is an English corpus that includes texts collected from the Web annotated by genre (i.e., blog, discussion, legal, news) and classified by topic (i.e., arts, business, games, health, home, recreation, reference, science, sport, society, and technology). Given the extremely large nature of the reference corpus—which contains 36 billion words overall—the enTenTen Topic Health was chosen as a reference subcorpus. This choice was motivated by the small size and health-relatedness of the specialised corpus. The enTenTen Topic Health is in fact proportionately smaller compared to the general enTenTen20 since it constitutes 8.6% of the total amount of texts, that is 309,600 tokens.

Through *SketchEngine*, lexical bundles were first extracted. However, since they did not prove particularly useful to obtain a comprehensive view of the linguistic realisations of appraisal and negative/positive polarisations in the SLC, the analysis further considered the significantly salient terms, their co-text, and relevant co-occurrences (Calsamiglia & van Dijk, 2004). Keywords, concordances, and collocates were thus analysed with the aim of singling out the more recurrent lexico-grammatical choices used by users for the expression of appraisal in the SLC. Hashtags and mentions were also examined; the former to cast light on the interpersonal bonds built among users by means of attitudinal stance and emotive language, and the latter to understand how twitterers aligned or disaligned themselves with other

platform interlocutors while endorsing or disendorsing the opinion of others (Zappavigna, 2012, 2018).

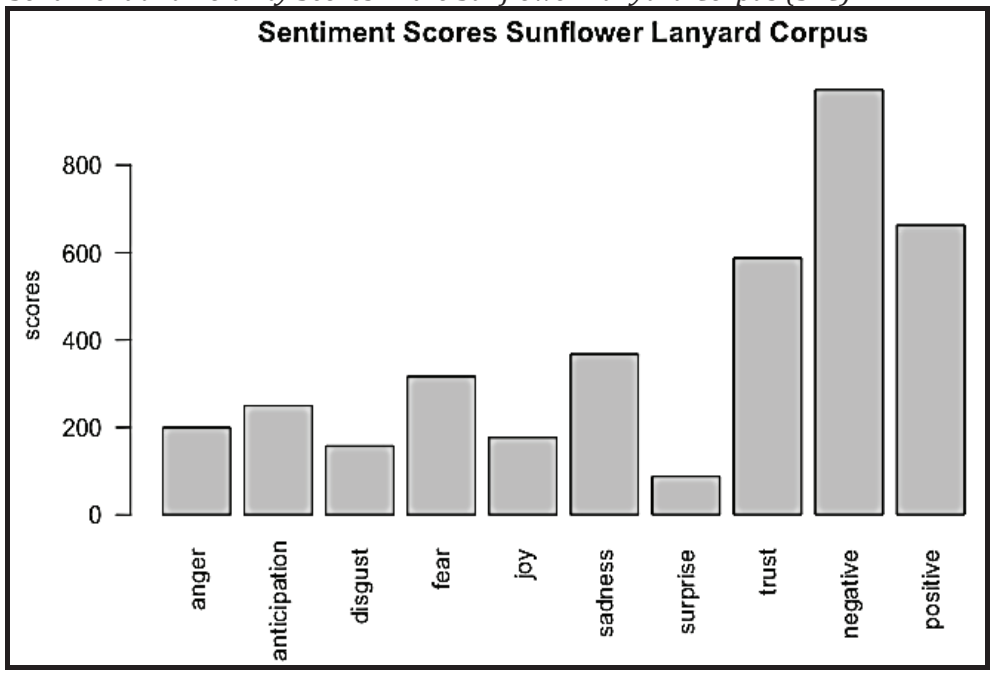
Subsequently, the search was narrowed from bulk data retrieval to qualitative analysis to combine a corpus-assisted Critical Social Media Discourse Analysis to the analysis of the Appraisal Analysis of the Sunflower Lanyard in association with mask exemptions (Baker, 2006; Martin & White, 2005). More specifically, this final stage of the analysis focused on how users reacted to news-based risk communication regarding the epidemic in terms of affect and specific discourses of disablism.

4. Results

4.1. Sentiments in the SLC

Once the automated annotation of the corpus and its manual revision were carried out, sentiment analysis was conducted to shed light on how the different basic emotions featuring in *EmoLex* were distributed across the collection of tweets and on whether the SLC leaned toward a positive or a negative polarity.

Figure 2.
Sentiment and Polarity Scores in the Sunflower Lanyard Corpus (SLC)



As shown in Figure 2 and Table 1, trust was largely associated with the tweets

pointing to how users' evaluative stance was expressed in terms of feelings of un/trustworthiness towards given entities or actors. The second most frequent computed sentiment was sadness followed by fear, which indicated an unfavourable attitudinal stance among Twitter users. Anger and disgust were also detected during the tagging procedure pointing to a diffuse dissatisfaction. Anticipation and joy were singled out as well, and their association strength appears to be relevant in the retrieved bar plot. Surprise was the least observed sentiment in the SLC.

Table 1
Association Strength per Item-Category

		Association Strength (Total Score)
Sentiment	*anger*	200
	anticipation	250
	disgust	158
	fear	317
	joy	177
	sadness	368
	surprise	88
	trust	588
Polarity	negative	973
	positive	663

After focusing on the specific sentiments associated with the tweets, the polarity of the overall corpus was measured to identify whether the SLC was negatively or positively oriented. To do so, sentiment scores were aggregated and provided a higher value in association with the "negative" variable rather than the "positive" one. As shown above, despite significant instances of positively evaluated items within the corpus under analysis, their cumulative effect resulted in the overall negative polarity of the SLC. Further investigation was nonetheless needed to single out the linguistic realisations and the prosodic structure of appraisal in the SLC (Halliday, 1979; Martin & White, 2005).

4.2. A corpus-based quantitative analysis

Moving on to the corpus analysis, keywords were first obtained to single out the statistically relevant words used for the formation and consolidation of discourses in the SLC (Baker & Ellece, 2011). Once retrieved through the software tool SketchEngine, keywords were grouped into thematic categories according to their semantic similarity to unveil the discursive specificity of the corpus under investigation.

Table 2
Keywords List

Rank	Keyword	SLC (hits)	EnTenTen Topic Health (hits)	Keyness (Log-Likelihood)
#3	exempt	138	2,293	3,766.7
#4	fuck	34	989	663.7
#5	exemption	81	3,660	631.0
#6	hidden	95	6,451	454.6
#7	badge	25	1,520	375.7
#12	tesco	12	576	305.6
#16	selfish	9	1,021	179.9
#17	ableist	4	24	172.0
#18	abled	4	72	162.4
#19	wear	581	124,740	160.3
#20	scum	4	182	143.94
#22	anti-mask	3	8	131.8
#23	cunt	3	19	130
#24	ebay	7	1,139	126.3
#25	bus	18	4,169	125.9
#26	twat	3	82	120.6
#27	disabilities	11	2,397	119.9
#28	humiliate	5	702	116.9
#29	wearer	14	3,400	116.0
#30	card	70	21,005	113.3
#31	shopper	7	1,463	108.1
#32	sainsbury	3	215	104.6
#33	disabled	29	8,921	103.5
#34	visor	3	235	102.5
#35	shout	8	1,968	100.9
#36	fag	3	260	100.1
#37	sanitise	3	289	97.4
#39	shop	58	21,716	89.3

As shown in Table 2, these included (a) covid-related terms, e.g., exempt (138), exemption (81), facemask (4 hits), anti-mask (3 hits), visor (3 hits), sanitise (3 hits), which pointed to risk communication and to the risk-prevention measures enforced to avoid the spreading of contagion during the period under consideration; (b) swear words, such as FUCK (lemma) (34 hits), scum (4 hits), cunt (3 hits), twat (3 hits), fag (3 hits), which revealed the usage of highly negative evaluative language used by Twitter users and simultaneously their need to demarcate a boundary between in-groups and out-groups while displaying solidarity with the former and hostility with the

latter; (c) disability and medical conditions: disabilities (11 hits), disabled (29 hits), autistic (13 hits), disability (144 hits), asthmatic (5 hits), asperger (3 hits), asthma (12 hits), autism (14 hits), which hinted at the different disabilities that were included in the Sunflower Lanyard scheme; and lastly, (d) shop-related terms: tesco (12 hits), ebay (7 hits), shopper (7 hits), Sainsbury (3 hits), shop (58 hits), which unveiled a commercialised aspect of the issue under analysis.

These preliminary findings found further correspondence in the retrieval of key lexical bundles, whereby several multi-word terms indicated that salient discourses in the SLC are related to the non-visible nature of some disabilities—consider, for instance, hidden disability (83 hits), invisible disability (10 hits)—in connection with mask exemption, e.g., mask exemption (35 hits), exemption card (20 hits), mask exempt (5 hits), and instances of negative evaluation, such as dirty look (8 hits), fucking mask (6 hits), and people abuse (3 hits), which exemplified the predominant negative polarity of the corpus and the particularly adverse attitude Twitter users expressed to complain about specific events.

Even though the hashtagging practice was poorly adopted by Twitter users (representing 0.03% of the total amount of tokens in the corpus), hashtags enhanced semantic redundancy in the corpus. As a matter of fact, the most frequent hashtags of the SLC were covid-related, e.g., #covid, #covid19, #covididiots, #facemask, #coronavirus, #pandemic; and disability-related, e.g., #hiddendisability, #sunflowerlanyard, #disabled, #autism, #sunflower, #mentalhealth, #hiddendisabilities. Therefore, hashtags mainly served the experiential function, that is they constructed a form of "searchable talk" for users interested in sharing information, stories, and resources on these topics (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 9). In other words, these hashtags assigned "a keyword to a tweet in the form of metadata", presupposing the existence of potential attentive interlocutors in the digital environment (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 85).

Although mentions did not occur frequently across the corpus, they were yet representative of specific categories of interlocutors. As a matter of fact, mentions included four different groups of interlocutors, that is (a) supermarket chains and shops: @tesco, @morrisons, @sainsbury, @marksandspencer, @asdaserviceteam (ASDA customer service), @lushltd, @mcdonalds, @costco, @waitrose; (b) transport and coach operators: @nxcare (National Express customer service team), @norwichbuses, @tfl (Transport for London), @easyjet; (c) the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard official account: @sunflwrlanyward; (d) broadcasters and television/radio programs: @thismorning, @bbctheoneshow, @bbcbreakfast, @bbcwatchdog, @bbcnews. The first two categories of interlocutors relate to those stakeholders involved in the National Disability Strategy (NDS

hereafter), that is a governmental commitment that aims to remove barriers and improve the life quality of people with disabilities across the United Kingdom (HM Government, 2021). The NDS has in fact been developed "with the input of more than 14,000 disabled people, as well as disability organisations, businesses, policy experts and many others" (Disability Unit and Equality Hub, 2021). Interestingly, the category of broadcasters and television/radio programs points to the remediation of such institutional discourses, that is their circulation from Twitter to mass media outlets and vice versa—Prime Minister Boris Johnson's official account (@borisjohnson) is also emblematic in this regard (Chouliaraki & Musarò, 2017). The preliminary quantitative analysis substantiated the qualitative corpus-driven examination of discourses emerging from the SLC, which is carried out in the remaining part of this paper.

5. Discussion

5.1. Discourses in the SLC

The concordance tool of *SketchEngine* was used to visualise keywords as displayed in their linguistic surroundings and to single out what kind of discourses and appraisal were associated with them. Hence, Zappavigna's Appraisal Theory (2012) was concurrently applied to selected tweets with the aim of analysing how Twitter users expressed emotions through the affect system, assessed behaviour through the judgement system and estimated value through the appreciation system. Three macro-discourses were thus identified: discourses of disablism, through which Twitter users reported offline instances of intolerance and social prejudice against people with disability wearing the sunflower lanyard on the social media platform; discourses of internalised ableism, whereby the external discriminatory and subordinating experiences endured by people with disability led to self-deprecation; and lastly, discourses of hatred against abusers of the Sunflower Lanyard, that is non-disabled people who unjustifiably wore the sunflower lanyard to be considered as mask exempt.

5.1.1. Dis/ableism: Reporting offline discrimination in Twitter discourse

During the COVID-19, many Twitter users employed Twitter to report offline instances of intolerance and social prejudice against people with hidden disabilities in relation to mask exemptions and the Sunflower Lanyard. Disablism was singled out in the SLC corpus by exploring the lexical bundle *dirty looks* and the keywords *selfish, abled* and *ableist*. Disablist non-verbal behaviour, insults and comments were reported in all the following tweets. Moreover, from the tweets, it becomes clear that offline ableism was perpetrated by different actors, causing distress, uneasiness, and anxiety to

people with both visible and invisible disabilities. The negative appraisal of twitterers is in fact expressed through numerous instances of inscribed attitude, e.g., "*i don't appreciate* being verbally abused because i have a disability" (example 4), "*I get intimidated and struck with anxiety* by uneducated people" (example 3), some of which are upscaled through capitalisation, e.g., "my anxiety is *HIGH* baby" (example 1).

Users report incidents in which they were discriminated through verbal (e.g., "yelling", "verbally abused") and non-verbal behaviour (e.g., "dirty looks") for not wearing masks (examples 1-3), for being selfish not wearing face masks (examples 2, 4), thus putting the health of abled people at risk, and being not disabled enough, that is in constant need of proving their disability (examples 1-4, 7). Interestingly, selfishness is similarly attributed to abled people "for co-opting disabled resources" while pursuing an anti-mask agenda, thus nullifying the benefits of the NDS commitment for disabled people (example 6).

(1) I mask up every time I go out of the house right but I've just been in B&Ms and it was particularly busy and warm and my anxiety is HIGH baby so I didn't have my mask on (sunflower lanyard was visible) and the amount of **dirty looks** I was getting was unreal

(2) The worst thing about this whole pandemic is that I can't wear a mask due to claustrophobia and have a sunflower lanyard which I use IF I need to go anywhere which tbh I don't which has left me anxious at the **dirty looks** since "AsTmAtIcS cAn WeAr mAsKs StOp bEiNg **SeLfIsH**"

(3) I take my sunflower lanyard with me, a lanyard excusing me from wearing a mask because of my autism, when I go out to the shop and I get **dirty looks**?

Awareness needs to be raised on the news because I get intimidated and struck with anxiety by uneducated people.

(4) uhhh, @TfL i wear a sunflower lanyard due to having a hidden disability, ive just come off one of your trains and been verbally abused my two much older people being called "**selfish**" as i'm not wearing a mask. i don't appreciate being verbally abused because i have a disability -

(5) Can **abled** bodied people & anti-maskers, stop yelling at us disabled folks who are wearing a sunflower lanyard & a mask? Thanks.

(6) #Make**Ableists**Uncomfortable

The sunflower lanyard existed before the pandemic and is not just a "mask exemption" card. **Abled** ppl who use the lanyard are **selfish**. You

are co-opting disabled resources for your anti-mask agenda and diluting their meanings. https://t.co/Xz88wWdAxQ

(7) @coopuk Hey co-op, our local store was being **ableist** against my disabled partner, even tho he has his hidden disabilities card and sunflower lanyard. Apparently he "didn't look very disabled" so they told him either he wore a mask or left and not to come back again.

The analysis also reveals the use of linguistic resources to express stance and engagement (Zappavigna, 2012). Users relate to other twitterers with respect to the positions advanced in their text and construe solidarity with the in-group and social distance with the out-group. This alignment dimension allows them to acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of other twitterers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants (Zappavigna, 2012, 2017). It involves the marking of the in-group through the first person singular (examples 1-4) and plural (consider "us disabled folks" in example 5), whereas the out-group is referred to through the synecdochic expression "dirty looks" (examples 1-3) and "our local store" (example 7), "uneducated people" (example 3), "older people" (example 4), "abled bodied people & anti-maskers" (example 5, 6). Therefore, Tweets are heteroglossic, namely they enable the emergence and copresence of a diversity of voices across the digital setting (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 49). As a matter of fact, dialogism is enhanced through direct speech introduced by quotation marks (examples 2, 7) associated with a colloquial and oral style - e.g., "baby" (example 1), "Thanks" (example 5), rhetorical questions (example 3 and 5), abbreviations, e.g., "tbh" (i.e., to be honest, example 2), "ppl" (i.e., people, example 6), "tho" (i.e., though, example 7), and mentions addressing specific interlocutors, "uhhhm @TfL" (example 4), "@coopuk Hey co-op" (example 7).

The hashtag #MakeAbleistsUncomfortable (example 6), which performs an interpersonal function in the tweet, is also self-explanatory with regard to the discursive construction of the us-versus-them divide, whereby the tweeting perspective is that of a disabled person and the targets of the message are abled individuals, who should give up their "comfortable" abled life (example 6), be educated (example 3), and behave more kindly towards people with disability (examples 1, 2, 4, 5).

5.1.2. Internalised ableism

Discourses of internalised ableism were also detected after a close reading of the lexical bundles *hidden/invisible disabilit** and the lemma WEAR in context. Such discourses developed as a result of the discriminatory, debasing, and

abusive practices to which people with hidden disabilities were subjected to during the epidemic (Campbell, 2009). Feelings of guilt and unworthiness seem to be directly related to internalised ableism and the fear of being mistaken for abusers of the Sunflower Lanyard, e.g., through the simile "I feel guilty and like an imposter for wearing it" (example 10). Even though they are fully aware of being entitled to mask exemption, people with hidden disabilities often expressed self-doubting thoughts through hedges and modal verbs: "My autistic ass always second guesses whether I *should* wear my sunflower lanyard in spaces where I 100% *need to*" (example 10), "Whereas me . . . feels guilty about getting one even though I *should*" (example 9), and "I'm not worthy of one because I *can* still wear a mask" (example 11). The following tweets are illustrative in this respect and explicitly reveal feelings of unworthiness, social anxiety, and insecurity, "covering emotions concerning eco-social well-being" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 51). In other words, the twitterers' social well-being seemed to be at stake as they shared "their own affectual state"—a first-person perspective is predominant in the telling, providing a highly subjective and interpersonal account of the twitterer's inner state (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 56)

(8) Tempted to get a sunflower lanyard & **hidden disabilities** card. Have a mental health condition & get very anxious supermarket shopping so husband supports me. I **wear** a mask. @Tesco asks people to shop alone & I sometimes feel I am being watched & judged. Makes me feel very guilty

(9) I keep thinking about that person who got a sunflower lanyard just because they didn't want to **wear** a mask. Whereas me, someone who actually has an **invisible disability** (aspergers) feels guilty about getting one even though I should.

WHY ARE PEOPLE LIKE THIS?

(10) My autistic ass always second guesses whether I should **wear** my sunflower lanyard in spaces where I 100% need to (such as airports), I feel guilty and like an imposter for **wearing** it, but now people who DON'T need them are running around like 'lol got my lanyard no mask for me!'.

(11) Just got myself a sunflower lanyard because I'm starting to really struggle with **wearing** masks for long periods of time and eventhough I am literally disabled I feel like I'm not worthy of one because I can still **wear** a mask

Conflicting feelings about mask exemptions generated exasperation in the

twitterers, which may be analysed in terms of its force and graduation (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 65). Frustration was intensified through the use of capitalisation (examples 9 and 10), fictional reported speech presumably formulated by abusers of the sunflower lanyard (example 10), and a clown face emoji in example 11, which displays foolishness and self-deprecation (Emojipedia, 2022). The perceived arrogance of the lanyard abusers is particularly evident in the fictional quotation "'lol got my lanyard no mask for me!'", where the internet slang "lol" (i.e., laughing out loud) symbolises the vilification and consequent sense of humiliation introjected by people with hidden disabilities.

Internalised ableism also seems to correlate with hesitancy manifested in the verb forms, e.g., "tempted to get" (example 10), "keep thinking about" (example 11), "always second guesses" (example 12), which reflects the twitterers' fear of being targeted for faking disability. On the other hand, they expressed a manifest irritation in having to prove their disability as in the case of the adverbial intensifiers in the following tweets: "Whereas me, someone who *actually* has an invisible disability" (example 11), "even though I am *literally* disabled" (example 13).

5.1.3. Affiliation against abusers of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard

A related predominant discursive category was alignment against abusers of the Sunflower Lanyard. The latter emerged by exploring the lemma FUCK, which pointed to a statistically significant pattern across the SLC by comparison with the reference corpus. Considering the frequent co-occurrence of swear words in its linguistic surroundings, the keyword indicated the repeated use of offensive language in the corpus under investigation (Allan, 2019). The judgment system, which "critiques human behavior: what people say and believe" through the expression of social esteem and/or social sanction (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 60), was therefore useful to closely investigate negative evaluation in microblogging.

Specifically, social sanction was particularly prevailing in the formulation of alignment against abusers of the Sunflower Lanyard. As shown in the examples below, the lemma FUCK is used in its adverbial form (i.e., "fucking" in examples 12, 15-17) preceding dysphemistic expressions (such as "cunt", "scum", or "pricks"), as an expletive phrase (i.e., "fuck you" and "what the fuck" in examples 13,14,18), and as a noun (i.e., "fuckers" in example 16) to express the harsh accusation of Twitter users towards the despicable conduct of the Lanyard abusers. Interestingly, in example 18, the negative judgement is coupled with three different emojis, or "graphological realisations of facial expressions" (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 76) that display anger, frustration, and

disapproval consistently with the verbal content of the tweet. Such emojis reflect the negative emotional stance of the twitterer and contribute to the expression of interpersonal meaning, that is solidarity among the in-group participants and hostility against the out-group.

(12) If you're one of those people abusing the sunflower lanyard so you can pretend to be exempt from wearing a mask, you are a **fucking** cunt

(13) if you bought a sunflower lanyard just so you can say "oh i have a hidden disability so i can't wear my mask!" i hate you. i appreciate others who genuinely can't wear one but to those who can but are making excuses, **fuck** you.

(14) if you willingly wear a sunflower lanyard to avoid wearing a mask. **fuck** you. you are **fucking** scum what the **fuck** is wrong with you. i hope that strangers tell you you're faking, just like they say to REAL disabled people.

(15) Don't abuse the sunflower lanyard system to get out of wearing a mask you **fucking** pricks.

(16) Listen up **fuckers**. If you aren't disabled and wear a sunflower lanyard to get out of wearing a **fucking** mask you're an absolute shithead. I will shit in your pants

(17) This is **fucking** disgusting. The sunflower lanyard is for people with disabilities and hidden illnesses. Not for arseholes to pretend they have a disability so they don't need to wear a mask. I'm so, so angry. https://t.co/80IkeBfXQU https://twitter.com/emilylinka/status/1286569943685791745

(18) There's people that I know, who've just started wearing the sunflower lanyard/face mask exemption card because they're fed up of wearing a face mask!! What the actual **fuck**?!

Through these inscribed judgments, which are used to "label behaviours deemed to contravene social decorum", the tweet posters question the veracity of the abusers' feigned disability (Martin & White, 2005, p. 53; Zappavigna, 2012, p. 61). Example 14 is particularly representative in this regard, given that the out-group and in-group are respectively defined through judgement as fake and authentic: "i hope that strangers tell you you're faking"; "just like they say to REAL disabled people". This dichotomic construction is also attained through other linguistic realisations. For instance, in example 13, there is a clear evaluative juxtaposition of the positive evaluation of 'truthful' Lanyard wearers, i.e., "i appreciate others who

genuinely can't wear one [mask]", versus the critical stance towards those abusing the Lanyard, i.e., "but to those who can but are making excuses, fuck you". Example 17 shows the same syntactic construction with an overtly negative initial judgement, i.e., "This is fucking disgusting", and inscribed affect expressed at the end of the verbal part, i.e., "I'm so, so angry.", where the adjective angry is scaled upwards through the repetition of the adverbial intensifier "so".

Overall, offensive language serves to discursively construct the in-group (i.e., people with hidden disabilities purposefully wearing the Sunflower Lanyard, together with their allies, claiming a fair and legitimate use of the Lanyard) versus the out-group (i.e., individuals misusing the Lanyard and face mask exemption card to avoid wearing the medical device). The former is linguistically expressed through the pronouns "I" and "we" (examples 13,14,16,18), while the latter through the pronouns "you" (examples 12-16) and "they" (examples 17,18), which accentuate public condemnation and social distance. Furthermore, the in-group is linguistically counterposed to the moral decay of the out-group through the imperative mode, e.g., "Don't abuse" (example 15) and "listen up" (example 16) as well as the iterative use of conditionals ending with dysphemistic expressions used to antagonise the interlocutor (examples 12-14, 16), e.g., "if you willingly wear a sunflower lanyard to avoid wearing a mask. fuck you." (Allan & Burridge, 2001). The out-group is ultimately delegitimised by the in-group, and such delegitimisation manifests itself in acts of negative other presentation, blaming and criticising the moral character of those people illegitimately wearing the Lanyard (Chilton, 2004).

6. Conclusion

In line with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2020), that is "to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, . . . human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity", the present article aims to contribute to the active promotion of digital inclusion and equality by disseminating knowledge and spreading awareness about hate and harmful speech in English online communication. It therefore hopes to raise awareness about disability hate speech, disablism and ableism among English-speaking educators and to empower learners by allowing them to recognise, resist and actively combat online disability hate speech.

Building on the premises that epidemics are not just an incidental but a predictable trigger of negative and positive emotions, the article investigated Twitter discourse as a possible site of intolerance and/or encounter,

connectivity, and conviviality. The present study aimed to assess what kind of sentiments were quantitatively predominant in a purposely created corpus as well as to single out what discourses these sentiments were associated with. The analysis specifically focused on the discourses emerging during the COVID-19 outbreak concurrently with the use of the Sunflower Lanyard Scheme in the United Kingdom. In doing so, it sought to identify the lexical, grammatical, and communicative resources (i.e., hashtags and mentions) used by Twitter users to express attitudes oriented to affect (Martin & White, 2005; Zappavigna, 2012). The Appraisal Linguistics framework was thus employed to explore how meanings "registering positive and negative feelings" were expressed on the social media platform, and specifically whether people with hidden disabilities felt "happy or sad, confident or anxious, interested or bored" while tweeting (Martin & White, 2005, p. 42; Zappavigna, 2012).

Preliminary findings showed that the overall polarity of the corpus was negatively oriented, and that trust was the sentiment most frequently associated with the tweets, which pointed to how users' evaluative stance was expressed in terms of feelings of un/trustworthiness towards given entities or actors. In regard to the corpus-driven analysis, statistically relevant terms mainly related to the pandemic and risk-prevention measures enforced to avoid the spreading of contagion. They predictably referred to disability and medical conditions but also to commercial domains such as supermarket chains and shops, pointing to the widespread reporting and sharing of offline everyday life experiences. These findings found further correspondence in the retrieval of mentions, which comprised several stakeholders involved in the National Disability Strategy. Keywords also included several swear words, which revealed a widespread usage of offensive language in the corpus.

From the analysis of appraisal in the corpus, three main macro-discourses emerged: discourses of disablism, through which Twitter users reported offline instances of intolerance and social prejudice against people with disability wearing the Sunflower Lanyard on the social media platform; discourses of internalised ableism, whereby the external discriminatory and subordinating experiences endured by people with disability led to self-deprecation; and lastly, discourses of hatred against abusers of the Sunflower Lanyard, that is those individuals who misused the Sunflower Lanyard to avoid wearing face masks.

By means of evaluative lexical and grammatical resources, twitterers demarcated the in-group versus the out-group while establishing interdiscursive links across the collected tweets and heteroglossia. As a matter of fact, the out-group was repeatedly described as the bearer of an adversarial ideology and as a distant yet real threat to the in-group, which linguistically resulted in the use of deictics such as "you" or "they" versus "I"

or "we". Offensive language was also extensively employed to increase social distance between the in-group and the out-group, and specifically towards abled individuals abusing the resources allocated for people with disability with the Sunflower Lanyard Scheme. The latter were in fact depicted as morally corrupted and associated with qualities such as despicability and wickedness. In doing so, the in-group sought legitimisation for alignment against the out-group while affirming their moral superiority.

The present research argues that people with disabilities used Twitter to counter the silence and absence of self-narratives in the news-based risk communication of the COVID-19 epidemic and the Hidden Disabilities Lanyard. At the same time, they countered the spread of false narratives about the Hidden Sunflower Lanyard which had acutely negative repercussions on their lives. The study ultimately revealed how twitterers raised several issues related to their quality and style of life and behaviour, the right to participation in public settings and mass education. It is the contention of this study that the COVID-19 epidemic unveiled the persistence of disablist and ableist ideologies, whereby people with disabilities (and their allies) demanded a re-evaluation of their status using the social media platform as a highly productive source to convey everyday episodes of discrimination and experiences of disablism. Simultaneously, they implicitly attempted to reclaim their role as positive agents of change and stressed their concerns over the loss of agency and self-determination related to ableism.

Notes

1. https://hiddendisabilities.com/

2. https://hiddendisabilities.com/

Authors' Statement

The authors discussed and conceived the article together. In particular, Ass. Prof. Katherine E. Russo is responsible for §1, §2, §6, and Dr. Arianna Grasso for § 3, §4, §5.

The Authors

Katherine E. Russo (Email: kerusso@unior.it) University of New South Wales, Sydney, is Associate Professor at the University of Naples L'Orientale. Her research interests include Critical Discourse Analysis, English Language Teaching and Digital Technologies, Language Variation and Change, World Englishes, Intercultural Communication, Audio-visual and Translation Studies.

She is the author of *Practices of Proximity: The Appropriation of English in Australian Indigenous Literature*, which won the ESSE Book Award, *Global English, Transnational Flows: Australia and New Zealand in Translation*, and *The Evaluation of Risk in Institutional and Newspaper Discourse: the Case of Climate Change and Migration*.

Arianna Grasso (Email: ariannagrasso@unior.it) holds a PhD in Literary, Linguistics and Comparative Studies from the University of Naples "L'Orientale". Her research interests include Australian Populism, Refugee and Digital Media Studies. Her recent publications include "Populist dialogues on Twitter to #PutAustraliaFirst" and "Populist Islamophobia: The Australian Refugee Crisis on Twitter". In June 2021, she was awarded the *Outstanding Doctoral Researcher* prize, sponsored by Palgrave Macmillan, with her paper "Twitter and Refugeehood: Practices of Resistance in Contemporary Australia", presented at the *Approaches to Migration, Language and Identity* Conference (University of Sussex).

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Donna Williams' *Nobody nowhere* and *Somebody somewhere*: A corpus-based discourse analysis of the author's language as a tool to negotiate one's relationship with the world and the self

Alessia BATTISTA, Università degli Studi di Napoli "Parthenope", Italy

Focusing on issues of identity, diversity, disability, labelling and shame, this paper analyses language as a tool to negotiate one's identity and relationship with the self and the world. The paper examines two international bestsellers by Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere* (Williams, 1992) and *Somebody Somewhere* (Williams, 1994), about her life before and after being officially diagnosed with autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder implying difficulties in communication and interaction (APA, 2013). Williams' social media presence has also been explored through her personal website (Williams, n.d.), where mature contributions about her life, work, and diagnoses can be found, and her presence on a social activism website (auties.org). Relying on a Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis methodology, Williams's language (Waltz, 2005) and the use and distribution of collocates and metaphors in it (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008) have been investigated to understand their role in the negotiation of her identity with 'the world' and with herself, as a person deemed as 'mad' first, and autistic later. The analysis revealed that writing enabled Williams to understand her own nature, and that her linguistic choices mirror her thoughts and feelings, which are also expressed through metaphors, despite issues with language, pragmatics, and metaphorical language being commonly associated with autism.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis; Corpus Linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; Donna Williams; Identity Negotiation

1. Introduction

Starting from the tenet that a binding relationship exists between language and identity (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021), this paper analyses how language, as well as the presence of collocations and metaphors therein, can be used to negotiate identity and construct one's relationship with the self and the world. Two international bestsellers, *Nobody Nowhere* and *Somebody Somewhere*, and two websites, *auties.org* and *donnawilliams.net*, were investigated, representing the life accounts of Donna Williams, a woman who

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lived with Autism Spectrum Disorder between the XX and XXI centuries. Born in Australia in 1963 and passed away in 2017, Williams was a singer-songwriter, a painter, and a novelist by chance. Indeed, her international bestsellers were the result of an attempt to find out more about her 'diversity', which would be defined as autism only in her late 20s.

Autism has been explored extensively since the 1940s, in spite of numerous changes in its conception (from childhood schizophrenia to a neurodevelopmental disorder and a neurodiversity) and diagnosis. However, little attention has been paid to how language is used directly by autistic people to shape and negotiate their identity. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to the linguistic analysis of first-hand contributions by autistic people sharing their personal experiences, by exploring Williams' personal and social worlds, as an autistic woman and a social activist.

The remainder of this paper presents an essential literature review in section 2, and the methodological tools and frameworks used for the analysis in section 3, whereas sections 4 and 5 describe and discuss the results of the investigation carried out on Donna Williams' novels and websites.

2. Background

Since it was first described in the 1940s (Kanner, 1943), autism has been studied extensively. However, in these studies the researcher was usually an external observer, which could explain the editorial and scientific success of Donna Williams' life accounts, which are not only literary works (Williams 1992, 1994), but also medically accurate descriptions (Williams, n.d.-a).

Most research carried out about autistic people focuses on the accounts of parents, particularly mothers, whose 'lack of warmth' supposedly caused a kind of psychiatric disorder in their children (Bettelheim, 1959, 1967; Kanner, 1943). Although Kanner's 'refrigerator mothers' theory has become obsolete (Koi, 2021) over the years, and autism is now regarded along a spectrum and as a neurodiversity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013), research still tends to consider accounts provided by parents and siblings rather than by those who actually live with this condition. The focus is usually on the influence of parental behaviour (Crane et al., 2021; Riccio et al., 2021), although recent research seems to be acknowledging the importance of first-hand accounts, particularly by adults (DePape & Lindsay, 2016; Kim, 2019), and recognises that women, who are more likely than men to receive a delayed ASD diagnosis, tend to develop compensatory strategies to try to fit in society (Green et al., 2019), such as social mimicry (Bargiela et al., 2016) and social camouflaging (Cage & Troxwell-Whitman, 2019; Leedham et al., 2019). Further approaches involve the intersection of gender and autism (Janssen et al., 2016), novel interpretations of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983,

1990, 2013) applied to ASD, as opposed to the medical model (Chapman, 2019; Woods, 2017), or studies about young autistic people in educational settings (Mesa & Hamilton, 2021; Williams et al., 2019).

One area of study attracting numerous researchers is language, since one of autism's main symptoms is experiencing difficulties in communication and interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In fact, most research in this area is about the typical linguistic phenomena characterising the speech of autistic people, such as pronoun reversal, echolalia (Boksa & Kominek, 2022; Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Naigles et al., 2016), and challenges in the linguistic areas of pragmatics, lexis and semantics (Naigles & Tek, 2017). More specifically, it has been suggested that autistic people lack imaginative and metaphorical skills, which results in an infrequent use of metaphorical language and challenges in understanding it with ease (Vyshedskiy, 2019; Wing et al., 1979). However, research also shows that autistic individuals tend to produce better and more novel metaphors than neurotypical people (Rucińska et al., 2021). Generally speaking, how language is used by autistic people to shape their identities has been little investigated, the focus being rather on how language shapes the way neurotypical people perceive ASD (Markelova, 2017), or on the use of metaphors to frame ASD within different cultural narratives (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008).

Recent research is considering the use of social media by autistic individuals. It seems that both autistic people and those close to them tend to seek informational, social, and emotional support in online communities on digital networks (Cole et al., 2017; Saha & Agarwal, 2016; Zhao et al., 2019). Moderate use would appear to have beneficial effects, leading autistic people to also live happier lives (Ward et al., 2018).

3. Method

The present study consists of three separate analyses, whose results will be compared to get a holistic view of Donna Williams' growth as an autistic person.

The methodology used relies on Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis, a hybrid approach which takes advantage and overcomes the limitations of both Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. The former approach has become increasingly popular in studying literary texts, leading to a new research branch, 'corpus stylistics' (McIntyre & Walker, 2019), providing quantitative and statistical support to qualitative intuitions. It relies on the use of specific software, which guarantees a higher degree of objectivity and a lower risk for the research to be influenced by the so-called 'researcher's bias' (Baker, 2006). Since concerns have been raised that Corpus Linguistics may not consider contextual features of production, particularly when multiple or

large corpora are analysed (Baker et al., 2008), it seems advantageous to combine Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, which considers structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control, linking the text to the external and situational contexts, as language is understood a social practice, reflecting and producing social ideologies (Baker et al., 2008).

The software selected to analyse the corpora is *#LancsBox* (Brezina et al., 2020), developed by a team of researchers at Lancaster University. Although various tools to carry out a corpus analysis exist, *#LancsBox* is a sophisticated, open-source, downloadable toolbox, with which it is also possible to analyse corpora in .pdf or .txt formats. Moreover, this software relies on POS-Tagging, an automated annotation system which tags each word in the corpus based on its grammatical category, e.g., 'NN' for noun, singular or mass; 'NNS' for noun, plural; 'VV' for verb, base form. It is also possible to use the symbol * as a wildcard to search all the words beginning with the typed letters. *#LancsBox* offers multiple tools, including the Whelk tool, providing information about the distribution of a search term (node) across the corpus, and the Words tool, creating a list of the most frequent words. Both the Whelk and the Words tools can calculate raw frequencies (the number of times a node occurs in the analysed corpus) and relative frequencies, namely frequencies normalised per 10.000 tokens, which are very useful to compare corpora of different sizes (Baker, 2006). To ensure the relevance of the data retrieved for this study, only nodes whose relative frequency approximates 2 and absolute frequency is greater than 10 were considered. Another useful tool is the *GraphColl*, with which collocations can be identified and their collocation graphs generated. Grammatical words were excluded, with a few exceptions considered to be relevant within the context of the narration, and a span of 6 words to the right and to the left was chosen to get relevant results, alongside with one of the 14 collocational statistic measures offered by *#LancsBox*: the MI3 Score. This is a variation of the traditional MI Score (Mutual Information Score): both consider the exclusivity of the collocation, but the MI3 Score also considers its frequency, as the MI Score occasionally mistakes the low frequency of a collocational relationship with its exclusivity (Brezina, 2018).

The data retrieved from the corpora was also compared with a reference corpus to understand whether a node was used in the analysed corpora more or less frequently than what could be regarded as standard usage in a linguistic variety. For the present study, the Freiburg Brown Corpus of American English, also known as FROWN Corpus (National Library of Norway - Språkbanken, n.d.), was considered, as it contains texts from the early 1990s in American English, therefore representing a sample which is supposedly close to the linguistic variety used in Donna Williams's novels and website presence.

Three corpora were built to investigate how the negotiation of Williams's identity with and within "the world" (Williams, 1992, 1994, n.d.) and her understanding of autism changed over the years. They consist of Donna Williams' two international bestsellers, *Nobody Nowhere* (1992) and *Somebody Somewhere* (1994), and selected contents posted on her websites (About Auties.Org, 2008; Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.; Welcome to the new Auties.Org, 2013; Williams, n.d.-a), all of which contain significant contributions about her life with autism, both before and after receiving the diagnosis. The NN-Corpus is based on *Nobody Nowhere*, and consists of 71383 tokens and 6991 types, whereas the SS-Corpus is based on *Somebody Somewhere* and consists of 89422 tokens and 7059 types; in both cases, introductions, dedications, and/or afterwords were excluded. The Web-Corpus is composed of two subcorpora for a total amount of 19810 tokens and 3629 types: the DW-Subcorpus, based on selected contents among those available on Williams' personal website (Williams, n.d.-a), and the Auties-Subcorpus, containing extracts from the self-help website she founded with her husband, Chris Samuel (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.).

More specifically, the subcorpus based on *donnawilliams.net* (Williams, n.d.-a) consists of 16846 tokens and 3314 types, as only its three sections in which information about her life and her diagnosis can be found were taken into account: 'about me' (Williams, n.d.-b), 'diagnosis' (Williams, n.d.-c), and 'official bio' (Williams, n.d.-d); the 'my name' section (Williams, n.d.-e), containing information about Williams' ancestry, was only considered for further insights into her family history and life. Considering the importance of the internet portal *auties.org* (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.), which Williams and her husband launched in 2004, its contents were selected to build a second sub-corpus. Originating as a platform to help autistic people create their public virtual space and share information (About Auties.Org, 2008), it has been inactive since 2010 and in 2012 turned into "an information only page" (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.), as social media like Facebook or blogs were considered, by Williams and her husband, to be more effective in ensuring people have their own web presence. Nevertheless, its contents can still be accessed via the *Wayback Machine* (n.d.), a digital archive of websites: users can type a URL, select a date or a date range, and browse the available versions.

Based on the existing archives, it could be observed that the website featured two different aims and styles. Being a virtual place for people to meet, the second version seems very similar to what we would nowadays refer to as 'social network'; therefore, the Auties-Subcorpus only contains texts from the older version, which was online from 2004 to 2008 (the latest archive was considered, dated August 30, 2008). The aim of the website was explicitly declared: [a portal] "for people on the Autistic Spectrum who are ready to

dare reach out, open the doors to the community and market their abilities directly to the public and for those interested in supporting these pioneers" (About Auties.org, 2008). The 'About Auties.Org' section and its subsections 'What is an Autism Spectrum Condition', 'Autism FAQs', 'Employability FAQs' were considered, for a total amount of 2964 tokens and 755 types.

For the NN-Corpus and the SS-Corpus notes were taken based on the researcher's intuitions; they constituted the core data to carry out a Critical Discourse Analysis. More specifically, a number of relevant topics were identified and used to draw conclusions, most of which were common to the two corpora: (a) Communication and writing; (b) Donna and her family; (c) Donna's identity; (d) Donna in the outer world; (e) Donna versus the outer world; (f) Meaning of the title of the novel. In the SS-Corpus a further theme could be identified, (g) Autism, whereas one common topic, (d), slightly changes: it is not only Donna in the outer world, but it is (d1) autistic people in the outer world.

Subsequently, thanks to *#LancsBox*, corpus-based analyses were carried out. Firstly, the lexical variety for each corpus was calculated, and a word list with the most frequent lexical items was produced, before grouping them into relevant categories. Then, to grasp deeper meanings that could have possibly been missed by simply reading and critically analysing the texts, a study of the most relevant collocations and semantic fields was carried out. Afterwards, the use of metaphors and metaphorical language was analysed. Considering the pervasiveness of metaphors in everyday life, not only in language, but also in human thought processes (Gibbs, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), a number of nodes based on the categories of common metaphors related to autism identified by Broderick and Ne'eman (2008) was analysed, including geographic separateness and autism as a disease or part of a spectrum within neurodiversity; therefore, the nodes searched within the corpus are: 'alien*', 'separat*', 'normal*', isolat*', 'wall*', 'surface', emerg*', 'beyond', 'identity', and 'name'. For each node, the relative and absolute frequencies were calculated and compared to data extracted from the FROWN Corpus. Moreover, the concordance lines were investigated to ensure the relevance of the data was considered.

4. Results

The results of the analysis will be presented separately for each corpus and then compared.

4.1. The NN-corpus

The first data to have been analysed is the lexical variety of the novel *Nobody Nowhere*, also known as the type/token ratio, which calculates the average

number of tokens per type (Baker, 2006); in this case, the types being 6991 and the tokens 71383, the lexical variety (rounded to the second decimal place) is 10%.

Secondly, a word list of the most frequent lexical items was produced; as *#LancsBox* also allows for a filtering system, by typing "/.*_(n|v|adj|adv)/", only nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs were considered, although high-frequency verbs were manually excluded, such as 'to be', 'to have', 'to say'. Therefore, the most relevant and frequent lexical items could be grouped in categories: 'human beings'; 'places'; 'feelings and perception'; 'communication'. The category 'human beings' includes: 'people'; 'mother'; 'carol'; 'donna'; 'williams'; 'nobody' (manually searched, being part of the title); 'willie'; 'tim'; 'children'; 'brother'; 'father'; 'friend'; 'teacher'; 'characters'; 'family'. The category 'places' includes: 'world'; 'school'; 'home'; 'room'; 'nowhere' (manually searched, being part of the title); 'house'; 'wall'. The category 'feelings and perception' includes: 'eyes', 'face'; 'fear'; 'hand'; 'feeling'; 'mind'; 'body', 'mirror'; 'mad'; 'afraid'; 'different'; 'disturbed'; 'frightened'. The category 'communication' includes: 'words'; 'music'; 'language'. One final category consists of eleven nodes, of which the first eight are featured in the frequency list, whereas the other five were manually searched for their importance in Williams's life: 'alone', 'name', 'darkness', 'problem', 'strange', 'closeness', 'autistic', 'nothingness', 'weird', 'autism', 'retard', 'retarded', 'weirdo'.

Subsequently, the relative frequencies of the above-mentioned nodes, with the exception of proper names, were compared to the data of the FROWN Corpus. Almost all the nodes are significantly more frequent in *Nobody Nowhere* than in the FROWN Corpus, with a few exceptions: the words 'autistic' and 'autism' are totally absent in the reference corpus.

Based on these results, the collocations of the most relevant words were analysed. The most relevant collocates of the node 'mother' include: 'my', 'carol's', 'told', 'said', 'brother'. The most relevant collocates of the node 'world' include: 'the', 'my', 'outside', 'carol's', 'donna'. The most relevant collocates of 'donna' include 'williams', 'I', 'world'; it is interesting to note that there are no verbs. 'Carol' usually collocates with 'willie', 'I', 'self', 'home', while 'willie' collocates with 'carol', 'time', 'other'. 'Brother' collocates with 'older', 'little', 'my', 'mother', while the only relevant collocate of 'father', excluding high frequency words, is 'my'. 'Autistic' collocates with 'I' and 'a', while 'autism' has no collocates at all; similarly, the only significant collocates of 'language' are 'I' and 'my'. 'Mad' only has one relevant collocate, which is '"you're' (in quotation marks). 'Home' often collocates with 'children's', 'my', 'stray' and 'carol', while 'house' collocates with 'friend's', 'carol's', and less frequently with 'my'. 'Writ*' collocates with 'I', 'music', 'my', while 'music' collocates with 'classical' and 'my'. Finally, 'mirror' collocates with 'front', 'carol', 'my'.

By reading the novel, a number of semantic fields emerge: darkness, fear, loneliness, closeness, and war. Their frequencies, both relative and absolute, were analysed, revealing that war has lower frequency values. Interestingly, all the nodes occur more frequently in the novel than they do in the FROWN Corpus. This makes them relevant to the purpose of this study.

To sum up, the use of metaphorical language related to autism was analysed. As previously mentioned, the nodes considered are 'alien*', 'separat*', 'normal*', isolat*', 'wall*', 'shell', 'surface', emerg*', 'beyond', 'identity', and 'name'. For each of them, both in the NN-Corpus and in the FROWN Corpus, only the metaphorical or strictly identity-related occurrences were considered. All of the nodes occur more frequently in *Nobody Nowhere* than in the FROWN Corpus, with the exception of 'beyond', which is never used metaphorically in the latter.

4.2. The SS-corpus

The analysis carried out on the SS-Corpus mirrors the one based on the NN-Corpus.

Firstly, the types being 7059 and the tokens 89422, the lexical variety rounded to the second decimal place is 8%.

Secondly, a word list based on frequency was produced relying on the same criteria used for the NN-Corpus and the categories in which the words were grouped. The words belonging to the category 'human beings' include: 'people', 'carol', 'person', 'children', 'someone' (manually searched, being part of the title), 'willie', 'donna', 'friend(s)', 'family', 'mother', 'woman', 'characters', 'father', 'tim', 'child', 'teacher'. The category 'places' includes: 'world', 'place', 'home', 'house', 'class', 'walls', 'somewhere' (manually searched, being part of the title). The nodes related to 'feelings and perception' are: 'face', 'eyes', 'hand(s)', 'mirror', 'touch', 'feeling(s)', 'body', 'mind', 'meaning', 'emotions', 'fear', 'ears', 'afraid', 'smile', 'sound', 'safe', 'close(ness)', 'lights', 'deaf', 'emotional', 'angry'. Finally, the category 'communication' includes: 'words', 'language', 'book', 'music'. An extra category which could be identified in *Somebody Somewhere* but not in *Nobody Nowhere* is connected to autism and includes: 'autistic', 'autism', 'control', 'different', 'pattern', 'normal'. Furthermore, a number of nodes were manually searched for their relevance in the light of Williams's growth and experiences, although they do not belong to any category in particular and the last five do not match the set frequency criteria: 'life', 'nothing', 'alone', 'aware(ness)', 'unable', 'nothingness', 'difficulties', 'name', 'strange', 'surface', 'nobody', 'retard*', 'disturbed', 'mad', 'weird'.

Subsequently, the relative frequencies of the nodes, except for personal names, were compared to the FROWN Corpus. All the words analysed occur

more frequently in the novel than in the reference corpus, with only two exceptions: 'autistic' and 'autism' are not present in the FROWN Corpus.

The following step was to analyse the most relevant collocations thanks to the *GraphColl* tool. More specifically, the main collocates of 'mother' are 'my', 'her', and 'me', while 'father' collocates with 'my' and 'said', and 'brother' collocates with 'tom' and 'my'. The only interesting collocates of 'home' are 'my' and 'felt', whereas 'house' often collocates with 'marek's', 'my' and 'their'. 'World' usually collocates with 'the', 'my', 'guarantees', 'mirror', 'strategies', 'place', 'me', 'real', 'against'. 'Donna''s collocates include 'williams', 'said', 'want', 'asked', while 'carol' collocates with 'willie', 'I', 'me', and 'willie' collocates with 'carol', 'I', 'me. 'Autism' often collocates with 'me', 'words', 'people'; the main collocates of 'autistic' include 'people', 'I', 'children', 'woman'. 'Mad' collocates with 'I', while 'mirror' has multiple relevant collocates, including 'hands', 'my', 'world', 'front', 'against', 'reflection', 'looked', 'touch', 'eyes'. To conclude, 'writ*' often collocates with 'book', 'since', 'I', 'my', 'me', whereas the main collocates of 'language' include 'foreign', 'I', 'body', 'my'.

Similarly to what could be observed by analysing the NN-Corpus, the nodes belonging to the semantic fields of darkness, fear, loneliness, closeness, and war were considered. Each of them has higher relative frequencies in the SS-Corpus than in the FROWN Corpus, with one exception: 'aloneness' is totally absent in the reference corpus.

Finally, the use of metaphorical language was investigated by searching the nodes 'alien*', 'separat*', 'normal*', isolat*', 'shell', 'wall*', 'surface', 'emerg*', 'beyond', 'identity', and 'name'. The results are the same as those which emerged from the analysis of *Nobody Nowhere*, as all the nodes are used much more frequently in the novel than in the reference corpus, whereas 'beyond' is only used literally in the FROWN Corpus.

4.3. The Web-corpus

As previously mentioned, Williams used to run a personal website (Williams, n.d.-a) and a self-help platform for autistic people and their dear ones (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.). Two versions of the latter can be retrieved through the *Wayback Machine* (Internet Archive, n.d.), which were online and active from 2004 to 2010 and from 2010 to 2012, respectively; however, the present analysis considers the older version.

Firstly, the type/token ratio for both subcorpora was calculated. The lexical varieties of the DW-Subcorpus and the Auties-Subcorpus (rounded to the second decimal place) are 20% and 25%, respectively.

Secondly, using the Words tool in *#LancsBox*, two lists of words ranked by

frequency were produced, one for each subcorpus. In both cases, words with a relative frequency of at least 10 were considered and their concordances explored. In the DW-Subcorpus three broad categories could be identified: 'autism' (including 'autism', 'diagnosed', 'autistic', 'speech', 'echolalia', 'echolaic', 'feral'); 'personal development' (including 'mother', 'father', 'family', 'home', 'school', 'teacher'); 'medical language' (including 'disorder', 'cancer', 'brain'). Scrolling down the list, regardless of the relative frequencies of the words, other significant items could be found. For example, Williams identified herself not only as 'Donna', but also as 'Polly', explaining that her first name was chosen by her mother as it meant 'female' in Spanish, whereas her father used to call her Polly, with which she identified most in spite of acknowledging her first, legal name as her 'fame name' (Williams, n.d.-e); she also mentioned 'Dolly', the nickname her mother gave her, as "she developed attachment to me as her Narcissistic Object and . . . 'I was *her* doll . . . .'" (Williams, n.d.-c, emphasis in original). However, it is interesting to note the use of highly specialised medical lexis, such as 'eds' (Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, with which Williams was diagnosed in 2012), 'ptsd' (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, with which she lived until her 40s), 'allergies', 'trauma', 'valium', 'conditions', 'borderline'. Furthermore, she defined autism as a 'fruit salad', a creative expression intended to convey the idea that this condition can change from one person to another.

A similar analysis was carried out on the most frequent words extracted from the Auties-Subcorpus, which were grouped in three main categories: 'autism', 'lexis related to economics and work', 'social relations'. The first category includes 'spectrum', 'autism' and 'autistic', 'conditions', 'community', 'ability', 'autie', 'diversity', 'diagnosed', 'disability', 'equality', 'celebration'. The words related to the world of economics and work include 'work', 'employment' and 'employable', 'businesses', 'services', and a series of means to increase one's employability, such as 'website', 'email'. The category 'social relations' includes '(autie-)friendly', 'social', 'activities'.

Subsequently, the collocations of some nodes considered to be relevant were analysed. In the Auties-Subcorpus, among the most interesting collocates of 'autistic' are 'spectrum' and 'people', while in the DW-Subcorpus 'be', 'with', 'have'. In the former subcorpus, 'autism' often collocates with 'spectrum', 'friendly', 'conditions', whereas in the latter there are many more collocates, including 'fruit salad', 'spectrum', 'diagnosed', 'expert', 'deemed', 'psychosis' and 'childhood', 'disorder'. 'Employ*' never occurs in the DW-Subcorpus, whereas it is frequent in the Auties-Subcorpus and often collocates with 'self', 'autism', 'spectrum'. Conversely, the nodes 'language', 'identity', 'book' and 'mother' do not have any relevant collocates in the Auties-Subcorpus, while in the DW-Subcorpus 'language' frequently co-occurs with 'processing' and

'disorder'; 'identity' with 'dissociative' and 'disorder'; 'book' often collocates with 'first' (referring to *Nobody Nowhere*); and 'mother' with 'my', 'father', 'child'.

Next, the use of words related to the semantic fields of darkness, fear, loneliness, closeness, and war was analysed. While in the Auties-Subcorpus there are no instances, in the DW-Subcorpus 'dark*', 'alone', 'void', 'empty', 'close', 'battle', 'surviv*' emerged, and their relative frequencies are higher than in the FROWN-Corpus.

In short, the analysis of metaphorical language revealed that this is almost absent in the Web-Corpus. In the Auties-Subcorpus, the word 'walls' is used only once, as a metaphor, in the sentence "if you are someone in the community who believes in building bridges and not walls, then welcome to Auties.org […]" (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.). Conversely, the node 'normal*'', is used only twice in relation to Williams's condition in the DW-Subcorpus: "I lived in an emotional and perceptual chaos which taught me surrealism and the relativity of the word 'normal'" (Williams, n.d.-b).

5. Discussion

Having analysed the three corpora and having presented the results of said analyses, this section compares and interprets the data.

Firstly, the lexical variety of each corpus was analysed: while this was quite low in the NN-Corpus and in the SS-Corpus, it was much higher in the two subcorpora of the Web-Corpus, which might be explained by the range of topics with which each corpus deals (Baker, 2006). The two novels are autobiographies written by Williams with the sole aim of understanding more about herself and were not meant to be published (at least initially); therefore, they are considerably personal and intimate. Conversely, the two websites deal with more varied themes, resulting in a greater linguistic variety: *donnawilliams.net* deals with Williams's own life, although the website was probably founded with the aim of spreading information about autism, whereas *auties.org* had a target-oriented approach from the onset, offering services and networking opportunities to and for autistic people. In this sense, the former website is closer to Williams's novels, since it features accounts of her diagnoses, her childhood and her family, albeit with a more scientific and objective style, as recourse to medical lexis shows. On the contrary, being a self-help website for autistic people or for those who live close to them, *auties.org* did not deal with Williams's personal life, although it may be argued that it was precisely the writer's personal experiences which made her realise the importance of founding the platform; indeed, this website featured a more practical approach, which may explain recourse to a very direct and plain writing style.

Secondly, frequency lists were produced and organised into relevant categories, most of which were common to the two novels. However, these lists can also be relevant for the Web-Corpus; while they are not always applicable to the Auties-Subcorpus, which is not about Donna Williams's life and in which only the categories (g) and (d1) fully apply, they are meaningful for the DW-Subcorpus, as Donna Williams's website functions as an extension of her autobiography, albeit with a different style and approach, since it has a more public nature than her autobiographies and appears to be more technical.

Comparing the data from the NN-Corpus and the SS-Corpus, the first and most striking difference is the presence of (g) Autism only in the second novel, which can be explained by the fact that Williams was officially diagnosed with ASD only in her late 20s, which resulted in the need of a new life and understanding of the world and of people around her; indeed, from the analysis of collocations it can be observed that the author talked both about herself and other autistic people and children. It is also interesting to note that 'autism' and 'autistic' are not present in the FROWN Corpus, which could be explained by the fact that autism had been considered a form of childhood psychosis/schizophrenia until the 1970s; it only became a separate disorder in 1987, with the publication of the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1987), and a spectrum since 1994 with the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Vivanti, 2020; Zeldovich, 2018).

'Words' often collocates with 'autism' and 'meaning', thus representing a way to connect with the outer world; words are the symbol of the author's difficulties in communication: she seemed unable to fully grasp the meaning of what people said and she felt that she spoke a totally different language. This leads to another point: (a) Communication and writing. Having always had trouble expressing her thoughts through her voice, Donna Williams realised that she could rely on other forms of communication. In *Nobody Nowhere*, Williams talked about a language of her own, and the node 'writ*' often collocates with 'music'; indeed, she was also an artist who could express herself through music: "Through my music I began more and more to reach and express my true self" (Williams, 1992, p. 127). Furthermore, *donnawilliams.net* welcomes users with a video in which Donna playfully sings and dances. In *Somebody Somewhere*, instead, 'writ*' collocates with 'book' and the importance of this relation is to be appreciated in the events occurring between the publications of the two novels. Williams never dreamt of becoming a writer; *Nobody Nowhere* originated from her wish to search inside herself for a word capable of rendering what she had in common with her friend Shaun. She recalled taking her autobiography to a child psychiatrist, who sent the book to a specialist on autism. It was this specialist who pointed out that her experience was very common, and that publishing

her book might contribute to a better understanding of people like her. Initially, Williams felt her book was too personal for the world to read, but she eventually agreed to have it published. This is the starting point of *Somebody Somewhere* and partially explains the titles (f): writing about herself helped Williams understand who she was, as she clarified: "More than a book, it had been an exorcism. Writing it had been like a fever before the waking" (Williams, 1994, p. 14). Therefore, *Nobody Nowhere* is a milestone in Williams's life: she had never had any word nor diagnoses to describe and explain to herself why she was the way that she was; however, writing her book and having a psychiatrist read it enabled her to access a new part of her identity and find her place in the world, thus turning from a 'nobody nowhere' into a 'somebody somewhere'.

Donna Williams occasionally talked about herself with a plural personal pronoun, "we", which might seem bizarre, since *Somebody Somewhere* is an autobiography, but this is actually particularly meaningful considering how Donna managed to survive before her diagnosis. Indeed, she invented a set of characters, Carol and Willie, allowing her to merge with the world (Carol's pleasing and accommodating behaviour), and to protect herself from it (Willie's more assertive behaviour). However, after writing *Nobody Nowhere*, Williams's feelings changed: "I [Donna] didn't need Willie and Carol anymore. I needed Donna. I said goodbye to the characters who had sustained me for so long and welcomed the me I wanted to know better" (Williams, 1994, p. 8). As a matter of fact, the names of the characters often collocate with 'Donna', thus signalling a strong relationship with her, but also with 'mother', with whom she had a very complex relationship, and 'home', where Donna could not feel at ease; moreover, the lack of verbs among Donna's collocates might signal a lack of agency and linguistically reflect the author's rather passive attitude in life. Donna Williams's characters are the emblem of her difficulties in establishing a safe relationship with the world, which leads to a set of key issues: (b) Donna and her family; (c) Donna's identity; (d) and (d1) Donna and autistic people in the outer world; (e) Donna versus the outer world. Having always been considered retarded and mad, as the frequency of these words show, particularly in the first book (therefore, before her official diagnosis), Donna Williams started re-negotiating herself, also in relation to other people, fully embracing her diagnosis. Her mother was perhaps the most influential person in her early development (as the relative frequency of the node 'mother' shows): having psychological issues herself, Donna's mother was described as unloving and not interested in her child, whom she looked at as 'retarded'. Donna Williams's father, with whom she felt closer, only lived with her until she was three, when "he was ordered not to speak to me and to have nothing to do with me" (Williams, 1992, p. 8); unsurprisingly, in both novels the node 'father' has lower relative frequencies than 'mother'.

The analysis of collocations in the novels is also useful to understand how Donna (d) and autistic people in general (d1) relate to the outer world. In both books, 'mirror' is used as a noun and as a verb. In *Nobody Nowhere*, its main collocates are 'front', 'carol', 'my': as a matter of fact, social mimicry is one of the compensatory strategies autistic people, and particularly women who receive a delayed diagnosis (Green et al., 2019), tend to use when trying to merge in the world, and Donna Williams experienced this since her childhood. One day, she met a girl named Carol and, by copying anything she did, she felt she was "amused and amusing" (Williams, 1992, p. 17). Therefore, even when Carol's mother forbade her to meet Donna again, the latter would meet her friend in her own mirror, and that was the moment when one of her characters was born, since Willie already existed as "a pair of green eyes . . . that lived under my bed" (Williams, 1992, p. 9). Thanks to the Carol in her mirror, Donna learnt how to please others, make friends, and be a socially acceptable person, capable of surviving the outer world. In *Somebody Somewhere*, 'mirror' has more collocates: 'hands', 'my' and 'me', 'world', 'front', 'against', 'reflection', 'looked', 'touch', 'eyes'. Growing up and becoming more conscious of her neurodiversity, Donna Williams realised that looking in the mirror enabled her to try to get into Carol's world of social acceptance, or to live in what she called 'my world': a secure space where she could be alone with her own reflection. However, even if the mirror was initially only Williams's private refuge, she later realised that there were other people who also "knew what it was to live as a mirror, to become other people" (Williams, 1992, p. 9).

Although during her university years she had already met someone like her, Tim, it is mainly in *Somebody Somewhere* that Donna Williams engaged in social life, meeting other autistic people, for example during her training as a teacher's aide in schools for people with special needs. This work experience showed her that there were lots of autistic people; most of them, labelled as 'retarded' or 'slow', were taught to live "up to unbelievably low expectations" (Williams, 1992, p. 21), and their teachers were not trained adequately. However, having learnt how to live with autism herself, Donna Williams could better understand their feelings and thoughts (d1); for example, she knew that tugging a child's arm was enough to bring them back into "the world" from a moment of self-isolation, or she could teach children that humming a tune to oneself was a better option than grinding one's teeth to detach from the disturbing noise of the outer world. Moreover, working with other autistic people allowed Williams to learn how to better manage her own emotions; for instance, it had always been very challenging for her to deal with being touched by someone else, until she met a child who helped her overcome a panic attack after he took her hand to be accompanied to the toilet. Therefore, being close to other autistic people was a mutual exchange for Donna: "I learn

from others by reflecting them and can learn from them by their reflecting me" (Williams, 1994, p. 69), and "I was afraid to see it finally so clearly from the outside. I could finally see why others had sometimes been frightened by my sudden shifts, changes, and contradictions" (Williams, 1994, p. 240-241).

These considerations about Donna's growth and understanding of her condition also led to a negotiation of her own identity (c). Indeed, in *Nobody Nowhere* Donna could only "function" in the outer world if she knew she could dissociate from herself, as when she was child and insisted that she was to be called by her middle name, Lee, or when it was not Donna with whom people interacted, but her anger (Willie) and her "ability to perform and communicate, embodied in the emotionless and empty shell I secretly called Carol" (Williams, 1992, p. 56), since she "feared becoming possessed by the real me" (Williams, 1992, p. 95). Thanks to her sessions with a psychiatrist, Donna became aware of her coping mechanisms: "I referred to myself as 'you.' . . . One develops an 'I' in interaction with 'the world.' Donna didn't interact; the characters did" (Williams, 1992, p. 103). Conversely, in *Somebody Somewhere*, Donna learnt how to control her reactions, allowing herself to experience emotions, including friendship and love, anger and fear, until she "felt like an alien suddenly acquiring humanness" (Williams, 1994, p. 258), when she could actually perceive her body. These experiences, alongside with her sessions with a psychiatrist specialised in ASD, helped her better understand her condition and needs (e), eventually realising that "AUTISM IS NOT ME. Autism is just an information-processing problem that controls who I appear to be. . . . I CAN FIGHT AUTISM . . . . I WILL CONTROL IT . . . . IT WILL NOT CONTROL ME." (Williams, 1994, p. 255).

To sum up, the analysis of metaphorical language showed that while it is almost totally absent in the Auties-Subcorpus, probably due to the aim and nature of the website, it is considerable in the other corpora, being more strictly connected to Donna Williams' personal life.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated how Williams used language to negotiate her own identity as a child and teenager deemed as 'retarded' first, and as a high-functioning autistic woman later on, with specific attention devoted to the distribution of collocations and metaphors. The way she could describe her condition in such detail highlights how useful language can be to better understand oneself; indeed, despite having always experienced difficulties in expressing her thoughts and feelings, Donna Williams used writing to delve deeply into herself, and it was precisely thanks to her first novel, *Nobody Nowhere*, and to the specialists who read it, that she could be officially diagnosed with autism.

Recourse to the Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis approach in the analysis of data allowed for the identification of numerous patterns. The frequency and collocational analysis carried out on the two novels showed a correspondence between Donna Williams's experiences and the linguistic choices made, such as recourse to the so-called characters and how they helped her fit in 'the world', or the complex relationships with her family, particularly with her mother. The publication of *Nobody Nowhere* represented a real turning point in Donna Williams' life, as demonstrated not only by her life account, but also by the language she used, where reference to her diagnosis and feelings occurs. The analysis of *donnawilliams.net* is to some extent similar to that performed on the novels, with regards to her personal life, in spite of some differences: the website is more detailed and medically accurate, also reporting information about other health issues, so it can be inferred that the idea behind the website itself was to have a public space which could also be useful to other autistic people and their loved ones. However, *donnawilliams.net* was also a platform on which Donna Williams could share her artworks and information about her consulting work, similarly to how social media are used nowadays. This could explain the reason why Donna and her husband founded *auties.org*, whose language is radically different both from the books and from the author's personal website: it is more practical, target-oriented, and draws from the lexica of sociality, economics, and work.

The analysis of metaphorical language showed that Williams verbally negotiated her identity as an autistic person by relying on the typical metaphors for autism identified by Broderick and Ne'eman (2008); however, she also created her own metaphors, such as 'fruit salad', thus confirming the theory that, despite their difficulties with pragmatics, autistic people can still create novel metaphors (Rucińska et al., 2021).

To conclude, the present study has tried to explore the social and inner world of autism based on the analysis of direct accounts by an autistic person. Further research could investigate the use of language in identity negotiation processes by autistic people on modern social media platforms, which would also allow for an analysis of interactional exchanges. On a more practical level, storytelling could be considered, for example in schools, also relying on forms of computer mediated communication, thus encouraging children on the autistic spectrum to read and/or write about similar/their own experiences.

The Author

Alessia Battista (Email: alessia.battista001@studenti.uniparthenope.it) is a first-year doctoral candidate in "Euro(pean) Languages and Specialized

Terminologies" at the University 'Parthenope' of Naples. She earned a MA *summa cum laude* and final dissertation worthy of publication in "Languages for International Communication and Cooperation" at Università Suor Orsola Benincasa, Naples, Italy, and a BA *summa cum laude* and highest honours in Modern Languages and Cultures from the same university. Her research interests focus on English linguistics, and the interaction between language, society, identity construction.

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Mental disabilities: Fighting stigma and discrimination in public service announcements

Sole Alba ZOLLO, University of Napoli Federico II, Italy

In the last few years, the role of public service announcements (PSA) in conveying a message of social responsibility to a wide audience has increased due to the fact that many governments have adopted a less authoritative approach in favour of policy-making based on promotion and education. Against this backdrop of global changing policies, governments have started to include discourses of diversity and inclusivity in mass media campaigns. For instance, more and more mental health organisations have been launching awareness-raising campaigns on diversity and inclusion featuring a diverse group of individuals to speak out against commonly held stereotypes and the so-called 'implicit bias'. The present research examined a sample of PSAs on mental disabilities collected from the websites of two non-profit organisations: the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and the Ad Council, USA. Against the theoretical framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis and visual argumentation, the research aimed to explore how non-profit organizations promote diversity and inclusion through verbal and visual argumentative-persuasive techniques and to what extent multimodal argumentation contributes to fighting stigma and discrimination, changing public attitudes and behaviour towards mental disabilities, especially among the young generations.

Keywords: Diversity and Inclusion; Mental Disabilities; Multimodal Argumentation; Public Service Announcements; Stigma

1. Introduction

Public communication campaigns have come to play an increasingly important role in our societies. In this era of 'permanent campaign' (Perloff, 2003), campaigns are undertaken to influence people on every topic, ranging from personal to social issues.

Social campaigns aim to spread ideas and practices through mass media. Their main purpose is to change people's behaviour or attitude through persuasion, which is a symbolic process where the persuader attempts to convince people to change ideas about an issue but in an environment of free choice. According to Blair (2004), the indispensable ingredient in persuasion

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able to influence the audience is that "the person persuaded assents to the pressure of the vector of influence. The person consciously assents, and that implies that he or she is free to resist the causal influences" (p. 43). Social campaigns generally try not to perform a particular action but to change a specific behaviour, and sometimes these campaigns are more complex since they refer to values, prejudices and stereotypes.

Nowadays, public service announcements (PSAs) on different issues (environment protection, health advice, anti-drug abuse, public security, among others) can be seen everywhere. Their main purpose is both to inform people about social issues and change specific behaviours and systems of values.

> On the one hand, PSA reflects the customs, ethical standards and values of our society. On the other hand, thanks to its highly persuasive emotional effect, PSA can ultimately change the system of values and lifestyle of a person; reform his or her ideals and allegiances.
>
> (Terskikh & Malenova, 2016, pp. 139-140)

By combining Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Visual Argumentation theory, the present research analysed a sample of American and Canadian PSAs in order to verify how mental disabilities are represented in dynamic multimodal texts and to what extent they contribute to fighting prejudices and taboos and promoting inclusivity.

2. Background

In the past, debates on diversity often focused on only one or two identities – mostly gender and race. The so-called 'epidemic of invisibility' (Smith et al., 2016) has affected LGBT+ people, minorities, people with disabilities, people with mental problems. Companies have started to pay attention to the so-called discourse of the 'invisible' and develop discourses of diversity and inclusion in their public campaigns. For example, for years toy producers have ignored diversity in toys' adverts. The only model available in the toy shops was the unrealistically beautiful and physically perfect 57-year-old Barbie. Since the discourses of diversity and inclusion have become popular, especially in new media, international toy companies such as Mattel have started to introduce more realistic body-diverse dolls in their lines (even dolls with disabilities) in order to represent real life diversity(ies) into toys (de Almeida, 2017). Apart from product-based campaigns, more and more non-profit organisations have been launching awareness raising campaigns on diversity and inclusion featuring a diverse group of individuals to speak out against commonly held stereotypes and the so-called "implicit bias" (Aaberg, 2012; FitzGerald & Hurst, 2017; Holroyd & Sweetman, 2016). The implicit

bias is a form of unintentional discrimination that influences how we look at and interact with people different from us. It can impact someone's ability to get a job, a house, a loan or even a fair trial, perpetuating social and economic disparities. Today many PSAs aim to make people aware of this bias, confront it and work towards greater acceptance.

Over the last two decades, PSAs have stimulated research interest in communication studies. With the development of multimodal discourse analysis, studies on PSAs have increased. Among these studies, Stiles (2012) employs rhetorical analysis and feminist semiotic methodology to investigate a British anti-trafficking PSA video and suggests some guidelines for future social campaigns. Terskikh and Malenova (2016) focus on the verbal and visual metaphorical structure of PSAs on the issues of childhood by developing a method to analyse visual metaphors and verify their effectiveness. Feng (2016) uses a sociolinguistic approach to investigate the rhetorical features and multimodal argumentation strategies in the anti-drug public service advertisements in Hong Kong. By drawing on a case study of a PSA in China, the study by He (2016) aims to show how Halliday's transitivity model can be used to understand the meaning-making processes of kinetic typography. More generally, Liu (2019) investigates the interactive meaning in three PSAs in the field of wildlife protection, parenting, and health. Since studies on PSAs from a multimodal argumentative perspective are not many, if compared to the proliferation of works on product-based adverts, the present study hopes to make a contribution to this research field.

3. Method

3.1. Data and aims

The study was conducted on a sample of videos collected from the websites of two non-profit organisations, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)[1] and the Ad Council,[2] USA, which create and promote public service announcements focusing on crucial social issues. In particular, the research focused on the two organisations' most recent PSAs on mental disabilities.

The CMHA is the only association in Canada that addresses all aspects of mental health and mental illness. It collaborates with policymakers, educators, mass media, stakeholders and other service providers. The videos taken into consideration for the analysis are:

Balance,[3] *Depression one,*[4] *Depression two,*[5] *Remember your mind-Body genie,*[6] *Remember your mind-Exercise*.[7]

The Ad Council is a private, non-profit organization that is the nation's leading producer of public service advertising campaigns, addressing some of the most pressing social problems in the USA, such as *Diversity & Inclusion*, *Gun*

Safety, *Racial Justice Series*, *Suicide Prevention* and more recently *Coronavirus Response*, *COVID-19 Vaccine Education*, and *Disaster and Crisis Relief*. The analysed videos, taken from the Suicide prevention campaign *The Awkward Silence - Friendship & Mental Health*, are:

What's seize the awkward?,[8] *Conversation starters,*[9] *During the conversation.*[10]

The present study aims to investigate how mental disabilities are represented in the collected videos and to what extent these announcements contribute to raising awareness, changing public attitudes and behaviour towards this social issue. Public awareness campaigns can employ various communicative techniques and different materials, but they are all based on the art of persuasion relying on "argumentation, sloganeering, and emotional appeals in an effort to mould public attitudes" (Perloff, 2003, p. 303). Since "language is an integral aspect of the persuasive transaction, with nonverbal behaviour coming into play as an instrument for reinforcing the meaning and/or credibility of verbal messages" (Miller, 2002, p. 5), this study focuses on the linguistic and visual manifestations of argumentation looking at the way in which they interact to produce a persuasive message. Against the theoretical framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis (Bateman, 2018; Breazu & Machin, 2018; Ledin & Machin, 2018; Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2013) and multimodal argumentation (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, 2007; Blair, 2004; Groarke, 2015; Roque, 2012, 2017; Tseronis, 2021; Tseronis & Forceville, 2017), the research aims to explore how national organizations promote diversity and inclusion through verbal and visual argumentative-persuasive techniques and to what extent these strategies interact in the campaign material, also allowing PSAs to become effective instruments to fight stigma and discrimination.

3.2. Theoretical framework

As stated by Dozier et al. (2001) "public communication campaigns may be viewed as strategies of social control because one group has taken it on itself to affect the beliefs or behaviours of another group" (p. 232). As a result, a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach allows to extend the concept of discourse from the traditional and natural "language in use" to be a social practice per se, taking into account the interaction between different interactional modes.

The term Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) suggests a merger of two approaches: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodality. The aim of CDA is to identify the actions concealed and abstracted in texts focusing on the ideological implications. As a result, for MCDA it can be crucial how different types of semiotic resources are co-deployed in this process of abstraction. Since recontextualisation is a key concept to investigate the

discursive process of social practices, it is important to see how actions, participants and settings are recontexualised. For Machin (2013), "they are not represented through actually giving a clear account of events, nor by logical argument, nor by a reasonable assessment of information, but through a process of abstraction, addition, substitution, and deletion" (p. 352). Some aspects of a social practice can be deleted, such as participants or settings, other elements can be added such as legitimation or purpose, other elements can be substituted, for example details can be substituted by generalisations or vice versa, and finally evaluation of a social practice is always present. These processes can help us identify the argumentative function of different semiotic resources used in PSAs to recontexualise values, behaviours, etc. in order to fight stereotypes and taboos. Being critical at the multimodal level can be instrumental in seeing how different semiotic resources can be employed to convey messages and discourses thanks to processes of deletion, addition, substitution, and evaluation.

For years arguments have been considered only verbal, because the reasons they employ are propositions expressed by sentences which have a truth value. But "argumentation is a communicative act—not a verbal text" (Kjeldsen, 2018, p. 81). Nowadays the concept that arguments are expressed mainly verbally has been widely debated, since scholars have started to contest the idea that rhetoric is the art of persuading through verbal language only, but also non-verbal arguments can be persuasive. Therefore, they begin to propose the idea that rhetoric can also include visual language, in other words, it can also be asserted the presence of visual persuasion (Blair, 2004).

Visual arguments are essentially enthymemes, that is, some parts remain unexpressed and must be inferred by the audience. Visual persuasion can evoke emotions and does not use argumentation in the traditional sense. Groarke (1996) claimed for the development of a theory of visual argument raising an important and stimulating discussion for the theory of argumentation in general. His position was supported by several scholars (Blair, 1996; Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Shelley, 2001). A division between words and images is not possible so we cannot have visual arguments because we do not have pure images. Even though we cannot transform a visual argument into a verbal proposition, we can find how an argument is expressed within the language of images. In fact, Roque (2009, p. 8) states that: "what is properly visual in a visual argument is not the argument itself, but the way it is visually displayed, which calls for a closer look at the syntactic layout of visual images".

Most of the time a visual argument is not merely visual, but it includes verbal components too. For instance, in most commercial adverts or social campaign materials, a visual argument is based upon a combination of verbal and visual

modes and for this reason Roque (2012) suggests another definition: "a visual argument is an argument conveyed through the visual channel and sometimes using the visual code alone, but most of the time both verbal and visual codes combined within the same message" (p. 276). Therefore, for him arguments result from mental operations independent from the verbal so they can also be expressed visually. "It is not the argument itself that could be considered visual, but the way it is displayed" (Roque 2012, p. 277). He suggests a classification of the different types of relationships between visual and verbal argumentation to make clear how the two modes work together in mixed media. The first category, called 'visual flag' (a term coined by Groarke, 1996), is when a picture attracts attention to an argument presented verbally. The visual is only a flag and not a real argument since the image does not contain an argument but only directs our eye to the text which conveys the actual argument. The second category is when the visual and the verbal express parallel argumentations contributing both to the general meaning. There is no hierarchy between the visual and the verbal. Sometimes they can also present the same argument and it often happens in advertising posters. The third category is when the argument is elaborated using visual and verbal elements, so called "joint argument". Visual and verbal components are closely entangled in the building of the argument with a contribution from both. Mostly, the conclusion is given by the text. Finally, in the last category the argument is created through an opposition between the verbal and the visual.

In the last few years, more and more researchers (Bura, 2020; Groarke, 2015; Kjeldsen, 2018; Tseronis, 2018, 2021; Wildfeuer & Pollaroli, 2017) have paid attention to the multimodal aspects of arguments and different scientific journals have started to publish works dealing with the interplay of different semiotic resources in argumentative interactions and discourses. Instances of multimodal communication do not only inform the recipients but also convince them about some specific claims. Consequently, these forms of communication can be defined as multimodal argumentation, that is, "a rational and social activity, in which two or more modes play a role in the procedure of advancing a standpoint and testing its acceptability" (Tseronis & Forceville, 2017, p. 5). Since arguments are instruments of persuasion and rhetoric includes the study of the tools of persuasion, it is important to take into account the relationship between persuasion, rhetoric and argument. Arguments give us reasons to accept a point of view and the standpoints can be descriptive as well as evaluative or prescriptive. As a social practice, argumentation is used in different communities of practice, and, in this case, it is used in a public sphere and in the specific context of social campaigns in order to raise awareness on diversity and inclusion.

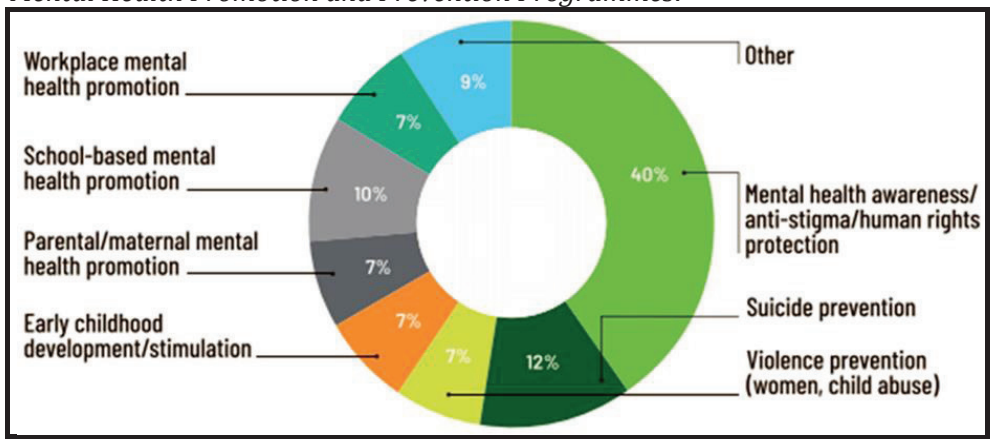
As we will see in section 4, the arguments present in the videos under investigation are multimodal since they are a mixture of verbal and visual

components, and the analysis will take into account the above mentioned classification of mixed media arguments. For this reason, a MCDA perspective can help us to see how different modes are "grammatically" displayed in order to identify multimodal arguments.

4. Results and discussion

Both Canada and the United States have invested resources and energies to develop national policies and programmes on mental health promotion, particularly in government services and sectors. Figure 1 shows the distribution of mental health promotion strategies according to the national CMHA policy paper, "Cohesive, Collaborative, Collective: Advancing Mental Health Promotion in Canada,"[11] published in 2019. The graph shows that the majority of functioning programmes (40%) were aimed at improving mental health literacy or fighting stigma followed by programmes aimed at suicide prevention (12%).

Figure 1.
Mental Health Promotion and Prevention Programmes.



Retrieved from the CMHA policy paper *Cohesive, Collaborative, Collective: Advancing Mental Health Promotion in Canada* (May 2019).

One of the recommendations outlined in the CMHA policy paper is to implement a national mental health promotion strategy to combat stigma. As it can be seen in the following extract, the organization is willing to invest in social campaigns in order to enhance mental health awareness and fight stigma, injustice and social discrimination.

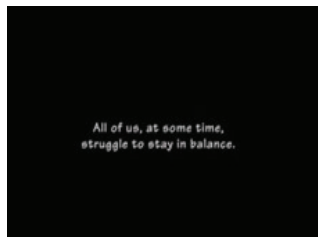
> Specifically, if [Mental Health Promotion] is to achieve its transformational goals, ending stigma must be a central component of MHP efforts. In the Canadian context, several national and provincial-

> level interventions have been very successful in enhancing mental health awareness and reducing stigma. Further investment would help bridge the information deficit about mental health, creating opportunities for individuals, social and professional communities, and workplaces to address mental health, learn about and share strategies, successes, and challenges and mobilise action on the implications of stigma.
>
> (CMHA 2019 Summary Report, p. 6)

The images used in the PSAs under investigation never play an illustrative role in the construction of argumentation. Instead, in most cases, images substantially and directly contribute to one of the key components of argumentation, i.e., the communication of propositional premises and conclusions. Arguments are conveyed through the use of both verbal and visual resources. In some cases, further modes (music, sound, body movement) convey fully propositional arguments, without the need of verbalization or verbal reinforcement.

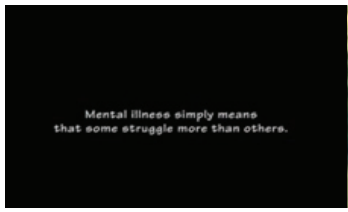
Figure 2.
Balance

Frame 1



Frame 2

Frame 3



Frame 4

Frame 5

The video *Balance* is an example of "joint argument" (Roque 2012, 2017) since the whole meaning is given by the interaction of verbal, visual and sound resources (Figure 2). First, we have a visual text where a male child tries to stay in balance while walking on a tree branch (frame 1). Then the premise is given by the verbal text "All of us, at some time, struggle to stay in balance" (frame 2). The visual frame 3 (same action performed by a female Asian child) reinforces the verbal message and the presence of an Asian girl

reinforces the precedent phrase "all of us" in frame 2. It is only in frame 4 that the viewer starts to realise the real content of the PSA "Mental illness simply means that some struggle more than others". Finally, in the following visual frame we can infer the conclusion of the claim (frame 5): everybody can suffer from mental problems but the Canadian Association can help you. The organisation is like the child in the last frame, who tries to help holding one of the child's hands.

The music and colour saturation emphasise the positive message that the video wants to convey. Mental illness is not to be hidden and people with mental problems must not be excluded, but they can be easily helped, and the positive evaluative adverb "simply" reinforces the concept.

Apart from the intertwined relation between words and images, in this video sound is one of the semiotic modes which complements the other modes in the creation of a persuasive message. In his book *Speech, Music, Sound*, van Leeuwen (1999, p. 14) tries to integrate speech, music and other sounds, pointing out that, like pictures, sound has a grammar of its own. Sound and image can both establish relations between what is being represented and the addressee of the message and, hence, contribute to communication.

> There is, for instance, no equivalent of the 'frontal' and 'side on' angle in sound. Sound is a wrap-around medium. But there are also similarities. Both can create relations between the subject they represent and the receiver they address . . . .

Music plays a significant role in order to attract attention and elicit a certain emotion. It creates the mood and the emotional temperature of the scene represented. For van Leeuwen (1999), sound is dynamic, ". . . it can move us towards or away from a certain position, it can change our relation to what we hear" (p. 18). In the video under investigation music is positioned as *Figure*, it means that it is treated as the most significant sound, the sound which the listener must identify with and/or act in response. It reminds one of lullabies. So, it is associated with the children's feelings of serenity and peace by stirring viewers' response. The sweet melody communicates joy and optimism.

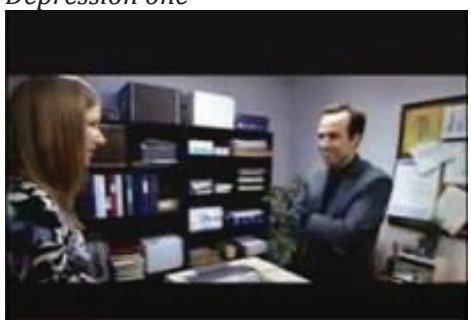
The PSAs *Depression one* and *Depression two* deal with depression, a common mental disorder characterised by sadness, tiredness and lack of interest in activities that you previously enjoyed. According to the World Health Organisation[12] depression is the largest cause of disability around the world and it is estimated that 5% of adults suffer from this illness, with an increase of 25% in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Metaphors play an important role in the PSA discourse, especially when we

talk about mental problems. The theory of cognitive metaphor has demonstrated that metaphors play a crucial role in societal communities shaping word views and influencing human behaviours (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors are powerful rhetorical figures to convey necessary information into the recipient's consciousness. The recipient takes part in a sort of intellectual game, as they must interpret the information and, if they succeed, they get some cognitive and emotional satisfaction. Moreover, this interpretative process helps information root in the recipient's consciousness.

In these two videos (Figures 3 and 4) we find personification. Depression appears as an ordinary man (not a monster, interestingly not a woman). Personification is maybe the most obvious ontological metaphor that allows us to understand a variety of experiences with non-human entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics and activities.

Figure 3.
Depression one

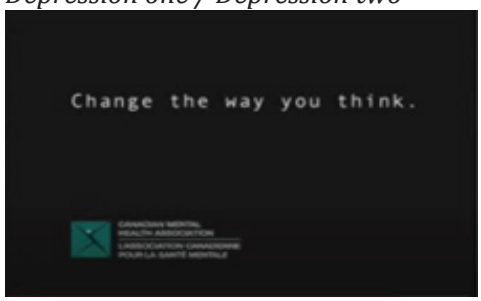


Frame 1

Figure 4.
Depression two

Frame 2

Figure 5.
Depression one / Depression two



Frame 1

Frame 2

As it can be seen in the conversation between the two actors (see the scripts below), the presence of humour contributes to lightening the content and involves the viewer.

Script – *Depression one*

> Woman: I didn't see you come in.
> Depression: Most people don't.
> Woman: Who are you?
> Depression: I'm depression and I've come for you.
> Woman: Ah . . . I'm not depressed.
> Depression: Oh! You're not? What about schizophrenia?
> Woman: No.
> Depression: Anxiety disorders?
> Woman: No.
> Depression: eating or mood disorders?
> Woman: No and no.
> Depression: Oh, my mistake. It's next Tuesday that you lose your job and your boyfriend leaves you.

Script – *Depression two*

> Man: What . . . ! Can I help you?
> Depression: I'm depression. I've come for you.
> Man: Pardon me?
> Depression: Depression you know? I get people angry, keep them up at night, give them anxiety, muddle with their heads.
> Man: That's . . . .
> Depression: . . . that's crazy, yeah! Actually, the government likes to refer to me as a mental illness.
> Man: Well, shouldn't you wear a cape or . . . .
> Depression: . . . so people can see me coming? This is perfect. I got 20% of all Canadians already. I can get anybody.

The narrator does not meet readers' expectations of a discourse oriented to compassion, sympathy. Blommaert (2005, p. 85) states that:

> Whenever we communicate we have expectations of iconicity: expectations about mappings of style and content; correspondences between ways of speaking and topics or domains. We are expected to adopt a 'serious' style when talking about serious topics; a funny one when talking about funny things. Failure or refusal to meet these expectations may be a source of, for example, humour, irony, or sarcasm . . . .

Usually, PSAs use arguments which appeal to fear, for example many campaigns on smoking, alcohol consumption, drugs, pollution, road accidents aim to raise awareness by appealing to people's fears, bringing them to think

about their own death. This approach contributes to reinforcing a stigmatising attitude. Referring to terror management theory (TMT), Abrams and Giles (2004) argue that mortality salience reminds people of their vulnerability and creates anxiety or terror. Thus, in order to control their anxiety, they "subscribe to a highly rigid worldview where stability, coherence, and predictability are valued and maintained" (p. 31). As a result, all those individuals or situations that are perceived as dangerous for an individual's worldview are stigmatised. According to Smith (2007), in the area of health, messages usually follow two formats: "stigma formats" or "challenge formats" and mental illness usually falls in the former category. Stigma formats present ill people as responsible for their condition and use images and words that evoke shame and disgust (i.e., HIV/AIDS ads) reinforcing stereotypes. In the stigma format we find:

> (1a) depictions of the person as the health concern (e.g., epileptics), (1b) diagnosing marks, (1c) attributions of responsibility for the health concern, (1d) markers of normative exclusion, (1e) out-group labelling (e.g., they, them), and (1f) peril associated with the concern through words and images evoking danger and disgust. (Smith, 2007, p. 239)

In the challenge format, we can find a description of the health concern, elements of inclusion (pronouns as we, us; modifiers as ours), optimism and encouragement to fight against the problems.

The PSAs under investigation fall in the challenge format. The issue is presented as a challenge to be faced with the support of the community ("we" instead of "they"), not as threats, thereby, avoiding the generation of stigma and exclusion. The illness rather than the people affected by it becomes the target. An illness may be personified. The messages emphasise the responsibility of the community to address the challenge. In addition, mental illness is not associated with danger, shame, or evil.

What is most striking in the videos *Remember your mind-Body genie* and *Remember your mind-Exercise* is the use of irony and parody. Irony is a powerful figure of speech, often used in advertising discourse, because it attracts addressees' attention and also gives rise to an emotional response. Traditionally, irony means the opposite of what one says. It comes from the Greek word eirôneía meaning "dissimulation", "assumed ignorance". The aspect of obliviousness on the part of one or more of the participants in an ironic circumstance and of awareness on the part of the ironist and the audience are essential characteristics of irony. Sperber and Wilson (1981) interpret irony as "echoing a remark or opinion that the speaker wants to characterise as ludicrously inappropriate or irrelevant" (p. 310). In these videos the incongruity which occurs between the world as depicted in the

image and our own prior world view and preconceptions makes us recognize its ironic intent. The image is ironical because it flouts our expectations—ads usually advertise products, but at the end we realise that this is a parody—and "force us to question our beliefs and in so doing alert us to the possibility that we were hitherto duped by these beliefs, that we were the victims of our own fallible world views" (Scott, 2004, p. 44). By seeing incongruity as a signal of a flawed world, the video with its clear "condemnatory" (Scott, 2004) ironic intent becomes a medium to raise awareness on a delicate issue. It is a kind of 'mise en abyme', a product-based advert within a social issue PSA. The premise is first given by the product advert. Media is full of ads which promote products or activities to look after our body, but we rarely find spots which invite us to look after our mind. The conclusion is expressed in the final verbal slogan "It's one thing to look after your body. Just don't forget about your mind". The viewer can be still confused and only when the logo appears "Canadian Mental Health Association. Practice mind + body fitness" the whole message becomes clear.

The three Ad Council PSAs *What's seize the awkward?*, *Conversation starters*, *During the conversation* stress the fact that, even if having a conversation about mental health might be uncomfortable, it can be useful. The videos propose some conversation guides and tips which could be useful to help those in need. They also employ irony to subvert dominant representations and fight stigma and educate people, especially the young generations. Humour is, in fact, "a social inclusive mechanism through which social actors may reach and somehow educate the audience" (Balirano, 2016, p. 176). In these videos humorous elements are present especially thanks to the interplay of non-verbal elements (facial expressions and music). The interaction between funny facial expressions, body movement, gestures and lively music, typical of old silent films, contribute to the construction of the argumentative multimodal message, since the videos not only inform the audience about an issue but tend to convince them of the importance of dialogue with friends.

In the first 30 seconds of the video *What's seize the awkward?* there is not any talking, but only facial expressions that convey different feelings (uneasiness, embarrassment, puzzlement), sounds and the superimposed complex proposition "No one likes an awkward silence. But it can do a lot of good. So, seize the awkward". Interestingly, the three clauses appear in three different frames stirring the viewer's curiosity. The whole argument is clear only at the end of the first 30 seconds. Then in the second part of the video (25 seconds), the protagonists pronounce opening lines, mainly interrogatives, which could help make starting the conversation easier, and the conclusion of the whole argument is indicated in the verbal text which appears at the end of the spot, that is, "Reach out to a friend who might be struggling with their mental

health. It doesn't matter how to ask". Consequently, the organisation is inviting people, especially the young, to ask questions and talk to friends who might have some problems. There are no right or wrong words, what is important is to talk. In the entire video all characters look at the viewers, demanding something from them, that is, entering into some kind of personal relationship with them. While in the first 30 seconds close-up and medium shots alternate, suggesting a shift from an intimate distance to a social one and vice versa, in the last part of the video the protagonists are represented only in close shots, establishing an intimate relation, even if imaginary, with their interactive participants. This attempt to create solidarity and trust is reinforced by the presence of contextualization: the scene is set in a living room which reproduces a familiar and cosy atmosphere.

Conversation starters and *During the conversation* are very similar. Also in these two videos the rhetorical effect of personification is exploited to build a persuasive message. The Broadway actor Gideon Glick personifies an awkward silence that can exist between friends before and during a conversation about their mental health problems. The actor's gaze directly addresses the viewers, demanding an imaginary social response from the interactive participants, but also real actions from the other two represented participants, the two teenagers on the sofa. From the point of view of interactive meaning, the actor is depicted in a medium long shot that shows the whole figure seated in a relaxed way on an armchair with space around it, determining social distance and maybe suggesting self-confidence and authority. There is a tight interplay between modes since the verbal input by Gideon Glick causes an immediate physical action by the two teenagers. They immediately follow Glick's instructions and then appreciation for their actions is made explicit through the positive evaluative sentences "That was great!" and "Well done, awkward teenage actor!". Through commands the actor provides some tips to reach out to a friend and ask if they are fine. Pragmatically, form and content do not coincide since the imperative sentences are not perceived as commands but as suggestions. Moreover, the bizarre scenarios depicted provoke a humorous atmosphere that conveys a message of hope and optimism targeting teens and young adults. Without any explicit message about suicide prevention, the "challenge format" of these PSAs employs multimodal argumentation to sensitize the younger generations about mental health, including suicidal thinking and behaviour.

5. Conclusion

Since we process information not only through the linguistic code but also through other semiotic systems, nowadays argumentative messages are mostly conveyed by the interplay of different semiotic resources in a variety of affordances and media.

The PSAs under investigation present a high interaction of multimodal resources (words, images, and sound). They incorporate multimodal argumentative strategies aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion, where also music plays a key role in the construction of the whole message. Both CMHA and Ad Council videos follow the "challenge format", because they are characterized by the description of the health concern or personification of the disability, the addition of elements of inclusion (the use of the inclusive pronoun "we"), and positive evaluative discourses, which hint at optimism and encourage to fight clichés and discrimination.

Even if scholars and experts have started to analyse PSAs drawing on multimodality and argumentation theory, research on PSAs is still scarce compared to the amount of studies on commercial advertising. Therefore, this study could be a starting point to integrate argumentation studies and critical multimodal discourse analysis to verify whether premises and conclusions can be expressed also through the integration of different semiotic modes and identify their persuasive force in order to promote diversity and inclusion.

Notes

1. https://cmha.ca
2. https://www.adcouncil.org
3. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFRssFZYwnk (Last accessed April 2022).
4. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=Btp3FdtOuwM (Last accessed April 2022).
5. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=psFHRvmTNvM (Last accessed April 2022).
6. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=30&v=BV9ho0B1aa0 (Last accessed April 2022).
7. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=LSHzD82evZA (Last accessed April 2022).
8. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiJMuonKbPw (Last accessed April 2022).
9. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXgOiCgfVfQ (Last accessed April 2022).

10. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=Rt4VybWO22E (Last accessed April 2022).
11. It is available at https://cmha.ca/brochure/cohesive-collaborative-collective-advancing-mental-health-promotion-in-canada/ (Last accessed April 2022).
12. https://www.who.int/health-topics/depression#tab=tab_1

The Author

Sole Alba Zollo (Email: solealba.zollo@unina.it) is Researcher of English Linguistics and Translation at the University of Napoli Federico II. She holds a PhD in English for Special Purposes (ESP) from the University of Napoli Federico II. She has published extensively on her research interests which include human rights discourse, multimodal critical and positive discourse analysis in institutional contexts, rhetoric and visual argumentation, the language of tourism, education and social media, new literacies, and communication strategies in women's writings between '700 and '800.

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Why hire disabled people? Corporate inclusive policies by three tech giants

Stefania D'AVANZO, University of Campania 'L. Vanvitelli, Italy

The study aims to explore inclusion policies related to disabled people promoted by some companies from the technological field. In particular, the website sections devoted to disability of three tech giants, including Apple, Microsoft and Google will be explored. Methodology will be based on studies from Multimodal analysis (Jewitt et al., 2016; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; O'Toole, 2011; Wignell et al., 2018) and the use of metaphors in corporate branding (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Koller, 2009; Morgan, 1986). Specifically, the study will attempt to analyse corporate awareness related to disability and the promotion of inclusiveness while offering job opportunities to disabled people. Outcomes of the study have revealed some different strategies enacted by the three companies under scrutiny to build up their own identity whenever their inclusion policies are promoted.

Keywords: Corporate Identity; Disability; Hiring; Inclusion; Social Semiotics

1. Introduction

According to some recent studies from Social Sciences, when it comes to finding appropriate jobs, people with disabilities are still heavily disadvantaged (Aichner et al., 2021). This is mainly due to negative prejudices held by employers, who often think that people with disabilities cannot perform as efficiently as non-disabled workers. Notwithstanding this, some companies from the field of Information Technology (IT) have understood the importance of hiring disabled people.[1] In particular, they realised that some computer-assisted activities can be performed by blind people or people with severe motor disabilities. Starting from these assumptions, this work will explore the multimodal strategies enacted by these companies to build up their own corporate identity when inclusive policies are promoted. In short, the study will try to answer two main research questions:

1. How is disability represented in the promotion of hiring processes by the companies under scrutiny?
2. What kind of promotional identity related to corporate inclusion policies is conveyed by the companies?

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2. Background

The concept of corporate identity has been explored over the years in relation to corporate narratives (Brown, 2006). In particular, 'organisations' identities are identified as discursive linguistic constructs as through narratives, they bring into existence a reality that did not exist before their utterance (Ford & Ford, 1995). This concept derives from social constructionist and critical studies which have suggested that narratives are the products of particular contexts (Gabriel, 1995), and that organisations are literally narratives (Cooren, 1999) or ante-narrative networks of dynamic and unfinished stories (Boje, 2001).

In this study, corporate identity will be explored in relation to the inclusion policies promoted by the companies under scrutiny from a multimodal perspective. In previous studies, inclusive policies have been explored in relation to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Gould et al., 2020). The outcomes revealed that businesses have not yet prioritised disability within diversity and inclusion reporting and corporate social responsibility strategies. In this study, the website sections devoted to inclusion and disability of three giants in the technological field, such as Apple, Microsoft and Google, will be analysed. As mentioned above, this choice stems from the fact that these companies are assumed to be strongly aware of the importance of hiring people with disabilities due to their highly specialised skills concerning, among other aspects, some computer assisted activities. Thus, these three giants are expected to be strongly motivated and committed to promoting inclusive policies, with a view to reducing inequalities, and welcoming disabled people.

3. Method

The study will attempt to include both a systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis (Halliday, 1978, 1985; Jewitt et al., 2016; O'Toole, 2011; Wignell et al., 2018) and a social semiotic approach (Kress &Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006). The concept of metafunction as related to social semiotics has been widely discussed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), who focused on three metafunctions such as the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual ones. The ideational metafunction was defined as any semiotic mode able to represent aspects of the world as it is experienced by humans.

In other words, ". . . it has to be able to represent objects and their relations in a world outside the representational system. That world may of course be, and most frequently is, already semiotically represented" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 42). The interpersonal metafunction was defined, instead, as any semiotic mode which ". . . has to be able to project the relations between the producer of a (complex) sign, and the receiver/reproducer of

that sign . . . .” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 42). Finally, the textual metafunction has been identified as any semiotic mode which “. . . has to have the capacity to form texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 43). Some more recent studies on metafunctions have also theorized a systemic functional approach to multimodal analysis (SF-MDA) (Jewitt et al., 2016). The latter involves developing systemic descriptions of semiotic resources organised according to three main metafunctions: (a) experiential, (b) interpersonal, and (c) textual meanings.

‘Experiential meaning’ will provide visual happenings in terms of processes, participants, and circumstances. ‘Interpersonal meaning’, instead, is more related to gaze, framing, light, and the perspective of images. Finally, ‘textual meaning’ involves the concepts of proportion and alignment. This approach allows us to understand “. . . how semiotic choices combine to create meaning” (Jewitt et al., 2016, p. 50). Thus, SF-MDA is mainly based on the metafunctional principle, which plays an important role in understanding the underlying organization of semiotic resources. According to a social semiotic approach, instead, the focus is on how processes of ‘meaning making’ shape individuals and societies. As Balirano (2017, p. 157) asserts: “Images play an equal, if not more important role in the construal of meaning”. In the study, further attention will be devoted to Denotation and Connotation which characterise images. Denotation characterises photographs, which represent people or things. It does not mean that they are ‘neutral’ recordings of reality as subjective perspectives are likely to be produced when taking a photo (Machin, 2011). According to Barthes (1977), no image is ever free of connotation. Anyway, lack of abstraction is a peculiar feature of denotation.

Connotation, instead, represents the second layer of image meaning, that is, the ideas and values associated with them. It is conveyed by connotators, such as poses, objects and settings, and photogenia. In this work, visual arrangements will be explored also in terms of image act, gaze, size of frame and social distance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2006). As far as the image act and gaze are concerned, it must be pointed out that they are mainly related to vectors, which are formed by participants’ eyelines and gestures, thus connecting the participants (in our example - the employees) with the viewers. When the participants look directly into the viewers’ eyes, contact is established. This visual arrangement has two main functions: “. . . In the first place it creates a visual form of direct address. It acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual ‘you’. In the second place it constitutes an ‘image act’. The producer uses the image to do something to the viewer” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 117).

Thus, the image can be identified as a sort of 'demand', as the participants' gaze and gestures demand something from the viewer. Similarly, gestures, such as pointing at the viewer or inviting the viewer to come closer, convey something the participants want from the viewers, such as staying at a distance, or, conversely, creating a kind of a bond with them. Further means may convey different relationships, such as facial expression. Participants could smile, so that the viewer is asked to create a form of social affinity with them. Alternatively, they could stare seductively at the viewer, in this case requesting that the viewer desire them. The same happens with gestures. For instance, a hand can invite the viewer to come closer or to remain at a distance. ". . . And in doing this, images define to some extent who the viewer is (e.g., male, inferior to the represented participant, etc.), and in that way exclude other viewers" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 118). The way the participants are depicted has been interpreted in terms of 'demand' and 'offer'. The latter characterise pictorial genres. For instance, 'the demand' picture is preferred in newsreading television and the posed magazine photograph as these contexts require a sense of connection between the viewers and the authority figures, celebrities, and role models they represent. In some other contexts, for example, television drama or scientific illustration, the 'offer' is preferred.

There is a further dimension to the interactive meanings of images, related to the 'size of frame' and 'social distance'. The former has been explored in terms of parameters such as close-up, medium shot and long shot, and so on. In particular, the close shot (or 'close-up') shows the head and shoulders of the subject, and the very close shot ('extreme close-up', 'big close-up') depicts anything less than that.

The medium close shot cuts off the subject approximately at the waist, the medium shot, on the other hand, approximately at the knees. The medium long shot shows the full figure. In the long shot the human figure occupies about half the height of the frame, and the very long shot is anything 'wider' than that. As far as social distance is concerned, it is possible to assert that it is strongly related to social interaction.

People are represented as though they are friends, or as though they are strangers. Images allow us to imaginarily come close to public figures as if they were our friends or neighbours—or to look at people like ourselves as strangers, 'others'. A further feature to be considered is the horizontal angle of an image, which deals with the two main concepts of detachment or involvement. In particular, the horizontal angle provides information related to the degree of involvement between the image-producer and the represented participants:

The frontal angle says, as it were, "What you see here is part of our world,

something we are involved with." The oblique angle says, "What you see here is not part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 136).

Power, rather than involvement, is deeply entangled with vertical angles. According to Martin (1968, pp. 37-38), "Low angles generally give an impression of superiority, exaltation and triumph . . . high angles tend to diminish the individual, to flatten him morally by reducing him to ground level, to render him as caught in an insurmountable determinism'". Models and celebrities in magazine articles, on the other hand, generally look down on the viewer as they are represented as exercising symbolic power over us. Thus, products depicted in advertisements may be photographed both from a low angle, as having symbolic power over us, and from a high angle, as being within reach and at the command of the viewer.

Finally, in this study, attention will also be devoted to studies on metaphors in corporate branding. Since the 1980s, metaphors in corporate branding have been conceptualised as living organisms (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Morgan, 1986). The main assumption is that 'brands are living organisms' (Koller, 2009), as they are represented as people in terms of growth, dynamism, connectivity and flexibility. In particular, they are constituted by ". . . a mapping or blending of domains from different modes, e.g., visual and verbal, or visual and acoustic" (Koller, 2009, p. 46). In this work, metaphors will be explored in pictures where inclusion and diversity are metaphorically represented.

4. Results

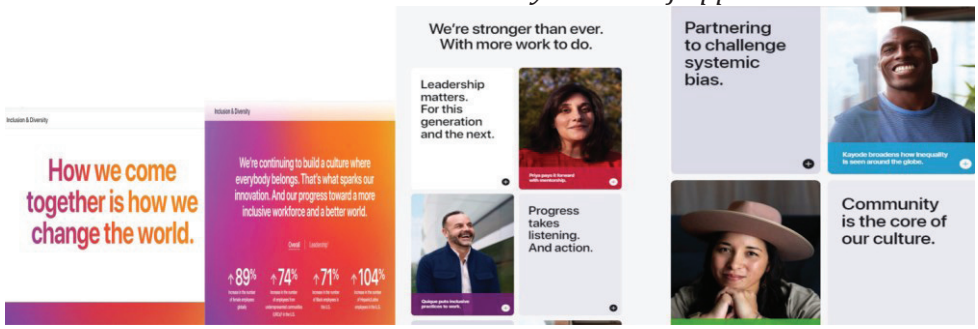
4.1. 'Inclusion and diversity': Apple inclusion policies

Apple provides information concerning the inclusion of disabled people in the career section of its website devoted to its recruiting process. It is necessary to point out that in the *career* section of Apple website, disability is listed along with other forms of diversity. In particular, the company asserts its intention to ensure equal opportunity ". . . for all applicants without regard to race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, Veteran status, or other legally protected characteristics".[2] Thus, in this section, the inclusive policies provided by Apple aimed at welcoming all applicants will be explored. In particular, a slideshow will be investigated including pictures where the company mission referred to inclusion is clearly represented, as can be observed in the images in Figure 1 (below).

The slideshow includes a sequence of pictures where 'diversity' and 'inclusion' are represented and explained through some different multimodal strategies. The pictures are placed vertically and can be observed by scrolling

down to the bottom of the page. In the first picture, inclusion is metaphorically represented by a combination of colours from red to orange. A mixture of colours is often employed to convey inclusion metaphorically. In previous studies (Clement & Shade, 1998; Seale, 2006) the rainbow metaphor has been used as a useful tool for conceptualising universal access to information because it simultaneously suggests unity and diversity. In particular, the coloured layers can be distinguished from each other, and there are no definitive boundaries between them. Furthermore, a mixture of colours often represents different cultures, races or religions, so the rainbow ". . . can be used to symbolise the cooperation and collaboration of different people and cultures: a diverse group of people united in working together for a common purpose" (Seale, 2006, p. 195). Thus, in the picture under scrutiny, the combination of different shades of colours is likely to convey inclusive values. The verbal message illustrated as the first image of the slideshow reinforces inclusiveness (e.g. 'How we come together is how we change the world'). Inclusion is also emphasised by the second picture where the company represents itself as an institution founded on this value (e.g., We're continuing to build a culture where everybody belongs) to the extent that its progress is identified by a more inclusive workforce. In the same picture, some data concerning the increase in the number of female, black, Hispanic employees and employees from underrepresented communities in the USA is provided, thus explicitly communicating the inclusive mission of the company. The third picture of the slideshow, shows the actors involved in the promotion of inclusive policies. In particular, the four employees are posing while smiling. From a multimodal perspective, posing conveys a denotative metafunction. The latter is usually in contrast with connotation and the predominant choice of one metafunction rather than another could clarify the actual corporate promotional identity.

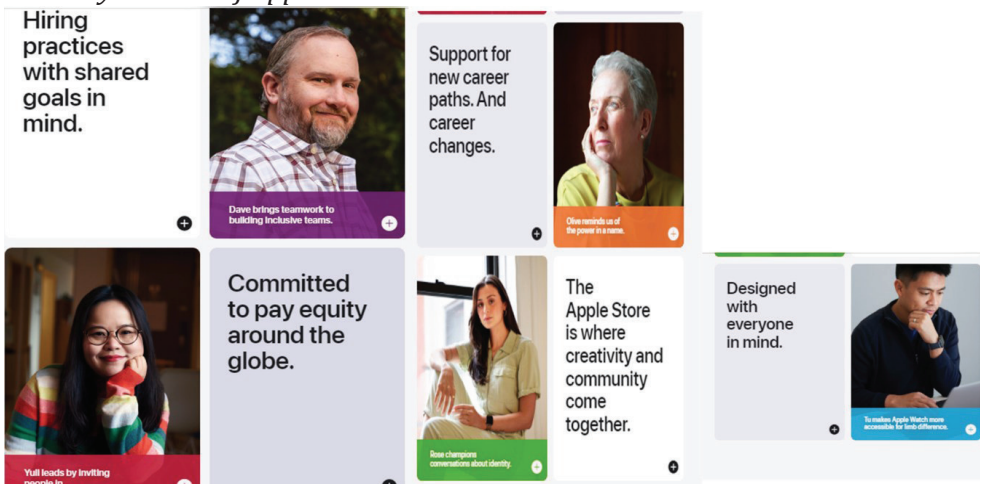
Figure 1.
Slide-Show Found on 'Inclusion and diversity' Section of Apple Website[3]



Textual metafunction is defined as a semiotic system able to form coherent

wholes (Machin, 2011, p. 18). Denotation is related to showing something. For instance, some images show particular events, people, or places, so, they denote (Machin 2011, p. 23). In the picture above, mainly consisting of posing, denotation seems to prevail. The employees have been captured while smiling in the open air, thus showing satisfaction with the professional duties they are involved in. In the next pictures belonging to the same slideshow, some other professionals engaged in inclusive policies are represented.[4]

Figure 2.
Professionals Working at Apple from the Slideshow found on 'Inclusion and Diversity' Section of Apple Website

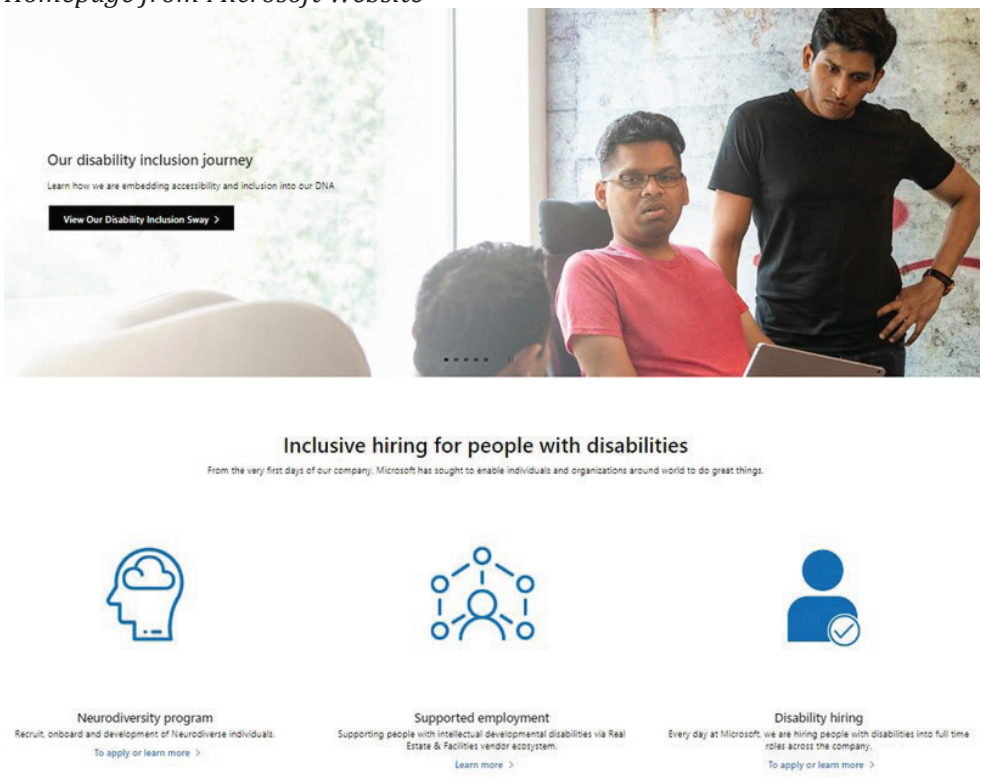


As in Figure 1, also in the figure above some personal details referred to employees from Apple are available. Specifically, information concerning Apple employees' personal data (e.g., first name) along with their professional role is provided. Moreover, all the people are posing while looking at the camera except for Olive and Tu. Olive is not looking at the camera although she seems to be posing, whereas Tu seems to be posing while working. Denotation seems to characterise all the pictures included in the slideshow investigated so far. For this reason, people who are currently working for the company appear to stand as the testimonials of a campaign where inclusion is promoted as one of the essential values. This is also shown through the verbal messages written next to each picture which represent the company goals aimed at promoting equity, creativity, and the support of new careers. As asserted above, Apple does not devote a section to disability as the latter is mentioned along with other forms of diversity. Thus, disabled people are implicitly included under 'everyone'—an umbrella term used by the company to refer to every kind of diversity. Some different approaches related to inclusion policies are promoted by the other companies investigated.

4.2. 'Global diversity and inclusion': Inclusive policies by Microsoft

Over the years, Microsoft has shown a great interest in hiring disabled people as the latter represent ". . . one of the world's largest untapped talent pools".[5] Furthermore, as stated in its 2021 report on Diversity and Inclusion, Microsoft thinks that inclusion of disabled talent is crucial to achieving the company mission. Employees with disabilities have been the promoters of great Microsoft innovations such as Learning Tools, live captioning in Teams, the Xbox Adaptive Controller, Seeing AI, Surface Adaptive Kit, and many more. For this reason, the company continues to actively work to hire and nurture people with disabilities to include their expertise into their processes, products, and culture at every level.

Figure 3.
Picture 1 from the Slide Show Published on 'Global and Diversity and Inclusion' Homepage from Microsoft Website[6]



One of the strategies enacted by the company to better understand their workforce and appropriately invest and support employees consists in encouraging them to voluntarily self-identify as having a disability. Moreover, the company has realised that the pandemic, its impact on mental health, and

the long-term effects of COVID-19 have both directly and indirectly increased their understanding of disability itself and increased the number of people who identify as having a disability. Thus, Microsoft continues to promote a safe environment and a welcoming culture where everyone can bring their authentic selves to work, inclusive of their disability.

In contrast to Apple, Microsoft showcases its inclusive values in a section labelled 'Global Diversity and Inclusion', which is entirely devoted to disability. In this section, disability is represented by an interesting text-image complex, as can be observed seen in the homepage of the section (Figure 3). In the image above three main parts can be distinguished. The higher section includes a photo of three men, who appear to be located in their workplace and chatting to each other.

This assumption is supported by the verbal message where the company emphasises its commitment to enable disabled employees to do something important for their future (e.g., 'From the very first days of our company, Microsoft has sought to enable individuals and organisations around the world to do great things). The next two sections on the lower part of the same page are devoted to providing detailed information concerning its inclusive policies. The company policy includes the 'Microsoft Neurodiversity Hiring Program', which aims to attract ". . . talented neurodivergent candidates and provide the training and support needed for career growth and success on the belief that neurodivergent individuals strengthen a workforce with innovative thinking and creative solutions."[7]

Moreover, further information is provided concerning the 'Supported employment program', which is aimed, instead, at creating job opportunities for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) at Microsoft facilities across the globe. Furthermore, a 'Disability hiring' section explains Microsoft's mission consisting in promoting a hiring process specifically for candidates with disabilities and providing an environment in which they can contribute to support a stronger organisational culture. Finally, a concluding section summarises Microsoft's mission consisting in promoting an inclusive company culture. As mentioned above, the picture in Figure 1 is part of a slideshow that includes other pictures representing employees suffering from different diseases. Some observations related to all the pictures included in the slideshow will now be provided in order to have a wider overview of the inclusive policies promoted by this particular company. The 'demand' vs. 'offer' pictures are two fundamental concepts which will be explored here. It is interesting to note that a kind of real or imaginary barrier is erected between the represented participants and the viewers, a sense of disengagement, in which the viewer must have the illusion that the represented participants do not know they are being looked at. From a

linguistic perspective, the pronouns 'I' and 'You' are implicitly found in 'demand' pictures:

> The 'demand' picture . . . reminds more of the language of, for instance, advertisements and instructions, where 'you's' abound but 'I's' are rare, than, say, of the language of personal letters, where 'I's' and 'you's' are likely to be equally common. 'Real producers' cannot refer to themselves directly. They must speak impersonally, as traditionally in bureaucratic and scientific language, where 'I's' were, and in many cases still are, also repressed. The public, on the other hand, is addressed directly at, and in which the represented participants must pretend that they are not being watched.
>
> (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 22)

As mentioned above, some common features related to all the multimodal features illustrated so far can be observed in the pictures published in the Microsoft section devoted to 'Global Diversity and Inclusion':

Figure 4.
Picture 2 from the Slide Show Published on 'Global and Diversity and Inclusion' Homepage from Microsoft Website[8]

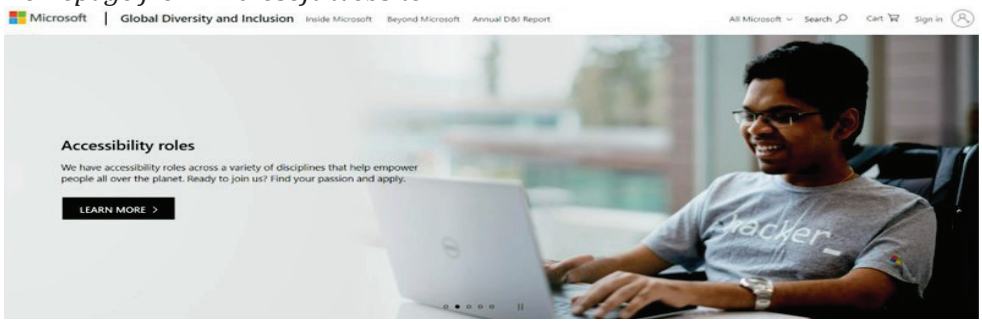


Figure 5.
Picture 3 from the Slide Show Published on 'Global and Diversity and Inclusion' Homepage from Microsoft Website[9]

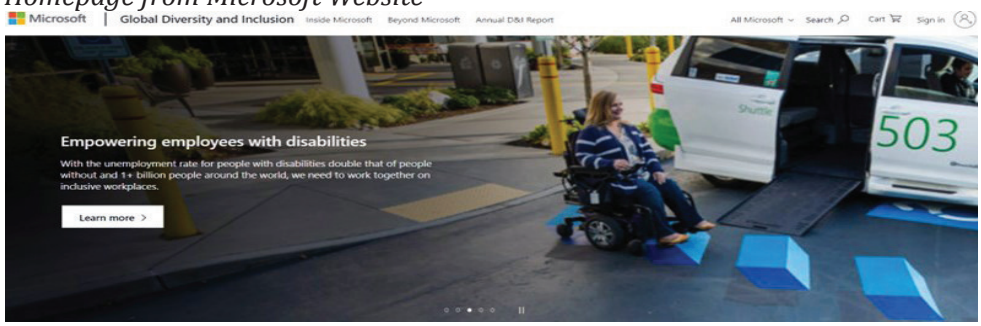


Figure 6
Picture 4 from the Slide Show Published on 'Global and Diversity and Inclusion' Homepage from Microsoft Website[10]

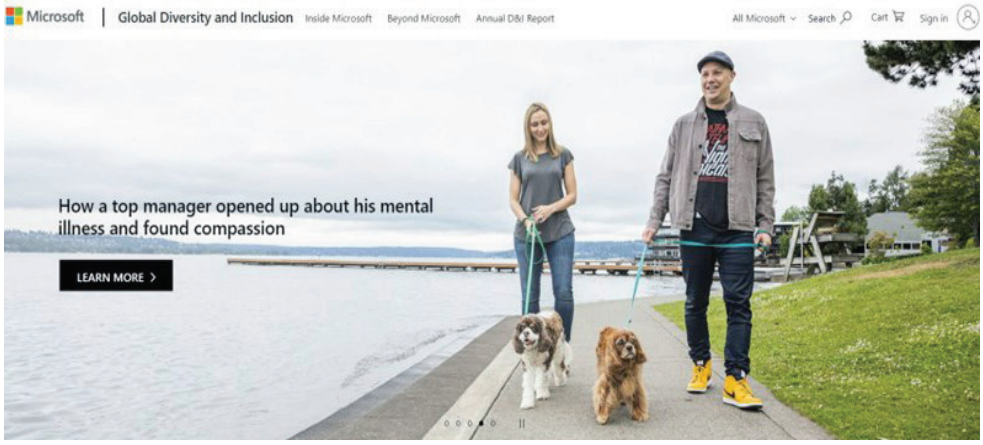
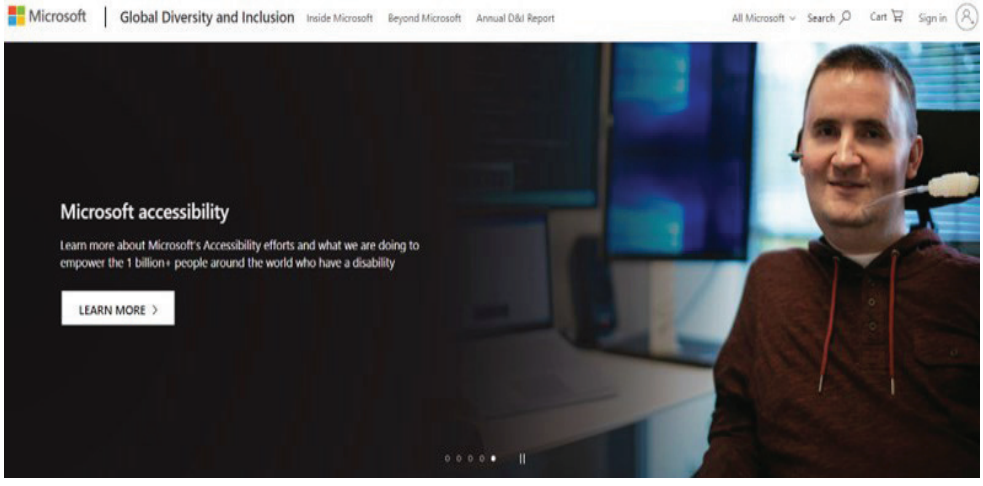


Figure 7.
Picture 5 from the Slide Show Published on 'Global and Diversity and Inclusion' Homepage from Microsoft Website[11]



In all the pictures above, potential Microsoft employees are represented. They are not directly looking into the camera but rather seem to have been captured while at their work station with the exception of the man in Figure 6, who seems to be posing while enjoying some free time. In Figures 3, 4 and 7, a faded background can be observed, whereas the men are clearly represented while using their technical work equipment. In Figures 5 and 6, instead, people seem to have been shot in some different contexts. In Figure 5, for instance, the woman is represented while getting out of a shuttle which may

have driven her to her workplace. This could be inferred from the verbal message which can be observed next to the image—"With the unemployment rate for people with disabilities double that of people without and 1+ billion people around the world, we need to work together on inclusive workplaces"-. In particular, 'inclusive workplaces' are mentioned, which probably refer to the demolition of architectural barriers promoted by the company. A virtual representation (in blue) of the path followed by the woman in her wheelchair, seems to reinforce this commitment by the company. In Figure 6, the two people are depicted while walking their dogs in the open air. In the 'Learn more' section, some further information related to the people represented in the picture is provided. The man on the right is Craig Cincotta, the senior director of communications for Microsoft Azure and Business Application; we are informed that he suffers from mental health disorders. In the 'Learn more' section, he talks about the moment in which he told his manager and his team about his disease, he claims to have felt comfortable as his colleagues expressed only compassion and friendship.

Thus, in the Microsoft case, employees are also visually represented but we are told something more about their story and their diseases. This conveys a sense of trustworthiness and reliability. A greater sense of realism and freedom are also found in the images, as the background is not faded and the people are also depicted when enjoying their free time or a break in their working day in the open air. Conversely, in Figure 7, which is the last picture included in the slideshow, the man is posing while working. When analysing the 'size of frame' and 'social distance' in the slideshow, a medium close shot can be observed related to figures 3, 4 and 7, whereas, in 5 and 6, there is a medium long shot. The latter seems to reinforce and convey more realism to the pictures. Specifically, in 5 disability is clearly shown and the woman sitting in her wheelchair is depicted outside a shuttle while moving toward a trajectory which appears to represent a comfortable workplace. In 6, on the other hand, the full figures of the people walking their dogs seem to reduce the attention paid to the workplace and emphasise, instead, spontaneity while enjoying their spare time. Some similar features related to social distance can be observed in all the figures except for figure 4. In all the figures a 'frontal angle' prevails. As mentioned above, angles are related to the ways the images interact with the audience. Specifically, frontal angles convey involvement with the audience as the people represented in the pictures are represented as part of the world belonging to both themselves and the viewers. This kind of representation is clearly found in all the pictures above. A high angle is found, instead, in Figure 5, where the photo seems to be taken from above. As mentioned earlier, power, rather than involvement, is deeply entangled with vertical angles. In 5 social distance between the woman and the viewer can be observed. She is depicted immersed in her world made up of possible

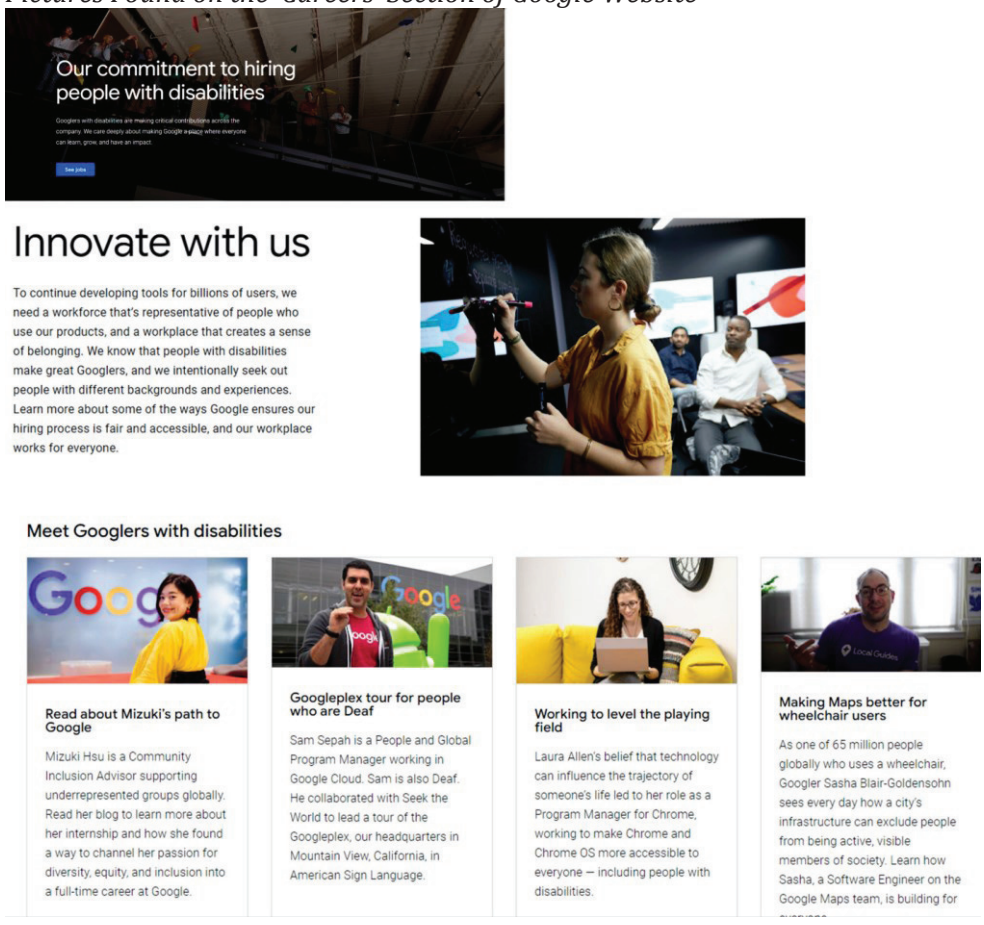
architectural barriers and distanced from the viewer, who is thus not involved in the interaction with the figure represented. In short, it is possible to assert that the interpersonal metafunction is doubtless the most relevant one. As already mentioned in the methodology section, this function mainly deals with the relationship between the producer of a (complex) sign, and the receiver/reproducer of that sign. In all the pictures examined so far, people are posing while looking at the camera or represented while working or happily living their life, thus communicating calm and relaxation while living in an inclusive workplace.

4.3. Careers for disabled people at Google

Google strongly believes in the inclusion of disabled people in their team. In 2012 the company founded The Disability Alliance (DA)—an Employee Resource Group (ERG) for Google (and Alphabet) employees who care about disabilities, learning differences, special needs, and neurodiversity, for themselves or a child, relative, or friend. This is a community where employees ". . . can advocate, build awareness, and share advice around disability topics, with the goal of creating innovative and inclusive teams, products, and workplaces. It also serves as a source of input as Google designs its products, workspaces, and culture."[12] The Association has thousands of members spread across 18 countries, and manages numerous topic-specific groups covering issues such as chronic health conditions, caregivers and their needs, parents of children with disabilities, wheelchair users, and other significant themes. Each year the DA partners with the Central Accessibility team to plan a global Accessibility & Disability Inclusion Week with the aim of educating, inspiring and engaging employees, and raising awareness for the more than one billion individuals in the world with some form of disability. In 2019 over 12,000 Googlers engaged in over 250 activities in 44 offices, including product demos, tech talks, discussion panels, social events, and awareness activities. On the Google homepage devoted to Inclusion, the following pictures (Figures 8 and 9) can be seen. In the pictures below, Google employees appear to be represented. In 8, employees are implicitly mentioned using the possessive 'our' in the verbal message written across the picture (e.g., Our commitment to hiring people with disabilities) as the company identifies with its own employees, who are committed to welcoming and including people with disabilities. In the picture, the employees are represented while throwing coloured paper aeroplanes from a raised platform. The mixture of different colours seems to metaphorically represent inclusion. If the horizontal angle of the picture is analysed, the intention to adopt vertical rather than frontal angles can be observed. In particular, the people are represented from a low angle. As mentioned previously, according to Martin (1968, pp. 37-38), low angles generally convey the impression of

superiority, exaltation, and triumph. In 8, exaltation and triumph emerge from the playful attitude of the people depicted. They seem to be part of a cohesive and happy team who really enjoy working and welcoming disabled people. Cohesion is also emphasised in the picture representing the woman who is drawing or writing.

Figure 8.
Pictures Found on the 'Careers' Section of Google Website[13]



The verbal message next to the picture refers to a "sense of belonging", which is promoted by Google through the integration of employees with disabilities in an inclusive workplace. The woman appears to be working while supervised by a team, or to be teaching something innovative to empower the team she belongs to. Thus, here too, a denotative function represented by a realistic workplace seems to prevail. In the 'Meet people with Disabilities' section, the viewer's eye is caught by the interaction which emerges between

them and the people represented in the picture. The vectors are emphasised by the participants' eyelines and gestures, which connect directly with the viewers. Both Sam Sepah and Sasha Blair-Goldensohnthus—two Google employees with disabilities—seem to interact with the viewers through their gestures while looking into the camera. Laura Allen, instead, who works as a Program Manager for Chrome, is depicted while working at her computer. Finally, Mizuki Hsu—a Google Community Inclusion Advisor supporting underrepresented groups globally—is posing while smiling into her computer. Both the frontal angle, the gaze of the people represented, along with a medium close shot convey a strong relationship with the viewers, thus boosting the idea of a company seeking constant 'demand' offered to the viewer or more in general to Google users in terms of interaction and lack of social distance.

Figure 9.
Picture Found on 'Google's Disability Alliance' (DA) Section of Google Website[14]

A similar intention is conveyed by the picture in Figure 9. Here, the people in the photo represent the entire DA Association team, which obviously includes employees with disabilities. In the pictures, all the subjects are posing in front of their workplace. They are smiling and appear to be enjoying themselves. Moreover, they are wearing coloured clothes which create a consistent whole with the colours depicted in the background (e.g., the red, black, yellow, green and blue of the 'Google' company building behind them). A strong textual metafunction (Machin, 2011) provided by similar colours reinforces the feelings of joy and happiness that stem from belonging to a company that contributes to the inclusion and education of disabled people. If the semiotic contrast between 'demand' and 'offer' is analysed, it can doubtless be asserted that the people in Figure 9 are addressing the viewers directly and encouraging them to share their happy feelings and felicitous work conditions. The frontal angle emphasises this aspect. As stated previously, the frontal angles reinforce the idea that what the viewers see is part of the world to which the people represented belong (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 136).

Thus, the prevailing 'image act' is related to a 'demand' image that requires that the viewers get involved and become aware of the happy mood which prevails in the Google workplace.

5. Discussion

In this section, some observations on the similarities or differences will be provided regarding the inclusive policies devoted to disabled people promoted by the three multinationals under investigation. Firstly, we must remember that Apple does not devote a section to disability. Indeed, Apple devotes attention exclusively to Inclusion and Diversity and these two labels are mainly referred to gender and ethnic inequalities rather than disability. Notwithstanding, a strong commitment is conveyed by the company towards inclusive policies, which are mainly represented by the employees of the company depicted while involved in the promotion of inclusive practices. An interpersonal function characterises the complex text-image coupling found in the Inclusion and Diversity section on the company website. The Apple employees are mainly represented in the workplace with emphasis laid on their professional role inside the company.

Microsoft, instead, devotes a vast section to Inclusion and diversity. Disability is represented by disabled people themselves or other employees. Here the emphasis lies upon the welcome provided by the company and its promotion of wellbeing and career growth. Social distance and the combination of frontal with vertical angles contribute to create an interpersonal function through which the people represented convey happiness and the awareness that they are working within a safe and inclusive workplace.

Finally, Google seems to reinforce the values of cooperation among its employees. In this case, disabled people are represented together with other employees belonging to the company, thus putting a strong emphasis on the importance of teamwork. A textual metafunction is more frequently employed in all the pictures found on the Google website compared to the pictures from the websites of both Microsoft and Apple. Consistency in the use of colours can also be observed in the pictures devoted to the representation of disabled employees or in those representing employees committed to promoting corporate inclusive policies.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the inclusion policies related to people with disabilities promoted by three of the 'giant' companies belonging to the technological field. The investigation aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) How is disability represented in the promotion of hiring processes by the companies under scrutiny? (2) What kind of promotional

identity related to corporate inclusion policies is conveyed by the companies. As far as the first research question is concerned, it can be claimed that disability is represented through a number of multimodal resources mainly consisting of pictures depicting both disabled employees and those involved in inclusive policies. Apple is the only exception, as the company's interest focuses mainly on inclusive policies including every kind of diversity. In this case, disability is represented along with racial and gender inequalities, although it is less frequently mentioned. Conversely, some similarities can be found between Microsoft and Google concerning their decision to represent disability through images which depict both their disabled employees and the ones involved in inclusive corporate policies. In the images, the high frequency of medium close shots and frontal angles along with the denotative functions characterising the pictures contribute to the idea of a close relationship with the viewers. The latter are invited to focus on the devotion and corporate commitment expressed by the companies which, in turn, aim to promote safe, joyful workplaces where disabled employees are warmly welcomed.

The second research question referred, instead, to the promotional identity conveyed by the companies. As previously stated in the discussion section, both Microsoft and Google express corporate identity values based on inclusion by representing inclusive team work where disabled people can carry out their duties and interact with all the other employees in safe and comfortable workplaces.

Conversely, Apple conveys identity values based exclusively on the efficiency of its own action and on the policies enacted to promote recruiting policies that reach out to people who are victims of some form of discrimination.

Notes

1. https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/companies-leading-in-disability-inclusion-have-outperformed-peers-accenture-research-finds.htm
2. https://www.apple.com/careers/us/accommodation_drugfree.html
3. https://www.apple.com/diversity
4. https://www.apple.com/diversity
5. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/annual-report
6. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/hiring.aspx
7. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/neurodiversityhiring
8. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-

disability/hiring.aspx
9. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/hiring.aspx
10. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/hiring.aspx
11. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/hiring.aspx
12. https://careers.google.com/stories/googles-disability-alliance
13. https://careers.google.com/programs/people-with-disabilities
14. https://careers.google.com/stories/googles-disability-alliance

The Author

Stefania D'Avanzo (Email: stefania.davanzo@unicampania.it) is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at University of Campania 'L. Vanvitelli'. She earned a PHD in English for Special Purposes from the University of Naples Federico II. Her main research interests and publications focus on Corporate, Legal, Environmental, Institutional and Popularization Discourse. Methodology and theoretical approaches include, among others, Corpus-Based Approach, Multimodality, Critical Discourse Analysis, Cognitive Linguistics. She has recently co-edited a special issue on Business narratives (Catenaccio P., D'Avanzo S., Geert J. (eds). 2021. Narrating and communicating business 'stories'- multifaceted approaches to corporate communication, *I-Land Journal* 1/2021). She is the author of a monograph on legal and political discourse on immigration and asylum (D'Avanzo S. 2012. *Europe: Home of migrants built on Sand. EU Political and Legal Discourse on Immigration and Asylum*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing)

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https://careers.google.com/stories/googles-disability-alliance/

https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/annual-report

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Investigating older persons' perceptions of ageist language and its use: Focus on Sindh, Pakistan

Maya Khemlani DAVID, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia[1]
Ameer ALI, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan
Sardar Ali SHAH, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan

Discrimination against older citizens in Pakistan's Sindh province is a serious issue, and the provincial Government of Sindh is introducing laws and health care policies to protect these residents. Before hastening to introduce such laws and policies, it is important to comprehensively investigate ageism. Anti-discrimination policies cannot be effective unless they seek to address the issue of ageist language used against older persons. Therefore, in this research, we seek to explore how older persons perceive ageist language, how it is used against older citizens in Sindh, how it affects older persons' psychological well-being, and how such language can be neutralised. We argue that ageist language is one of the main causes of discrimination against older citizens, and anti-discrimination policies should criminalise and penalise such use of language. Data collected through narrative inquiry from 30 older citizens have been qualitatively analysed using the concept of 'ageist language'. Participants were asked to narrate their stories focusing on the ageism they faced in the home and public domains. Findings demonstrate that older persons negatively view ageist language, which, to a large extent, results in discrimination against older citizens in the home and public domains. Ageism can be neutralised with age-friendly language. It is suggested that health care and protection policies devised for older citizens should adopt a comprehensive counter strategy that must address the issue of ageist language.

Keywords: Ageism; Discrimination; Language; Pakistan; Older Citizens; Sindh

1. Introduction

Sindh is one of the four provinces in Pakistan, a country which is anthropologically rich in the variety of customs, cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, and traditions (Ali & David, 2021a). Sindh is home to a

[1] Corresponding Author (Email: mayadavid@yahoo.com)

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range of ethnic groups. The Sindhis, Saraikis, Brahuis, Baluchis, Punjabis, and Pashtuns are some of the ethnic groups living in Sindh (Ali et al., 2021), with the Sindhi ethnic group accounting for 59.7% of the provincial population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Although many Sindhis in Sindh are Muslims, Sindhi Hindus (Ali & David, 2021b), Christians, and Zoroastrians (Minorities Affairs Department, n.d.; Ali & David, 2021c) are the minority religious communities.

There are 15 million people aged over 60 currently living in Pakistan, constituting 7% of its total population (HelpAge International, 2019). Of the country's total older population, 19.59% are living in Sindh (Pakistan Census Report, 1998). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2012) estimates that there will be 43.3 million older persons living in Pakistan by 2025. The growing population of older persons in Pakistan merits policy makers' attention. Ageing poses social, economic, and cultural challenges (David & Ali, 2022). Many older persons also face such problems in Sindh (Ansari et al., 2019). Moreover, older persons are seen as a threat to the society's well-being because they are claimed to overconsume resources of health systems (Cronshaw, 2012). Ageism involves stereotypes of older and younger persons in public discourse and on social media (World Health Organization, 2021).[1]

> Ageism has serious and wide-ranging consequences for people's health and wellbeing. Among older people, ageism is associated with poorer physical and mental health, increased social isolation and loneliness, greater financial insecurity, decreased quality of life and premature death . . . it intersects and exacerbates other forms of bias and disadvantage including those related to sex, race and disability leading to a negative impact on people's health and well-being.

Ageism or age discrimination can be found in a range of sectors. According to Stypinska and Nikander (2018), ageism prevails in the labour market where hiring managers discriminate against older workers. Discourse of ageism is also shaped by medical experts who negatively describe and explain the health problems of older persons (Wyman et al., 2018). In their comparative study Marshall et al. (2022) discussed how discourses of technological innovations entangled with the discourses of ageing in the Netherlands, Spain, and Canada, and how such technological innovations can help in healthy, sustainable ageing.

The Government of Sindh has passed some acts, such as The Sindh Senior Citizens' Welfare Act 2014 and the Sindh Employees' Old Age Benefits Act 2014 to reduce discrimination against older Sindhis and protect their rights in Sindh. The use of 'senior' in the title is ageist. According to Jacoby (2012), the

term 'senior citizens' 'has fallen out of favour' because it has ageist connotations. Before introducing such acts, it is important to comprehensively investigate how older adults are victims of discrimination. Anti-discrimination policies cannot be effective unless they seek to address the issue of ageist language used against older persons. Therefore, in this research, we seek to explore how ageist language is used against older citizens in Sindh, and how it causes discrimination.

Ageist language has been an under-researched topic in Sindh because many researchers have either focused on racial discrimination (Ali et al., 2022; Bhaiwala et al., 2020), ethnic discrimination (Feyyaz, 2011; Minority Rights Group International, 2009; Tekchandani, 2005) or gendered discrimination in Sindh's context (Bukhari et al., 2019; Memon et al., 2019). Others have relied on health care approaches to examine older Sindhis needing health and medical care in Sindh (see Thaver et al., 2014). Among the few studies on older Sindhis are those conducted by David and Ali (2021) on the discourse of folk literature on healthy ageing, Ali and David (2021d) on older Sindhis employing language as a security tool during the pandemic, and by David and Ali (2022) on how older Sindhis achieve resilience in the wake of spousal loss.

In Pakistan's Sindh province, the process of ageing is generally seen as the accumulation of knowledge, wisdom, and experience (David & Ali, 2021). Such accumulated wisdom and experience can help older Sindhis earn social respect, however, this has not often been the case. This is shown in the Sindhi saying used by some young Sindhis, *"50 salan kha poi, dimag ghat kam kando ahy",* (When a person crosses 50 years of age, his/her brain works less efficiently). Such assumptions which associate the cessation of cognitive processes with a point of time in a person's age have been negated by recent research work (see Wachob, 2022). Nevertheless, ageism against older persons continues to affect and shape many persons' attitudes and behaviours in the home and public domains. The continued use of ageist language against older persons can impact their psychological, physical, and social well-being resulting in a health crisis for these older community members. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate older persons' perceptions of ageist language, its use in the home and public domains, its effects on older persons' psychological wellbeing and how such language can be neutralised. Neutralising ageist language can to some extent help achieve sustainable and healthy ageing.

It is also noteworthy that studies such as this are conducted because vulnerable age groups, such as older Sindhis in Sindh, are in dire need of health, medical (Thaver et al., 2014), social, and emotional care (David & Ali, 2022). These groups also require pragmatic health reasoning (Cummings, 2018). Recent studies on older Sindhis have demonstrated how they are

affected by the pandemic (Ali & David, 2021d; David & Ali, 2021), and spousal loss (David & Ali, 2022). Meanwhile, the literature further notes that ageism involves linguistic mistreatment against older persons (Chye & David, 2006; Desmette et al., 2019).

2. Background

The existing research has provided evidence of the negative impact of ageist language on older adults' physical and mental health. Ageism, as a manifestation of negative attitudes towards older persons, is accepted and normative in a range of contexts (Boduroglu et al., 2006; Bryant et al., 2012; Levy, 2009). It is a complex and covert phenomenon, which is difficult to notice (Gendron et al., 2015). Evidence of ageism can be witnessed on a macro-level (for instance, anti-ageing beauty campaigns) and on a micro-level (for example, everyday language showing contemptuous and derogatory remarks about ageing or older persons) (Gendron et al., 2015).

There is an abundance of research describing the phenomenon of ageism and its negative health outcomes among older persons who experience and internalise ageism (Bryant et al., 2012; Levy, 2009; Mock & Eibach, 2011). Using age stereotype embodiment theory, Levy (2009) defines the mechanism by which age stereotypes affect persons over their lifespan. The theory postulates that age stereotypes are imbibed from the surrounding cultural context and everyday interactions (Levy, 2009). Ageism can either be internalised or externalised (Gendron et al., 2015; Ratner et al., 2014). Internalized ageism is a kind of ingroup discrimination, in which one older person can marginalize or discriminate against another older person; in contrast, externalized ageism is a type of outgroup discrimination, in which a young person can marginalize and discriminate against an older person (Gendron et al., 2015). These types of ageism perpetuate a discriminatory pattern in which a perpetrator (ingroup) will move to a victimized category (outgroup) (Jonson, 2013). Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated that internalised ageism is linked with lower life expectancy, high blood pressure, reduced self-respect, reduced risk taking and motivation (Coudin & Alexopoulos, 2010; Cruikshank, 2003; Levy et al., 2002).

Age identity is constructed, in part, by social processes, such as face to face interaction that can be interpreted from a sociolinguistic viewpoint (Ylanne-McEwen, 1999). It is, therefore, important to examine the particular language employed to communicate attitudes and perceptions about ageing and older adults.

The ageist attitudes or perceptions can either be explicit or implicit (Gendron et al., 2015). Explicit (age) bias is manifest and intentional, while implicit (age) bias is hidden and unintentional (Blair et al., 2011). Kemper (1994) was

the first researcher to use the expression, "elderspeak" to define a speech style, which implicitly questions the competence of older persons. Elderspeak is both patronising language and a style of speech that "has a slower rate, exaggerated intonation, elevated pitch and simpler vocabulary than normal adult speech" (Caporael, 1981, cited in Gendron et al., 2015, p. 999). Elderspeak, also termed as secondary baby talk, "is usually employed by interlocutors when communicating with the (older persons) due to their perception that the (older persons) need to be subjected to a different code" (Chee, 2011, p. 6). Implicit ageism and microaggression are difficult to identify due to cultural differences and lack of operational definitions (Gendron, et al., 2015).

Research on ageism has been conducted in different contexts (Bowman & Lim, 2021; Chee, 2011; Desmette et al., 2019; Minichiello et al., 2000; Saif-Ur-Rahman et al., 2021). In the Australian context, Minichiello et al.'s (2000) qualitative study demonstrated that health professionals are a major source of ageism perpetrated against older persons. In such a situation, some older persons accommodate ageism, while others "actively negotiate new images of ageing for themselves and those who will be old in the future" (Minichiello et al., 2000, p. 253).

Chee's (2011) qualitative study in Singapore's context demonstrated that ageism was perpetrated through elderspeak. However, it was shown that elderspeak could be either wrong or right, and it was suggested that caregivers used the right type of elderspeak that contained no ageist connotations (Chee, 2011). The wrong type of elderspeak interferes with healthy ageing and renders deleterious effects on the quality of healthcare services (Desmette et al., 2019). In contrast, the right type of elderspeak is the "person-first-language", in which a person or a group of persons are placed before the descriptive phrase (Bowman & Lim, 2021). For example, "use 'a person who has paraplegia' instead of 'a paraplegic person' and 'a person who has diabetes' rather than 'a diabetic person' or 'diabetic'" (Bowman & Lim, 2021, p. 270).

In the right type of elderspeak, care and concern are shown towards older persons' needs. For instance, the statement, "Let's take a break for a while. Anybody needs to use the washroom?" (Chee, 2011, p. 12) shows care and concern for older persons' toiletry needs. In contrast, the wrong type of elderspeak may sound rude to older persons. For instance, when an older person in a health care home complained that her chair was occupied by another older person, she was rudely told: "Do not always be so grumpy about this. She will just return to her seat and problem will be resolved, isn't it? No one is here to help you anymore" (Chee, 2011, p. 17).

Research on explicit and implicit ageism has been well established in a range

of contexts (Gendron et al., 2015). However, there is a lack of research on the use of ageist language in Sindh's context. Therefore, this research seeks to explore how ageist language is viewed and used in the home and public domains in Sindh, and how it can be countered by promoting respectful and dignified language use in the home and public domains. This is in accordance with the World Health Organisation (2021) decade plan of action for fighting against ageism, and in line with the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (World Health Organisation, n.d.) (2021-2030).

3. Method

The research was based on the narrative inquiry conducted with older persons over a period of three months (from February 2022 to April 2022). Initially, the participants were contacted and briefed about the study by the researchers. Subsequently, the participants were contacted one by one via phone calls, and they were invited to share their narratives related to ageism. The relevant findings for this article were gathered during the phone call inquiry (digital ethnography) with the participants. Digital ethnography involves the use of computers and smartphones to assist researchers in remotely collecting data (Beneito-Montagut, et al., 2017). The participants told their stories regarding the ageism they faced in the home and public domains.

3.1. Participants

A short message calling for participation in this study was sent to fifty older persons, who were on the researchers' contact list. The contacts were obtained through snowball sampling. The researchers contacted their acquaintances who provided the contact details of the prospective participants. Thus, the contact list was developed. However, only thirty of them agreed to participate in this study, and these participants were subsequently contacted. All the participants were guaranteed that their identity would remain confidential. The participants were Sindhis and spoke Sindhi as their first language. Ten of the participants were women, while twenty participants were men. All of the participants belonged to Larkana, which is a district in Sindh. The average age of the participants was 65, and all of them, with the exception of three, were retired professionals who once served either in the private sector or in the public sector. Twenty-seven participants belonged to the middle socio-economic class, while three came from the lower socio-economic class. Those who earned more than twelve million rupees[2] annually were classified as belonging to the middle socio-economic class. In contrast, those who earned five hundred rupees per day were placed in the lower socio-economic class. The former were educated (Master's Degree Holders), while the latter were primary school dropouts.

3.2. Instruments

Each participant responded to ten semi-structured questions about the use of ageist language in the home and public domains. In total, thirty conversations were conducted via phone calls, and each conversation was of an average length of 20 minutes. The questions were designed to encourage the participants to share their narratives. The following questions were asked:

1. Why did you feel hurt or harassed by ageist language?
2. Why do you think the person used that language?
3. How should the person have phrased their language to avoid hurting your feelings?

The benefits of employing narrative inquiry include: getting in-depth detail of a situation or experience, recording historically significant issues, and democratising the documentation of common persons' experiences (Liamputtong, 2019).

3.3. Procedure

For this study, two sets of data were required. The first included detailed information about the participants' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds as well as their demography and personality, and the second involved the instances of 'ageist language'. For this study, ageist language was operationally defined as covert and overt discrimination based on a person's age. The participants were asked to recall the exact wording of the ageist language used against them in the home and public domains.

Responses were provided in the Sindhi language, and these were translated into English. For instance, "I heard a young person say: 'old persons can tolerate neither warm weather nor cold weather. Many died this year. They are also easily affected by COVID-19'," or "My children believe that I have lived out my active days and that my mind is not functioning as effectively as it used to". The responses were transcribed manually. Content reading was conducted to perform bottom-up coding, identify themes, and derive empirical conclusions. In the first phase, the coding was conducted, and in the second phase, the researchers discussed the coded data to resolve probable mismatch in codified data.

4. Results

In this section, results of this study are presented and analysed based on four main themes: (1) older persons' perceptions of ageist language, (2) the use of ageist language in the home domain, (3) the use of ageist language in the public domain, and (4) the effect of ageist language on older persons' psychological wellbeing.

4.1. Older persons' perceptions of ageist language

Older persons' perceptions of ageist language have been presented and analysed in this section. How they perceive ageist Language and what it means to them is demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Perceptions of Ageist Language

No.	Response	Sex
1	For me ageist language is when people my age call me 'aunty'. Once such a person did that and I warned him not to do it again.	Female
2	When people talk loudly with me, assuming that I have not good hearing. The loud talk is ageist.	Female
3	People use some ageist Sindhi sayings, such as "achi darhi, atto kharab" (old persons have grown white beard but still do bad deeds) to derogatively refer to me and other older persons.	Male
4	I heard a young person say: "old persons can tolerate neither warm weather nor cold weather. Many died this year. They are also easily affected by COVID-19.	Male
5	We are often addressed as "purano panjah" (old fifty rupee note), "jhoono jhaz" (an old airplane), etc.	Male
6	We are described as persons having obsolete ideas and as persons incompatible with the modern era.	Male

Participant 1 in Table 1 conceptualises being called an "aunty" by the same age group members as ageist. The word, "aunty" represents externalised ageism because one older person uses it to address another older person (woman). Moreover, it demonstrates implicit discrimination because it contains hidden ageism behind what appears to be a socially acceptable form of address. Such implicit behaviours of ageism are imbibed from the cultural context (Levy, 2009).

Ageism manifests itself by the increased pitch of a talk. Increasing one's pitch of voice while speaking to an older person might be intentional. According to participant 2 in Table 1, such a way of increasing the pitch of one's voice is ageist because it is assumed that the addressee (older person) suffers from a hearing deficit. Furthermore, the Sindhi saying, "achi darhi, atto kharab" (old persons have grown white beard but still do bad deeds) is ageist because it makes explicit, contemptuous, and derogatory claims about older citizens (see response 3 in Table 1). In the words of Boduroglu et al. (2006), such claims are manifestations of negative attitudes about older persons.

Participant 4 in Table 1 mentions how some ageist persons associate weaker immunity with older persons. Some ageist persons often make judgements about older persons based on the older persons' capacity to withstand cold/warm weather, or their ability to resist some kind of disease. Making these judgments is ageist because older persons' abilities are considered weaker in comparison to younger persons' abilities.

Other ageist persons show explicit ageism by making remarks, such as "purano panjah" (old fifty rupees note), "jhoono jahaz" (old airplane) (see response 5 in Table 1), or "incompatible" (see response 6 in Table 1) to refer to older persons. Making these judgments and remarks can result in the reduced self-respect and motivation of older citizens (Coudin & Alexopoulos, 2010).

4.2. The use of ageist language in the home domain

In this section, the use of ageist language against older persons in the family domain is discussed (See Table 2).

Table 2
Ageism in the Home Domain

No.	Response	Sex
7	I once heard my young relative saying "this old woman has troubled us a lot. She just gives orders".	Female
8	My granddaughter was telling another granddaughter: "Look at this old woman, how well behaved she is! In contrast, our old women never are happy with what we do for them".	Female
9	My grandson once said to me: "Wow, grandma is colouring her hair to look young".	Male
10	My children believe that I have lived out my active days and that my mind is not functioning as effectively as it used to.	Male
11	I am called "kharpeel" (emotional) and "jehraloo" (quarrelsome). Nobody understands what I want, and my family members are avoiding my company.	Male
12	Lack of patience and much of aggression by myself are associated with my old age.	Male

Ageism is explicitly expressed by identifying and then associating certain traits of character with older persons. For instance, participants 7 and 8 in Table 2 discuss how some young people associate the traits of "gives orders" and "never are happy" with older women. Based on these characteristics, older persons are categorised into a group, and most of their habits are seen as a source of trouble. Young persons' discourse of ageism regarding older persons' traits/habits is a manifestation of explicit discrimination. Unlike

responses 7 and 8, response 9 is an implicit expression of ageism. The response appears to be a compliment; however, it contains unintentional ageism because youth has been associated with colour and beauty. In contrast, old age has been implied as colourless, which might lack beauty. As mentioned by Gendron et al., (2015) such complimentary remarks may be accepted in certain contexts, however, the ageism hidden behind the remarks needs to be identified.

According to participant 10, his grandchildren identify physical and cognitive weakness as marked features of old age. Participant 11 states that cognitively weak persons are viewed as emotional and quarrelsome. These persons are claimed to lack patience and exercise aggression (see response 12 in Table 2). This shows how age identity is created through the social process of interaction (Ylanne-McEwen, 1999). Moreover, these discursive representations of older persons question what Kemper (1994) calls the physical and cognitive competence of older persons and show how some young family members negatively view old age and older persons. After discussing the use of ageist language in the home domain, the use of ageist language in the public domain is now discussed.

4.3. The use of ageist language in the public domain

Table 3
Ageism in the Public Domain

No.	Response	Sex
13	We went to visit my son-in-law's friends. Their children would tease me and call me 'banbh' (witch).	Female
14	Old women are resembled to "khakri" (a sucked seed of a mango), or offensively called "kholi" (a derogatory term used to refer to an old woman).	Female
15	Whenever I coughed, and some young persons noticed this. They would say: "look at the way he is coughing as if he has contracted COVID-19".	Male
16	Once I did not show up on time in the company of my friends. When I came late, a friend sarcastically said: "look, the old fifty rupee note has arrived now".	Male
17	One day I was going on foot and a young person who I knew shouted: "Why are you going on foot uncle? Have some mercy on your age!"	Male
18	I was in hospital with my son for a medical check-up. One of the staff called me an old person. My son reacted angrily to this and prohibited him from using such ageist language.	Male

The use of ageist language in the public domain is illustrated in Table 3. Responses 13 ('banbh' meaning witch), 14 ('khakhri', a sucked seed of mango, 'kholi', an old woman), 16 ('purano panjah', an old note of fifty rupees), and 18 ('kuraro', an old man) in Table 3 show how ageist terms are used to refer to older persons. Moreover, responses 15 and 17 demonstrate how older persons' coughing and walking are viewed negatively by their younger compatriots in the public domain. These responses show how ageist language is used in the public domain to refer to older persons.

Ageist language outgroups older persons and identifies them as diseased (coughing) and weak (should not walk). Such ageist discourse implicitly associates good health and strength with younger persons.

4.4. The effect of ageist language on older persons' psychological well-being

How ageist language affects psychological health is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4
The Effects of Ageism on Psychological Well Being

No.	Response	Sex
19	Though I feel hurt, at the end of the day I have to accept the bitter reality.	Female
20	It is a very tough experience for me to be addressed in that way.	Female
21	It saddens me, and I feel alienated and out of place.	Male
22	Being neglected and teased!	Male
23	I feel as though I have no importance in their life.	Male
24	I feel rejected and disconnected, which affects my mental peace and solace.	Male

Participant 19 in Table 4 says she feels hurt whenever she is a victim of ageism. Her ultimate acceptance of ageism shows how she accommodates to her ageist identity. According to Minichiello et al. (2000), the victims of ageism either accommodate or negotiate new images of ageism. In contrast, participant 20 finds it difficult to accommodate ageism. Participants 21, 22, 23, and 24 who felt sad and alienated also neither accepted their ageist identity nor negotiated new images of ageing.

Instead of accommodation or negotiation of their identities, the participants expressed feelings of sadness and anger and states of disconnection, alienation, and rejection. This shows how older persons can react differently to ageism, and how ageist language can have negative effects on the psychological wellbeing of the participants.

4.5. Solutions to counter ageist language

In the previous section, we discussed how ageist language used against older persons was used in the home and public domains, and how older Sindhi males and females were its main victims. Such ageist language can cause damaging effects on the psychological wellbeing of older persons. Therefore, in this section, we present solutions that can help neutralise ageist language and contribute to anti-ageist laws and policies in Sindh. The solutions come from the participants' narratives, which are now presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Solutions to Ageism

No.	Response	Sex
25	People should not use such language to refer to us. We are older citizens, and I think we deserve some respect. Terms of respect, such as "madam", "bibi" (a term of respect), or 'khatoon' should be used to address older women.	Female
26	It's okay if relatives call us by kinship names, such as 'khala' or 'maasi' (aunty), or 'nani' (maternal grandmother), or 'dadi' (paternal grandmother).	Female
27	Ageism should be treated like racism.	Male
28	Terms of respect, such as "sain" should be used to address an older person.	Male
29	Ageism is the result of intergenerational gaps which should be bridged through increased communication and mutual understanding.	Male
30	Ageist language should be penalised, and everyone should be made aware of its use.	Male

Responses in Table 5 provide suggestions to neutralise ageist language and the use of age neutral language. For example, responses 25 and 26 in Table 5 suggest using more inclusive titles or names for older persons because according to the participants, the titles/names can help neutralise ageist language used mostly against older persons and therefore show respect.

Using the word, "sain" for an older person can ensure mutual respect and acceptance. If a young person shows respect for an older person by using such terms, this can lead to age-neutral and acceptable language, which in the words of Bowman and Lim (2021) can foster values of respect and dignity. Moreover, in building respectful rapport with older women, local terms used for women (Bibi, Khatoon) are suggested because these are socially acceptable, and can neutralise gendered language (Bowman & Lim, 2021).

Moreover, ageist words, such as "khakri" or "kholi" used to address older

women need to be stopped. According to Desmette et al. (2019), neutralising ageist notions implicit in such terms can lead to healthy ageing. The use of age-neutral terms is preferred by older persons. The word in the Sindh context that can be used to respectfully address an older person is "mohtram" (a respectful term for a male) or "mohtarma" (a respectful term for a female). Since older persons are a treasure trove of wisdom (David & Ali, 2021), it is much better to use such words to address them. Using such respectful terms of address can increase mutual respect and acceptance in different age groups.

Finally, it is suggested that young persons in the home and public domains should understand the local Sindhi saying, "jhono thyo jahaz, sat na sahy sarh jee" (speak gently with older persons because they cannot tolerate harsh/ageist language), or another commonly used Sindhi statement "wadi umar wara manho samjh wara honda ahen" (older people are wise). Understanding such words of wisdom can reduce the use of ageist language and hopefully pave the way for comprehensive laws and policies to counter ageism in Sindh.

5. Discussion

Ageism has been described as a manifestation of negative attitudes about older persons (Boduroglu et al., 2006). According to Levy (2009), these attitudes can be imbibed from cultural contexts. Similarly, this research has demonstrated how ageism is imbibed in the home and public domains in Sindh.

According to Minichiello et al. (2000), health professionals are a major source of ageism. Contrarily, this study has shown that some younger family members, friends, and family friends of older persons are a major source of ageism. Based on the findings of this study, it can be deduced that not only professionals but also friends and family members use ageist language against older persons.

In the words of Coudin and Alexopoulos (2010), ageist language can have strong negative effects on older persons. This study has also shown how ageist language used against older persons in the home and public domains is causing negative effects on older Sindhis' psychological wellbeing. Unlike Coudin and Alexopoulos' findings (2010), which focused on reduced self-respect and motivation, this study demonstrated how the use of ageist language against older persons made them feel sad, alienated, and rejected.

Such ageist language can negatively affect the process of healthy ageing and can result in increasing health problems for older adults. The use of ageist language in the home and public domains in Sindh should be categorised as a social challenge, and it should be addressed as the world looks to be more

inclusive and sustainable. Sustainability, in this context, can be conceptualised as the ability to move forward, while reducing any negative impacts of ageism on progress and the healthy ageing of older persons.

Older persons need to be treated with respect in the home and public domains as shown in section 5 of this study. Using terms of respect, socially acceptable terminology, and age neutral language, as suggested in Table 5, can provide motivation and positive cues for older persons, and can consequently play a vital role in their healthy ageing.

The mechanism of neutralising ageist language can be initiated by using professional titles, terms of respect, both for older males and older females. Employing these terms can be equated to the phenomenon of acknowledging the importance of older citizens, and a positive role can be played by older Sindhis in both the home and public domains. Therefore, it is suggested that inclusive language that stresses the acceptance of all age groups should be mainstreamed, and age-friendly language needs to be first understood and then encouraged and appreciated in both the private and public domains. With such data, anti-ageist policies and laws in Sindh can be discussed.

6. Conclusion

Taking into account a limited number of participants (30), this study explored a tendency of ageism against older persons in the home and public domains in Sindh. Findings demonstrated how some younger persons, family friends, and friends of older persons used ageist language against older citizens, and how such ageist language rendered negative effects on older persons' psychological wellbeing in Sindh.

Anti-ageist language that stresses professional lexicon, socially acceptable terminology, age-neutral vocabulary, and other culturally appropriate terms were suggested to be used when addressing older persons. It is argued that understanding ageist language is important before hastening to make anti-ageist laws and policies in Sindh. Though this study was limited to one district in Sindh, similar studies can be conducted in a range of contexts, which can perhaps provide similar results.

This study makes a conceptual contribution to existing literature on ageism. It also makes a practical contribution to the implementation of comprehensive anti-discrimination and health care policies for older persons. It also highlights the need for policymakers in the health care sector to comprehensively understand ageism before making anti-ageist policies. As increasingly viable segments of the population face ageism in the home and public domains, this study provides insights into cultivating a healthy anti-ageist climate.

In short, this study demonstrates a significant level of awareness regarding ageist language among participants. This study also demonstrates older persons' perceptions of ageist language, the use of ageist language in the home and public domains and its effects on older persons' psychological wellbeing. It also suggests how ageist language can be neutralised, and how inclusive language that respects all age groups should be used in all domains. It is hoped that this research will pave the way for researchers to expand research in a range of contexts where ageism is a social problem.

Notes

1. www.who.int/news/item/18-03-2021-ageism-is-a-global-challenge-un
2. Rupee is the name of the currency used in Pakistan. The old fifty rupee note is no longer used in Pakistan, and the phrase "old fifty rupee note" is sarcastically used to refer to older persons in Sindh.

Authors' Statement

Maya Khemlani David contributed to sections 1, 2, 3, and 4.5, and Ameer Ali worked on sections 4-4.4 of the article. Syed Sardar Ali Shah worked on sections 5 and 6 of the article.

The Authors

Maya Khemlani David (Email: mayadavid@yahoo.com) is an Honorary Professor at Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; recipient of the Linguapax Award in 2007; an Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguistics, United Kingdom; a Member of Advisory Board, Linguapax, Barcelona; and an Executive Committee Member of the Foundation of Endangered Languages. She has published over 450 research papers and book chapters.

Ameer Ali (Email: ameer7037@gmail.com) is a researcher at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. His areas of interest include Language and Ageism, Language and Racism, Forensic Linguistics, and Eco-linguistics. He is a solidarity member of the Foundation of Endangered Languages. He has published over thirty research papers and book chapters.

Syed Sardar Ali Shah (Email: sardar.shah@usindh.edu.pk) is an Assistant Professor at Institute of Law, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. He is a Ph.D. in Law with expertise in Legal Education. He has written many research papers and book chapters related to law and legal issues. Moreover, he has presented his work in many national and international conferences.

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