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CHANGE

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The Theatrical Model of Artaud's Self-in-Flow

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Abstract

The study examines Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, focusing on whether cruelty can be conceived as a process of self-knowledge observed from a third-person perspective. The dynamics of Artaud's inner actualities, in constant motion, and the momentary modes of his selves are interpreted through a model of theatre that, in accordance with the Plessnerian *conditio humana*, enables the subject to create distance from itself. The analysis differentiates between the world stage, understood as the process unfolding between the self and the external world, and a *private theatre*, constituted by the inner performances enacted within the self—a theatre defined by the encounter of the self with itself. The articulable modes of Artaud's consciousness—expressed through various characters, shifting masks, and identifiable components of the self—are situated within his *mental theatre*, which engages the horizontal plane of Artaud's consciousness. To map even the inarticulable, elusive events within the Artaudian subject, the occurrences of his private theatre are analyzed across *three planes of existence*, analogous to the vertically arranged logic of early modern emblematic theatre. Throughout the analysis, particular attention is given to Artaud's propensity for self-dissection and anatomization, a dominant force manifested consistently in both his writings and visual works. The following presents and develops this analysis.

Keywords: Antonin Artaud, theatre of cruelty, planes of existence

Mental Theatre and the Anatomization of Consciousness

For Artaud, writing is an apparatus that enables him to capture the fleeting impressions of his thoughts. In his correspondence with Jacques Rivière, the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (Artaud, 1968), Artaud discusses the crisis of thought, revealing that the cause

of his suffering is not the content of the thoughts that unfold in his innermost being, but the conviction that he is not the owner of those thoughts. By putting down on paper the estranged images that flowed through his mind, the painful and exhausting travail of his consciousness, Artaud gave an insight into the struggles of his self that have been the subject of many studies. Artaud's impressions are not merely regarded as remarkable works or reflections in philosophy, but thanks to their sophisticated language and plastic description of psychological difficulties, they are also considered to be relevant to literature and psychology, as today's medical diagnosis is that Artaud may have suffered from schizophrenia (Darida, 2011). Artaud's oeuvre cannot be disassociated with "the terrible illness of his mind" (Artaud, 1968, p. 20). Consequently, every single poem, piece of prose, letter, drawing, talisman, every story about him, every situation in his life, his fate itself, every gesture he made seems to be a reference to his theatre of cruelty. As he puts it: "Cruelty was not tacked onto my thinking; it has always been at home there: but I had to become conscious of it" (Artaud, 1938/1958, p. 102). It is impossible to separate Artaud's visions, claims, and demands for the theatre of cruelty, which is not art but a viable deed, a real magical action (Artaud, 1953, p. 103), from his life and his emotions in relation to the world around him.

The irreconcilable nature of Artaud's verbal sorcery, rooted in his plural selves and fragmented mind, puts the recipient in a state of discomfort. The rather associative and diverse tendencies of the ideas seem to entrap the interpreter, who clings to rational understanding, in a labyrinth or melting pot where adherence to entrenched explanations only widens the distance to the exit. The zigzagging of fragmented ideas creates multiple, contradictory narrative planes between which there is no passage, only a leap. The failure to understand the Artaudian textual cascade rationally evokes a key moment in the aesthetics of performativity, as defined by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), in which the recipient no longer interprets but experiences, no longer observes but acts—dislocated by Artaudian cruelty. The guardian of experience is none other than the body, since "the idea of a serious theater […] inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten" (Artaud, 1938/1958, pp. 84–5). In *The Nerve Meter*, Susan Sontag identifies the revelation of Artaud's 'innermost' self, in which he attempts "minutely to retrace the heavy, tangled fibers of his body-mind" (Sontag, 1980, p. 23). According to Sontag, in his work, as he discusses the state of alienation of his consciousness, Artaud refutes the *cogito*, unlike Descartes, he does not reach the reassuring conclusion that there must be a self from which thoughts arise. For Artaud, there is no solid or sure foundation, in line with Descartes' first principle, and he cannot see anything clearly and distinctly (*clare et distincte*). Artaud perceives his thoughts in a deafeningly silent, imageless space, where he is shaken to the core, for it is in this unreality

that fragments of the real world are revealed to him (Artaud, 1968). Sontag stresses that Artaud's real pain occurs when he senses changes within his thoughts, confronting the fact that consciousness can only be a process, ever-changing and ever-flowing. The insatiable desire to find a *cogito*—foredoomed to failure—is what drives Artaud to madness. Only through the act of writing can he resist this oppressive force, even as the boundless flux of his consciousness prevents resolution, and the inadequacy of language distorts his scattered, uncertain thoughts: "I am a man whose mind has suffered greatly, and as such I have the *right* to speak" (Artaud, 1968, p. 28).

The fragile Artaudian consciousness constructs a heterogeneous, fractured subject, presenting it through writing as a form of *mental drama*. This expression, as Veronika Darida points out, was used by Artaud himself in his early text *Bird's Bait*, which can be read as a drama that takes place in the mind alone (2010, p. 155). The protagonist is not a real person, but an "I" who is both the title character, the Renaissance painter Paulo Uccello, and Artaud himself, who cannot control his spirit from overflowing beyond himself. In Darida's view, Uccello is Artaud's first great mask, as cruelly treated by society as he was. From among the outcasts, Artaud invites several characters to join his mental theatre, such as Abélard, the love-struck, castrated monk, Nerval, the deranged, suicidal poet, Cenci, the demonic figure who transgresses social norms, Van Gogh, the despised, "suicided" painter, but also evokes the ghosts of Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Poe, Hölderlin, Coleridge, and Kierkegaard (Artaud, 2022). Each of the Artaudian masks confronting the faceless masses bears the stigma of what society calls madness, because to be clear-sighted, ruthlessly honest, uncompromising, and authentic is regarded as an unforgivable sin. According to Artaud, the evil-minded average majority emits poison into the air, whereby the exceptional are inevitably infected and victimized by breathing. The mediocre mob casts its net on the unspoilt individual, torments the days with anxieties, burdens the nights with fears, and vomits its bourgeois curse until the victim is entirely cast out of society.

Darida repeatedly characterizes the Artaudian phenomenon of outcasthood through the imagery of surgical intervention. Individuals who perceive others as different often confine them to mental institutions, seeking to remove them from what is considered the healthy body of society (Darida, 2010). Regarding Van Gogh's portrait, Darida describes the gaze as weighing heavily on the viewer, as if placing them on a dissection table (2010). In another instance, Uccello's eye is described as looking inward rather than outward (Darida, 2010). Artaud's approach to dissecting consciousness, separating and examining its elements, closely resembles the process of an autopsy. This movement of searching in the depths—a paradoxical, continually expanding inward turn (Kiss, 2024)—was already

evident in the early modern period. Attila Attila Kiss, referring to the emblematic theatre of the Shakespearean era, encapsulates the essence of Artaud's mental drama, claiming that it is as if we were in the laboratory of consciousness, where we can also look again and again into the anatomy of mental processes; early modern drama is a double anatomy, bodily and mental, testing the limits of meaning, knowledge and identity (Kiss, 2024).

Artaud's self-dissecting tendency is also present in the various forms of exploration and dissection of the body, to mention just a few examples: the image of the woman murdered in *The Butcher's Revolt*, whose mutilated, bleeding body is found in a basket with her arms thrown over her head, or the butcher's preparation to cut up the little woman who has been laid out, in *Héloïse and Abélard*, the removal of the penis with scissors, in *Cenci*, the title character drinking from the goblet as if from the blood of his sons, in *The Jet of Blood*, the torrent of blood spurting from the hand of God, or the Nurse's swelling genitals and the dragging of the dead girl's body.

In Artaud's mental theatre, both the masks and the previously mentioned gory, cruel poetic images reinforce an inward focus and a commitment to the anatomization of self-knowledge. The same applies to Artaud's prints, most notably his self-portraits that expose his most intimate parts.

Toward Higher Reality via Theatre and the Double

According to Jacques Derrida (1998), Artaud's theatre of cruelty is not realized in real space, but on the stage of writing and drawing, where the artist, by diving beneath the surface, tears up the underlying layer (*subjectile*) and breaks the awkward order of forms. Artaud redraws his face several times, deepening his features to the point where they become more like sharp scars, until finally the wounds cover entirely what looks like a slit skin on a sheet of paper. In the momentum of the "expanding inward turn," the tip of the grey pencil, like a surgeon's scalpel, cuts into the coating of the canvas body by a sharp scratch or puncture, getting closer to the nerve and flesh. In several of his drawings, the surface is almost filled with composite facial configurations. Certain body parts, such as the ears or hands, are accentuated. Nevertheless, the gestures inscribed by the pencil strokes generate powerful, dynamic shock waves that resist the fixation of a single, stable face. Just as Artaud's thoughts cannot be grasped—only their fleeting impressions are inscribed in his writing—so too the features of the faces accompanying the voices he articulates elude documentation. What remains are blurred, deformed, and fragmented shapes produced by the rapid alternation of faces, or by the "streams of flesh" (*fleuve de chair*) in the Deleuzean sense (Deleuze, 2014).

Gilles Deleuze interprets Artaud's cruelty through the works of Francis Bacon and Paul Cézanne, the painters who captured sensation. One of the most significant merits of these two artists, according to Deleuze, is their ability to represent the ever-vanishing Figure—a turbulent bundle of energy, always in a state of flux, always in a state of formless change—that acts as a guide to deformation and affects the nervous system. The essence of the Figure in intense movement, and the painters' desire to represent this invisible force, leads to a paradoxical situation. At the same time, although the perceptible representation is visible in contrast to sensuality, it is the effect of the former that is more powerful. The sensation, which transcends the levels of hearing and sight, is not qualitative in nature, but a vibration comparable to an alternating rhythm, a lively force. According to Deleuze (2014), just as the Figure is in constant motion, the pulsation of cruelty has nothing to do with representation, only with sensation. Thus, from the endless stream of facial metamorphosis, the Artaudian self-portraits flashing through the vibrant graphite lines, and the multiplicity of masks pulsating in his texts, they can only convey a sense of the constant change that is taking place within. Otherwise, the static face looking back from the frozen moment would be a death mask.[1] In Darida's reading: in Artaud's "mental theatre," under every role and under every mask, there is a single face: the face of Antonin Artaud. A face that cannot yet be captured, a face in constant transformation: a face that can only acquire its final features in its own death mask. Until then, it is constantly changing (Darida, 2010).

The entirety of Artaud's inward-turning, anatomizing oeuvre—visual, verbal, phonetic, vocal, and those works arising from their negation or reconfiguration—centers on the exploration of the self in flux. A more purified version of this intention and engagement can be seen in the dramas of Adrienne Kennedy, where the characters are *expressis verbis* the different selves of an unraveled subject; for example, the protagonists of the drama *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the disintegrated consciousness of the protagonist, Negro-Sarah, are the Duchess of Habsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba. Kennedy, in agreement with Artaud, rejects the linear plot line of the traditional conception and the realistic representation of the bourgeois illusion-realist theatre, while also drawing attention to the inadequacy of character. The representation of the fragmented identity traces of the plural self on stage can be reconciled with poststructuralist thinking, according to which the subject is produced through an ideologically prefabricated identity pattern shaped by current technologies of power. Kennedy's schizoid characters suggest that there is no pre-existing,

[1] Derrida thinks that death always lurks in the countenance of the self-portrait, and looks both the spectator and the artist that they encounter a rigid skull (1993, p. 73).

essential, circumstantial, or environment-independent unity, truth, or self-identity behind the disintegrated consciousness, only an always-emergent, ongoing subject. Kennedy's up-ended characters are thus identities that can be interpreted through the dominant cultural and political social system of symbols and relations, and are consequently in a state of permanent crisis (Kiss, 2019).

The use of a common technique in postmodern literature—desubstantiation, as defined by Elinor Fuchs—can thus already be observed in Kennedy's dramas. In the anti-essentialist conception, characters are empty subjects without an inner core. While there are many similarities between the Artaudian approach and the postmodern toolkit, such as the various manifestations of the split-conscious self, the difference between the two worldviews is even more significant. While postmodernism claims that there is nothing but emptiness behind the fragmented subject, Artaud's anatomizing and introspective work suggests the opposite. Artaud performs a kind of living, mental autopsy on himself because he believes that behind his fragmented, injured consciousness, there is a more complete reality in which he can recreate himself, both mentally and physically. One of the most striking examples of his essentialist worldview is the paradox of the "body without organs" (*corps-sans-organes*), which he calls the etalon of the human body, derived from the original whole, unrepresentable and unthinkable. For Artaud, the contradiction is not synonymous with isolation due to incompatibility but is a legitimate element of the path towards a restored totality. This is why, for a deeper understanding of cruelty, the influence of Heraclitus' teaching on Artaud's view of the necessity of contradictions cannot be overlooked.

According to Heraclitus, everything in the world, and in human life, i.e., in both external and internal processes, is constantly changing and in motion (*panta rhei*). Hence, opposites are also just manifestations of processes of change; that is, opposites are just aspects of unity, and therefore, from a distant perspective, they are the same. Like the external world, the interior of the individual is a dynamic whole composed of opposing elements. Artaud demonstrates his profound knowledge of the fragments of the "obscure" philosopher in *Mexico and Civilization*, in *New Revelations of Being*, and in the Pseudo-Heraclitan fragments: "From opposites are born agreement and Harmony." When discursiveness ceases in Artaud's texts, giving way to images and metaphors—often paradoxical and charged with passionate dynamism—it is crucial to recognize Artaud's conviction that, from a distant perspective, the opposing forces, the poles of the inner conflict, are ultimately the same. Artaud is convinced that behind his contradictions lies something beyond reason, something more real than any visible, comprehensible, mundane reality—a different reality that penetrates the visceral. His agreement with Heraclitus therefore ceases at this point, because on the one hand,

he disputes that the deep structure of the world can be grasped rationally and linguistically. On the other hand, he is not concerned with whether there is a structural system or a world law (*logos*) that can be revealed at the depths of all things. Artaud contends that beyond socially constructed everyday life lies a more archetypal, essential, and threatening total reality (Kékesi Kun, 2007, p. 219), full of contradictions, which can only be realized in the truer semblance of life: the theatre. He asserts that between the person he is on stage and the person he is in reality, there is indeed a difference of degree; however, the theatrical is the higher reality (Artaud, 1985). The question then arises: for Artaud, who regards the stage as "the reflection of man," where are the boundaries of the theatre drawn?

The task of theatre, as the essence of life, is to guide the individual toward their authentic, essential self: their double. Since conventional artistic language, by definition, cannot express real, essential content, Artaud seeks a means of communication that can bridge the gap between thought and language, experience and expression. Artaud's dualistic essentialism is based on the duality between the primordial, profound experience of the artistic event and the potential, superficial quality of expression. Sontag observes that Artaud, like the Gnostics, sees the process of materialization as material: while the soul materializes into flesh, thought is devalued into language. While the most depraved activity of the former is sex, the most atrocious form of the latter is literature. However, in order to recreate one's own ill-constructed body and transform one's spirit, one must transform art into total art and the body into a "body without organs." This is possible through the search for a doppelganger that contains the energies of life and death, the resonances of terror and suffering, the anarchic, contradictory resources of origin.

Three Planes of Existence Through the Skin Surface, Its Depths, and Beyond

In his study, which can be understood as an analysis of the Artaudian double, Deleuze (1990) describes two ways of engaging with the world. The first is a well-functioning realm of superficial engagement with the world, characterized by social exteriority and a constant alternation of meaningless words. The other, however, is the opposite of this horizontal line, the vertical line that seeks depths, that sinks. The two opposite tendencies are represented by the fairy-tale heroine Alice, created by Lewis Carroll, and the schizophrenic Artaud. The schizophrenic sees the skin, the surface, as perforated, as a sieve; that is, he comes to realize that the surface becomes nothing, disappears. Therefore, the body no longer has a surface, having split open; it is a vast void that swallows everything.

Since for the schizophrenic the surface of the skin is lost, the inside–outside, the inner–outer pairs of opposites also cease to exist. Although Artaud's body is fixed in the horizontal, social world represented by Alice, the vertical line of his double, his true self, draws from the deepest reality, and records on paper the shock waves or signs that arise when the energy accumulated there is released, whether in drawing, poetry, drama, or theatre.

Artaud's fragmented, contradictory, split-conscious, ever-changing self never strives to overcome rigid opposites, but to allow the forces in tension within it to alternate with the greatest possible dynamism, so that the movement raging within it appears as a blurred, contourless image. Artaud communicates from this in-between state, from the inarticulate noise of the conceptual pairs: art–life, horizontal–vertical, aesthetics–society, politics–ethics. According to Camille Dumoulié (1992), it is this in-between that Artaud names when he discusses the modes of bodies: the first is the "obscene," that is, the ordinary body in which we live, while the second is the outcast "pure," also known as the "body without organs" (*corps-sans-organes*). Since the latter is an elusive middle point that is both a principle of unity and a principle of dispersion, it cannot be defined by verbality. Artaud does not classify himself within any mode of the body and, with some irony, positions himself between the genital organ and the anus (*entre-deux-corps*). He regards contradiction as a validation that beneath the horizontal plane runs a vertical path toward restored wholeness; consequently, he favors a both–and logic over an either–or reasoning.

Artaud's inner actualities, in constant motion—that is, the dynamics of the momentary modes of his selves—can be mapped through a theatre model conceived as a vertical space in which events unfold across multiple planes of existence. Artaud perceives the horizontal, everyday occurrences of life through his schizoid skin surface. Beneath his skin—using the method of anatomization—he aims to reach the essential sphere, his Doppelgänger located deep within, a sphere accessible through theatre. He longs for transcendence beyond his skin surface, in the re-creation of his corrupted body, toward the body without organs, a pursuit that borders on the impossible. This theatrical template corresponds to the emblematic theatre of the early modern era, which, following the theory of *analogia entis*, established a cosmic space structured by a vertical logic. By constructing a microcosm on stage, it simultaneously illustrates the interconnectedness of the macrocosm. Consequently, emblematic theatre did not seek to replicate everyday, empirical reality exclusively; in other words, it did not consider its task to be to illustrate the social, horizontal mechanism of life on stage, but to view and interpret the workings of the world from a metaperspective. The stage symbolized the events of social, everyday life.

The level of the balconies represented the mundane world, while the painted canvas above the stage symbolized the supernatural, divine sphere. The part below the stage, accessible through the trapdoor, was the underworld, the realm of hell.

The performances were staged exclusively in natural light, allowing the audience to see everything on stage, including the partially covered events. More importantly, they could also see each other. Thus, the event that takes place in the theatre's framed and highlighted space, along with the feedback and reactions expressed in the auditorium, became the object of public observation under transparent conditions. As the stage volume extended into the auditorium, attention was focused not only on the actor but also on the spectator's body, thereby erasing the distinction between the theatrical representation and the reality of the audience (Kiss, 2024). Although the structure of Artaud's vertical private theatre resembles that of emblematic theatre, there are significant differences. While Renaissance spectators were not entirely passive, in Artaud's theatre, spectators and actors become indistinguishable; in other words, full equality between spectator and actor is desired, so that the audience becomes an integral part of the experience (Artaud, 1985).

Artaud constructs the spatial structure of his private theatre of cruelty primarily within his own body, that is, within his skin-covered nervous system, flesh, muscles, internal organs, and skeleton: "a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all" (Artaud, 1938/1958, p. 79). Because of the illness of his mind, as Deleuze illustrated, the schizophrenic's skin is permeable and perforated; he cannot draw a sharp line, he absorbs everything, and as a result, the body does not distinguish between inside and outside, inner and outer. As Artaud's expansive introversion, in his exploration of the inner dimensions of his body and consciousness, consumes all boundaries, he cannot perceive the difference between the impassable opposites. Diving down the vertical line is vital to Artaud because it leads him to a more archetypal and essential reality, where he can recreate himself. This is why he risks sinking into the gaping void: in addition to being unable to separate himself from anything, his sieve skin cannot protect him from external influences.

Artaud's theatre does not know the boundary of the principle of differentiation. Instead, it emphasizes the ambivalence arising from the in-between state, all the more so. The boundary, as debarment or exclusion, is the most relevant element of the classical theatre conception, since it determines the imaginary location of the fourth wall between actors and spectators. The border represents the law that separates art from life. Artaud, on the other hand, positions his theatre in a magical transitional space that encourages transgression. In the art of this kind of crossing, where the border becomes a threshold and offers the possibility

of transformation, Fischer-Lichte sees a performative turn as a phenomenon in which life and art intertwine. The Artaudian private theatre, in my opinion, serves as a threshold to be crossed, thereby multiplying Plessner's claim that the actor embodies the *conditio humana* itself (Plessner, 2016). According to Helmuth Plessner, when the actor steps out of himself and offers his body (*Körper*), which can also be used as an instrument, to another possible content, but at the same time is identical with this materialized body (*Leib*), the human capacity for duplication and the inherent distance become emphasized. The quality of being human thus emerges within this tension—in the capacity to refer to oneself self-reflexively (-Lichte, 2008, pp. 104–5). Artaud defines the frames of his private theatre within the contours of his own body. This also implies that, alongside the ever-changing Artaudian masks—Van Gogh, Nerval, Hölderlin, and others—on the internal stage of cruelty, observation from multiple audience perspectives is an integral part of the Artaudian content. This duality is experienced in Artaud's suffering when thoughts arising within him do not originate from his own consciousness. He presents the actors on his inner stage through the masks flashing across his endlessly transforming self-portraits and texts; simultaneously, through the absurdity of these thoughts, he conveys the perspective of the anxious and astonished Artaudian spectator.

At this stage of his private theatre, Artaud experiences the coexistence of the two essential elements of theatre—the actor and the viewer, the subject–object dichotomy. The events unfolding on the stage and in the auditorium of his vertically structured theatre correspond to the Plessnerian *conditio humana*, expressed in the capacity for self-observation. In this way, all of Artaud's under-the-skin movements—the dynamics of tension among his internal organs, the communication between his selves, the constant interchange between actor and spectator, and the tumult of role reversals—are enacted through the observer–actor ensemble. Artaud's dualistic essentialism is thus evident not only in the event–language relation, but also in the actor–spectator and actor–observer relations. In my view, these forces of high dimension, confronting each other under the skin, are at work in the more essential reality that Artaud calls the Double. The theatre of cruelty is inherent in life, and unlike the social way of being, it offers a more real sphere: the possibility of total existence. The double, emerging from the private theatre, releases energies that inevitably resonate with the social body anchored in the horizontal, everyday world:

> The theater is the only place in the world, the last general means we still possess of directly affecting the organism and, in periods of neurosis and petty sensuality like the one in which we are immersed, of attacking this sensuality by physical means it cannot withstand. (Artaud, 1938/1958, p. 81)

Both the emblematic theatre and the theatre of cruelty, operating according to the logic of a vertical system, place the dimensions of everyday, social human life at the center. While the former positions the earthly mode of existence on the stage at the boundary between the realms of God and Satan, Artaud attempts to sense the dividing line of his social self through his skin, covered with perforations. However, by penetrating the vulnerable surface, Artaud does not enter hell, but rather the reality of the Double: "For this reality is not human but inhuman, and man with his customs and his character counts for very little in it" (Artaud, 1938/1958, p. 48).

Artaud experiences hell on the social plane of existence, in each and every suffering-filled second of everyday life. At the age of five, he contracted a severe case of meningitis, the consequences of which haunted him for the rest of his life. In order to endure the physical pain, he was forced to use strong painkillers and opiate products, forcing him to undergo a drug withdrawal treatment. From the forty-first year of his life, he was treated in closed wards in various neurosanatoriums. Despite his protests, he was electroshocked more than fifty times during therapy. In *Letters from Rodez*, he states he has suffered for seven years and feels exhausted. He asserts his right to imagination and some happiness, yet believes the world has never provided this, leaving him to view his life as merely a simulacrum (Artaud, 2011). Therefore, Artaud seeks redemption in the reality that unfolds beneath the surface of his skin, where he can move from a horizontal existence, which is social and no longer human, but uncanny or demonic, to the fulfilment of total man, or total art, which is merged with life. The surface of Artaud's skin is not a border but a magical threshold in an intermediate space that offers the possibility of transformation into a more substantial form of life.

Artaud is convinced that by exploring the Double, which resonates with life and death, a threshold can be crossed into a transcendent reality—beyond horizontal and vertical perception, independent of the immanent world—where man can reconstruct his own ill-formed body and transform his spirit. This transcendent mode of being in the theatre of cruelty, comparable to the supernatural or divine sphere of emblematic theatre, exists above the Artaudian skin surface, in the unrepresentable dimension of the "body without organs." The fragmentation of Artaud's schizoid consciousness overflows and, twisting the self-referentiality of the Plessnerian *conditio humana*, he aspires to a vision beyond the metaperspective. A sign of this is how, in *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, Artaud displaces God and situates the capacity for re-creation within his own transcendent body without organs, realized in the rhythmic unity of the senses.

Conclusion

Artaud's color print, *Le Théâtre de la cruauté*, shows four doubles lying in coffins and a headless, amorphous figure. Although Artaud's doubles appear to be dead, the open eyes seem to tell us something else, that is, to speak to us from the space between the living and the dead. Artaud places this intermediate space between the ordinary body, lying in a coffin, and the deformed body without organs, which transcends the boundaries of verbality and representability (*entre-deux-corps*), located in the picture's right-hand corner. The Artaudian threshold, which invites a magical crossing, appears as the invisible yet visible realizations and manifestations of a self-induced theatre of cruelty in progress, permeating the imagination, the nervous system, and the viscera. Two facial impressions can be discerned from the shape of the body without organs; one reveals the green bruise marks, and the other the circular spreading of a red wound, which then fades into a fog. It is as if, in this apocalyptic and meaningless state, Artaud's effort to give form even to the various nervous waves and vibrations prevails. While he is disjointing himself in his graphics and texts, which depict his inner, intimate space, he is doing his utmost to recreate his body and spirit by acquiring his true self, his double. By drawing multiple lines, Artaud creates a new human being, no longer with the aim of reconstruction but of absolute transformation.

Artaud's inner actualities are in constant motion and can be understood across three planes of existence through a theatre model, similar to the vertical logic of the emblematic theatre. Both the emblematic and the *theatre of cruelty* place the social, everyday human being at the center. The emblematic positions earthly existence at the boundary between heaven and hell, while Artaud perceives the hell of everyday life through the vulnerability of the skin. The subcutaneous sphere corresponds to the vertical mode of the Artaudian Double, and the transcendent mode occupies the dimension of the "body without organs," leading toward the total human and the fulfillment of total art. The framework of his private theatre is marked out by Artaud's skin, functioning not as an isolating boundary, but as a magical threshold. Fischer-Lichte defined the difference between the border and the threshold phenomenon in the theatre as follows: the former works on a sharp separation between life and art, appearance and reality, while the latter denies the autonomous definition of art; in other words, it merges art with life. In this spirit, the performative turn from Artaud's vision renounces rational understanding. It opens the way to a non-dichotomous, "magical" aesthetic worldview in which the act of performativity provides the possibility of transgression. By exploring his body and his mind, by dissecting them into parts, Artaud demonstrates his commitment to an anatomizing self-knowledge. To make visible the elusive thoughts and contourless faces of his own inner processes, he uses the gesture of performativity to split his own skin and let himself

and his spectators into the space between life and death. Artaud's overflowing spirit communicates from this passageway, the "death point of space," which cannot be measured by reason.

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Changes in Gender Approaches—The Phenomenon of Neo-Prudery

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Abstract

In everyday perception, there is a growing sense that feminism and the #MeToo movement are "going too far," while sexual "deviations" appear overly prominent. Women's rights have undeniably expanded, moving from the confines of academic discourse into the wider public arena. At the same time, however, the acceptance of non-heteronormative identities—though framed as a progressive development—is increasingly contested, in some cases even facing legislative backlash. Judith Butler's latest book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024) also addresses this phenomenon. Our relationship with the naked body has, in recent years, taken on paradoxical dimensions. Bodily and personal boundaries are no longer limited to physical functions and touch but have come to encompass visual representation itself. Since the 1990s, significant regression is evident: while pornography attracts an ever-expanding audience, the public display or artistic representation of the body faces increasing restriction. Society seems to have swung to the opposite extreme, adopting a markedly rigid stance on nudity. This development is encapsulated in the rise of "neo-prudery." Social media policies banning nudity exemplify this trend, with repercussions not only for contemporary art but also for the canon of art history—and at times, even for museum programming. This study analyzes neo-prudery through the works of Valie Export and Marina Abramović, as well as cases of banned artworks.

Keywords: gender, neo-prudery, LGBTQ, feminism, social media, art

A New Prudery—or the Re-tabooization of the Body

Questions raised in the context of the works of Valie Export and Marina Abramović[1]

We often assume social change is increasingly positive: the world appears more liberal, the situation of women has improved, and diverse sexual orientations seem to enjoy greater acceptance. LGBTQ communities, in particular, are more able than before to express their identities. Nevertheless, this narrative of progress is far from linear.

Consider the case of Iran, for example: in the 1960s and 1970s, women could wear mini-skirts and shorts in public without difficulty, their hair was loose, neither hijab nor chador was imposed (Fülöp, 2025). Following the 1979 revolution, however, compulsory veiling was introduced. The Iranian-born American artist, Shirin Neshat, who had left Iran in 1975, was profoundly shocked by these transformations when she returned in the 1990s (Zomorodi, 2023). This confrontation with a radically altered society inspired her photos of the *Women of Allah* series and several video works created around 1999–2000, including *Turbulent*, *Rapture*, *Tooba*, and *Zarin*.

At the same time, compared to the 1990s, a significant backlash can be observed in the so-called "Western" world. For example, in 2023, Pride marches were absent from 92 countries around the world, and in 62 countries, homosexuality remains criminalized. In March 2025, Hungary also amended its assembly law to effectively ban Pride; however, the mayor of Budapest later granted it local approval. Within Europe, apart from Hungary, Pride is currently banned only in Belarus, and more broadly, in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Recently, in the United States, during the Trump presidency, support for LGBTQ rights has been curtailed through the withdrawal of federal funding from organizations advocating such freedoms.

As noted in the abstract, Judith Butler addresses this phenomenon in her recent book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024). Building on this discussion, the article investigates the emergence of neo-prudery through the work of two feminist artists, the Austrian Valie Export and the Serbian Marina Abramović, both of whom have been the subject of major retrospective exhibitions in recent years. Notably, many of their earlier projects could scarcely have been realized under present conditions, which underscores a paradox: in the interim, pornography consumption has become normalized.

[1] Valie Export—Krakow, MOCAK (Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow) permanent exhibition from 29.06.2023, Vienna, Albertina, until 01.10.2023. Marina Abramović—Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 14.03.2024–07.14.2024/Zürich, 25.10. 2024–16.02.2025.

> Nowadays, I'd be arrested… Our society has become very restrictive, and it is becoming even more restrictive, it is a step backwards compared to the 1970s. … You are no longer allowed to do anything in the public space other than walking, standing, looking. (AFP, 2023)

commented the Austrian performance artist Valie Export to the French *AFP* before the opening of her 2023 exhibition in Vienna.

In Europe, attitudes towards the body began to shift in the late 16th century. Previously, the body was conceived as "open"—where the microcosm of the body was seen as part of the macrocosm of the world, and bodily activities were performed in the presence of others without the notion of privacy. However, this conception gradually gave way to a more "closed" view. This transformation first appeared among the elite and, by the eighteenth century, had permeated all levels of society. The emergence of privacy, as we understand it today, was closely tied to the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bahtyin, 1982). Furthermore, as privacy gained importance, various bodily functions and manifestations came to be regarded as undesirable or hidden from view. At the same time, visible practices were regulated by new norms of dining, cutlery use, hygiene routines, and evolving codes of dress (Lafferton, 1997). Through this process, the body's boundary increasingly came to signify the boundary of the self.

Over the past four centuries, significant changes have occurred in how individuals perceive both their own bodies and those of others, particularly in relation to hygiene, clothing, sexuality, and, more recently, human rights. Today, the principle of bodily self-determination is widely affirmed, at least in official discourse. The 1990s marked a high point of freedom regarding the body, accompanied by significant progress in both theoretical reflection and the legal recognition of bodily rights.

This period also saw increased attention to abuses and acts of violence, which had long remained concealed since these had not even been considered crimes. These abuses are not the result of freedom; on the contrary, freedom has made it easier to expose them. Yet, the exposure of violations, especially those involving women and children, has also produced new caution and restraint. As a result, the body has once again become taboo in many contexts, even as sexuality and sexual references permeate public discourse. This paradox is underscored by sociological research. A recent survey conducted by *AddictionHelp.com* indicates that pornography consumption is steadily rising: in the United States, 67% of men and 41% of women (according to self-reported data) watch pornography online (Miller, 2025).

There are an estimated four million pornographic websites worldwide. For example, one of the largest platforms alone registered 42 billion visits in 2023. The influence of such widespread availability is reflected in research showing children are exposed to pornography at early ages, typically between 9 and 13. In Hungary, surveys indicate that children first encounter pornographic films at an average age of 11. Similarly, according to an EU study, pornography-related terms rank as the third most common online search category among children aged 7 to 10 (Séllei, 2019).

This widespread exposure contributes to what can be described as a hyper-sexualization of culture, the tendency to interpret virtually all phenomena through a sexual lens. As a result, every representation or bodily image acquires sexual connotations. Paradoxically, however, this hyper-sexualization seems to underlie the increasingly rigid rejection of public nudity, even when the naked body or a body part is not associated with sexuality.

Breastfeeding provides a striking example: once considered natural, even in highly conservative eras, it is now often treated as indecent or inappropriate, despite recent campaigns to normalize breastfeeding in public places. For instance, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, one of the most popular devotional images was the Nursing Madonna. Today, however, such a depiction of the Virgin would likely provoke scandal. This shift demonstrates how breastfeeding now stands at the intersection of nutrition, health, and sexuality. The maternal breast, once an emblem of nurture and motherhood, appears to be viewed almost exclusively as a sexual object (Bordács, 2024). Further highlighting this changing cultural attitude, outrage has even been directed toward images of naked newborn babies: the umbilical cord may still be attached, yet people demand that the infant be clothed.

This new prudery is not simply a continuation of traditional Protestant ethics. Instead, it could be the subject of a separate study examining how American culture, once profoundly shaped by Protestant values and Puritan restraint, has evolved into a hedonistic, consumer-driven society in which the original moral framework has been largely eroded.

Art history provides a further lens for this paradox. The nude, one of its central genres, was especially prevalent in Venetian painting, where mythological or biblical pretexts, such as Venus, Susanna, or nymphs, conventionally veiled it. In the 20th century, however, artists increasingly dispensed with such "alibis," choosing to represent the nude without disguise. This shift maintained the idealization of the attractive female body. A more significant change emerged in the 1960s, when a new wave of women artists began to reclaim the representation of the female body, seeking to express women's lived bodily experiences in contrast to the long-dominant male gaze.

The emblematic figures of this first generation of women artists are Valie Export (b. 1940, Linz) and Marina Abramović (b. 1946, Belgrade). Their work is characterized by radical transgression, probing the relationship between the artist and the audience, while simultaneously exploring the physical limits of the body and the potential of the mind through performance.

Their practices consistently challenged social conventions, particularly those related to gender roles, while their perspectives were also shaped by their Central European contexts. The Albertina's 2023 retrospective, devoted to Valie Export, emphasized the female body as a cultural construct and the staging of female roles, presented through her art-historical references, films, photographs, videos, and performance documentation. By contrast, MOCAK in Krakow did not attempt such a comprehensive overview; instead, it mounted a focused "mini-exhibition" of ten video works (Export, 2023) from Export's twenty-nine-part *Metanoia* series, which the museum's permanent collection had acquired in June 2023.

Although Export's oeuvre encompasses film and photography, two performances most powerfully crystallize her critical practice. Her critical stance was directed partly against Austrian society's failure to reflect on its complicity with Nazism, and partly against post-war Austrian art. Like her male contemporaries among the Viennese Actionists, she subjected her body to pain and danger. However, her work diverged sharply from theirs: she was concerned with the ways power relations embedded in media representations shape the female body and female consciousness. Examining society and art from an explicitly feminist perspective, she consistently deployed her own body as a medium—a bearer of signs and symbols.

One of Export's most defining projects, also represented in the Krakow collection, is *Tapp and Tastkino* (1968). For this work, she attached a miniature "cinema" to her bare chest, first constructed from Styrofoam and later from aluminum. Encouraged by her collaborator, Peter Weibel, she invited passersby to "visit the cinema" by reaching into the small "theatre" structure and touching her bare breasts (Kennedy, 2016/2023). Performed in several European cities, the action inverted conventional roles: rather than offering her body to spectators' gaze, Export replaced visual consumption of the female body with direct physical contact. The public thus became active participants, encountering the artist's body within a public sphere.

The media response was mixed, ranging from fascination to panic and fear (Indiana, 1982). As a result, Export received threats and was reportedly taken to court on charges of indecency. Despite these challenges, she was able to continue staging the work,

the documentation of which is still regularly exhibited in museums. In contrast, today she argues that such an action would be impossible to realize: she believes the police would intervene immediately, and the artist herself would likely be treated not as a provocateur but as an aggressor, accused of harassing or abusing her audience. This shift illustrates the transformation of social boundaries around the body.

Another emblematic work, *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), raises similar issues. In the famous photograph, Export sits with her legs spread in a wide, masculine stance. She wears trousers cut open at the crotch. Her visible pubic hair contrasts sharply with the machine gun's phallic shape and the masculine pose. Her assertive pose inverts conventional gender roles. Here, the demonstratively female figure assumes a dominant, masculine position. She does not display fear; instead, she instils it in others. Yet, this work was not primarily a staged photograph. It was a live-action piece in which Export entered a Munich cinema dressed in this outfit, confronting and intimidating the audience. Repeating such an action today would be virtually impossible. Beyond charges of indecency, she could face accusations of harassment, intimidation, or endangering public safety. As long as an artist's actions remain confined to their own body, society tends to tolerate them. However, when the audience is directly implicated, the work crosses into territory now defined as harassment.

Not only would several of Valie Export's works be considered more scandalous today than in the 1970s, but the participatory performances of Marina Abramović would likewise be reinterpreted under current sensibilities. Abramović repeatedly tested the limits of her own physical and psychological endurance, often creating situations in which the audience became active participants. In particular, performances in which visitors were invited to use objects on her body—actions that clearly constituted abuse or mistreatment—were nonetheless framed as the artist's conscious decision to explore the dynamics of power, vulnerability, and responsibility. Today, however, replicating such works with other participants is no longer conceivable. Instead, these performances have been re-enacted in museum contexts by different performers, as seen at MoMA in 2010 and, more recently, at the Stedelijk Museum and Kunsthaus Zurich[2] in 2024, accompanied by documentation of the original performances in photographs and films.

Her most notorious early work, *Rhythm 0* (1974), staged in a Belgrade gallery, epitomizes this approach. Abramović arranged 72 objects on a table—ranging from innocuous items to dangerous implements such as a knife and a loaded revolver—and invited the audience

[2] Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, March 16–July 14, 2024; Zürich, Kunsthaus Zürich, October 25, 2024–February 16, 2025; Vienna, Albertina, October 10, 2025–March 1, 2026.

to use them on her body in any way they wished. Over the course of six hours, the performance escalated into a disturbing study of human behavior and aggression. When she finally ended the piece, she was left bleeding and in tears. The action has often been compared to the Stanford Prison Experiment; however, in this case, the participants' actions targeted the artist directly.[3]

In the recent Stedelijk and Zürich exhibitions, only the objects were displayed on the table, recalling the set-up of the original performance. However, now 79 years old, Abramović no longer subjects herself to such physically extreme actions, and her performances survive primarily through photographs, films, and carefully staged re-performances.

The ethical dilemma of Abramović's endurance-based works becomes particularly acute when others re-enact them. While Abramović's own decision to risk pain and abuse was a deliberate artistic choice, the question arises: can artist-assistants or volunteers be expected to subject themselves to similar harm in the name of art? Because of the risks and ethical concerns, such self-harming performances are rarely, if ever, staged by others.

A well-known example from her collaborations with Ulay is *Imponderabilia* (1977). In this work, the two artists stood entirely nude on either side of a narrow doorway, compelling visitors to squeeze through them to access the gallery. Each attendee had to choose whom to face, making their physical and psychological responses essential to the performance. The audience's reaction to the exposed bodies was integral to the piece. The work explored not only the artists' vulnerability but also the confrontation between the public and nudity in a shared space.

In recent years, Abramović's trained assistants have re-enacted the performance, with security guards closely monitoring the situation to prevent incidents of abuse—something that has occurred in the past. The risk of misconduct became particularly visible during the 2010 MoMA retrospective, where the piece was re-enacted with volunteer participants. To safeguard the performers, MoMA implemented a preliminary code of conduct even though participants volunteered for the re-staging of the work and were aware of the risks. Nevertheless, controversy ensued.

In 2024, John Bonafede, who participated in the 2010 MoMA exhibition, filed a lawsuit against the museum. He alleged that his naked body was groped on seven separate occasions by older male visitors who turned to face him before touching his genitals (Jonze, 2024).

[3] She repeated this project later in 2010 at MoMA and at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2014.

Although John Bonafede reported the incidents to MoMA security at the time, he brought the case 14 years later under New York's revised Adult Survivors Act, which extended the statute of limitations for such claims.

In light of these events, European institutions currently presenting re-enactments of Abramović's work have heightened precautions: security guards now closely supervise the performances, and visitors are prohibited from taking photographs. These measures demonstrate both the enduring relevance and the persistent controversy surrounding the participatory dimensions of Abramović's practice.

At the same time, new manifestations of prudery continue to emerge, and they are by no means confined to representations of the female body. The celebrated masterpieces of Venetian painting that shaped the history of the nude—long accessible in the Accademia in Venice—could be viewed without restriction well into the 20th century, provided one paid the entrance fee. By 2025, however, a blurred plexiglass screen had been installed in front of works depicting nudity, preventing unauthorized viewers from directly seeing the bodies. Access is now only possible by deliberately circumventing the barrier.

Other absurd cases illustrate the same trend. In spring 2023, a Florida school principal was dismissed after a parental complaint. The complaint followed the presentation of canonical Renaissance artworks—Michelangelo's David, *Creation of Adam*, and Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*—to 11- and 12-year-old students during an art history class (Kim, 2023).

Public opinion data highlight the recurrence of such incidents. A recent survey revealed that 14 percent of Americans consider the depiction of nudity in classical art problematic, while 28 percent object to such works being shown to children. When compared to the statistics on pornography consumption discussed earlier, this rejection of artistic nudity appears symptomatic of a profound cultural contradiction and reveals the hypocrisy of society's moral standards.

A similar phenomenon appears in the censorship of nudity on social media platforms, where artworks depicting the naked body are routinely deleted. Viennese museums have been frequent targets: for example, in 2018, Facebook removed an image of the *Venus of Willendorf*; in 2019, Instagram censored a Rubens painting, and in 2021, TikTok blocked the Albertina's account while Facebook and Instagram deleted a short video from the Leopold Museum, all on the grounds of potential pornographic content (Körösvölgyi, 2023).

As these examples demonstrate, censorship on social media is not confined to contemporary art. Nevertheless, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become

indispensable for artists and art institutions. On the one hand, they are celebrated as digital spaces that democratize access, enabling individual artists to share and sell their work directly, while also compelling galleries and museums to maintain an online presence. On the other hand, artists working with themes of the body—whether in body art, abject art, or transgressive practices—are subject to severe censorship.

Platform algorithms consistently fail to distinguish between gratuitous pornography and artistic representations of the body. As a direct result, artworks are unjustly removed, even when doing so contradicts the platforms' explicit community guidelines, which permit nudity in an artistic context. These repeated bans damage artists' careers and livelihoods.

Numerous cases could be cited (Di Liscia, 2021). One striking example occurred in 2019, when the death of American feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann was announced. Social media was soon flooded with her works, including performance documentation and photographs of the female body and sexuality. The algorithms quickly deleted many of these images. The irony of the situation was not lost on observers: throughout her life, Schneemann herself had been both a frequent target and a vocal critic of censorship.

Even the sociographic series of Brazilian documentary filmmaker and photographer Sebastião Salgado has been flagged as "sexual content." The strength of Salgado's work lies in his humble, observant, and documentary approach to nature and humanity, through which he sensitively portrays diverse social groups. In his *Awá* series, created as part of a campaign to defend the rights of one of Brazil's last nomadic tribes, Salgado photographed community members, who, as part of their way of life, often appear unclothed. As a result, Salgado's black-and-white images depicting subjects partially or fully naked were also removed from social media.

This inability to distinguish between pornography and artistic or documentary nudity is not unique to Salgado's work. In 2012, the Centre Pompidou faced a similar case when it shared Gerhard Richter's painting *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)* on Facebook to promote his retrospective. The post was immediately censored, only to be reinstated after widespread complaints.

These examples reveal a paradox of our oversexualized world: sexuality is perceived everywhere, even where it is absent. Our relationship with the naked body has reached an absurd point, where bodily and personal boundaries are thought to extend not only to physical contact but even to the mere act of looking. While countless efforts are made

to regulate pornography—despite its persistent visibility across media—the artistic representation of the body is increasingly restricted. It is, of course, essential that harassment and abuse be prevented and punished. However, society seems to have swung to the opposite extreme, adopting a rigid and dismissive stance toward the naked body.

In any case, the work of both Valie Export and Marina Abramović is considered a benchmark in art, even if various social media systems, contrary to their own policies, struggle to distinguish between art and non-art. Today, despite the dominance of hypersexualized media and pornography, even classical paintings, ethnographic images, and documentaries are censored. The naked body remains interesting and continues to be, or rather, taboo. This whole paradoxical situation raises further questions about artistic freedom, social norms, and our cultural fears—and how our assessment of these issues changes over time. The article also discusses the historical cyclicality of the depiction of the body (when it is taboo, when it is not, where it is celebrated, where it is (almost) forbidden) and what these constantly shifting boundaries reveal about the societies in question.

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Spaces of Exploitation and Resistance: A Postcolonial Ecofeminist and Phenomenological Reading of Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Abstract

Exploring literary representations of our ongoing ecological crisis from an ecofeminist perspective can unravel the role of "human-caused environmental change in the twin oppressions of women and of nature, driven by patriarchal power and ideologies" (Vakoch, 2021). A postcolonial ecofeminist focus recognizes that this twin oppression is "intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism" (Kaur, 2012, p. 384). This perspective may offer further invaluable insight. This paper applies a post-colonial ecofeminist and phenomenological approach. It focuses on the interconnected-ness of the climate crisis and the exploitation and oppression of nature and women by a patriarchal, totalitarian regime in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017). The dystopian novel follows the protagonist-narrator, Shalini, on her physical and mental journey from a life of privilege to a punitive facility for women called Purity Camp. The story takes her through exploited and heavily polluted slums to the Purity Pyramid and Skydome, which epitomize totalitarian power. Through close reading of Shalini's phenomenological facticity and actions in these dominated and dominating spaces, this paper will analyze the portrayal of ecological and societal changes, subjugation, and resistance as manifested in the heroine's embodied and lived experience. It will argue that, while challenging the notion of exploiting nature and women in the name of 'purity,' Shalini constructs a self-identity as a feminist ecological citizen in a world that treats her as a slave.

Keywords: climate crisis, postcolonial ecofeminism, Indian science fiction, embodied and lived experience, space and identity

Introduction

> It was hotter that summer than it'd been for a hundred years. Why do they tell us things like this? All over the city the trees sagged like broken men. Still no one followed the rules: the construction boom and the factories took the groundwater almost to zero. On TV they'd show clips of wailing Slum women, banging brass pots, dragging reporters by the wrist to the insides of dark huts. […] The young men interviewed didn't talk to the reporter. Instead they shouted directly at the camera […] asking why their families had been ignored so long. (Akbar, 2017, p. 54)

The above quotation from Indian author Prayaag Akbar's 2017 dystopian novel, *Leila*, is a palpable depiction of our ongoing climate crisis and its social implications, which have devastating effects on the underprivileged. Women, in particular, predominantly in the Third World, are often viewed as the primary victims of the consequences of environmental deterioration. Exploring literary representations of this phenomenon from an ecofeminist perspective entails focusing on the parallels between how the land and women are affected by such ecological and societal changes. An ecofeminist approach can thus unravel the role of "human-caused environmental change in the twin oppressions of women and of nature, driven by patriarchal power and ideologies" (Vakoch, 2021), and particularly how "women are exploited by patriarchal development attitude because of their close association with nature and dependency on it" (Patil, 2020, pp. 15–17), while a *postcolonial* ecofeminist focus, acknowledging that this twin oppression is "intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism" (Kaur, 2012, p. 384), may offer further invaluable insight.

Applying a postcolonial ecofeminist, as well as a phenomenological approach, the present paper focuses on the interconnectedness of the climate crisis and the exploitation–oppression of nature and women by a patriarchal, totalitarian regime in Akbar's *Leila*. The novel follows the protagonist-narrator, Shalini, on her physical and mental journey from a privileged life to a punitive facility for women called Purity Camp, through the exploited and heavily polluted slums to Purity Pyramid and Skydome, the epitome of the totalitarian power depicted. After a brief discussion of the theoretical background, my paper first investigates ecological and societal changes from a primarily postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, then examines the transformation of identity in this spatial and social context, expanding its theoretical focus to the phenomenological aspects of the characters' lived experience. Through the close reading of Shalini's phenomenological facticity, mental state, and actions in these dominated/dominating spaces, the paper will analyze the portrayal of ecological and societal changes, as well as subjugation and resistance,

as manifested in the heroine's embodied and lived experience. It shall argue that while challenging the notion of exploiting nature and women in the name of 'purity,' she constructs a self-identity as a feminist ecological citizen in a world that treats her as a slave.

Theoretical Background and Literary Context

Ecofeminist novels, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), generally highlight the links between the domination of women and the domination of nature under patriarchy, while postcolonial ecofeminist fiction, such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020) examine how colonialism and imperialism have shaped and intensified both gender oppression and ecological exploitation, that is, they emphasize the triple yoke of patriarchy, ecological destruction and *colonialism*.

The Handmaid's Tale, in particular, has been noted as an inspiration for and displaying several similarities with Akbar's *Leila* (cf. Simonpillai, 2019; Yadav, 2024), on account of both novels being feminist dystopias describing patriarchal, fundamentalist totalitarian control, and having a female protagonist confined and constrained both physically and mentally. Most notably, Juan Agudo draws a comparison between Offred and Shalini in terms of their reaction to being torn apart from their children and relegated to a fenced existence in confined spaces, of their entrapment in oppressive patriarchal states that have come into being (partly) as a result of ecological deterioration and which use religion to justify the exploitation and enslavement of women, and points out similarities between their revolt against being silenced, brainwashed, disciplined and abused (2023, p. 29–32).

What Akbar's novel adds to Atwood's portrayal of a woman's lived experience in a patriarchal, exploitative regime—and to ecofeminist concerns in general—is a specific, though not highly emphasized, postcolonial aspect. *Leila* is a postcolonial ecofeminist novel, both due to its setting (postcolonial India) and its hints at the legacy of colonialism in the totalitarian society depicted. In this respect, it displays more similarities with Roy's *The God of Small Things* in its exploration of the lingering effects of casteism, colonialism, patriarchy, and hierarchical dualisms in a postcolonial society that exploits its people and the environment alike.

In light of the above, this paper presents a postcolonial ecofeminist reading of Akbar's novel. This approach relies on postcolonial ecofeminism, which blends the concerns of postcolonial feminism and ecocriticism. It posits that the material circumstances of Third World women shape their environmental interactions, and that women's oppression

and nature's exploitation are interlinked. Factors such as class, caste, and (neo-) colonialism also shape these dynamics, all of which Akbar acknowledges in his creation of dystopian spaces and society.

Indian ecofeminist activist Vandana Shiva blames the androcentric attitude for the dual exploitation and domination exerted in the name of 'development.' She claims that all development strategies, whether aiming at the market economy or colonization, are actually "maldevelopment." These strategies represent not progress, but a regressive and violent process by which women and nature are subjugated and abused (Shiva, 1988, p. 4). For Shiva, 'development' projects in postcolonial countries are equated with the civilizing mission of colonialism. Roy suggests that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies, such as mind–body, male–female, spirit–matter, and culture–nature (Ahsan, 2016, p. 255). Patriarchal dominance maintains control through the repressive and ideological state apparatus. It posits women and other 'deviants' as the Other, to be exploited by the majority in postcolonial society. Postcolonial ecofeminism can also be seen as a response and resistance to patriarchal and (neo-)colonial societies' domination of territory and the body, which are equated with and viewed as political spaces (Mattar, 2024, p. 75). This domination leads to the oppressed and exploited individuals' complete lack of control over their living space and their bodies.

The postcolonial ecofeminist novel's concern with dominance and lack of control appears in both its discussion of space and society (the primary focus of the following section) and in its portrayal of the protagonist's lived, embodied experience. This, in turn, prompts a phenomenological approach to reading Akbar's novel (covered in "The Transformation of Identity"). My reading is phenomenological in two ways. First, it focuses on the protagonist's unique, subjective experience, drawing on Heideggerian phenomenology. Here, subjectivity as personal truth depends on one's cultural, social, and historical context. Second, it pays close attention to bodily and emotional experience. This follows Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, which claims that the body fundamentally shapes human experience, perception, and emotion, and that human consciousness is inseparable from lived bodily experience. The most useful phenomenological terms for this research are embodied experience and facticity. In this paper, embodied experience refers to the notion that sensory perceptions of the body shape one's emotions and cognition. This is based on the idea that the lived body is the center of experience (Husserl, 1952) and that bodily experience cannot be separated from perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenological facticity refers to the inherent, unchangeable aspects of existence and the world that form the basis for all human experience.

It can be understood as the constraints of a given situation (Heidegger, 1962), but also as the condition for freedom (Sartre, 1956). For example, it has been argued that without facticity, freedom would have no basis, while facticity would have no meaning without freedom. I believe that understanding facticity and embodied experience is essential for grasping the individual experience behind the wider ecological–social phenomena portrayed in postcolonial ecofeminist fiction.

Ecological and Societal Changes

Akbar's novel is set in the near future in an unnamed Indian city divided into sectors by 59-feet-high walls. The high sectors with their "wide, lovely avenues, […] fringed either side with a stripe of thick boskage, palm squirrels and macaques skittering through the leaves" (Akbar, 2017, p. 98) are reserved for the privileged, who have access to clean water and air. Outside their walls, the slums—the so-called Outroads—are "a noisome meld of human waste and rotting vegetables," characterised by "rancid smell," rats, "a dense, growing pile of trash," extreme temperature, and water shortage (Akbar, 2017, p. 97, 13). They are festering sites of an ecological disaster, where the Slummers live segregated, vulnerable, precarious lives, at the mercy of ecological and political forces. The inhabitants of the high sectors dump their litter and toxic waste on them, pollute their air, and take away their water; they use them as servants and treat them as abject, inferior subjects. They are oppressed and exploited in the name of purity in a society divided by caste. The novel may thus be read as a "critical eco-dystopia" which, according to Manoj Rajbanshi and Nagendra Kumar "imagines the harsh fates of humans who live in severely degraded environments and are forced to realize that their very existence is predicated on a set of ecological [and social] conditions that have been thrown out of balance" (2024, p. 79). It sheds light on the potentially devastating consequences of changes occurring in the world today, triggered and exacerbated by fear and self-interest. In Akbar's narrative, these are the very motivating forces behind the actions of the totalitarian regime led by the Council, with Skydome and Purity One being the primary tools and symbols of exploitation and oppression, encompassing both ecological and societal aspects.

Skydome is a gigantic air conditioner, a "techno utopian device" which, as Diya Rajput points out, ensures the "hierarchy of the provisions to citizens in the name of purity" (2022, p. 13): it provides clean water and cool, fresh air for the high sectors, while the heat it emits further increases the temperature and causes fires outside the sector walls. Purity One, a 60-feet-high wall around the political quarter, not only symbolizes power but also safeguards the "abundance" enabled by Skydome: it encloses a paradise which, with its clean, tree-lined avenues and lush gardens, "feels like a different city, a fathomless

distance from the place I live, on a mountaintop, perhaps, locked away. The political sector is the prototype. One by one, so I'm told, all the high sectors have begun to look like this" (Akbar, 2017, p. 98). Although the novel does not provide a detailed description of this transformation, it is mentioned that in the forty years since Purity One was erected, hundreds of other walls have been built, preserving nature inside, but leaving only barren land, water shortages, and filth outside. The changes Akbar describes clearly indicate that the ruling political elite and its privileged followers damage the environment for the Slummers to create their own ecotopia, an ecologically ideal place or situation, covering up actual ecocide, the destruction of nature by intentional or careless human action. It must also be noted that with its "colonial bungalows, the Ministries, the old Turkic gardens" (Akbar, 2017, p. 8), the exclusive space of the political sector is a testament to the legacy of colonial times as well. Although this is the only instance where the novel makes a direct reference to the colonial past, the fact that the colonial bungalows are located in the political sector and inhabited by the ruling class indicates that oppression may, in fact, continue in postcolonial India, with a mere shift in power from the hands of the colonizer to a handful of powerful men.

From a social perspective, both Purity One and Skydome are physical manifestations of the Council's 'divide and rule' strategy. This is highlighted by the wording of the Skydome advertisement: "Why share the air? PureSeal … outside impurities. 100% ClimaControl" (Akbar, 2017, p. 130). These words highlight the sanctity of the ideology of purity and the means by which it may be achieved. Spatial and societal division, exclusion, and dominance, and the abuse of nature and people are all emphasized. Interestingly, Skydome may have negative implications both for the outside and the inside. While the slums segregate the impure, the high sectors become a golden cage for their inhabitants. This perpetuates the importance of isolating themselves from "outside impurities"—the slum dwellers and the natural environment—on which they are, in fact, dependent. Each high sector has a slum attached to it, which provides space for waste disposal and serves the people living in that area. This means that the privileged life of those living in high sectors can only be maintained through exploitation and destruction. This is then justified by the need to preserve purity.

Purity One is "believed to have an inscrutable power" (Akbar, 2017, p. 8): it is the dividing line not only between ecotopia and ecocide but also between the ruling caste and the rest of society. It is the symbol of the totalitarian regime built on spatial and social division, segregating and imprisoning the privileged and the precarious alike: no one dares question or challenge its function and the position/space it confines them in.

The sector walls and the so-called flyroads connecting them above ground create an enormous maze. Citizens can get lost in it forever. Each person is enclosed in their own sector and the life it enables, excluded from the others. There is minimal trespassing allowed between the sectors, with no mobility whatsoever. Any transgression is severely punished. As the protagonist, Shalini, notes: "These walls diminish us. Make us something less than human" (Akbar, 2017, p. 30). The regime controls all life both spatially and mentally by denying the 'impure' any fundamental human right. It also keeps the 'pure,' privileged citizens secluded and under strict control.

The sectors and walls are also vital tools of the political propaganda of a utopian society and ecotopia. They were erected to symbolize and remind people of the order implemented by Council Law and preserved by their militia, the Repeaters. In narrative flashbacks, Shalini recalls the birth of the regime, when, as a response to the growing number of immigrants in the city and the unfolding ecological crisis, the head of the Council, Mr Joshi first voiced his political agenda: "making this city pure, pure as the cities of the ancients […] A place of order, discipline. Clean and pure" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 70–72). In order to reclaim their "rightful place at the top of the world," the citizens must obey the rules and pledge total allegiance by protecting "*our* walls, *our* women, the communities" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 71–72; my emphasis). The possessive pronoun indicates that the Council uses the "underprivileged population and climate crisis for political purposes" (Rajput, 2022, p. 12) since the slogan of the regime, "Purity for All" actually means securing conformity for the 'pure ones,' the governing class of privileged Hindu men and their families, and ostracizing the ones who "seem to crave for disorder" and who have "no respect for our oldest rules" (Akbar, 2017, p. 28, 71). Consequently, immigrants, Muslims, Slummers, and any transgressor, particularly women, are deprived of their basic needs and rights; they are viewed and treated as both polluted and polluting. The sectors segregate people based on religion and *jati* or caste identity. The identity of the lower castes (Shudras and untouchables) and anyone considered Other are equated with the notion of innate impurity: they are defiled, abject beings, waste thrown away like litter over the walls (Rajbanshi & Kumar, 2024, pp. 83, 87).

Another interesting aspect of this quotation is its inherent critique of Hindu nationalism as a direct consequence of the colonial past and the Partition of 1947. As noted by Šarūnas Paunksnis, the intention of Hindu nationalism to be as powerful as the colonial regime may be read as a sign of masculine anxiety, manifested in controlling and exploiting the bodies of women, as well as a strife for freedom, to debunk the colonial myth of Hindu weakness by demonstrating its strength through religious ideology, corporeal discipline and strict spatial politics (2023, pp. 45, 50–51), dividing society both literally and metaphorically.

In one of Shalini's visions, her husband, Riz, describes the sector system and segregated society as follows:

> That's what this city is like. I feel it all the time. Everyone tucked behind walls of their own making, stewing in a private shame, like I was that day. They can't come out into the open. Anyone who can afford it hides behind walls. They think they're doing it for security, for purity, but somewhere inside it's shame at their own greed. How they've made the rest of us live. That's why they're always secluding themselves, going higher and higher. They don't want to see what's on the ground. They don't want to see who lives here. (Akbar, 2017, p. 144)

The quotation draws attention to how segregation may become a double-edged sword, for the more they fear abjection, the more they exclude the impure; the more ashamed they feel for their actions, the more they turn a blind eye to their role in the wrongdoings; the more they try to protect themselves, the more isolated they become. Consequently, fear not only protects but also destroys them and their perfect, 'pure' world, since exclusion and exploitation have devastating social and ecological consequences: the slums increasingly experience and, at the same time, further increase the environmental catastrophe that the high sectors and the Council strive to solve by creating them.

The lived experience of spatial and social division depicted in Akbar's novel offers new insights into the cyclical process of climate change leading to societal changes, and social crisis aggravating the climate crisis, resulting in further and further transformations in the name of purity, which continually widen the gap between the privileged and the precarity, isolate and alienate the citizens, both solidify and intensify domination, oppression and exploitation. It is an irreversible process of destruction and demise, running in a loop—a vicious circle that is impossible to break.

The Transformation of Identity

The sector that manages to remain autonomous and liberal for the longest is the East End. Here, "no one much bothered with the Council's indices of purity" (Akbar, 2017, p. 53). The protagonist, Shalini, lives in the East End with her Muslim husband, Riz, and their daughter, Leila. This changes after a brutal attack by the Repeaters, who presumably kill Riz and abduct Leila. Shalini has committed the crime of interfaith marriage and has wasted water at the pool party thrown for her daughter's third birthday. Instead of being expelled to the Slums or killed like other lawbreakers, Shalini is taken to Purity Camp, a punitive facility where 'deviant' women are to be 'purified.' Her punishment is masked as an act of generosity, offering her a second chance at re-integrating into society.

In fact, Shalini is treated as "less than human" (Akbar, 2017, p. 30), while the Slummers are the outcasts, perceived as not even 'human beings' by those in the privileged sectors. The totalitarian regime kidnaps, brainwashes, eliminates, and dehumanizes at will. This is all part of its systemic and structural injustice (Rajput, 2022, p. 9). It controls both men and women through psychological manipulation, corporeal discipline, and strict spatial politics, but the consequences differ significantly. Disobedient, rule-breaking men are killed and discarded; by contrast, women's bodies are claimed as a "property of the nation, so they are re-educated, enslaved, and moulded as per the wishes of the male ruling elite" (2023, p. 51). This illustrates the ecofeminist claim of the parallel oppression and exploitation of both nature and women. Land in the high sectors is technologically controlled and exploited for the exclusive benefit of a powerful few, while the slums and Outroads serve as landfills for society's waste and 'shame.' Ostracized and "re-educated" women are exploited as servants and still viewed as the "forbidden fruit" (Akbar, 2017, p. 122), their abuse satisfying the ruling men's hidden desires. Thus, both nature and women function as "commodities," victims of "a patriarchal need for dominance" (Shah et al., 2024, p. 3174).

Women's exploitation, oppression, and the concomitant changes that Shalini is forced to undergo are depicted in the narrative on three levels: the protagonist's body and mind, her social position and attitude thereto, as well as her subjectivity and agency—lost, revived, and constantly re-constructed. Her transformation both parallels the changes in the environment and society and is intricately intertwined with them; it is the result of and a reaction to totalitarian control.

Recalling her and thirteen other 'deviant' women's arrival at Purity Camp, Shalini describes the Repeaters' violent actions as follows:

> When the sun is up men remember their responsibility. At night they will do anything, as if their vileness, their desperation to possess, can only be seen in the day's glare. We were vulnerable—the loose, the ripe—choosing sex over family, over the wishes of the elders, the intentions of the community. Through the night the Repeaters had prodded us with their sticks, finding a fleshy thigh, a side of stomach, thrusting in the splintered end. (Akbar, 2017, p. 83)

The quotation depicts a misogynistic attitude and physical violence, with sexual abuse implied. It shows Shalini realizing that the Repeaters want the abducted women to surrender so they can fully control their bodies and minds (Agudo, 2023, p. 31). The words show how body and mind are linked in control and suggest that by treating these women

as lesser, the system makes them so. The aim is to purify them—meaning to subjugate them physically and psychologically. Dr Iyer, the head of the facility, says: "It's for you all. All of you, who sacrificed your purity. [...] Your last hope" (Akbar, 2017, p. 85). As part of the 're-education' program, the women slowly lose hope, a core part of humanity. Shalini notices this on the way to Purity Camp: "As the distance between us grew I began to feel a deep pressure in my shoulders, a resistance band, Leila, Leila holding on as they forced forward" (Akbar, 2017, p. 83). This physical pressure signals her longing to go home and be with her family, but also shows her realization that returning is impossible—bringing panic, fear, guilt, and the shame of failing as a mother and protector—a complex experience of forced separation.

The graphic image of Purity Camp that the protagonist paints likewise reveals that the lived experience of her abduction is deeply felt in the body: "When I first got there, I felt in pieces, ensnared by the wide, open fields with the lonely gabled sheds. A single step from the brink" (Akbar, 2017, p. 19). The embodied experience of fragmentation and entrapment, of distress and fear, is intensified by perceiving the camp as "a place apart, separate from everything else" where "any sign of outside existence […] seemed strange, unreal" (Akbar, 2017, p. 84). Forcefully removed from a life of privilege and thrown into that of subjugation, the changes Shalini experiences are so sudden and rapid that they are practically incomprehensible but clearly and deeply felt in the body. The cognitive and physical aspect of her very existence in Purity Camp may be interpreted as the embodied experience of her phenomenological facticity, which points to Heidegger's (1962) concept of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), in a sense of being thrown into the world without any prior explanation and being alive within a fixed set of physical, spatial, and temporal possibilities. The heroine is confined in a space of abuse and control for an unknown length of time until she 'comes round.' She is 'purified' to re-enter the world as a useful, loyal citizen, serving the patriarchal, totalitarian regime.

The process of 'purification' is described as a forced transformation: "It is not something from me but something *of* me that has been taken. The part that could feel warmth, happiness, desire. Or is it that there is no they. It is *I* who have yielded something of myself" (Akbar, 2017, p. 82, my emphasis). As part of her re-education, Shalini is deprived of the ability to experience positive emotions. She is compelled to internalize the idea that her impurity and deviance pose a threat to her daughter's happiness and her wealthy friends' notion of home, which affects her mental state and sense of self. In the early days of her confinement, she experiences strong, sensitive feelings and embodied emotions. For instance, being separated from Leila feels like "physical hollowness" and a "numbing ache" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 89–90). Dr Iyer instructs her not to think too much and to put away

her anger unless she is on top of the so-called Anger Tower. There, she can "abuse, […] kick, scream" (Akbar, 2017, p. 89). What he gives her is only the illusion of freedom and choice. In reality, he mentally and physically controls her emotions, her body, and her very existence. Eventually, she feels that everything is "random, without real purpose. Like a balloon unstopped, zipping one corner to the other, every moment weaker, lesser" (Akbar, 2017, p. 95). Shalini's perception of being reduced by the experience, and of her existence in Purity Camp as uncertain and pointless, may be explained by Quentin Meillassoux's definition of facticity, which describes it as "the absence of reason for any reality; in other words, the impossibility of providing an ultimate ground for the existence of any being" (2014, p. 21).

To find purpose in their impossible existence, the women try to cope by "doing desperate little things so we could remember what was normal," but the Pill that Dr Iyer regularly gives them to "instill discipline" thwarts these attempts as it turns "the mind from the vigils of the day, the memories we guard, the images we polish and protect and return to" (Akbar, 2017, p. 20, 19, 18). The Pill thus serves as another tool for oppression: it is designed to control the bodies and minds of these women, to rob them of free will and memories—the essence of their humanity. Still, Shalini keeps remembering—even having visions of—her loved ones. She describes this cognitive and embodied experience as follows: "now everywhere there's a slow, warm tingle. I'm staring at something soft, something smooth, [...] I see there's no distance between my self and these folds of satin memory, we are one, the same." (Akbar, 2017, p. 18). The Pill may change her perception of the world around her, but it cannot diminish her emotions or erase her memories. This implies that although her existence in Purity Camp is incomprehensible and unjustifiable, it is also irreducible.

The protagonist challenges her facticity and control over her body and mind by holding on for the sake of her daughter. Furthermore, she finds reason and ground for existence in the community of women in Purity Camp, who are portrayed as tough, "strange and beautiful women with the courage to slash at every expectation" (Akbar, 2017, p. 91). Although these women come from diverse sectors and castes, they form alliances despite their differences, united by their shared experiences of oppression and resistance. Their 'transgressions' include interfaith and same-sex marriage or campaigning against the *khatna* (cutting the girl's genitals before puberty). With the support of this community, the heroine undergoes a mindset shift, realizing how negligent she was in her former privileged position, having turned a blind eye to the climate crisis and social inequality, as evidenced by her wasteful use of water and mistreatment of her maid, Sapna.

Over four months in Purity Camp, Shalini awakens to the reality and cruelty of the totalitarian regime and patriarchal oppression. She learns that restraining women's freedom and forcing them to become 'pure' means exploiting and marginalizing them, stripping away their sense of self and identity.

Sixteen years later, in the narrative present of the novel, the protagonist lives in Purity Tower with other 're-educated' women, since "the Council decided we had to be kept out of the city. They said we might pollute the rest. […] Here there were no sixty-foot walls. No sectors. Only scrubland and an empty horizon" (Akbar, 2017, p. 17). The spatial imagery reveals another aspect of the dual exploitation of women and nature. Although 'purified,' the so-called Tower widows are still treated as abject. They are symbolically equated with barren or polluted land. They no longer have any perspective or hope for revival, so they have no impetus to transgress or revolt. As she says, "The loneliness of these sixteen years is taking me out of myself. I will edge into a different state without realising" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 100–101). The changes she experiences stem from her subjugated position and her embodied sense of hopelessness. They are also induced by the Pill that Shalini still takes occasionally. Despite this, Shalini continues to have vivid memories of Leila and visions of Riz, especially when repeatedly visiting Purity One on her daughter's birthday, "[t]o ask her for forgiveness. We didn't respect these walls, so they took her from me. […] To her I am an emptiness, an ache she cannot understand but yearns to fill. No. I have left more, a glimmer at least. […] The warmth of her first cradle, my arms" (Akbar, 2017, p. 11). Her words suggest that she has internalized the guilt created by the Council's propaganda of purity. However, she also maintains an indestructible emotional and embodied connection with Leila. Against all odds, this connection keeps her hope alive that Leila is still alive, thus preserving her humanity.

Nevertheless, performing peon duties for the political sector, Shalini continues to be treated by the totalitarian regime as a slave. Her confined existence is an embodied experience of "suffocation, inescapability and regimentation" (Agudo, 2023, p. 32). However, the Council cannot fully control her emotions. Her determination to survive and to find Leila is fueled by love, hope, and anger. She interprets this drive as "My body reminding me that I had work, that I needed to go on" (Akbar, 2017, p. 90). Her unsuppressed, embodied emotions not only give her a sense of being alive; they also provide a profound connection to her inner self. They also propel her to continue her quest and transgression. Thrust into "the most dispossessed and sordid existence" and gradually realizing what women must endure under the regime, the heroine starts a personal crusade. She seeks to reunite with Leila and to "reposition herself as a woman in a country in which they

are exploited for the sole benefit of the new ruling elite" (Agudo, 2023, pp. 26–27). In this enclosed space and existence, Shalini carves out a sense of freedom for herself. Her present facticity does not limit this sense of freedom. It resonates with the Sartrean idea that one's values depend on one's facticity yet are still freely ascribed by the individual (cf. Sartre, 1956).

It is this very freedom, I believe, that makes the protagonist a representation of feminist ecological citizenship. Sherilyn MacGregor coined this term to denote "citizenship as a means of resistance" (2014, p. 629). As a servant in the political sector, Shalini manages to gain access to the Ministry of Settlement. She does so at the cost of allowing the Council official to pleasure himself while touching her breast—another example of the hypocrisy and totalitarian power of the 'pure' and privileged. By pretending conformity and submission, she enters the headquarters of the Council and the symbol of the regime, the Purity Pyramid. It is described as an "onyx monstrosity, winking and wavy like a mirage" (Akbar, 2017, p. 128). There, she can secretly find the address of her former maid, Sapna, now the wife of a Councilman. Sapna is believed to raise her daughter. Shalini thus transgresses, resists, and subverts in the hope of finding Leila. Her disobedience may be interpreted as "a capacity and practices that resist being normalised by institutional orders" and is "at the core of what constitutes 'acts of citizenship'" (Mattar, 2024, p. 88). Her feminist ecological citizenship lies in realizing her ecological responsibility and "acknowledging the legacy of sexual bias that continues to drive patriarchal society" (Wyman, 2020, p. 154). It is reflected in recognizing women's strength in oppressive situations and resisting the normalization of dehumanization. It also lies in carrying on, against all odds, despite the limitations of her facticity, with love and hope as her driving forces.

In the end, the protagonist finds Sapna. Sapna denies raising Leila and orders the Repeaters to drag Shalini away. Yet, Shalini manages to catch a glimpse of the girl and believes she has finally found her daughter. The novel ends with this 'recognition,' which symbolizes hope: "She's beautiful. […] Double dimples, dimples unlike any other, dimples like my mother and I have. […] She keeps making that gesture. She is calling me" (Akbar, 2017, p. 154). Although ambiguous, the ending demonstrates that hope motivates Shalini's perseverance and is central to her ability to resist dehumanizing control. Love and hope are portrayed as more potent than any form of oppression and as tools to combat exploitation. Hope, in this context, is not only a marker of the protagonist's irreducible humanity but also a subversive force. Henry A. Giroux defines it as "a discourse of critique and social transformation […] that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents" (2004, p. 63).

Conclusion

Leila portrays a totalitarian regime where citizens are divided by caste, and nature and women are oppressed and exploited. It depicts the destruction of nature and the creation of spaces where the Other is violated and dehumanized in the name of purity. *Leila* is a poignant and frighteningly realistic literary representation of present-day ecological and societal changes, as well as their foreseeable consequences. However, it also offers a tiny ray of sun in this bleak future. Akbar's protagonist, despite being deprived of her social position, dignity, and freedom, still fights subjugation through acts of subversion and resistance. She is controlled, humiliated, and treated as Other, as abject, as less than human. Still, she constructs a self-identity as a feminist ecological citizen. She transforms her incomprehensible existence into the embodied experience of freedom and preserves her humanity through love and hope. The novel may be read as a warning or a cry for help, but also as a call to recognize our shared humanity and responsibility. It urges us to awaken to our capacity for generating positive changes.

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Patriarchy vs Feminism: The Dialectics of Social Norms, Gender, and Character Delineation in Selected Anglophone African Fiction

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Abstract

African societies are predominantly patriarchal. It is also a fact that the earliest writers of Anglophone African fiction were men. Since the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*—credited as the first African novel—in 1958 (Killam, 1969), a discernible pattern has emerged in which most male writers, by centralizing male characters, tend to tilt towards patriarchal ideals. In response to this narrative, new female voices have arisen to write women into relevance. This paper interrogates these trends and their implications for literary scholarship. The four novels selected for study are representational, and they are: Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* (2005), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dream Count* (2025). The research methodology is qualitative, examining the first two novels for patriarchal bias in character delineation, while the other two are analyzed by highlighting efforts at writing back by female writers. Social realism theory (1862) and Judith Butler's performative feminism theory (1990) serve as the analytical tools for the research. The paper demonstrates that most male writers project male characters and marginalize female ones, while female writers, in an effort to change the trajectory, produce 'protest' fiction that relegates men to the background. Ultimately, the paper argues that both patriarchal depictions and the consequent feminist "writing back" phenomenon expose biased perspectives that appear to present most African fiction by writers of English expression as lopsided.

Keywords: patriarchy, gender representation, characterization, realism, feminism

Introduction

The African society, like other societies around the world, has never been short of men and women achievers who perform their respective functions in the development of society. The projection of men as central characters and relegation of women to peripheral roles have been observed in most of the Anglophone African fiction this researcher has studied. It is also observed that this tendency is what appears to have triggered reactions from female writers who, in their efforts to flip the coin and change the narrative, commit what could amount to the same anomaly for which male writers are often accused.

The four novels randomly chosen for this study are: *Arrow of God* (*AOG*), *A Grain of Wheat* (*AGOW*), *House of Symbols* (*HOS*), and *Dream Count* (*DC*). The novels expose a pattern of gender bias that tends to obscure the beauty of realism and plausibility as far as African fiction is concerned. The choice of the four novels is because they span the period from the earliest African fiction to the present day.

Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, a novel set in the colonial era of Nigeria, is about Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu deity in Umuaro traditional community. In his obstinacy, he procrastinates to announce the commencement of the harvest that should usher in a new season, citing the non-appearance of the moon. His stubbornness is his tragic flaw, which leads to his fall. Because Ezeulu is cast in the mould of the classical tragic hero, his fall leads to monumental calamity for his community.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* is set in the fictional Kenyan community of Thabai and centres on the people's preparations for independence. As they take stock, the central character, Mugo, is caught in the web of a dilemma that leads him to question the people's perception of him as one of the two heroes of the struggle alongside Kihika, another male character.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* celebrates the protagonist, Eaglewoman, and her strength of character, which leads her to succeed in her home, social, and political life. She achieves success despite the challenges posed by patriarchal and social conditioning. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dream Count* tells the stories of four women: Chiamaka, Zikora, Kadiatou, and Omelogor. Each is accomplished professionally, but their coming-of-age experiences in love and relationships lead to varying levels of disillusionment.

The four novels are compartmentalized to reflect the gender slant, and the research methodology involves in-text qualitative analyses and explication. The novels are also critically evaluated by deploying social realism theory and Judith Butler's performative

feminism to interrogate their conformity or non-conformity with the notion of literature as a "representation of life" or "an expression of society" (Wellek & Warren, 1969, pp. 94–95).

Social realism, as an offshoot of the sociological approach to literature, emerged in the 19th century as a literary movement that depicted the realities of everyday life. Exponents like Wellek and Warren postulate that works of literature can be regarded as "social documents, as assumed pictures of social reality" (1969, p. 102). Social realism emphasizes the writer's fidelity to reality, and a major means of achieving this is character delineation, because characters are the everyday people who populate the writer's narrative. Also, characters are the vehicle by which realistic fiction depicts "life accurately and truthfully, focusing on the everyday experiences of ordinary people without embellishment" (Biscontini, 2024, Para. 1). The second theory, performative feminism, as propounded by Butler (1990), highlights gender performance rather than fixed or stereotyped portrayal of women as found in some literary works. Performative feminism, as a variant of feminism, serves the purpose of this paper by evoking gender roles as dynamic and performative. Butler affirms that "gender is not something that one is. It is something one does, an act. A 'doing' rather than a 'being.'" (1990, p. 34). This means that a woman should not be evaluated on the basis of her gender. Rather, her performance, achievements and contributions to social development should define her.

Related Scholarship

Arrow of God, *A Grain of Wheat*, and *House of Symbols* have received a gamut of critical evaluations, but *Dream Count* is too recent to have received significant reviews.

Ugwu (2014) examines *Arrow of God* against the background of the novel's trans-cultural relevance to the overall theme of cultural conflict. The work alludes to the novel's "propensity to conform with Aristotle's definition of tragedy as an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and is of a certain magnitude" (Ugwu, 2014, p. 273). The scholar's assessment is germane, as the novel features a protagonist portrayed as larger than life whose pride leads to his fall, just as the classical heroes in Aristotle's canons do.

Another scholar, Amechi Akwanya writes about *Arrow of God* as "a harrowing story of traumatic change in which a traditional society loses its cultural identity under pressures—internal and external" (Akwanya, 2013, p. 35). Akwanya further states that the loss of identity was inevitable as the tribal life of the Umuaro community buckled in the wake of what he describes as colonial meddling, the protagonist's flaw, obstinacy, and his indecision. This double-barreled "arsenal" constituted a strong force that worked against the traditional society, which was already infiltrated by powerful external forces.

Mambrol (2022) reflects on *A Grain of Wheat* and the "poisonous memories of jealousy, mean-spiritedness, betrayal and disillusionment which confront the major characters of the novel on the eve of the country's independence" (para 2). Mambrol (2022) submits that the characters' struggles to re-build their lives amount to "late pursuit of ill-defined justice" (para 2). Despite this assessment, Mugo, the novel's protagonist, under the weight of his betrayal, confesses his guilt to avoid a more dire consequence, such as rejection by the people. Although Ngugi portrays Mugo as a hermit, he is still ostracized.

Kumar (2019) examines *A Grain of Wheat* from the perspective of the two revolutionary movements captured in the novel—the Mau Mau revolt and the eight years of pre-emergency insurgency. Kumar highlights the socio-cultural and ethnic disintegration of the Gikuyu (Kenyan) society following the domineering presence of Western imperialist forces and the attempt by the people to uphold their identity and language. He believes that the elements of identity and language provide a common basis for people's "shared emotions and sentiments" (Kumar, 2019, p. 272). The critic's position lies at the heart of the changes in Kenyan society Ngugi depicts in the novel.

Worguji (2014) interrogates the male child obsession in the African society in *House of Symbols* and how the phenomenon leads women to give birth to multiple unplanned children in their search for a male child and heir to the family fortunes. The critic's assessment reflects the dictates of patriarchy and its tendency to place greater value on the male child to the disadvantage of the female offspring. This forms part of the major concern for feminist writers who argue that such a stance should not be promoted by African writers, who have a responsibility to draw attention to the injustice of gender bias in order to influence social change.

Pointing out attempts to counter patriarchal bias, Burtner (2025) argues that Adichie's *Dream Count* stands in opposition to the valorization of men. Instead, men and their foibles are a major focus of the novel. She contends that the novel exposes the ways in which many men abdicate their responsibilities. Burtner also describes the novel's structure as creating "gaps that ultimately left expectations unfulfilled" (2025, para 1). This present study, however, maintains that what Burtner (2025) regards as a weakness is, in fact, part of the novel's strength and symbolizes the checkered experiences of the four young women around whom the narrative revolves.

Further research reveals some similarity with the present work in the studies of Okolocha (2022) and Oso (2018). Okolocha (2022, p. 373) examines the stereotypical and traditional images of women in Nigerian literature written by men and the dominant feminist

ideologies propagated by women writers. She highlights the subordination of women and the efforts by female writers to counter the portraiture of women as inferior to men.

On his part, Oso (2018, p. 256) writes about the relegation of women in the male-authored African novels noting that in response to this proclivity, many female African novelists have exposed the patriarchal nature of African society in their novels. He further argues that female writers "deliberately demonized and bestialized the male characters in their novels to get even" (Oso, 2018, p. 256). While this latter view seems somewhat extreme, Okolocha (2022) and Oso's (2018) positions on what could be termed "male for male" and "female for female" trends remain germane. Although their arguments validate the concerns of this research, what distinguishes this study is its focus on the implications of these trends, such as the erosion of the fundamental philosophy of literature, which is to present life realistically as it is (Wellek & Warren, 1949, p. 94). The African society comprises strong men and women across all ages and seasons, and that reality should not be buried in the grave of the parochialisms projected by fiction writers.

This study also distinguishes itself by illuminating what the actions of African fiction writers portend for literary scholarship. This dialectical approach, therefore, is a critique of the dichotomy between the valorization of men and the denigration of women and of the projection of women and the marginalization of men by Anglophone fiction writers.

Patriarchy, Valorizing Men and Denigrating Women

Patriarchy is a social structure that emphasizes the supremacy of males, especially fathers, within a family. African fiction has long reflected this ideology, as male writers frequently construct heroic male protagonists at the expense of female characters. In Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the central character, Okonkwo, is portrayed as a larger-than-life character who "breathed heavily and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe" (Achebe, 1958, p. 4). Achebe sustains this emphasis on dominant males and subordinate females in his third novel, *Arrow of God*. Its protagonist, Ezeulu, the chief priest of the Ulu deity in Umuaro, wields such immense authority that when he "considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people, he wondered if it was real" (Achebe, 1964, p. 3).

Ezeulu is exalted, like a demigod, cast in the mold of the classical hero—powerful and endowed with almost absolute powers. His authority is so overwhelming that even he questions its reality. Like Mugo in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Ezeulu is valorized despite the imperfections that the narrative gradually reveals.

> Mugo's name was whispered from ear to ear. Mysterious stories about him spread among the market women. This would not have happened on an ordinary market day. But this was not just another day. Tonight Kenya would get Uhuru. And Mugo, our village hero, was no ordinary man. Wambui put it in his way: Independence Day without him would be stale; he is Kihika born again. (Wa Thiong'o, 1967, p. 195)

The image of Mugo as a superman, projected by the novelist in the excerpt above, is subtly reinforced by the reference to "market women"—a term often used to denigrate women within the African cultural contexts. A second male character, Kihika, is also similarly eulogized: "women sang for Kihika and Mugo, the two heroes of deliverance from our village" (Wa Thiong'o, 1967, p. 221). These portrayals reflect a tendency to elevate men as central figures while relegating women to bystander or cheerleader roles. By portraying Mugo and Kihika as the "two heroes of deliverance," the text implicitly suggests that women did not participate meaningfully in the community's major activities or contribute in ways that would make an impact, thereby earning them the status of heroes. Indeed, the two novels examined in this section of the paper consistently portray women as weak, docile, and ineffective. They are frequently grouped with children:

> "And I say which Ezeulu? Or don't you know who you are looking for?" The four other men in the hut said nothing. Women and children thronged the door leading from the hut into the inner compound. There was fear and anxiety in their faces - - -. "What does he look like?" asked the corpral. "He is tall as the iroko tree and his skin is white like the sun." (Achebe, 1964, p. 153)

In the above passage, the men are depicted as stoic and composed, while the women, like the children with them, give in to emotions of fear, with "anxiety in their faces," further diminishing women's agency and significance. On the other hand, Ezeulu is described as "tall as the iroko tree" to paint an awe-inspiring picture in the reader's mind.

In reality, when faced with uncertainty, such as the fearsome moment when policemen arrive to arrest Ezeulu, "baring all their weapons at once" (Achebe, 1964, p. 152), the reactions of those present are not likely to be based on gender. It is this rigid portrayal of women as easily shaken that feminist theorist Judith Butler critiques. She argues that women are not static beings and should not be depicted in literature as robotic or emotionally predictable.

The events narrated in *Arrow of God* and *A Grain of Wheat* depict communities under stress, grappling with imminent social and political changes. Such circumstances call for collective action, with all members of the community contributing to peaceful social transformations. However, the authors of the two novels appear to re-inforce patriarchal

norms by predominantly featuring men in discussions and actions that shape these transitions. In contrast, women are portrayed primarily as wives or daughters, confined to domestic spaces, whose roles are limited to celebrating male achievements or enduring subjugation without objection or voice.

Achebe illustrates a scene during one of the festival days, recounting:

> As Obika and Ofoedu drank with the three men at the market place, one of the men had thrown a challenge to them. The conversation had turned on the amount of palm wine a good drinker could take without losing knowledge of himself.
>
> "It depends on the palm tree and the tapper" said one of the men.
> "Yes agreed his friend, Maduka. It depends on the tree and the man who taps it."
> "That is not so. It depends on the man who drinks…" (Achebe, 1964, pp. 77–78)

The village festival is centered entirely around men, as if women do not exist. One might ask: could it be said that women did not participate in the communal festival, or are they deemed irrelevant? The writer's silence on the roles of women during such an important communal activity suggests a lack of regard for their presence and contributions. Achebe does not see the need to balance the representation of men and women in such an important community festival, reflecting a patriarchal worldview that dismisses the social and political relevance of women. This omission undermines the ideal of inclusivity. Fundamentally, it reveals a failure to present literature as a mirror of life—one that reflects an equitable and just society. Instead, the narrative reinforces gendered hierarchies that marginalize women's voices and capacities, thus making "social inequities and imbalances of power public knowledge" (Dobie, 2012, p. 93).

A similar pattern emerges in *A Grain of Wheat* where only men sit to take stock on the eve of Thabai's independence, in a fictionalized Kenyan society. It is the men who are portrayed as preoccupied with the issues surrounding the arrival of "Uhuru." Women, by contrast, are mentioned only in passing, typically as sisters, girlfriends or wives of the central male characters. Their roles are confined to those of spies or caretakers, supporting the men engaged in the actual struggle for freedom. Ngugi appears to set the tone for the exclusion of women from leadership roles when the narrator of the novel derisively recounts the events leading to the overthrow of women's leadership:

> Nevertheless, his words about a woman on the throne echoed something in the heart, deep down in their history. It was many, many years ago. Then women ruled the land of the Agikuyu. Men had no property, they were only there to serve the whims and needs

> of the women. Those were hard years. So they waited for women to go to war, they plotted a revolt…. They would sleep with all the women at ones, for didn't they know the heroines would return hungry for love and relaxation? Fate did the rest; women were pregnant; the takeover met with little resistance. (Wa Thiong'o, 1967, pp. 11–12)

The extract above denigrates women, portraying them as too effeminate to be entrusted with leadership. They are further ridiculed as love-struck and irrational, while the author uses a natural phenomenon—pregnancy—as a vehicle for negative social commentary. This imbalance is even more pronounced when viewed against the backdrop of male authors' influence on a social system that elevates men to positions of superior power and intellect. The denigration of women is further evident in the lines:

> years later, a woman became a leader…. She was beautiful. At dances, she swung her round hips this way, that way… men were moved by the power of a woman's naked body…. She too knew this was the end…. She was removed from the throne. (Wa Thiong'o, 1967, p. 12)

The passage trivializes female leadership by reducing it to a physical allure. The subordination of women is reflected in the narrator's statements in *Arrow of God*, particularly in moments of tension caused by Ezeulu's obstinate decisions. When his daughter questions his judgment in sending one of his sons to join the new religion, Ezeulu retorts: "Shut your mouth," indicating that he will not permit anyone, least of all his daughter, to challenge his authority or question his wisdom (Achebe, 1964, p. 43).

As the crisis escalates, and he is being led away by armed men from the white man, the "women and children followed fearfully at a good distance" while "Oduche's mother began to cry, and the other women joined her" (Achebe, 1964, p. 45). This portrayal of women as weak is juxtaposed with the novel's strong, heroic male characters. Based on this researcher's analyses of the two Anglophone African novels in question, the writer's role in offering an unflinching portrayal of society falls short. In response to the dominant patriarchal lens of male novelists, female writers such as Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie are actively reclaiming narrative space and giving women their own voices.

Feminism, Changing the Trajectory, Writing Women into Relevance

Feminism in literature expresses gender concerns and seeks to project women's roles and rights. As established in the preceding sections of this paper, Anglophone male African fiction writers have historically centered men in their narratives, relegating women to the margins of social experience. Palmer captures this dynamic succinctly when he writes:

> The presentation of women in the African novel has been left almost entirely to male-voices—Achebe, Amadi, Ngugi, Ousmane Sembene, Laye, Beti, Armah and Soyinka—and their interest in African womenhood, even in the case of Ousmane Sembene has had to take second place to numerous other concerns. These male novelists, who have presented the African woman largely, within the traditional milieu, have generally communicated a picture of a male-dominated and male-oriented society and the satisfaction of the women with this state of things has been, with the possible exception of Ousmane Sembene, completely taken for granted. Achebe, Ngugi and others have portrayed women who complacently continue to fulfil the roles expected of them by their society and to accept the superiority of the men. (1983, p. 38)

Emerging female writers are now challenging the "man-made world" created by male writers. This re-awakening has led to a deliberate emphasis on the female perspective in character development. Crucially, this perspective is no longer one of lamentation, but of assertive, self-confident women.

House of Symbols and *Dream Count*, selected for this analysis, elucidate vividly the efforts of Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie to write women into relevance. First, the protagonists in both novels, as is typical of the novels of other Anglophone female authors studied by this researcher so far, are women. Second, these central characters are accomplished professionals. For example, Eaglewoman, the protagonist of *House of Symbols*, is depicted as the quintessential modern woman: a wife, mother, businesswoman, and politician who blends philanthropy with her responsibilities, making her a valued member of her fictional Umuga community in Eastern Nigeria:

> But there is a lot that can be said about Eaglewoman's relationship with people, those who work with her or for her, with those who are her friends, her relations and even her business rivals. She knows how to give and enjoys giving relationships and other things what she herself has come to describe as a personal touch. Eaglewoman is a solid rock that gathers moss. Around her, green and yellow moss blossom in a thick furry mass at all seasons. (2005, pp. 108–109)

This excerpt paints a portrait of an ideal human being, admired and loved by her community for her admirable performance in multiple roles. Described as "a solid rock that gathers moss," Eaglewoman stands in stark contrast to the weak and timid female characters often depicted by male writers. She is self-actualized and evaluated by society based on her dynamic contributions—not as a robot controlled by her husband. Butler (1990) challenges the stereotypical portrayal of women and advocates for more nuanced representations.

The same strength of character, attributed to Adimora-Ezeigbo's heroine, is evident in the four central characters of Adichie's *Dream Count*. One of the two homodiegetic narrators, Chiamaka, speaks of her cousin, Omelogor, in such glowing terms to Darnell, her boyfriend:

> Only two years older but she had always hovered vigilantly, ready to jump in and protect me from myself. I told Darnell how brilliant and fearless she was, gleaming wherever she went, a star from birth doing starry things as a banker in Abuja.
>
> 'You talk about her like a myth',
> Darnell said.
> 'I do?'
> 'Yep. Like she can do no wrong.' (2025, p. 28)

The passage above clearly depicts the female character as fearless, assertive and purposeful. Indeed, the central female characters in *Dream Count* are portrayed as resilient and dynamic. This is an intentional departure from the traditional portrayal of women as vulnerable and submissive in male-authored novels. This aligns with Butler's (1990) stance that gender is not about what one is, but what one can do.

It is through the examination of the complexities that Chiamaka recounts in *Dream Count* her emotionally fraught relationship with Darnell, whom she characterizes as cold and arrogant. Though she endures his cold, denigrating attitude towards her for a while, eventually, she takes the bold step to reclaim her dignity by ending the relationship. She narrates:

> He locked the door to fend me off, to keep away this person darkly guilty of ordering a mimosa in Paris. I slept on the thin sofa and awoke early in a kind of gold light. While he silently made coffee, I looked online for flight tickets to Washington, DC.
>
> I sent Omelogor a message to say I was leaving Paris today and it was over. Her response was *love you. Call once in Paris.* It was done. telling Omelogor made it real, and I heard in my head the sound of the breaking spells. (2025, p. 57)

Darnell's rebuke over Chiamaka's choice of 'mimosa' during a dinner date is emblematic of his condescending attitude. Her decision to leave him is not merely personal—it symbolizes a broader feminist assertion of dignity and autonomy. The phrase "sound of the breaking spells" resonates both personally and generically, signifying the breaking of emotional dependency and, in the broader sense, the dismantling of patriarchal expectations. Such decisive action is rarely depicted in male-authored fiction, where women often endure abuse due to societal expectations of complacency.

In *House of Symbols*, Adimora-Ezeigbo's protagonist, Eaglewoman, exemplifies this affirmative agency. Despite her husband, Osai's, reservations, she fully immerses herself in business and politics. She is portrayed not as a subordinate, but as the dominant partner in their marriage. In one scene, the couple visits a friend in need:

> Eaglewoman turns to Osai and sees that he too has turned to look at her in that peculiar way they are able to speak to each other, to communicate without words. The eye contact lasts only a moment, but it is time enough for them to reach a decision and to cast a lot choosing who should speak their minds. The lot falls on Eaglewoman to announce their decision. (2005, p. 286)

The excerpt reveals a strong bond and mutual respect between the couple. The woman is not treated as inferior; rather, she is a decision-maker, a partner, and a leader. The depiction of deep respect and emotional intelligence between Eaglewoman and Osai challenges patriarchal norms that reduce women to appendages of men and advocates for change.

Furthermore, *House of Symbols* debunks the myth of compulsory betrothal. Aziagba, Eaglewoman's mother, supports her daughter's decision to reject a childhood betrothal to Nathaniel Okeke despite economic hardship. Okeke was in a position to provide for them. The narrator recounts:

> Even as a child she understood her mother's dilemma, her plight. Her worry over the bride price and other conjugal accessories splashed on the family by Nathaniel Okeke was real - - -. Osai made history by paying back everything. The things that could be returned were sent back. The rest were redeemed with a lot of money. (2005, p. 7)

The underlying message in the narrative above is a woman's right to choose her husband and to love. Also, this act of restitution is symbolic—it represents a rejection of transactional marriage and a reclaiming of female autonomy. Eaglewoman's story, like Chiamaka's, is a testament to the evolving literary landscape where women are no longer passive figures but active agents of change.

In the same vein, the women in *Dream Count* are independent, assertive, and actively participatory in shaping their lives. They are not passive observers of societal events, as women are often depicted in the novels of Achebe and Ngugi discussed in this study. Zikora in *Dream Count* experiences a sense of self-actualization, yet her lover, "could not understand that she might not want to be unemployed or that she, too, needed to do things in the world, to own things for herself" (2025, p. 106).

The depiction of educated, independent, and proactive women reflects a deliberate shift in female authors' narrative perspective. It asserts that the average woman is not inherently dependent on a man, but rather capable of autonomy and self-determination. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) is particularly relevant here, as these characters challenge traditional gender roles through their actions and choices. Equally significant is the theme of mutual dependence between men and women, and the imperative of change, for Ezeigbo affirms that: "change is gradually but steadily taking place in this country and everywhere. Women are aware of this change and are capitalizing on it" (Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 76). This concept promotes a vision of gender relations rooted not in hierarchy, but in balance and reciprocity.

Conclusion

This study has examined Anglophone African fiction from the perspectives of male and female writers, each foregrounding their respective genders. The four novels selected span the period between 1959 and 2025, meaning that in approximately five decades, starting from the earliest novels, which reflect the colonial experience in the African countries of Nigeria and Kenya, to the present day, a pattern is discernible. That is, a pattern of male writers valorizing men and denigrating women, while female writers resort to changing their "circumstance" by giving women a voice and platform to showcase their achievements through their fiction. This is because of their belief that the societies depicted have never been bereft of brave and assertive women who have successfully contributed their quota to social growth, in commerce, politics, and the family.

The above phenomenon warrants serious debate due to its implications for literary scholarship. This paper is expected to stimulate further critical examination of the seeming parochialism that is read into much African fiction. This is expedient, particularly from the perspective of social realism, to serve the essence of literature as "primarily an imitation of life" (Wellek & Warren, 1949, p. 109). Although Wellek and Warren (1949) argue further that literature is "no substitute for sociology or politics," it has its "own justification and aim" (p. 109). That aim is to present life as it is. Fiction writers—male and female—have a responsibility to reflect social reality in their works to drive social change. In this regard, social change that sees men and women dispassionately portrayed as they are, with their strengths and weaknesses, rather than how the system of patriarchy perceives them to be.

Moreover, literature, under which fiction falls, is a creation of society and mirrors society, the whole of society, not a part. Mirroring society requires fidelity to realism. Even though there are elements of imagination, the veracity or plausibility of actions or events portrayed

in the novel should not be questioned. This is because fiction or literature serves as a powerful tool for positively influencing society. If novelists are to be swayed to write in the promotion of patriarchy and feminism based on their genders, then their ability to creatively impact society may become limited and doubtful.

It is not in doubt that many fiction writers display gender bias in their delineation of characters. A most fundamental implication of the "male for male" and "female for female" phenomenon in the works examined is that the novels may not accurately portray life in the context of African experience, as literature is wont to do.

Finally, it is pertinent to point out that despite the issue of gender bias, the four novels stand out in African fiction for their skillful use of language to convey their respective thematic concerns. The authors' crafts are attained through the use of African proverbs, symbolism, and idiomatic expressions, in particular. The writers' art elevates the novels above mere documentation of history and experiences.

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Fake News on Both Sides of the Border: Media Literacy Among Young Hungarians Living in the Partium Region (Romania) and Along the Hungarian Border

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Abstract

Digitalization and online social media platforms have radically transformed the flow of information. Anyone can disseminate almost any information on these platforms, including fake news and other fraudulent messages. The latter includes phishing scams and fake sweepstakes. In this environment, media literacy is critical, as it enables individuals to critically evaluate media content from multiple perspectives and identify fraudulent content. Most research focusing on media literacy among young people has been based on self-reporting, examining a specific type of information, and only in the context of a single country. There is a lack of research exploring differences in media literacy among members of an ethnic group living in multiple countries. Our research simultaneously assesses, in practice, the ability to identify fake news, phishing scams, and fake sweepstakes among young Hungarians living in two neighboring countries on opposite sides of the Romanian–Hungarian border. The questionnaire consisted of 20 screenshots of real social media posts, emails, Messenger messages, and SMS messages. Each contained either verified false or real information, and participants had to decide the message's authenticity based on clues in the screenshot. Based on the results, it can be said that young Hungarians in Partium scored significantly lower across all three deception categories than young Hungarians living across the border. This may be due to fundamental deficiencies in their media

awareness, the different socio-cultural, infrastructural, and educational conditions in the two countries, and their status as an ethnic minority, but sampling and questionnaire bias may also play a role.

Keywords: media literacy, phishing, fake news, students, Partium

Introduction

In addition to their positive effects (such as unrestricted and easy communication and instant access to news and information), online social networks also facilitate the spread of fake news (Aïmeur et al., 2023). This phenomenon increases the number of unreliable sources and false content, disrupting public discourse and reducing trust in the media (Bodaghi et al., 2024). Krekó classifies fake news as disinformation, which he defines as a set of manipulation techniques intended to deliberately mislead (Krekó, 2018). Walters believes that fake news is "(a) content holding itself out as a news piece (b) that makes objectively false assertions that given events have occurred (c) in a materially false manner" (Walters, 2018, p. 142). Based on all this, it can be said that fake news is "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213), which are typically spread on the internet and social media. "Digital fake news" is deliberately false information disseminated on online platforms in the form of news articles, images, or videos, most often related to well-known individuals or events of great interest, appearing to be reliable but appearing on unverified, dubious websites/social media pages (Kenyeres & Szűts, 2024). Veszelszki (2017) extends the scope of fake news to various internet scams, including phishing. According to Harrison et al. (2016), "Phishing is an attempt to gain personal and sensitive information from individuals through online deception" (p. 265). Phishing primarily uses social engineering and some kind of technical solution to obtain users' personal data (Yang et al., 2022). The technical solutions usually include a bait email with a link that takes the user to a website that looks deceptively similar to an official site, where they are asked to enter data that will end up in the hands of fraudsters (Harrison et al., 2016). Social engineering methods include fearmongering, pressure tactics, and appealing to human greed and the desire to get rich quickly (Kenyeres & Szűts, 2025). The latter is exploited by scammers advertising fake sweepstakes. However, in order to obtain the nonexistent valuable prize, the user must first provide their personal data.

Online fake news and various types of disinformation and scams are present in both Romania and Hungary (Kenyeres & Weigand, 2023). According to the literature available on this subject in the Scopus database, Hungarian journalists believe that fake news and

disinformation campaigns are widespread in Hungary (Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth, 2025). Based on international literature, fake news is also prominent in Romania (Mustață et al., 2023), specifically in relation to Covid-19 (e.g., Radu, 2023; Schulte-Cloos & Anghel, 2024), in connection with natural disasters such as earthquakes (Mărcău et al., 2023), or the Russian–Ukrainian war (Natea, 2023; Vintilă et al., 2023). In addition to fake news, various forms of online electronic fraud, including financial fraud, have also appeared in Romania, exacerbated by the emergence of artificial intelligence (Losano, 2025), for example, through the spread of deepfake videos promoting fake financial investments. In Hungary, online financial fraud has become so widespread that the Hungarian National Bank is planning to overhaul the financial transfer system as a result (Szabó, 2025). In Romania and Hungary, research has shown that journalists are also being bribed to publish various fake news stories, which also affects the lives of businesses (Teichmann et al., 2024). The problem is therefore real in both countries, which is why it is particularly important for young people living here to be able to distinguish between real and false content in online media.

Defense against Fake News—The Role of Media Literacy

There are several strategies for reducing the impact of disinformation and fake news. One of the most important of these targets users by developing their media literacy. According to Potter, the most important function of media literacy is to help individuals protect themselves from the potentially negative effects of media content (Potter, 2010). One of the earliest written definitions of media literacy was provided by Aufderheide and Firestone, who defined it as "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes" (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993). Since then, there have been several attempts to define media literacy precisely, the most important common point being that it encompasses the skills for the critical analysis of media content, as well as the background knowledge and attitudes necessary for their practical application. Most of these abilities refer to accessing media messages, critically analyzing and evaluating messages, and creating messages transmitted through the media (see Ashley et al., 2013; Hobbs & Frost, 2003; Vraga et al., 2015). In this study, media literacy is understood as the ability to critically analyze, evaluate, responsibly use, and produce media content from online and/or digital platforms, accompanied by knowledge and appropriate attitudes related to the functioning of the media system and society.

Several international studies have examined the impact of media literacy on young people's recognition of fake news and other scams. Few of these studies have been conducted

on an international comparative basis (e.g., Martzoukou et al., 2020; Fastrez et al., 2022), and most of them have revealed differences between countries (Chen et al., 2025; Michelot et al., 2022; Palau-Sampio et al., 2022; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2024; García-Ruiz et al., 2020). In Romania and Hungary, research on the recognition of fake news is limited. In the literature available in the Scopus database, we found that research by Faragó et al. in Hungary showed that higher-level analytical thinking and belonging to the ethnic majority reduce susceptibility to fake news (Faragó et al., 2024). At the same time, susceptibility to conspiracy theories increases the likelihood of believing fake news (Szebeni et al., 2023). Research conducted by Schulte-Cloos and Anghel in Hungary and Romania found that the tendency to spread fake news increases when individuals must make quick, impulsive decisions (Schulte-Cloos & Anghel, 2024). In their Romanian study, Corbu et al. found that an individual's level of education did not significantly affect recognition of viral fake news (Corbu et al., 2020). Dumitru's research showed that, for the most part, neither children nor adolescents consider the reliability of information appearing on social media. (Dumitru, 2020).

The previous studies we reviewed examined some dimension of media literacy through self-reporting or specifically measured recognition of fake news. These focused primarily on individual countries, with few studies comparing multiple countries and even fewer examining different countries with populations that speak the same language (e.g., Michelot et al., 2022; Palau-Sampio et al., 2022). In the case of Romania and Hungary, there is a lack of research that tests, in practice, the media awareness of young Hungarians living in both countries. Our research is novel in that it simultaneously assessed the ability to recognize fake news, phishing scams, and fake sweepstakes in practice among young Hungarians in two neighboring counties on opposite sides of the Romanian–Hungarian border: among young Hungarians living in Hajdú-Bihar County in Hungary and Bihor County in Romania (in the historical Partium region). We were curious to find out what differences and similarities could be found between the critical media literacy of Hungarian youth living on both sides of the border and speaking the same native language in terms of identifying fake news and real news, phishing attempts, and fake and real sweepstakes.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Our first research question concerned differences between countries:

> R.Q.1. Does the media literacy of Hungarian students differ between the Romanian and Hungarian sides of the border?

Previous studies have shown differences between countries in several dimensions of young people's media literacy (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2024; Palau-Sampio et al., 2022; Michelot et al., 2022). Based on this, our hypothesis is as follows:

> H.1. The media literacy skills of the young people participating in our research in recognizing fake news and attempts at deception show different results from country to country.

During the research, we also asked the students about their gender, and we examined the following research question in this regard:

> R.Q.2. Does the relationship between gender and media literacy differ between countries?

Some previous similar studies have shown differences between genders in terms of young people's media literacy (Yesmin, 2024; Jones & Procter, 2023; Cerdà-Navarro et al., 2021). Based on this, our hypotheses are as follows:

> H.2.a. The gender of respondents in both countries will affect media literacy test scores: media literacy is higher among women.
>
> H.2.b. We see the same pattern in both countries.

During our research, we also explored the type of residence of the students (small town, big city), so our research question in this regard is as follows:

> R.Q.3. Does the relationship between settlement type and media literacy differ between countries?

Previous international studies have revealed differences in the relationship between media awareness among urban and rural youth (Kurniawan et al., 2020; Tamam et al., 2021; Uddin et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2023). Based on this, our hypothesis is as follows:

> H.3.a. The size of the settlement positively affects media literacy.
>
> H.3.b. We see the same pattern in both countries.

In our research, we also asked young people about their subjective financial situation. In this regard, our research question is as follows:

> R.Q.4. Does the relationship between perceived financial status and media literacy differ between countries?

Previous studies have found that better financial status is associated with higher media literacy among young people (Montiel Torres et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2025) and adults (Arin et al., 2023; Gogus et al., 2024), so we assume that:

H.4.a. A higher perceived financial status will have a positive effect on media literacy.

H.4.b. We see the same pattern in both countries.

Since we also assessed the age of the students, we will examine the following research question in this regard:

R.Q.5. Does the relationship between age and media literacy differ between countries?

Previous research has revealed differences in media awareness between younger and older age groups among students (Martzoukou et al., 2020; Cerdà-Navarro et al., 2021; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2024), so our hypothesis is:

H.5.a. Media literacy is higher among older students.

H.5.b. We see the same pattern in both countries.

Research Objectives and Methods

The aim of this research is to compare the media literacy of Hungarian young people living on both sides of the Romanian–Hungarian border (Hajdú-Bihar County in Hungary and Partium (Romania, Bihor County) on their ability to recognize fake news/real news, fake/real sweepstakes, and phishing attempts, as well as to examine how sociodemographic background variables affect this ability and whether their impact differs between countries.

We used a quantitative questionnaire-based research design for this study. Data collection was conducted via an online questionnaire (Google Forms). Sampling was conducted online from September 1, 2023, to February 23, 2024, using a self-completion method. The research was conducted as part of the international Erasmus+ project "Media Detective for Young People" with the participation of the "Hajdúsági Hallgatókért és Civilekért Egyesület" — Association for Students and Civilians in Hajdúság (HU), the "Partiumi Hallgatókért és Ifjúságért Egyesület" — Association for Youth and Students in Partium (RO), and TANDEM n.o. (SK). The 20-question online fake news test was completed in Hungarian by young people in Hungary, Romania (specifically in Partium), and Slovakia during school lessons. The test was given to teachers and youth workers, who used a QR code to share the test link with young people during school lessons.

Completing the test was voluntary, and respondents gave their prior informed consent, which they confirmed by signing attendance sheets. The data was stored in a secure database accessible only by the research team.

Sample

The present analysis is based on only part of the collected data—the Hungarian (N = 618) and Romanian (N = 575) samples. Table 1 shows the distribution of the demographic and background variables of the participating students. The gender distribution was balanced in both countries. However, there were significant differences in settlement type: the Hungarian sample was more urban, while the Romanian sample consisted mainly of rural students. The subjective financial situation was considered to be moderate in both countries. The average age was lower in the Romanian sample than in the Hungarian sample.

Table 1

Variables and their frequency of occurrence

Variable name		**Hungary (N = 618)**	**Romania (N = 575)**
Gender			
Male		280 (45.3%)	276 (48.0%)
Female		338 (54.7%)	299 (52.0%)
Residence			
Village		93 (15.0%)	275 (47.8%)
Small town		295 (47.7%)	231 (40.2%)
Big city		230 (37.2%)	69 (12.0%)
Subjective sense of wealth			
Low		33 (5.3%)	43 (7.5%)
Medium		393 (63.6%)	425 (73.9%)
High		192 (31.1%)	107 (18.6%)
Age (years)	Average (Standard deviation)	16.9 (1.9)	13.9 (1.8)

Note. Values within categories show the number and percentage of participants; age is shown as an average (standard deviation).

Measurement Methods and Variables

In addition to personal variables collected from participants (country, gender, age, place of residence, subjective sense of wealth), we measured fundamental, practical skills in analyzing and critically evaluating media messages within media literacy in relation to fake news, phishing scams, and fake sweepstakes, using a self-developed measurement tool (fake news recognition test) that we compiled based on tests used in previous similar studies (Porshnev & Miltsov, 2020; Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Al-Zou'bi, 2021; Orhan, 2023).

The fake news recognition quiz consisted of 20 dichotomous items. Across the entire sample, the scale's internal reliability was moderate (Cronbach's α = 0.634). In Hungary, the reliability was acceptable (α = 0.704), whereas in Romania it was low (α = 0.368). This suggests that the quiz measures a homogeneous construct to varying degrees in different cultural contexts.

All 20 items in the test are real screenshots that either contain verified real information or verified false information/fraud. The tool's elements were reviewed by media and communication researchers and police experts, and a pilot test was conducted in July 2023 with a sample of 424 people of mixed ages. Based on the experience and feedback gathered there, we developed the final measurement tool. The 20 items are divided into three topics: fake and real prize games (5 items), phishing attempts and real, official messages (10 items), and fake news and real news (5 items). A correct answer was worth 1 point, and a wrong answer was worth 0 points.

The study's target variable was the score on the fake news recognition test (SCORE). On a scale of 0–20, Hungarian students scored an average of 12.6 (SD = 3.2), while Romanian Hungarian students scored an average of 11.0 (SD = 3.0). Our results, therefore, suggest that Hungarian students in Hungary perform better than Hungarians living in Partium.

The independent variables in the study were as follows: country (Hungary, Romania), gender (male/female), age (continuous), type of place of residence (village, small town, large city[1]), and subjective sense of wealth (low, medium, high[2]). The categorical variables were dummy-coded, with "Romania" for country and "female" for gender, and the lowest-level category was used as the reference in all other cases.

[1] The original categories were merged (the categories "county seat" and "capital city" were merged to form the category "big city").

[2] The original categories were merged (the "well below average" and "below average" categories were merged to form the "low" category, and the "above average" and "well above average" categories were merged to form the "high" category).

Procedure

We used linear regression for the analysis and built the model in hierarchical steps. In model 1, we considered the main effects (country, gender, age, settlement type, wealth). In model 2, we examined differences in the effect of gender across countries, including the country × gender interaction. In step 3, we analyzed the differences in the effect of settlement type by country, including country × settlement type interactions, and in model 4, we included country × age interactions to examine the combined effect of student age and country, and then, in addition to the above, we also included wealth × country interactions, so that the model 5 included all possible two-way interactions between country and background variables.

The regression conditions were checked using diagnostic procedures (Appendices 1–3). The distribution of the residuals showed acceptable normality, and no heteroscedasticity occurred.

Overall, multicollinearity did not pose a serious problem in the first four models. However, in the fifth model, the interpretation of interactions must be treated with caution due to the high VIF values. The analyses were performed using SPSS 30.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) and Microsoft Excel.

Results

The results of the hierarchical linear regression models (Table 2) showed that Hungarian respondents in Hungary scored significantly higher on the quiz than Hungarian respondents from Romania (B = 1.12–3.10, $p < .001$). This difference persisted in all models and proved to be the strongest determinant in the country. The main effect of gender was significant in the initial model (e.g., B = 0.94, $p < .001$), indicating that men scored higher than women on average. However, this effect gradually weakened in the expanded models. It remained only marginally significant in the final model (B = 0.50, $p = .051$), suggesting that the effect of gender can be interpreted in interaction with country. Indeed, the interaction term was significant (B = 0.80, $p = .025$), indicating that the male–female difference was more substantial in Hungary than in Romania (Figure 1).

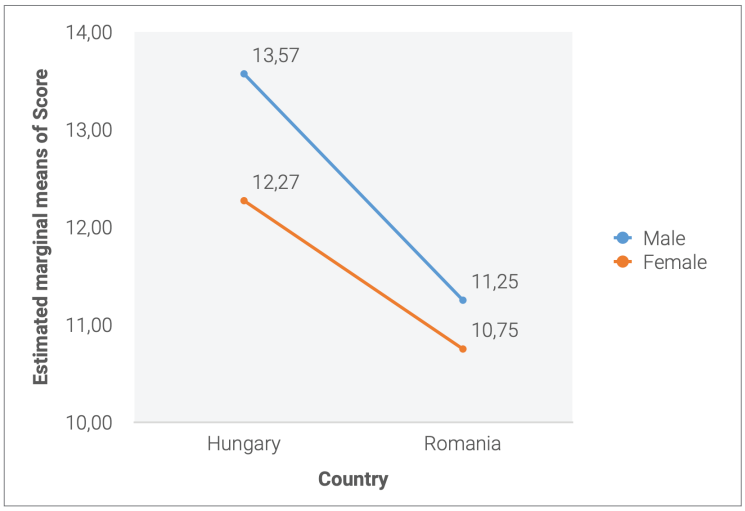

Figure 1
Country × gender interaction

The main effect of settlement type was initially not significant, but in a later model, those living in big cities achieved significantly higher scores than those living in villages (B = 1.29, p = .002). At the same time, the country × big city interaction was negative and significant (B = –1.83, p = .001), suggesting that while living in a big city is advantageous for Romanian Hungarian students, this effect does not occur in Hungary and, in fact, comes with a relative disadvantage. A similar pattern was observed in small towns (B = –1.45, p = .001) (Figure 2).

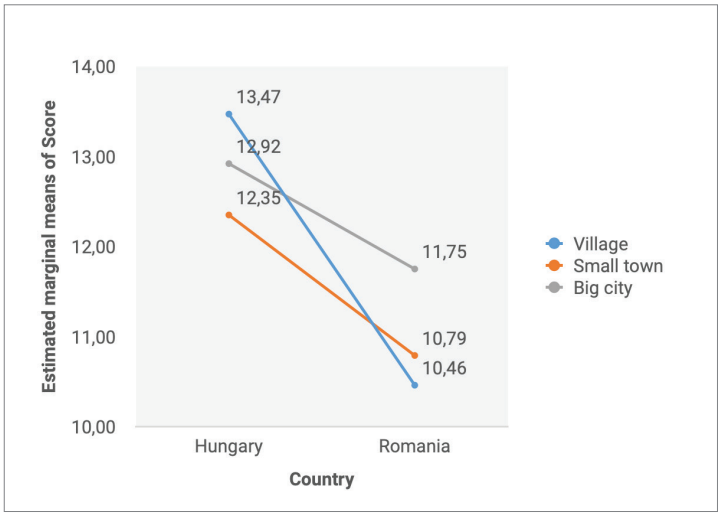

Figure 2
Country × residence interaction

Financial status did not prove to be a significant factor in most cases, although moderate wealth showed a positive correlation in one model (B = 0.98, p = .045). However, the interaction effects were not significant, meaning that financial status alone did not explain the differences in scores.

Age was not a significant predictor either as a main effect or in interaction, meaning that age differences did not influence performance.

Table 2

Results of hierarchical linear regression for the dependent variable SCORE (N = 1193)

Variable	Model 1 B (SE)	Model 2 B (SE)	Model 3 B (SE)	Model 4 B (SE)	Model 5 B (SE)
Constant	10.06 (0.39)***	10.26 (0.40)***	9.93 (0.40)***	10.00 (0.42)***	9.63 (0.52)***
Hungary (ref = Romania)	1.54 (0.25)***	1.12 (0.30)***	2.27 (0.44)***	2.28 (0.44)***	3.10 (0.81)***
Male (ref = Female)	0.94 (0.18)***	0.51 (0.26)*	0.47 (0.26)†	0.47 (0.26)†	0.50 (0.26)†
Age (z-standardized)	−0.05 (0.12)	−0.04 (0.12)	−0.06 (0.12)	0.02 (0.17)	0.00 (0.17)
Small town (ref = village)	−0.15 (0.22)	−0.14 (0.22)	0.33 (0.27)	0.34 (0.27)	0.34 (0.27)
Big city (ref = village)	0.48 (0.26)†	0.49 (0.26)†	1.30 (0.41)**	1.30 (0.41)**	1.29 (0.41)**
Medium wealth (ref = low)	0.51 (0.37)	0.52 (0.37)	0.58 (0.37)	0.55 (0.37)	0.98 (0.49)*
High wealth (ref = low)	0.54 (0.40)	0.55 (0.40)	0.63 (0.40)	0.61 (0.40)	0.76 (0.55)
Hungary × Gender	—	0.84 (0.36)*	0.86 (0.35)*	0.85 (0.36)*	0.80 (0.36)*
Hungary × Small town	—	—	−1.46 (0.45)**	−1.49 (0.46)**	−1.45 (0.46)**
Hungary × Big city	—	—	−1.82 (0.56)**	−1.85 (0.56)**	−1.83 (0.56)**

Variable	Model 1 B (SE)	Model 2 B (SE)	Model 3 B (SE)	Model 4 B (SE)	Model 5 B (SE)
Hungary × Age	—	—	—	−0.15 (0.24)	−0.14 (0.24)
Hungary × Medium wealth	—	—	—	—	−0.97 (0.74)
Hungary × High wealth	—	—	—	—	−0.50 (0.81)
R^2	.092	.096	.106	.107	.108
ΔR^2	—	.004*	.010**	.000	.002
F	17.05***	16.19***	14.01***	12.90***	11.70***

Note. † p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Discussion and implications

According to our results, young Hungarians in Hungary scored significantly higher on the fake news test than their Hungarian peers in Partium. This confirmed our first hypothesis, and our results reinforced previous international media literacy studies that showed differences in media literacy among young people across countries (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2024; Palau-Sampio et al., 2022; Michelot et al., 2022). One reason for this may be the ethnic minority status of Hungarians in Partium, in connection with which Faragó showed that belonging to the ethnic majority reduces susceptibility to fake news (Faragó et al., 2024), while a Danish study concluded that developing the literacy skills of ethnic minorities can be a challenge for mainstream formal education (Drotner & Kobbernagel, 2014). Thus, the specific characteristics of digital information literacy education in each country may also play a role (Merga & Mat Roni, 2025). However, according to Corbu et al., an individual's level of education does not significantly affect the recognition of viral fake news (Corbu et al., 2020). At the same time, test bias may also be an important factor, as we used the same test in both countries, which primarily contains examples from Hungary. Thus, certain platforms may be unfamiliar to a Hungarian living in Romania, making it difficult to assess the credibility of information originating from or appearing to originate from there. This is in line with the findings of Palau-Sampio et al. (2022),

who argue that the geographical proximity of students to the information is also important in identifying disinformation (Palau-Sampio et al., 2022). Age differences may also have an impact, as the Partium sample included younger people who may not necessarily have the same knowledge and experience as their older peers, so their media literacy may be weaker, as has been shown among high school students (Turpo-Gebera et al., 2023) and university students (Cerdà-Navarro et al., 2021).

We rejected hypothesis H.2.a. because men performed better, which contradicts the results of several previous studies among high school students (Jones & Procter, 2023; Turpo-Gebera et al., 2023; Tamam et al., 2021; Çelik et al., 2022). However, our results confirmed better performance among men in the university-age group (Cerdà-Navarro et al., 2021; Uddin et al., 2021). On the other hand, we also found differences between countries, as the difference between men and women was more pronounced among young people in Hungary, so our hypothesis H.2.b. was not confirmed either. The difference between countries can be explained by the younger age of the Romanian Hungarians in our sample, as previous research has shown that women in the youngest age group and men in slightly older age groups showed stronger media literacy skills. Hence, the disadvantage for women was more minor among younger Hungarians in Partium.

We did not confirm hypothesis H.3.b., because we observed different patterns in the two countries. While living in a large city was associated with better test results among Hungarian students in Partium, this effect did not occur in Hungary; in fact, it was associated with a relative disadvantage compared to villages. Thus, our hypothesis H.3.a. was only confirmed in the case of Hungarians in Partium, supporting previous research which found that urban youth have higher media literacy and critical thinking skills than their rural counterparts (Gupta et al., 2023; Uddin et al., 2023; Kurniawan et al., 2020). The Hungarian results show a pattern along settlement type that contradicts not only the above studies, but also those that showed higher critical literacy among rural students compared to those in large cities (Çelik et al., 2022; Tamam et al., 2021). The unusual pattern in Hungary may stem from the fact that the sample included younger students from large cities, who scored slightly lower on the test than older students from rural areas.

The subjective financial situation of young people did not have a significant impact on test scores in either country, so our hypotheses H.4.a., H.4.b., nor did hypotheses H.5.a. and H.5.b., as the age of the students did not prove to be a significant predictor in either country.

Our findings can serve as an important lesson for decision-makers, teachers, education professionals, and youth workers in both countries. They highlight the shortcomings

in the media literacy of Hungarian youth living in both countries, especially in the case of Hungarian students in Partium. With these results in hand, it is possible to plan targeted media literacy interventions. In the case of Partium, based on our results, it would be critical to reduce social inequalities between rural and urban areas, as these can also manifest themselves in access to education (Chávez-Fernández et al., 2025), thus, it is crucial to develop critical literacy in rural areas, to provide inclusive and context-sensitive media awareness training (Mazahir & Yaseen, 2025), and to reduce infrastructural inequalities between urban and rural areas (Prakash, 2025). Our findings can also be instructive for policymakers in both countries in developing targeted, personalized education policy interventions, and for individual educational institutions in optimizing their curricula to address young people's media literacy gaps.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the present study was based on a large sample, several limitations must be considered when interpreting the results.

Limitations of sampling: sampling was convenience-based, using the school network of civil society organizations participating in the Media Detective for Youth project. This may have resulted in several limitations. First, the sample is not representative of the entire Hungarian student population in the given border counties (Hajdú-Bihar County in Hungary and Bihor County in Romania). Although the sample size was large (N = 1193), the distributions of settlement and school types across countries differed, which may have influenced the results. For example, the Hungarian sample included a higher proportion of students from large cities, whereas students from villages and small towns were overrepresented in the Romanian samples. However, during the analyses, we controlled all significant background variables (age, gender, settlement type, school, subjective financial situation). Hence, the differences between countries are not solely due to these patterns. Nevertheless, the results are indicative as a cross-country comparison and require cautious interpretation. The data are cross-sectional and therefore do not allow causal conclusions. Although the regression models reveal correlations, it cannot be ruled out that other background factors (e.g., family background, parents' education, access to media) mediate or modify the effects found. Interpreting differences across countries is complicated by the study's lack of detailed data on media and digital competence development practices in education systems. Based on the results, it can be assumed that the educational and cultural environment significantly influences fake news recognition, but the exact mechanisms remain to be further researched. Limitations of the fake news

recognition test: the tool only examined a limited dimension of critical media awareness (the ability to analyze and critically evaluate media messages in relation to fake news, phishing scams, and fake sweepstakes). Other related skills (e.g., source criticism, online information verification, and algorithm awareness) were not measured, so the results can only be applied to certain types of scams. A further limitation of the test is that users can only rely on the information shown in the screenshot; they cannot click the articles shown, search for information from external sources, read comments, etc. Furthermore, although the actual email addresses and URLs are included in the screenshot for masked sender email addresses, participants do not necessarily know they should pay attention to them or what they mean. The results across countries may be distorted by the fact that only news from Hungarian websites and messages primarily from Hungarian service providers are included, which may reduce recognition effectiveness among Hungarians in Romania. In the case of young people in Hungary, however, the familiar topics, public figures, service providers, and financial institutions included in the tasks may increase the proportion of correct answers among them.

In future research, it would be worthwhile to use longitudinal data to examine how media awareness changes as students grow older and the roles of parents, teachers, and peer groups in the development of critical thinking. An important area of research could be to explore gender differences in greater depth and to examine the relationship between religiosity and the educational environment. In addition, it would be helpful to supplement the quantitative results with qualitative methods (e.g., interviews and focus groups) to understand the underlying mechanisms better. It would also be important to extend the research to include fake content generated by artificial intelligence (e.g., images and deepfake videos). By supplementing the test tasks with a self-reported questionnaire, it would also be possible to explore the differences between perceived and actual knowledge. Another interesting area of research could be to explore the differences in media literacy between Hungarian and Romanian youth in Romania by compiling a personalized test that still allows for comparison. Another interesting research topic could be to compare students' performance across schools with the educational guidelines in place at each school.

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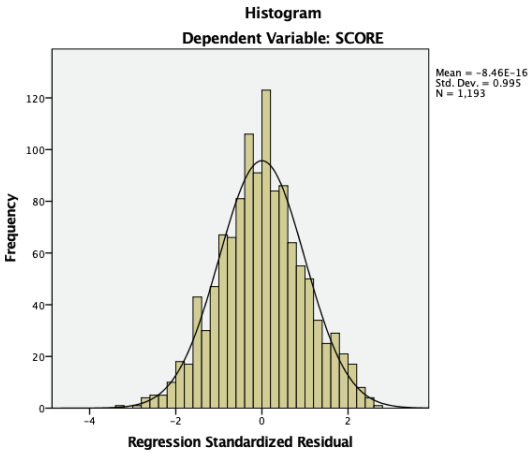
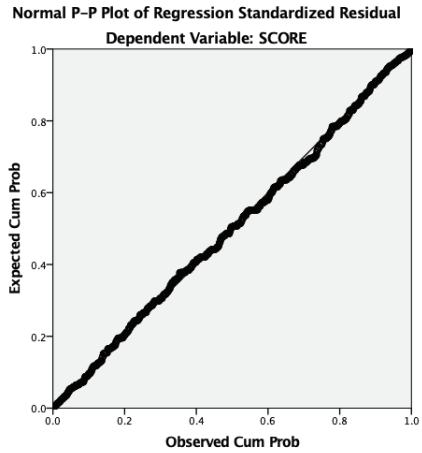
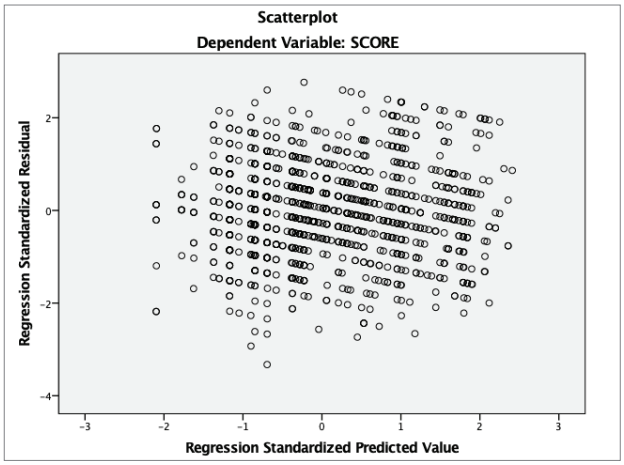
Appendix

Appendix 1

Diagnosis of normality







Appendix 2

Diagnosis of homoscedasticity

Appendix 3

Multicollinearity diagnostics (VIF values)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Small town (ref=Village)	1.49	1.49	2.36	2.38	2.38
Big city (ref=Village)	1.64	1.64	4.10	4.10	4.11
Medium wealth (ref=Low)	3.71	3.71	3.73	3.77	6.68
High wealth (ref=Low)	3.78	3.78	3.80	3.85	7.42
Hungary × Gender	—	2.90	2.91	2.92	2.96
Hungary × Small town	—	—	4.93	4.99	5.01
Hungary × Big city	—	—	6.24	6.27	6.33
Hungary × Age	—	—	—	2.68	2.69
Hungary × Medium wealth	—	—	—	—	15.74
Hungary × High wealth	—	—	—	—	11.32

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The Role of Maternal Attachment Styles in Children's Sleeping Habits, Feeding, and Adjustment to Nursery

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Abstract

Research over the last fifty years has shown that the security and emotional stability experienced by an infant in the first year of life have an impact on the individual's entire life, on how they respond to stressful situations, on how they raise their own children, on the dynamics of their relationships, and on their general psychological and physical state. That is why it is so important that today's generation of adults be able to consciously develop the parenting style that will lead to more securely attached children growing up. Such a change would be a huge step forward in healthy psychological functioning; however, it would also require the individual to confront his or her own maladaptive functioning and attachment difficulties. According to my hypothesis, mothers with a secure attachment style are more likely to be responsive in parenting, and they are more supportive of their children during the separation period than those with anxious and dismissive attachment styles. The online questionnaire survey involved 113 respondents. One part of the questionnaire concerned the parenting practices used by the respondents in the first year of their children's lives; another part concerned their experiences of settling in. In addition, the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) questionnaire was used to measure mothers' attachment styles. The results show that mothers' attachment styles affect both their responsiveness and their emotional and behavioral mechanisms during the separation of their children.

Keywords: attachment styles, responsiveness, parenting styles, separation

Introduction

The sense of security experienced by the infant in the first year of life, the responsiveness and emotional stability provided by the mother, have an impact on the whole of the individual's life (personality development, general psychological and physical well-being, coping with stress, relationships, parenting, etc.). Today's adult generation of young children may not have experienced the exact parenting mechanisms mentioned above. This was partly due to a lack of information and knowledge, partly due to the socio-cultural environment and expectations, and also to the fact that they themselves did not grow up in responsive and emotionally stable families, making it difficult for them to follow a different pattern. However, we now know that the mother–infant bonding is essential not only for a balanced childhood, but also because we carry this early attachment pattern throughout our lives (see Bowlby, 1977; Ainsworth & Bell, 1985). That is why adults who become parents today can make a significant difference in helping their children become securely attached and emotionally stable adults at a higher rate than previous generations.

This change is more likely to occur now than at any time in the last century because we have scientific evidence of what makes a child securely attached and the benefits of this in later life, and because society offers young mothers many more opportunities to raise their children responsively. The ability to change is therefore primarily a matter of individual traits and experiences. What makes this change complicated is that approximately half of the current adult generation lacks a secure attachment (Kató et al., 2024). In the light of this, it is only through conscious attention, self-education, effort, and sometimes overcoming instinctive impulses that parents who are not securely attached can pass on a different pattern to their children.

Characteristics of Attachment Styles

Attachment is a connection, an emotional bond primarily between two persons, in childhood primarily between parent and child (Szalai, 2014). Attachment may form in the first year of life, but it actually begins at birth. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the infant is dependent on its caregiver for a relatively long period of time from birth; its physical and psychological development, in other words, survival itself, is achieved through the care of parents and adults. The presence, reliability, and consistent availability of the parent influence the child's well-being, emotional state, and behavior. The characteristics of attachment are embedded in our personality and affect all our later relationships, as the attachment patterns established with the primary caregiver provide a template for later attachment functioning mechanisms. Patterns that develop during this period

can make us vulnerable, increasing health risks in the individual, or conversely, enhancing our physical and psychological resilience (Adams et al., 2014).

As Bowlby (1977) noted 50 years ago, it is not enough for a child to be physically cared for; they also need emotional feedback from their environment. One element of this is physical closeness, in the form of touch, and two-actor play (i.e., play based on direct contact between the child and the adult) also plays an important role. The child will feel safe and perceive their mother (primary caregiver) as a bonding figure who provides a secure base and a safe environment when needed.

Attachment styles were formulated by Ainsworth and Bell (1970) and Ainsworth (1985), who described the patterns that give rise to an individual's attachment style through the Strange Situation experiment. In the experiment, children aged 1–3 years were tested on how they reacted when they found themselves in unfamiliar situations. Our attachment system is activated in any situation that appears emotionally threatening and, depending on the characteristics of our patterns, provides coping strategies that can help or hinder the individual in regaining a sense of security. Nursery/preschool settling-in is perhaps one of the first emotional crises in which the child begins to operate this system of trying to restore safety. However, in many ways, this accommodation is also similar to the original experimental situation, and thus illustrates the attachment patterns of children entering nursery.

In the experiment set up by Ainsworth and Bell (1970), the infants were observed while being separated from and reunited with their mother a couple of times. Based on this plot, the authors were able to describe three patterns: the secure attachment style, the insecure–anxious style, and the insecure–avoidant style. Later, they added the disorganized style to their theory. A securely attached child is calm, active, and curious in the company of their mother. They may show signs of distress when separated from their parent, but soon calm down on reunion and become interested in their environment again. The child's behavior shows that they trust their mother, who provides an appropriate emotional support, responds consistently to the child's needs, so that the child learns to trust their environment, especially their parents, and has a secure attachment. The second type is called insecure–anxious attachment. In the Strange Situation experiment, the child finds it difficult to calm down in the absence of their mother, shows strong emotions, and has difficulty returning to explore the environment even when their mother returns. This pattern of attachment is typical when the mother is inconsistent, sometimes strict, punitive, sometimes overbearing, and sometimes almost pleading with her child. For the infant, the mother's behavior is thus unpredictable and unsettling. The third type is the

insecure–avoidant attachment. In the experimental situation, the child is emotionally distant, unresponsive to either distancing or reunification. This is typical if the mother is passive, unavailable, rejecting, or emotionally absent from the child's life. Thus, the infant is forced to protect himself or herself early on, tries to become independent as soon as possible, and, although negative emotions are also present, they do not express them, keeping an emotional distance from the mother. The disorganized attachment pattern is most common in children from abusive families. In such families, it is impossible to develop secure relationships (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Studies with adults have shown that 60% of people have secure attachment, regardless of culture, with the remaining 40% divided between the other three attachment patterns. However, insecure attachment types are much more culturally influenced. Avoidant attachment is more common in Eastern Europe than in Western countries. Anxious attachment is also highly prevalent in our cultural milieu, but it is even more prevalent in Mediterranean cultures and dominant in Northern Europe as well (Hoenicka et al., 2022). In a recent study of young adults (aged 20 to 40), the distribution of attachment styles in the Hungarian sample is even more dispersed than the European averages. According to this study, 31% of the respondents had secure attachment, 26% anxious attachment, 20% avoidant attachment, and 23% disorganized attachment (Kató et al., 2024).

Parental care plays a significant role in the development of attachment from the moment of birth. Neuropsychology researches show that early caring, nurturing, and consistent attention to the infant's needs have a significant impact on the child's later development. A child born into a neglectful environment has a slower left-brain development, which increases the susceptibility to depression in later life, and hypersensitivity of the limbic system leads to anxiety disorders (see also Ciechanowski et al., 2003; Riggs & Jacobvitz, 2002). In brain development, a neglectful environment also inhibits the growth of the hippocampus, which later leads to learning and memory difficulties. Children of mothers who provide adequate care and affection later on become better parents and cope better in stressful situations than children who are not surrounded by warm care. This is now supported by studies of chemical and hormonal changes in the brain (Winston & Chicot, 2016).

Maternal Responsiveness, Mother–Infant Bonding

In order for a secure attachment to develop in the child, the mother must be ready to respond. Maternal responsiveness means that the caregiver is sensitive to the child's cues and attuned to them. In this way, the child learns that the parent is available in case

of danger—providing safety and predictability. The main pillars of responsive parenting in the first year of life are on-demand feeding, physical closeness, and responsiveness to the child's cues, both during the day and at night.

In terms of feeding, research tends to distinguish between breastfeeding, mixed-feeding, and formula-feeding. Several studies support that secure mother–infant attachment is better facilitated by breastfeeding (Abuhammad & Johnson, 2021; Kim et al., 2024; Linde et al., 2020). In a recent research, Kim et al. (2024) found that breastfeeding mothers were more typically emotionally available than the mothers of infants who were formula-fed. The mother–infant relationship was therefore closer and more secure. Abuhammad and Johnson (2021) also included mixed-fed infants in their sample and were able to show a difference in mother–infant bonding between the three groups as early as the second month in favor of the exclusively breastfed infants and their caregivers. As postnatal depression makes responsive parenting more difficult, studies that focus on the quality of the mother's sleep are also important. Breastfeeding may also be associated with the sleep quality of mothers. A 2011 large sample study (N=6410) showed that mothers who opted for breastfeeding had more sleep compared to mothers who used mixed or formula-feeding only. The study concluded that they sleep more hours, have better health, more energy, and less depression than mixed or formula-feeding mothers (Kendall-Tackett et al., 2011).

Co-sleeping is a complex family habit in which recent psychological researches suggest that the physical closeness experienced by infants helps them to develop. Although there are cultural variations around this issue, more and more people are opting for co-sleeping, which facilitates responsiveness in nighttime care and promotes synchronization and regularization of the infant–mother dyad (Barry, 2019). Higley and Dozier (2009) investigated how nighttime care is related to infant–mother attachment and infant attachment style at 12 months of age. The results show that the mothers of securely attached 1-year-olds were more consistent, sensitive, and responsive during overnight care compared to the mothers of insecurely attached children. The most typical maternal behavior in terms of responsiveness was to hold and reassure the child, which the mothers of securely attached infants did much more often than those of children in the other groups. Carrillo-Díaz et al. (2022) found that children who slept with their parents for less than 6 months used self-soothing devices (e.g., pacifiers) significantly more often than those who spent more time in their parents' bed and had higher levels of anxiety.

Breastfeeding and sleeping in the same room or bed with the infant are two forms of care that have a significant role to play in the health, safety, and development of the infant. Until now, these factors have been approached from a cultural and sociodemographic perspective,

with less attention paid to psychological characteristics, one of which is mothers' attachment patterns (Jones et al., 2020). A Dutch study investigated the implications of mothers' attachment styles for infant care techniques. All mothers in the study initiated breastfeeding, with the number of mothers who breastfed decreasing by month 6. The mothers who gave up breastfeeding earliest were those who had an avoidant style. The result is not surprising, as the avoidant style is characterized by fear of dependence and intimacy. As the infant grows, the avoidant mother may experience attachment intensely, and breastfeeding becomes a form of bonding between her and her infant, which she may find difficult to tolerate over time, and therefore, she terminates breastfeeding. No correlation was found between co-sleeping and mothers' attachment style. Here, however, social environment, parental status, or other demographic correlations are likely to play a more significant explanatory role. Research has found a trend-like association between co-sleeping and mothers with anxious attachment style (Jones et al., 2020).

A meta-analysis conducted in 2020 analyzed data from 8900 participants (Linde et al., 2020). It found that infants who were breastfed for extended periods of time had higher scores for secure attachment. The research also examined whether a mother's attachment style influenced breastfeeding. Mothers with secure attachment were more likely to choose to breastfeed their babies than those with insecure attachment. Another study shows that early mother–infant attachment is negatively affected both by a mother's anxious style and by avoidant style (Nordahl et al., 2020).

Benoit et al. (1992) showed that 100% of mothers of young children with sleep problems were insecurely attached (65% rejecting, 35% anxious), but that the mother's attachment style was not always associated with the child's sleep problems, as the number of insecurely attached mothers in the control group was 57%. In another study, mothers' secure attachment was positively associated with the child's adequate sleep (Scher & Asher, 2004). Looking at infants' attachment, Beijers et al. (2011) found that infants with an anxious pattern woke up more times during the night in the first 6 months of life compared to children in the other two groups, and that the avoidant group had the lowest number of wakings.

The Transition to Nursery

The transition to nursery is a critical developmental milestone for every child. This transition bridges the developmental contexts of family, everyday life, and preschool. There are many changes that take place while children become preschoolers. Children must be away from their primary caregiver, mostly their mother. This is emotionally extremely

stressful for children, as indicated by elevated cortisol levels in children during preschool enrollment (Bernard et al., 2015; Nystad et al., 2021). They are expected to perform at a higher level socially, follow rules and routines, and have some early childhood socio-emotional skills developed while missing their mother and family (Ladd et al., 2000; Nathanson et al., 2009). There are many factors that influence the mild transition from the family environment to the nursery. Some of them are structural aspects such as introduction length and intensity, timing for first child–parent separation, and number of children and teachers involved in the introduction process. In Romania, the law allows the parent to stay with the child during the first 10 days of attending the educational institution, to facilitate his or her adaptation to the community (Ministerul Educației, 2023). Despite this, some parents are unaware of this right or are discouraged from using it, while findings suggest that inviting parents to participate actively in preschool transition may help in a better and less traumatic transition (Andersson et al., 2023).

A child's attachment style significantly impacts preschool adjustment. Secure attachment helps lower stress, promotes exploratory behavior, and leads to a more positive emotional experience during the transition to preschool. Children with insecure attachments may struggle with separation anxiety, unfamiliar environments, and emotional regulation, making the transition more challenging (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2025). To my knowledge, there has been no study on whether mothers' attachment styles influence children's separation processes and transition to nursery.

Objectives and Hypotheses

In the present research, I aimed to highlight and investigate a moment in the parent–child relationship when characteristics of both mothers' and children's attachment styles may emerge. This situation is the period of nursery or preschool induction. I examined how the settling-in period is affected by mothers' attachment patterns, their reactions to their children, their emotions, and their coping with negative feelings from the separation. I also considered how these factors indirectly impact children's behavior, settling-in time, and emotions. Additionally, I explored how mothers' attachment patterns affect their parenting of infants, which forms the basis for children's later attachment and detachment.

I formulated two hypotheses:

1. Mothers with secure attachment patterns are more likely to have responsive parenting (see Scher & Asher, 2004; Jones et al., 2020; Linde et al., 2020; Nordahl et al., 2020).

2. Mothers with secure attachment patterns are more stable in responding to their child's separation crisis than mothers with anxious and avoidant patterns. The reactions of children of securely attached mothers are less extreme than those of children of mothers in the other two groups.

Methodology

Mothers completed an online questionnaire that I created. This consisted of 15 questions. The first part recorded statistical data, the second part asked about the parenting techniques used during the first year of the child's life, and finally, I asked the mothers to share their experiences of the initial introduction to nursery/preschool.

I also used the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) in the questionnaire to measure mothers' attachment style. The scale was developed by Collins in 1990, and is a self-report questionnaire with 18 items, initially using a 5-point Likert scale, assessing anxiety, dependence, and closeness in a relationship (Collins & Read, 1990). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 is "not at all characteristic of me" and 5 is "very characteristic of me." The Hungarian version of the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) has been validated in Hungarian studies, with findings indicating satisfactory reliability and internal consistency (Őri et al., 2021).

Participants

113 mothers responded to the questionnaire. The age distribution of the participants is as follows: 20–30 years old 30.1%, 31–40 years old 58.4%, mothers over 40 years old, 11.5%. 32.7% of the respondents live in urban areas and 67.3% in rural areas. In terms of marital status, they are mostly married (85.5%), 13.3% are in a cohabiting/partner relationship, and .9% are single. 44.2% have one child, 46% have two children, 7.1% have three children, and 1.8% have four or more children. Most of the questions in the questionnaire were about participants' children, so I asked how old the child was at the time the parent completed the questions. Based on these, the mean age of the children was 4.19 (Md = 4.00; SD = 2.69) years. In terms of gender distribution, 46.5% were boys and 53.5% were girls.

Results

Results on Responsive Parenting

The attachment patterns of the participants as measured by the AAS scale were as follows: 36.3% secure attachment, 44.2% avoidant, and 19.5% anxious (see Figure 1).

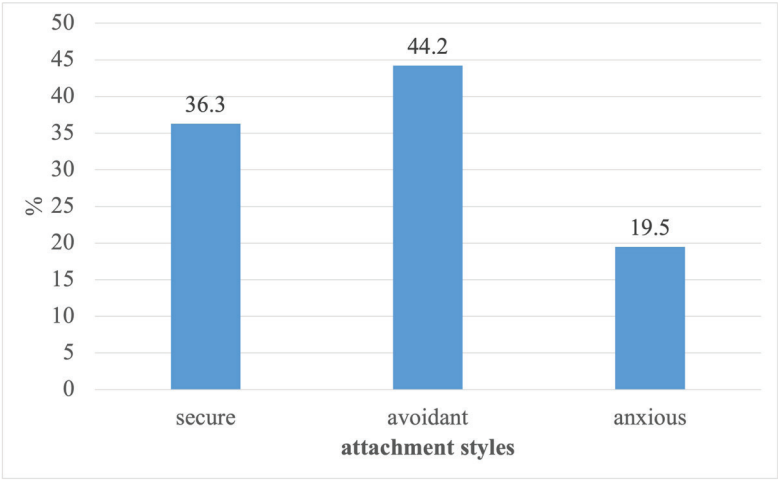

Figure 1
Participants' attachment styles

In a subsequent part of the questionnaire, I asked mothers about their level of agreement with common misconceptions about parenting a young child, such as the idea of letting the baby cry, cuddling when comforting the infant, feeding on demand, talking to the baby, carrying, sleeping alone, and the 'running away' from the child strategy used when separating. Although the data show that mothers know which of these behaviors are considered outdated and which are behaviors to follow in infant care, there were significant differences in the three attachment style groups' responses on several topics. For the statement that it is appropriate to let the baby cry because it strengthens his/her lungs, on a scale of 1 to 5, the mean score for securely attached mothers was 1.04, for avoidant mothers 1.66, and for anxious mothers 1.44. These data indicate a significant difference between the three groups: $F(2, 110) = 6.063$; $p = .003$. The following statement was that the infant should not be cuddled often because it indulges him/her. Here, the mean for parents with secure attachment was 1.17, for avoiders 1.6, and for anxious parents 1.68 ($F(2, 110) = 3.263$; $p = .042$). There was also a difference in means for on-demand feeding: $F(2, 110) = 4.065$; $p = .02$. This significant result reflects the difference between means, which were as follows: secure attachers: 1.26, avoiders: 1.86, anxious: 1.63. The most substantial difference between the responses of the three groups was for infants sleeping alone. The statement was: *A baby should learn to sleep alone by the age of 1.* Mothers who were securely attached agreed less with this statement, with a Likert scale mean of 1.36. In contrast, avoidant mothers scored a mean of 2.94, and anxious mothers scored 2.36. There was a strong significant difference in responses: $F(2, 110) = 17.803$; $p = .000$.

I also asked separately about co-sleeping and breastfeeding habits. The group of securely attached mothers had the highest number of breastfed infants, with 75.6% feeding their babies in this way (see Figure 2). The results for the three groups were significantly different: $F(2, 110) = 5.113$; $p = .008$.

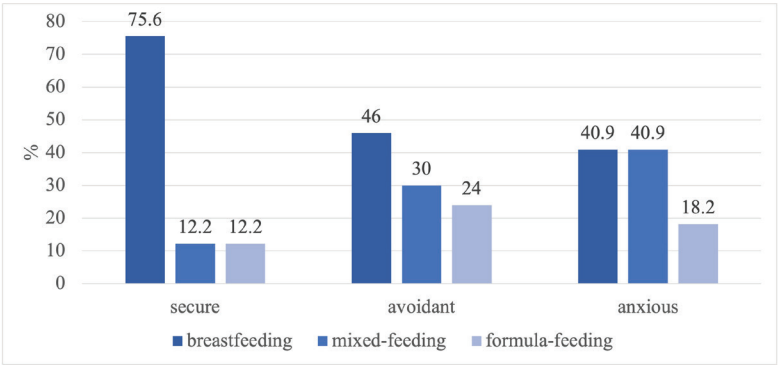

Figure 2
Feeding habits in the attachment style groups

In terms of infant care, I observed that there was a difference in sleep patterns between the three attachment style groups. Co-sleeping with infants is a 53.7% phenomenon in groups of securely attached mothers, 24% in groups of avoidantly attached mothers, and only 13.6% in groups of anxious mothers. Sleeping in a separate bed but in the same room is the most preferred sleeping method for both avoidant (54%) and anxious parents (68.2%). Most mothers do not prefer their infant to sleep in a separate room. The data for co-sleeping are shown in Figure 3. There was also a significant difference for sleep patterns: $F(2, 110) = 6.863$; $p = .002$.

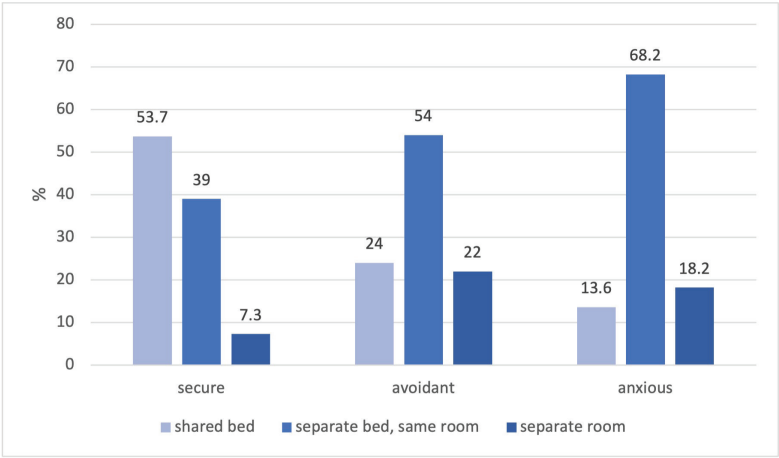

Figure 3
Co-sleeping habits in the attachment style groups

It was important to ask whether the mother had experienced postnatal depression, as this can have a major impact on her ability to care for the child and can have long-term consequences for the mother–child relationship. The results showed that 90.2% of the securely attached mothers did not have postpartum depression, 7.3% felt symptomatic but did not receive or request a diagnosis or treatment of their condition, and 2.3% had a diagnosis of postpartum depression in the first year after childbirth. 60% of avoidant mothers indicated that they had no depression, 36% felt some depressive symptoms, and 4% had a diagnosis. Of the mothers in the anxious attachment group, 50% showed no symptoms of postpartum depression, 45.5% felt depressed but were not diagnosed, while 4.5% were diagnosed. The differences were significant for postpartum depression: $F(2, 110) = 6.154$; $p = .003$ (see Figure 4).

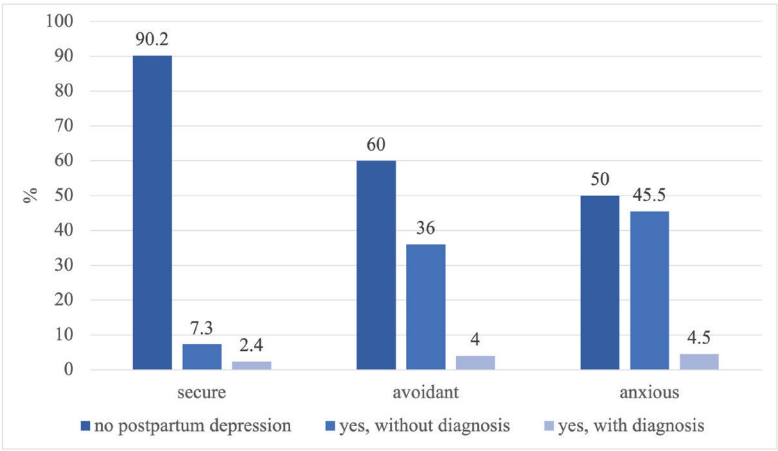

Figure 4
Postpartum depression and attachment styles

Characteristics of Settling into Nursery

The mean time of enrolment in nursery/preschool for the children studied was 28 months (Md = 27; SD = 7.85). The youngest child entered the community at 8 months and the oldest at 48 months. Mothers perceived that their child was very keen to attend nursery or preschool at the time of the research, with an average preference for attending nursery school of 8.00 on a scale of 10 (Md = 9; SD = 2.02). When analyzing these results by parents' attachment style, children of secure mothers prefer to attend the community most. Their mean was (M = 8.83), while the mean of avoidant mothers was (M = 7.44), and anxious: M = 7.73. This also shows a significant difference: $F(2, 110) = 6.068$; $p = .003$.

Children's settling-in time mostly took less than two weeks. 45.1% of respondents said it took less than two weeks for their child to adjust to nursery. For the 30.1% of children

settling in took 2 to 4 weeks, for the 13.3% of them it took 1 to 3 months. 8% of the children had difficulties, and it took 3 to 4 months to adjust to nursery, and only 3.5% of the group had difficulties in detaching for more than 4 months (see Figure 5).

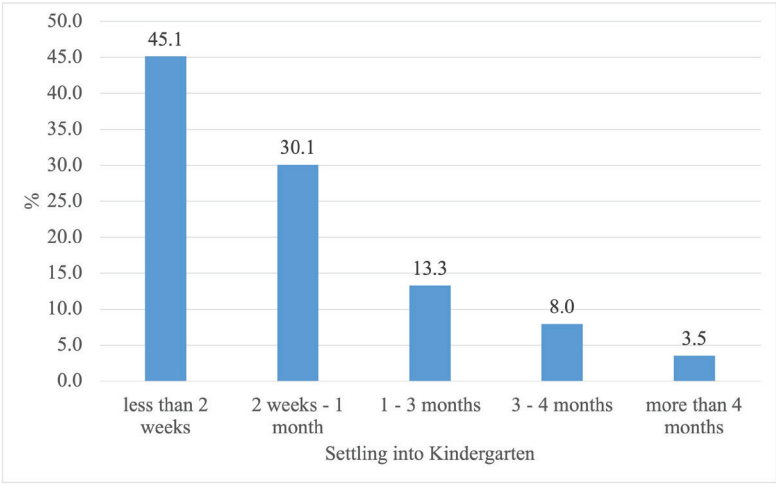

Figure 5
Settling-in time of children

Based on attachment style, there were differences between the children's settling-in times. Specifically, children of avoidant mothers tended to settle in faster than 2 weeks, with 60% of these mothers reporting that their child detached and settled very quickly. In contrast, 39% of children of securely attached mothers detached within 2 weeks. Meanwhile, children of anxious mothers were least likely to detach easily, as only 22.7% had a rapid transition. See Figure 6 for more results. Overall, there was a significant difference between the results of the three groups: $F(2, 110) = 7.885$; $p = .001$.

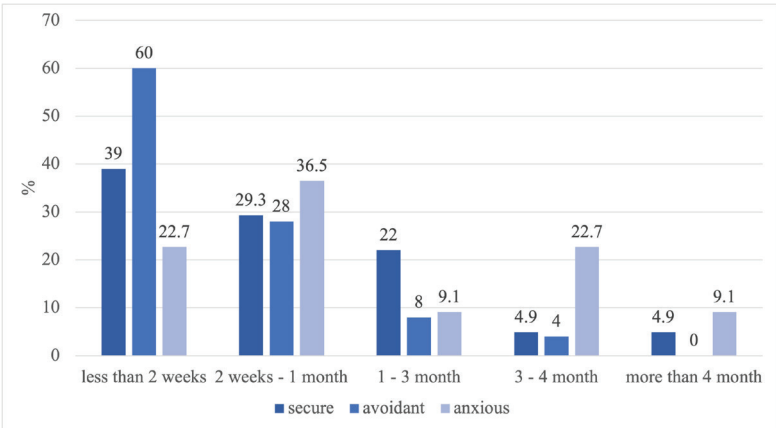

Figure 6
Children's settling-in time by mothers' attachment style

In the questionnaire, mothers could tick several response options to the question of whether they had experienced a change in their child's behavior in the first few weeks of being in the community. 49 times they ticked the response option that *there was no change in the child's behavior*, and 26 times that the child *had become more open*. Negative changes in behavior were less common: more tantrums than before (18 mentions), lots of crying (14), poor sleep (10), withdrawal (9), changed/bad eating habits (7), fearfulness (6), and aggression (5). The appearance of the *no change* option was analyzed by the three attachment groups (see Figure 7). This option was selected by 61% of mothers who were securely attached, 32% of avoiders, and 31.8% of anxious mothers. The difference between the three groups is also significant here: $F(2, 110) = 4.147$; $p = .018$ (see Figure 8).

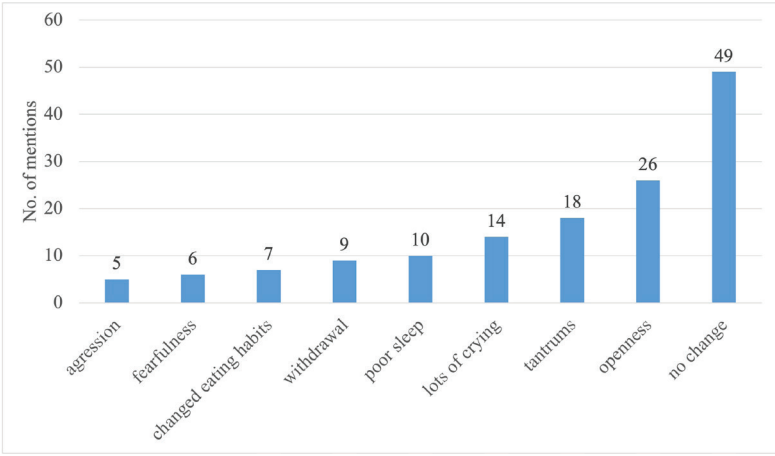

Figure 7
Emotional and behavioral changes of children in the period of settling in

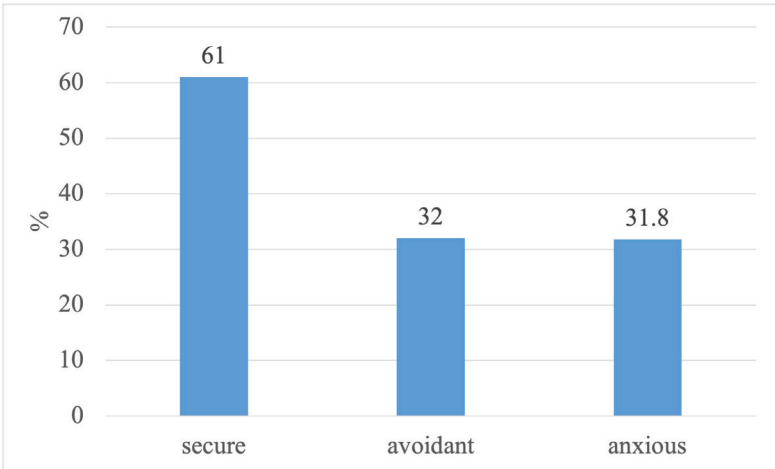

Figure 8
No changes in the child's behavior

Mothers' experiences with settling-in separation were gathered through an open-ended question. Responses fell into three categories: (1) reporting difficult emotions, (2) difficulty changing habits, and (3) no worries or negative emotions about the first notable separation from their child. Group responses did not differ significantly. Securely attached mothers most often reported difficult emotions (51.2%). Similarly, about half of anxious mothers experienced difficult emotions, while only 28% of avoidant mothers felt emotional distress. Habitual difficulty was reported by 14.6% of securely attached mothers, 32% of avoidant mothers, and 22.7% of anxious mothers. The percentage of mothers reporting no difficulties was 34.1% for securely attached, 40% for avoidant, and 27.3% for anxious mothers (see Figure 9).

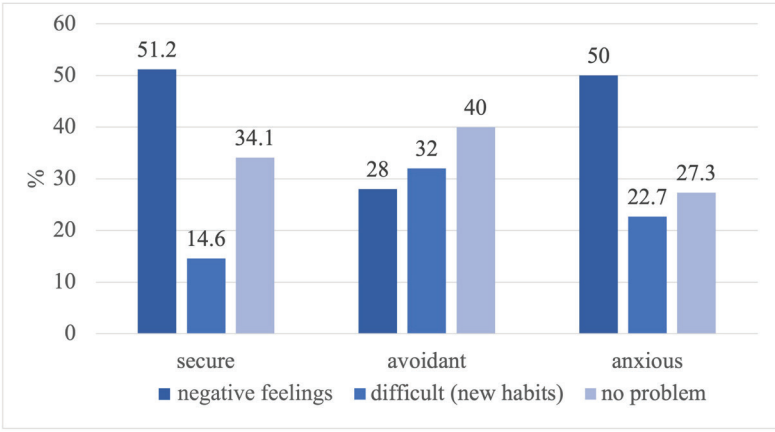

Figure 9
Mothers' emotional responses to detachment (sorted by attachment styles)

Discussion

At the beginning of my research, I formulated two hypotheses:

1. Mothers with secure attachment patterns are more likely to have responsive parenting (see Scher & Asher, 2004; Jones et al., 2020; Linde et al., 2020; Nordahl et al., 2020).

2. Mothers with secure attachment patterns are more stable in responding to their child's separation crisis than mothers with anxious and avoidant patterns. The reactions of children of securely attached mothers are less extreme than those of children of mothers in the other two groups.

My first hypothesis is confirmed, as the statistics show that mothers with secure attachment patterns are more likely to have responsive parenting techniques. I investigated the parenting methods used by mothers in order to form bonding between them and their infants by looking at feeding patterns and sleeping/co-sleeping habits, but also by monitoring the mothers' perceptions of the statements and parenting habits that were very much characteristic of their childhood. The findings on feeding methods are consistent with previous research in this literature and show that mothers who have secure attachment styles are the most likely to adopt breastfeeding (Jones et al., 2020; Linde et al., 2020; Nordahl et al., 2020). In relation to co-sleeping, the present study only looked at the sleep habits that parents chose for their child. In most families, infants sleep in the same room as their parents but in separate beds. However, mothers who are securely attached are more likely to choose to sleep in the same bed as their child, thus providing them with night-time feeding and a sense of physical closeness. As far as we know today, co-sleeping is entirely safe for the infant, subject to a few health and co-sleeping rules, and the adult's body temperature, respiratory regulation, and heart rate regulate these biological functions of the infant (Barry, 2019). Co-sleeping is also beneficial for the development of mother–child bonding (Scher & Asher, 2004; Beijers et al., 2011). Previous research on young children's sleeping habits has shown that children of securely attached mothers have fewer sleep difficulties than children of mothers in the other two groups (Beijers et al., 2011; Benoit et al., 1992; Scher & Asher, 2004).

Parenting habits, passed down from generation to generation, and now outdated strategies often stand in the way of change. This may be due to the fact that young families adopt advice without trying other methods or learning about the subject. My findings outline that mothers who are securely attached are the easiest to break out of habitual patterns. It is likely that they themselves have experienced the benefits of secure attachment and want to pass this on to their children. Furthermore, in these families, intergenerational differences of opinion are likely to be more easily accepted, as the sense of security in such families allows for the expression of differing views without sanction.

My second hypothesis was that securely attached mothers would be better able to support their children during periods of separation than those with anxious and avoidant patterns. Certain factors of my hypothesis did indeed show a correlation with the attachment patterns of mothers. One of these components is the extent to which children currently like to go out into the community. I hypothesize that children of securely attached mothers feel more comfortable in the community because they receive reinforcement from their parents about the positive effects of the community experience. Of course, the

preference for going to preschool depends on many other factors, from the personality of the teacher to the personality of the child to the peer group surrounding the child. Thus, parental attachment patterns are only one of the possible factors that influence a child's experience of preschool. The time of adjustment may be a stronger factor than this. In this context, the results show that children of securely attached mothers settle into nursery or kindergarten between 2 weeks and 3 months, while children of avoidant mothers tend to settle very quickly, and children of anxiously attached mothers very slowly.

Children's emotional and behavioral responses showed that children of securely attached mothers were less likely to show different behaviors during the settling-in period. However, the emotions experienced by mothers during this period did not differ according to their attachment styles. The tendency of the results is that mothers with an avoidant style were the least likely to report that it was difficult and emotionally stressful to separate from their children.

In future research, it would be useful to apply Mary Ainsworth's observational aspects to a smaller sample of mother–child dyads during familiarization.

Conclusions

Attachment style has an impact on parenting strategies, the ability to connect with the child, and the ability to express emotions. The way a child experiences the security of his or her environment, the consistent meeting of needs, and the imparting of a sense of being loved, in the first year of life, will affect them throughout their life. With only half (or less) of the adult population currently known to have secure attachment, change will require more effort. Without this, children of avoidant and anxious parents will 'reproduce' the difficulties of attachment style in adulthood.

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Changing Approaches in the Education of Visually Impaired High School Students

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the teaching of visually impaired students and their preparation for intermediate- and advanced-level examinations. The teaching attitude needed to achieve this outcome, which contributes to young people finding their place in the world and discovering their intrinsic value. The theoretical introduction includes definitions of visual impairment and its degrees. Physical impairments are complemented by social integration issues, such as adjusting to a new environment. The main part presents 4 years of teaching experience from a teacher's perspective in a natural environment, in an integrated high school classroom with sighted students. The teacher needs to be familiar with the initial period of acclimatization at the beginning of Year IX, as well as the myriad challenges of a stimulating environment, which span the whole period from getting to school to arriving on time for classes in different classrooms, through to the full duration of the education. The question is whether the teacher, upon entering the classroom for the first time, is aware of these circumstances. Should they be aware of this, or is it just a matter of delivering the lesson and holding them to account? What kind of teacher attitude is required for successful cooperation? The practical implementation of the topic should include the people and tools involved in the teaching, i.e., the teacher, the student, and the parent, and the advantages of using different literacy tools (NVDA, Jaws, Braille keyboard, etc.). This is necessary to make the lessons, especially the Hungarian lessons, successful. As teachers, we need to identify the qualities of visually impaired people that are not typical of sighted people, and how receptive they can be in an optimal educational environment. For example, they can read lyrical works through a reading program with an emphatic, expressive interpretation and recite the text aloud while hearing the following line read.

Keywords: teacher attitudes, integration, discrimination, education of the visually impaired

Introduction

To sum up, it is crucial to understand the perspective of young people with these problems in depth, to see in it the world they have constructed, a world that is rounded and livable for them in its entirety. Of the four students mentioned, two are now studying at a liberal arts university, one is training to be an event organizer, and the one who passed the Hungarian A-levels with a 77% (and is grateful that his blindness has allowed him to escape the toxic community and abject poverty he was born into) is now studying for a short course in IT at law school. It is important to note that their achievements are largely due to their struggles, their ability to overcome setbacks, and their personalities. The success of inclusive education largely depends on teachers' attitudes and knowledge regarding students with disabilities (Dapudong, 2014). Although a substantial body of scholarly research examines teachers' attitudes toward educating students with disabilities, relatively few studies investigate teachers' attitudes and knowledge specifically related to students with visual impairments. Addressing this gap, Dimitrova-Radojičikj (2020) explores the perspectives of elementary and high school teachers on the inclusive education of students with visual impairments. Similarly, Ajuwon et al. (2020) examine the attitudes of secondary school teachers in selected Nigerian states towards students who are blind or partially sighted. Students with visual impairments remain particularly underrepresented in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Although they are cognitively comparable to their sighted peers, they encounter unique challenges because STEM instruction often relies heavily on visual representations. To ensure equitable access, these students require alternatives such as enlarged or audio versions of text, tactile graphics, and opportunities for hands-on experimentation. Responding to these needs, Rule et al. (2011) implemented a program to increase teacher awareness and provide financial support for adaptive resources, supplies, and equipment. Over the course of a year, the authors examined changes in the attitudes and instructional practices of 15 science and mathematics teachers who taught students with visual impairments. Supporting the development of disciplinary competence is also central to the work of Godfrey et al. (2015), who emphasize the importance of empowering blind students to become producers—not merely interpreters—of statistical information. This goal highlights the broader need for practical guidance and collaboration between sighted educators and visually impaired learners. The issue of accessible instructional materials is further examined by Brixius et al. (2022), who propose adaptations to activities from an English language textbook intended for blind students in the sixth year of Basic Education. Their qualitative study, situated within Applied Linguistics, identifies several recurring concerns: the scarcity of adapted materials and relevant research,

insufficient teacher preparation to address the specific needs of visually impaired learners, and ongoing challenges in fostering autonomy and inclusion in the classroom. A complementary perspective is offered by Akmalovna (2021), who presents methods, guidelines, and recommendations for beginner English as a second language teachers working with visually impaired or blind students. The article also offers valuable insights for parents and homeschoolers. Drawing on classroom observations and a social constructivist framework of disability, the study reveals that students often receive insufficient instructional modifications in foreign language learning. Nevertheless, learners make effective use of assistive technologies such as NonVisual Desktop Access (NVDA) and Job Access With Speech (JAWS). These findings suggest that visually impaired students develop unique, technology-supported strategies for language learning—strategies that should be acknowledged within disability-specific education and further explored in special education research. Finally, Teke et al. (2019) investigate the subject-specific needs of a 10th-grade congenitally blind student in an inclusive chemistry classroom. Using a single-case study design, they conducted detailed observations and interviews to identify students' learning needs. Based on these findings, the researchers developed 2D and 3D tactile instructional materials to teach the topic "energy in living systems," with particular attention to the symbolic language of chemistry. Taken together, these studies underscore that effective inclusive education for students with visual impairments requires well-prepared teachers, accessible instructional materials, appropriate technological support, and thoughtfully designed pedagogical adaptations.

The main theme of this study is to help visually impaired people make successful career choices by demonstrating the right teaching attitude. This positive, conscious attitude helps young people identify potential resources based on their knowledge of different subjects, which will help them find a career that enables them to succeed in life later. The four pillars of my work are: 1. difficulties due to visual impairment in the initial phase of education, 2. formulating teaching objectives and attitudes, 3. teaching in Hungarian class, and 4. reaching the exit point.

Methodology

The results of quantitative research, backed by empirical data, have supported many research hypotheses across many areas, but often only scratch the surface of the evidence and do not provide opportunities to understand problems, processes, and human behavior. Qualitative research aims to fill this gap. These are methods that use research to gain qualitative insights into phenomena and opinions, and to collect and analyze attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. These studies are based on an exhaustive exploration of the research

area, often using a small, non-representative sample. There are no predefined specific questions, as in survey research; only the central questions remain the same, as one of the main objectives of the essential task. Therefore, the typical qualitative research method is observation, which investigates the motivations that influence learners' cooperation.

Discussion

Difficulties due to Visual Impairment in the Initial Phase of Education

To get a comprehensive picture of the situation of people with visual impairments, we need to address key aspects, including the presentation of visual impairment by level and the physical and psychosocial aspects of the resulting situations that pervade everyday life.

A visual impairment is defined as a person whose visual acuity is between 0 and 33% of normal vision (100%) with both eyes and corrected vision, or whose visual field is significantly reduced (10 to 20 degrees). Based on the degree of residual vision, three groups of visually impaired people are distinguished: a. blind people, who have no residual vision, have a visual acuity of 0, and do not perceive light; b. people with low vision, whose visual acuity is between 0.01 and 0.1%, with a severe degree of eye disease, who need to be able to touch to gain information, people who are sensitive to light, finger-readers, whose visual acuity corrected by glasses is up to 0.1%, c. whose visual acuity is more than 0.1%, but whose field of vision is less than 20%. In this case, the small residual visual acuity, while invaluable for orientation and transport, is less valuable pedagogically.

Some causes of visual impairment are worth mentioning, since people with perfect vision are scarce today. According to current WHO measurements, about 2 billion people worldwide suffer from some kind of eye disease. However, in half of the cases, the visual impairment is due to lack of preventive measures or proper treatment, not to age-related glaucoma, macular degeneration, and others (World Health Organization, n.p., para. 2). In the present work, I focus on the school life of young people with irreversible vision loss, where, in addition to genetic causes, there is also the presence of retinal nerve damage in premature infants (ROP, Retinopathia Praematurorum).

Given the difficulties caused by these health problems, visually impaired pupils are classified as pupils with special educational needs under Article 4, Point 13, of Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education, under the subheading "pupils with special educational needs." In this case, differentiated pedagogical work is also to be understood as a process encompassing the planning, organization, methodological implementation, and evaluation of learning and teaching, justified by the heterogeneity of pupil groups and the different learning

needs of each pupil. According to Act XXVI of 1998 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Ensuring their Equal Opportunities, public services are accessible on an equal basis if they can be used, with the autonomy appropriate to the condition of the recipient, by all, in particular by people with disabilities, especially those with reduced mobility, visual, hearing, mental, and communication functions (Act XXVI of 1998, Section 4(h)).

The difficulties and obstacles that visually impaired students have to overcome are often invisible to sighted people, and we are talking about physical barriers as well as psychological ones. One such empirical problem is the transition to a new environment after a successful admission, when the environment they have been used to, through enormous effort and patience, is replaced by a completely different one. Consequently, organizing access to the institution (with parental assistance or independently, using public transport), getting to know the building's facilities (e.g., navigating the corridors in the middle of lunch or in the moments before ringing the bell) becomes a significant challenge for these students, raising the stress factor level. Among the social factors that cause psychological distress is the double novelty, where not only is the student unfamiliar with the environment in which they are placed, but they are also a novelty to the fellow students, teachers, special needs teachers, and other staff around them. It is imperative to explain the reasons for this special situation so that it is as alien as possible for as little time as possible. Although a few months of acclimatization may pass, the number of stress factors remains only partially reduced, as it is determined mainly by the classroom atmosphere and the way pupils express themselves (verbalization, grumbling, etc.). The development of relationships is initially unstable, often bipolar, since, after a good start, negative experiences can break the relationship.

The cardinal question is: what is the teacher's responsibility, and should they pay attention to how (or more precisely, overcoming what obstacles) a visually impaired adolescent gets to the classroom on time, what is the state of mind of the adolescent, and what or who motivates them to prepare for class? When we look at the trials and tribulations of everyday school life, it is clear that the boundaries blur for a sighted student and a visually impaired student. Yet the non-sighted face a more difficult situation among the sighted, which a sighted person cannot see or perceive.

Formulating Teaching Objectives and Attitudes

The general teaching objectives are essentially limited to fulfilling requirements to meet basic expectations, such as competence-based knowledge transfer and preparation for successful graduation. Perhaps in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, the desire to get to know the student (especially if the student is an introvert trying to play the role of

an extrovert), the need to be part of the student's inner world to a certain extent from the outside, and the need for the pleasure of working specially and collaboratively are overshadowed. In fact, each of these is a crucial, sometimes difficult, but by no means impossible problem. One of the key elements of these dilemmas is the teacher's attitude, which includes awareness and emotional responses towards the person(s), group(s), subjects, knowledge, etc. It has a significant impact on motivation to learn and can facilitate or hinder the achievement of learning outcomes and the acquisition of various competencies. According to the components of attitudes (cognitive, affective, and behavioral), the cognitive component refers to the individual's knowledge of the subject of the attitude. The affective component refers to the person's feelings about the object of the attitude. In contrast, the behavioral component refers to the behavior—approaching or distancing—that the person exhibits in the presence of the object of the attitude. The characteristics of the teacher's behavior to be maintained are the following: they strive to learn as much as possible about the world of young people, they respect students' differences and rights; they do not consider their professional education as permanent but are ready for continuous renewal in the field of science, methodology, and education. Furthermore, they can cooperate, reciprocate, assert themselves, and communicate helpfully in pedagogical situations; they are open to asking for and accepting professional help to resolve conflicts and problems. It is worthwhile to monitor the implementation of all these among young people who are not visually impaired and to assess the energy required to achieve them.

The problem raises new questions to be answered, if we consider the initial set-up, in our case, in the pedagogical work in a secondary school providing integrated education. Firstly, at the beginning of Year IX, the period of accommodation is characterized by integration, bonding, and the formation of first friendships, so that learning itself is somewhat overshadowed by the varied and changeable environmental influences. For the visually impaired, this stimulating environment presents many challenges, from getting to school to arriving on time for classes in different classrooms. The question is whether the teacher who first enters the classroom is aware of these circumstances? Is it just to deliver and account for the lessons, or should a teacher be mindful of this? The answer to the latter part of the question is a resounding yes, for at least two reasons: one is that the teacher should not feel pity for such a pupil, but should discover in them a personality capable of overcoming many more obstacles in everyday life than an adolescent with normal senses; the other is that we need to understand that what we, as sighted people, would consider to be a lack in the lives of the visually impaired—if it is not a loss of sight—from their perspective it may not be seen as such, for them their world is as complete and whole as ours. We can do this by allowing ourselves to be introduced to a dimension that may

be unknown to us. The realization of this gesture can be quite helpful in interactions as people approach and get to know each other. The Invisible Exhibition can be visited a few times, but the uniqueness and non-repeatability of the lessons can be a source of experience for the sighted, the non-sighted student, and the teacher alike. One way of doing this is the concept of adaptation: who and to whom should one adapt, when, and in what situation? It is shocking to think that a non-sighted person has to cope in a world of sighted people and therefore has to adapt in all possible ways, whereas sighted people have fewer problems in this area. The ideal adaptation of the teacher and fellow students also dwarfs the challenges that people with visual impairments must overcome. This is the context in which sensitization education arises. Still, a more appropriate term is 'expressive education' and its practice in a classroom lesson (e.g., trying out a white cane, learning about Braille, talking to computers and mobile phones, etc.). This approach affects each lesson and promotes student-to-student and teacher-to-student cooperation.

Indeed, positive and negative discrimination is a more complex issue, which shows significant differences in school life. Discrimination means differentiation: harmful discrimination is differentiation against, positive discrimination is differentiation in favor of a person or phenomenon. The ideal situation would be for students not to experience any harmful discrimination, but this is not within the teacher's control, so it is up to the teacher to ensure equality of opportunity in the classroom to the best of their professional knowledge and moral conviction. Visually impaired students, confronted for the first time with the situation of their sighted peers, are emotionally torn between too much help, discouragement, or even apparent indifference. In this situation, the teacher can act as a facilitator, helping the class optimize the problem by finding a compromise. If the teacher uses positive discrimination in favor of the visually impaired (e.g., less homework, better marks for a weaker oral answer, etc.), this can damage his/her relationship with the fellow students. A possible solution would be to adopt a consistent approach and conflict-management skills in the situation if the joint discussion method proves insufficient.

To summarize the topic of teacher goals and attitudes, it is essential to establish an appropriate connection with all students, regardless of their physical condition, as it is in the light of mutual knowledge that productive collaboration can take place.

Teaching in a Hungarian Class

Regarding the practical implementation of the theme, the people and means of teaching—namely, the teacher and various literacy tools—should be mentioned. Special needs teachers are prepared, sensitive, aware, persistent, and humble. Although they are helpers, they

cannot be forced into a servile position. Instead, they serve as partners for students in need. Their visible service often seems like that of an attendant, but they also do a tremendous amount of background work across all subjects, making learning for the visually impaired and teachers' work easier. Parents (if they share a household with their child or live at all) can find common ground with the teacher through frank discussion, informing the teacher of their child's educational goals. Consulting colleagues in micro-meetings can be helpful, allowing experienced colleagues to step out of the 'omnipotent' role and guide younger staff through difficult situations. They support teachers and visually impaired students of all abilities and can moderate situations such as school trips.

Information and communication technology tools can also be highly useful. A Braille keyboard is commonly used by visually impaired children in smaller classes, while in secondary school, portable computers become the preferred method for writing. Applications such as RoboBraille (since 2004), NVDA, and JAWS are widely utilized. TXT files are specifically preferred over Word and PDF because they are editable and easier to navigate. The depth and quantity of knowledge acquisition, as well as the development of the ability to apply knowledge, are achieved through participation in an active learning process involving these selected tools.

Both verbalism and literacy are used in the classroom. In the first case, oral performance proves an appropriate tool for argumentation, questioning, group work, and other activities. The reading program can also be used to read poetry, given the students' excellent memory and divided attention: while reciting what the reading program reads, the program continues to read what the student also hears and remembers, thus ensuring continuity of the reading. The secret to successful implementation is particularly fast speech listening and perception (the student's reproduction is slower, so it is understandable to anyone, but the speed at which the reader works is not). This allows a first-time reading of a poem to be a powerful, expressive performance.

Teacher communication and paraphrasing are essential during the lesson, although sometimes they can be a barrier, for example, naming colors for pupils born blind. An essential element of the lesson is the teacher's demonstration reading of a short work or an excerpt from a larger work of art. This is particularly important for non-sighted students, because the mechanical voice is inexpressive, monotonous, and lacks any source of experience, which is why they still like to listen to works of art read by volunteers or narrated by actors.

Note-taking works well when the teacher reads the text aloud while writing on the board, and students who cannot see write on their laptops. It should be noted that, due to their

very fast typing, they often write down much more information than what is written in the other students' notebooks, but they also sometimes record 80–90% of the teacher's discourse. Unfortunately, the ratio of oral to written expression can often be skewed towards speech, although apart from minor spelling mistakes, mispronunciations, and editorially specific solutions, this method works well.

Difficulties in the classroom may include a lack of independence with some subtasks, different stressors, difficulty accurately verbalizing visual information for sighted people, writing important information on the board without verbalizing it (e.g., homework, announcing a paper), or even drafting a sentence analysis graph. For the latter, the solution is to write out the parts of the sentence without a diagram. Strengths include an outstanding working memory and split attention, which allows the simultaneous activation of several communication channels. Understanding the text is not a problem either, because the task keywords are searched in the text, and the question is answered. There are no obstacles to recording the content of the essay, but rather some new features in the editing: sentences are written on separate lines, and paragraphs are marked with a blank line.

Reaching the Exit Point

The question arises as to whether an individual development plan is necessary to achieve measurable performance based on the student's abilities and potential, which includes the student's personal learning programme and all the development needs, tasks, and activities necessary for the student's progress. If so, should this programmed work plan be compulsory for all teachers, or only for the development teacher? Undoubtedly, for a conscientious teacher with in-depth knowledge in this field, this is not an obstacle, but it will certainly lead to more productive results if they follow the guidance of the special needs teacher. It is, therefore, crucial that there is ongoing, regular communication between the teachers, for example, on the format of files, preparation for an expected lesson, or even on difficulties that arise in the meantime, and how to resolve them.

The formal requirements for taking the high school final exam are less developed and less accessible in practice. The written part is replaced by an oral part (i.e., two items have to be drawn), but if the question paper contains pictures, tables, or matching exercises, the programme cannot interpret them. The teacher's explanations may be described as assistance from the examination board. This is a very delicate issue, because the fate of the pupil who takes the examination depends on the marks obtained. In the best case, young people with visual impairments continue their studies in the social sciences and humanities, or they may choose to study a foreign language or even computer science.

Conclusion

Finally, some thoughts on teacher attitudes and the education of people with visual impairments. In my view, it is an extraordinary and honorable task to set a young person on their path, even if they have been resisting it for years as an adolescent. An essential element of this achievement is a positive teaching attitude, a sense of vocation, determination, resilience, perseverance, and mentoring, that is to say, being present when a desire, a determination is born in the life of a young adult who is in some ways entrusted to us for a short period of time. The question is whether educating the blind and partially sighted is a difficulty or a challenge. If it is a difficulty, then it is a burden, a problem, an extra task, a nuance, a complication, or a disruption. Still, if it is experienced as a helpful challenge, then it is a test of strength, a task to be accomplished, or rather, a task to be completed. At least we have a choice.

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Active Learning Through Aesthetic Board Games: A Reflective Workshop Session on Mentoring

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Abstract

In a time of growing complexity, higher education is undergoing profound change. Increasing social inequalities, shifting student needs, and the call for more inclusive and engaging teaching methods pose serious challenges for educators. Active learning is a key element of higher education, as it enhances student engagement, supports deeper understanding, and promotes the development of transferable skills. Among active learning methods, game-based learning offers a unique opportunity to develop competencies by combining emotional engagement, critical thinking, and social awareness. This study presents a workshop that uses storytelling and socially engaged board games to strengthen core competencies among future peer mentors, such as empathy, collaboration, reflexivity, and sensitivity to inequality. The training began with a symbolic reflection using *Dixit* cards, it continued with a Roma folktale and a thematically linked memory game, followed by the board game *Mentortársas 2.0*, in which mentor–mentee pairs navigate the challenges of the Hungarian education system. Through role-play and chance-driven obstacles, participants gain insight into how structural inequalities shape educational opportunities. By integrating emotionally and aesthetically rich narratives with game mechanics, the workshop created space for active involvement and reflective learning. Participants highlighted that the games offered a meaningful and motivating context for practicing mentoring-related skills and for exploring social issues. Several students noted feeling inspired to integrate similar tools into their future mentoring practice. Overall, the workshop demonstrates how game-based learning can effectively support the pedagogical and emotional preparation of future mentors working with disadvantaged students.

Keywords: board games, higher education, active learning, mentoring, peer mentor

Introduction

In response to global social, economic, and technological shifts, higher education has undergone a significant transformation. Universities are increasingly viewed not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as drivers of social change, promoting inclusion, critical thinking, and civic engagement (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). This role has gained urgency amid growing social inequalities and the reproduction of disadvantage through education. Educators are now expected not only to foster cognitive development but also to address broader social justice concerns, such as equitable access to quality education (Kelemen et al., 2013; Marginson, 2016). However, research shows that higher education programs do not always support competency development or active learning. In Hungary, studies also note a shift in student expectations toward more practice-oriented, less theory-heavy curricula (Kocsis & Pusztai, 2024; Kocsis & Pusztai, 2025; Kovács, 2016; Óbuda University, 2018). This highlights the need to modernize curricula-not only to enhance pedagogical quality but also to encourage active learning and provide practical, labor-market-relevant skills (Hurtado, 2007; Teichler, 2011; Török, 2017).

This paper explores the pedagogical potential of board games in preparing future mentors to support disadvantaged students. It presents a university-based workshop model and analyzes participant reflections to evaluate its effectiveness. The session, part of the *Let's Teach for Hungary* mentoring program, combined a Roma folktale, a corresponding memory game, and the board game *Mentortársas 2.0*, which simulates the educational trajectories of disadvantaged students. The workshop aimed to foster understanding of social inequality while offering inspiration for future pedagogical practice through play-based, emotionally engaging methods. The first part of this study introduces the mentoring work carried out within the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program. Then, it explores the educational use of board games. In the next section, we discuss the methodological considerations, the workshop's structure and goals, and an analysis of student reflections and self-reflection. The discussion of the results is followed by the presentation of limitations and our recommendations for academic staff.

Theoretical Background

Changing Higher Education—Board Games as an Intervention

In the context of rapid societal changes, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to contribute to social justice and inclusion. As the boundaries between formal education and community engagement blur, universities must prepare students not only for the labor market but also for democratic citizenship and equity-oriented professional roles (Hurtado, 2007; Teichler, 2011; Török, 2017). The modernization of training content

goes hand in hand with the need to develop pedagogical and methodological culture. Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to enhance the effectiveness of teaching by improving pedagogical practices and knowledge transfer methods. This includes embracing new approaches to knowledge sharing and creating active learning environments that promote practical experience and foster competencies aligned with labor market demands (Török, 2017). To meet these growing expectations, there is a pressing need to incorporate more experiential, student-centered methods into higher education programs. These methods support both skill development and deeper social awareness.

Serious games, designed with educational rather than purely recreational goals, provide a safe and engaging environment for learners to experiment and build skills. By aligning gameplay with instructional objectives, such games can effectively shape learners' attitudes and behaviors, offering valuable contributions to the educational experience (Abt, 1970; Cosimini & Collins, 2023). In higher education, such board games foster experiential learning and emotional engagement (board games: Csempesz, 2016; Kocsis et al., 2024; Szilágyi, 2023), key factors in preparing future mentors to work with marginalized youth.

Board games have emerged as powerful tools in education, especially for developing empathy, critical reflection, and perspective-taking. According to the literature, current educational challenges call for the renewal of traditional teaching methods (Khalaf & Zin, 2018; Prensky, 2001), primarily through pedagogical tools that also consider the emotional and social dimensions of learning (Illeris, 2003; Lim et al., 2019). Game-Based Learning (GBL), including board games, is increasingly recognized as an educational approach that enables experiential learning in which students actively and joyfully engage in the learning process (Ge & Ifenthaler, 2018; Hwang, 2014; Kangas, 2010; Tang et al., 2009). Games support the development of students' intrinsic motivation (Aldemir et al., 2018; Eltahir et al., 2021; Eppmann et al., 2018; Subhash & Cudney, 2018), which can foster flow experiences (Wang & Chen, 2010). They also play an important role in developing problem-solving skills as well as creative and critical thinking (Perini et al., 2018). Through board game-based learning, students learn to focus, cooperate, and broaden their horizons through new experiences (Jesztl et al., 2016; Juhász & Radics, 2019). Lencse (2015) emphasizes that board games can develop a wide range of key competences (such as aesthetic–artistic awareness and expressiveness, social and civic competence, communication, etc.), making them well aligned with educational goals. Their effectiveness often exceeds that of more traditional forms of learning (Karbownik et al., 2016). Overall, the use of board games not only offers an enjoyable learning experience but also effectively enhances students' collaboration, intrinsic motivation, and key competences.

Based on the literature, we considered it essential to incorporate board games into the workshop. On the one hand, the literature highlights their pedagogical effectiveness, particularly in fostering motivation, empathy, and active engagement. On the other hand, the use of games can serve as a practical model for student mentors, offering concrete methods they can apply in their future mentoring work. Since their mentees are typically younger, alternative, more interactive pedagogical approaches are needed to build meaningful connections. Moreover, for disadvantaged youth, games can foster trust and teamwork, creating a safe and inclusive space for learning and relationship-building. These insights underline the crucial role of mentoring in supporting the personal and competence development of disadvantaged students. For mentoring to be truly effective, however, mentors must possess certain personal and professional qualities, such as empathy, adaptability, and reflective thinking, that enable them to respond meaningfully to their mentees' needs. The workshop presented in this study, therefore, served a dual purpose.

Methodology

Research Aim and Design

The primary aim of this study was to demonstrate the relevance and legitimacy of using board games in higher education, particularly in mentor training. The workshop was part of the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program. We sought to show that game-based learning methods are not only engaging for students but also offer a valuable pedagogical tool for developing mentoring-related competencies. Beyond examining student responses, another important goal was to offer methodological inspiration to other educators interested in designing similar workshops that combine emotional engagement, storytelling, and game-based learning. Accordingly, we aimed to present the workshop structure, the board games used, and the underlying pedagogical and didactic considerations. We also sought to summarize student feedback in order to assess the workshop's perceived effectiveness and its potential for adaptation in other educational settings.

Let's Teach for Hungary program

The *Let's Teach for Hungary* program offers a promising response to these changing needs and educational challenges: it supports the academic progress of primary school students while also providing opportunities for mutual learning, as university students themselves grow and develop through the mentoring process. The *Let's Teach for Hungary* program aims to provide support to children living in small settlements in choosing a career, getting to know the world of work, and using their free time productively. The task of the mentors standing next to them is to show them the excitement and possibilities of the world

beyond the settlement—high schools, businesses, so that they can see how many different occupations and futures they can choose from. Kocsis and Bocsi (2022) examined students' opinions and experiences in a mentoring program. According to her findings, participants' expectations focused primarily on gaining new experiences and discovering unfamiliar environments. In 2023, the program is present in more than 110 elementary schools nationwide. With more than 1,100 mentors studying at 17 higher education institutions and more than 4,700 mentees, we prove that every child is talented in something; this talent must only be discovered (Tanítsunk Magyarországért, n.d.). While the initiative provides an institutional framework for mentorship, there remains a pedagogical need to prepare future mentors for the complexity of their roles and to develop their sensitivity to issues of marginalization. The greatest strength of the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program is that it can serve as an important link between higher and public education, as it requires active collaboration between actors from both sectors to succeed (Antalné Szabó, 2021). Mentorship, when embedded in a reflective pedagogical framework, can foster transformative experiences for both mentor and mentee. Research shows that effective mentoring goes beyond learning support: it requires empathy, mutual trust, and awareness of the mentee's lived realities (Di Blasio et al. 2011; Dávid et al., 2014; Papp 2023).

Mentoring can be embedded in everyday educational practice and contribute to social equity over time. Effective mentoring demands personal commitment, empathy, patience, perseverance, goal orientation, and a strong desire to support others. Key elements include regular feedback, positive reinforcement, attentive care, and active, empathetic listening, grounded in reciprocity and mutual respect (Kocsis & Bocsi, 2022). Papp (2023) stresses the importance of emotional support for disadvantaged youth, who often benefit from safe spaces to express feelings. For many, mentor-led activities such as excursions offer rare opportunities to expand their worldview and develop social skills. In the absence of parental involvement, mentors help fill relational gaps, benefiting both mentees and mentors by enhancing social sensitivity and empathy. As such, mentoring supports holistic development and fosters social equity. Overall, mentoring emerges as a reflective, student-centered, and innovative pedagogical approach that calls for openness and a progressive mindset.

Participants

The workshop and the research took place in Spring 2025 at the University of Debrecen, as part of a three-hour mentor training of the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program. Participants enrolled voluntarily in the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program. No prior filtering or selection criteria were applied. The voluntary nature of participation may imply self-selection bias,

but it also allows for authentic, intrinsically motivated involvement. Participation in the research was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. All responses were anonymized during analysis. As the session focused on social inequalities and personal reflection, a supportive and respectful environment was maintained throughout.

The workshop involved predominantly female students, with one respondent identifying as non-binary or preferring not to disclose gender. Most participants were enrolled in undergraduate programs, while one of them was a master's student. Regarding their year of study, 50% were second-year students, 3% were first-year students, and 1% were third-year students. In terms of field of study, participants came from various health-related disciplines, including dietetics, physiotherapy, and health visitor training, as well as from the humanities (e.g., Italian studies). However, only a few were preparing for teaching or social support professions. This stands in contrast to earlier findings by Godó (2021), which identified a strong representation of future teachers and helping professionals among mentor candidates. Socioeconomic background data revealed that most students (75%) came from families with sufficient income to cover daily expenses but were unable to afford major expenses. The remaining 25% reported a more stable financial background with the ability to save and afford discretionary spending (e.g., vacations). No participant reported living in poverty or financial insecurity. They had little prior experience working with children in schools. The limited pedagogical training of students in this sample highlights the importance of experiential workshops like this one, which aim to develop basic educational and reflective competencies for mentoring, especially among students with little or no prior methodological knowledge or pedagogical background.

Although the workshop generated qualitative insights, it involved a relatively small number of participants from a single higher education setting (n=15). Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalizable. The small sample size precludes statistical analysis; instead, the study aimed to capture the reflective and experiential dimensions of learning. This limitation should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

Data Collection and Instrument

Data collection focused on participant reflections after the workshop. These reflections were gathered informally through a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of two main sections: game experience and overall impressions, suggestions.

The first section contains 21 items using a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all," 5 = "Fully agree"). The questions aim to measure general enjoyment and motivation (e.g., "I enjoyed

the activity overall") and cognitive impact (e.g., "The activity helped me understand the content better"). They also address collaborative learning (e.g., "I was able to cooperate with my peers"), perceived effectiveness of game-based learning (e.g., "I learn more from these types of activities than from traditional classes"), and self-efficacy and flow (e.g., "I felt capable of completing the tasks"). Additionally, the game-specific items explore the value of the game in several ways. They help students reflect on the role and responsibilities of a mentor, understand the life situations of disadvantaged learners, identify challenges and opportunities in mentoring, and acquire new knowledge about mentoring practices.

The second section includes both Likert-scale and open-ended items. Topics covered realism and relevance of the game to mentoring contexts, interest in the dilemmas presented during gameplay, and likelihood of recommending the game to peers. Open-ended questions explore specific knowledge gained through the game, perceived strengths and value of the board game, and reflections prompted by the use of *Dixit* cards. The final section collects data only on the level of study, study program, year of study, perceived family financial situation, and gender.

The purpose of the research was to capture rich, contextualised insights into how students responded to the workshop activities and how these experiences influenced their perspectives on inclusive education and mentoring. Reflexivity plays a central role in this process, as the researcher's own positionality, as both educator and researcher, inevitably shapes the design, facilitation, and interpretation of the learning process.

Results

In the following section, we present the workshop structure, illustrating how integrating Roma storytelling with the *Mentortársas* board game supports the development of socially responsive pedagogical thinking. The analysis of the workshop materials revealed how playful experiences can foster deep reflection on social inequality, mentorship, and the educator's role. The following section presents the main findings.

Workshop Structure and Activities

The workshop consisted of three main phases: introduction to the theme, discussion of the theme, and reflection. The following table summarizes the training process, the objectives, and instructions for each task. At the end of the workshop, we provided the future mentors with a handout containing all activities and tools used, each linked to its specific pedagogical goal (Appendix 1).

Table 1

The workshop structure

Main part	Activity	Instructions, tasks	Goals
Introduction to the theme	Brief introduction, explanation of the purpose of the workshop *(5 minutes)*	Each participant selected a Dixit card to symbolize how they felt during or after the game. Everyone tells what they chose and why—it can be emotional, thoughtful, or even a reflection on mentoring or social differences.	Participants will be able to express their inner feelings and thoughts through symbolic images. Listening to others' thoughts and feelings helps develop an empathetic attitude. Free association and the use of symbolic images enhance imagination and abstract thinking.
	Dixit *(20–25 minutes)*		
Discussion of the theme	Opening with narrative: Roma folktale *(10–15 minutes)*	A Roma folktale was read aloud or retold to the group.	Introduce participants to Roma culture and traditions through storytelling. Encourage appreciation of cultural diversity and the value of oral heritage.
	Memory game as a reflective tool *(15 minutes)*	A short trial of the memory game related to fairy tales Formation of pairs for the board game: At the end of the game, shuffle the memory cards, everyone draws one, and after finding their partner, the pairs are formed for the next game.	Develop memory, observation, and visual interpretation skills. Reinforce themes from the folktale and foster symbolic interpretation.
	Mentortársas 2.0 Social board game as experience *(80–90 minutes)*	Explanation of instructions and game rules Game: The pairs play the Mentor Companion, with one as the mentee and the other as the mentor.	Offer participants the chance to experience the challenges of mentoring and educational inequalities in a game-based format.
Reflection and closure	Mind map *(30 minutes)*	Group discussion connected experiences to real-life mentoring challenges.	Promote shared understanding and synthesis of insights through group discussion. Bridge the gap between experiential activities and pedagogical/mentoring theory.

Board Games in Practice

Tools

DIXIT

Dixit is a commercially available board game published by Libellud Studios. *Dixit* is a creative, associative board game in which players use cards featuring unique, dream-like illustrations (GemKlub, 2021). Designed for 3 to 8 players, it is a competitive game in which each player competes individually. The game features large, fully illustrated cards, a scoring board, and coloured rabbit-shaped player tokens. The game develops abstract thinking (Janiga & Haverlíková, 2024), making it the perfect choice for a sensitization program.

In our workshop, we adapted *Dixit* from its original format and repurposed it as an educational tool. This modification aimed to facilitate reflection and expression by using the game to explore students' thoughts, emotions, and experiences related to mentoring.

Book and Memory Card Game

International research indicates that memory card games can be practical tools in both digital and traditional education. A study presenting the development of a web-based memory game illustrates a successful integration of playful learning and technological innovation, with a strong focus on optimizing user experience and educational applicability (Helda et al., 2023). Another study found that memory games, particularly so-called "smart memory cards," positively impact the working memory of children aged 5–12, which in turn can support improved academic performance (see in more detail Hermahayu et al., 2023). These findings support the idea that memory games are not only entertaining but also contribute to cognitive development.

We used *Mért nem tudnak a fák járni?* (Why Can't Trees Walk?), a collection of folktales and a memory card game. The book brings to life the heroes of seven Transylvanian Roma folktales. The stories take readers to a world where imagination breaks the rules of everyday logic, clever twists shape the action, and the line between reality and the supernatural fades. With Andrea Kürti's bright and detailed illustrations, this storybook is a great companion for children aged 5 to 12, leading them into an exciting world. The memory card game features drawings from Gutenberg Publishing's series of folk tales.

Figure 1

Book: Mért nem tudnak a fák járni? (Why Can't Trees Walk?)

Source. Gutenberg Kiadó

Figure 2

Memory card game

Source. Gutenberg Kiadó

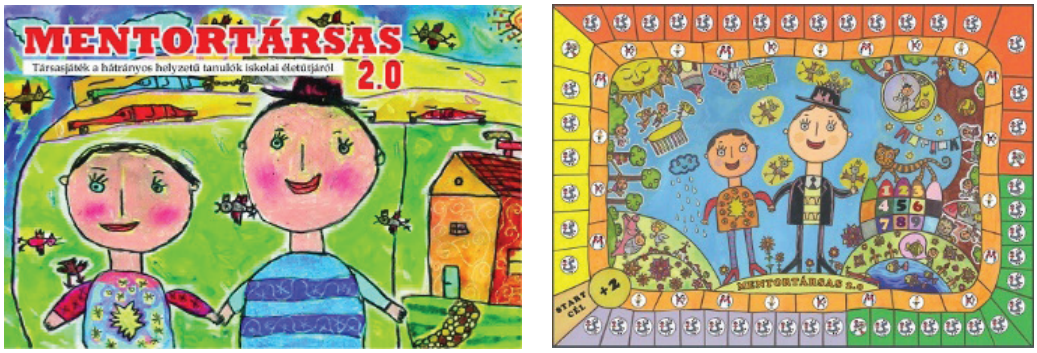
Board Game: Mentortársas 2.0

Mentortársas offers an innovative way to represent the educational journey of disadvantaged students, following their path all the way to higher education. At the same time, it highlights the challenges and difficulties these students face throughout their studies. The goal of the board game is to achieve the highest possible level of education. It provides university students with the opportunity to experience life situations that shape the everyday realities of disadvantaged learners. What makes the board game especially unique is that its situations are based on real-life experiences. The scenarios featured in *Mentortársas 2.0* are primarily inspired by the lived experiences of these mentored students (Kelemen et al., 2013). The development of the game is grounded in insights from

the Motivation Workshop's mentoring work and draws on academic literature on school segregation. The illustration on the game box was created by Tamás Csébi, a student of the Igazgyöngy Alapítvány, while the game board itself was designed by Lajos Kovács, a teacher at the same institution (Csempesz, 2016).

Figure 3

Board game: Mentortársas 2.0



Source. Motivációs Műhely

The game is played in pairs of mentors and mentees. The board consists of two concentric circles, with the outer circle representing the path of disadvantaged students. This outer path illustrates the various stages of the Hungarian education system through color-coded spaces from kindergarten to higher education. The distribution of the spaces is proportionate and realistic: the yellow section represents kindergarten, followed by a significantly longer red section for primary school, and then the green section for secondary education. Once a player completes secondary school and obtains their graduation certificate, they can advance to the purple section, which represents higher education (Csempesz, 2016).

In the game, reaching higher education presents a significant challenge for disadvantaged students. Progress is hindered by "fate cards," which represent barriers players must overcome. These cards contain short narratives offering glimpses into the everyday preschool or school experiences of disadvantaged children. For example, a card might indicate that the student attends a segregated school where most classmates are disadvantaged. The student is interested in history, pays attention, and often raises their hand in class. During the break, their classmates call them a nerd. As a result, next time they decide not to participate. For this reason, they move back one space in the game (Csempesz, 2016). Overcoming the challenges presented by these cards often requires

the support of a mentor. As indicated on the card, the mentor takes the student to the university library, a modern glass building. The next day, the student tells their friends that hundreds of people were reading there at the same time. Their mentor says that many students spend the whole day studying there and even receive scholarships. In the student's mind, the university becomes a "cool" place, so in the game, they move forward two spaces (Csempesz, 2016).

The player acting as the mentor moves along the inner circle of the game board and plays not for their own advancement, but to support their mentee, reflecting one of the game's core, realistic elements. The mentor and mentee form a team. When the mentor lands on certain spaces, they draw either a mentor card or a question card. By solving tasks or answering questions, the mentor can earn extra moves to help their mentee progress. The primary goal of the mentor cards is to enhance the gaming experience rather than to strictly convey academic content. These cards feature school- or learning-related terms that the mentor must explain through pantomime or drawing, while the mentee tries to guess the correct word (e.g., parent–teacher conference, dictation) (Csempesz, 2016).

In the *Mentortársas 2.0* board game, players who take on the role of a mentor character can also draw "mentor experience cards." These cards tell short stories about the challenges and successes mentors encounter. What makes them unique is that the same situation can turn out positively or negatively depending on the result of a dice roll; thus, a single event may become a memorable success or a difficult lesson in the mentoring process. For example, one card indicates that the mentor helps one of their mentees prepare for a test all afternoon. At their next meeting, they happily share that they received a B in math after their study session. This news fills the mentor with pride (Csempesz, 2016).

In *Mentortársas 2.0*, alongside mentors and disadvantaged students, there is also a character who is not disadvantaged. This is an average student: not particularly wealthy, lucky, or exceptionally diligent, just someone living in circumstances that allow for uninterrupted educational progress. They attend extracurricular classes, occasionally face difficult periods too, but generally follow an educational path that, for their disadvantaged peers, may seem like an unattainable dream. By the end of the game, this contrast becomes strikingly clear: while this student reaches university, the disadvantaged characters usually finish in vocational school or do not even obtain a qualification, despite doing their best. *Mentortársas 2.0* draws attention to this social reality: in Hungary today, some students face disadvantages through no fault of their own, and despite all their efforts, receive poor-quality education, often drop out of school, or complete it with a qualification that provides them no real opportunities in the labor market (Csempesz, 2016).

Developing Aesthetic Awareness and Expressive Skills through Board Games

Dixit, the storybook *Mért nem tudnak a fák járni?*, the accompanying illustration-based memory game, and *Mentortársas* are not just didactic tools, but also media with significant aesthetic and artistic value. They are particularly well-suited for developing aesthetic and artistic awareness, expressive ability, and creativity. The surreal, open-ended imagery of *Dixit* encourages symbolic thinking, associations, and storytelling playfully, providing an artistic experience that activates the inner world of images and narrative creativity.

The storybook *Mért nem tudnak a fák járni?* is illustrated by Andrea Kürti, whose unique visual style and richly detailed, lyrical drawings offer a powerful visual experience that speaks to both children and adults. The memory game created from the book's illustrations not only develops visual observation and memory but also invites deeper interpretation of the image, thus creating a strong connection between play and the goals of arts education. What makes *Mentortársas 2.0* unique is that, in addition to raising social awareness, it also holds artistic value: the game board and box illustrations were created by disadvantaged youth and their teachers (Igazgyöngy Alapítvány, n.d.). This supports the development of visual expression while also conveying the philosophy of participatory art. Used together, these four tools offer participants an opportunity to engage with their own experiences and others' realities in a more sensitive, creative, and reflective way, while simultaneously developing their aesthetic awareness, visual literacy, and expressive repertoire.

Table 2

Visual Recognition and Interpretation—Questions for the Memory Game and Book Illustrations

Aspects	Questions
Content Recognition	• Which story scene or character do the images on the memory cards remind you of? • What happened in the story at the point shown on the card?
Connection Between Image and Story	• On which card did you feel the image most effectively capture the mood of the story? Why? • Is there an illustration that "tells" more than the text itself? What does it add?

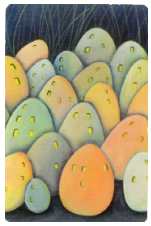
Aspects	Questions
Interpretation of Symbols and Motifs	• What might the object, color, or figure in the image symbolize? • Do you see any recurring motifs that might appear in several stories? (e.g., a scarf, a horse, a bird, a road, a star)
Characteristics of Romani Art (for initiating a sensitizing discussion)	• In what ways are these illustrations different from those you usually see in other storybooks? • What kind of atmosphere do these pictures convey: vibrant, dreamlike, decorative, or minimalist? • If you had to name a "style," how would you describe these images?
Discussion Starters on Cultural Meaning	• What values are represented in the stories and the illustrations? (e.g., family, cleverness, survival) • Why do you think it is important to include these stories and images in education? • How can Romani folktales and their accompanying illustrations help to challenge and reduce prejudice?

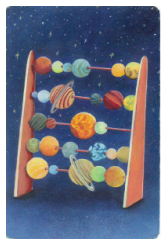
Feedback

Firstly, the mentors selected *Dixit* cards that symbolize their mentoring experience or role, and then associated the following words with them. These words represent different aspects of the mentoring process and can be grouped into thematic categories.

Table 3

Key dimensions of the mentoring role based on Dixit card reflections

Category	Words	*DIXIT* cards
Relationship and Emotion	connection, bonding, mother hen role, help	

Category	Words	*DIXIT* cards
Challenges and Coping	social anxiety, coping tools, overcoming	
Guidance and Direction	guidance, direction	
Self- and Other-awareness	understanding people	
Playfulness and Creativity	play, colorful	

The relationships and emotional connection category includes words that express the mentor's emotional bond, trust, and connectedness with their mentees. Mentoring is not just about knowledge transfer, but also about creating a safe, supportive, and accepting relationship. Mentors often play a nurturing role, providing emotional presence and stability (Kocsis & Bocsi, 2022; Papp, 2023). The second category includes aspects related to the emotional and psychological challenges mentors may encounter. Mentors may face their

own insecurities or fears, and they also support mentees in managing theirs. The terms "overcoming" and "coping tools" reflect the personal development that occurs through mentoring. The guidance and direction refer to the mentor's role as a guide and supporter (Godó, 2021). The mentor acts as a counselor and role model, helping mentees find their way and gain new perspectives. This role requires responsibility and leadership. The self-awareness and understanding others category focuses on how mentoring enhances self-reflection and interpersonal insight. Mentoring is also about learning—not just about others, but about oneself. It develops empathy and a deeper understanding of human behavior. The last category reflects the creative, colorful, and playful aspects of the mentoring process. Mentoring is not always a formal process; it can be experiential, fun, and varied. The diversity of situations and personalities adds vibrancy to the mentoring role.

Finally, the reflective component using *Dixit* cards was also received positively. Students found the cards effective in helping them articulate thoughts and emotions related to mentoring (mean = 4.4), and they considered the integration of visual-reflective tools beneficial for pedagogical and social topics more broadly (mean = 4.4). They noted that the *Dixit* game, in particular, can help disadvantaged students express themselves and articulate their emotions, while providing a safe space for communication. Some of the thoughts expressed by the participants referred to the cards facilitating expressing what they could not express in words; in the same line, the cards enhance expressing opinions; participants also referred to the cards being a mode of escape from real life; one of the benefits mentioned was that there are no wrong answers.

The evaluation of the workshop revealed overwhelmingly positive student perceptions of the Mentortársas board game as a pedagogical tool. Participants consistently reported high levels of enjoyment and motivation. On a five-point Likert scale, students rated their overall enjoyment of the activity and willingness to participate in similar sessions in the future at 4.6. Their sense of motivation during the game was also notably high (mean = 4.3).

In terms of educational value, the activity was seen as beneficial for understanding course content (mean = 4.4), identifying personal areas for improvement (mean = 4.0), and enhancing subject-related knowledge (mean = 4.2). The board game format was considered appropriate for formative assessment purposes (mean = 4.1), indicating its potential as a reflective learning tool.

Open-ended responses further reinforced these results. Participants emphasized the game's potential to deepen understanding of social inequalities, foster collaboration, and provide a creative yet meaningful way to engage with complex educational challenges.

One question in the survey asked students to identify a specific piece of information they learned from the board game. Many highlighted teamwork and cooperation, as well as the challenges faced by disadvantaged students. According to the students, the board game is an effective and enjoyable form of learning that both stimulates thinking and teaches through real-life situations.

The game also significantly enhanced participants' understanding of the mentoring role. Respondents indicated that they had acquired new insights into the nature of mentoring (mean = 4.4) and gained a better grasp of the challenges faced by disadvantaged students (mean = 4.8). Additionally, the game supported reflection on participants' future responsibilities as mentors (mean = 4.3) and strengthened awareness of the mentor's role (mean = 4.6).

Interpersonal collaboration was another key outcome. Students rated their ability to work with peers very highly (mean = 4.9), and many noted that they had learned from their fellow participants during the session (mean = 4.2). The game elements themselves were perceived as both entertaining (mean = 4.4) and motivating (mean = 4.3), with several respondents reporting a sense of immersion or "flow" while playing.

Regarding realism and practical relevance, the Mentortársas board game was rated highly realistic in its portrayal of mentoring experiences (mean = 4.6). The decision-making scenarios embedded in the game were also found to be thought-provoking and engaging (mean = 4.3). Most participants expressed a willingness to recommend the game to other students or prospective mentors (mean = 4.5), indicating its perceived transferability.

The students clearly supported the integration of board games into higher education, as these tools make learning more experiential and practical, especially in pedagogical and mentoring contexts, helping students learn more easily through play. They emphasized the usefulness of board games in fostering creativity and imagination, supporting self-expression in mentoring relationships, enriching course content, and providing moments of relaxation.

The mind map (Appendix 2), created during the Mentortársas board game session, reflects the complex social and educational issues that participants identified through gameplay. Keywords such as luck, inheritance, irredeemable disadvantage, and parental obstacles highlight how structural factors shape students' life trajectories. Topics such as school segregation, free school choice, teacher attitudes, and vulnerability show how systemic inequalities shape educational opportunities. The inclusion of preparation for sexual life suggests

that participants viewed mentoring not only as academic support but also as broader life guidance. Overall, the mind map illustrates how the board game encouraged critical reflection and helped participants see mentoring as part of a larger socio-educational context.

Discussion

Interestingly, only a small number of participants in the current sample were pursuing studies in teaching or social support fields. This diverges from previous findings by Godó (2021), who reported a strong presence of future educators and helping professionals among mentor candidates. Most participants had minimal prior experience working directly with children in school settings. The limited pedagogical background of these participants underscores the value of experiential, reflective workshops like the one described in this study. Such training sessions can serve as an entry point for developing foundational mentoring competencies, especially for students with little exposure to educational theory or practice.

The findings of this study suggest that board games, particularly those with social, reflective, and aesthetic dimensions, can serve as practical pedagogical tools for mentor training in higher education. The *Mentortársas 2.0* board game and the *Dixit*-based reflective activity were not only well received by participants but also contributed meaningfully to their understanding of the mentoring role, social inequalities, and collaborative learning.

First and foremost, students perceived *Mentortársas 2.0* as a highly engaging and relevant simulation of real-world mentoring experiences. Its game-based structure, embedded with role-playing and decision-making elements, provided a meaningful context for participants to explore the complexity of educational trajectories shaped by structural disadvantage. Student reflections confirmed that the game made abstract concepts such as inequality of opportunity, institutional selectivity, and the importance of guidance tangible and emotionally resonant. These findings align with prior literature emphasizing the transformative potential of game-based learning in fostering active engagement and more profound understanding (Perini et al., 2018; Aldemir et al., 2018).

The activity was also effective in enhancing students' self-reflection and insight into the mentor role. The thematic associations students made through *Dixit* cards provide evidence of a nuanced understanding of mentoring as a multidimensional task. The evaluation data also pointed to a strong sense of collaboration among participants. Peer learning was frequently mentioned as a positive outcome, and the high ratings for cooperation and group dynamics underscore the social learning value of board games (Wang & Chen, 2010).

Importantly, participants viewed the training activity not only as enjoyable but also as educationally valuable. They highlighted its capacity to consolidate knowledge, raise awareness of mentoring challenges, and inspire future use of similar tools in their own pedagogical practice. These findings suggest that game-based learning can serve both as content delivery and as professional identity formation, a dual function particularly crucial in teacher education.

In sum, this study affirms the value of integrating game-based and aesthetically rich tools into mentor training programs. The approach not only fosters reflective and empathetic thinking but also encourages creativity, cooperation, and critical awareness, all essential qualities for future educators and mentors. As universities increasingly seek methods to bridge theory and practice, particularly in socially responsive teacher education, board games such as *Mentortársas 2.0* offer a promising direction for innovation.

As the workshop facilitator, I held dual roles as educator and researcher, enabling close observation of participants' interactions and reflections. My background in inclusive education informed the choice of tools, including *Mentortársas* and the Roma folktale memory game. However, this dual role also posed challenges. The storytelling activity, for instance, was less engaging than expected—participants responded passively when the tale was read aloud. Future sessions could benefit from sharing the story in advance or using collaborative storytelling methods. Group size also affected the depth of discussion, with smaller groups likely offering more meaningful reflection. While the memory game worked well for partner-matching, more explicit instructions and pacing would help students better grasp its reflective purpose. Overall, we recommend using more participatory narrative techniques, tailoring group size to session goals, allowing time for debriefing, and offering written reflection options.

It should be noted that the workshop was a single session, which may have influenced participants' engagement and responses through novelty effects, the researcher's presence, or specific group dynamics. The one-time implementation limits our ability to assess the sustainability of the attitudinal or reflective changes observed. Future research involving repeated or longitudinal sessions would allow for a more accurate understanding of the lasting impact of such activities.

Conclusion

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the workshop was conducted in a single higher education setting with a relatively small group of participants, limiting the generalizability of the results. The analysis was

primarily conducted by the workshop facilitator, who, while offering deep contextual insight, may also introduce interpretive bias. Interviews could strengthen the validity of the findings in future studies.

Future research could adopt a longitudinal perspective to examine the long-term effects of game-based and reflective activities on mentors' attitudes and practices. Expanding the workshop to multiple higher education institutions would enable cross-institutional comparisons. Moreover, combining qualitative reflections with quantitative data collection could enhance the validity and transferability of results. Building on the workshop's promising outcomes, several avenues for future research can be identified. First, longitudinal studies could investigate the sustained impact of game-based activities on mentors' (or pre-service teachers') attitudes toward disadvantaged learners. Observing how these early reflections translate into long-term pedagogical practices would offer valuable insights. Second, experimental designs involving control groups could more rigorously assess the effectiveness of various tools (e.g., board games) in developing critical awareness and reflexivity. Third, a participatory action research approach involving students, educators, and community members, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, could deepen the authenticity and relevance of the materials used. Collaborations with Roma artists and storytellers could enrich the workshop experience and foster the co-creation of pedagogical content.

The workshop highlighted the transformative potential of artistic and game-based tools in sensitizing pre-service teachers to issues of social inequality and educational disadvantage. Based on these insights, the following recommendations can support wider integration in higher education or specifically teacher education. Using visually rich and emotionally engaging materials, such as illustrated folktales or symbolic games, supports not only knowledge acquisition but also emotional and ethical engagement. Encouraging students to analyze illustrations (e.g., those by Andrea Kürti) fosters interpretive thinking, aesthetic awareness, and empathy. This also supports the development of visual literacy, a key 21st-century skill. Board games like *Mentortársas 2.0* offer immersive experiences that reveal structural inequalities in education. These activities can catalyze deep reflection and discussion about systemic barriers. Workshops involving sensitive themes require structured reflection (e.g., mind maps, group discussions) to help participants articulate and process their reactions. Elements of the workshop, such as the memory game or simplified versions of the board game, can be adapted for use in primary and secondary education to develop students' empathy or explore diversity and equity themes. By embedding these practices into teacher training, educators not only promote inclusive attitudes but also equip future mentors and teachers with creative, culturally responsive pedagogical tools.

Overall, while the findings of this study are promising, the small, self-selected sample and the one-time nature of the intervention mean that the results should be viewed as preliminary. Future studies on a larger scale and in diverse contexts could provide stronger evidence on how artistic and game-based pedagogies contribute to mentor preparation and social awareness. Nonetheless, this exploratory workshop demonstrates the potential of such tools to inspire reflective, empathetic, and socially responsive practices in higher education.

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Appendix 1

Guide for Mentors: Playful Pedagogical Tools

Why use board games to address these topics?

- *Emotional engagement*: Game situations allow participants to step into the lives of others (e.g., disadvantaged youth).
- *Reflection*: Experiencing a situation makes it easier to articulate thoughts and dilemmas.
- *Experiential learning*: The joy of playing motivates students while engaging with meaningful content.
- *Social sensitization*: Hidden prejudices and structural injustices may surface through play.

1. Mentortársas 2.0

Topic: The life paths of disadvantaged youth: opportunities and obstacles.

Game roles: Mentor and mentee.

Pedagogical goals:

- To understand the difficulties of social mobility.
- To experience how much a supportive person can matter.
- To reflect on the role of a mentor/educator.

Tips for classroom/workshop use:

- Suitable for social studies, homeroom sessions, or career orientation classes.
- End with a reflective circle or a discussion using Dixit cards.

2. Roma Folktales and Memory Game

Topic: Cultural diversity and learning about marginalized communities.

Tools:

- A storybook of Roma folktales.
- Matching memory game with visual illustrations.

Pedagogical goals:

- Reducing prejudice in a narrative-based environment.
- Sensitization through storytelling, not direct teaching.
- Developing children's imagination and empathy.

Usage tips:

- Select 1–2 folktales and read them aloud with dramatic expression.
- Discuss: "What was fair in the story?"
- Follow up with the memory game using the tale's characters and motifs.

3. Dixit

Topic: Expressing emotions, thoughts, and experiences through images.

Use in this context:

- After Mentortársas or the folktale session, participants select a card to help verbalize their experiences.

Pedagogical goals:

- Opening up nonverbal channels.
- Supporting self-reflection through play.

Tips:

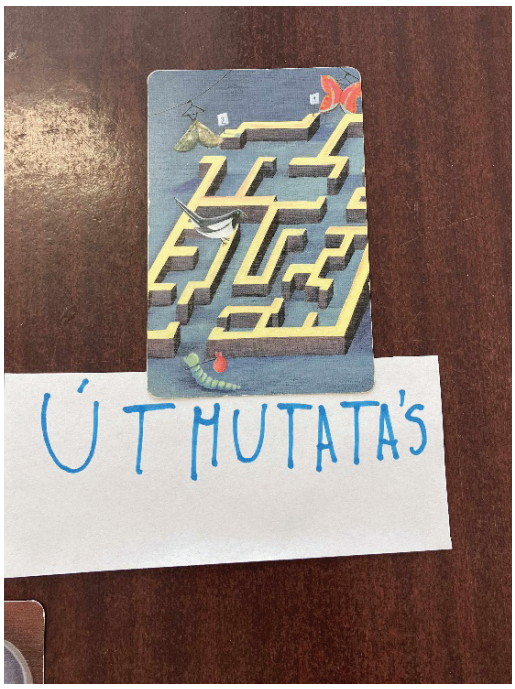
- As a closing activity: "Choose a card that represents your experience today."
- Possible discussion prompts:
    - "What does your card symbolize for you?"
    - "If this image represented a feeling, which one would it be?"

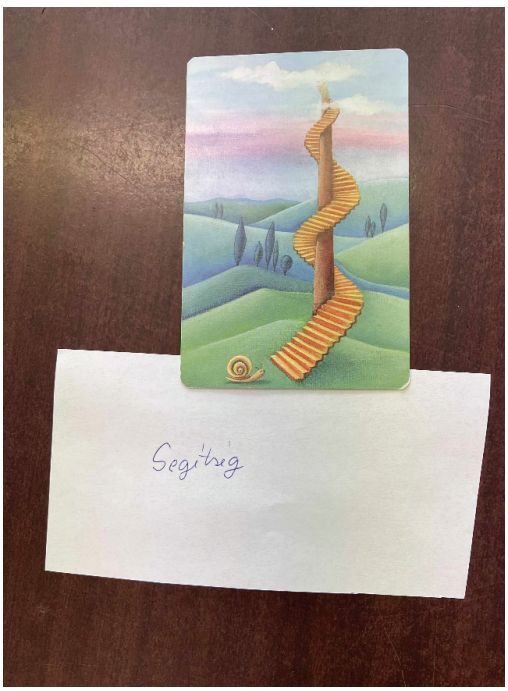
Further game-based ideas on these topics

Topic	Board game idea	
Problem solving	SZITU	The events of an imaginary class trip, during which, of course, problems arose. Can we recognize the problem and the emotions it triggered in us?
Communication, self-awareness	Körvonal (Quality Time)	A card game consisting of questions and suggestions that help us get to know each other and ourselves better.
Career Orientation	CV	Players design life paths combining jobs, skills, and obstacles.

Appendix 2

Photos from the Workshop






MENTORTÁRSAS
NEMI ÉLETRE FELKÉSZÍTÉS
Szerencse
ELŐNYÖS HELYZET
Szabad iskolaválasztás/segítségül
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Book Review: "Mini-Gems of Scholarship"—Toma Sava's Edition of Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines*

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Once upon another time, probably last year, I came across an edition of Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone*, an early 17th-century text. The edition pleasantly surprised me with its accuracy, the dedication of its editor, and his decision to promote this almost-forgotten text to 21st-century readers. When questioning his option, I found out that there had already been a previous enterprise, another "mini-gem of scholarship" and edition, but of a late 17th-century text, Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines*. Another *fine translation & editing*, which proved that scholars in English studies could find, without major difficulties, unexpected sources for polishing their research skills and challenge, at the same time, the critical killing instinct of their peers.

Unlike *The Man in the Moone*, whose author was an Anglican bishop, *The Isle of Pines* was written by a politician. And unlike its science-fiction predecessor, it is a Utopian narrative, and an Arcadian fiction, and a Robinsonade anticipating Defoe. Still, just like *The Man in the Moone*, Henry Neville's book is a text hanging on, or at least pretending to hang on, to another text. Thus, an intertext that took turns, along the centuries, just like *The Man in the Moone*, being either *gone, but not forgotten* or *forgotten, but not gone*. The truth was that—whenever these texts found a devoted editor and, as a consequence, a new readership—both books increased their initial impact. Which, somehow, accounts for Toma Sava's decision to lovingly approach them and introduce them to academic readers (at least).

Published in 1668, *The Isle of Pines* raised controversy from the very beginning because of the (presupposed) narrator's frankness in depicting aspects of the love life of five cast-aways, a man and four women, on a paradisiacal island somewhere along the coast of India.

Although it did not match the morals of the Puritans—actually, Henry Neville was one of Oliver Cromwell's opponents—it did match the slight licentiousness of some of the literary works of the time. Centuries later, in our time, it came to be perceived as a reversed utopia, a *pornotopia* more exactly, for imagining a patriarchal society in which women were used merely as reproductive tools and sexually (even) discriminated against on account of racial traits. So, the warning placed by the editor at the beginning of his introduction, "Caveat emptor" (Sava 2019, p. 5) or "let the buyer beware," may be entirely justified.

Toma Sava covered plenty, or most, of these critical opinions, which is one of the strengths of his almost forty-page introduction and of the footnotes in the translated text. He resorted to sources on various and divergent/convergent issues, such as popular works, oblivion, castaways, utopia, eroticism, sexual freedom, patriarchal society, intertextuality, reader response, and, last but not least, the different editions of Henry Neville's work. Multiple lenses—be them from the second decade of the 20th-century, like W. C. Ford's edition, or from one hundred years later, John Schecker's edition—can only be of help in establishing the proper status of this 17th-century literary curiosity: "is it a utopia, a farce, a pamphlet, a robinsonade, or all these together?" (Sava 2019, p. 23).

Interestingly, besides questioning the literary identity and the avatars of *The Isle of Pines*' editions, this one places in the same volume large portions of another 17th-century work, Hans von Grimmelshausen's picaresque novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus*. The German author published his masterpiece in two installments, the first five "books" in 1668, and a *Continuatio* a year later. It is this *Continuatio* that Toma Sava has chosen to illustrate the effect that *The Isle of Pines* had on its contemporaries, as Grimmelshausen's story described a character totally opposite to Neville's protagonist, although living in a very similar location. Grimmelshausen must have been aware of the English author's little fantasy, but here temptation is rejected and, instead of a patriarch indulging in sexual promiscuity, we find a repentant hermit, fiercely protecting his spiritual condition, while the paradisiacal island becomes a place for meditation and reconnecting with divinity.

In this respect, considerations from a comparative perspective are made in the last part of the introduction, but I think readers would have also benefited from such considerations had more of them been included in the footnotes to the fragments from the German author. When they intersect, travel literature and the picaresque novel, both taking their characters and readers to places imaginary or not, used to be a powerhouse in 17th-century literature. Through his analysis and with so many references, the editor (and translator) laid the groundwork for a very appealing project, if further pondered upon.

Just think, for instance, how texts circulated and through which mediation channels, in real life but in fiction as well, as was the case, in both works, with Dutch sailors/merchants/explorers. In this respect, Henry Neville's story is claimed to have been introduced to readers (presumably English) by a certain Cornelius Van Sloetten, who inserted it in a frame-letter sent via Amsterdam. Regarding Hans von Grimmelshausen's *Continuatio* of Simplicissimus' adventures, the account belongs (apparently) to another Dutch ship captain, who is willing to deliver to the world back home the message of the reclusive protagonist. Also of interest could be the mention of Portuguese navigators, who, as frequently as the Dutch, were deeply involved in (inter)mediating texts and mentalities.

All in all, readers, even if not particularly involved in such scholarly quests into former colonial empires, may find absolute pleasure in deciphering the patterns of behavior and mentalities of older times. And it is the real merit of such endeavors, like Toma Sava's, to stir their curiosity and—why not?—inflame their imagination.

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