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EDITORIAL

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Digital Geographies of Hope: Situated Futures in a Data-Driven World

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Abstract

This thematic issue advances digital geographies of hope as a lens for examining how possibilities for action, connection, and alternative futures take shape in a deeply datafied and platformized world. While critical scholarship has documented extraction, surveillance, bordering, and algorithmic injustice, the contributions foreground hope as situated, relational, and contested, emerging within crisis rather than outside of it. Drawing on utopian and feminist thought, queer and decolonial critique, and research on affect, care, and solidarity, the thematic issue conceptualizes hope as both affective and infrastructural: enacted through everyday practices, collective struggles, and sociotechnical imaginaries that expand "room to act." Cases range from feminist and anti-war organizing to rural and regional media ecologies, post-digital work cultures, and AI governance debates. Read across these contexts, hope appears as ambivalent yet generative, enabling refusal, repair, solidarity, and world-making across scales.

Keywords

critical geomedia studies; digital activism; digital geographies; futures; hope; platformization; spatial justice

1. Introduction

As this thematic issue contends with the role of hope in a datafied and platformized world, we open with two reflections that illuminate the fragile conditions under which hope becomes possible. In her book *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit (2015) writes that uncertainty itself creates spaces for hope: "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty there is room to act" (foreword to the third edition, para. 10). In *The Spirit of Hope*, philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2024) warns that hope cannot survive in atmospheres governed by fear: "In a climate of fear, there is no hope. Fear represses

hope. What is needed is therefore a politics of hope that creates an atmosphere of hope against the regime of fear" (Han, 2024, prelude, para. 35).

In recent years, critical scholarship on digital media, datafication, and platformization has been dominated by diagnoses of harm: extraction, surveillance, bordering, and algorithmic injustice. For example, critical work has mapped how digital infrastructures extend state and corporate power into everyday space, and how digital systems reproduce racialized, gendered, and classed inequalities at multiple scales, from intimate life to planetary logistics. Yet, people continue to assemble, imagine, and build forms of connection, care, and resistance. It is in these tensions that this thematic issue on digital geographies of hope is situated. This issue has its origins in the 5th international geomedia conference *Digital Geographies of Hope*, held at Tampere University, Finland, in September 2023, and co-organised with the Centre for Geomedia Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden, where scholars from across human geography, media and communication, and cognate fields explored how hope is articulated and contested in a deeply datafied world. It also connects to earlier work that has brought questions of futures and sociotechnical imaginaries into geomedia studies by conceptualising geomedia as both a sociotechnical regime and an imaginary, and by interrogating hegemonic geomedia futures (Fast et al., 2024). While that thematic issue foregrounded "geomedia futures" more broadly, here we turn explicitly to digital geographies of hope as a way of engaging with possible futures under conditions of datafication and platformization. While several of the contributions were developed from work presented at the conference, the thematic issue includes additional articles submitted in response to our call for papers, further widening the empirical and conceptual range of digital geographies of hope.

What do we mean by hope—and how to conceptualize it? Hope is an elusive and fragile concept, marked by considerable ambiguity and often applied rather loosely across diverse contexts within the social sciences and humanities.

In *Principles of Hope*, Ernst Bloch (1959/1986) formulates utopian thinking as anticipatory consciousness in a world that is incomplete and constantly becoming. Thus, hope presents itself in the energy of imagining better futures, in the desire to transcend the status quo. In a similar way, feminist scholarship connects hope with the affective energy of becoming: Mary Zournazi (2003) frames hope as a vital force—a drive or energy that embeds us in the world and sustains our engagement with the ecology of life, ethics, and politics. She identifies a need to re-envisage and imagine hope as "a convergence of new agendas, conversations and possibilities in everyday life and political activity" (Zournazi, 2003, p. 17).

While the utopian energy and drive to imagine are identified as central to hope, the question of the abstract nature of utopian thinking and the extent to which aspirations can be realized preoccupies reflections on hope. Many thinkers argue that hope for the future should be anchored in reality while remaining radical through a transformative imagination that envisions alternatives to the present. Some are especially cautious about how hope is mobilized within ideological agendas that determine which futures are imagined and by whom. For example, in *Hope Without Optimism*, Terry Eagleton (2015) adopts a history-of-ideas approach to argue that hope is never ideologically neutral; rather, it is embedded within—and shaped by—relations of power. In queer studies, Jack Halberstam (2022) has consistently argued for the need to problematize hope and to instead recognize the critical value of failure, collapse, and unworlding.

Such contextual forms of hope can be traced across a range of theories engaging with utopian imagination, yet they diverge in how deeply hope is embedded in the everyday routines of life or whether it assumes a central role during moments of crisis.

Gayatri Spivak (as cited in Zournazi, 2003) conceives of crisis not simply as a moment of breakdown but as a hopeful opportunity: an interruption of the everyday that opens possibilities for resistance. Such ruptures can unsettle dominant epistemologies and create spaces for rethinking agency, particularly in relation to the subaltern and the ethics of responsibility. Here, crisis is a condition that demands a reconfiguration of ethical and political responsibility—an acknowledgment of shared precariousness that can ground new forms of solidarity. For some scholars, such as Achille Mbembe (2019), crisis is not a singular rupture but a lived condition that gradually becomes normalized, shaping the temporal and affective structures of everyday existence where uncertainty and vulnerability become constitutive of life rather than exceptional states. While Mbembe is far from hopeful, his work has been used in exploring how everyday hope emerges as a relational and situated practice of resilience—woven into the fabric of ordinary life as a stubborn determination to persist. Such hope is not innocent; it may be cruel, demanding endurance in the face of structural violence and deferred futures (Visser, 2025). Payal Arora (2024) even argues that in precarious contexts, hope manifests as a necessity that provides a horizon towards the future, whereas pessimism is a privilege reserved for those who can afford it.

While politics of hope may sometimes be connected to a coercive sense of "we-ness," there are approaches of hope that reimagine collectivity not as a prescriptive identity but as an open horizon: as a convivial ethos of sharing (Ashcroft, 2017) or a performative practice that transgresses entrenched normativities (Muñoz, 2019).

Such polyvocal imagination has been an objective of research that explores practices of digital witnessing and care, technologies of experience and encounter, and digital constellations of solidarity (Nikunen, 2019). As many of the contributions in this special issue show, the affective drive to imagine through and with digital media requires contextual grounding to lived experience. Furthermore, it often requires radical rethinking and reformation of the digital conditions, questioning the algorithmic platform power that shapes digital participation as well as the mobilization of alternative digital spaces. From this perspective, then, hope is not treated as naïve optimism or a simple counterweight to critique. Rather, following recent calls to engage geographies of hope as an analytical lens for spatialized struggle and possibility, we approach hope as an affective, relational, contextual, and (infra-)structural orientation that emerges precisely within contexts of crisis, precarity, and oppression. Across the contributions, hope appears as a contested, processual, sometimes fragile disposition that is enacted through intersectional feminist coalitions, diasporic and anti-war organizing, rural media ecosystems, post-digital workspaces, AI governance debates, and user imaginaries of immersive technologies.

2. Mapping the Contributions of the Thematic Issue

Several articles in this issue explicitly seek to move critical digital geographies beyond what Sarah Elwood (2026) describes as "theoretical cycles of negation" by turning to analytical frameworks that can apprehend minor, situated practices as openings onto other, alternative futures. José Esteban Muñoz's (2019) methodology of hope, queer of colour critique, decolonial feminist approaches to AI, and the concept of affective bridges all proposed ways of reading digital practices and digital platforms as spaces where

alternative modes of being and relating are tentatively brought into view. Hope, in this sense, is a way of looking and listening that refuses to reduce minor practices to mere epiphenomena of structural power.

At the same time, the contributions point out that hopeful digital geographies are often entangled with violence and constraint. Intersectional feminist coalitions in Turkey mobilize against femicide and anti-gender backlash in a context of networked authoritarianism; Russian anti-war activists negotiate visibility and invisibility across dispersed locales and heavily surveilled platforms; Nigerian youth craft "virtual exile" and digitally mediated futures from within conditions of systemic failure and uneven state provision. In rural Sweden, participatory action research on "socially smart villages" uses place-based digital design to contest urban-centric smart imaginaries and to co-create modest, locally grounded digital solutions that strengthen social bonds and future orientations in marginalised communities. In Castilla-La Mancha, Spain, a mixed-methods analysis of rural mediatization shows how differentiated local media ecosystems and media ensembles interplay with higher levels of territorial hope, belonging, and outward projection in depopulated municipalities, highlighting media presence as a symbolic condition for feeling recognised and future-bearing in so-called "left-behind" regions. Post-digital workers in coworking spaces and domestic VR users seek relief, belonging, and alternative spaces in and against platformized environments, experimenting with practices of presence, immersion, and withdrawal that re-situate the spaces of the social.

Overall, the articles in this issue show that digital geographies of hope are produced through situated practices of infrastructuring, imagination, and refusal. Hope appears in the crafting of "affective bridges" across feminist and trans movements, in the logistical uses of Telegram that sustain proximity between dispersed anti-war actors, in community-driven smart village projects and rural media ecologies, in critical re-framings of gender AI safety in the Global South, and in mundane negotiations of presence, escape, and immersion in post-digital workspaces and immersive media. The collection also foregrounds the importance of scale: from bodily autonomy and intimate images to homes and workplaces, villages and regions, cities and diasporas, and transnational policy fields.

We have organized the issue into four overlapping themes. The first develops conceptual and methodological frameworks of hope in digital geographies, drawing on queer, feminist, and decolonial approaches. The second examines contentious spaces, activism, and transnational solidarities under authoritarian and crisis conditions. The third focuses on rural and regional media as drivers of territorial hope. The final theme turns to post-digital everyday life, work, and technological imaginaries, exploring how people negotiate connection and utopian/dystopian futures in deeply mediatized environments. Across these themes, hope coexists with fear, exhaustion, and marginalization, yet it also serves as a resource for imagining and enacting other digital futures.

2.1. Conceptualising Hope: Critical Frameworks and Situated Methodologies

The first theme gathers contributions that develop conceptual and methodological frameworks of hope in digital geographies, from queer urban activism to intersectional feminist coalitions and decolonial approaches to AI. The issue opens with Sarah Elwood's (2026) article, which proposes "queer methodologies of hope" as a way to move critical digital geographies beyond what she calls "theoretical cycles of negation." Centring on the Stop the Sweeps campaign in Seattle, and drawing on Muñoz's (2019) methodology of hope and queer of colour critique, the article treats minor, everyday praxes as anticipatory glimpses of more just

urban futures rather than as politically insignificant. Dilara Asardag (2026) then introduces the concept of "affective bridges" to theorise how intersectional feminist and trans coalitions in Turkey sustain solidarity, care, and political imagination under conditions of increased femicides, anti-gender backlash, and networked authoritarianism. Through a manifesto-style argument grounded in empirical cases, the article shows how digitally mediated feminist activism builds fragile but powerful infrastructures of hope that connect bodies, experiences, and struggles. Weijie Huang, Payal Arora, and Marta Zarzycka (2026) extend this conceptual agenda into the field of AI governance by rethinking deepfake harms and "gender AI safety" from the standpoint of the Global South. Their article develops a gen(der) AI safety framework that foregrounds pleasure-positive, survivor-centred, and decolonial approaches to non-consensual synthetic intimate images, and proposes geographies of hope as a way to imagine more just and situated AI futures that do not reproduce data universalism.

2.2. Hope in Struggle: Activism, Solidarity, and Contentious Digital Spaces

The second theme turns to contentious spaces, activism, and transnational solidarities under authoritarian and crisis conditions. Svetlana Chuikina's (2026) article examines Russian anti-war activism after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, focusing on how activists navigate platform visibility and street (in)visibility within a dense regime of surveillance and repression. Tracing practices such as amplification, evasion, hijacking, and the logistical uses of Telegram, the article shows how protest spaces are reconfigured across "streets and streams" and how hope is maintained through the careful distribution of risk, visibility, and proximity between dispersed localities. Jaana Serres' (2026) contribution shifts the focus to Nigeria's digital entertainment industries and the notion of "virtual exile." It explores how young Nigerians invest in the promise of "making it from Africa" through platformized creative labour, while confronting systemic failure, infrastructural breakdown, and uneven state provision. By analysing how Lagos is discursively and infrastructurally refigured as a global tastemaker city, the article reveals digital geographies of hope that are deeply entangled with precarity and inequality, yet also mobilize powerful imaginaries of African futures in global cultural circuits. As such, these articles show how hope is enacted in contentious, high-risk environments where digital infrastructures both constrain and enable collective action and future-making.

2.3. Territorial Hope: Rural Futures and Regional Media Ecologies

The third theme focuses on rural and regional media as drivers of territorial hope in contexts marked by depopulation and marginalisation. Lotta Braunerhielm, Pernille K. Andersson, and Laila Gibson (2026) analyse "socially smart villages" in rural Sweden through participatory action research. Critiquing dominant, urban-centric smart-village models that privilege technological efficiency and economic growth, they show how place-based digital design and locally anchored storytelling projects can support social cohesion, visibility, and a sense of future in small communities. Rather than reproducing narrow techno-solutionist imaginaries, their work highlights modest, situated digital solutions that emerge from the everyday needs and aspirations of rural residents. Vanesa Saiz-Echezarreta, Belén Galletero-Campos, and Joan Ramon Rodriguez-Amat (2026) turn to Castilla-La Mancha in Spain, combining a survey with an analysis of local media ecosystems to operationalise geographies of hope as territorial attachment, belonging, and outward projection. They demonstrate how differentiated local media ensembles correlate with higher levels of territorial hope in depopulated municipalities, and argue that local media presence functions as a symbolic condition for being recognised as future-bearing rather than "left-behind." Read alongside one another,

these two articles foreground how rural (geo-)media participate in shaping who and what is imagined as having a future.

2.4. Everyday Futures: Post-Digital Everyday Life, Work, and Technological Imaginaries

The final theme addresses post-digital everyday life, work, and technological imaginaries, asking how people negotiate connection and utopian/dystopian futures in deeply mediatized environments. André Jansson, Karin Fast, and Magnus Andersson (2026) explore coworking spaces in Oslo as "romantic workplaces" that anchor post-digital knowledge workers who are otherwise exposed to precarious, placeless forms of labour. Through the lens of post-digital consumption, they show how coworking spaces promise authenticity, community, creativity, and hope for more meaningful and sustainable futures, even as they remain entangled with neoliberal work regimes and urban redevelopment. Linnea Saltin (2026) examines "VR heterotopias" in Swedish homes, analysing how users imagine virtual reality headsets as technologies for reaching utopian elsewhere spaces. VR emerges as a heterotopic counterspace in relation to smartphones and social media, where users negotiate desires for escape, intensity, and alternative worlds.

3. Conclusion

To return to Solnit's (2015) reminder that hope lives in "the spaciousness of uncertainty" and to Han's (2024) call for a politics that can counter regimes of fear, this issue insists that the data-driven world is not only a terrain of extraction, surveillance, and algorithmic injustice, but also a space where alternative futures are continuously rehearsed; sometimes in minor gestures, at other times in organized struggle, often in forms that are fragile, ambivalent, and unevenly distributed. Across the contributions gathered here, hope is neither a celebratory antidote to critique nor a mood that emerges from an "outside" crisis; it is a situated orientation that takes shape through the infrastructures people inherit and the ones they improvise—through coalition-building, rural mediations of belonging, tactics of (in)visibility, and everyday experiments in presence, withdrawal, and connection. The articles hosted in this thematic issue invite us to treat digital geographies of hope as an analytical entry point for noticing where possibilities are being made, contested, and sustained under pressure; and, crucially, for asking what kinds of digital conditions would expand that room to act.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

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Digital Geographies and The City: Queer Methodologies of Hope

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Abstract

Critical digital geographies scholarship has a well-developed repertoire for theorizing adverse relations between technology, media, society, and space, setting up an enduring ambivalence in the analysis of minor, small-scale, improvisational efforts to rewrite these relations. At this impasse, I argue for an intentional turn to analytic frames rooted in queer of color critique, such as methodologies of hope. This approach emerges from Jose Esteban Muñoz's writings on queer futurities, which he crafted as an epistemological-political frame for apprehending hope, justice, and life-affirming futures from positions of deep material and ideological exclusion. Muñoz's approach offers vital off-ramps from the theoretical cycles of negation found in much critical digital geography thought. My article demonstrates how orienting to minoritarian digital activisms through a queer methodology of hope illuminates dynamic cycles of critique and creation that transgress accepted limits to urban inhabitations and demonstrate normatively unthinkable, yet already existing, possibilities for being and being in relation in the city. I demonstrate this approach through a close reading of the digital mediations and mediatizations advanced in the social media tactics of Stop the Sweeps Seattle, a local collective fighting the systematic eviction of tent encampments of unsheltered people by municipal authorities. A queer relational analysis of these emplaced politics illuminates the digital, material, and ideological pathways they forge toward staying put and living well in the city against seemingly impossible odds.

Keywords

digital geographies; geomedia; homelessness; hope; queer of color critique; spatial mediation; urban geography

1. Introduction

Digital urbanism is well-theorized as the condensation point of multiple adverse material and ideological relations (MacKinnon et al., 2022). Critical analysis of the so-called geomedia city, platform city, smart city, or computational city have documented the existence and workings of myriad political, economic, institutional, and digital structures of harm. From technocapitalist urban development regimes to the surveillant data collection praxes that enable algorithmic regulation of the city, to digital circulations that mediate sociospatial regimes of elite consumption, digital urbanism is demonstrably replete with domination, dispossession, and stark inequalities (Faxon & Kintzi, 2022; Hartmann & Jansson, 2024; Polson, 2024). Societal consent to these adverse relations has been manufactured through widely circulating technocultural discourses that idealize digitization and computational regulation of the city as an optimization—efficient, orderly, rational, and fair (Leszczynski, 2016; Mattern, 2021). While the digital mediation of these dynamics is more recent, urban development in the US has long relied upon dispossession to literally make space for capital and property, through systematic removal and regulation of impoverished (and often racialized) people via market processes and urban policy that protect propertied persons: the taxpayer, the business owner, the homeowner, the tourist, and the consumer (Harris, 1993; Roy, 2017).

These dynamics are manifest in the prevailing response of US municipalities to a housing crisis that has forced nearly 800,000 people to live outdoors, often in tents, vehicles, and self-built shelters in public places (Soucy et al., 2025). Nationwide, local governments authorize systematic eviction of tent encampments by police and private contractors. Colloquially known as "sweeps," these evictions are authorized by administrative statutes that codify grounds for removal, and they are data-driven, triggered by citizen complaints submitted via municipal customer service interfaces (Elwood, 2025; Sparks, 2017). Encampment sweeps have been fiercely resisted by civil liberties groups, social services agencies, and advocacy groups, and by local collectives organizing under a shared call-to-arms "Stop the Sweeps." Present in cities and towns across the US, Stop the Sweeps collectives are small, voluntary, sometimes short-lived, and minimally resourced. They document and protest removals, mobilize mutual aid to encampment dwellers, and assist them during and after evictions. They also use social media to document sweeps, mobilize allies, and circulate alternative responses to urban homelessness. The theoretical apparatuses of much critical geography scholarship are poised to apprehend these kinds of digital and emplaced activisms as insufficient: Too small, short-lived lived, or loosely organized to scale up to a social movement; neither confronting nor dismantling the technocapitalist computational governance regimes that undergird sweeps.

My article starts from this problematic: Within a theoretical-epistemological status quo in much critical geography that has tended to read these kinds of praxes as holding little potential to transform unjust worlds, what other pathways might we forge to apprehend digital geographies of hope? In the face of these foreclosures of hope in critical digital geography, I argue for deepening our engagement with modes of criticality less commonly deployed in our field, specifically turning to analytic frames from queer of color critique, an approach rooted in the relational turn in queer theory that centers struggles for liberation, self-determination, and social transformation under conditions of seeming impossibility. Within this tradition, I turn to José Esteban Muñoz's (2019) methodology of hope as an analytic orientation to the kinds of minor digital practices that critical geography has tended to situate as insufficient in the face of powerful structural relations. Muñoz's methodology of hope is prescient at this impasse, offering an approach that is not a "naïve or neoliberal faith in the future that everything will get better but rather puts the current and

past negativities into the center of the project of futuring" (Bayramoğlu, 2022, p. 10). This approach offers a double move to exit cycles of negation by exposing normatively obscured harms and illuminating liberated futures, breaching received wisdoms, and cultivating collective desires for other ways of knowing and being.

In Section 2, I situate my argument within critical human and digital geographies' ambivalent encounters with hope. Both arenas have tended to anticipate the reiteration of adverse structural and ideological relations and the swift re-inscription of resistant, liberatory, or insurgent practices into these topologies. In critical digital geography, I argue, these theoretical cycles are also rooted in part in an enduring emphasis on mutually-reinforcing relations of technology, media, and political economy, and the ideologies and modes of governance that uphold these arrangements. While such formulations remain trenchant in the face of technocapitalist urban governance, an unintended consequence of their continual reiteration has been a foreclosure of the possibilities for apprehending hopeful politics enacted through other registers and relations.

In Sections 3 and 4, I demonstrate a methodology of hope in digital geographies through a close reading of digital activism advanced by the Stop the Sweeps collective in Seattle, Washington. Stop the Sweeps activism sits at the wicked crossroads of computational urbanism and liberal poverty governance where the dispossession and dehumanization seem inevitable. Yet as I will show, a queer relational orientation to these digital activisms illuminates their transgressive mediations of normatively unimaginable sociospatial relations, urban inhabitations, and futures. My analysis further traces how these sociospatial politics are crafted through entanglements of digitization and mediatization. Here, mediatization refers to the functioning of mass media as a site of cultural political formation and more specifically to Stops the Sweeps Seattle's enactment of their digital tactics in and through social media platforms. As I will show, the group's activism intervenes into collective sociospatial imaginations regarding homelessness, encampments, and the possibilities for urban inhabitation, making creative use of the powerful semiotic, circulatory, and connective affordances of social media in this effort. My article illustrates the kinds of transformative mediations and mediatizations revealed by orienting to minor digital practices through a queer methodology of hope.

2. Critical Geographies and Hope: A Queer Relational Turn

Despite its emancipatory aspirations, much critical human geography has taken an ambivalent stance in theorizing hope and the possibilities for hopeful politics. Blomley (2007) notes widespread rejection of hope as utopian thinking that is unattainable from within present structures. Some work argues that hope functions politically as a sort of naïve optimism, a softly coercive means of manufacturing consent to status quo inequalities (Braun, 2005; Fuller & Kitchin, 2004; Sparke, 2007). Others sharply delimit hopeful politics as only interventions aimed at dismantling oppressive institutional and political economic arrangements (Harvey, 2000; Sparke, 2007). Marxist feminist analyses more often recognize hopeful potential in micropolitics but typically do so with a strong imperative on demonstrated potential to scale up toward global solidarities and collective action. Fenton's (2008) analysis of social media activism counts as hopeful only those micropolitical mobilizations that accrete toward challenges to global capitalism. Critical geography's ambivalence toward hope is also inscribed by Foucauldian theorizations of power/knowledge, surveillance, governmentality, and biopolitics (Sparke, 2007; Thrift, 2007). These frames offer vital insights into the production of space and power through political-economic and governance structures and through affective and poststructural relations, yet all are poised to find relations of domination, even when orienting toward hope. For instance,

Cloke et al.'s (2017) analysis of small-scale mundane care acts in spaces such as food banks characterizes these actions as hopeful but simultaneously theorizes them as "in the meantime" affective politics that only minimally address neoliberal harms whilst awaiting political-economic transformation.

Critical digital geographies scholarship bears similar theoretical impulses. Accounts of the emancipatory potential of digital technologies of often co-articulated with concepts that anticipate adverse material and ideological relations. In early geographic information systems and society analyses, hope was often coupled to fear, and empowerment to surveillance (Klinkenberg, 2007; Sheppard, 1995)—analytic reflexes that carry forward to contemporary scholarship in what Dalton and Thatcher (2022) identify as a pervasive hope-fear dialectic. Analyses of smart city and open data initiatives reflect these ambivalences, framing hopeful discourses of inclusion as false promises that conceal neoliberal and technoscience logics (Wiig, 2015). Concepts such as shareveillance theorize emancipatory possibilities of open data initiatives as already compromised (Birchall, 2016) while social media activisms have been theorized as technoliberal participation that sharply limits any potential for transformative politics (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023; Salzano, 2021). Other work reiterates skepticism toward micropolitics, exploring whether social media activisms are "slacktivism" and "clicktivism" (Christensen, 2011) or evaluating the hopeful possibilities of communitarian digital innovations such as blockchain and Web3 in terms of demonstrated potential for scaling up (Ettlinger, 2024).

Some analyses of digital geographies depart from hope-fear dialectics and their anticipation of extraction, instrumentality, and quiescence. Studies of urban tech sovereignty collectives (Lynch, 2020), popular economy mobilizations around gig work platforms (Magalhães, 2023), and locally developed freecycling and mutual aid platforms (Kavada, 2020; Santala & McGuirk, 2022) evidence the partiality of supposed technocapitalist domination. Other work examines digital urbanisms beyond economies, reading for the use of digital platforms to mediate interdependent social relations of sharing, collective care, and everyday provisioning (Cenere, 2025; Kavada, 2020; Santala & McGuirk, 2022). These counter-readings of digital geographies are crucial openings. Yet the theoretical status quo in critical digital geographies continues to anticipate the insufficiency of these kinds of minor (Katz, 2017) and minoritarian (Muñoz, 2019) digital praxes. As one example, Dalton and Thatcher (2022, p. 5) frame micropolitical tactics that challenge contemporary digital/data mediations as "lacking the tools with which to confront and contest structural power" and therefore unable to generate broader systemic change.

One source of this skepticism around the transformative potential of minor(itarian) digital praxes can be found in digital geography's strong reliance on Frankfurt School critiques of the structural relations between technology, media, and political economy and the ideologies that make these adverse relations seem normal, inevitable, and necessary. Oft-referenced examples include Weber's (2001) diagnosis of the mutually reinforcements of economy and technology that co-constitute the "iron cage" of capitalist modernity, Heidegger's (1977) tracing of how technologies reflect the social settlements of a particular conjuncture, and Horkheimer and Adorno's (1972) arguments that media and technology uphold social hierarchy at the intersection of consumption and calculation, circulating aesthetic politics that flatten, decontextualize, and rank individuals and social groups. These arrangements are understood to be upheld by ideological projects of governance that manufacture consent to capitalist inequalities and amplified by the thoroughgoing mediatization of societies (Habermas, 1972; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Within these formulations, the kinds of challenges that can be recognized as most consequential are those that directly mobilize collective

action to dismantle structural relations of technology, media, political economy, or the ideologies that secure them. For instance, Benjamin (2008) predicates the political significance of popular media on the basis of whether it scales up individual experience to create "an aesthetic register capable of directly invoking revolutionary action" (Dalton & Thatcher, 2022, p. 22).

These critiques of the structural relations of technology–media–society remain trenchant in this age of global social media and technocapitalist urban regimes. Yet continual recentering of these formulations has generated traditions of theory less able to apprehend the transformative potential of digital praxes that fight for more just worlds on other terms. As minoritarian feminist and queer theory have underscored, any theoretical status quo unwittingly forecloses alternative theoretical-political lines of flight by reiterating and re-centering the structures and relations of its critiques such as capitalism or white liberalism (Lawson et al., 2023). An exit from such cycles of theory, they contend, can be crafted by "reading for difference"—an intentional epistemological shift to alternative modes of critique and less-traveled theoretical frames (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Muñoz, 2019; within digital geography, see also Carraro, 2023; Cenere, 2025; Vadiati, 2022).

I argue that analytic frames originating in queer of color critique offer critical digital geographies scholarship ways to apprehend a wider range of transformative politics. I turn to Jose Esteban Muñoz's (2019) "methodology of hope," an analytic frame for theorizing hope under conditions of apparent impossibility. Muñoz crafted this approach while wrestling with the limits to subjectivity and politics for racialized queer subjects, specifically the conundrum that for those who exist outside normative categories of inclusion and power (whiteness, heterosexuality, respectability, property), claiming belonging via existing frames only fuels a re-instantiation of the terms of their exclusion and suffering. Further, the concrete asymmetries of power and resources that result from these normative relations often render overt confrontation certain to fail. From such positions of profound material and epistemic exclusion, Muñoz asks, what possibilities exist for exiting these cycles of negation?

Sustained attention to this question is the cornerstone of Muñoz's methodology of hope. He positions hope as a hermeneutic—a critical optic for apprehending the possibility of something beyond present (adverse) relations and the societal settlements that make them appear to be normal, necessary, and common sense. Further, from Ernst Bloch (1954/1995), Muñoz theorizes hope as practices of concrete utopia that envision and demonstrate ways of being and belonging that overspill the normative terms of existence in a society. Queer relationality theorizes such transgressions as generative, as manifesting possibilities for "something else, something better, something dawning…a resource for the political imagination…a flight plan for a collective political becoming" (Muñoz, 2019, p. 189; see also Cohen, 2019; Yep et al., 2022). Importantly, this emphasis on transgression of normativities situates this framework as "queer" in ways that extend its analytic reach beyond the lives of queer subjects. From these foundations, Muñoz's methodology of hope is an analytic orientation to modes of thought and action that mark and transgress accepted scripts for being and being in relation. It reads for practices of critique that call attention to the limits and harms of normativities, and practices of "anticipatory illumination" that demonstrate alternative possibilities that are unimaginable from within prevailing norms—the concrete utopias in Bloch's formulations. This approach offers lines of departure from the cycles of negation in critical analyses of minor practices by and with minoritarian subjects in digital urbanisms. It offers a way of apprehending hopeful politics on terms other than their extensibility, durability, or structural impacts and without engaging in naïve optimism that ignores structural, ideological, or material violences.

A queer methodology of hope in digital geographies requires connecting these ideas to theorizations of space and society. Here, relational theorizations of the interconnections of space, society, and digitality are fruitful, grounded yet non-determinist in their orientation. Leszczynski's (2015) writing on spatial media/tion is key, conceptualizing spatiality "as always-already mediated…the contingent, necessarily incomplete comings-together of technical presences, persons, and space/place" (p. 729). This framing elides problematic distinctions between "virtual" and "real" spaces, keeping their dynamic co-constitutive relations in view and conceives of digital-social-spatial relations in ways that do not anticipate technoscience and technocapitalist logics a priori. Spatial mediation also opens onto explicit theorizations of networked spatial technologies as media—as channels or cultural apparatus for the negotiation and circulation of sociospatial meanings. Further, theorizing geomedia as "the conjuncture of mediated and spatial dimensions of the social world" (Strandlund, 2023) offers a way of accounting for how social media and other media platforms may function as spatial technologies, as the mediatization of sociospatial content becomes consequential in the formation of lived worlds. Together, these contributions illuminate two interrelated registers through which the sociospatial impacts of geomedia unfold: by mediating space and by mediatizing content (Jansson, 2013; Leszczynski, 2015).

3. Stop the Sweeps: Fighting Encampment Removals in Seattle

I demonstrate a methodology of hope in digital geographies through an interpretive analysis of activisms by Stop the Sweeps Seattle (STSS), a local collective engaged in mutual aid to unsheltered people living in tent encampments, direct action against city-sponsored evictions of encampments, and social media tactics that document, signify, and circulate these activities to broader publics. STSS is an ideal case for illuminating the potential of Muñoz's methodology of hope, an archetypal example of the minor/itarian digital praxes that much critical geography theory has anticipated as insufficient. The group's battle against encampment evictions confronts seemingly impossible odds given the mutually-reinforcing dynamics of poverty stigma and blame, liberal governance regimes organized to prioritize and protect property and property owners, and ever-deepening computational regulation of urban life (Elwood, 2025; O'Connor, 2001; Roy, 2017).

Launched in 2021, STSS mobilizes mutual aid to encampment residents, protests evictions, and assists residents during and after evictions. They gather and distribute donated supplies to help encampment residents live as safely and comfortably as possible: Clothing, phone chargers, food, water, sunscreen, cooking equipment, coolers, propane, and books to read. They recruit volunteers to donate and distribute supplies, and help assemble safe injection and Naloxone kits. They mobilize in support of encampment residents when sweeps are expected or underway, gathering to protest and document removal, and to help residents pack and protect their belongings and find alternate shelter. STSS is not institutionalized as a formal organization and does not circulate information about the number or identities of participants, most likely because members have experienced police harassment and criminal prosecution (Oron, 2024a). Based on their self-disclosures in social media content and profiles, STSS participants include people with past or present experience of homelessness, members of other local mutual aid groups, housed members of the public, and people engaged in overlapping work in support of tenants, immigrants, and other structurally vulnerable groups. I am not a direct participant in their work.

STSS is one of many Seattle groups engaged in responding to the shelter crisis and to sweeps. The Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project and its street paper, *Real Change News*, do policy advocacy and

low-barrier employment. The Services Not Sweeps Coalition, comprised of economic and racial justice groups, testifies and protests to elected officials and members of the public. Grassroots and mutual aid groups like SHARE/WHEEL have supported self-governing community-provisioned encampments on public and private sites since the 1990s, while large nonprofits like the Low Income Housing Institute hold contracts to manage city-sanctioned tiny house villages. Groups like Facing Homelessness sponsor photojournalism, podcasts, and other outreach to housed members of the public, aiming to generate compassion through encounters with the lives and experiences of unsheltered people. Within this diverse ecosystem, STSS's approaches are most closely aligned with mutual aid and direct action—they are not seeking solutions within the structures of liberal governance such as policy or funding changes. Their social media work addresses members of the public; they eschew the sympathy and charity frames that anchor much visual and social media work around homelessness.

STSS is also engaged in narrative change around homelessness, encampments, and sweeps. They use social media platforms to mobilize allies, publicly document and critique sweeps and their impacts, and circulate counterclaims about sweeps, unsheltered people, and ways of responding to encampments. Over the past four years, STSS has created a collection of carefully choreographed Instagram posts that are sometimes co-published to other platforms (Facebook, X, TikTok). Most posts are dedicated to documenting encampment removals in Seattle through photographs and observations by STSS mutual aid volunteers present at removals. These posts are typically composed of a series of slides that follow a consistent design, aesthetic, and narrative structure: Documentary photos or video, annotations contextualizing the imagery; a city map showing sweeps carried out the previous week; and an infographic detailing how to join STSS to support encampment residents. Growing week by week, month by month, STSS has built this collection documenting sweeps in Seattle, the violence and destruction enacted in removals, and pervasive violations of statutory requirements for the protection of residents and their belongings.

This content reaches a substantial audience. At the time of writing, STSS's Instagram account had over 10,000 followers, including a mix of individual/personal accounts, Stop the Sweeps collectives in other cities, local mutual aid groups, and groups with allied politics (police abolition, immigrant aid, racial justice, anti-poverty). Platform-level metrics show rising engagement with STSS posts which further boost algorithmic circulation of this content. STSS's earliest posts garnered only a few dozen "likes" whereas more recent posts typically have several hundred likes, and an especially high-impact post generated over 1,600. STSS's content is engaged by diverse audiences in a variety of ways. Some interlocutors add context and detail in their comments, such as comments added by a former mutual aid volunteer detailing logistical barriers unsheltered people face in accessing social services. Others add emojis expressing support or enthusiasm (fire, applause hands) or emotional responses (heartbreak, crying face). Some respondents post content disagreeing with STSS's claims or reiterating stereotypes and hostility toward unsheltered people. One commentator on a post detailing the City's failure to offer shelter during sweeps asserted that unsheltered people refuse shelter because of addiction and choose not to follow shelter requirements. On a post decrying the deployment of police for sweeps, another viewer wrote, "If they would quit committing crime, we wouldn't need so many cops" (Russ, 2024). Such commentary is almost always challenged or debunked by other interlocutors. Responding to the claim about rejecting shelter offers, a commentator responded that many shelters do not accept pets, partners, or belongings. Another responded to this assumption of criminality with the comment, "Nothing is so effective for public safety as guaranteed basic income, housing, and counseling or friendly faces." (AJ, 2024). These responses are notable in their

non-inflammatory tone, calmly rejecting stereotypes and hostility with assertions that redirect the thread back toward STSS's core claims and counternarratives.

In the following section, I read these digital practices through analytic frames of a queer methodology of hope. My analysis is based upon a close reading of STSS's Instagram posts from June 2021 through December 2024, a corpus of nearly 400 posts. Close reading is a type of critical discourse analysis that involves sustained fine-grained attention to phenomena—a way of reading out from evidentiary objects to notice, describe, contextualize, and interpret their details, especially paradoxes and tensions (Lukić & Espinosa, 2012). Often used for literary or other textual analyses, I extend this approach to analysis of textual, photovisual, and cartovisual elements of STSS's social media posts and responses, and STSS's deployments of the connective and circulatory affordances of social media.

4. STSS: A Queer Methodology of Hope

A queer methodology of hope orients to modes of thought and action that mark and transgress normative scripts for being and being in relation, tracing cycles of critique and anticipatory illumination that highlight and overspill these limits. Such an analysis starts from theorizing STSS's activism in relation to the normative sociospatial arrangements they confront. STSS's refusal of sweeps and support for encampments unfolds in relation to long-held societal settlements that delimit understandings of homelessness, unsheltered people, and what should or should not be done. In the US, these cultural politics have long denigrated unsheltered people as lazy, dirty, and dangerous, framed encampments as aesthetic and material threats to the city, and blamed them wholesale for urban decline (Clawson & Trice, 2000; Johnson, 2019; Speer, 2019). Through these discursive frames, removal of encampments appears necessary, even beneficial. Additionally, the regulation of encampment removals through municipal code and digital data taps into a suite of broadly-accepted discourses about administrative and computational governance as fair, unbiased, systematic, orderly, and efficient (Elwood, 2025; Eubanks, 2018). In Seattle, encampment removals are authorized under municipal statutes that delimit criteria for removal, advance notification, offers of alternate shelter and storage of belongings, and are triggered by data on encampments submitted via municipal customer service apps (City of Seattle, 2017). Policy makers and mainstream media cite these practices as evidence that sweeps are systematically undertaken with high levels of support for encampment residents (Westneat, 2024).

STSS's social media activities circulate visual and textual representations that puncture broadly accepted understandings of homelessness, encampments, and removals. Their documentary posts about sweeps in Seattle refuse the pervasive problematization of unsheltered people that dominates public, media, and policy discourses about urban homelessness. STSS's Instagram content instead redirects this problem frame away from encampment dwellers and toward sweeps themselves. Countless images frame sweeps through symbols of physical force and institutional authority: police officers and municipal workers; police cars, contractor trucks, and heavy equipment; blue and black uniforms, orange and yellow safety vests. These images center domination and disproportionality. Photos from May 2023 removals depict seven police officers looming over a single person packing belongings from a tent (STSS, 2023a), and a row of police officers forming a human barrier while a single person carries away a small box (STSS, 2023b). Textual annotations amplify these representations: "How many cops does it take to watch while one mutual aid volunteer packs to move?" (STSS, 2023a).

STSS's social media collection thoroughly punctures the notion that sweeps are carried out in a measured way that protects encampment dwellers, their belongings, and the city itself. Posts about sweeps where STSS witnessed the action and assisted residents in documenting routine ridicule, disregard, and destruction of essential belongings. In one post, an annotated photo of a garbage truck at a site being swept reads, "The…worker directing this sweep commented, 'Nice load!' to the worker driving a truck full of residents' trashed belongings" (STSS, 2023c). In another post, residents' belongings are shown affixed on the grill of a removal contractor's truck like trophies (STSS, 2024c), with another showing a wheelchair being loaded into a truck for disposal (STSS, 2024d). STSS's re-signification of sweeps frames them not just as harms to unsheltered individuals but also as collective harms to place and publics. Multiple posts show public paths and sidewalks blocked by legions of trucks, tractors, and vehicles during sweeps, land gouged and scraped bare afterward, and public spaces filled with concrete blocks. One post records the closure of a public restroom and the destruction of a community garden in repeated sweeps in a city park (STSS, 2023d).

STSS's social media also documents repeated and ongoing violations of the claims that sweeps are orderly and conducted in accordance with the requirements of the administrative statute. Their collection records the chaos of sweeps in photos showing heaps of belongings and still-useful items abandoned after residents were forced away. Textual annotations repeatedly note minimal or no notification for residents to vacate a site and remove their belongings, and document routine violations of the municipal code that supposedly minimizes harm to encampment residents. Despite the provision for advance notification, STSS's Instagram records countless sweeps carried out while residents were at work and unable to remove their belongings. Nearly all the weekly maps of sweeps in their posts include one or more designated as a "surprise" sweep. Oron's (2024b) analysis of the City's own data confirms these claims: In 2022 and 2023, respectively, 83% and 99% of sweeps were classified as "obstructions" under the removal statute criteria, negating the requirement for advance notification. STSS reveals as fiction the claim that residents have an opportunity to move and protect their belongings. As these posts accrete and circulate over time, they evidence pervasive violation of the moral and administrative codes that supposedly minimize harm and maximize support to evicted residents, undercutting the justifications used to make this mode of urban governance broadly acceptable. In these ways, STSS's social media work publicly critiques and marks the limits of normative social and spatial settlements around encampments, sweeps, and urban governance.

Simultaneously, STSS's social media circulates representations of encampments and their residents that are unimaginable from within normative limits—the anticipatory illumination of already-existing alternatives at the heart of Muñoz's formulations. Against prevailing rhetoric and practices that treat encampment residents' dwellings as trash, STSS's posts universally script them as homes. One illustrative annotation of a photo of workers removing a tent and chiminea fireplace during a sweep reads: "Tents are homes. RVs are homes. Structures people build are homes" (STSS, 2024a). Against dominant framings of encampments and their residents as isolated, excluded, and abject, STSS's content resolutely insists that encampments are in community in collectively beneficial ways. Their posts include countless photos framed to show encampment spaces arranged for shared use such as chairs gathered around a table or tents assembled by a canopy-covered gathering space. Many photos and annotations underscore community and collectivity, such as this framing of a photo showing a beautiful mural-covered RV being towed away: "This resident…used her vehicle as a shelter and warming center for others, and kept food, Narcan and other supplies to share with her neighbors" (STSS, 2023c). Another post shows official vehicles assembled for a sweep, noting contractors had arrived to find the encampment already relocated by residents and allies:

"Community members showed up strong for people they had built relationships with and effectively helped them get as much time as they needed to move safely" (STSS, 2024b). STSS's content routinely asserts that encampment dwellers and housed residents can be good neighbors engaged in collective care of people and place—propositions that are wholly unthinkable within prevailing understandings of encampments and unsheltered people.

These representations push back against normative framings of encampments and their residents as imminently and justifiably removable, paving the way for STSS's still more transgressive claim: That collectively-supported encampments could be a legitimate mode of inhabitation. In addition to documenting sweeps, STSS also uses their social media to circulate announcements of weekly distributions ("distros") of donated food, supplies, and harm reduction kits to encampments, and invitations to join mutual aid gatherings assembling these supplies for delivery. Annotations on these photos assert that sustained relationships of active support with encampments are possible and form a foundation for collective care: "Weekly distros and showing up is community care that saves homes and lives." (STSS, 2024b). Some such posts are crafted to function as public pedagogy, explaining principles of harm reduction and mutual aid. Simultaneously, they demonstrate the existence of sociospatial relations more often understood to be impossible: Housed residents living in close proximity and interdependent relations with unsheltered neighbors, and encampments remaining in place as one element of a more life-supporting collective response to the shelter crisis. STSS's emplaced and representational practices, circulated to broad publics, mediate the city otherwise by illuminating already existing yet normatively unimaginable alternatives to the systematic state violence that sweeps policy downloads onto people, place, and community.

STSS relies upon the affordances of social media platforms to rupture a normative knowledge regime that typically allows sweeps to remain unwitnessed by most residents of the city. Encampments are more likely to coalesce and remain in less-traveled locations (Archibald, 2017), and by its very nature, a sweep is an erasure—carried out in a discrete spacetime and likely seen by few people except those directly involved. City of Seattle data on encampment removals is public, yet static and difficult to find, with after-action reports published quarterly as PDF files on a sub-page of the Department of Human Services website. STSS's systematic documentation of sweeps through social media platforms breaks open these dynamics of concealment. Digital representation of a sweep makes it witnessable beyond its specific spacetime and using a social media platform for this digitization renders the collection more knowable to broad publics, creating a timely and public record of these actions. This digitally mediated witnessing is an essential tactic in STSS's efforts to recondition public knowledge about sweeps, encampments, unsheltered people, and possible responses to them.

By mediatizing their content, STSS also renders it dynamic and circulatable, opening possibilities for creative tactics that expand and diversify potential witnesses and alliances. STSS routinely uses hashtags to amplify their critiques and push their content to diverse audiences who are not actively seeking content on homelessness, encampments, or removals. For instance, when Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell's administration resumed encampment removals after a moratorium during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, STSS began applying the hashtag #bruceharrell to posts documenting sweeps. This move connected the violence of sweeps to Harrell's administration while also ensuring that their content would appear in the feed of any Instagram user following or searching on this hashtag, presumably including supporters of Harrell. STSS's interlocutors and allies on Instagram adopted the hashtag in their comments and crosspostings, driving

further circulations. In a related example of such hashtag hacking, when STSS noticed an increase in removals prior to Major League Baseball's 2023 All-Star Weekend in Seattle, they began hashtagging these posts with #MLB and #SeattleMariners. These tactics rupture the social media echo chamber, cuing algorithmic circulations to audiences seeking wholly different content and likely not mobilized around homelessness or sweeps. In these examples, STSS marries their deep knowledge of local actors and events to basic tools for shaping content circulation in the social mediaverse in order to catalyze public witness of sweeps by heterodox audiences.

STSS also uses hashtags to interconnect their activities and political philosophies with closely allied movements. Some hashtags forge connections among local allies and causes, such as their use of #withoutshelterpeopledie, a slogan repeatedly used in protests, memorial events, and policy campaigns around the shelter crisis in Seattle. Deployed as a hashtag, #withoutshelterpeopledie connects these diverse micro-mobilizations to one another with minimal demand on scarce resources and renders them knowable as a broader collective force. Beyond locality, the broad application of #stopthesweeps to posts and reposts by Stop the Sweeps collectives across the US (and a few in Canada) has consolidated this shared mobilizing frame and makes the activities, politics, and digital content of these collectives broadly knowable to one another and to broader publics. When STSS tags its posts with #mutualaid and #wekeepussafe, they signal the philosophies and movements that inform their activism (mutual aid, de-policing, prison abolition), and render their content findable through these frames. All these mediatization tactics are technically simple, yet they interconnect and circulate shared frames and politics in meaningful ways. These circulations testify to the existence of a diverse and wide-reaching ecosystem of cross-resonant justice groups already doing things that popular and media discourses routinely reject as impossible, too small, too radical, and doomed to fail. In so doing, they interrupt the limits of public imagination by circulating normatively unthinkable possibilities for urban inhabitations, politics, and futures, an anticipatory illumination of "hope in the face of heartbreak" (Muñoz, 2019, p. 207).

5. Conclusion

Orienting to STSS's anti-sweeps activism through a queer methodology of hope illuminates interrelated mediations and mediatizations of urban inhabitations that interrupt broadly held sociospatial and political settlements around homelessness in US cities. A close reading of these "microdetails of possibility" (Villarejo, 2014) opens fresh insights into the significance and workings of digital sociospatial practices that prevailing lines of theory in critical digital geography have too often anticipated as insufficient. STSS's social media work is anchored around a generative cycle of critique and creation that challenges the taken-for-granted framings that make the expulsion of impoverished people seem reasonable and necessary and justify encampment removal policies, while also demonstrating alternatives for provisioning, safety, and living as well as possible in place. Digital mediation and mediatization of these politics are essential to their efforts to recondition public imagination around encampments. By documenting and reframing sweeps in social media, STSS builds public witness in ways that interrupt spatiotemporal dynamics that typically obscure encampments and sweeps from a broad view. They rely upon simple circulatory tools of social media to make their content dynamic—pushing it to unexpected audiences, amplifying their critiques, and forging interconnections with allied justice work near and far.

STSS countermediates the city through critique and revelation of the failed scripts that frame sweeps, and by circulating concrete possibilities for sociospatial relations that transgress received wisdom about homelessness, encampments, and urban futures. Orienting to this case through a queer methodology of hope lays plain how such interventions into normative societal imaginations are consequential in making and remaking the city, revealing radical claims to the urban present and future that elude pacification and de-politicization. More broadly, my analysis demonstrates how queer methodologies of hope offer ways to wrestle productively with digital geographies at the intersection of the pragmatic and the prophetic—an honest reckoning with limits and violence of what is, and a sustained epistemological commitment to apprehending the enduring presence of seeds of future freedoms.

Reading these digital activisms for their sociospatial mediations and mediatizations draws on conceptual resources from the overlapping terrains of digital geography and geomedia studies. Attending to digital representational practices as mediation accounts for them as consequential in making and remaking space and society, while attending to their mediatization accounts for multiple mechanisms through which these transformations occur—as interventions into cultural politics through mass media and through tactical deployments of the circulatory and connective capabilities of particular platforms. These formulations help account for how sociospatial change can be wrought through the representational, circulatory, and connective affordances of social media as a locus for intervening into the collective imagination and societal settlements of a particular conjuncture and catalyzing collective desires for other futures. Thinking at the intersection of mediation and mediatization in these ways also highlights an ongoing contribution of geomedia studies: Its generative expansion in understandings of "geographic" technologies. Much digital geographies scholarship remains strongly referential to its roots in GIScience, centering digital technologies with geolocative, cartovisual, or geotagging capabilities. Geomedia studies also considers the representational and communicative affordances of these types of geotechnologies, but from its inception has traced how media platforms that do not have these affordances also produce space and sociospatial relations in consequential ways. Said more simply, the "geo" in geomedia studies has a wider remit, expanding the kinds of digital-spatial apparatuses considered as "geographic" in digital geographies scholarship. My article demonstrates the kinds of analysis and insights that are opened up by cultivating conceptual interchange across these two sub-fields.

Finally, I will emphasize that my argument for queer methodologies of hope in digital geographies is additive, not a call to supplant longstanding conceptual vocabularies theorizing structures and ideologies that produce domination, dispossession, and unjust enrichments through digital technologies and logics. These theoretical-epistemological paths remain trenchant. Yet because the continual reiteration of these frames forecloses other possibilities, embracing alternative modes of criticality is urgent. Queer relationality is rooted in an epistemological-political commitment to apprehending possibility under conditions of impossibility, offering a powerful foundation for challenging the epistemological skepticism characterizing many prior encounters with hope. Methodologies of hope elucidate the world-making potential of politics that transgress normative delimitations of what can be, be known, and be created. Across the breadth of critical scholarship on digital geographies, a queer relational turn stands to illuminate hopeful politics that realize concrete possibilities for more solidaristic urban inhabitations, and in so doing, prefigure radically different futures.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

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ARTICLE

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Manifesto for Our Times: Theorising and Demonstrating "Affective Bridges" for Intersectional Feminist Coalitions

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Abstract

The article proposes the theoretical concept of "affective bridges" to describe "affective connection," "solidarity practice," or "political articulation" that elevates intersectionality within feminist and trans activisms in Turkey through its three elements: experience, movement, and discourse/action. It explores the emergence of affective bridges for bodily autonomy, against femicides and gender-based violence, as well as against the specific anti-gender backlash conditions created by anti-gender networked authoritarianism in Turkey. Turkey was chosen for the case study to build, establish, and demonstrate this concept, but the concept is intended to be applicable transnationally, particularly in countries where global political events have local ramifications and where such forms of intersectional solidarity, coalitions, and collaboration are needed.

Keywords

affective bridges; bodily autonomy; digital feminist activism; femicide; gender-based violence; intersectional feminist solidarity; performative theory of assembly; right to appear; space of appearance

1. Introduction

There is currently an escalating transnational anti-gender backlash, along with the existence of transnational trans-exclusionary discourses by right-wing actors (e.g., US President Trump, Turkish President Erdoğan, and Russian President Putin), trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs; see the UK and Turkey), and a post-truth scenario with rising levels of disinformation (Asardag & Donders, 2021). In the face of these current realities, by seeking to comprehend the polyvocal public sphere, recent research demonstrates how queer and feminist issues are endorsed in digital spaces and how diverse actors are offered a new arena to "speak up and talk back"

while building resistance transnationally (Sorce & Thomas, 2025, p. 5; see also Baer, 2016; Bayramoğlu, 2025; Fuentes, 2019; Mukherjee et al., 2023; Olson, 2016; Pain, 2020; Puente, 2025; Rentschler, 2017; Şener, 2021; Williams, 2016). Understood from bell hooks's perspective, when performed in a public setting, speaking up holds performative power as it invites co-witnessing and sharing in dissent through solidarity (Puente, 2025; Sorce & Thomas, 2025). However, this comprehension of "witnessing" and "co-witnessing" can still point to more individual, individualised, and passive understandings of solidarity transnationally. Relatedly, despite the immense potential offered by digital platforms for feminist debates and activism (Chamberlain, 2016; Munroe, 2013; Rivers, 2017), academic research has shown that digital feminist activism may not have contributed to intersectionality as expected. For example, feminist scholars have asked why a movement such as #MeToo in the West has had an impact only when wealthy and often white cis women joined the movement, excluding trans women of colour or gender non-conforming people and indigenous women, when the issues of violence and assault have long been key struggles in feminist, women of colour, and trans activism(s) (Koivunen et al., 2018, p. 3).

In the context of authoritarian Turkey, previous studies have demonstrated how intersectional feminists establish strong solidarity networks online especially against femicides, violence against women, and anti-gender narratives (Büyükgöze, 2025; Eslen-Ziya, 2013; Şener, 2021; Yüce & Çatalbaş, 2023). However, recent research suggests that feminist activists need to more specifically consider the existence of the anti-gender movement in Turkey (Eslen-Ziya, 2022; Eslen-Ziya & Bjørnholt, 2023; Özbay & Ipekci, 2024; Özkazanç, 2019, 2020; Ural & Eslen-Ziya, 2024), especially the conditions created by the anti-gender networked authoritarianism (Asardag, in press) that emerges under the themes of: political repression, state violence, and criminalisation of dissent; economic precarity, intersectionality, and systemic exclusion; rising levels of online misogyny, trolls, and disinformation; algorithmic invisibility and moral regulation; individualising tendencies within feminism; and the affective condition of impasse. This recent research highlights that, in addition to fighting against the rising numbers of femicides and gender-based violence, intersectional feminists must also consider fighting against the anti-gender backlash, especially against gender-critical Islamic actors, male violence, institutions, policies, and discourses but also gender-critical Islamic feminists, TERFs, and the rising levels of oppression, criminalisation of dissent, misogyny, disinformation, surveillance, and moral regulation in Turkey (Asardag, in press).

Taking the aforementioned realities into account, how can new forms of alliances be established within transnational feminist activism and action? Although the feminist movement in Turkey is already intersectional, renewed efforts and affective bridges between the feminist and trans movements are needed to keep the solidarity engaging and alive. According to Braidotti (2019), "affirmative ethics"—"the pursuit of affirmative values and relations" (Braidotti, 2022, p. 9)—is also needed to enact a collective political praxis of hope, compassion, and transformation. Articulations of feminist digital geographies of hope against fear and hatred can emerge beyond the online–offline division through affective bridges. This article is an original contribution to the *Digital Geographies of Hope* thematic issue, as the affective bridges concept seeks to illustrate how "affective connections," "solidarity practices," and "political articulations" between the feminist and trans movements foster mutual opening, enabling participants to attune to one another's bodies, experiences, and emotions. This enhances feminist intersectionality and further leads to hopeful, compassionate forms of digital feminist activism in Turkey. My positionality as a pansexual intersectional feminist and LGBTIQ+ rights activist has enabled me to develop an in-depth understanding of the research context, to gain access to the field, and to form trusted relations with the research participants (Ghaffari,

2019). At the same time, however, it requires critical reflection and the ability to maintain a critical distance in the interpretative analysis. Since I am located in Finland, my positionality also provides an outsider status that can make it easier for some of the participants, particularly in restricted contexts, to confide in me and share their experiences, as argued by Bukamal (2022). Thus, my positionality becomes relevant in different stages of the research in different ways and requires reflexivity along the way.

In the affective bridges concept, "affect" is understood as a form of intensity and drive that can create a subjectively felt bridge for personal transformation that also brings people together in "spaces of appearance" (Butler, 2015) beyond the online–offline division to exercise their "right to appear" through words, discourses, and actions. Hence, the affective bridges concept has three elements: experience (intensity and drive), movement (human and non-human), and discourse/action.

Section 2 elaborates on the affective bridges concept which brings together the performative theory of assembly and space of appearance (Butler, 2015) as well as affect theory on material and discursive levels (Ahmed, 2004a; Deleuze & Guattari, 2013). After this, the methodology is presented, followed by an empirical analysis of two spaces of appearance (Butler, 2015) for affective intersectional feminist solidarity through the lens of affective bridges.

2. Conceptualising Affective Bridges

2.1. Performative Theory of Assembly and Space of Appearance

To conceptualise affective bridges and to comprehend how they materialise in digital platforms' spaces of appearance, I refer to Judith Butler (2015). Comprehending bodies as plural forms of performative action, Butler (2015) argues that precarity—"the politically induced situation in which certain populations suffer more from failing social and economic networks of support [and] become differentially exposed to injury, violence[,] and death" (p. 33)—has been a galvanising force in today's highly visible protests. For her, precarity gathers together women, queers, and transgender people, among other marginalised people. The feminist movement and trans liberation should not be construed as different from each other but as accompanying, enriching, and feeding into each other.

Bringing together performativity and precarity theories, Butler (2015, pp. 27–28) suggests how we can consider the right to appear as a coalitional framework that would merge gender and sexual minorities with more generally precarious populations. She extends performativity theory beyond speech acts to include the concerted actions of the body and connects assembly with precarity by pointing out that a body suffering under conditions of precarity still persists and resists, and that mobilisation tends to generate these two corporeal dimensions. While the public assemblies make the bodies that require basic freedoms of movement visible, these assemblies also expose coercive practices in prison, the dismantling of social democracy, and the continued demand for authorizing marginalized lives as "mattering" (Butler, 2015). Assembly, for Butler (2015), is the potential to appear and to embrace the right to appear.

Butler's (2015, p. 77) "public assembly of bodies" draws on Hannah Arendt's reconceptualisation of the political as the space of appearance where the political is grounded in the public and the public is comprehended as the in-between that brings the political into being. As argued by Butler, referring to Arendt (1998), to be truly

political, the space of appearance (polis, the square) must include engagements/participations other than those specifically directed towards political action, such as speeches on public squares (Nikunen, 2018, p. 5).

Butler (2015) utilises the concept of the space of appearance to describe the conditions needed for political articulation/action, visibility, and recognition. For her, the spaces of appearance are the public spaces—in our case, the spaces beyond the online–offline division—where individuals assemble together through their discourses and actions to establish their realities and subjectivities while claiming their rights and lives. Butler (2015) expands this by analysing how these spaces are constituted by the bodies of those who assemble, their material needs, and their continuous struggle for their right to be recognised as part of the political community. The right to appear, on the other hand, points towards the individual and collective political claim(s) to visibility and existence made by individuals and groups, particularly marginalised ones, through public assemblies. It is a performative act that focuses on individuals' and groups' right to be seen and recognised by challenging established political and social norms that hinder who is considered human and worthy of rights.

What are the contributions of spaces of appearance and the right to appear? The notion of a space of appearance provides a conceptual language with which to describe the inter-corporeal dimensions of political assembly. Moreover, the performative theory of assembly and the space of appearance contribute to the affective bridges concept, especially through the right to appear under extreme precarity and authoritarian conditions.

Every affective bridge formation can be materialised—that is, enabled through a space of appearance beyond the online–offline division. This is where, starting from individuals, collectives exercise their right to appear through words, discourses, and actions, and assemble with the most marginalised others to assist them in exercising their right to appear. Under everyday authoritarian conditions (e.g., political repression, state violence, and criminalisation of dissent), such as those in Turkey, feminists and LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer or questioning; the plus sign signifies other identities not openly listed [Equality Project]) activists can be labelled as criminals and terrorists both due to their everyday street appearance as well as their online presence. For example, women's and transgender people's right to appear against femicides and gender-based violence and to affirm their bodily autonomy through words, discourses, and actions in digital platforms' spaces of appearance can become intrinsically linked with every other struggle to appear online and beyond the online–offline division without violence. To further conceptualise affective bridges and comprehend how affect as intensity and drive invigorates this form of feminist activism, affect must be comprehended on the material and discursive levels.

2.2. Affect on the Material and Discursive Levels

The second dimension that appears relevant for the affective bridges concept is connected to the way affect can affirmatively operate across the material and discursive levels for intersectional feminist activism by creatively combining different theoretical understandings of it, such as Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) non-representational comprehension of it as intensity and becoming, and Ahmed's (2004a) discursive, experience-based, and socially constructed comprehension of it. Deleuze and Guattari (1994, pp. 169, 173–174) define affect as an excessive range of connections. Notably, this understanding of affect (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), in emphasising the body's ability to affect and be affected, removes boundaries between

humans and other animals, between objects and subjects, and between nature and culture, and shifts the attention to the mobility and flow of the body's current and possible states (Wetherell, 2012, p. 75). In other words, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) comprehend the body as a continuously flowing process of simultaneous messages and stimuli that has no clear boundaries, only porous interfaces. This porous body can form countless assemblages with any other body, forming an affective assemblage exchanging actions and passions.

However, affect is not only a subjectively felt intensity, drive, and consequent bridge to the other that creates an experience but is also discursively expressed, represented, circulated, and mediated, as well as it "sticks" (Ahmed, 2004a). Ahmed (2004b, p. 119) argues that through discursive means, emotions "do things" and align individuals with communities through the intensity of their attachments. This approach conceives emotions as relational and shaped through contact with objects by evoking the phenomenological notion of experience as "lived conjunction" (Ahmed, 2004a, pp. 4, 6–7; Koivunen, 2010, p. 14). Accordingly, it is through emotions and how we respond to objects and others that surfaces or boundaries are established; the "I" and "we" are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others (Ahmed, 2004a, pp. 8–10; Koivunen, 2010, p. 14). In this sense, emotions become a site of embodied meaning-making and social ordering, a process through which boundaries of communities are articulated and re-articulated (Koivunen, 2010, p. 14). According to Ahmed (2004a), knowledge is intimately connected with what leads us to sweat, shudder, and tremble, feelings sensed on the bodily skin surface, where we touch and are touched by the world. Thus, it is important to reflect on the building up and stickiness of emotions such as anger, rage, sadness, and cynicism, and their transformative potential into hope, joy, desire, and drive through affective bridges. Affect, understood in this way, can then align bodies and carry transformative potential in a feminist political struggle.

3. Methodology

The empirical material of this article includes two case studies of intersectional feminist activism. Although these two cases refer back to activism in 2021 and 2022, they were pivotal moments of activism that are still prominent today. Inspired by Markham's (2018) comprehension of ethnography in the digital era, the feminist assemblage ethnography adopted in this article involves: reminiscing core events; digital auto-activism archives as entry points; screenshots/captures of activist moments; and saving, tracing, scrolling, following, and in-depth reading of and reflection on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) posts and conducting interviews.

Through auto-ethnography (Markham, 2018, p. 1146) and self-reflection exercises, obtaining nuanced layers of meaning about how people experience everyday life in digitally saturated social contexts is possible. As auto-ethnography (Markham, 2018, p. 1146) offered an entry point to this feminist assemblage ethnography, I collected screenshots of my March 7–13, 2021, digital activism archives (also part of my mental notes) in my Instagram account. The first case study concerned #SiziBırakmayacağız hashtag research data that involved building affective bridges through intersectional feminist solidarity with Kurdish trans women. The data were collected from March 7, 2021, using the search term "#SiziBırakmayacağız." Overall, 145 posts that used this hashtag were identified, and 10 typical posts on March 7 were selected and saved on Instagram for in-depth reading and observation, after which screenshots of them were taken.

Small-data approaches relying primarily on qualitative analysis offer "a granularity of detail that might otherwise be lost in large-scale data visualisations that value the quantitative over the qualitative" (Losh, 2015, p. 1650; see also Laestadius, 2017). Thus, both in the first and second spaces of appearance, a small sample size was intentionally selected. The data collected for the second case were related to the March 5–8, 2022 Women's Day March from the public X account of a TERF group (anonymised). In this second case, after identifying the visible TERF group, I scrolled through their X account and identified their posts related to their involvement in the March 8 Women's Day March. This process brought me to other videos and posts in which this TERF group could be seen as having been repudiated by intersectional feminists. These data were obtained through virtual ethnography and participant observation of the two cases on social media (Hines, 2015).

I also carried out nine interviews in July–September 2023 with grassroots feminist activists or female nongovernmental organisation workers, as well as journalists and lawyers whose work included feminist and LGBTIQ+ individuals or whose daily practices involved some forms of feminist online/offline activism. The interviewees' affiliations were as follows: Cinsel Şiddetle Mücadele Derneği (Association for Struggle Against Sexual Violence), Mental Clitoris Podcast, BIANET platform (an independent news agency based in Beyoğlu, Istanbul), Kırmızı Şemsiye Cinsel Sağlık ve İnsan Hakları Derneği (Red Umbrella Sexual Health and Human Rights Association), 17 Mayıs Derneği (May 17 Association), Pembe Hayat LGBTİ+ Dayanışma Derneği (Pink Life LGBTI+ Solidarity Association), Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı (Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation), Feminist Movement in Turkey, LGBTI Equal Rights Association for Western Balkans and Turkey, Velvele.net (an LGBTIQ+ media collective), 8 Mart Feminist Gece Yürüyüşü (8th March Feminist Night March), Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu (We Will Stop Femicides Platform), and Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi (Women's Initiative for Peace). The interviewees were selected through a mixture of snowballing and online observation (mainly on Instagram and X). Each interview included about 10 open-ended questions and lasted approximately an hour. In the interviews, I inquired about the perceived role and purposes of social media platforms and the interviewees' perceptions about affect and intersectionality in digital feminist activism. The interview data were later analysed through thematic content analysis (Anderson, 2007). The interview participants and their positions can be observed in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewees and their positions.

Interview Participant	Job Position
Interviewee 1	Journalist, activist, podcast producer
Interviewee 2	Journalist, editor, activist
Interviewee 3	Human resources expert, feminist (but does not define herself as an activist)
Interviewee 4	Individual trans activist, international relations coordinator
Interviewee 5	Activist
Interviewee 6	Activist, consultant for civil society groups, editor
Interviewee 7	Sociologist, independent activist
Interviewee 8	Lawyer, social media coordinator
Interviewee 9	Journalist

Although the data sample (both Instagram and X activism posts and interviews) was small, primarily focused on intersectional feminist activism arising from big cities such as Istanbul and Ankara, and not representative of the whole of Turkey, the approach used allowed for a deep, qualitative engagement with key activist

moments and the interviewees' multi-layered experiences and perceptions. Moreover, although auto-ethnographic encounters are important, they cannot be generalised.

Due to privacy and surveillance concerns regarding Turkey's authoritarian conditions, I sent an information sheet about the research's purposes and content to the interviewees, and all the interviewees cited in this article signed consent forms approving their participation in the study. In addition to interviewees, I also obtained my contact/friend's consent for publishing her name as part of the auto-ethnography. However, during the study, I took into account the ethical guidelines provided by AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers; franzke et al., 2020) to reduce harm to the research participants and anyone else whose full names and pictures might appear in the article as part of the research data. Due to my research being politically sensitive as it involved women activists,' minorities,' and LGBTIQ+ communities' accounts, the account names and handles reflecting private names were anonymised. These sensitive data were stored securely in the university repository, and only my primary supervisor and I had access to them.

4. Imagining and Comprehending Affective Bridges

4.1. Space of Appearance One: Affective Bridges with Kurdish Trans Women Through #SiziBırakmayacağız (#WeWillNotLeaveYou)

The first space of appearance concerned the analysis of the #SiziBırakmayacağız hashtag which involved intersectional feminist activism and solidarity with Kurdish trans women. After Kurdish trans women were brutally detained by the police, the #SiziBırakmayacağız hashtag appeared on Instagram. Feminist and LGBTIQ+ activists started sharing Instagram posts with this hashtag, elevating the importance of intersectionality, solidarity, and togetherness against the patriarchal state structure and violence beyond the online–offline division. In a multi-layered and multidimensional country such as Turkey, where there are many disparities with regard to, for example, the socioeconomic situation, ethnic identity, class, sexual orientation, and political opinions, social media—according to the interviewees—became a great tool for *revealing data* and stories about women and LGBTIQ+ people across all these differences and distinctions while creating *visibility*. Interviewee 4, a trans feminist activist, stated the following:

> I think digital platforms are effective, especially in terms of political organisation. Beyond being physically organised, they also help the stories and problems experienced by different women and *lubunya* [queer] from Hakkari to Tekirdağ, from Ordu to Antakya Samandağ, to become accessible, heard, communicated, and publicised. Using hashtags is a good strategy; you can at least capture everything falling under them as data. They also provide visibility. If they get interactions and are planned correctly, they can help an issue become visible instantly, for an hour, two hours….

Moreover, according to Interviewee 1, a feminist activist and journalist, digital platforms clearly have a role in "political organisation" and can sometimes be regarded as a last resort when it comes to justice seeking in Turkey, while allowing for self-transformation:

> I think social media is very effective in organising any kind of action—digital or street action—or for other rights-based political motives. While there are so many restrictions due to censorship in Turkey, it has become very common to bring visibility through social media, to convey a demand for rights, and

> to use social media as a tool in this search for justice, which is a distant dream. For some, social media can assassinate one's reputation, but for others, fighting for justice is their last option. We also use social media to create new words, change, and transform.

By embodying the aforementioned non-human agency, feminist activism and solidarity online, especially in the form of hashtags, act as spaces of appearance for materialising hopeful formations of affective bridges in discursive and material means.

To illustrate the foregoing, in the annual March 8 march organised in Istanbul, trans women were brutally detained by the police. Not being attuned to the struggle of trans women within the intersectional feminist movement in Turkey and around the world in previous years, that year, I remember sharing KAOS GL's post with the hashtag #SiziBırakmayacağız (#WeWillNotLeaveYou), as well as KAOS GL's post showing two banners from the march saying "trans rights are human rights!" and "you go crazy; I will live no matter what!" Not only did I engage in that year's feminist march beyond the online–offline division, but my previous affective connection and encounter with a transgender friend of mine online, which transformed me, also led to an affective connection or bridge to other transgender people within the feminist movement in Turkey for allyship without any previous personal experiences and connections with them.

Thus, social media activism also creates "remembrance and data memorialization" through digital archives. Interviewee 6, an editor and feminist activist, shared the following: "I think digital platforms are very important. We are going through a particularly difficult period in Turkey. During such times, keeping memory is very important, especially as it creates a permanent resource."

As digital archives and remembrance are important components of digital feminist activism, auto-archival, auto-ethnographical, and auto-activist memories can also act as openings for entering the field, as mentioned earlier (Markham, 2018), for starting the feminist assemblage ethnography. Reminiscing and resurrecting personal memories through feminist reflexivity can assist in comprehending, internalising, and demonstrating such forms of online feminist activism as first instances of affective bridges and as "echoes of experience" (Nikunen, 2023). It was spring 2020 when I met for the first time, coincidentally on Instagram, a transgender friend of mine who worked as a cultural consultant for the Netflix mini-series *Unorthodox* (about a young ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman who flees her arranged marriage and religious community to start a new life abroad), which I watched during the Covid-19 lockdown. Before that year, I considered myself an intersectional feminist, but transgender rights had never been a focal point of concern for me as a feminist researcher/activist. We followed each other on Instagram through stories and posts, and we met a few times through the Instagram video function because she lives in New York. After a while, she came out as transgender on her Instagram account and started identifying with the pronoun she/her. She invited me to an Instagram live session while taking her hormone pills, reciting a Jewish blessing, and celebrating the sixth month since her transition. Since that day, I have been reading the stories she shared on her Instagram account and have learnt much about transgender issues and the injustice experienced by trans people, especially trans women.

As I was open to the experiences of another woman, in which I was invited to participate, I realised the brutal injustices she had been exposed to, which I had not. Thus, an affective bridge emerged between us, beyond online and offline. Not only did I participate in an Instagram live session that she initiated, but an affective

bridge also materialised between us through Instagram's spaces of appearance when I commented on her posts, engaged with and participated in her stories, and shared stories supporting her journey of becoming. This case is an example of the ways in which these participations and interactions imbued with drive and intensity can have a transformative effect on a person. What starts as anger and rage over the injustices one has experienced can transform into hopeful and joyful solidarities. Taking into account three dimensions of affective bridges, what started as an affective bridge (as experience) by participating in the life experiences of another transgender woman (my friend), created a movement towards other transgender people, and led to trans-inclusive intersectional feminist discourses and actions in the spaces of appearance of digital platforms (as can be seen from examples above). So this case shows how the three dimensions of experience (intensity), movement, and discourse operate in digital space to create a connection and a drive towards transgender people, trans women especially, and their cause.

Interviewee 3 made the following compelling argument about the importance of affect and emotions in queer/feminist politics and activism:

> Our body is the area of struggle. We see emotions as deriving from that body and against rationality. Our education has been in that direction since primary school, and this is what society imposes on us. However, a body politic cannot be made without emotions. When women and LGBTIQ+ people show their anger, they are always thought of as marginal and incredibly shameful….These discussions allowed me to take ownership of my anger and make peace with it. I feel anger over a very serious injustice, and this is quite normal. This also makes one more confident when one does politics on the street; it transforms feminist activism's production and articulation.

The above interview quote demonstrates how affect operates as a drive to invigorate solidarity but also transforms anger and rage into hope. Affect, in affective bridges, accommodates and leads to the desire, drive, and move to transform the affective dissonance experience of anger, rage, sadness, cynicism, and despair into emotions such as hope through emergence.

In the March 8 Women's Day rally organised on March 6 at the Kadiköy Pier in Istanbul, the police did not allow rainbow flags or umbrellas to be brought into the protest area. A group of trans+ activists/protesters who attended the rally were brutally attacked by the police. Five Kurdish trans women and LGBTIQ+ activists, who were detained while being beaten, were fined TL 3,500, based on Public Hygiene Law No. 1593. One of the activists, Güneș, recounted their experience in a news article:

> When we first entered the area with our banners and slogans, we stated that we would enter with a group of trans+ people, and the police told our friends, "They cannot enter with this banner." A few of my feminist friends said, "They will not let you in, but we will be with you. We will resist; we will fight." As we entered the area with slogans, the police started to directly attack our banner and us. (Karakuș & Karakuș, 2022)

Ağrın, an activist, also stated:

> At the rally stage, we wanted to reveal the violence we had been experiencing, but the women who formed a circle didn't allow us to do this. So, the two opposing groups both consisted of women.

> I think that whatever those women's reason was for barring us from revealing the violence we had been experiencing, no one among them, despite their being cis, trans, bisexual, or lesbian, had ever experienced the violence that we Kurdish trans women had experienced. Thus, the problem is not just about being trans, but it is also related to Kurdish identity. Thus, I feel the need to ask why we were not allowed to deliver a better speech on the stage. (Karakuş & Karakuş, 2022)

The instance recounted above is a living testimony to the brutal state and police violence in Turkey, depriving the most marginalised people of bodily autonomy and freedom of speech, criminalising dissent, and the divisions created between some feminists and trans people. After the brutal March 8, 2021, feminist march incident, the hashtag #SiziBırakmayacağız became visible through the spaces of appearance on social media (Butler, 2015, p. 55). In this way, feminist activists were able to establish and materialise affective connections or bridges through intersectional feminist solidarity by sharing words, images, and hashtags in the spaces of appearance on Instagram.

The Instagram post of a university women+ community (anonymised) shown in Figure 1 features the trans women whose detention spurred the creation of #SiziBırakmayacağız with the colours purple (the colour of the feminist movement) and blue and pink (the transgender flag colours).

Figure 1. Screenshot of a #SiziBırakmayacağız hashtag post endorsing intersectional feminist struggle against patriarchal state structure. Note: Translation of the second part of the of the post—"Against the fascist, homophobic, patriarchal state, we are together. Detentions and arrests will not wither our colours. We will take our friends; you can drown in hate!"

With the hashtag #SiziBırakmayacağız (both as a usual hashtag and as appearing in the image), and as discursively materialised in the caption of the aforementioned post, with words such as "we," "togetherness,"

"solidarity," and "variety of colours," affective connections or bridges among the people in the feminist movement are elevated against the hatred of the fascist, homophobic, patriarchal state of Turkey.

Shown in Figure 2 is another post by another university women+ community (anonymised) with the motto "women are rebelling from lecture halls to the streets!" and with the same visuals presented.

Figure 2. Screenshot of a #SiziBırakmayacağız hashtag post elevating togetherness and intersectionality. Note: Translation of the second part of the post—"We will not give up defending the rainbow and our lives. You will get used to it!"

In the aforementioned post, affective bridges materialised discursively through the word "rainbow," symbolising the LGBTIQ+ community, and the community members were elevated by their defence of intersectionality, solidarity, inclusivity, multiplicity, love, and life, depicted in all shades of the community's colours.

Moreover, according to an independent feminist network/organisation (anonymised), as can be read in Figure 3, just hours before the March 6 event organised by 8th March Women's Platform, the police told the action committee, "We're opening the area for you, but there should be nothing related to LGBTIQ." However, hundreds of women who came to the meeting replied, "We won't disappear when we're told that there will be no LGBTIQs," and they marched from various parts of Kadıköy. Throughout the march and at all the entrances to the area, women fought tirelessly for every coloured banner, umbrella, and piece of clothing. Thanks to their solidarity and determination, all the colours of the rainbow were able to enter the area, and trans people exposed the police violence against them that continued all day long.

So in this other important post related to the same event, the same independent feminist network (anonymised) shared an important manifesto-like activist statement (see Figure 3).

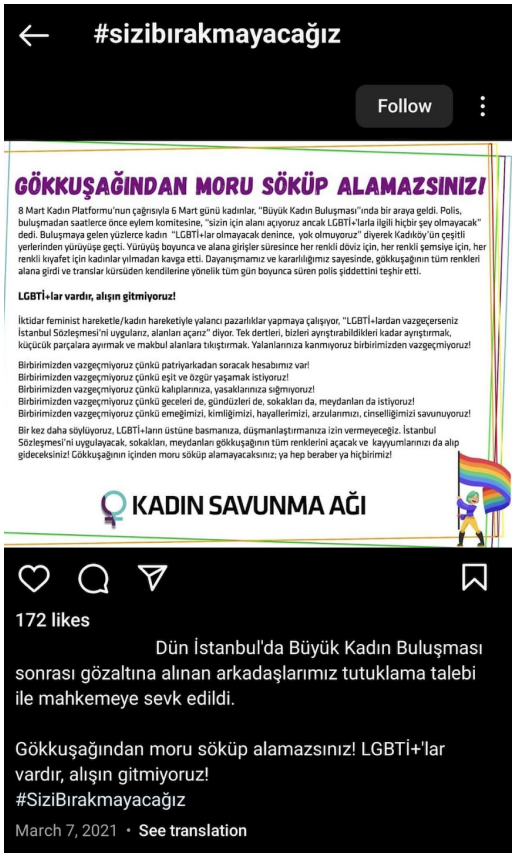

Figure 3. Screenshot of #SiziBırakmayacağız hashtag post articulating intersectional feminist manifesto-like statements. Note: Partial translation—"The government is trying to strike false negotiations with the feminist/women's movement. They say that if we give up on LGBTIQ people, they will implement the Istanbul Convention and open up the spaces. Their only concern is to separate us as much as they can, to divide us into small pieces and cram us into acceptable spaces. We are not fooled by your lies, we are not giving up on each other."

In the aforementioned section of the post, the feminist network built affective bridges with LGBTIQ people by criticising the government's anti-gender backlash and attempts to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention by posing LGBTIQ+ people as scapegoats, as well as the government's attempts at creating division, separation, and discrimination within the feminist movement and against LGBTIQ+ people, especially transgender people. They also implicitly criticised the government's public morality arguments by pointing out that the government was trying to squeeze women and LGBTIQ+ into "acceptable spaces."

The aforementioned feminist network also said:

> We don't fall for your lies; we don't give up on each other!
>
> We don't give up on each other because we have something to ask from the patriarchy!

> We don't give up on each other because we want to live equally and freely!
>
> We don't give up on each other because we don't fit into your moulds and prohibitions!
>
> We don't give up on each other because we want the streets and squares day and night!
>
> We don't give up on each other because we defend our labor, our identity, our dreams, our desires, and our sexuality!

In response to an environment of distorted notions of truth and anti-gender backlash, affective bridges were formed among women as they used the pronoun "we" and said, "We don't fall for your lies; we don't give up on each other." The pronoun "we" materialised the affective bridge in the post because it signified togetherness, intersectionality, and inclusivity, and referred to women and LGBTIQ+.

The aforementioned post also stated:

> We say it once more. We won't allow you to step on LGBTIQ+ people and turn them into enemies. You will implement the Istanbul Convention, open the streets and squares to all the colours of the rainbow, and take your *kayyums* and leave. You won't be able to take the purple out of the rainbow—either all of us or none of us!

In the statement above, the words "all the colours of the rainbow" again materialise affective bridges, solidarity, and togetherness because purple (the feminist movement's colour) cannot be separated from the other colours of the rainbow (LGBTIQ+). The metaphoric alignment of colours is followed by solidarity in relation to the Istanbul Convention, which is expected to be implemented for the benefit not only of women but also of LGBTIQ+.

The aforementioned examples illustrate how affect is not only a subjectively felt intensity, drive, or dissonance that results in an experience of personal transformation and bearing witness (experience as feeling for someone) but also a consequent drive or move in the form of emergence, a bridge to others, and is also discursively expressed, circulated, and mediated (Ahmed, 2004a). As in the case of the #SiziBırakmayacağız hashtag, which formed affective bridges, emotions "do things"—they align individuals with communities, or bodily space with social space, through the intensity of their attachments (Ahmed, 2004b). By adopting the hashtag #SiziBırakmayacağız in Instagram's spaces of appearance, feminist activists could build and express affective connections and bridges through discourses and actions upholding intersectional feminist solidarity.

4.2. Space of Appearance Two: Affective Bridges With Trans Women Through Resistance Against a TERF Group

In Turkey, the anti-gender backlash and violence are perpetrated not only by the government, the police, and affiliated civil society actors but also by TERF groups. It can also be argued that transnational TERF groups and conservative governments, civil society actors, and the police forces can articulate and materialise their own version of affective bridges by building solidarity among themselves and against trans activists, allies,

and intersectional feminists. Thus, I argue that digital platforms can also offer a space of appearance for intersectional feminists "to speak up and talk back" at TERF discourses in the spirit of bell hooks's passionate politics (Sorce & Thomas, 2025). This can also be done by making visible the ways in which TERF groups can be spatially and discursively repudiated by intersectional feminist activists ("acts of repudiation") through boundary-setting beyond the online–offline division while establishing solidarity with trans women. Feminism, as Butler (2024) argues, has always been a struggle for justice formed in alliance and affirming difference. Trans-exclusionary feminism is not feminism—or rather, it should not be (Butler, 2024, p. 168). Thus, in this second case, I will demonstrate "speak-outs" and "talk-backs" as well as acts of repudiation and boundary settings against TERFs online.

When I came across the mentioned anti-gender, TERF group (anonymised) from Turkey, I scrolled through their X account and realised the post thread they shared on March 5, 2022, right before that year's March 8 rally, that confirmed their participation in the women's march to amplify the voices of "biological" women and channel their anger by discriminating specifically against trans women, as well as trans people and gender-queer people, through the hashtag #sexnotgender. This post in Figure 4 below, written in English, not in Turkish, demonstrates the transnational connections between TERFs and how TERFs have been arising out of academic discussions in the Turkish context.

Figure 4. Screenshot of the TERF group's (anonymised) post confirming their discrimination against transgender people.

By resorting to a discourse of victimhood and claiming that gender is an "ideological capture," to prove their point, with the hashtag #women, the aforementioned feminist group continued their discourses as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Screenshot of the TERF group's (anonymised) post articulating their discrimination against transgender people and their statements of victimhood.

The statement above, shared by the TERF group (anonymised), seemed to articulate an inclusive call, but in reality, through gender criticality, it left out trans people and gender-queer people and continued with the rumination shown in Figure 6.

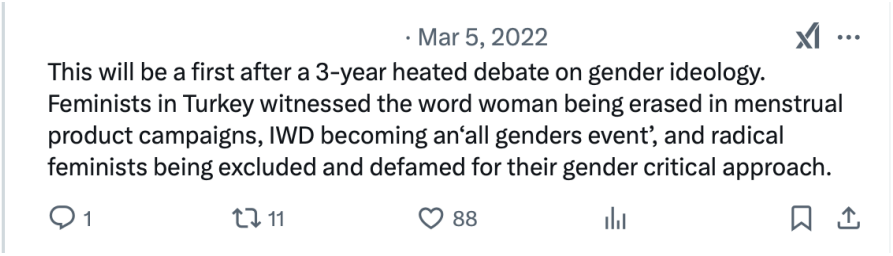

Figure 6. Screenshot of the TERF group's (anonymised) post and their continuation of victimhood statements as well as their critique of "gender."

The aforementioned group also reshared others' posts with statements insulting trans women, such as "*Amin Kumbara Değildir Gülsüm, Pezevenklere Inanma*" (your pussy is not a piggy bank, Gülsüm; don't believe the pimps), "*Rıza Satın Alınamaz*" (consent cannot be bought), "*Kadın Kadındır, Cis Babandır*" (woman is woman, cis is your dad), "*Fuhuş Öldürür, Kadın Dayanışması Yaşatır*" (prostitution kills; women's solidarity saves lives), "*Kuir Değil, Lezbiyeniz*" (we are not queer but lesbian), "*Porno Kadın Düşmanlığıdır*" (porn is misogyny), and "*Cis Ney Kız Adımızı da mı Unuttun?*" (what is cis, girl? Did you forget our names too?). As Butler (2024) argues, TERFs oppose trans women's basic claims for self-determination, freedom and autonomy, and rights of protection from violence and access to public space and healthcare without discrimination, all of which are rights that they, as feminists, also fight for. With this emphasis on identitarian claims and unsubstantial fears, TERFs' activism contributes to anti-gender phantasm without any interest in coalitions or resistance against the rise of the Right.

In reality, trans people face atrocious violence and other rights violations all over the world, with a striking rise in anti-trans legislation and hate speech globally, and Turkey is no exception to this (Güler, 2020). Previous ethnographic research (Güler, 2020) showed how, at the urban margins, encountering intense police surveillance, societal discrimination, and a lack of other employment options leads trans women sex workers to self-organise, creating networks of care and community for visibility and against shame and despair in Turkey. Despite the differences between trans women's, cis women's, and feminists' experiences, women+ should be able to build affective bridges for bodily autonomy against anti-gender backlash, gender-based violence, and state oppression.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 7, X's account (anonymised)—a lesbian, feminist, and journalist—by articulating affective bridges with trans people and by being inclusive of all LGBTIQ+ people, responds—in hooks's (1989, as cited in Sorce & Thomas, 2025, pp. 1–2) words, "speaks up and talks back"—to the TERFs' official statement in Turkish with a comment on a X post and by resharing the TERF post. In fact, some would also argue that by resharing the actual TERF post and not cancelling it, she contributed to the amplification and visibility of TERFs. However, she emphasised togetherness and solidarity with transgender people in her comment below.

Figure 7. Screenshot of a "speak-up, talk-back" against TERFs. Note: Translation of the post—"Transphobia is not a 'thought' or 'opinion,' as they are claimed to be in these statements, and LGBTIQ+ are not 'a practice of masculinity.' Trans women are the most marginalised group, facing discrimination and exposed to violence. In a world where LGBTIQ+ are constantly exposed to criminalisation, feminism is for everybody. On March 8, we will be together; we will not be separate!"

X's statement "feminism is for everybody" reminds me of a book with the same title by the well-known feminist author bell hooks (2000) in which she defines feminism as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression, and demonstrates how feminism is not about divisions but is, in fact, a political movement for everybody. Feminism is for everybody because not only cis women but also trans women, not only cis men but also trans men—all genders—should be encouraged to embrace it. A passionate, rebellious, radical, visionary feminism that combats sexism, racism, and classism is the kind of feminism bell hooks imagined (Sorce & Thomas, 2025, p. 1).

According to hooks (1989, as cited in Sorce & Thomas, 2025, p. 2) when performed in a public setting, speaking up holds performative power because it encourages co-witnessing and sharing in dissent through solidarity. She comprehends this experience as empowering:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (hooks, 1989, p. 9).

I argue that the form of talking back in X's comment goes beyond merely co-witnessing because X not only spoke up and talked back from her own positionality but also built affective bridges with transgender people and was inclusive of all LGBTIQ+ people.

However, Interviewee 6 issued the following important comment:

> You can't create believability and credibility just by reacting. Okay, you will respond to some things…but how do you set your own agenda and create your own digital queer feminist media?…You can turn your own media into an area of encounter, and your own movement into something attractive, so that young people can read and be curious about you.

Furthermore, through an act of repudiation, dokuz8haber (Turkish news agency based on citizen journalism) reported that activists prevented the TERF group from carrying the statements and banners mentioned above and from entering the March 8, 2022, Feminist March arena in Ankara, stating that they were making "transphobic statements."

In the screenshot of the video in Figure 8, the alignment of trans women, cis women, and LGBTIQ+ created a shield against the TERFs, and as an act of repudiation, prevented the entrance of the TERF group into the protest area. This act operated as a barrier; however, it was a barrier against hostility, and therefore it can be perceived as an affective bridge emphasizing togetherness and solidarity. Here we can observe how affective bridges involve movement, discourse, and action. Feminists also chanted the well-known slogan of the feminist movement in Turkey—"You will never walk alone"—while gathering at the protest area, as can be seen from Figure 9.

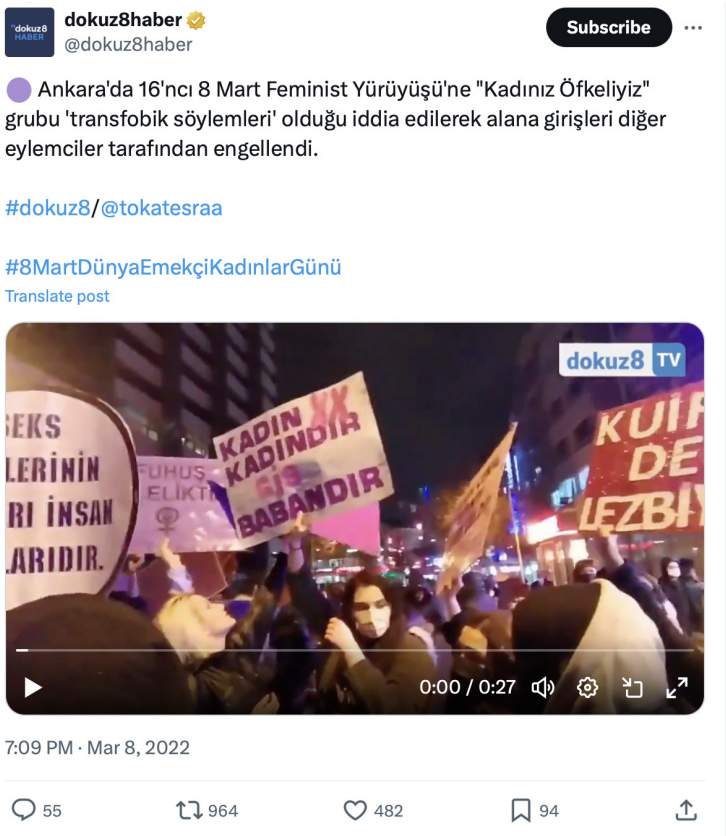

Figure 8. Screenshot of an act of repudiation against TERFs. Note: Translation of the post—"In Ankara, during the 16th, March 8th march, the [anonymised TERF group] was prevented from entering the area by other feminist protesters, who claimed that they made transphobic statements."

Figure 9. Screenshot showing rallyists chanting "you will never walk alone" emphasizing intersectionality and togetherness against TERFs. Note: Translation of the post—"In Ankara, women who say 'you will never walk alone' continue to gather at Sakarya Street."

My discussions with the interviewees confirmed that the TERF discourses originate from academic discussions in Turkey and are imported from Europe. Moreover, although a TERF debate also exists in Turkey, the feminist movement in Turkey is considered intersectional and trans-inclusive. In agreement with the interview participants' views, and as it happened with the speak-ups and talk-backs against the TERFs' posts and through the act of repudiation in which a TERF group was prevented from entering the protest area, the trans women, cis women, and LGBTIQ+ in Turkey could demonstrate affective bridges through intersectional feminist solidarity.

Interviewee 4, a trans activist, said:

> As the trans movement started organising in the mid-2000s, and with its strengthening in 2006 and 2007, feminist perception and discourse in Turkey became trans-inclusive, more intersectional, and immigrant-inclusive. It was the Amargi Academy that revealed what trans-inclusive feminism is and established transfeminism as an academic and political discourse. It produced a feminism with a broad perspective, in which even minorities with disappearing languages found a place for themselves and could produce words. Thus, I think we are able to keep trans queer feminism alive in Turkey by considering the intricacies of Turkey and Middle Eastern contexts. The TERF situation is much higher and stronger in the Anglo-Saxon world than in Turkey. The feminist movement in Turkey is very strong, inclusive, and intersectional, so when TERFs appear, the members of the movement can immediately keep them out the door.

According to Interviewee 3, although the feminist movement in Turkey is broadly intersectional and trans-inclusive, it can do better in terms of intersectionality. Thus, the interviewee claimed that there is still a need for politics and spaces for affective bridges to emerge:

> I think this TERF debate was spread from Europe to here by some academic people, and it found supporters. This trans-exclusionism is a debate inherent in radical feminism. I think the feminist movement in Turkey is intersectional and responds to TERFs, but the encounter between feminism and the queer and trans feminist movements is very important. We can still perceive how heterosexuality and the binary gender regime are dominant within feminism. We are still fighting with the women's movement on these issues.

Moreover, even though the feminist movement in Turkey is intersectional, existing anti-gender backlash conditions not only in terms of right-wing authoritarian state violence, police oppression, civil society actors, and TERFs but also in the form of cultural feminist groups such as KADEM (Kadın ve Demokrasi Vakfı) can still be detrimental to the intersectional feminist solidarity. Interviewee 4 added:

> However, there are also groups funded and supported by this anti-gender movement and also receiving state support, such as KADEM. Turkey is a conservative country with a low level of education, and because the mainstream media is under government control, these groups have an image of being able to spread their messages much more and present their beliefs as if they are the norm.

Moreover, although the interviewees thought that the TERF discourse was imported from the West and that not the women's movement but the feminist movement is intersectional and inclusive, there may still be

barriers for this movement to reach distant geographical regions of Turkey, or issues may arise when we think about the online and offline dimensions. According to Interviewee 6:

> Of course there is a distinction between online and offline. Many women who are less educated and who don't have any political involvement don't exist in digital activist spaces. Without physical activism, digital activism becomes too narrow a field to satisfy activism elites. You cannot become an activist only online.

The interviews also confirmed that although there is a need to strengthen affective bridges, the intersectional feminist solidarity in Turkey is already strong. The three elements of the concept of affective bridges are clearly visible in both of the aforementioned spaces of appearance. Taking into account these three levels, how intersectional feminists formulate affective bridges, solidarity, and togetherness both discursively through speak-ups and talk-backs in the form of bell hooks's passionate politics and through discourses, movements, and actions can be observed.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I theorise and demonstrate the concept of affective bridges against the anti-gender backlash, for bodily autonomy, against femicides and gender-based violence, through two spaces of appearance online. The affective bridges concept simultaneously emerged from the mentioned spaces of appearance and through theory synthesizing, by bringing together the performative theory of assembly and space of appearance (Butler, 2015) as well as affect theory on the material and discursive levels (Ahmed, 2004a; Deleuze & Guattari, 2013).

The theoretical concept of affective bridges refers to the phenomenon of affective connection, solidarity practice, and political articulation within the feminist and trans movements elevating, strengthening, and deepening feminist intersectionality. The phenomenon enables collective action of bodies, community building, and mutual recognition across various identities and political struggles. Thus, affective bridges are about the solidaristic and transformative movements that emerge within feminist activism as people assemble together and exercise their right to appear. However, beyond mere solidarity and connection, they involve an affective process of opening to one another and attuning to each other's bodies, experiences, and emotions while collectively creating a political force. By being active listeners and being receptive to our own vulnerabilities and those of others, affective bridges can transcend distant solidarities and evolve into a transformative force for change at a deeper level. Through these affective connections, participants not only align around shared interests and feelings but also transform themselves and their relations, generating the affective momentum and energy that bolster feminist politics and activism.

Although the study had a small sample that was not representative of the whole of Turkey, it still enabled an in-depth and nuanced comprehension of intersectional feminist activism in Turkey. Especially in Turkey's authoritarian context, where there is a strong backlash against the feminist movement and LGBTIQ+ rights, the affective bridges concept has substantial relevance. Turkey was selected for the case study to build, establish, and demonstrate this concept, but the concept is intended to be applicable transnationally, particularly in countries where global political events have local ramifications and where such forms of intersectional solidarity, coalitions, and collaboration are needed. Affective bridges can also materialise as

"rainbow utopias," emergent inclusive spaces of appearance, and digital geographies of hope beyond the online–offline division to assert bodily autonomy and fight against femicides, gender-based violence, and anti-gender backlash, but also against state oppression, inequality, and authoritarianism. As the queer scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009, p. 12) argues:

> Utopia can offer us a critique of the present[,] of what is[,] by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be…where hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naive but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stifling temporal logic of a broken-down present.

Hence, affective bridges can be considered a posthuman feminist manifesto for our times—involving experience (intensity and drive), movement (human + non-human), and discourse/action. I feel the resonances of the affective rainbow bridges and hence digital geographies of hope emerging—those that transgress and go beyond the binaries of East and West, North and South, global and local, modernity and tradition, male and female, and online and offline. Removed from the binaries that divide us, potential alliances can be built among transnational feminist groups—in which hegemonies are scattered, complex, and multiple—against violence and oppression under conditions of transnational connectivity.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is securely stored in the university repository. Due to the sensitive context of the research, the data access is allowed only to me and my primary supervisor.

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Geographies of Hope: Rethinking Deepfake Harms and Gender AI Safety in the Global South

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Abstract

This article builds on the "geographies of hope" (Hazlewood et al., 2023) to better understand and address the gendered challenges posed by AI technologies in the Global South. AI-powered surveillance and technology-facilitated gender-based violence have reshaped digital geographies, leading to the rise of non-consensual synthetic intimate images—often called "deepfakes" or "deepfake pornography"—that disproportionately target women, LGBTQI+ communities, and racialized groups. These harms reveal the urgent need for inclusive AI safety and AI regulation frameworks that reflect the diversity of material and cultural geographies across the Global South. Through a cross-regional analysis of emerging AI safety policies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, this article critiques the limitations of top-down, risk-based governance models and introduces a cross-cultural Gen(der) AI Safety framework rooted in decolonial and feminist praxis. Using critical discourse analysis, it identifies three systemic challenges—exclusionary legal-technical architectures, overreliance on individual responsibility, and entrenched power asymmetries. In response, the article proposes "geographies of hope" that emphasize localized, community-driven, and pleasure-positive interventions to counter digital harms. By centering intersectional and decolonial approaches, it calls for an AI safety agenda that affirms gender agency, collective joy, and justice.

Keywords

AI governance; decolonial AI; deepfakes; digital rights; feminist AI; gender AI safety; Global South; technology-facilitated violence

1. Introduction

In an era marked by digital technologies, datafication, algorithmic surveillance, and broader digital inequalities, new digital geographies of both harm and hope are emerging. AI is now a powerful socio-technical force reshaping social structures, digitally mediated governance, and daily life. The rise of AI-enabled tools is transforming societies worldwide—from restructuring gig economies in India (Bansal et al., 2024), to predictive welfare models in Denmark (Amnesty International, 2024), to diagnostic systems in Mexico's public health sector (Bandhakavi, 2024). However, AI is not neutral; it is embedded in spatial, cultural, and geopolitical contexts, shaped by global power dynamics, colonial legacies, and the socio-technical landscapes of its locations. Its widespread adoption can exacerbate existing social inequalities (UN, 2024b). In response, a countercurrent is emerging, grounded in justice-oriented interventions. For example, the UN Women AI School ("AI for gender equality," 2025) and Pivotal Ventures' gender-focused tech investments (Confino, 2024) reimagine AI from the margins by advancing gender-inclusive AI capacity building and equity-oriented design models.

AI safety refers to ensuring that AI technology is designed, developed, and deployed with sustainable reliability to mitigate harm, emphasizing technical safety and social impacts (Leslie, 2019). As AI becomes widespread, Fearnley et al. (2025) argue that the definition of AI safety must extend beyond physical harm to include the psychological harm caused by AI. For instance, technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is a broad term covering behaviors that use digital technology to promote gender-based harm (UN Women, 2022). AI can not only amplify the threat of gender-based violence, but also create new forms of violence, which have profound psychological and social consequences for victims (Dunn, 2021). Among them, non-consensual synthetic intimate images (NCSII), as a new type of TFGBV, severely invade the privacy and dignity of victims, particularly across platforms and regions with weak legal protections (Sheikh & Rogers, 2024).

Building upon data feminism (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020), which emphasizes how data practices intersect with gender and power, this article frames AI safety as a practice rooted in relational care, accountability, and justice, extending beyond technical risk-management approaches. We further adopt De Sousa Santos' (2015) "pluriversal" epistemologies, emphasizing that Indigenous, feminist, and relational knowledge systems should guide AI governance, moving beyond the assumptions of Western liberal frameworks that prioritize individual autonomy, rationality, and universal norms. This study adopts a framework of harm, care, and hope: Harm reveals structural injustices in AI gender safety, while care and hope offer relational and political paths for responding, rebuilding, and imagining alternative futures (Hazlewood et al., 2023; Held, 2005; Tronto, 1993). From this decolonial perspective, the "Global South" is understood not as a homogeneous region, but as a political category. Following Spivak's (1988) notion of "strategic essentialism," we employ it as a solidaristic category, enabling countries with shared colonial legacies, weak institutions, and limited infrastructure to form strategic solidarities. This approach provides a cross-cultural comparative lens to understanding and addressing gender AI safety, fostering collaborative, justice-oriented practices that are sensitive to historically underrepresented contexts and communities.

Although some studies have explored TFGBV safety and governance in Kenya (Amatika-Omondi, 2022) and Pakistan (Batool et al., 2024), dominant AI safety frameworks remain shaped by Western ethical traditions. These frameworks often center the individual, rationality, and universal rules or outcomes, sidelining collective responsibility, relational obligations, ethical cosmologies, or community-led norms—central to many traditions

in the Global South, such as Ubuntu in Africa, Dharma in South Asia, or Confucian relational ethics in East Asia (Goffi, 2021; White et al., 2024). Therefore, global governance models often overlook the majority of digital users in Africa, Asia, and South America (Arora, 2024a).

Current AI governance often adopts a paternalistic stance, assuming Western values as universally applicable. This unidimensional normative output suppresses cultural diversity and inadequately addresses differences within Global South norms and values, including clashes between genders, states, and citizens, as well as enforcement capacities, thereby poorly integrating the needs of the Global South as technology users and governance stakeholders (Goffi, 2021). More critically, the existing framework generally lacks the collection of "gender data" (disaggregated data on women and girls, non-binary and other gender-diverse individuals), which undermines evidence-based policymaking and reinforces social inequality and systemic bias (Arora & Huang, 2025). Therefore, conceptualizing AI safety as a technical and regulatory issue risks obscuring its deep social, political, and geographically sensitive dimensions. To introduce hope as an analytical lens, this study draws on Hazlewood et al. (2023) to situate digital geographies as spaces where critical imagination informs transformative practice. We advocate repositioning digital geography as a site of hope, resistance, and rebuilding through transformative policy, challenging gender biases and injustices while recentering pleasure-positive approaches to digital intimacy.

This article examines emerging forms of TFGBV in the Global South, particularly NCSII in "deepfake" and "shallowfake" involuntary pornography. By analysing insufficient legal protections within cross-cultural and patriarchal systems, we highlight the urgency of addressing global gender AI safety and call for a contextualized, cross-cultural examination. Current AI safety discourse around deepfake technology predominantly frames harm as risk aversion, rather than considering gendered agency and justice (Fabuyi et al., 2024). The feminist perspective remains marginalized in the AI safety framework, with insufficient attention to the root causes of gender inequality (Arora & Huang, 2025).

Methodologically, this study adopts a critical discourse analysis approach, examining policy documents, feminist advocacy texts, and media coverage through a feminist and decolonial lens (Catalano & Waugh, 2020). This approach allows us to critically examine existing power structures (harm), explore ethical practices grounded in relationality, accountability, and justice (care), and identify actions and discourses that actively envision more equitable digital futures (hope).

To move beyond the dominant discourse on *harm* and to foster a vision of digital geographies guided by *care* and *hope*, this article proposes a Gen(der) AI Safety ABCDE Framework: Alliances, Beta-testing, Collective rights, Design justice, and Empowerment (see Table 1). This framework operationalizes a feminist and decolonial approach, and provides practical steps for policymakers, technologists, and other stakeholders in the Global South to develop gender-sensitive AI safety frameworks that address local contexts and protect vulnerable communities, contributing to a more equitable digital future for all.

Table 1. The ABCDE Framework for Gen(der) AI safety.

Framework element	Focus	Power shift	Core principle	Problem-solving
A: Alliances cross-cultural and cross-sectoral	Cross-sector, cross-cultural AI safety governance	From Western platform monopoly to local–global feminist coalitions	Power: Shifting control to those historically excluded	Centering affected communities in shaping rules and responses
B: Beta-testing approach to evidence-led policymaking	Participatory AI governance and empirical co-evaluation mechanisms	From elite lab models to lived-reality experimentation	Responsiveness: Iterative, community-driven policymaking	Co-developing tools and policy from the ground up with users
C: Collective rights and responsibilities	Local data sovereignty and group data justice	From individualist privacy to collective data governance	Justice: Centering group-based redress and recognition	Redressing harms by protecting group identities and community data
D: Design justice of affordances and constraints	Inclusive, transparent, explainable AI systems	From opaque engineering to co-created, accountable design	Inclusion: Designing AI systems that serve all, especially the marginalized	Embedding feminist values into AI architectures and interfaces
E: Empowerment and enablement-oriented	Survivor-centered, agency-enhancing tech policies	From harm reduction to flourishing and autonomy	Self-determination: Enabling individuals and communities to govern their own digital identities and futures	Creating binding obligations for platforms and states to protect users

2. Literature Review

Mainstream research on AI safety remains rooted in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) paradigms, often relying on abstract risk frameworks detached from the lived realities of users in the Global South (Arora, 2024a). This research takes a different approach. Grounded in feminist, interdisciplinary, and postcolonial studies, it understands technology as both a site of harm and hope. It centers the experiences of women and gender-diverse groups in the Global South, redefining gender AI safety as a pursuit of justice, accountability, and relational care. In these regions, patriarchy, gendered institutions, data extraction, and platform power are intertwined, creating unique digital vulnerabilities. By situating digital harms within their geopolitical and cultural contexts, this section reveals gaps and structural inequalities in current AI governance frameworks, the socio-technical logics of NCSII—commonly referred to as "deepfake pornography," though this term should not normalize or trivialize the harms involved the feminist political economy of synthetic media.

2.1. Mapping TFGBV: The Gendered Landscape of Digital Harm in the Global South

TFGBV is defined as follows:

> Any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated, or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological,

> social, political, or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms. (UN Women, 2022, p. 4)

TFGBV encompasses a broad range of digital harm, including network harassment, image-based sexual abuse, doxxing, defamation, stalking and monitoring, threats, and hate speech, that disproportionately target women and marginalized groups (Dunn, 2021). Definitions of TFGBV across legal and platform frameworks remain fragmented, reflecting divergent understandings of harm, responsibility, and accountability.

In this context, women and gender-diverse groups in the Global South face unique vulnerabilities shaped by intersecting inequalities. A global survey found 85% of women experiencing or witnessing online violence, with rates reaching 98% in the Middle East and 90% in Africa (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). Furthermore, intersectional reports show that some groups are disproportionately affected by TFGBV. For instance, the UNESCO project The Chilling highlights that Black, Indigenous, and Jewish women journalists report higher exposure to online violence than white women journalists (Chowdhury & Lakshmi, 2023). UN reports also indicate that women in rural or low-connectivity regions remain disproportionately vulnerable to TFGBV due to digital literacy gaps and limited access to protection resources (UN, 2024a).

These individual-level harms are not isolated incidents—they are rooted in gendered power relations embedded in digital technologies and institutional structures (Dunn, 2020). TFGBV operates beyond the interpersonal level, revealing structural and institutional dynamics through the affordances of digital platforms, including virality, anonymity, and permanence. As such, it increases the circulation of abuse and diminishes perpetrators' accountability (Henry et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2021). Women in many low- and middle-income countries are increasingly misappropriated to generate "deepfake" content, resulting in harassment, blackmail, reputational damage, and social exclusion (Sheikh & Rogers, 2024). In countries like Ghana, Namibia, and Senegal, "deepfake pornography" has been weaponized against female politicians and journalists to undermine their credibility (Miliza et al., 2025). Structural dynamics of TFGBV in the Global South, where harms intersect with deep-rooted patriarchy, honor-based cultures, low digital literacy, and limited protections, produce systemic formations of vulnerability (Bansal et al., 2024). In such contexts, accountability often shifts from offenders to victims, leading to silencing and exclusion from public and digital life. For instance, Moroccan activist Ibtissame "Betty" Lachgar faced online threats, harassment, and a criminal sentence after her feminist social media post went viral ("Moroccan court upholds," 2025), and an 18-year-old woman on Facebook was killed after a manipulated photo of her next to her boyfriend went viral (Hussain, 2023).

2.2. "Deepfake Pornography" as Socio-Technical Gendered Harm

With the advancement of AI, NCSII has become increasingly widespread online, marking a disturbing evolution of TFGBV disproportionately targeting women (Umbach et al., 2024). Unlike early forms of image-based sexual abuse, which circulated authentic non-consensual intimate images, NCSII does not require pre-existing explicit material, and uses publicly available images to generate synthetic sexual content (Thomasen & Dunn, 2021). Of the 95,820 identified deepfake videos globally in 2023, pornographic content constituted 98% of the total, with 99% of the victims being women (Home Security Heroes, 2023, as cited in Birrer & Just, 2024).

NCSII builds on existing structural gendered inequalities, exacerbated by AI tools and social media algorithms that facilitate its rapid production and dissemination (Li et al., 2024; Viola & Voto, 2023). Generative AI has significantly lowered both technical and financial barriers to producing such content, while platform recommendation algorithms, driven by engagement metrics, inadvertently amplify its viral circulation (Kalpokas & Kalpokiene, 2022, pp. 65–71).

Across regions, AI governance has adopted distinct regulatory frameworks in response to this phenomenon. While the EU model integrates NCSII into broader digital governance, emphasizing transparency and data privacy, and the US focuses on criminalizing specific harms and safeguarding individual rights within a free speech context (Fabuyi et al., 2024), both fail to address the structural, gendered nature of digital harm (Birrer & Just, 2024). In the Global South, these harms are further exacerbated by deep-rooted socio-cultural norms, legal gaps, and limited legal aid and digital literacy (Sheikh & Rogers, 2024).

Feminist and decolonial theories reveal how AI exacerbates gender inequalities, challenging claims of technological "neutrality" and arguing how these systems are structurally embedded in and reinforce existing power dynamics. From a data feminism perspective (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020), patriarchal structures within AI systems lead to the non-consensual extraction and commodification of marginalized groups' identities and experiences, thereby reproducing and deepening intersecting gendered, racial, and economic inequalities. Benjamin (2023), in her analysis of the "New Jim Crow," further reveals that technology not only passively replicates but actively amplifies structural racial and gender hierarchies and fosters new mechanisms of social control. Arora and Natale (2025) advocate for "Situated AI" practices, to reinvigorate engagements with the global that can account for the local, the cultural, and the particular in the context of generative media. Based on these theoretical insights, NCSII can be understood as more than an individual harm, as they are situated at the intersection of gendered technological infrastructures and global power structures.

From this perspective, our decolonial feminist approach operates on three interrelated levels: epistemologically, by centering experiences from the Global South (Arora, 2024a); methodologically, by promoting cross-regional and reflexive research (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020); and politically, by challenging Northern-centric AI governance narratives (Arora & Natale, 2025). This framework deepens critiques of dominant models of AI governance and provides a basis for examining the political economy of deepfake content regulation. More importantly, it sets the stage for introducing reconstructive approaches such as "geographies of hope" (Hazlewood et al., 2023), which reframe governance beyond risk and harm toward reimaginations of care, agency, and future visions.

2.3. The Political Economy of Deepfake Technology: Who Controls AI-Generated Content?

A feminist political economy allows us to examine how NCSII emerges from and reinforces intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, and global power, especially for women and marginalized digital users (Rao & Akram-Lodhi, 2021). The development and governance of deepfake technologies are concentrated among tech companies, open-source developer networks, and online communities, mainly located in the Global North, leaving Global South countries with little autonomy in setting platform accountability or technical standards (Viola & Voto, 2023). These actors control both content production tools and the infrastructures that distribute and monetize NCSII content, including cloud services, algorithms, and hosting platforms. This ownership structure excludes Southern communities from decisions over their data, digital identities, and

participation in online spaces (Paris, 2021). In particular, women and gender-diverse users in the Global South often lack control over how their identities are used or commodified. Furthermore, the technical labor of AI and deepfake tools is dominated by male engineers, developers, and entrepreneurs in the Global North (Mishra et al., 2024). Meanwhile, women, especially in the Global South, bear the social and emotional burden of NCSII. This unpaid, gendered labour, including coping with harm, seeking redress, protecting oneself online, and rebuilding safety, remains insufficiently recognized within many platform design and policy frameworks (Birrer & Just, 2024).

Despite generating economic value in advertising, entertainment, and politics, deepfake technologies operate within platform economies that tend to prioritize monetisation and innovation, and often at the expense of user safety and gender justice (Paris, 2021). Regulatory frameworks, too, are tilted toward maintaining the existing power structures and logics, rather than being centred on user wellbeing and social justice. For instance, in the US, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act shields platforms from liability; while the EU's Digital Services Act centers on a "notice-and-action" mechanism that emphasizes post-event governance and user rights, providing large technology companies with legitimacy and operational space due to its complex compliance system. China's Deep Synthesis Regulation imposes proactive pre-publication review and platform accountability to maintain social stability and public opinion security (Okolie, 2023; Zheng et al., 2025). Whether driven by commercial logic or state-oriented control, these models fail to center user safety and gender equality, which indirectly exacerbate the vulnerability of women and gender diversity groups in the Global South. By contrast, some countries have implemented specific legislation aimed at protecting victims from NCSII content, including the UK Online Safety Act 2023 and Australia's eSafety Commissioner regulations (Broinowski & Martin, 2024; Romero Moreno, 2024). These developments demonstrate that regulatory practices vary significantly across the globe, underscoring the need for global standards that are rights-based, feminist, and yet are situated in the lived realities, local cultures, and social structures, to ensure standards can become enforceable.

From the perspective of feminist political economy and decolonial theory, NCSII is a systemic phenomenon driven by platform capitalism, patriarchal structures, and global hierarchies. Global North-controlled infrastructure and algorithms can reinforce capital accumulation, transforming the identities and experiences of women and gender diversity groups in the Global South into exploitable data resources. Economically, platform capitalism shifts the costs of safety and emotional labor onto female users, while benefiting from the guise of neutral regulation to mask these inequities. Moreover, colonial power dynamics have historically produced gendered "accumulation by dispossession," making the structural marginalization of Global South women in digital spaces almost inevitable (Harvey, 2004). Therefore, the proposed Gen(der) AI Safety framework must go beyond content moderation and include those excluded from the design and regulation of digital technologies.

2.4. Cross-Cultural Policy Approaches and Challenges for Gender AI Safety in the Global South

Dominant global AI governance models are shaped by frameworks led by the EU, the US, and China, each reflecting distinct institutional priorities. The EU's AI Act establishes a risk-centric regulatory framework focusing on quantifiable AI risks (e.g., unacceptable or high) and emphasizing conformity assessments and transparency obligations. However, it offers limited attention to deeply rooted social and intersectional harms, such as TFGBV, which are difficult to quantify (Fabuyi et al., 2024; Valeriani & Polito, 2025).

In contrast, US AI policy tends to privatize safety through legislation like Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, leaving survivors of digital abuse to navigate opaque moderation systems with limited recourse (Paris, 2021). China's model allows for rapid intervention, particularly in the governance of synthetic media, but prioritizes state security and social stability. Policies like the Provisions on the Administration of Deep Synthesis Internet Information Services prohibit harms such as NCSII; however, these bans often serve state control rather than gender justice (Birrer & Just, 2024). While these frameworks differ in approach, they define safety through institutional and geopolitical logics rather than the lived experiences of survivors, limiting their capacity to address the complex social, cultural, and legal realities of TFGBV, especially in Global South contexts.

The NCSII challenges in the Global South reveal the structural limitations of Global North models in addressing gender AI safety. Cultural logics and intersecting social identities shape both the forms and severity of harm. For instance, South Africa has criminalized NCSII and incorporated it into data protection law (Cybercrimes Act and the Protection of Personal Information Act), but its legal framework still reflects Western-leaning priorities emphasizing free speech and intellectual property, making enforcement difficult due to weak accountability and delayed implementation (Gotora, 2024). In Senegal, women with public visibility and political engagement are more likely to be targeted by deepfakes (Miliza et al., 2025). These cultural logics interact with dimensions such as age, caste, religion, sexual orientation, and disability, exacerbating the vulnerability of certain groups (Bansal et al., 2024). These examples demonstrate that Northern-centric governance standards cannot adequately reflect the complexities of Global South societies.

In addition, support for victims varies significantly across the Global South. In countries such as Namibia and Indonesia, survivors often face shaming, isolation, or indifference from law enforcement (Ferdinal & Bakir, 2024; Miliza et al., 2025). Structural barriers, including limited legal protections, weak enforcement, and cultural stigma, further discourage reporting in Ghana and Senegal. These challenges persist in many Global North contexts, where police responses to NCSII remain limited and inconsistent (Birrer & Just, 2024; Umbach et al., 2024).

Institutionally, many legal systems in the Global South lag behind technological developments, lacking clear definitions and regulatory mechanisms for harms such as NCSII or algorithmic bias. For instance, India lacks a legal definition of "deepfake" (Vig, 2024). Although South Africa passed the Cybercrimes Act in 2021, its narrow definition of TFGBV and the need to prove "intent to harm" create obstacles for prosecution (Gotora, 2024, p. 14). Mexico's Ley Olimpia represents a landmark legal response to TFGBV, including deepfakes, yet over 80% of cases go unreported (Escalera Silva et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the Global South faces systemic disadvantages in technological infrastructure, data sovereignty, judicial capacity, and cross-platform governance. Judicial institutions often lack the technical tools and training to identify AI-generated content in NCSII cases, complicating evidence collection and prosecution (Miliza et al., 2025). Meanwhile, NCSII frequently spreads across platforms and countries, testing the limits of traditional territorial jurisdiction, making it more difficult to hold people and organizations accountable (Batool et al., 2024). At the same time, due to the fragmented and inconsistent policies and tools used by technology companies to define and detect NCSII content, law enforcement agencies often remain dependent on platform-specific procedures for content removal and evidence extraction (Bioni et al., 2023).

Despite judicial inefficiencies, limited technical capacity, and transnational regulatory gaps, the Global South has developed a range of innovative, locally rooted practices that bridge the systemic gaps left by dominant governance frameworks in the EU, US, and China. In Brazil and Senegal, local actors pilot community-based AI ethics through Indigenous data governance models and open infrastructures (Bioni et al., 2023; Miliza et al., 2025). Without strong state-led regulation, locally rooted experimentations step in and offer alternative pathways. For instance, in Pakistan, NGOs collaborate with law enforcement to develop hybrid judicial models combining digital forensics with trauma-informed care, offering survivors both emotional support and evidentiary resources (Batool et al., 2024). In Latin America, the Olimpia chatbot provides AI-powered emotional support and legal guidance to TFGBV victims, addressing gaps in institutional care (AuraChat.Ai, 2025).

These localized examples challenge the assumption that effective AI governance must mirror models from the Global North. Instead, they highlight the agency of Global South communities in shaping alternative pathways through culturally grounded resistance, relational care, and local gendered experiences, and in making the Global South not a regulatory gap for AI safety, but a geography of hope.

3. Policy Pathways for Gen(der) AI Safety

3.1. The Geographies of Hope for Policymaking

As generative AI becomes deeply embedded in social and cultural systems, scholars are moving beyond singular risk-based governance approaches, shifting toward multidimensional frameworks that integrate ethical, social, and relational perspectives (Pawelec, 2024; Whittaker et al., 2023). This has led to calls for a geographic reorientation of technology governance, emphasizing the need to treat spatiality as a critical dimension in understanding and shaping AI safety policy contextually (Walker & Winders, 2021). In response, critical geography's concept of "geographies of hope" offers a bottom-up theoretical and practical pathway for reimagining AI governance (Hicks, 2018). Hazlewood et al.'s (2023) "geographies of hope-in-praxis" framework stresses that technology policy must be embedded in space, power relations, and lived experiences, asking who gets to imagine hope, in which spaces, and whose futures are included. This implies that policy development should move beyond a narrow focus on technical functionality and economic utility, instead grounding itself in broader socio-spatial contexts and attending to the experiences and aspirations of those marginalized by technology, such as the Global South communities.

Here, the Global South represents a political category rather than a homogenous geographic entity. Despite its temporal flattening, it enables solidarity across shared postcolonial trajectories of weak institutional enforcement, patriarchal norms, and limited infrastructures (Spivak, 1988). Following Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism," we deploy the Global South not as a homogenous unit but as a solidaristic category for comparative insights and collective pathways to gender AI safety. This provides a basis to move beyond the North/South binary toward South–South and North–South strategies, insisting that AI protocols be intrinsically cross-cultural and equity-based, with geographies of hope co-constructed by historically underrepresented contexts and communities.

Hence, efforts to govern gender AI safety in the Global South must begin with understanding that hope in the Global South is not a product of naivety, but a persistent ethical stance and survival strategy emerging from

enduring harm, structural asymmetries, and historical injustice (Arora, 2024b). This method centers the fears and hopes of women, LGBTQ+, and sexual minority groups in digital environments, positioning tech policy as a potential site of transformative practice. Their insights reframe AI safety not as a technical challenge but as a lived, ongoing negotiation of harm, care, and hope. These grounded practices require governance frameworks that are participatory, intersectional, and responsive to the diverse realities of life in the Global South. Thus, constructing a "mapping of hope" is not merely a conceptual exploration, but a practical reconstruction of how policy knowledge is produced, who participates, and what social imaginaries do technologies carry (Geerts, 2022, p. 385). Hope, in this context, becomes a governance approach in the Global South: a commitment to expanding the conditions of possibility for gender digital flourishing.

3.2. Legislative Innovations for Gendered AI Safety in the Global South

In the Global South, feminist and citizen-led data governance communities are pioneering innovative approaches to AI safety regulation that center care and justice in response to the challenges of gender inequality and algorithmic harm. These innovations are fundamental, not merely experimental, serving as structural responses to the gendered harms deeply embedded in digital infrastructures. What's more, these efforts challenge the dominant AI governance paradigms shaped by the Global North.

Unlike the risk-management approaches that prioritize hazard mitigation and strict control, legislative innovations in the Global South view AI safety as inseparable from broader struggles for gender justice, data sovereignty, and technological self-determination. The Digital Rights Foundation exemplifies this shift by developing feminist digital security frameworks that foreground survivor-centric, trauma-informed, and gender-responsive policies (Digital Rights Foundation, 2025a). Its Digital Security Helpline, South Asia's first dedicated service for digital rights, has received over 20,000 cases since its launch in Pakistan, offering psychosocial and legal support, as well as policy recommendations grounded in the lived realities of digital harms. According to the foundation's executive director, Nighat Dad, "cultural nuance, emotional intelligence, and lived experience cannot be programmed" (Digital Rights Foundation, 2025b). The Digital Rights Foundation's work advocates for reimagining gender AI safety as contextual, relational, and care-oriented, resisting automation-driven responses to gendered harms such as deepfakes, algorithmic blackmail, or image-based sexual abuse.

This reorientation is not confined to institutional governance; it is expanded through grassroots feminist tech practices across the Global South, where communities mobilize data not merely to protect, but also to empower. The civic interventions are not confined to risk reduction; they proactively create structures that strengthen participation and decision-making. Activist projects like Mariéme Jamme's iamtheCODE Foundation in Senegal and María Salguero's femicide mapping in Mexico exemplify how data can be mobilized for justice and visibility rather than surveillance and exclusion (Johnson, 2022; McCormick, 2024). Jamme's coding camps equip marginalized girls with the tools to become digital creators, not just passive subjects of AI systems. Salguero's femicide maps have not only raised national awareness but have also informed legislative reforms and public policy debates in Mexico, exemplifying how feminist data activism can transform fragmented, grassroots evidence into powerful tools for shaping state accountability and responsive governance. These examples demonstrate a situated, hopeful approach that emerges not from pessimism but within the Global South's fragmented, censored, and often digitally mediated patriarchal conditions (Arora, 2024a).

Furthermore, localized regulatory mechanisms are emerging to formalize these grassroots practices. In Mexico, Ley Olimpia, a comprehensive set of legislative reforms enacted across various states, recognizes and penalizes digital violence, particularly offences that violate individuals' sexual privacy through digital means (de la Vega & Escalera Silva, 2025). Named after activist Olimpia Coral Melo, who led the "Ley Olimpia movement" after surviving image-based abuse, the law is now considered a model framework for combating digital gender violence in Latin America (de la Vega & Escalera Silva, 2025, p. 5). Although often contested and incomplete, these legislative strategies in the Global South indicate the potential for feminist engagement with state structures to reshape legal infrastructures around digital harm.

Most importantly, these interventions demonstrate the limitations of standardized regulatory modes that attempt a one-size-fits-all solution (Phelan, 2022). Instead, they advocate for pluriversal approaches that recognize and incorporate local contexts, legal traditions, and sociotechnical realities that are situated, context-specific, and co-created with communities, acknowledging multiple valid ways to understand technology, define justice, and live in the digital world. This includes cross-sectoral collaborations between civic organizations, government policymakers, technologists, and feminists to create governance models of safety, participation, and flourishing.

3.3. The ABCDE Framework for Gen(der) AI Safety: Mapping of Hope

As AI technologies increasingly shape the lived realities of billions through recommendation systems, automated content generation, virtual agents, and biometric surveillance, the question is no longer merely whether AI systems are safe, but safe for whom, by whom, and under what conditions (Bengio et al., 2025; Valeriani & Polito, 2025). Addressing this complex notion of AI safety demands a fundamental shift in approach. It cannot be resolved through technical fixes or regulatory mandates alone, as its inherent complexity is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and political factors (Valeriani & Polito, 2025). This requires an urgent shift from centralized, reactive, and technocratic governance models toward participatory, anticipatory, and justice-driven approaches that center cultural specificity, community agency, and the lived realities of marginalized groups (Arora, 2024a). This article proposes the ABCDE Framework for Gen(der) AI Safety to operationalize this transformative vision of inclusive, anticipatory, and feminist AI governance. Figure 1 shows the overall structure of the ABCDE framework and its five interdependent pillars. This inclusive framework is rooted in cross-cultural alliances, empirical co-design, collective rights, design justice, and empowerment. Each pillar of the framework directly addresses one or more of the questions above, providing a holistic strategy to building AI futures that are not only safe, but also fair, equitable, and inclusive.

3.3.1. Alliances Cross-Cultural and Cross-Sectoral

AI governance models fundamentally shape how safety is defined, how it operates, and whose interests are ultimately served (Paris, 2021). In a deeply mediatized AI ecosystem characterized by structural inequities and asymmetrical power flows, cross-cultural and cross-sectoral alliances are not subsidiary to governance. Rather, they are the architecture upon which inclusive AI futures must be built (Arora, 2024a). Even the most technologically advanced AI systems can replicate and exacerbate existing exclusions if their design, deployment, and governance are divorced from inclusive relations, social context, and the lived experiences of those they serve. This highlights that to address gender inequality and other deep social exclusions in AI systems, it is not enough to rely on technological development alone. Instead, building and relying on

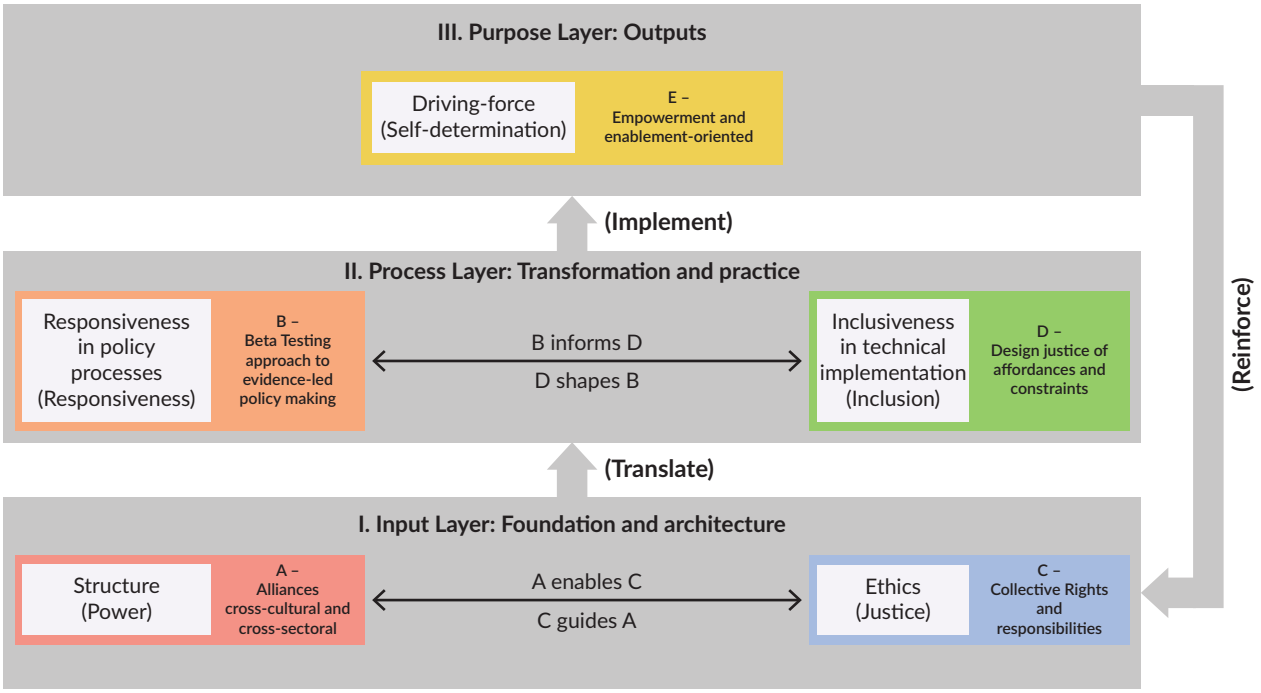

Figure 1. The ABCDE Framework for Gen(der) AI Safety.

cross-sectoral alliances is crucial to connect policymakers, feminist researchers, grassroots organizers, artists, technologists, and civil society actors. Moreover, the framework also insists on cross-cultural solidarity as a central governance mode, especially among Global South actors. These alliances must extend beyond a symbolic level of diversity and promote in-depth dialogue and transformation between feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous knowledge systems, which are not just consulted but structurally embedded.

According to Arora (2024a), decolonial frameworks require more than mere recognition. They need a fundamental redistribution of governance power, enabling agency of marginalized communities most impacted by AI systems. This process involves supporting institutional mechanisms traditionally excluded from the core of AI governance, including higher education translating critical knowledge into actionable insights, public institutions promoting fair and equitable legislation, and rights-based advocacy groups mediating local norms with global justice. This redistribution is both ethical and strategic: Cross-cultural and cross-sectoral alliances are more resilient to capture by Big Tech monopolies or authoritarian regimes and reflect governance logics already practiced in many Indigenous, feminist, and cooperative traditions across the Global South. These alliances decentralize power while institutionalizing accountability through legal reforms, public oversight, and platform compliance mechanisms, thereby translating power redistribution into enforceable governance. They further enhance survivor support systems, and improve platform procedures for content removal, data preservation, and evidence provision.

The intersectoral feminist alliances in Latin America offer an example (Ciolfi Felice et al., 2025). By promoting legal reforms and cross-regional networks, they have built a governance framework to challenge tech monopolies and algorithmic discrimination. Yet, despite advances in legislation and public advocacy, there remain challenges related to resource sustainability and limited leverage over large technology corporations. Persistent transformation of governance structures grounded in cross-sectoral and cross-cultural alliances can incrementally but meaningfully institute structural change.

3.3.2. Beta-Testing Approach to Evidence-Led Policymaking

Beta-testing is proposed as a foundational strategy for developing evidence-based policies that are responsive to the lived experiences of those most affected by AI harms in the Gen(der) AI Safety Framework. Rather than top-down and technocratic models, characterized by regulation and risk-based technical classifications (Birrer & Just, 2024), beta-testing calls for an iterative, participatory, and community-driven approach to AI safety governance. At its core, beta-testing reframes policymaking as an evolving process: one that relies on empirical testing, localized feedback mechanisms, and user-driven interventions (Arora, 2024a). It centers communities as co-creators of policy, not passive recipients of legal frameworks. This shift is especially critical in addressing emerging AI harms such as "deepfake pornography" where threats evolve more rapidly than legal systems can respond.

Responsive governance is made possible through mechanisms such as community-informed pilot programs, digital helplines, and survivor-led consultations. For example, the Digital Rights Foundation's helpline in Pakistan, designed to support victims of TFGBV, exemplifies how grassroots infrastructures can inform agile policy reform (Digital Rights Foundation, 2025a). Such models do more than collect complaints; they generate real-time insights that can be translated into concrete responsibilities, design interventions, and enforcement practices. Beta-testing can enable survivor-centered policy decisions, with continuous iteration for assessing its effectiveness across diverse cultural and contextual environments. The core contribution of the beta-testing approach lies in establishing an agile cycle linking practice, empowerment, and systemic strengthening, given the fast-changing nature of AI technologies. When feedback and response mechanisms are embedded in policymaking, governance no longer operates as a one-way directive and becomes a self-learning, self-correcting process.

3.3.3. Collective Rights and Responsibilities (Group Privacy vs. Individual Privacy)

US and EU AI safety and data governance models are deeply rooted in liberal legal traditions that prioritize individual rights, especially personal privacy and consent, as the normative foundation of ethical oversight (Fabuyi et al., 2024). However, in deeply mediatized environments of the Global South, data are fundamentally relational, cultural, and communal (Bhatia et al., 2025). Consequently, WEIRD models often obscure a critical reality: Harms are not exclusively personal. They are also collective, particularly for marginalized gender groups, racialized communities, and Indigenous populations whose data and representations are co-constituted through shared histories, identities, and systemic injustices (Arora, 2024b).

The collective rights and responsibilities pillar addresses this gap by centering group privacy, and cultural data sovereignty. It sidelines the Western paradigm of data protection, which is shaped by narrow, proprietary conceptions that prioritize the individual and marginalize relational and collectivist ethical frameworks (such as Ubuntu and Buddhist perspectives) that emphasize communal accountability and interconnected privacy (Goffi, 2021). This limitation is critical because AI systems, operating within data capitalism, routinely extract, process, and commodify data in ways that implicate entire communities, especially in the Global South, reinforcing systemic inequalities, eroding collective autonomy, and perpetuating digital colonialism (Medrado & Verdegem, 2024). For instance, when facial recognition algorithms misclassify racialized gender expressions, or when generative AI systems remix Indigenous symbols without consent, attribution, or accountability, they not only violate individual privacy but also

disrupt communal narratives, cultural continuity, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge (Chateau et al., 2025; Zevop & Ballet, 2025).

Furthermore, this pillar redefines the architecture of justice. Shifting the focus from individual compensation, it advocates for community-led response systems and shared responsibility. This includes collective legal standing in content takedown processes, cooperative licensing models for cultural expression, and restorative justice measures for algorithmic harms disproportionately affecting gendered and cultural communities. These interventions reimagine AI safety as relational and systemic, not just procedural (Arora, 2024a). For example, African communal data governance practices demonstrate how local communities collaboratively manage sensitive genetic and health data, guided by philosophies such as Ubuntu and Ujamaa, which emphasize relational responsibilities, collective ownership, and shared accountability in decision-making and data use (Munung et al., 2024). These practices echo minority-led initiatives in Western countries, including the Sámi Data Sovereignty Initiative (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). The Sámi Data Sovereignty Initiative enables the Sámi people to assert authority over their data, embedding cultural values and ethical principles into digital infrastructures. These cases demonstrate how marginalized communities across diverse regions are operationalizing justice-centered approaches to AI and data governance, while also revealing ongoing challenges such as resource constraints and the need for institutional support.

Ultimately, recognizing collective rights necessitates a radical shift in power—from extractive data regimes dominated by corporate platforms and state institutions toward community-determination. This means enabling communities to define the terms under which their data are gathered, circulated, and remediated, including who benefits and how harm is addressed. In feminist and decolonial contexts, this is essential to counteract ongoing epistemic violence, cultural appropriation, and gendered exploitation, often obscured by the rhetoric of "innovation." The significance of these practices is rooted in the empowerment they generate among participants. When communities exercise genuine control over their data, narratives, and identities, they shift from being objects of governance to active agents. This enhanced agency reinforces both the ethical foundations and operational structure, creating a self-reinforcing cycle resilient to external exploitation and grounded in cultural resources. Meaningful AI safety frameworks, therefore, must be embedded in sustained, community-driven, justice-oriented practice.

3.3.4. Design Justice of Affordances and Constraints

Design justice demands a shift from WEIRD paradigms toward participatory, transparent, context-sensitive approaches rooted in feminist, decolonial frameworks. It centers the idea that technologies, particularly AI systems, are never neutral in design (Bengio et al., 2025). They are not only embedded with human values, intentions, and social biases during their design and training, but they also actively structure the conditions of hope for user behavior, shaping what actions are enabled, constrained, or excluded. In the ABCDE Framework for Gen(der) AI Safety, design becomes the site where power is encoded: At the interface level, the framework surfaces who matters, what is normal, and what forms of agency are permitted or denied when attending to algorithmic decisions. To promote gender AI safety and flourishing in the Global South, design justice must center the affordances (what systems enable) and constraints (what systems restrict) from the perspective of the marginalized users (Arora, 2024a).

For instance, in Latin America, UN Women and the UN International Computing Centre co-developed a multilingual AI model to detect and flag sexist content on X (formerly Twitter), trained on Spanish-speaking culturally specific datasets (International Telecommunication Union, 2024). This initiative exemplifies design justice in action—embedding feminist principles into AI, while ensuring that content moderation reflects local realities rather than defaulting to WEIRD-centric norms. A comparable approach is seen in Western contexts, such as Costanza-Chock's (2020) design justice project that develops participatory methods to co-design digital systems with marginalized groups, ensuring the technologies reflect people's needs and values. These cases highlight how inclusive design, especially in moderation systems, can empower marginalized users. Extending this principle further, gender-diverse representation, multilingual moderation, and community-controlled data can expand agency and inclusion (Arora, 2024a). Restricting AI from generating hypersexualized, racialized, or non-consensual imagery is a safeguard against structural violence (Bengio et al., 2025).

Reframing safety as a relational and political concern implies building it into AI systems at the level of everyday user interaction, rather than relying solely on state regulatory frameworks. When embedded within the technical architecture, such design can empower users and communities, transforming them from passive subjects of protection into active agents in shaping the technological environment. This enhanced capability, in turn, generates a continuous drive and legitimacy for the safety governance system, advancing its continual evolution toward greater justice and inclusivity.

3.3.5. Empowerment and Enablement-Oriented

The final pillar of the ABCDE Framework—empowerment and enablement-oriented—repositions gender AI safety not as a perimeter of risk avoidance, but as a platform for hope, which is a spatial, social, and political commitment to empowerment and self-determination. This orientation moves beyond conventional, protectionist models of AI governance that treat users as passive recipients of harm mitigation, and instead affirms them as co-creators of digital futures grounded in justice, joy, and autonomy.

Mainstream AI safety discourses—dominated by the US, EU, and China—often flatten the spatial politics of AI, negating the lived realities and knowledge systems of those at the margins, particularly in the Global South. As Hazlewood et al. (2023) argue, empowerment is spatially situated and relationally constituted. It draws from critical geography and feminist theory to center the aspirations and creative capacities of communities that have historically been excluded from shaping technological imaginaries, particularly women, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized groups in the Global South. These are not just "end users" of AI; they are key actors whose unique knowledge and cultural visions must guide AI governance (Arora, 2024a).

Empowerment involves survivor-led policy design, gender-sensitive safety architectures, and community-driven governance mechanisms (Miliza et al., 2025). Examples of this empowerment in action are already visible: In Argentina, the feminist initiative AymurAI, developed by Data Género, equips judicial staff, particularly in criminal courts, with tools to anonymize and structure legal rulings on gender-based violence (Whitehead & Gandhi, 2024). By transforming opaque judicial records into open, privacy-protected datasets, AymurAI strengthens the capacity of institutional actors to make gender-based violence data accessible and actionable, while enabling feminist civil society to use these data for survivor-centered advocacy, policy reform, and systemic transparency. The significance of such practices derives from the ongoing drive for change they generate; they establish a reinforcing cycle: Enhanced institutional action and

stronger social oversight create a governance environment more responsive to gender justice, which in turn fosters further empowerment initiatives.

This pillar serves as a vital, self-reinforcing engine for the gender AI safety framework system, ensuring that governance transcends static regulation-making and continuously evolves through the strengthened agency of communities and institutions toward justice.

This ABCDE Framework offers a transformative roadmap for reimagining gen(der) AI safety through a feminist, justice-oriented, and Global South-led lens. This framework not only safeguards against harm, but also actively cultivates inclusive, culturally grounded, and empowering digital futures.

4. Rethinking AI Safety: From Harm and Care Toward a Hopeful Future

Feminist technoscience scholars argue that safety and harm in technology and design are not isolated risk control issues, but are shaped and determined by profound social, relational, and political factors (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Dominant regulatory approaches remain narrowly focused on detecting AI content that imitates reality, such as synthetic media or manipulated video, while this harm-centered perspective overlooks the structural exclusions embedded in AI design, deployment, and governance (Bengio et al., 2025; Fabuyi et al., 2024). Most regulatory systems in the Global South continue to rely on outdated models that treat such harms as incidental rather than systemic (Batool et al., 2024). This blind spot is further compounded by global governance structures in which standards, enforcement, and accountability are largely shaped by institutions in the Global North, often leaving the Global South structurally excluded (Okolie, 2023; Zheng et al., 2025).

This approach often overlooks the agency and motivations of marginalized users themselves. Global South users, including women and other marginalized groups, engage with digital platforms to access work, education, public visibility, and community building. As Arora (2019, 2024a) emphasizes, marginalized users frequently navigate challenging environments (such as patriarchal norms, surveillance, censorship, and bias). Hence, the digital can serve as one of the few places where they can assert autonomy, resist marginalization, and participate in public life, despite the digital harms and risks. Overlooking this dual reality of harm and hope results in policy approaches that restrict access rather than enabling safer, more equitable participation online. Feminist and justice-oriented AI governance must begin with this contradiction where risk and opportunity coexist, and shift from diagnosing harm to cultivating care and mobilizing hope.

Rethinking AI safety requires a decisive shift away from defensive, risk-centric paradigms toward frameworks that are co-constructed, spatially situated, and contextually grounded. Drawing on feminist theory and the concept of the geographies of hope (Hazlewood et al., 2023), we argue that care must be reframed not as digital paternalism but as a commitment to infrastructural support, mutual accountability, and enabling agency. It demands the development of co-designed AI systems that prioritize user dignity, participatory governance, and collective well-being (Arora, 2024a). Furthermore, we reposition the digital space through the geographies of hope. Grounding AI governance in the lived experiences and socio-spatial realities in the Global South enables policy frameworks that respond to the aspirations, fears, and hopes of marginalized communities. Through this reconceptualization, gen(der) AI safety offers not only a critique of Global North paradigms, but also a forward-looking approach for inclusive, proactive, and just AI futures.

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ARTICLE

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Fostering Proximity Through Telegram's Logistics: Russian Anti-War Activism Between Streets and Streams

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Abstract

Space is "a set of relations *between* entities and is not a substance" (Urry, 1985, p. 25). Starting from this proposition, this article examines the constitution of protest spaces enacted through a set of physical and technological entities. The case study is of Russian anti-war actors who aimed to organise anti-war protests following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, after which repression in the country significantly intensified and many were forced into exile. By conducting qualitative interviews with anti-war actors, underpinned by offline and online ethnography, the study examines hidden street anti-war agitation in Russia and reveals logistical orchestration in exile. Drawing on previous research that studies activism through a framework of "algorithmic tactics," this article reveals that while anti-war actors cope with algorithms, their broader approach extends beyond the algorithmic logic of social media. Instead, anti-war actors incorporate infrastructural adaption. The study argues that in order to foster proximity between dispersed geographical localities, actors utilise the affordances of both digital and physical environments. Specifically, it zooms in on logistical media, particularly Telegram, that enables polycentric coordination among multiple sites and allows anti-war actors to navigate in different contexts—inside the country as well as abroad.

Keywords

affordances; anti-war activism; logistics; protest spaces; proximity; Russia

1. Introduction

Space has always been of concern for studies on social movements, since social movements are ultimately about the production of spaces (Kaun, 2015), and through both symbolic interaction and the physical experience of being in spaces, social movement actors reveal social and political struggle. The role of media

technologies in space production has been intensely debated over the last few decades, with scholars pointing out how the arrival of digital technologies has accelerated space–time relationships (Castells, 2007), stimulating the affective participation of publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Many studies have focused on how protest spaces have been constituted and advanced alongside technologies, especially during mass rallies and political events where large numbers of people have taken to the streets (Gerbaudo, 2012; Herasimenka, 2022; Lim, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015).

Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been paid to understanding how protest spaces are organised from scattered localities when large street gatherings are restricted by police control and online surveillance, such as in contemporary Russia where after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many left the country to avoid being drafted or due to their disagreement with the war and the intensified repression directed against such critical publics. This study aims to fill this research gap and contribute both empirically and theoretically to the recognition of organised proximity between dispersed geographic localities in hostile and authoritarian contexts. In doing so, it asks two interconnected research questions:

> RQ1: How has proximity between protest spaces played out inside Russia, where street rallies have been criminalised and social media monitored, and outside of Russia by actors in exile?
>
> RQ2: How do anti-war Russians leverage media affordances to organise covert street actions in the country and link them with coordinated rallies abroad in order to sustain collective agency across dispersed and high-risk settings?

2. Anti-War Protests Inside and Outside of Russia in the Wake of the War

On June 12th, 2022, I joined an anti-war protest march in Stockholm. This was four months after "Black February," when the Russian army attacked Ukraine, leading to what has now become the deadliest conflict in Europe since the Second World War. Just weeks after the invasion, Russian authorities introduced and implemented several articles in the Criminal Code, imposing criminal penalties and fines for "discrediting the army" and "spreading disinformation" about the Russian armed forces. This intensification came on the back of an already strict repression over the previous several years, and in the first few months following the war, the police and the Rosgvardiya cracked down brutally on all anti-war protests held in Russia. More than 20,000 people have been detained for public anti-war stances, according to the human rights organisation OVD-Info. These statistics include 856 detentions for posts on social media (OVD-Info, 2025).

For participating in such protests, but also for disseminating anti-war posts on social media and distributing street leaflets, people were harshly sentenced to anything from hefty fines to years of detention. Stockholm looked peaceful in contrast, and life continued as usual. At the time, it was mainly Russians who had left the country prior to the war who took to the streets to demonstrate against the invasion of Ukraine, shouting in English and Swedish: "Russians against the war! Stop buying Russian gas!" The march in Stockholm was part of a number of joint actions of solidarity, with corresponding demonstrations organised and held simultaneously by newly formed anti-war groups all around the world. People who joined these local groups abroad synchronised their actions by choosing the same day, June 12th, for their manifestations. The date was not accidental. June 12th is a national holiday celebrated as Russia Day and officially commemorates the formation of the Russian Federation following the end of the Soviet Union. Thus, the idea of organising a

global anti-war rally on the same date demonstrated a struggle for the space of symbolic representativity: opposing the onslaught of propaganda narratives about Russia Day, and through the public display of active anti-war dissent.

These global protests, organised by anti-war Russians, also signified a shift from spontaneous pickets and meetings towards more strategic and networked resilience among Russians abroad and in exile. I specifically focus here on groups that were mobilised against the war, while there is also a sizable "illiberal diaspora" (Golova & Sablina, 2024), that is, Russians who support the war and the narratives that back it up.

3. Previous Studies

3.1. From Networked Connectivity to Proximity

At the time of the development of Web 2.0 communication technologies, Castells (2010) highlighted the organisational functionality of communication networks, the ability of digital technologies to link separated physical localities into what he defined as a "space of flows," which represents the material arrangements that enable simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity. This is the central point of his analysis, underpinned by a number of examples: global movements such as Occupy Wall Street, environmental movements, as well as more locally contextualised cases such as the Arab Spring and the Spanish Indignados movement.

In contrast, and with an outlook from "the techno-commercial perspective" of platform functionality, other scholars have made the point that social media "*steer* users towards personalised communication…while introducing the viral mechanism of togetherness" (Poell & Van Dijck, 2015, p. 533, author's emphasis). Problematising further the universalism of the "technological approach," Gerbaudo (2012), in his book *Tweets and Streets*, looks at how a symbolic construction of public space online facilitates and guides highly dispersed street gatherings. He argues further that media not only provide "networked connectivity" but also contribute to the development of collective identity and advance proximity between spaces. In another study exploring the phenomenon of the Occupy movements in Latvia and Sweden, Kaun's (2015) qualitative research shows that such movements are constituted around "travelling narratives" rather than a networked logic, and such narratives are largely linked to people's localised experiences and contexts.

Inspired by such a critical perspective, this research aims to contribute to the growing scholarly interest beyond "networked connectivity" by advancing a place perspective where localities themselves matter since they situate people's experiences in specific contexts. As human geographer Doreen Massey (2005) argues, proximity is central to the production of spaces, encompassing mobility and distance as embedded in space-making practices. Building on this, this study delves into an understanding of how space is constituted across digital loci and dispersed physical localities. The Russian case study of intensified repression and the resulting large-scale emigration after the country's war against Ukraine (Kamalov et al., 2025) provides rich material for examining the constitution of protest spaces under radically different conditions, where some are in exile, situated far apart, and others are confined by state restrictions.

3.2. Civic Engagement Under Rising Authoritarian Pressure

In the last decade, Putin's return to the presidency and the annexation of Crimea led to an intensification of the political struggle in the country, although scholars point out the persistence of structural weaknesses, limited resources, and fragmentation among counterforces (Gel'man, 2017). Russian "online activism" was not merely digital (Lonkila et al., 2021) but rather spanned across political and apolitical participation (Zhelnina, 2023). In making this distinction, Zhelnina recognises the political participation inspired by opposition leaders, such as Alexei Navalny, whose electoral and anti-corruption campaigns mobilised the grassroots (Dollbaum et al., 2018). Additionally, as Zhelnina points out, apolitical participation sparked numerous citizen initiatives that united people over more local issues, such as ecological and urban activism (Bederson et al., 2025). Lonkila et al. (2021) have identified three main patterns of online protest mobilisation in Russia before the war: communicative online activism, where ordinary users became involved with the semi-professional campaigns of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation; technoactivism, sparked by the massive use of Telegram in a backlash against the increasing governmental control over the internet; and non-contentious forms, which did not directly challenge state power but elaborated alternative discourses (Lonkila et al., 2021).

In light of the above, this study views anti-war activism as a continuation of earlier political struggles in the country. Many of my interviewees had been involved with Navalny's headquarters prior to leaving Russia, either as activists or volunteers. Others participated in civic engagement through locally organised initiative groups, or, as Morozov (2009) notes, engaged in forms of "slacktivism" by commenting on, and disseminating, political content—activities that have since been criminalised following the outbreak of war. Additionally, sabotage-oriented anti-war groups have emerged (Aizman, 2024), along with those who joined the Ukrainian armed forces. This study, however, focuses on civic activism and civic anti-war engagement among politically diverse actors.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Beyond Algorithmic Tactics

Theoretically, I follow an ecological approach (Treré & Mattoni, 2016), addressing both users' practices and the technological specificity of platforms. In depicting the platform ecosystem as a "multipolar algorithmic battlefield," Treré and Bonini (2024) study how users—from gig workers to activists—develop inventive tactics to negotiate, exploit, and resist the algorithmic governance of platforms. They identify tactics such as amplification, evasion, and hijacking. By operationalising Treré and Bonini's framework, this study attempts to understand how Russian anti-war actors have adopted and tailored these tactics in accordance with specific affordances of platforms, adapting to algorithmic logics, but also acting beyond them. In particular, it examines how proximity as "the production of interrelations" (Massey, 2005, p. 9) has played out through practices and been constituted within media infrastructures.

Unlike Occupy and Indignados, which were characterised as explicitly event-based movements (Della Porta & Pavan, 2018), Russian anti-war activism has rather been embedded into everyday routine actions. Even compared to Hong Kong's 2019–2020 protest cycles, which were understood as prolonged, recurrent, and crystallised through live streams (Fang, 2023), Russian anti-war activism has remained dispersed and

organisationally diffused. By spreading anti-war agitation on Russian streets with leaflets, graffiti, and even symbolic flowers, people have adapted *in*-visibility—which is similar to Hong Kong's "Be Water" strategy (Fang, 2023)—remaining below the thresholds of both physical policing and platform moderation inside the country. By contrast, Russian protests abroad have aimed to amplify the visibility of dissent through coordinated mass rallies and the use of mainstream platforms.

To capture how proximity has been organised in order to overcome geographic dispersion and state restrictions, the study takes a further conceptual step, looking at how actors enact platform affordances (Costa, 2018) and tailor their tactics to meet the specific challenges they have been facing.

4.2. Enacting Affordances

The concept of affordances has been employed to overcome the deterministic view of technological advancement and to point out the socially related status of technologies (Hutchby, 2001). Post-Gibson studies place affordances into a broader sociocultural context to develop a middle ground between social constructivism and techno-determinism. In this account, affordances have been seen as "imagined" (Nagy & Neff, 2015), "enacted" (Costa, 2018), or "actualised" (Jansson, 2022) in social practices. Jansson identifies three main affordance registers of digital environments: representation, connectivity, and logistics. Representation means the visibility that media traditionally provided, which was reinforced by digital technologies affording recontextualisation and constant updating of media texts (Jenkins et al., 2013). Connectivity highlights forms of mediated togetherness—online crowds—organised as socio-technical assemblages of algorithmic connections (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Finally, an increasingly crucial role in our current media ecology, where "data sets define our situation" (Rossiter, 2021, p. 135), is played by "logistical media" (Peters, 2015): "A logistical shift implies that the controlled, generative *movement* of various types of representation becomes more significant than representation per se" (Jansson, 2022, p. 17). Simply put, logistical affordances mean a thickening of data around certain informational units. Through analysis, I develop this theoretical point by looking at how such "thickness" becomes instrumentalised via different tools—hashtags, visual symbols, and Telegram—propelling both coordination across streets and the orchestration of data streams.

4.3. Telegram as a Facilitator of Logistics

Telegram, owned by Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov, has been discussed as a tool of "deplatforming" (Rogers, 2020) in the sense that, unlike other instant messaging platforms, its affordances enable private communication through chatbots and public communication via channels. Yet, its encryption has been deemed vulnerable and problematic for use in an authoritarian context—experts point out that Telegram secret chats offer optional end-to-end encryption, whereas default "cloud chats" are only server–client encrypted (Lucien, 2021). Scholars situate Telegram within a broader model of "digital authoritarianism" in countries like Iran (Alimardani & Michaelsen, 2021), Russia (Wijermars, 2022; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022), and Belarus (Rudnik & Rönnblom, 2025), where states have tightened technological and legal constraints. Unlike mainstream platforms, Telegram is not primarily algorithmically driven; the app's extended architecture supports one-to-one and many-to-many communication which has become crucial for coordination. Herasimenka (2022) shows how Telegram enabled shadowed "poly-centric leadership" during Navalny's 2018 protests when many opposition leaders were arrested. This study makes another contribution by

examining Telegram's role not only as a stand-alone platform for protest mobilisation, as previous studies have done, but as embedded within the wider media ecology of Russian anti-war activism—focusing on how Telegram fosters logistics across physical localities and digital loci.

4.4. Navigating In-Visibility, Organising Proximity

This framework situates tactics and affordances as co-dependent and overlapping. Thus, amplification, evasion, and hijacking tactics (Treré & Bonini, 2024) are not only considered to be algorithmically based but they can also be carried out through the opportunities and constraints of both digital and physical environments, while affordances become meaningful when enacted. This mutual entanglement is especially important for an authoritarian context where being "seen" by the wrong audience can carry heavy consequences.

By emphasising logistical affordances (orchestrated through Telegram, hashtags, and more mundane symbolic chains), the analysis below reveals how activists amplify "in-visibility" (internal distributed visibility) when goals remain opaque or difficult to decipher for the authorities. The analysis demonstrates how anti-war actors can coordinate, motivate each other, and organise a palpable sense of proximity between scattered localities by creating "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1985) through shared symbols and tactical repertoires.

5. Methodology

The data in this article form part of my PhD project, *Infrastructuring the Counter-Publics: Anti-War Civic Engagement in Russian Authoritarian, Militarised and Exile Contexts*, and derive from long-term ethnographic research carried out following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Between 2022 and 2024, I conducted online and offline observations in Georgia and Germany, both of which became informal hubs for anti-war Russians in exile. Additional fieldwork took place in the Czech Republic and in Sweden, where other prominent anti-war diasporic communities have formed. My observations include not only street rallies, such as those in Stockholm and Berlin, but also participant observation of more routine practices embedded in everyday life, such as writing letters to political prisoners and attending activists' conferences and hackathons. In Tbilisi, for example, I visited several co-working spaces where anti-war Russians gathered and a shelter where I conducted interviews with those in exile.

In constructing the ethnographic space of this study, I combined on- and offline observation. Following Postill and Pink's (2012) call to avoid reducing sociality to a "network vs community" dichotomy, I treat "ethnographic places" as emerging through the research process, tracing how localities are intertwined. Accordingly, I regularly followed the public Telegram channels and Instagram accounts of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, the Vesna movement, Russians Against the War (Stockholm), and several civic organisations such as OVD-Info, Go to the Forest, Teplica—Technologies for Social Good—and the open digital space Platforma. During interviews, participants were invited to share links and materials they considered important artefacts of their experience.

I employed purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 45 participants who became involved with Russian anti-war activism either as core organisers of such initiatives—such as the youth movement Vesna and the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR)—or as supportive publics: those who participated in anti-war protests

before they were forced into exile or those who left Russia pre-emptively to avoid potential risks. I interviewed only those who at the time of the interview had left the country to minimise the risk of exposure. Twelve participants left Russia before the war, and 33 during the first two years following the invasion. Core activists were recruited through ethnographic observation at street protests and related events such as conferences and workshops, which enabled me to establish trustful relationships. Participants on the fringes were recruited via snowball sampling: Initial interviewees circulated a recruitment announcement in closed Telegram groups and personal networks. I am not an activist myself and was transparent about my role as a researcher when taking part in these events.

The interviewees were geographically dispersed, reflecting the broad scattering of anti-war actors worldwide. Most were between 25 and 35 years old; more than half were women, others men, and several self-identified as LGBTQ+. I did not systematically collect data on ethnicity. The key inclusion criterion was involvement in anti-war activity, either as activists (organisers, core members of initiatives) or as part of the public who supported anti-war initiatives as volunteers or through mediated engagement, and/or were involved in protest action rallies. The majority of the semi-structured interviews were conducted online, and the length of each interview was between 1 and 1,5 hours. Each interview was structured in four main blocks: the personal background of participants of the study, personal motivations for their involvement in anti-war activism, their media practices and other forms of engagement, and reflections on platform affordances and constraints (upon request).

Standards of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority were adhered to: All participants were informed of the possible risks and gave their consent to have their interviews recorded, provided that the interviews were to be anonymised.

6. Constituting Proximity Across Protest Spaces

6.1. "Memetic Signifiers" as Amplifiers of Visibility

The procession I joined in Stockholm on June 12th, 2022, carried the Ukrainian national flag as well as white-blue-white flags, with a large banner at the front. This new flag design was directly drawn from social media discussions over the Russian tricolour's association with the war, wherein the red field was thought to invoke associations with the colour of blood in its use by Russian military forces to mark occupied territories. As a symbol of anti-war protests, this revamped flag had appeared spontaneously and quickly spread among Russian communities abroad. At that moment, the flag as a symbol of protest helped to map and make visible a number of self-organised anti-war groups and individuals across the world. Here, both the representative and logistical affordances of platforms were enacted in practices (Costa, 2018). Actors used the representation of social media, particularly Instagram, which many refer to as an effective visual instrument, in order to flood online spaces with new white-blue-white symbols (see Figure 1).

In parallel, "logistical affordances" (likes, shares, hashtags) enabled a "thickness" of data (Jansson, 2022), allowing white-blue-white symbols to be tracked, aggregated, and promoted. These protest actions were collected and shared under common memetic banners in social media feeds. As one of the activists from Stockholm noted, one of the first videos that their organisation produced for Instagram was about the white-blue-white flag, and this video became viral. My participants describe how they added

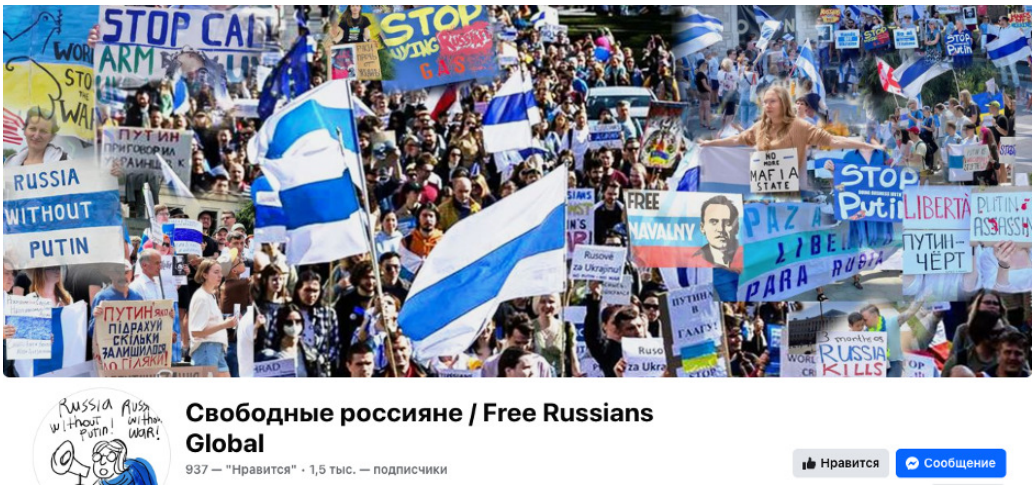

Figure 1. Russian anti-war protests across the globe. Source: Svobodnye rossiyane / Free Russians Global (n.d.).

white-blue-white heart icons to their anti-war messages and posts and would later recognise each other in the streets through this symbol. Gerbaudo (2015) pointed out in his study on the use of the Anonymous mask avatar of Occupy Wall Street that such memetic synchronisation contributed to a collective fusion. In the Russian case, the flow of visual symbols travelling across platforms and physical spaces helped bridge the separation between protesters abroad and those conducting single pickets inside Russia. The white-blue-white flag has become a memetic signifier, allowing anti-war Russians to conceive of themselves as collective subjects and to claim visibility and recognition. Another participant of this study from Germany described the symbolic meaning of the flag for actors from anti-war diasporic groups as follows: "In Germany, it became an important symbol for anti-war Russians, because Putin supporters here organise their manifestations under the Russian tricolour flag. This [white-blue-white] flag is the symbol of the Russian anti-war resistance" (Respondent 042, female, age 30–40).

The symbolic value and the representative meaning that the flag carried, interlocking with collective identity and underlining an anti-war positionality, were important points brought out by my interviewees. While taking the memetic mechanism of aggregation for granted, respondents viewed it rather as a backbone of cultural practices, something that was "becoming" infrastructural for the constitution of proximity between dispersed localities through its intense use.

6.1.1. Hashtags as Spatial Organisers

The hashtag is another type of material object (Krämer & Otto, 2023) that has been recognised in previous studies as an amplifier for public visibility (Papacharissi, 2015; see also hashtag activism). Treré and Bonini (2024) show how activists cope with algorithms and the computational logic of platforms by prompting visibility through the massive use of hashtags, exemplifying this with the technopolitical practices of the Spanish 15-M movement and Me Too. In the Russian case, anti-war protests were widely spread across localities, as there was no possibility of organising any large centralised rally. In this situation, hashtags served not only as instruments of simultaneous connectivity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) but also as another logistical instrument. Thus, as Krämer and Otto (2023) point out, a "hashtag infrastructure allows its user to move through database records and to inscribe something into the database records and thereby

increase its potential reach" (p. 90). This, in my study, describes precisely how hashtags were imagined and enacted by dispersed diaspora-based anti-war groups.

Demonstrations for peace at the outbreak of the war in 2022 involved more than 80 anti-war communities across the world, and their online appearance was often framed through hashtags such as #whitebluewhite, #russiansagainstwar, and #standwithukraine. My participants describe how they aimed to make the hashtags equally open for any political propositions and identities: "We didn't use any words related to…I don't know—liberal values or democracy. Back then we just wanted people against war to join us, and we made our hashtags maximally open for everyone" (Respondent 049, male, age 30–40).

Such openness for anyone means that hashtags link individuals with collectives and enable organised spatio-temporal modes among heterogeneous actors via "synchronisation" (Jordheim & Ytreberg, 2021). In this regard, hashtags as material objects become latent infrastructures for logistics. Unlike "hard infrastructures," they appear as situated in contexts and evoked through practices as both a technology for mobility and a cultural form that carries meaning (Krämer & Otto, 2023).

Figure 2. Instagram hashtag search #russiansagainstwar regarding announcements of anti-war demonstrations: (a) Stockholm, Sweden, (b) Seoul, South Korea, (c) Bellevue, USA. Source: (a) Russians_against_war_se (2024); (b) Tochka_opory_kr (2024); (c) Russianseattleforfreedom (2024).

6.1.2. "Focusers of Attention": Activists as Celebrities and Celebrities as Activists

The newly organised anti-war groups enforce their visibility with the support of those celebrities who have become part of anti-war activism as well as those who have achieved fame by virtue of their activism and management of personal accounts on social media. Such networked "microcelebrity activists" possess an ability to command and focus attention (Tufekci, 2013), making use of the mechanisms of personalised communication and self-representation that platforms encourage. Glazunova and Amadoru (2023) identify "anti-regime influentials" as key social media actors who gained prominence during protests triggered by Alexei Navalny's imprisonment in 2021. Their study demonstrates how influencers across X, YouTube, and Facebook managed algorithmic recommendations to leverage their criticism of the regime and the visibility of their dissent.

Furthermore, the network of celebrities and influencers has become an important amplifier of Russian anti-war activism. One such example is the activist and writer Daria Serenko, who left Russia shortly after the war

and initiated the public Telegram channel FAR, which quickly gained popularity (as of today, FAR has more than 30,000 subscribers). Not least, Daria has become known for her anti-war poetry, autofiction novels, and feminist statements. In her personal accounts on Facebook and Instagram, Serenko shares life stories of activism in exile, of being wanted in her home country, and of making public anti-war statements as a writer and feminist activist. The embeddedness into grassroots activism, as well as the representative power that such microcelebrities wield, puts them in a unique position that facilitates the bringing together of very disparate levels of the anti-war movement and connecting the fringes with the core. As another activist with such a microcelebrity status told me, "after two handshakes we all know each other and we of course coordinate our actions when it is important to make certain things visible" (Respondent 032, female, age 30–40).

Moreover, following the Russian army's invasion of Ukraine, numerous public figures, including musicians, actors, and journalists, who had made anti-war statements were forced into exile. Many were branded as "foreign agents" or were classified as being linked to extremism. A number of these celebrities—for example, the comedian Tatyana Lazareva and the rap musician Noize MC—became integrated with the grassroots, involved with internal communication, and provided another level of visibility of the meso level of anti-war actors:

> We asked so-called leaders of public opinion to support and share information about the upcoming rally. Some people among the organisers knew someone in person, while others we just contacted on social media. Many supported us since it was the first such globally organised action of Russians abroad, they started to share our information. (Respondent 049, male, age 30–40)

Through such organised synchronisation, networks of influencers impose another level of logistics inside Russian anti-war communities, wherein personal accounts with large numbers of followers are used to bypass and rechannel algorithmic logistics in order to amplify the visibility of particular events, providing an arena for recognition. Again, these amplification tactics follow the same pattern as that considered above, relying on different levels of imposed logistics: memetic symbols, hashtags, and personal accounts with a high level of visibility.

6.2. In the Space of In-Visibility

6.2.1. Telegram Connectivity and Evasion Tactics

While anti-war actors outside Russia by and large aim to amplify visibility, the anti-war actors inside the country, under imposed legal restrictions, have been forced to operate under the radar. Treré and Bonini (2024) coined the concept of evasion to describe a form of algorithm-based tactics—for example, when Turkish activists used vernacular images from popular culture for criticism of the president, thus lowering the risk of being detected by the government. In Russia, since the outset of the war, evasion tactics have changed the pattern of everyday usage from algorithmically driven social media platforms to communication on Telegram. The Messenger app was frequently used during the initial anti-war protests but also when there was a crackdown on mass rallies and people urgently began leaving the country.

The youth movement Vesna (Spring) was one of the organisations behind the calls for street protests in Russia. Vesna used loose coordination in Telegram underpinned by Facebook groups previously associated with Alexei

Navalny's headquarters, employing them as a submerged network for establishing contacts with those who could organise, lead, and broadcast protest actions across Russia. One of my respondents from the Vesna movement, which was behind this coordination, describes how the Vesna channel on Telegram began to grow quickly after they had announced their first anti-war rally across the country:

> At the moment when the war started, previous oppositional structures were dysfunctional inside Russia; they were banned as extremist organisations (like, for example, Navalny's foundation), but Vesna still existed plus we were well known among the broader activist community. When we announced an anti-war marathon across the country through our Telegram channels, the information started spreading very quickly. People just reposted our announcement or shared a link because the demand for protest actions was very high….We had something like 1,000 subscribers on the federal Vesna channel, but in the first few months of anti-war protests, we got more than 50,000 followers, and at our last protest wave against mobilisation in April 2022, we had 120,000. (Respondent 012, male, age 25–35)

My respondents describe how, at the beginning of the war (before the pro-war so-called "Z-channels" began actively mastering Telegram for pro-war mobilisation), citizens taking steps into protest actions were sending each other direct links inviting each other to join newly appeared anti-war groups and channels.

Elena, an actress at a small alternative theatre, joined anti-war rallies in Saint Petersburg in February 2022. She started following Vesna's public channel, which was then gaining in popularity. In parallel, she joined small "secret chats" where people were invited through "friends of friends" and which became informal coordination points for them, mainly self-organised, chaotic, and spontaneous. Many of Elena's friends followed the OVD-Info public channel, a civil rights organisation providing monitoring and legal aid, for example, to those who had been detained:

> There was a lack of coordination, of course, but we, for example, also followed the OVD-Info channel. They regularly published information on where people were detained and constantly updated these statistics. This helped us, also, to regulate our actions on the streets to avoid the places where we could be caught by the police. Plus, OVD-Info could ask their followers to call the police to find people who had been detained….I myself helped find such people, those who were detained and needed legal assistance. (Respondent 041, female, age 25–35)

Through Telegram's connectivity, such organisations as OVD-Info and a number of other civic and journalistic projects made protest actions and cases of detention visible. In parallel, these organisations also posted detailed instructions on how to prepare for protests—recommending, among other things, methods for locking away sensitive information on mobile phones and whom to contact in the case of arrest and the need for legal assistance. Another participant of the anti-war rallies in Moscow described how he printed and distributed leaflets that had been circulating on Telegram, spreading them on the street:

> When you go for a street protest, you feel jitters in your body, and you try to overcome them. For these rallies in February, I took my backpack with warm socks, water, and leaflets. I printed OVD-Info leaflets on how to behave in the case of police detention and gave them to people on the streets.

> Why did you decide to spread these instructions on the streets? Were you somehow affiliated with the organisation?
>
> No, I wasn't, but I felt this duty; I wanted to do something meaningful. After the first crackdowns, it was evident that we needed better preparation for street rallies. (Respondent 017, male, age 25–35)

The combination of Telegram chatbot connectivity and representativity on social media has facilitated chains of logistical actions (Jansson, 2022) among anti-war actors. Such actions, as Jansson denotes, are not only the labour of users for the benefit of platforms, but they also strive to enable the communicative process and promote a sense of conducting meaningful actions (Jansson, 2022, p. 155). This is precisely how many of my participants reflect on their reliance on Telegram, which they appropriated for logistics, providing self-organised coordination between multiple actors—organisations and individuals.

6.2.2. Organising Logistics: Between Streets and Streams

The aftermath of the 2022 anti-war protests resulted in mass repression (reaching its peak in the first months of the war, with nearly 20,000 people detained). Thus, what began as tactical contention evolved into a more strategic use of media technologies for protest resilience in the face of growing control and repression. My respondents among the activists expressed the need to continuously adapt to a rapidly changing context, lacking organisational and human resources, and looking for new and more strategic forms of resistance. As one of the Vesna movement activists explained, "because many were detained and started leaving the country, we had to change the format of protest actions to a more decentralised one" (Respondent 012, male, age 25–35).

Movements like Vesna and FAR used their public channels on Telegram and Instagram to post anti-war symbols, slogans, leaflets, and stickers, which anyone could print and disseminate on the streets. In parallel, they produced visual cards with instructions for self-protection for those who were spreading anti-war agitation on the streets, which were circulating across social media—Instagram and Telegram channels primarily. At the same time, Telegram was utilised for a kind of reverse loop: Those who went on to the streets would take pictures of anti-war agitation and submit them via chatbots to Vesna, FAR, or other channels, which then created daily updates on protest actions (see Figure 3). As expressed by a Vesna activist, they adopted media infrastructures for these new dispersed actions:

> People themselves started sending to our chatbot, at first, anti-war graffiti and leaflets. We realised that we could create an infrastructure for these actions. So we started generating leaflet templates on Instagram that people could print themselves and spread on the streets. At the very beginning, we received endless flows of such anti-war pictures in our chatbot, 300-500 per day. (Respondent 012, male, age 25–35)

Figure 3. Daily updates of anti-war agitation: (a) campaign "Mariopul-5000", (b) campaign "No war!" Source: (a) FAR (2022a); (b) Vesna (2025).

What seemed to be single and separated pieces of anti-war agitation on the streets, in the overlap of Instagram's visual affordances and Telegram's organised logistics, enabled datafied "semantic units" (Milan, 2015) that linked images, separated localities, and comments, making the anti-war actors visible to themselves and others on social media and also on the streets. In this way, my participant living in Stockholm recognised other people attending a protest on Sergels Torg with a white cross—a symbol that members of the FAR initiative were spreading in Russian cities after the assaults on the Ukrainian city of Mariupol:

> I came to the square and immediately recognised the people with a white cross sign—Mariupol-5000, which I had seen on Instagram or maybe Telegram, I don't remember—used by activists in Russia, and that is how I met the people with whom we later organised the Feminist Anti-War cell in Stockholm. (Respondent 051, female, age 25–35)

In other words, Telegram enabled the logistical orchestration of fragmented street agitation and also datafied streams on social media, since people received direct links to particular Instagram accounts or Telegram channels. The reliance on Telegram not only provided anonymity but also propelled logistics for poly-centric coordination.

6.2.3. Hijacking as Counter-Logistical Intervention

Treré and Bonini (2024) designated "hijacking" as a common form of activist tactics for disturbing, for example, the algorithmic flow of hashtags. Here, I consider hijacking as a form of logistical intervention organised with the use of material and technological resources (both digital and physical) at the disposal of anti-war actors, looking at how such actors maintained the regime of in-visibility through "intervention *into*" existing communicative flows in order to disturb them (Jansson, 2022, p. 158).

Go to the Forest (Russian name Idite lesom) is an organisation that provides legal and financial support for Russian deserters and draft evaders (Telegram channel is *Go to the forest* [t.me/iditelesom_help] with 112,500 subscribers in October 2024). Idite lesom is what you would figuratively say to someone to mean "go away," "get out of here," "get lost," and the name carries a double meaning since literally hiding in the forest is recognised as a common method for avoiding conscription. The organisation also provides and spreads information and instructions on how to protect relatives and friends from army conscription.

On October 1st, 2024, following rumours of a new mobilisation drive (the Russian government has, thus far, seemed determined to avoid the word "mobilisation" and never announced any official date), Go to the Forest announced an anti-war marathon, encouraging their followers to draw anti-war symbols by tracing their geolocation history while running. Step-by-step instructions were published, detailing how to perform anti-war routes by using the mobile app Strava for ranging and how to submit the task via a chatbot where images were published on Go to the Forest's Telegram channel. Such marathons additionally functioned as fundraisers, with a 20€ fee for each participant. Tactics such as these could be said to have gone beyond algorithmic hijacking (Treré & Bonini, 2024) in rather imposing logistical intervention into physical and digital spaces: superimposing anti-war traces onto maps of Russian cities and linking them with marathon runners abroad (see Figure 4). Also, such protest actions have been considered comparatively safe to conduct inside Russia.

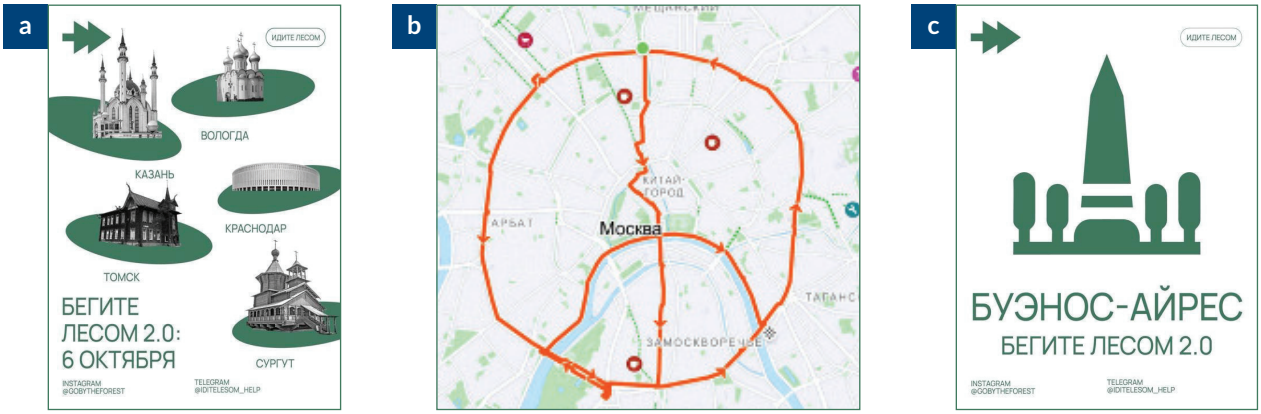

Figure 4. Announcements of anti-war marathon "Run to the Forest": (a) Russian cities, (b) the anti-war route, Moscow, and (c) Buenos Aires. Source: (a) Go to the Forest (2024a), (b) Go to the Forest (2024b), (c) Go to the Forest (2024c).

Anti-war banknotes are another similar example of a logistical intervention launched as a campaign by the FAR. They promoted the use of banknotes and coins with added anti-war inscriptions, utilising money as a medium of logistics for the distribution of anti-war agitation. As their step-by-step instruction underlines, the initial link (the creator of the inscription) would soon become lost in the chain of exchanges. However, following intensified state restrictions, performing even such mundane actions inside the country has turned out to carry high risks of imprisonment.

In spring 2024, FAR began disseminating digital anti-war Easter postcards using the vernacular style of such digital cards that is popular among Russian users for sending congratulations via messenger apps or on Russian social media such as Odnoklassniki or Vkontakte (Figure 5). While the two examples above were aimed at interfering in the physical realm, the dissemination of anti-war Easter cards was organised as an

intervention into everyday communication by simulating the particular visual aesthetic of such communication but providing it with an explicit anti-war message. It became popular to send these cards to relatives or friends via WhatsApp or Telegram to declare one's anti-war position (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Anti-war banknotes (a) and anti-war postcard (b). Notes: (a) Money with anti-war slogans, and (b) Easter postcard, "enough of the war." Source: (a) Vesna (2022); (b) FAR (2022b).

These examples highlight how anti-war actors organise (counter-)logistical actions for interfering in the public realm. This kind of hijacking relies on logistical affordances and their hybrid operability between the physical and the digital realms. By focusing on evasion and hijacking as key tactics, the analysis views them not only as algorithmic manoeuvres but as intertwined with socio-spatial infrastructures and material objects at the disposal of actors. These tactics encompass how anti-war actors aim to insert anti-war agitation into the everyday-life continuum, and to interfere in public spaces by organising proximity between streets and streams.

7. Discussion

Through the lens of media affordances, this article has examined two interconnected research questions: first, how proximity between protest spaces has played out inside Russia, where street rallies were criminalised and social media monitored, and outside Russia by actors in exile; and second, how anti-war Russians leveraged media affordances to organise covert street actions in the country and link them with coordinated rallies abroad to sustain collective agency across dispersed and high-risk settings.

In response to the first question, the study indicates that actors outside Russia primarily aimed for "visibility" in order to constitute a collective we among separated groups in exile and gain recognition as collective actors, whereas inside the country, they sought *in*-visibility by looking for tactics that would work under increasing repression (lacking organisational resources and with diminishing possibilities for open protests).

In exile, anti-war actors have aimed to establish collective agency through "amplified visibility" (Treré & Bonini, 2024). Dispersed and separated anti-war groups across the world have coped with the algorithmic

logic of platforms, as discussed. They have tactically achieved amplification by combining different affordances of platforms: representational and logistical. The memetic white-blue-white flag, Instagram visuals, and celebrity endorsements are representational affordances. In parallel, dispersed diaspora-based anti-war groups have developed hashtags—#whitebluewhite, #russiansagainstwar, and #standwithukraine—providing logistics and functioning as "an infrastructure of mobility, navigation, and reach" (Krämer & Otto, 2023, p. 90). These multiple layers were captured and streamlined through Telegram's direct communication and coordination between a number of newly appeared anti-war initiatives that aimed to unite individuals. The analysis reveals how anti-war actors used Telegram for logistical orientation across informational streams by sharing direct links and also for polycentric coordination among separated groups abroad, whereas on mainstream platforms, orientation was underpinned by hashtags and templates as logistical organisers.

Domestically, anti-war actors followed paths of evasion and hijacking (Treré & Bonini, 2024). Evasion was initially about avoiding algorithmic or state detection but developed as repression intensified, shifting protests into small-scale, decentralised actions. Yet, as the empirical findings show, such tactics were not merely related to the algorithmic logic of the mainstream platforms. Instead, actors aimed to facilitate chains of "logistical actions" in order to highlight street anti-war agitation with datafied streams to make it visible for audiences on social media. Movements like Vesna, FAR, and human rights organisations like OVD-Info used their public channels on Telegram and Instagram to post anti-war symbols, slogans, leaflets, and stickers, which anyone could print and disseminate on the streets of Russia. Telegram was utilised for a reverse loop—to submit pictures of anti-war agitation on the street via Telegram's chatbots to the anti-war channels of Vesna or FAR, which then created daily updates on protest actions. To hijack communicative flows (Treré & Bonini, 2024), actors advanced counter-logistical interventions. These interventions use existing logistical channels—maps, money, or greetings—to carry dissent into everyday life. Such tactics helped to establish the "regime of in-visibility"—a repertoire of protest actions under repression and surveillance.

Turning to RQ2, the study reveals how a trade-off between in-visibility and visibility shaped collective agency; yet, these two regimes overlapped and linked actors in exile and inside Russia. The collective agency has been exercised through organised polycentric coordination among activists in exile and people disseminating anti-war messages on Russian streets. Such coordination also facilitated risk distribution—actors in exile made anti-war agitation from Russian streets visible on platform streams, whereas those in the country took the risk of direct action. Ultimately, in failing to organise mass anti-war rallies in the country, anti-war actors manage to create a "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1985)—the offstage criticism of power voiced among multiple subordinated groups both inside and outside Russia. That contributed to finding and keeping open a venue for an action repertoire of political contention directed against the state and its attempts to establish loyalty and maintain the status quo in Russian society regarding the war against Ukraine. The collective agency of anti-war civic activists is not a unified or stable ideology but a processual capacity to act together despite disagreements and frictions, continually generated through proximity.

8. Conclusion

The ethnographic data and interviews presented in this article have demonstrated that social media networks do not generate protest spaces; rather, such spaces depend on the proximity that can be

constituted through mediated interactions between geographic localities. By operationalising Treré and Bonini's (2024) framework, the analysis emphasises how amplification, evasion, and hijacking are enabled within infrastructural affordances.

Placing Telegram as embedded into the broader media ecology of anti-war activism, the study makes an important contribution in that the platform not only provided actors with anonymity but also became an important "site of logistics." Telegram chatbots and channels (as well as other logistical organisers like hashtags and memetic templates) were widely used, enabling initially spontaneous and fragmented instances of anti-war agitation on the streets to be converted into streams of semantically coherent units. Moreover, logistics have been especially vital for coordination and navigation amid divergent contexts: rising authoritarian pressure inside Russia and the global dispersion of exile groups. Hence, proximity to a large extent depends on the coordination and logistical intensifications that Telegram fosters.

In her theoretical account, Massey (2005) shows how proximity privileges some actors (e.g., regime centres with media control) while distancing others (e.g., dispersed activists under surveillance), yet civic activists can counter this by manufacturing alternative proximities through polycentric coordination by turning relational closeness into hidden forms of solidarity.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

In accordance with the approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Reference number 2023-00388-01), the research data of this project is anonymised and stored on Karlstad University's system Sunet Drive, accessible only to the researchers of the project. Anonymised outtakes from interviews can be provided by the author at request.

LLMs Disclosure

LLMs have been used for grammar revision, syntax, and coherence of sentences.

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Svetlana Chuikina is completing her PhD at Karlstad University, Sweden. Her dissertation, *Infrastructuring Counterpublics*, examines how citizens enact media technologies as infrastructures of resistance in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine. She applies a phenomenological perspective, studying media technologies as material conditions of human experience.

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From Virtual Exile to Digital Futures: The Nigerian Entertainment Industry's Quest to Re-Enchant "Africa"

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Abstract

Amidst economic austerity and institutionalized gerontocracy and tribalism, Southern Nigerian youth experience persistent disillusionment with their national leadership. Global media has fueled a longing for a more viable "elsewhere"—a phenomenon popularly referred to as "virtual exile" or "mental secession" in the megacity of Lagos. Yet, young people also invest in digital technology with the hope of "making it from Africa." Over the past decade, Lagos has emerged as a global entertainment hub, propelled by the virality of Nigerian content on streaming and social media platforms. This article examines how algorithmic imaginaries interact with the phenomenology of place. It situates Nigerian engagement with digital media within Africanist histories of technology's incorporation into local cosmologies. It then presents empirical data collected through long-term ethnographic research in the Afrobeats industry, focusing on African and Afro-diasporic platform representatives on the one hand, and Lagos aspiring youth on the other. The article traces digital entrepreneurship's function as both an economic strategy and an ideological project—one that re-enchants places and futures that otherwise seem hopeless. As digital professionals seek to appeal to the "global" gaze, this article shows that their efforts operate largely inwardly by reshaping local subjectivities. Nigerian youth embrace new technology's promise of extraordinary transformation with an intentionality akin—and in many ways tied—to faith. Techno-optimist discourse can then be seen as a strategy from below to cultivate agency and commitment to place under systemic failure.

Keywords

Afrobeats; African digital culture; Afro-optimism; algorithmic imaginaries; digital platforms; Global South; Nigerian migration; techno-optimism

1. Introduction

As Nigeria's commercial and entertainment capital, the coastal city of Lagos is enacted as a gateway to global markets in the worlding trajectory of Nigerian cultural production. "Lagos to the world," "Nigeria to the world," and "Africa to the world" are used interchangeably as slogans and prayers among the megacity's youth, as its digital content increasingly enters the transnational media landscape. Nigerian professionals are highly aware of digital circulation's power to project representations that shape the global imagination and intentionally harness social media's affordances to ground the symbols of economic development in African spaces. Self-described "brand influencer" Charity Ekezie states: "Africa has zero PR in the West," and frames this as the motivation for her humorous videos asserting the continent's modernity that earned her second place in TikTok's Top Creator 2022 Sub-Saharan Africa awards (Johnson, 2024). Nowhere is this logic more visible than with Afrobeats, the international name for Nigerian popular music that boomed through the use of digital production and distribution tools. Despite Afrobeats' early reliance on the Nigerian transnational ethnoscape and its increasing embeddedness in networks of global capital, symbolically charged narrative practices constantly re-center it in Lagos. For example, Spotify's Head of Music for Sub-Saharan Africa, while based in Dubai herself, writes in *The Guardian* about "The Nigerianification of the World: Why Lagos is now a Global Tastemaker City" (Okumu, 2022).

By conspicuously locating the viral music genre's commercial center in Africa's most populous city, African and Afro-diasporic professionals invert the representational dynamics governing the continent's place in the global economy. Literature on the neoliberal order has mostly featured "Africa" as a site of resource extraction by foreign actors, where productive enclaves are purposely disconnected from urban centers—offshore oil fields, remote mining sites, and deep forest concessions (Appel, 2012; Ferguson, 2006; Hendriks, 2021). This framing has gained renewed significance within critical discussions of "digital colonialism" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Staab, 2024), in which African societies are often cast simply as grounds for extraction or experimentation (Gravett, 2020; Kwet, 2019; Obi, 2024). Against these placeless economic interactions, entertainment and platform professionals explicitly seek to construct Lagos as a space of youthful creativity and commercial potential in the digital era. To convey this potential, they sometimes even reappropriate the resource narrative underpinning Nigeria's status as Africa's largest oil producer. Thus, Nigerian artist and digital entrepreneur Mr. Eazi told his 4.6 million followers via an Instagram Story in January 2025: "Online marketing is like oil and gas if you do it right."

This article explores how efforts explicitly aimed at the external gaze end up operating inwardly, reshaping local subjectivities. Positive imaginative potential is scarce in Nigeria: Only 6 percent of youth surveyed in 2024 believe the country is moving in the right direction (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 19). Yet 89 percent expect their own standard of living to improve very soon (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 60). The article argues that digital technologies play a key role in producing this paradoxical situation. With an average of 4 hours and 36 minutes daily, Nigerians spend the longest time on social media in the world (DataReportal, 2023). On one hand, it heightens youths' frustrations with their local environment by exposing them to a steady stream of cosmopolitan lifestyles. On the other hand, social media fuels a discourse of personal possibility and visibility, sustaining the hope to "make it from Africa." Two-thirds of young Nigerians report that social media improves their mental health—by far the highest rate on the continent (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 111). Individual aspiration then becomes the locus of faith, mediated by digital platforms.

Capturing the nuances of African platform imaginaries and how they interact with the phenomenology of place requires qualitative, situated, and historically grounded analysis. The research takes the specificity of a leading site of African digital culture as starting point, drawing on a long-term ethnography of the Nigerian entertainment industry. The article first lays out the theoretical framework, drawing on both Africanist and media studies literature. Following a presentation of the methodology, it then traces recent historical shifts in Southern Nigeria, situating engagement with digital media at the juncture of political, economic, social, and religious dynamics. Empirical observations are presented next, followed by a brief discussion and conclusion. Together, the sections show that faith in digital media serves as a strategy to cultivate agency under systemic failure, enabling commitment to places that would otherwise seem hopeless.

2. Theoretical Framework

The article follows Wasserman's (2021, p. 21) call to "foreground the social" in African digital media studies. It implies resisting an a priori North–South hierarchy that would reduce African digital media participants into mere data. Instead, an epistemology that centers the situated signifying frameworks, political imaginaries, and social relations through which digital technologies are mobilized locally asserts their agency and dignity against long histories of data extraction (Wasserman, 2021, p. 30). In a similar vein, Newell and Pype (2021) argue that the decolonization of the virtual starts with the recovery and amplification of its conceptualization in African societies.

In *The Colony*, Mbembe (2006, p. 112) describes the pillars of "the metaphysics of life" in West and Central Africa as "the communal state between human beings on one side and, on the other, objects, nature, and invisible forces." He argues that this enduring pre-colonial division makes human beings the plaything of realities that surpass them, and notes that the form of this economy of subordination constantly changes. Since the pre-colonial era, West African systems of thought have indeed been characterized by constant reconfiguration and adaptation (Guyer, 1996). This dynamic remains particularly salient among the Yoruba, the dominant ethnic group in Lagos, who describe themselves as "traditionally" open to new practices and objects, as long as they are efficacious (Adedeji, 2010; Waterman, 1990). In 2016, in the Abiola lecture at the African Studies Association annual meeting in Washington, DC, Mbembe suggested a parallel between African cosmological understandings and cultural representations of digital social space.

There is indeed a general recognition that from the perspective of cultural narratives and political power, "technology often functions as magic" (Davis, 2015, p. 172). In Western contexts, the wonder, awe, and terror that it provokes has been described as the "technological sublime" (Nye, 1996). These deep-rooted cultural representations ground the social reception of complex, transformative, and "mythical" (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022) contemporary technologies such as algorithms. Pype (2012) already showed how communication technologies such as television, radio, and phones became embedded in bewitchment and healing practices in Central Africa, where technology is invested with spiritual qualities that in turn impact individual users. With the advance of the digital—a fortiori, artificial intelligence—technology everywhere is depicted as an "autonomous agent, a determinist force" that acts upon our societies (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022, p. 864). It is tied to the notion of "rupture," which can fuel techno-optimist claims. As described by Mager and Katzenbach (2021), these claims are the product of contingent hype but have powerful effects in how they structure actors and resources. While these analyses operate from a Western perspective with governments, institutions, and private companies in mind, the faith in technology can also be mobilized from below.

As Newell and Pype (2021, p. 14) write, a guiding question for the decolonization of the virtual then becomes "who is playing with the technological possibilities" in African contexts, where states "often block rather than promote entrepreneurship." In this article, I approach it through the booming Nigerian entertainment industry, specifically music. As Seaver (2022) and Born (2022) remind us in their respective landmark studies of digitalization, the music industry serves a "prophetic" function by offering a testing ground for new technology, anticipating broader transformations. It was the first major sector of cultural production to confront the challenges and opportunities offered by the Internet (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). In Nigeria, it has also been the blueprint for mobilizing digital opportunities, as I will show in Section 4. Furthermore, music in Lagos has historically been intertwined with social change (Alaja-Browne, 1989; Waterman, 1990), making it a compelling heuristic entry point.

3. Methodology

The data presented in this article comes primarily from a long-term ethnography of the Nigerian entertainment industry. It consisted of interviews and sustained participant observation in Lagos (2018–2020) and online (2018–2025), following participants across networked online and offline spaces, as outlined in the methodological framework proposed by Lane and Marler (2022). Punctual research trips were also conducted in Paris, London, and Dubai (2021–2023). The research participants included: (a) African and Afro-diasporic entertainment and platform professionals at music streaming, distribution, aggregation, and downloading services, and (b) Lagos-based aspiring dancers, singers, and other creators of content (including bloggers, DJs, and behind-the-scenes photographers).

Part (a) centered on an ethnography of the Lagos office of Chinese-owned Boomplay—then Africa's leading music streaming platform, before being overtaken by Audiomack—where I followed participants for three months in 2019. It also draws on interviews and participant-observation with African and Afro-diasporic digital professionals across Lagos, Paris, London, and Dubai. These included notably professionals at American audio discovery platform Audiomack, Swedish music streaming platform Spotify, Nigerian music streaming platform UduX, American short-form video sharing platform Triller, Nigerian music downloading service NotJustOk, American digital music distributor Empire, and Nigerian music distributor and curator Ingle Mind Digital Concept. Semi-structured interviews lasting between one and three hours were conducted with 24 informants. The most substantive data was collected through participant-observation in semi-informal settings, including industry conferences, concerts, club nights, and other events where professional and social spheres overlapped, as well as through ongoing contact on social media. Some of these professionals had private social media profiles. All participants gave consent to take part in the research and be quoted. Where appropriate, quotes were anonymized, reflecting the moral relationship between anthropologist and informant, as outlined in the Ethical Guidelines 2021 of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK.

The aspiring entertainers in part (b) were aged 14 to 30, approximately two-thirds male, and lived mainly in the Lagos neighborhoods of Bariga, Mushin, and Agege. Some had university degrees, others had dropped out of school. Several had moved to Lagos alone, hoping to "make it." Only a few held formal employment. They were recruited through online contact, entertainment events, and snowball sampling. While a few participants were minors, they were not formally enrolled in the study and no personal data or quotations were collected from them. For others, consent to participate in the research was obtained orally.

No interviews were conducted, as such a format was unfamiliar and caused intimidation. Instead, data was gathered through direct observation, informal conversations, and "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) during such occasions as dance rehearsals, studio sessions, content creation sessions, social gatherings, and while following participants throughout their day. I lived six months intermittently in Bariga, sharing a room with aspiring dance content creators, which provided direct access to community events and daily interactions. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms.

My work as a researcher was facilitated by the aspirational frameworks and the imaginaries of connectivity that this article addresses. The fact that I am not related to Nigeria through kinship or ethnic ties meant that I fit perfectly within the narrative—still largely performative in the late 2010s—that the Lagos entertainment industry was "going global." I was often introduced from one person to another as "someone from Oxford who has come to study how we do things here." "Study" in this context did not refer to the colonially charged study of the Other as a curiosity, but to the study of a successful model in order to learn and replicate it. My interlocutors' confident self-representation as upwardly mobile "entrepreneurs"—whether they were aspiring TikTok dancers or corporate professionals—made them very willing to engage with me. It was a way to both assert their position as knowledgeable experts who can "teach" a Western scholar, but also as part of their constant efforts toward self-actualization, at a time when a fantastic sense of opportunity pervaded the air, yet data was scarce.

The following section situates these ethnographic insights by drawing on historical sources and my interviews with industry pioneers to contextualize the emergence of the Afrobeats industry and the stakes of digital media engagement in Southern Nigeria.

4. Media, Privatization, and the Rise of Pentecostal Governmentality

4.1. Historical Backdrop

Nigeria, known as the "African Giant," gained independence from the UK in 1960. This ushered in a period of optimism grounded in the reappropriation of colonial positivist teleologies (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010; Apter, 2005; Piot, 2010). The postcolonial vision of utopian modernization was bolstered by the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in the late 1960s (Ekanade, 2014; Frynas, 2000). During the 1970s, oil-fueled growth translated into visible infrastructural and institutional expansion (Apter, 2005). The oil economy fueled the rise of Nigeria's first music superstars, such as Ebenezer Obe and King Sunny Ade, whose success reflected the broader national euphoria. Corporations like Sony Music and EMI increased their presence in Lagos.

By the 1980s, a downturn in global oil prices exposed the fragility of the Nigerian economy. The ensuing fiscal crisis opened the door to a structural adjustment program (SAP) mandated by the International Monetary Fund (Anyanwu, 1992). These reforms, which emphasized privatization, deregulation, and fiscal austerity, dismantled the post-independence model of state-led development. One of the immediate casualties was the music industry. Foreign corporations withdrew, with Sony relocating to South Africa and EMI moving its regional headquarters to Abidjan (Servant, 2003, p. 34; see also Adedeji, 2010). Piracy proliferated, currency instability took hold, and the international infrastructure that had supported the Lagos scene unraveled. By the end of the decade, the local music ecosystem had largely collapsed.

The fate of Nigeria's vibrant cultural industries paralleled deep changes in national prospects. The once-expansive state could no longer absorb graduates into stable jobs, eroding the developmentalist social contract (Apter, 2005). The optimism of the postcolonial decades gave way to widespread feelings of disillusionment, articulated through the affective registers of loss and trauma. To this day, Nigerians often fondly remember the era of functioning public services—a time "when foreigners would come to Nigeria for medical treatment in our government hospitals"—alongside the world-famous cultural life. The collapse of the economy also led to the withdrawal of global consumer brands that had been part of the Nigerian commercial landscape since the colonial era, making them symbolic markers of a "lost" modernity (Piot, 2010). Liberalization reforms thus had a long-lasting impact, experienced both as material deprivation and a narrowing of the imagined possibilities tied to Nigeria.

Exclusion from the global economic order also deeply affected cultural identity through symbolic erasure (Ferguson, 2006). The privatization of TV and radio led to the proliferation of new channels, creating a demand largely filled by Western cultural imports (Akpan, 2006). Through South African intermediaries, American conglomerates such as Viacom saturated Nigerian media with US entertainment—especially music videos (Shonekan, 2013). As Africanists have noted, the SAP reinscribed colonial dynamics. The African subject was once again positioned as objectified and spoken for, rather than a speaking participant in global circuits of value and meaning (Ferguson, 2006; Marshall, 2009; Mbembe, 2006). The aggressive austerity measures and economic decline also triggered waves of emigration—primarily to the US and the UK (Mbegu & Pongou, 2010; Odoemene & Osuji, 2015)—compounding the feeling that sovereignty is located "elsewhere." There, young, educated Nigerians often encountered racialization and economic precarity, feeding a sense of symbolic exclusion and cultural marginality.

4.2. A Dual Contemporary Situation

The poverty and abjection that afflict Lagos have received considerable attention (Agbiboa, 2022; Koolhaas et al., 2000), as shown in evocative titles such as "Lagos: Surviving Hell" (Subirós, 2001) or the use of Lagos as a key illustration for Robert Kaplan's influential *The Coming Anarchy* (2000). Beyond these external representations, structural conditions shape the way in which people conceptualize their own environment, with "themes of insecurity" and "precarity" piecing together "a phenomenology of Lagos life" (Agbiboa, 2022, p. 124). In 2024, 85 percent of Nigerian youth reported plans to emigrate within three years (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 70). This collective longing for "the abroad" constitutes what Piot (2010) calls "virtual exile." In Lagos, it is commonly referred to as "mental secession," a state in which hope is channeled to the promise of foreign lands rather than local institutions. The "Nigerian factor" is widely believed to block self-actualization, discouraging people from investing effort or resources in their immediate environment.

Yet, almost 90 percent of Nigerian youth remain confident in their own success in the near future (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 60). Pentecostal Christianity cultivates this sense of agency in the face of seemingly insurmountable collective challenges. In Meyer's words, it provides "the possibility of some sort of individualism and closure" (Meyer, 2009, p. 14). As elsewhere in Africa, economic liberalization in Nigeria was accompanied by the phenomenal rise and appeal of Pentecostal churches (Marshall, 2009; Obadare, 2016; Wariboko, 2014). Lagos, in particular, has been described as "the Pentecostal locomotive" of Africa (Quayson, 2010, p. 326). Pentecostalism celebrates the modern, the urban, and the transnational, encouraging believers to seize neoliberal capitalism's consumerist possibilities and media technologies

(Meyer, 2009; Quayson, 2010)—values that resonate in Africa's entertainment capital. Accordingly, the pursuit of accumulation is not only normalized but morally elevated.

4.3. The Rise of Nigerian Digital Entertainment

All the trends above have collided in the digital age, spawning the Afrobeats movement. Since the 2010s, Nigerian artists have come to dominate the African and global pop music scene—a historical reversal so remarkable that even skeptics of Pentecostal claims about thaumaturgic power might call it a miracle. Afrobeats tracks regularly chart worldwide and have reached number one positions across Asia, Europe, and Latin America, propelled by digital platforms and viral social media circulation. When Spotify launched in 85 new markets in 2021, Nigeria alone accounted for 15 percent of the newly added artists on the platform (Spotify, 2022). Nigerian artists now make up 61 percent of all music streams in the country—the highest share for domestic artists in Africa and the Middle East (Luminate, 2025).

Tracing its origins to the late-1990s Lagos scene, Afrobeats emerged at the convergence of post-SAP economic realities and the rise of accessible digital technology. Cassettes of American and Caribbean music, along with home studio equipment, initially arrived through the expanding diasporic networks. Nigerian youths then used Digital Audio Workstations to produce rhythm-driven, densely layered tracks that hybridized hip hop, dancehall, and West African genres like highlife and fuji. Early local circulation was fueled by pirated mixtapes, emerging private Nigerian and continental radio and TV channels, and diaspora-oriented satellite media. Launched in 2006 by US-based Nigerian computer engineer Demola Ogundele, the music downloading platform NotJustOK connected the diaspora with the booming Lagos scene, fostering the sense of a shared transnational space in Nigeria and of positive identification among the diasporic African middle class (Shipley, 2013). This would later support the industry's globalization.

These flows took a new turn with the advent of digital platforms as distribution tools. While Lagos artists and record labels initially uploaded their content online without a particular strategy, algorithms propelled Nigerian cultural production to the world. Launched in 2005, YouTube played a major, albeit unintentional, role in the mass popularization of Nigerian music. Over time, circulation expanded through the recommendation systems of music streaming platforms, and more recently through social media, where viral dance challenges and user-generated content have become key drivers of Afrobeats' visibility. In recent years, the function of platforms has shifted from passive intermediaries to active participants in African music industries, pushing Nigerian content to global subscribers through targeted campaigns developed with artists' teams and influencers. This shift has been driven in large part by African and Afro-diasporic professionals who enthusiastically steered platform expansion into the continent, as the next section will explore.

5. Empirical Observations

5.1. African and Afro-Diasporic Platform Professionals

The internalized—yet contested—(in)visibility of "Africa's giant" runs deep for a generation whose lifeworld has been shaped by the global offensive of corporate media at the turn of the millennium. Most influential Nigerian platform professionals are in their early 40s. A recurring theme in interviews and personal conversations is

the memory of international music—mainly American, British, and Jamaican hits—blasting throughout Lagos as they were growing up. This backdrop is invoked as motivation or to emphasize how dramatically things have changed. Temitope Omole, senior director at the Digital Acceleration Office for Africa at The Coca-Cola Company, recalls: "You just can't imagine how it was back in the day. You'd go to a wedding in Surulere [then a middle-class Lagos neighborhood], and you wouldn't hear a single Nigerian song. Now it's the opposite!" She previously worked on the development of the music platform Cloud 9 by Emirati-owned telecom operator Etisalat in Nigeria, and views that role through a patriotic lens. She states: "Talented Nigerians were given an opportunity for the first time."

This shift holds significant affective value for middle-class corporate professionals, who were particularly exposed to international media representations through a cosmopolitan upbringing. Many spent extensive periods in the UK or the US and commonly recall: "It really wasn't cool being African growing up. You would always try to lie and say you're Jamaican." Oyebowale Akideinde exemplifies this cohort. Currently General Manager of Digital Products & Innovation at the Indian telecom group Airtel, he previously led OTT music services at South Africa's MTN—where he set up the Music Time digital platform—after serving as regional director at Boomplay. Akideinde studied computer science in the UK, identifies as a "hip hop head," and was also strongly influenced by British grime. He explains: "You know how hip hop was born in the Bronx, then evolved and was the first Black genre to go global, so Afrobeats is the next thing like that." While developing Boomplay in 2018, he described his efforts to obtain the rights of international artists to me in the following terms: "We want to also have foreign artists on the platform, so you can have Wizkid next to a Beyoncé and people will see that they are on the same level." With contemporary Nigerian pop and gospel artists eclipsing any Western or Caribbean star among African grassroots consumers—Boomplay's target market—this business strategy is framed around categorical equality rather than profitability.

Human leadership of digital platforms is constantly foregrounded as the site of power in informal conversations with African practitioners. Informants often highlight the importance of personal connection in processes of algorithmic recommendation and virality. For example, an executive at a music streaming platform described:

> All the artists, they try to get my number. They know that if they can get in touch with me and I like their new song, we can work something out. I can make you #1 in your country, I can make you top 10 in Africa, we know how to do those things.

Spotify's Head of Music for Sub-Saharan Africa, Phiona Okumu, publicly declared: "Spotify is as much a tech-driven company as it is a cultural champion." Such affirmative rhetoric signals a discursive break for platforms, away from the "implied neutrality" (Gillespie, 2010) of simple intermediaries.

Recent high-profile appointments at international platforms and the efflorescence of local platforms across Africa have been steeped in the language of identity and cultural affirmation. Many of the African professionals operating in those spaces have a background in the continent's music industries and continue to see themselves as cultural brokers, rather than "tech professionals." Presenting themselves publicly as "stakeholders" in the continent's emergence, they frame technology as a conjunctural vehicle for cultural agency. For example, Charlotte Bwana, currently vice president of marketing and brand strategy EMEA at Audiomack, was part of Nigerian superstar Davido's team before her corporate career. During our interview,

she framed platforms' intervention as necessary and generative. Having helped launch Audiomack's first African office in Lagos, she passionately justified her role at the American tech company: "We're creating jobs in Africa, creating African playlists, pushing local African artists to global audiences. We're also organizing events locally, supporting festivals, funding studio sessions." When pressed on the structural inequalities shaping global platform governance, she balanced it with the urgent need for the material resources that digital corporations can bring to African creative industries and youth-driven economies. She emphasized the importance of her own positionality as an African professional, stating: "If we're not doing it, nobody will….*They* don't care about Africa."

These actors navigate power imbalances and ideological ambiguities by framing their role as part of a broader, often spiritually inflected, world-making project. Bwana, for example, concluded the interview with: "I feel I am walking in my purpose. Honestly, I believe it was a calling." In private conversations and on social media, they commonly refer to God—for example, soundtracking posts about their work with gospel songs. One Nigerian regional executive who moved from a Chinese-owned streaming platform to an American digital distribution service posted a picture in front of their new office, captioned: "May God help us all find our purpose and live impactful lives acceptable in the sight of God." Many peers commented "Amen" or "God bless our journeys." Another senior figure at a multinational digital distribution company captioned a concert picture of a Nigerian client performing at a major London venue with: "I believe God has positioned me to help bring Africa's sound into developed markets to advance our artists' global opportunities. This is just the beginning of the work ahead. Keep believing." During interviews, these professionals often explain that they publicly display their corporate success for "inspiration."

A large painting titled *Inspiration* hangs in the Lagos office of Tega Oghenejobo, chief operating officer of Nigeria's Mavin Records and cousin to its co-founder and popular icon Don Jazzy. It depicts Don Jazzy among Elon Musk, Jack Ma, Jeff Bezos, and other global figures. Oghenejobo explained that the painting aims to counteract a period of foreign-dominated references:

> Growing up, the media was saturated with foreigners that we took as role models; our goal is for the new generation to have Nigerians they can look up to. Don Jazzy is a visionary; he's someone who can inspire young Nigerians.

Nigerian entertainment professionals are indeed followed by masses of youths, many of whom are seeking pathways out of poverty—and often also out of the country. With 15 million Instagram followers, Don Jazzy self-consciously hammers that, thanks to digital platforms, youths are just one post away from success, even in Nigeria. For example, in a video from 27 September 2025 viewed nearly a million times, he recounts how he discovered the now Grammy-nominated singer Ayra Starr as he was talent scouting on social media. He was looking to create a "teenage Afrobeats superstar from Nigeria that we want to make sure goes global," and noticed a short video she posted of herself freestyling. He explains: "So I went to her, and I entered her DM; I said, hello, how are you?… After a couple of hours, she responded, and we took it from there."

5.2. Lagos's Aspiring Youth

Jay Star came alone to Lagos from Nigeria's troubled South-South Region at 18, hoping for a career as a professional singer. Upon arrival, he worked odd jobs such as bricklayer and gateman before securing a

videographer role, producing behind-the-scenes social media content for entertainment professionals. At 27, he still lives hand to mouth, often sleeping at the company's office or on nightclub couches. In 2019, just before Nigerian songs achieved global virality on TikTok, he already asserted enthusiastically: "Everyone wants to listen to African music now, Wizkid is the hottest artist in the world." When I questioned this, he insisted: "You don't know that? If you check online, you will see." Such statements reflect the algorithmic logic of the filter bubble, in which recommendation systems amplify perceived global reach beyond measurable scale, well documented in political content studies (Chueca Del Cerro, 2024; Dylko et al., 2017; Rhodes, 2022; Spohr, 2017). Shipley (2013) showed over a decade ago how West African digital sociality fosters a magnified sense of Afrobeats' reach, shaped by algorithmic experiences of diasporic proximity. It became clear to me, however, that declarations like Jay Star's were meant to be performative rather than factual.

During fieldwork, this kind of aspirational hyperbole around online virality was common, as youths were seeking to convince themselves—as much as me—of the validity of their hopes. When asked about their future goals, aspiring artists regularly invoked the figures of Wizkid, Davido, or Burna Boy as precedents, and then articulated their own ambitions in phrases like: "I want to be the biggest global pop star the world has ever seen," "I want people in America and all the way to China and India to listen to me," or "Now with social media it's possible for Africans, you know." Recurrently, they would resort to the standard phrase, "I want to put Africa [/Lagos/Nigeria] on the map."

This assertive faith in algorithms was even more pronounced among aspiring dancers, whose hopes for mobility rest almost entirely on social media. Street dance is central to Nigerian social life and highly influential in popular culture, yet it scarcely exists as an industry. With no formal infrastructure, dancers survive through precarious, adaptive strategies while waiting to "blow." Before TikTok's boom, most worked in the music industry, where their labor was undervalued and their creativity tightly constrained. Dance crazes nonetheless drove Nigerian music's virality and transnational appeal, often inspiring artists to build songs around specific moves. This dynamic intensified around 2020, when platforms like Triller and TikTok began actively promoting Nigerian content, rewarding artists who generated global engagement. Several dancers, in turn, gained international visibility online and ways to monetize their influence.

Yet, for most, material circumstances remain extremely harsh, and dance remains stigmatized in Nigerian society. Choreographers and video directors warn younger ones that their profession will hurt their marriage prospects. Against such realities, the open-ended promise of social media becomes both a survival strategy and a moral resource. As one male dancer explained:

> Nigerian girls, they want someone who has either money or a dream and faith in God. If you have faith, God will push your content and there is no limit to what you can achieve. Nigerian women, they understand that.

Structurally, digital platforms offer the idea of local agency against the previously devastating recognition of being at the bottom end of the value chain locally, and being picked up by foreign actors as the only prospect. A widely respected 33-year-old dancer, who still lived precariously at the time of the fieldwork, saw social media as a key tool for community organizing, asserting leadership through the amplification of its possibilities. He explained to me:

> You have these White women at [an art NGO operating in Nigeria] who think they know better than us what is good for us. The dancers go to London and whatnot, meanwhile, they come back and they're still dirt poor. We were kept ignorant here, it makes me sick! If I grow my Instagram, organizing dancers here, the sponsors will see us, and that's real money.

By the time of writing, his community page had gained half a million followers on TikTok and sponsorship from Coca-Cola. Yet his personal circumstances remained uncertain and the pull of relocating abroad was constantly in the back of his mind, despite the faith he displayed in front of younger dancers.

The affordances of social media (Abidin, 2021; Lin & de Kloet, 2019) and the discourse of possibility around it (Bishop, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2018) offer a sense of individual and collective emancipation that is morally and spiritually valued locally—akin to a religious belief structure. The religious dimension of social media aspiration is often explicit. For instance, under the posts of successful artists, Nigerian users frequently comment prayers: "My song will go viral this year by God's grace, Amen." These receive dozens of replies echoing "Amen." Faith in one's potential to "blow" online can drive creative labor and even materialize as its narrative core. This is well illustrated by Idaham's 2019 breakout song "Billion Dollar," whose lyrics went:

> *Eledumare* [God almighty] / Give me give me billon dollar / … / *Oluwa I dey beg oh* [God, I beg you] / Open my way for me oh / Open my way / *Oluwa I dey beg oh*

The artist explained in a private conversation:

> The song is kind of a tool, you know? People can use it as a script on their spiritual journey, to start the day with God. They should listen and repeat it every day.

As the song gained traction on social media, young Nigerians resonated with its functional logic. Some comments read: "This is what Nigerians need to hear right now!! Inspirational music. We can all make it," or "This song is my daily prayer, every morning. So helpful, especially to someone trying to make it in the entertainment industry."

5.3. Transmitting Faith

The belief in algorithmic visibility as a path to salvation *from Nigeria* is institutionalized through industry efforts that constantly target youths with these messages. Educational podcasts, training academies, and public events organized by entertainment professionals frame social media as a horizon of possibility within a new moral economy of self-realization. One illustration is the No Limits Conference: An Empowerment Initiative, held in Lagos in October 2019. Presented as a social justice event, the conference promoted a vision of empowerment that explicitly rejected structural explanations for inequality, instead emphasizing personal effort, moral and religious discipline, and the strategic use of social media. For example, comedian Omotunde Adebowale David, known as Lolo, proclaimed:

> The biggest mistake you can make is blame where you started for your lack of success. It's the silliest excuse. Wherever you plant a seed, it's still a tomato. A lot of you like success, but you hate to work. Post things on your phone, don't just watch. Are you building capacity, or just watching people's lives on your phone? You want God's grace, but you can't wipe his shoes.

This rhetoric positions young Nigerians as "subjects of capacity" and social media as a "site of capacity" (McRobbie, 2007), where their efforts can translate into tangible rewards and recognition. It recasts digital visibility as a marker of agency, embedded in a religious logic that challenges traditional institutions and government-led developmentalism that failed to lift Nigerians out of poverty. The conference speeches and panels articulated this shift through a motivational approach that was self-consciously similar in tone to Pentecostal preaching. Gender-queer model and media personality Denrele thus sought to energize the crowd:

> You see now, you are in an era where your difference is your content. What is your content? How are you monetizing your content? Young people can build brands that resonate and create campaigns that go viral. This is empowering. What are you doing?!

Responding to concerns from the audience about increasing competition, the speakers doubled down on the inspirational register. Pioneer choreographer Kaffy, a "godmother" for Lagos rising dancers, explained:

> We needed to go to the office and give the demo. Today with social media it's easy; you have a platform. You don't need to know somebody. You are in the eyes of the world. There's never been an easier time than now for Africans!

Veteran rapper Ruggedman added: "I can't even count the number of people who have become successful by just posting one-minute videos on their phones, right here from Lagos."

These discourses resonate with local realities, where psychological survival is widely believed to be a priority. As I meet with young Nigerian dancers, it is not uncommon to hear them greet each other with: "Ah-ah, you still *dey* here? You no *dey japa*." *Japa* is a street slang that means to run swiftly out of a dangerous place, which has come to refer to Nigeria itself. Jay Starr himself recurrently evokes the prospect of turning 30 and the fear of not having "time" to reach success. "People die young nowadays," he explains; "If I die tomorrow, I'll have nothing to leave behind, it'll be like I was never here at all." The thought of risking his life on the perilous road to Europe has often crossed his mind. He is scared, but he also believes that if he "hustles" hard enough, the entertainment industry can offer him better prospects in Lagos.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

While part of corporate expansion strategies, platforms' discourse and practices in Nigeria take a specific form shaped by the historically grounded ideologies and social configurations that have structured the subject position of their key actors. The empirical data sheds light on the agency of African and Afro-diasporic platform professionals who have contributed to recoding tech infrastructures as aligned with African youth's aspirations. They mobilize the transformative power generally invested in technology, embedding it in a situated religious imaginary. These actors blur market logic with cultural agency, advancing claims rooted in local contexts within corporate structures.

Ethnographic data reveals that where African digital professionals are most influential, yet, is in mediating a brand of techno-capitalist utopianism. They shape perceptions of "Africa" as a site of dynamic cultural potential where digital futures can unfold. This process is largely turned inward. Spiritual rhetoric

resonates within prevailing aspirational economies. It is operationalized through faith in the power of algorithms to offer life-changing virality to Lagos' youth. While typically spawned and exported globally by Silicon Valley (Gillespie, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2018) and international institutions (Friederici et al., 2017), techno-optimistic imaginaries are thus reappropriated by diverse local actors who tailor them for grassroots youth.

Lagos plays a strategic role in this process, both materially and symbolically. The city is enacted as a gateway to global markets—reconfigured from a horizon of dysfunction into a signifier of African cool, modernity, and cosmopolitanism, propelled by digital circuits. Afrobeats, whose digital streams come about half from the US, UK, and France, then becomes a paradigmatic world-making tool—even as it remains entangled in the (post)colonial dynamics of global capitalism. Through digital culture, an African megacity is positioned within what Mbembe (2016, p. 322) calls a "new, de-centered but global, history," feeding the aspirational horizon of an Africa-based project of modernity and globalization at a time when most youths are tempted to give up entirely.

This vision draws on the ideological remnants of the "Africa rising" narrative of the mid-2010s, a pan-African capitalist imaginary carried by highly educated cosmopolitan Africans, later reframed by Nigerian scholars as "Africapitalism" (Amaeshi et al., 2018; Edozie, 2017). Its proponents mobilized the performative dimensions of investment capitalism to present "Africa" as a land of opportunity. This challenged the entrenched global imagination of "Africa" as a negative "category through which a 'world' is structured" (Ferguson, 2006, p. 5). Turning the economic gaze to neoliberal capitalism's "next frontier," "Africa rising" momentarily reenchanted financial markets during the post-2008 crisis, when global faith in the economic system was deeply shaken (Gabay, 2018; Mizes & Donovan, 2022; Roitman, 2021).

In a similar way that "Africa rising" revitalized faith in a discredited financial capitalism by hyping up its potential positive impact for the continent, the new form of performativity enabled by digitally mediated culture offers a positive vision of platforms amid widespread distrust caused by accusations of neocolonial extraction (Kwet, 2019), algorithmic racial bias (Noble, 2018), and amplification of inequality (Heeks, 2021). African digital professionals reinvigorate data capitalism by mobilizing an Afro-optimist lens propelled by the performance of faith and the genuine belief in miraculous algorithmic reach. To re-enchant "Africa," they reappropriate and repackage the datafication of culture as an opportunity for global export for a youth traumatized by exclusion.

Born out of the need to reinvent a future after devastating SAPs, Lagos youth's engagement with the digital has consistently pushed back against a positioning at the margins of both their gerontocratic society and the international order. The adoption and integration of new technology into local cosmologies allowed for the "ordinariness of extraordinary aspirations" (Weiss, 2009, p. 38). The potentiality of virality in the near future now fills what Guyer (2007) described as the gap between an instantaneous and unbearable present and a long-term prospect of salvation. As such, it shifts representations of emancipatory paths from migration routes to digital futures that can be constructed from Lagos.

Literature on place marketing generally postulates that "branding messages are designed by advertising agencies on the basis of indications of local policy-makers, with limited connections to the inhabitants, their feelings and their desires" (Vanolo, 2017, p. 77). In Lagos, however, authorities find themselves catching up

with a movement they did not initiate and only began to support recently. The virality of Afrobeats has thus already turned the megacity into what CNN describes as a "global winter tourism hub" (Ntuli, 2025). This provides a partial response to Newell and Pype's (2021) question about the drivers of Africa's digital turn when gerontocratic states seek to maintain the status quo. The article has shown how circumstantial alignments emerge. It described how African platform professionals and aspiring youths both engage in place-making in the vacuum left by failing governments, mobilizing digital technology to reconfigure their environment from a place to escape into one of creativity and opportunity.

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About the Author

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Bridging Digital Geographies and Socially Smart Villages: Participatory Action Research in Rural Place Design

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Abstract

This article critically explores the intersection of digital geographies, community building, tourism development, and bottom-up processes that shape resilient rural futures. While rural development initiatives often adopt urban-centric norms and technology-driven solutions, such approaches risk overlooking the lived realities and social fabric of rural communities. Digital representations of rural places frequently reinforce stereotypes, leaving these regions underrepresented and mischaracterised in media narratives. In the Smart Villages in Sweden project, we sought to counter this trend by integrating tourism and place design through participatory, place-based methods. Rather than assuming technology as a panacea, our approach foregrounded local knowledge, everyday practices, and grassroots engagement to co-create digital solutions that resonate with rural life. This participatory action research process enabled the identification of concepts that address local challenges and aspirations, fostering hope and vitality within communities. Our findings demonstrate that sensible digital development—anchored in sociality and local agency—can bridge spatial, social, and digital divides. By combining geomedia studies with tailored, community-driven design, digital tools become more than technical artefacts: They serve as catalysts for storytelling, value creation, and connection. Ultimately, technology must be embedded in the rhythms of rural life to strengthen social bonds, cohesion, and solidarity. We argue that sustainable rural futures depend not only on innovation but on approaches that respect and amplify the voices and practices of those who inhabit these places.

Keywords

digital geographies; participatory action research; rural place design; rural tourism; socially smart villages

1. Introduction

This article explores how place-based digital solutions can be customised for rural communities to strengthen social bonds and nurture future hope, connecting both people and places. By using place design as both an approach and a method, we examine the intersection of "digital geographies," community, tourism development, and bottom-up innovation. The aim is to develop new pathways of hope by bridging spatial, social, and digital divides through thoughtful place design.

Drawing on extensive research into spatially sensible digital innovation in tourism and place development, we employ critical geomedia studies (McQuire, 2016; Ryan Bengtsson et al., 2022) to examine nuanced processes of geomedia technologies. Using this perspective, we explore the concept of a "smart village." Our project, Smart Villages in Sweden, aims to deepen the understanding of what it means to be "smart" in modern rural communities. It identifies residents' and visitors' needs for services, commerce, and information, and investigates how digital solutions could enhance local attractiveness and economic opportunities. The term "smart" is often linked to ICT use for sustainable social development, resulting in urban-centric initiatives in which authorities collaborate with technology firms to address environmental issues and improve resource efficiency (Harrison et al., 2010; Kitchin, 2015). Although "smart villages" promote bottom-up cooperation in rural areas (Aziiza & Susanto, 2020; Zavratnik et al., 2018), their realisation often reflects urban-focused, technology-led logic. A review of the literature (Anastasiou et al., 2021; Cāne, 2021; Cowie et al., 2020; Cvar et al., 2020; Devadiga, 2020; Hlaváček et al., 2023; Martinez-Gil et al., 2020; Paniagua, 2020; Patnaik et al., 2020; Slee, 2019) reveals a critical viewpoint: The concept risks prioritising technological innovation over genuine community engagement, leading to solutions that may be misaligned with local realities.

Contemporary society is increasingly shaped by digital technologies, surveillance, and "smart" systems, which are often depicted as solutions to societal challenges. This technology-centric narrative is evident in tourism and place development, where digitalisation is pursued without sufficient attention to local needs or sustainability. Rural development is frequently viewed through an urban perspective, assuming urban solutions can be easily adapted to rural areas (Cowie et al., 2020; Sigala, 2018). Meanwhile, digital representations of rural areas—especially in social media and other marketing channels—rely on stereotypical images of landscapes and cottages, overlooking the complexities and available resources of rural areas. Our research focused on place-based mediated digital solutions that enhance visitor experiences or promote social interaction, linking spatial and sociocultural conditions. This led us to ask: How can "smart" be redefined through place-based digital design practices to better reflect rural realities and aspirations? And how can place design support socially sustainable, place-sensible development by aligning digital solutions with local needs and hopes?

We argue that digital solutions should be grounded in the unique characteristics of place—its people, history, and resources—rather than imposed through generic, top-down models. Our research addresses a gap in understanding the drivers and beneficiaries of digital development in rural tourism and local contexts. In critiquing "smart villages," we draw on geomedia studies (McQuire, 2016) to explore the interplay between media and place and the power of digital representations (Jansson, 2020). Using value creation theory (Vargo et al., 2017), we promote a participatory approach.

Place design emerges as both an approach, a mindset, and a method: A holistic framework combining problem-solving design with local knowledge and inclusive processes. It tackles complex societal challenges through action research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003) and place-adapted strategies (Braunerhielm, Gibson, & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024), emphasising understanding the local place through inclusion and collaboration with local resources and actors (Braunerhielm, 2025). Unlike technology-driven models, this approach contributes to a set of methods that use diverse tools to co-create solutions, integrating tangible and intangible resources—such as local culture, history, and identity—to identify challenges and aspirations. Stakeholders with local knowledge contribute to outcomes that benefit residents, workers, and visitors. Digital technologies offer rural communities opportunities for entrepreneurship and resilience by overcoming geographic limitations (Li et al., 2024; Olalekan, 2024). Hope lies in their capacity to foster autonomy, ownership, and sustainable development (Braunerhielm, Gibson, & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024).

Our project focused on two rural communities, Sillerud and Sysslebäck, in Värmland, Sweden, with a focus on tourism and services. These communities face common rural challenges, including struggling businesses and tourism-related seasonal population fluctuations. Both are situated in municipalities known for small- and medium-sized enterprises, but are geographically marginalised, located near the regional border between Norway and Sweden. Our case studies show how place design incorporates diverse geographies, needs, hopes, and resources into customised processes. The resulting digital solutions were, above all, socially meaningful, fostering connections among residents, workers, and visitors. As a result, we have reimagined the "smart village" concept as "socially smart villages," where social cohesion and local engagement are essential to digital intelligence.

This article provides a critical, practice-based contribution to understanding how bridging digital geographies with socially smart approaches can foster hope and resilience in rural communities (Braunerhielm, Gibson, & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024). We outline the "smart villages" concept and its connection with geographies of people and places, present our methodological approach grounded in participatory action research and place design, and share outcomes from workshops conducted between 2021 and 2024. We conclude by reflecting on how place-based design processes can support inclusive and sustainable rural development.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of "smart villages" is well established in Europe but remains relatively unfamiliar in Sweden. It promotes the use of digital technologies to support rural economic and social development (Malik et al., 2022), with the EU framing it as a means to revitalise rural services and strengthen resilience through innovation (Zavratnik et al., 2018). However, "smart" is often interpreted through a technology-centric lens, as seen in discussions of smart villages, cities, and tourism (Cāne, 2021; Cvar et al., 2020; Shafiee et al., 2021). While digitalisation can aid rural development, it is not inherently transformative or sustainable and may carry with it environmental and social consequences.

What makes a community "smart" is not the level of digitalisation but how technologies address local needs and enhance quality of life (Zavratnik et al., 2018). "Smart villages" are based on the idea that value is co-created with actors connected to a specific place (Cāne, 2021), making contextual understanding essential (Vargo et al., 2017). Here, value refers to immaterial resources—knowledge, ideas, solutions—that promote local development. The approach combines practical results with scientific insights through

collaborative methods (Aziiza & Susanto, 2020). Yet, research and practice still lack reflective and democratic perspectives (Braunerhielm et al., in press). Current debates tend to focus on agriculture, connectivity, and digital skills, while broader social issues receive less attention (Devadiga, 2020; Hlaváček et al., 2023). In Sweden, "smartness" often relates to resource efficiency, service adaptation, and innovation for shrinking populations (Cedergren et al., 2025). However, many initiatives are criticised as top-down, favouring technology firms over citizens and prioritising economic growth over social and environmental values (Luque-Ayala & Neves Maia, 2019; Rose, 2020). We suggest an alternative model where digital technology acts as a tool—rather than the driver—of development. This involves examining technology's influence (Fast et al., 2018) and how places both shape and are shaped by it.

2.1. Geographies of People and Places

The modern landscape merges urban and rural elements, creating unique challenges for tourism and development. The urban norm has shaped rural lifestyles worldwide (Cloke, 2006; Woods, 2011), while ruralisation emphasises urban reliance on rural resources such as agriculture and energy (Westlund & Nilsson, 2022; Woods, 2005). Rural areas are increasingly blending work and leisure, exemplified by pandemic-driven migration and rising interest in holiday homes (Carson et al., 2016). This fusion of urban and rural spaces results in overlapping landscapes, economies, and lifestyles (Matern et al., 2019), challenging traditional binaries. Hybrid spaces can promote innovative digital infrastructure and participatory approaches tailored to local needs, bridging the gap between urban and rural areas. They also influence the demand and supply of services, necessitating strategies that reflect these shared geographies.

Recent restructuring of rural areas has revitalised them, particularly through tourism and creative industries. The dominant design approach emphasises idyllic images (Eggert-Heerdegen & Louafi, 2011), making tourism essential in creating attractive places for visitors, residents, and businesses. However, tourism stakeholders are often overlooked, with local authorities focusing on manufacturing and residents. Leveraging tourism expertise could help tailor rural strategies to local contexts. From a tourism geography perspective, places must be meaningful for both visiting and living, offering experiences shaped by activities and design (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2024). As urban norms influence rural landscapes, design needs to reflect the needs and ambitions of both residents and visitors (Inayatullah, 2007). This involves moving beyond isolated thinking and adopting integrated approaches that consider the sociocultural context of places (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2023).

2.2. Digital Geographies

Geomedia as a theoretical lens helps problematise places and tourism by examining the interactions among spatial, social, and digital elements (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2023; Jansson, 2020). Geomedia also provides a critical perspective on how technology-driven development influences everyday life in tourism, fostering both value and hope (Braunerhielm, Gibson, & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024).

In tourism and place development, digital information layers are often "placed" using positioning systems and tracking methods, such as historical maps or location-based games. Visitors access real-time feedback during events via devices and networks, while location-based services promote user innovation through user-generated content. Tourism researchers highlight how visitors have become intermediaries for much of

the information on social media (Munar, 2010), giving them considerable influence. Interactions on TripAdvisor, Facebook (van Dijck, 2013), Instagram (Conti & Lexhagen, 2020), and smartphones (van Dijck et al., 2018) shape perceptions of locations. Social media thus creates new digital representations of place, affecting identities (Lindell, 2022; McQuire, 2016). These geomedia platforms shape digital geographies and representations, leaving notable digital footprints. Algorithms and user-generated content often glamourise places (Ash et al., 2018; Valentine & Skelton, 2008), producing homogenised images that eclipse authentic local stories. For example, the Swedish countryside is often depicted as idyllic, with red houses and outdoor activities, while local actors lose control over their portrayal. This signifies a shift in power towards technical experts and visitors (McQuire, 2016; Morozova et al., 2021; Rydzik & Kissoon, 2021). ICT actors and marketers frequently overlook place-based priorities (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2023), raising concerns about the accuracy and representation of local culture and history (McQuire, 2016).

2.3. Digital Geographies of Value

A geomedia perspective on tourism and placemaking (Braunerhielm, Grip, et al., 2024) emphasises how smartphones enable place-specific content, reviews, and social interactions, fostering autonomy and participation (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). However, Roy et al. (2017) highlight a techno-optimism that is tempered by the "digital paradox," where tools intended to enhance experience can alienate users (Roy et al., 2017). Geomedia technologies distribute and gather information (Fast et al., 2019; McQuire, 2016), allowing digital navigation and connections to local stories (Somdahl-Sands & Finn, 2015). Customers engage with businesses through peer-to-peer communication (Minkiewicz et al., 2013) and digital practices such as online engagement and mediated storytelling (Bolton et al., 2018). Value thus arises for visitors and locals through a dynamic journey across multiple touchpoints (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015) and is experientially shaped in specific sociomaterial contexts (Edvardsson et al., 2011).

Digitalisation intensifies this relational ontology, reconfiguring service landscapes into many-to-many environments and opening new modes of value creation (Teixeira et al., 2017). However, digital solutions continuously redefine touchpoints, reshape behaviours, and construct places as layered, affective, and symbolic spaces (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

2.4. Bridging (Digital) Geographical Complexities

Rarely do we encounter methods that integrate the uniqueness of a place, the needs and challenges of its people, and its resources into digital development processes (Alvarado-Sizzo, 2021). Research also indicates that many other disciplines explore digital aspects of tourism without a comprehensive understanding of the industry or an understanding of the conditions of place (Braunerhielm & Hoppstadius, 2025). With knowledge of geomedia technologies, their effects, and possibilities, geomedia studies (McQuire, 2016) can support an approach that promotes a less technology-centred view of place development. Here, the concept of geomedia sensibility (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2023) emerges as central to adopting a holistic perspective of a place, considering interactions among actors, history, resources, different representations, and digital solutions. This is one way of addressing the spatial and sociocultural dimensions involved in the formation and construction of digital geographies.

Both spatial and social perspectives are essential. The dependence on sociocultural capital increases and thus intensifies the further one gets from urban areas. The cultural history of a place also reflects the attitudes and ambitions of the local community (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2023). A place's actors are therefore crucial in creating value for the community and enhancing a place's appeal and social environment (Boylston, 2019; Inayatullah, 2007; Zielinski et al., 2020). Today, the tourism industry plays a role in societal development, making its experience and expertise central to this complexity. As a result, knowledge and understanding of digital layers and their utilisation to connect various locations are necessary. But how can we integrate diverse geographies, sociocultural aspects, and digital layers in place design?

3. Our Approach and Method

We use place design as our starting point, both as an approach (how to think) and a method (how to do). Design involves solving complex problems (Jones, 2014). Place design has inspired us to combine the design process with society (Boylston, 2019; Fesenmaier & Xiang, 2017) and the research method of participatory action research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). It primarily focuses on addressing challenges and needs, making it essential to understand the place and users. The design process should be exploratory and process-oriented (Boylston, 2019). Palermo and Ponzini (2014) also emphasise the importance of working across boundaries and adopting a critical stance towards the physical and social contexts of the places being developed. Therefore, design, based on our approach, requires collaboration with co-creators to bring in the necessary expertise. We start by leveraging the unique conditions of the location and by involving in the design process those who live, work, or visit. Additionally, we incorporate digital layers as tools, for example, to create value or encourage interaction.

The design process itself is vital for creating both appealing places and local influence within them, thereby empowering communities and turning them into attractive tourist destinations (Braunerhielm et al., in press). In this context, design pertains to the approach and method for collaborating with stakeholders to develop a place in harmony with spatial, sociocultural, and digital conditions (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2023). Place design can thus influence the future and foster hope among those who live, work, or visit a place (Inayatullah, 2007). With this in mind, understanding the complex contexts that impact tourism and place design is essential. Recognising the differences among various rural areas is crucial for developing tailored, place-based solutions suited to each location.

3.1. Creating Hope Through Place Design

This article presents the findings of our research project Smart Villages in Sweden. The project ran from September 2021 to August 2024. The research design emphasises participatory, democratic methods to promote change (e.g., Haraway, 2016; Ren et al., 2017).

Participatory action research guides the facilitator of the design process to work in cycles, each consisting of enquiry, action, and reflection. According to Brydon-Miller et al. (2003), the aim is for the knowledge and perspectives generated in each cycle to inform subsequent cycles. Participants played an active role at every stage of the design process (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Fesenmaier & Xiang, 2017). In this way, place design helps identify different dimensions by involving the place and actors from the outset and by participating in shaping the entire process, thereby contributing to knowledge while gaining new insights about the place.

We used in-depth interviews and a series of workshops to engage various actors in the process. Thompson and Prokopy (2016) argue that this collaborative approach is vital for helping people recognise their power and capacity to shape their history, strengthen hope, and influence the future of places through engagement with issues of place, representation, and power.

3.2. Studying Places

Our two cases included in the project, Sillerud and Sysslebäck, were selected alongside local key businesses and the municipalities in each area. Based on earlier research on rural tourism development, the challenge of rural communities providing local services to residents and visitors was identified as an important aspect to include in future studies. Therefore, the selection criteria from previous studies were also refined to include rural communities or villages that serve as service centres for residents and businesses and that also attract significant tourism.

Our communities are roughly 250 km apart, enabling face-to-face meetings and joint workshops. Sillerud offers local services and attracts international summer visitors for canoeing, fishing, hiking, and cycling, as well as many Norwegian shoppers. Sysslebäck is a year-round service centre, with winter tourism centred on skiing and motorsport, and summer activities along rivers and through forests. Both communities share Swedish-Norwegian cultural influences and have a diverse population of permanent residents, second-home owners, and tourists. Despite seasonal peaks, both are facing declines in permanent populations and the challenge of meeting varied visitor expectations—creating a complex environment for local development.

A small number of local businesses and organisations served as advisers, providing valuable local knowledge and input during the design process, which consisted of three cycles (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). The first cycle, "in-depth place interviewing" (Boylston, 2019; Braunerhielm et al., in press; Ryan Bengtsson et al., 2022), was conducted over roughly six months. It involved mapping both the physical and digital representations of the sites to develop a multifaceted understanding, identifying challenges, needs, and hopes through qualitative interviews.

We conducted 25 interviews with residents, local associations, businesses, service providers, and public actors, using strategic and snowball sampling. To complement this, a visitor survey was distributed via email and QR codes at 37 tourist sites in Swedish and English during winter and summer, resulting in 138 responses. We also inventoried digital technology use and analysed digital representations on websites and social media through visual collages for workshop discussions. Data from interviews and surveys were analysed thematically, identifying key themes such as local service needs, resources, rural challenges, and attitudes towards digital solutions. These insights informed the next phase of collaborative workshops.

3.3. Designing Collaborative Creation

The second cycle was guided by a challenge-driven process rooted in local perspectives. Over a year, the research team facilitated co-creation workshops that built upon needs identified in the first cycle. Instead of imposing predefined goals, the approach adopted a "fuzzy goal," allowing local actors to steer the process in line with participatory action research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Workshops were structured around three guiding questions: Why is development needed? What resources

exist? How can ideas be implemented? This ensured discussions began with local challenges and aspirations. The first workshop involved public organisations, the second included local entrepreneurs and associations, and the third brought together residents and potential visitors—uniting diverse voices from the grassroots across different stages.

The third cycle, over six months, brought key actors from both communities together to co-create concepts for future solutions: mainly digital services for local and tourism development. These sessions yielded concrete ideas for digital solutions to address local challenges and create new opportunities for businesses and community actors. The research team analysed the entire process and shared results for future planning.

Around 100 people participated in this process in the third cycle. Outcomes were documented through drawings, written notes, and summaries prepared by a project assistant. This material informed subsequent workshops and final analysis.

3.4. Research Processes: A Winding Road to Travel

A place design approach inspired by participatory action research offers benefits but also presents challenges. Selecting cases and participants can be biased when researchers are familiar with the area, and limited time and resources restrict inclusion. To promote transparency and diversity, we combined local recommendations with public sources and held open discussions with key actors about participant selection for interviews and workshops. Including everyone is impossible, and involving younger people proved difficult, a common challenge in rural development research and practice. By addressing these concerns with informants, we aimed to involve a diverse range of businesses, associations, and organisations connected to local services and tourism. Local knowledge was enhanced with data from websites and registers, and activities were scheduled at convenient times and locations for the participants.

Managing conflicts of interest, sensitive topics, old grievances, or overly negative individuals is another challenge in participatory action research. Conflicts exist in every community, so we invited diverse perspectives, encouraged open dialogue, and offered individual follow-ups. Including stakeholders throughout the process and addressing tensions in workshops helped bridge differences, meet varied needs, and incorporate multiple regional experiences.

4. Results: Different Local (Digital) Geographies

"In-depth place interviewing" provided knowledge and understanding of the local communities, but also revealed several challenges, including limited access to services, skills shortages, difficulties in attracting or retaining residents, and a lack of coordination among local actors. Infrastructure issues, such as energy access, charging stations, transport, and digital connectivity, were also prominent. While empty premises were seen as potential assets, they also posed obstacles to development when neglected, as vacant buildings signal a community in decline. Social resources like networks, voluntary organisations, and collaboration were identified as strengths. However, these were often inaccessible to newcomers or visitors, highlighting a gap in social inclusion. By examining different digital layers and representations, we uncovered invisible boundaries between physical and perceived geographies. These included distinctions between areas for residents versus visitors, and historical narratives that excluded women and children or focused

solely on the past or present. This revealed tensions between physical and digital geographies and sociocultural divides. These fragmented digital representations created barriers to participation and belonging, shaping how people experienced and navigated the place.

We worked on transferring knowledge from one stage to the next and bringing insights from each participating group. For example, starting by involving public authorities in workshops helped them gain a new understanding of and relationship with the places. They shifted from being "stakeholders" to "stakemakers," in which their interest in increasing collaboration with local communities grew, thereby creating trust and confidence among the local population. The findings here provide counterarguments for why these places are significant. The "why" and the motto for Sysslebäck became "A string of opportunities! A place for life!," while for Sillerud—where, for example, Sweden's first unmanned ICA store (i.e., 24/7) is located—the motto was "The hub that creates opportunities. A dynamic living 24/7." Developing these mottos collaboratively with public actors was very important. It helped create understanding and instilled great pride.

In the second workshop with entrepreneurs and associations, tensions and core values of each place were identified, leading to a rediscovering of the communities, a learning of local history and traditions that inspired creativity and future collaborations. Workshops with residents and visitors generated ideas for development, including digital solutions, building on previously identified needs.

The participating stakeholders asked several questions: How can we gather more information about what already exists? How can we make visible what is happening and what exists? How can we tell the story of our place? They discussed the need to be a "fly on the wall"—to listen and learn if it works here. The focus was on social aspects and local culture for newcomers to Sillerud, for example. Ideas included resident guides, mentors, or godparents for newcomers. The topic of local hospitality for everyone was also discussed in Sillerud. Can we make information visible digitally? Early on, an idea was conceived for a digital portal for the district named "Visit Sillerud/Living in Sillerud"—for residents and visitors, with on-demand services such as Uber, Facebook groups for babysitting, QR codes on notice boards, etc. The idea also emerged in workshops in Sysslebäck for a digital portal named "Hej Nordvärmland i Sysslebäck." In Sysslebäck, there was talk of an all activity centre for courses or for crossing borders and meeting. Digital courses were proposed to help visitors explore nature, read maps, find trails, understand how to behave, and locate the best fishing spots. Knowledge about nature and information transfer were also discussed. The idea of a geofencing digital solution was raised, which would notify visitors when they pass a certain point on the road with a ping on their phone, along with details about various offers. They discussed how to improve existing solutions and develop new digital tools to enrich the experience for both residents and visitors.

During the third workshop, participants created a customer journey that covered before, during, and after the visit to Sillerud and Sysslebäck. They explored solutions for living, visiting, and working in these two communities, including both fixed and mobile options. An important consideration for the customer journey, and thus also for the digital solution, was where face-to-face meetings are necessary. The discussion on digital technology centred on how it can support the expressed needs and promote social interaction. This emphasised the need for solutions that enable new residents to learn how things work in the area, lend items to each other, assist with services, facilitate interactions between visitors and residents, and share stories about places. Participants highlighted that digital technology should not replace anything but serve as a helpful support.

4.1. Digital Solutions for Social Interaction

Through our workshops, we identified three critical areas. It became clear that these two communities, first and foremost, lacked clear information for visitors (and for residents and second-home owners) about local services and places to visit. Secondly, they also wanted to communicate their local culture and way of life. Here, it was evident that they were not ready to develop more place-based digital solutions and enhance visitor experiences. They needed to concentrate on strengthening the social fabric of each place.

We developed concrete concept sketches for digital solutions, such as digital portals that showcase what communities have and who they are. We used metaphors to explain these solutions, ensuring they align with the identified needs and challenges, and match the mottos created by the public authorities during the first workshop. The solution for Sysslebäck primarily focused on a digital platform but also included a physical presence in the neighbourhood. The solutions aimed to address the strong need to build local identity and pride—the social glue that binds the communities along the 100 km-long Klarälven valley. We proposed an appropriate metaphor that resonated with local stakeholders: "String of Pearls"—a digital platform designed to connect the various communities along Klarälven, acting as the thread in the string of pearls.

A similar situation in Sillerud was identified, characterised by an "underlying" need and hope for the wider community to bring people closer and enhance human interaction. In this case, the villages surrounding our "main village" tended to mind their own business, and previous collaborations and local developments either stalled or proceeded slowly. The metaphor evolved into a set of unconnected cogs with missing links. A strong driving force was likely preventing others from getting involved. An information platform was needed to restart progress. The metaphors served as analytical tools and as a shared goal or vision for local stakeholders. The online solutions aimed to emphasise the importance of information, encourage social connections, and meet visitors' desires to experience local nature and culture. We recognised that digital solutions can be vital tools for facilitating face-to-face social interactions. These solutions were not the end but a means to achieve the broader vision.

The results and digital solutions highlighted the importance of an adaptable approach when identifying local stakeholders. Such needs-driven design processes do not start with technology but focus on the creative process. The stories that actors wished to share, or how the needs and hopes of visitors or residents could be fulfilled, were most essential. The digital layer was gradually integrated, and solutions were developed throughout the process. These digital solutions also helped bring people together and foster connections among those who live, work, and visit the area. They contributed to building bridges between people and places. Past conflicts between villages were addressed through solutions with the purpose of connecting places and people rather than dividing them. One example is the digital platform that included all the villages in the valley where Sysslebäck is located. The aim was to foster interaction and help bridge the historic disputes and rivalries between the villages, as well as the divide between the left and right sides of the river.

The solution in Sysslebäck also strengthened social bonds and created a tangible connection by forming a local development group—providing a unified front for dialogue with the municipality or larger players in the tourism industry, such as a bigger ski resort on the other side of the river. This local development group also became the natural owner and caretaker of the digital platform, thereby promoting social sustainability and local ownership. Ultimately, the solution served as a means of bridging physical, digital, and social geographies.

5. Discussion: Bridging Digital and Social Geographies

We aimed to design a process collaboratively involving the place and its actors. Our results contributed to boosting the competitiveness of villages, but more importantly, to strengthening local communities and fostering stronger bonds among people. We identified three types of measures needed: (a) information about existing local attractions and events (tangible) to enhance their visibility for both visitors and residents, especially newcomers; (b) stories about local culture and cooperation (intangible), particularly to help residents learn about the place's history, local customs, traditions, and norms; (c) improvements to existing services and the visitor experience (for residents, visitors, and part-time visitors). The Smart Villages project shows that place-based mediated digital solutions can bridge social, spatial, and digital divides when rooted in the lived realities and aspirations of local communities. This contrasts with the technology-driven and often urban-centric approaches that dominate digitalisation discourses (Harrison et al., 2010; Kitchin, 2015), which risk overlooking the sociocultural conditions of rural areas (Cowie et al., 2020; Sigala, 2018). As highlighted in the introduction, contemporary smartness narratives tend to prioritise technological innovation over local engagement, potentially resulting in solutions that do not align with rural realities (Hlaváček et al., 2023). The project instead supports arguments from smart villages research that genuine smartness must be bottom-up and collaborative (Aziiza & Susanto, 2020; Zavratnik et al., 2018) and aligns with our critique that "smart" is often uncritically equated with digitalisation (Braunerhielm et al., in press).

The design process revealed that neither Sillerud nor Sysslebäck initially required complex digital solutions. Instead, their priorities focused on making existing services and attractions more visible, articulating local culture and norms, and strengthening social bonds that support the sustainability of rural communities. These insights directly align with value creation theory, which stresses that value emerges through networks of actors who co-create meaning based on context (Vargo et al., 2017). They also resonate with geomedia perspectives that emphasise the influence of digital representations in shaping how places are understood, experienced, and valued (Jansson, 2020; McQuire, 2016). Using a grounded, participatory approach, the project enabled the redefinition of smartness—shifting from a focus on technology to what is now called socially smart development, in which digital solutions serve as tools to support local identity, cohesion, and hope (Braunerhielm, Gibson, & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024; Inayatullah, 2007).

The place design methodology was essential in facilitating this transformation. As Palermo and Ponzini (2014) argue, place-based development requires working across social and spatial boundaries, and this was evident throughout the project. During the in-depth interviewing phase (Boylston, 2019; Ryan Bengtsson et al., 2022), participants reflected not only on visible challenges but also on invisible boundaries shaped by history, culture, and power. Examples include the longstanding divide between the left and right sides of the river in Sysslebäck, and the limited integration between newcomers and long-term residents in Sillerud. Such complexities align with discussions of rural–urban hybrid geographies (Gillen et al., 2022; Matern et al., 2019) and the socio-cultural dimensions of rural life (Cloke, 2006; Woods, 2005). Recognising these boundaries was vital, as Thompson and Prokopy (2016) emphasise the importance of collaborative processes in enabling communities to regain control over their own narratives.

During workshops, it was clear that digital technology could serve as a bridge between the physical and social dimensions when used in context-sensitive ways. This finding aligns with geomedia research indicating that digital layers can reshape place experiences (Ash et al., 2018; van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck et al.,

2018). However, as scholars such as Conti and Lexhagen (2020), Lindell (2022), and Valentine and Skelton (2008) caution, digital representations also risk glamourising or homogenising rural areas, reducing local cultures to picturesque imagery. This issue was evident in both communities, particularly in how social media influenced their external image. By developing locally produced digital solutions—such as "String of Pearls" in Sysslebäck and the digital information hub in Sillerud—the project challenged these tendencies and empowered local agency over digital geographies (Morozova et al., 2021; Rydzik & Kissoon, 2021).

The metaphors developed during the workshops offer concrete examples of how digital solutions originated from local needs. The "String of Pearls" metaphor in Sysslebäck symbolised the bridging of historical tensions between villages along the Klarälven valley. This aligns with Baker and Ward's (2002) argument that digital communities must be rooted in geographic and social proximity to be meaningful and sustainable. In Sillerud, the metaphor of interlocking yet disconnected gears demonstrated the need for renewed cooperation among villages that had previously drifted apart. These metaphors became analytical tools that assisted local actors in articulating future pathways and hopes, and in imagining how digital solutions could support rather than replace physical interactions. This perspective corresponds with research showing that digital tools can enhance local autonomy, social bonds, and sense of place when embedded within sociomaterial contexts (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Roy et al., 2017).

A key contribution of the project lies in how hope emerged as a central theme. Hope functioned simultaneously as an emotional, social, and theoretical category. From a geomedia perspective, hope relates to the way digital representations open or constrain imaginaries of the future (McQuire, 2016). From a participatory action research standpoint, hope arises when people gain agency, recognition, and influence over the development process (Boylston, 2019; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Inayatullah, 2007). In the workshops, participants repeatedly described how the process itself made them feel more empowered and able to shape their place. By rediscovering forgotten histories, identifying shared challenges, and co-creating new digital solutions, they generated renewed optimism about future possibilities. This aligns with previous research on how collaborative, place-based approaches foster engagement and pride (Braunerhielm, Gibson, & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024; Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2023).

The outcomes in both communities demonstrate how digital solutions can act as catalysts for enhancing social cohesion and fostering new forms of local agency. In Sysslebäck, the design process helped establish a local development group, which took ownership of the digital platform—a clear sign of increased local influence. In Sillerud, the digital information hub helped reconnect villages whose collaborations had stalled. These developments support the argument made by Alvarado-Sizzo (2021) that development processes must recognise the uniqueness of each place, and they show how digital geographies, when co-created, can promote socially sustainable futures.

6. Summary and Conclusion

The findings from the Smart Villages in Sweden project demonstrate that rural digitalisation is not mainly a technological challenge but a relational, cultural, and narrative process. Digital solutions can indeed support rural development, but only when they are embedded in approaches that value local knowledge, encourage social interaction, and foster hope. By integrating spatial, social, and digital dimensions through place design,

the project showed how communities in rural Sweden can strengthen social ties, reclaim their digital identities, and envisage more hopeful futures.

The results show that digital solutions can be powerful tools for shaping rural narratives, highlighting potential, and connecting people and places. Such solutions can strengthen social bonds, cohesion, and solidarity, contributing to vibrant communities and fostering hope for the future. However, a weakness of this study was the absence of children's and young people's voices, which are crucial for understanding how future generations perceive and imagine their communities. Future research should therefore include these perspectives to better understand what inspires hope and to create digital geographies that reflect their visions.

Our study of the cases presented and discussed in this article can be seen as an intervention, with the intention of contributing to a more sustainable way of working with local rural development. Our role as the researchers in this design method involves being involved in the processes that take place with participating actors, which means that we are facilitators and initiators of the process. It is therefore difficult to imagine what local development processes in these communities would have entailed if our research had not been carried out at this time, or at all. It is also difficult to say that the outcome has not been influenced by the fact that we, researchers, together with local actors in these communities, have participated in the process. To address this, we have discussed our role as researchers throughout our research, both within our team and with other researchers using similar methods. We have also had continuous dialogues with our key actors about our analyses and results to ensure that these are consistent with how they perceived the processes. However, we would welcome more joint reflections on research with similar design processes in the future.

Our approach harmoniously integrated tourism and place design, using participatory action research to develop ideas for digital solutions that address local challenges and needs. This highlights the importance of understanding local contexts when designing and implementing digital solutions, as well as promoting cross-border collaboration across administrative, cultural, and historically shaped boundaries. We therefore advocate for the concept of socially smart villages, where "smart" signifies a shared approach to place design that benefits both people and places—not solely through technology. In conclusion, being socially smart is a prerequisite for being digitally smart. We suggest that future research and practice should focus on smart ways of working—approaches that integrate social, spatial, and digital aspects—to create digital geographies of hope and strengthen rural communities in meaningful ways.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

Data can be made available on request.

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Local Media, Rural Depopulation, and Territorial Attachment: Geographies of Hope in Castilla-La Mancha

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between local media ecosystems and territorial hope in depopulated rural areas of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain). Drawing on geographies of hope as a travelling concept, we examine how local media shape affective orientations toward the future. Within the framework of rural mediatization, we conceptualize media ensembles as key drivers in the symbolic construction of place and as potential enablers of hope in territories historically marked by demographic decline. Approaching news deserts from the perspective of communicative resilience, we combine a media mapping of 721 depopulated municipalities with a face-to-face survey of 529 residents to analyze the role of local media in sustaining collective affective configurations. We construct an index of territorial hope based on three interrelated indicators: personal optimism, sense of belonging, and outward projection of the locality. Statistical analyses show that municipalities with more local media score significantly higher on this index, and a regression model confirms that media-related variables—especially interest in local news and trust in professional media—are stronger predictors of territorial hope than most sociodemographic factors. Our findings suggest that local media contribute to the emergence of territorial hope. This underscores the importance of integrating communication indicators into the study of geographies of hope and highlights their relevance to strengthen the symbolic agency of rural communities.

Keywords

geographies of hope; local media; media ensembles; mediatization; rural depopulation

1. Introduction

In 2021, the EU laid the foundations for its long-term vision for rural areas (European Commission, 2021). Based on this, the Rural Pact was launched, aiming for a more prosperous, connected, and ecologically and socially resilient Europe. This vision is especially relevant in areas most affected by demographic decline, a process that impacts the broader territory: 69% of NUTS-3 regions (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, in which level three corresponds to small regions) lost population between 2011 and 2021. This trend is expected to intensify in already depopulated areas (Curtale et al., 2025). Spain, one of the countries facing the most severe demographic decline (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011), has identified depopulation as a state-level challenge with the Ministry of Demographic Challenge. Among recent policies, one Spanish region, Castilla-La Mancha, is regarded as a European reference in strategies to mitigate and, when possible, reverse this phenomenon (European Network for Rural Development, 2022).

The design of multi-scalar policies to address depopulation and promote rural revitalization includes, among others, two communication-related axes: on the one hand, the infrastructures that ensure these areas remain connected, on the other, a shift in the narrative about rurality, aimed at displacing discourses of abandonment and marginalization (sacrifice zones; Christmann, 2016) in favor of new narratives grounded in hope and future projection (zones of opportunity; Castelló, 2023; Molina et al., 2023) as a way to foster well-being and social cohesion in rural communities.

Our study engages with current debates on places that don't matter (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), news deserts (Gulyas et al., 2023; Verza et al., 2024), communicative resilience (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2024; Usher, 2023), and geographies of hope (Hazlewood et al., 2023). The concept of geographies of hope has been applied to ecological and climate change issues (Sabin et al., 2023), and more prominently to research on resistance and protest in contexts of crisis, precarity, or vulnerability (Joronen & Griffiths, 2019; Silveira et al., 2017; Tups et al., 2023).

This article contributes to a situated understanding of geographies of hope as a travelling concept (Bal, 2002), by exploring how local media conditions—in terms of infrastructures, perceptions, and practices—are linked to the configuration of collective expectations about the future. We apply the lens of geographies of hope to rural areas in the enriched Global North, to examine how hope, understood as an affective configuration (Macón, 2020), relates to processes of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2022; Hepp et al., 2024).

The argument is based on the premise that the construction of place cannot be understood apart from its communicative infrastructures (Jansson, 2022), its discursive dimensions (Christmann, 2022), and its media practices (Brantner et al., 2021). Our approach draws on the representational dimension of place-making (Banini, 2021; Banini & Ilovan, 2021; Christmann, 2022), within the framework of geomedia studies (Jansson & Ritter, 2024) and the geography of communication, with a specific focus on rural areas (Braunerhielm et al., 2024; Jansson & Andersson, 2012; Zerrer, 2024).

We analyze how the presence of media infrastructures and practices—conceptualized as media ensembles (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017)—in depopulated rural municipalities relates to an affective orientation toward hope. We aim to highlight the relevance of incorporating media and communication indicators into this interdisciplinary research field. Like previous studies that have sought to measure mediatization processes

by operationalizing them through quantitative methods (Bengtsson et al., 2020), we use data on the media ecosystem of areas classified as depopulated in Castilla-La Mancha, in connection with the results of a face-to-face survey of residents (n = 529) about their perceptions of local media, interest in news, and sense of community well-being. This approach enables us to assess the extent to which media presence affects satisfaction with local information coverage and whether this presence has an impact on perceptions of hope for the future of these territories.

The article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the conceptual framework by revisiting the notion of geographies of hope. Second, we discuss the role of media ensembles in rural place-making processes. Third, we present Castilla-La Mancha as our study context—focusing on rural mediatization in depopulated areas—and describe the methodology. Fourth, results are then presented in two stages: (a) a comparison between environments with differing levels of local media, considering sociodemographic variables, media uses, and evaluations; and (b) an analysis of the territorial hope index and its predictors, emphasizing the mediating role of satisfaction with local news coverage. Finally, we discuss implications of the findings and outline directions for future research.

2. Geographies of Hope: A Travelling and Situated Concept

As part of the multidisciplinary affective turn, geography (like communication) has become increasingly concerned with affect in relation to territory (Anderson & Harrison, 2010; Thrift, 2000). Within this context, interest in hope has emerged, giving rise to multiple readings (Appadurai, 2013; Harvey, 2000). Along these lines, the notion of geographies of hope has taken shape, grounded in critical geography and postcolonial thought (Hazlewood et al., 2023). We adopt this notion not as a normative or fashionable framework, but as a travelling concept (Bal, 2002), one that crosses disciplinary boundaries, theoretical paradigms, and geopolitical contexts.

In the conceptual translation proposed here, we understand hope as an affective configuration (Macón, 2020), a term referring to the mechanisms that organize collective emotional orders in response to specific issues and historically situated contexts. In the framework of a politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2004), this allows us to conceptualize hope not as an individual emotional state, but as a collective, situated, and performative affective configuration through which the meaning of the future is negotiated within systems of power, territorial memory, and agency. These configurations stabilize what is considered a legitimate affective response—such as optimism, resignation, nostalgia, or resilience—through a sedimented ensemble of imaginaries, commonplaces, practices, institutional devices, and embodied dispositions. Although they may appear natural or inevitable, such orders are always ambivalent: they can reinforce hegemonic interpretations of reality, but also serve as catalysts for transformation (Macón, 2020).

In this line, Hazlewood et al. (2023) capture the complexity of such configurations by conceptualizing geographies of hope as an affective, relational, and performative praxis composed of six interrelated dimensions: place, alliances, the unthinkable, perseverance, resilience, and the (im)possible. This articulation shapes the reconfiguration of spatial imaginaries, territorial identities, and expectations about the future.

Given this complexity, hope cannot be assumed to operate uniformly in the so-called left-behind places (Pike et al., 2023). The dialectic between hope and hopelessness, persistence and disillusionment, action and

inaction (Joronen & Griffiths, 2019; Tups et al., 2023) precludes any assumption of homogeneity or coherence. Several studies have pointed out that contradictory imaginations of hope can shape social realities (Nikunen, 2016) or that optimism—often considered a component of hope—can, under certain structural conditions, act as a limiting factor that prevents hope from translating into effective, future-oriented intervention (Berlant, 2011; Burnett, 2023; Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2024).

Every affective configuration—as an emotional order—must be inscribed within a historically and socially situated regime through which territory is felt, made, and attached to (Banini, 2021). Such configurations are neither linear nor unidimensional; they are shaped by power relations (Massey, 2005) and by often conflicting modes of defining what territory means—in this case, what ruralities are (Mormont, 1990).

Our starting point is that, in the context of rural Europe, rhetoric around hope and future-oriented optimism circulates across institutional, activist, and media discourses. This circulation can be read as an indicator of a shift away from previous affective dispositions dominated by narratives of hopelessness, abandonment, and institutional neglect. Rural areas have long been represented in terms of lack of opportunity and future, and identified with loneliness, suffering, abandonment, or escape (Font Garolera, 2023), symbolically evicted (Christmann, 2016).

In places like depopulated Spain, in recent years, such representations have been traced in culture, in media representations, and in public policies and social mobilizations. We observe a turn toward rhetorics of ambivalent hope (Castelló, 2023; McClancy, 2022), a dynamic interplay between vulnerability and aspiration (Saiz-Echezarreta, 2024), clearly visible during the Revuelta de la España Vaciada (Esparcia, 2024).

In this transitional context, hope functions as an emerging affective configuration that displaces the historical pessimism associated with depopulated Spain, fostering greater optimism about the future of these territories. This hope not only contributes to symbolic recognition and a sense of belonging in rural areas but it also enhances their visibility and resilience in the face of urban-normative paradigms, mobilizing publics and expanding the boundaries of what is considered thinkable in relation to rural futures.

3. Rural News Deserts, Media Ensembles, and Place-Making

Place cannot be understood as a fixed or merely geographic entity, but rather as a space imbued with meanings, affects, and disputes (Massey, 2005), and always as the result of historical, social, and symbolic processes that make it habitable, narratable, and emotionally significant (Banini & Ilovan, 2021; Christmann, 2022). Territory, at any scale, is a relational and dynamic construction in which imaginaries, representations, systems of meaning, and semiotic practices are interwoven (Peñamarín, 2025).

Attachment to territory presupposes the existence of affective configurations that sustain shared ways of being and remaining in place, as well as narratives that (re)produce or displace meanings of belonging. Place is not only a reference for being, but also for becoming-with-others (Banini, 2021), which entails a work of imagination to project oneself into the future (Appadurai, 2013). In peripheral territories, such as depopulated rural areas, degrees of pessimism or optimism, disaffection or pride are situated responses to material, political, and sociocultural conditions that define what is thinkable, desirable, or attainable for those communities.

Remaining in a territory and projecting its future requires, among other factors, the ability to communicate, represent, imagine, and narrate it—both within and beyond the community (Christmann, 2022; Stoustrup, 2025). For this reason, we argue that territorial identity and place attachment are sustained and transformed through media ensembles (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017), as conceptualized within the paradigm of mediatization (Hepp et al., 2024). Abundant literature has described how the media construct geographies and a sense of place: from Anderson (2016), Gellner (1983), or Rodriguez-Amat (2011) on imagined communities and the nation; or more recently with works exploring geographies of journalism and place making in digital news (Gutsche & Hess, 2018) or local journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020; Olsen, 2021) and hyperlocal journalism (Harte et al., 2017) for urban imaginations (Leupold et al., 2018) or small towns (Hess, 2015). Indeed, far from being mere technical devices, the media act as territorial agents, building forms of geographic imagination, and becoming the conditions of possibility contributing to the definition of who belongs, what is worth telling, and which ways of life are possible in a given place—thus shaping place-making (Braunerhielm et al., 2024), always understood as a negotiated and contested process (Burnett, 2023). The communicative dimension is constitutive of territory, as it is through stories, discourses, and information that the meanings enabling a community to feel part of a place are sedimented—or challenged.

In peripheral areas affected by demographic decline, weak or absent media undermine the ability to sustain positive territorial attachment. The scarcity of local outlets, limited media relevance, and persistent negative representations at broader scales (Christmann, 2022, pp. 106–108) erode the collective capacity to imagine a shared future. While this is a shared risk among the so-called news deserts (Gulyas et al., 2023; Verza et al., 2024), we suggest avoiding simplified readings based solely on indicators of abandonment or deprivation. Instead, we propose shifting the focus toward the communicative resilience that many rural communities display in response to these deficits (McAdam, 2025; Usher, 2023). It is essential to consider not only what is lacking but also the alternative forms that emerge to sustain symbolic ties to territory, including municipal communication channels, village social media networks, or hyperlocal outlets that, despite their vulnerability and limitations, fulfil relevant functions (McAdam & Hess, 2024).

Mapping the local media ecosystem—beyond conventional media—makes it possible to identify material conditions with symbolic effects that can shape perceptions of the future, promote optimism, and, ultimately, enable the emergence of hope.

We argue that in historically marginalized territories, the mere presence of media infrastructures—even minimal ones—expresses that the place is narratable, that it can occupy a space in the public sphere, and that it is worthy of attention. Having local media is not just a technical asset; it is a symbolic condition anchoring the feeling of belonging and reinforcing the perception of collective value. Being acknowledged through the media ecosystem implies a form of affective and political dignity, projecting the community as a future-bearing subject within the shared map.

4. Castilla-La Mancha as a Depopulated Region With a Hopeless Past

Applying such frameworks to the rural European context, this article focuses on the Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha. During the second half of the 20th century, Spain experienced significant migratory flows from rural and agrarian regions in the central part of the country toward industrialized areas on the periphery (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011). This rural exodus led to the progressive emptying of inland Spain,

including Castilla-La Mancha, which lost one million inhabitants between 1941 and 1980 (Artola, 1993), and was marked by poverty and a lack of opportunity in the immediate postwar period following the Spanish Civil War (Amo, 2003). Today, it remains a region with a predominantly rural character and a highly dispersed population, especially in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, which make up 69.7% of its 919 localities. One of its five provinces, Cuenca, is part of the NUTS-3 triad that forms what has been named the Spanish Lapland, along with Teruel and Soria (Burillo-Cuadrado & Burillo-Mozota, 2018). With a population density below eight inhabitants per square kilometre, it is one of the most pronounced demographic deserts in Europe.

While depopulation has been addressed through public policies and investment, these have been described as fragmented and uncoordinated for years (Pinilla & Sáez, 2017). Since 2015, however, there has been growing concern at the regional, national, and European levels (Esparcia, 2024), leading to efforts to design coherent strategies to promote the development of these territories. The goal is not to reverse irreversible situations, but to implement innovative policies that guarantee people's freedom to choose where they want to live—including in rural areas (Sáez & Pinilla, 2024).

Castilla-La Mancha has been a pioneering region in legislating against depopulation. Law 2/2021 has become a European reference by promoting a cross-cutting approach in which all areas of public policy are involved through rural proofing. To implement the law, a territorial zoning model was established (Decree 108/2021), grouping municipalities into 52 zones across six categories: urban, peri-urban, intermediate rural, at risk of depopulation, intense depopulation, or extreme depopulation. The three categories identifying depopulated areas encompass 721 of the region's 919 municipalities and 22% of its population (438,024 people).

However, depopulation is not only a sociodemographic issue but also a symbolic one. The disappearance of rural settlements may "truncate personal life projects and erase communities with long histories and even great future potential" (Pinilla & Sáez, 2017, p. 3). The Castilla-La Mancha Strategy Against Depopulation 2021–2031 highlights the need to develop territorial communication strategies and "raise awareness of the intrinsic positive aspects of rural life" (Specific Objective 8.1; Gobierno de Castilla-La Mancha, 2021, p. 120), recognizing that narratives shape how these areas are projected as liveable places and revealing the emergence of a hopeful affective configuration. Moreover, recent legislation in this and other regions has incorporated communicative and discursive components, both in terms of infrastructure and narrative, acknowledging the importance of media in reshaping the interpretive frameworks applied to rural territories.

With regard to its media structure, Castilla-La Mancha has historically been defined by a fragile media ecosystem. According to the most recent census (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2023), the region hosts 211 media outlets, 43.6% of which are digital media. Most of these outlets are typically local or hyperlocal in scope and sustain small-scale workforces. Private ownership predominates (74.9%), although no major communication conglomerates are headquartered in the region. Publicly owned outlets represent a smaller share (20.8%), consisting mainly of municipal radio stations under the authority of local councils, while community media account for 4.3%. The regional public broadcaster, Castilla-La Mancha Media, based in the regional capital and supported by provincial delegations, also plays a significant role.

From its leading position in the public debate on depopulation, Castilla-La Mancha constitutes a singular and fitting case study for observing the role of local media in shaping residents' perceptions of the future of their territory.

5. Objectives

We ask to what extent hope—understood as trust in a prosperous future for rural territories—is related to the media ensembles taking place in these contexts. From this premise, as a general objective, we propose to explore how the local media ecosystem in rural municipalities can shape residents' territorial hope.

The specific objectives (SO) of the study are:

> SO1: To examine differences in the perceived impact of local media, trust in these media, and patterns of news consumption, according to the local media ecosystems.
>
> SO2: To construct the index of territorial hope as a tool to comparatively measure confidence in the future of the territory among people living in different local media ecosystems.
>
> SO3: To analyze the relationship between local media ecosystems and the level of territorial hope, also taking into account sociodemographic variables and patterns of interest and consumption of local information.

In general terms, we hypothesize that, in the context of deep mediatization, the public visibility provided by media—the very fact of being symbolically acknowledged through media presence—can operate as a disposition toward hope, acting as a symbolic activator in response to dominant narratives of abandonment.

6. Methodology

To achieve the proposed objectives and test the central hypothesis, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach that allows for the connection between the structural conditions of the local media ecosystem and residents' perceptions regarding the future of their territory. The research strategy combines the mapping of local media—as an indicator of the degree of local mediatization—with a survey conducted among residents of depopulated rural municipalities in Castilla-La Mancha. This combination allows for the relationship between the media structure of each locality and the perceptions of local media and the levels of territorial hope as inferred from residents' responses.

The data collection and survey design are part of this broader, multi-method research program developed since 2019 on the mediatization of rural depopulation, combining discourse analysis, interviews, ethnographic observation, and participatory workshops. Previous research indicated that an approach to news deserts focused solely on news media was insufficient. Based on focus groups with a sample of the population and an analysis of the media structure, the importance of alternative communication resources and the diversity of functions they fulfill for the inhabitants of these communities became evident, as well as the value attributed to media as a source of social recognition (see Galletero-Campos et al., 2023). This cumulative and situated approach has informed both the design of the questionnaire and the interpretation of the results.

6.1. Materials

In a previous study (January–May 2024; Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2023), a map of municipal information sources was developed, collecting data online and via phone calls to town halls. This database included the presence of the following: mobile public notice apps, messaging platforms (WhatsApp and Telegram), official municipal Facebook pages, municipal websites with updated local news, and non-professional media projects (such as community radios, newsletters, or blogs). This database was supplemented with a mapping of professional local media in the region (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2023). The sum of municipal information sources and professional media constitutes the local media variable, ranging from 0 to 5. This measure corresponds to the sum of the channels through which municipal/local information is disseminated, including professional local media, with all channels assigned equal weight. The aim was to identify towns with a more comprehensive information ecosystem in contrast to those with only minimal resources.

Our survey, designed to examine how residents relate to local media and community wellbeing, was conducted between November and December 2024. The questionnaire design draws on similar studies conducted in comparable contexts, including Park et al. (2023), the BBVA Foundation (2023) *Information Consumption Survey*, and the community well-being index developed by Schirmer et al. (2016). The study focused on a universe of 721 municipalities (78.5% of the total in the region) classified as depopulated and with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, with a reference population of 438,024 residents. The surveys were conducted in public settings, including streets, medical clinics, markets, bars, pharmacies, schools and high schools, municipal buildings, and regional administrative offices, seeking to ensure diversity of gender and age within the sample. The final sample comprises 529 valid responses, with a margin of error of ±4.26% and a confidence level of 95%. The questionnaire was administered through face-to-face interviews, using a quota-based stratified sampling method by age and gender. The final sample included 53.5% women and 46.5% men, with 9.5% aged 17–29, 39.7% aged 30–49, 38.3% aged 50–65, and 12.5% aged over 66. The 21 sampling points (Figure 1) correspond to municipalities from different provinces in Castilla-La Mancha and reflect a balanced distribution of communicative structure levels: one group with 4–5 local media (triangle symbol) and another with 1–3 local media (circle symbol).

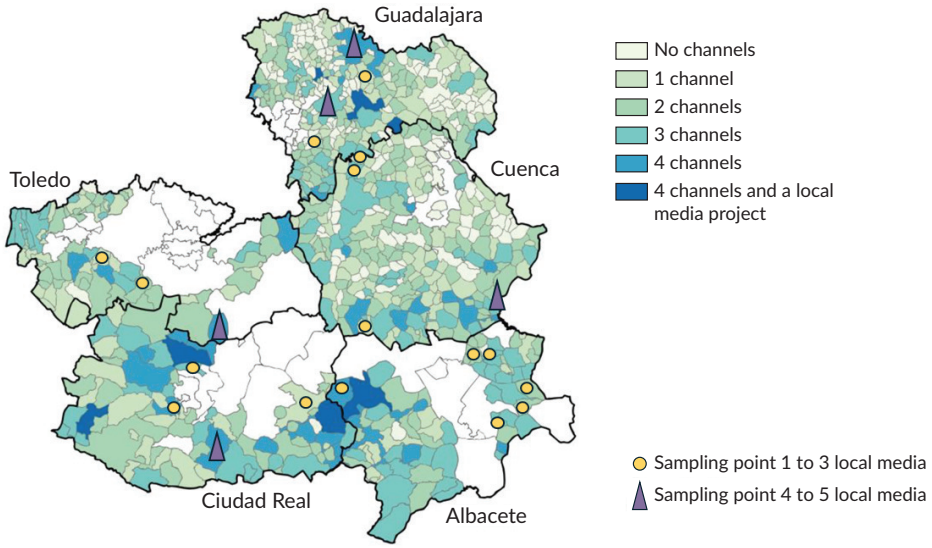

Figure 1. 21 sampling points for the developed survey.

Survey responses were grouped into two categories depending on whether the respondent lived in a municipality with more or less local media. When designing the sampling points, the aim was to select locations in depopulated areas, ensuring that each province included at least one municipality with a high number of channels and one with a low number, from different zones, with the third point from any category. Following these criteria, the sample was expanded to 21 points. The responses were then recategorized into two groups to capture the greatest possible disparity in media ecosystems, resulting in a balanced division of the sample. The first group includes individuals from municipalities with 4–5 local media, specifically, Iniesta, Brihuega, Calzada de Calatrava, Urda, and Sigüenza (n = 266 respondents). The second group comprises respondents from the remaining 16 municipalities with 1–3 local media (n = 263): Alhambra, Alpera, Bonete, Cañaveruelas, Corral-Rubio, El Provencio, Fuente el Fresno, Golosalvo, Mahora, Menasalbas, Ossa de Montiel, Petrola, San Martín de Pusa, Tendilla, Torremocha del Campo, and Villalba del Rey.

The questionnaire (Table 1) consisted of 21 questions, which were structured around the following themes:

Table 1. Dimensions and items of the questionnaire.

Themes	Variables
Sociodemographic	Gender, age, employment, education, income, time in the municipality, ideological self-placement, and municipality size
Interest in current affairs Scale from 0 to 5: 0 = *not at all interested* and 5 = *very interested* *	Scope: regional, national, and local Topic: politics/culture and society/economics/environment/sports
Media use Available options: a lot, quite a lot, a little, not at all, don't know, I do not keep myself informed about local news	Gets local news from TV, radio, newspapers, municipal channels, WhatsApp and/or Facebook groups, or other social media
Satisfaction Scale from 0 to 5, indicating agreement: 0 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*	There is enough news about my village and my region in the media I feel that my interests are reflected in the local media The media offer an accurate portrayal of villages like mine If there is a controversial issue in my area, the media will come to cover it
Trust in media Available options: very likely, quite likely, not very likely, not at all likely	Likelihood of receiving false news about current affairs through: TV, radio, newspapers, municipal channels, WhatsApp and/or Facebook groups, or other social media
Media impact Scale from 0 to 5, indicating agreement: 0 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*	They help people get involved in local activities They have no impact They allow for understanding different points of view on controversial issues affecting the area They help draw attention from higher-level administrations They help preserve the stories of local villages and their inhabitants They serve as a tourist attraction

Table 1. (Cont.) Dimensions and items of the questionnaire.

Themes	Variables
Motivational	Informs in order to talk with others
Scale from 0 to 5: 0 = *not at all important* and 5 = *very important*	Informs in order to understand local events
	Informs in order to manage daily life
	Informs in order to participate in local decisions
Community well-being	I am optimistic about the future of my area
Scale from 0 to 5, indicating agreement: 0 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*	I would recommend my village to others as a good place to live
	I feel well integrated in my locality

Note: * = Among the response options, the questionnaire incorporated a spontaneous "Don't know/No answer" category.

6.2. Statistical Methods

The statistical analysis included both bivariate and multivariate techniques to explore the relationship between the local media ecosystems and residents' perceptions of them, as well as territorial hope. In this exploratory analysis aimed at identifying significant differences between the two categories of municipalities and given that normality of data distribution could not be assumed, non-parametric tests were applied: the Mann–Whitney U test for ordinal and scale variables, and chi-squared tests of independence and Cramér's V for categorical and dichotomous variables.

Drawing on the literature review, we constructed the territorial hope index, structured around three interrelated dimensions that operate as partial indicators and can be understood as entry points into the more complex affective configuration of hope. These items showed statistically significant and consistent relationships based on Pearson correlations, measured on a Likert scale from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*:

1. Identity and integration ("I feel well integrated in my locality"): This item seeks to capture the attachment to place, understood as a shared mode of being and becoming-with-others in a historically and socially constructed space (Banini, 2021; Banini & Ilovan, 2021).

2. Optimism about the future ("I am optimistic about the future of my area"): This item reflects an individual affective orientation that expresses a positive disposition and a hopeful anticipation toward what lies ahead, opening up the possibility of alternative futures. Optimism, as a resource, can provide a foundation for hope, although there is also the risk that it may ultimately hinder it (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2024).

3. Perception of value/external recognition ("I would recommend my village to others as a good place to live"): This item addresses the outward projection and symbolic legitimacy of the territory, expressing indirectly the desire for recognition and visibility in broader publics—a key element in the constitution of hope as a relational (Hazlewood et al., 2023).

In its validation, a principal component analysis confirmed the existence of a unidimensional structure, with an explained variance of 58.5% and an acceptable Cronbach's alpha of 0.616. The index is scored on a scale from 0 to 15, which allows for the distribution of the sample into low, medium, and high levels of territorial hope. The overall mean was 12.51 ($SD = 3.71$), with predominantly high values likely due to social desirability bias. Three levels of hope were classified: low (0–9; 13.8%), medium (10–13; 28.5%), and high (14–15; 57.7%). The statistical significance of differences in the index between the two subsamples—based on the presence of local media—was tested using ANOVA and Student's t-test. Once these differences were confirmed, a multiple linear regression was designed to evaluate the simultaneous influence of sociodemographic and media-related variables on the index, with the aim of identifying which variables carry the most weight in predicting hope regarding the future of the territory. The absence of significant collinearity was verified through the variance inflation factor and the condition index analysis, which supports a reliable interpretation of the model.

Finally, to examine the relationship between the territorial hope index and local media, a mediation analysis was performed using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2022), with 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence level. The objective was to explore whether satisfaction with local information acts as an intervening mechanism between the media ecosystem of the municipality and residents' optimistic perception of their territory.

Both methods make it possible to go beyond bivariate comparison and to detect indirect relationships and compound effects that are common in complex phenomena of a social and symbolic nature.

7. Results

7.1. Differences Between Local Media Ecosystems

The comparative analysis between respondents living in both types of municipalities (with more or less local media) reveals a series of statistically significant differences that allow us to characterize the impact of the local media ecosystem across several dimensions: in particular, satisfaction with local information, perceptions of media impact, and community well-being.

Residents of municipalities with a greater number of local media report significantly higher scores across all evaluated items on satisfaction with local information. Regarding the perception that "there is enough news," localities with more media rank higher (mean = 283.4) than the 246.4 ranked in municipalities with lower activity ($p = 0.003$); similarly, the feeling that their interests are reflected in the local media is higher in environments with more media outlets (277.86 vs. 251.99, $p = 0.039$). The most pronounced difference appears in the perception that the media offer an accurate portrayal of the village, with a mean rank of 287.97 in municipalities with more media, vs. 241.77 in those with fewer media ($p < 0.001$). Likewise, confidence that the media will cover controversial local issues is significantly greater in municipalities with a more numerous media structure (282.60 vs. 247.20, $p = 0.002$).

With regard to perceived media impact, significant differences are observed in five out of six items. The belief that the media help to understand different perspectives on local conflicts is stronger in municipalities with active media (277.55 vs. 252.31, $p = 0.038$), as is their perceived ability to attract the attention of higher-level administrations (279.01 vs. 250.83, $p = 0.022$). The media are also more highly valued as tools for preserving

local stories (276.32 vs. 253.55, $p = 0.043$) and as instruments for tourism promotion (276.46 vs. 253.41, $p = 0.047$). Although it does not reach the threshold of statistical significance, a positive trend is observed in the perception that the media help people get involved in community activities ($p = 0.080$).

In contrast, the proportion of people who believe that the media "have no impact" does not differ significantly between contexts ($p = 0.334$). In fact, nearly one-third of the entire sample (28.4%) strongly agree with the statement that the media "have no impact" on the life of their village or region. This response is transversal across sociodemographic groups, suggesting a form of shared structural skepticism. The only type of media that shows differences in consumption for this group compared to the others is radio. There is a statistically significant relationship between the perceived impact of media and local radio consumption, a finding consistent with the preeminence and importance of radio in these areas.

Subjective indicators of community well-being show a clear difference in favor of municipalities with active media. These municipalities report higher levels of optimism about the future of the territory (245.13 vs. 284.64, $p < 0.001$) and a greater willingness to recommend the village as a place to live (253.93 vs. 275.95, $p = 0.021$). In contrast, no significant differences were observed in the level of local integration ($p = 0.224$).

Other variables, however, show weaker associations. With regard to media consumption, significant differences were found only in the use of local print or digital newspapers, which was higher among respondents living in municipalities with active media (276.3 vs. 227.1; $p < 0.001$). For all other channels—such as radio $p = 0.735$, TV $p = 0.454$, municipal website $p = 0.175$, municipal Facebook page $p = 0.936$, and other social media $p = 0.883$—no statistically significant differences were observed, suggesting that their use is widespread and not directly dependent on the local media ecosystem.

Regarding motivations for staying informed and the willingness to share information, no statistically significant differences were found between municipalities ($p > 0.05$, for all items). In both contexts, the most valued reasons are those related to understanding the local context and engaging in conversation with others, rather than practical or participatory functions.

In relation to interest in current affairs topics, respondents from municipalities with less local media show greater interest in environmental issues, both at the local scale (282.54 vs. 247.66, $p = 0.004$) and the national scale (282.00 vs. 248.19, $p = 0.004$), while no significant differences were found for topics such as economy or sports. Conversely, municipalities with more active media exhibit less interest in local politics (278.09 vs. 252.05, $p = 0.036$) and in local cultural and social issues (277.07 vs. 253.07, $p = 0.048$), which could reflect a shift or diversification in informational repertoires.

In terms of perceived reliability of information sources, only one significant difference was found: municipal channels were perceived as more reliable in municipalities with fewer media. This is reflected in the lower perceived likelihood of receiving false news through these channels (187.3 vs. 220.4, $p = 0.003$). Although it is not the focus of our study, we consider that this may be due to relational proximity to local authorities and lower exposure to multiple information sources, which reinforces the perception of authenticity and legitimacy of these messages (Torre et al., 2024; Verza et al., 2024).

It is worth noting that sociodemographic variables—gender, age, employment, education, income, time in the municipality, ideological self-placement, and municipality size—do not show significant differences between residents of the two types of municipalities ($p > 0.05$). Employment status shows a marginal difference ($p = 0.050$, Cramér's V = 0.121), as does time in municipality ($p = 0.002$, Cramér's V = 0.178). These results allow us to rule out that the observed differences in media perceptions and uses are due to different population compositions.

Lastly, the presence of active media is predominantly concentrated in larger municipalities ($p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.528), which reinforces the structural relationship between demographic size and communicative infrastructure.

In the following section, we address how these dynamics affect the index of territorial hope.

7.2. Media predictors of territorial hope

The index of territorial hope used to measure territorial hope in depopulated areas in Castilla-La Mancha was constructed from three key survey questions: the optimistic feeling about the future of their area, the feeling of belonging in their locality, and whether they would recommend their village as a good place to live. Principal component analysis showed how these items effectively capture a shared sense of hope, explaining a positive 58.5% of the variance in the sample responses.

Each item contributes differently to the index: the strongest loading corresponds to whether respondents would recommend their village (0.852), followed by sense of belonging (0.771), and optimism about the future (0.661).

In the initial exploration, the student's t-test for independent samples revealed statistically significant differences with respect to the variable of local media. Municipalities with more local media showed higher levels of hope ($M = 12.99$, $SD = 3.42$) than those with low or moderate communicative activity ($M = 12.03$, $SD = 3.93$), $t(515.5) = 2.99$, $p = 0.003$. Although the effect size was small ($d = 0.26$), it was statistically significant and relevant, suggesting that local media ecosystems may be associated with a more optimistic perception of the future.

Given the differences between the two samples, a multiple linear regression model was tested to further explore the factors influencing optimism about the future of the territory. The model incorporated both sociodemographic and media variables. Among the sociodemographic variables listed in Table 1, those included in the model were gender, age, employment, education, income, time in the municipality, ideological self-placement, and municipality size. On the communicative side, two types of variables were introduced: (a) the presence of local media channels (high: 4–5, low: 1–3), and (b) three indicators of individual communicative practices, that is, interest in local news, interest in national news, and trust in professional local media (press, radio, and TV).

This combination of variables allows for an integrated analysis of the extent to which structural conditions and perceptions about media influence the level of territorial hope expressed by citizens.

The model was statistically significant ($F(10, 367) = 5.506$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 10.7% of the variance. The most relevant predictors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Statistical values for predictors of territorial hope.

Independent variable	Standardized coefficient (β)	Significance (p)
Interest in local news	0.281	< 0.001
Trust in professional media	0.151	0.003
Age	0.163	0.002
Municipality size	0.120	0.040
Presence of local media	0.123	0.035
Interest in national news	−0.164	0.027

The results indicate that the territorial hope index varies according to certain communicative and sociodemographic conditions. Regarding the latter, higher age is associated with higher levels of territorial hope ($\beta = .163$, $p = 0.002$). Likewise, larger municipalities within the sample tend to show higher levels of territorial hope ($\beta = 0.120$, $p = 0.040$). Among the sociodemographic variables, only age (and municipality size) show significant effects in the linear regression model.

The statistical significance of media variables, alongside the absence of effects from the sociodemographic factors included in the model—gender, income, educational level, and ideological self-placement—reinforces the initial hypothesis: the level of territorial hope is explained primarily by the local media ecosystem. In line with this, living in a municipality with active media or communication projects is significantly associated with higher levels of territorial hope ($\beta = 0.123$, $p = 0.035$).

In addition, trust in professional media—radio, newspapers, and TV—also has a positive effect ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = 0.003$), suggesting that a positive perception of the local information ecosystem strengthens optimistic dispositions. Moreover, the strongest predictor in the model is interest in current affairs (see Table 1, for the response scale): the greater the attention paid to what is happening in one's immediate surroundings, the higher the level of hope placed in the future of the territory ($\beta = 0.281$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, interest in national news has a negative effect ($\beta = -0.164$, $p = 0.027$).

Finally, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether satisfaction with local news coverage mediates the relationship between the presence of local media and the level of territorial hope. The results show that the indirect effect is statistically significant, although moderate (coefficient = 0.0956; 95% CI [0.0448, 0.1710]). A significant indirect effect was observed, indicating that the influence of the media structure on territorial hope is mediated by satisfaction with local information.

8. Discussion

In this study, we hypothesize that in a mediatized environment, the existence of media infrastructures and local media practices can activate a disposition toward hope in rural areas marked by depopulation. Our analyses support the presence of such effects.

Beyond population composition, the media ecosystem accounts for differences in the perceived value of media, satisfaction with information, attributed impact, and sense of community well-being (SO1). In addition, we have developed, as a methodological contribution, an index of territorial hope based on three interrelated indicators: personal optimism, sense of belonging, and outward projection of the locality (SO2). Analysis using the PROCESS procedure confirms that part of the positive effect of media ensembles on territorial hope is mediated by satisfaction with local information. This indirect effect suggests that territorial hope is shaped not only by the objective presence of media but also by how positively these media are evaluated by residents. Satisfaction, understood as the feeling that there is sufficient news, that one's interests are represented, or that the media offer an accurate portrayal of the locality, functions as a key mechanism through which the communicative structure of a municipality translates into a hopeful disposition toward the future.

Furthermore, the most explanatory and predictive factors for territorial hope are variables linked to the communicative ecosystem and media-related practices (SO3). The most influential predictor is interest in local information, confirming that attention to one's immediate environment reinforces hopeful outlooks. Another relevant predictor is trust in professional media—radio, press, and TV—as well as the presence of local media. These findings suggest that the perceived reliability of the information system and the vitality of local communication contribute to sustaining a hopeful perspective on the future of the territory.

Despite the positive effects associated with the local media environment, one third of the respondents (28.4%) fully agree with the statement that "the media have no impact" on the life of their municipality. This pattern of skepticism does not differ significantly between municipalities with high and low levels of communicative activity, indicating that it is not primarily a response to current media conditions, but rather to news disaffection and to shared historical experiences of institutional neglect and accumulated disillusionment. This structural skepticism serves as a counterpoint to overly optimistic interpretations of the findings and may point to the limits of the symbolic power of the media when they are not perceived as legitimate spaces of representation by citizens who do not see themselves reflected in dominant discourses (Castelló, 2023; Galletero-Campos et al., 2023).

It is worth noting that, when comparing both categories of municipalities, the most significant media-related impact concerns outward projection. In particular, we highlight responses such as "they help draw attention from higher-level administrations" and "they serve as a tourist attraction." In this regard, within the composition of the index, the item with the greatest explanatory weight is the statement "I would recommend my village as a good place to live," which ranks above both the sense of integration and personal optimism. This suggests that territorial hope cannot be reduced to emotional attachment or individual optimism alone (Banini, 2021; Christmann, 2022).

This outward projection of the place's value—the desire for validation by others—reveals that hope operates as a relational disposition that transcends subjective experience (Hazlewood et al., 2023). Territorial hope cannot be understood solely as a disposition arising from individual experiences, but rather as a shared affective configuration shaped by institutional rhetorics, local communicative infrastructures, and everyday informational practices.

Rural mediatization (Zerrer, 2024) reinforces the idea that local media do not merely inform, but also shape how the community imagines itself and is imagined by others (Anderson & Harrison, 2010; Appadurai, 2013). Public visibility is not simply a technical condition for communicative existence; it constitutes a fundamental symbolic dimension that structures the perception of the territory as a legitimate, active, and future-oriented space (Brantner et al., 2021; Braunerhielm et al., 2024). Local media, therefore, function not only as channels of information but also as devices for collective visibility, in the Arendtian sense of public appearance. The perception that a territory matters, that it deserves to be inhabited or can be recommended to others, is mediated by the media's capacity to make everyday experiences, shared values, and possible horizons visible. Thus, the projective function of hope is closely tied to symbolic recognition, which not only affirms the internal value of the territory but also positions it externally as a legitimate place.

9. Conclusions

This study offers an empirical proposal for understanding territorial hope as an affective configuration that emerges from media ensembles in depopulated areas, which have historically been made visible through hopeless framings.

It certainly has limitations that should be acknowledged. It must be noted that the territorial hope index may be affected by social desirability bias. The high scores recorded (M = 12.51 out of a maximum of 15, SD = 3.71) could reflect, at least in part, the effect of a positive discursive climate currently permeating institutional, activist, and media rhetoric around rural territories. This phenomenon—which may be specific to the Spanish context when compared to other European cases—requires more in-depth analysis. Additionally, the questionnaire structure—positively framed response options—may introduce acquiescence bias, potentially inflating associations between local media and territorial hope (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In this sense, the presence of local media not only facilitates the place-making process, but should also be considered in terms of how it may convey institutional and activist discourses that legitimize the territory as a place that deserves to exist and can have a future. For future research, we may assume that municipalities with strong local ecosystems tend to exhibit more circulation and sharing of these narratives of possibility, reinforcing a common sense that binds the community emotionally and discursively through hope. Qualitative studies are needed to explore whether expressions of territorial hope stem from lived everyday experiences in the immediate environment, or whether they instead reproduce an institutionalized rhetoric disseminated by the media. This distinction is key to understanding which future-oriented discourses are appropriated, resisted, or simply repeated by citizens. On the other hand, previous research has suggested that it is not enough for media outlets to merely exist; news outlets must provide up-to-date and valuable information, be active and engaged in the community, that is, produce reliable and accurate journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020).

The results open pathways for the development of situated communicative resilience indicators that assess the capacity of territories to sustain collective hopeful dispositions in the face of adverse conditions. The findings also suggest implications for the design of territorial communication strategies sensitive to local dynamics, and for the promotion of participatory media governance models that reinforce the symbolic agency of rural communities.

At the same time, future longitudinal studies could examine the evolution of affective dispositions in contexts of communicative transformation and assess whether changes in the media ecosystem lead to sustained variations in territorial hope. Comparative research in other rural regions would also be valuable, as it could identify contextual patterns and local specificities. Such an approach would contribute to consolidating a robust interpretive framework for understanding territorial hope as a communicative, relational, and political phenomenon.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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The Romantic Workplace: How Coworking Spaces Drive Post-Digital Consumption

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Abstract

Society and culture are increasingly marked by post-digital developments where the normalization of digital connectivity is challenged both through critical resistance, e.g., digital disconnection practices, and in commercial discourses on, e.g., "digital wellbeing" and "digital detox." This article seeks to understand such post-digital trends in working life through the lens of romantic ideals. In modern history, the Romantic ethic implied an escape into the beautiful, the genuine, and the sublime. While constituting a counter-force to functionalism, it also shaped the evolution of modern consumerism through the embracing of novelty and imagination. Here, the analytical focus is on coworking spaces (CWS), a form of digitally reliant workspaces where mobile workers can rent a desk or an office for a limited period of time and where disconnection and non-digital features are promoted as ingredients of "good work." Previous research shows that many CWS, while promoted as consumable destinations, function as anchoring places and environments for gaining a sense of presence and peace under digitally networked conditions. The current analysis extends these arguments through a case study of a CWS in an early-gentrifying part of Oslo, Norway. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews, the article shows how four romantic tropes—novelty, authenticity, creativity, and harmony—saturate spatial production as well as the mindsets of coworkers. It is concluded that CWS form part of a neo-romantic movement that includes a plethora of related post-digital phenomena, together constituting a counter-culture within capitalist consumer society.

Keywords

consumer culture; coworking spaces; digital disconnection; digital work; gentrification; media geography; post-digital; romantic ethic; sense of place

1. Introduction

Coworking spaces (CWS) are digitally connected workspaces where freelancers and other "flexible" knowledge workers can access a "hot desk" and other work facilities for a limited period. In a recent analysis, Merkel (2022) suggests that these workplaces can be understood as "destinations and new stakeholders in hospitality ecosystems" (p. 140). This is a pertinent formulation that captures, first, that CWS are promoted and consumed in a way similar to tourism destinations, and, second, that part of their desirability should be understood in a relational manner. CWS are designed to evoke attraction among customers and do so both through their appearance and through their functional and semiotic ties to neighboring places and businesses (bars, restaurants, shops, and so forth). In this respect, CWS represent a cultural shift whereby (some) workplaces become subjected to individual consumer choice (e.g., Bacevice, 2022; Burrell & Dale, 2014; Gruen & Bardhi, 2025). Of course, self-employed workers and entrepreneurs selected their places of operations also in the past, and some customers of CWS are assigned to a particular establishment by their employer. But never before has productive work in this way coalesced with *the consumption of place*. Today, there is competition among CWS companies to provide the best value for money as well as between cities and municipalities to attract new CWS establishments (e.g., Mariotti et al., 2024; Nakano et al., 2020).

As an index of this commoditization of the workplace, much research, especially from business- and management-oriented strands, has charted the demands and preferences of mobile workers, trying to learn what the CWS business looks like (e.g., Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2021; Jeske & Ruwe, 2019). Notably, CWS are demanded because they can provide (in addition to basic infrastructural amenities) a sense of community and boundedness, as well as social serendipity, among people who would otherwise suffer from loneliness and/or liquid working conditions (Garrett et al., 2017). What has been less discussed and analyzed, however, is how the construction of workplaces as "destinations" and "stakeholders" in "hospitality ecosystems" builds upon deeper socio-cultural value systems (Fast & Jansson, 2024; Merkel, 2022). This development, we argue, is not just a market-driven response to the fact that a growing share of the workforce in many Western countries lacks long-term employment and a fixed workplace. Having conducted several years of fieldwork—ethnography as well as analyses of marketing discourse—we discerned that CWS articulate values that correspond to the Romantic roots of consumer culture (Campbell, 1987). While the CWS business is diverse (ranging from global franchises to locally anchored collaborative hubs), meaning that romantic influences come in different shapes, our studies suggest that CWS are sites that reproduce a shared dream of authentic connections between place and identity. They are workplaces that ask to be consumed in a spirit of self-fulfillment, thus interweaving the forces of production with the "imaginative hedonism" of consumers (Campbell, 1987).

Based on these preliminary observations, we set out to explore the following research question in a more systematic fashion: How does the material and socio-cultural construction of CWS reflect and re-articulate romantic values, and how do such values relate to the dreams and hopes of their customers, that is, digitally entangled laptop workers?

We will show that CWS are constructed and appropriated as environments where the reliance on digital connectivity, and the associated threat of "placelessness" (Relph, 1976) and loneliness (King, 2017), are countered by means of socio-semiotic textures that speak to workers' longing for a "genuine" sense of place and belonging (Adams & Jansson, 2023). CWS use romantic tropes to promote and sell *a* post-digital

sense of place—a particular form of topophilia (Tuan, 1974/1990) that refers to both the workplace and its local surroundings.

To build our argument, we use a case study from a CWS in Oslo, Factory Tøyen (FT). FT is located in an early gentrifying neighborhood, Tøyen, and hosts mainly cultural entrepreneurs and start-ups. It is promoted by a strong focus on work-life balance and encapsulates the fundamental values of the coworking movement (Gandini, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012). Our study is abductive in nature, meaning that the results presented here do not respond to any pre-defined hypotheses, nor do they stem from an entirely open-ended exploration. Rather, our interest in the romantic undercurrents of CWS emerged as we started to interpret disconnection practices and other post-digital phenomena in light of consumer culture. This also means that while we begin the article by presenting our theoretical framework, including the notions of topophilia (Tuan, 1974/1990) and imaginative hedonism (Campbell, 1987), this framework is also part of our results. In subsequent sections, we present our methodological approach and the findings from our ethnographic fieldwork. The findings are grouped according to four romantic tropes defining a post-digital sense of place: novelty, authenticity, creativity, and harmony.

2. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

Contemporary society is marked by post-digital developments where the normalization of digital connectivity is challenged or even resisted. The post-digital is articulated through critical practices (e.g., digital disconnection or withdrawal) as well as in commercial discourses (e.g., "digital wellbeing," "digital detox"). In CWS, we argue, these tendencies come together in interesting ways as CWS are digitally reliant workplaces that *also* promote disconnection and non-digital features as ingredients of "good work." Such efforts to construct CWS as desirable post-digital environments put the accent on place-making, ranging from material design to the curation of pleasurable atmospheres intended to compensate for digital fatigue. Along these lines, we theorize CWS as at the same time consumer objects and sites where mobile workers can nourish a strong sense of place—where imaginative longing for the latter drives the former.

In the following, based on previous research, we discuss CWS as (a) post-digital workspaces, (b) identity anchoring places, and (c) consumable destinations. We also show how ideals rooted in Romanticism—notably, the appreciation of nature, emotion, creativity, and imagination, as well as the human striving for authentic experiences and inner harmony (see, e.g., Smith, 2023)—contribute to the linking of these themes. The Romantic movement harbored what Campbell (1987, p. 259) calls a "cult of sensibility" that peaked around the mid-18th century, especially in literature and philosophy, but played a deep and enduring role for modern society at large. In their reactivation of this cult, CWS unfold as neo-romantic havens for the uprooted digital subject.

2.1. CWS as Post-Digital Workspaces

Cramer (2015) argues that "the post-digital condition" is characterized by "disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets" alongside a revalorization of "old media" (p. 12). He illustrates this with the analogue typewriter whose cultural status, Cramer claims, is rising beyond niche "hipster" communities. While the extent of the "mainstreamification" of post-digital tastes can be debated (e.g., Fast et al., 2021), we accept Cramer's view of the post-digital as a response to the normalization of digital

technologies in everyday life (see also Albris et al., 2024; Taylor, in press), including working life. Like Jansson et al. (2025, p. 4), we understand the post-digital condition as a social condition encompassing "a continuum" of responses to digitalization, from coping tactics against "digital threats to individual agency" to "deliberate resistance to digital pervasiveness and social norms." Among these responses are various tactics for fighting the media "messiness" (Cramer, 2015, p. 17) that define the post-digital condition, such as "digital minimalism" (Newport, 2019), "digital detoxing," or "digital decluttering."

Through various examples of the "disconnection turn in work," Fast (2021) shows how, in post-digital capitalism, digital disconnectivity is re-coded from deficiency to resource, aligning with traditional work values like productivity. She identifies the post-digital workplace as a material and cultural model embodying a critique of digitalized work, including hyper-flexibilization and the subsequent loss of socio-spatial anchoring. The laptop-intensive CWS can thus be seen as prototypical of a post-digital workplace ideal that embraces "disconnective" technologies and designs such as designated areas for analogue recreation like yoga. Through their boundedness, CWS even act as "post-digital territories"; exclusive havens in hyper-connected surroundings (Fast & Jansson, 2024).

The spatial implications of (non-)media use in CWS are also analyzed by Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte (2021), who point to tensions arising in milieus where the digital is both indispensable and contested. These tensions include disputes over the core function of CWS. As they note, "Putting technology centre stage or relegating it to the backstage are material practices that constitute the CWS as either a workspace for productivity or a social space for community" (p. 7). We argue that this (spatial) ambiguity is symptomatic of the post-digital work culture.

We also argue that the post-digital workplace must be seen within a longer history of organizational measures to create productive *and* "happy" workers. This includes initiatives pertaining to the spiritualization of work—a trend that, fueled by the return to Romanticism in the 1960s, gained momentum in the 1980s (Watts & Houtman, 2023). The "spiritual workplace," Watts and Houtman (2023) argue, reflects the view that "within each and every worker lies an *authentic inner self*…that is the repository of the spiritual/sacred, but which is stifled and repressed by the bureaucratic and rationalized character of the modern workplace" (p. 440, emphasis added). Today, this neo-romantic trend comes in the guise of corporate "mindfulness," "workfulness," and "digital detox" programs (e.g., Guyard & Kaun, 2018) that aim at to "purify" work—not primarily from "bureaucratic pollution" (see Watts & Houtman, 2023, p. 441) but from digital contamination. Thus, the post-digital workplace shares traits with what Gregg (2018) calls "the mindful workplace," designed to secure productivity amid digital distractions and modern afflictions such as "digital fatigue," "Zoom exhaustion," and "technostress" (Bondanini et al., 2025).

2.2. CWS as Identity Anchoring Places

As shown, post-digital discourses and practices actualize place as a counterweight to digital networks and connected life-forms. This does not mean that there is an opposition between place and digital media; digital technologies and (locative) platforms can also enhance place-making practices (Halegoua & Polson, 2021) and deepen people's experiences of place (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024). Yet, there is a tendency among people to think of, and relate to, digital connectivity as a threat to place and spatial boundaries, and vice versa, to retreat to certain places in order to get away from digital connectivity demands (Adams & Jansson, 2023).

It may be a second-home, a place in nature, or simply a dedicated—and disconnected—place in one's home (e.g., Doerr, 2021; Fast et al., 2021; Hesselberth, 2021; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). As digital connectivity has turned into the normal state for many people, it takes boundary work to secure such exceptional places (Adams & Jansson, 2023).

There are romantic undertones to this longing for undisturbed places free from digital "pollutions." To grasp this phenomenologically, we shall turn to Tuan's (1974/1990) understanding of topophilia, the love of place. The term topophilia "couples sentiment with place" (Tuan, 1974/1990, p. 113), meaning that people's affective ties with the surrounding environment are crucial to how they evolve as human beings. Tuan's mission is to understand how different manifestations of topophilia come about. He points to three aspects, which are also relevant to our analysis of CWS. First, people's attachment to place may unfold as responses to aesthetic or sensory impressions. The appreciation of delightful sceneries has long historical roots, especially within the Romantic movement, but may not always resonate with other tactile experiences. Tuan mentions children, whose "aesthetic distance is minimal" (p. 96), meaning that other senses than vision sustain their appreciation of, for example, a playground.

The second aspect has to do with "health, familiarity and awareness of the past" (Tuan, 1974/1990, p. 92), which Tuan illustrates with the fact that spatial appreciation also depends on one's physical state and inner wellbeing. A place can become subject to precious feelings if it sustains and is associated with wellbeing, such as a café where one regularly meets with friends to have a cup of coffee. This stresses that topophilia must be understood holistically, which is important to our analysis of CWS.

Thirdly, Tuan highlights that place attachment evolves and gains deeper meaning in relation to what a place *is not* (Tuan, 1974/1990, p. 102). This is a fundamental logic of semiotics, as seen for instance in how modern urbanization and "the temptations and distractions of city life" (p. 102) soon led to a growing, romantic appreciation of nature and the countryside. A classical trope is the "cabin in the wood," to which the modern, urbanized individual can temporarily escape to reconnect with oneself and with nature. This romanticization of "simple," non-urban places resonates in interesting ways with the post-digital turn, as we will show.

Whereas Tuan's work has been little cited in research on CWS, it can illuminate findings on how CWS attract customers and why customers stay (if they do). A key reference here is Bacevice and Spreitzer's (2023) analysis of a CWS business in the US, which captures the importance of spatial anchoring. While technological amenities are rudimentary, the authors argue, what makes a CWS attractive has largely to do with how well it resonates with the individual's self-identity. This, in turn, is grounded in material and aesthetic elements as well as in social factors, that is, who else occupies the place. Similar conclusions have been drawn in other studies (e.g., Cnossen & Stephenson, 2022), emphasizing that feelings of community and place attachment play an important role for mobile knowledge workers seeking somewhere to belong (see also Savage, 2008). In a certain sense, then, CWS are in the business of constructing and selling topophilia—something that, in turn, demands a high degree of spatial and cultural sensibility.

2.3. CWS as Consumable Destinations

According to Campbell (1987), the Romantic ethic, with its "cult of sensibility" (p. 259), was as important as the Protestant ethic to the expansion of a capitalistic society based on consumption. While Weber's

(1920/2001) classical analysis could explain the emergence of capitalists—as Protestant ascetic ideals spurred and legitimized capital accumulation—it was not satisfactory for understanding where all consumers came from. What drove them to spend? According to Campbell (1987), it was largely the romantic search for novelty, difference, and something "tasteful" that motivated people, notably the growing bourgeoisie class, to indulge in consumption beyond functional needs. In contrast to Protestant values, Romanticism advocated pleasure, hedonism, and sublime experiences that were true to the self (see also Smith, 2023). Such experiences refer to something else than just material comfort and can only be achieved if people are able to gain new, even unique, sensations (Campbell, 1987, pp. 112–113). As a consequence, the Romantic ethic celebrated a state of longing, or what Campbell calls imaginative hedonism.

Romantic sensibilities saturate consumer culture through the modern consumer's predisposition to imagine how a novel commodity might bring about genuine pleasure (Campbell, 1987, pp. 142–143):

> The essential activity of consumption is thus not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, "real" consumption being largely a resultant of this "mentalistic" hedonism. Viewed in this way, the emphasis upon novelty as well as that upon insatiability both become comprehensible. (Campbell, 1987, p. 144)

The romantic longing for genuine experiences pertains to a wide range of phenomena, including places. As such, imaginative hedonism provides a theoretical bridge between consumerism and Tuan's notion of topophilia. In his book *Romantic Geography* (Tuan, 2013), Tuan observes, for example, that the lure of the city stems from the possibility to build many intense local attachments and walk through fleeting moments of spatial excitement and surprise—New York being "a superb instance of the romantic sublime" (p. 139). He also discusses other places, including natural environments like mountains, oceans, and forests, that in different ways work as "dream material" (see Campbell, 1987, p. 144), offering a refuge from the orderly conditions of modern life.

In this way, we can theorize CWS as consumable destinations responding to the neo-romantic desire for authentic place experiences, whether adventure or stillness. Similar approaches to spatial consumption and phantasmagoria have figured in tourism studies (e.g., Strain, 2003; Urry, 1995), while just occasionally referring to the Romantic ethic (e.g., Garcia, 2016; Gilroy, 2000; Jansson, 2024). More than any other form of consumption, tourism is characterized by a longing for places that are perceived as exotic, genuine, and hedonistic. While modern tourism developed in tandem with the industrial revolution, Romantic views of travelling were mainly constructed in opposition to mass tourism and pre-packaged experiences. Mass tourism fails to deliver authentic encounters with place and cannot assist the individual in finding their true self. In a similar way, the saturation of Romantic ideals into the world of work could be seen in the arts and crafts movement around the turn of the 20th century, which was a reaction to industrial mass production and standardization (Thompson, 1976/2011).

While few researchers have paid attention to the romantic underpinnings of new forms of work and workplaces, there are many rich descriptions of how flexible work regimes are constructed and promoted as alternatives to bureaucratic structures and standardized office spaces. Burrell and Dale (2014) take a quote from the Romantic poet William Wordsworth—writing in the early 19th century that "the desk is an instrument of torture"—as a point of departure when analyzing the modern office as a consumer object and

environment. The quote illustrates the longstanding controversies surrounding the production of modern office spaces, pointing to the antagonistic relation between the Romantic ethic and bureaucratic ideology. Even bureaucracy's semantic root in the French word for desk (bureau) underscores the significance of architecture and material emplacement for controlling employees and their movements (Burrell & Dale, 2014, p. 686). By contrast, new digitalized work regimes, including CWS and digital nomadism, are saturated by a mythology of mobility, entrepreneurship, and flat organizations. Burrell and Dale (2014, p. 693) emphasize that the management of flexible work organizations aims "to bring the whole person into relationship with the organization, including their emotional and sensory responses," which motivates things like "mood management" and a focus on "aesthetic pleasures." This is also how the workplace gradually becomes a space of consumption and lifestyle choice as much as of production.

CWS are symptomatic of this trend, where the "community manager" plays an important role in shaping atmospheres and (re)creating affective environments (Gregg & Lodato, 2018; see also Bernhardt, 2023). As Bacevice (2022) shows, it is symptomatic that CWS (in contrast to most traditional offices) are located on street level and form an important part of urban storefront spaces. Additionally, an expanding branch of corporations offer sensory stimulation to the consuming gaze (of office spaces), including plants, art, special scents, and so forth (Burrell & Dale, 2014). Even the recruitment of the "right" customers in terms of lifestyle and expressive markers has become an element of office design and management, meaning that customers of a CWS are at the same time producers, consumers, and commodities in the new urban economy (Dale, 2012; Grazian, 2020).

In this context, we must acknowledge the relationality of CWS. As Gruen and Bardhi (2025) conclude, it is not just the workplace as such that defines it as a consumer object. The attraction of CWS is also tied to broader "consumer lifestyle aspirations" (Gruen & Bardhi, 2025, p. 11) that coworkers feel cannot be fulfilled in traditional, more alienating, office spaces. Here, the position of CWS within hospitality ecosystems (Merkel, 2022), including neighboring restaurants, bars, shops, and other services, plays a key role in whether an individual feels that a particular CWS resonates with their taste and desired identity. It is not a coincidence that CWS have been found to play a role in gentrification processes due to the inflow of upwardly mobile knowledge workers and cultural entrepreneurs for whom work and distinctive leisure practices overlap (e.g., Jamal, 2018; Mariotti et al., 2017). These groups typically spur the early, aestheticizing stages of gentrification, when neighborhoods are still perceived as "authentic," even a bit "rough," and real estate prices are relatively low (e.g., Ley, 2003; Pratt, 2018). As Gerosa (2024) argues in his analysis of the urban "hipster economy," digital start-ups and innovation hubs—commonly the customers of CWS—tend to cluster with micro-breweries, gourmet food trucks, craft cocktail bars, and other micro-entrepreneurs that cater for the hipster's longing for "something rooted in tradition but with an innovative twist, which makes it distinctive" (Gerosa, 2024, p. 3; see also Campbell, 2005; Zukin, 2020). These are the kinds of romantic desires we intend to explore in the following analysis.

3. The Case Study: Contexts and Methods

This article is part of a four-year research project funded by the Swedish Research Council that investigates the manifestation of CWS as both an industry and social movement. We have conducted ethnographic studies including longer and shorter fieldwork at altogether 16 individual CWS, in Malmö (Sweden), Oslo (Norway), Denver (CO, US), and Palma de Mallorca (Spain). Due to the diversity of the CWS market—in terms of profile,

aesthetics, business models, etc.—we first undertook what we call a "hot-desking ethnography," involving short stays in many different CWS, before concentrating our fieldwork on four sites in Malmö and Oslo—FT being one of them. The approach has been abductive, recognizing the importance of ethnographic serendipity which means that findings are not "found" but created along the way (e.g., Sacramento, 2025). Our insights from diverse CWS thus provide an important backdrop to the analysis and findings presented in the current study. Likewise, we have used our theoretical knowledge sensitively while moving "from ideas to data as well as from data to ideas" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 168), gradually leading up to the four analytical tropes constituting the scaffolding of our results (see Section 4).

3.1. Factory Tøyen

FT was selected as one of our key sites for three main reasons. First, it represents an independent, privately owned corporation that is not part of any bigger brand. FT is thus a unique place, with a deliberate design. Second, FT represents a CWS that mainly targets people in the creative industries, especially smaller entrepreneurs and startups at the intersection of culture and tech. This profile also characterizes our selection of informants. Third, FT is located in a gentrifying neighborhood, Tøyen, which has a deep history as a working-class area and, more recently, a reputation for social challenges due to immigration, low levels of education, and high unemployment rates. Geographically, Tøyen is located on the eastern side of Oslo, traditionally classified as "working-class," in-between the gentrified and rather "hipsteresque" Grünerløkka and a socially more disadvantaged area called Grønland. During the last two decades, Tøyen has undergone several social development programmes, most significantly the "Tøyen lyft" ("Elevating Tøyen"), and seen a gradual inflow of people with higher incomes (Holgersen, 2020; Huse, 2016). However, while marketed as a diverse and "hip" neighborhood, Tøyen is still relatively poor in economic terms. Altogether, these factors provide a backdrop to our discussions around neo-romanticism and post-digital tendencies in office work.

FT is distributed over two floors in a red-brick building from 1913, originally housing textile manufacturing. After the factory closed in the mid-20th century, the 6,250 m² building stood empty until FT opened in 2019. FT comprises coworking areas, offices, meeting rooms, lounges, studios, event spaces, a meditation/yoga room, and a kitchen and lunch area. The reception is staffed during standard working hours. However, anyone with a membership and the designated location-detecting key app on their smartphone can enter outside of these hours. Opening hours are 06:00 to 22:00 on weekdays and 07:00 to 20:00 on weekends.

FT was founded by a young local entrepreneur, Amalie Kristoffersen. In an interview on *Estate Media* (all quotes below have been translated to English by the authors), Kristoffersen explains that the space is inspired by London and New York (Rønne, 2018). Her aim was to create a "convenient" space for creative "millennials"—working, for example, in "fashion, architecture offices, photo, film, graphic bureaus, design, technology, media, and advertising"—who yearn for a flexible working life (Rønne, 2018). This is still their target group (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-a). Although FT now also houses more established firms, many clients are early-career professionals or run small-scale or even single-person businesses.

The management emphasizes "design, environment, sustainability, and harmony" as central to FT's identity and mission (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-b). "Light, air, and nature" are framed as "the foundational pillars" of their "design philosophy" (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-c). The building is protected from radical renovation by the Municipal Archivist, and FT has endeavored to align the new design with the original interior, for example, by preserving

old radiators, original wood paneling, and the "pearl of the coworking area—the glass roof" (Rønne, 2018). The mix of old and new interior features contributes to FT's "industrial cool" aesthetic (Willim, 2005). From the outset, it was also a vision that the building would house companies that complement each other. As of March 2024, FT shared the building with a Swedish digital design company and, on the ground floor, a French family business and vintage shop, and a combined "craft bakery" café and wine bar that regularly organizes multi-purpose events like "knitting, wine and livepod."

As of June 2025, FT offers four main types of memberships, ranging from basic access to the communal coworking areas and social spaces for 10 days a month (1,990 NOK/month/person) to lockable studio workspaces for 2–20 people (5,990 NOK/month/person). All memberships include postal services, printing, and coffee (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-b). FT has no designated community app (but uses Slack to some extent), and scheduled social activities at FT are relatively limited. As we were told in a research interview, the management values bottom-up and face-to-face initiatives for networking and sociality. Nonetheless, the staff arranges seasonal parties and regular community brunches to foster companionship and affiliation. By the time of our study, FT also organized yoga classes every Thursday morning. A special deal was offered to non-members who purchased tickets for the yoga class: They were allowed to remain in the CWS until lunchtime.

3.2. Fieldwork and Data

The main fieldwork at FT was carried out in March 2024 by two of the project researchers. One researcher conducted most of the fieldwork, but the involvement of the second researcher allowed for discussion of empirical insights. In total, the researchers spent 55 hours in FT's premises, distributed over nine working days (from March 5 to March 27). It is a short fieldwork in ethnographic terms. Nevertheless, it gave us opportunities to capture social, material, and organizational contexts. During the fieldwork, the researchers carried out their regular academic duties and simultaneously engaged in informal conversations, notably over lunch and by the coffee machine, and observed the material and social environment. Fieldnotes in diary format combined detailed observations, interpretive insights, and personal reflections. The fieldwork also included the urban context of FT, the Tøyen neighbourhood. Walking the streets, visiting public spaces, and commercial establishments gave us insights into local life, with a particular focus on gentrification (Huse, 2016), which also included adjacent neighborhoods mentioned in the interviews.

The fieldwork also involved semi-structured interviews. We interviewed one staff member, a male community host, and eight clients (five female, three male). They were recruited via direct contacts and snowball sampling, aiming to reflect the typical FT clientele in terms of different occupations, ages, and genders. On average, the interviews lasted 37 minutes. While it proved difficult to book longer interviews, informal conversations, especially around the coffee machine and in the lunch room (where laptops were prohibited), provided additional insights. In the interviews, coworkers were asked about their work, work conditions—notably their handling of digital connectivity—and their overall experiences and views on the environment of FT and its surroundings. The host was asked about (his view on) FT's history, visions, design choices, community activities, and his efforts to create a professional and social atmosphere. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for one which, at the respondent's request, was documented only via note-taking. Prior to the interviews, all respondents were informed about the project's ethical guidelines and conditions. All gave written consent to participate. We have been careful to keep the interviewees

anonymous and, therefore, do not reveal what they work with or their real names. Therefore, the names in the interviewees' quotes are pseudonyms.

4. Findings: Four Romantic Tropes in the Post-Digital Sense of Place

During our fieldwork at FT, we gradually realized that much of how the place was constructed, and how customers appropriated it, was replete with romantic ideals. The same thing can be said about how the coworkers we interviewed envisioned a good workplace. A general takeaway from our fieldwork is thus that FT represents a relatively coherent social space where encoded discourses, visions, and experiences are in harmony. Most customers that we interviewed had chosen FT deliberately with regards to their businesses and personal lifestyle (with one noteworthy exception). It was also important to them that FT represented something different from major CWS franchises, and that it was located in Tøyen ("the East") rather than in the affluent neighborhoods in the central and western parts of Oslo.

Bringing together our findings, we discern four recurring and overlapping romantic tropes that capture what makes FT attractive to its customers and how it spurs a post-digital sense of place: (a) novelty, (b) authenticity, (c) creativity, and (d) harmony. The tropes were crystallized through an abductive approach, typical for short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013), starting out from the overall observations of our project. Already in the hotdesking ethnographies and analysis of promotional discourse, the emphasis on genuine, mindful, and creative work environments stood out. This inspired us to revisit the theoretical literature on Romanticism, especially Campbell's (1987, 1992) work on the rise of consumer capitalism. Here, novelty represents the supreme driver of imaginative hedonism, whereas the three additional tropes can be understood as sub-themes that further articulate what the search for novelty is about in the context of CWS. The labels should be understood as elastic constructs, comprising various features that we found during the fieldwork—their common denominator being that they resonate with the overall "cult of sensibility" (Campbell, 1987, p. 259) characterizing the Romantic ethic.

4.1. Novelty

In Campbell's (1987, 1992) theory of imaginative hedonism, the desire for novelty plays a key role. The romantic ideal is fundamentally about achieving a life that is vitalizing and true to the self, rather than repetitive and standardized. In our interviews with FT customers, such an outlook is articulated regarding both the CWS and the Tøyen neighborhood. Many of our informants express their excitement with being in a neighborhood in flux, "up-and-coming," that is also different from the nearby, already gentrified, Grünerløkka:

> Turid: Um, I really like it….I know that cities can change, and I'm pretty sure that this is a kind of up-and-coming neighborhood. Maybe it used to be not as nice…but now, to me, it seems like things happen here, and it's nice and residential.

To several informants, working at FT means that they feel part of an ongoing urban transformation that brings a promise of novel things happening, such as new establishments being opened and interesting people moving in:

> Nora: Generally, Tøyen is like the new Grünerløkka. It's like a transition where this is more authentic with more newcomers and creative people….Tøyen has been a little bit problematic with some social challenges. But this is the part of Oslo that will flourish a lot within not too many years. Then, it might be very expensive to buy apartments here….Now is the phase when it's pretty interesting here.

While statements like this articulate an awareness of gentrification and the socio-economic dynamics at play, the desire to be in a place where one's work and leisure resonate with local developments seems to prevail over social critique. Here, the transitory design of the FT building itself—the integration of new functions and aesthetics into a former factory building—adds to the romantic sense of adventurousness. One informant says that coming to FT is like passing through "a portal into an unexpected world," and that it is an event for her customers to visit. Similarly, Josefine explains why she thinks that FT is a "cool place":

> When you enter, people think this looks like a place in New York and you are like in a café. You are in a place in Tøyen where you've never been before. You didn't know it existed. And then it's about the people working here who are in the creative industry and are very different in a way. Urban people working with stuff that people find exciting.

Josefine's description highlights the romantic fascination with spatial discovery; the experience of finding a place one did not know existed, even a bit bewildering at first, where it is still possible to make oneself at home among like-minded people. It is also obvious that the creativity of these "urban people" spurs a sense of spatial excitement and elective belonging (Savage, 2008). FT is a place where people come from a variety of backgrounds and are understood to do, and create, many different things. There is also an outspoken celebration of face-to-face meetings and digital minimalism among most informants. The absence of a community app underscores the post-digital vision of a workplace that spurs social serendipity. As one interviewee puts it, "word of mouth is pretty much the only way things happen here":

> Nora: I began winter-bathing this winter and we are three–five persons who do it….And it's so fun because there is one who is from [country X] who do [X] and one working with gender solutions….There is one doing sustainability stuff….So, we're just very different people and nationalities….We got in touch just one day in the kitchen and I just said yes.

Nora's story encapsulates the overarching desire for cultural pluralism and new experiences among our FT informants. The fact that Nora "just said yes" indicates a romantic openness to the unexpected. Several informants also hold that the location in Tøyen, a diverse area, makes people "a bit more open" than otherwise in Norway, which is a "tough crowd" if you want to get to know new people.

4.2. Authenticity

While a slippery theoretical concept, authenticity is a core value among coworkers at FT. Much of their appreciation of FT stems from a feeling of being in a place that has a genuine history, a unique design, and is interwoven into a lively neighborhood. As told by one of the managers, this is also how the place was envisioned from the start:

> Manager: The building has a rich history, being over 100 years old. It originally housed Lauritsen & Sørensen's knitting factory, located at Kjølberggata 21. It's considered the younger sibling to the Havnelageret, both designed by the same architect.
>
> Interviewer: Ah, exactly. And I can see that you have also preserved a lot of the old material and old details?
>
> Manager: Yes….That was very important, to preserve the soul of the building.

The ambition of the FT management has thus been to inscribe, or invest, a sense of authenticity into FT—preserving "the soul of the building"—in different ways, including the preservation of original details and historical narratives, and adding an artistic signature to the design. This has been a successful investment. Most FT customers describe the place as "true," "genuine," and "unique," compared to major CWS firms like Spaces that stand for the "corporate" and "standardized." Some informants also describe a sense of local pride—a strong articulation of topophilia (Tuan, 1974/1990)—meaning that they link their identity to this place, rather than to other places. Here, the nearby neighborhood Grünerløkka is an important reference point for making more fine-grained distinctions:

> Josefine: This is not like being in Grünerløkka or the central city. It's rougher. And in a way this is a unique place in this area….We are like, proud to say that we work here, and I notice myself when we tell people where we are….Then it's very easy to pitch it.

Grünerløkka is understood as more gentrified and thus less authentic than Tøyen. At the same time, there is an awareness among informants that Tøyen might become more like Grünerløkka one day. To some, this imposes a state of dissonance. Much of the attraction of FT lies in its integration into a wider hospitality ecosystem (Merkel, 2022), including bars, restaurants, and bakeries, many of them with a sustainability profile and focus on local tradition and craftsmanship. At the same time, there is a concern that this very ecosystem, targeting the FT clientele, might engulf the neighborhood:

> Felicia: [This area] has a lot of potential….I think it's a part of the city that used to be like a more kind of dangerous place, like a lot of immigrants live there. And it was kind of seen as a sketchier part. I hope that gentrification doesn't like, push certain people out of there, but I hope that the city does things just to make it a nicer place.

To Felicia, the romantic longing for genuine place experiences collides with an awareness of how gentrification works, and that she is part of the "problem." This type of reflexivity is symptomatic of early gentrification processes when rents and prices are still relatively low and the inflow of artists, cultural workers, and small entrepreneurs contributes to setting a creative vibe in the area (e.g., Ley, 2003; Pratt, 2018). Threadgold et al. (2024) call it reflexive complicity, denoting a condition where early gentrifiers in possession of cultural rather than economic capital create spaces that (they know) also speak to the taste of more affluent middle-class consumers. Still, none of our informants says that they consider leaving FT for this reason. Their romantic fascination with Tøyen is stronger and the creative venues and side-activities available in relation to FT are to their taste.

Digital services and technological amenities are *not* mentioned when describing the attraction of FT. Computers, mobiles, and screens are taken as mundane tools, or infrastructure, whereas other activities can help people get off their screens, even finding a better way of life. Felicia mentions that working in the creative environment of FT has made her realize that she is tired of only working with the computer and that she wants to do something more creative. Her example shows how romantic values of authenticity and self-fulfillment underpin a post-digital sense of place.

4.3. Creativity

Given the culture-oriented businesses of most coworkers at FT, their celebration of creativity comes as no surprise. Yet, it is worth reflecting on how their creative ethos intersects with romantic ideals of what a good workplace and a good neighborhood are. Most of our interviewees stress that they have chosen FT partly because of its "laidback vibe" and the absence of conventions, such as dress codes and distinct work-leisure boundaries. FT is a place where creativity can flourish in an open-ended manner and where the whole setting, including the streets of Tøyen, invites free thinking:

> Thomas: I'm a person who always works from everywhere, like I'm very happy to work from a café…or the type of coworking spaces where there is a lot of buzz….I can say that there is a more laid-back, chill, vibe here….It's like "come as you are." People in high heels, you don't see much of them here….And [in Tøyen] there are many people working with ceramics, furniture carpentry, painting, and what else they do. Very nice then…yeah, it's like children are playing out in the streets, that's how it is.

Thomas's words encapsulate an ethos that can be found across our interviews. Even though Thomas works a lot, it is important for him to feel no pressure and for the surroundings to denote something more than just work. Symptomatically, his description links the CWS (where you can "come as you are") with the creative and seemingly tolerant culture of Tøyen (where "children are playing out in the streets"). According to our informants, creativity and playfulness do not match with the conventions found in many other workplaces, notably on "the west side" of Oslo:

> Nora: I find it very inspiring to have this kind of diverse environment and flexibility in my everyday life. I was nine years at an engineering firm…and I feel that being within such frames that are very, very boxed…it chokes my creativity and my inspiration and my drive to have things done and find solutions….I felt it became too much like the west side [of Oslo]. Very much a profit environment….I like that it's more rustic, that it's not like that super-professional with a polished façade.

Our informants' understanding of what makes a creative environment combines social factors, such as work regulations and unspoken rules, and characteristics related to location (not "the west side") and spatial design (the "rustic" feel of FT). Creativity is associated with handicraft, free play, and an environment that is not too clean. This goes hand in hand with the appreciation of the analogue over, or alongside, the digital that saturates FT at large, including adjacent activities such as the "wine, knitting and podcast" sessions arranged by the sourdough bakery in the same building.

The significance of the analogue is spelled out more explicitly in other parts of our interview material. For example, Kjetil describes what we might call a "post-digital workshop" in his vision of how FT could become an even better workplace:

> I often think I should go to them [the management] and ask, "Listen, are you interested in somebody putting up a drawing corner?" Cause I can do that. I can draw and I know which pens you need. I mean, it's not that expensive. It's just a fraction of what the digital infrastructure costs….It should just be like a corner workshop where you can just go and draw things. Perhaps some post-it notes but you should not book it, never. And it doesn't have to be kept very clean, no, no…then some of the magic is lost.

The envisioned drawing corner is not just analogue, including pens and Post-it notes, but it is also explicitly contrasting the digital infrastructure. Creativity is associated with spontaneous face-to-face interactions and a minimalistic attitude when it comes to rules, regulations, and cleanliness. Thus, Kjetil's vision is a bit like a romantic dream of a sacred place liberated from the burdens of bureaucratic and/or digital working conditions. And this dream is not completely unrealistic. FT is an environment where this type of initiative could happen and, as such, it both responds to and energizes people's longing for place. Ultimately, FT has succeeded in making coworkers feel that they are part of building something new—their identities and careers, as well as the workplace and the "up-and-coming" neighborhood—while also acting as consumers.

4.4. Harmony

The tagline of FT is: "Work-life balance is not the goal—it's a lifestyle" (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-b; authors' translation from Norwegian). This outlook also saturates the design of the material environment, with an emphasis on organic materials, plants, fresh air, and direct contact with the sky. Part of the concept is also the enabling of activities and time-spaces for disconnection and contemplation:

> Manager: Thanks to the design and the glass ceiling, you can just set your computer aside, have a cup of coffee, and stare at the sky….Disconnect from this digital world and this excess of information that we are being bombarded with. I think there is a huge value in that. And I myself very often use analogue media.

Digital disconnection and analogue media are thus integral to the managerial vision of harmony, reverberating with broader cultural trends in work-life management like yoga and various forms of mindfulness as well as with discourses of digital wellbeing and digital minimalism (Newport, 2019). The customers of FT buy into this post-digital vision—also literally, through post-digital consumption (Humayun & Belk, 2020)—and feel that they have found a place where they can achieve a sense of here-and-now, temporarily detached from the outside world. Several of our informants are familiar with digital detoxing and have tried it (one of them during a yoga retreat). Bente describes that she never brings any digital devices to FT, except for her smartwatch and a smartphone without a SIM card. She handles all digital interaction and work duties in her home office while FT functions as a post-digital territory for thinking, inspiration, and social interaction (Adams & Jansson, 2023). Other informants mention that they would have liked FT to emphasize disconnection and harmony even more:

> Kjetil: Well, it was almost the main reason why I was drawn here—the yoga on Thursdays. Yeah, it could have been even more because in many jobs all work happens on the screen, but there are also ways of inviting other ways of working…to have large whiteboards and access to paper and stuff to draw with, to get people off their screens.

> Nora: It feels very nice to be here because it feels like you are almost a secret. So, when you work, it feels like you are in a nice atmosphere. Maybe it has something to do with the rustic and the green…yes, there is a choice of earth tones. But I would have liked to see even more plants here.

Overall, leisure-oriented features are much prioritized by the FT clientele. Turid, who also signed up due to the yoga classes, says that she likes the picnic tables that are placed outside during the summertime. She sometimes sits out there and works. Felicia mentions the importance of huge windows and high ceilings to bring light and air into the workspace. Again, many of these descriptions include references to "corporate" spaces and the "west side" to clarify what FT *is not*—"dark," "strict," "snobbish," and "masculine":

> Kjetil: It's quite old around here. You have like, a museum neighborhood where you also have a botanical garden. That's nice. I like it more here than on the west side. It's more snobbish on the west side. Here, it's a more down-to-earth and laid-back culture.
>
> Interviewer:…Does it also show on the inside?
>
> Kjetil: Yes….One can tell that there is a feminine over-representation here. There are more women than men in this coworking space, and they are more than average interested in a healthy lifestyle.

It should be stressed that there are also examples in our interviews where coworkers describe frictions, frustrations, and a sense of *not* belonging. One example comes from Frederik, a customer who works in a different sector than most others in the building. He and his business partner have chosen FT mainly for logistical and economic reasons, but are looking for alternatives as they feel out of place. While they find the factory building rather cool, they would prefer a place with less buzz and a stronger work focus. Another interviewee expresses that she likes the aesthetics of FT but thinks it has been taken too far in some respects. She mentions that the lighting in some meeting rooms and telephone booths seems "over-designed" and less adapted to the purposes of the rooms.

Accordingly, there is no rule stating that "harmony" must stem from a particular kind of nature-oriented aesthetics or the absence of digital connectivity. Under certain circumstances, and to some people, such features may work against harmony, what we might think of as a post-digital backlash. Still, these few examples are exceptional in their "anti-romantic" stance and thus underscore the overarching post-digital focus of FT.

5. Concluding Discussion

We have tried to grasp the post-digital turn in working life through the lens of the Romantic ethic and by empirical scrutiny of CWS. We have approached CWS as spaces of consumption where *place*—and, more specifically, the longing for place—constitutes the key commodity. While this might seem like a redundant remark in relation to a business that vends office square meters, our results illustrate how CWS sell more than "just" a place to work. They trade in spatial anchoring (Bacevice & Spreitzer, 2023). As such, CWS promise to fulfil laptop-workers' hopes and desires for a more meaningful working life where office desks, power sockets, and Wi-Fi networks are supplemented with material, social, and aesthetic features that generate a contrast to mobile and hyper-connected, potentially alienating, working conditions. Through an

ethnographic case study of one specific CWS, FT in Oslo, we have shown how the encoding and enactment of such place-anchoring features revolve around four romantic tropes: novelty, authenticity, creativity, and harmony. We argue that these tropes fuel what Campbell (1987) terms "imaginative hedonism," referring to the romantic inclination to encounter the surrounding world—notably consumer objects—as "dream material." Our interviews with FT coworkers illuminate how the combination of a historic factory building, rustic materials, organic design elements, offline activities like yoga and sauna, analogue technologies, and a diverse, transitory neighborhood—including the gentrifying hospitality ecosystem of Tøyen—spur the clientele's vision of a good working life. What is more, we see this as part of a broader post-digital trend, which bespeaks how the digitalization and datafication of work and life necessitate spaces where alternative values and outlooks can be nurtured in order to build hope for more meaningful and sustainable futures.

While critical points can be raised regarding the CWS business as a whole—for example, concerning its role in gentrification processes and its basic goal to make a profit from the precariousness of self-employed workers—our study highlights a striking congruence between the values encoded by the FT management and the outlooks held by customers. It is difficult to argue that our interviewees are being exploited. Most of them describe what we with Tuan (1974/1990) might call "topophilia," a love of place. This means something more than just liking a place or thinking that it is "cool." It means that an individual feels that there are meaningful bonds between their identity and the place, which in our case refers both to FT and the Tøyen neighborhood. Our informants sense that they have discovered, or selected (Savage, 2008), a place that is for them, meaning that it is also different from something else (notably, the "corporate" CWS sector with more standardized and "clean" offices and stricter regulations, located on "the west side" of Oslo). They also feel that they are part of a thrilling process where something new and authentic is being created, involving the neighborhood as well as their own life trajectories. In this way, FT not just responds to, but also spurs a romantic ethos. While promoted almost like a tourist destination (cf. Merkel, 2022), FT is *not* consumed in the moment people start working there. Rather, it provides a sense of anchoring through nurturing a feeling among its customers that they are "going somewhere," if only through their imagination.

Our overarching argument is that FT is symptomatic of a broader post-digital trend in society, including a disconnection turn in work (Fast, 2021), and that this trend re-actualizes deep-seated Romantic ideals. In a broader sense, we see CWS as part of a neo-romantic movement that includes a plethora of related phenomena that together constitute a counter-culture within capitalist society. Besides initiatives that emphasize digital disconnection and self-discovery, such as digital detox retreats and similar hospitality services, there are trends like the neo-craft movement (Gerosa, 2024), urban exploration and ruin tourism (Jansson, 2018), and certain place-based subcultures and music scenes (Garcia, 2016) that allude to romantic values and might even be mapped like neo-romantic (urban) geographies. Thus, in line with previous research (e.g., Gerosa, 2024; Ley, 2003; Pratt, 2018), romantic ideals seem to saturate early, consumer-driven gentrification processes at large.

This does not mean that all CWS manifest this neo-romantic wave to the same extent, or in the same way, as FT. We admit that FT is a particularly obvious case where post-digital and other neo-romantic tendencies come together. Still, the findings from our research project at large are replete with examples that point in the same direction. Even larger, more "conventional" firms emphasize holistic views of work, including amenities for digital disconnection, and play with romantic tropes like organic materials and analogue media in their

design concepts. Then, as Campbell (1987) states in his theory of consumer culture, the Romantic ethic is not just a counter-force to consumer capitalism; it is an integral and indispensable part of it.

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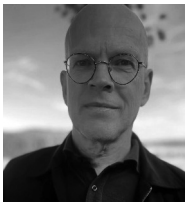

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ARTICLE

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VR Heterotopia: User Imaginaries of Virtual Reality Headsets as Technology for Reaching Utopic Spaces

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Abstract

The re-emerging nature of virtual reality (VR) and recurring waves of hype have made this technology a conduit for imaginations of solving complex social and ecological problems. Recent iterations of VR, such as mobile VR and VR head mounted displays (HMDs) for casual users, have made it evident that the spatial relations of VR are multiple and complex. This article utilizes the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia to explore how spatilities of VR are imagined and practiced as counter-spaces in a digital landscape of smartphones and social media. Focusing on the heterotopia's ability to provide a space for contesting and inverting the societies within which they exist, I show how VR is constantly juxtaposed against other technologies, digital places, and techno-embodiments in user imaginaries and practices. Through ethnographic materials on domestic VR usage collected in Swedish homes, I found that notions of VR as an "other" or different medium are laden with imaginings of VR technology bringing about a better society—a virtual utopia. These positive futures are paired with and derived from dystopic imaginaries and fictions. Recognizing the necessity to take media imaginaries and their inherent spatiality seriously, through how they are expressed and acted upon in the digital geographies of everyday life, I explore how VR users' contesting ideas are deployed to make VR a hopeful other in a technological landscape. I conclude that conceptualizations that are slippery, self-contradicting, and do works as tricksters have much to offer digital geographies.

Keywords

digital geographies; dystopia; domestic VR; heterotopia; media imaginaries; virtual reality; utopia

1. Introduction

Utopic aspirations lie at the heart of emerging technologies. Each new medium offers the possibility for a brave new world—the end to constrictions on humanity such as geography, politics, and temporalities of communication (Mosco, 2004). The text presented below is from my fieldwork on domestic virtual reality (VR) usage in Swedish homes carried out from 2023 to 2024. It was the first moment that one of my research participants started talking about the imagined futures of VR using dystopic imagery. Although users would frame their own VR usage, and VR itself, as a medium that references or strives toward positive futures, the utopias of VR imaginaries are confusingly dystopic:

> "We are building our own Matrix," Pärlan says with some profundity. As I ask him about what is to come for VR, Pärlan tells me about a future where we won't have to leave our VR headsets ever, a better future. Confused by the reference to humanity being ruled by machines framed as positive, I ask, "Isn't that what the traitor in the movie *Matrix* realizes? That it is better not to know about the reality outside, if that reality is worse than the virtual one?" As Pärlan pauses, I consider whether it was rude of me to suggest his future vision would be a dystopia rather than a utopia. But Pärlan is more practical in his reply: "Yeah, they really had that figured out, keeping the body safe in the pods and everything."

It is common to draw upon fictional representations when talking about VR (Chan, 2014). Although VR is as accessible as it has ever been on the consumer market, the technology's relation to an imagined future imbues it with a quality of never arriving (Evans, 2018). This shifting nature, where VR is positioned as having arrived while also remaining a technology of the future, makes for an interesting moment in imaginaries of VR technology and the society toward which it is hoped to lead. Following the suggestion from Fraser (2023) to explore VR as a heterotopia, this article explores user imaginings of VR as a device for accessing digital spaces differently. Heterotopia is a Foucauldian concept that, while contested, is widely applied as a spatially focused approach to otherness and deviance (Johnson, 2013). In the case of VR, it provides an opportunity to capture user tendencies to situate VR as a technology that produces counter-sites to everyday digital spaces, framing VR as a different technology within the wider tech landscape.

VR technology produces spaces that challenge our way of talking about digital spatiality, as well as affect our imaginings of media spatialities themself. This article contributes to the increasing interest in imaginaries of media and the mediated in the intersection between geography and media, whether you call that geomedia (Fast et al., 2019) or digital geographies engaging with mediation (Leszczynski, 2015; Rose, 2019). As showcased by Hill (2024) in her use of mental maps when exploring streaming practices, media imaginaries are always spatial. We find examples of this in work on building for digital futures (Couldry, 2024), geomedia imaginaries (Fast et al., 2024), VR imaginaries of different realities (Messeri, 2024), metaversical dystopias (Lanier, 2021), and digital constellations and expression of hope (as explored in this thematic issue).

Recognizing that all media use is placed somewhere (Fast et al., 2019), that media use creates complex spatial relations McQuire (2012), and that inquiries into media should have a spatial sensibility (Braunerhielm & Bengtsson, 2023), this calls into question how the casual usage of VR head mounted displays (HMDs) ties into imaginaries of VR futures, particularly with the spread of the latest iterations of quite affordable, plug-and-play VR HMDs that you can use "anywhere" (Saker & Frith, 2018, 2020) including in one's own home.

This article contributes to empirical work on the spatial relations produced through VR usage in the field of digital geographies. Although engagements with VR as a technology and VR spatialities as empirical subjects for digital geographers are increasing (Osborn & Jones, 2023), further engagements remain necessary (Bos, 2021; Fraser, 2023; Osborn & Jones, 2022). Contributions by geographers working with VR, augmented reality (AR), and extended reality (XR) have already noted the dystopian and utopian connotations of the technology. For instance, Jones (2023) comments on the dystopian futures of the metaverse, and Wright (2023) frames XR experiences as a heterotopia of deterritorialization.

What hope can be found in taking seriously the imaginings of VR as different from other media technologies in the current tech landscape? I approach user understandings of VR as providing for and producing other spaces as a hopeful possibility; the imagined difference of VR as a medium might provide insights into hopeful trajectories that include futures of resistance to all-encompassing digital convergence and platform domination.

In the following sections, I first engage with VR spatialities and their relationship to reality, which I argue has complicated conceptualizations of VR and VR HMDs within the field of digital geographies. Second, I introduce the concept of heterotopia and describe geographers' productivity and annoyance in deploying this concept in their work. The methods section presents the collection of empirical material on VR usage in domestic settings in Sweden. The results discuss VR as a heterotopia, with a focus on the heterotopias juxtaposing quality and utopic aspirations. The analysis reveals that users consider VR as a hopeful other in a technological landscape; in the imaginaries and practices of VR-usage, utopic and dystopic futures are blended until they are hard to tell apart.

2. Background: Spatiality of VR and Digital Geographies

In his 1967 lecture, *Des Espaces Autres*, Foucault states, "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault, 1984, p. 1). For Foucault, this epoch of scrambled spatialities was rooted in technological developments: Emplacement was shifting from the located to a question of reach. This called for contemplation of the questions emerging technologies posed to our sense of the spatial—and no medium plays on illusions of infinite reach and anywhere-ness like VR.

VR is a medium often explained through its immersive capabilities—that is, the notion of feeling present in the virtual, and the spatial sensation of being "there" created through VR devices (Bailenson, 2018). Measuring and improving immersion to optimize VR has been an ongoing endeavor within VR research (Slater, 2009; Slater et al., 2022; Valentin et al., 2019; Witmer & Singer, 1998). These immersive capabilities feed into imaginaries of being able to visit places and embodied outlooks virtually, reaching through time and space to visit inaccessible places such as historical sites (Izaguirre et al., 2024), refugee camps, and coral reefs (Hassapopoulou, 2018), as well as seeing from marginalized outlooks such as indigenous and trans bodies (Kostopoulos, 2024). Imaginings of inhabiting others' embodied outlooks are especially strong in the hype of VR as an empathy machine (Milk, 2015). Recent work in media and communication studies has, however, called for critical approaches to immersion (Bowman et al., 2024) and critique of VR as a device for identity tourism (Kukshinov, 2024).

Despite the alluring spatialities evoked through VR applications and imaginings, digital geographers have yet to engage with VR as a spatial medium on a grander scale. I am not the first to note that, in terms of empirical engagement, Virtual Reality and VR have been somewhat overlooked (Blackman, 2022; Bos, 2021; Fraser, 2023; Osborn & Jones, 2022, 2023). Recent work in digital geographies on digital ecologies names VR and AR as a way to engage with world-making and materiality of the digital (Turnbull et al., 2023). The most ongoing engagement with VR in the field of digital geographies is represented by the works of Jones and Osborn, who have considered the metaverse (Jones, 2023), embodiment in VR (Osborn & Jones, 2022), VR in geography education (Jones & Osborn, 2020), and VR as a research tool (Jones et al., 2022). That VR is a technology for engaging with places (Gardner et al., 2023) can be noted through the intersection between VR research and research on teaching geography in higher education. Not only a tool for teaching but for knowing and going places, Jones and Osborn (2020) and Schott and Marshall (2018) have shown that virtual fieldtrips can produce the same insights and sensations for undergraduate geography students as "real" fieldtrips.

Although VR can produce a place experience, this experience is time again understood as a different way or mode of being in place. VR is described as giving another dimension to interacting with the teaching material (Bos et al., 2022; Schott & Marshall, 2018), and McLean's (2021) attempt to use VR to amplify indigenous voices has shown that VR is imagined as a possibility for decolonial practices and different ways of knowing. Roelfsen and Carter-White (2022) found that virtual fieldtrips provided a socio-spatial environment with other rules of interaction; for students who felt inhibited by visiting historically charged sites such as Auschwitz, the virtual visit provided a condensed, deferred representation of the actual place. Bos et al. (2022) found that students became more critical through engaging with a virtual place in VR because they reflected not only on the virtual place as a place, but as a representation of a real place. VR is thus constantly made out as other than and a possibility to reflect or mirror the real. Šašinka et al. (2018) even argue that it is this juxtaposition of place representations and environments that makes VR a good fit for geography education.

At the heart of discussions on VR in human geography is the question of realness and the relationship between VR and non-VR. VR is a medium that confuses conceptualizations of materiality and the reality of digital spaces at different levels: from the simple question of where one *actually* is and how the spatialities of VR relate to other emplaced media practices, to the very question of the digital/virtual/physical divide and the real and the virtually real. Descriptions of spatial experiences of the virtual, such as sensations of being removed from one's immediate geography (Osborn & Jones, 2022) or being "teleported in and out of a digital landscape" (Zhou et al., 2024), lend themselves to this separation of virtual and non-virtual places. The entanglement with these questions can be traced back to earlier discussions of VR technology, virtual reality, and cyberspaces, which engaged geographers interested in emerging virtual spaces and places in the 90s and 00s. Conceptualizing VR as an interface to enter cyberspace, the exciting space developing through computers and the internet (Kitchin, 1998)—the hype was recognizable. Discussions of cyberspaces centered on how to understand the virtual in relation to the real or the material (Batty, 1997) and reduced VR to a "badly analyzed version of the real" (Doel & Clarke, 1999, p. 261) within the field of virtual geographies. It is no wonder that the emerging field of digital geographies, picking up some of the spaces and objects that virtual geographies aimed to study, declared an interest in concrete objects, doings, and ontics rather than the nature of reality or ontologies (Ash et al., 2018).

The discussion of realness and reality looms over discussions of the virtual in human geography (Kinsley, 2014). It haunts discussions of the digital through quests for material articulations of how the ubiquitous digital

entangles itself with our ecologies and worlds (Turnbull et al., 2023). The concept of heterotopia refuses taxonomies and holds conflicting qualities together, being a real and unreal place at the same time (Foucault, 1966/1970). Therefore, rather than avoiding this discussion of reality, I argue for the separation of the virtually real and the real as a productive tension in user imaginings of VR.

3. Introducing Heterotopia

The development of the concept of heterotopia can be considered as having two origins. The first is given in the introduction to his book *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1966/1970), where Foucault is reading Borges's fictional taxonomy, "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge." Reflecting on the merciless mix of real, made-up, and lucidly dreamt creatures, Foucault (1966/1970) states that "the non-place of language" is the only place where these animals can meet and be juxtaposed (p. xviii). The heterotopia is introduced through its properties of gathering the seemingly incompatible: It springs from the need for a place where the unreal and real can co-exist—a utopia.

The second mention of heterotopia is in the lecture *Des Espaces Autres*, commonly translated as *Of Other Spaces* or *Different Spaces*, given in 1967 and published in 1984. Here, Foucault considers relational sites, or relations between places, in response to the spatial anxiety caused by technological developments. He focuses on utopias and heterotopias, places that contest the places they refer to through representation and inversion. As related concepts, Foucault (1984) makes a distinction between utopias as "sites with no real place," while heterotopias are real places that "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (p. 3). The relational—both through heterotopias being relational sites and their raison d'être as spatial expressions of the constant juxtaposition against other places in their societies—is present in both these starting points. In *Des Espaces Autres*, Foucault (1984) sets up six conditions for his heterotopia. These principles are presented below. I then discuss the juxtaposing quality of heterotopia, which I argue can be found in all of principles of heterotopia, as well as what I call the utopic aspirations of heterotopia: The need for heterotopias to relate to, reflect, and mirror a perfect place.

3.1. Principles of Heterotopia

The first principle is that heterotopias exist in all cultures. Due to their juxtaposing and relational nature, heterotopias take different forms in different societies. Here, Foucault (1984) distinguishes between heterotopias of crisis and of deviation, arguing that the former speak to a need to place some experiences outside of daily life (the menstrual hut, spaces for the sacred). Foucault observed an increase in heterotopias of deviation, answering a need to place some people and phenomena outside of society (asylums, prisons, retirement homes). Heterotopias serve the double function of providing a refuge: a place of illusion, as well as a place that is other, yet perfect in a way that real everyday places are not.

The second principle is that, because heterotopias serve distinct functions in their societies, their properties can change over time. This again speaks to their juxtaposing quality: As societies change, so do the ways in which heterotopias are constituted as other than. Foucault gives the burial site as an example and how spatial planning, as well as social norms constructing death as removed, have affected graveyards.

The third principle is that heterotopias "are capable of juxtaposing in a single real place with several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1984, p. 6). This is exemplified by the garden, which gathers plants, cultures, and ecosystems as a microcosmos of its own. Other spaces can have presence in the single heterotopia which holds ambiguous relations with other places and spaces present, "simultaneously represented, contested and inverted." (Foucault, 1984, p. 3).

The fourth principle is that heterotopias break with traditional time and relate to, as well as constitute, a slice of time. Heterotopias function best when they have multiple, simultaneous, and confusing temporalities. Examples here include festivals celebrating historical events, archives, and museums.

Principle five is that the access to a heterotopia is not straightforward. In Foucault's view, heterotopias condition their entrance through systems of opening and closing; they can be isolated, but they are not closed. To enter the heterotopia, one must have knowledge of access, as they demand certain rites to enter (e.g., sacred sites, hammams, or saunas). To recognize the heterotopia as an "other" space, one must enter it in a way that performs this otherness and separation.

Principle 6 concludes that heterotopias are relational to all other spaces. Here, Foucault distinguishes between the heterotopia of illusion, which is a seemingly perfect place that exposes other spaces as illusory (exemplified, for Foucault, by the brothel), and the heterotopia of compensation (where Foucault gives the example of early colonization), the imagined creation of an ordered place that is juxtaposed against the disorder of other spaces.

3.2. The Juxtaposing Quality of Heterotopia and Its Utopic Aspirations

Foucault (1966/1970) describes heterotopias as disturbing due to their capability of holding things together that contradict each other. This makes for a refusal of taxonomies (Knight, 2017). From the first mention of heterotopia, the sheer ridiculousness of Borges's taxonomies leads Foucault (1966/1970) to muse on heterotopias as spaces that confuse categorizations and destroy syntax. Foucault's laughter can be seen as extended to heterotopias when grouped, as the mentioned examples of heterotopias in themselves do not go together—a train, a garden, a graveyard, a brothel. This eclectic gathering is continued by scholars who use this concept; porn webpages, group dynamics, masculinity practices, museums, and the Vienna Gardens are merely a few examples (Johnson, 2013). One might be tempted to deem heterotopia a concept without sharp edges (and some do, as we shall see). But it is in the combination of the juxtaposing quality and the disruptions of taxonomies that it becomes a trickster concept. Heterotopias let the real and the unreal go together in a way that does not make sense. As we see in the six principles, heterotopias are constantly juxtaposed and juxtaposing other spaces, temporalities, and embodied behaviors. This juxtaposing quality is dependent on a certain spatiality of proximity, with heterotopias appearing outside as well as side-by-side to other sites. It creates a place that is different or other, through positioning. This juxtaposition allows for the heterotopias' needs to be self-contradicting, inhabited by opposites. For example, heterotopic sites are both mundane and profound (Johnson, 2013) and can be real and unreal simultaneously (Foucault, 1984).

This is underlined in heterotopia's relation to the non-place, utopia. I am not the first to argue that utopic aspirations are central to how we understand heterotopias. Johnson (2013) notes the strong imaginative qualities of heterotopic sites, and Dalton (2014) argues they are key to understanding heterotopia as a

concept: “There is no heterotopic space that does not have a corresponding utopic vision and, far from being ‘imaginary,’ utopias give form to the content of heterotopias” (p. 50).

4. Approaching Heterotopia: Spatiality, Difference, and Digitality

In presenting heterotopia as a trickster concept of spatial difference, contesting not just other places and spaces but also itself, I set the stage for presenting why geographers have found heterotopia both provocative and productive. While VR has been theorized through engagements with VR in geography, empirical engagements with VR HMDs by geographers are bourgeoning. Heterotopia has had an opposite trajectory: Engagements with and cataloguing of heterotopias have been carried out over global objects of study, ranging from cultures, architecture, places, and countries (on the cottage industry of heterotopia, see Johnson, 2013). At the same time, heterotopia as a concept is often accused of lacking theoretical grounding. These opposite directions make for a conundrum in this article; analyzing VR as a heterotopia purely as a theoretical question is a disservice to empirical VR research in digital geographies, which benefits from empirical engagement. But establishing the empirical case of VR as a heterotopia will do just that—add another space to the bestiary/atlas of these spaces. Taking Harvey’s (2000) question of why we should care if a place is heterotopic seriously, I present how heterotopia as a concept has been both productive and contested by geographers and introduce my approach to it. I then present my methods and data collection on casual domestic VR usage.

4.1. Contesting Heterotopia

In the context of a lecture for architects, *Des Espace Autres* where Foucault develops the concept, heterotopias have been understood both as an opportunity for Foucault to enjoy a pure contemplation of space, unbound by fitting in with theoretical frameworks, as well as an underdeveloped concept disconnected from the rigor of the Foucauldian theoretical framework (Dalton, 2014; Harvey, 2000; Johnson, 2013). Heterotopia is often presented as a concept in need of further contextualization and paratexts (Knight, 2017). For geographers engaging with the concept, the interview Foucault gave in *Héredote* in 1976 on spatial questions in his writing is considered one important paratext (Johnson, 2013). The interview discusses questions of spatiality in Foucault’s concepts and theory, and it begins with the interviewer stating that time and temporalities are privileged over space and spatiality in the philosopher’s work. What is often highlighted is Foucault himself concluding that he has changed his mind throughout the interview, and that in his further theorizing, “Geography must indeed necessarily lie at the heart of my concerns” (Foucault, 2007, p. 182). Cresswell (2015) holds up this interview as a turning point for Foucault, recognizing that, in questions of power, space is just as important as time—or even more so. Curiously, this interview is championed as Foucault recognizing the primacy of spatiality, while Foucault’s texts on heterotopias are heavily criticized for their lack of theoretical rigor.

How to understand heterotopia is in itself contested. Johnson (2013) argues that geographers like Saldanha (2008), who call heterotopia “disproportionately influential” (p. 2081), and Harvey (2000), who holds up the *Des Espaces Autres* as if not typical of Foucauldian theory, typical for his approach to geography, both use heterotopia as a vehicle for their overall critique of Foucault. Elden (2002), meanwhile, underlines how *Des Espaces Autres* is not typical of Foucault’s geographical approach, which has more to offer. In *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, heterotopias are defined as “any real or metaphorical space that permits thought and

action that noticeably departs from the conventions of a society" (Rogers et al., 2013). It is thus easily reduced to a question of spatial difference and or places allowing for behavioral deviance. Dalton (2014) challenges the one-size-fits-all approach in this adaptation of the concept as simply any deviant space, or space as "other." Rather than inventing a radically new space, heterotopia is a spatial approach.

Heterotopia has become particularly successful as a spatially oriented approach to study the spatialities of difference, most notably in Hetherington (1997) and Soja (1996). Johnson (2013) argues that heterotopia should be understood as a methodological concept that allows for modes of studying difference and space with an emphasis on the emplaced, while Rousseaux and Thouvenin (2009) use heterotopias as epistemological sites for exploring otherness or deviance in the virtual. Lefebvre (1974/1991) calls heterotopias "contrasting places" (p. 163) or "mutually repellent places" (p. 366), hinting at their processual nature. One could argue that heterotopic places are simply other, but then again, everything is other than something, unless it is per definition everything. Rather than difference, deviance, or resistance, I suggest lifting up the juxtaposing quality of heterotopias as constantly positioning them as other, allowing the heterotopia to constantly shift and morph in how it is imagined and experienced.

4.2. Methods and Data Collection

The data presented in this article were collected during the period 2023–2024 as part of an exploratory study on VR usage in Swedish homes. As Pink (2021) notes, homes are environments where one, as a researcher, cannot spend prolonged periods of time without becoming part of the place and social setting. I prefer Wilmott's (2020) term "ethnographic encounters," although similar data collection processes (interviews and participatory observations) have been deemed ethnographies within the field of digital geographies (Ash et al., 2023). The study design, including interview questions and observation schema, underwent a review by the university's ethics board. The study was approved as the data collected and the suggested analysis would not tend to include sensitive personal information. Participation in the study was deemed safe and without any negative impact on the research participants. The participants did not receive any compensation or benefit for participating. Participants were recruited through various channels organized around VR including Meta groups and Discord channels on the subject of VR as a technology, specific VR consoles, and specific VR experiences and games. This was complemented by snowball sampling.

Drawing on Pink's (2015) sensory ethnography, data collection aimed to capture users' sensory experiences and understandings of their emplacement and embodiment when using VR at home. Data collection was structured as a home visit with an audio-recorded interview and video-recorded observations. The questions were organized around the usage area, embodied usage, and the social setting of the home. A total of 24 research participants over 22 homes shared their ideas about usage, spaces, and practices of domestic VR. The users were recruited as casual users of VR who all owned a VR HMD that was kept and used in their home. One third of the participants were women and two-thirds were men, with an age range of 19–58 years old.

Recognizing that data collection took place in the research participants' homes, an intimate environment that, in most cases, was shared with others (e.g., spouses, partners, children, and pets), and that the data collection was carried out by the author face-to-face, some reflexivity is in order. Although there are limits to what reflexivity can do in accounting for the researcher's effect on the data collection process (Rose, 1997), it speaks

to the fact that the researcher does not shed her body in going out to the field and that power relations and social position carry over to the social situation of data collection (Valentine, 2002). In this study, the fact that I am a white, middle-class, relatively young-looking woman probably played into my participants' comfort in letting me into their homes. Because about 50% (n = 13) of research participants were parents, the fact that I was a mother of toddlers worked to further flesh out my person as familiar in a domestic setting (as well as providing an excuse to claim my home was messier than that of any research participant in the study, something women would often make excuses for when letting me in).

The data were transcribed and the material was coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. This was followed by abductive analysis which allowed for significant themes to arise both from theory as well as the material. This article focuses on the themes of imaginings, the relationship between VR and other current and future realities, as well as notions of VR in a wider societal technological ecosystem, which are themes that emerged from the material. The material is presented in a summarized fashion as well as in longer quotes when needed to illustrate complex and sometimes self-contradictory beliefs among the users in the study. Based on user preference, participants in the study either chose to participate under their own name, chose an alias, or were given an alias by me. These names are used to present their statements in Section 5. The research participants are referred to as users and participants in the study interchangeably. Claims about VR users should be read as referring only to users who participated in this study.

5. Results and Discussion: Juxtaposing VR Spatialities

In this section, I demonstrate how VR is constantly juxtaposed against other technologies, spaces, or expressions of digitality and technology in our society through user practices and imaginaries. I use Foucault's principles of Heterotopia to structure the discussion, showing how users constantly position VR technology as other or provide a quality of otherness. I focus the discussion on utopic aspirations to Principle 6, where I find that constellations of the real, the virtual, and the hyperreal build toward imagined utopic/dystopic futures.

5.1. Principles 1–2: VR in the Digital Landscape

To scholars of and professionals working with VR, the acquisition of the VR company Oculus by Meta, formerly Facebook, signaled that VR as a technology had arrived (Bailenson, 2018). For users in the study who owned a Meta headset, the connection to Meta or the fact that they could see who from their friend lists was using VR did not affect their choice of which virtual spaces to visit. Users cared little for the connectedness of their VR device to social media, and the connection to a Meta account was mentioned only in cases of annoyance. To the dismay of some users in the study, VR devices from Meta require users to have a Meta account to use the headset. Matilda was angered by the isolating effect this created for the headset, locking it to one user. She, a married mother of two, would like for the VR to be a family device, and saw a future for VR in classroom settings, but the logistics and privacy infringement of forcing students to get user accounts made her hopes for VR as a teaching device complicated. Wilke, meanwhile, tried to use his headset without an account for as long as possible. When he gave in, he felt immediately punished for it: The headset kept giving him pop-up notifications in all his virtual experiences from a health app that he could not uninstall. Both Matilda and Wilke expressed annoyance at attempts by Meta to connect VR to other digital spaces, encroaching on the feeling of VR as a counterspace. Users expressed experiencing

VR as being invaded by platform logics, while it would preferably be a separate space in the societal digital landscape.

Foucault (1984) argues that, historically, heterotopias have provided spaces for *crises*—situating events that needed to happen outside of society—but that we now see an influx of heterotopias of *deviation*—spaces that allow for different behaviors and norms. The constant juxtaposition of VR technology as other to social media and the societal tech landscape overall was not expressed by users as a hope for a space allowing for deviant behavior. Rather, other technologies were posed as deviating from social behaviors, with VR providing a more real connection. Robert, a very active user of his VR headset, had strong feelings against the spread of smartphones and social media and the effects they might have on younger generations' mental and physical health. VR, he argued, is something else; a place where you can *really* connect. Users discussed VR as different from normative digital socialites of our time, and they imagined it as providing a possibility to explore connections in digital spaces.

Because my data collection was carried out in 2023–2024, the upcoming release of Apple Vision Pro was something that came up as participants discussed VR's position in the wider tech landscape. Apple's release was imagined as a possibility for VR, and many users mentioned Apple's ability to make technology become mainstream. That VR technology would spread throughout society was imagined as a positive. Although VR was understood as a technology providing a counterspace to social media and platforms, users looked forward to VR becoming part of societal processes rather than a technological outsider.

5.2. Principle 3: VR and the Juxtaposition of Spaces

Foucault (1966/1970) describes how heterotopias play with and disrupt taxonomies. This can be seen in the varying spaces accessed through VR and how users understand them. There was no consensus among users on what kind of space VR is or what activity VR HMDs should be used for. Rather, users were surprised by their usage and which spaces they used their VR HMD to access. The third principle of heterotopia states that heterotopias can create their own microcosmos with ambiguous relations to the spaces which they reference, contest, and invert. This is especially noticeable in the relationship between VR HMDs and gaming spaces. Although these headsets are used to access a plethora of spaces, users reported using VR for work (as an office space or for meetings), traveling devices (pre-visits or actual trips), and gyms (home gym equipment or a way to leave the home for a workout, without actually leaving), many users have or are currently using their VR HMD for gaming.

Gaming makes up a significant part of the content bought in VR stores (Wehden et al., 2021). Notably, users expect and describe gaming spaces in VR as different from other, normal forms of digital gaming. This is why Stefan expected to be mind-blown when he got his first VR headset: this would be something else. Mirea, a self-described gamer, expressed surprise at her VR gaming, which she considers different from video games as a hobby. Pärlan and Vincent spoke of VR as a different style of gaming, more physically taxing and therefore not as at hand as a video game. This is reminiscent of Joffe, who traces her VR usage to being an old gamer with fingers that are too slow: VR provides another, embodied form of gaming. Non-gamer users had another way of juxtaposing VR as a different gaming space. Kunru, who turned Beat Saber into a virtual home gym, reported not being into games at all. Chiv, who had never been interested in gaming or technology, found himself part of an esports team in a VR game, with a complete lifestyle change of scheduled matches and

training sessions. Even for users who gamed or visited gaming spaces, VR gaming was juxtaposed against gaming as such. No matter if juxtaposed against the digital spaces of gaming or gaming as practice, VR as a heterotopia is constantly made out to be different.

5.3. Principle 4: VR Chronotopia

According to Foucault (1984), heterotopias play with time, which can be gathered, distorted, and multiple. Access to places that are heterotopic through VR (e.g., museums) is an example of these stacked temporalities and multiplicities (Korkut & Surer, 2024). VR lines up and provides access to virtual spaces such as gyms, games, travel destinations, and offices—thus blurring whether time is spent on leisure or labor. Anna, who bought her VR for virtual traveling, found herself playing violent action games to blow off steam, and Thomas, who expected to use his HMD for gaming, surprised himself by mainly using his VR as a home gym. Not only do the heterochronologies of VR confuse what kind of time is spent, but users also expressed a loss of the ability to sense time. Several users reported they found it hard to keep track of time in VR, and the HMD's caution that the battery had drained was a common reference point that two hours had passed. Users who usually checked the time on their phone lacked this option in VR, as they most commonly put away their phone when entering VR.

Although VR contains multiple temporalities, the future was the main temporality mentioned by users. Guy said that VR is "like something from the future," and Vincent noted his first go at VR as "arriving in the future." Users like Stefan, Robert, and Cam, who all tried VR for the first time in the 1990s, with lower graphics and brutish immersion, all recalled a futuristic feeling, glimpsing the future at low resolution. VR has a property of never arriving (Evans, 2018). The link between VR and the future is so strongly forged that even the possibility of getting VR for one's home does not mean that the virtual future is here. Although they were using VR HMDs in their homes, users talked about VR as a technology of the future that has not yet arrived. As an illustration of this vision of VR as a futuristic device, Max said that maybe VR would be here when we have flying cars. As a heterotopia, VR connotes the utopia of the virtual society and morphs to remain out of reach.

5.4. Principle 5: Entering VR

Foucault (1984) states that rites of transition must be performed to enter heterotopias. In the case of VR, these transitions serve both to mark entering another space and as expressions of spatial, embodied, and technological needs. Because VR is a separate space, but the user also remains in the physical place, some users have rituals for preparing their home for VR usage. They also reported spending time acclimatizing their body to VR to avoid what Wehden et al. (2021) call cybersickness. Centering user imaginaries of VR as a technology of otherness, and how VR is juxtaposed as providing access to different technological spaces, I highlight how connectedness and loneliness are expressed through casting. While PSVR and PSVR2 have auto-casting abilities (showing what the VR HMD user is seeing on their screen on another screen, like a TV or computer monitor), the Quest 2, the most common headset in this study, does not. Anna commented on this separateness of the virtual space, the isolation of the user, when she told me how there was no point in letting her husband try the VR: "He'll ask me what to do, and I can't. It's not like a videogame where you can just help. I can't see anything or push a button for him. You can't help anyone in there." Several Quest users expressed the need to cast to be able to help someone in the virtual space, but even when casting, the sensation of being intimately alone in a virtual space can be overwhelming. Guy describes playing a horror game while

having friends over. Although he was auto-casting through his PSVR2, he describes walking through the dark forest as something he experienced alone. In entering VR, you leave the home behind to enter a lonelier yet connected virtual space.

5.5. Principle 6: Utopic Aspirations and Imaginings of VR Futures

Heterotopic places are not only juxtaposed against other real places, but against unreal places as well (Foucault, 1966/1970). It is in heterotopia's Principle 6 that we find the relationship to the utopic the most pronounced. Dalton (2014) argues that each heterotopia has a utopia to which it refers, and although VR is a harbinger of good futures (Messeri, 2024), it is not always clear where the boundaries between the utopic and dystopic lie. Users provided numerous examples in which VR technologies are imagined to solve problems such as: an empathy machine for showing the lived experience of battered women; the possibility for virtual intimacy through VR sex for those unable to have intimate relationships in their non-virtual life; a space for youth to engage with the digital in healthier ways; an option to pacifying technologies like smartphones and computers; a way to reduce our need for painkillers through entering simulations that work to remove one from medical situations or bodily experience; or for phobia treatment. VR technology was described as having unpacked potential for positive change. Yet users kept referring to their imagining of VR futures through fictional work laden with dystopic narratives. When users described what sparked their interest in VR and imagined futures that VR HMDs would produce, it was through cultural references such as *Neuromancer*, the *Matrix*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Lawn Mower Man*, and *Ready Player One*. That VR is understood through fictional representations and cultural expressions is in itself nothing new (Champion, 2021; Chan, 2014). But the side-by-side, dynamic contrasting of how VR is a technology for bettering society that is derived from and inspired by dystopic narratives showcases the breakdown of categorization and dissolving of taxonomies that heterotopias enable.

In this final section, I present the utopic aspirations of VR as a heterotopia from users' imaginings of VR futures as they relate to the real/unreal. This reveals a sliding scale of the relationship between imaginings of VR and non-VR. Here, VR becomes hyper-real; it exists as its own realm in a digital landscape or presents a sharp split between virtual and physical/analogue reality. Throughout these imaginings, the utopia is confused with, overlaps, or becomes accentuated by dystopic futures. This article started with Pärlan's vision of a virtual space we have no reason to leave, if the VR technology is good enough. The utopic aspiration of this VR heterotopia would be for VR to replace the non-VR as primary. It is a utopic future as Baudrillardian (Baudrillard, 1981) simulacra: VR is more real than the real, it is the site of our life. VR would thus become a heterotopia of illusion (Foucault, 1984), revealing physical reality as imperfect and flawed. This utopia demands complete immersion that needs no breaks from a perfected virtual world.

The notion of never having to leave VR blends the dystopian/utopian striving of VR as a heterotopic device. When asked about the future, Cam mentioned never having to take the headset off: "In the future, VR will replace the phone. A headset you wear for all hours of the day. Charging while you lie down to sleep, still wearing it. Your whole life goes through a camera lens." This was not a dystopic vision for Cam; rather, he was dreaming of more immersion in his daily usage, a running bowl, a haptic vest that would make him feel interactions on his physical body. We might consider whether heterotopia's compulsion for juxtaposing, which confuses categorization and taxonomies at the cost of the stability of the heterotopia as a singular place, can be extended to the heterotopia's utopic aspirations; what becomes utopic or dystopic depends on what it is juxtaposed against, thus blurring the boundary between the utopic and the dystopic in the

imagined futures of VR. For Robert, the utopic possibilities of VR lie in how it is juxtaposed against social media, which he considers a technology that makes us antisocial. In sharply distinguishing between VR and other media in the digital landscape, Robert observed how hard it is to be together in the analogue world, because people are constantly on their smartphones. VR, meanwhile, enabled people to be together in the digital in a meaningful way. Dalton (2014) underlines the relationship between the heterotopia and utopia through how heterotopias mirror, invert, and relate to specific utopic aspirations. Although there is a loneliness to immersion through VR HMDs, in the virtual utopia reached through VR human connection is key. The duality of being an isolating technology for sociality is a heterotopic trait of VR; the refusal of taxonomies provides a place that is self-contradicting and shifting.

Kunru and Yu also make a clear distinction between the virtual and real worlds. Rather than striving against the virtual, however, Kunru argues that it is not a positive that VR might provide a perfect alternative to everyday life:

> I do have a negative comment on the future of VR. The idea, that when you put on your VR, you enter another world. You start using maybe other characteristics of you, doing other things in the other universe. It's like they (Meta) are saying, "We can make it so that you feel like you can get rid of your real life and enter another space." It's not a new world! It's a bit un-human. If you can do a social activity in reality, then do it in reality.

Paired with this imaginary that VR might lead to a future that loses its grasp of what is real and meaningful, Kunru and Yu still see VR as a technology with a positive impact on industry, and they are looking forward to increased immersion in domestic VR. Again, we see a breakdown of categories in imagining VR futures. Yu imagines that the separation between the virtual and the real will become starker; he thinks society's youth are more intrigued by the analogue than by misleading virtual spaces. To underline the separation, he ponders: "I guess future generations will be more into reality than the digital."

6. Conclusions

I have offered up heterotopia as a concept for digital geographies to juxtapose the current dystopic techno-political landscape with utopic aspirations, to consider hopefulness and difference in a time of a collapsing sense of the real. Hetherington (1997) argues that heterotopias should be understood through how they recombine "social control and expressions of freedom" (Johnson, 2013, p. 792). The current technological and political moment of White House bromances, doom scrolling embodiment, apathy before every day all day mass surveillance, the spread of genocidal technologies such as AI facial recognition (Mortensen, 2024), and live-streamed genocides call for investigating how realities are shared, overlapping, and conflicting.

While the end of geography is a driving mythology for the development of cyberspaces (Mosco, 2004), or what we today call the digital, making sense of these spaces and places requires spatial thinking. Although VR as a technology has not yet taken off in the platform economy, there has been significant interest shown by tech giants such as Sony, Apple, and Meta in developing their visions of the future. The imaginaries and politics of developers (Messeri, 2024), as well as the ideologies of developers, companies, and business leaders (Evans, 2018), affect where VR is going today. While the embodied internet of Zuckerberg's dreams, his VR utopia,

might have been simply a business move for Meta to have its own hardware production, the Metaverse is an imagined future backed by a lot of money (Evans et al., 2022). Lanier (2021) states that although VR might be imagined as a utopia, the Metaverse is deeply troubling and attempts at integrating VR "can even have a lonely, dystopian flavor" (Lanier, 2024).

This article began as a way to capture my research participants' imaginings about VR as a technology, as it related to their everyday usage. These imaginings were simultaneously utopic and dystopic, juxtaposing VR against other technologies, media, and forms of being together in the digital. Like Messeri (2024), pondering the "unquestioned acceptance of VR's benefit to humanity" (p. xiii), I found that dystopic references were used to describe utopic futures among home VR users. While VR has always been heavily tied to sci-fi and cyberpunk (Champion, 2021; Chan, 2014), we have the recent example of Turnbull et al. (2022) turning to science fiction and the weird to grasp current socio-ecological conditions.

Foucault's musings on heterotopias begin with Utopia, a real/imagined place created by Sir Thomas Moores in 1516. It can be found between Utensia and Uxal in the dictionary of imaginary places (Manguel & Guadalupi, 1999). If all happy families are alike, maybe all utopias are as well. Dystopias, meanwhile, are myriad and adapt to political climates and imaginings. The VR heterotopia described in this article is in constant flux to remain other to the particular geopolitical technological moment of today; this conversation reaches beyond VR and is expressed in a media landscape of fractured, different realities (Messeri, 2024). As the geopolitical landscape changes, we should pay attention to how technologies are shaped by imaginings of a better world, especially when multiple realities are being championed violently. Here, heterotopias can provide a starting point for approaching articulations of digital spatiality, if not differently: as unstable, constantly juxtaposed spaces. What I call the juxtaposing quality of heterotopias could also be formulated as a relational compulsion. The need for heterotopias to constantly juxtapose, to present themselves as different or counter to other places, makes them unstable as specific places. This is also a hopeful possibility: to be able to remain a counter and outside the society it is mirroring, inverting, and reflecting, heterotopias must be flexible in their contestation.

This provides for a slippery concept. I argue that digital geographers should seek out trickster concepts, as Haraway (1991) would have it. Concepts that defy taxonomies or, as Turnbull et al. (2022) put it, in their invitation for us to join in weirding geography, unsettle classification to allow for conceptualizing self-contradicting, fast-morphing media geographies. Engagement with media imaginaries and practices, such as VR usage, needs not only to center spatial thought, but also explore the spatial imaginings beyond a discussion of the real and virtually real, material or abstract. I have argued that the lack of empirical work on VR in geography stems from the very discussion of the real. The struggle to talk about the places and spaces of VR, because it transitions into a discussion on reality and materiality, is not isolated to VR HMDs but extends to virtuality and digitality as such. Whether you subscribe to the Deleuzian conceptualization of the virtual as real but not actual, or to a Baudrillardian simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981) where the virtual is more real than the real, or Shields' (2003) view of a virtual that is almost as real as the real, it is inherent to VR to discuss realities in the plural.

Here, I wish to make a final point about heterotopias in the digital landscape. Productive conceptualizations such as digital ecologies have been suggested to describe complex systems of how the digital materializes and is encountered (Turnbull et al., 2023), and heterotopias lend themselves to ecological thinking, as Gandy

(2012) showcases in the exploration of heterotopic alliances in Abney Park. Gandy points to the joint experiences of diverse people, animals, and imaginings in a real shared place, while underlining how difference is made through proximity. Not only a juxtaposing, but the side-by-side appearance of diverse elements, bodies, ideas, histories, and meanings. Even starker than the alongside-ness of the human and non-human (Ash & Simpson, 2016), the side-by-side existence of conflicting elements in heterotopias forces us to contemplate co-existence, not only at the scale of the earth, but in individual places.

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