

A Study on the Effect of Gender Factors on the Language Learning Beliefs of International Undergraduate Students in China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Chinese language learning beliefs among 100 international undergraduate students in China using a quantitative research approach. Beliefs are analysed across five dimensions: difficulty, nature of learning, learning ability, communication strategies, and motivation/expectations. Results indicate generally positive beliefs, particularly in motivation and expectations. In sum while gender has limited influence, it significantly affects beliefs related to the ability and strategy preferences. No significant differences were observed based on the students' academic majors. The study offers practical suggestions for Chinese language instruction: enhancing motivation, refining strategies, promoting cultural integration, recognising individual differences, and improving teacher training. These findings provide both theoretical insights and pedagogical values to improve Chinese language education for international students.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, individual differences among language learners have garnered increasing attention from linguists and researchers. Stem (1983) suggested that more in-depth studies should be conducted on the conditions of foreign language learning and learning strategies in various contexts, including

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environment, age, linguistic background, and proficiency levels. Research on language learning beliefs constitutes a critical component of studies on individual differences, offering significant insights for understanding learner variability and improving teaching practices. Existing studies predominantly focus on English learners, with limited research on the evolving beliefs of second-language learners of Chinese. Against the global enthusiasm for learning Chinese, the number of students coming to China to study the language has grown annually. Therefore, it is imperative to explore how second-language learners of Chinese construct their beliefs on Chinese language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The beliefs of language learning

Language learning beliefs, as a crucial aspect of individual learner differences, are explored from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Two representative models in this field are those proposed by Wenden (1986) and Gabillon (2005). Wenden conceptualised learner beliefs as a form of metacognitive knowledge, encompassing person, task, and strategic dimensions. Her model emphasises how learners perceive themselves, the nature of language learning tasks, and the strategies they consider effective, reflecting a cognitive and learner-centered orientation.

In contrast, Gabillon (2005) introduces a more multidimensional and socially informed framework. She identifies six components of learner beliefs: metacognitive knowledge, internal and social representations, self-concept, self-efficacy, control beliefs, and attribution. This model incorporates not only cognitive but also affective and socio-cultural dimensions, highlighting the role of identity and social context in shaping beliefs.

Research on the Beliefs of Language Learning

Beliefs about language learning are widely recognised as a key factor in individual learner differences and have been central to second language acquisition (SLA) research. Numerous studies have demonstrated that such beliefs profoundly influence learners' motivation, strategic behaviour, and eventual learning outcomes (Zhong, 2014, 2015; Esmail & Mahdi, 2014). Scholars have examined these beliefs from multiple dimensions, including cognitive characteristics (Fujiwara, 2018; Takayoshi, 2018), individual differences such as gender and age (Dörnyei, 2005), and interactions with learning environments (Bo & Fu, 2018). These perspectives underscore the interplay between internal psychological mechanisms and external social contexts in shaping the learners' belief systems.

In recent years, SLA research has increasingly focused on English as a foreign language (EFL), with particular attention to the role of gender. Studies such as Kutuk et al. (2021) have shown that gender stereotypes heighten learner anxiety and reduce self-efficacy, which in turn hinders achievement. Xiao and Xie (2022) observed significant gender-based differences in self-efficacy among English learners in flipped classrooms, while Kutuk (2023) further explored how gender norms affect learners' cognitive and emotional engagement. Collectively, these studies identify gender as a persistent and influential factor in shaping language learning beliefs. Much of this research has employed Horwitz's (1988) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a widely used instrument for measuring learner belief systems across different contexts. However, despite its versatility, BALLI-based research has predominantly

focused on English language learners, with comparatively less attention paid to other language learning domains.

In the Chinese context, studies on language learning beliefs began relatively late and have mainly concentrated on English learners (Wen, 2001; Chen, 2004; Liu, 2010). Foundational research by Wen and Wang (1996) and Hu (2007) proposed structural models of belief, while subsequent work expanded to encompass learners at various academic levels, including secondary school (Qiao, 2017), undergraduate (Zhou, 2017), and graduate students (Li, 2016). These studies often distinguished between English and non-English majors (Dai & Wang, 2002; Teng, 2019) and consistently identified gender as a variable of interest. Nevertheless, more recent studies suggest a decline in scholarly attention to this area (Li & Hu, 2019), with limited exploration beyond English language learning.

By contrast, research into Chinese as a foreign language has gained momentum in recent years. Zhu (2015), for example, compared learners from Chinese-character and non-character cultural backgrounds using BALLI and interviews, revealing the influence of cultural factors. Other studies (Fang, 2018; Sun, 2017; Song, 2014) have explored gender-related belief differences among international students, often from the perspectives of classroom context and proficiency levels. Xie (2019) and Li (2018) examined cross-national variations in the strength of language learning beliefs, while Hu (2021) and Li & Hu (2020) analyzed the dynamic evolution of beliefs over time. Notably, Xiao (2023) investigated the relationship between learning anxiety, academic major, and Chinese learning beliefs, again highlighting gender as a key factor. Despite this expanding body of literature, most existing studies focus on short-term language learners or general language outcomes. There remains a noticeable lack of research specifically targeting undergraduate international students enrolled in degree programs in China, particularly on how gender may influence their beliefs about learning Chinese.

In sum, language learning beliefs are shaped by a complex interplay of internal dispositions and external conditions, and this dynamic interaction evolves as learners gain experience. Yet, the intersection of belief, gender, and undergraduate study in Chinese as a foreign language remains underexplored. The present study seeks to fill this research gap by examining gender-based differences in language learning beliefs among international undergraduate students in China.

Research Objectives

This research aims to:

- (i) examine the Chinese language learning beliefs of undergraduate international freshmen in China;
- (ii) identify significant gender-based differences in the Chinese language learning beliefs of undergraduate international freshmen; and
- (iii) explore the implications of these beliefs for Chinese language teaching practices.

Research Questions

This research attempts to answer the following questions:

- (i) What are the overall and dimensional characteristics of Chinese language learning beliefs among undergraduate international freshmen in China?

- (ii) Does the gender factor significantly influence the Chinese language learning beliefs of these students?
- (iii) What pedagogical implications can be derived from these beliefs for Chinese language teaching practices?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the Chinese language learning beliefs of 100 international undergraduate freshmen in China. The participants include 48 students majoring in trade economics, 31 in civil engineering, and 21 in electronic information engineering. The data collection instrument is a structured questionnaire comprising two sections. The first section gathers demographic information about the participants, including gender, age, and academic major. The second section is adapted from Horwitz's (1987) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)* and consists of 34 items measuring beliefs across five dimensions: perceived difficulty of learning Chinese, the nature of Chinese language learning, beliefs about learning ability, communication and strategy use, and motivation and expectations. All items are rated on a five-point Likert scale, where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research uses a purposeful sampling method to select participants, including all international students (N=100) enrolled in the 2023/2024 academic year. Questionnaires were distributed and collected in person. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive analyses included t-tests, mean score analyses, and standard deviation calculations. These results were utilized to address the research questions.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was developed based on Horwitz's (1987) "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)." The questionnaire addresses five dimensions of language learning beliefs: linguistic ability, learning difficulty, learning nature, communication strategies, and learning motivation.

The questionnaire consists of two parts:

- (i) The first part includes four items describing the demographic characteristics of the participants, such as gender, age, and major.
- (ii) The second part comprises 34 items aimed at determining participants' language learning beliefs.

Reliability Test

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the Chinese language learning beliefs of 100 international undergraduate freshmen in China. The participants include 48 students majoring in trade economics, 31 in civil engineering, and 21 in electronic information engineering. The data collection instrument is a structured questionnaire comprising two sections. The first section gathers demographic

information about the participants, including gender, age, and academic major. The second section is adapted from Horwitz's (1987) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)* and consists of 34 items measuring beliefs across five dimensions: perceived difficulty of learning Chinese, the nature of Chinese language learning, beliefs about learning ability, communication and strategy use, and motivation and expectations. All items are rated on a five-point Likert scale, where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree.

Table 1. Reliability Coefficient of Study Instruments

Instrument	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
BALLI	34	0.741

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Research question 1: What are the overall and dimensional characteristics of Chinese language learning beliefs among undergraduate international freshmen in China?

To explore the general characteristics of Chinese language learning beliefs among undergraduate international freshmen, descriptive statistical analyses were performed on the beliefs of beginner-level learners.

Table 2. The overall situation of Chinese learning beliefs for undergraduate freshmen studying in China (N=100)

Dimension	Mean	Max	Min	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Beliefs about the difficulty of learning Chinese	3.115	5	1	1.113	-0.138	0.091
Essence of Chinese Learning	3.888	5	1.333	0.967	-0.886	0.497
Chinese learning abilities	3.509	5	1	1.027	-0.516	0.196
Chinese learning communication and strategy belief	3.513	5	1.125	1.048	-0.556	0.328
Motivation and expectation of Chinese learning	4.258	5	2	0.803	-1.99	1.166
Overall	3.657	5	1.292	0.992	-0.817	0.456

SD standard deviation, N number

The analysis indicates that the overall mean score for Chinese language learning beliefs is $M = 3.657$, $SD = 0.992$, suggesting that participants generally hold moderately positive beliefs, tending toward agreement. Among the five measured dimensions, motivation and expectations received the highest mean score ($M = 4.258$), indicating that students possess strong motivation, clear learning goals, and a recognition of the importance of acquiring Chinese language proficiency.

In contrast, the difficulty dimension yielded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.115$), revealing a notable divergence from the other dimensions. While this score reflects a relatively neutral stance overall, it suggests that learners perceive Chinese as somewhat challenging. The mean scores for learning ability ($M = 3.509$) and communication and strategy beliefs ($M = 3.513$) show minor but consistent variation, suggesting that learners share relatively stable and confident beliefs in these areas.

The ranking of the five dimensions from highest to lowest mean score is as follows:

- (i) Motivation and Expectations
- (ii) Nature of Learning
- (iii) Communication and Strategy Use

(iv) Learning Ability

(v) Perceived Difficulty

The maximum scores across all dimensions were consistent, while minimum scores were uniformly 1 (strongly disagree), except for the motivation and expectations dimension, which had a minimum of 2 (disagree), further reflecting strong overall motivation. Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences between the dimensions ($p = .05 > .05$).

In summary, the findings suggest that international students generally hold positive beliefs about learning Chinese, particularly in terms of motivation and future expectations. This pattern aligns with broader trends emphasising cross-cultural education and the rising global demand for Chinese language competence (Hossain et al., 2023; Hong & Kitili, 2023; Chen et al., 2024).

Beliefs about the Difficulty of Learning Chinese

To understand international students' beliefs about the difficulty of learning Chinese in various dimensions, statistical analyses were conducted on the five dimensions of Chinese language learning beliefs. The descriptive statistical analysis of the first dimension, beliefs about the difficulty of learning Chinese among undergraduate international freshmen, is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Belief dimensions of Chinese learning difficulty for undergraduate students studying in China ($N=100$)

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
Q3	20	25	25	16	14	3.21	1.32
Q4	5	10	28	36	21	2.42	1.084
Q5	50	37	10	1	2	4.32	0.851
Q15	7	10	18	44	21	2.38	1.135
Q25	16	27	27	22	8	3.21	1.192
Q34	9	33	30	20	8	3.15	1.095

SD standard deviation, *N* number

To better understand international students' perceptions of the difficulty involved in learning Chinese, statistical analyses were conducted across the five dimensions of Chinese language learning beliefs. The descriptive statistics for the first dimension, beliefs about the difficulty of learning Chinese, are presented in Table 3.

This dimension comprises six items: Q3, Q4, Q5, Q15, Q25, and Q34. Among them, Q5 recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.32$), with 87% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing. This suggests that most students are confident in their ability to learn Chinese. In contrast, Q15 had the lowest mean score ($M = 2.38$), with 65% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that learning Chinese for just one hour a day would require five to ten years—or longer—to achieve mastery. This indicates a widespread belief that language learning success is closely tied to consistent, long-term effort.

Q4 yielded the second-lowest mean score ($M = 2.42$). While 36% and 21% of participants perceived Chinese as “easy” or “very easy,” respectively, 28% regarded it as moderately difficult, and 15% found it difficult or very difficult. These results suggest that more than half of the students find Chinese relatively accessible; however, the substantial gap between the scores of Q4 and Q5 highlights a shared belief that learning Chinese still requires significant time investment.

Responses to Q3 showed that 45% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that

some languages are easier to learn than Chinese, while 25% were neutral, and 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating a moderate level of perceived difficulty. Regarding language modalities, Q25 revealed that 43% of respondents believed speaking Chinese is easier than understanding it. Similarly, Q34 indicated that 42% found reading and writing easier than speaking and comprehension, with approximately one-third maintaining a neutral stance.

Taken together, the results suggest that international students perceive Chinese as a manageable but time-intensive language to acquire (Hu, 2021; Tao, 2023). They tend to view receptive skills (listening and comprehension) as more challenging than productive skills (speaking, reading, and writing). Despite recognising these difficulties, students generally express strong confidence in their ability to succeed, particularly when supported by clear learning goals and a conducive educational environment.

Beliefs about the Essence of Learning Chinese

The "Nature of Learning Chinese" dimension in the belief survey consists of six items: Q8, Q12, Q17, Q23, Q27, and Q28. Descriptive statistical results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Belief dimensions of the essence of Chinese learning for undergraduate students studying in China (N=100)

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
Q8	28	34	18	17	3	3.67	1.146
Q12	0	63	31	5	1	4.56	0.641
Q17	39	41	13	4	3	4.09	0.975
Q23	0	13	20	51	16	3.7	0.893
Q27	20	46	23	6	5	3.7	1.02
Q28	21	42	21	9	7	3.61	1.127

SD standard deviation, N number

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for items related to students' beliefs about the nature of learning Chinese. Among the six items in this dimension, Q12 recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.56), with 63% of participants agreeing and 31% remaining neutral. This indicates that a majority of students believe language acquisition is most effective when conducted in a target-language environment.

In contrast, Q28 had the lowest mean score (M = 3.61), with 63% agreeing or strongly agreeing that translation from the native language is essential. This suggests that while learners value immersive environments, they also perceive native language support as important, particularly in the initial stages of second language acquisition.

Q8 ranked second lowest (M = 3.67), with 34% and 28% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that understanding Chinese culture is necessary for language proficiency. This reflects a recognition of the close relationship between language and culture, though not yet a unanimous consensus.

Q23 and Q27 shared identical mean scores. Notably, 51% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with Q23's statement that grammar is the most important part of learning Chinese, suggesting a relatively surface-level or alternative conceptualisation of language structure. By contrast, 66% agreed or strongly agreed with Q27, affirming the view that language learning differs significantly from learning other academic subjects.

Q17 received the second-highest mean score (M = 4.09), with 80% of participants acknowledging the importance of learning Chinese characters. This finding contrasts with the more neutral or negative views toward grammar (Q23), indicating that students prioritise orthographic knowledge over formal

grammatical instruction.

Overall, these results suggest that international students possess a relatively nuanced understanding of the nature of Chinese language learning. They acknowledge the logical structure of the language, the value of studying in an immersive environment (Xu & Yang, 2023), and the importance of cultural knowledge (Hossain et al., 2023). Additionally, students emphasise the significance of character learning over grammar and recognise the necessity of native language translation as a transitional support mechanism during the early phases of acquisition.

Beliefs about the Ability to Learn Chinese

The "Ability to Learn Chinese" dimension includes nine items: Q1, Q2, Q6, Q10, Q11, Q16, Q19, Q30, and Q33. Descriptive statistical results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Dimensions of Chinese learning ability and belief of undergraduate freshmen studying in China ($N=100$)

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
Q1	36	39	14	6	5	3.95	1.095
Q2	30	40	21	3	6	3.85	1.077
Q6	23	39	32	4	2	3.77	0.92
Q10	16	37	30	10	7	3.45	1.095
Q11	2	9	25	25	39	2.1	1.087
Q16	20	36	35	7	2	3.65	0.947
Q19	7	15	37	16	25	2.63	1.212
Q30	30	43	22	3	2	3.96	0.909
Q33	48	31	17	3	1	4.22	0.905

SD standard deviation, N number

Table 5 presents the analysis of international students' beliefs regarding their language learning ability. Among the six items in this dimension, Q33 recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.22$), with 79% of participants agreeing and only 4% disagreeing. This indicates a strong collective belief in the universal ability to acquire a foreign language.

Conversely, Q11 yielded the lowest mean score ($M = 2.10$), with 64% of respondents disagreeing with the statement that individuals skilled in science and engineering are unable to learn Chinese. This suggests a broad rejection of the notion that academic background in STEM disciplines is incompatible with language learning.

Similarly, Q19 received a relatively low mean score ($M = 2.63$), reflecting disagreement with the stereotype that women are inherently better than men at learning Chinese. These findings indicate that most participants do not perceive gender or academic specialization as barriers to language acquisition.

The remaining items in this dimension had mean scores above 3.0, suggesting a general agreement with positive views about individual learning potential. While participants acknowledge the potential advantages of certain factors—such as early-age exposure and prior multilingual experience—they overwhelmingly believe that Chinese can be learned by anyone, regardless of gender or academic profile.

Overall, international students express confidence in their ability to learn Chinese and tend to reject fixed mindsets related to academic discipline or gender. Nonetheless, some subtle gender stereotypes may persist. Importantly, learners' beliefs about their ability are likely to influence their approach to learning and their choice of strategies (Watson et al., 2018).

Beliefs about Communication Strategies

The "Communication Strategies" dimension includes eight items: Q7, Q9, Q13, Q14, Q18, Q21, Q22, and Q26. Descriptive statistical results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Chinese Learning Communication Strategies and Belief Dimensions for Undergraduate Students Studying in China($N=100$)

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
Q7	52	30	10	7	1	4.25	0.968
Q9	7	22	16	29	26	2.55	1.282
Q13	41	43	11	3	2	4.18	0.892
Q14	10	25	26	22	17	2.89	1.246
Q18	68	27	4	1	0	4.62	0.616
Q21	12	20	34	19	15	2.95	1.218
Q22	16	21	26	23	14	3.02	1.287
Q26	14	46	32	6	2	3.84	0.871

SD standard deviation, *N* number

Table 6 presents findings related to international students' beliefs about communication and language learning strategies. Among the items in this dimension, Q18 had the highest mean score ($M = 4.62$), with 95% of participants agreeing and only 1% disagreeing. This result highlights a strong consensus on the effectiveness of repetition as a key strategy in language learning.

In contrast, Q9 received the lowest mean score ($M = 2.55$), reflecting general disagreement with the notion that one must speak perfect Chinese before attempting communication, although 29% still expressed agreement. This suggests that while many students are open to practicing without full accuracy, a significant minority still prioritize correctness.

Other relatively low-scoring items include Q14 ($M = 2.89$) and Q21 ($M = 2.95$), indicating varied attitudes toward using contextual guessing as a strategy and experiencing fear of speaking Chinese in public. These results reflect both cognitive and affective factors that influence students' willingness to take communicative risks.

Overall, students demonstrate a strong appreciation for effective communication strategies, especially those involving pronunciation and repetition, which are perceived as essential for developing expressive fluency. However, beginner learners often exhibit a preference for accuracy over fluency, showing low tolerance for errors and a desire for corrective feedback to enhance precision (Zhang, 2022).

Beliefs about Motivation and Expectations

The "Motivation and Expectations" dimension includes five items: Q20, Q24, Q29, Q31, and Q32. Descriptive statistical results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Chinese Learning Motivation and expectation belief dimensions of Undergraduate students studying abroad in China($N=100$)

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M	SD
Q20	17	29	28	19	7	3.3	1.168
Q24	2	2	9	38	49	4.3	0.87
Q29	56	33	8	3	0	4.42	0.768

Q31	73	21	6	0	0	4.67	0.587
Q32	67	26	7	0	0	4.6	0.62

SD standard deviation, N number, M Mean

Table 7 presents the results related to students' motivation and expectations regarding learning Chinese. All items in this dimension, with the exception of Q20, had mean scores above 4.0, indicating strong overall motivation and clearly defined learning goals among the participants.

Q31 recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.67$), with 94% of respondents expressing agreement. This demonstrates a high level of commitment to mastering the Chinese language, reflecting learners' intrinsic motivation and long-term dedication.

In contrast, Q20 had the lowest mean score ($M = 3.30$), with 46% agreeing that Chinese is important for their home countries, while 36% disagreed. This variance suggests that students' perceptions of the geopolitical or economic relevance of China may depend on their national backgrounds and the strength of bilateral relations with China.

Overall, the findings show that international students possess strong motivation to learn Chinese, driven by perceived benefits in terms of career development, cultural understanding, and social integration. However, the extent to which they view China as important to their home countries varies, indicating that external, context-specific factors also shape their expectations.

Research question 2: Do individual factors (e.g., gender) significantly influence the Chinese language learning beliefs of these students?

To examine the relationship between gender and Chinese learning beliefs, descriptive and independent sample tests were conducted on the five dimensions. Results for the first dimension, "Beliefs about the Difficulty of Learning Chinese," are shown in Table 8. Further analysis will elaborate on gender-related differences across all dimensions.

Table 8. Gender Factors: Belief of Chinese Learning Difficulty (Male=74, Female: N=26)

Item	Gender	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	M± SD	t	sig
Q3	M	17.6%	25.7	23	20.3	13.5	3.14±1.307	-0.956	0.921
	F	26.9	23.1	30.8	3.8	15.4	3.24±1.362		
Q4	M	4.1	12.2	24.3	41.9	17.6	2.43±1.048	0.193	0.325
	F	7.7	3.8	38.5	19.2	30.8	2.38±1.203		
Q5	M	52.7	33.8	9.5	1.4	2.7	4.32±0.908	0.085	0.278
	F	42.3	46.2	11.5	0	0	4.31±0.679		
Q15	M	9.5	12.2	16.2	43.2	18.9	2.5±1.208	1.804	0.007
	F	0	3.8	23.1	46.2	26.9	2.04±0.824		
Q25	M	13.5	25.7	32.4	23	5.4	3.19±1.106	-0.293	0.019
	F	23.1	30.8	11.5	19.2	15.4	3.27±1.43		
Q34	M	9.5	28.4	32.4	21.6	8.1	3.09±1.1	-0.852	0.864
	F	7.7	46.2	23.1	15.4	7.7	3.31±1.087		

M± SD Mean ± standard deviation, N number

Table 8 presents responses to six items (Q3, Q4, Q5, Q15, Q25, Q34) assessing perceptions of Chinese learning difficulty, differentiated by gender. Mean scores for Q3, Q4, and Q5 were nearly

identical between male and female students—e.g., Q5 showed a mean of 4.32 for males and 4.31 for females—indicating a shared perception of Chinese as a difficult language.

However, significant gender differences emerged in other items. For Q15, males scored 2.50 while females scored 2.04 ($p = 0.007$), suggesting that female students are more sensitive to the long-term challenges of learning Chinese. Similarly, in Q25, females scored slightly higher (3.27) than males (3.19), with a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.019$), implying gender-based preferences in learning strategies. These findings are consistent with Brown's (2007) assertion that strategy selection can be influenced by gender under high-difficulty conditions. In contrast, Q34 showed no significant gender difference ($p = 0.864$), reflecting general agreement across groups.

Overall, while both genders share similar beliefs about the general difficulty of learning Chinese, female students tend to exhibit greater emotional responsiveness and are more affected by perceived challenges, supporting Ellis's (2021) observation that females react more strongly to difficult tasks. Male students appear to place more emphasis on the relationship between difficulty and achievement (Xu, 2020), while females consider broader emotional and contextual factors.

Table 9. Gender Factors: Belief Dimensions of the Essence of Chinese Learning (Male N=74, Female N=26)

Item	Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M±SD	T	Sig
Q8	M	32.4	33.8	17.6	13.5	2.7	3.8±1.122	1.898	0.557
	F	15.4	34.6	19.2	26.9	3.8	3.31±1.158		
Q12	M	66.2	28.4	5.4	0	0	4.61±0.593	1.271	0.163
	F	53.8	38.5	3.8	3.8	0	4.42±0.758		
Q17	M	33.8	43.2	16.2	4.1	2.7	4.01±0.958	-1.328	0.661
	F	53.8	34.6	3.8	3.8	3.8	4.31±1.011		
Q23	M	14.9	46.2	26.9	7.7	0	3.68±0.908	-0.458	0.679
	F	19.2	46.2	26.9	7.7	0	3.77±0.863		
Q27	M	20.3	45.9	24.3	5.4	4.1	3.73±0.114	0.49	0.391
	F	19.2	46.2	19.2	7.7	7.7	3.62±1.134		
Q28	M	23	44.6	16.2	8.1	8.1	3.66±1.162	0.779	0.65
	F	15.4	34.6	34.6	11.5	3.8	3.46±1.029		

M± SD Mean ± standard deviation, N number

Table 9 presents six items (Q8, Q12, Q17, Q23, Q27, Q28) examining gender differences in beliefs about the nature of learning Chinese. For Q8, both male and female students reported the same mean score ($M = 3.80$), with no significant difference ($p = 0.557$). Similarly, for Q12, males scored 4.61 and females 4.42, both indicating high agreement with the importance of immersive learning, though the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.163$).

Across all items (Q17–Q28), significance levels exceeded 0.05, indicating that gender has little to no impact on beliefs related to the fundamental nature of Chinese language learning. These results align with prior findings suggesting minimal gender influence in this conceptual dimension (Ranjan & Philominraj, 2020; Saty, 2022).

Compared with other dimensions, such as learning strategies, gender differences in beliefs about the nature of learning appear negligible. As Li (2018) noted, perceptions of learning essence tend to be more universal and less shaped by gender-based differences.

Table 10. Gender Factors: Perception of Chinese Learning Ability (Males=74, Females: N=26)

Item	Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M±SD	T	Sig
Q1	F	32.4	41.9	13.5	6.8	5.4	3.89±1.105	-0.894	0.965
	F	46.2	30.8	25.4	3.8	3.8	4.12±1.071		
Q2	M	29.7	44.6	17.6	2.7	5.4	3.91±1.036	0.867	0.149
	F	30.8	26.9	30.8	3.8	7.7	3.69±1.192		
Q6	M	27	40.5	24.3	5.4	2.7	3.84±0.98	1.248	0.273
	F	11.5	34.6	53.8	0	0	3.58±0.703		
Q10	M	17.6	36.5	28.4	9.5	8.1	3.46±1.137	0.145	0.363
	F	11.5	38.5	34.6	11.5	3.8	3.42±0.987		
Q11	M	2.7	10.8	27	23	36.5	2.2±1.135	1.606	0.076
	F	0	3.8	19.2	30.8	46.2	1.81±0.895		
Q16	M	23	33.8	33.8	6.8	2.7	3.68±0.995	0.456	0.229
	F	11.5	42.3	38.5	7.7	0	3.58±0.809		
Q19	M	8.1	14.9	32.4	16.2	28.4	2.58±1.271	-0.679	0.043
	F	3.8	15.4	50	15.4	15.4	2.77±1.032		
Q30	M	32.4	43.2	21.6	2.7	0	4.05±0.809	1.764	0.058
	F	23.1	42.3	23.1	3.8	7.7	3.69±1.123		
Q33	M	54.1	18.9	21.6	4.1	1.4	4.2±1.007	-0.321	<.001
	F	30.8	65.4	3.8	0	0	4.27±0.533		

M± SD Mean ± standard deviation, N number

Table 10 analyses nine items (Q1, Q2, Q6, Q10, Q11, Q16, Q19, Q30, Q33) to assess gender differences in beliefs about language learning ability. Significant differences were found in Q19 and Q33. In Q19, females reported a slightly higher mean score ($M = 2.77$) than males ($M = 2.58$), with a significance level of $p = 0.043$, suggesting greater female confidence regarding gender-related ability perceptions. In Q33, females again scored higher ($M = 4.27$) than males ($M = 4.20$), with a significance level of $p = 0.001$, indicating stronger female belief in universal language learning ability.

Items Q11 ($p = 0.076$) and Q30 ($p = 0.058$) approached significance but did not meet the threshold. Notably, Q11 suggests women are slightly more inclined to believe that STEM aptitude may hinder language learning, while Q30 reveals that men are more likely to view multilingualism as a sign of innate linguistic talent—none of the male respondents disagreed with this view.

Overall, gender differences in this dimension are primarily reflected in self-perception and confidence. Female students consistently rated their learning ability more positively and exhibited greater internal consistency, whereas male responses showed more variability. These findings align with Kheder and Rouabhia (2023), who highlighted gender-based contrasts in confidence and perceived competence. However, they differ from Li (2018), who found no significant gender effects across belief dimensions.

Table 11. Gender Factors, Chinese Learning, Communication and Strategy, Belief Dimensions (Male=74, Female, N=26)

Item	Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M±SD	T	Sig
Q7	M	56.8	28.4	9.5	4.1	1.4	4.35±0.913	1.786	0.495
	F	38.5	34.6	11.5	15.4	0	3.96±1.076		
Q9	M	5.4	23	18.9	25.7	27	2.54±1.263	-0.124	0.657
	F	11.5	19.2	7.7	38.5	23.1	2.58±1.362		
Q13	M	45.9	37.8	10.8	2.7	2.7	4.22±0.940	0.683	0.098
	F	26.9	57.7	11.5	3.8	0	4.08±0.744		
Q14	M	9.5	24.3	27	21.6	17.6	2.86±1.242	-0.339	0.909
	F	11.5	26.9	23.1	23.1	15.4	2.96±1.28		
Q18	M	70.3	24.3	4.1	1.4	0	4.64±0.632	0.413	0.918
	F	61.5	34.6	3.8	0	0	4.58±0.578		
Q21	M	13.5	20.3	27	23	16.2	2.92±1.280	-0.429	0.03
	F	7.7	19.2	53.8	7.7	11.5	3.04±1.038		
Q22	M	16.2	20.3	29.7	18.9	14.9	3.04±1.287	0.268	0.579
	F	15.4	23.1	15.4	34.6	11.5	2.96±1.211		
Q26	M	14.9	45.9	33.8	4.1	1.4	3.69±0.826	0.953	0.24
	F	11.5	46.2	26.9	11.5	3.8	3.50±0.990		

M± SD Mean ± standard deviation, N number

Table 11 analyses eight items (Q7, Q9, Q13, Q14, Q18, Q21, Q22, Q26) related to gender differences in communication strategy beliefs. A significant difference was found in Q21, where females reported a higher mean score ($M = 3.04$) than males ($M = 2.92$) with $p = 0.03$, indicating greater willingness among females to speak Chinese in public despite potential errors.

While the remaining items did not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$), Q22 approached significance. Response frequency analysis for Q22 reveals gender divergence: female participants showed a more polarized distribution across agreement, neutrality, and disagreement, with nearly half expressing disapproval of immediate error correction, compared to a more even distribution among male participants.

These results suggest that female students tend to use communication strategies more frequently, demonstrating higher interactivity and a stronger tendency to seek feedback, especially when facing language barriers. In contrast, male students appear more self-reliant, preferring task-based learning and less dependent on interpersonal corrective strategies.

Overall, gender differences are apparent in communication strategy beliefs. Female students show greater engagement in interactive language use and feedback-seeking behaviours (Nguyen, 2021; Sumarni & Rachmawaty, 2019; Huang, 2023), contrary to Li's (2018) earlier findings that reported no significant gender-based differences in language learning beliefs.

Table 12. Gender Factors: Chinese Learning Motivation and Expectation Dimensions (Male N=74, Female N=26)

Item	Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M±SD	T	Sig
Q20	M	20.3	29.7	31.1	14.9	4.1	3.47±1.101	2.569	0.366
	F	7.7	26.9	19.2	30.8	15.4	2.81±1.234		
Q24	M	48.6	36.5	10.8	1.4	2.7	4.27±0.911	-0.574	0.436
	F	50	42.3	3.8	3.8	0	4.38±0.753		

Q29	M	62.2	28.4	8.1	1.4	0	4.51±0.707	2.089	0.636
	F	38.5	46.2	7.7	7.7	0	4.15±0.881		
Q31	M	71.6	23	5.4	0	0	4.66±0.58	-0.224	0.89
	F	76.9	15.4	7.7	0	0	4.69±0.618		
Q32	M	66.2	28.4	5.4	0	0	4.61±0.593	0.22	0.339
	F	69.2	19.2	11.5	0	0	4.58±0.703		

M± SD Mean ± standard deviation, N number

Table 12 analyses five items (Q20, Q24, Q29, Q31, Q32) related to gender differences in learning motivation and expectations. For Q20, males reported a higher mean score ($M = 3.47$) than females ($M = 2.81$), indicating that male students were more likely to view learning Chinese as important in their home countries. The relatively large standard deviations for both groups suggest diverse opinions influenced by national or cultural context.

In contrast, Q24 showed minimal gender difference, with both groups agreeing that learning Chinese enhances understanding of China. For Q29, over 80% of both male and female respondents agreed that Chinese proficiency would support future job prospects, reflecting strong instrumental motivation (Li & Liu, 2021; Xiao, 2023). Similarly, over 90% expressed positive attitudes toward Q31 (desire to speak Chinese well) and Q32 (desire to make Chinese friends), demonstrating high integrative motivation shaped by the target-language environment.

Overall, mean scores in this dimension exceeded 4.0 for both genders, and no significant gender differences were observed. These results suggest that motivation and expectations are primarily shaped by individual factors such as personal interest, career goals, and cultural identity, rather than by gender.

Summary of Gender Differences Across Dimensions

An analysis across all belief dimensions shows that while gender differences exist, they are generally limited in scope. Notably, gender has minimal impact on beliefs related to the nature of learning and learning motivation, where responses tend to be consistent across male and female students.

Where gender differences do arise, they are most pronounced in emotional responses, strategy selection, and self-assessment of learning ability. Female students tend to exhibit stronger emotional engagement, greater interaction, and a higher tendency to seek feedback, especially in communication strategies. In contrast, male students are more inclined toward self-directed learning and task-oriented approaches.

In terms of learning ability, females tend to rate their competence more positively and consistently, whereas males display greater variability and occasional self-doubt. These observations support prior findings regarding gender-based patterns in language learning confidence and behavior.

Importantly, the influence of gender is nuanced rather than dominant, reflecting specific variations in strategy use and confidence rather than fundamental differences in belief systems. Furthermore, no significant differences were found across academic majors. T-test results showed that major-related factors had no significant effect on any belief dimension, suggesting that academic discipline does not impact international students' Chinese learning beliefs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, international undergraduate students in China generally hold positive beliefs about learning Chinese, particularly regarding motivation and expectations. Gender differences, though limited, were evident in beliefs about learning ability and strategy use. These findings underscore the importance of considering individual learner differences in instructional design.

The analysis reveals five primary characteristics of learning beliefs among novice Chinese learners: 1. Positive beliefs overall: Particularly strong in motivation and expectations, indicating high enthusiasm and clear goals among learners. 2. Diverse beliefs: Belief of difficulty, essence, ability, and strategies vary widely, influenced by cultural and learning environments. 3. Cognition of learning difficulty: Most learners perceive Chinese as challenging but show strong determination to overcome obstacles. 4. Practice-oriented learning: Learners emphasize the importance of practice, particularly in vocabulary and pronunciation, and seek interaction to enhance proficiency. 5. Cultural integration needs: Learners believe that language learning requires a deep understanding of the target culture. Gender influence is limited but evident in certain dimensions, such as emotional responses to difficulty, strategy use, and self-assessment of ability. Female students display higher emotional engagement and interaction, particularly in communication strategy use and feedback-seeking, while males prefer independent learning and task-oriented strategies. Gender differences in ability perception are also notable, with females demonstrating greater confidence. However, gender has minimal impact on motivation and beliefs about the essence of learning, reflecting the universal nature of these dimensions.

Based on the survey results, this paper puts forward relevant suggestions from three aspects: schools, teachers and learners :

- (i) Enhance motivation: Share success stories to inspire learners and incorporate cultural elements into curricula to demonstrate the practical application of learning outcomes.
- (ii) Optimise learning strategies: Utilise multimedia technologies, such as Chinese speech simulation systems, to strengthen pronunciation and expression training. Encourage error tolerance and self-correction.
- (iii) Provide cultural support: Organise cultural exchange activities and establish language partner programs to facilitate interaction with native speakers.
- (iv) Address individual differences: Design personalised courses for different proficiency levels and offer psychological support during challenging phases to build learner confidence.
- (v) Improve teacher training: Enhance cross-cultural education for Chinese language instructors and adopt diverse teaching methods, such as situational and immersive teaching approaches.

This research has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to 100 students from a single private university in Jiangxi Province, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the reliance on self-reported quantitative data limits the depth of analysis, as it cannot capture the nuanced processes of belief formation. Future research should expand the sample across multiple regions and institutions, incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observations, and explore belief development over time through longitudinal studies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author independently completed all stages of this research, including conceptualisation, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used IBM SPSS Statistics 30 in order to run data analysis. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The data generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Jiangxi University of Engineering. The research involved participants from multiple universities in China. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All procedures involving human participants/animal subjects were in fulfilment of the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the study.

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Meaning Visualisation Through Semiotic Theory of the Malay Film *Doh*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the process of meaning formation in the Malay film *Doh* (2023) by utilising Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory. Films are not merely entertainment; they also negotiate and perpetuate dominant ideas, emotional narratives, and social identities. This paper employs a descriptive qualitative methodology to decode selected visual and linguistic signifiers, including the brown diary, Hacks mint candy packaging, and bird imagery. It demonstrates that seemingly straightforward items are permeated with profound ideological significance. The results indicate that visual components, such as colour, gesture, and object location, are not neutral; rather, they serve to normalise traditional family hierarchies, filial obligation, and the conflict between modern desires and ancestral obligations. The diary symbolises inherited emotional effort, while the red-coloured candy packaging emphasises the ideological bond of family obligation. In a paradoxical twist, the flocks of birds, which symbolise liberation, underscore the significance of loyalty and return. This investigation exposes the extent to which *Doh* reinforces traditional values and conventional gender roles within a myth-making process by operating behind the façade of intimate family stories. The research underscores the critical importance of semiotic analysis in understanding the subtle ways in which visual media influence and sustain broader socio-cultural concepts through the identification of these multiple meanings.

INTRODUCTION

Films represent an essential facet of daily human experience, serving as a medium of entertainment that is shared with the wider public through television (Sazirah, 2021). As an essential element of cultural

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dimensions, it captivates individuals across all levels of society. As noted by Norwani (n.d.), cinema holds significant value, serving as a vital source of entertainment for community members. In contemporary society, numerous individuals frequently grapple with significant stress, and the act of watching films is regarded as a means to mitigate this issue (Abdul Rahim et al., 2023). A study conducted by Cromarty et al. (2023) reveals that films are perceived as a valuable educational tool for individuals with learning disabilities, as they enhance understanding of reading materials and provide appropriate avenues for creative and significant self-expression. Furthermore, visual elements in films are employed to assist students with high incidence disabilities in recognising visual features that align with the seven components of screenplay across different cinematic works (Dunn, 2020). Kubrak (2020) identified significant impacts on adolescent viewers following their experience with *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012). The film profoundly influenced their evaluations of the regulatory, cognitive, and emotional characteristics of older individuals.

Understanding Semiotic Theory

Semiotic theory, articulated by Roland Barthes in the 1950s, serves as a framework for analysing the construction of meaning via signs and symbols in many kinds of communication. Barthes expanded upon the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who characterised a sign as consisting of two fundamental components:

- a. The *Signifier* that represents the physical existence that can take place in forms of sound, word, image, shape and colours.
- b. The *Signified* represents the mental concept of the signified element.

For instance, the Manchester United logo's crimson tint, which dominates the emblem's background, is symbolic of the club's fervor and identity. Yellow and black are additional primary colours that represent vitality, prosperity, and contrast, respectively. Manchester United supporters perceive the club as the most venerable football institution, as evidenced by a legacy of prestige, triumphs, and renown, as per these readings (Rohmani et. al., 2025).

The *Doh* film

The film *Doh* was released on September 16, 2023. Directed by Muhamad Ariffin bin Zulkarnain, it centers on a familial conflict around Farhan's bakery, owned by Faiz's father. The death of his father has led to a dispute among the siblings on the management of the bakery, placing him in a quandary.

Application of Semiotic Theory in films

Films, as a visual and aural medium, are abundant in signs and symbols, making them an exemplary topic for semiotic research. Semiotics may be used to several components in films, including language, visual imagery, music, colour, and narrative structure. The following illustrates the practical use of the theory:

- a. Visual imagery

Colours, shapes and objects carry significant meanings in films. For instance, the brown diary held by Faiz in the movie signifies his comfort, stability and reliability as he finally has to make an important

decision on the matter of his father's bakery. By holding and scrutinising the diary, he feels a sense of comfort as he knows that whatever decision that he will take is agreed by his late father.

b. Language and dialogue

The choice of words, tone, and delivery in dialogue conveys not just literal message but also deeper social or emotional contexts. For example, *Abang janji, suatu hari nanti, abang balik sini jaga kedai sama-sama dengan bapak. (I promise, that one day, I will come back to take care of the shop with you.)* is a dialogue uttered by Farhan to his late father, when he informs him that he has finally landed a job a bit far from home. The use of the word *janji (promise)* signifies his pure intention of taking care of the bakery with his late father.

c. Symbols in narrative

Specific items or repeating motifs serve as symbols, embodying fundamental concepts or character developments. A bakery in *Doh* exemplifies family connections and the patriarch's heritage, while also serving as a venue for sibling discord and reconciliation.

Semiotics and cultural ideology in *Doh*

Barthes' notion of mythology is the investigation of quotidian cultural artefacts and activities that communicate ideological significances beyond their superficial appearance. Myth, as articulated by Barthes (1957), denotes systems of communication, or second-order sign systems, that convert historical and cultural values into perceived natural and universal realities. Analysing cinematic signals reveals concealed meanings that reflect cultural conventions, power dynamics, and ideologies. In *Doh*, the predominance of the male character, Faiz, in leadership positions throughout the film supports conventional gender hierarchies. This film focuses on a family bakery, enabling a profound examination of ideological conflicts about heritage, tradition, and modernity.

Semiotics in film analysis

Through the use of Semiotic Theory, filmmakers may intentionally encode messages, enabling critics and researchers to decode these meanings for a deeper comprehension of the cultural and psychological effects of films. This method may aid in the analysis of:

- a. how films develop identities, ideologies, and social roles
- b. how films emotionally connect with viewers via visual and auditory clues.
- c. the interaction of visual, aural, and narrative symbols in the construction of meaning.

Semiotic theory, as articulated by Barthes, provides important perspectives into the construction and communication of meaning via signs, making it an effective instrument for the analysis of films and other cultural materials. Films, being a medium abundant in visual, aural, and narrative components, provide a conducive environment for using this theory to reveal meanings that are beyond the literal interpretation. Barthes' framework, emphasising signifiers, signifieds, denotations, connotations, and myths, facilitates the deconstruction of cultural, emotional, and ideological meanings inherent in cinematic works.

The examination of the film *Doh* illustrates the pragmatic use of Semiotic Theory in analysing how visual imagery, conversation, symbols, and sound facilitate the creation of meaning. The bakery in *Doh* serves

as a potent emblem of family connections, discord, and resolution, while the conversations and character interactions illustrate wider cultural and ideological conflicts about tradition and modernity. Barthes' notion of myths enhances this research by revealing how ostensibly mundane components in the film normalise society conventions, including conventional gender hierarchies and family duties.

Analysing these levels of meaning improves our understanding of how films construct identities, engage audiences, and reflect societal norms. This aligns with broader goals in semiotic film analysis: to examine how cinematic texts function not merely as entertainment but as vehicles for cultural and ideological expression. The concepts of Semiotic Theory are crucial for examining films and modern cultural artifacts like memes, as they clarify the complex connections between signals, meaning, and ideology within our shared cultural frameworks.

As Semiotics is the examination of signs and meanings; it therefore provides a robust framework for analysing visual narratives and artefacts. Visuals, music, and symbols relate to signs, while semiotics provides methods to interpret the nuances of meaning conveyed by these elements. This theory posits two essential carriers of meaning: the *signifier* that are manifested as tangible things and the formation of a mental concept upon perceiving a physical form is denoted by the term '*signified*.' When these two concepts are juxtaposed, they contribute to the meanings of a sign. Medina (2021) established the element of signification, defined as the intersection between signifier and signified, a convergence of rational and subjective realms. For instance, when an attractive guy smiles at you, you attempt to comprehend the grin in an instant. The remarkable aspect of this processing is that the response will manifest as affection rather than through cognitive means. Babayiğit and Pilatin (2025) assert that, in essence, semiotic theory is an appropriate framework for analysing the concealed meanings underlying signs. A lot of cultural codes are employed in movies to get people to like and pay attention to them. In addition to this, movies are a substantial component of intercultural communication, indicating that people from various cultures can get to know and understand each other better and become aware of their biases. (Günay and Saygılı, 2024). Nonetheless, individuals' diverse cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences result in various interpretations and understandings of meanings (Fiveable, 2024). A study by Akpan and Ikuelogbon (2023) stated that culture plays an important role in helping audience to achieve meanings. The study examined film scenes from the US and Nigeria, revealing that signs are most intelligible within their respective cultural contexts. The data analysis concludes that films convey more than simple narratives, concepts, and settings; they transmit substantial signs (signifier, signified).

Films function as significant cultural artefacts that reflect on and influence the society from which they emerge. They are not only entertainment but are substantial reservoirs of social, political, and cultural significance. Films, as visual and narrative forms, embody the ideas, values, and ideologies of their era, providing spectators insight into the collective consciousness of a society. They serve as a medium of narrative, using symbolism, language, and images to reflect and criticise societal norms, power dynamics, and historical circumstances. Films also serve as cultural artefacts that encapsulate the zeitgeist of their time. Historical dramas and science fiction both interact with social concerns (Rosenstone, 2023; Khoo et. al., 2021), either by explicitly confronting them or by providing a metaphorical perspective for interpretation. Dystopian films often examine concerns around technological progress (Al Zahrani et. al., 2022), humans' struggle in a world full of chaos (Matondang, 2022; Mukherjee, 2022), alien invasions (Briggs, 2022) and social disparities (Virameteekul, 2021; Love and Fox, 2020). In addition, romantic comedies illustrate evolving gender roles and relational dynamics.

These tales enable viewers to interact with cultural ideas on both conscious and subconscious levels. Zetulkhina et. al. (2023); Chan (2022); William and Schwarz (2020) and Latiffa and Kristianto (2022) conclude that films are also able to function as medium for the construction of identities, contestation, and reimagining of cultural identities (Mishra, 2025; Lu, 2023). They provide a platform for marginalised populations to articulate their experiences and contest prevailing narratives. Independent film has been crucial in enhancing varied viewpoints, providing alternative storylines to popular portrayals. Analysing films reveals the underlying ideologies, power dynamics, and social conflicts inherent in the cinematic text.

Furthermore, films are dynamic cultural artefacts, since they are viewed variably by audiences who are influenced by their own cultural backgrounds. The same film may provoke diverse reactions, as people impose their own experiences and prejudices onto the storyline. This polysemy renders films a participatory cultural medium, always redefining meaning between artists and spectators. As globalised media, films surpass geographical limitations, facilitating cultural interchange and hybridisation. They expose people to many cultures (Kolker et. al., 2024; Nematzadeh et. al., 2021) while also facilitating the homogenisation of global media (Anand, 2024; Chen & Shen, 2021). Hollywood, Bollywood, and several other film industries significantly influence worldwide cultural perspectives, underscoring the convergence of art, business, and ideology in cinema. Films serve as cultural texts that amuse, educate, challenge, and alter. Examining them enables researchers to elucidate intricate levels of meaning, providing insights into the cultural, historical, and ideological framework of society. Films are essential instruments for comprehending and scrutinising the world in which we live.

Hence, this begins a broad semiotic examination of *Doh*, whereby semiotic theory will aid in deciphering and comprehending the many symbolic, social, and cultural tales embedded in *Doh*. This work has not garnered any artistic awards so far, resulting in little attention to its basic semiotic patterns, particularly about the socio-cultural reality it represents. This introduction initially delineates the issue statement and emphasises the significance of a semiotic analysis to elucidate the complexities of *Doh*'s narrative and systems of meaning.

Research questions

1. What are the functions of visual and text as presented in the four selected scenes and a dialogue found in the *Doh* film?
2. How are the interaction between visual and written modes found in the four selected scenes and dialogue shape the interpretation of the selected scenes and dialogue found in the film?

Research objectives

1. To present the functions of visual and text as presented in four selected scenes and a dialogue found in the *Doh*.
2. To discover how the interaction between visual and written modes found in the four selected scenes and a dialogue shape the interpretation of the three selected scenes and a dialogue found in the *Doh*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Languag Barthes' Semiotic theory has been extensively applied to analyse films as semiotic texts, revealing how visual and auditory signs function to convey ideological messages. Christian Metz (1974), a French film theorist introduced *film semiotic*, an extension of the Semiotic theory by exploring the cinematic codes that govern narrative construction, mise-en-scène, and sound. This further highlight cinema's capacity to construct layered meanings, situating films as vital cultural artifacts. These foundational theories have informed numerous studies on the semiotics of films, with scholars examining the interplay between signs, narratives, and audience reception (Umberto Eco, 1998).

Barthes' concepts of denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associated meanings) are particularly relevant in analysing Malaysian films, where visual and narrative elements often carry deep cultural connotations. For example, elements like traditional attire, architectural styles, and local languages in Malaysian films serve as cultural signifiers that reflect broader socio-political and historical narratives.

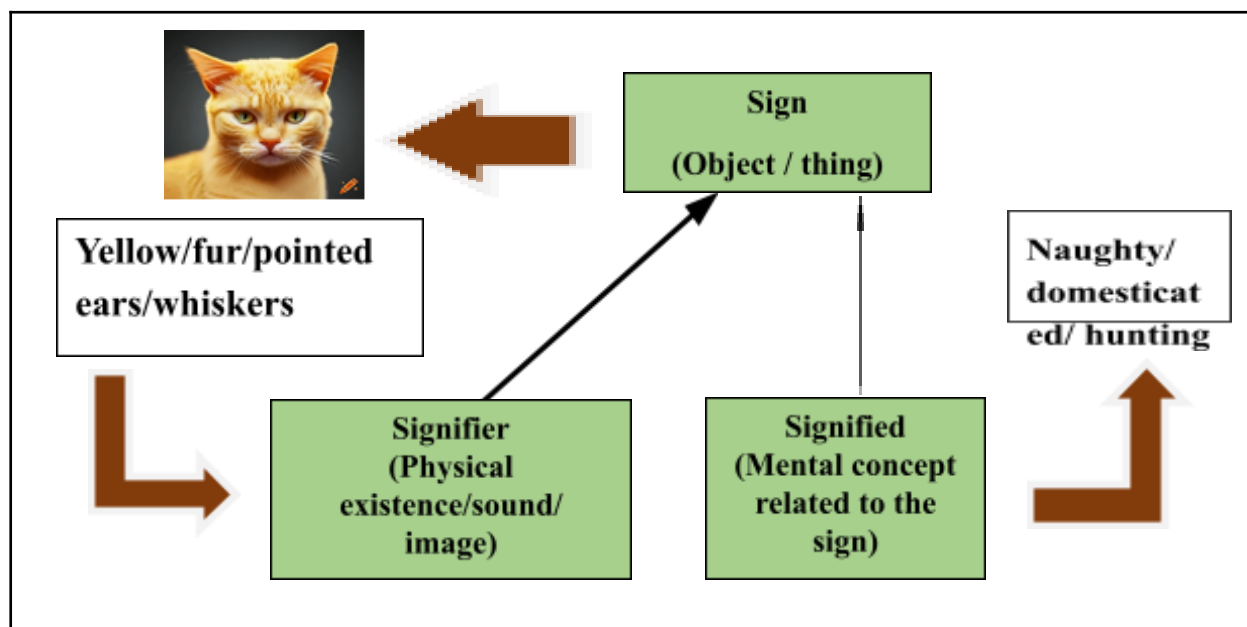


Figure 1. Semiotic Theory (*Yellow Cat* image adapted from <https://pics.craiyon.com/2023-11-15/yHa5KfY3Q523ppWdzPaVYQ.webp>)

Cultural factors in *signifier*

A study conducted by Achin and Bianus (2022) reports that cultural factors and knowledge of myths, beliefs, and social differences are the key aspects of symbolism application in films, especially in the animation field. The study analysed *signifiers* that are found in a Malaysian-animated adventure film *Seefood* that was produced in 2012; a story of the adventure of two sharks in their adventurous journey on stopping the illegal poachers from stealing marine life. Two sharks Pup and Julius are characterised as brave and determined; however, in Japanese culture, sharks are described as characters who are easily deceived but have a determination (Kravitz, 2024) and perseverance (Tattoo, 2025a) towards things that they want to possess. On the other hand, a population in Kalimantan, Indonesia describes sharks as large

animals that have tenacity and courage. These important findings indicated how culture and geo-location mold the *signified* interpretation of *sign* produced in any type of discourse.

In another study conducted by Robin and Giacinta (2024), critical paradigm approach was used in gaining an in-depth understanding about the *signifier* found in *Pulang* the film. 12 scenes were carefully selected in unfolding the prejudice on the word “pulang”. As mentioned earlier, *signified* can take forms in sound, word, visual, sound and colours. The word *Pulang* as according to the researchers has invoked a form of prejudice. Positively, it portrays returning home as something pleasant. Adversely, the same word could also represent embarrassment and terrifying situation, as the protagonist is a former offender.

Signifier as a physical existence in films

The representation of a ball used in football is another excellent example in the use of *signifier* in representing an important theme found in the *Ola Bola* (2016) film that was produced in 2016. With multiculturalism as the issue, Maheendran (2017) discovers that the film maker has successfully crafted the idea of sharing the same culture is more than having different skin colour or speak different languages. All this is due to the same multicultural elements like body languages, dialogue, gestures, characters and context. Deraman and Razak (2018) share similar view as their research proves that a *signifier* in a form of ball has successfully united different races in Malaysia. The study also discovers other *signifiers* that are closely related to patriotism; national flag and national anthem as they transport sense of loyalty and deep connection to one another. Other forms of *signifiers* have also been the center of studies for few researchers where the focus is on themes and ideologies found. Boon-Arch’s study (2024) consists of five films directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a Thai independent director (Teh, 2011); the research findings reveal that semiotic analysis, following semiotics theory, delves deep into the films, encompassing both denotative and connotative meanings. It emphasises themes like medicine and public health, forests, myth, gender, politics, memory, love, sleep, truth and illusion, marginal people, time, instinct, and orchids. Through intermedial analysis, the use of symbols to create meaning is evident, fostering diverse media networks that broaden understanding and interpretation.

Signifier in a form of colour scheme

Even without direct communication, symbols convey connotative meanings effectively. Swamynathan (2023) presents several significant findings from the semiotic analysis of the movie “*Yaavarum Nalam*” a Tamil horror film that was produced in 2009. One of the focuses of the study is the elements of *signifier* that is represented by the use of colour scheme to depict both positive and negative aspects within the film. The duality in colour utilisation enriches the narrative, enabling viewers to interpret scenes in several manners, which is very significant in a horror context. Güzel’s (2023) findings reveal that the use of red, black and white in the “*Fresh*” movie poster play a crucial role in establishing the film’s horror genre. Red is associated with blood and danger, while black conveys darkness and evil while white signifies purity (Pasya & Rahayu, 2024). These colours contribute to the overall mood and help set the audience’s expectations regarding the content of the film.

Nonetheless, the representation of *signifier* may often be mistaken by some audience who are not familiar with a culture portrayed in a particular film. On top of this, some audience may not be fully equipped with the appropriate background knowledge needed. To illustrate, Desi (2019) mentioned that the *signifier* found in both of the *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (2001) sequels could be wrongly interpreted.

Bridget Jones' Diary is a *signifier* that represents her frustrations, hopes and romance in her life, which may be incorrectly interpreted by some who think that her actions who pen down every event in her life is just based on her imagination that leads to negative interpretation of the character.

Thus, this research attempts to provide logical elaborations of the three selected scenes and a dialogue from the movie *Doh*, considering the associations of colours, shapes, visual and imagery found.

METHODOLOGY


This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyse signs and their interpretations within the selected film. As noted by Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative research focuses on understanding and interpretation, which entails gathering diverse materials and employing various approaches, including observations. The emphasis shifts from objective meanings to subjective interpretations, such as personal attitudes, motivations, behaviours, events, and contexts.

According to Kim, Sefcik and Bradway (2016), the descriptive qualitative method is characterised as a study that produces data aimed at detailing the 'who, what, and where of events or experiences' from a subjective viewpoint. Therefore, qualitative research emphasises the subjective interpretations, such as the writer's perspective, rather than solely relying on the established facts associated with an object. It allows for the greatest autonomy in forming conclusions based on individual observation.

For the data collection, the Malay film *Doh* was chosen due to its diverse scenes that offer significant signifiers, leading to meaningful signified concepts. In the analysis of these data, Semiotic Theory (Barthes, 1957) is employed, as it addresses the relationship between signifier and signified elements.

The following is a compilation of scenes that have been identified.

Table 1. Lists of selected scenes for data analysis

Datum	Item	Minute in the film
1	Brown Diary 	66:75

2	Hacks wrapper in the diary that belongs to Faiz's late father. 	66:89
3	Hacks wrapper handed by Faiz's late father 	67:42
4	Flocks of birds flying away 	67:56

Table 2. Conversation between Faiz (the protagonist) and his dad

Character	Conversation in Bahasa Melayu	English Translation of the conversation in Bahasa Melayu
Faiz/The protagonist	Abah, abang dah dapat surat dari KL.	<i>Abah, I received a letter from KL.</i>
Abah /Dad	Oh ya! Macamana?	<i>Oh, really. What did it say?</i>
Faiz/The protagonist	Diaorg terima abang.	<i>They accepted me.</i>
Abah /Dad	Alhamdulillah. Bila abang nak pergi?	<i>Praise to God. When will you go?</i>
Faiz/The protagonist	Tak tau lagi. Tapi bila nanti abang dah kat sana, susah pulak nanti abang nak balik sini.	<i>I'm not sure yet. But once I am there, it'll be hard for me to come back.</i>
Abah /Dad	Takpe, bapak dengan mak memang ada je kat sini. Ada masa nanti, baliklah.	<i>It's fine. Your mom and I will be here. When you have time, come home.</i>
Faiz/The protagonist	Terima kasih, abah.	<i>Thank you, abah.</i>
Abah/Dad	Jaga diri. Kerja elok-elok. Faham?	<i>Take care. Work hard. Got it?</i>
Faiz/The protagonist	Abang janji, suati hari nanti, abang balik sini jaga kedai sama-sama dengan bapak.	<i>I promise, that one day, I will come back to take care of the shop with you.</i>

FINDINGS

RQ1: What are the functions of visual and text as presented in the four scenes and one dialogue found in the *Doh* film?

In datum 1, the brown diary that Faiz (the protagonist) possesses illustrates the psychological effects of human emotions and conduct (Minnibach, 2025). To begin, this colour is closely linked to security, stability, and tenderness. When encompassed by a brown hue, individuals can experience feeling at ease. As this old diary is inherited from his late father, holding it has helped Faiz to form a reconnection to his late father's life as a confectioner. The way Faiz holds the diary and how he places the diary onto his lap demonstrate how precious and delicate the diary is to him. By positioning this diary on his lap, it conveys a personal reflection in which he may be in the verge of reading something intimate, which in this case, his father's words on hopes for the bakery. It also demonstrates a great significant in terms of Faiz's emotional conditions. When his fingers softly caressing the pages on the diary, it indicates profound thoughts and recollections of memories. Typically, when a character in a film has a diary on his lap, it often signifies contemplation, confidentiality, or the burden of personal experiences. The journal may symbolise a link to historical occurrences, concealed realities, or important recollections that the character is reflecting upon.

Datum 2 employs the same situation; however, the presence of the red Hacks mint candy wrapper signifies a heightened emotional response from Faiz. The mint candy wrapper was discovered concealed between the pages of the brown journal, perhaps placed there by his late father as a memento of their chat just before Faiz relocated to Kuala Lumpur after accepting the job offer. The mint candy wrapper has intensified Faiz's emotions as this colour is believed to have the ability of influencing psychological functioning, thus, acting as a significant link to his recollections of his deceased father.

The same Hacks mint candy wrapper is also detected in Datum 3, where Faiz's late father handed him the candy with a palm-up (PU) gesture. Cliff (2020) concludes that palm-up (PU) gestures reveal to be responsive, rather than initiating. PU cues, whether used independently or in tandem with other hand movements that consists of reaching, showing (Cienki, 2021), check understanding of the participants' action (Jokipohja & Lilja, 2022), serve to initiate speaking turns, pose questions, request favors, and express personal opinions, feelings, and moods. Often, this universal gesture conveys generosity and trust, openness and honesty but speaking from this context, the palm up gesture displayed by Faiz's late father can be considered as an invitation to accept or participate willingly.

This context is further heightened with the presence of the colour of the Hacks mint candy wrapper which can be translated as a positive assurance of the discussion that took place between Faiz and his late father. Although the PU has been variously labeled, documented and researched, one of the aspects that has been overlooked is what Manrique (2011) and Floyd et. al. (2016) call 'hold' which means personified action with turn taking; a pointing gesture accompanying a question held until the end of the recipient's answer, and only released just before the gesturer's own acknowledgement (Mondada, 2007). This gesture encompasses a wide range of embodied actions deploying the head, eyes, face, hands or abdomen or any combination of these.

As for the fourth scene, the birds that are flown in flocks carry a deep and meaningful symbol. In Datum 4, a flock of birds is seen flying away leaving the current location where a deep conversation between Faiz and his deceased father took place at a playground. Babič (2023) explains that birds according to Slovenian folklore symbolises freedom, beauty and wisdom; on the other hand, an indigenous tribe in western Ethiopia exhibit a profound cultural connection to birds, viewing them as a sacred and spiritually valuable beings as a result of cultural values (Aticho et. al., 2024).

The duration of the dialogue (Table 2) is one minute 77 seconds, takes place at the 1:09:52. In the conversation, Faiz's late father presents him with a mint candy towards the end of the conversation, and the same wrapper was kept in pages of the brown diary for years. This is a notable move that signifies his late father's high hopes that one day, Faiz would return to manage the bakery, as Faiz said *I promise, that one day, I will come back to take care of the shop with you.*

RQ2: How do the interaction between visual and written modes found in the four selected scenes and one a dialogue shape the interpretation of the selected scenes found in the film?

The interaction between visual and written modes in *Doh* (2023) plays a pivotal role in shaping how audience interpret key moments in the film, specifically in scenes involving the brown diary, the Hacks mint candy wrapper, and the emotionally charged dialogue between Faiz and his late father. These multimodal interactions do not operate in vacuum; instead, they collide to create complex meanings that shape the viewer's emotional and ideological analysis of the narrative. The brown diary functions as both a visual artifact and a narrative stimulant. The viewer's perception of reflection, emotional anchoring, and

personal responsibility is activated by the presence of the object, which is accompanied by Faiz's physical engagement (stroking the pages, settling it on his lap). The traditional values that Faiz is currently fighting with are visually reinforced by the colour brown, which is associated with stability, comfort, and connection. The diary, as a signifier, extends its literal function and emerges as a symbol of inherited duty and familial legacy.

In addition, the Hacks mint candy wrapper leads to this dynamic by incorporating a dual-layered semiotic interaction: visually, the red wrapper conveys emotional urgency and filial attachment, while textually, it is incorporated into a recollected discourse. This exchange is further accentuated by the palm-up gesture, which serves as a visual cue that signifies emotional openness, surrender, and invitation. Faiz's present emotional conflict is directly connected to his prior intentions by the transformation of a simple object into a mythic token of promise through the combination of these modes.

The speech further solidifies these visuals by a vocal commitment - "*Abang janji...*" ("*I promise...*"). This statement enhances the visual context, incorporating cultural ideals of filial piety, duty, and reciprocity. The dialogue's semantic content, along with non-verbal gestures and symbolic imagery, directs the audience towards an interpretation influenced by Barthes' notion of myth - where individual choice is obscured as cultural determinism.

In the concluding symbolic moment (the flock of birds taking flight) the visual representation implies liberation or departure (Siqi, et. al., 2023). However, in relation to the prior discussion, it assumes an ironic significance. The birds symbolise emotional release intertwined with unavoidable responsibility, quietly suggesting that real freedom may never be completely achievable within the confines of cultural expectations. The interplay between visual elements (colour, gesture, object) and verbal components (conversation, narration) reconfigures audience interpretation by establishing a polygonal semiotic framework that normalises cultural ideals, particularly about gender roles, tradition, and familial loyalty. *Doh* uses multimodal clues to replicate and mirror societal norms in family drama, portraying them as emotionally valid and socially unavoidable, rather than depicting them neutrally.

DISCUSSION

The semiotic analysis of *Doh* (2023) reveals that meaning within the film is carefully constructed through a network of visual and verbal signs that do more than advance the narrative - they operate ideologically, shaping viewers' perceptions of family, tradition, and personal responsibility. The brown diary, red Hacks candy wrapper, and the imagery of birds are not neutral symbols; rather, they function as emotional and cultural anchors (Piermattéo, 2021), inviting audience to accept particular social values as inevitable and natural.

The diary, associated with stability and emotional continuity, subtly reinforces the expectation that the eldest son must shoulder familial obligations. It transforms a personal object into a cultural artifact (Heersmink, 2023; Ankenbauer et. al., 2024) of duty and nostalgia, normalising patriarchal succession within the family unit. Similarly, the red Hacks wrapper - laden with emotional resonance - operates as a site of memory and promise, intensifying the affective power of familial bonds while masking the weight of inherited obligation. The gesture of the father offering the candy in a palm-up position furthers this ideological transfer, disguising duty as a freely chosen emotional bond.

Meanwhile, the flight of birds, often read as a symbol of freedom, ironically signals entrapment in the specified scene. Although the birds visually suggest departure and liberation, their movement is tied directly to Faiz's internal conflict between personal ambition and family loyalty. The film thus subtly disarms resistance to traditional roles by cloaking obligation in the language of love, belonging, and memory.

Through these signifiers, *Doh* participates in the wider cultural project of myth-making described by Barthes - transforming historically contingent social structures into seemingly natural and universal truths. The myth of the "dutiful son" and the sanctity of inherited family roles are not interrogated but reaffirmed, emphasising emotional reconciliation over critical examination of tradition. In doing so, *Doh* invites the audience into a comforting narrative that stabilises cultural norms while rendering their ideological work invisible.

It is indeed crucial for audience to recognise this dynamic, as film like *Doh* demonstrates how cultural productions, even those that appear intimate or localised, are deeply implicated in the reproduction of societal hierarchies. Meaning is never innocent; it is crafted, circulated, and absorbed in ways that both reflect and reinforce the existing social order. Semiotic analysis thus serves not only to decode symbols but to expose the cultural negotiations and power dynamics hidden beneath the surface of everyday storytelling.

CONCLUSION

The semiotic investigation of *Doh* (2023) unveils the profound ideological functions embedded within its visual and narrative design. By applying Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory, this study demonstrates that the film does more than narrate a familial drama - it subtly encodes and circulates dominant socio-cultural values (Dong, 2023; Wang and Yuan, 2024) particularly those surrounding ancestral obligation, tradition, and gender roles. The film's symbolic elements - the brown diary, the red Hacks mint candy wrapper, and the flock of birds—are not merely decorative props but are carefully selected to signify emotional weight, ideological loyalty, and cultural expectations.

The brown diary, through its association with warmth, stability, and memory, becomes a powerful metaphor for inherited obligation and emotional continuity. It visually reinforces the protagonist's role as the bearer of his family's legacy, not by force but through sentimental attachment. Similarly, the red candy wrapper acts as a symbolic relic, embedding memory, promise, and emotional debt into a seemingly trivial object. These visual cues, when combined with dialogue and gestures; such as the palm-up offering of the sweet operate as powerful conveyors of cultural norms, cloaking obligation in the affective language of love and loyalty.

Moreover, the scene of the birds in flight encapsulates the paradox of freedom versus responsibility. While birds are traditionally seen as emblems of liberation, their placement within the narrative following an emotionally charged conversation between father and son renders their symbolism more complex. Rather than offering an escape, their flight gestures toward a cycle of return, loyalty, and inescapable cultural duty. Thus, even nature itself becomes part of the ideological landscape, reinforcing the emotional and cultural pull of home and heritage.

These findings reaffirm that *Doh* is not a passive cultural product but an active participant in myth-making. It naturalises certain ideological structures, particularly those concerning patriarchal authority, male leadership in family enterprises, and emotional labor disguised as voluntary devotion. The film does not question these roles but affirms them, thus contributing to the quiet endurance of hierarchical traditions.

This analysis underscores the significance of semiotics in unpacking the implicit messages embedded in film and media. It also calls attention to the importance of critical viewing practices among audience. Films like *Doh* illustrate how even intimate, localised stories carry with them the weight of cultural narratives (Guo and Chen, 2023) that shape collective perception and behaviour. Through the decoding of these layered signs, researchers and viewers alike are invited to re-examine what is presented as natural, inevitable, or benign.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the power of film lies not only in storytelling but also in the transmission of ideology through symbol, sound, and silence. By making the invisible visible, semiotic analysis enables a deeper, more critical engagement with the media we consume and the cultural narratives we inhabit.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author contributed to the conception and design of the study.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author used Quillbot and Gemini in order to check facts, generate initial ideas and citations for accuracy. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Derwina Daud upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research has gained UiTM Research Ethics Committee approval. The REC approval number is REC/02/2025 (ST/EX/2).

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Rhetorical Appeals in Political Discourse: Bibliometrix Analysis and Its Future Trends

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates global research trends on rhetorical appeals in political discourse through a systematic bibliometric analysis. Recent scholarship demonstrates a marked increase in the academic examination of ethos, pathos, and logos within political communication. It reflects heightened interest in how rhetorical strategies construct persuasive narratives, shape public opinion, and legitimise authority. The objectives of this study are (a) to synthesise publication trends on most cited countries, corresponding authors' countries and most global cited documents of rhetorical appeals in political discourse, (b) to create the intellectual structure of keyword map, word frequency over time, thematic map and thematic clusters of rhetorical appeals in political discourse and (c) to predict future trends of research regarding rhetorical appeals in political discourse. Employing a hybrid methodology that integrates systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis, this research synthesises data from 74 peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus. Analytical tools such as Biblioshiny were utilised to map citation patterns, influential authors, thematic clusters, and intellectual structures across the literature. The findings reveal a concentration of scholarly influence within Western and Anglophone countries but also signal emerging contributions from non-Western contexts. Thematic analysis highlights motor themes such as political discourse, populism, and elections, alongside foundational and emerging topics. Persistent challenges include methodological fragmentation, terminological ambiguity, and the underrepresentation of diverse regional perspectives. The study denotes the necessity for greater internationalisation, methodological innovation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. These insights provide an evidence-based foundation for future research, guiding scholars, educators, and policymakers towards more inclusive, contextually informed, and ethically responsive studies of rhetorical persuasion in global political communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Global trends in political communication indicate a marked rise in the scholarly examination of rhetorical appeals within political discourse. It is a development corroborated by recent bibliometric and systematic reviews highlighting the sustained growth of research in this area (Hart et al., 2020; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2021; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The study of rhetorical appeals, namely ethos, pathos, and logos, remains central to understanding how political actors construct persuasive messages, shape public opinion, and legitimise authority (Charteris-Black, 2014; Finlayson, 2021). These appeals are instrumental in framing political narratives, mobilising support, and influencing democratic processes (Cheng et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2016).

Despite the evident significance of rhetorical strategies in shaping political outcomes, the scholarly literature notes persistent variations in how such appeals are employed across contexts, cultures, and regimes (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Zarefsky, 2014). The effectiveness and ethical implications of rhetorical appeals in political discourse are profoundly shaped by context-specific factors such as media environment, political culture, and institutional frameworks (Van Dijk, 2015; Richardson, 2007). While the foundational role of rhetoric in politics is widely acknowledged, significant disparities remain in the focus, methods, and theoretical approaches adopted by researchers worldwide.

Comprehensive bibliometric analyses such as those by Hart et al. (2020) and Wodak & Meyer (2016) have demonstrated a steady increase in the number of publications addressing rhetorical strategies in politics. However, the Global Discourse Monitor (DDM) and related reviews reveal that studies differ substantially in their conceptualisation and operationalisation of rhetorical appeals, with some emphasising classical Aristotelian categories and others adopting critical or discourse-analytic frameworks (Finlayson, 2021; Charteris-Black, 2014).

Persistent challenges, including terminological ambiguity, methodological fragmentation, and underrepresentation of non-Western political contexts, have limited the cumulative impact of this research field (Zarefsky, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Additionally, despite an increase in research output, the literature is marked by siloed approaches, with few studies providing integrative overviews of intellectual trends, influential scholars, or major publication outlets (Hart et al., 2020). These limitations impede the understanding of how rhetorical appeals function across varying political environments and historical periods.

Recognising these enduring gaps, recent scholarship has called for a comprehensive bibliometric review to map the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and influential contributions within the field of rhetorical appeals in political discourse (Cheng et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2016). Such a review is necessary to clarify conceptual boundaries, identify dominant trends, and guide future research efforts. While previous literature reviews have synthesised findings on specific rhetorical strategies or genres such as campaign speeches and parliamentary debates, there remains a lack of focused bibliometric analysis that systematically charts the evolution of this research domain.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to address the gap by conducting a systematic bibliometric analysis of research on rhetorical appeals in political discourse. By synthesising publication trends, influential works, co-authorship networks, and emergent themes, this study aims to inform the future trajectory of rhetorical studies in political communication. The objectives of this study are (a) to synthesise publication trends on most cited countries, corresponding authors' countries and most global

cited documents of rhetorical appeals in political discourse, (b) to create the intellectual structure of keyword map, word frequency over time, thematic map and thematic clusters of rhetorical appeals in political discourse and (c) to predict future trends of research regarding rhetorical appeals in political discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of rhetorical appeals remains fundamentally rooted in the Aristotelian triad of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. *Ethos* is central to establishing the credibility and character of the political actor which is essential for legitimising authority and fostering trust within the electorate (Charteris-Black, 2014). In contrast, *pathos* leverages emotional triggers such as hope, fear, or anger to mobilise support and create a collective identity among followers (Finlayson, 2021). *Logos* provides the rational framework by using evidence and structured argumentation to justify policy decisions and persuade undecided voters (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2021). However, these appeals do not function in isolation but are deeply interconnected within broader campaign strategies (Cheng et al., 2021). For instance, political advertising often simultaneously employs *logos* through its textual content while utilising *pathos* via visual and tonal elements to maximise persuasive impact (Moffitt, 2016). This multimodal approach reflects the complexity of modern political communication as candidate characteristics like competence and honesty are shaped by a strategic blend of logical and emotional messaging (Marcus et al., 2000).

Beyond classical frameworks, the adoption of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has become a prominent methodological trend in examining how language shapes power relations and social reality (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). CDA allows researchers to move beyond the surface meaning of political texts to uncover underlying ideological assumptions and subtle forms of manipulation in policy documents and campaign speeches (Van Dijk, 2015). This approach is particularly effective in studying themes and sub-themes of the political texts. In the context of rising global populism, discourse analysis reveals how leaders craft narratives that position the people against a perceived elite by using rhetorical strategies to appeal to widespread public frustrations (Moffitt, 2016). These studies highlight how political discourse functions as an analytical foundation for constructing political realities and mobilising citizens. Furthermore, the intersection of politics with identity, religion and nationalism has become a niche theme as researchers explore how discursive practices establish boundaries between “us” and “them” to reinforce belonging and legitimate claims to power (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

The rapid digitalisation of the political sphere presents a significant shift in how rhetorical appeals are deployed and analysed. The emergence of social media, influencer politics and AI-driven content generation has introduced new dimensions to traditional persuasion (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). The focus has shifted to how algorithms amplify or distort rhetorical appeals by prioritising sensationalism and virality to heightened political polarisation (Perloff, 2020). Moreover, the integration of data analytics allows for micro-targeting strategies where rhetorical appeals are precisely calibrated to exploit the specific psychological profiles and emotional vulnerabilities of niche audience segments (Bennett, 2022). This granular approach often prioritises the rapid dissemination of *pathos*-driven content over substantive logical debate (Knuutila et al., 2022). Consequently, the interplay between human agency and automated curation necessitates a reevaluation of how persuasive authority is established and maintained within these fragmented online ecosystems (Tucker et al., 2018).

The transition from manual qualitative analysis to automated quantitative mapping represents a significant milestone in the study of political rhetoric. Bibliometric analysis has emerged as a rigorous method for synthesising large volumes of scientific data (Donthu et al., 2021). By employing tools such as Biblioshiny and VOSviewer, main themes can be identified as the structure of a research field (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The macro-level perspective complements micro-level discourse analysis by revealing how specific rhetorical strategies have migrated across borders and disciplines to provide a bird's-eye view of the scholarly landscape that traditional systematic reviews may overlook (Zupic & Cater, 2015).

Furthermore, the identification of niche and emerging themes through thematic clustering offers a predictive framework for future research directions. Current bibliometric trends indicate a growing intersection between political linguistics and environmental psychology to examine how rhetorical appeals are used to navigate the New Ecological Paradigm and shape environmental identity (Dunlap et al., 2000). As political discourse becomes increasingly globalised, there is a marked shift toward exploring how non-Western rhetorical traditions and diverse linguistic contexts influence international relations and climate diplomacy (Sun & Wang, 2020; Bondermup Dohn, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis enable researchers to trace the development and intellectual landscape of a scholarly field over time, revealing how concepts such as rhetorical appeals in political discourse evolve and gain prominence (Zoller & Muldoon, 2020). Over recent decades, the study of rhetorical strategies within political discourse has grown considerably. This study adopts a hybrid approach by integrating systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis to synthesise and map the research landscape surrounding rhetorical appeals in political discourse.

A systematic literature review is a foundational element of scientific inquiry, offering a comprehensive inventory of existing knowledge, surfacing new perspectives, and posing novel research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tranfield et al., 2003). Its methodological transparency ensures replicability and rigor (Lim & Weissmann, 2023). Nonetheless, systematic reviews are subject to interpretation bias due to its being qualitative in nature (MacCoun, 1998; Boubaker et al., 2023). Complementing this, bibliometric analysis introduces a quantitative dimension that minimises subjective bias and offers a more objective mapping of research trends (Boubaker et al., 2023). The combination of these approaches is increasingly recognised in scholarly practice (Boubaker et al., 2023; Sureka et al., 2022; Tomar et al., 2021).

Data Collection and Screening

Data for this analysis were systematically extracted following the protocol established by Tranfield et al. (2003) to ensure transparency, legitimacy, and reproducibility throughout the review process. The initial step involved determining keywords capable of capturing the relevant literature. Drawing on previous review articles in political discourse and rhetoric (Charteris-Black, 2014; Cheng et al., 2021), the search string of “*rhetorical AND appeals AND in AND political AND discourse*” was constructed using Boolean operators to maximise the relevance and coverage of the field. The search was conducted within the fields of “*Article Title, Abstract, Keywords*” in the Scopus database.

The initial query produced 149 articles. To ensure quality, the search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles which yielded 104 articles. Further refinement restricted the sample to publications in English that resulted in 94 articles. A manual screening process was subsequently performed to ensure the final dataset's relevance and focus. Titles and abstracts were reviewed. Articles deemed irrelevant such as those focusing on psychology, nursing, media without political context, technical, branding or marketing outside of politics, or narrative studies which lack political discourse were excluded. This process resulted in the removal of 20 articles. In the end, the methodology produced a final set of 74 articles directly related to rhetorical appeals in political discourse.

Analytical Tools and Procedures

Beliefs To analyse these 74 articles, bibliometric software tool of Biblioshiny was employed for descriptive and network analysis. The study examined citation patterns, core journals, influential authors, and intellectual structure of keywords and thematic progression. Furthermore, bibliographic coupling cluster evolution analysis was undertaken to trace the thematic development of research on rhetorical appeals in political discourse over time (Boubaker et al., 2023). This retrospective approach contextualises the historical evolution of the field and identifies emerging areas of scholarly interest to provide a foundation for future research directions.

The principal aim of this multi-layered methodology is to identify the most significant contributions, leading scholars, and thematic shifts, while mapping developmental trends in the study of rhetorical appeals in political discourse. This analysis provides a comprehensive and objective overview of the field, guiding future research and supporting the advancement of rhetorical and political communication studies.

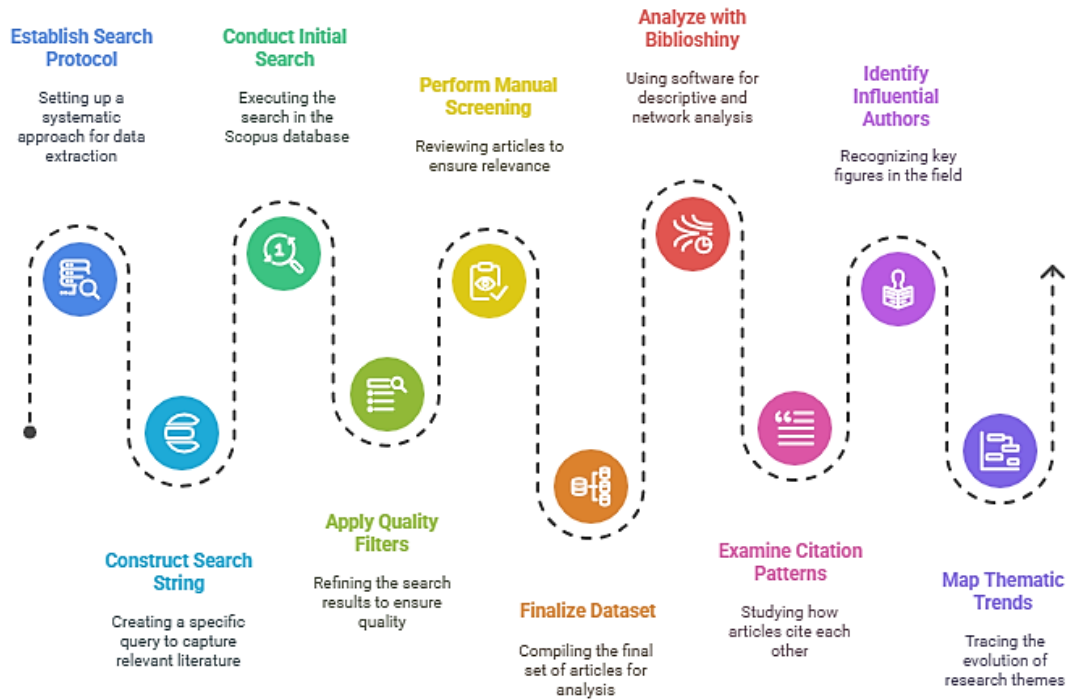


Figure 1. Research design

FINDINGS

Descriptive Trends Among Research Constituents

Publication trends

Figure 2 of “Most Cited Countries” illustrates the distribution of research citations by country. Finland and the United Kingdom stand out as the most cited countries with 109 citations. The United States follows closely with 98 citations. These three countries dominate the landscape which indicates their substantial contribution and influence in the research area. Norway (46 citations) and Australia (45 citations) form a second tier of highly cited countries although their citation counts are less than half of the leading group.

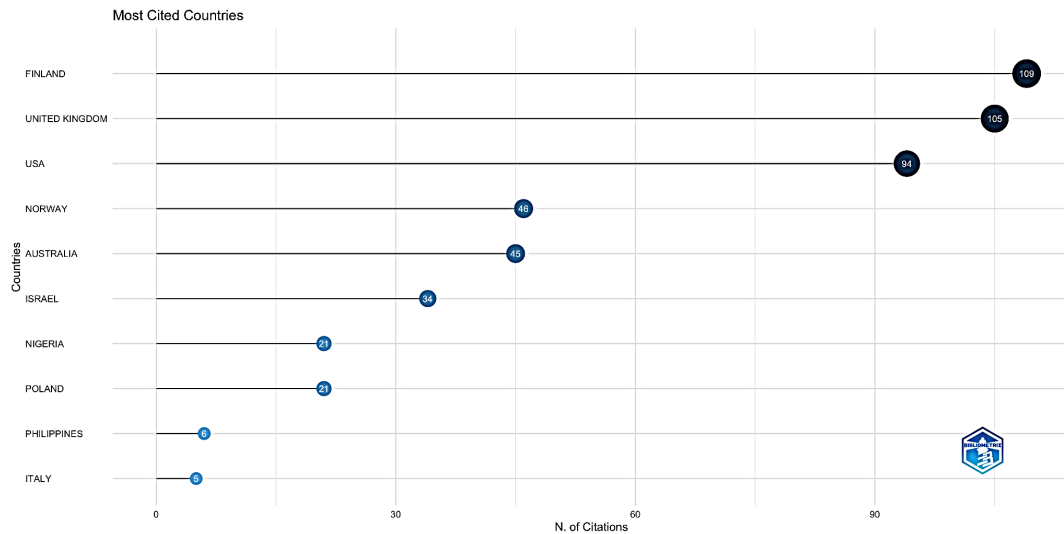


Figure 2. Most cited countries

The middle segment includes Israel (34 citations), Nigeria (21 citations), and Poland (21 citations). These countries demonstrate moderate impact and reflect growing research activity and international collaboration. The Philippines and Italy are the least cited among the countries listed, with 9 and 8 citations respectively. It indicates limited but present engagement in the research discourse.

This citation pattern reveals a concentration of research influence in Western and Northern Europe with strong representation from Anglophone countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. The presence of countries like Nigeria and the Philippines also highlights emerging contributions from the Global South. However, the inclusion of countries from different regions signals a gradual broadening of research participation.

Figure 3 provides a comparative overview of the geographic distribution of corresponding authors in scholarly publications. It displays the number of documents for each country by distinguishing between Single Country Publications (SCP, shown in teal) and Multiple Country Publications (MCP, shown in red), which reflect the extent of international collaboration. It reveals that the United States leads by a significant margin with the highest number of corresponding authors and almost all publications classified as SCP. It reflects that most research led by the U.S.-based authors tends to be domestically produced. The United Kingdom follows with a strong presence of single-country publications. Nigeria ranks third which shows notable engagement in scholarly authorship.

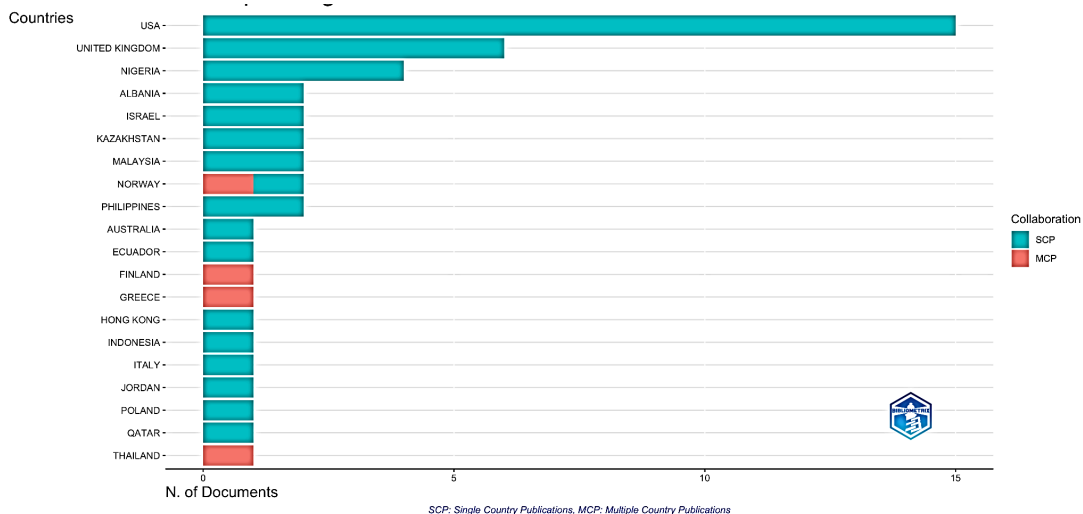


Figure 3. Corresponding author’s countries

Countries such as Israel, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Norway, and the Philippines display moderate representation. Several countries including Malaysia, Norway, Finland, Greece, Qatar, and Thailand have visible proportions of MCPs. It denotes a greater degree of international collaboration in their research outputs. This is visually reflected by the presence of red segments in their bars. The lower portion of the chart features countries like Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Poland with relatively fewer corresponding authors and a mix of SCP and MCP publications. The diversity of countries represented suggests a growing trend of global participation even on a smaller scale.

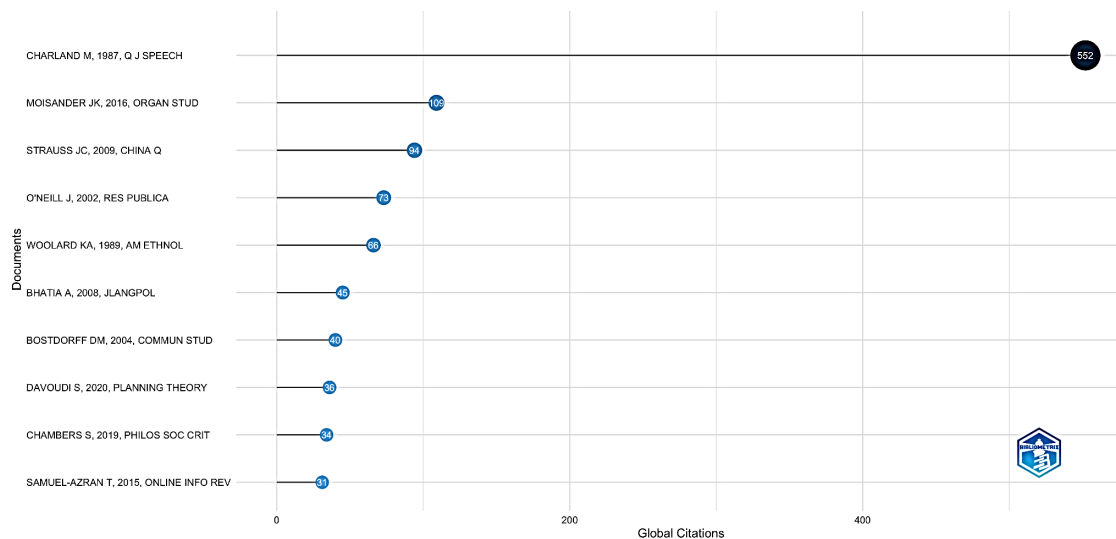


Figure 4. Most global cited documents

Figure 4 depicts the most frequently cited documents of rhetorical appeals in political discourse. The

most notable finding is the significant citation count for the work by Charland M. (1987) published in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* which stands out with 552 citations. The next most cited document is by Moisaner JK (2016, *Organization Studies*) with 108 citations, followed by Strauss JC (2009, *China Quarterly*) with 94 citations. Other highly cited works include O’Neill J (2002, *Res Publica*; 72 citations), Woolard KA (1989, *American Ethnologist*; 66 citations), and Bhatia A (2008, *Journal of Language and Politics*; 45 citations).

Each of these publications is recognised for its significant scholarly influence as they address key issues or theoretical frameworks that resonate widely within the academic community. The lower end of the spectrum includes Bostdorff DM (2004, *Communication Studies*; 40 citations), Dayoud S (2020, *Planning Theory*; 39 citations), Chambers S (2019, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*; 32 citations), and Samuel-Azran T (2015, *Online Information Review*; 31 citations). Although these documents have fewer citations compared to the leading publications, their presence still signifies notable recognition and impact in their respective areas.

Intellectual Structure

Keyword Map



Figure 5. Word cloud

Figure 5 presents a word cloud visualising the most prominent keywords found in the analysed corpus of literature. The most dominant terms are “political discourse,” “rhetoric,” and “political rhetoric.” Their prominence indicates that the field is heavily focused on the study of language use, argumentation, and persuasion within political contexts. Other frequently appearing terms include “populism,” “political communication,” “power,” and “rhetorical appeals.” These keywords highlight ongoing research interests in how political actors mobilise support, construct persuasive messages, and exert influence through language. The word cloud also features “critical discourse analysis,” “deliberative

democracy” and “framing” that signal methodological and theoretical approaches prevalent in political discourse studies.

Additionally, keywords such as “nationalism,” “identity,” “religion,” “pathos,” “ethos,” and “logos” reflect deeper inquiries into the intersections of politics with culture, values, and emotional appeals. The presence of country names like “Nigeria,” “Israel,” and “United Kingdom” suggests comparative or case study-driven analyses. It illustrates that research in this domain is multidisciplinary which draws on linguistics, political science, communication, and sociology to explore how language shapes, and is shaped by political processes. The diversity and frequency of keywords captured in the word cloud provide a clear map of dominant topics, theoretical orientations, and research foci within the field.

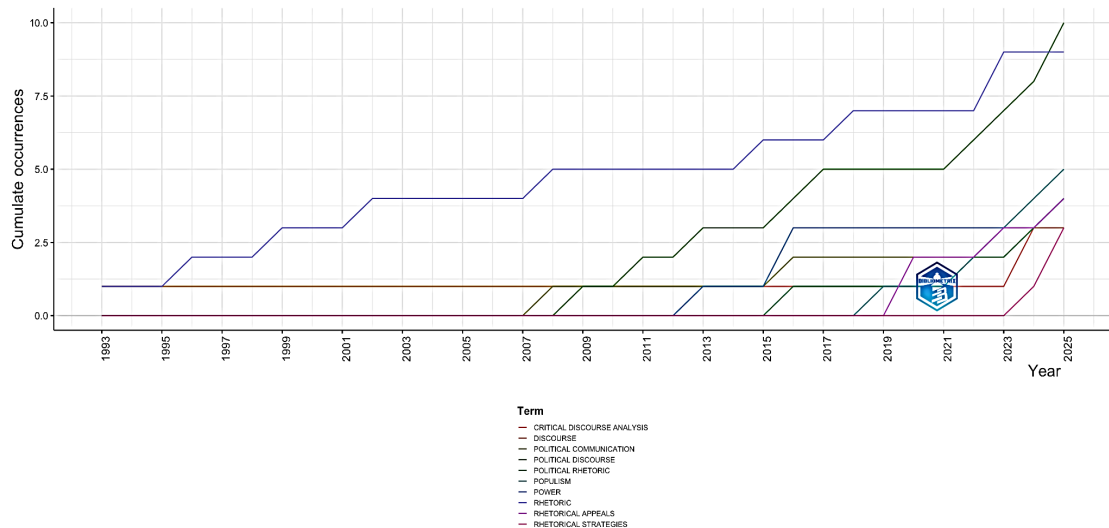


Figure 6. Word frequency over time

Figure 6 tracks the cumulative occurrences of selected key terms in the research literature from 1993 to 2023. It reveals clear temporal trends in the usage and prominence of important concepts within the field. The terms “political discourse” and “political rhetoric” show the highest cumulative occurrences, especially after 2010. It demonstrates a steady and then accelerated increase which reflects growing scholarly attention to how language is used in political contexts.

Other terms, such as “populism,” “rhetorical appeals,” and “critical discourse analysis,” begin to appear later (post-2010) but show a clear upward trajectory particularly after 2017. The increasing frequency of “populism” mirrors global political trends and the rise of populist movements. The term “critical discourse analysis” also rises which indicates the adoption of this methodological approach in examining political texts and communication. “Power,” “ethos,” “rhetorical strategies,” and “political communication” are less frequent but still show a noticeable presence with most growth observed in the past decade. It suggests an expanding analytical scope and incorporating classical rhetorical concepts and communication theories into the study of political language. The increasing frequency of terms related to

discourse, rhetoric, and populism indicates dynamic research activity and highlights the relevance of these concepts for contemporary analysis.

Thematic Map

Figure 7 organises the main themes found in the literature into four quadrants based on two axes of development degree (density) on the y-axis and relevance degree (centrality) on the x-axis. In the upper-right quadrant, labelled “Motor Themes,” are topics that are both highly developed and central to the field. Here, “political discourse,” “populism,” and “elections” are identified as core themes. The upper-left quadrant, “Niche Themes,” contains “discourse analysis” and “identity.” These themes are well-developed within their specific areas but are less central to the overall research field. It indicates specialised but influential pockets of scholarship that may serve as resources for deeper or comparative analysis.

The lower-right quadrant, “Basic Themes,” includes “rhetorical appeals,” which are central but not yet highly developed, and “political rhetoric,” “democracy,” and “Israel,” which occupy transitional positions between basic and more developed themes. The lower-left quadrant, “Emerging or Declining Themes,” contains “political communication,” “rhetorical strategies,” and “framing.” These themes currently show lower centrality and density. It suggests they are either emerging areas of interest or may be declining in prominence.

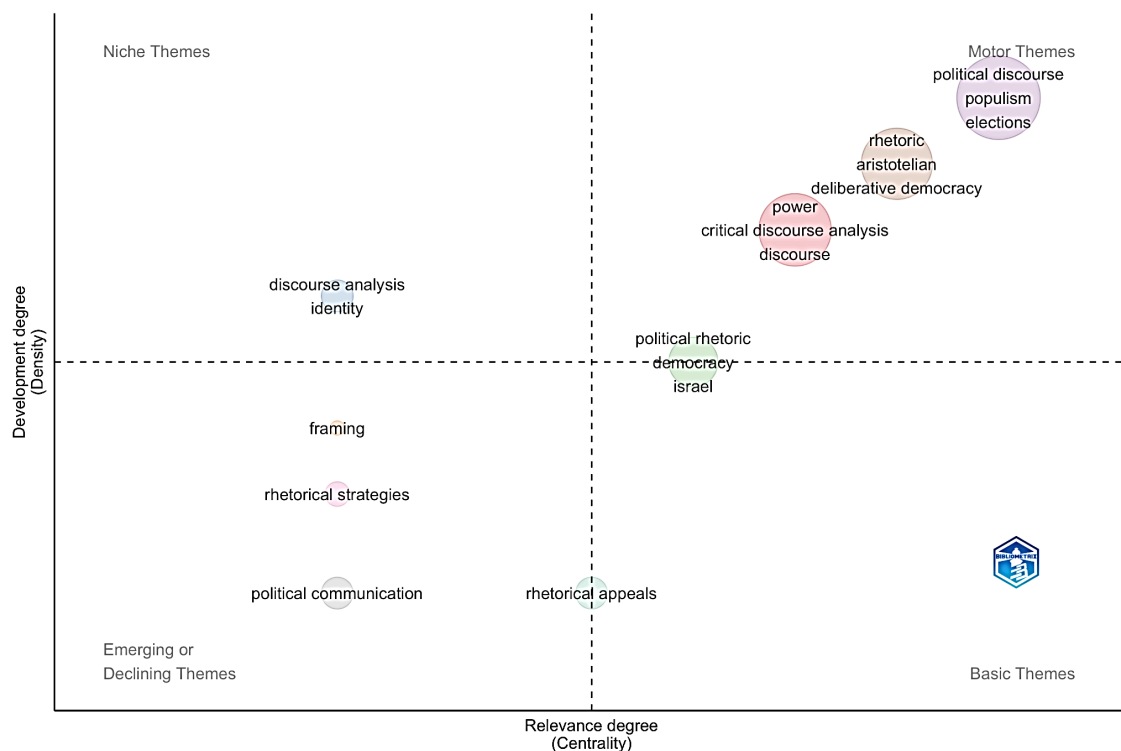


Figure 7. Thematic map

Thematic Clusters

Cluster 1: Motor Themes

Cluster 1, identified as Motor Themes, consists of topics that are both highly developed and central to the field of political discourse studies. This cluster includes “political discourse,” “populism,” “elections,” “rhetoric,” “aristotelian,” and “deliberative democracy.” These themes are critical because they represent the primary drivers of academic inquiry and shape the theoretical and methodological directions of current research.

“Political discourse” functions as the analytical foundation for understanding how language is used to construct political realities, legitimise authority, and mobilise citizens. It involves examining speeches, debates, manifestos, and other communicative acts within political contexts, thus serving as a platform for interrogating ideology and power relations.

“Populism” has emerged as a significant theme due to its global resurgence in various political systems. Researchers investigate how populist leaders craft discourse that positions “the people” against “the elite” by using rhetorical strategies to appeal to widespread frustrations and foster collective identity. “Elections” are central events that intensify the use and study of political rhetoric. During electoral campaigns, discourse is meticulously analysed to understand persuasion, agenda-setting, and voter mobilisation. It reflects the strategies of political actors and the responses of the electorate.

The inclusion of “rhetoric” and “aristotelian” underscores a sustained interest in classical frameworks, particularly Aristotle’s modes of persuasion (ethos, pathos, logos). These concepts remain foundational for analysing how arguments are constructed and how emotional, ethical, and logical appeals are balanced in contemporary contexts. Finally, “deliberative democracy” focuses on the quality and inclusiveness of public discussion and decision-making processes. Scholars in this area study how discourse facilitates participation, consensus-building, and legitimacy in democratic institutions.

Cluster 2: Niche Themes

Cluster 2, referred to as Niche Themes, includes “discourse analysis” and “identity.” Although these topics are well-developed within their specialised areas, they are less central to the broader field. They often serve more focused or interdisciplinary research agendas. “Discourse analysis” is a methodological approach used to systematically study language in use across various social contexts. In political research, it enables scholars to uncover the underlying structures, power relations, and ideological assumptions present in political texts and talk. This theme draws from linguistics, sociology, and communication studies to interpret how language constructs meaning and mediates social action.

Discourse analysis is often applied to uncover subtle forms of persuasion, bias, or manipulation in policy documents, campaign speeches, or media coverage, allowing researchers to move beyond surface meanings and reveal deeper social implications. Its methodological flexibility makes it a valuable tool for interdisciplinary work but may limit its direct impact on mainstream political discourse studies, which often focus on broader, and more generalisable themes.

“Identity” as a research theme explores how individuals and groups construct, negotiate, and express their collective or personal sense of self through language. Political contexts are particularly rich sites for examining identity because political actors frequently appeal to national, ethnic, religious, or ideological

identities to foster unity or differentiate themselves from opponents. Research on identity investigates how discursive practices establish boundaries between “us” and “them,” reinforce belonging, and legitimise claims to power or resources. The focus could be on identity formation in the context of migration, minority politics, or the rise of populist movements.

Cluster 3: Basic Themes

Cluster 3, labeled as Basic Themes, comprises “political rhetoric,” “democracy,” “Israel,” and “rhetorical appeals.” “Political rhetoric” focuses on the strategies and techniques employed by political actors to persuade, influence, or mobilise audiences. It draws upon classical traditions and contemporary approaches in order to examine how arguments are structured and tailored to different contexts or audiences. Researchers analyse rhetorical devices such as repetition, metaphors, and analogies to reveal how political leaders frame issues, justify decisions, and build consensus.

The theme of “democracy” reflects ongoing scholarly interest in the principles and practices that underpin democratic governance. In political discourse studies, it often involves examining how language is used to promote democratic values, legitimise authority, and foster civic participation. The research focuses on debates about electoral fairness, civil liberties, or participatory mechanisms. It considers how discourse shapes and reflects the functioning of democratic institutions.

“Israel” appears as a specific geographic and political reference which suggests that studies in this cluster frequently draw on case studies from Israeli politics. It involves exploring political communication strategies in a highly contested environment, media representations, or the role of discourse in conflict and peace processes. “Rhetorical appeals” refers to the use of ethos, pathos, and logos as persuasive strategies rooted in classical rhetoric. This theme is central to understanding how speakers establish credibility, evoke emotions, and construct logical arguments in political settings. It helps to reveal the underlying mechanisms of persuasion and audience engagement in political speech.

Cluster 4: Emerging or Declining Themes

Cluster 4, classified as Emerging or Declining Themes, includes “political communication,” “rhetorical strategies,” and “framing.” “Political communication” refers to the study of how information, ideas, and messages are transmitted within the political sphere, encompassing actors such as politicians, media organisations, and the public. It investigates the interplay between traditional and digital media, campaign strategies, and public opinion formation. Recently, the digitalisation of politics, social media influence, and evolving news consumption habits have offered new avenues for inquiry. It suggests potential for renewed relevance in this theme.

“Rhetorical strategies” focuses on the specific techniques and methods speakers use to craft persuasive messages in political contexts. Unlike the broader study of rhetoric, this theme examines the tactical choices made to address particular audiences, situations, or issues. For instance, the research explores how politicians tailor messages to different demographic groups, respond to crises, or counteract opponents’ narratives. As political discourse adapts to rapidly changing communication environments, novel rhetorical strategies continue to emerge especially in online and multimedia settings.

“Framing” centers on the ways in which issues, events, or actors are presented and interpreted in political texts and media. Framing theory is used to analyse how language shapes public perception, prioritises certain viewpoints, and guides interpretation. Current research investigates how frames are

constructed and contested across different platforms and contexts with particular attention to the role of framing in polarisation, agenda-setting, and policy debates.

Rhetorical Appeals Map

Figure 8, titled “Rhetorical Appeals Map,” represents the intricate network of relationships among core concepts in political persuasion. It focuses on how emotional and logical appeals are operationalised within campaign discourse and electoral strategies. It offers a holistic overview of the ways in which persuasive techniques are structured and deployed in contemporary political communication.

At the base of Figure 8 lies “Emotional and Logical Appeals” which are foundational to the study of rhetoric. These concepts, originating from Aristotle’s classic distinction between pathos (emotional appeal) and logos (logical appeal) which remain highly relevant in analysing how political messages are crafted to sway audiences. Politicians and campaign strategists deliberately invoke emotional responses such as fear, hope, or anger or appeal to reason through evidence and argumentation. It aims to connect with voters at affective and cognitive levels.

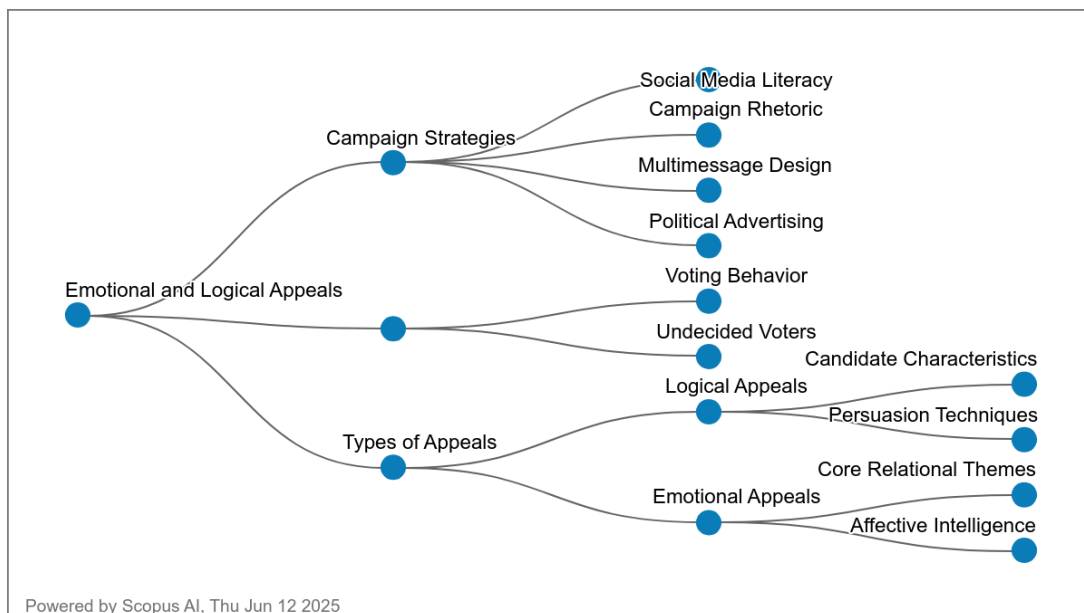


Figure 8. Rhetorical appeals map

Then, Figure 8 branches in two main directions of “Campaign Strategies” and “Types of Appeals.” The “Campaign Strategies” node captures the strategic dimension of modern electioneering. Subcategories under this branch, such as “Social Media Literacy,” “Campaign Rhetoric,” “Multimessage Design,” and “Political Advertising,” reflect the multiplicity of platforms and techniques used to reach the electorate. The rise of digital media has elevated the importance of social media literacy for political actors who must navigate new terrains of influence and for voters. “Multimessage Design” refers to the adaptive nature of political communication as campaigns often tailor distinct messages for different audience segments to maximise resonance and reach.

Other crucial sub-branch addresses are “Voting Behaviour” and “Undecided Voters.” It emphasises that campaign efforts are frequently targeted at those whose electoral choices are not predetermined. Understanding the motivations, cognitive biases, and emotional triggers of undecided voters is essential for crafting persuasive rhetoric that can tip electoral outcomes. It further illustrates that both logical and emotional appeals are pivotal in shaping perceptions of “Candidate Characteristics” such as competence, honesty, and relatability qualities that often influence electoral decisions beyond policy positions.

The “Types of Appeals” branch bifurcates into “Logical Appeals” and “Emotional Appeals” with their own downstream connections. Logical appeals are linked to “Persuasion Techniques” where evidence, statistics, and logical reasoning reinforce the credibility and rationality of political messaging. These appeals play a significant role in debates, manifestos, and policy explanations by providing voters with arguments to justify their choices. Emotional appeals connect with “Core Relational Themes” and “Affective Intelligence.” “Core Relational Themes” refer to fundamental human emotions and relationships such as trust, solidarity, or anger that campaigns leverage to foster identification with candidates or parties. “Affective Intelligence” draws from political psychology to explain how emotions guide political learning and behaviour, influencing how citizens respond to new information or uncertainty.

A key insight from the rhetorical appeals map is the interconnectedness of these concepts. Campaign strategies, types of appeals, and the various subcategories are part of a dynamic and iterative process. For example, “Political Advertising” may simultaneously employ logical appeals in its content and emotional appeals in its visuals and tone, thereby maximising persuasive impact across different voter groups. It offers a comprehensive model of how rhetorical appeals function within the broader system of political communication.

DISCUSSION

The bibliometric analysis reveals a concentration of scholarly influence within Western and Anglophone countries, particularly Finland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These countries produce the most cited works and host the majority of corresponding authors. It signifies their continued dominance in shaping research agendas and theoretical advancements. However, the presence of countries such as Nigeria, Malaysia, and the Philippines signals a slow yet noticeable diversification in scholarly participation. This expansion of geographic representation, especially with increased multiple-country publications (MCPs), is consistent with the broader movement towards global research collaboration and knowledge democratisation (Gazni, Sugimoto, & Didegah, 2012). Such diversification is essential for capturing contextually nuanced perspectives and broadening the scope of rhetorical studies beyond Euro-American paradigms.

Intellectually, the most frequently cited documents serve as foundational references that define core theories and methodologies. Seminal works have set enduring agendas in the analysis of political rhetoric. It often focuses on the persuasive dimensions of language and its impact on public opinion and identity. The prominence of these core publications highlights the field’s strong reliance on established frameworks (Adams, 2013). However, the ongoing citation of more recent and diverse scholarship suggests that the field remains open to new perspectives and interdisciplinary integration (Bornmann & Leydesdorff, 2014).

The keyword analysis, as visualised through the word cloud and frequency-over-time graphs, denotes the centrality of terms such as “political discourse,” “rhetoric,” and “populism.” These concepts showed increasing salience in the literature, particularly in response to global shifts towards populist politics and heightened political polarisation (Moffitt, 2016). The rising frequency of terms like “critical discourse analysis” and “deliberative democracy” further indicates a growing methodological sophistication, with scholars increasingly employing robust analytical tools to interrogate how language shapes power relations, identity, and democratic processes (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

The thematic map reveals a dynamic intellectual structure with “motor themes” such as political discourse, populism, and elections positioned as both highly relevant and well-developed. These themes drive contemporary research and reflect ongoing interest in understanding how rhetorical strategies are deployed in moments of political crisis or transformation. In contrast, “niche themes” like discourse analysis and identity provide depth and specialisation by offering critical insights that remain essential for comprehensive understanding. The identification of “basic themes” such as democracy and rhetorical appeals confirms the foundational role of classical rhetoric in both academic study and political practice. Meanwhile, the “emerging or declining themes” highlight areas for future exploration, particularly as digital media continues to reshape the communicative landscape (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016).

The rhetorical appeals map further clarifies the operational complexity of persuasive strategies in political contexts. It demonstrates that emotional and logical appeals are deeply embedded in broader campaign strategies, voter targeting, and multimodal communication. The interconnections between campaign rhetoric, social media literacy, persuasion techniques, and affective intelligence suggest a highly adaptive and context-sensitive field, responsive to both technological innovation and shifts in voter psychology (Marcus et al., 2000; Perloff, 2020). This finding reflects the need for future research to explore the interaction between emerging technologies, data-driven campaign strategies, and evolving forms of rhetorical persuasion.



Figure 9. Future trends

Looking ahead, Figure 9 identified the trends in this bibliometric analysis that signal several impactful and promising directions for future research in rhetorical appeals within political discourse.

There is a strong imperative for the field to move beyond the dominance of Western-centric paradigms and incorporate a broader range of regional, cultural, and linguistic contexts (Moed, 2017). Future research should prioritise cross-regional and cross-cultural comparative studies to understand how rhetorical appeals are shaped by local values, political cultures, and historical experiences. For example, the rhetorical strategies employed in Southeast Asian democracies, African emerging states, or Middle Eastern societies may differ significantly from those documented in Western Europe or North America. Including more non-Western case studies enriches the global relevance of the field and allows for the identification of context-specific persuasive techniques, power dynamics, and public responses. Such expansion would also facilitate dialogue and knowledge transfer between scholars from diverse backgrounds, strengthening the global research community and producing more nuanced, inclusive theoretical frameworks (Mokhothu & Callaghan, 2018).

Methodological innovation will be crucial for advancing the study of rhetorical appeals. The increasing availability of large-scale datasets from social media platforms, digital news, and political speeches creates opportunities for leveraging computational tools such as machine learning, natural language processing (NLP) and network analysis. Automated discourse analysis and sentiment analysis can systematically uncover patterns, emotional tones, and argumentative structures across massive corpora, offering empirical evidence at a scale previously unattainable (Grimmer, Roberts, & Stewart, 2022). When combined with classical rhetorical theory, these methods reveal what is persuasive, why is it persuasive, and under what conditions. This methodological synergy can help move the field towards more predictive and explanatory models of political persuasion.

The transformation of the media landscape through digitalisation and algorithmic communication presents both opportunities and challenges for rhetorical research. The nature of political messaging is being reshaped by the dynamics of social media, influencer politics, micro-targeting, and the use of bots and AI-driven content generators. Researchers need to examine how rhetorical appeals are adapted, amplified, or distorted by algorithms that prioritise sensationalism, virality, or polarisation. Additionally, there is a growing need to investigate the efficacy of rhetorical appeals in digital formats such as memes, short videos, or interactive content which may engage audiences differently than traditional speeches or manifestos. Understanding these shifts will be crucial for both scholars and practitioners aiming to navigate and respond to the rapidly evolving ecosystem of digital political communication.

As the use of persuasive techniques becomes more technologically sophisticated, concerns about manipulation, misinformation, and ethical boundaries in political rhetoric are becoming increasingly urgent. Future research should address questions related to the ethical deployment of rhetorical appeals, the impact of disinformation campaigns, and strategies for fostering media literacy and critical thinking among the public. Building public resilience to manipulative rhetoric and promoting transparent, accountable communication practices should be central to the research agenda.

Finally, the complexity of modern political communication necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing insights from linguistics, psychology, communication studies, computer science, and political science. There is growing value in exploring multimodal rhetoric where words, images, sound, and design interact to shape meaning and influence. How different modalities of appeal such as visual, textual, and auditory combine to produce persuasive effects in diverse audiences should be assessed to reflect the complexity of modern political communication.

CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of rhetorical appeals in political discourse by systematically mapping the publication trends, intellectual structure and future trends through bibliometric analysis. The research highlights the dynamic interplay between theory, methodology, and context that continues to shape this area of inquiry. It emphasises the necessity for continual reflexivity as new political realities and communicative technologies evolve.

The ongoing diversification of research actors and approaches signifies a shift towards more inclusive, global, and interdisciplinary engagement. Such developments challenge the field to move beyond traditional boundaries by promoting the integration of computational tools and the critical examination of digital communication's role in political persuasion. Moreover, the ethical dimensions of rhetorical strategies and their societal implications demand sustained scholarly attention, particularly as manipulation and misinformation become pervasive.

Ultimately, the future of research in rhetorical appeals will depend on its capacity to respond adaptively to rapid social, technological, and political changes. It will be defined by its ability to internationalise, innovate methodologically, adapt to digital realities, address ethical concerns, and foster interdisciplinary inquiry. By fostering methodological innovation, embracing diverse perspectives, and maintaining a critical focus on power and influence, scholarship in this domain will remain essential to understanding and shaping the evolving landscape of political communication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author independently completed all stages of this research, including conceptualisation, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author used BIBLIOMETRIX in order to generate the results of the study. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The data generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study utilised secondary data from publicly available academic databases of Scopus. As the research did not involve human participants, animal subjects or any private personal data, formal ethical approval was not required. All data used in this bibliometric analysis were retrieved from published literature and no individual participants were contacted or identifiable.

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