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Research Lifecycle: Motivations, Dead Ends and Impact



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Contents Page

Welcome from the Editors	7

The disconnect between human and physical Geography: a case for why we should reconnect them - <i>Becca Cole</i>	11

Methodological Exclusion as a Research Dead End: Reflections on the Rejection of Quantitative Approaches in Gender Studies - <i>Natalia López-Hornickel</i>	21

Out in the Field: Notes on Researching Queer Violence in Kenya - <i>Ahmed Elmi</i>	33

Navigating Discomfort and Positionality: Researching Abuse Amongst Pagans - <i>Bliss Qadesh</i>	41

Research After Disaster: Ethical Considerations from After the January 2025 Los Angeles Fires - <i>Zia Saylor</i>	49

Social Research as Praxis: Motivations, Reorientations, and Reflexivity in Doctoral Fieldwork - <i>Felipe Schaeffer Neves</i>	55

Researching Youth, Impact and Charismatic discourse: Reflection on Motivation, Risks and Impact in Online Authoritarian research - <i>Joyleen Kour</i>	61

Researching Between Conviction and Constraint in Postgraduate Studies - <i>Alessia Sofia</i>	69

'Who Is My Thesis For?': Communicating Doctoral Research Across Academic and Public Contexts - <i>Tommy J.G. Nagle</i>	75

A Reflective Journey Through the Research Lifecycle: An International PhD Student's Perspective - <i>Jiixin Deng</i>	83

Welcome from the Editors

This year's theme — Research Lifecycle: Motivations, Dead Ends and Impact — invites contributors and readers alike to reflect on the full arc of research: the impulses that set inquiry in motion, the unexpected turns and frustrations that inevitably arise along the way, and the meaningful difference that research can ultimately make in the world.

We asked researchers to question why they wanted to follow a particular research topic – was it because of their individual interest? A desire to make change? How does this connect to institutional priorities? We also asked about the challenges along the way, and finally how they see the impact and legacy of their research. We want to know about the chance encounters, the participants who challenge research assumptions, and the moments of productive confusion that may prove to be among the most generative parts of the journey. The contributions gathered in this edition speak honestly and thoughtfully to this: to what drives us to undertake research in the first place, to the dead ends that redirect rather than defeat us, and to the ways in which our work reaches within and beyond the academy.

The edition opens with Cole (2026), whose reflection on the divide between human and physical geography is presented as a guiding concern that has shaped their research journey. Cole (2026) develops this argument through discussions of decolonising geographical knowledge and a commitment to social and environmental justice, using carbon sink ecosystems as a lens through which to explore the relationship between people and the environment. This is examined by a case study of peatlands and fjords around Caleta Tortel in southern Chile, alongside engagement with Indigenous knowledges and examples of knowledge co-production in environmental governance (Cole, 2026).

Next, López-Hornickel (2026) reflects on the tensions between quantitative and qualitative methods in gender studies. After affirming the importance of gender studies, López-Hornickel (2026) goes on to discuss debate on the use of quantitative approaches in gender research. Their central argument is that researchers should not ignore the potential for critical quantitative approaches to add rich data to research projects and relates this to their own practice (López-Hornickel, 2026).

After this, Elmi's (2026) reflexive essay examines the ethical, emotional, and methodological challenges of researching violence against queer people in Kenya, drawing on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork. The essay critiques the limits of institutional ethics, advocating relational and care-based approaches responsive to participants' safety (Elmi, 2026). It foregrounds queer African epistemologies, showing how community practices and resilience generate alternative ways of knowing (Elmi, 2026). Ultimately, Elmi (2026) argues for decolonial, accountable research rooted in solidarity.

Qadesh (2026) critically examines the ethical, emotional and methodological complexities of researching intimate partner violence and spiritual abuse within Pagan communities. Drawing on their dual position as both a researcher and a member of the community under study, Qadesh (2026) offers a nuanced account of how positionality shapes trust, participant recruitment, researcher-participant relationships and researcher wellbeing. Qadesh (2026) invites readers to consider what responsible, reflexive and compassionate research practice might look like when engaging with topics that are personally, socially and ethically complex.

After this, Saylor (2026) confronts the uncomfortable disconnect between researchers and the researched, drawing on personal experience as a lifelong resident of Altadena and Pasadena, two communities devastated by the Eaton Fire in January 2025. Saylor (2026) discusses two interconnected problems. The first is the proliferation of research requests across community Facebook groups, creating duplication, ambiguity, and intrusion, and the second is the tendency of post-disaster research to claim beneficence whilst offering little concrete reciprocity (Saylor, 2026). Saylor (2026) challenges the norm of researcher neutrality, arguing it can justify what is, in practice, an extractive relationship and instead advocates for community investment as a core ethical obligation.

Then, Schaeffer Neves (2026) asks what it means to conduct social research not merely as an academic exercise, but as a practice committed to transformation. Drawing on doctoral fieldwork with beiradeiro (riverside) communities in the Brazilian Amazon, Schaeffer Neves (2026) offers a candid reflection on how research motivations evolve, how theoretical frameworks are unsettled by empirical realities, and how accountability extends beyond data collection. Engaging with Freire's dialogical pedagogy and decolonial frameworks such as Escobar's concept of the pluriverse, Schaeffer Neves (2026) reflects on for whom research is conducted and what reciprocity is ethically required.

Next, Kour (2026) explores the practical, ethical, and methodological challenges of conducting research in politically sensitive and authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts through the author's study of Narendra Modi's charismatic political discourse and its impact on social cohesion among Indian youth. Drawing on experiences from online discourse analysis and survey research, the article examines issues such as respondent mistrust, fear of surveillance, low participation, ethical dilemmas, researcher positionality, and methodological adaptation (Kour, 2026). By reflecting on the research lifecycle, Kour (2026) offers valuable insights for scholars undertaking research in politically constrained environments.

Sofia (2026) offers a reflective and personal account of the motivations and tensions within choosing a research journey. Sofia (2026) describes the compromises between academic interest and funding needs and questions how we decide what research is valuable. Sofia (2026) then carefully navigates research pivots and considers if they are the researcher they imagined they would be. Sofia (2026) concludes with thinking about who their research is for (including if it is for themselves) and considers how their research may continue to evolve.

Nagle (2026) offers a thought-provoking reflection on one of the most fundamental yet rarely examined questions confronting doctoral researchers: who is the research ultimately for? Nagle (2026) discusses recent X/Twitter backlash toward researcher Dr Louks and reflects on the uneasy relationship between the academy and the public. At its heart, Nagle (2026) raises an important tension: while researchers may aspire to produce knowledge that speaks to everyone, a thesis designed for every possible audience risks becoming meaningful to none.

Finally, Deng (2026) explores the research lifecycle through the lived experience of an international PhD student in psychology. Deng (2026) traces a journey from undergraduate research training in China to doctoral study in the UK, showing how uncertainty, academic transition, supervision and interdisciplinary learning shape the development of an identity as an independent researcher. By reflecting on the formulation of research questions, academic writing, project-based learning and iterative refinement, Deng (2026) offers practical and reassuring insights for early-career researchers navigating their own scholarly paths.

Reflecting on our three themes of motivations, challenges and impact, there are several common points across the ten articles. In discussing motivations, researcher positionality, being able to adapt to changes (chosen and not), and having positive community relationships have been key. For challenges, authors have focused on finding the right methodology, navigating ethics and securing funding. Finally, for impacts, researchers have mainly focused on the impact research can have on the self, and on communities.

As postgraduate students ourselves, we truly appreciate each of our authors for inviting us into their research worlds, and for all the peer reviewers who took the time to review the pieces. We hope you find this edition of The Open Review (TOR) inspirational for your own research journey and helpful to reflect on your own motivations, challenges and impact.

Thank you from the TOR Editorial Team

The disconnect between human and physical Geography: a case for why we should reconnect them

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Abstract

Carbon sinks are relatively well understood globally as significant nature-based climate solutions, which might not sound like the start of a social science article, but what about the social side? What about the important connection of people to these immensely important systems? Whilst I am considered a "Physical" geographer, I consider myself a geographer, first and foremost, and this means looking at the whole picture, not just the chemistry of the mud. This is why in this article I look to explore the connection between people and carbon sinks, such as the fjords and peatland that I study, and consider why more research has not been done into this. I must also explore the privilege I hold as a white European geographer, and therefore, with consideration of the history of colonialism deeply rooted in European geography, explore what I want my impact and 'legacy' to be as I seek to do good with my research as a young researcher, and what my motivations are to do this research as someone decolonising their education.

Introduction

Along my research journey since my undergraduate degree in geography, I have been critical of the way in which the discipline allows for such a disconnect between the 'two sides' of geography: human and physical. It inherently didn't make sense to me when I could see so many connections between the two. This has, as this article reveals, greatly impacted the way I think and carry out my research, altering my motivations, my choice of literature sources, and the way I communicate and engage with my findings, which ultimately, I think will affect the impact my research will have.

In this article I will explore the history and likely reasoning behind this disconnect between the 'two sides' of geography, how this influences our research, and why we might consider reconnecting human and physical geography for more socially and environmentally just research.

History of Geography and colonial ties

One could define the discipline of Geography as simply the human urge to understand the world around them, an effort that has been carried out since humans emerged, and long before the term 'geography' existed. Many geography historians refer to Roman and Greek societies as the first to practice geography (Tozer, 1971), yet ignore the exploration before

this of the subject by Muslim, Asian, and Latin American communities and scholars (Gallini, 2009; Elshakry, 2010; Pourahmad and Tavallai, 2004), as well as indigenous communities around the world; their knowledges often not considered geography by many due to erasure through colonisation (Beery *et al.*, 2023; Kinkaid *et al.*, 2025).

The design of modern western geography is one of capitalism and imperialism, and the split between human and physical geography could be seen as a colonial practice (Gallini, 2005; Saavedra, no date), introducing a divide between humans and 'nature' primarily to make it easier to justify exploiting resources such as oils, gases, natural minerals, and more (Patel and Moore, 2017, p.51; Beery *et al.*, 2023). This split made between humans and the environment through colonialism is what I believe has led to the split between these 'two sides' of Geography (Driver, 1992), but has this helped or harmed research into Geography?

Learning from Indigenous knowledges

There are over 476 million Indigenous people worldwide, representing more than 5,000 distinct communities with histories and knowledge systems (Walderman and Branova, 2025) that pre-date that of western science and knowledge as we know it today, including that of western geographers.

Increasingly in the past decade indigenous and local communities all over the world have been informing western scientists of the negative effects of dividing people from the environment and environmental protection (e.g.: Ángel and Gallini, 2019; Ulloa, 2023), particularly in relation to global climate change, including directly bringing lived knowledges to the UN youth advisory group for climate change, such as the Okalabni Mariner with the 350 Pacific Climate Warriors, representing several islands in the Pacific and Charitie Ropaati, a Yup'ik and Samoan indigenous climate justice advocate (United Nations, 2026). Groups of indigenous people are continuously bringing forth environmental knowledge to advocate for reduced greenhouse gas emissions and highlighting the impact of climate change from a diverse history of communities with lived experiences of co-existing with the environment, knowledges which have proved many times, more effective than western geography because they are tried and tested over generations of co-existing with the environment (Abdullahi *et al.*, 2013; Guto, 2020; Stafford *et al.*, 2025). They bring together a holistic understanding that there is an inherent, deep relationship between people, animals, plants, and the environment, considering humans as active participants in the ecosystem rather than detached beings (Walderman and Branova, 2025). This ideology is not integrated into western geographical practices and research. By separating humans from their inherent relationship with their environment both in and out of academia, a mental disconnect has occurred between humans and their environment, which may have had negative effects on research and policy, both for people and the environment.

By comparing the way western researchers disconnect people from the environment, versus how many indigenous communities use their knowledge of their relationship with the environment to live, we can see that this change to disconnection makes people become less inclined to take responsibility or accountability for their actions on the environment (Dinnalli and Ramaswamy, 2025).

That is not to say that indigenous knowledges should simply be borrowed to strengthen or improve western academic frameworks, but that we as geography researchers must take into more consideration when and where this knowledge emerges, in a respectful partnership. If we as academics and non-academic geographers kept this link more implicitly in our research by even just combining the 'two sides' of Geography, would we be able to have a bigger impact with our research as people simply care more for nature?

Indigenous knowledges show us that diversifying our knowledge base across 'human' and 'physical' geography and having more holistic worldviews increases survivability for all, particularly through co-production of knowledge (Djentontin and Meadow, 2018; Cooke *et al.*, 2021). For example, land management of the forest of British Columbia, Canada by the Xáxli'p community includes systematic burning of certain areas of forest to reduce the total amount of burnt area during wildfire seasons, and they have learnt this through watching the environment for generations (Nikolakis and Roberts, 2020). Co-production of knowledge between the Xáxli'p community and the Ministry of Forests in British Columbia, Canada has resulted in better environmental protection of this environment, having a positive effect for people and the land (Diver *et al.*, 2017).

How much more could the environment benefit if western geographers co-produced knowledge with indigenous communities?

Carbon sinks within a different geographical framework

Carbon sinks such as the fjords and peatlands I study are so much more than the sediment they are made of. They are holistic ecosystems with landscape wide connections to organisms, and that includes people. As a case study I use the Baker valley in Chile, and a village west of this valley, Caleta Tortel, where I study peatlands and fjords side by side as an example of the relationship between people and carbon sinks, and why I believe it is important to take into consideration both the 'physical' and 'human' side of the geography in this area whilst researching.

Tortel is a remote village in the Aysén region of Chile, home to just over 500 inhabitants (Zaret, 2011). The people of Tortel have a unique and contrasting relationship with the fjords and peatlands that sit around their home which I got to learn about while carrying out two

weeks of fieldwork there to study the carbon sinks these people live with. Whilst I was in Tortel to research solely the carbon potential of these fjords and peatlands, people in Tortel have a very different lived experience of these ecosystems, quite literally being surrounded by them, with the west of Tortel being a vast fjord system and to the east vast extents of valley peatlands.

Many of the families of those who currently live in Tortel travelled there by canoe to settle in the village (**Figure 1**) and continue today to travel in the fjords to collect resources such as firewood and timber from the cypress trees in the fjords which provide much of their livelihoods (Zaret, 2011). In 2008, a research centre for studying fjords - Laboratori de Oceanografía Costera/Tortel - was set up by Universidad de Concepción, Centro Investigación en Ecosistemas de la Patagonia, and Centro de Investigación Oceanografía en el Pacifico Sur-Oriental, who research the fjord ecosystem and its carbon storage, showing a strong urge to protect the fjord system they live with (COPAS, accessed 2026). All this building quite a positive relationship with the people and the fjord system.



Figure 1. Wooden statue in Tortel depicting indigenous people travelling by canoe to Tortel.
Photo by Becca Cole, December 2025.

However, Tortel inhabitants, including Euro-Chilean and indigenous peoples, have a contrasting relationship with the peatlands around them. Historically, burning has been carried out on the forest-peatlands in the Baker valley by settlers which has increased the growth of peatlands from 1930-1950 (Vidal, 2011; Zaret and Holz, 2024), moving away from a dominance of trees in the area. In more recent decades on the other hand, Tortel residents have begun to extract *Sphagnum* moss from the Baker valley peatlands for export use in horticulture, as a source of income (Zaret, 2011), which I observed on my fieldwork (**Figure 2, left**). This has resulted in peatland degradation and contamination of the freshwater river that provides drinking water to people in Tortel (**Figure 2, right**).

This shows a distinct difference in motivation to protect peatlands as ecosystems in comparison with fjords due to the different relationships they have with each ecosystem and shows the complexities of researching solely the physical aspect of carbon sinks. While urging people to protect carbon sinks to mitigate climate change, we often ignore the pre-existing relationships people have with the environment they live in, which ultimately impedes our desire as researchers to protect the environment, as we do not take into consideration that *people's livelihoods rely on these ecosystems*.



Figure 2. Images showing sphagnum extraction from peatlands in the Baker valley where bags of drying sphagnum moss can be seen on the roadside next to the peatlands (left) and the eroding peatlands visibly seen in the waterways that provide drinking water to Tortel (right). Photo by Becca Cole, December 2025.

So why hasn't more research been done into carbon sinks and its connection to people? Most likely because it is 1) hard to research both within our current academic frameworks and funding, and 2) we are highly disconnected both in research and western societies from our environment.

Even as far back as 1925, European Geographers acknowledged the difficulties and disconnect between studying 'human' and 'physical' Geography, with Wright (1925, p.192) saying "Danger besets a man who would study the relation between geographical environment and human thought. So complex are the factors which mould our mental processes, so imperfect our understanding of the relation between geography and the physical - let alone intellectual - activities of humanity", yet has this been acted on?

Many factors play into why we may not research both 'sides' of geography in one; including funding, financial and personal interests of companies and government, but I would like us to consider more widely as geographers if it is wise to split these two aspects of geography when they are so intrinsically intertwined.

Positionality and motivations

Positionality can be defined as the place in society and overlapping identities we do and don't share between each other as people, and reflexivity is the self-scrutiny of this when we do our research (Bourke, 2014).

In geography, I would argue reflexivity is of utmost importance to practice. As a white European, I must consider my position in my research and whether it motivates the research I do. Do I have motivations to leave a good 'legacy' for myself whilst doing my research and could this dissuade me from doing impactful research and instead something that can be funded? Does this take away or add to my ability to connect the 'physical' and 'human'? I know I can ensure my research is as positively impactful for people and the environment as it can be by practising reflexivity, and it is helpful to discuss this ***with colleagues for an outsider's opinion as you can get caught up in the mud - literally in my case - when you have no outside opinion on your research.***

Trying to practice reflexivity whilst doing my research as I mentioned before however is hard for young researchers. There are so many other things in academia to focus on that there is scarcely time to think. But I do ensure I make time to think about this once a week, as it quite honestly channels my motivation to ensure my research has the positive impact on our world that I want it to.

Conclusions

Geographers have a unique, underutilised potential to bridge the gap of researching both people and the physical world at the same time. Should we in our research lifecycle consider changing this? That is up to you, but I know that as someone trying to integrate decolonisation into my research I will continue to consider the two as equal and intrinsically connected, and that this will have an enormous impact on my research for people and the physical world to more effectively serve my motivations of social and environmental justice.

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Methodological Exclusion as a Research Dead End: Reflections on the Rejection of Quantitative Approaches in Gender Studies¹

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Attitudes towards gender equity refer to the disposition to support gender equity. Higher levels of sexism predict declines in women's political representation and economic opportunities (Brandt, 2011). This is relevant for adolescents, who are in a formative stage in which social norms and gender role expectations consolidate (Kågesten *et al.*, 2016), a stage in which attitudes are also socialised (Abendschön, 2013).

The level of support for gender equity is associated with young people's aspirations, expectations, and perceptions of gender roles and societal gender equity (Dotti Sani and Quaranta, 2017; Nuamah, 2019). Thus, gender attitudes are critical to more democratic and sustainable societies (Isac, Sandoval-Hernández and Miranda, 2018; Kennedy, 2019; UN, 2023), and they are associated with opportunities in life trajectories (Kågesten *et al.*, 2016; Nuamah, 2019). Therefore, understanding their distribution across populations becomes relevant. This requires methodological tools capable of identifying patterned variation.

Debates in gender studies have questioned the use of quantitative methods in feminist inquiry (Oakley, 1998; Westmarland, 2001; Scott, 2010). Specifically, there has been scepticism regarding the reduction of women's experiences, the reification of categories, and the excessive positivism of this approach (Scott, 2010). These criticisms raise concerns about reflexivity, categorisation, and the relationship between knowledge and power, which are critical dimensions to consider in any analysis (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2023). Nevertheless, using these concerns to reject quantitative approaches, as a whole, closes analytical avenues that are fundamental to examining large-scale inequalities.

This article argues that rejecting quantitative approaches in advance constitutes a *methodological dead end* for gender research. When research questions concern the

¹*This article is based one of the introductory subsections of my doctoral thesis (López-Hornickel, 2025)*

distribution, scale, and patterned variation of inequality across populations, large-scale quantitative analysis becomes necessary. Excluding statistical approaches narrows the range of questions that can be asked and limits the capacity to document how gendered inequalities are structured across groups and institutional contexts. The article also discusses some of the critiques and tensions surrounding quantitative inquiry, drawing on experiences from my PhD journey.

As an illustration, the discussion refers to my doctoral research on gender equity attitudes among adolescents in Latin America. This case demonstrates how questions concerning trends and patterned variation across populations require a quantitative approach.

This article reflects on the consequences of methodological exclusion in gender studies and on the methodological tensions surrounding the use of quantitative approaches in feminist inquiry. Rejecting quantitative approaches a priori, on the grounds that they are incompatible with feminist inquiry, forecloses analytical possibilities that gender research cannot afford to lose. This work examines epistemological critiques commonly directed at quantitative methods and argues that rejecting them in this area risks undermining gender research's capacity to document the scale, distribution, and persistence of inequality.

Criticisms against quantitative approaches

Debates surrounding the role of quantitative methods in gender research have a long history (Westmarland, 2001). A recurring critique is that survey-based designs tend to reduce complex social realities by treating individuals as comparable units, thereby obscuring the power relations that operate within patriarchal social structures (Westmarland, 2001).

Quantitative research has also been linked to positivist traditions that prioritise claims of neutrality and detachment, a tradition often associated with male-dominated academic practices that give limited attention to reflexivity and context (Scott, 2010; Stauffer and O'Brien, 2018).

Related critiques target the use of fixed analytical categories, suggesting that categorisation can confine lived experiences and fail to capture their relational, fluid, and performative dimensions (Leung *et al.*, 2019). From this standpoint, translating social life into variables and numerical indicators may appear aligned with patriarchal or colonial epistemologies (Scott, 2010).

As Humbert and Guenther (2021) observe, quantitative methods are frequently viewed as synonymous with positivism. They are therefore rejected in their entirety by some scholars, who use this refusal as a symbolic stance against dominant knowledge systems. Some

authors refer to the rejection of positivism and quantitative methodologies as a form of rebellion against the dominant system (Humbert and Guenther, 2021).

While these critiques raise important epistemological concerns, in practice, some discussions surrounding quantitative inquiry can reduce its analytical role to overly narrow assumptions about positivism, objectivity, or categorisation.

Tensions and critiques regarding quantitative approaches and the use of secondary data

As part of my research journey, I have encountered several situations in which I have been told or heard diverse ideas about quantitative approaches that seem relevant to address.

This is particularly evident in the review process at journals. I have been asked by reviewers to address the fact that gender is measured as a dichotomous variable. While research has increasingly moved toward more inclusive measures of gender identity, large-scale assessments must develop instruments that can be implemented consistently across different national contexts. That also implies political challenges, depending on the country, regarding the inclusion of more alternatives. In studies using secondary data, researchers cannot modify the instruments. Acknowledging this constraint does not deny that binary measurement represents an important limitation when analysing questions related to gender.

There are also criticisms regarding how quantitative research uses variables and theoretical hypotheses. Surveys rely on scales and items to operationalise concepts through measurable variables. For example, one important variable in my analyses was civic knowledge, which in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) is measured through a standardised assessment designed to evaluate students' understanding of political institutions and democratic processes (Schulz *et al.*, 2025). In my analyses, this variable was included based on the political sophistication hypothesis, which proposes an empirical association between political knowledge and the expression of democratic or egalitarian attitudes (Highton, 2009). However, in some discussions, this hypothesis has been interpreted as implying an elitist conception of civic education centred on the accumulation of formalised knowledge, thereby misrepresenting its analytical purpose.

Another concern that has been raised, mostly in seminars, relates to the potential for bias in quantitative survey data, including large-scale assessments. However, issues such as misreporting, social desirability, and the interpretation of questions are not unique to quantitative research; they affect all forms of social inquiry. Researchers must therefore remain attentive to the limitations of their instruments and the contexts in which data are collected.

In the case of internationally recognised large-scale assessments, such as the ICCS, PISA, TIMSS, or the World Values Survey, the scope and limitations of the data are explicitly defined. And extensive procedures, including piloting, cognitive testing, and validation, are implemented to ensure that items are interpreted consistently across contexts and that resulting measures are suitable for analysing population-level patterns.

Strengths of the quantitative inquiry

Quantitative research provides distinctive means for detecting regularities, trajectories, and underlying processes through which social inequalities are produced and maintained (Scott, 2010). By estimating the extent and distribution of inequality, researchers can demonstrate its scale, track changes over time, and identify the settings where disparities are most evident. Empirical mapping of phenomena such as violence against women or enduring gender gaps relies heavily on systematic statistical evidence (Leung *et al.*, 2019). As Scott (2010) emphasises, quantitative analysis is not premised on the assumption that women's experiences can be reduced to numerical indicators (*They will insist that women's experiences cannot be reduced to numbers. No serious social scientist would claim that they could be*, p. 234); rather, it seeks to capture broader social processes without denying complexity.

Concerns about the use of analytical categories also require clarification, particularly given the plurality of perspectives within gender research. Debates around categorisation can be reframed through the lens of intersectionality, a framework developed to analyse how race, gender, and other axes of identity overlap to produce distinct experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Building on this tradition, McCall (2005) distinguishes three analytical approaches. The anticategorical perspective questions whether fixed categories can adequately represent social complexity. The intracategorical approach directs attention to social locations at neglected intersections, often privileging in-depth qualitative inquiry into the experiences of specific groups. In contrast, the intercategorical perspective deliberately employs categories in order to document relations of inequality across groups and to examine how multiple dimensions of stratification interact (McCall, 2005, p. 1773).

Most quantitative intersectional analyses align with the intercategorical approach, modelling inequalities through additive and interaction effects across multiple social dimensions (Evans, 2019). This approach enables systematic comparison across groups and contexts, allowing researchers to examine how different axes of inequality intersect at the population level (McCall, 2005). Such analyses are particularly relevant when the objective is to assess the scale of inequality, including unequal access to gender-related educational opportunities.

Large-scale assessments constitute an important empirical resource for this type of research. Their breadth, standardised design, and cross-national coverage enable analysis of how inequalities vary across institutional and societal contexts. As Scott (2010) notes, quantitative intersectional studies remain relatively uncommon, mainly because many datasets lack sufficiently detailed measures. When appropriate data are available, however, they allow examination of how gender intersects with class, age, ethnicity, and other dimensions within specific educational and social settings. This capacity is central to identifying and understanding systemic forms of inequality.

Finally, quantitative inquiry does not imply the absence of reflexivity, as D'Ignazio and Klein (2023) explain. Careful attention to the construction of indicators, the choice of categories, and the limits of available data is necessary to ensure that analyses remain sensitive to power relations and the historical contexts in which knowledge is produced (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2023). This is compatible with the interest of including more inclusive measures of gender beyond binary categories (Guyan, 2022), and developing distinctly feminist quantitative practices that are more transparent, intersectional, and reflexive about their assumptions (Small, 2025).

Limitations of quantitative inquiry

The limitations of quantitative methodologies must be acknowledged. As feminist data scholars have emphasised, data are never neutral representations of reality; they are shaped by the categories, classifications, and institutional priorities that guide their collection (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2023). Decisions about which variables to measure, how categories are defined, and whose experiences become visible in datasets reflect broader social and political contexts.

The scope of quantitative inquiries is oriented toward enabling analysis of patterns, distributions, and relationships at the population level (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Therefore, large-scale surveys, for instance, cannot capture the complexity of lived experiences. As discussed earlier, the binary measurement of gender in many international datasets illustrates how available data may not reflect the full spectrum of gender identities. This is something that international organisations should reconsider when developing large-scale studies.

Recognising these limits is essential. Expecting quantitative data to provide insights into the depth of lived experience is akin to expecting a method to answer questions it was not designed to address. At the same time, researchers using quantitative approaches have a responsibility to apply them with methodological rigour and reflexivity, remaining attentive to the categories, assumptions, and potential exclusions embedded in the data.

For this reason, methodological pluralism remains essential in gender research. Quantitative and qualitative approaches contribute different forms of knowledge, and their combined use allows researchers to examine inequality both as a structured social pattern and as a lived experience.

Applied Illustration. Quantitative Analysis and the Study of Gender Attitudes

The analytical discussion described above becomes particularly visible in the study of gender attitudes among adolescents. Understanding how adolescents adhere to gender equity and how different socialisation factors shape these attitudes raises a set of empirical questions: Do all young people endorse gender-equitable attitudes to the same extent? Are there identifiable patterns of adherence? Which individual and contextual characteristics explain variation? How can evidence be generated to inform educational policy and curricular decisions? (López-Hornickel, 2025).

A quantitative approach is the right approach to address these questions because it treats attitudes as structured distributions across populations. Statistical analyses allow us to recognise unobserved population heterogeneity (Nylund-Gibson and Choi, 2018), estimate the magnitude of differences across social groups, and examine how multiple intersections of stratification operate (McCall, 2005; Scarborough *et al.*, 2021; Keller *et al.*, 2023).

To obtain population-level evidence, large-scale assessments provide representative datasets, allowing inferences about population-level patterns and contextual variation (Wagemaker, 2014). An example in the field of education is the ICCS (Schulz *et al.*, 2018), which provides information on adolescents' gender attitudes and school-level variables, among other civic and citizenship scales.

Importantly, large-scale assessments are not merely repositories of survey responses; they are designed using measurement models to ensure comparability and validity across groups (Rutkowski *et al.*, 2010; Rutkowski, Von Davier and Rutkowski, 2014). This is relevant when we aim to provide rigorous evidence for the design of public policies. As noted by Equal Measures 2030 (Equal Measures 2030, 2021), high-quality quantitative data can provide more systematic and comprehensive information and help identify the complex structural dimensions of gender inequality. Quantitative analyses that account for gender inequalities and use robust data provide a basis for identifying where disparities are most pronounced.

With respect to the research questions outlined above, quantitative analysis has revealed distinct and sometimes paradoxical patterns in gender attitudes among Latin American adolescents. While some students consistently endorse gender equity across domains, others express partial support that weakens when questions address male privilege directly

(López-Hornickel and Sandoval-Hernández, 2023). These profiles would be difficult to identify without modelling population heterogeneity. The analyses also demonstrate that open classroom discussion, in which teachers encourage critical engagement with social issues, is positively associated with stronger support for gender equality. Conversely, authoritarian orientations emerge as a significant risk factor, predicting higher levels of sexist beliefs (López-Hornickel *et al.*, 2024; López-Hornickel, 2025). Such findings illustrate how individual dispositions and school-level experiences interact in shaping gender attitudes.

At the same time, this type of analysis also has limitations. Research based on large-scale survey data relies on instruments designed in advance and applied across different contexts. Thus, the available variables and analytical categories are predetermined by the survey framework. As a result, some dimensions of identity and experience cannot be fully incorporated into the analysis. For example, gender is often measured through binary categories in international datasets. These constraints illustrate that, while quantitative approaches are well-suited for identifying patterns and distributions across populations, they cannot fully represent the complexity and diversity of lived experiences.

Despite these limitations, the analysis illustrates the broader argument of this article. Quantitative approaches make it possible to identify systematic patterns in how gender attitudes are distributed across populations and social contexts, patterns that would be difficult to detect without population-level data.

Final remarks

Dismissing whole methodological traditions in advance risks foreclosing lines of inquiry before their analytical possibilities are properly examined. Within gender research, quantitative approaches have frequently been portrayed as reductive, excessively positivist, or implicated in the reproduction of dominant power relations (Westmarland, 2001; Humbert and Guenther, 2021). Such critiques offer important cautions about the limits and potential pitfalls of survey-based and statistical analyses (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2023). However, sentencing quantitative methods as intrinsically problematic disregards their capacity to make visible systematic patterns of inequality that may otherwise go unobserved.

More broadly, treating quantitative and qualitative approaches as mutually exclusive narrows the epistemic foundations of gender research. Methodological pluralism allows scholars to address inequality at multiple levels, from individual experiences to population-wide patterns. Rather than privileging any single methodological tradition, the choice of methods should be guided by the research question at hand. Different designs are suited to different analytical aims: quantitative methods are particularly effective for examining population-level patterns, distributions, and comparisons, whereas qualitative methods are better suited

to exploring meanings, practices, and lived experiences. Recognising these distinct analytical capacities strengthens, rather than fragments, the study of gendered inequalities. In this sense, quantitative analysis complements rather than competes with other approaches, providing evidence that is difficult to obtain through small-scale or exclusively qualitative designs.

Rejecting quantitative approaches in advance constitutes a methodological dead end, as it forecloses analytical possibilities that may be necessary for addressing specific research questions, particularly those concerned with the scale, distribution, and persistence of inequality.

AI Statement

I have used AI in proofreading.

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Out in the Field: Notes on Researching Queer Violence in Kenya

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the ethical, emotional, and methodological complexities of conducting ethnographic research on queerphobic violence in Kenya. Drawing on nine months of fieldwork across urban centres, it argues that research in contexts where queerness is criminalised cannot be adequately understood through institutional ethics alone. Instead, the field is conceptualised as a relational and embodied space shaped by shifting power dynamics, positionality, and emotional labour. Using standpoint theory and queer African epistemological approaches, the essay demonstrates how knowledge is co-produced through ongoing negotiation, care, and accountability. It highlights the researcher's fluid insider-outsider positioning, the limits of procedural ethics, and the emotional toll of engaging with trauma and risk. By centring lived experiences and community practices, the essay contributes to decolonising methodologies, challenging Euro-American research frameworks. Ultimately, it positions fieldwork as a process grounded in reflexivity, solidarity, and a commitment to resisting the conditions that sustain queer violence in Kenya.

Keywords:

Queer fieldwork; Kenya; queerphobic violence; positionality; decolonising methodologies; research ethics; emotional labour; LGBTQ+ Africa

Introduction

Reflecting on fieldwork can be a messy and uncomfortable endeavour, often deeply personal. My research on violence against queer people in Kenya was not just an academic undertaking; it was also a profoundly embodied, political, and ethical experience. For almost nine months, I engaged with queer communities, activists, and survivors of violence across Kenya's urban regions, including Eldoret, Kisumu, Mombasa, and Nairobi. In a country where same-sex intimacy and gender diversity remain criminalised and highly stigmatised (Republic of Kenya, 2010; Wamaitha, Kiriimi and Owuor, 2023), queerphobic violence is pervasive. For many of the people with whom I had the privilege of engaging, this violence formed part of their everyday lives. As a gay man of the East African diaspora, my fieldwork was never neutral. It was a space shaped by tension, risk, intimacy, and vulnerability. While navigating the challenges of ethnographic research, I immersed myself in the lived experiences of the people I spoke with, while also negotiating my own safety and the complexities of my identity. These encounters made it increasingly difficult to approach the field as a detached site governed solely by institutional ethical protocols.

In this essay, I argue that fieldwork in contexts where queerness is criminalised cannot be understood through institutional ethics alone. Rather, the field is a relational and embodied place in which knowledge is shaped by shifting power dynamics, emotional labour, and situated forms of understanding. Drawing on standpoint theory and queer African epistemological approaches, I show how ethical practice emerges through ongoing negotiation, care, and accountability, rather than through procedural compliance. By centring queer African epistemologies, this essay contributes to broader conversations on decolonising research methodologies. It does so by challenging dominant research frameworks, often associated with Euro-American academic traditions, and by foregrounding the lived realities of queer communities in Kenya as sites of knowledge production. Here, the field is not an objective backdrop to research, but a dynamic arena in which relationships, power, and resistance are continually negotiated.

Positionality and Standpoint in the Field

My research positionality on this issue was never static. As someone who could “pass” for a local despite being culturally socialised in a Western context, I often navigated ambiguous spaces of belonging and exclusion. In some instances, my perceived identity, whether in terms of sexuality, ethnicity, or gender expression, facilitated access and trust within certain queer communities in Kenya. In others, it generated suspicion or heightened risk. Standpoint theory provides a useful framework for understanding these mechanisms. It posits that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalised groups can possess forms of epistemic privilege grounded in lived experience (Harding, 1991). In practice, this sometimes enabled me to build rapport in more queer-friendly settings. However, this positionality was not stable. In more conservative contexts, my perceived queerness and proximity to an East African identity required careful negotiation of self-presentation and personal safety. For example, Somalis are one of the prominent ethnic groups in Kenya and my Somali identity added another layer of tension. In areas with a visible Somali presence, I often felt a degree of anxiety due to an awareness, rooted in personal experience, of the community’s prevailing conservative attitudes towards queerness. At the same time, when engaging with Somali participants, shared cultural familiarity created moments of connection. These interactions often took on a “brotherly” or “sisterly” quality, shaped by both mutual recognition and an awareness of the constraints imposed by community norms.

These experiences highlight the fluidity of insider and outsider positions in the field. Rather than occupying a fixed standpoint, I moved between positions depending on context and perception. This mobility created both opportunities and tensions. For instance, I frequently questioned whether my ability to “pass” for a local involved withholding an aspect of my identity to gain access. Such moments underscore the importance of reflexivity as an ongoing practice rather than a retrospective exercise. My affiliation with a UK-based

institution introduced further complexity. In initial interactions, particularly over email, I occasionally encountered caution from participants. This reflected, in part, broader concerns about research practices associated with institutions in the Global North, which are sometimes perceived as extractive (Smith, 2021). However, these dynamics often shifted in face-to-face encounters. When participants assumed I was Kenyan, or broadly East African, interactions tended to become more open, sometimes accompanied by remarks such as “We mostly only get white people who come to do queer research.” In these moments, I was careful to clarify my position without over-explaining or attempting to justify my presence. These layered positionalities shaped how I navigated the field and how knowledge was produced within it. They required constant attention to questions of access, trust, and responsibility. Positionality, for me, was not simply a background condition of the research, but an integral part of the fieldwork itself.

Ethics Beyond the Review Board

Institutional ethical review boards often operate with a universalist logic that does not always account for the specific challenges of conducting research in hostile environments. While I adhered to formal protocols such as informed consent and confidentiality, these frameworks proved limited in practice. For instance, written consent posed risks for some participants who were wary of documentation, fearing potential state or community retribution if they were outed as queer. In the Kenyan context, such concerns are well-founded. In these situations, consent became an ongoing and negotiated process rather than a one-time procedural requirement. I often relied on verbal consent, reaffirming it throughout each interaction to ensure that participants retained agency at all stages. This approach was grounded not only in practical necessity but also in trust-building. Existing scholarship on LGBTQ+ research in African contexts highlights the risks associated with data misuse, including surveillance and persecution in repressive settings (Daly, 2022). Ethical practice, therefore, cannot be reduced to a checklist, but must remain responsive to context, risk, and participants’ needs.

During my interviews, I encountered several difficult moments, particularly when speaking with trans women who had experienced police brutality and sexual assault, and lesbians who had endured corrective rape. As participants recounted these experiences, I was confronted with the weight of their trauma and the limits of my role as a researcher. I often questioned whether asking participants to revisit such experiences risked re-traumatising them, and whether I could offer anything beyond academic representation. Engaging with participants beyond the interview setting raised similar concerns. Spending time together in more informal contexts and learning about their lives in a more personal way further complicated the boundaries between research and relationship. These interactions prompted me to reflect more critically on the ethics of extraction and on whether forms of scholarly

detachment are either possible or desirable in this kind of work. Researching violence also demanded significant emotional labour. As Moran and Asquith (2020) note, researchers working with trauma survivors may experience forms of vicarious trauma, particularly when there are personal or cultural resonances with participants' experiences. After long days of interviews, I often found myself emotionally overwhelmed and exhausted. These responses underscored that ethical engagement involves not only responsibility towards participants, but also an awareness of the emotional demands placed on the researcher.

Emotional Labour and Personal Trauma

The emotional toll of this research was compounded by the need to maintain professionalism and composure during interviews. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour, understood as the management of feeling to meet the demands of a role, was ever-present in the field. Journaling, peer debriefing, and long calls home became important tools for processing these experiences. At the same time, this labour was not only a burden; it also deepened my empathy and strengthened my commitment to the work. There were periods, sometimes lasting days or weeks, when I questioned whether to continue. One particularly difficult moment occurred when I experienced and witnessed homophobic police brutality first-hand. While queuing for a music festival with a participant who had become a close friend, two police officers pulled us aside, took us into a dark room, and directed homophobic insults towards us. When my friend responded in Swahili, they slapped him repeatedly. I froze before eventually saying, "I'm a British citizen, the embassy knows where I am." The situation changed immediately, and we were released.

It was clear that the officers had initially assumed we were local Kenyans they could target without consequence. In that moment, my access to a British identity operated as a form of protection. Acknowledging this privilege was difficult. I was left wondering how many others were subjected to similar violence without the possibility of escape that night. Encounters of this kind reflect broader patterns in which individuals perceived to be queer are targeted by police, often in contexts shaped by criminalisation and social stigma (Wairuri, 2022). The emotional impact of this experience, combined with the accounts shared during interviews and the ongoing fear of being targeted, contributed to feeling isolated. At times, this made it difficult to separate my role as a researcher from my own vulnerability within the field. However, moments of solidarity with fellow queers, shared meals, conversations, and mutual care, offered a different perspective. These interactions highlighted the resilience of queer communities and the significance of collective support in navigating hostile environments. This sense of community was not only personally sustaining but also analytically important. It provided insight into how individuals create networks of care, resist marginalisation, and sustain forms of belonging in difficult conditions. In this way, emotional labour was intertwined with knowledge production, shaping both how I engaged with participants and

how I understood the field itself.

Queer African Epistemology

Decolonial feminist scholars have argued that fieldwork should move beyond extractive models and instead centre relationality and accountability (Lugones, 2010; Boer Cueva *et al.*, 2024). Boer Cueva *et al.* (2024), for instance, emphasise the importance of what they describe as “loving accountability” an approach to research grounded in community, reflexivity, and the co-construction of knowledge. This perspective requires researchers to be transparent about their intentions, to share power where possible, and to remain accountable to the communities they engage with. In practice, this involved approaching research encounters as collaborative rather than extractive. Where appropriate and safe, I shared emerging interpretations with participants in informal and conversational ways, inviting their perspectives and reflections. These exchanges often provided additional context and nuance, shaping how I understood and represented their experiences. At the same time, agency in the field was not solely located with the researcher. Participants actively shaped the research process, often using storytelling as a means of asserting control over how their experiences were communicated. In doing so, they resisted being positioned solely as victims and instead articulated more complex narratives of identity, survival, and resistance. These moments challenged dominant representations of queer suffering within existing scholarship, highlighting the importance of centring lived experience as a key site of knowledge production.

Queer African epistemological approaches further challenge the dominance of theoretical frameworks often associated with Euro-American academic traditions. As Tamale (2020) argues, African sexualities must be understood within their specific cultural, historical, and political contexts. This requires moving beyond universalising assumptions and recognising African lived experiences as sources of theory in their own right. In my fieldwork, these epistemologies emerged not only through formal interviews but also through everyday practices within queer communities. I observed how community members cared for one another, the coded forms of language used for survival, and the ways in which collective memories of violence were shared and sustained. These practices resisted the pathologisation of queerness and offered alternative ways-of-knowing grounded in community, resilience, and everyday life. They also challenge the persistent narrative that queerness is “un-African,” a claim often mobilised in political and religious discourse (van Klinken, 2019). Decolonial praxis, therefore, is not limited to engaging with particular bodies of literature. It also involves rethinking the research process itself: how knowledge is produced, whose voices are prioritised, and how representation is negotiated. This requires an ongoing commitment to reflexivity, responsiveness, and accountability, as well as a willingness to be shaped by the field. Knowledge production, in this case, becomes a shared

and evolving process rather than a fixed outcome.

Conclusion

Ekine and Abbas (2013) argue that queer African activism must move beyond a narrow focus on rights to encompass broader questions of freedom, kinship, and futurity. As someone from the East African diaspora, these insights shaped how I approached the field. Rather than treating it simply as a site of data collection, I came to understand it as a space for learning, unlearning, and engaging with the complexities of power and vulnerability. This essay has reflected on the ethical, emotional, and methodological challenges of researching violence against queer people in Kenya. Drawing on standpoint theory and queer African epistemological approaches, it has argued that the field is not a neutral or passive setting, but a relational space in which knowledge is produced through interaction, negotiation, and care.

Fieldwork in criminalising contexts requires moving beyond procedural understandings of ethics and towards approaches grounded in accountability and responsiveness. It also requires recognising the ways in which researchers are simultaneously positioned within structures of power and vulnerability. This interplay is what shaped my experience in the field and the forms of knowledge that emerged from it. Although I left Kenya, the field has remained with me. It continues to inform how I think about LGBTQ+ issues, how I approach research, and in the way I now imagine justice. More broadly, it reinforced the idea that research is not simply about producing knowledge, but about building relationships, practising care, and remaining accountable to the communities that make such work possible. The insights generated through this research extend beyond the academy. They point towards a mode of inquiry grounded not only in analysis, but also in solidarity, reflexivity, and an ongoing commitment to challenging the conditions that make violence possible.

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I have not used AI

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Navigating Discomfort and Positionality: Researching Abuse Amongst Pagans

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Abstract

This article outlines challenges in participant-researcher relationships and personal impacts of researching Intimate Partner Violence and Spiritual Abuse Amongst Pagans. This growing and hard-to-reach population is stigmatised (Williams, 2020; ONS, 2022). Researcher positionality affected project design and recruitment (Bulk and Collins, 2024). Awareness of changing roles as an in-group researcher developed my reflexivity (Bukamal, 2022). Whilst researching sensitive topics in a vilified population (Qadesh, 2024), I built rapport in different settings (Silverio *et al.*, 2022). Inclusive Paganism distinguishes this project from similar work on faith and coercive control (Harvey, 2016; Mulvihill *et al.*, 2022). Researcher wellbeing was supported through various practices (Sonnex *et al.*, 2022) to mitigate secondary trauma (Kaul *et al.*, 2024). This article emerged from a presentation at the 2025 European Network of Gender Violence conference, Vienna.

Background

My research explores the intersection of faith with abuse in secretive communities of a delegitimized but growing faith population (Harvey, 2016; Williams, 2020), through an anonymised survey of Pagans in the United Kingdom; which collected lived experiences and hopes for Pagan communities facing the problems of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Spiritual Abuse (SA)¹ and interviews with Pagan leaders; discussing the impacts of IPV and SA and what might prevent incidence or support Pagan victim-survivors (Kraemer and Aburrow, 2016).

Victim-survivors² of IPV may find support within Pagan pathways with emancipatory sacred practices such as seasonal festivals and group ritual, and archetypes, for example Goddesses

¹ *Spiritual Abuse (SA) is a term which describes the misuse of religious or spiritual authority to exploit others, which can result in harm. This form of abuse can include coercion, manipulation or sexual violence perpetration, and has parallels with coercive control in the context of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (Ellis et al. 2022).*

² *Victim-survivor is a neutral identifier which represents the continuum and range of a person's experience of abuse within the terminology around intimate partner violence, encompassing an experiencer's entire transition from a "victim" during the period of abuse and reporting to a "survivor" with support and empowerment post-violence. (Lovell, 2024)*

of ancient mythology (Snooks, 2022), enabling resilience within or after leaving abusive relationships (Sonnex *et al*, 2022). For some, Paganism's reputation of gender equality and healing has been marred through abuse of power; enabling high status individuals to perpetrate abuse and remain unchallenged whilst victim-survivors become further excluded (Kraemer and Aburrow, 2016).

Methodology

Certain considerations were essential in design of this project, for safety and reducing risk of re-traumatisation. Support information was provided for participants in the information pack, with a specialist Pagan abuse organisation, sex specific and LGBTQIA+ support, relating to spiritual abuse and intimate partner violence. Participants were given information on how to hide browser history, and a decoy webpage link was provided.

The initial phase of the project involved an anonymised qualitative leaning online survey, for Pagans over the age of 18. For the second phase, Pagans over the age of 18 were interviewed, with responsibility within a Pagan organisation, contacted via email with some providing this at events, or published online.

This project is particularly challenging to conduct since Paganism within the United Kingdom is still a secretive population, with many practitioners concerned about the reputation of an emerging "out and proud" community due to the stigma and victimisation many Pagan practitioners have suffered through harmful stereotypes and false allegations (Hutton, 2015), and mis-use of Pagan symbolism by far-right groups (Butters, 2023). It has been important to reassure participants about confidentiality and anonymity in respect of data collection. Investigating this topic poses a risk of re-traumatisation for those who have experienced past harm (Weiss, 2025) and could inflame or increase risks of perpetration for those currently in abusive relationships; should participants be discovered to be sharing their experiences by their abuser.

Semi-structured interview questions focused on participants' understanding of intimate partner violence and spiritual abuse, and views around incidence or prevalence. Interviewees were asked about responsibilities of Pagan leadership and how Pagan organisations can help to support victim-survivors or engage with perpetrators. The interviews did not question on subjective experiences of spiritual or relational harm; however, participants shared these voluntarily.

Interview transcripts and survey responses were data scrubbed to remove identifying details. Analysis of data takes an embedded approach with the quantitative survey data placed into demographic descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis of the open qualitative survey questions and interview transcripts.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Locating oneself within the research is about personal identity and justified investment in the topic. Caring is not enough to sanction study of other's personal lives or abuse histories. Positionality as researcher has personal and political underpinnings and justifications, which Koobak and Thapar-Björkert (2014, p. 49) describe as "naming the place from which one speaks". Being a Pagan researcher offers connectedness with different threads of Paganism, and familiarity with Pagan discourse and intersectionality within abuse victim-survivorship and engagement with support services for Pagans.

Positionality as a researcher within Paganism requires consideration to the way relationships between researchers and people within this population influence research processes and outputs. Embeddedness can improve uptake of participation in research, however familiarity between participants and researcher can alter relationships, with participants feeling misrepresented and loss of trust that may ensue from this (Snooks, 2022).

My positionality began young witnessing my mother's victim-survivorship. I later experienced abusive relationships with Pagans; two resulted in relocations as a parent carer, all involved loss of community and support networks. This upheaval was background to my work as a therapist, hearing other's stories of victim-survivorship. I trained in several Pagan pathways and founded a community temple, where group invalidation and victim blaming led to loss of a member who disclosed experiences of IPV and SA, following their relationship with a well-connected Pagan.

Researcher positionality creates complex challenges, unique to each aspect of nuanced relationship with an area of study and subjectively experienced by each reflexive researcher in social science (Bukamal, 2022). Reflexivity has offered the chance to reframe my experiences and to glean more from the interactions with participants, to give greater depth and insight into the analytical process of exploring the qualitative themes expressed within the survey and interview data by each lived experience shared by participants (Palaganas *et al.*, 2017).

Researcher positionality had personal impact within my local community, despite not researching among them. The shift I made into academia created distance and discord in the temple I had served in. I found myself shut out from the organisation I stepped back from leading to conduct research as a Pagan practitioner rather than a figurehead, to reduce power differential between myself and those taking part in the study (Weatherston, 2024). This situation gave me greater objectivity, and to challenge biases I might have held from the perspective of my commitment to a specific Pagan pathway.

The lessons and challenges I have had to overcome to continue in the progress of my research have required a great deal of reflective consideration of my positionality. Responsible research necessitates that I become aware of and attempt to mitigate my own biases and preconceived notions around Paganism, gender violence, and community, as well as what it means to recover from abuse (Fischer and Derham, 2016). I had assumed that my familiarity with Paganism and my first hand experiences and recovery from past abuse would enable me to conduct research into this area with greater ease, having the status of an in-group researcher in both aspects would enable rapport (Morgan, 2014).

Recruitment and Field Relations

Despite having community links and understanding the nuances and stigmas of Paganism, positionality challenged me academically and personally. I chose not to recruit from within communities where I have membership to prevent bias or undue influence over the data (Bulk and Collins, 2024). This meant avoiding well-placed informants. I reached out to hard to find, secretive groups and individuals unknown to me, attempting to establish trust and openness as a stranger; around a topic which is already sensitive and fraught in terms of possibly re-traumatising participants or endangering those already in abusive relationships (Silverio *et al.*, 2022).

Some online Pagans were angered at my attempts to recruit on social media during the initial phase of more open recruitment for the online survey. I received several hateful messages and comments on the research recruitment flyer, including accusations that my work could damage the reputation of Paganism and draw more unwelcome scrutiny or encourage false testimonies. Pagan community leaders individually invited to take part in interviews during the second phase of data collection were sometimes suspicious of the motivations of the research and hesitant to respond.

One Pagan organiser, who had messaged cordially to request an information pack, publicly discouraged members of their online community from taking part in the research. Others simply ignored emails and did not engage, while some used the recruitment posts in social groups to make vulnerable shares, which risked harm from abusers or problems in criminal or family courts (Gelinas *et al.*, 2017).

Others were keen to participate, with stories from situations within their local communities and advice for future improvements to safeguarding and support policies within Pagan communities, as well as messages to those in health, criminal and social care who minister to Pagan service users. My sense of obligation to participants as an in-group researcher was magnified in response to the trust I held through other's perception of my role and what it means to them (Singer, 2013).

I found solutions to these challenges online through more receptive interactions and potential participants at Pagan events, where I handed out flyers and took the time to discuss the research face to face (Bishop *et al.*, 2011). My physical appearance as recognisably culturally Pagan evoked greater trust, and many people encountered at these events wanted to tell me their stories.

Pagans in positions of responsibility were concerned about their reputations being damaged for speaking out about perpetrators within the community. Several interviewees volunteered personal stories despite the semi-structured interview questions avoiding this to minimise risk of re-traumatisation.

Researcher Wellbeing and Implications

Secondary traumatisation is an issue for researchers undertaking projects that explore sensitive topics (Williamson *et al.*, 2020). As a victim-survivor and Pagan researcher, the process of data analysis was retraumatising as I encountered stories from participants that paralleled or closely resembled my own, some-times within familiar communities or traditions (Kaul *et al.*, 2024). One interviewed participant disclosed an experience of harm in a community where I had also been a member, which I found upsetting but concealed this during the process of the interview. Researcher Wellbeing groups are one way for those doing research on upsetting or difficult topics to give one another peer support and look at ways of managing secondary trauma (Skinner *et al.*, 2023).

Coding, analysis and writing up data within my thesis has taken longer than expected due to trauma impacts on health and cognition (Couette *et al.*, 2020), despite support from my supervisors and psychotherapeutic counselling. Self-compassion and releasing myself from the guilt of extended timescales has enabled me to continue writeup of thematic findings for the research.

Attention to self-regulation and wellbeing is crucial for navigating research into sensitive topics. I use spiritual practices of creating meditative flow states through activities such as nature walks, dance, yoga and music making, and altar creation to invoke beauty and sacred presence. I participate in shared ceremonies and pilgrimages to support my wellbeing and reduce the stress of this ongoing work (Katz-Henkin, 2021).

Conclusion

This project gives a voice to victim-survivors and illuminate a topic with a sparse literature base within academic research, adding to growing evidence base around faith, intimate partner violence, and spiritual abuse. My process developing methodology for this project has been impacted by positionality, and my status as in-group researcher. I also inhabit out-group status; in terms of the ethical approach to Pagan populations in my sample.

Researcher reflexivity, and commitment to my wellbeing, sustained the continuation of this project.

AI Statement

I have not used AI.

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Research After Disaster: Ethical Considerations from After the January 2025 Los Angeles Fires

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Introduction:

On January 7 and 8, 2025, the Eaton and Palisades fires destroyed over 16,000 structures in the Los Angeles area and directly killed 30 individuals, with subsequent excess mortality models estimating a true number of fire-related deaths closer to 440 (Jiménez, 2025; Paglino, Raquib and Stokes, 2025; Wall, Steinberg and Shew, 2025). The harm to individuals, homes, and their livelihoods, however, extends further, with studies from alternative disaster situations documenting how traumatic natural disasters can create long-term and spiralling effects for individuals and communities (Cook *et al.*, 2008; Wilson-Genderson, Heid and Pruchno, 2018). Understanding the scope of these post-disaster effects is critical, as it allows for societies to bolster long-term supports in addition to immediate reactions (Ausbrooks, Barrett and Martinez-Cosio, 2009; Kendra and Gregory, 2019; Van Brown, 2020).

Academic institutions and researchers investigating and conducting research in the aftermath of such instances typically exercise elevated caution around participant engagement (Browne and Peek, 2014; Hunt *et al.*, 2016; Mezinska *et al.*, 2016; Tansey *et al.*, 2017). This includes offering participants resource sheets following participation, disseminating findings amongst impacted communities, and compensating survivors for their participation (Ausbrooks, Barrett and Martinez-Cosio, 2009; Kendra and Gregory, 2019). Despite existing guidelines and literature, this article puts forward further suggestions for integration with the disaster ethics literature based on perceived research harms caused in the post-fire aftermath.

Researcher Positionality:

Altadena and Pasadena, the areas impacted by the Eaton Fire, have been my lifelong home. I was there on January 7, and my neighbourhood was among the first to evacuate. My positionality within this topic thus reflects an entanglement with my own feelings of space, community, and home. This offers a strength—in considering the ways in which I wish my community had been considered by researchers—and a weakness—as I can in no way claim to be impartial about what transpired during or after the fires. I am embedded within the community and write this piece both as an early career researcher and as a Californian.

Research After the Fires: Dual Recommendations

Following the aftermath of the fires, Facebook groups for community support ballooned in usage for advice-sharing, grieving, and venting in the unique set of circumstances faced by community members. Yet also, requests for research participation proliferated through these channels, with researchers seeking everything from topsoil samples to survey engagement and interviews. The accreditation of researchers varied, with some researchers at academic institutions, some degree-seeking candidates, some professionals from nonprofits, and others lacking formal research training in its entirety.

The issue with the flood of participation requests was the significant duplication and drain of community resource without clear pathways to community restoration. This paper explores both issues.

Recommendation #1: Reduce Duplication, Ambiguity, and Intrusion in Community Spaces

Research duplication with unclear participant benefits at times overshadowed community-driven efforts to aggregate data in an accessible manner. When trying to determine safety for returning to unburnt structures, for example, some community members started a Google Form where individuals could submit their cross-streets or a nearby location and then the levels of toxins that had been detected in their homes. This was not a scientific endeavour, but one that we as a community needed immediately. Seeing neighbours who had—or hadn't—had many toxins detected served as a helpful benchmark for determining immediate safety precautions. Yet shortly after this Google Form was deployed, two alternatives also sprang up. One, an institutional soil sampling study, wanted to receive tests of topsoil and would, in exchange, notify participants of the chemical levels found. Though this offered the benefit of information to participants themselves that they might not be able to get elsewhere, it was unclear how widescale data from such institutional efforts would be aggregated and redistributed in a manner akin to the map that the community had been making. This ambiguity became the symptom of a broader issue: With numerous researchers of various affiliations and training levels duplicating efforts, it became difficult to distinguish between studies that offered some potential benefits to participants versus none. And to non-academic group participants, there remained a lack of clarity on the difference between the types of researchers engaging in our community.

The issue of overlapping research aims has not been addressed in present literature, other than to advise researchers to be mindful of participant research fatigue (Kendra and Gregory, 2019; Abeysinghe and Leppold, 2023). To rectify these issues, having a clear and mandatory research registration database—including understandable benefits to participants—for all post-disaster communities would be an advisable way for research communities to proceed. Instead of being bombarded with research requests in virtual community spaces, interested individuals could peruse this database when they felt ready to engage with researchers. Though an additional bureaucratic step for researchers, it would also reduce

duplication and instead encourage researcher collaboration on overlapping areas of interest.

Recommendation #2: Increase Community Benefits for Participation

Just as prioritising the acquisition of knowledge above all else leads to duplication, so too does it also lead to extractive research practices. Researchers themselves are often urged to maintain neutrality and distance from their subjects and research itself is often considered to be an altruistic practice. Ethical guidelines support fair but non-coercive compensation, with the idea that part of the benefit to participants is the participation itself (Grant, 2002, 2006). Some researchers find that participation in research can be experienced as a cathartic way to feel heard in one's story (Ranney *et al.*, 2015), even as this is tempered by contrasting findings that point to research fatigue and re-traumatisation in post-disaster settings (Boscarino *et al.*, 2004; Patel *et al.*, 2020).

In the case of the Los Angeles fires, researchers - despite seeking time, effort, and emotional energy from participants - often failed to offer concrete community benefits. Many studies will be published in years from now, and among those that have been more prompt in their publication, there has been little reciprocation to the community. With community members still struggling with ongoing crises of mental health, insurance denials, lack of accountability for the significant death toll, and housing, amongst many needs exacerbated by this disaster, there remains active space for academics who have flown in for data collection to contribute to recovery.

Regardless of the potential for positive research impact on participants, researchers engaging with recovering communities should recognise community investment as a core component of research ethics. That is not to say the findings from post-disaster studies have not been useful both in understanding areas for improvement or learning for the future, but rather to assert that simply claiming beneficence is not enough (Sheel and Kirk, 2018; Abeysinghe and Leppold, 2023; Abeysinghe *et al.*, 2025). Rather than pretending that research is passive and impartial, disaster research should incorporate principles of ethics that foreground support for recovery efforts (Meyer *et al.*, 2018; Tuhkanen, 2023). Offering free community trainings that apply lessons from the research to the lives of participants, contributing financially to recovery efforts, volunteering time where community help is needed, or otherwise anchoring work within the community should become a critical part of future disaster ethics review processes. While this role may be uncomfortable to those who are wed to neutrality, it reflects the inherent value-laden nature of research and holds researchers accountable for the way they engage with post-disaster communities.

Conclusion

It is with these recommendations that I put forward a pro-active research approach in communities impacted by disasters. These lessons are drawn from my own experiences as a resident of the area impacted by the Los Angeles fires and as a passionate researcher.

The implementation of these small but effective changes offers a path forward that learns from missteps of this case study to guide future post-disaster research.

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I did not use AI.

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Social Research as Praxis: Motivations, Reorientations, and Reflexivity in Doctoral Fieldwork

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Abstract

This article reflects on doctoral fieldwork in the Brazilian Amazon to examine how social research operates as praxis rather than as a linear process of knowledge production. Drawing on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive field diary practices with beiradeiro communities, it explores how research motivations, reorientations, and ethical commitments evolve through engagement with empirical realities. The article argues that critical social research cannot be epistemologically neutral, as it is embedded in power relations and material conditions. Instead, it must remain reflexive, relational, and accountable to the communities with whom it is conducted. By foregrounding tensions between theory and practice, the article contributes to debates on the research lifecycle, particularly the role of “dead ends”, reorientation, and the practical meaning of impact in doctoral research.

Keywords: *Praxis; Reflexivity; Positionality; Political ecology; Amazon.*

Introduction

Doctoral research in the social sciences is often presented as a structured and sequential process: a clearly defined question, a coherent epistemological stance, a robust methodology, and incremental findings leading to measurable outputs (Baur, 2019). This representation is reinforced by funding frameworks and doctoral training programmes that prioritise performance indicators, particularly publications (Muller, 2019). While such structuring serves institutional and pedagogical purposes, it sits uneasily with research that engages directly with social transformation. As Marx argued, the task is not only to interpret the world but also to change it (Marx, 1845/2002).

This tension reflects a broader contradiction. On the one hand, doctoral research is increasingly governed by linear expectations of progress and productivity; on the other, social reality is uneven, relational, and marked by contradiction. Approaches grounded in objectivist-positivist epistemological assumptions of neutrality and linear causality risk obscuring these dynamics. Critical social research instead requires engagement with uncertainty and power as constitutive elements of both the object of study and the research process itself (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2009).

Using the research lifecycle as a lens, this article reflects on three interrelated dimensions of doctoral fieldwork: motivations, reorientations (including “dead ends”), and accountability/impact. Drawing on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive field diary practices, it argues that research should be understood as praxis: an iterative process through which theory and practice are continuously reshaped through engagement with empirical reality.

Background

My research is situated at the intersection of political ecology and development. It departs from the premise that contemporary capitalism is undergoing a structural crisis characterised by ecological degradation, intensified extraction, and deepening inequality (Kurz, 2017; Menegat, 2019). Within this framework, the climate crisis and the expansion of extractive frontiers are not anomalies, but systemic expressions of a growth-dependent economic order.

The empirical focus is the Brazilian Amazon, a region marked by socio-ecological diversity and persistent struggles over land and development. Among the populations inhabiting this region are beiradeiro communities—riverside groups whose livelihoods depend on small-scale agriculture, fishing, and forest extraction (Lira and Chaves, 2016). Their practices are often described as grounded in collective resource management and locally embedded ecological knowledge (Lira and Chaves, 2016, p. 73), though such characterisations risk romanticisation if detached from material constraints. Fieldwork involved approximately six weeks of immersion, combining semi-structured interviews with participant observation. This methodological approach aimed to move beyond formal narratives to capture everyday practices through which socio-ecological relations are reproduced.

The research emerged from tensions between dominant sustainability discourses—particularly those centred on green growth, carbon markets, and conservation finance—and the search for alternative development pathways. Political ecology scholarship has shown that such approaches frequently reproduce inequalities and forms of dispossession (Nightingale *et al.*, 2020; Kolinjivadi *et al.*, 2023). In the Amazon, these contradictions are especially visible, as conservation initiatives coexist with expanding extractive and infrastructural frontiers (Gudynas, 2019). Rather than treating beiradeiros as passive beneficiaries or symbolic “guardians of nature”, the research conceptualises them as political actors embedded in contested socio-ecological relations. The analytical focus is therefore not whether these communities are “sustainable” in abstract terms, but how their practices illuminate both the possibilities and limits of an ecosocial transition under conditions of extractive dependency.

Why do Social Research?

The motivation underpinning this research is grounded in the Marxist notion of praxis: the inseparability of theory and transformative action. Research is not neutral but embedded in historical and material relations that shape both its questions and outcomes (Harvey, 2000). This implies an ethical responsibility to interrogate dominant structures, particularly in contexts marked by socio-environmental inequality. At the same time, much development and sustainability research remains oriented towards abstract models and externally designed interventions (Baur, 2019), often marginalising situated knowledge. Decolonial perspectives, such as Escobar's concept of the pluriverse, challenge this by emphasising multiple, locally grounded forms of knowledge and social organisation (Escobar, 2018).

My initial engagement with political ecology drew on frameworks such as post-extractivism, degrowth, rights of nature, and buen vivir. These appeared to offer coherent alternatives to dominant paradigms. Fieldwork, however, unsettled this assumption. Rather than encountering clearly articulated alternatives, I observed fragmented and context-specific practices shaped by immediate material constraints. One moment that illustrates this rupture was when, during a conversation following a morning of rubber tapping, a participant explained that while forest preservation was valued, the immediate concern was securing a reliable income and access to basic services. The discussion shifted quickly from environmental stewardship to healthcare access and transport costs. This exchange exposed the limits of approaching the field with pre-defined normative frameworks of "sustainability".

Such encounters constituted moments of reorientation within the research lifecycle. Early expectations of identifying replicable alternatives gave way to a more grounded analysis of how communities navigate tensions between survival, autonomy, and ecological care. What initially appeared as a deviation from the research trajectory became analytically productive: a "dead end" that forced a reassessment of theoretical assumptions. This shift reframed the purpose of the research. Rather than seeking prescriptive models, the focus became understanding how possibilities for transformation are conditioned by material realities. In this sense, motivations are not fixed but evolve through engagement with the field. Praxis is therefore not simply an abstract principle but a methodological orientation grounded in iterative learning and reflexive adjustment.

For whom is Social Research?

A central question that underlies my doctoral research concerns its intended audience and political orientation. Drawing on Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', knowledge production can be understood as a dialogical process in which participants are recognised as co-producers rather than passive subjects (Freire, 2017). Freire emphasises that emancipatory knowledge emerges through collective reflection and critical consciousness.

From this perspective, research should be conducted 'with' communities rather than 'on' them. This requires methodological flexibility and responsiveness to participants' priorities, while also confronting the extractive tendencies of academic knowledge production.

In practice, these principles were tested during fieldwork. Many participants expressed scepticism towards researchers who collect data and leave without sustained engagement. Academic research was often perceived as another extractive activity, mirroring broader patterns of resource exploitation. Building rapport, therefore, required time, presence and a willingness to suspend my research schedule in favour of listening and participating in daily activities. For instance, I joined participants in rubber tapping and cocoa cultivation, postponing formal interviews until later stages of fieldwork. These shared activities created space for informal conversations and allowed access to forms of knowledge that would not emerge through structured interviews alone, while also improving my understanding of daily priorities and constraints. Whilst this participatory and bottom-up approach was effective for this type of qualitative social research, it exposed the tension between emancipatory research ideals (Freire, 2017) and institutional constraints, particularly time-limited fieldwork and funding expectations.

This also raised questions of accountability. Although the scope for reciprocity was limited, I sought to provide feedback through informal debriefing conversations and by explaining how the findings would be used and disseminated. These practices do not eliminate asymmetries but render them more explicit and contestable. Reflexivity was central to navigating these dynamics. Daily field diary entries enabled ongoing analysis and critical engagement with emerging insights. Rather than aspiring to neutrality, I sought to be transparent and reflexively attentive to how my positionality shaped both the research process and its outcomes. As Palaganas and colleagues (2017, p. 426) argue, "it is impossible to remain 'outside of' one's study topic while conducting research".

In this sense, reflexivity operates as an ethical practice rather than a purely methodological one. It involves recognising that knowledge production is situated and that the researcher is implicated in the relations they study. Rather than resolving power asymmetries, reflexive engagement situates them within the research process, making them a central object of analysis (England, 1994).

Conclusion

This article has conceptualised doctoral research as a non-linear process shaped by contradiction, reorientation, and empirical engagement. Drawing on fieldwork in the Amazon, it has shown how research motivations, methods, and analytical frameworks evolve through interaction with the field. By framing research as praxis, the article highlights the

analytical value of “dead ends” as moments that expose the limits of prior assumptions and enable more grounded forms of inquiry. At the same time, it emphasises that research impact cannot be reduced to measurable outputs. Instead, impact must be understood as an ongoing process of accountability to the communities involved and to the realities their experiences reveal. For this project, this implies a commitment to ensuring that findings remain accessible, that representations are critically examined, and that the research does not reproduce the extractive dynamics it seeks to critique. Social research as praxis, therefore, requires not only the production of knowledge but also a sustained engagement with its ethical and political implications.

AI Statement

I have used AI in developing ideas and I have used AI in referencing and/or proofreading

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Researching Youth, Impact and Charismatic discourse: Reflection on Motivation, Risks and Impact in Online Authoritarian research

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Introduction

Researching authoritarian regimes throughout the world is marked by innumerable ethical, social and political challenges impacting the researchers as well as the researched. My research on '*the discourse of charismatic authoritarian leader Narendra Modi and his discourse's impact on social cohesion among the youth*' brought up ethical and logistical issues that shaped my understanding of challenges as a researcher and pivots for future research in the Indian Sub-continent and beyond, especially in authoritarian¹ and semi-authoritarian² settings. This research comprised two phases of data collection and analysis. The first comprised of secondary qualitative data which was extracted through YouTube and governmental websites and analysed through Discourse Historical Approach (DHA); the second phase comprised of surveys that were extracted through Google Forms. Being a part of the editorial team of the journal, this essay is a response to the journal's theme, 'Research lifecycle: Motivations, Dead Ends and Impact' reflecting on research motivations, ethical dilemmas, challenges, pivots and impact in an authoritarian or a highly politically sensitive field through my experiences as an online researcher in a polarised, semi-authoritarian society (India). The essay highlights how authoritarian contexts not only shape the research methods but also trust, and research impact.

Why research Authoritarianism?

Political discourse has been a cause of concern worldwide due to the impact it holds on the wider public. It is an essential parameter not only to understand the impact or social cohesion in the society but also the state of democracy in the country. This study focused on the discourse by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a leader with the highest social media following in the country (Yilmaz and Saleem, 2023) whose speeches comprise of a blend of ideologies and morals leading to a wider public appeal which highlights how authoritarian charismatic leaders frame their discourse and influence the wider public (Chhibber and Verma, 2014; Sud, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2021).

¹ *A regime that can be characterised by centralised power system with occasional cult of a personality, limited political freedom, polarisation and suppression of dissent (Bedeski, 2010).*

² *A hybrid-regime that comprises of both authoritarian and democratic characteristics.*

Researching authoritarian regimes not only highlighted power symmetries and social cohesion in the society but also helped in understanding the threats, ethical dilemmas and social matrix that impacts the research life cycle. Methodologically, the study followed a mixed methods approach with qualitative discourse analysis employing purposive sampling, supported by surveys (youth) which comprised of closed-ended, open-ended and Likert scale questions.

Research Motivations

The motivations for this study were academic, personal and social. The chief motivations for this research developed from: my personal experiences; observations while living in the country; following the politics closely; increased hostility towards minority and increased polarisation among the youth. Furthermore, participation in various debating and political societies increased my urge to understand: how knowledge production is influenced by key influential political leaders and how it impacts the ground level public? - As the ideological shift remained evident in the society especially among the youth at the university and college level. Additionally, academic engagement with key theoretical lenses and ideas as well as access to a globalised overview through western academic institutions helped in further exploring the area.

Positionality

As a woman researcher from a minority background and being born and brought up in India with education at a western academic institute provided me with a hybrid insider-outsider positionality. While the hybrid positionality was an asset for this research it also led to power asymmetries that could have hampered the data collection and results. Additionally, the outsider status could have created suspicions due to the environment of regular suspicion of foreign involvement to malign the image of the country (Pandey, 2025) among the youth propagated through mainstream political discourse as well as the national media. Being an insider helped me mitigate this challenge through access to participants, building rapport and linguistic/contextual understanding which was a key factor in effective data collection and analysis, while the outsider privilege of western epistemology helped develop global perspectives and a deeper theoretical outlook.

Respondent Feedback / Concerns

Considering the political sensitivity of the research and threat to respondents, the survey for this study was designed by employing data minimisation and further anonymised to avoid identification of the respondents. Even after the considerations, the feedback and survey responses revealed the threat and insecurity faced by the youth (especially minority religious groups) while discussing political leaders and governmental policies. Further on, the survey responses revealed people's fears and suspicion while responding to questions regarding governmental policies and political leaders especially belonging to the ruling party. Thus, highlighting the scrutiny faced by people living in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states.

These responses unwrap the fear of being targeted and tagged as 'Urban Naxals' or 'terrorists', 'declared anti-nationals' or socially criticised, creating an environment of hostility. The study found a strong impact of political speeches by the charismatic leader on public discourse and sense of safety among the youth which was evident at various data collection stages.

A respondent disclosed their suspicion to a key informant saying, 'this survey is being conducted by the government to find dissenters', while another highlighted the threat one faces if speaking against or opposing the government by commenting, 'need to hire a lawyer before dissenting'. This threat is further exacerbated by the prevalent use of Unlawful Activities Prevention Act [UAPA] and sedition against scholars and student activists raising their voice on various social and political issues (Pandey and Dey, 2026; Muradh and Jamal, 2025) raising concerns for their safety as participants of research.

The data gathered through responses highlights a high suspicion and fear among the minority groups when speaking against the governmental policies where they feared not only social hostility but also legal repercussions. The trend of neutral responses forced me to confront the methodological dilemma, where fear influenced participation and silence itself became the data. The initial bias in responses revealed the impact of authoritarianism and legal suppression of the youth's voice. This can also impact research dissemination and result in researcher's self-censorship as the researcher could face similar legal repercussions.

Ethical issues

Safety of the respondents

Due to the sensitive social environment and suspicion of surveillance, any breach may have led to economic and social repercussions impacting the safety and security of the participants, thus making it essential to maintain anonymity of the respondents. Data anonymisation and trust building were essential components of this research due to politically sensitive field and lack of trust (Norman, 2009). The responses were further accessed by contacting through recommendation (Browne and Moffett, 2014), snowball sampling and previous contacts at the institutions which helped create a trust among the respondents.

Dead Ends, Challenges and Pivots

Low response rate

The initial aim was to gather 150-160 participants comprising an equal distribution of minority and majority groups. The research was concluded with 83 responses after a slower response rate reaching 50 responses and negligible increase post 60 in the initial phase of data collection.

Though the low response rate was evidently due to the underlying fears as highlighted in respondent's responses. The initial plan of gathering respondents through university and college groups and student representatives with the benefit of insider access and past acquaintances proved unsuccessful in gathering enough respondents, this was mitigated later by snowball sampling.

Mistrust

An important consideration to make while conducting research in an authoritarian setup is to understand the legal framework and social matrix to avoid any social and political repercussions to the researcher or the researched (Weinstein and Blanchard, 2023). As Goffman (1959) pointed "the presentation of self" is essential for the researcher to maintain one's identity as researcher and to avoid any suspicious activity (cited in Brownie and McBride, 2015, p. 35). Through this research experience I learned the importance of maintaining contacts as a researcher and informing the participants about the research which helps in building trust, as highlighted by Swinth (1967), trust is not developed automatically but by a constant contact. While for my research I depended on online survey responses due to anonymisation and snowball sampling (Norman, 2009) maintaining a long-term contact with all participants was not possible. The insider positionality helped build trust among the initial respondents whose further references proved beneficial for data collection (Glasius *et al.*, 2018).

To collect online data through surveys, I adopted 'data minimisation' as a technique to avoid any personal or identifiable details of the respondents (Milliff, 2022) making data handling and anonymisation less complex and in keeping the data confidential through secured devices.

Online Limitation

While online research reduced the challenges faced by an on-field researcher, the online studies come with their own set of challenges. A key concern prior to data collection was the risk of dummy responses and socially desirable answering. To mitigate this, participants were accessed through trusted key stakeholders and personal acquaintances, which helped build rapport and enhance the authenticity of the responses.

The online survey data was an essential part of this study but due to lack of contact between the respondents and the researcher the access to observational data like body language and other signs could not be accessed. The sensitivity and security of the respondents demanded complete anonymisation which led to lack of contact with the respondents, hampering chances of future longitudinal research (Maslovskaya, Struminskaya and Durrant, 2022).

Transcribing and translating

Initially I planned to use transcribing and translating software and tools like NVivo for analysing political speeches. This resulted in alteration of context and meaning of the speeches. To mitigate this issue, I took an alternate approach by manually transcribing and coding the speeches which was possible due to my insider privilege of understanding vernacular languages. Manual transcription and translation proved effective for maintaining the contextual richness of the speeches; however, the considerable time required for this process posed a notable challenge within the research's limited timeframe which was mitigated by adopting purposive sampling while extracting speeches.

Framing Questionnaire

To understand the youth perception of the political speeches it was essential to keep the tone of the questionnaire neutral to reduce any chance of discomfort or aggravating the social polarisation which could have an impact on the respondents as well as the research (Art, 2016). An understanding of the 'Red Lines'³ and social and political dynamics helped in developing the questionnaire without hurting sentiments. Additionally having a balanced approach helped the questions sound harmless (Glasius *et al.*, 2018). Pilot surveys were also conducted, and the questionnaire shared with local scholars to minimise any unconscious bias or sensitive wording.

Flexible data collection/ Analysis strategy

Flexibility in data collection strategies was an essential step in collecting data as the initial plans had to be changed in the data collection phase. Extracting data through random sampling was a dead end considering the time constraints of the research which would have provided extensive data on the political tone and discourse but employing purposive sampling for political speeches helped save time and reduced chances of irrelevant speeches in analysis.

Collecting quantitative data through Google Forms brought in the challenge of low response rate through social media calls and requests in University and College groups. This was mitigated later by snowball sampling and recommendations from acquaintances.

Flexibility and longer time for collecting data would increase the number of respondents. In a politically sensitive environment snowball sampling proved beneficial to gather participants and data especially among the marginalised and minority populations (Cohen and Arieli, 2011) who would require sufficient validation before responding even to the online surveys.

³ *The red lines are the issues that can lead to consequences for the respondent if discussed openly in authoritarian regimes (Glasius et al, 2017). Understanding red lines can help understand the political sensitivity and stigma around a topic and helps a researcher present research and questions (questionnaires) in a depoliticised and sensitive version.*

Reflexivity

In an authoritarian setting the researcher needs to be reflexive to minimise the researcher's bias. As an insider researcher the researcher should be reflective of one's own positions (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli, 2021) and contemplate one's wellbeing due to exposure to sensitive information. I employed reflexive journaling and discussion with peers which helped me reduce prejudices and helped me look beyond my personal experiences and exposure to violence, marginalisation and community's prejudice (Thomas, 2018) which would have led to biased and skewed results.

Conclusion

This study helped me realise the impact an authoritarian regime can have on academic integrity, research life cycle and impact. Researchers in an authoritarian setting must make key considerations in every part of their research to keep themselves as well as the respondents safe. This article reflects on the key challenges, pitfalls and learnings of my research on the authoritarian discourse and its impact on the youth. While this study comprised online data collection it contributed to the scholarly debate on authoritarianism, polarisation and discourse benefiting the youth, marginalised religious and political groups and civil society at large. Specifically, the reflections from this study will benefit future scholarly work not only in India but also in South Asia and authoritarian regimes worldwide.

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AI was used for Grammar

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Researching Between Conviction and Constraint in Postgraduate Studies

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Abstract

Academic research is often narrated retrospectively as a coherent and linear journey: a clearly defined question, a carefully chosen method and a set of outcomes that appear to follow logically from the initial design. Yet for many postgraduate researchers, the lived experience of research is far messier. It is shaped not only by intellectual curiosity, but also by funding priorities, institutional agendas, supervisory expectations and personal commitments that do not always align neatly with what is considered academically “safe” or strategically valuable. This article reflects on my own research lifecycle as a postgraduate researcher in Sociotechnical Futures and Digital Methods, focusing on the decision-making processes that underpin my research design and the persistent tension between academic and funding interests on the one hand and personal, political and ethical motivations on the other. Rather than presenting my research as a stable project with a fixed trajectory, I explore it as a negotiated and evolving process, marked by uncertainty, compromises and reorientation. By situating this reflection within broader discussions around creativity, impact and knowledge production, I argue that moments of tension and apparent failure are not peripheral to the research lifecycle, but central to how postgraduate researchers learn to navigate academia and to imagine what their work is ultimately for. Postgraduate research projects, which are often exploratory and developmental in nature, may generate impact not only through definitive findings, but through the process of learning to ask better questions and engaging in informal, yet meaningful, scholarly discussions.

Funding, Framing and the Politics of Research Questions

For context, my postgraduate research focuses on virtual influencers. Virtual influencers are computer-generated characters, often referred to as CGI or AI influencers, that perform roles similar to those of human influencers on social media (Sookkaew and Saephoo, 2021). They are typically designed to resemble real people and are often created by marketing agencies with clear commercial objectives. However, this was not the focus of my initial research proposal. Throughout my research journey, my proposal had to change and adapt to secure institutional support. Funding frameworks frequently prioritise innovation, impact and policy relevance, yet these categories are far from neutral. Drawing on my own experience, as well as conversations with other researchers, it became clear that such priorities carry implicit assumptions about what kinds of research are considered valuable, who they are for, and which forms of knowledge are worth producing. In my case, this meant reframing my skills and interests into a project that aligned with broader institutional

agendas around digital innovation and social impact. A decisive turning point occurred when I applied for a scholarship with a clearly defined thematic focus on virtual influencers. Applicants were required to design a research project centred on these emerging digital figures. Although I had never heard of virtual influencers before, I was immediately intrigued and recognised an opportunity to connect my existing knowledge in marketing, the corporate world and media studies, as well as my interests in inequality, activism and social media platforms, with this emerging phenomenon. This process ultimately led to the development of my research question:

What role do virtual influencers play in promoting social justice on Instagram?

While this framing enabled the project to move forward institutionally, it also introduced a persistent tension between the critical questions I wanted to ask and the instrumental changes required to legitimise them. Prior to applying for the scholarship, my interests lay in some of the most critical, marginalised and institutionally under-supported forms of media activism and discrimination. For example, the lived experiences of independent journalists reporting from conflict zones, content analysis of extreme forms of online propaganda or niche online counter-movements seeking to challenge dominant narratives. Now, however, my research requires me to analyse marketing tools, market trends, corporate dynamics and forms of bland and synthetic brand and commodity activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012), positioning me as an "expert" in a field I had not originally set out to study. Yet, this redirection was also the condition that made my doctoral research possible. It provided access not only to funding, but to academic spaces, professional networks and opportunities for intellectual development. In this sense, pursuing this topic became both a compromise and a strategic entry point into academia, one that I hope will eventually allow me greater freedom to pursue the topics that first drew me to research. This experience raised a series of uncomfortable but necessary questions: to what extent does funding shape not only the scope of research, but also its underlying values? How much critical edge is lost or strategically softened through the process of academic translation?

When I first imagined becoming a sociologist, I did not consider the many variables that would shape my academic career. I was motivated primarily by a desire to make the world a fairer place and to look after those who are less seen. A few years into my doctorate, I still find myself grappling with these conflicting feelings. On the one hand, I am progressing through my PhD and developing professionally: I have travelled to conferences, delivered presentations, met fellow researchers and grown intellectually. None of this would have been possible without institutional funding. On the other hand, I continue to question whether I would have chosen this particular field of specialisation in the absence of funding constraints, and what it means, ethically and intellectually, that such choices are so deeply shaped by financial necessity.

Why I Research: Motivation Beyond Curiosity

I still remember my first sociology module during my undergraduate studies in Italy. The professor opened the class with a simple question: "What does a sociologist look like?" Few people attempted an answer; most of us just looked confused. After a pause, she offered her own: "A sociologist looks like the odd, silent person sitting alone at the end of a bar, watching everyone else interact and trying to make sense of it." The room remained uncertain. She continued: "That's because sociologists are interested in how people relate to one another through everyday, small and seemingly mundane actions, like sitting at a bar with friends, and in uncovering the deeper, more complex meanings about society that are embedded within those moments". She then went on to show us a range of sociological texts that focused on the most mundane, overlooked or even taboo aspects of social life, such as public toilets (Molotch and Norén, 2010), nightlife (May, 2014) and sex work (Grant, 2014), among others. At that moment, my image of what it meant to be a sociologist began to take shape. A sociologist, I realised, was someone who cared about the unnoticed; someone who saw value in the smallest actions and refused to take the social world for granted. It was someone who questioned the assumption that things simply are the way they appear to be; someone who quietly observed environments and noticed what others overlook or accept as normal. That was who I wanted to be.

My initial motivation to pursue doctoral research was driven by a mix of intellectual fascination and a desire (perhaps shaped by idealism and a youthful sense of omnipotence) for a fairer world. I was drawn to questions of power, representation and inequality in digital cultures, particularly in relation to online activism; issues that felt both academically generative and socially urgent. During my master's degree, I read *Twitter and Tear Gas* by Zeynep Tufekci (2017) and *Empowered* by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018). Both works explore how social media and digital technologies have reshaped contemporary protest movements by allowing messages to spread rapidly and mobilise large numbers of people (Tufekci, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018). At the same time, they show how this speed and visibility can undermine movements' long-term sustainability and political effectiveness (Tufekci, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018). These readings profoundly shaped my thinking. They led me to question the digital environments I inhabited as a social media user and activist and inspired me to pursue these questions further through my own research. However, enthusiasm alone rarely sustains a research project. As I could not self-fund my PhD, I had to seek institutional funding. From its earliest stages, my research was, therefore, also shaped by external structures of validation: funding calls, institutional research priorities and dominant trends within my field. These forces subtly but powerfully determined which questions were considered timely, fundable or legitimate. In this sense, my motivation to research was already entangled with a need to translate personal interests into academically recognisable and desired forms. This translation process required compromise.

I had to abandon the idea of pursuing certain research topics, as they were already extensively explored within academia. Given the constraints of PhD funding, timelines and my own level of experience, it felt difficult to propose a project that could offer a sufficiently original or distinctive contribution within fields that were already extensively discussed by established academics. At the same time, it was not only a matter of identifying the “right” topic, but also the “right” methodological approach. While the proposal did not need to be perfect or fully methodologically developed since it would inevitably evolve throughout the doctoral journey, it did need to appear original, innovative and compelling enough to stand out among many competing applications. This placed considerable pressure on me as an early-career researcher. In focusing on how to design a project that would be fundable and competitive, I often found myself losing sight of why I wanted to conduct the research in the first place. During the reviewing process and applications, certain aspects of my initial research interests were framed as too broad, too simplistic or insufficiently “relevant” according to institutional expectations and supervisory guidance. As a result, my proposal kept changing toward the direction of what was expected from me rather than what I expected from my work; motivation became something I had to actively protect and continually renegotiate throughout the research lifecycle, rather than a stable foundation I could rely on.

Who Is My Research For and Why? Rethinking Concepts of Audience and Impact

Another recurring tension in my research concerns the question of audience: who am I writing for? Like many researchers, I am motivated by a desire to care for others; to attend to those made invisible, much like the solitary observer at the bar who notices what others overlook. Yet it is unlikely that those I most wish to support will ever read my work, as not many non-academics like to spend their evening reading PhD papers and early researchers’ publications. Although some scholars experiment with different forms of non-academic communication, like blogs and social media, often the primary audience for research is the academic community. Recognition from scholars in the field is necessary to build credibility and status within academia. This legitimacy, in turn, creates the conditions that make it possible to effect change beyond academic spaces. At the same time, I must also write for myself, both to sustain a viable academic career and to remain faithful to my passions, values and ethical commitments. Balancing these audiences can be challenging and mutually exclusive at times. Writing for academic journals often requires specialised language and theoretical depth, while communicating with non-academic audiences demands clarity, accessibility and ethical sensitivity. Nevertheless, my passions and interests are not always considered relevant or “safe” within the contexts in which I seek to discuss them and, as my PhD process shows, they must be constantly negotiated. This tension prompted me to reconsider what is meant by *research impact*.

If I cannot directly engage with those who might most benefit from my research, in what sense can my work be said to have impact? Is contributing to scholarly debate sufficient or does impact require more tangible forms of engagement and change? Existing literature suggests that the value of research is often intertwined with neoliberal ideas of economics, success and media visibility (Belfiore, 2015). Such definitions risk overlooking the slower, less visible forms of impact generated through critical scholarship such as reframing debates, challenging dominant assumptions or equipping future researchers with more reflexive analytical tools (Belfiore, 2015; Burawoy, 2005). I believe that impact can also happen in subtle forms of influence, such as shifting conversations, raising uncomfortable questions or validating lived experiences. Not only that, but impact is not only external, it is internal. Impact should not just be framed as the final stage of the research lifecycle: something that happens after publication, dissemination or policy engagement. My experience suggests a different perspective. Throughout my PhD I have had moments of impact not only through formal outputs, but through conversations with peers, teaching experiences and reflexive shifts in my own thinking. These moments are difficult to pinpoint, yet they have profoundly shaped both the direction of my research and my understanding of its purpose. Hence, I argue that impact is not a discrete outcome, but an ongoing process that unfolds throughout the research journey. This process-oriented view of impact also challenges the pressure to produce immediate or easily demonstrable outcomes. Instead, impact may be understood as a process of learning to ask better questions and engaging in informal discussions, rather than simply providing definitive answers and formal outputs.

Conclusion: Research as an Ongoing Negotiation

Reflecting on my research lifecycle reveals that motivation, conflicts and impact are deeply interconnected. The tension between academic, funding and personal interests is not something to be resolved once and for all, but a condition of contemporary research practice, particularly for postgraduate researchers navigating precarious and competitive academic environments. Rather than presenting this tension as a weakness, I argue that it can be a source of critical insight. Attending to moments of discomfort and compromise allows researchers to better understand the structures that shape knowledge production and to make more intentional choices about how they engage with them. This is not to suggest that researchers should passively conform to institutional agendas or set aside critical thinking in pursuit of funding. On the contrary, there remains a responsibility to challenge institutions to support diverse, critical and socially meaningful research, and to advocate for more equitable access to funding and resources. Equally, researchers must strive to remain intellectually and ethically committed to their values, rather than pursuing topics solely for strategic or institutional gain. Ultimately, my research journey has taught me that research is less about arriving at certainty and more about learning how to remain accountable to ideas, to communities and to oneself, within systems that rarely make such accountability easy.

AI Statement

I have used AI for proofreading

Funding Statement

SWDTP studentship

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'Who Is My Thesis For?': Communicating Doctoral Research Across Academic and Public Contexts

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As a PhD student, writing a thesis can at times seem like an insurmountable task. It is by far the most important process of *my* life and leaves *me* with more questions than I could possibly think up answers to. The one which irks me the most is the question of '*who is my thesis for?*' Certainly, there is an institutional aspect of professional development: if *I* wish to work in academia, then completing *my* PhD is typically par for the course. In this case, *my* thesis is for whatever institution *I* go on to work for. Naturally, *I* have great passion for the topic, which I won't directly explore here, and enjoy both the highs and lows of the research project. I will not deny that my PhD is for *me*. *I* feel privileged to be able to undertake it. In many ways, the process of completing *my* thesis benefits *me* - intellectually, professionally and (hopefully) financially. Yet, I cannot neatly answer the above question. The work is not only mine. I am indebted to those who make the work possible, *participants, collaborators, funders, and publics*, without whom the project would neither exist nor matter. And still, I suspect - in fact, I'm almost certain - that none of the people who enabled this work will read the thesis itself. This, in turn, reopens the very question I began with: *who is my thesis really for? And what then do I owe to those it isn't?*

This complex and self-referential question is one which I continue to wrestle with as I complete my PhD. So far, much of the process has been about *me*: my chosen research project, individualised research praxis, personal choices over examiners, among other things. These peculiarities of the PhD process certainly impact how the above question is framed, but it is not one which I can provide a simple answer for. I was confronted with this tension far earlier than anticipated when I came across the backlash to Dr Ally Louks' doctoral research. Louks posted a simple congratulatory post on the social media platform *X* (formerly: *Twitter*) (Louks, 2024c). Alongside a picture of herself holding a hardbound copy of her thesis - titled: '*Olfactory Ethics: The Politics of Smell in Modern and Contemporary Prose*' (Louks, 2024b), Louks included a small caption saying "Thrilled to say I passed my viva with no corrections and am officially PhDone". In her own words, "the photo was taken just before I submitted the copy to Cambridge University Library, the final requirement for my PhD to be approved" (Louks, 2024a), with the post initially gaining "traction among kind strangers celebrating my achievement" (*ibid.*). Like many doctoral students, I look forward to that moment - however far away it seems - when I too might post a similar photograph. It feels like a well-earned rite of passage, a small act of recognition for years of care, effort,

and exhaustion; a somewhat fitting end to years of hard work. However, what followed could not have been further from the spirit of that moment.

Within hours, Louks' self-congratulatory post was swiftly attacked. Whilst I will not quote any direct replies here, both Louks and her thesis were subject to bigoted, derogatory, sexist, sexualised, and profoundly hateful comments. I believe I speak for all - both within and outside of academia - when I say that I fundamentally disagree with the abuse that Louks received. There will always be a place for research that takes seriously how sensory depictions intersect with politics, identity, and power. I encourage you, especially those also undertaking doctoral research, to read up on her story and follow her ongoing discussions on social media. Still, the hostility she faced stayed with me. The scale of the abuse was immense, with the post being "viewed more than 100 million times, receiving over 20,000 reposts and accumulating 11,000 comments" (Morgan, 2025). What struck me most was her calm and principled responses online, a stark reminder that intellectual generosity and grace are themselves forms of resistance. Still, I must admit it is a kind of resistance which I would dread having to perform.

At this stage of my doctoral journey, Louks' experience prompted me to think more critically about the symbiotic relationship(s) between us as researchers, and the public cultures which largely constitute our research within the social sciences and humanities. What does Louks' experience say to the relationship between the academy and the publics who encounter our work, often stripped of its disciplinary context? What too does it reveal about the communication of doctoral research theses: those long, careful texts written for examiners rather than audiences, and rarely designed for public consumption? This article has so far been full of unanswered questions. Through the following sections I return to those same concerns within the broad context of social research as a means of thinking through what it means to research, write, and communicate responsibly. My central argument is simple: the doctoral thesis is a necessarily specialised form, but once research enters open and digital public circulation, scholars should reflect on their responsibility to translate that work beyond the examined document. A thesis designed for everyone becomes a thesis for no one. Yet, Louks' response to virality also shows that specialisation need not entail communicative closure: through patience, clarity, and a willingness to reframe her work across different media, she demonstrated how rigorous scholarship can still be made more publicly legible.

Evidence of a Problem? The 'Academy' vs The 'Public':

For some news outlets and individual commentators, the backlash to Louks' post was framed as an example of the academy's (apparent) separation from the 'real world' (e.g.: Jennings, 2024; Spector, 2024; Luse, 2025). The New York Post coverage smarmily quips "[o]nline critics needed smelling salts after reading what they deemed to be woke-sounding academic gobbledygook" (Spector, 2024). Such forms of ridicule frequently attach themselves to

humanities research, rather than to the natural sciences or STEM; the humanities and social sciences remain uniquely vulnerable to accusations of irrelevance or indulgence. The point isn't that 'the public' rejected Louks' work; it's that doctoral writing is increasingly encountered in public contexts that strip it of its genre and nuance, abstracting the work away from its purposes in ways STEM research is less often forced to endure. As academics, we may view this through the tricky lens of 'anti-intellectualism' and hostility to expertise. However, Louks' experience also points to something deeper: the fraught relationship between specialised academic writing and the wider publics who increasingly encounter it outside its original context.

Yet, I am hesitant to treat the responses to Louks' post as any substantive reflection of 'public' opinion. The actions of a few highly-vocal, profoundly hateful, and, perhaps, digitally-astute accounts do not speak for the 'people'. As Marwick and boyd (2010) show, visibility on social media is shaped through performative and networked dynamics rather than neutral public deliberation. Gillespie (2018) similarly reminds us that platforms actively organise what becomes visible, while Bishop (2019) shows how visibility itself is governed and managed. Then, what circulates as online outrage can be viewed through a lens of digital infrastructures - algorithms, visibility and virality logics, platform cultures - rather than as a mirror of social consensus. Under Musk's guidance, X has recently become a place where "conservative trades, anti-woke crypto bros, and mask-off white supremacists enjoy a platform increasingly friendly to their extremism" (Jennings, 2024), with many academics vacating the platform for the greener pastures of Bluesky (Mallapaty, 2024; McIntyre, 2024). Moreover, the discourse around Louks' post generally adopted a populist and misogynistic tone: a framing of 'ordinary people' revolting against an imagined 'academic elite'. In Hofstadter's (1966) classic formulation, anti-intellectualism depends on suspicion toward forms of expertise coded as elitist; Apple (2013) and Nichols (2017) then show how that suspicion is reproduced in contemporary public culture. The discourse around Louks' thesis drew precisely on that grammar, recasting a doctoral project as evidence of academic excess.

This narrative was largely driven by "right-wing accounts who...mocked the idea of [the] thesis" (Louks, in: Luse, 2025). Many of these accounts repositioned the incident within broader culture-war debates - invoking "alt-right misogyny, the anti-woke crowd, [and] calls for disinvestment in the humanities" (Luse, in: Luse, 2025). In their reframing, Louks and her thesis were reduced to a symbolic proxy - a convenient carrier for a broader, politically and misogynistically-charged narrative about what the humanities and social sciences are imagined to represent (see, also: Laclau, 2005). Yet the magnitude of this discourse must be interpreted cautiously. What appeared as large-scale public revolt was, in reality, intensified by the closed circuits and amplificatory tendencies of X's echo chambers, with populist rhetorics distorting the reach and representativeness of localised online sentiment.

Still, in recognising the potential locality of this issue, we must be careful not to reproduce the familiar trope of the academic under siege, isolated in their so-called 'ivory tower' (Mahtani, 2006; Shapin, 2012; Leonelli, 2023). Amongst the hordes of abuse and right-wing populist narratives, some commentators expressed more genuine intrigue and, at times, discomfort; discomfort about funding allocation, about knowledge valuation and dissemination. These concerns, when raised responsibly and politely, are not without merit. They point to something often missed in culture-war retellings of incidents like this: that the relationship between universities and the publics they serve is, and has always been, symbiotic. Academic research does not occur in a vacuum. As Orr (2002, p. 37) states, it is "crucial that we see the academy as an institution that is very much part of the 'real world'". It is resourced, legitimised, and ultimately judged within wider societal contexts; equally, many social, cultural, and political advances rely on the forms of inquiry and critique that universities cultivate. Whilst I believe Louks has been cautious with the use of this term, the counter-rhetorics of 'anti-intellectualism' espoused by several media outlets (pace Khan, 2024; Al-Badry, 2025; Luse, 2025) do little to mend or improve this relationship.

To dismiss such genuine concerns as 'anti-intellectual' risks reinforcing the very hierarchies and exclusions that critical scholarship and Open Access doctrines often seek to challenge. Following Leonelli's *Philosophy of Open Science* (2023, p. 18), we must aim to move "beyond the strictures and narrow-mindedness associated with the idea of academia as Ivory Tower" through more equitable, accessible, and participative forms of communication and knowledge production. The hostility that emerged was deeply unfair, yet it also made me reflect on the need for humility in how we present our work; a humility which Louks continues to demonstrate. The conditions that enable academic research - time, funding, intellectual space - are not guaranteed for everyone, and not everyone will immediately understand or value what we study. When our research, often shaped by disciplinary conventions and linguistic complexity, enters publics unfamiliar with those codes, we must work with those who show genuine intrigue to foster dialogue rather than deepen the sense of distance. Such distance is not only one of knowledge but of communication: how we write, how we frame, and how we make meaning.

Communicating Doctoral Research Beyond the Thesis:

Relating back to Louks' initial post, the public outcry initially centred on her doctoral *thesis*; that looming c. 80,000-word document which I am still yet to complete. My focus on the thesis here is, therefore, deliberate. It is the principal examined document through which the doctorate is awarded, as well as the specific object around which the reaction to Louks' research coalesced. Written to satisfy a highly specific set of institutional and disciplinary expectations, the thesis is ultimately read by only a small number of examiners. In that sense, the thesis answers the question of *who it is for* quite straightforwardly: it is for assessment, for demonstrating rigour, competence, and originality within a defined field. This context directly shapes what we write, but, more significantly, how we write,

encouraging forms of argumentation, citation, and linguistic density that are legible to insiders but far less so to wider publics. The thesis is not designed for broad public consumption, nor should it necessarily be judged as though it were.

I certainly do not propose a critique or dilution of the thesis as an examination genre (see, also: Cook *et al.*, 1998, 2001). Complex arguments often require specialist prose, and the PhD examination process is one which has stood the test of time. However, we must recognise that doctoral research does not remain enclosed within a purely examinational frame. Increasingly, universities mandate open-access deposits and digital availability, meaning that a document written for a handful of specialists can circulate through institutional repositories, search engines, and social media. When a thesis written for examiners becomes unexpectedly public, the question of 'who it is for?' takes on a more complicated resonance. Open Access, in this sense, is a public good: it ensures that publicly-funded PhD research is (mostly) not locked behind institutional paywalls (see: Leonelli, 2023). However, open access alone does not guarantee access in any meaningful sense (Pyati, 2007; Beall, 2013). Even within academia, few people outside of the immediate supervisory or examination team read theses in full; most of us encounter doctoral research later, in the compressed forms of articles, conference papers, or book chapters. Those more digestible forms, often streamlined and edited versions of thesis chapters, are then frequently held behind paywalls (see, also: James, 2020). This points to an underlying problem of circulation. We, as researchers, are then held to provide routes in for those outside of the immediate disciplinary conversation to uphold the principles of open access and the doctoral process.

A PhD is not reducible to the thesis alone; it is a process. The years we spend learning, critiquing what counts as legitimate knowledge, and reformulating 'proper' arguments are certainly encoded within the thesis' assessment-led frame. Yet, if we hold that as the ultimate standard, we are at risk of reproducing the very distances we claim to critique - distances of language, access, and legitimacy. Moving beyond the thesis is not a dilution of our scholarship. It is a learned skill to broaden our impacts and include publics who may feel excluded by the specialised registers of academia. Louks' responses modelled a rare combination of intellectual patience and clarity. Whilst simultaneously standing unequivocally against outright hate, Louks has consistently translated her work through a variety of media. She continues to engage with genuine discourses on social media, often referencing popular culture events to both aid understanding and highlight the project's importance. The numerous podcasts, media interviews and non-academic writings she has done vary the genre or medium of consumption, widening potential engagement (e.g.: Louks, 2024a, 2025). Defensiveness and ignorance often harden and reinforce distance. Louks' approach of strategic openness has, instead, widened audiences and deepened engagement. This matters to us, as researchers, as communication is no longer seen as optional; it is an integral part of meaningful public research.

So, I return to the question I began with: 'Who is my thesis for?' Whilst I cannot claim to answer this question outright, Louks' experience and my own reflections on the PhD process have led me to a more fundamental principle. A thesis for everybody is - in fact - a thesis for nobody. No single genre, nor linguistic style, can satisfy every audience. We may still be beholden to academic praxis for our submitted thesis, but we must also recognise and take responsibility for how it travels. No single text will please everyone. A commitment to translation, through digital abstracts, blogs, public-facing threads, podcasts, workshops, and collaborative outputs, broadens understanding without sacrificing the specificity that makes scholarship worth doing. If doctoral research is personal in process but public in encounter, then communicating responsibly is not an optional add-on. It is part of the work.

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I acknowledge the following uses of GenAI tools in this article. I have used GenAI tools to:

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- give me feedback on a draft.
- proofread and correct grammar or spelling errors.

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A Reflective Journey Through the Research Lifecycle: An International PhD Student's Perspective

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Abstract

The research lifecycle is rarely linear. Rather, it is characterised by ambiguity, adaptation, and the continuous negotiation between the known and the unknown. This reflective article traces the author's personal trajectory towards becoming an independent researcher. It details the process of identifying a meaningful research focus, navigating the transitional challenges of relocating to a new country and pivoting to a new research topic, and acquiring the methodological skills required to work within a cross-disciplinary field. Drawing on these experiences, the article offers four practical strategies for early-career peers who encounter similar challenges as they navigate the research landscape.

Keywords: *Research Lifecycle; Early Career Researchers; Doctoral Students; International Students; Academic Writing*

Engaging with the Research Process

Life is shaped by the experiences we accumulate. As a PhD student in psychology, I have gathered these experiences by approaching change with an experimental mindset and using it to support personal growth across my research lifecycle. My life path took a decisive turn during my third year of undergraduate study—a period I now view as my true entry into the scientific world. Before this point, I had never imagined developing a career in psychological research, let alone publishing articles or pursuing a PhD abroad.

This shift began the moment I joined a research group focusing on psychometric assessment in the third year of my undergraduate study at a university in south-eastern China. Prior to this, psychology felt abstract, and grand theories such as Freud's psychoanalytic theory seemed distant and intangible. However, joining the research group demystified my understanding of how the scientific process works. Put simply, research often involves bridging the gap between theory and empirical investigation. This is a complex challenge, and the methodological approaches used to achieve this goal vary considerably across disciplines.

At an early stage, I struggled to find the 'right answer' to my research questions. However, I gradually realised that research goes beyond simply learning what is already known, and that there are no truly 'right', 'wrong' or 'standard' answers. After gaining practical experience through different research projects, I learnt that particular questions or topics can be

interpreted differently across perspectives or remain unresolved because of mixed findings.

Research can be understood as a cycle of proposing theory-driven questions, identifying gaps in the literature, collecting and analysing data, and disseminating findings. Researchers live within a space of inherent uncertainty, balancing the 'known' and the 'unknown'. While stepping into the unknown can be daunting, it is also what makes the process exciting, driving us to elucidate the mechanisms of human behaviour. For me, research in psychology is more than an exercise in curiosity; it is also a process that cultivates critical thinking and reshapes my worldview.

Navigating the uncertainty of the research process requires identifying a topic of genuine research interest, which can then serve as the foundation for preliminary experimentation. Although the relationship between motivation and action is often viewed as a reciprocal loop, concrete and actionable steps are essential for translating theoretical interests into empirical reality.

Embracing the Challenges of Change

Like many early-career researchers, I encountered common developmental uncertainties: determining whether my long-term career goal lay in academia or industry; developing the adaptive capacity required to live and study in a new cultural context; and cultivating a distinct research focus. Recognising that theoretical contemplation alone could not resolve these ambiguities, I realised the necessity of experiential learning. Consequently, I actively pursued diverse academic and professional opportunities to discover, through first-hand experience, which path best suited my strengths and interests.

To gain insight into the differences between academic and industry settings, I undertook an internship as a high-school psychology teacher during my undergraduate study and analysed educational assessment data for a commercial organisation after my MSc. These experiences were valuable and helped clarify where my true passion lay. I found myself drawn not merely to the practical application of data, but to understanding the mechanisms behind different phenomena. The thrill of interpreting findings and connecting them to the bigger picture strengthened my resolve to pursue a PhD, with my focus shifting from industry to academia.

In September 2024, I moved from my home city to Bath, UK, to commence my doctoral studies. This relocation and new academic chapter presented not only the challenge of acclimatising to a different cultural context, but also the need to establish effective working dynamics with supervisors across different disciplines. A crucial insight from my own journey—one that continues to serve me well—is that while identifying a project one is truly passionate about is vital when commencing a PhD, finding the 'right' supervisor and

cultivating a mutually supportive relationship is equally important (Nature, 2025; Nordling, 2025). Although developing this dynamic takes time, it can fundamentally enhance the overall research experience.

As someone who occasionally struggles with self-doubt and 'imposter syndrome', I have found timely feedback from my supervisory team essential for navigating uncertainty. Alongside constructive suggestions, their positive reinforcement and encouragement have consistently strengthened my confidence. Their interdisciplinary expertise has also provided diverse perspectives, allowing me to conceptualise my study more comprehensively.

At the same time, I chose to pursue a broader scope for my doctoral research, transitioning from narrowly defined subjects to a cross-disciplinary field. Specifically, I am investigating the association between antisocial behaviour and substance use in young people using a UK cohort study dataset. Venturing into this unfamiliar territory proved challenging. As an interdisciplinary topic, it extends beyond psychology to encompass psychiatry, criminology and criminal justice, epidemiology, public health, social policy, and medicine. While this has demanded a steep learning curve as I master unfamiliar theoretical frameworks and methods, I have found the chance to expand my skill set highly motivating and rewarding.

Ultimately, how we approach these transitions matters. Viewing change as a chance to grow, and committing the time it requires, can be profoundly beneficial to our academic journey. Conversely, resisting change can exacerbate the inherent friction of the process. As noted above, establishing a robust support network is essential for navigating this trajectory. The comprehensive support I have received from my supervisory team has not only sustained my motivation, but also equipped me with the skills and confidence needed to mature into an independent researcher.

Philosophy and Practical Strategies for the Research Journey

Drawing from these experiences, I have distilled four core reflections for those navigating similar challenges in their research trajectories. This guidance is particularly directed towards passionate, early-career international students. These insights progress from targeted academic strategies to broader, transferable principles applicable well beyond the scholarly domain.

The first is to prioritise the topic and let the question drive the method. Postgraduate students often fixate on research methodology, treating statistical proficiency as the main challenge. However, I have come to realise that the research topic and specific question are what truly matter. The capacity to formulate a novel and distinct question is the true mark of an independent researcher; methodologies, while essential, are simply the tools we use to answer it.

The second is to prioritise narrative flow over linguistic perfection. As a non-native English speaker, I initially viewed academic writing mainly as a linguistic challenge. However, experience has taught me that the core challenge is storytelling. A coherent narrative and robust logical organisation are fundamentally more important than native-level fluency. Linguistic proficiency does not naturally translate into scholarly writing; indeed, even native speakers often encounter difficulties without explicit academic training. While precise language is undeniably important, subject-matter expertise, structural integrity, and clear logical flow take precedence.

The third is to adopt a project-based approach to learning. Immersion is arguably the most effective strategy for mastering unfamiliar domains. Rather than attempting to absorb vast amounts of theory in isolation, the research process is best navigated incrementally. Building theoretical and methodological knowledge cumulatively, through direct hands-on engagement with empirical projects, is highly recommended.

The final strategy is to initiate action and embrace iterative refinement. Perfectionism can be acutely paralysing, frequently preventing a project from beginning at all. Instead of striving for immediate polish, it is more productive to embrace the unpolished preliminary draft and aim to produce a functional 'beta version'. Much like a complex software operating system, scholarly research develops through successive versions. Limitations can be addressed, methodologies refined, and arguments strengthened in subsequent iterations; however, one cannot iterate upon work that has not yet been produced.

Ultimately, the PhD experience is a challenging but deeply formative journey. Friction can create opportunities; in this sense, the process fosters profound personal and professional growth. It allows researchers not only to master new theoretical knowledge and methodological skills, but also to develop the resilience needed to face future difficulties. I have always believed that no substantial reward is achieved without hard work. Everyone faces challenges and uncertainties during the doctoral journey. By openly sharing my experiences, particularly the added complexities of being an international student adapting to a new cultural and academic context, I hope to normalise these struggles and offer tangible support to peers navigating a similar path.

In this doctoral marathon, we are running alongside one another. By sharing similar experiences and struggles, we can draw strength from each other as supportive peers. Supervisors can also act as essential coaches and running partners, offering direction when the path becomes confusing. Fundamentally, however, each researcher must remain willing to commit to the process and keep running.

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