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Preface

The Amsterdam Journal of Social Sciences continues to flourish. Since the last (and first-ever) printed edition was published at the end of the academic year 2024/2025 at our annual symposium, many things have changed: a new Board, new Editorial Team members and new events, what persists is the energy of everyone involved.

This ambition for academia beyond ECTS and the idea that students deserve a space to present their work drives the AJSS forward. In the end, we are just a bunch of students interested in academia who meet weekly to discuss niche articles, complex methodologies and theoretical frameworks over some snacks and Capri Suns. This community believes that there is so much to do in order to give students the experience of what the academic world feels like.

In this academic year, we have already hosted the event 'Beyond Lecture Halls' in which 3 guest speakers talked about how to publish your Master thesis, how to find a PhD and how to effect real-world impact with your research. And now with this printed edition, we once again highlight important discussions across Social Science disciplines. The symposium for the release offers authors the possibility to also present their research to a live audience in a creative way. These efforts aim to provide a platform for students to see what academia is all about.

Many more events and journal editions will follow, and we hope to empower students to become researchers by continuing this path of the AJSS.

We hope you enjoy the read and follow us on our exciting journey!

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Who Votes for Populist Parties in Latin America?

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Abstract

Much research has been done regarding the profile of the populist voter in Europe, however, we know less about the populist voter in Latin America. Populism can have backsliding effects on democracy Latin America, as a region has experienced populism throughout the 21st century, it is thus pertinent to understand the Latin American populist voter, i.e., know the voter's attitudes towards democracy, specifically towards the pillar norms of democracy. Following Van der Brug et al., this paper studies the attitudes of ten Latin American countries' voters towards democratic norms, dividing by populist voters, non-populist voters, and interaction between incumbent and populist voters. This study finds that, in Latin America, voting for populists does not result in lesser support of democratic norms, even if the populist is incumbent. In contrast, this research finds that voting for an incumbent (irrespective of populist status) does result in a statistically significant decrease in supporting democratic norms. This paper calls for further research into Latin America's voter profiles as well as more exhaustive datasets containing relevant information towards the study of democracy in the region.

Keywords

Populism, Democracy, Incumbency, Latin America, Backsliding

Introduction

It is known that populism can have democratic 'backsliding' effects on democracy (Ruth-Lovell and Grahn, 2022; Dussauge-Laguna, 2022; Lee, 2024; Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). Thus, it is important to know the mechanisms behind such backsliding capacity, for example if populist leader(s) drive such backsliding or whether it is the populist voters who permit such backsliding. This paper focuses on the study of bottom-up mechanisms towards populism. As such, we must first understand who votes populist, and what sort of characteristics does this voter have.

In Europe, the populist voter is known to have 'populist attitudes' (Akkerman et al., 2013, p. 1345). Populist attitudes entail, attitudes that follow the populist ideology, that is attitudes that are rooted in the "sovereignty of the people, opposition to the elite, and the Manichean division between 'good' and 'evil'" (Akkerman et al., 2013, p. 1331).

Despite having populist attitudes, the populist voters tend to have higher levels of support towards demo-

cracy in a general sense (Zalsove et al., 2021, p. 740), while supporting fewer concrete democratic norms––e.g. freedom of speech (Van der Brug et al., 2021, pp. 138-140). As such, there is a sort of contradiction within the populist voter: a higher support for democracy in the general, and a lower support for the pillars of democracy.

Knowledge regarding the attitudes and characteristics of populist voters have mostly focused in Europe and the US, while research has been scant regarding the populist voter in Latin America, a region that has seen an increase in distinctly radical populism during the 21st century (De la Torre, 2017, pp. 200-201). The populist voter in Latin America is not homogenous (Moncagatta and Safranoff, 2013, p. 44), they can rather be divided into "convenience followers" and "hardcore supporters" (Azpuru, 2024, p. 214). Knowing that the backsliding capacity of populism in 'fragile democracies' (such as Latin American democracies) is more substantial (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013, pp. 110-112), it seems necessary to bring a fuller picture of the populist voter in Latin America.

Thus, this research aims to narrow the gap in knowledge about populist voters and their beliefs, whether they support anti-democratic norms as in Europe (Van der Brug et al., 2021, pp. 138-140) or whether the heterogenous composition in Latin America (Moncagatta and Safranoff, 2013, p. 44) also affects the appearance of a general pattern of populist voters' attitude toward democratic norms in the region.

Following Van der Brug and colleagues (2021), this research studies populist, incumbent, and incumbent populist voters' attitudes towards democratic norms in ten Latin American countries using the LatinoBarometro 2023 dataset (LatinoBarometro, 2023). No statistical significance is found between voting populists and supporting or opposing democratic norms. Voting for an incumbent does result in being opposed to one democratic norm, but not to all. Lastly, the interaction between populist and incumbent also results in no statistical significance. The findings call for further research in Latin America and the necessity of building a more extensive and exhaustive dataset representing Latin American voter beliefs.

Theoretical Framework

Populism is an ideology that divides society into two antithetical groups (a 'pure people' against 'the corrupt elite') and argues that the will of good people should be followed in politics (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). It is worth noting that other conceptualizations of populism exist, and that the concept is a contested one. This paper follows Mudde's conceptualization as this was the conceptualization used by Van der Brug and colleagues (2021), and by the available populist dataset. Using Mudde's conceptualization thus allows the present study to test the external validity. Results thus are specific to this conceptualization. Other possible conceptualizations refer to populism from a strategic point of view (see Weyland, 2021), or a form of discourse (see Katsambekis 2020).

Plenty has been written on the effects of populism and democracy (Ruth-Lovell and Grahn, 2022; Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019; Dussauge-Laguna, 2022; Pintsch et al., 2022; Lee, 2024). Some argue that it can be a corrective to democracy (Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019, p. 73). Others argue that it can be nocive to

democracy for several reasons (Ruth-Lovell and Grahn, 2022; Dussauge-Laguna, 2022; Lee, 2024). Populists can shine a spotlight on sectors of a society that were previously excluded (Collier and Collier, 1991). As such, they "give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 21). However, populism can push (fragile) democracies into authoritarianism because, first, populists are political outsiders that have little experience with institutions of representative democracy; second, successful populists earn an electoral mandate to bury the political establishment; third, newly elected populists generally confront hostile institutions of horizontal accountability, that is, they fight against institutions that are in place to prevent autocratization (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013, pp. 110-112).

Despite our knowledge of populism and democracy, few have focused on the individual voter as the subject of study in populism. As Zaslove and colleagues (2021) mention, there is little data regarding the populist attitudes of people towards democracy (p. 730). Given that the democratic backsliding capacity of populism is known (Ruth- Lovell and Grahn, 2022; Dussauge-Laguna, 2022; Lee, 2024; Levitsky and Loxton, 2013), it is thus important to also understand whether voters of populist parties are unique in supporting practices that challenge democratic (liberal democratic) norms (Van der Brug et al., 2021, p. 131). One of the few studies found a significant and positive correlation between having populist attitudes and the intention to vote for a populist party (Akkerman et al., 2013, p. 1345). Another found that people holding populist attitudes are more likely to be more supportive of democracy, although minimally (Zalsove et al., 2021, p. 740). Additionally, through a study of 28 European countries, it was found that populist voters are more likely to support anti-democratic norms than non-populist voters (Van der Brug et al., 2021, p. 138). Moreover, rejection of liberal democracy's norms is stronger in populist voters whose candidate party is also incumbent as opposed to non-populist voters, and populist voters when the incumbent is not populist (Van der Brug et al., 2021, p. 140).

Current literature (as the above mentioned) focuses on Europe, while other researchers on the topic focus on regions such as the US (Castanho et al., 2023) or others (see Marcos-Harne et al., 2023, for a systemic review on the subject), research on populism in Latin America has been neglected. Populism in the 21st century in Latin America commonly took the form of radical left-wing populism (De la Torre, 2017, p. 200). The rise of populism can be explained by a crisis in political representation, widespread resistance to neoliberalism, and a perceived surrender of sovereignty to foreign elites (De la Torre, 2017, pp. 200-201). This came about only a few years into the democratization process of Latin America —the region entered a 'third' wave of democratization from the 1980s to the 2010s (Munck & Luna, 2022, p. 116). As of now, only three countries in Latin America can be understood to have a 'high quality' democracy: Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica (Munck & Luna, 2022, p. 179). As mentioned, populism can push 'fragile' democracies into authoritarianism (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013, p. 110). Thus, Latin America appears as a focal point of inquiry since the effects of populism on democracy could be most pernicious there. Indeed, "there is an overall negative relationship between populist rule and the quality of liberal democratic institutions" in Latin America (Lee, 2024, p. 18). This reflects an incompatibility between populist ideals and liberal democratic norms (Lee, 2024, p. 18).

Comprehensively, Latin America is adequately situated to be studied in the subject of populism because

of three key aspects. First, the harmful effects of populism on democracy can be most felt in the region given the region's endemically low state capacity (Munck & Luna, 2022, p. 44; p.18). This is not exclusive to Latin America; other regions also have countries with low state capacity. What makes Latin America suitable is the abovementioned 'rise' in populism (De la Torre, 2017, pp. 200-201), in combination with the wide array of populist parties available to voters (Appendix, Table 2a). Thus there is both variation across countries and within countries which makes the statistical analysis suitable, and given the plausible effects, necessary.

In Latin America, support for populism can be understood by dividing populist voters into "convenience followers" and "hardcore supporters" (Azpuru, 2024, p. 214). The former are those who, for some reason (economic, views on corruption, or performance of the country), decide to, at one specific point, support a populist candidate (Azpuru, 2024, p. 214). The latter refers to those who, for multiple reasons, at different points, support a populist candidate (Azpuru, 2024, p. 214). A precise and homogenous voter profile cannot be made of Latin American populist voters, but socioeconomic dissatisfaction seems to be at least a potential explanatory variable for left-wing populist support (Moncagatta and Safranoff, 2013, p. 44). Thus, we know fairly little of what the populist voter in Latin America believes regarding democracy. As such, following Van der Brug and colleagues., it is necessary to explore the beliefs of the populist voter in terms of democratic norms while simultaneously understanding that the Latin American populist voter is not entirely convinced of the populist ideas (Azpuru, 2024, p. 214) and that hence, it is plausible that European findings do not hold for Latin America.

Van de Brug and colleagues (2021) researched 28 European countries, and by doing so established certain characteristics of the individual in Europe who votes for populists. By testing their findings on a Latin American sample, we can assess the generalizability of their findings. Furthermore, this will provide a better understanding of the Latin American case and its specificities (as mentioned, a heterogenous voter profile). Specifically, Van der Brug and colleagues (2021) find that "populist party supporters are more inclined" to support a strong leader, "they are less likely to support an independent judiciary", and find less support for independent media "although here the difference between populists and nonpopulists is small" (pp. 138-139). They, however, find no statistical significance in support of freedom of speech. These principles are important to democracy as they ensure broad power-sharing, accountability, and freedom. Thus:

H1: Populist voters support three democratic norms less than non-populist voters —limited leader, independent judiciary, and independent media (Van der Brug et al., 2021, pp. 138-139).

They also find that when testing for incumbent vs non-incumbent votes, in all the rubrics, incumbent voters support democratic norms less than those who vote in opposition (Van der Brug et al., 2021, p. 139). Hence:

H2: Supporters of incumbent parties will support all democratic norms less than opposition supporters.

Lastly, when testing for the interaction between the incumbent vote and the populist vote (i.e, incumbent × populist), they find the status of incumbency matters more to populist voters than to non-populist voters

(Van der Brug et al., 2021, p. 140). Supporters of incumbent populist parties showed the lowest support for all forms of democratic norms. Ergo:

H3: Supporters of governing populist parties will show the least support for democratic norms compared to populist voters for non-incumbents, and non-populist voters.

While, as mentioned, the findings are specific to Europe, and it is known that Latin American populist voters are distinct and heterogenous, the testing of these hypotheses allows us to understand, within the heterogeneity of populist voters, if all or any of the democratic norms are held less than by non-populist voters.

Design and Method

Case Selection

Our understanding of the Latin American populist voter is relatively low compared to other regions. In contrast to other regions, state capacity and democratic quality in Latin America are endemically low (Munck & Luna, 2022, p. 44 & p. 180). Thus, research is necessary. Aside from the necessity, Latin America offers a suitable ground for populist research since, throughout this century it has experienced a rise in populism (Munck & Luna, 2022, pp. 248-249 & pp. 101-103).

Since no survey or dataset exists depicting the same variables as Van der Brug et al. (2021) use, the LatinoBarometro dataset was chosen as it includes several questions relating to the present investigation and has openly available information. LatinoBarometro is one of the few cross-national public opinion datasets covering Latin American countries on a frequent basis. For the 2023 dataset, "face to face interviews in 17 countries" were carried out "between February 20th to April 18" (LatinoBarometro, 2023).

The countries studied are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela. At the time of LatinoBarometro's interviews, these ten countries represented around 75% of the Latin American population. Exactly half of them, at the time of LatinoBarometro's interviews, had incumbent populist parties, while the remaining half did not (see Appendix for Table 2). As such, ten countries represent a just distribution in incumbent populist status. All the countries had at least one populist party, so measuring support for populist parties was possible in all of the countries.

Method

Van der Brug et al. (2021) find that the relationships hold significance even in alternative models and thus do not control for other variables in their paper (p. 137). Since a homogeneity of populist voters in Latin America does not seem possible, controlling for other variables appears necessary in this case. Control variables will be the same as Van der Brug et al. (2021) appendix controls, aside from EU-specific variables (e.g. South Europe or EU support). Hence, before having run binary logistic regression on the variables without controls, a binary logistic regression with control was carried out that determined whether the relationships hold significance. After running such regressions and seeing their significance this research did not proceeded with uncontrolled regressions, for controls showed no statistical significance.

Measures

Populist parties were identified through the 'Votes for Populist' dataset from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. "This dataset contains all national political parties [...] classified as populist" in Latin America (Grzymala-Busse et al., 2024). Parties in the dataset are coded following Mudde's criteria for populism, ensuring coherence throughout party identification. Given that the dataset is expert coded, it may induce some subjective biases such as classifying concrete political actors as (non) populists, which may not be widely agreed. Only parties present in 2023 were selected since LatinoBarometro's surveys were conducted through the first months of 2023 (LatinoBarometro, 2023). After making a list of the populist parties within each of the countries studied, the list was cross-referenced to LatinoBarometro's individual country 'results documents' to create a list of the non-populist parties in each country present in the survey (see Table 3 in Appendix).

Having identified the populist and non-populist parties, a dummy variable for populist parties was created to study the populist vote, stemming from the variable, "If elections were this Sunday, which party would you vote for?". This was the only variable from the dataset that revealed voter preference; as such, it is the most suitable. However, this is a proxy to the variable used by Van der Brug et al. (2021), wherein they retrieve concrete votes (p. 137). A value of 1 was assigned to populist parties and a value of 0 to non-populist parties.

No dummy variable was created for supporting the incumbent's party since the dataset already includes one, it was only recoded to show incumbent as 1 and nonincumbent as 0. For the interaction between populist and incumbent, a variable was computed by multiplying the populist dummy variable and the incumbent variable. As such, only populist incumbents received a score of 1, everyone else (non-incumbent populists, incumbents who are not populist, and non-populists) a score of 0.

Van der Brug et al. (2021) measure democratic support through four norms: (1) support of an independent judiciary, (2) support of freedom of speech, (3) support for media freedom, and (4) support for the limited executive (p. 136). Four proxy variables were used to measure these norms given that the LatinoBarometro did not contain the specific questions Van der Brug et al. (2021) used in their survey.

For support of an independent judiciary, the answers to "agree/disagree: Judiciary power must be independent from executive power", measured on a four-point Likert scale, recoded as 1-2 = against independent judiciary, and 3-4 as support of independent judiciary. To measure support for media independence, the question "agree/disagree: in case of difficulties, it is alright for the president to control the media", measured in a four-point Likert scale (1 strongly agree to 4 strongly disagree) recoded as 1-2 = support of independent media, and 3-4 as oppose independent media. Hence, a higher value will denote less support for the democratic norm of media independence. This question differs from Van der Brug et al. (2021, p. 136), but it also highlights the voter's perceived importance of an independent media.

For support of freedom of speech, a dummy variable was computed from the two variables which asked what was the most important aspect to respondents. If "freedom of speech" was chosen as the most important value or as the second most important, then a value of 1 was assigned. All other answers were assigned a

value of 0. It is worth noting that this variable will not tell us whether they would protect freedom of speech in all circumstances or if the voter would be 'fine' with the executive limiting freedom of speech. Thus, when analysing, the results should be understood in that sense.

Lastly, for the norm regarding 'limited' executives (i.e., having constrains on the power of the incumbent), a variable was computed from the question "most important aspect of governing". A value of 1 was assigned to responses that had as the most important or second most important "to distribute powers in several institutions". All other responses were coded as 0. This proxy variable is suitable since it allows us to see whether voters think the executive should control or distribute power, if power is concentrated or shared; power-sharing is one of democracy's tenets.

To measure general support for democracy, the variable "Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government", to which respondents could answer on a 4-point Likert scale, which was recoded as 1-2 = 0 (no support) and 3-4 = 1 (support).

In accordance with the information found in the annex of the Van den Brug (2021) study we used the following control variables, the following variables were included as controls: satisfied with Democracy, Satisfied with Economy, Support Same-Sex Marriage, Upper Class, Middle Class, Unemployed, Religious, Female, Age, Secondary Education, Tertiary Education. All of these variables, except for age, were recoded as binary. That is, in the case of all (except for age) a 1 denotes a 'yes', for example, satisfied with the economy: 1 = yes.

Results and Analysis

Table 1 depicts support for democratic norms, as well as for democracy in general by all three independent variables, including control variables. Regarding H1: hypothesizing that populist voters support three democratic norms (limited executive power, independent judiciary, and independent media) less than non-populist voters— this research finds no statistical significance for the populist vote variable across all five models of democratic support. That is, voting for a populist candidate has no relationship to supporting an independent judiciary, nor on opposing media independence, nor in supporting free speech, nor in favouring a limited executive. Voting for populist is not significant with general support of democracy.

It is worth noting that the dataset used did not account for actual votes, but rather by voting preference. Hence, from the data and the findings it can be said that populist vote preference bears no relation to democratic norms. Given the lack of statistical significance with all models, H1 is rejected.

Regarding H2: hypothesizing that supporters of incumbent parties will support all democratic norms less than opposition supporters, statistical significance is found on one of the four democratic norms, opposing independent media (Model 2), and in the general support for democracy (Model 5). Voting incumbent has a positive and statistically significant relationship with opposing media freedom. This suggests that voting for an incumbent makes it more likely that the incumbent voter will be more receptive with the government meddling with the media in times of crisis than an opposition voter. This seems coherent since voters of a par-

ty are expected to show more confidence in such a party's ruling. Moreover, voting for incumbents also has a positive and statistically significant relationship with general support of democracy. Voting for incumbents makes it more likely to show general support of democracy. Hence, H2 is rejected. Voting for an incumbent does not make the voter less supportive of all democratic norms. From the data set it appears to only affect opposing media independence and supporting democracy in general, while not affecting support for an independent judiciary, for free speech or for a limited executive.

Turning to the interaction between populist and incumbent, and to H3: hypothesizing that supporters of governing populist parties will show the least support to democratic norms, there is no statistical significance across models. This suggests that voting for a populist incumbent does not affect support or opposition for any of the four democratic norms.

Table 1: Support for democratic norms and democracy in general by all three independent variables (including control variables)

	Model 1 Support Independent Judiciary	Model 2 Oppose Independent Media	Model 3 Support Free Speech	Model 4 Support Limited Executive	Model 5 Support for Democracy
Constant	.804(.23)***	-1.271 (.21)***	-.163 (.20)	.188 (.20)	-.676 (.023)**
Voted for Populist	.123 (.21)	.178 (.19)	.041 (.17)	-.230 (.18)	-.072 (.019)
Voted for Incumbent	.144 (.12)	.763 (.10)***	-.171 (.10)	-.045 (.10)	.657 (.013)***
Interaction Populist and Incumbent	-.308 (.25)	-.180 (.22)	-.160 (.21)	.035 (.21)	-.233 (.24)
Satisfied with Democracy	.259 (.11)*	.432 (.10)***	-.102 (.09)	.037 (.10)	1.17 (.12)***
Satisfied with Economy	.104 (.13)	.345 (.11)**	.111 (.10)	.020 (.11)	.414 (.15)**
Support Same Sex Marriage	.197 (.10) *	-.288 (.08)*	-.242 (.08)**	.350 (.09)***	.588 (.10)***
Upper Class	-.312 (.24)	.835 (.24)***	.277 (.22)	-.469 (.23)*	-.515 (.024)*
Middle Class	.322 (.12) **	.101 (.11)	-.082 (.10)	.137 (.11)	.140 (.12)

Unemployed	-.191 (.12)	.011 (.10)	-.143 (.10)	.017 (.10)	.233 (.12)*
Religious	.009 (.12)	.474 (.12) ***	-.165 (.11)	-.170 (.12)	.087 (.13)
Female	-.128 (.1)	.458 (.10)***	-.015 (.08)	-.178 (.09)*	-.065 (.10)
Age	.002 (.003)	-.003 (.003)	.001 (.003)	.003 (.003)	.011 (.003)***
Secondary Education	-.130 (.10)	-.419 (.09)***	.136 (.09)	.185 (.09) *	.238 (.10)
Tertiary Education	.210 (.14)	-.910 (.12)***	.149 (.11)	.613 (.12)***	.590 (.14)***
N	2623	2733	2701	2604	2727

Notes: Table entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; *** denote $p < 0.001$, ** denote $p< 0.01$, * denote $p < 0.05$.

It is worth remembering that voting for incumbents (regardless of being populist or not) is associated with the voter being more likely to oppose independent media in times of crisis. In this model, when the incumbent is populist, voters are not more likely to oppose independent media. This represents an area of great interest, as it could mean that trust decreases in the incumbent controlling the media in some people when the incumbent is populist, although this was not tested. The same is true for general support of democracy. As such, H3 is rejected as well. Indeed, incumbent effects on democratic support are not stronger on populist incumbents in Latin America, in this data set.

The constants in the five models represent the baseline log odds of supporting each democratic norm when all predictors are set to their reference values (0 in the case of all, e.g. Support same sex variable, reference is No = 0). In three out of the five models (Model 1: Independent Judiciary, Model 2: Independent Media, and Model 5: General Support of Democracy), the constants are statistically significant. Suggesting that, even in the absence of the predictors, there is a meaningful baseline likelihood of supporting these democratic norms. Interestingly, the variable voting incumbent shows opposing values to those of the constant, in the statistically significant models for it (Model 2 and Model 5). This further consolidates the findings of this paper regarding H2. Interestingly, general democratic support in Latin America appears to be low, while support for judicial independence, and opposition to controlled media is high. In addition, the constant is not statistically significant in Models 3 and 4 (supporting free speech, and supporting a limited executive respectively), indicating that the baseline likelihood of both dependent variables = 1 when all predictors are at their reference values is not clearly different from zero. Thus, support for these norms seem to be reliant on other predictors.

Turning to control variables, the variable ‘supporting same sex marriage’ has statistical significance across

all models. Supporting same sex marriage has a positive relationship with supporting independent judiciary, a negative relationship with opposing independent media, a positive relationship with supporting free speech (and it is the only variable holding statistical significance), and a positive relationship with supporting a limited executive. As such, across all models, the strongest predictor for supporting all democratic norms is supporting same sex marriage. The strongest predictor for Model 1 (independent judiciary) was belonging to the middle class, although the strength of the relationship is not too high. For Model 2 (opposing independent media) the two strongest predictors were: having tertiary education, with a significant and negative relationship, and being upper class, with a significant and positive relationship. That is, those who are educated to the tertiary level will be more likely to oppose government meddling in the media, whereas those in the upper class will be more likely to support the government doing so. Model 4's strongest predictor was also having tertiary education. As such, having attained tertiary education results in a higher likelihood of supporting a limited executive power.

Since the models are not statistically significant, uncontrolled models were not included, although they showed statistical significance. Furthermore, their standard deviations were close to zero, perhaps because of the small number of cases compared to the dataset used by Van der Brugge and colleagues (2021). Given the small number of cases, interval plotting was futile since they depicted no useful insights.

Having presented the findings and returning to the overarching knowledge gap this paper sought to narrow, the profile of the populist voter in Latin America does appear to continue being heterogeneous (Azpuru, 2024, p. 214), also in terms of their democratic support. It may be possible that disaggregating the populist voter variable into "hardcore" and "convenience" voters (Azpuru, 2024, p. 214), may result in diverging attitudes towards democratic norms. However, in general, the profile of the populist voter in Latin America is complex.

Moreover, it cannot be said that Van der Brug et al. (2021) findings can be generalized outside of Europe. Latin American particularities regarding populism may be relevant to the relationship populism has to democracy in the region. Populism sprung from a crisis in political representation, widespread resistance to neoliberalism, and a perceived surrender of sovereignty to foreign elites (De la Torre, 2017, pp. 200-201). As such, the anti- establishment capitalized by populists in the region is not grounded against its democratic institutions. The findings also have important implications regarding the backsliding capacity of populism in Latin America. Since the voters for the populist party are not more likely to support anti-democratic norms, the democratic erosion process of populism in Latin American countries would seem to be principally top to bottom. As such, this calls for further research on the processes of elite-driven democratic backsliding.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between populist voting and democratic norms in Latin America, several limitations must be acknowledged. This research relied on LatinoBarometro's dataset, and not on a specific survey for this research as did Van der Brug et al. (2021). As such, it is

plausible that proxy variables do not represent the totality of the findings. Moreover, when creating the dummy variable of voting for populist parties, 60.5% of the cases appear as missing, because "would not vote" and "do not know" were coded as missing values in order to only represent actual vote intention in terms of populist vote or non-populist vote, and incumbent vote or non-incumbent vote (as opposed to populist vote or any other voter intention, and incumbent vote or any other voting intention). Imputation of missing cases was carried out, and results did not vary greatly. This results in a considerably smaller pool of cases in comparison to Van der Brug et al. (2021) who have around 21000 cases for each model, in comparison to 2 500 cases in this research. Using a similar number of cases could result in different, and more precise results. This research does not test for causation, but merely looks at the likelihood of an event happening as variables are binary. As such, the research does not distinguish between the strength of support in the democratic norms and voting populist, incumbent, or their interaction.

Conclusion

More research is needed on the Latin American voter, but shining a light on the populist voter in Latin America has allowed this research to assert that the populist voter in Latin America is not in general more likely to be less supportive of democracy as measured by democratic norms. This research finds distinct considerations of the populist voter in Latin America. Based on the data, it is not possible to say that voting for populists is associated with lesser support for democratic norms. This is also true for the incumbent-populist voter. In contrast, voting merely for the incumbent does show a higher likelihood of supporting one of the four democratic norms less; specifically, voting incumbent represents a higher likelihood of opposing media independence in times of crisis. In addition, voting for incumbents represents a higher likelihood of supporting democracy in general. The strongest overall predictor for all models was supporting same-sex marriage. Having attained a tertiary education appeared to also be a strong predictor in Models 2, 4, and 5 in support of democracy. Contrarily, being upper class was a strong predictor for supporting democracy less according to models one and five.

Several limitations are present in the research, but the most important or necessary revisions are the use of proxy variables and the number of respondents. Since no survey was available targeting each specific variable, the present research needed to use proxy variables; however, it is noted that proxy variables do not necessarily reflect the same relationships as the variables used by Van der Brug et al. (2021). Results may shift when (or if) a dataset targeting the specific questions becomes available. Moreover, this research's number of cases was significantly lower than that of Van der Brug et al. (2021) —as mentioned, a difference of 21,000 cases against 2,000. Nonetheless, the research presents valid insights with the available data.

Similarly, to using proxy variables, the LatinoBarometro dataset was the only available data source, representing the most accurate findings within the current data. It is possible that having a higher number of respondents would result in different findings; however, since LatinoBarometro offers high-standard representative samples, it is not expected that a higher number of respondents will result in different findings. As was also mentioned, imputation of missing cases was done, and even after imputing the results remained

similar. Since imputable results do not represent actual people, they were not included.

This research highlights the need for large data sets reporting on Latin American voters' perceptions of democratic norms. A thorough survey is necessary to conclude Latin American voters' values concretely. Moreover, as is the case for multiple topics in political science, further research is also necessary regarding the populist voter profile in Latin America. In addition, further research should set to investigate the populist voter at different levels of analysis (e.g. municipal level and state level) to make the findings of this paper applicable to the Latin American region more profoundly. Moreover, given that LatinoBarometro offers datasets for other years, further research could consider studying the populist voter across different years.

In conclusion, the present research serves to further highlight the differences between populism in Europe and the US and populism in Latin America. While the phenomenon of populism has seen a worldwide presence, its concrete appearance across different setting is varied. The Latin American populist voter does not hold the same likelihood of (not) supporting democratic norms as do the European populist voters. Hence, this shows the need for further studies in the Latin American populist voter to discern its specificities. Such necessary investigations may be able to provide normative guidance towards curtailing the populist trend and its likely consequences on the, still young and unconsolidated, Latin American democracies.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Unveiling the Collective Shadow: A Deep Dive into Romania's 2024 Political Transformation

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary Romanian politics through the lens of historical factors influencing the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections. The central research question investigates how Romania's collective shadow, rooted in its authoritarian past, affects public perception and behaviour during this electoral period. The analysis posits that the unexpected success of far-right candidate Călin Georgescu reflects unresolved societal issues stemming from Romania's history, particularly its communist regime. The study begins by defining the concept of the collective shadow, drawing on Jungian theories of the shadow archetype and collective unconscious. It then provides a historical overview of Romania's fascist and communist eras, highlighting how authoritarian practices shaped a culture of fear and mistrust among citizens. This context is crucial for understanding the resurgence of nationalist sentiments and the political landscape leading up to the 2024 elections. Subsequent sections explore socio-political factors contributing to the current electoral dynamics, including media narratives and public sentiment. The paper argues that the collective shadow manifests in harmful societal trends and influences voter behaviour, revealing deep-seated fears and desires that have shaped electoral outcomes. Ultimately, this analysis aims to illuminate the complexities of Romanian identity as it grapples with its past while navigating a pivotal moment in its democratic evolution. By integrating historical insights with contemporary political analysis, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the forces at play in Romania's 2024 elections, emphasising the importance of acknowledging and addressing the collective shadow in shaping future political trajectories.

Keywords

Collective shadow, Călin Georgescu, Nationalist sentiments, Democratic evolution

Introduction

Romania's modern political landscape is haunted by shadows cast over decades of authoritarian rule. From the chilling violence of the interwar Iron Guard to the suffocating grip of communist dictatorship, the country's history is a story of survival under regimes that demanded obedience and punished dissent. This legacy is not merely a backdrop: it is a living force, shaping the fears, hopes, and choices of voters today.

One of the most striking examples is the rise of far-right candidate Călin Georgescu, whose popularity

has led many to ask whether Romania is still haunted by its history of authoritarianism and political corruption. To understand the present, it is essential to confront Romania's troubled past, marked by cycles of violence, repression, and betrayal. In the twentieth century, Romania endured the brutality of the Iron Guard's fascist terror, with political assassinations and state-sanctioned anti-Semitic violence leaving entire communities in fear. This was followed by decades under a communist regime that institutionalised surveillance, censorship, and the systematic crushing of dissent. Generations grew up learning to distrust their neighbours, fearing that a careless word could lead to arrest or worse. The legacy of these regimes is not just historical; it is woven into the fabric of daily life, shaping how Romanians relate to authority, to each other, and to the idea of democracy itself

This paper looks at whether Georgescu's success is just a reaction to current problems or if it points to something deeper: a "collective shadow" that the country has not fully dealt with. The main question I ask in this paper is: Does the rise of far-right politics in Romania show that the country is still struggling with its past, and how does this hidden history affect today's elections and political culture? Using Jungian theory as a lens, this paper takes a different approach from traditional political science. Instead of just looking at institutions or voting patterns, it tries to understand the deeper feelings and memories that shape how people act and vote. This approach is especially useful for countries like Romania, where the memories of dictatorship and sudden changes in government still affect how people see themselves and their country. Romania stands out as a particularly compelling case study because of its unique trajectory through some of the most repressive authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. Few European countries have experienced such a rapid succession from fascist dictatorship to communist totalitarianism, followed by a turbulent transition to democracy. This layered history has left deep scars on the national psyche, making Romania a prime case for examining how unresolved collective traumas can resurface and shape contemporary political life. At the same time, the paper recognizes that using psychological ideas to study society has its limits, and it will discuss both the strengths and weaknesses of this method.

In my analysis, I organize the argument in several steps that build on each other to answer the main question. First, I explain what the concept of the collective shadow means when applied to entire societies, and how this idea can help us understand group behaviour. Next, I look back at Romania's twentieth-century history, focusing on how the experiences of fascism and communism have left deep marks on the country's identity and political debates. I then examine how Romania's electoral system and political institutions can either ease or worsen the influence of these old anxieties on voters. After that, I explore some of the main social and political factors—such as economic struggles, unstable alliances, and the role of the media—that have divided today's political scene and made it so tense. Finally, I use the example of Călin Georgescu's rise to show how these historical and psychological forces play out in real life.

By bringing all these pieces together, I aim to give a clearer picture of how Romania's past still shapes its democracy today. It hopes to shed light not only on the current election but also on the bigger question of how countries deal with painful histories and how those histories continue to influence politics. In the end, my argument is that, if we want to understand Romania's political challenges and opportunities, we need

to pay attention to the hidden forces of the collective shadow that still shape the country's path forward.

Theoretical Framework

To accurately define the concept of the collective shadow, we must first explore its roots in Jungian psychology, specifically the shadow archetype and the collective unconscious.

Firstly, the shadow archetype represents suppressed impulses, thoughts, or ideals. It can be broadly defined as the dangerous aspect of the unrecognised dark half of one's personality (Jung, 1966). For instance, nightmares can embody unresolved conflicts and suppressed emotions. The ultimate goal here, as explained by Jung himself, is not to suppress this darkness but to embrace it because that is the only path to self-fulfilment (Adelaide Psychology, 2023).

Secondly, the collective unconscious can most simply be considered the 'invisible reality' (Jung et al., 2001). Unlike the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious is an inherited part of the psyche containing universal archetypes that individuals have never consciously experienced (Jung, 1936). For example, mass hysteria or collective emotional responses in social networks are phenomena that support Jung's ideas (Bobrow, 2011).

Building on these foundations, the concept of the collective shadow can be understood as the point where the individual shadow archetype and the collective unconscious intersect. The shadow archetype represents the repressed or denied aspects within each individual, while the collective unconscious contains the shared psychological patterns and archetypes inherited by all members of a society. When many individuals suppress similar qualities, such as prejudice, aggression, or fear, these traits do not simply disappear; they accumulate and become embedded within the collective unconscious. This fusion gives rise to the collective shadow: the repository of traits, impulses, and attitudes that a society as a whole refuses to acknowledge or accept (Gabriel, 2020). The collective shadow often manifests in widespread social phenomena, such as racism, scapegoating, or systemic injustice, where unacceptable qualities are projected onto certain groups or issues (Gabriel, 2020). In this way, the collective shadow is not just a sum of individual denials but a powerful, often hidden force that shapes collective attitudes and behaviours, reflecting the darker undercurrents of a community's psyche.

Looking at a concrete example from Romanian history is helpful to illustrate how the collective shadow operates in practice. One of the clearest manifestations of the collective shadow in Romania can be seen in the widespread anti-Semitic attitudes and violence during the interwar period and World War II, particularly under the influence of the Iron Guard and the fascist government. During this time, anti-Semitism was not just a fringe belief but became deeply embedded in public discourse and state policy, leading to the persecution and murder of thousands of Jews and Roma. These actions were often justified by appeals to national purity and traditional values, reflecting repressed fears and insecurities about national identity and sovereignty. Even after the fall of fascism and the subsequent communist regime, these underlying

prejudices did not simply disappear. Instead, they were often pushed underground, only to resurface in different forms during moments of social or political crisis. For example, in the post-communist era, there have been periodic outbursts of nationalist rhetoric and scapegoating of minorities, especially during times of economic hardship or political instability. This pattern shows how the collective shadow, rooted in historical trauma and collective denial, continues to shape Romanian society, influencing attitudes, behaviours, and even electoral outcomes.

By understanding the collective shadow in both theoretical and practical terms, we can better grasp how unresolved historical issues continue to influence contemporary Romanian politics. The Jungian concept of collective shadow thus sets the stage for analysing how these deep-seated patterns play out in the 2024 presidential election context. Keeping this definition in mind, we can now examine Romania's case and its current elections by examining how political trends and societal repressions interact to reflect the nation's collective shadow.

While a range of political science theories could be applied to explain the dynamics of Romanian politics, this study turns to Jung's concept of the collective shadow for several reasons. First, Jungian theory provides a unique lens for understanding how societies process collective trauma and unresolved historical experiences, particularly in contexts characterised by authoritarianism and systemic repression. The collective shadow concept is beneficial for capturing the psychological undercurrents that traditional political theories may overlook, such as the persistence of fear, mistrust, and suppressed desires that continue to shape public attitudes long after regime change. In operationalising this approach, I deliberately selected texts and sources that directly engage with both Romania's authoritarian past and the Jungian framework, prioritising those that illuminate the intersection between historical trauma and contemporary political behaviour. By foregrounding Jung, the analysis aims to reveal the "hidden" forces influencing electoral outcomes—forces that might remain invisible if only classic institutional or sociological models were used. This theoretical choice thus adds value by highlighting how collective psychological patterns, rooted in a society's past, can resurface and influence democratic processes in ways that more conventional political science frameworks might not fully capture.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to comprehensively examine the influence of Romania's collective shadow on the 2024 elections. Romania was selected as a case study due to its complex history of authoritarian regimes and socio-political transformations, providing a rich context for exploring the manifestations of the collective shadow. The research involves analysing media narratives, historical accounts, and articles focusing on the Romanian political sphere to reveal how societal fears and desires have influenced electoral outcomes. Data sources include news articles, academic papers, political speeches, and social media content. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to select relevant articles and media content. In this context,

"relevant" refers to sources that directly address the influence of Romania's authoritarian past on contemporary political attitudes and electoral behaviour, with a particular focus on the 2024 elections and the concept of the collective shadow. I specifically included articles and historical accounts that describe Romania's fascist and communist eras, as well as sources discussing historical trauma, far-right movements, collective memory, and public responses to political candidates like Călin Georgescu. I prioritised sources that offered a range of viewpoints, including mainstream media, independent journalism, and scholarly analysis, to ensure a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the topic. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives, while snowball sampling facilitated the identification of additional sources through references and citations. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the collective shadow in the collected data.

The methodology for this study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed independently but during the same phase of research. Qualitative data consisted of media narratives, historical accounts, and scholarly articles focusing on the Romanian political sphere, which were thematically analysed to uncover how societal fears and desires have shaped electoral outcomes. Quantitative data, including election results and public opinion polls, were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and correlations in political behaviour. The findings from both strands were then integrated during the interpretation phase: qualitative insights provided context and possible explanations for patterns observed in the quantitative data, while statistical trends helped to validate and generalise themes identified in the qualitative analysis. This integration allowed for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the interplay between historical context, public perception, and political outcomes in Romania, ensuring that the strengths of one method addressed the limitations of the other.

Historical Roots of Romania's Collective Shadow

The Garda de Fier (Iron Guard) movement, or, more simply, Legiunea (the Legion) or Mișcarea Legionară (Legionnaire movement), was established in 1927 by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Initially, its official name was Legiunea Arhanghelul Mihail (The Legion of the Archangel Michael), but it later became known as the Legion. Codreanu established the Legion after splitting from the far-right party LANC (Liga Apărării Național-Creștine - National-Christian Defence League) because he claimed to have received a divine vision from the Archangel Michael, which inspired him to create a movement dedicated to Romania's spiritual and national revival. The Legion attracted support primarily from students and peasants, distinguishing itself from other fascist movements of the time that were more aligned with military veterans (Clark, 2012). Codreanu's vision for Romania sharply contrasted with the prevailing elite perspective, which aimed to transform the country into a modernised and Westernised "France of Eastern Europe". Rather than adopting French ideals of universal values and human rights, he championed an ultra-nationalism that was both exclusive and xenophobic. The Legion called for a return to traditional Eastern Orthodox values, emphasising the importance of Romania's peasant culture and folk customs as authentic representations of "Romanian genius."

In March of 1930, leaders of the Legion established a paramilitary branch dubbed The Iron Guard, the movement becoming widely known by this name, while its participants were referred to as Legionari (Legionnaires) by the Romanian population or "Greenshirts" by outsiders, due to their green uniforms (Iordachi, 2023). The movement primarily gained traction because it denounced the corrupt Romanian political elite during the Great Depression (Clendenin, 2023). Especially in the early years, members were often dressed in peasant costumes adorned with crucifixes and carried bags of Romanian soil, symbolising their commitment to the land and its heritage (Iordachi, 2023). The Iron Guard was notorious for its involvement in political violence, including a series of assassinations and attacks targeting perceived enemies of the Romanian people, mainly Jews and political opponents (Iordachi, 2022). After being banned by the Romanian government in 1931 and again in 1933, the Iron Guard retaliated violently. A significant act of vengeance occurred on December 29, 1933, when its members assassinated Prime Minister Ion Duca at the Sinaia railway station. This assassination was a direct response to Duca's crackdown on their activities, which included arrests and violent repression of Legion members. In addition to high-profile assassinations, the Iron Guard utilised death squads to carry out targeted killings motivated by their fascist ideology and religious nationalist beliefs. This cycle of violence and revenge contributed to an atmosphere of terror in interwar and World War II Romania (Iordachi, 2022).

The abdication of King Carol II of Romania on September 6, 1940, marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among the Romanian populace. As a result, he was compelled to transfer power to General Ion Antonescu, who had risen to prominence amid the turmoil and was seen as a strong military leader capable of addressing the pressing challenges facing Romania at that time (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). Following his appointment as Prime Minister, Antonescu established a military dictatorship and secured an alliance between Romania and Nazi Germany.

His regime initially sought to suppress the Iron Guard, which had been a significant nationalist and fascist movement in Romania, but eventually agreed to work with them to expand and establish his influence across the country. However, internal conflicts soon arose between Antonescu and the Iron Guard, culminating in a violent confrontation in January 1941 when Antonescu ordered a crackdown by the Romanian army on its members after they had attempted a coup against him. This effectively dismantled the Iron Guard (Iordachi, 2023). Antonescu's following regime did not fare much better. Initially, he found some success by fully aligning with Hitler's Nazi Germany, sending troops to support German military operations (such as Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR), and gaining some territory for Romania. But as the tide turned against the Axis powers, the Romanian army suffered more and more defeats, and in 1944, Soviet troops started to enter Romanian territory. All of this, in addition to being responsible for the deportation and murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews and Roma (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019), led to his regime becoming more unstable by the day.

On August 23, 1944, King Mihai I of Romania (the son of former King Carol II, who had been a figurehead monarch until then) executed a coup against Antonescu. King Mihai, supported by opposition

parties and military leaders, ordered the arrest of Antonescu and his government, which marked a significant shift in Romania's allegiance as the country transitioned from the Axis to the Allies. Following the coup, King Mihai announced Romania's withdrawal from the war against the Allies, sought to negotiate peace with the Soviet Union, and joined the Allied forces (Sfetcu, 2022). Historians around the world consider the actions of King Mihai to be a pivotal moment in the war and estimate that this coup shortened the war by as little as six months.

These events left a lasting imprint on Romania's national identity and its unresolved collective shadow, particularly in how the country grapples with the legacy of authoritarianism. The Iron Guard and the fascist government not only inflicted political violence and anti-Semitic persecution but also embedded deep societal wounds, fears, divisions, and unresolved guilt that were never fully confronted after their fall. The Iron Guard's orchestrated pogroms, such as the 1941 Bucharest pogrom, which saw public humiliation and the murder of over a hundred Jewish citizens, left a legacy of communal trauma and unresolved moral reckoning. The Legionnaires' systematic targeting of minorities, forced conversions, and the use of public spectacle in violence created a culture of fear and complicity that was rarely confronted in postwar narratives. Rather than being openly addressed, these aspects of Romania's past were suppressed or reframed, contributing to a collective shadow that lingers beneath the surface of national discourse. While such atrocities were tragically widespread across Europe during World War II, Romania's case is marked by the subsequent silence and lack of public accountability regarding these events. The phenomenon of a collective shadow is not unique to Romania, but its case is particularly illustrative due to the enduring silence and reframing of the Iron Guard's legacy in public discourse. This unresolved past continues to manifest in contemporary political rhetoric, social divisions, and periodic scapegoating of minorities, reflecting the persistence of the collective shadow in Romanian society.

The Communist Regime: Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu

The emergence of communist forces challenged King Mihai's short reign, forcing him to appoint a pro-communist government. On the night of December 30, 1947, having barely returned home from a trip to London, Mihai found himself surrounded by communist-loyal troops. Petru Groza and Communist Party leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej demanded that he sign a pre-typed abdication document. Despite his reluctance and a reported threat of violence (as Groza showed him a pistol during the encounter and claimed that, if the King did not sign, he would order the execution of approximately 1,000 pro-monarchy supporters, many of whom were students), Mihai complied (Sfetcu, 2022). Following his abdication, the Romanian Parliament proclaimed the country a People's Republic, abolished the monarchy, forced Mihai into exile, and marked the beginning of the Communist regime.

The first de facto leader of the Romanian People's Republic was Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who rapidly rose to power in the communist party after the 23 August 1944 coup. Initially, he was recognised as a leader closely aligned with Stalinist principles. As the membership of the Communist Party expanded significantly in the aftermath of World War II (from approximately one thousand members in 1944 to nearly

a million in 1948), a claim was made that "unsound" elements had infiltrated the party, and verification was required. As a result, around 190.000 members were brutally purged, even those aligned with Stalinist ideals (such as Ana Pauker in 1952, who was accused of "cosmopolitanism" and "rightist deviations"), and new membership applications were restricted. Through these widespread political purges, Dej sought to align the party's vision of Romanian socialism with his own. By the end of 1955, he had become the party's undisputed leader. Other aspects of his Stalinist policies included the elimination of private land ownership, the adoption of socialist industry, the push for rapid industrialisation, party unity, and monolithism (Petrescu & Tismaneanu, 2022).

However, after Nikita Khrushchev took power in the Soviet Union and initiated his de-Stalinization campaign, Romanian communists, including Gheorghiu-Dej, had to adapt their policies, fearing a Soviet-backed coup that would remove them from power. They recognised the importance of preserving national identity and swiftly incorporated nationalist rhetoric and policies that resonated with the Romanian populace in their governance. Over time, they adapted their strategies to utilise national identity to consolidate power and maintain stability. This process, termed 'selective community-building', included the following aspects: the fusion of party and nation by integrating nationalist ideology with socialism, the portrayal of the regime as the protector of Romanian interests to reinforce citizens' loyalty, and the selective revival of local traditions and cultural identity to foster a sense of belonging and community (reference). By 1964, this process evolved into a broader nation-building initiative that reflected a blend of socialist ideology and national pride (Petrescu & Tismaneanu, 2022). Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej died in 1965, leaving behind a legacy of transition from Stalinism to a campaign of national identity promotion, which would ultimately lay the groundwork for his successor, the infamous Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Initially, Ceaușescu's policies appeared promising, as he further highlighted national identity and modernised Romania through investments in agriculture and industrialisation. These policies, combined with reduced censorship, increased his legitimacy among Romanians. He promoted Romania's position on the international stage as a standalone nation, thus breaking Soviet direct control over the country, which resonated with most citizens. The primary focus was on heavy industry (e.g. the production of machinery, vehicles and construction materials), leading to some economic growth, which marked his legitimacy in the eyes of the people (Abraham, 2016, pp. 47-49). He also condemned military repression during the Prague Spring of 1968, refusing to send Romanian troops to Czechoslovakia. These policies and actions, combined with a mild reduction of censorship, portrayed him as a leader who prioritised his people's interests. However, it was clear from the beginning that he aimed to assert control over the country. He reformed the PCR (Partidul Comunist Român - Romanian Communist Party), expanding its membership from approximately 1.5 million in 1965 to 3.8 million by the end of the regime. Moreover, he established additional political socialisation programmes for children (next to the existing Pioneer Organisation, as per the Soviet model), such as Șoimii Patriei (Falcons of the Fatherland), for those under seven (Abraham, 2016, p. 51).

Ceaușescu's government also implemented some horrific measures during this period. Because he

believed that a strong nation needed to be a populous one, he banned abortion in 1966. Many women, unable to access legal abortion or contraception, resorted to clandestine and unsafe procedures, such as using unsterilized instruments, seeking help from untrained individuals, or attempting self-induced abortions, which frequently resulted in severe infections, infertility, or even death. As part of his abortion ban decree (Decree 770), he also set population goals for the future, which were not achieved.

It is widely argued that official visits to North Korea and China in 1971 marked a turning point in his regime. In the aftermath of these visits, Ceaușescu began regularly employing methods characteristic of a strict authoritarian regime in Romania, including ideological manipulation and heavy censorship. Communist propaganda depicted him as an ideal leader, a model statesman, and a global peacemaker, while his wife, Elena, was awarded numerous academic titles to reinforce her image as a renowned scientist (Abraham, 2016, p. 55). During the late 1970s, the regime implemented stringent austerity measures to address growing foreign debt to facilitate loan repayments. These measures consisted of the rationing of food, heating and electricity, leading to a significant decline in the standard of living (e.g. some foods were only given out through stamp cards, and heating was mostly turned off, even in the winters, forcing many to endure freezing cold temperatures); export-oriented policies, despite the economic hardship at home; and cuts in social spending (e.g. healthcare spending was cut by 17%, and education funding was cut by 53%).

These policies were rigorously enforced by the Securitate (Security), the Romanian equivalent of the KGB. Although established in 1949, it saw a meteoric rise during Ceaușescu's regime, as the leader brought it under his control, using it to control the population and promote his personality cult. Some analysts argue that, by the end of Ceaușescu's regime, the Securitate contained around 144,300 members (which, based on the population at the time, meant there was one Securitate member for every 150 Romanians), not to mention the countless whistleblowers it employed alongside those members. As a result, widespread paranoia took hold, with Romanians fearing constant surveillance and refraining from speaking openly (Abraham, 2016, pp. 65-66). This pervasive atmosphere of fear and self-censorship became a defining feature of Romanian society, driving painful experiences and forbidden thoughts into the collective shadow, where they remained unprocessed but continued to exert influence on the national psyche. The inability to openly acknowledge or process these traumas created a reservoir of repressed emotions that would later resurface in unexpected ways throughout Romania's political development.

Unsurprisingly, all these strict policies and firm control of the regime made him increasingly unpopular with the population, and it would all reach a boiling point in December of 1989. Ceaușescu remained an outlier among other Communist leaders as he attempted to tighten his grip on power by repressing any attempts to protest and jamming foreign radio stations so the Romanian population would not hear about the reforms being made in other Eastern Bloc countries.

On 15 December 1989, a protest erupted in Timișoara in response to attempts to extradite a reformed pastor who had criticised the regime. More and more people started gathering over the coming hours and days, protesting against the government and its oppression. The Securitate failed to suppress the

movement forcefully, and protests ignited nationwide. Ceaușescu was still trying to censor any news of protests breaking out and held a massive rally in Bucharest on the 21st of December to attempt to consolidate his power, but he was met with hostility and gunshots. Following this display, Ceaușescu ordered the military and Securitate to suppress dissent, and on December 21 and 22, violent confrontations occurred between security forces and demonstrators. The government's use of live ammunition resulted in numerous casualties among protesters, leading to a total of 1290 deaths during the revolution. Despite the violence, the demonstrators' resolve only intensified, leading to larger gatherings demanding an end to Ceaușescu's rule. As the army slowly started to defect to the side of the protestors, the Securitate lost control of key areas of the capital, and the Ceaușescu couple fled Bucharest, but they were captured shortly after. Their trial and subsequent execution on the 25th of December 1989 marked the end of Communist rule in Romania (Abraham, 2016, pp. 111-115).

Overall, the Communist regime left lasting marks on Romania's collective shadow. Firstly, by making the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) the only legitimate government and establishing the Securitate, Gheorghiu Dej's regime set the stage for a Soviet-style political system. This repression grew worse under Ceaușescu as the Securitate penetrated every sphere of society and successfully silenced any possible protests. Secondly, both regimes manipulated Romanian national identity. This narrative frequently involved suppressing or altering historical facts perceived as contradicting the party's assertion that it was the legitimate head of state. Thirdly, Ceaușescu's strict economic austerity measures and enforcement by the Securitate left a climate of fear and mistrust among Romanian citizens that is still traceable today. Ultimately, today's Romanian identity is influenced by a collective shadow created by the widespread culture of fear formed during communism. Many citizens who lived during those times still display mistrust in institutions and a careful approach to social relationships.

The fall of communism in 1989 marked Romania's official transition to democracy, though the shadow of its authoritarian past continued to linger. As the country established its new democratic institutions, the electoral system became the formal mechanism through which Romanians could express their political will. However, this system would also become the arena where the collective shadow would repeatedly manifest itself.

The Collective Shadow in post-Communist Romania

Romania's post-communist electoral framework, established in the early 1990s, created the institutional structure through which the nation's unresolved collective shadow would find expression. The country adopted a semi-presidential republic, initially granting the president a four-year term. However, in 2004, this was extended to five years in an effort to stabilise the political system and better align presidential and parliamentary cycles. The president is directly elected, while the bicameral parliament is chosen through a system of proportional representation. This electoral architecture, while designed to foster democratic representation and stability, has also inadvertently provided channels through which historical anxieties and repressed societal tensions can resurface. For example, the proportional representation system has a

5% threshold for parties to enter parliament, which has contributed to a fragmented political landscape, making it easier for nationalist and populist voices to gain a foothold during periods of social unrest or disillusionment with mainstream parties. In this way, the very institutions meant to embody Romania's democratic aspirations have also become arenas where the country's collective shadow continues to shape political outcomes.

After the Communist regime, the FSN (Frontul Salvării Naționale - Front of National Salvation) established itself as the leading authority in the initial post-communist period. The first round of free elections was held in May 1990, in which Ion Iliescu, a founder of the FSN, won the presidency by a landslide, securing 85.07% of the votes, as shown in Table 1. The FSN also secured a parliamentary majority in both Chambers with over 80% of the votes. Notably, Iliescu, like many members of FSN, was a former Communist and part of the established elite of the PCR. However, Romanians saw this as an asset, as Iliescu positioned himself as a reformist who opposed Ceaușescu's policies and was perceived as a stable leader due to his political experience (Abraham, 2016, p. 145). He was also likely propelled to the presidency because his two opposing candidates had just returned to Romania after living abroad during the communist regime: Ion Rațiu had been living in England since 1940, while Radu Câmpeanu had served time in a communist jail during the 1950s but had fled to France in 1973. Both of them returned to Romania after the Communist regime was toppled, and Romanians conversely saw them as outsiders, as people who had not suffered with them, and had watched from abroad. This view reinforced Iliescu's image as a man of the people.

Nevertheless, the fact that a former Communist Party member became Romania's first democratically elected president after the fall of communism heavily reflects the collective shadow that formed in the 20th century. It can be argued that people relied on familiar figures from the past to overcome present challenges. Iliescu, as a former communist member, embodies the legacy of deep scars left by the regime on the Romanian people, which has influenced how people currently perceive political authority. This legacy was also reflected during the 1990-1991 Mineriads, when the new government mobilised miners from the Jiu Valley to violently suppress anti-government demonstrations.

Table 1

Results of the 1990 Romanian Presidential Election

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Ion Iliescu (FSN)	12.232.498	85.07%
Radu Câmpeanu (PNL)	1.529.188	10.64%
Ion Rațiu (PNȚCD)	617.007	4.29%

After the elections, the FSN split into two sovereign parties. The first new party that emerged was the FDSN (Frontul Democratic al Salvării Naționale - Democratic Front of National Salvation), created by Iliescu, which later merged with other parties to create PSDR (Partidul Social Democrat Român - Party of Social Democracy in Romania), which eventually became the current PSD (Partidul Social Democrat - Social Democratic Party). The second party that emerged from the FSN was the PD (Partidul Democrat - Democratic Party), which became PDL (Partidul Democrat Liberal - Democratic Liberal Party) in 2007 and later merged with the current PNL (Partidul Național Liberal - National Liberal Party) in 2015. This evolution of the parties is the direct result of the collective shadow. The fact that major contemporary parties, such as PSD and PNL, have roots in the FSN reflects a continuity of political elites associated with the communist regime, leading to ideological confusion among voters and scepticism among citizens regarding their intentions and motivations.

A new roundof elections was held in 1992, following the adoption of a new Constitution in late 1991. Iliescu, campaigning on behalf of the FDSN, led the first round with 47.53 % of votes, as seen in Table 2. He ultimately won re-election with 61.43 % of the votes in the second round of elections, as shown in Table 3. Additionally, the FDSN also got a majority in both parliamentary Chambers. This again reflects the lingering authority of former Communist leaders in the country. A clear example of this lingering authoritarian legacy in the initial post-Communist period was the long- awaited return of King Mihai I to Romania. Having lived in exile in Switzerland, the king made several attempts to return home after the revolution but was repeatedly blocked by Iliescu's administration, which feared that the people would rally behind the monarch and return him to power. Iliescu permitted him to visit in 1992 for a couple of days, but it was the only time the king was let into the country. Eventually, Mihai I regained Romanian citizenship in 1996 and was fully welcomed back to Romania after Emil Constantinescu electoral victory.

Table 2

Results of the 1992 Presidential Elections (First round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Ion Iliescu (FDSN)	5.628.855	47.34%
Emil Constantinescu (CDR)	3.714.955	31.25%
Gheorghe Funar (PUNR)	1.293.568	10.88%
Caius Traian Dragomir (Independent)	563.687	4.74%
Ioan Manzatu (PR)	362.111	3.05%
Mircea Druc (MER)	326.521	2.75%

Table 3

Results of the 1992 Presidential Elections (Second round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Ion Iliescu (FDSN)	7.393.429	61.43%
Emil Constantinescu (CDR)	4.641.207	38.57%

The next round of elections was held in 1996, where Emil Constantinescu, a member of the CDR alliance (Convenția Democrată Română - Romanian Democratic Convention), surprisingly defeated Iliescu, despite the incumbent president leading in the first round with 32.2 % of votes, as seen in Table 4. Constantinescu won with 54.4 % of votes in the second round, as seen in Table 5. The parties that made up the CDR also obtained a majority in the Parliament. As an active anti-communist alliance, the CDR aimed to distance Romania from its authoritarian past. This election was emblematic of the country's collective shadow, as the CDR victory represented public discontent with the previous Iliescu administration and reflected the population's desire to move past the legacy of communism.

Table 4

Result of the 1996 Presidential Elections (First round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Ion Iliescu (PDSR)	4.081.093	32.25%
Emil Constantinescu (CDR)	3.569.941	28.21%
Petre Roman (USD)	2.598.545	20.54%
Gyorgy Frunda (UDMR)	761.411	6.02%
Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM)	597.508	4.72%

However, economic struggles persisted, and Constantinescu's administration struggled to implement necessary reforms, primarily due to internal conflicts among alliance members. Notably, their attempt to introduce privatisation in the country was bogged down by bureaucratic complexities, and their failure to remove obsolete industries hampered economic growth, leading to public discontent. These challenges indicated that, although there was an apparent demand for reform, deeper systemic issues remained unaddressed, or at least addressed incoherently, thus allowing many remnants of the old regime to persist in modern Romanian society.

Table 5

Results of the 1996 Presidential Elections (Second round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Emil Constantinescu (CDR)	7.057.906	54.41%
Ion Iliescu (PDSR)	5.914.579	45.59%

The inefficiency of Constantinescu's administration and the CDR contributed to a radical ideological shift in the 2000 elections. Iliescu campaigned again as part of the PSDR, but his main rival this time was a right-wing extremist: Corneliu Vadim Tudor, campaigning on behalf of PRM (Partidul România Mare - Great Romania Party). Tudor employed an aggressive, nationalistic, and xenophobic rhetoric, targeting ethnic minorities and exploiting public discontent to gather support. He even argued that Romania could

only be governed "cu mitraliera" (with a machine gun) (Ziarul de Iași, 2000). He gathered massive support in the first round of elections, securing 28.34 % of the vote, while Iliescu led with 36.35 %, as shown in Table 5.

This enabled Iliescu to position himself as a 'saviour of democracy', a position from which he would eventually secure the second round with 66.83 % of the votes, as seen in Table 7, while the PSDR secured a parliamentary majority. This election marked a pivotal moment in Romania's collective shadow, as the fear of a return to authoritarian policies became evident among the population, and it illustrated past traumas by serving as the foundation of 'voting the lesser evil' in Romanian elections, a rhetoric used by the population to this day as a response to perceived extremist threats.

Table 6

Results of the 2007 Presidential Elections (First round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total Votes	%age
Ion Iliescu (PDSR)	4.076.273	36.35%
Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM)	3.178.293	28.34%
Theodor Dumitru Stoloian (PNL)	1.321.420	11.78%
Constantin Mugurel Isărescu (CDR)	1.069.463	9.54%
Gyorgy Frunda (UDMR)	696.989	6.22%

Table 7

Results of the 2007 Presidential Elections (Second round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Ion Iliescu (PDSR)	6.696.623	66.83%
Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM)	3.324.247	33.17%

The 2004 election was a showdown between Traian Băsescu, campaigning on behalf of the DA alliance (Alianța Dreptate și Adevăr – Justice and Truth Alliance), formed by PNL and PD, and Adrian Năstase, campaigning on behalf of the Uniunea Națională PSD + PUR (National Union of PSD and PUR), Partidul Umanist Român - Humanist Romanian Party. During the final presidential debate, Băsescu highlighted a common sentiment, stating: "Măi, ce blestem o fi pe poporul ăsta de a ajuns până la urmă să aleagă între

doi foști comuniști? Între Adrian Năstase și Traian Băsescu. În 15 ani, nu a apărut unul să vină din lumea asta, să nu fi fost târât de năravurile comunismului." (Well, what kind of curse do these people have to choose between two former communists? Between Adrian Năstase and Traian Băsescu. In 15 years, not a single candidate has emerged who has not been tainted by the vices of communism) (Leca, 2010). This statement underscores the enduring influence of communism in Romanian politics, which, even 15 years after the Revolution, had not been entirely eradicated. The failure to adequately address this legacy cast a long shadow over the country.

Adrian Năstase led the polls in the first round, with 40.94 % of the vote, as shown in Table 8. In the end, Băsescu won the election with 51.23 % of votes in the second round, as seen below in Table 9, while the PSD and PUR alliance won the most votes in Parliament. However, PUR later left the coalition and joined DA and UDMR (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România - Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania) to form a majority. This political manoeuvring is an example of the unresolved collective shadow, as it reflects Romanians' scepticism and mistrust in politicians due to acts such as this backstabbing between political parties and coalition members. This ties into the unresolved collective shadow. Generations grew up learning to distrust their neighbours, fearing that a careless word could lead to arrest or worse. The legacy of these regimes is not just historical; it is woven into the fabric of daily life, shaping how Romanians relate to authority, to each other, and to the idea of democracy itself.

Table 8

Results of the 2004 Presidential Election (First round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Adrian Năstase (PSD + PUR Alliance)	4.278.864	40.94%
Traian Băsescu (D.A. Alliance)	3.545.236	33.92%
Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM)	1.313.714	12.57%
Marko Bela (UDMR)	533.446	5.1%
Gheorghe Coriolan Ciuhandu (PNȚCD)	198.394	1.9%

Table 9

Results of the 2004 Presidential Election (Second round)

Party/Alliance/Independent candidate	Total votes	%age
Traian Băsescu (D.A. Alliance)	5.126.794	51.23%
Adrian Năstase (PSD + PUR Alliance)	4.881.520	48.77%

The 2009 Presidential election was the tightest one in Romanian history. Băsescu was up for re-election on behalf of PDL, and his primary opponent was Mircea Geoană on behalf of PSD. After the first round of elections, Băsescu narrowly led with 32.45 % of the votes, as seen in Figure 10. However, in a surprising shift, PNL staggeringly announced they would not support Băsescu's candidacy (as they had done in 2004 with the DA coalition), and they would instead support the candidacy of Geoană, whom they considered the "lesser evil". UDMR also supported Geoană in the second round. Here, we again see that the ideological lines of Romanian political parties are highly blurred, thus developing mistrust as a significant part of the unresolved collective shadow.

Table 10

Results of the 2009 Presidential Elections (First Round)

Party/Alliance/Independent candidate	Total votes	%age
Traian Băsescu (PDL)	3.153.640	32,45%
Mircea Geoană (PSD)	3.027.838	31.15%
Crin Antonescu (PNL)	1.945.831	20.02%
Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM)	540.380	5.56%
Kelemen Hunor (UDMR)	372.764	3.84%

Băsescu's turning point came during the final presidential debate, where he employed a highly confrontational approach against Geoană, catching him off guard and calling him out for spreading false information. Eventually, getting him to admit a recent midnight visit to controversial media mogul Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, linked to accusations of financial misconduct and corruption. This revelation during the debate led to a negative backlash against Geoană and was a key factor in the failure of his candidacy. Băsescu won the 2009 elections in the second round with 50.33 % of the votes, as shown below in Table 11.

Table 11

Results of the 2009 Presidential Election (Second round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Traian Băsescu (PDL)	5.275.808	50.33%
Mircea Geoană (PSD)	5.205.760	49.67%

The 2014 Presidential elections were marked by controversy. The two leading candidates were Klaus Iohannis, who was on behalf of the ACL (Alianța Creștin Liberală - Christian Liberal Alliance), formed by PNL and PDL, and Victor Ponta, the then Prime Minister, who represented the PSD. Ponta led the polls in the first round, gaining 40.44% of votes, as seen in Table 12.

Table 12

Results of the 2014 Presidential Elections (First round)

Party/Alliance/Independent candidate	Total votes	%age
Victor Ponta (PSD)	3.836.093	40.44%
Klaus-Werner Iohannis (ACL)	2.881.406	30.38%
Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu (Independent)	508.572	5.36%
Elena-Gabriela Udrea (PMP)	493.376	5.2%
Monica-Luisa Macovei (Independent)	421.648	4.45%

However, the electoral process was highly controversial, as many Romanians living abroad faced long queues and difficulties casting their votes. Some claimed their respective voting stations were closed early, leading to widespread protests and accusations against Ponta's government for failing to ensure free and fair access to the electoral process. Additionally, Ponta was under investigation on multiple corruption charges, including document forgery, tax evasion, and money laundering. These scandals fuelled growing support for Iohannis, who positioned himself as a champion of democracy and transparency. He ultimately won in the second round with 54.43 % of votes, as seen below in Table 13. His victory symbolised a desire for change, and the controversies surrounding the election reflected the broader societal discontent regarding the political elite's failure to address systemic issues.

Table 13

Results of the 2014 Presidential Elections (Second round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Klaus-Werner Iohannis (ACL)	6.288.769	54.43%
Victor Ponta (PSD)	5.264.383	45.57%

In 2019, Iohannis ran for re-election, with his main opponent being then-Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă, representing the PSD. Due to her unpopularity and perceived incompetence in the public eye, Iohannis led the first round of elections with 37.82 % of the vote, as seen in Table 14.

Table 14

Results of the 2019 Presidential Elections (First round)

Party/Alliance/Independent candidate	Total votes	%age
Klaus-Werner Iohannis (PNL)	3.485.292	37.82%
Viorica Dăncilă (PSD)	2.051.725	22.26%
Dan Barna (USR-PLUS)	1.384.450	15.02%
Mircea Diaconu (PRO-ALDE)	815.201	8.85%
Theodor Paleologu (PMP)	527.098	5.72%

The incumbent president eventually won by a landslide in the second round, gaining 66.09 % of votes, as shown in Table 15 below.

Table 15

Results of the 2019 Presidential Elections (Second round)

Party/Alliance/Independent candidate	Total votes	%age
Klaus-Werner Iohannis (PNL)	6.509.135	66.09%
Viorica Dăncilă (PSD)	3.339.922	33.91%

The 10 years of Iohannis's presidency, despite initial hopefulness in 2014, have been marked by widespread corruption accusations, a lack of transparency, and the further erosion of party ideological lines (Simina, 2024). Under his administration, there has been a perceived expansion of the role of intelligence agencies in governance, with reports indicating that the number of areas classified under "national security" jurisdiction has increased significantly. This expansion has raised alarms regarding the potential for overreach and undermining democratic processes (Simina, 2024). Moreover, these developments have fostered a sense of betrayal among voters, as citizens who once placed their hopes in Iohannis's leadership now feel that their expectations have not been met. His presidency, particularly in its later years, and especially after his party, PNL, formed a governing coalition with its long-time rival, PSD, became the final straw in deepening political mistrust in Romanian society. This disillusionment has fueled the rise of multiple populist and extremist parties and figures, such as Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR), also known as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, and S.O.S. România, both of which have gained increasing support since Iohannis's re-election.

The rise of Călin Georgescu as the Resurgence of the Collective Shadow

The 2024 elections faced complications due to the cancellation of the first round by the CCR (Curtea Constituțională a României - Romanian Constitutional Court). This, however, cannot deny the monumental rise of Călin Georgescu's candidacy, having led in the first round of the elections with 22.94% of the vote, as seen in Table 16. His campaign was primarily conducted through Romanian influencers who were paid by an external company. As a result, he gained a massive following that went largely unnoticed until the preliminary election results were made public. Georgescu portrayed himself as a saviour of Romania and neutral in the political sphere.

Despite this, he was the pupil of Mircea Malița, a former member of the communist elite, whom Georgescu publicly acknowledged as his mentor. This link highlights the continuity of certain communist ideologies within contemporary Romanian politics. Additionally, he was also a leading figure in the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), though the party later distanced itself from him after a criminal

investigation was opened against him. The investigation stemmed from his promotion of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Ion Antonescu, whom he referred to as "eroi naționali" (national heroes), despite their historical roles in crimes against humanity (Recorder, 2024). His association with these controversial figures signifies a resurgence of authoritarian sentiments that resonate with specific population segments, thereby embodying the collective shadow of Romania by acknowledging the darker aspects of its history that remain unaddressed. Additionally, the appeal of strongman figures and nostalgia for authoritarian order can be seen as another expression of the collective shadow. These sentiments reveal a longing for the certainty and stability associated with past regimes, even as they mask unresolved trauma and an inability to fully embrace democratic uncertainty.

Table 16

Results of the Cancelled 2024 presidential election (First round)

Party/Alliance/Independent Candidate	Total votes	%age
Călin Georgescu (Independent)	2.120.401	22.94%
Elena Lasconi (USR)	1.772.500	19.18%
Marcel Ciolacu (PSD)	1.769.760	19.15%
George Simion (AUR)	1.281.325	13.86%
Nicolae Ciucă (PNL)	811.952	8.79%

So, what can we make of all of this? Based on the historical analysis presented above, on the formation and development of the collective shadow, the rise of extremist candidate Călin Georgescu is the result of years of mismanagement in the political sphere, growing mistrust in political leaders, numerous corruption scandals involving mainstream political parties, and countless economic hardships, especially during the Iohannis presidency. Extremist candidates have received a record-high tally of votes, both in the Presidential elections, where these candidates received a combined 36.8 % of votes in the first round (between Georgescu and George Simion, the leader of AUR) and in the Parliamentary elections, where extremist parties received a combined 34.73 % of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies and 35.06 % in the Senate, between AUR, S.O.S. Romania and POT (Partidul Oamenilor Tineri - Party of Young People). Voter behaviour shaped by fear, anxiety, or resentment illustrates how the collective shadow influences political choices. Rather than being solely the product of rational calculation or short-term interests, these responses are deeply entwined with the country's historical experience of collective trauma and repression.

The resurgence of nationalist rhetoric can be interpreted as a direct manifestation of Romania's collective shadow. The unresolved fears and anxieties rooted in the country's authoritarian past, such as concerns about national identity, sovereignty, and external threats, are projected onto minority groups and political outsiders, fueling exclusionary and reactionary politics. This increased support for extremist parties suggests a shift in public sentiment, possibly influenced by disenfranchisement, disillusionment with traditional political structures, corruption allegations, and perceptions of leadership. The historical context highlights how Romania's unresolved collective shadow, rooted in its authoritarian past, has resurfaced in contemporary politics. This resurgence is not merely a reaction to current events but a culmination of longstanding societal issues festering beneath the surface.

Conclusion

In conclusion, examining Călin Georgescu's rise in the cancelled 2024 presidential election highlights the profound impact of Romania's collective shadow on contemporary political dynamics. This collective shadow, rooted in a history marked by authoritarianism, political violence, and socio-economic friction, has resurfaced as a significant force shaping public sentiment and electoral outcomes. This historical overview reveals how the traumas of the past, exemplified by the Iron Guard's fascism and the oppressive communist regime, have left deep scars on national identity and societal cohesion. Georgescu's unexpected support, evidenced by extremist candidates garnering a combined 36.8% of votes in the presidential elections, reflects pervasive disenchantment with traditional political structures and a yearning for representation among disillusioned citizens.

This unprecedented backing signals not only a reaction to current political mismanagement and corruption but also the awakening of long-suppressed fears and desires characterising Romania's collective psyche. As Romania grapples with these dynamics, it is crucial to confront its collective shadow head-on.

Acknowledging and addressing the historical grievances that have fueled the rise of extremism is essential for fostering a more inclusive and stable political environment. Only by engaging with these underlying issues can Romania hope to rebuild trust in its democratic institutions and navigate a path toward healing and unity. The challenge lies in transforming the collective shadow from a source of division into an opportunity for growth, ensuring that the lessons of history inform a more hopeful future for all Romanians.

Conflict of Interests

This analysis is written from the perspective of a concerned Romanian citizen. While I have a personal interest in the country's future direction, I have made every effort to maintain objectivity, relying on verified data and academic sources to inform my perspective. I have consciously excluded personal anecdotes and subjective interpretations to present a balanced and fact-based analysis, an approach I consider particularly important in a politically sensitive context.

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Tuned In or Zoned Out: Investigating the Influence of Meta-Awareness in Mind Wandering on Working Memory under Varying Task Difficulty

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Abstract

Mind wandering, the shift of attention from external tasks to internal thoughts (Smallwood & Schooler, 2014), affects executive functioning, particularly working memory. While traditional theories explain its mechanisms and relationship to task difficulty, they often overlook distinctions between different mind wandering states. However, it has been suggested that mind wandering is not a singular process but a multidimensional phenomenon, with meta-awareness being a key factor (Seli et al., 2018b). This study was inspired by Smallwood et al. (2007), who demonstrated that EF task performance differs depending on whether mind wandering occurs with or without meta-awareness. This study aimed to investigate how the presence or absence of meta-awareness in mind wandering influences working memory performance under varying levels of cognitive demand. Participants completed an n-back task with experience sampling probes to assess their attentional state. Results revealed that working memory performance was highest when participants were on task, followed by tuning out, and lowest during zoning out episodes, but this pattern was more pronounced under low task difficulty. Contrary to predictions, participants performed better under high than under low task difficulty. These findings ultimately contribute to the growing understanding of mind wandering and executive functioning, supporting the idea that meta-awareness plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative impact of mind wandering on performance. Furthermore, they challenge existing theoretical assumptions about task difficulty, highlighting the need for more nuanced models.

Keywords

Mind wandering, Meta-awareness, Working memory, Task difficulty, Executive functioning, Cognitive load

Introduction

We get lost in our thoughts every day, even though we tend not to notice it right away. Depending on what is counted as mind wandering, some studies suggest that we spend up to around 45% of our days engaged in thoughts which are unrelated to the task at hand (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Considering that mind wandering seems to be so fundamentally embedded in our day-to-day lives, it comes as no surprise that this phenomenon has piqued the interest of poets, authors and researchers alike.

Mind wandering describes a phenomenon in which attention shifts from external tasks to internal thoughts (Smallwood & Schooler, 2014). While it can facilitate creative thinking (Gericke et al., 2022), it generally impairs executive function performance (Kam & Handy, 2014). Executive functions are defined as top-down mental processes enabling goal-directed behaviors, which are crucial for self-regulation, focus, and problem-solving. In practice, executive functions allow individuals to control behavior, such as resisting dessert while on a diet or remembering a password to access their email. The core components of executive function include inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Miyake et al., 2000). Although all three of these functions are essential for navigating daily life, working memory stands out as being particularly important (Diamond, 2012). Working memory is defined as a cognitive function which enables temporary holding and use of information (Diamond, 2012). It allows for complex reasoning and problem-solving and has even been credited with enabling tool use in human evolution (Engle, 2010). All crucial features that, to some extent, make us humans who we are. Fortunately, working memory can be trained and improved through various styles of cognitive training, helping us perform better on a range of complex tasks (Klingberg, 2010).

The relationship between mind wandering and executive functioning has been the focus of several theoretical accounts, including the Attentional Resource Theory (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006) and the Control Failures x Concerns Theory (McVay & Kane, 2010). The primary difference between these theories lies in their explanation of the mechanisms behind mind wandering. The Attentional Resource Theory posits that mind wandering arises from a competition for limited cognitive resources between task-related and task-unrelated thoughts. According to this theory, mind wandering requires the active engagement of executive resources to support the generation and maintenance of task-unrelated thoughts (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). On the other hand, the Control x Concerns Theory suggests that mind wandering results from a failure of the executive control system to suppress automatically generated thoughts while engaged in a task (McVay & Kane, 2010). So, from this viewpoint, mind wandering occurs not because of an excess of available resources but rather due to insufficient cognitive control to maintain task focus. Both theories thus provide different explanations for how executive functions, including working memory, are disrupted by internally directed attention.

Task difficulty plays a central role in understanding the relationship between mind wandering and working memory. As tasks become more challenging, they place greater demands on working memory, drawing on increased cognitive load. According to Cognitive Load Theory, cognitive load refers to the demand placed on working memory during learning (Bannert, 2002). Research shows that increases in task difficulty elevate cognitive load, which in turn influences both working memory performance and mind wandering. For example, Krimsky et al. (2017) found that under higher cognitive load, participants made more errors over time, indicating a decline in working memory efficiency. Interestingly, participants also reported fewer instances of mind wandering during these more demanding tasks, suggesting that fewer mental resources were available for internally directed thoughts. However, since the study focused solely on visual working memory, further research is needed to determine whether similar patterns occur across other domains of cognitive demand.

Drawing from the framework of Attentional Resource Theory by Smallwood & Schooler (2006) it is

suggested that, while performing easier tasks, the surplus of executive resources that are not needed for the task can be used to let the mind wander, without interfering with the task (Thomson et al., 2015). In contrast Control Failures x Concerns Theory by McVay and Kane's (2010) theory posits that easier tasks tend to allow for more intrusions, because easier tasks require less cognitive effort, therefore needing fewer executive resources to be actively engaged (Seli et al., 2018a). Since there is less engagement, there is also less of an active control barrier that can keep out the mind wandering thoughts. In short, both theories agree that an easier task leads to more wind wandering, but they differ in their explanations of the mechanism. The Attentional Resource Theory emphasizes available surplus resources being used for mind wandering, while the Control Failures x Concerns Theory focuses on weakened cognitive control, which allows thoughts to intrude. Even though the claims brought forward by these theories about the interplay of mind wandering and task difficulty have been supported (Brosowsky et al., 2021), there is evidence of the contrary, with other findings suggesting a different effect. For instance, Feng et al. (2013) found that participants reported more mind wandering when reading difficult texts as opposed to easy texts. This inconsistency highlights the importance of further research to clarify how different task difficulties shape mind wandering tendencies and how these can affect working memory performance.

Although the above-mentioned theories acknowledge the role of task difficulty, they have largely treated mind wandering as a monolithic construct, failing to differentiate between different types of mind wandering states (Seli et al., 2018b). However, mind wandering is a highly complex phenomenon that extends beyond the simplistic notion of "task-unrelated thought" (Mills et al., 2017). Its heterogeneous nature varies across multiple dimensions, and failing to consider these variations may lead to profound misinterpretations (Seli et al., 2018b). Mind wandering and its effect on executive functioning represents a fundamental challenge to human performance across virtually all domains. Given that we spend almost half of our waking hours engaged in task-unrelated thoughts (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010), understanding this phenomenon is not just academic curiosity, but essential for optimizing human cognitive functioning. Mind wandering research can be used to inform attention strategies which are applicable in many different domains. For example, in educational settings, where students engage in tasks of varying difficulty everyday, understanding when different types of mind wandering are most detrimental can inform teaching strategies and interventions. Moreover, working in high risk environments, where being unaware during routine tasks can pose a serious safety risk, attention strategies can help to significantly increase workplace safety. To address the problem of a binary definition of mind wandering, research by Smallwood et al. (2007) distinguished between two types: tuning out and zoning out. Tuning out is described as mind wandering episodes in which the person is aware of their drifting off. For instance, when reading a book, someone might notice that they are not focused anymore but can quickly refocus their attention. Other times, one's mind drifts off, but they only become aware of it after the fact; this is called zoning out. The main distinction between these two terms is the presence or absence of meta-awareness. Meta-awareness is defined as the ability to observe and reflect on the content of one's thoughts and mental state (Schooler, 2002). Although it was long thought to be redundant (Seli et al., 2017), research has shown that it can be actively trained (Seli et al., 2017), which makes it an important dimension to consider, since it can help to reduce mind wandering and therefore improve executive functioning (Kam

& Handy, 2014). This is demonstrated by Price et al. (2023), who aimed to investigate how increased meta-awareness, facilitated through mindfulness-based attention training, could help reduce mind-wandering episodes. They found that participants who underwent mindfulness training (i.e, increased meta-awareness) became more aware of their actions, leading to a decrease in mind-wandering frequency. In a similar vein, Smallwood et al. (2007) examined the relationship between meta-awareness and mind wandering, discovering that individuals who were unaware during episodes of mind wandering tended to make more errors. Although research has found effects of meta-awareness on mind wandering on various task performances, such as reading (Baird et al., 2013), driving (He et al., 2011), or attending a lecture (Varao-Sousa & Kingstone, 2019), there is a notable lack of studies examining how meta-awareness in mind wandering specifically influences working memory.

Given the findings presented above, two key gaps remain in the current literature. First, meta-awareness may mitigate the disruptive effects of mind wandering on cognitive performance (Smallwood et al., 2007), however, the nature of this relationship across varying levels of task difficulty has yet to be empirically established. Second, while mind wandering and task difficulty have each been shown to influence working memory independently (Krimsky et al., 2017), it remains largely unexplored how meta-awareness during episodes of mind wandering affects working memory performance, particularly across varying levels of task demand. To address this gap, this study aims to explore how the presence or absence of meta-awareness in mind wandering states (i.e. tuning out and zoning out) can influence working memory performance under varying task difficulties. The results are aimed to contribute to developing interventions aimed at improving meta-awareness and further inform theoretical models on the relationship between meta-awareness in mind wandering and executive functioning.

In line with previous research and theories (Kam & Handy, 2014; McVay & Kane, 2010; Smallwood & Schooler, 2006), this study expects that maintaining on-task focus will yield the highest working memory performance compared to any mind wandering state. This expectation is grounded in the idea that focused attention on the task allows for optimal use of cognitive resources and thus optimal performance, whereas mind wandering introduces interference with task-unrelated thoughts Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1a: *Working memory performance is higher during on-task focus than during episodes of tuning out.*

Hypothesis 1b: *Working memory performance is higher during on-task focus than during episodes of zoning out.*

Moreover, evidence suggests that not all forms of mind wandering are equally disruptive. Specifically, zoning out, characterized by a complete lack of meta-awareness, has been shown to impair response inhibition more than tuning out, where individuals retain some awareness of their mental drift (Smallwood et al., 2007). According to Smallwood et al. (2007), the deeper engagement in internal thoughts during zoning out consumes more cognitive resources, which in turn leaves fewer resource available for the task at hand. Based on this reasoning, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1c: *Working memory performance is higher during tuning out than zoning out.*

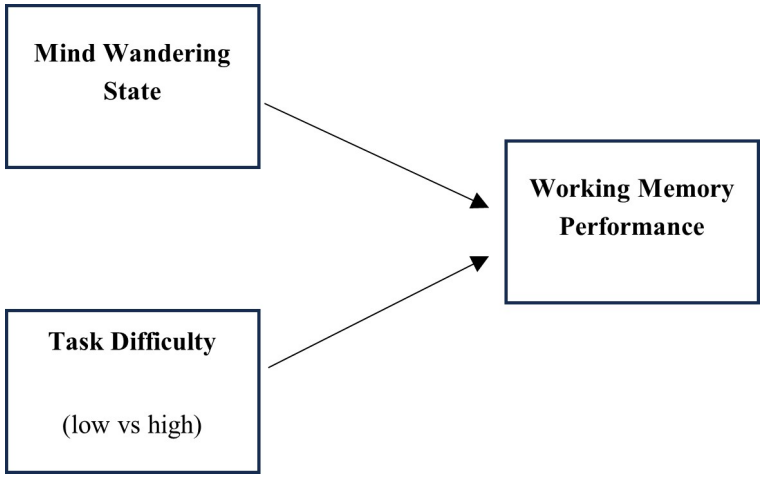
Finally, task demands play a significant role in performance outcomes. Prior studies have demonstrated that performance declines more steeply over time when individuals are exposed to high difficulty tasks compared to low difficulty tasks (Krimsky et al., 2017). This suggests that more difficult tasks tax cognitive resources more heavily, exacerbating the effects of mind wandering. Consequently, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2: *Working memory performance is better under low task difficulty than under high task difficulty.*

Figure 1 presents the causal relationship between the proposed variables, describing how as meta-awareness in mind wandering increases, so does working memory performance and as task difficulty decreases, working memory performance increases.

Figure 1

Schematic Model of the Relationship between Mind Wandering State, Task Difficulty & Working Memory Performance.



As a measure of working memory performance, participants completed an n-back task (Gilmour et al., 2018), with the task difficulty being manipulated through the match or non-match trial types within the task. Throughout the task, mind wandering state was measured using an experience sampling technique that intermittently prompts participants to report their current mental state. As this study was part of a larger bachelor thesis project, alongside the n-back task, participants also completed a visual detection task. However, this will not be analyzed in this report.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy, primarily utilizing the University of Amsterdam student body. All 34 participants had normal or corrected-to-normal vision and a sufficient command of the English language. Of the 34 participants, 80% were female, and 20% were male. The ages of participants varied from 20 to 24, with an average age of 21,26 and a standard deviation of .91. Most partici-

pants were right-handed, with only 5.98% reporting being left-handed. Data collection was conducted over eight weeks during in-person lab sessions at the Roeterseiland University Campus Behavioral Sciences Lab. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee overseeing the research conducted at the University of Amsterdam.

Design

The first independent variable of this study was the presence or absence of mind wandering with or without meta-awareness, as defined by Smallwood & Schooler (2007). This variable was operationalized using experience sampling (ES) (Christoff et al., 2009), intermittently prompting participants to report their current mental state. For this study, the ES method was adapted to not only probe for the absence or presence (on task or off task) of mind wandering but also for whether the participant was tuning out (TO) or zoning out (ZO) (Smallwood et al., 2007) to detect meta-awareness.

The second independent variable, task difficulty, was operationalized using different trial types in the n-back, which was used to measure the dependent variable. The trial types were either match or non-match (Kam & Handy, 2014). In a match condition, the current letter would match the previous one. This represents a low cognitive load, as these did not require participants to update the stimulus letter in their minds. In a non-match condition, the letter shown currently does not match the one shown previously; since this requires an updating of the letter, this represents a high cognitive load.

The dependent variable was working memory performance, operationalized using the n-back task. This task is a reliable and well-validated measure of working memory in cognitive neuroscience and takes accuracy and reaction time as its primary measures (Gilmour et al., 2018). A schematic overview of the n-back including experience sampling and a visualized explanation of the distinction between match and non-match can be found in Appendix B. This study focused on accuracy, with higher accuracy indicating better working memory performance. In this within-subjects task, participants had to determine if the currently displayed stimulus matched the one presented one step earlier. To counterbalance the order of experiments, half of the participants were randomly assigned to first complete the n-back task, while the other half were randomly assigned to first complete the visual detection task.

Materials

Participants were asked to provide demographic information, including age, gender, and handedness. The experiments were conducted on full-screen computer displays in a well lit laboratory room. The n-back was programmed in Python using the PsychoPy toolbox developed by Peirce (2007). Participants were first presented with two instructional slides: the first provided a general overview of the task, while the second offered detailed instructions regarding key responses for each trial type, mind wandering classification, and the procedure to exit the experiment. . The exact introductory and instruction slides are provided in Appendix B. The stimuli consisted of a subset of consonant letters (C, B, D, F, G, H, J, L, and M) randomly presented one at a time, centred on the screen in white text (50-pixel height) against a black background. A white fixation cross (5 pixels) was displayed for one second between stimuli presentations at the centre of the screen.

Each letter was displayed for 0.7 seconds, followed by a fixation cross shown for a randomized duration between 1.9 and 2.1 seconds, in which the participants should respond. They were asked to respond to each stimulus using the specified keys, with a left key indicating a match and the right key indicating a non-match. Participants completed 12 practice trials with feedback ("Wrong!" or "Correct!" shown for one second) to familiarize themselves with the task. Apart from the feedback, the practice trials were identical to the main task trials. The main task consisted of 720 trials, divided into blocks, with Experience Sampling probes appearing randomly every 15 to 20 trials. An equal proportion of match and non-match trials were included. Participants were shown a "Thank you" screen to signal the end after completing the experiment. The experience sampling probes asked participants to indicate their mental state immediately before the probe with the question, "Where was your attention just now?" Participants had to respond using a keypress to indicate whether they were "on-task" ("d"), "off-task (aware)" ("g"), or "off-task (unaware)" ("j").

Procedure

Every participant was asked to come in for two sessions, each lasting about 45 minutes up to an hour. There had to be one day between the sessions to avoid effects of fatigue. Before beginning an experiment, participants were informed about the general content of the procedure. They were also asked to provide informed consent for their responses to be used in subsequent analyses. During the n-back task, pupil dilation was measured for a related research project. Therefore, participants were instructed to sit upright and focus on the centre of the screen to ensure the eye tracker functioned optimally. They received verbal instructions on how to perform the tasks and a description of the different mind wandering states and asked whether these were clearly understood. Participants were also informed of their right to stop participation at any time and of the right to revoke their permission for their data to be used. The experiment then consisted of either the n-back task or a visual detection task. There was always one experimenter present to supervise the sessions. After completing both of the tasks, participants were debriefed about the purpose and aim of the study.

Data Analysis

Performance on the n-back task was assessed by comparing accuracy across match and non-match trials and across mind wandering states. Average accuracy scores were calculated for each trial type and each participant. These scores were further categorized based on the attentional states reported in the ES probes (on task, TO, ZO). Only the eight trials preceding each ES probe were analyzed, based on the temporal dynamics of attentional states, as reported by Sonuga-Barke and Castellanos (2007), who suggested that attentional states fluctuate at a rate of 10–15 seconds.

The primary analysis consisted of a repeated measures ANOVA examining the effects of mind wandering state and trial type on accuracy, including Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons. These were conducted using JASP, with the significance threshold set at $p < .05$ and effect sizes reported. In order to ensure that the ANOVA assumptions were met, Shapiro-Wilk tests and Q-Q plots were used to assess normality violations (Muhammad, 2023). Missing data were removed during preprocessing under the assumption that the data were missing completely randomly (MCAR; Glas, 2010) and participants with missing data were subsequently removed. Moreover, to ensure proper task compliance and to ultimately reduce noise, participants

with an accuracy of below 0.6 were excluded (Pedersen et al., 2022).

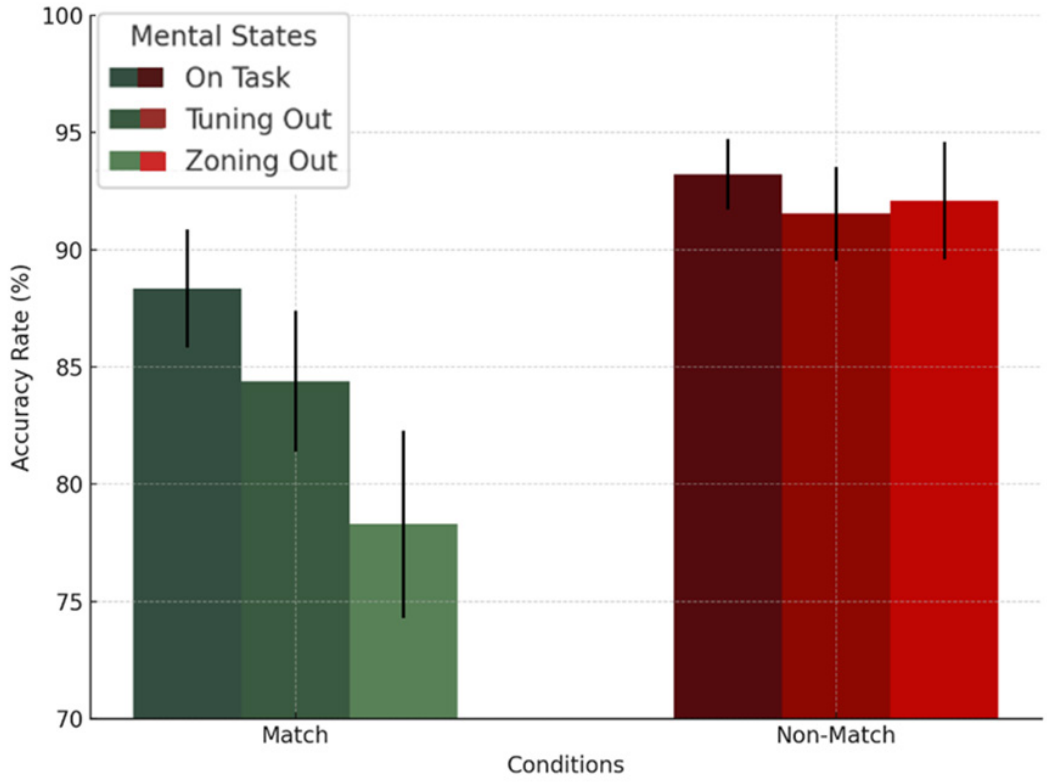
Results

Descriptive Statistics

Across the dataset, there were an almost equal amount of match (50,85%) and non-match (49,15%) trials present. For the mind wandering reports, the most selected state was on task (51,26%), followed by tuning out (34,46%) and then zoning out (14,28%). The average accuracy rates across trial types and mental states, including error bars displaying the standard deviation, are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Average Accuracy Rates across Trial Types and Mental States, with SD



Confirmatory Analysis

A repeated measures ANOVA on the effects of trial type (match vs. non-match) and mind wandering state (OT vs. TO vs. ZO) on accuracy was conducted using JASP. After preprocessing the dataset in Python as outlined in the data analysis plan, the data were imported into Excel for further inspection. Participants were screened for missing values and for overall accuracy below 0.6, which led to the exclusion of eight participants. The final sample for analysis consisted of 25 participants from the original 34. After preprocessing the file as described in the data analysis plan utilizing Python, the data was loaded into Excel and participants were inspected for missing values and an overall accuracy of below 0.6. This led to an exclusion of eight participants, leaving 25 of the original 34 for data analysis.

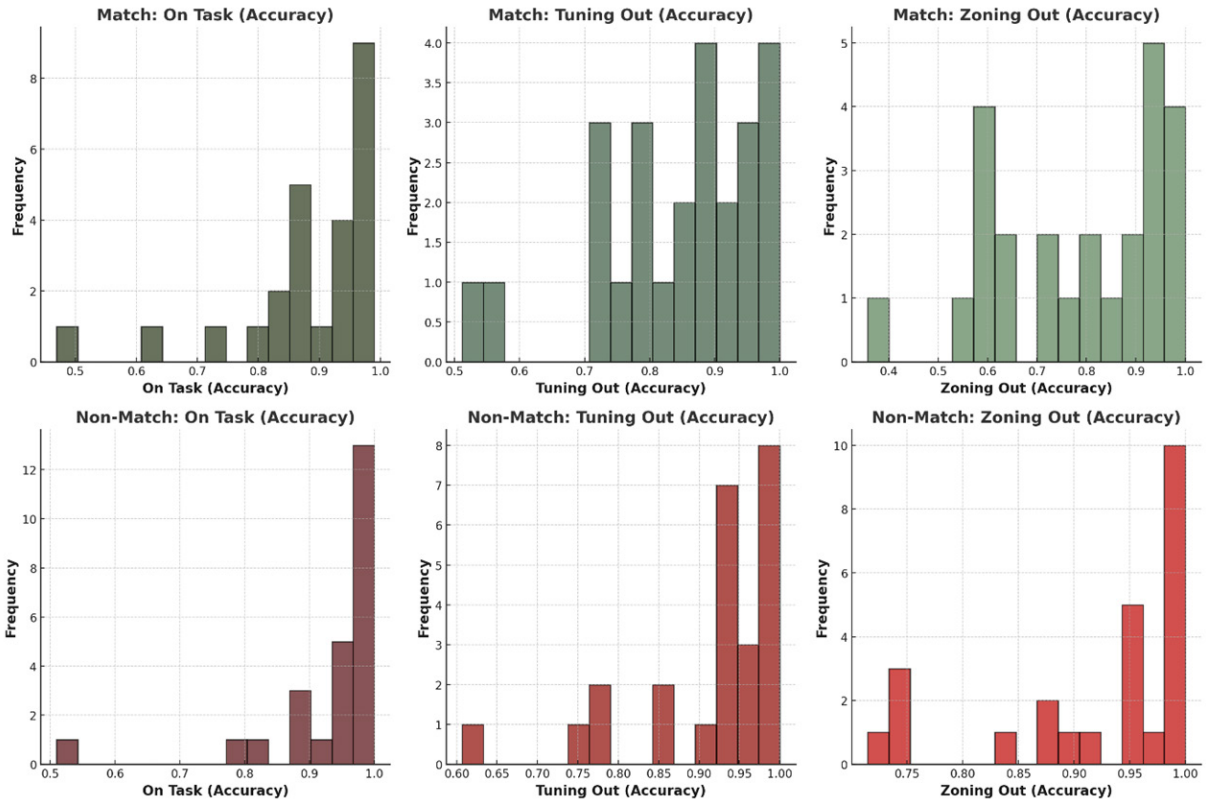
The analysis revealed that the main effect of trial type was significant ($F(1, 24) = 17.71$, $p < .001$, $np^2 =$

.184) as was the main effect of mind wandering state ($F(2, 48) = 4.03$, $p = .024$, $np^2 = .052$). This indicates that both performance on match and non-match trials as well as in different mental states significantly differed. Moreover, the interaction between trial type and mind wandering state was also significant ($F(2, 48) = 4.928$, $p = .011$, $np^2 = .036$), meaning that the effect of trial type depends on the mind wandering state.

Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons inspecting trial type showed that participants performed better in non-match compared to match trials ($t(24) = -4.209$, $p < .001$). The comparisons between mental states revealed a significant difference between on task and zoning out ($t(24) = 2.840$, $p = .020$) for both match and non-match. However, no significant difference was found between tuning out and zoning out ($t(24) = 1.4$, $p = .498$), or between on task and tuning out ($t(24) = 1.43$, $p = .475$). Furthermore, the analysis for the interaction effect suggests that performance in match trials was significantly higher in on task than it was compared to zoning out ($t(24) = 4.08$, $p < .001$), but not significantly different from tuning out ($t(24) = -1.07$, $p = 1.000$). For the non-match trials, no significant differences in accuracy were found between the mind wandering states. Specifically, performance did not differ between on task and tuning out ($t(24) = 0.684$, $p = 1.000$), on task and zoning out ($t(24) = 0.455$, $p = 1.000$), or tuning out and zoning out ($t(24) = 0.229$, $p = 1.000$). However, all p - values for the Shapiro -Wilk tests were significant for all conditions, indicating that the data violates the normality assumption. This was supported by visual analysis of the Q - Q plots, showing deviations in all conditions, especially for ZO. The histograms (Figure 3) further illustrate this variability and skewness of accuracy within each condition.

Figure 3

Distributions of Accuracy Scores across Conditions, organized by Trial type and Mind Wandering State Exploratory Analysis



Exploratory Analysis

In light of the assumption test results, an additional nonparametric analysis using the Friedman test was run using Python. The test inspected the same relationship as the confirmatory analysis. The results also indicated that there was a significant difference between the conditions (X^2 (6) = 38.52, $p < .001$, W = 0.26).

Post hoc pairwise comparisons for match trials revealed a significant difference between on task and zoning out ($p < .001$), with accuracy being significantly higher when on task compared to zoning out. Moreover, this test found a significant difference between on task and tuning out ($p < .05$) with performance being better in on task compared to tuning out. These results support Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b, which predicted that working memory performance would be higher during on-task focus than during episodes of tuning out or zoning out, respectively. A significant difference was also found between tuning out and zoning out ($p < .05$), indicating that accuracy is higher when tuning out compared to zoning out, supporting Hypothesis 1c.

In the non-match conditions accuracy was again significantly higher for on-task compared to zoning out ($p < .001$), and tuning out was significantly better than zoning out ($p < .001$), lending further support to Hypothesis 1b and Hypothesis 1c in the context of lower task difficulty. However, no significant difference was found between on-task and tuning out ($p > .05$), indicating that Hypothesis 1a was not supported in the non-match (lower difficulty) condition.

To summarize, for match conditions (lower difficulty), we see a significant difference between on task, tuning out and zoning out, with on task having the highest accuracy, followed by tuning out and then zoning out supporting Hypothesis 1a, Hypothesis 1b, and Hypothesis 1c . In the non-match conditions (lower difficulty), zoning out remained the lowest-performing state, while on-task and tuning out did not significantly differ, thus only Hypothesis 1b and Hypothesis 1c were supported. Lastly, this pattern of results does not support Hypothesis 2, which predicted better performance under lower task difficulty, as the actual overall accuracy of participants was higher in non-match trials (higher difficulty). A summary of the Nemenyi test post hoc pairwise comparisons are to be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Post Hoc Comparisons of the Nemenyi Test Across Conditions

Pairwise Comparison	p-value	Direction of Effect
Match: On task vs. zoning out	< .001	On task > zoning out
Match: On task vs. tuning out	< .05	On task > tuning out
Match: Tuning out vs. zoning out	< .05	Tuning out > zoning out
Non-match: On task vs. zoning out	< .001	On task > zoning out
Non-match: On task vs. tuning out	> .05	-
Non-match: Tuning out vs. zoning out	< .001	Tuning out > zoning out

Note. Significant p – values are bolded, no correction applied

Although both a Friedman test and a repeated-measures ANOVA were conducted, the repeated-measures ANOVA results were not considered for interpretations, due to the severe violations of the normality assumption. Therefore, all conclusions and interpretations are based on the Friedman test and its post hoc comparisons.

Discussion

To assess how the presence or absence of meta-awareness in mind wandering can differently influence working memory under varying task difficulties, the present study had participants perform an n-back task while measuring their mind wandering with experience sampling probes. The results overall support previous findings, the Executive Resource hypothesis and the Control x Concerns hypothesis, positing better working memory performance in a focused compared to a mind wandering state. However, although not present in the high task difficulty condition, we also see the predicted interaction between mind wandering state and performance (TO > ZO) in the low cognitive demand condition. Interestingly, though performance was predicted to be higher in the low cognitive demand condition, the opposite was seen in the results.

Although the initial hypothesis concerning mind wandering states could only be partially supported, the low task difficulty condition findings still suggest that working memory performance is differentially effective depending on the presence of meta-awareness. Importantly, this illustrates the effect of better working memory performance with increased meta-awareness. This pattern aligns with Smallwood et al., 2007, whose findings suggest a difference in executive functioning as a function of meta-awareness being present in mind wandering. However, the results of this study suggest that this distinct pattern may depend on task difficulty. According to the Attentional Resources Theory (Kahneman, 1973, as cited in Bruya & Tang, 2018) and prior research on related cognitive functions (Vannucci et al., 2018), high cognitive load likely diminishes the attentional resources available for monitoring processes. With more cognitive resources allocated to the demanding task, there might be less capacity for meta-awareness, resulting in fewer instances of mind wandering with meta-awareness. This reduction in resources may blur the distinction between tuning out and zoning out.

The current study further provides evidence challenging the findings by Krimsky et al. (2017) which showed more errors under higher cognitive load compared to a low cognitive load. One possible explanation for the pattern observed in this study is that higher task difficulty may promote increased cognitive engagement, as suggested by Dong et al. (2015). When tasks are more challenging, they may demand greater focus and mental effort, enhancing performance despite the higher cognitive load. These findings however also demonstrate the importance of investigating task difficulties across different mind wandering states, as its effects may vary depending on the type of mind wandering.

A key strength of this study is its multidimensional approach to understanding mind wandering. Although the field is gradually evolving, many studies continue to treat mind wandering as a simple binary construct, classifying states along the lines of on-task or off-task. The diverse classification system employed here (on-

task, tuning out, zoning out) revealed meaningful differences that would have been overlooked by traditional approaches. Additionally, this study employed a methodologically robust and valid measurement to study the variables at hand. The n-back measure is a gold standard for measuring working memory in cognitive neuroscience (Gilmour et al., 2018), which, unlike subjective measures, provides precise outcome measures of working memory performance.

While this study contributes valuable findings to the field of mind wandering and working memory, it is essential to consider certain limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of the presented results. Firstly, it is important to stress that the reliability and generalizability of this study's results are limited due to various factors, including the sample size and the population used (the majority being young female university students, recruited through purposive sampling).

Secondly, it is quite possible that not all participants optimally or accurately reported their mental state. According to verbal reports following the experimental sessions, they often either a) defaulted to on task or tuning out or b) reported that it was hard to tell what their preceding mental state had been, therefore maybe answering incorrectly. Even though all participants were instructed on how to distinguish the different terms and asked if they needed clarification, a short experiment period simply might not have given everyone enough time to adequately familiarize themselves with the terms. To account for this, the experience sampling probes could include reminders, short explanations or concrete examples to reinforce the distinctions periodically. Another way to address this issue could be to include reaction times as a measure of mind wandering state (Smallwood et al., 2007). This additional measure would make it possible to compare the reported state with the reaction times and validate the self-report. For example, if someone repeatedly reports being on task, while their reaction times become slower, this might be an indication that the self-report was not accurate. This would result in a design that balances reliance on self-reports and objective data. For now, including this measurement was outside of the scope of this study, however it is strongly advised to explore this further.

Thirdly, another shortcoming of this study is the way task difficulty was operationalized using match and non-match conditions in the n-back. The two conditions were used to represent either high or low cognitive load, ensuring they were presented at random and in equal proportions. However, this still leaves room for repeated trials within the experiment, potentially encouraging more mind wandering due to prolonged cognitive demands of one kind. To address this limitation, a more structured randomization approach could be used, where match and non-match trials are still distributed randomly and equally but within predefined blocks (e.g. preceding an experience sampling probe). This would minimize the likelihood of sustained periods dominated by either match or non-match trials.

A critical consideration for future research concerns the ceiling effect observed in the current task, as illustrated in Figure 3 of the results section. Participants performed very well on the task, with most accuracy rates exceeding 0.8-0.9 (which ultimately also resulted in a lack of a normal distribution). However, tasks that measure mind wandering must be sufficiently easy to allow for intrusions to happen, but there is a strong need to find a better balance between task difficulty and mind wandering opportunity. According to the At-

tentional Resource theory (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006) and the Control x Concerns hypothesis (McVay & Kane, 2010), a task that is too difficult will demand excessive cognitive control, reducing opportunities for mind wandering. Conversely, a task that is too easy may not effectively engage working memory. While significant differences were observed between conditions, they were, in some cases, relatively marginal (shown by the effect sizes of the RM ANOVA and Friedman test). To account for this, future studies could test working memory with different measurements or variations. One obvious one would be to test an n-back again, but to increase n to two or three. Other tasks, like a complex span task (Foster et al., 2015), could also be tested to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Mainly and most importantly, the task needs to be challenging enough to engage working memory while still allowing for sufficient mind wandering.

Research has demonstrated that mindfulness interventions, such as breathing exercises (Turkelson & Mano, 2021), can enhance individuals' ability to monitor their mental state (Wong et al., 2018) and improve working memory capacity (Mrazek et al., 2013). A potential avenue for further studies would be to explore how meta-awareness can be directly manipulated within task designs without requiring prior mindfulness training. In practice, this could look like, for instance, developing in-task reminders that will prompt more frequent monitoring to stop people from drifting off without being aware of it. In a further step, a simple yet effective method like this could be implemented in tests which take working memory as a measure (such as standardized IQ tests). If a simple reminder could reduce episodes of zoning out, such findings could have immensely useful implications for enhancing working memory performance in a competitive environment.

Examining an abstract cognitive concept like mind wandering has always and will always involve a plethora of pitfalls and difficulties. However, this should not deter one from making them the subject of their investigations. Discovering new ways of unravelling these covert mental states is imperative to gain a more comprehensive understanding of cognition. By exploring nuanced distinctions, researchers can refine traditional theoretical models and better explain how different aspects of mind wandering, such as meta-awareness and task difficulty, interact with and influence executive functioning.

Positionality Statement

As a bachelor student of Psychology with a focus on cognitive sciences, my education has immersed me in an academic environment which prioritizes scientific reasoning and empirical research. This background has shaped my understanding of knowledge as being objective and measurable. My personal ontological perspective is rooted in realism, viewing reality as ultimately existing independently of human perception. While engaging with research and theoretical frameworks I allow myself to approach psychological phenomena with both academic rigor and personal insight. I acknowledge that my immersion in academics may introduce certain biases, potentially limiting my capacity to consider alternative perspectives. In order to prevent this, I aim to reflect on my work, carefully and critically examining how my education and personal experiences might have influenced my research approach and subsequent interpretations.

Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interest.

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Pulling Out of the Conversation? Masculinity, Responsibility, and the Politics of Male Birth Control in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Contraceptive responsibility has long been shaped by gendered assumptions that cast it as primarily a woman's concern, leaving men's roles underexplored in both public discourse and academic research. Guided by scholarship on hegemonic and emerging masculinities, this thesis asks: How do men living in the Netherlands perceive and navigate contraceptive responsibility? What do their personal narratives reveal about the information available in public discourse, social media, healthcare, and personal decision-making? Based on qualitative interviews with young men, the study identifies five key themes: gendered responsibility, negotiation in relationships, risk-taking and method preferences, emerging masculinities, and informational barriers. The findings show how dominant masculine ideals can limit men's active engagement with contraception, while more reflexive, caring masculinities offer space for change. This research contributes to debates in medical sociology, gender studies, and reproductive justice by highlighting how contraceptive responsibility is not merely individual but embedded in cultural scripts and institutional exclusions.

Keywords

male contraception, reproductive responsibility, hegemonic masculinity, fertility and virility, gendered stereotypes, gendered identities, emergent masculinities, gender equity

Introduction

In matters of contraception, men's voices are often missing. Not because they are silenced, but because they are not expected to speak. Contraceptive responsibility has long been framed as a predominantly women's concern, with women bearing the physical, emotional, and financial burdens of preventing pregnancy (James-Hawkins et al., 2019; Kimport, 2018). This framing is reinforced through medical, educational, and policy systems that center women as the primary actors in reproductive care (Kimport, 2018). From the early development of the contraceptive pill to the routine targeting of women in sex education and family planning programs, the burden of contraception has been systematically feminized (Kimport, 2018). Meanwhile, men's engagement remains limited, both due to the restricted availability of methods —currently confined to condoms, vasectomy and withdrawal— and to dominant gender norms that discourage their involvement (van Wersch et al., 2012; Kimport, 2018). This disparity is not merely a

matter of individual choice but is shaped by broader social norms, gendered expectations, and institutional structures that influence how reproductive responsibility is assigned and performed (van Wersch et al., 2012). Existing research highlights that hegemonic masculinity, being the dominant form of masculinity that privileges control, autonomy, and virility, can create resistance to male contraceptive use, which reinforces the idea that contraception is a woman's issue (van Wersch et al., 2012).

This resistance persists even as clinical researchers have, in recent decades, made significant progress in developing hormonal male contraceptives, such as transdermal gels and oral pills combining progestin and testosterone, demonstrating that male fertility can be suppressed reversibly and safely in controlled trials (Nickels & Yan, 2024). However, despite promising results in clinical trials, no male hormonal method has yet reached the market (Nickels & Yan, 2024). Several factors explain this delay. First, male contraceptives must suppress sperm production continuously, unlike female methods that act on a monthly cycle, which makes the development and testing process longer and more complex (Nickels & Yan, 2024). Second, some trials have reported side effects such as changes in mood, sex drive, and body weight, and although these effects are often mild —and very similar to the ones women bear with hormonal contraceptives methods—, they have raised safety concerns and slowed down progress (Nickels & Yan, 2024). Finally, large pharmaceutical companies have largely pulled out of male contraceptive development, because many see it as a risky investment due to uncertain demand, strict regulations, and competition with well-established female methods (Nickels & Yan, 2024). This delay in developing hormonal male contraceptives methods reflects and reinforces a broader research gap: while women's experiences and burdens have been extensively studied, far fewer studies have explored men's perspectives on contraceptive responsibility (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). Where men have been studied, they are often positioned as reluctant, resistant, or peripheral actors (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). However, changing gender norms, growing demands for gender equity, and advances in male contraceptive technologies provide a critical moment to reassess male engagement in contraception (van Wersch et al., 2012).

This research aims to analyse how masculinity influences men's attitudes and practices regarding contraception, examining how responsibility is constructed, performed, and negotiated in different societal spheres. In this study, masculinity is understood not as a fixed identity, but as a set of socially constructed norms, expectations, and practices associated with being perceived as masculine, including but not limited to ideals of autonomy, strength, control, and responsibility (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Building on literature on hegemonic masculinity used throughout this study, these norms are approached as relational and context-dependent, shaped through everyday interactions and institutional settings such as intimate relationships, healthcare encounters, and reproductive decision-making (Thompson, 2005; van Wersch et al., 2012). Masculinity is therefore treated as something that is continuously negotiated in practice rather than possessed, which makes in-depth interviews particularly well suited to capturing how men articulate, justify, and sometimes question gendered expectations in their narratives. By integrating these perspectives, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis of how masculinity and contraceptive responsibility intersect. It also addresses how men encounter information about contraception, through healthcare, digital platforms, and informal networks, and how the availability or framing of information

influences their choices. In doing so, this study broadens discussions on gender equity in reproductive health and the social transformation of contraceptive responsibility, by contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how men experience contraceptive responsibility.

This thesis paper aims to answer the following research question: **How do men living in the Netherlands perceive and navigate contraceptive responsibility? What do their personal narratives reveal about the information available in public discourse, social media, healthcare, and personal decision-making?**

The research is structured around sub-questions that correspond to key themes explored throughout the findings:

1. How do gendered norms around masculinity affect men's sense of responsibility toward male contraception?

2. How are masculinity and responsibility about male contraceptives portrayed in public discourse, social media, digital communities, and healthcare?

3. How do men access information about male contraceptives, and how available, reliable, and biased is this information?

To address these questions, this study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with men currently living in the Netherlands. Focusing on the Dutch context is analytically relevant because the Netherlands is often characterised as a progressive and liberal society with widespread access to contraception, comprehensive sexual education, and an established discourse on gender equality (Weaver et al., 2005). This makes the continued feminisation of contraceptive responsibility particularly puzzling, as one might expect male engagement to be more normalised in such a context. Yet, despite these favourable structural conditions, participants' narratives consistently framed contraceptive responsibility as a women's issue, raising critical questions about the persistence of gendered norms beneath ostensibly egalitarian arrangements. In this study, "personal narratives" refer to men's own accounts of how they experience, interpret, and navigate contraceptive responsibility in their everyday lives. Analysing these narratives allows the research to examine not only men's practices and knowledge, but also how meanings around masculinity and responsibility are constructed in relation to partners, healthcare, and public discourse. By examining men's personal narratives within this setting, the study explores how masculinity, responsibility, and access to information are negotiated in everyday life, offering insight into why gendered patterns of contraceptive responsibility endure even in one of Europe's most "advanced" reproductive health contexts.

This thesis is structured as follows. The next chapter presents the theoretical framework, which introduces the key concepts and perspectives that inform the research questions and guide both the analytical lens and the operationalisation of core themes. The selected theories not only provide a foundation for understanding masculinity, responsibility, and reproductive decision-making, but also shape the methodological choices and interpretation of findings. Following this, the methodology chapter outlines the use of semi-structured

interviews and qualitative thematic analysis. It also includes a critical reflection on positionality and the ethical considerations that shaped the research process. This thesis is structured around a clear analytical distinction between findings and discussion in order to make transparent how empirical insights are generated and then interpreted theoretically. The findings section presents the interview data thematically, using participants' narratives to show how masculinity and contraceptive responsibility are articulated, negotiated, and experienced in everyday life. The discussion section then builds on this analysis by situating these empirical patterns within broader theoretical debates on masculinity, gendered responsibility, and reproductive health. This separation allows the analysis to remain grounded in participants' voices while also demonstrating how the findings contribute to and extend existing theory. The thesis concludes with a summary of the main findings, a reflection on the study's contributions and limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

1. Gendered Identity and Forms of Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that is culturally idealised and linked to power, control, and traditional gender norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It shapes how individuals perceive masculinity and sets the standard against which all other forms of masculinity are compared. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that hegemonic masculinity remains a vital concept for understanding gender power relations, though it requires theoretical refinement. They stress that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed identity but a configuration of practices legitimising men's dominance over women and subordinated men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These configurations of hegemonic masculinity are lived, reproduced, and made meaningful through gendered identities that organise everyday expectations, roles, and responsibilities. Gendered identities, as discussed by Oudshoorn (2004), refer to the socially constructed roles and expectations that individuals are assigned based on their perceived gender. In many societies, masculinity is still defined by power and virility, which can discourage engagement with contraception (van Wersch et al., 2012). This reluctance reflects deeply embedded gendered identities that associate fertility with femininity and sexual control with masculinity (van Wersch et al., 2012; Oudshoorn, 2004).

Thompson (2005) further illuminates how masculinity is constructed and contested in reproductive contexts. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, they show that men undergoing infertility treatment must actively perform masculinity, through displays of virility (e.g. sperm count) or demonstrations of emotional commitment, to reaffirm their gender identity (Thompson, 2005). Infertility thus becomes not only a medical condition but a perceived failure of masculinity, threatening the cultural link between male identity, potency, and fatherhood (Thompson, 2005). Men respond with "parodic" performances, which are exaggerated enactments of traditional masculine roles, to repair this disruption and reassert legitimacy within a heteronormative framework (Thompson, 2005). These dynamics are crucial for understanding male contraception, as they reveal the cultural pressures men face to align reproductive

capacity with masculine worth. Just as infertility can trigger gender insecurity, the voluntary prevention of reproduction may be perceived as emasculating, especially in contexts where fertility is equated with virility. Thompson's ethnographic examples underscore that men's reproductive behaviours are shaped not by biological facts alone but by deeply gendered scripts that reward reproductive capacity and penalise deviation from hegemonic norms (Thompson, 2005).

While hegemonic masculinity remains structurally dominant, it does not fully capture the dynamic and evolving ways men negotiate gendered expectations in relation to health and reproduction. Regarding changes and evolutions in the concept of "manhood", Inhorn and Wentzell (2011) offer a crucial lens for understanding how masculinities are not static but emergent, particularly concerning reproductive and sexual health technologies. Inhorn and Wentzell (2011) propose the concept of "emergent masculinities" as a response to rigid notions of "hegemonic masculinity" as theorised by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). Through ethnographic research, they demonstrate how men engage with reproductive and sexual health technologies in ways that both challenge and reproduce dominant gender norms (Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011). Their concept of "emergent masculinities" emphasises how men adopt novel, context-specific gender performances as they navigate changing sociopolitical realities, bodily transformations, and medical interventions (Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011). This concept offers a crucial analytical tool for interpreting the ambivalence and contradictions that characterise men's narratives around contraceptive responsibility. By emphasising the relational and embodied nature of masculinity in flux, this perspective reveals how men may adopt new forms of gendered behaviour, such as assuming greater responsibility for contraception, as they negotiate changing sociopolitical expectations, intimate relationships, and health-related choices.

Inhorn and Wentzell (2011) argue that masculinities are not static but in progress, shaped by bodily change and social context. Applied to male contraception, this framework helps illuminate how men may begin to embody more caring and health-engaged masculinities, even within settings structured by hegemonic norms that traditionally associate contraceptive labour with women (Greene, 2000). Rather than viewing male responsibility as a complete rupture from dominant gender ideologies, the concept of emergent masculinities allows us to see male participation in contraception not merely as a passive shift in behaviour, but as an active negotiation of identity, where new masculinities may take shape.

While scholarship on hegemonic and emergent masculinities offers valuable frameworks for understanding gendered power relations, much of this work remains conceptually oriented or focused on specific reproductive disruptions, such as infertility, rather than on men's everyday understandings of contraceptive responsibility. As a result, there is limited insight into how men themselves articulate, reflect on, and negotiate masculinity in relation to contraception in ordinary life contexts. This study builds on these theoretical perspectives by centering on men's personal narratives, examining how hegemonic norms, moments of reflexivity, and emergent masculinities coexist within men's accounts of responsibility and reproductive decision-making. In this research, gendered identities and forms of masculinity are operationalised through men's narratives about responsibility, bodily control, fertility, and communication.

2. Contraceptive Responsibility and Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity helps understand the reluctance of men to engage with contraceptive responsibility, as it aligns masculinity with fertility and virility (van Wersch et al., 2012; Thompson, 2005). Although decades of research have shown that a male contraceptive pill is pharmacologically viable, its absence from the market is largely attributed to psychosocial and cultural barriers rather than medical limitations (van Wersch et al., 2012). While men across contexts tend to support the idea and development of a male pill, willingness to use it in everyday life remains more conditional, by societal expectations of masculinity, perceptions of trust in relationships, and concerns over bodily control and medical side effects (van Wersch et al., 2012). The introduction of male contraceptive methods, particularly the male pill, challenges these norms by shifting responsibility traditionally ascribed to women, threatening the perception of male virility and authority (van Wersch et al., 2012).

Since the 1960s, nearly all contraceptive innovation has focused on women, leaving men with methods like condoms and vasectomy (Oudshoorn, 2004). Oudshoorn (2004) highlights how male contraception disrupts long-standing associations between masculinity, reproductive control, and women's role in contraception. She argues that creating hormonal contraceptives for men involves not just technological innovation, but also a cultural renegotiation of masculine identities (Oudshoorn, 2004). This renegotiation of masculine identities challenges the hegemonic discourse that has historically excluded men from contraceptive decision-making. The fear that male involvement in contraception undermines masculinity stems from the view that masculinity is tied to physical strength, fertility, and sexual dominance (Oudshoorn, 2004).

Building on the framework of hegemonic masculinity, Greene (2000) argues that gendered stereotypes (stemming from hegemonic masculinity) have led to the disproportionate burden of contraceptive responsibility being placed on women. Reproductive health and family planning initiatives have historically operated under the assumption that women are the primary actors in reproduction, while men are cast as peripheral, problematic, or outright obstructive (Greene, 2000). This perspective, deeply embedded in demographic research, has reinforced myths of male irresponsibility and female accountability (Greene, 2000). By portraying men as passive or unchangeable, such programs have failed to address the gendered power dynamics that shape reproductive decision-making (Greene, 2000). As a result, interventions that assume male disengagement often end up validating it, thereby entrenching traditional roles that undermine reproductive autonomy. Greene (2000) highlights how these stereotypes are not only embedded in policy and research but also perpetuated by health systems and broader societal expectations, which view male engagement with contraception as unnecessary or abnormal. These structurally reinforced assumptions about men's disengagement do not remain abstract, but materialise in everyday masculine practices through which men actively reproduce distance, silence, and non-responsibility in relation to sexual and reproductive matters.

This gendered division of contraceptive responsibility is not only visible in who performs contraceptive labour, but also in how responsibility is avoided. Dalessandro et al. (2019) conceptualise this avoidance

as “strategic silence”: a patterned practice in which men remain silent in order to shift responsibility onto women while maintaining alignment with hegemonic masculine norms. Among college men, this silence is not merely a passive absence of communication, but an active strategy used to avoid vulnerability, and maintain group cohesion while distancing themselves from sexual violence accountability (Dalessandro et al., 2019). Instead of overtly denying sexual violence, men avoid discussing it altogether, allowing them to remain neutral and disengaged while upholding dominant masculine norms (Dalessandro et al., 2019). These silences are not accidental but reflect conscious or semi-conscious decisions to manage impressions and avoid emotional or social risks (Dalessandro et al., 2019).

Although existing research has extensively documented the feminisation of contraceptive labour and the structural exclusion of men from reproductive responsibility, men are often positioned as passive absentees rather than as reflective subjects navigating these arrangements. Consequently, less attention has been paid to how men themselves understand, justify, or question their limited engagement with contraception. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding men’s own accounts of contraceptive responsibility, showing how disengagement, silence, or reliance on female partners are not merely defaults, but gendered practices shaped by hegemonic ideals of autonomy, control, and virility. Contraceptive responsibility is operationalised by analysing how men talk about their perceived role in contraception, their willingness or reluctance to engage with male contraceptive methods, and their views on the division of labour between partners. Particular attention is paid to expressions of discomfort, deferral, silence, and responsibility-shifting, which are analysed as meaningful indicators of how hegemonic masculinity structures reproductive behaviour.

3. Men’s Contraception in Social, Healthcare, and Policy Contexts

While hegemonic masculinity has historically limited men’s engagement with contraception, emerging male contraceptive technologies hold the potential to disrupt these entrenched gendered arrangements at a structural level. Recent studies suggest that advancing male contraceptives is crucial not just for expanding contraceptive choices but also for fostering gender equity, strengthening health systems, and promoting universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services (Kidula et al., 2025). Currently, the only male contraceptive choices available (condoms, withdrawal, and vasectomy) each come with specific challenges regarding their effectiveness, ease of access, or societal acceptance; however, emerging methods under development offer hope for a more balanced method mix (Kidula et al., 2025). Their introduction could act as a catalyst to integrate men’s sexual and reproductive health and rights services into broader healthcare, potentially increasing men’s engagement with health systems, broadening health education, and alleviating the gendered burden of contraception (Kidula et al., 2025). Overall, Kidula states that the availability of male contraceptive methods could challenge the traditional gendered division of labour in contraception and empower men to take more active roles in family planning (Kidula et al., 2025). However, integrating male contraceptive methods into health systems requires a shift in societal attitudes and health practices, including the deconstruction of gendered stereotypes that position men as uninvolved

in reproductive matters (Greene, 2000).

While policy and health systems literature increasingly highlights the societal benefits of expanding male contraceptive options, these discussions often overlook how men's own perceptions, knowledge gaps, and gendered assumptions shape the viability of such interventions. This creates a disconnect between macro-level ambitions for gender equity and the micro-level realities of men's everyday decision-making. By centering men's narratives, this study contributes a grounded perspective that exposes how structural silences, limited information, and gendered expectations continue to constrain men's engagement with contraception, even in contexts where new technologies are imagined as transformative. The societal impact of men's contraception is examined through participants' reflections on public discourse, social media, healthcare encounters, and access to information. By analysing how men evaluate the availability, reliability, and framing of information about male contraception, the study reveals how individual experiences both reflect and reproduce broader structural and institutional barriers.

Research Design

Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

This research used semi-structured interviews to explore how men perceive and navigate contraceptive responsibility. Drawing on the methodological principles outlined by Bryman in Clark et al. (2021), this qualitative approach enabled rich, in-depth engagement with personal narratives while allowing flexibility to adapt to individual experiences. The interview guide was structured around key themes, including contraceptive practices, responsibility, masculinity, communication, public discourse, and medical discourse, while remaining open to emergent topics raised by participants (see Appendix 1 for the interview guide).

Key theoretical concepts —such as hegemonic masculinity, reproductive responsibility, and access to knowledge— were operationalised through both the design of the interview questions and the analytical approach. The research questions and sub-questions were broken down into concrete topics explored during interviews (see Appendix 2 for the interview guide), allowing participants' personal experiences to be connected to broader social and theoretical concerns. To explore how gender norms and masculinity shape men's sense of contraceptive responsibility, interview questions focused on how participants understood their role in contraception, how they perceived the division of responsibility between men and women, and whether they felt pressure or discomfort when thinking about active involvement. Concepts from Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) framework of hegemonic masculinity —particularly autonomy, emotional restraint, and bodily control—, and from Thompson's (2005) framework on masculine gendered identity —particularly fertility, virility, potency—, guided the development of these questions and informed later analysis.

The sub-question on representations in public discourse, media, and healthcare was operationalised

through questions about where and how participants had encountered male contraception, either in formal education, medical settings, or online environments. Participants were asked about what they had seen or heard, how these messages were framed, and whether they felt included or addressed by them. These reflections were analysed considering literature that critiques the marginalisation of men in reproductive discourse (Oudshoorn, 2004; Greene, 2000). Finally, to investigate how men access and assess information about male contraception, interviews included questions on sex education, online research habits, peer conversations, and trust in healthcare professionals. These responses helped to evaluate not only the availability of information but also its perceived relevance, clarity, and emotional impact. This process of operationalisation ensured that abstract theoretical concepts were translated into accessible and meaningful prompts during interviews, while remaining closely tied to the analytical framework used in coding and theme development.

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, aimed at capturing both demographic and experiential diversity (Clark et al., 2021). Demographic diversity was pursued in terms of relationship status and nationality, while experiential diversity concerned participants' familiarity with contraceptive methods, their perceived level of responsibility, and openness or resistance toward male contraception. The final sample consisted of ten participants, all currently residing in the Netherlands: five were in a relationship (three Dutch men and two internationals from Brazil and Poland), and five were single (also three Dutch men and two internationals from England and Ecuador). This composition enabled a balanced exploration of how relationship context and cultural background may influence perceptions of contraception. While the sample was limited to ten participants, this size was considered sufficient for in-depth thematic analysis and allowed for detailed engagement with each narrative. Recurring themes across participants also indicated a degree of data saturation. A detailed overview of the interview planning, including anonymised participant aliases, relationship status, and the dates and times of each interview, is provided in Appendix 3.

One of the recruitment criteria concerned men's country of residence, with participants required to be living in the Netherlands. This choice allowed masculinity to be examined as a relational and situational practice, emerging through everyday interactions within a shared social and discursive environment. Rather than treating masculinity as a fixed attribute tied to nationality, residence was used as a key analytical criterion, enabling the study to examine how men negotiate contraceptive responsibility within the same societal context while bringing diverse gendered backgrounds into that negotiation. Additionally, focusing on younger men enabled the study to examine contraceptive responsibility at a stage of the life course where reproductive decision-making and negotiations of responsibility are actively ongoing (the age of the participants can be found in Appendix 3). From a theoretical perspective, this focus aligns with an understanding of masculinity as a dynamic and processual phenomenon, allowing for closer analysis of how gendered norms are negotiated, questioned, or reproduced in real time rather than retrospectively.

Recruitment began through purposive outreach within relevant social networks, followed by snowball sampling, where initial participants were invited to informally refer others who might be interested in

contributing. This strategy proved effective in building a sample that reflected both variety and thematic relevance. Most interviews were conducted in person, in settings chosen by the interviewee to ensure their comfort, privacy, and openness. Three interviews took place online to enhance accessibility, particularly for participants who preferred the anonymity and convenience of a virtual setting. In-person interviews offered opportunities to establish rapport and observe non-verbal cues, while online interviews made it easier for some to discuss sensitive issues and to participate in the study. In a few cases, interviewees later reported that their participation had prompted conversations with peers or acquaintances, and relevant, consented insights from these indirect sources were also incorporated into the broader analysis to reflect the surrounding discursive environment.

All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded and transcribed using the software NoScribe. Transcripts were subsequently reviewed manually to ensure accuracy and to correct any errors in spelling, transcription, or formatting. The research was informed by an interpretivist epistemology, aiming to understand how participants construct meaning around contraception and responsibility within their social and relational contexts (Clark et al., 2021). Data analysis was guided by thematic analysis principles, particularly as outlined by Terry et al. (2017), with a focus on uncovering recurring patterns in how men express views about contraception, responsibility, and gender roles. Thematic analysis was considered especially suitable for this study because it allows for a flexible yet systematic examination of shared meanings across participants' narratives, while remaining attentive to contradictions, ambivalence, and variation within individual accounts. This approach aligns with the study's aim to explore how men *perceive and navigate* contraceptive responsibility, rather than to test predefined hypotheses or quantify attitudes.

ATLAS.ti was used to support a rigorous and transparent coding process. Coding was conducted in multiple rounds, with each interview transcript coded at least twice. An initial round of open, inductive coding focused on close reading of the data to identify salient concepts, expressions, and experiences emerging directly from participants' narratives. Subsequent rounds involved refining, merging, and re-coding segments of the data, allowing earlier transcripts to be revisited in light of insights gained from later interviews. This iterative, back-and-forth process ensured that emerging patterns were consistently examined across the dataset and that codes remained analytically grounded rather than fixed prematurely. Although the analysis was primarily inductive, it remained sensitive to existing theoretical concepts such as masculinity, bodily autonomy, and responsibility. Particular attention was paid to how these themes intersected with factors such as relationship status, trust, access to information, and contraceptive practices. Through this process, broader themes were developed by clustering related codes and examining how they operated across and within participants' accounts. The full codebook, including the frequency of each code, is presented in Appendix 4.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this research. The study followed the University of Amsterdam's ethical guidelines, as well as the ethical practices outlined by Clark et al. (2021). Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview (oral and written consent), with a clear explanation of the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence following Clark et al. (2021). A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix 1. All data were anonymised by removing identifying information, with participants selecting their own pseudonyms, and securely stored in password-protected files to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Particular care was taken regarding potential discomfort that could arise from discussing sensitive topics such as reproductive control, body image, and medical mistrust, and participants were offered resources and follow-up support if needed.

As a young female researcher studying masculinity and contraceptive responsibility, I was acutely aware of how my positionality could shape the research process. Gender dynamics may have influenced how participants presented themselves, particularly on topics involving sexual behaviour, responsibility, or emotional vulnerability. This positionality could also have shaped how questions were asked, how silences were interpreted, and how narratives were analysed. I remained reflexive throughout the research process, considering how my presence and identity could both open up and close down certain narratives.

To encourage openness and reduce potential discomfort, I adopted several informal strategies to build rapport. Drawing on my personal experience and social proximity to male peers, I used conversational language and expressions familiar from male friendship groups. I made an effort to mirror participants' phrasing, even when I found their statements disputable, so as to avoid a confrontational dynamic and sustain the flow of dialogue. Humour and casual language were used strategically to create a relaxed atmosphere, allowing participants to feel that I could be a part of the conversation rather than an external evaluator. These performative choices, such as laughing along, validating their contributions, and carefully choosing when and how to challenge certain views, were central to establishing trust and accessing more truthful reflections. While these tactics were effective in creating a non-judgmental space, they also raised ethical questions about complicity and critical distance. I remained mindful not to reinforce problematic views and took care to balance empathetic listening with analytical scrutiny during data interpretation. This reflexive engagement with positionality not only shaped the interviews but also informed the analytical lens through which I interpreted the narratives, acknowledging both the co-constructed nature of the data and the structural dynamics that shaped the fieldwork.

Beyond the interviews themselves, the topic often sparked reflection and conversation among participants and within my own social circles. Many participants initiated debrief conversations immediately after the interview, while others messaged me days later to share new thoughts or insights that had emerged after discussing the topic with friends, partners, siblings, or parents. Some even described how the interview prompted more sustained dialogue within their relationships or households. These ongoing exchanges

and similar discussions within my private network suggest that men are not only willing to engage with questions of contraceptive responsibility but are increasingly open to rethinking their roles. This, in itself, is an encouraging sign of shifting norms and growing reflexivity.

Findings

In the following section, the findings are expanded across five thematic sections by linking participants' narratives to key theoretical frameworks and existing literature. Using direct quotes to deepen the analysis, this section operationalises the theoretical framework introduced earlier, showing how abstract concepts such as responsibility, masculinity, and care take shape in lived experience. These themes highlight not only the dominance of traditional gender norms and structural silences but also moments of reflexivity, care, and shifting masculinities. In doing so, they provide insight into how men negotiate and navigate their position in the reproductive domain, often marked by ambivalence, contradiction, and gradual change. By situating individual narratives within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts, this section reflects on what these findings suggest about the possibilities and limits of shifting contraceptive responsibility.

1. Responsibility is a Woman's Thing: Masculinity and the Gendering of Responsibility

Across interviews, participants described contraceptive responsibility as something inherently gendered, often feminised, avoided, or negotiated through masculine ideals. This section explores how men internalise and navigate dominant ideas of masculinity in relation to contraception. The data reveal how hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) not only shapes behaviour but also structures what men feel is possible, shameful, or admirable regarding contraceptive involvement.

Participants often described responsibility as part of a feminine domain, a perspective so normalised that it often went unquestioned, as states Chris with *it's on women to think about it and not on men* and *it's more put on women to protect themselves*, or even Johan with *it has always been, like, girls, not their responsibility, but it was always their job*. It was expected and natural for men to think that women would take responsibility for contraception, not necessarily because of an explicit decision, but because it aligned with what they saw as the norm. Leon, for example, reasoned, *I do think that because so many women are on the pill*, revealing how the widespread use of the pill by women serves to reinforce expectations that they will handle contraception by default. Jeff echoed this logic in a more immediate, relational context: *she's using the pill, I don't need to use a condom*, suggesting that a sexual partner's contraceptive use not only relieved him of responsibility, but also justified the absence of his own involvement.

As Greene (2000) mentions, hegemonic masculinity puts the responsibility of contraception solely on the shoulders of women. By thinking about contraceptive responsibility in that way, for example, in healthcare systems and cultural narratives, men are left uninvolved and unaccountable. This leads to an endless cycle

of reproduced gendered contraceptive division of labour where men will never see themselves as having to be a part of it (Greene, 2000), as Josh mentioned that even if male methods were easily available, it would still be the woman's responsibility. This sense of inevitability often came with an initial low awareness of male options (e.g. *No, I really don't know anything for men* (Tim)) and low awareness of female options (e.g. *I don't even know how the woman's pill works* (Bob)), reinforcing the idea that men just do not need to think about it. When mentioning contraceptive responsibility as a burden, John even mentioned that he does not *necessarily even see it as a burden*. Such views show how gendered responsibility is institutionalised not only culturally but structurally (Greene, 2000). Men's limited awareness of both male and female contraceptive methods points to broader structural arrangements in which contraceptive knowledge, counselling, and responsibility are routinely directed at women rather than men. Healthcare encounters and public discourse rarely position men as primary or even equal contraceptive subjects, which means that men's lack of knowledge and sense of non-responsibility are not experienced as shortcomings, but as normal and institutionally reinforced. As a result, disengagement is sustained not through explicit resistance, but through the absence of structural expectations that men should be informed, involved, or accountable.

Additionally, many men expressed discomfort with the idea of taking an active role in contraceptive care, fearing it might make them appear less masculine to others or even to themselves. Some mentioned that they would be mocked by their peers, as Johan said that *there, there would be, uh, laughs about it*, or that their partner would be having too much power over them, as Josh mentioned that it would be like *letting the woman decide everything*. Mentions of the male pill were sometimes associated with loss of power, emasculation, or even being feminised, captured in phrases like *If this guy pill decreases my testosterone, increases my estrogen, and I literally start becoming more of a woman* (Bob), or *I could understand that if you're taking a pill, that you would feel a bit less like a man* (Josh). This discomfort reflects how hegemonic masculinity equates male sexuality with virility, independence, and control (van Wersch et al., 2012; Thompson, 2005). Male contraception, by requiring care, planning, or bodily change, challenges this construction. Even though most men mentioned carrying condoms on a regular basis, which is a form of male contraception, they mentioned either liking the freedom and control it gave them, or that *using a condom, some people might argue, would ruin the moment* (Jeff). Yet even here, contraception had to be reframed in traditionally masculine terms, control, power, and initiative, to be acceptable.

Many men openly acknowledged that they benefit from a system and natural dispositions that place the burden on women. Several mentioned that men can just get away with it, or that *it's also because it's not my body that I don't think as much about it* (Michael). As Dalessandro et al. (2019) mentioned, men sometimes make use of strategic silence, where they can avoid responsibility not due to ignorance, but as a way to uphold their masculine identity while evading vulnerability. Participants also described this asymmetry in concrete ways: women are the ones who plan, worry, take pills, or deal with consequences like pregnancies, while men rarely face physical, medical, or social fallout from unprotected sex. As Johan said, *the guy will never feel the consequences of not using contraception*. Leon even mentioned that he was *disappointed that I had to pull out, because I liked it more not pulling out, but I did understand it and I also*

did respect it. This creates a gendered hierarchy of risk and effort, in which male responsibility is seen as voluntary or even heroic, while female responsibility is expected and invisible. As Chris pointed out, even the wide variety of female contraceptives reinforces this gap: *you have so many, like, female options*. But instead of this sparking reflection, many used it to justify disengagement.

2. She Brings It Up: Love, Power, and the Contraceptive Talk

While hegemonic masculinity reinforces the idea that men should remain distant from reproductive responsibility, everyday contraceptive decision-making often happens in intimate, social, and relational spaces. Men exhibit both resistance and possibility in how responsibility is shared or avoided, in the way they navigate conversations, peer influence, emotional labour, and partner dynamics when it comes to contraception.

Many participants described how conversations about contraception are typically unequal and initiated by their partners. Indeed, Josh mentioned that it is often the woman who brings it up, Leon said how some of his partners are the ones initiating the use of condoms (*there was also one girl who wanted me to put on a condom, which was fine*), and Chris said how contraceptive decisions were *more of my girlfriend's idea*. Some men were well-aware of this imbalance and even expressed a desire for their — potential— contributions to be acknowledged. As Leon puts it, if he would take on responsibility: *I do hope that at least that would be a bit of an acknowledgement, like, hey, good job, buddy, I appreciate it*. However, the fact that such recognition is requested reinforces how rare male initiative remains and how support is framed more as a favour than a shared duty.

While romantic relationships were a space where some men did discuss contraception, peers often served as the opposite, a space of silence and social pressure. Men often mentioned discussing their sexual encounters with friends; however, more often regarding how pleasurable it was, rather than having open discussions about contraception. As Chris exemplifies, *it's more about, you know, who you hook up with and stuff. Rather than, if you used a safe method of contraception*, same for Leon *it's more like comparison. Like, how are your experiences? How are my experiences? What do you think about this and that*. Following Dalessandro et al. (2019), silence becomes a way to conform to masculine ideals, by avoiding emotional vulnerability and maintaining an image of detached sexual agency. When male contraceptives were discussed, especially the potential use of hormonal male pill, reactions often involved discomfort, as Josh mentioned that *a lot of people would find it weird at the moment still*, while Leon said *if you want to be a lab rat, have such a thing being tested out on you, uh, go ahead, good luck, buddy*. Those discussions also involved mockery: *People do make fun of me because I wear condoms, but I don't give a shit* (Bob, in a relationship). These moments reflect how contraceptive engagement threatens masculine peer identity, especially when care is perceived as weakness or loss of control (Oudshoorn, 2004).

Still, a few interviewees described moments where friends did engage in deeper conversations, especially around the risks of STDs or pregnancy. Jeff noted how he changed his friend's mind by reprimanding him on his unsafe sexual behaviour: *you should have used one* [about the use of condoms]. Johan reflected on

his past contraceptive habits with his friends, especially when not wearing condoms: *I have said something in the past, like, hey, we're stupid, dude*. Bob also judged his friends' contraceptive habits, noting: *they never expect to use condoms because their girlfriends take pills*. Moreover, when facing anxiety about risky behaviours, particularly related to STDs, some men became informal sources of support for their peers. As Leon recalled, *he was totally freaking out about it. Asking me, like, hey, dude, uh, what was your experience with this? Am I screwed or not?*. However, even in these exchanges, responsibility was often projected onto women. As Leon commented in another context, *as a woman don't just let every guy hit*, shifting accountability for safe sex onto women's choices rather than men's actions. These glimpses show that while peer silence is common, it is not unbreakable: discussions within men's friendship groups can and do emerge, though they are often shaped by persistent gendered assumptions.

Alternatively, some participants expressed that responsibility was increasingly shared, or at least negotiated, within their relationships. A growing number of men are aware of the need for balance: *sometimes the lady, sometimes the guy, to make sure that you both use it, not at the same time, but, like, 50-50* from Josh. And, most men in relationship mentioned how decisions about contraceptives were made by discussing it with their partner: *As soon as you're in a relationship, I think it's all about communicating* (Michael), *sex and contraception is something that just has to be communicated really extensively* (Leon), and couples compromising about contraception. Kidula et al. (2025) note that male contraceptives and conversations around them can challenge the gendered division of labour in contraception and promote relational equity. Yet, these negotiations are often uneven. Men's decisions to participate tend to remain optional or situational: *I've never really been in a long-term relationship, so I've never really felt the need to use them* (John) or *she is the one who wanted me to pull out* (Leon). This ambivalence underscores Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) idea that hegemonic masculinity operates as an internalised standard that quietly organises everyday practices and expectations. In the accounts above, men articulate support for shared responsibility and communication, yet their participation in contraceptive labour remains conditional, relational, or reactive rather than assumed as their own responsibility. This reflects how hegemonic masculinity functions less as an explicit ideology and more as a background norm, allowing men to endorse gender equality discursively while still relying on women's default responsibility in practice.

3. Condoms Kill the Mood: Risky Logics and Everyday Practices

While hegemonic masculinity influences broader attitudes toward responsibility, it is in men's actual contraceptive practices, and the reasoning behind them, that this influence becomes embodied. This section explores how participants chose or avoided specific methods, how they negotiated risks, and how emotional and social logics often took precedence over medical knowledge.

There was a conditional logic showing how contraceptive decisions were shaped less by formal health education and more by situational factors, especially the emotional context of sex and the level of perceived intimacy with a partner. Rather than drawing on consistent knowledge of effectiveness or risk, participants

made decisions based on how "safe" or "serious" a given encounter felt. As a result, many expressed a casual or dismissive attitude toward pregnancy prevention, justifying non-use with statements like *I'm not as stressed about pregnancy* (Michael). In long-term relationships or when trust was high, methods like withdrawal were seen as sufficient, revealing how emotional closeness could override perceived risk. Josh explained, *it would be more for STD safety than pregnancy safety*, while Michael noted, *I mostly use it to prevent STDs*. These responses suggest that contraception was often framed not as a shared, ongoing responsibility but as something negotiable, situational, and reactive, especially in the absence of clear guidance or consistent norms. This supports van Wersch et al.'s (2012) idea that risk-taking aligns with traditional masculine norms of control and invincibility. Rather than planning proactively, many relied on improvisation by random decision-making or not doing an STD test.

Condoms, one of the only male-controlled and widely available contraceptive methods, were frequently framed by participants as unpleasant, inconvenient, or simply undesirable. The persistent myth that "it doesn't feel as good with a condom" continues to shape attitudes and practices: *once you go without a condom, you'll never come back* (Bob, married), *a slightly bit of pleasure because it feels the best to do it without a condom or to come inside* (Leon, single), *there is a stigma around condoms being less fun or being less nice* (Jeff, single), and *it's just not the nicest way if you would use condom all the time* (Josh, in a relationship). This perception goes beyond personal preference and points to a broader peer-based stigma. Amongst male peer groups, condoms are often framed not only as physically less pleasurable, but also as something undesirable or even embarrassing, something men are expected to avoid if they can. This stigma also carries an implicit message that a "real man" should not need or want to wear a condom, reinforcing a gendered narrative in which male sexual pleasure is prioritized and contraceptive responsibility is minimized or displaced. Several men admitted they preferred withdrawal because it felt more natural, pleasurable, and because it had become normalised in their digital and peer environments. These preferences echo the way hegemonic masculinity positions pleasure, spontaneity, and dominance above caution and mutual responsibility (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Thompson, 2005).

Although this section mostly focuses on condom (non-)use, bringing the male pill into the conversation helps reveal the broader logics men use when making contraceptive decisions. Condoms are currently one of the only male-controlled methods available, so when participants were asked to imagine alternatives, like the male pill, their responses shed light on the same underlying concerns: control, risk, responsibility, and bodily autonomy. Comparing how men talk about condoms and how they talk about hypothetical options like the pill helps to expose the emotional and cultural conditions under which they are willing or unwilling to take contraceptive responsibility. When asked about the male pill, many participants responded with interest, but a conditional interest: *considering the side effects, yes, I'd be open to taking it* (Jeff) and *if there's no bad things about it, then yeah, I would try to take it* (Josh). The male pill, while promising, was still framed in terms of potential loss of control, fertility, or strength. Leon mentioned that with the male pill, *you're playing with your fertility*, whilst others mentioned being afraid of sterility. These concerns mirror what Thompson (2005) observes in the context of infertility treatment, where fertility is not only a biological function but a symbol of masculine legitimacy. Just as infertility threatens the cultural

link between masculinity, virility, and control, the male pill is perceived by some as undermining that very foundation. Following Oudshoorn's (2004) argument that male contraceptives challenge traditional associations between masculinity and reproductive dominance, Thompson's (2005) work helps clarify why some men respond with discomfort or resistance. In this context, even openness to the male pill is framed by efforts to preserve control and reaffirm masculine identity, which is what Thompson (2005) describes as "parodic performances" that attempt to reassert dominance in moments of perceived vulnerability.

4. More of a Man with the Pill: Reflexive and Emerging Masculinities

Although much of this research reflects the persistence of hegemonic norms, many participants also described moments that hinted at change. Whether through action, reflection, or aspiration, a number of men articulated attitudes that challenge the dominant model of distant, detached masculinity. Almost all participants expressed a clear sense of own responsibility: *be responsible for yourself* from Bob, *both of them should be responsible because they're both consenting adults* from Chris, *you're both your own responsibility* from Johan, or even *both should have a lot of responsibility, but I think everyone themselves should feel like a hundred percent responsibility* from Michael. This shifting perspective connects contraception not only to risk management but also to values such as care, mutual accountability, and relational trust, which some scholars have identified as central to more emotionally engaged and equitable models of masculinity (Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011). Michael stated that *if it's about penetration, it's also maybe a bit more the male's responsibility*, while Bob mentioned always using condoms because they have zero barriers. For some, taking initiative was not a threat to masculinity, but a confirmation of it: with the male pill, *it would make me feel more of a man* (Chris), or with condoms, *I think you're just a little boy if you don't dare buying them* (Johan).

Others described mutual care and relational thinking. Men spoke about mutual responsibility (*if you're having sex, and it's unprotected sex, it's on both of you* from Bob), shared roles (*we both have a role to play in it* from John) and taking care of your partner (*you know, just taking care of my girlfriend, making sure that she doesn't have to take contraception* from Chris), while a few also explicitly linked their sense of responsibility to relationships with women in their lives: *I care about my sisters and I don't want anything bad to happen to them* (Johan, who has sisters and wants their boyfriends to care about contraception). These responses reflect what Inhorn and Wentzell (2011) have described as caring or emerging masculinities: forms of masculinity that reject dominance and detachment in favour of emotional presence, relational accountability, and active involvement in reproductive care. Rather than distancing themselves from responsibility, some men articulated a clear ethic of care that extended to both their partners and their broader social circles.

Willingness to consider new methods also emerged, even when uptake was still hypothetical. Some participants said they would consider trying the male pill or would *do a vasectomy and feel as manly as before the vasectomy* (Johan) later on in their life, if it fit their values and relationship goals. Others saw male methods as a path to greater autonomy and fairness, as John stated, *I would feel free then, and it's more important for life*. Some, like Chris, mentioned that it would be a good thing if men would take on

more responsibilities: *if a person takes it, they take some of that risk from the other person, so you would be doing a very good deed*. Even Michael, now single, ultimately took on the burden of responsibility to support his previous partner: *two months later, I said, alright, we're in a relationship at that point in time. And I know how much the pill screws with her. I said, alright, we'll just use condoms and you can get off the pill*. Importantly, these moments of shift were not always presented as revolutionary. Some participants described them as common sense: Bob *always uses a condom*, or Johan offered *her to pay for it* regarding Plan B.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that shifts toward more equitable understandings of contraceptive responsibility often arise not through dramatic change, but through everyday actions, subtle reflections, and evolving expectations. While hegemonic masculinity still shapes many practices, participants also expressed emerging attitudes rooted in care, mutual accountability, and relational thinking. These align with what Inhorn and Wentzell (2011) describe as emerging masculinities, where responsibility is not avoided but actively embraced as part of being emotionally present and ethically engaged. Men discussed shared responsibility, the importance of protecting partners, and the value of reducing the burden placed on women. Their openness to future methods like the male pill or vasectomy suggests a quiet redefinition of masculinity that includes care and cooperation. Rather than distancing themselves from contraception, some men framed their involvement as common sense, a natural extension of fairness and intimacy. These shifts, though subtle, suggest that masculinity is being reimagined not only in response to societal change, but within the small, personal negotiations of everyday life.

5. Men Just Don't Hear About It: How Men Learn About Contraception

Participants often described their understanding of contraception as fragmented, outdated, or simply absent. For many, sexual education had been minimal or ineffective: *it was one class in first grade, and then the teacher, he was like, yeah, you guys can't take it seriously* (John), *in elementary school, it's all a joke. Because people can't concentrate* (Michael). This aligns with Greene's (2000) critique of systemic failures that reinforce gendered stereotypes by excluding men from comprehensive sexual and reproductive education. Michael as well was well aware that current sexual education is not sufficient: *I think it should be definitely more of a topic in sexual education in high school*. Participants noted that they did receive some basic information, such as how to use a condom and that withdrawal was not a recommended method. However, this knowledge was limited and often superficial. Instead of schools or doctors, most participants cited friends or just Google as their primary sources of knowledge. When seeking information, they made a conscious effort to use government-approved websites to ensure the content was trustworthy and accurate. While some mentioned going *to sources that I already trusted* (Michael), others highlighted confusion: *It's hard to find good reliable information on the internet* (John). John's difficulty in finding clear and reliable information online is exemplified by the first website that appears when searching "male contraception" on Google (*Male Birth Control Options*, 2023). The site presents five methods: condoms, spermicide, vasectomy, outercourse, and withdrawal. Notably, spermicide is a chemical substance designed to disable or kill sperm and is applied inside the woman's body, typically in the vagina, which

makes its classification as a male contraceptive method misleading. Its inclusion in this list highlights the confusion and imprecision that can arise in public informational sources about male contraception, where responsibility is rhetorically shifted without corresponding control or bodily involvement.

Trust in healthcare providers was also inconsistent. Several participants noted that their GP only addressed STDs or promoted condom use without mentioning other male-oriented methods. Others described medical professionals as sceptical or biased, particularly in non-Dutch contexts, such as perceived bias in Brazilian healthcare as mentioned by Bob. Comparing GP to the internet, Jeff put it as *I don't think there's that much of a discrepancy*. One participant shared a telling example later on, after the interview was conducted: when a female acquaintance of his told her GP she planned to stop using the pill and switch to condoms with her partner, the GP discouraged her, warning that it would likely cause "more disagreements" in the relationship because condoms are uncomfortable for men. This anecdote underscores how even trusted health professionals can reinforce gendered assumptions and misinform patients, further entrenching the idea that contraception is —and should remain— a woman's burden. These narratives highlight how medical gatekeeping and silences reproduce the notion that reproductive responsibility lies outside the domain of men.

This invisibility extends into media and pharmaceutical messaging. Participants saw no interest in male contraception ads (*I would be bored after 10 seconds* from Johan), no profit, so no display (*I don't think it will really be of interest to the news outlets* from Michael) and a general belief that male methods are not in the media because it is boring for men (*because it's boring and because I just don't think they'd be interested in it* from Leon). Yet, some imagined change, like Johan mentioning that maybe if a male influencer talked about it, it could help, or Jeff *keeping an eye on the current state of affairs and seeing where it goes*. For Johan, a cultural shift is needed: *I think it needs time to set in a society, like, to people get used to it*. Finally, many participants pointed to their upbringing. Parental education shaped whether they viewed contraception as normal or taboo. Bob noted how *she kind of broke the taboo right there* talking about his mother when she talked contraception with him. Alongside this, participants expressed mixed feelings about the future of male contraceptives. While some were hopeful (*men will not be the same as women, but they'll have the same option as women to use a contraception* from Jeff), others were hesitant, as aforementioned, with male contraception affecting their masculinity. These ambivalent responses reflect what Oudshoorn (2004) describes as the cultural negotiation of new technologies, where emerging methods challenge traditional gender roles but remain constrained by existing norms, scepticism, and lack of visibility.

Discussion

Drawing on thematic analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews, and as exemplified in the above findings section, the empirical findings consist of five key themes that emerged, reflecting the gendered, social, and emotional landscapes through which male contraceptive responsibility is shaped.

This discussion section situates these findings within the broader theoretical and empirical literature on masculinity, gendered responsibility, and reproductive health. Rather than introducing new data, it reflects on how the patterns identified in the interviews connect to and extend existing theories. By revisiting the findings through a theoretical lens, this section highlights what the study contributes to ongoing debates about the possibilities and limits of shifting contraceptive responsibility.

The first theme focusses on the first sub-question, exploring how contraceptive responsibility is perceived as inherently gendered (**1.**). Reflecting Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reformulation of hegemonic masculinity, many participants described contraception as "naturally" a woman's role, internalising ideals that associate masculinity with emotional detachment, bodily distance, and a rejection of care-related practices. Taking an active role in contraception was not only unfamiliar but often felt at odds with their sense of self, evoking discomfort, embarrassment, or even shame. This discomfort aligns with Greene's (2000) concept of gendered stereotypes, which highlights how emotional engagement, especially in areas like reproductive care, is socially coded as unmasculine. Participants' avoidance of contraceptive responsibility was less about ignorance and more about navigating boundaries imposed by normative masculinity. Dalessandro et al. (2019) similarly argue that men's reproductive behaviours are shaped by broader cultural scripts around intimacy and responsibility, which became visible in moments when participants hesitated or felt unequipped to take initiative. Finally, as van Wersch et al. (2012) and Thompson (2005) observed, the persistent lack of male contraceptive knowledge reflects not just gaps in education, but a deep-rooted gendered division of labour, one that continues to frame men as peripheral actors in reproductive decision-making, and links masculinity with fertility and virility.

The second theme, focussed on the first sub-question, tackles how men negotiate responsibility within intimate relationships and social circles, revealing how gendered power relations shape the ways responsibility is negotiated or deferred (**2.**). Consistent with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, participants often positioned their partners as the initiators of contraceptive conversations and as the ones carrying most of the emotional and practical labour. Taking on responsibility themselves was rarely expected or encouraged, reinforcing ideals of masculinity that emphasise emotional detachment and autonomy over care and collaboration. Within these relationships, many men expressed ambivalence: while willing to support their partners, they lacked both the knowledge and the emotional language to fully participate. This reflects what Dalessandro et al. (2019) identify as "strategic silence", which structures men's reproductive involvement, where care and communication are feminised, and thus distanced from normative masculinity. These dynamics were further shaped by peer environments. Conversations about male contraceptives were rare, and when they did occur, they were often framed with humour or dismissal. As Oudshoorn (2004) explains, by historically designing contraceptive methods around female bodies and excluding men from reproductive healthcare narratives, institutions have contributed to the perception that contraception simply "belongs" to women, making male involvement feel unnatural or even inappropriate. However, some participants engaged and promoted discussions, which helps promote relational equity, as advocated for by Kidula et al. (2025).

Coming to the third theme, focussed on the first and third sub-questions, it examines how men navigate contraceptive practices in their daily lives, focusing on method choice, perceived risks, and the logics underlying these decisions (**3.**). Participants commonly expressed preferences for withdrawal or condoms, often emphasising spontaneity, sensation, and personal control over caution or mutual planning. These preferences reflect Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) and Thompson's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity, which prioritises autonomy, physical pleasure, and dominance, being values that can conflict with shared responsibility or precaution in sexual encounters. Such preferences were also shaped by how certain methods aligned, or clashed, with participants' sense of masculinity. Many viewed male hormonal contraceptives with hesitation, describing them as unnatural or potentially emasculating. This echoes Oudshoorn's (2004) argument that male contraceptives challenge dominant associations between masculinity and reproductive control. For some, the idea of altering their bodies for contraception was not only unfamiliar but posed a perceived threat to their gender identity. Risk-taking further emerged as a central theme, particularly in how men justified less reliable methods like withdrawal. This aligns with van Wersch et al. (2012), who found that young men often approach sexual risk with a sense of invincibility, downplaying consequences in favour of maintaining control and spontaneity. These findings suggest that contraceptive decision-making is not only about knowledge or access but deeply entangled with emotional, sensory, and gendered logics that shape what feels acceptable or desirable.

The fourth theme, providing new insights, covers how some men are beginning to question traditional gender norms and engage with contraception in more reflexive, relational ways (**4.**). While hegemonic ideals still shaped many narratives, a number of participants described moments of personal responsibility, emotional awareness, and care toward their partners. These accounts reflect shifting understandings of masculinity, not rooted in dominance or detachment, but in presence, accountability, and mutual trust. This resonates with Inhorn and Wentzell's (2011) notion of emerging masculinities, which highlights how men's identities are increasingly shaped through caregiving roles, emotional engagement, and relational ethics. Rather than seeing contraception as irrelevant or emasculating, these men framed their involvement as an act of respect and shared responsibility. Their openness to learning, communicating, and even making sacrifices (such as adapting sexual practices or expressing willingness to try new methods) suggests a move toward more caring and collaborative forms of masculinity. Importantly, these shifts did not appear as radical breaks from tradition but as subtle, everyday reorientations. Inhorn and Wentzell (2011) emphasise that such changes often unfold through small decisions, quiet reflection, and growing awareness within relationships. The participants' stories support this view, offering insight into how masculine identities are not fixed but continually negotiated in the context of intimacy, responsibility, and evolving gender norms.

Last but not least, the fifth theme, regrouping second and third sub-questions, is concerned with how men seek, encounter, and often struggle to access information about male contraception (**5.**). Participants pointed to gaps in formal sex education, limited engagement from healthcare providers, and the near absence of male-focused contraceptive content in public discourse. Many relied on informal sources such as upbringing, peers, or online searches shaped more by chance than by structured support. These experiences reflect what Greene (2000) critiques as systemic failures in sexual and reproductive education,

where men are routinely excluded from comprehensive knowledge, reinforcing the idea that contraception is not their concern. This absence not only limits awareness but also reproduces gendered stereotypes about responsibility and care. Participants' uncertainty about new male methods also speaks to what Oudshoorn (2004) identifies as the cultural negotiation of technology. While emerging methods challenge traditional gender roles, their uptake is hindered by scepticism, limited visibility, and persistent norms about who contraception is for. Without clear messaging or cultural reference points, male contraception remains peripheral, more imagined than integrated. Overall, these five themes presented provide a detailed account of how men living in the Netherlands perceive and engage with contraceptive responsibility across social, relational, and institutional contexts.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate how men living in the Netherlands perceive and navigate contraceptive responsibility, an area often marginalised in both scholarly inquiry and public health discourse, and what their narratives reveal about the information available in public discourse, social media, healthcare, and personal decision-making. Through in-depth qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, this research traced how young men make sense of contraception within a web of cultural expectations, emotional norms, and shifting gender roles. Five key themes emerged: gendered responsibility, negotiation in relationships, risk-taking and method preferences, emerging masculinities, and informational barriers. Taken together, they provide nuanced answers to the main research question and its sub-questions.

The findings show that hegemonic masculinity continues to shape men's disengagement from contraception. Responsibility was often viewed as incompatible with masculine identity, with several participants describing discomfort, shame, or confusion when imagining themselves in an active contraceptive role. This was especially visible in practices such as withdrawal or condom use, where control and spontaneity were prioritised over mutual planning or long-term reliability. However, the research also identified emerging masculinities, grounded in care, reflexivity, and relational thinking, where some men began to reframe responsibility as a sign of respect, partnership, and maturity rather than weakness or feminisation.

Regarding how masculinity and responsibility are portrayed in public discourse, healthcare, and digital communities, participants described an overwhelming absence of male contraception as a visible or valued topic. In formal healthcare settings, conversations were often heteronormative and centred on women. In digital spaces, especially social media, male contraception appeared either as a joke or as a speculative future product, reinforcing a sense of detachment and irrelevance. These portrayals often failed to challenge gendered assumptions or offer men any meaningful entry point into the conversation, thus reproducing the sense that contraception is not "for them".

Moreover, when it comes to how men access information, participants revealed a patchwork of informal,

inconsistent, and often biased sources. Many had learned about contraception only indirectly, through partners, peers, parents, or outdated sex education. Several expressed frustrations at the lack of accessible, balanced information about male contraceptives, particularly new or emerging methods. Some relied on self-led internet searches, while others admitted to avoiding the topic entirely due to discomfort or lack of guidance. The knowledge gaps were not simply informational but deeply gendered: men were not just uninformed, they were structurally and culturally excluded from the conversation.

By drawing on theories of hegemonic masculinities and gendered stereotypes (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Greene, 2000) as well as emerging masculinities (Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011), and more, this thesis contributes to sociological understandings of how gendered responsibility is produced, resisted, and reworked. It highlights that reproductive responsibility is not simply a matter of individual decision-making or technological availability, but a deeply social and relational process, shaped by norms, silences, and the emotional politics of gender. In doing so, it also raises difficult questions: What would it take for male responsibility to become the norm, rather than the exception? What kind of emotional and institutional infrastructures are needed to support this shift?

However, this research has its limitations. It focused on a relatively small sample of cisgender heterosexual men within a particular national and cultural context, leaving open important questions about how race, class, religion, sexuality, and other intersecting identities shape men's experiences of reproductive responsibility. Future research should continue to expand this conversation. Yet even within its limits, this study demonstrates that men are not absent from the conversation; they are listening, thinking, feeling, and in some cases, acting. They are questioning what they were taught, engaging with their partners, and starting to see that responsibility can be a form of care, not a threat to their masculinity. That shift, however slow or quiet, is powerful. If we are to build a more just and equitable future for reproductive health, we must stop framing men's involvement as optional, exceptional, or secondary. Instead, we must imagine and create a world in which shared responsibility is not a radical act, but a natural expectation.

Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interests.

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The Frontstage Never Ends: Affective Self-Revisitation on Instagram as Recursive Impression Management among Dutch Young Adults

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Abstract

Happiness in contemporary Western societies has increasingly become a cultural imperative, shaping how individuals display and manage emotion on social media. While prior research has examined how users curate positive self-presentations, little is known about how people later return to these curated memories or how such revisitations shape emotional experience and possibly self-understanding. This study addresses this gap by naming and examining affective self-revisitation (ASR): the practice of revisiting one's own previously posted Instagram content, whether intentionally or not, in ways that become emotionally or narratively meaningful. Based on four semi-structured interviews with Dutch young adults, analysed through thematic coding, we show that ASR is rarely a conscious mood-regulation strategy. Instead, it emerges as an incidental, emotionally ambivalent, and temporally layered encounter with a previously performed self. Participants' revisitations were shaped by platform-specific feeling rules through which a platform-specific positivity norm, rooted in broader cultural happiness imperatives, gets enacted, resulting in memory archives that are selectively filtered before they are revisited. We argue that ASR constitutes a form of narrative identity work structured by emotional norms, revealing how digital platforms mediate not only the presentation of the self but also the ways individuals return to and reinterpret their past. The study opens pathways for future research into the emotional and temporal dynamics of digital memory.

Keywords

digital memory, self-presentation, social media practices, Instagram, happiness, affective self-revisitation

Introduction

Various scholars have argued that in contemporary Western societies, happiness has shifted from an inner feeling to an imperative. Individuals are expected to be happy and to perform happiness and positivity as evidence of living the 'good life' (Ahmed, 2010; Bruckner, 2011; Rose, 1998). Earlier exploratory work by one of the authors of this project raised a conceptual question on how individuals not only present happiness to others but also become audiences of their own emotional performances on social media. Noting the relative under-theorisation in sociology of how people engage with their own posted memories,

this study seeks to address this literature gap.

Previous research suggests that social media revisitation can 'feel good' to users (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023), though this has rarely been examined beyond psychological perspectives on mood repair. We identify a sociological gap in understanding how revisiting one's own digital content, which we propose to term 'affective self-revisitation' (ASR), operates within broader cultural norms of positivity (Ahmed, 2010), dramaturgical self-presentation (Goffman, 1956/2022), the positivity bias on social media (Lin & Utz, 2015; Thelwall et al., 2009; Bazarova, 2012; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2020), and platformed memory (Van Dijck, 2010; West, 2012). Does looking back at past social media posts make people feel better when they feel down, or does it evoke other, unexpected emotional experiences? And assuming that Instagram posts are curated under a positivity bias, what effects does revisiting these memories have on self-understanding and identity?

These questions formed the foundation of this current project, leading to our central research question: *How do Dutch young adults revisit past Instagram posts, and how does this practice relate to emotional experience and self-understanding within the context of the platform's positivity norm?*

In this study, we explore ASR not merely as an individual emotional regulation strategy, but as a socially situated practice shaped by feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983), the cultural happiness imperative (Ahmed, 2010), and Instagram's platform environment. Our objective is to analyse how emotional experience and identity are co-constructed through the revisitation of curated digital memories, and to examine the implications this has for emotion and self-understanding within a positivity-oriented digital culture. To address these aims, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Dutch young adults, arguably among the most active social media and Instagram users (CBS, 2023, p. 50; Afix & Van Tiel, 2025) and prone to share mostly positive content (Bailey et al., 2020). We asked them to reflect on their Instagram posting and revisitation practices, emotional experiences, and identity, and situated their individual narratives within broader cultural and platform logics of positivity, self-presentation, and memory.

This topic is relevant to sociology because it shows how the affective self is shaped by cultural norms surrounding happiness, which extend into the digital platforms that mediate and discipline emotion and memory. We show how positivity norms structure not only what is performed to others, but also what is available for self-reflection and self-understanding. Our contribution is thus twofold. Empirically, we provide insight into how Dutch young adults engage in ASR as an everyday emotional and identity practice. Theoretically, we attempt to extend dramaturgical and emotion sociology by showing how impression management can stretch across time, and how digital memory practices are shaped by positivity norms. Our findings provide insight into the layered affective dynamics of a culture where happiness is expected both in public display and in private self-consumption.

Theoretical Framework

This section begins by examining happiness as a social imperative, followed by an exploration of the

positivity norm on Instagram and its influence on digital memory practices. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for proposing ASR.

Social expectation of happiness

Against the backdrop of rapid developments in technology and media, and with the expansion of self-improvement tools to videos, smartphone apps, and personal development courses (Hyman, 2014, pp. 3, 20), contemporary Western societies are characterised by a deepening focus on the self and inner emotional life. This is accompanied by an increasing influence of psychology (Wright, 2008, p. 321) and a widespread preoccupation with happiness and well-being (Hyman, 2020), which together suggests a social expectation that individuals actively pursue and optimise their happiness.

Various scholars (e.g. Bruckner, 2011; Ahmed, 2010) argue that we operate under an imperative to be or appear happy. We would perform happiness to meet this pervasive cultural expectation, transforming happiness from a private feeling into a personal duty (Bruckner, 2011). Nikolas Rose (1998, p. 157) observed that individuals are urged to treat life as a personal project by shaping emotions, relationships, work, and sexuality to create a lifestyle aimed at self-worth, happiness and fulfilment. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed (2010) describes the pervasive social expectation that participating in what society deems 'good' will make us happy, and that by being or at least performing happiness, we will also please others. She notes that people often 'pass as happy', performing happiness to maintain social harmony (p. 59). Negative emotions, by contrast, tend to be treated as deviant, disruptive (Ahmed, 2010), undesirable, or are even medicalised (Dworkin, 2001).

Although 'positive' and 'negative' emotions are multifaceted and complex concepts both in sociology and psychology, it is often affective experiences such as amusement, awe, compassion, contentment, enthusiasm, love, and pride that are included as positive and happy experiences (Keltner & Cowen, 2021, p. 217; Piff & Moskowitz, 2017, p. 903). In psychology, the concept of 'negative' emotions is problematic, as it oversimplifies the diverse roles and evaluation of emotions (Kristjánsson, 2003, p. 361). They are often linked to fear, frustration, anger, boredom, sadness, shame, embarrassment, or guilt (Rowe & Fitness, 2018, p. 1), and while public discourse often views them as detrimental, they can actually be beneficial in certain circumstances, making their collective label as "negative" unhelpful (Kristjánsson, 2003, p. 361). Whilst psychology and sociology complicate the definition of positive and negative emotions, this rarely is the case in public discourse, where the definitions of negative and positive largely seem to follow what psychology defines them to be.

We can follow this through by looking at the culture of positive thinking that has become widespread across different areas of society (Ehrenreich, 2021), resulting from the unwritten imperative to live life oriented towards joy and positivity, what Ahmed (2010, p. 59) calls happiness scripts. Happiness is often used to measure societal well-being, linked to economic, political and social indicators (Veenhoven, 1988), and success across life domains like work, relationships and health (Fisher, 2009, p. 399; Ramsey & Gentzler, 2015; Steptoe, 2019). Research in social and emotional psychology confirms that people

increasingly internalise this emotional norm (Tsai, 2007, p. 245; also Carver & Scheier, 1990; Rojas & Veenhoven, 2011). In other words, happiness is not only valued personally, but also collectively through culture and both local and (inter)national measurements, suggesting that happiness is a highly public and performative emotion that is governed and politicised by social pressures, and not merely a private emotion.

The idea that societies establish norms guiding how individuals should behave and express emotions in public is well-established. In fact, classic sociology of emotion supports this view. Ahmed's (2010) notion of happiness scripts connects closely with Arlie Hochschild's (1983/2012, p. 56) concept of feeling rules, which refers to social norms that guide how we should feel and express emotions in different social contexts. We learn there are 'right' and 'wrong' emotions for certain situations and adjust our feelings accordingly. While originally applied to the emotional labour in jobs, like customer service, feeling rules clearly shape everyday social life and social media. For instance, when someone shares a post about graduating or starting a new job, they are expected to frame it positively through smiles, celebratory captions, or emojis. If the same moment is shared with a caption expressing anxiety, doubt, or sadness, it might prompt confusion or concern from followers. This further shows how emotions are social phenomena regulated and enforced through interpersonal cues and reactions, rather than merely private and internal.

Under these feeling rules and happiness scripts, happiness can emerge as a socially expected emotion. This contributes to a cultural environment where individuals may feel pressure to appear happy to friends, family, or colleagues, as happiness is often treated as a default emotional state that typically requires little justification, unlike expressions of negative emotion (Linzbach & Suojanen, 2020, pp. 211, 214–218).

Positivity norm on social media

These cultural feeling rules and the affective social expectation of happiness powerfully manifest in social media networks (SMN), especially on image-centric platforms like Instagram. Several studies point towards a positivity *bias* on SMN: positive emotions are posted more commonly than negative emotions (Lin & Utz, 2015, p. 30; Tehlwall et al., 2009, p. 190–194) and they elicit more positive feedback than negative emotions (Bazarova, 2012, p. 827). Additionally, SMN users tend to curate their posts in such a way to present more favourable or successful images of themselves (Lin & Utz, 2015, p. 3; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2020, pp. 329–330), suggesting how personal life is turned into a curated display of positivity.

The inclination to display happiness and positivity on SMN may find root in a broader desire to maintain favourable self-images and gain social approval (Pounders et al., 2016, p. 15, 36–38, 41–47; Spottswood & Hancock, 2016, p. 252). Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation helps to further explain this. In his classic work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1956/2022) paralleled social interaction to dramaturgy: people, like actors performing roles for an audience, actively manage how they are perceived by others. He used theatre metaphors to explain the contrasts between an individual's 'frontstage' and 'backstage' behaviour. In everyday life, people engage in frontstage self-presentation

through choices in clothing, hairstyles, or brands, tailoring their appearance to suit particular contexts, as well as how they carry out the role. However, what Goffman could only anticipate in the analog era has, arguably, been exponentially amplified by social media. Individuals increasingly communicate online, constructing and performing their identities online as well. Additionally, the self is not merely presented, but iteratively constructed and displayed in ways that prioritise visibility, validation, and aesthetic affect, resulting in the typical SMN user's tendencies of sharing personal highlights, smiling selfies, vacation photos, and omitting or obscuring negative emotions (Masciantonio et al., 2025). Simply put, the self-presentation described by Goffman has become even more curated and continuous.

SMN like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) collapse the private and public realms. Users are thus invited to engage in 'condensed performances of the self' before multiple audiences (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 2). Each update, photo, story, Snap, or Tweet can be considered a mini-performance, signaling who we are, carefully tailored to balance social rewards of connectivity against the risks of visibility (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 2; Livingstone, 2008). Since positive display is favoured, positivity itself becomes a safe and appealing aesthetic currency that tends to yield more positive feedback than negativity. In contrast, expressions deviating from this norm risk being labelled as oversharing, as 'firmly outside of [one's] boundaries of what belongs in these spaces,' or dismissed as 'attention seeking or self-indulgent' (Annabell, 2020, p. 2). This does not mean that negativity is fully banned from Instagram; it is often allowed when framed humorously or given a positive spin (Annabell, 2022). Thus, users learn, consciously or not, that showing happiness or positivity is part of a successful online self-presentation.

Because users observe which behaviours are most common or socially accepted on SMN, they become socialised into particular posting practices, shaping what they share and how they behave on the platform (Boczkowski et al., 2018, p. 246; Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 27). New users often mimic the emotional tone of others, reinforcing this norm without explicit instruction (Smoktunowicz et al., 2023, p. 1353). This dynamic can also be understood through Goffman's concept of face, which describes how individuals manage their presentation to maintain social approval. On Instagram, where self-presentation is central (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), displaying negative emotions may risk a 'loss of face' if such posts are met with resistance, disinterest, or are ignored by the audience.

Bringing this together, we suggest that SMN, like Instagram, function under a positivity *norm* that encourages an emotionally selective self-presentation. Previous research (Lin & Utz, 2015; Tehlwall et al., 2009; Bazarova, 2012; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2020) primarily describe this tendency as a positivity bias; that is, the empirical observation that positivity is posted more frequently and receives more favourable feedback than negative posts. In this study, we conceptualise positivity as a normative expectation rather than merely a descriptive pattern. We propose that positivity on SMN is socially expected, anticipated, and learned as the appropriate emotional register for participation. We understand this positivity norm as a platform-specific manifestation of broader cultural expectations surrounding happiness. While cultural happiness imperatives and expectations establish positivity as desirable and expected (e.g. Bruckner, 2011; Ahmed, 2010), SMN translates this into concrete norms affecting online

self-presentation. Importantly, this norm does not originate solely from the platform's algorithmic design, nor solely from user culture, but emerges from their interaction. On the one hand, users bring culturally learned expectations about happiness and emotional appropriateness into the platform, shaping what they post, omit, or anticipate will be well received. On the other hand, platform affordances such as *likes*, filters, algorithm-driven visibility, and feedback metrics actively amplify positive content by making it more visible and rewarding. Together, these dynamics socialise users to 'keep it positive' in order to 'fit into' the platform. We suggest that these processes operate at the interactional level as platform-specific feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983): situational emotional expectations through which users learn which emotions are appropriate to express, which should be downplayed, and which are best excluded or archived. In this sense, feeling rules function as the mechanisms through which broader cultural happiness imperatives and the platform-specific positivity norm are enacted and enforced within the socio-technical environment of SMN, shaping not only practices of self-presentation but also what ultimately becomes available for later self-revisitation.

Positivity as memory archive condition

SMN do not only serve as sites of presentation, but also archives of personal history (Good, 2012, p. 557). Platforms like Instagram allow users to look back on lived events, effectively turning personal memory into a networked, mediated archive. However, this archive is not a neutral or complete chronicle, as it is curated through the lens of social norms.

Personal memory has always been socially shaped. Maurice Halbwachs (cited by Van Dijk, 2007, as cited in West, 2012, p. 12) argued that individuals recall the past through collective frameworks (e.g. family, religion, nation), which provide the cues and schemas for remembering. This means that memory is not purely individual, but recursively shaped through social interactions (West, 2012, p. 2); even childhood memories are co-constructed through shared narratives and mediated artifacts like family photos. With social media, this interdependence becomes immediately visible. Building on Halbwachs, José van Dijck (2010) argues that personal memories are always mediated by technology and culture, meaning that what we remember and share is guided by social frameworks. On Instagram, the dominating framework of the positivity norm results in a memory curation skewed towards positivity. It thus follows that Instagram's positivity norm appears to have profound implications for how our memories are recorded. What is remembered and looked back upon tends to be selectively curated to reflect moments of joy, composure, and positivity, rather than the full range of lived emotional experiences that a SMN like Instagram theoretically allows to be expressed. The archive is a selective, self-presentational act and also an anticipatory, emotional practice. Courtney Hopf (2012) refers to this as 'pre-emptive memory-curation': individuals actively decide not only what others should remember them by, but also their future selves. Given the cultural pressures surrounding happiness, the identity most people want to display is a positive one. We can essentially understand this as Goffman's dramaturgy across a longer time scale: impression management is not only in the moment, but reaches into the past and future, and, most importantly, individuals manage the memory of their impressions as well.

Introducing affective self-revisitation

While the impression is often that SMN are directed at an external audience, posts also form part of users' own affective repertoires. This brings us to the under-researched practice of engaging with one's own curated digital memories, often during emotionally challenging or ambivalent moments (described in everyday terms as negative emotions). In this study, we refer to this phenomenon as affective self-revisitation (ASR). We define ASR as an individual's affectively charged engagement with their previously posted online content, through which they reconnect with past emotional states, self-presentations, and moments of perceived happiness. Importantly, while previous research documented how individuals use Instagram or other SMN as personal archives (Good, 2012; Zhao et al., 2013) in order to look back to their past posts as a way 'to feel good' (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023, pp. 7–8), we do not presuppose ASR as always with deliberate intent. While some instances may involve intentional revisitation, our focus is on how such engagements, whether intentional or unintentional, become emotionally and narratively meaningful within a positivity-oriented digital environment. With this, we attempt to extend this phenomenon by situating the practice within a sociological perspective on affect, memory, and normativity.

At first glance, ASR may resemble what psychology refers to as emotional self-regulation: the deliberate adjustment of emotional states through various strategies (e.g. Cole et al., 1994; Thompson, 1994). This study, however, builds on and departs from that view by situating ASR within a sociological understanding of emotion and memory. We depart from a purely intentional regulatory strategy by conceptualising ASR as a socially situated emotional practice that becomes meaningful through its affective and identity-related consequences, which can occur without explicit planning or deliberate emotional goals. The focus is on how emotional experience and self-understanding are co-constructed through social norms and digital memory systems (e.g. Van Dijck, 2010, pp. 402–403).

Method

This study explored how Dutch young adults revisit past Instagram posts and how this practice relates to emotional experiences and self-understanding within Instagram's positivity norm. A qualitative approach was chosen because this research aimed to capture subjective meaning-making and emotional reflection on social media practices, for which qualitative methods are particularly suited (Clark et al., 2021, p. 475).

Scope and operationalisation

Given the limited scope and timeframe of this project, this article does not aim to exhaustively theorise, empirically prove or formalise the concept of ASR. Rather, it aims to provide a sociological entry point into its contours and implications. Accordingly, as we worked with a small qualitative dataset, we focused on conceptual clarity and analytical depth rather than empirical generalisation. This approach allowed for a more grounded exploration of sociological questions concerning emotions and memories as mediated and shaped by SMN.

The key constructs of the theoretical framework have been operationalised as follows:

Positive social media posts: Drawing on Ahmed's (2010) conceptualisation of happiness as a form of world-making that orients individuals towards objects and experiences promising a good life, we trace the framework by Annabell (2020, p. 2) to define positive social media posts as those that depict or describe moments, objects, or themes associated with happiness. This includes posts described by participants that highlight friendships and relationships (e.g. photos or captions expressing affection, love, gratitude, or companionship), celebrations and events (e.g. birthdays, graduations, weddings, (religious) festivals, achievements), holidays and landscapes (e.g. travel posts, nature appreciation, scenic photography with positive framing), and everyday joyful moments (e.g. enjoying food, leisure activities, simple pleasures, humour). Such posts reflect orientations towards what is perceived as contributing to a happy or 'good life' (Ahmed, 2010), including both extraordinary and ordinary experiences framed positively. This also follows our theoretical understanding of the positivity norm on social media.

Feeling rules: Defined by Hochschild (1983, p. 56) as socially constructed expectations regarding which emotions are appropriate to feel and express in particular social contexts. This concept was operationalised by examining participants' references to expectations about appearing happy or positive online (e.g. 'You don't post sad stuff on Instagram'). We also attended to the absence, deletion or archiving of negative content, hesitation to share posts expressing negative or vulnerable emotions, and the framing of positivity or happiness as a normative baseline or social obligation in participants' reflections on their own profile or feed. This also follows our theoretical understanding of the positivity norm on social media.

Digital memory practices: Following Van Dijck (2010; West, 2012), this involves the ways individuals curate, revisit, and emotionally engage with personal content stored on SMN in the form of images, captions, stories, or other relevant media. This can be indicated by the frequency and manner of archiving, highlighting, and/or saving content by participants, but also their mentions of social media as a memory tool, diary, archive, or repository of personal meaning. Contrasts between public curation and private revisitation behaviour are also considered under this operationalisation.

ASR engagement: As defined in the theoretical framework as the affectively charged act of revisiting one's own previously posted (positive) content, which may occur intentionally or incidentally, and which can involve processes of mood regulation, emotional repair, or identity anchoring. ASR engagement was identified when participants described returning to their own posts, stories, highlights, or archived content and reflected on the emotional responses this evoked (e.g. comfort, reassurance, nostalgia, longing, ambivalence) or the meanings attached to these moments in relation to their sense of self. Intentionality and use of saved content or self-curated highlights as emotional reference points are also considered. Emotional context (e.g. boredom, stress, sadness, or reflective moments), degree of intentionality, and the use of saved or curated content as affective or identity reference points were treated as analytic dimensions of ASR rather than defining criteria.

Further, it should be remarked that we recognised the theoretical complexities around labelling emotions as 'negative' (Kristjánsson, 2003). However, for clarity with participants, we used common positive

and negative labels often used in public discourse (see Rowe & Fitness, 2018, for typical psychological categorisations of these emotions). Additionally, because our analysis focuses on participants' emotional relationships to their past posts rather than on analysing the content or aesthetics of the posts themselves, happiness scripts (Ahmed, 2010) were not treated as a separate analytical category. There were also concerns that they would overshadow the analysis of micro-level practices with macro-level ideological critique.

Instagram was selected for its popularity among Dutch young adults (Afix & Van Tiel, 2025) and its public visual memory functions, which are suited to studying emotional self-presentation and revisitation. These include posts (which remain permanently visible on a user's profile until deleted or archived), Stories (which are available for one day and do not appear on the main feed or the user's profile, but can be shared publicly or with a selected list of 'Close Friends'), Story Highlights (Stories saved in curated folders on a user's profile and permanently accessible unless deleted), and the post archive (where posts are removed from the public profile and stored in a private folder accessible only to the user). These affordances enable users to curate, store, and revisit personal content over time, thereby providing a structured environment in which practices of ASR can emerge.

Snapchat, another very popular SMN among Dutch young adults, was considered, but Snapchat's private exchanges often involve more emotionally complex or socially transgressive content (e.g. grief, anger, violence, or sexual material) that is less common in Instagram's curated environment. In addition, Instagram's visible posts, Stories, and Highlights enable meaningful reflection on how individuals construct and revisit their public emotional selves over time. Other platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter/X, BeReal, WhatsApp, or Pinterest) were excluded due to their lack of strong visual memory functions, their primary use for text-based information exchange rather than self-curated memory, or due to a low young adult Dutch user base.

Data collection

The analysis was based on semi-structured in-depth interviews (N = 4), a method offering the necessary flexibility to explore participants' personal experiences in depth, allowing participants to reflect on emotional regulation in a private and open setting (Clark et al., 2021, pp. 1383-1385). An initial interview guide was structured around three key themes: (1) posting practices and emotional regulation (i.e. posting behaviour); (2) affective self-revisitation (i.e. looking back on past posts); and (3) emotional curation and digital memory (i.e. participants' profiles). This interview guide was designed to investigate the relationship between Instagram practices, emotion regulation, and the cultural norms shaping online self-presentation, by situating the micro (Theme 2) in the macro of broader emotional norms (Theme 1) and the framing/restructuring of memories on social media (Theme 3).

Following Clark et al. (2021), participants were recruited using purposive convenience sampling, as this allowed for faster recruitment within the limited timeframe of the project (pp. 391–392), from both researchers' personal networks. While this approach enabled efficient recruitment, it may have introduced

selection bias by favouring individuals with similar social, educational, or cultural backgrounds to the researchers. As a result, the sample is not representative and the findings may reflect experiences more typical of our networks. Participants were included based on their age (young adults aged between 20–30 years old), country (currently residing in the Netherlands), Instagram activity, and their potential for posting and revisiting memories on Instagram. The sample was purposely constructed to include both male (n = 2) and female-identifying (n = 2) participants to enhance the credibility of the results and to capture a wider range of perspectives (pp. 692–693).

To maintain consistency in interviewing techniques and avoid variation in interpersonal dynamics, all interviews were conducted by Kelsey. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' oral consent. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for student research in the social sciences: participants were informed about the aims and contents of the research with the ability to opt out at any given moment, and all interview records were fully anonymised prior to transcription (Clark et al., 2021, pp. 147–150). All interviews were held in Dutch to allow interviewees to express themselves more freely and fully, without the cognitive burden of responding in a second language. It also prevented overly cautious or filtered answers and enabled a more natural conversational flow, which in turn supported richer, more emotionally nuanced responses. All quotations included in this paper have therefore been translated into English with attention to clarity and accuracy.

Participants

All participants have been anonymised through assigning generic pseudonyms. For this research, we interviewed Anne, a 26-year-old teaching assistant with a professional (HBO) bachelor's degree; James, a 28-year-old credit controller with an MBO degree (VET-equivalent); Claire, a 26-year-old university teacher and entrepreneur with an academic (WO) master's degree; and John, a 26-year-old internal communication officer with a professional (HBO) associate's degree. Except for John, who lives in the area of Rotterdam, all participants live in the area of Amsterdam.

Analyses

All anonymous interview records were automatically transcribed using NotebookLM and then manually cleaned by Aaron to ensure accuracy and readability for coding and analysis. Four transcripts were coded by both researchers. The fifth interview provided limited relevant material due to recording issues and what remained did not yield sufficient analytical depth on ASR and was thus omitted.

We followed a two-phase iterative coding process using Atlas.ti (Web, v9.18.0). We used thematic analysis for iteratively reviewing and categorizing qualitative data to identify recurring themes and patterns that help explain participants' experiences (Clark et al., 2021, p. 935). In the first phase, both researchers independently coded two transcripts using an initial codebook primarily derived from the interview guide. In the second phase, Aaron conducted an open coding phase, allowing new codes to emerge, whilst Kelsey prepared relevant quotes into emerging patterns for the actual analysis.

After coding, considering the time constraints, both researchers drafted their own analyses, which

were then later discussed and merged. This approach also made it possible to compare interpretative angles and codes that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Findings

Across the interviews, three key patterns emerged that help us understand how emotional norms, memory practices, and identity work intersect on Instagram. These patterns reveal that ASR is not simply a matter of looking back to feel better. Rather, it happens within a broader emotional culture that encourages the performance of positivity, the curation of digital identity, and the internalisation of platform-specific affective expectations. ASR is a layered emotional and narrative practice, situated at the intersection of social norms, selfhood, and memory.

The positivity norm as emotional filter

All participants described Instagram as a personal archive where one could revisit memories and create a visual narrative of the self. Claire (26, university teacher and entrepreneur) noted: 'For me, it's really a medium where people can instantly see who I am as a person.' However, this archive is curated through an emotional lens deeply shaped by the positivity norm. Participants consistently described a reluctance to share emotional vulnerability, political opinions, or expressions of sadness, anger, or failure. These were seen as either inappropriate or attention-seeking, even within more private spaces like Close Friends stories or private profiles. Anne (26, teaching assistant) remarked: 'Then I thought, okay, maybe it's actually not good to share that, because [...] it almost seems like I'm crying out for help, even though I'm really not.' Rather than functioning as neutral platforms for expression, Instagram profiles were experienced as stages for emotional composure and social desirability. As James (28, credit controller) put it: 'Instagram is for the good things, not for the bad things.' This reflects not only internalised affective expectations, but also a form of emotional governance: Instagram's affordances and social norms encourage users to rehearse, regulate, and restrict certain feelings in ways that resemble Hochschild's feeling rules. Even moments of grief or hardship were seen as inappropriate. John (26, internal communication officer) noted that during a trip where a friend was pickpocketed, he still posted a beautiful image from the vacation, omitting the uncomfortable part. The logic of curation extended into what Hochschild (1983) might call feeling rules: unwritten emotional expectations that govern what is shareable and acceptable in a given social space. In Goffman's (1956/2022) terms, this reflects the management of face where individuals curate content to express themselves and to maintain a consistent and socially appropriate emotional presentation in the 'frontstage' of Instagram.

This curation wasn't limited to public audiences. Participants still exercised restraint in private or semi-private spaces, such as Close Friends stories. What emerged was a form of affective discipline: a filtering of emotion that carries from frontstage to backstage, shaping even the internal archive. Anne sometimes archived old posts because they no longer "fit" with her present identity, aesthetic, or relationships. James:

'If I think it's important to me, but not necessary for the people around me, then I archive it. Because, like I said, it's for me, not for the world.' Even this personal memory space is shaped by earlier judgments about what was acceptable to share, creating an emotional archive pre-filtered by normative expectations of Instagram's feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). This suggests a contamination of the backstage by the frontstage: the space meant for private reflection is already structured by the public performance previously curated for others (Goffman, 1956/2022).

Ambivalence as result of incidental revisitation

While it may appear intentional, ASR was rarely described as a conscious form of mood repair. Contrary to models of deliberate emotional regulation, which emphasize purposeful strategies to alter affective states (e.g. Cole et al., 1994; Thompson, 1994), participants often encountered their digital archives in unplanned ways, complicating the findings of Jungselius & Weilenmann (2023). These moments were frequently triggered by platform features such as story highlights, casual conversations with friends, or emotional drift during periods of boredom or sadness. James recalled: 'I was on the phone with one of my best friends and we were talking about old messages, about old things, how much times have changed.' Claire described scrolling through her gallery in low moments and unexpectedly confronting old photos: 'Then you just look back at my photos every now and then and think: Okay, you know what, actually, it's fine, you look good, and maybe it's just this day that you're feeling this way.' Although these moments might seem solitary or introspective, they often unfolded within socially entangled spaces, such as during conversations or while navigating apps, structured around visibility and audience awareness. The boundary between private reflection and public performance became blurred. These revisitations did not occur in a separate backstage space, but in a context better described as an overlap between backstage and frontstage (Goffman, 1956). ASR was not detached from interaction, but embedded in it. A memory might resurface in response to a friend's message, a resurfaced story, or even a new like. These subtle social cues prompted renewed reflection, functioning as mini-performances that revisited past selves. This aligns with Papacharissi's (2012) idea of social media posts as condensed and stylized expressions shaped for networked audiences.

These revisitations often produced ambivalent emotional responses. While participants sometimes experienced nostalgia, pride, or joy, they also reported regret, dissonance, or a sense of alienation. Claire, for instance, reflected on the contrast between how a photo looked and how she actually felt when posting it:

> 'I think it was just a selfie or a smiling photo of myself. And obviously, when I think back to the moment I posted it, it's not like I was necessarily super happy or anything at that time. I actually don't think I was feeling very good at all.'

These moments reveal a subtle but powerful form of emotional dissonance: ASR reactivates the memory, but also the awareness that the memory was once selectively performed. In this sense, ASR is not simply a reflection of the past, but a way of re-encountering the self as it was once shaped for others.

Claire and Anne both described instances when looking back did not necessarily comfort them, but instead made them aware of who they were, or used to be. James commented on seeing his old self as 'a completely different person,' highlighting how digital memory can provoke recognition, rupture, or reflection rather than emotional resolution.

Curated continuity and narrative labour

Beyond mood regulation, ASR also emerged as a form of identity work. Participants often spoke of their feeds as personal timelines, reflective of values, changes, and milestones. James stated: 'This [own feed] describes me. It makes sure that my message takes the right form.' Here, James frames his Instagram profile not only as a personal archive but as a form of self-presentation that communicates something about who he is. His feed becomes both a reflection and a tool; a curated version of the self, intended for both self-recognition and audience interpretation. Claire emphasized that she curates her Story Highlights so others know 'what's important' to her. Anne described her profile as 'a kind of personal memory album', capturing the double function of Instagram as both an intimate record and public performance. These examples show how ASR is not merely an inward-facing emotional act but also a socially situated performance. The revisitation of past content activates a dynamic that can be understood through Goffman's (1956/2022) distinction between frontstage and backstage behaviors, as the boundaries between them become permeable: personal memory is filtered through the desire to maintain a coherent, presentable self-image. The platform collapses private and public boundaries, embedding emotional memory in a continuous impression management process. Each revisit is not just a return to a past self, but a renewed performance of identity. This performative dynamic resonates with Papacharissi's (2012) notion of social media posts as condensed, stylized performances of the self. In this view, digital memory is not neutral or static but shaped by an ongoing negotiation between emotional truth and social acceptability. What users choose to preserve, highlight, or return to reveals not only what matters emotionally but also how they wish to be seen.

This narrative function was not passive. Participants used ASR to reaffirm aspects of themselves, to trace growth, or to hold on to who they had been in difficult times. Claire remarked: 'It also just helps me put things into perspective. [...] Just because you're in this moment now doesn't mean you're always like that. I also have other things alongside it, and that is also a part of you.' This also suggests a form of anticipatory revisitation: curating content now with the expectation that it may become meaningful upon returning to it later. Yet, the emotional impact of such revisits remains unpredictable. Participants encountered moments of joy and recognition, but also longing or disconnection. ASR becomes a form of narrative identity work: a negotiation between the self once seen and the self now felt.

Conclusion

This project set out to understand how Dutch young adults revisit past Instagram posts and how this

practice relates to emotional experience and identity under the platform's positivity norm. While earlier work suggests that individuals revisit their social media content to 'feel good' (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023), our findings complicate this view. Affective self-revisitation (ASR) rarely appeared as an intentional strategy for mood repair, but happened incidentally through conversations, platform prompts, or simply boredom. This suggests the importance of understanding this act as an affective practice rather than a deliberate emotional strategy. Additionally, it unfolded within a dramaturgical framework of impression management, emotional discipline, and curated memory. What seemed to emerge is not a spontaneous emotional uplift, but a layered encounter with the self as once-performed and selectively archived.

Instagram, described by all participants as a 'personal archive', is anything but neutral. Users construct their archive under normative expectations of emotional appropriateness and aesthetic coherence, shaped by Instagram's positivity norm and enacted through platform-specific feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). On Instagram, these feeling rules inform what is appropriate to be shown *and*, consequently, what may be remembered. Negative emotions, described by participants as grief, anger, or sadness, were often excluded from public posts and even semi-private features like Close Friends Stories. They expressed fears of being perceived as attention-seeking, reported discomfort sharing such content, or found it unnecessary to include negativity on Instagram. This suggests a strong orientation towards socially expected modes of emotional display on Instagram. A result is that the act of looking back becomes filtered through these affective norms; what is available for self-revisitation is already shaped by Instagram's positivity norm, which is itself rooted and reinforced by broader cultural norms to appear happy (Ahmed, 2010).

Goffman's (1956/2022) dramaturgical lens helps articulate this phenomenon. Instagram collapses the binary between frontstage (public performance) and backstage (private expression), turning even the supposed digital backstage (e.g. Close Friends stories, or privately archived posts) into softened continuations of the front. When individuals revisit old posts, they seem to not actually return to a private past self, but to a curated face sculpted for their social media audience, and their anticipated future self that will look back on them. ASR can thus be understood as a form of recursive impression management across time. Aligning with Hopf's (2012) idea of pre-emptive memory curation, participants curate their own affective and often idealised biographies. When they revisit posts, whether intentionally to uplift mood or incidentally through social interaction, platform features (e.g. notifications, archiving posts), or boredom, this occurs within the limits of what was once deemed emotionally appropriate to share.

This has implications for identity. While participants described their Instagram profiles as timelines or depictions of who they are, our analysis shows that these profiles function more as sites of narrative identity work across past, present, and anticipated selves. Rather than neutral archives, they reflect forms of pre-emptive memory curation (Hopf, 2012) shaped by emotional norms. In this sense, ASR is not only about what one remembers, but about what one feels able, or permitted, to remember within the constraints of platform norms, audience expectations, and cultural scripts of positivity.

Bringing these insights together, we propose ASR as a valuable lens for understanding how emotion, memory, and identity are shaped by platform-specific positivity norms that are enacted through feeling

rules and reflect broader cultural imperatives surrounding happiness. Departing from the view that revisiting past posts functions primarily as a simple and intentional strategy to uplift negative emotions, ASR can instead be understood as a second-order encounter with one's previously constructed emotional self. What is revisited has already been filtered through earlier, normatively shaped decisions about what was appropriate to display, whether intentional or incidental, and does not necessarily produce emotional relief. In this sense, ASR is not only an emotional practice but also as a form of identity work through which individuals relate to, reinterpret, and maintain a sense of self across time.

This research offers three contributions to the sociological understanding of digital emotion and memory. First, our analysis illustrates how Goffman's dramaturgical lens can be applied temporally: ASR involves a form of impression management across time, where revisiting past posts can feel like re-encountering a previously performed self. Second, we build on Hochschild's theory of emotion work to reveal how social feeling rules govern memory, not only expression; even private self-revisitation is shaped by positivity norms. Finally, we complicate the notion of digital memory as comforting or cohesive, instead showing how curated memory archives generate ambivalence, and identity fracture and (re-)negotiation. By reframing ASR as a form of normatively shaped identity work, this study contributes to broader debates on the emotional costs of self-presentation in a culture increasingly structured by digitally-platformed identities, memories, and positivity imperatives.

While this study offers an in-depth exploration of ASR among Dutch young adults, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, all participants lived in urban centres of the Netherlands' metropolitan Randstad area and were relatively highly educated. Additionally, they were recruited from both researchers' personal networks, who both occupy a similar socio-cultural position to the participants. This convenient sampling and shared positionality helped with rapid rapport building during interviews, as experiences and vocabularies (including those surrounding Instagram use, with which both researchers were familiar) often required little elaboration. At the same time, this proximity may also have shaped both the interview dynamics and the interpretation of findings, such as rendering certain platform practices or affective expectations self-evident to both researchers and participants. To address this, we approached the analysis reflexively, discussing codes and interpretations collaboratively and attending closely to moments of hesitation, ambivalence, or contradiction in participants' accounts. Rather than treating positionality as a source of distortion, we understand it as a situated condition of knowledge production that shaped how ASR was accessed, interpreted, and theorised in this project. Further, the low sample size limits the generalisability of the findings across other regions, countries, age groups, and social backgrounds.

Second, most participants later reflected that they no longer posted on Instagram as frequently as they once did, suggesting that their ASR practices may be shaped by shifting platform engagement over time. Third, the data relied on self-reported reflections, which may not fully capture nonverbal, affective undercurrents. This ties into a limitation of interview-based research in struggling to access pre-cognitive, affective registers, or otherwise bodily, fleeting, or inarticulate responses to ASR. Fourth, the time constraints of the four-week project necessarily restricted the scope of participant recruitment and analysis

depth. Finally, it should be noted that our object of study is doubly-mediated: participants revisit only what they once deemed postable, which might skew the affective data before it even becomes accessible to them and the researchers.

Future research could expand on this study in several directions. First, ASR might be examined across different cultural contexts, regions, age groups, and ethnicities to understand how socio-cultural settings and backgrounds shape practices of self-revisitation, as this study provided a sample primarily from the Netherlands' metropolitan Randstad region. Further work could also investigate potential gendered differences, as well as how users vary in the frequency and temporal depth of ASR, and the extent to which they imagine or anticipate an audience when revisiting their own posts. Comparative research across platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, or BeReal may reveal how differing levels of ephemerality, visibility, and audience structure influence ASR. Finally, because ASR may unfold dynamically across the life course, longitudinal or diary-based approaches could provide insight into how individuals engage with revisitation during emotionally volatile or transitional periods. Theoretically, future work might also explore how ASR intersects with collective memory, grief, or political affect.

Conflict of Interests

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

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Editor's Note: The printed edition of the Amsterdam Journal of Social Sciences Volume 2 Issue 1 includes 5 key references selected by the author. The full Bibliography and Appendices can be found online, the QR-code below links to the AJSS website with the article pdf.

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In this edition, we highlight contemporary debates from the Social Sciences: general voting trends across the world in which populists have seen a strong resurgence, how we as individuals can perform our tasks when our mind is elsewhere, how it makes us feel to see a curated version of ourselves on Social Media and the collective effort we have to make to organize a fair system of reproductive responsibility.

This selection of articles showcases the strengths of this journal, insights from different disciplines are presented to the same audience with the aim to broaden our horizons. We may not be the best at reading regression tables or interpreting interview codes, but it is (usually) worthwhile to try. You are bound to pick some piece of fun fact knowledge up, and maybe we even foster shared ground and an appreciation for each other's work.

Selecting 5 high-quality, extensive works for this printed edition is a conscious choice, but we encourage submitting shorter works, personal essays and commentaries as well. In the end, developing original thoughts and an own academic voice with the guidance of the AJSS Team is our goal.

We thank everyone involved for their time, resources and energy by which we create a community and a platform that can give voice to meaningful work. Next up is our themed journal edition on Palestine, in which we present works that emphasize the importance of academia in effecting real-world change.

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