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Islamic law perspectives and social experiences on stigma toward disabled people in Indonesia

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Introduction: Stigmatization of disabled individuals remains a significant issue in Indonesia, particularly in Makassar, despite the existence of legal protections. This issue is further complicated by the intersection of religious and cultural norms, especially in Muslim-majority contexts. Islamic law (Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah) provides a framework for dignity, intellect, and social justice, yet societal perceptions often contradict these principles. This study investigates how social stigma—manifested through harassment, insults, and negative labeling—aligns or conflicts with Islamic teachings on compassion and inclusion.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative interviews with key informants and quantitative survey data from 400 respondents, sampled using the Taro Yamane formula. The study examines the prevalence of stigma against disabled people and explores the role of Islamic perspectives in shaping societal attitudes.

Results: Findings reveal that stigma against disabled individuals in Makassar is deeply embedded in social structures, often reinforcing their marginalization. While Islamic teachings promote inclusivity and protection of dignity, cultural misinterpretations and lack of awareness contribute to inconsistent application. The quantitative data indicate a strong correlation between negative labeling and social exclusion, while qualitative insights highlight the role of religious leaders and societal norms in shaping public perception.

Discussion: The study highlights Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah as a potential framework to counter stigma and advocate for more inclusive policies. However, societal resistance and entrenched biases pose challenges to implementation. Addressing these issues requires enhanced public education, stronger legal enforcement, and community engagement to shift societal attitudes toward disability rights.

Conclusion: This research contributes to the discourse on Islamic social justice and disability rights, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to reducing stigma. Policy recommendations include involving disabled individuals in public decision-making, strengthening religious and legal discourse on inclusion, and promoting awareness campaigns to challenge societal prejudices. These efforts are essential to fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

KEYWORDS

disabled people, Islamic law perspectives, social experiences, Maqasid al-Shariah, stigma

Introduction

Disability is often viewed as a disease, a curse, and a social problem (Grinker, 2020; Healy, 2020; Dawn, 2023). Although every social institution guarantees justice for all members of society, social reality frequently reveals a dichotomy in the division of social groups based on impairment, leading to marginalization in social life and diversity (Jay et al., 2021).

Lessons from various countries on the fulfillment and enforcement of social justice are reflected in the laws and regulations (Svara and Brunet, 2020; Wooldridge and Bilharz, 2022), and implemented likes in Indonesia, the United States, the Netherlands, South Africa, and Australia. Indonesia upholds social justice through the 1945 Constitution (Harvelian et al., 2020), similar to other countries. The United States enforces the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Melnick, 2024), while the Netherlands implements the *Wet gelijke behandeling* (Equal Treatment Act) of 1994 (Blom, 1995). Similarly, South Africa and Australia enforce the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) (Govender, 2016), and the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 (Trlin, 1984), respectively, to ensure social justice without regard to background or physical condition.

In addition to the stringent laws and regulations concerning social justice known in various countries, religiously based legal frameworks offer an alternative worth considering. For instance, within Muslim communities, there is the concept of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah. This concept refers to the noble objectives of Islamic law, aimed at promoting human welfare and wellbeing (Rasool et al., 2020). It comprises five primary goals: the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Shihan et al., 2023). In social contexts, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah serves as a guiding principle for Muslims to balance individual rights and obligations with the welfare of the broader society (Husni et al., 2015). It emphasizes values such as compassion, justice, and tolerance as foundational in building a harmonious society. With a profound understanding of these legal objectives, Muslim communities are better positioned to approach social issues with a perspective that values both individual rights and communal wellbeing, encompassing equity, welfare, and social security.

Across international contexts, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah offers relevant guidance for addressing social issues and promoting justice within Muslim communities worldwide (Kasri et al., 2023). Its principles can be applied to evaluate existing policies or legal systems, ensuring the protection of fundamental rights while minimizing potential injustices. For example, on issues related to economic disparity or minority rights, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah provides a perspective grounded in the protection and welfare of all individuals, regardless of origin, race, or social status. Thus, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah serves not only as a moral foundation but also as a tool to drive social reform, contributing to the establishment of a fair and prosperous society.

The dynamics and demands of implementing social justice are not limited to the diversity of ethnicity, religion, race, and gender, but also include the appreciation and assurance of justice for impairment (Mladenov, 2016; Aliyu and Mustaffa, 2022). The fulfillment of the rights of disabled people is often not well-realized and faces significant challenges.

The treatment and perception of disabled individuals have been widely examined across different social and cultural contexts, often revealing substantial challenges. In Muslim-majority societies, both religious beliefs and cultural practices have been shown to either mitigate or intensify the stigma surrounding disability. Studies from countries such as Pakistan and Egypt suggest that while Islamic teachings on compassion and care for disabled individuals can reduce stigma, societal misunderstandings and misapplications of these teachings often contribute to further marginalization (Hussain et al., 2020; O'Dell, 2023). Additionally, research highlights that negative perceptions toward disabled individuals can lead to their exclusion, depriving them of their right to live fulfilling lives. Disabled Muslims, whether living in predominantly Muslim countries or as minority citizens, immigrants, or refugees in non-Muslim countries, encounter diverse challenges shaped by their unique circumstances (Ibrahim and Ismail, 2018).

Complementing these findings, Dossa (2009) examines the compounded marginalization faced by immigrant Muslim women with disabilities in Canada, illustrating how racial, gendered, and disability-based discrimination intersect to shape their experiences. Hussain (2005) similarly explores how South Asian disabled women in the UK negotiate their identities amidst patriarchy and ableism, while Turmusani (2001) delves into the impact of Islamic teachings and Middle Eastern cultural norms on disabled women's roles in society. Alnamnakani (2022) further adds to this body of research by uncovering how disabled Muslim women in the UK resist societal stigma and navigate intersecting identities. Despite the substantial contributions of these studies, a notable gap remains in research focusing on Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country. Indonesia's unique blend of religious, cultural, and social dynamics presents an important opportunity to explore how Islamic teachings and societal norms interact to shape the experiences and treatment of disabled individuals, particularly in urban contexts such as Makassar.

According to the 2021 report from the Central Statistics Agency (as shown in Figure 1), disabled people in Indonesia are categorized into eight groups: visual impairments, mobility impairments, memory issues, hearing impairments, communication difficulties, hand/finger impairments, self-care challenges, and emotional disturbances. The most prevalent disabilities are visual impairments, affecting 65% of the population, followed by mobility impairments at 38.3%. Despite these individuals being capable of accessing education, contributing to various employment sectors, and being regarded as equals in social status, the reality is that opportunities in education, employment, and public access remain limited, as their impairments are not perceived as severe.

One of the indicators of global disability development is the inclusivity index, a holistic measure of inclusive development that focuses on gender equality, religion, race/ethnicity, and disability across various domains such as violence outside the group, incarceration rates, political representation, immigration policies, refugees, and income inequality. Unfortunately, according to statistical data, Indonesia ranks 125th with a score of 26.5% in inclusive development. This figure is lower than that of developed countries and also lags behind other ASEAN countries, as illustrated in Figure 2. This fact leads to the perception that disabled people in Indonesia have not yet received adequate services.

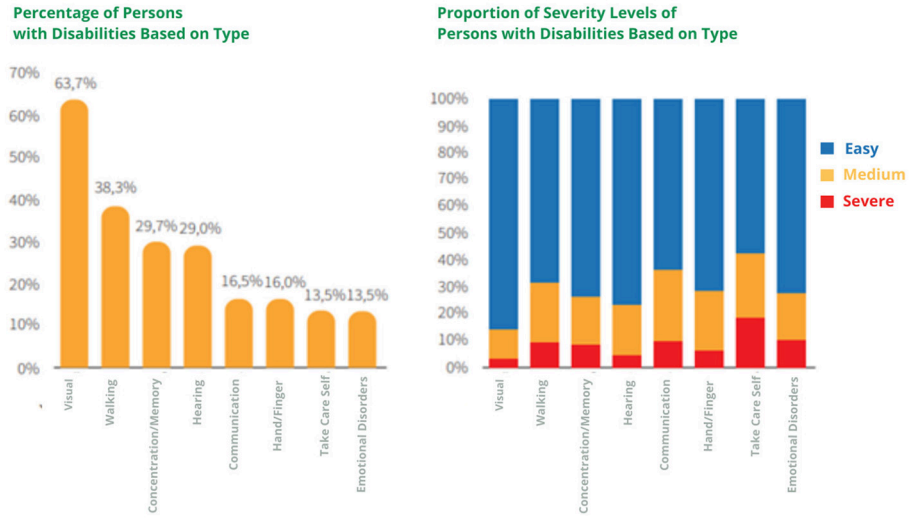

FIGURE 1
Percentage of disabled people by type and severity.

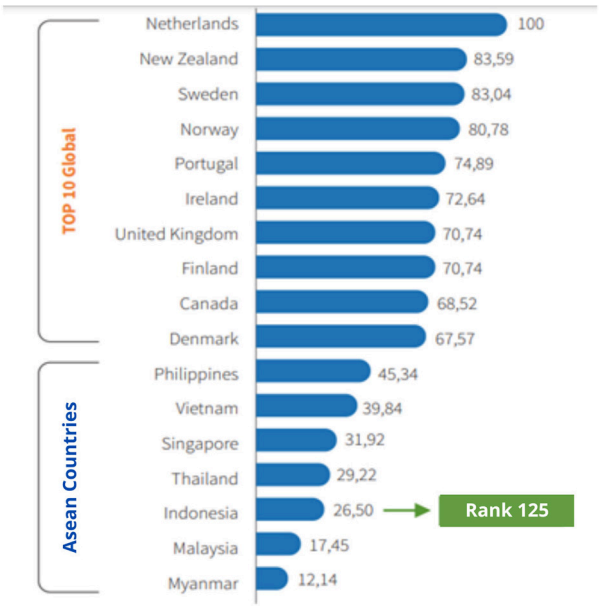

FIGURE 2
Global inclusivity index.

Various solutions must be pursued to address this issue, one of which is through religion (Sango and Forrester-Jones, 2017; Billah et al., 2023). Islam, as the majority religion in Indonesia, does not have classical scholarly discussions that specifically address disabled people. In the Qur'an and Hadith, there is no general term for disabled people, but rather the specific disabilities are mentioned, such as الأَعْمَى (the blind), as in Surah 'Abasa when the Prophet Muhammad was approached by a blind man (أَنْ جَاءَهُ الأَعْمَى) but responded with a frown. Other terms include أَنْ (the lame) and المَرِيْض (the sick) in Surah Al-Fatḥ, Chapter 48, Verse 17, as well as صُمّ (deaf) and بُكْم (mute) in Surah Al-Baqarah, Chapter 2, Verse 18. These terms do not always imply physical disabilities; sometimes they refer to those who refuse to see despite having normal eyesight. Similarly, in Hadith, there is no specific term for disabled people, but rather terms that refer to the specific disabilities they have.

In Arabic, the term "disabled people" is not recognized by either classical or contemporary jurists, but several general terms are used, such as أَصْحَابُ الأَعْذَار (those with excuses), which is found in several jurisprudential texts, including in al-Mabsūt by al-Ṭūsì, where a chapter is titled فَصْلٌ: فِي ذِكْرِ صَلَاةِ أَصْحَابُ الأَعْذَار: مِنَ المَرِيْضِ وَالمُتَحَوّل (Chapter: On the Prayers of Those with Excuses: Due to Illness or Distraction) (Al-Ṭūsi, 1992). Another term used is أَهْلُ البَلَاء (the people of affliction), referring to those who are tested by Allah with certain trials that prevent them from performing certain actions. Ibn Qudāmah is one of the scholars who used this term in his book al-Mugni (Al-Maqdisi, 1997).

These terms indicate that classical scholars have indeed discussed the rights of disabled people, even though a specific term for them had not been agreed upon. In contemporary terminology, several terms are used that relate to the concept of disability, such as ذُوالاِحْتِيَاجِ الخَاصَة (persons with special needs), as well as الإِعَاقَة and العَاهَة, all of which refer to individuals who have limitations in their activities, similar to what is now referred to as disability.

Despite the research conducted in other Muslim-majority regions, little has been done to explore the experiences of disabled people within Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country in the world. Indonesia's unique blend of religious, cultural, and social dynamics offers a critical lens through which to examine how Islamic teachings, and societal norms influence the treatment of disabled people. Although Indonesia has implemented laws and policies, such as the Law on Persons with Disabilities or disabled people, to protect the rights of disabled individuals, the lived realities of disabled Muslims in predominantly Islamic cities like Makassar remain under-researched.

Given the importance of understanding stigma in relation to both religious beliefs and societal practices, it is imperative to explore the stigma experienced by disabled Muslims in Indonesia.

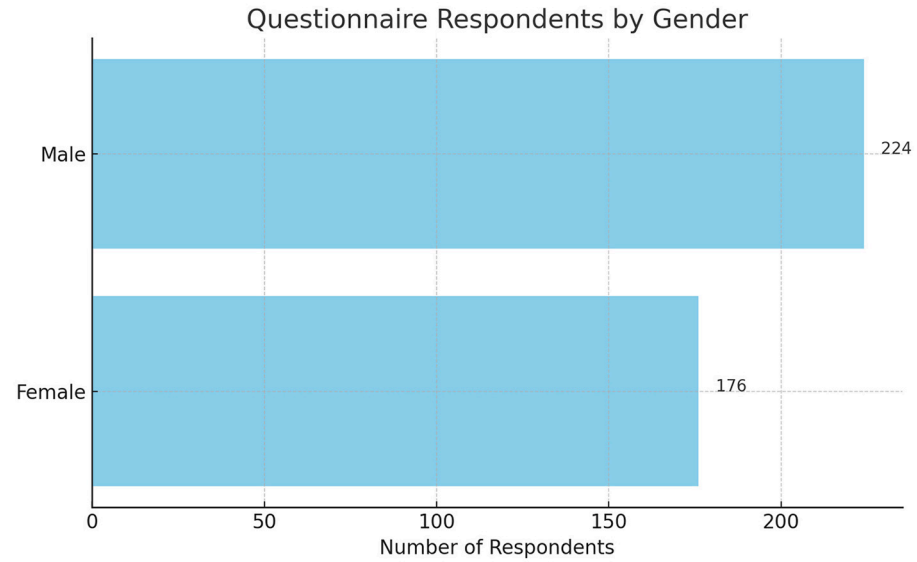

FIGURE 3
Distribution of respondents' gender.

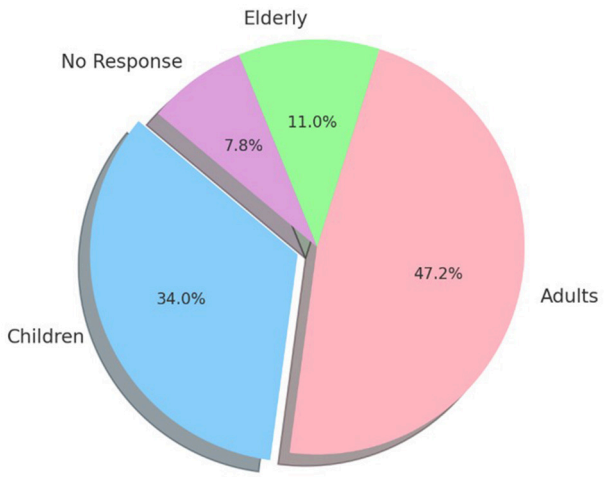

FIGURE 4
Age group distribution of respondents' interactions with disabled people.

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how Islamic teachings are interpreted and practiced in the daily interactions between society and disabled individuals in Makassar. Understanding these dynamics will contribute to a broader understanding of the role religion plays in shaping societal attitudes toward disability and will offer insights that may inform future policy and public education efforts aimed at reducing stigma in Islamic contexts.

The discussion is framed by the research rationale, which emphasizes the need to understand the complexities of stigma faced by disabled individuals in Makassar, the community's role in addressing such stigma, and the relevance of the Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah framework in fostering inclusion and dignity. From this foundation, the study is guided by three primary research questions:

1. What are the forms of stigma faced by disabled individuals in Makassar, and how do these manifest in their daily lives? This question seeks to explore and analyze the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of stigma as experienced by the disabled community.
2. What role does the community play in addressing stigma against disabled individuals in Makassar? This question examines the contributions and challenges of families, social groups, and religious organizations in combating stigma and promoting acceptance.
3. How does the Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah framework help recognize and enhance the dignity of disabled individuals based on empirical data? This question delves into the application of Islamic principles to reduce stigma and foster inclusion through legal, social, and educational measures.

Method

This study focuses on field research, which necessitates the direct collection of data (Richard Skogley and Sawyer, 2015). The researchers gather data that is relatively unknown or has not yet been studied, utilizing the concept of applied research. This applied research concept was combined with an inductive method to derive general conclusions from the findings in the field (Guest et al., 2013). The field research was conducted directly by the researchers in Makassar to collect on-the-ground facts about cases of social discrimination, harassment, and even assault against disabled people, which have drawn public attention and made Makassar a critical area for this study.

The research process adhered to ethical considerations in collecting data from participants, ensuring their rights were

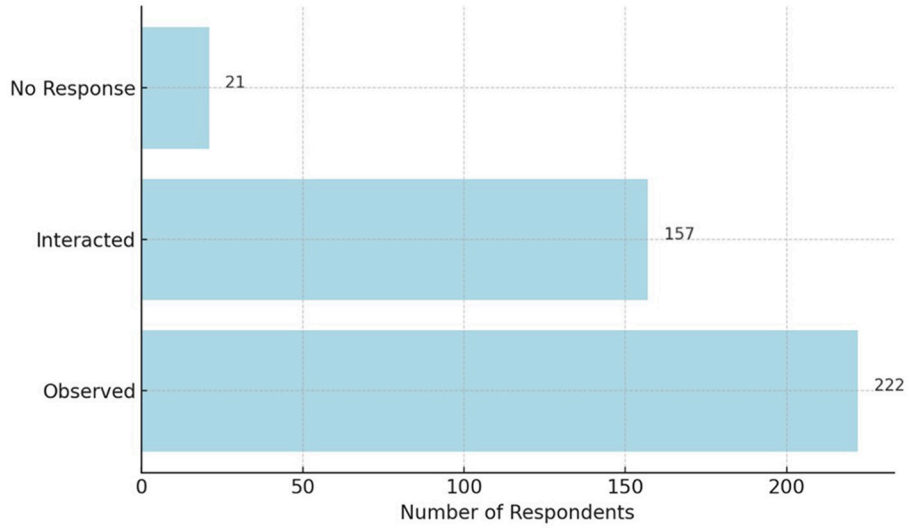

FIGURE 5
Form of interaction with disabled people.

respected in several keyways. Informed consent was obtained by asking participants if they were willing to participate, with no pressure to complete the questionnaire. Anonymity was maintained by not including participants names, thus protecting their privacy. Confidentiality was safeguarded to ensure that participants' information remained private. The principle of non-maleficence was upheld by providing participants with the option to agree or disagree with questions without any interference, ensuring no harm to their privacy. Finally, justice was ensured by treating all participants equally, without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, or other factors.

Qualitative research is chosen to uncover these perspective, making this study primarily focused on obtaining qualitative data (Fossey et al., 2002), which will be analyzed using the concept of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, particularly with the systems approach proposed by Auda (2008, 2011, 2016). The qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews were used as one of the methods of data collection, allowing flexibility while maintaining a focused line of inquiry. The interview questions were open-ended and designed to explore participants' views on disabled individuals, social interactions, and related stigma. The key participants, such as municipal government officials, activists who advocate for and support the rights of disabled people, respondents who are closely associated with stigma and religious leaders, were selected from the 400 respondents who participated in the study. We also involved disabled individuals as a informant who are at risk of facing stigma in public spaces to gain insights and perspectives from their experiences.

To support the qualitative data on stigma, the researchers employed quantitative methods as a tool to measure the level of stigma. Therefore, in this study, the researchers designed a questionnaire to identify respondents whose opinions on disabled people were sought. Quantitative methods served as supplementary data to confirm the level of stigma. The first use of quantitative data was in measuring stigma against disabled people in Makassar, using a Likert scale questionnaire (Joshi et al., 2015).

Participants included individuals in Makassar, Indonesia, who interact with disabled people, such as family members, neighbors, and service providers. A simple random sampling method was used to ensure broad representation from the general population, with the sample size calculated using the Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967). The study aimed to gather data from 400 respondents, a number determined to be statistically sufficient to represent the population (File, Population, and Sample section). Of these, 200 respondents identified as Muslim, while the remaining 200 chose not to disclose their religious background.

Inclusion criteria required participants to have interacted with disabled individuals in their daily lives, either personally or professionally, without restrictions based on age or gender. Exclusion criteria consisted of individuals who refused to provide consent to participate in the study.

Results

Analysis of respondents' characteristics and interactions with disabled people

The stigma experienced by disabled people in Makassar is based on data processed from 400 respondents, with the assumption that all samples have observed and interacted with disabled people across different age groups, from children to adults and the elderly. The data is categorized by gender, age group, and type of interaction, examining key stigma-related terms such as harassment stigma, insult stigma, and negative labeling of disabled people.

This study focuses on individuals who interact with disabled people. The decision to focus on individuals who interact with disabled people, rather than the disabled themselves, was made

to capture societal perspectives and behaviors that contribute to stigma. By studying those who interact with disabled people, such as family members, colleagues, or service providers, we can gain insight into how societal attitudes and biases are manifested. These individuals often play a role in shaping the environment and experiences that disabled people encounter daily, whether through conscious or unconscious behavior. Their perspectives can reveal how stigma is perpetuated or challenged in various social settings, as well as how Islamic law responds to such situations.

Moreover, studying the perspectives of non-disabled individuals helps highlight the social barriers—such as discrimination, exclusion, or misinformation—that disabled people face, which may not always be apparent when focusing solely on the reports of disabled people themselves. This external viewpoint is crucial for understanding the systemic and cultural sources of stigma affecting disabled people. Therefore, the responses from those who interact with disabled people provide valuable insights into the broader social dynamics that contribute to the stigma experienced by disabled people.

The questionnaire distributed by the researchers is categorized from several aspects, the first of which is gender. Based on the Figure 3, the majority of respondents who were willing to complete the questionnaire were male, numbering 224, while 176 were female.

The next aspect is age group. According to basic health research data, the age groups of disabled people can be categorized into three categories: children with disabilities, adults with disabilities, and elderly disabled people.

Figure 4 shows that respondents interacted most frequently with adults with disabilities, aged between 18 and 60 years (189 individuals), followed by children with disabilities (136 individuals). The least interaction was with elderly disabled individuals, aged 60 years and above (44 individuals), while 31 respondents did not provide an answer. This data provides researchers with the opportunity to understand the interaction process between society and disabled people who are in their productive years, focusing on their ability to work and obtain rights in public spaces.

The final aspect is the form of interaction. The type of interaction between respondents and disabled people is one of the factors measured by the researchers to understand the nature of these interactions.

Based on Figure 5, it is evident that most respondents only observed the condition of disabled people (222 individuals), although the number of respondents who directly interacted with disabled people is also significant (157 individuals), with 21 respondents not providing an answer. This finding serves as an initial argument for the high levels of stigma against disabled people in Makassar, as one of the indicators of stigma is the presence of mere perception.

How is the harassment and stigmatization of disabled people?

Stigma-related expressions such as harassment, insults, and negative labeling directed at disabled people. Harassment stigma can manifest against disabled people in the form of physical and psychological abuse, both verbal and non-verbal. The findings of this study show that respondents perceive disabled people as being physically different from themselves.

TABLE 1 Respondents on physical differences in disabilities.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	16	77.1875%	Very high
Disagree	108		
Agree	567		
Strongly agree	544		
Total score	1,235		

TABLE 2 Respondents on disabilities feeling burdened.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	40	62%	High
Disagree	312		
Agree	522		
Strongly agree	116		
Total score	990		

TABLE 3 Respondents on disability and physical vulnerability.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	115	53%	High
Disagree	290		
Agree	372		
Strongly agree	64		
Total score	841		

The perception of respondents in Table 1, who consider themselves physically different from disabled people, is categorized as very high. The strong perception among respondents that they are physically different from disabled people can lead to stigma, which may result in harassment. The physical differences and limitations experienced by disabled people can create opportunities for those who feel they can exploit these conditions.

> "People's pity makes us look different. But we are just as capable of doing our work as anyone else. Excessive pity can even lead to new forms of harassment and stigma against us." (Informant 2—Disabled Person)

> "I doubt they can do as well as others. Maybe it would be better if they were given less strenuous work. He is not capable of heavy work." (Participant 159)

TABLE 4 Respondents on disability vulnerability to inappropriate behavior.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	139	55%	High
Disagree	158		
Agree	423		
Strongly agree	160		
Total score	880		

TABLE 5 Respondents on witnessing forced kissing, rape, or exploitation of disabled people.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	244	39%	Low
Disagree	194		
Agree	126		
Strongly agree	64		
Total score	628		

> "I prefer to hire people without physical limitations. They would only slow down productivity. In a competitive work environment, their presence stands out significantly." (Participant 87)

The societal stigma regarding the burdensome nature of disabled people due to their condition is relatively high, as shown in Table 2. This indicates that there is a stigma suggesting that the physical form of disabled people is perceived negatively, which can lead to insults and even harassment.

The high level of societal stigma toward disabled people, which can lead to harassment, becomes evident when researchers explore the various forms of harassment, such as physical abuse.

Although Table 3 shows a significant number of respondents who disagree with the vulnerability of disabled people to being touched, the number of respondents who agree with this view is also considerable. This contributes to the high stigma of harassment against disabled people and suggests that the likelihood of harassment occurring in Makassar is relatively high. Additionally, respondents also believe that disabled people are at risk of being subjected to inappropriate behavior by those around them.

> "Because of their physical limitations, disabled people are vulnerable to ridicule. This perception is shaped by societal norms that view disability as a curse or merely as content for entertainment." (Participant 212)

> "The lack of convenient services for disabled individuals provided by the Makassar City Government in public facilities highlights the significant disparity in accessibility." (Participant 345)

According to respondents in Table 4, disabled people have a high likelihood of being subjected to inappropriate behavior due to the strong stigma against them. This clearly demonstrates the significant stigma directed toward disabled people, particularly in terms of harassment, with respondents believing that the likelihood of sexual harassment against disabled people is much higher.

> "The factors that lead to harassment of disabled people can stem from various causes, such as families feeling ashamed of having a child with a disability or families being unable to protect their disabled relatives. This is a reality we often hear as advocates." (Participant 22)

> "Building a harmonious family is key to ensuring that families can protect their members with disabilities." (Participant 56)

> "Environments prone to harassment, such as slum areas, lack of public spaces for disabled people, weak law enforcement, and lack of community oversight, all contribute to the high risk of harassment against disabled people. My friends and I have personally experienced this." (Informant 1—Disabled Person)

However, the high stigma regarding the likelihood of harassment contrasts with the responses given when researchers asked respondents to report incidents of harassment they had personally witnessed.

Respondents to the question reflected in Table 5 tend to report that the incidence of sexual harassment they have personally witnessed involving disabled people is relatively low. However, despite the low numbers, there is still a significant portion of respondents who agree with this statement.

Based on the data presented, it is evident that societal stigma in Makassar toward disabled people remains relatively high, particularly in terms of harassment. As a result, disabled people are always at risk of experiencing physical, psychological, verbal, and non-verbal harassment.

> "I rarely come across cases of witnessing forced kissing, rape, or exploitation of disabled people firsthand. However, I have read about such incidents several times in local online media." (Participant 122)

Therefore, there is a need for solutions that primarily focus on the wellbeing of disabled people, including the following: First, sexual education specifically for disabled people. Although it may be considered taboo, it is necessary for disabled people to understand which parts of their bodies can and cannot be touched by others, as well as to receive education on reproductive health supported by scientific data. Second, raising awareness about the prevention of sexual violence against disabled people. They should be taught about the dangers and consequences of harassment, particularly toward disabled people. Third, intervention by paying attention to events, perceiving situations that require immediate help, being responsible for addressing incidents, knowing how to act and report, so that disabled people should not remain silent in the face of harassment.

TABLE 6 Respondents on vulnerability of disabled people to insults.

Response	Number (T × C)	Percentage (Total score/Y × 100)	Result
Strongly disagree	127	56%	High
Disagree	164		
Agree	393		
Strongly agree	216		
Total score	900		

TABLE 7 Respondents on insults directed by them at disabled people.

Response	Number (T × C)	Percentage (Total score/Y × 100)	Result
Strongly disagree	263	36%	Low
Disagree	180		
Agree	117		
Strongly agree	20		
Total score	580		

TABLE 8 Respondents' reactions to physical forms of disabilities that elicit disgust.

Response	Number (T × C)	Percentage (Total score/Y × 100)	Result
Strongly disagree	265	36%	Low
Disagree	208		
Agree	54		
Strongly agree	48		
Total score	575		

They must actively participate if they suspect that harassment is about to occur.

Insults as stigma toward disabled people

Insult is a process, method, or act of degrading or defaming someone (Daly, 2018). It can also be understood as a criminal act and defamation, which can take various forms, including (a) oral defamation/verbal slander; (b) written defamation/libel; (c) slander; (d) minor insult; (e) false accusation; (f) creating false suspicion; (g) insult regarding a deceased person. The causes of insult generally stem from ignorance about the object of the insult, as well as emotional factors that lead to the victim being insulted.

The results of the questionnaire in Table 6 show that the majority of respondents agree that disabled people were found to be highly vulnerable to being insulted. This, of course, had a significant impact on the potential threat to their safety in public places, as it can lead to discomfort and even discrimination against them.

> "We frequently encounter bullying against students with dwarfism in schools. Words such as '**dattulu**,' '**tuyul**,' and '**cebol**' are often heard." (Participant 366)

This is evident from an incident that occurred in Makassar, where a 13-year-old student with dwarfism was frequently bullied by classmates over the past month. However, the situation only came to public attention after a video of the student's head being kicked went viral, causing severe trauma to the student and their family. This reality underscores that insults against disabled people in Makassar are both real and prevalent.

In a different dimension of questioning, the findings related to insults directly witnessed by respondents are relatively low. Respondents indicated that they have never insulted disabled people or their families.

The findings from respondents in Table 7 provided an opportunity to prevent the stigma of insults against disabled people through welfare-based prevention measures. One such prevention strategy can be the enhancement of protection for disabled people from individuals who hold the stigma that they are vulnerable to insults.

> "There is a significant difference between disabled individuals from poor and wealthy families. The stigma and perceptions are different. In lower-income communities, wealthy individuals are highly respected, even if they have disabilities." (Participant 187)

> "In our culture, people are respected based on social status, education, and wealth. There is almost no stigma or discrimination against these three aspects." (Participant 111)

From the perspective of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, preventing insults against disabled people must be based on fundamental principles that protect human dignity and honor. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which focuses on the protection of five basic things—religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property—provides a strong framework for understanding and preventing such insults. Insulting disabled people is a violation of the principles of protecting life and human dignity. In Islam, every individual, regardless of their physical or mental condition, possesses dignity that must be respected. Overall, the perspective of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah demands a holistic approach to preventing insults against disabled people, focusing on education, law, inclusion, empowerment, and social support, to ensure that all individuals can live with the dignity and respect they deserve.

The low results reflected in Table 8 provide an opportunity to offer education aimed at reducing the high stigma that disabled people are prone to insults, as respondents do not feel disgusted by the condition of disabled people.

The greatest support that can help disabled people avoid insults is the presence of family. Research conducted by Liu Fengbo has shown that the presence of family provides social support and happiness to disabled people, and the family's role can even alleviate various social problems, as the family can act as a mediator in case of issues (Fengbo et al., 2024). However, in the findings gathered by the researchers, many respondents

TABLE 9 Respondents on lack of family attention to disabled people.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	102	53%	High
Disagree	320		
Agree	348		
Strongly agree	84		
Total score	854		

TABLE 10 Respondents on the view that disabilities are a family disgrace.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	244	38.3125%	Low
Disagree	230		
Agree	75		
Strongly agree	64		
Total score	613		

believe that disabled people receive insufficient attention from their families.

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of treating all individuals with respect and compassion, in accordance with the teaching that humans are creations of Allah who must be valued and protected. Additionally, the view that disabled people are repulsive can harm their mental and emotional wellbeing. This contradicts the principles of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which seek to protect intellect and mental health. Discriminatory and demeaning treatment can cause psychological trauma and worsen the mental health conditions of disabled people. Islam teaches the importance of creating a loving and supportive environment for all family members, including those with disabilities. From the perspective of protecting lineage and family, negative views toward disabled people can undermine family harmony and unity. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of maintaining family honor and stability. Discrimination against family members with disabilities can lead to tension and disharmony within the family, which goes against Islam's goal of creating a loving and supportive family environment. Degrading views also conflict with the principles of justice and social welfare in Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah. Social justice in Islam includes fair and inclusive treatment for all individuals, including disabled people, and rejects all forms of discrimination. Considering disabled people as repulsive is a form of injustice that disregards their rights to be accepted and treated equally in society.

Table 9 illustrates the high level of respondent agreement regarding the lack of family attention toward disabled people. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has the right to survival, protection, development, and participation. The lack of family attention to disabled people significantly increases the likelihood of escalating stigma, particularly leading to harassment. Therefore, enhancing the role of the family should be prioritized to ensure greater attention is given to children with disabilities.

The data in Table 10 indicates that there is a belief that families should not need to hide the fact that they have a child with a disability. However, in reality, Dante Rigmalia (Chairperson of the National Disability Commission) states that the stigma against children with disabilities remains very strong. This is evident from the widespread bullying and arbitrary rejection by society, and even by families. This is largely due to the lack of knowledge among families and parents about children with disabilities, leading to children with disabilities being abandoned by their families and sent to social institutions.

In Indonesia, the perception that disability is a family disgrace is deeply rooted in cultural, social, and beliefs (Kiling et al., 2019; Subu et al., 2023). Many communities associate disability with negative connotations (Kusumastuti et al., 2014), viewing it as a result of past misdeeds or divine punishment. This belief is reinforced by cultural norms that emphasize familial reputation and social status, particularly in rural areas where societal acceptance is heavily influenced by collective identity. As a result, families with disabled members may experience social exclusion, as the presence of disability is often seen as a failure to conform to societal expectations of health, productivity, and normalcy.

> "At first, my family struggled to accept my situation as a disabled person. However, over time, with clear religious guidance on gratitude, mutual respect, and support, they eventually accepted me, making it feel more normal." (Informant 3—Disabled Person)

In some cases, misinterpretations of religious teachings lead to the belief that disability is a trial or test from God, further stigmatizing the individual and the family. The lack of public awareness and education about disability exacerbates this stigma, as families may internalize these beliefs, feeling shame or guilt for having a disabled family member.

This perception is further perpetuated by the limited visibility of disabled individuals in public spaces, as families may choose to hide or isolate disabled members to avoid judgment or gossip. Even more tragically, some families resort to imprisoning disabled members in inhumane ways, a practice known as *Pasung* (Baklien et al., 2023). The absence of adequate government support and the scarcity of accessible public services contribute to this marginalization, reinforcing the idea that disability is a private issue rather than a societal one.

Considering disabled people as a disgrace contradicts the principles of protecting human life and dignity. Islam teaches that every individual, regardless of their physical or mental condition, possesses dignity that must be respected. Viewing disabled people as a disgrace devalues their dignity and fails to recognize the human values instilled in Islamic teachings. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of treating all individuals with respect and compassion, in line with the belief that humans are creations of Allah who must be honored and protected.

Additionally, the stigma of being considered a disgrace can harm the mental and emotional wellbeing of disabled people. This is contrary to the principles of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which seek to protect intellect and mental health. Any form of discrimination or exclusion can cause psychological trauma and worsen their mental health conditions. Islam teaches the importance of mutual support

and providing a loving and understanding environment for all family members, including those with disabilities.

From the perspective of protecting lineage and family, considering disabled people as a disgrace can undermine family harmony and unity. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of maintaining family honor and stability. Discrimination against family members with disabilities can lead to tension and disharmony within the family, which goes against Islam's goal of creating a loving and supportive family environment.

TABLE 11 Respondents' views on negative stereotypes toward disabilities.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	58	67.188%	High
Disagree	176		
Agree	525		
Strongly agree	316		
Total score	1,075		

Societal dynamics in the negative labeling of disabled people

Labeling (stereotyping) is the generalization of individuals within a group without sufficient information, while ignoring the characteristics of the individuals in that group (Gershman and Cikara, 2023). Stereotypes are formed through various means, such as personal experiences, relevant experiences of others, and media influence. Stereotypes about disabled people develop within social categories and can be clearly categorized because disability is perceived as something unchangeable, like ethnicity, race, or sex (Wicaksono et al., 2021). Respondents believed that disabled people still receive negative stereotypes from society.

> "Disabled people are sometimes perceived as insane, possessed, or as a punishment from God. In reality, the root cause often lies in the lack of access to proper nutrition during pregnancy." (Participant 342)

The high stigma against disabled people, coupled with negative stereotypes as shown in Table 11, positions disabilities as a disease. Even more concerning, disabled people are often denied the inclusive rights to participate in various aspects of life, particularly those related to social issues. In reality, disabled people are like anyone else—sometimes healthy and sometimes ill. This negative labeling also occurs in Makassar.

> "It is not uncommon for disabled people to face rejection due to the perception that they are burdensome, when in fact, this is not the case. For example, there is a common misconception that restrooms for disabled individuals must always be specially designed. However, in reality, not all disabled workers require specialized facilities." (Participant 44)

Using negative labels against disabled people can degrade their dignity and disregard the human values emphasized in Islamic teachings. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah demands that all individuals be treated with justice and compassion, in accordance with the belief that humans are creations of Allah who must be respected. Furthermore, negative views toward disabled people can harm their mental and emotional wellbeing. This contradicts the principles of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which aim to protect intellect and mental health. Discriminatory treatment or exclusion can lead to psychological trauma and worsen their health conditions. Islam teaches the importance of creating a compassionate and supportive environment for all members of society, including disabled people.

From the perspective of family and lineage protection, negative views toward disabled people can undermine family harmony and unity. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of maintaining family honor and stability. Discrimination against family members with disabilities can create tension and disharmony within family relationships, which contradicts Islam's goal of fostering a loving and supportive family environment. Moreover, negative views toward disabled people can violate the principles of justice and social welfare. Social justice in Islam involves fair and inclusive treatment of all individuals, regardless of their physical or mental condition. Using negative labels against disabled people is a form of injustice that disregards their rights to be accepted and treated equally in society.

In matters related to societal stigma regarding employment opportunities, respondents view disabled people differently. The high societal stigma regarding the lack of employment opportunities for disabled people, as shown in Table 12, further reinforces negative labeling against them. In reality, disabled people have the same and equal rights to access employment in order to meet their livelihood needs. The state is obligated to protect, fulfill, and enforce the rights applicable to all citizens, regardless of their status, including disabilities. Several strategies that the government can implement to uphold the rights of disabled people in relation to employment include providing special treatment for them, especially in terms of inclusive rights. However, in practice, it remains challenging to enforce rules on employing disabled people due to difficulties in finding suitable job materials that meet employers' demands, inconsistent implementation of the 1% quota for disabled people, low awareness of the importance of employing disabled people, and the lack of motivation among disabled people to seek employment.

The view that disabled people are unfit to work can also undermine the human values in Islam. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of respecting and protecting the dignity of every individual. Considering them unfit to work diminishes their dignity and hinders their efforts to achieve economic and social independence. From the perspective of general welfare and social prosperity, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah highlights the importance of building an inclusive and just society. Providing equal employment opportunities to all individuals, including disabled people, is part of the effort to achieve the social balance and wellbeing desired in Islam. This aligns with the principle of social justice, which emphasizes fair treatment and equality, advocating for equal rights for all members of society.

Respondents show positive support for the need to enhance individual development and acceptance within the social

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TABLE 12 Respondents on the perception that disabled people cannot work.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	127	51%	High
Disagree	314		
Agree	246		
Strongly agree	128		
Total score	815		

TABLE 13 Respondents on special treatment for disabled people in social and individual development.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	14	86.063%	Very high
Disagree	38		
Agree	429		
Strongly agree	896		
Total score	1,377		

TABLE 14 Respondents on disabled people unable to attend school.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	188	44.1875%	Low
Disagree	278		
Agree	141		
Strongly agree	100		
Total score	707		

TABLE 15 Respondents on disabled people unable to work.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	127	51%	High
Disagree	314		
Agree	246		
Strongly agree	128		
Total score	815		

TABLE 16 Respondents on disabled people need assistance in decision-making.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	24	71.563%	Very High
Disagree	172		
Agree	597		
Strongly agree	352		
Total score	1,145		

TABLE 17 Respondents' reluctance to marry into a family with disabilities.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	102	54.375%	High
Disagree	308		
Agree	348		
Strongly agree	112		
Total score	870		

TABLE 18 Respondents' reluctance to associate with disabled people.

Response	Number ($T \times C$)	Percentage (Total score/$Y \times 100$)	Result
Strongly disagree	252	36.5%	Low
Disagree	242		
Agree	42		
Strongly agree	48		
Total score	584		

environment, a shown in Table 13. Special treatment for disabled people is guaranteed under Article 28H paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution, which affirms that everyone has the right to receive assistance and special treatment to obtain equal opportunities and benefits in order to achieve equality and justice. Therefore, to reduce the high stigma surrounding employment opportunities for disabled people, it is necessary to seek solutions based on public welfare.

Disabled people have the right to special protection because Islam teaches that every individual, regardless of their physical or mental condition, possesses dignity that must be respected and protected.

This view is reflected in the principles of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which outline the primary objectives of Islamic law to preserve human life and society in a just and balanced manner. First and foremost, special protection for disabled people is necessary to safeguard their dignity and wellbeing. Islam individual is created by Allah with a specific purpose and uniqueness. Ignoring or sidelining their needs means failing to respect the human values taught in Islamic teachings. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah demands that every individual, including disabled people, be treated with compassion and understanding.

Additionally, special protection is necessary to ensure that disabled people have equal access to the services and opportunities they need. This includes access to education, healthcare, transportation, employment, and various other social activities. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of social justice and inclusion, where all individuals have the same rights to participate actively in society. From the perspective of family and lineage protection, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah places significant responsibility on the family to protect its vulnerable members, including disabled people. This includes providing care, support, and an environment that enables them to develop to their fullest

potential. A well-functioning family, according to Islamic teachings, is one that nurtures the harmony and wellbeing of all its members, regardless of their condition. More broadly, special protection for disabled people reflects Islam's commitment to justice and humanity. Islam teaches that every individual should be treated fairly and equally in all matters, without discrimination based on status or physical condition. Providing special protection for disabled people is an integral part of creating an inclusive and just society, in line with Islam's vision of general welfare and social harmony.

In terms of assumptions regarding access to education, respondents believe that disabled people should have the same opportunities to attend school. Respondents in Table 14 believe that disabled people have the right to an education, which aligns with the availability of Special Schools in Makassar, although the total number is still relatively small-—2 State Special Schools and 20 Private Special Schools. Therefore, parents should not neglect the educational rights that children with disabilities are entitled to receive.

> "In accordance with the mandate of the law, the Makassar city government prepares special school and supports private special schools in creating a high-quality learning process for students with disabilities." (Participant 279)

> "We, from the Yayasan Pembinaan Tunanetra Indonesia (YAPTI), provide access to religious education for disabled people, particularly those who are visually impaired, through our religious learning programs, including the Braille Qur'an recitation program. The use of the Braille Qur'an requires blind individuals to first learn the alphabet, as the Braille Qur'an is composed of alphabetic letters." (Participant 338)

Although the desire for education is relatively high, disabled people still need a lot of encouragement to pursue education. According to the 2018 Rikesda data, 22% of disabled people were of school age, but as of that time, only 30.7% had completed secondary education. The impact of inadequate educational programs for disabled people is a reduced opportunity to obtain suitable employment, which may contribute to the increase in societal stigma.

Islam teaches that every individual, including disabled people, has the same right to develop their potential through education. Education is not only seen as a means to acquire knowledge but also as a way to build individual dignity and enable them to contribute meaningfully to society. In this context, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of eliminating all forms of discrimination and providing equal access to education for everyone. Islam encourages comprehensive social inclusion. Providing adequate education to disabled people helps create a more just society. Those who receive a good education have a greater opportunity to achieve economic independence, improve their quality of life, and contribute to the overall development of society. In this regard, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah highlights that education is a long-term investment in the prosperity and wellbeing of humanity.

Society believes that disabled people have the right to access education, as shown in Table 15. However, this view contradicts their perception of employment opportunities for disabled people. As previously explained, disabled people face significant challenges in accessing employment due to a variety of factors.

> "Although access to employment is limited, disabled people still need to be given opportunities to work. In Makassar, I have seen several small businesses, micro-enterprises, and cooperatives, such as Café Tulus and Tenoon.id, that involve disabled people as workers." (Participant 183)

Respondents also believe that disabled people still need assistance in decision-making, as shown in Table 16. This stigma leads to the labeling of disabled people as dependent and unable to make decisions on their own, as professionals and parents often fear that they will fail. This perception also contributes to the lack of skill development among disabled people.

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah demands that every individual, including disabled people, have equal access to the decision-making processes that affect their lives. This includes their right to be involved in decisions related to health, finances, education, and other important aspects of daily life. In this context, society is encouraged to provide a supportive environment where disabled people can actively participate in the decision-making processes that impact them directly.

In matters of marriage, disabled people still face significant challenges in Makassar. Based on the data in Table 17, respondents continue to hold the stigma of not marrying disabled people.

The high societal stigma against marrying disabled people indicates a strong negative label attached to them, as they are perceived as being unprepared to manage a household. However, even though respondents may not want to marry disabled people, they still believe that disabled people have the right to marry and become heads of families.

Based on the data in Table 17, respondents are unwilling to consider disabled people as their life partners. However, research shows that living together, including marriage between persons with and without disabilities, can remain long-lasting and harmonious with effective relationship maintenance strategies.

> "There is still a fear that marrying a disabled person might result in our children inheriting the same disability." (Participant 31)

> "Alhamdulillah, my husband and family fully accept my condition as it is because from the beginning, there was commitment and acceptance." (Informant 4—Disabled Person)

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the importance of not judging a person's ability to marry based on their disability, as marriage is a fundamental human right regardless of any disabilities they may have (Bakry, 2019). Instead, the focus should be on their ability to fulfill the responsibilities as a spouse and family member. Treating disabled people fairly and respecting their rights to lead a dignified family life is an implementation of Islamic

values that advocate for justice, equality, and compassion in social relationships.

Although negative labeling stigmas remain relatively high, respondents are willing to accept disabled people as friends, as shown in Table 18.

> "I am friends with disabled people. There is no difference because we are all creations of God. Helping and supporting each other is far more important." (Participant 41)

After discussing the three main points of protecting disabled people against stigma, particularly in terms of harassment, insults, and negative labeling related to their disability, it is clear that the level of stigma in Makassar remains high. Therefore, the findings suggest various strategic steps to reduce stigma against disabled people in Makassar. Key points for reducing this stigma include the importance of socialization and education for the public about human rights based on tangible benefits, increasing mutual awareness between persons with and without disabilities, and enhancing the knowledge of the people of Makassar using the foundation of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah concerning disabled people.

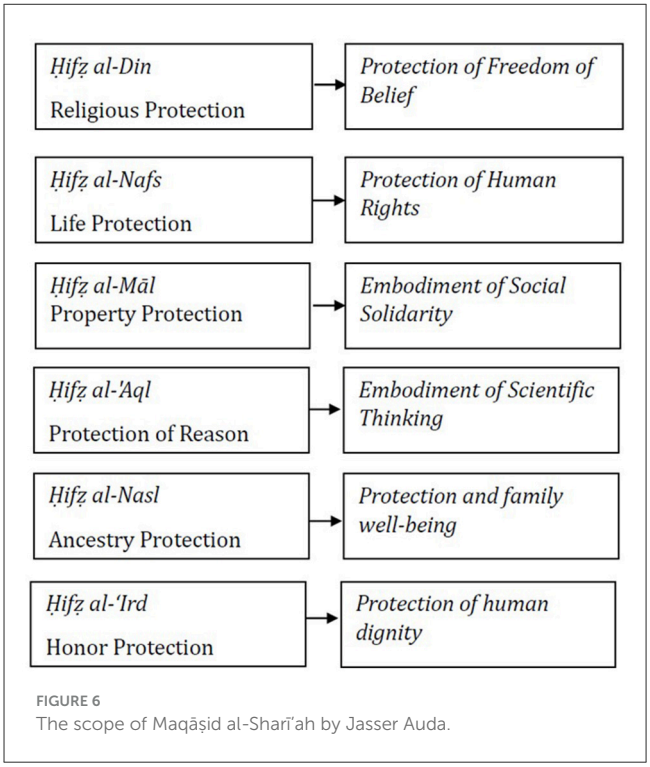

FIGURE 6
The scope of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah by Jasser Auda.

Discussion and implications

The term "persons with disabilities" is an adaptation of the terminology established by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (Nurhaeni et al., 2024). The Convention provides a new foundation for understanding and recognizing the principles of protection, respect, and fulfillment of the rights of disabled people in various countries to this day. In other terminology, "disabled people" is also used, emphasizing that individuals are disabled by societal barriers, such as stigma, rather than by their bodies (Shakespeare, 2013).

In Makassar, a city with a diverse demographic and cultural background, disabled people face significant stigma, which is deeply embedded in social interactions and perceptions. This stigma manifests in various forms, including physical, psychological, verbal, and non-verbal abuses, often leading to the marginalization of individuals with disabilities. The findings from this study, grounded in the Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah perspective, shed light on the complexities of these stigmas and offer a framework for understanding and addressing them within an Islamic context.

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah and the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities or disabled people have a strong relationship within Islam. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah refers to the objectives underlying Islamic law. The term Maqāṣid (مَقَاصِد) is the plural form of maqṣid (قَصَدَ) and is derived from the Arabic root qaṣada (قَصَدَ), meaning "purpose" or "objective," while Shari'ah (الشَّرِيْعَة) comes from the root shara'a (ش ر ع), meaning "law" (Wafa, 2021). In terminology, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah is defined as (al-Fasi, 1963):

الغَايَةُ مِنْهَا وَالأَسْرَارُ الَّتِيْ وَضَعَهَا الشَّارِعُ عِنْدَ كُلِّ حُكْمٍ مِنْ أَحْكَامِهَا.

"The objectives and wisdom behind the laws (Sharī'ah) that have been established by the lawgiver (al-Shāri') in every ruling of its laws."

Thus, broadly speaking, every law established by Allah (SWT) and the Prophet Muhammad carries inherent wisdom, which can be categorized into three essential principles: Ḍaruriyyāt (necessities), Ḍājiyyāt (needs), and Taḥsiniyyāt (complementary or embellishments).

These concepts—Ḍaruriyyāt, Ḥājiyyāt, and Taḥsiniyyāt—relate to the hierarchy of needs in Islam and are highly relevant to understanding the rights of disabled people. Islam emphasizes the protection and fulfillment of the needs of disabled individuals. They have the same rights to meet their Ḍaruriyyāt (basic needs), Ḍājiyyāt (essential needs), and Taḥsiniyyāt (higher complementary needs). The following sections will explain the definitions and relationships of Ḍaruriyyāt, Ḍājiyyāt, and Taḥsiniyyāt with disabled people, along with the support found in the Qur'an and Hadith, all provided in Arabic.

The progressive understanding of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah has evolved, increasingly focusing on empowerment after centuries of being one of the key theories in resolving issues in Islamic law. Jasser Auda, an Egyptian scholar, argues that Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah represents the intentions and objectives of the Lawgiver (Allah SWT and the Prophet Muhammad), realized in the form of tasyri' (legislation) through rulings established by mujtahids via the process of istinbat (extraction) from the sacred texts of Sharī'ah (Auda, 2008, 2011, 2016). According to Auda, the components of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah are closely tied to the values that the Lawgiver seeks to realize, which are then investigated by mujtahids through Sharī'ah texts (revelation) (Auda, 2008, 2011, 2016).

Auda expands Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah into a broader framework, emphasizing four key aspects (Auda, 2008, 2011, 2016). First, he categorizes Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah into three levels, beginning with maqāṣid al-'āmmah, which encompasses universal wellbeing

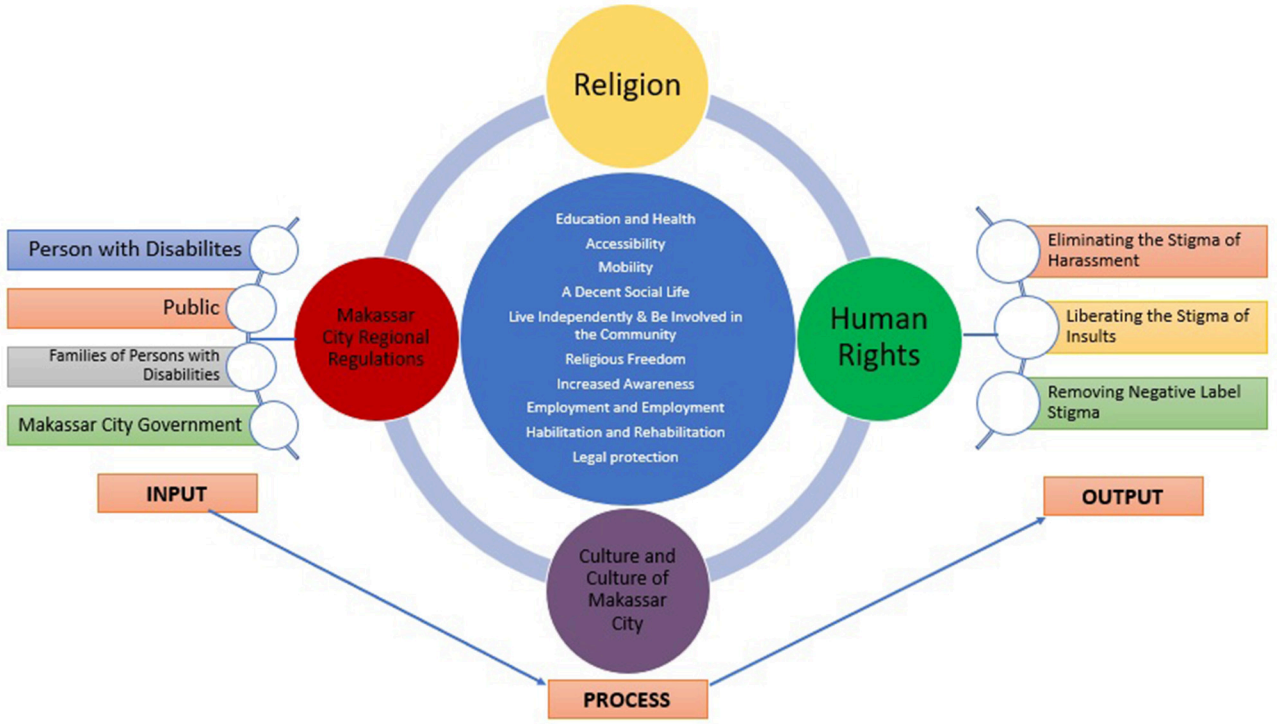

FIGURE 7
Addressing stigma against disabled people using Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, Indonesia.

through principles such as equal rights, justice, tolerance, and obligations. These general objectives aim to ensure contemporary relevance by promoting development (al-Tanmiyyah) in religion, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth. Second, he extends Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah beyond individual protection to encompass the development of societies, nations, and states. Third, the sources of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah are directly derived by mujtahids from the Qur'an and Hadith. Fourth, its objectives are not confined to protection and preservation but also emphasize human development, human rights, and comprehensive welfare.

Auda also introduces a systems approach (Auda, 2008, 2011, 2016), which underscores the interconnectivity of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah and the necessity of expanding its scope to encompass social and public dimensions. Rather than focusing solely on individual protection, Maqāṣid should extend to the wellbeing, development, and empowerment of society. This broader scope is illustrated in Figure 6.

From this perspective, sexual harassment against disabled individuals constitutes a serious violation of fundamental Islamic values. Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which prioritizes the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property, underscores the dignity and integrity of every human being, including disabled people.

Sexual harassment violates the protection of life and dignity, both of which are regarded as sacred in Islam. Any violation of the human body, including sexual harassment, is considered a grave sin (Musyafa'ah et al., 2023; Setiani et al., 2017; Syafa'at and Gassing, 2024). Such acts inflict physical and psychological harm on victims, contradicting the core principles of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which seeks to safeguard health and wellbeing.

Additionally, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah emphasizes the protection of intellect and mental wellbeing (Norman and Ruhullah, 2024). Sexual harassment inflicts psychological trauma, disrupting victims' cognitive and emotional stability. Thus, safeguarding mental health aligns with Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah's commitment to preserving intellect and wellbeing. Sexual harassment against any individual is unacceptable as it contradicts the core objectives of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which seek to uphold honor, stability, and social harmony.

As illustrated in Figure 6, the focus of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah has evolved from mere protection to community development and empowerment. Similarly, the status of disabled people is shifting from passive protection to active development. The present study applies Jasser Auda's expanded Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah framework to addressing stigma against disabled people, as outlined in Figure 7.

Figure 7 presents a systemic approach to reducing stigma. The inputs in this framework include disabled people, their families, the general public, and the Makassar City Government. The processes involve integrating education, accessibility, and cultural practices, reinforced by local regulations, to foster inclusion and dignity. The outputs aim to eradicate stigma, eliminate harassment, and remove negative labels attached to disabled individuals. These objectives are aligned with the Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah principles of protecting life, intellect, and dignity.

A crucial factor in mitigating stigma is the role of families. While family support can act as a protective barrier against discrimination,

societal pressure often compels families to inadvertently contribute to exclusion. This underscores the importance of family-centered interventions, including education, counseling, and empowerment programs. Moreover, religious leaders and communities must actively promote inclusive values based on Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah to reshape societal norms and attitudes toward disabled people.

The implications of this study span several domains. Disability rights laws must integrate Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah principles to ensure alignment with both Islamic and international standards. Increased oversight and accountability are critical to enforcing anti-discrimination measures. Incorporating disability rights education based on Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah into curricula and public campaigns is vital to challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusivity. Religious leaders should interpret and disseminate Islamic teachings on justice and compassion to promote inclusion. Support networks within mosques and Islamic organizations can provide resources for disabled individuals and their families. Counseling and training for families can create supportive home environments. Community-based initiatives must encourage interaction and reduce isolation, fostering mutual understanding between individuals with and without disabilities. Expanding studies to other Muslim-majority regions in Indonesia and assessing the long-term impact of interventions can provide valuable insights for national policies. This integrative approach, grounded in the Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah framework, provides a comprehensive pathway for addressing stigma, ensuring justice, and promoting dignity for disabled individuals in Makassar.

Conclusion

This research highlights the persistent stigma against disabled people in Makassar, particularly in the form of harassment, insults, and negative labeling. Despite existing legal frameworks, these stigmas continue to marginalize disabled people, undermining their rights and dignity. The study underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that align with the principles of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah, which emphasize the protection of life, dignity, and intellect.

A key recommendation is the implementation of public education and awareness programs that focus on the rights of disabled people, with the aim of fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment. Additionally, stronger legal enforcement is needed to ensure that disabled people have equal access to education, employment, and other essential services. These measures are crucial for reducing stigma and promoting social justice.

Furthermore, the study calls for increased involvement from both governmental in supporting disabled people. This includes providing resources for skill development, advocating for policy changes, and creating platforms for disabled people to voice their concerns. One of the most important recommendations is to ensure that disabled people are given a voice not only in research but also in all aspects of social life. By actively involving them in decision-making processes, society can move toward a more inclusive and equitable future, where the rights and dignity of all individuals are respected and upheld.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, Indonesia. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

MBi: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MBa: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KK: Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Data curation. AH: Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition. DS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LA: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Comparative analysis of media coverage concerning the social implications on three life sciences in Japan during 1991–2020

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Media coverage is an important determinant of the social conception and public understanding of science. Therefore, understanding the media framing of science and technology is important for science communication. As such, we try to determine the frames that are significant in news coverage concerning science and technology, whether the dominant frames changed over time, and whether there are any overlooked frames. To this end, we focused on news articles on multiple life-science fields in Japan to examine the ethical, legal, and social implications covered in the media of three fields: genetic modification, stem cell science and regenerative medicine, and brain-neuroscience. We examined seven frames (i.e., instrumental science, risky science, juggernaut science, techno-nationalism, governance, communication matters, and trust in science) related to the ethical and social implications for the three technologies. We collected 37,009 articles from the newspaper database. After a pilot analysis of the collected articles based on text mining, we coded a total of 1,805 articles from 1991 to 2020 using random sampling. Our results showed that the frames varied among the three technologies over time and no frame synchronization was observed. This implies that the media coverage of each technology was independent of those of the other technologies. A trend common to all technologies was that the frame "instrumental science" was dominant, meaning that positive opinions predominate in the Japanese media coverage of life sciences. This result suggests ethical issues of life sciences were often missing in Japanese media discourse. An urgent task is to bridge the gap between the discussions of ethics communities and the media coverage. Our study provides evidence of the potential social implications of life science according to assumed for public understanding.

KEYWORDS

media discourses, media analysis, framing, biotechnology, science communication

1 Introduction

Modern life science has a significant impact on society and has been applied to many areas, from agriculture to medicine. The rapid progress of life science has not only many benefits, but also brings a variety of broad ethical, legal, and social implications to society. In the current knowledge-based society, it is essential to consider the various impacts and implications of life science.

Japan has had long-term public discussions on life science. After the 1990s, Japan experienced bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and genetically modified organism (GMO) controversies [mainly on the genetic modification (GM) of food], similar to European countries (Nishizawa, 2005; Shineha and Kato, 2009), which had various social implications. Previous studies pointed out the correlations between the media, public attitudes, and politics on such issues (Yamaguchi, 2013, 2020).

Regarding stem cell research and regenerative medicine, the Japanese government has financially supported induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) since they were established by Japanese researchers in 2006. As such, there is hype and also high expectations regarding iPSCs and regenerative medicine in Japan (Shineha et al., 2010; Shineha, 2016; Shineha et al., 2018; Shineha et al., 2022). The Japanese government established a legal framework to promote regenerative medicine in 2014 (Konomi et al., 2015). However, as regenerative medicine by iPCSs has been promoted at the national level in Japan, Mikami, a sociologist, discussed the strength of an imaginary lock-in toward science policy based on a case study on stem cell research (Konomi et al., 2015). In 2015, a Japanese court ruled that a private clinic should pay compensation for damage to a patient who had received regenerative medicine therapies. This became the first worldwide reported case of reimbursement for regenerative medicine therapy for patient damage (Ikka et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the Japanese government has supported brain-neuroscience (BS) since the late 1980s. In the 2000s, the Japanese government initiated a funding program on BS and governmental bodies and academic societies published related guidelines (Gaillard, 2018). More recently, interdisciplinary research, particularly with AI, has been encouraged. As a result, new research projects on the social implications of BS have been conducted.

Scientific findings such as the ones described above relate to policymaking, hype, expectation, and concerns in both Japan and at the global level. Currently, the discussions considering the social aspects of science and society focus on responsible research and innovation (RRI). RRI has been regarded as a key concept in the discussions on science and technology policy as well (European Commission Horizon, 2020; OECD, 2022). The issues considered cover: broad public engagement in science and technology, increasing accessibility to scientific results, ensuring gender equality in both the research process and research content, encouraging of formal and informal science education, taking ethical, legal, and social implications (ELSI) (Stilgoe et al., 2013). According to Stilgoe and Guston, "Responsible innovation means taking care of the future through collective stewardship of science and innovation in the present" (Stilgoe and Guston, 2017, p. 1570). They also discussed the concept of RRI as having four key components: anticipation, inclusion, reflexivity, and responsiveness. In other words, RRI is a way of thinking about reflexive and adaptive innovation concerning emerging science and technology. This approach encourages us to develop legitimate and more effective processes of decision-making through open, transparent, and upstream dialog with various stakeholders, considering the previous experiences with GMOs, nanotechnologies, and others (Stilgoe et al., 2013; Stilgoe and Guston, 2017; Komiya et al., 2022).

As an important background of the discussions on RRI, we should mention "real-time technology assessment (RTTA)" (Guston and Sarewitz, 2002). Guston and Sarewitz discussed RTTA for better decision-making and communication between science and society and summarized the key components of RTTA as "research program mapping," "analogical case study," "communication and early warning," and "technology assessment and choice" (Guston and Sarewitz, 2002). Concerning the key component of RTTA—"communication and early warning"—Guston and Sarewitz discussed how media analysis can function as an "early warning" to understand the social agenda behind emerging science (Guston and Sarewitz, 2002).

Regarding emerging life science, media coverage affects public perceptions, expectation, hype, and images of science through repeated contacts with discourses and framings (Shineha, 2016; Bauer and Gutteling, 2006; Lewison, 2007; Listerman, 2010; Marks et al., 2007; McCluskey et al., 2016; Nisbet and Huge, 2006; Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002; Caulfield et al., 2016). Thus, understanding media framings on emerging science and technology is essential for understanding the related RRI and governance. However, few studies have comprehensively analyzed the media coverage on ELSI for multiple fields of life science. Thus, the use of media framings on ELSI for life science has not been examined in enough detail, which prevents a deep understanding of the relationship between press and politics (Nisbet and Huge, 2006; Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002), as well as the background of the public discourses on life science.

Considering this gap, this study aims to identify the social implications embedded in Japanese newspaper articles about life science topics. This includes *what* types of problems are outlined with *what* kinds of assumptions and *how t*hey are described and contextualized with other societal issues. Thus, the research questions are as follows:

- What frames are significant in each field (regenerative medicine [RM], GM, and BS)?
- Have the dominant frames changed over time?
- Are there any overlooked frames in the news articles concerning life science?

2 Context of media analysis

In this study, we focus on newspaper articles. Newspapers are still the main source of discussion on new life science for the public in Japan, despite the advent of social networking. The use of news sources differs with age. The elderly use newspapers and television as primary information sources, while younger people use the Internet more. However, mass media remains a main information source for the public (Shineha et al., 2017). In addition, Internet news media often use newspapers and television as resources. McCombs and Valenzuela discussed that the agenda setting function of newspapers have been strengthened in the Internet era (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2020).

As an example of an analysis of Japanese media discourses on life science, Hibino and Nagata (2006, 2008) and Nagata et al. (2006) analyzed news articles in *Asahi-shimbun* (one of the major newspapers in Japan) from 1985 to 2004. Through content and correspondence analyses, they found drastic changes in the relationship between themes (e.g., biomedical use, agricultural use, genetic research), frames (e.g., economic prospects, ethics, pandora's box, public accountability, globalization), actors, and so on. Meanwhile, the co-occurrences among the framings of "medical research," "economy," and "generic research" were stable and there were unique framings of

emotional attachment toward cloned animals. Shineha et al. (2008) focused on news articles regarding GMOs from 1984 to 2006. Employing text mining, they found two shifts in the dominant themes. The first shift occurred in the late 1990s, from "medical and industrial application" to "GM food," and simultaneously, the basic tone of the articles also shifted from positive to negative. The second shift occurred in 2003, from "GM food" to "field test." At the same time, the GMO controversy was overcome.

Concerning stem cell research (SCR) and RM, Shineha (2016) analyzed over 7,000 news articles from the 1980s to 2013 using co-word network analysis and pointed out the peripheralization of ethical framings on SCR and RM, particularly after the appearance of human iPSCs in 2007, which increased the framings on "national promotion." Hao and Hibino (2023) analyzed 105 news articles on brain-machine interface in Japanese and Chinese news coverage. They found that positive frames were predominant in both Japanese and Chinese news articles.

However, these previous studies have not conducted a comparative analysis between multiple fields. Further, the lack of benchmarks has caused them to fail to understand in depth the features of media discourse on each theme. This lack of knowledge is common worldwide, particularly since the 2000s (Shineha, 2016; Bauer and Gutteling, 2006; Marks et al., 2007; Nisbet and Huge, 2006; Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002; Hibino and Nagata, 2006, 2008; Nagata et al., 2006; Shineha et al., 2008; Gilbert et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2012; Racine et al., 2006; Ruan et al., 2019; Stapleton and Torres Yabar, 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2019) and has prevented a comprehensive understanding of the common structure and specific contexts of each technology.

To fill this lack of knowledge, Mikihito Tanaka, one of the authors performed a preliminary study of a large dataset of Japanese and English newspaper corpus using natural language processing such as unsupervised machine learning [Mitsubishi Research Institute (MRI), 2019]. The duration, objects, and themes of the preliminary study overlapped with this study. While the results justified the propriety of the comparative data (articles and keywords) among English and Japanese newspapers and indicated the existence of ritual attitudes toward ethical issues in the Japanese press (described below), the details were blurred in a large-scale quantitative process and were yet to be declared the characteristics of ELSI in Japan.

To overcome the lack of deep understanding of the social implications of common and specific trends in fields such as RM which is reported in media discourse, this study conducted comparative long-term analysis of multiple fields by focusing on the Japanese media coverage on life science. Specifically, we concentrated on Japanese newspaper articles regarding three life sciences: GM, RM, and BS. The application of GM to medicine and industry attracted media attention from the 1980s to the early 1990s in Japan (Shineha et al., 2008). After the mid-1990s, GM food became a primary issue in media discourse on GM (Shineha et al., 2008). As such, the media discourses on GM differ from those on RM (Shineha, 2016). Regarding BS, "neuroscience" and "brain science" are often used in Japan. Particularly, "brain science" is a popular keyword, including the meanings of neuroscience and neuro-technology (Gaillard, 2018). Therefore, we used BS to include both these meanings.

These three life sciences are outstanding topics in the media, having received long-term attention (more than 20 years), which resulted in a large volume of news articles on these topics (more than 6,000) in the four major newspapers in Japan. These life sciences are expected to advance rapidly and have led to emerging technologies with broad impacts on society (e.g., genome editing in GM, medical applications of iPSCs in RM, and brain–machine interference in BS). In addition, the Japanese government has continuously invested in these three life sciences.

Considering previous studies, this study examined 30 years of media coverage and their framings on life sciences in Japan. We targeted the main periods when the three life sciences have been covered by newspapers most. First, we identified common and different points of the public discourse on the social implications of GM, RM, and BS. Second, we clarified the change of the public discourse in each field over time.

3 Methods

We selected four major national newspapers: *Asahi-shimbun*, *Mainichi-shimbun*, *Yomiuri-shimbun*, and *Nihonkeizai-shimbun*. They all have a large circulation, namely 5 million readers for *Asahi-shimbun*, 2 million for *Mainichi-shimbun*, 7 million for *Yommiuri-shimbun*, and 2 million for *Nihonkeizai-shimbun* in 2020. However, these newspapers have ideological differences. *Asahi-shimbun* and *Mainichi-shimbun* are considered liberal and left-leaning, while *Yomiuri-shimbun* and *Nihonkeizai-shimbun* are more conservative and right-leaning. We collected both the titles and contents of articles in these four newspapers from online database by searching for keywords. The English translations of the three Japanese keywords used for the selection of articles are "genetic modification (GM)," "regenerative medicine (RM)," and "brain-neuroscience (BS)." We excluded commercial flyers for books and seminars.

First, to determine the frequency of each theme during a specific period, we identified the time phases that correspond to the changes in the topics addressed in news articles. We conducted correspondence analysis to explore the change in topics. Correspondence analysis is a descriptive or exploratory technique used to examine how topics change over time for specific themes (Greenacre, 2016). This technique leads to data visualization in the form of contingency tables with variables (articles) as rows and categories (keywords) as columns. To this end, we used the KH coder, a software for quantitative content analysis and text mining in the Japanese language (Higuchi, 2016). This software could extract all words automatically from the sentences of articles and analyze them statistically with using correspondence analysis, which find some topical words during a specific period.

Since the number of articles was too large to code manually, we conducted a random sampling of all articles (Riffe et al., 2005). We selected articles from the relevant subgroups (phase and theme) with using a random number generator by the following stepwise rule: when there were more than 1,000 articles, we selected 100 articles; when there were from 500 to 999 articles, we selected 10% of the articles; when there were from 100 to 499 articles, we selected 50 articles; when there were <100 articles, we did not select any of them in this phase. This procedure yielded a total of 1,805 articles (GM: 650, RM:600, BS: 555) and provided the adequate minimum volume for content analysis.

Next, to describe the social implications of the three themes in Japanese newspaper articles, we modified the related frames, considering previous studies (Bauer and Gutteling, 2006; Listerman,

2010; Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002; Hibino and Nagata, 2006, 2008; Nagata et al., 2006; Gutteling et al., 2002). Especially, we referred to five frames (utility, risk, control, fate, and morality) which Listerman (2010) proposed. Although previous studies consider frames and cultural differences in each country, these frames such as risk and morality were examined as common interests in each country (Bauer and Gaskell, 2002; Gaskell and Bauer, 2006). For modifying the frames, we conducted a mixed approach by combining deduction (top–down) with induction (bottom–up) (De Vreese, 2005). We made and modified tentative coding rules and conducted a content analysis. Then, we examined their reliability using the values of Gwet's AC1 and Cohen's kappa, which are described later in the comparison. These processes were conducted repeatedly, and they had the meaning of coder training.

This study aims to clarify *what* types of problems have been covered in longitudinal Japanese newspaper articles about life science topics, as well as determine *what* types of assumptions were made and *how* they were contextualized with other societal issues. While these issues are usually considered for framing analysis, this analysis does not have clear guidelines and several media studies neglected the concept due to insufficient conceptual examination (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Cacciatore et al., 2016). To avoid this mistake, we chose our conceptualization of frames by consolidating literature on news story framings. Price and Tewksbury (1997) conceptualized news story framings as an applicability effect during message processing. According to Price et al. (1997), the framing effect is embedded in text as a given message that renders the readers' thoughts applicable to evoking particular thoughts and feelings. To this end, a study must be designed not only by investigating the accessibility of frames, such as the frequency or representation of topics but needs to also consider the applicability of frames and what types of ideas are triggered in the readers. To this end, we nominated a leader for each topic (GM, RM, RS), and after the independent organization of the frames by this person, we collated the texts of the articles by reading them together and discussed the cognitive schemes evoked by the accessible framings. These processes were recursively repeated three times. Therefore, we obtained applicable coding framings based on the reflexive processes of how the ethical issues related to emerging sciences are restricted to some typologies. Our modified coding rules of social implications are presented in Table 1.

The coding was not exclusive, that is, one article could be coded under two or more frames. We assessed the reliability of the coding rule by selecting more than 10% of the observations in each phase and theme. This procedure yielded a total of 200 (GM: 70, RM:60, BS: 70) observations. The values of Gwet's AC1 and Cohen's kappa are shown in Table 2. Some Cohen's kappas were relatively small but high enough to prove sufficient credibility; however, these rather smaller values were caused by the prevalence effects, for which the frames showed low frequency by both coders. However, the values of Gwet's AC1, an indicator showing high robustness by prevalence effects (Gwet, 2014), indicated that the frames have high reliability. Considering the relative characteristics of Gwet's AC1 and Cohen's kappa (Vach and Gerke, 2023), The smaller gap between Gwet's AC1 and Cohen's kappa could be interpreted as each frame's conceptual strictness. For example, "juggernaut science," "techno-nationalism," and "dual-use" frames showed the broader gaps between two indicators: These tendencies indicate that these newly introduced concepts should be interpreted cautiously. On the other hand, some frames, such as "instrumental science" and "legal governance," showed relatively lower AC1 scores but higher kappa, which could be interpreted that these frame concepts are robust. Besides these variations, on the whole, values in both Gwen's AC1 and Cohen's kappa were high enough, so we concluded the reliability was sufficient for content analysis.

Next, we calculated the indexes of frame diversity with using the table of percentage of frames across phases (Table 3). We used Shannon entropy as the index of frame diversity, which previous studies have applied for media analyses (McDonald and Dimmick, 2003). The calculation is as follows: $H(X) = -xX\ P(x) \log P(x)$, where $P(x)$ is the proportion of each frame, x. The numbers of each frame x (or sub-frame x) were divided by the total number of articles in each phase and theme. Sub-frames were used for the diversity indexes. The higher this index of each phases and theme, the more diverse the frames. Conversely, the lower the index, the more uniform the frames.

Finally, we conducted correspondence analysis for the coding to investigate how each theme co-occurred with other frames in one article and how it changed across phases. Using the correspondence analysis, we could visually compare between phases in each theme, themes and frames, and each theme one another in one summary figure.

4 Results

4.1 Time phases of the three life science topics

In total, we collected 37,009 (GM: 12,267, RM: 18,272, BS: 6,470) articles from 1979 to 2020 (GM: 1979–2020, RM: 1991–2020, BS: 1990–2020). The four newspapers showed a similar change in the number of articles for all three themes (the yearly change in the number of articles in each theme is presented in Supplementary Figure 1).

In this pilot study, we could not find apparent differences in the results showing topic changes in the four newspapers through correspondence analysis. Thus, we did not distinguish between the types of newspaper for the following analyses.

As a result of correspondence analysis (see the data in Supplementary Figure 2) with using a software (the KH coder), GM articles were classified into three different thematic reference periods: "fundamental and medical research," "food application," and "agricultural application." "Fundamental and medical research" was the main term used during 1979–1996, and covered "clinical trials," "experiments," and "cells." "Food application" was used during 1997–2002, covering "soybeans," "label," and "citizen." There was controversy surrounding the safety of genetically modified foods over this period. "Agricultural application" was the main term used during 2003–2020, which covered "agriculture," "region," and "cultivation." These results correspond with those of Shineha et al. (2008).

RM articles were classified into three different thematic reference periods: "ES (embryonic stem) cells," "iPSCs," and "STAP (stimulus-triggered acquisition of pluripotency) cells." "ES cells" was the main term used during 1991–2005 and covered "cloning" and "fertilized eggs." "iPSCs" was the main term used during 2006–2013 and 2015–2020 and covered "pluripotent" and "Yamanaka" (who first produced iPSCs). "STAP cells" was the main term used in 2014 and covered "misconduct" and "Obokata" (who claimed that STAP cells could be produced). STAP cells were proposed as a new method of producing stem cells, which caused considerable national interest. However, research misconduct was identified, which resulted in a national scandal (Mikami, 2018).

TABLE 1 Seven frames describing social implications for the three themes.

Main-frame	Sub-frame	Explanation
1. Instrumental science		It describes technological advances as utility tools, which focus on positive expectations of technology. It covers the economic benefits of the technology and practical solutions for social issues.
2. Risky science		It describes the dangers and uncertainty of technology with paying attention to pessimistic aspects of technological advances. It covers precautionary principles and unexpected accidents.
3. Juggernaut science		It identified when no one cannot stop technological advances, which focuses on the autonomy of the progress. It provides a fatalist approach.
4. Techno-nationalism		It regards technological advance as the international competition between nations with comparing Japanese situation with foreign countries. It often emphasizes the delay of the domestic situation in technological advances.
5. Governance		It describes a call for appropriate control of technology.
	Problems and aims	• It includes the morality of technology and ethical topics.
	Governance	• It includes laws, ethical committees, and guidelines on technology.
	Dual use	• It states that the technology can be used for different purposes from the original, especially military aims.
6. Communication matters		It emphasizes the importance of dialogs, talks, and lectures providing technological knowledge.
	Mutual communication	• It describes two-way communication between scientists and ordinary people, which emphasizes the opinions of citizens, consumers, users, and patients.
	Enlightenment	• It describes one-way communication from scientists to ordinary people for giving a greater understanding of the technology.
7. Trust in science		It describes trustworthiness in technological advances.
	Research integrity-system	• It describes the integrity and trustworthiness of the whole research system.
	Research integrity-scientist	• It focuses on the trustworthiness of individual scientists.
	Integration/reduction to science	• It states that technological explanation is also applied to other fields, such as the humanities fields, which assumes that technological explanation is superior to others.

BS articles were classified into four different thematic reference periods: "fundamental and medical research," "educational application," "brain boom," and "heath application." "Fundamental and medical research" was the main term used during 1990–1996 and covered "cells" and "genes." "Educational application" was the main term used during 1997–2004 and covered "learning" and "education." "Brain boom" was the main term used during 2005–2009 and covered "Mogi Kenichiro," who is a domestic science pundit supplying BS news commentary. There was great interest in BS in the media over this period. "Health application" was the main term used during 2010–2020, and covered "health," "sleeping," and "cognition."

Thus, we chose to divide the thematic reference periods into seven phases for the analyses, as shown in Table 4.

4.2 Media frames of the three themes

The general trends of media coverage showed that the "instrumental science" frame was dominant in all three themes (Table 3). Therefore, the positive expectation of technology occupied the press discourse surrounding these technologies in life science.

We also found different trends for the three themes. Regarding GM, the frequency of the "risky science" frame was higher and the frequency of the "trust in science" frame was lower than those of the other frames (Table 3A). This indicated that the negative arguments surrounding GM mainly focused on food safety and environmental risks, but not on the trustworthiness of this technology. Regarding RM, the frequency of the "problems and aims" frame was higher, especially in phases 2 and 3 (1997–2005), and the frequency of the "trust in science" frame was higher in phase 6 (2014) than that of the other frames (Table 3B). The former finding indicated that many ethical committees on ES cells were held in this phase. This finding indicated that research misconduct related to STAP cells was dominant in 2014. Regarding BS, the frequency of the "integration/reduction to science" frame was higher than that of the other frames (Table 3C), which indicated that explanations from BS could often be applied to the humanities field. In addition, the frequency of "non-frame" (i.e., the article could not be coded under any of our frames) was the second highest in BS and higher than in other themes. This result suggests that a large portion of the articles on brain technology were "straight news" and did not mention any social implications.

The pattern of the sub-frames varied for "trust in science." "Integration/reduction to science" showed different patterns from "research integrity-system" and "research integrity-scientist." "Integration/reduction to science" had a 10–28% frequency in BS articles, while "research integrity-scientist" had only a 0–2% frequency (Table 3C). "Research integrity-system" and "research integrity-scientist" had frequencies of 33 and 20%, respectively, in phase 6 of RM, but "integration/reduction to science" did not appear in that phase of RM (Table 3B).

TABLE 2 The reliability of the frame by double coding (n = 200).

Main-frame	Sub-frame	Gwet AC1	Cohen's κ
Instrumental science		0.83	0.83
Risky science		0.96	0.81
Juggernaut science		0.96	0.44
Techno-nationalism		0.95	0.59
Governance		0.83	0.79
	Problems and aims	0.94	0.68
	Legal governance	0.84	0.74
	Dual use	0.99	0.50
Communication matters	ALL	0.96	0.65
	Mutual communication	0.99	0.80
	Enlightenment	0.96	0.52
Trust in science	ALL	0.89	0.76
	Research integrity-system	0.97	0.78
	Research integrity-scientist	0.98	0.79
	Integration to science	0.94	0.68

4.3 Diversity of frames

The time changes in the diversity index of the frames significantly differed among the three themes (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, all $p < 0.05$, GM vs. BS: V = 28, GM vs. RM: V = 21, BS vs. RM: V = 21, Figure 1). The indexes of diversity were not correlated among these themes across the time phases (Spearman's rank correlation test, all $p > 0.05$, GM vs. BS: S = 64, GM vs. RM: S = 52, BS vs. RM: S = 26).

The diversity index of GM articles showed a somewhat cyclical pattern for the time phases, that is, the GM diversity index increased from phase 5 (2010–2013) or phase 6 (2014) to phase 7 (2015–2020). The diversity index of RM articles was fixed at more than 1.5 and the diversity index of BS articles constantly decreased over the time phases.

4.4 Results of correspondence analyses

The correspondence analyses revealed the relative positions of the main frames in each theme and phase (Figure 2 and Supplementary Figure 3). Each circular dot shows the average of values from each article of each theme and phase. The percentage of each axis shows the contributing rate of each sample score, which indicates how the axis of frames could explain the variation of samples. These data were interpreted by the configuration of relative locations between themes or phases (for details, see Hibino and Nagata, 2006). For example, in Figure 2 "med-7" and "med-6" are relatively located away from each other, however "med-7" and "med-5" are close to each other. This indicated that regarding frames, "med-7" was similar to "med-5," and different from "med-6." The closer to the origin (0, 0) of the coordinate, it had the more similar with other samples (e.g., "thechno.national" in Figure 2). Conversely, the closer to the margins of the coordinate, it had more different from other samples (e.g., "trust.full" in Figure 2).

The sample scores were generally plotted around "instrumental science" (Figure 2), which indicates that positive opinions of technology were dominant in media coverage. In particular, BS articles were more associated with this frame. Both the "juggernaut" and the "techno-nationalism" frames were plotted near the center on the coordinate. The results showed that these frames co-occurred with other frames. Meanwhile, "risky science," "trust-in science," and "communication" were plotted near the margins of the coordinate, as these frames occurred solely in one article. Although both BS and RM became slightly closer to "instrumental science" as the phase progressed, the change across phases was not generally coordinated for these themes.

Our results also show that the three themes had the following different patterns. Of the three themes, GM articles were associated more with "risky science" and "governance" than with other themes (Figure 2). This indicates that GM articles had more negative opinions than the other themes. In the single GM analysis, "instrumental science" was closely associated with "techno-nationalism" (Supplementary Figure 3). The dominant frames in GM articles changed from "instrumental science" to "governance"; in other words, phases 1, 5, and 6 (1971–1996, 2010–2014) were associated with the former frame and phases 2, 3, 4, and 7 (1997–2009, 2015–2020) were associated with the latter one.

Regarding RM, "instrumental science," "governance," "techno-nationalism," and "juggernaut" tended to co-occur together in one article (Supplementary Figure 3). Although phase 6 (2014) of RM was plotted around "trust-in science," other phases of RM were generally plotted in the same surroundings of these three frames. This indicates that the type of the frames was largely constant across the phases of RM, except for 2014, when research misconduct related to STAP cells was reported.

Regarding BS, "instrumental science" was constantly dominant across the phases. The "trust in science" frame was associated with "governance" (ethical) in the single BS analysis (Supplementary Figure 3).

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TABLE 3 The percentage of frames across phases.

(A) Genetic modification (GM)								
Main-frame sub-frame	Phase 1 (1979–1996)	Phase 2 (1997–2002)	Phase 3 (2003–2005)	Phase 4 (2006–2009)	Phase 5 (2010–2013)	Phase 6 (2014)	Phase 7 (2015–2020)	SUM
Instrumental	56.0	23.0	34.0	44.0	39.0	50.0	54.0	42.3
Risky	18.0	24.0	15.0	14.0	21.0	26.0	29.0	20.6
Juggernaut	6.0	1.0	5.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	0.0	2.6
Techno-nationalism	4.0	3.0	2.0	4.0	6.0	10.0	9.0	5.1
Governance (ALL)	35.0	45.0	50.0	32.0	40.0	24.0	47.0	40.2
Problems and aims	3.0	5.0	3.0	3.0	1.0	0.0	6.0	3.2
Legal governance	34.0	39.0	49.0	28.0	37.0	24.0	43.0	37.2
Dual use	0.0	2.0	0.0	2.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.9
Others	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Communication (ALL)	2.0	6.0	8.0	8.0	5.0	2.0	9.0	6.0
Mutual	1.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	2.0	1.8
Enlightenment	0.0	3.0	4.0	7.0	4.0	2.0	7.0	4.0
Others	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Trust in science (ALL)	4.0	9.0	8.0	8.0	3.0	2.0	8.0	6.3
Integrity-system	2.0	2.0	6.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	2.0	2.2
Integrity-scientist	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.5
Integration	2.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Others	0.0	6.0	2.0	7.0	1.0	2.0	5.0	3.4
Non-frame	15.0	21.0	14.0	25.0	17.0	20.0	10.0	17.2
N	100	100	100	100	100	50	100	650

(B) Regenerative medicine (RM)								
Main-frame sub-frame	Phase 1 (1979–1996)	Phase 2 (1997–2002)	Phase 3 (2003–2005)	Phase 4 (2006–2009)	Phase 5 (2010–2013)	Phase 6 (2014)	Phase 7 (2015–2020)	SUM
Instrumental	NA	53.0	67.0	64.0	58.0	42.0	58.0	57.0
Risky	NA	0.0	0.0	1.0	3.0	0.0	7.0	1.8
Juggernaut	NA	9.0	2.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	2.2
Techno-nationalism	NA	10.0	4.0	7.0	4.0	2.0	8.0	5.8
Governance (ALL)	NA	62.0	52.0	34.0	36.0	16.0	26.0	37.7
Problems and aims	NA	23.0	23.0	16.0	6.0	2.0	5.0	12.5
Legal governance	NA	51.0	43.0	25.0	33.0	14.0	21.0	31.2
Dual use	NA	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Others	NA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Communication (ALL)	NA	3.0	2.0	3.0	5.0	6.0	2.0	3.5
Mutual	NA	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Enlightenment	NA	0.0	1.0	3.0	4.0	3.0	0.0	1.8
Others	NA	3.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	2.0	1.7
Trust in science (ALL)	NA	3.0	10.0	12.0	4.0	42.0	3.0	12.3
Integrity-system	NA	0.0	5.0	5.0	0.0	20.0	3.0	5.5
Integrity-scientist	NA	0.0	5.0	9.0	4.0	33.0	2.0	8.8

(Continued)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

(B) Regenerative medicine (RM)								
Main-frame sub-frame	Phase 1 (1979–1996)	Phase 2 (1997–2002)	Phase 3 (2003–2005)	Phase 4 (2006–2009)	Phase 5 (2010–2013)	Phase 6 (2014)	Phase 7 (2015–2020)	SUM
Integration	NA	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Others	NA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Non-frame	NA	13.0	8.0	12.0	17.0	13.0	18.0	13.5
N	0	100	100	100	100	100	100	600

(C) Brain-neuroscience (BS)								
Main-frame Sub-frame	Phase 1 (1979–1996)	Phase 2 (1997–2002)	Phase 3 (2003–2005)	Phase 4 (2006–2009)	Phase 5 (2010–2013)	Phase 6 (2014)	Phase 7 (2015–2020)	SUM
Instrumental	50.0	48.2	42.9	57.0	39.0	54.0	61.0	50.5
Risky	0.0	8.2	0.0	2.0	1.0	4.0	4.0	2.9
Juggernaut	6.0	4.7	5.7	3.0	3.0	2.0	2.0	3.6
Techno-nationalism	12.0	4.7	1.4	2.0	1.0	8.0	3.0	3.8
Governance (ALL)	16.0	24.7	20.0	9.0	8.0	10.0	5.0	12.6
Problems and aims	0.0	3.5	5.7	3.0	0.0	6.0	3.0	2.9
Legal governance	12.0	22.4	15.7	5.0	6.0	4.0	2.0	9.2
Dual use	4.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.0	1.4
Others	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Communication (ALL)	8.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	6.0	0.0	1.0	2.7
Mutual	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.7
Enlightenment	6.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	5.0	0.0	1.0	1.8
Others	2.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4
Trust in science (ALL)	32.0	22.4	22.9	19.0	13.0	14.0	12.0	18.4
Integrity-system	10.0	2.4	2.9	0.0	4.0	0.0	2.0	2.7
Integrity-scientist	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Integration	28.0	18.8	18.6	18.0	8.0	14.0	10.0	15.5
Others	0.0	1.2	1.4	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Non-frame	20.0	20.0	24.3	27.0	45.0	32.0	25.0	28.3
N	50	85	70	100	100	50	100	555

TABLE 4 Common time phases corresponding with the change of topic.

Phase	Genetic modification (GM)	Regenerative medicine (RM)	Brain-neuroscience (BS)
1. 1979–1996	Fundamental and medical research		Fundamental and medical research
2. 1997–2002	Food application	ES cells	Educational application
3. 2003–2005	Agricultural application		
4. 2006–2009		iPS cells	Brain boom
5. 2010–2013			Heath application
6. 2014		STAP cells	
7. 2015–2020		iPS cells	

The time phases are based on the results in Supplementary Figure 2. In the Supplementary Figures 1–4, the closeness between each year shows the similarities between topics in each year. We classified each time phase according to how close the years were.

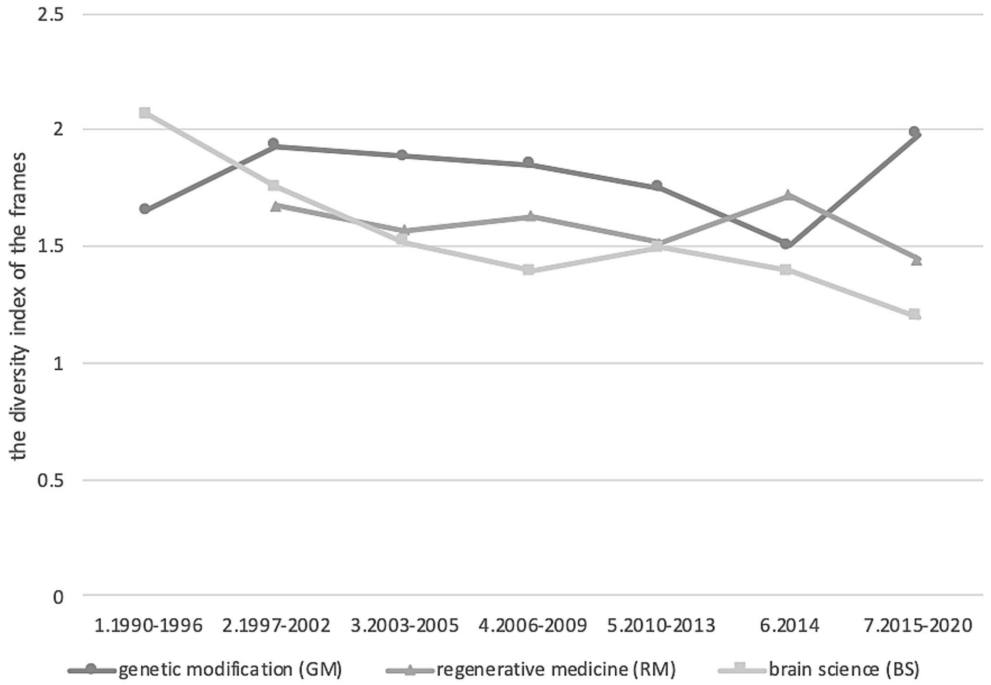

FIGURE 1
The diversity of frames for the three themes. The X axis shows time phases and the Y axis the diversity index of the frame for each theme.

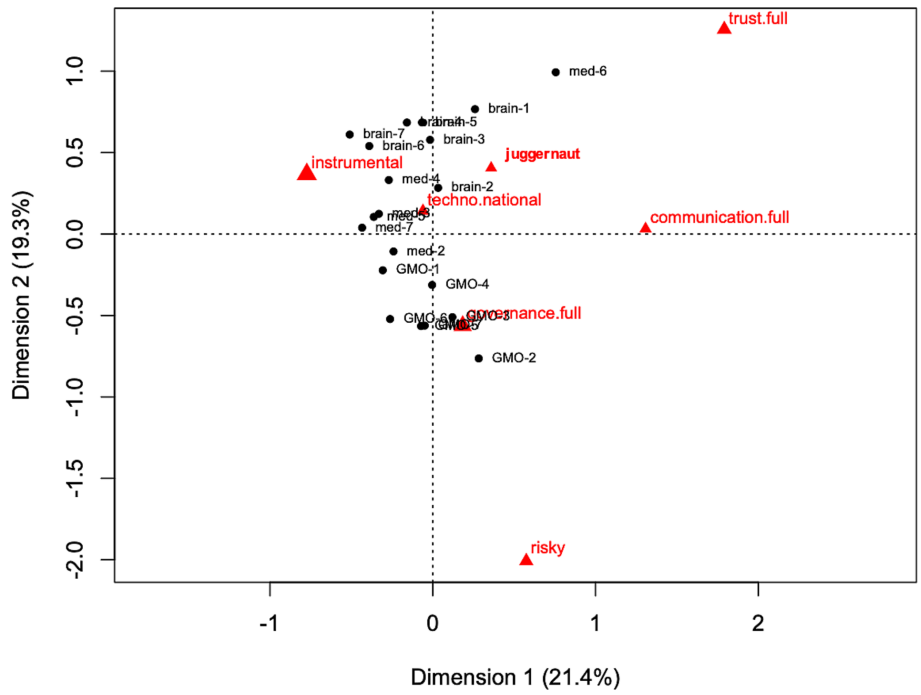

FIGURE 2
Correspondence of all themes with the frames for the seven phases. Notes: The circles indicate the average values of each theme (GMO, genetic modification; med, regenerative medicine; brain, brain-neuroscience) and each phase (each number indicated the time phase), and the triangles indicate the frames. Each circular dot shows the average position of the themes for each phase. The percentage of each axis shows the contributing rate of each score (i.e., data from multiway contingency tables), which indicates how the axis of word associations could explain the variation between scores.

5 Discussion

Our analyses found common and different points concerning how the Japanese media had covered GM, RM, and BS. Regarding the common points, the "instrumental science" frame was the most frequent among the three themes, which indicated that positive arguments were generally dominant. This is consistent with previous Japanese studies (Shineha, 2016; Hibino and Nagata, 2006) and international studies (Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002; Gilbert et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2012; Ruan et al., 2019; Gutteling et al., 2002; Kamenova and Caulfield, 2015) of the media discourse on life science. This suggests that the frames covered by the majority of articles on social implications are fixed to a particularly positive one.

Although the majority of articles are written in positive tone with an "instrumental science" frame, there are articles with a combination of the seven frames, particularly in GM and RM cases. Regarding the different points between three themes, GM covered more diverse frames than the other themes. In particular, there were phases when "governance" was higher than instrumental (phases 2, 3, and 5: 1997–2005, 2010–2013), which contrasted with other frames, in which "instrumental science" was the highest in any phase. Furthermore, "risky science" had the highest frequency in GM compared with the other themes and was unique in that it was mentioned alone. The diversity index of GM was also higher in the 5/7 periods (Figure 1), which indicated that GM covered the most diverse issues, including negative and positive views of technology in media coverage.

Regarding articles on RM, the issue of regulatory ethics followed events of clinical application and industrialization. Phases 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 (1997–2013, 2015–2020) were associated with the "instrumental," "juggernaut," "techno-nationalism," and "governance" frames (Supplementary Figure 3). Typical RM articles emphasized the usefulness of RM, described that no one could stop technological advances, or that Japan should lead the international competition, and also pointed out that the discussion of appropriate regulation and ethical issues was essential. In this context, the concept of governance was regarded as a requirement for promoting RM. Previous research has argued that RM tended to be optimistically reported in the UK, US, and Canada (Kamenova and Caulfield, 2015) and also in Japan (Shineha, 2016). Our results supported this trend.

Regarding BS articles, we identified an emphasis on its instrumental aspects throughout all phases. A sense of instrumentality in BS is enhanced through the expectations toward the advancement of technology. Most prominently, medical research with BS creates high expectations for a wide range of applications, such as a cure for Alzheimer's disease or dementia, or preventive medicine. In addition, BS knowledge is considered to be applicable not only to medicine but also to non-science fields, such as education and marketing.

Although each theme is adjacent to one another, our results suggested the public discourse of each theme do not overlap but are independent of one another. The frame diversity for each phase differed between the three themes and were not correlated among them (Figure 1). Our correspondence analyses showed that the phases tended to be plotted by grouping those of the same theme on the coordinate (Figure 2). These results support the independence of themes. Most content within an article did not refer to other themes.

This independence might reflect the different histories among the three themes. In GM articles, the relatively high frequency of "governance" frames in each phase was related to policy movements. In detail, the approach to "governance" in the correspondence analysis (phases 2 and 3: 1997–2005) was strongly related to the regulation of GM food labeling (phases 2 and 3: 1997–2005). The phase of relatively high "governance" frames (the top three are phases 2, 3, and 7) was strongly related to the establishment of guidelines for genome editing technology (phase 7: 2015–2020), which coincided with policy changes. In addition, these results are consistent with previous studies (Shineha et al., 2008). This response for genome editing contrasted with those for other themes, possibly because GM had a past history with governance affairs (i.e., the safety of GM foods), while RM and BS did not. This revival of the governance frame might be explained by the issue-attention cycle model (Downs, 1972). According to the issue-attention cycle, themes that attract hype progress rapidly in the aftermath of that hype. In addition, the emergence of genome editing technology (phase 7: 2015–2020) was linked to the rise in frame diversity, suggesting that novel technologies would lead to frame diversification in GM articles.

Our results generally coincided with those of other countries (especially, for European countries) and past cases (Bauer and Gutteling, 2006; Gilbert et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2012; Zimmermann et al., 2019; Gutteling et al., 2002; Eyck and Williment, 2003; Dobmeier et al., 2023; Fischer and Hess, 2022), despite differences in factors such as cultural backgrounds. This implies that past issues were important factors determining the present discourse in media coverage.

We also found some backlash against the three technologies. GM articles often picked up the negative opinions of consumers, especially in phases 2 when the safety of GM foods was debated. RM articles sometimes mentioned negative opinions on the application to fertilized eggs, such as the fear about the operation of life, especially in phases 2 and 3. Although there were very limited cases, some BS articles were cautious about the widespread use of BS. In some cases, the media took up the worry that the boom would foster public misperceptions of BS. Terms such as "the myth of brain-neuroscience" and "pseudo (brain) science" showed up in articles. Simultaneously, the role and responsibility of experts were discussed.

In addition, the arguments regarding philosophical and ethical problems overall did not evolve or deepen over time. Especially in RM articles, ethical discussions were not substantive but superficial and ritualistic, such as "It's going to spark an ethical debate," "We need to have an ethical debate," and "The ethical aspect will be an issue." Although the reason why ethical discussions in Japanese newspapers have been limited is beyond the scope of this study, a roundtable discussion conducted by Japanese science journalists based on the preliminary research [Mitsubishi Research Institute (MRI), 2019] presents several possibilities for the reasons for the ritual nature of the Japanese ethical debate, which was also found in this study (Pandemic ELSI, 2024). Firstly, Japanese science reporting has developed alongside national policy science, such as nuclear power and space development. For this reason, Japanese science reporting is used to provide knowledge commentary to help the public understanding of science or to criticize policy, but it is not used to question the nature of science itself fundamentally. Related to the first point, framing discussions about ethics also leads to questioning the responsibility of each individual citizen. It seems that framing the news in this way deviates from the critical approach to power that is the norm in Japanese journalism, and this leads to a lack of focus on ethical issues. What is more, it seems that this is not just a problem for science journalists, but also for experts in the humanities and social sciences in Japan. According to the roundtable discussion, when science

journalists ask experts in the humanities and social sciences for their comments on ethical issues like this, they often express a resigned attitude that "there are some things that cannot be disputed in the face of scientific progress." This is the very "juggernaut science" that we found in this study. In other words, juggernaut science is a way of thinking about science that is prevalent not only among science journalists but also among Japanese ethicists and others. The mechanisms by which Japanese science-related reporting avoids ethical issues should be examined further in the future, but it is thought that these historical and cultural aspects are having an impact.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that not all the ethical issues were ignored in the Japanese press. "Trust in science," particularly on research ethics issues such as fabrication, strongly attracted media attention in Phase 6. In BS articles, the variety of issues discussed in philosophy and ethics communities (Bublitz and Merkel, 2014; Council of Europe, 2021; Ienca, 2021; Ienca and Andorno, 2017; Ienca and Haselager, 2016; Lavazza, 2018; OECD, 2019; Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, 2014, 2015; Shen, 2013) was absent in the media coverage. It is evident that there is a huge gap in interests between the current discussions on social implications in academia and in the media.

Interestingly, the current survey showed that public attitudes toward genome-edited food are not negative compared to those toward GM food (Kato-Nitta et al., 2019). As our study found, media coverage on GM articles including genome-edited foods has a variety of framings, compared to the other two fields (RM or BS). This reflects the accumulation of controversies regarding GMO (particularly GM foods) in 1990s. One reason for the change from GMO to genome-edited food in public attitudes seems to be the accumulation of communications, dialogs, and controversies with various framings. The lessons learned from the GMO case will be useful for the consideration of other cases.

6 Conclusion

Our study examined how the social implications of three life sciences were represented in Japanese media coverage by analyzing relevant articles in four daily newspapers. The common trends of media coverage showed that the "instrumental science" frame was dominant, indicating that positive opinions of life science dominated media coverage. Our results also showed that the time change of frames varied by theme, and the diversity index of the frames differed significantly among the three themes. This finding implied that the background of time changes differed from theme to theme, and that there was little common background or influence on each other.

Regarding GM, the articles were associated with "risky science" and "governance," indicating that the press covered more negative arguments than for the other themes. Regarding RM, "instrumental science," "techno-nationalism," "juggernaut science," and "governance" co-occurred more often in one article, indicating that governance was aimed at promoting the development of technology. Regarding BS, the "instrumental science" frame was constantly dominant in the research period and dominated the other themes. In summary, GM had relatively diverse frames, including risks, while both RM and BS were limited to the "instrumental science" frame, thus preceding the expectation of utilization.

Our research adds to the basic knowledge of how public discourses of emerging life science have featured in media coverage. However, future research needs to clarify why each similar theme is independent of the other themes in the framing of media coverage.

Our study confirmed that the media tends to report positive expectations of life science in Japan. Therefore, this indicates a huge gap between professional discussions of ethics community and Japanese media coverage. An urgent task is to bridge this gap, for which we must recognize the need for ethics communication and science communication. These practices can contribute to better understanding and deliberating the social implications of emerging life science. Our findings on the framing of ELSI in mass media discourse in Japan will provide basic information on this gap.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

KFT: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MK: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KT: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MT: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RS: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

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Supplementary material

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Understanding Ukrainian military chaplains as defenders of the human soul

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The aim of this article was to explore the stresses of war on the human soul, utilizing empirical research on the experiences and contributions of military chaplains (MCs) in the war in Ukraine. The concept of the human soul was examined through a theoretical framework inspired by Mead's notions of the *I* and the *Me*. The *I* represented the unique, creative, and transcendent aspects of a person, while the *Me* reflected the cultural and social constructs that integrated individuals into broader socio-cultural contexts. This interplay between the *I* and the *Me* formed the basis for understanding the human soul as both transcending culture and deeply embedded within it. The empirical material was derived from a qualitative interview study conducted in 2024 with 12 Ukrainian MCs. Data analysis employed thematic coding using an inductive approach, resulting in the identification of key themes related to the moral, ethical, and character dimensions of military service. An abductive approach was employed in the analysis, which allowed concepts to cross-fertilize the key themes. The findings revealed that war disrupted the social structures, norms, and values that underpin peaceful societies, profoundly impacting the mental health of military personnel. MCs played a crucial role in mitigating these effects by fostering moral coherence, upholding ethical standards of the *Me*, and safeguarding the human *Me* of soldiers in the face of dehumanizing wartime conditions. Their work was deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, enabling them to address existential and moral issues that transcended the scope of conventional medical interventions. By offering confidential pastoral care, MCs created spaces for military personnel to process and interpret their experiences, reconnect with their moral and spiritual identities, or Me's, and maintain operational effectiveness. This pastoral, culturally grounded approach complemented—and, in some cases, surpassed—medical models in addressing the complex challenges of existential mental health during war. The article underscored the need for a more holistic understanding of war-related mental health challenges, emphasizing the importance of integrating cultural, moral, and religious/spiritual dimensions into care frameworks.

KEYWORDS

Ukraine, war, military chaplains, human soul, *Me*, *I*, moral, character

Introduction

Military chaplains (hereafter MCs) are generally tasked today with providing pastoral and spiritual care in military settings, conducting religious and spiritual rituals, and fulfilling additional roles, such as teaching ethics and morality or advising military commanders (Bock, 1998; Carey et al., 2016; Koenig et al., 2023; Liuski and Grimell, 2022; Stallinga, 2013). The presence, mission, and purpose of MCs are governed by the

socio-cultural traditions, legislation, and military regulations of each country. It is essential to take a nation's culture and traditions into account to understand the role and function of MCs (Grimell, 2024).

The term MCs refers to a modern designation for an ancient phenomenon: the presence of priests and other religious representatives accompanying military personnel and units during times of conflict and war (Carey et al., 2016; Gudmundsson, 2014). This phenomenon is not exclusively tied to contemporary perspectives on MCs, their roles, or their tasks. Historically, religion in Western societies—specifically Catholicism and Protestantism—was deeply intertwined with power, politics, and warfare (Harrison, 2016, 2019). However, secularization has fundamentally reshaped this relationship with power, authority, and state institutions, albeit to varying degrees depending on the specific socio-cultural context within the Western world (Casanova, 1992, 1994).

One thing that has not changed too much, despite the significant transformations many Western societies have undergone over time, is the fact that nations and military personnel continue to wage war and kill each other. The act of killing in war, as well as war itself, may even be considered good (LiVecche, 2021) and just (Holmes, 2005). The framings of war as good and just depend on the point of view that is adopted. A certain war frame may have political/power, legal, ethical/moral, and even theological layers embedded in a particular understanding of both the war and the act of killing. Different points of view exist side by side; it is in the nature of war to have at least two antagonists or more.

This archaic practice of state-organized killing, whether in defense against attacks or as a preemptive measure, remains a shared feature of most societies today (Huntington, 1957; Moskos et al., 2000; Wilson, 2008), as painfully evident in the full-scale war in Ukraine. MCs also hold a well-defined place within the war apparatus in Ukraine (Grimell, 2025a,b) and beyond, and their role can be understood as far more expansive than simply providing pastoral and spiritual care or performing religious and spiritual rites.

The toxic reality and stresses of war have mental health implications for military personnel, which, in the long run, can lead to medical consequences and be understood through a dominant medical perspective (e.g., alcoholism, depression, suicide). However, the root of these symptoms may rather lie in the fact that a human being is a socio-cultural construct with certain values, meanings, and practices—an analytical concept that can be referred to as a socio-cultural *Me* (Mead, 1934/2015).

The brutality of war erodes this *Me*, gradually dissolving the human aspect of a soldier and potentially creating a war animal (Grimell, 2025b). Preventing and countering the erosion of norms, values, and ethics/morals is a key focus of Ukraine MCs, who systematically work to address this issue (Grimell, 2025b). MCs can thus be understood as a distinct group with cultural competence outside traditional military medicine (psychiatry, psychology), working to preserve the existential mental health of military personnel and veterans. They embody an important *healing role* that both broadens and complements an overly narrow medical perspective in a complex situation (Illich, 1977).

Aim

The aim of this article is to reflect on the stresses of war on the human soul (conceptualized as consisting of a unique *I* and socio-cultural *Me*), through empirical research on the work and contributions of MCs in the war in Ukraine.

Until the specific interview study with Ukrainian MCs conducted in 2024, which this article draws its material from, there was no English peer-reviewed published research on Ukrainian MCs and their lessons learned from the war. Two publications from the study have since been released to outline the results in broader terms (Grimell, 2025a,b). This article, however, delves deeper into the material to explore a specific thematic area concerning the war's impact on the human soul.

The article will continue by briefly presenting military chaplaincy, Ukrainian military chaplaincy, conceptually defining the term human soul, and finally outlining the method, analysis, and discussion.

A brief overview of military chaplaincy as a practice and research field

Military chaplaincy, both as a practice and a research field, has gained renewed relevance in light of the many different operations that have followed the conflicts and wars of the 21st century (Grimell, 2024). Most armed forces, especially within NATO (Bock, 1998), have military chaplaincy services, but even countries outside NATO, such as Ukraine (Grimell, 2025a) and Russia (Gustafsson Kurki, 2024), have MCs. In some NATO member countries, such as Sweden, the function has existed for almost 500 years (Grimell, 2024).

The presence of MCs in armed forces is supported by legislation, culture, and tradition, which can vary between countries (Grimell, 2024). Often, but not always, the presence of MCs is driven by people's right to practice their faith and religious identities. This also means, though not always, that armed forces may have a multifaith representation of MCs, ranging from religious and spiritual traditions to humanist (secular) perspectives. However, in several armed forces (both within NATO and other examples), MCs can also perform other tasks of a more general nature, such as addressing and educating military personnel on ethical and moral issues.

Research on military chaplaincy has intensified over the past few decades and has been recognized as an important partner in military medicine. This can be linked to the emergence of the concept of moral injury (Shay, 2002, 2003; Litz et al., 2009) and the growing realization among clinicians that moral injury is better addressed by MCs (and clergy) than by clinicians who are not trained in the existential, religious/spiritual approach that such an injury requires (Besterman-Dahan et al., 2012; Bobrow et al., 2013; Litz et al., 2009; Wortmann et al., 2017).

Currently, research on military chaplaincy is often found as a subfield in religious, spiritual, and chaplaincy-focused journals, as well as in medically oriented journals, particularly those in psychiatry and psychology. However, there are also dedicated

journals on military chaplaincy, such as the *Australian Army Chaplaincy Journal* (published by the Australian Government, Department of Defense) and *U.S. Army Chaplain Corps Journal* (the official publication of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps).

Description of Ukrainian military chaplaincy

After Ukraine declared independence from the Soviet Union, priests and deacons began providing voluntary support to the Ukrainian military. For more than 20 years, pastoral military support relied on the voluntarism of the clergy. As a result, the Military Chaplaincy of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is likely the most recently formalized and professionalized state-led chaplaincy service in the world.[1]

In late 2021, shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Parliament (the Verkhovna Rada) passed a law establishing a military chaplaincy. This law, titled *"On the Military Chaplaincy Service,"* came into force on 1 July 2022. The Military Chaplaincy Service is now an official structure within the Armed Forces, the National Guard, the State Border Guard Service, and other military formations (Grimell, 2025a,b).

Prior to 2022, the presence of clergy in military units and at the front lines consisted of voluntary efforts by priests. On a volunteer basis, these clergy provided pastoral care and support to military personnel to the best of their abilities. Priests often stayed with military units at the front for weeks, months, or even longer periods, moving independently between frontline positions—often on foot—without the centrally regulated armed and experienced assistants (soldiers) that are now standard (Grimell, 2025a,b).

While the Military Chaplaincy Service of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is newly established as a professionalized structure, it includes many highly experienced wartime MCs. Several of these MCs have been active since the onset of the war in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, and they played a key role in the development and professionalization of the chaplaincy framework. Some of these MCs are arguably among the most experienced wartime MCs in the world, with nearly a decade of service in war conditions (Grimell, 2025a,b).

The Military Chaplaincy Service is multifaith, reflecting Ukraine's religious diversity. It includes Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim chaplains. Religious organizations and communities are responsible for evaluating the suitability, appointing, and providing spiritual formation for MC candidates. The Armed Forces employ these appointed MCs, who undergo military preparatory training based on their backgrounds and experience.

The MCs' four primary responsibilities are:

- Pastoral Care
- Religious and Educational Work
- Social and Charitable Activities
- Advising Commanders on Spiritual and Religious Issues

There are generally two types of MCs in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: brigade-level MCs (typically holding the rank of major) and battalion-level MCs (usually captains). Brigade MCs focus on organizing chaplaincy work within the brigade, taking on a more administrative and coordination-focused role. They work relatively closely with other functions, such as the brigade psychologist, and oversee the activities of battalion MCs.

Battalion MCs operate at a lower tactical level, directly delivering chaplaincy services to soldiers and their units. In situations where there is no assigned battalion MC, the brigade MC steps in to provide pastoral care for that battalion as needed.

MCs are non-combatants and are accompanied by an armed soldier when working near the front lines.

Given the dynamic nature of the war, with new units constantly being formed and the chaplaincy structure still undergoing professionalization, exceptions, adaptations, and improvisations in the deployment and roles of MCs are not uncommon. In cases where, for example, battalion MCs are lacking, brigade MCs can support the battalions by also assuming the role of a battalion MC. If an MC is missing in a heavily combat-engaged battalion, an MC from an entirely different branch of service may be ordered to support the battalion for an extended period. Given the dynamic nature of the war, the formation of new units, the ongoing establishment of the Military Chaplaincy Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the fact that MCs are injured or killed, one should exercise caution and restraint when making generalizations about MCs in Ukraine.

For further details see Grimell (2025a,b).

Conceptualizing the human soul

The soul is a deeply rooted concept in culture and human thought. Religious, philosophical, and cultural perspectives offer varied explanations and interpretations of what the soul truly means. Defining the soul is challenging due to its complexity and diverse meanings (Kurkiala, 2019).

The strength of a concept like the soul lies in its status as a deeply ingrained cross-cultural idea that both secular and religious theorists can engage with. The concept of the soul is widely accepted in religious traditions, such as Christianity and Hinduism, as well as in secular fields of study (for instance, Braidotti, 2006; Moss and Prince, 2014; McLaren, 2002; Tick, 2005), including philosophy (Foucault, 1979). A key dividing line often involves the connection to a transcendent dimension, which, from a religious perspective, can encompass existence after death and the immortality of the soul.

In general, the soul can be described as unique to each person, a bodiless reality (Foucault, 1979). The soul is an immaterial, spiritual, or conscious and unique entity believed to reside within every human being (Grimell, 2018). It is often associated

1 When it comes to, for example, the number of MCs in Ukraine, how many have died or been injured in the war, the researcher has taken the following stance: No figures are mentioned. This is partly because (a) war involves war propaganda, (b) partly because Ukraine does not release figures on casualties, and (c) partly because intelligence agencies are piecing together information. Various types of public figures circulate on the internet regarding all these matters, but the researcher has chosen not to publish internal figures mentioned during the interviews, as it is not in Ukraine's interest to do so.

with questions of human identity, character, consciousness, self-awareness, and an existence beyond the physical body (Brock and Lettini, 2013; Graham, 2017; Grimell, 2018; Tick, 2005). Regardless of whether one takes a secular or religious view of the soul, it is seen as beyond and more than the physical body (Grimell, 2024).

There is a strong relationship between the soul and the concept of spirit, which can be understood as synonymous but also nuanced depending on usage or distinctions made (Grimell, 2018). Regardless of distinctions, theorists from fields such as social psychology, psychology, pastoral care, and theology tend to describe the soul and spirit as an inner, unique, feeling, integrative, and creative part of a human being (Graham, 2017; Grimell, 2018; James, 1890; Pargament and Sweeney, 2011; Tick, 2005; Tillich, 1952/2014).

This article presents a sociologically and social-psychologically developed version of the soul.

A mead-inspired conceptualization of the human soul

Mead (1934/2015) described the self as consisting of two parts: the *I* and the *Me*. The *I* represents the active and acting part of the self, existing in the present (Mead, 1934/2015, p. 77). It is the ephemeral, unique, and creative agent of the self. The *Me*, on the other hand, is the social roles or cultural characters reproduced and created through the generalized other, which can be understood as society's influence on the self. The *Me* helps the self understand, interact with, and define situations in light of cultural symbols—particularly language, values, and practices—that emerge from a specific social context (Mead, 1934/2015, p. 209). The *I* and *Me* coexist in a reciprocal relationship, where the uniqueness, spontaneity, and creativity of the *I* are tempered by the *Me*, which exercises social governance over the *I* (Mead, 1934/2015, p. 210). Society's values control the *I* through the *Me*, and every group to which a person belongs creates a distinct *Me*. Humans, therefore, juggle multiple *Mes* that coexist and influence the *I*.

Mead's (1934/2015) version of the *I* was not as fully elaborated as James's earlier version (1890), which also distinguished between the *I* and the *Me*. In James's model, the I represented the aspect of the self that felt, experienced, thought, and was conscious, whereas Mead described the I in terms of creativity, spontaneity, and agency. In both Mead's and James's model, the *I* is the original, genuinely unique part of the self, while the *Me* is culturally constructed. Both parts are deeply interdependent and essential for a person to become human in a social context.

The Mead-inspired concept of the soul developed in this article repurposes the same theoretical framework—the *I* and the *Me*—to illustrate the human soul. The *I* represents the original, creative, and unique aspect of a person, the part that feels, experiences, thinks, and is conscious. The *I* transcends culture—that is, it is greater than, beyond, and prior to culture. However, culture and symbols, represented by the *Me*, are necessary for the *I* to become human. Without the "human" prefix and part of the concept, the *I* would lack orientation points and interpretive keys. The *Me* creates meaningful symbolic interaction and context. The Me has emerged in a cultural and symbolic everyday context that provides it with a certain sense of coherence—SOC, as Antonovsky (1987) describes it—which is connected to comprehensibility (i.e., understanding events in some kind of rational way), manageability (i.e., having the resources to handle a situation), and meaningfulness (i.e., the ability to create emotional meaning and existential motivation in a situation). At the same time, the *Me* is a part of the person that transcends the individual, integrating and embedding the individual in culture, symbols, and relational contexts.

Thus, the human soul transcends culture through the *I* and the individual through the *Me*. This reciprocal relationship is vital but also indicates that the human soul, via the sensitive and unique *I*, can be harmed by events with negative or destructive effects on the *I*, or by a cultural and symbolic *Me* that subjugates or violates the *I* (Grimell, 2023).

Methods

The empirical material utilized in this article is drawn from a qualitative interview study with Ukrainian MCs conducted in 2024. The study was initiated by the Chief Chaplain of the Swedish Armed Forces and aimed to gather experiences and learn from seasoned wartime MCs. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Reference number 2023-05049-01). Although key aspects of the findings have been published previously (Grimell, 2025a,b), nuanced details and certain implications of the material remain unexplored. This article delves deeper into analytical themes that can particularly be related to what has come to be conceptualized as the human soul. By doing so, it aims to reflect on the impact of war on the human soul through the lens of medical sociology.

Sample and selection

The study included 12 male participants ($N = 12$) recruited via two different points of contact combined with a snowball sampling method (Noy, 2008). Given the participants' ecclesiastical backgrounds and their broad and in-depth experiences of the ongoing war, qualitative saturation was satisfactorily achieved.

Selection criteria

Selection criteria required participants to have a background as priests or pastors within the Christian church family and to have served as MCs for as long as possible (ideally since the war started in 2014) to provide the most extensive experience possible. Since the study was initiated by the Swedish Armed Forces to learn from MCs in war, there was also an intention for the sample to resemble Swedish MCs as closely as possible—for example, in terms of their background as parish priests, ecclesiastical ordination, and affiliation with the Christian church family (Grimell, 2025a).

For priests within the Christian church family, aspects such as parish life (baptizing, confirming, marrying, burying, pastoral care, etc.), theology, liturgy, rituals, and the ecclesiastical office are more closely connected compared to entirely different religious traditions and communities, such as Jewish or Muslim ones. There are, of

course, also differences, yet there is also considerable overlap that can facilitate understanding and applicability.

This intention was achieved, as the 12 participants generally reflected the parish backgrounds of Swedish Lutheran (Protestant) MCs/priests and were distributed within the Christian church family as follows: six Orthodox, four Greek Catholic, and two Protestant.

One challenge was the gender dimension. In Sweden, many MCs are women due to the Lutheran Church's tradition of ordaining both men and women. This was difficult to reflect, as the Orthodox and Greek Catholic traditions in Ukraine do not allow women to serve in ecclesiastical ministries.

Sample characteristics

To minimize the risk of identifying participants, they are described only at a group level.

In general terms, the majority of the participants were highly experienced MCs in the Ukrainian context. A handful had served as volunteer MCs since the early 2000s, with some serving even longer. Nine participants had been volunteer MCs at the frontline since the war began in 2014. During this period, they served as parish priests and periodically volunteered to support military personnel at the front—spending weeks or months there before returning to their regular duties and then going back to the front again. These volunteer MCs have since been employed by the Armed Forces of Ukraine or integrated into the military chaplaincy structure, reflecting the institutionalization and professionalization of military chaplaincy.

One participant in the study remained a volunteer MC. Two participants had much shorter careers as MCs, having been employed during the professionalization process that began in 2022. Nonetheless, they had served as MCs at the frontline with units engaged in heavy combat over the past 2 years. While their experience was less extensive compared to their senior Ukrainian colleagues, it was significant in comparison to their international peers.

Most participants were aged between 40 and 50, with one just over 50 and another just over 30.

The participants represented a mix of both battalion- and brigade-level MCs, although there was a slight predominance of brigade MCs. Many participants had served in both roles and as volunteer MCs prior to and during the professionalization, reflecting their extensive service. The traditional branches of the Armed Forces—the Army, Navy, and Air Force—were represented, as well as other units not named here due to their unique nature. Of the 12 participants, 11 belonged to or had served in one or more frontline combat units. For further information, see Grimell (2025a,b).

Interview design

Participants received study information in both Ukrainian and English. The interview questions and informed consent forms were also translated into both languages. Participants were required to return signed consent forms before interviews were conducted.

The interviews were carried out via digital communication platforms. In some cases, participants provided written responses due to the logistical challenges posed by the wartime frontline context. It turned out to be a major challenge to arrange the interviews with frontline MCs belonging to units engaged in combat (see Grimell, 2025a). Eight participants were interviewed, while four submitted written responses.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to cover topics relevant to the study, ranging from background information, tasks, roles, moral, spiritual, and existential challenges in war, to aspects of maintaining the ability to conduct military chaplaincy during wartime (see Appendix 1). The guide also allowed for unplanned follow-up questions to clarify or expand on responses.

Language and interpretation

Language barriers arose during the interviews, as not all participants spoke English and the researcher did not speak Ukrainian. Therefore, a Ukrainian-Swedish interpreter from the Swedish Armed Forces assisted in seven interviews. One interview was conducted in English by the researcher. The written responses were primarily in English, with one exception, which was translated by the interpreter.

Interpretation introduced methodological considerations. Interpretation is not a direct representation of the interviewee's words but a translation, and thus partially an interpretation. This required the researcher to exercise extra care in understanding and analyzing responses. Clarity during interviews was essential, with questions sometimes repeated to ensure accuracy. Follow-ups with participants were conducted to clarify ambiguities, and participants were asked to review parts of the article to confirm accurate understanding.

Interview durations ranged from 1.5 h, in the shortest case, to over 2 h in several instances (specific durations are detailed in Appendix 2). All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Inductive thematic coding

A thematic coding process based on inductive logic (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Thomas, 2006) was employed, as no prior research or deductive theory on military chaplaincy during Ukraine's war exists. The qualitative analysis software *Atlas.ti* was used to systematically manage and group codes into code families.

The analysis followed two main steps.

1) Open inductive coding: The transcriptions were systematically analyzed, and all noteworthy observations were marked and labeled. For example, if a participant mentioned, "prayer is an important preparation before combat," this segment was coded as *prayer important before combat*. Similarly, if a participant stated, "confidentiality is an important release valve for military personnel," this was coded as *confidentiality important release valve*. This initial phase generated 454 unique codes, many of which overlapped among participants.

2) Thematic organization into code families: To present the codes meaningfully, they were grouped into overarching themes known as code families in *Atlas.ti*. This is a more abstract form of coding, where the inductive approach moved toward generalization and deduction. A key principle in the process was to present the analysis findings in a coherent way, focusing on what military chaplains do in war and the lessons learned. Not all individual codes were automatically reflected in a code family; however, the associations of a code should lead to a code family, and vice versa. While some individual nuances were lost in the transition from specific codes to general themes, this process provided structure and clarity. This analysis resulted in the identification of 15 code families (see Appendix 3).

This article specifically draws on material from code family 6, which focuses on "Morality, ethics, and character formation in war," and code family 14, which examines "Wisdom about the implications of war on soldiers, society, theology, Bible usage, etc."

In the subsequent analysis, concepts and theory have been used to cross-fertilize the thematic coding. This is referred to as an abductive approach and aims to deepen the analysis (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). It should be noted that *I* and *Me* are analytical concepts, with *Me* being the one that can primarily be approached empirically in research. Therefore, the focus of the analysis is on *Me*, while *I* remains an inseparable part of a person and, on a theoretical level, is entirely necessary.

Clear identity markers (e.g., names, ranks, geographical locations, specific events, and situations) have been omitted or blurred to make it more difficult to trace them back in the presentation of the analysis. Participants are referred to as, for example, MC 2 (Orthodox), and so on.

MC 9 has been given particular prominence in this article because his extensively articulated experience needed to be presented in more detail. His case was therefore deliberately not used extensively in previously published articles (Grimell, 2025a,b). However, his experiences are not unique, but correspond with many other experienced MCs who are also, of course, included in this article, although these accounts have been more extensively featured in earlier publications.

Analysis

Upholding and protecting morality, ethics, character, and the human aspect in war

MC 9 (Greek-Catholic) was a highly war-experienced chaplain who had voluntarily served as a frontline MC since the war began in 2014. He was one of the study participants with extensive and long-standing experience in military chaplaincy, dating back well before 2014. MC 9 shared that a key part of his work at positions along the frontline, as well as behind it, revolved around moral education, character, and attention with military personnel. This moral education and approach had a general character and was not dependent on any particular faith.

MC 9 (Greek-Catholic) recounted:

> In the fields, I was always walking from one position to another position, and whenever I was there, or in a village or another village, or another position in the frontline, I was creating my own military ethos program. These included lectures that could be useful no matter the faith or denomination, talks with lessons on moral issues, moral value orientations, or shaping character to deal with combat stress or related challenges. This was my priority.

An important reason for this focus was the war's erosion of norms and rules, including the gradual value shifts that occur during a full-scale war like this. According to MC 9, the focus on moral education—*shaping moral character*—was as much about pastoral care as it was about nurturing the moral principles of the cultural *Me*. In the context of war, the work on moral principles and character was to be understood as pastoral care adapted to prevent or counteract the dissolution of social order and the unraveling of character, or the socially constructed and shaped *Me*, that follows war.

MC 9 (Greek-Catholic) explained:

> One of the things that makes it difficult for people from the West to understand pastoral care [in war] is that it is still organized and structured for peaceful times in your countries, and that's exactly how civilization operates. There are a set of norms that regulate relationships between people. For example, you can schedule interviews between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. But you can't do that in a war zone. War is about chaos—that's why norms and regulations don't function or protect people as they should. This is precisely why my number one priority was to recreate those norms and certain types of communication within the minds of the military personnel I spoke with. Otherwise, the psychological health and mental wellbeing of soldiers are at great risk when they lose any sense of order. Recreating that order involved articulating norms, discussing moral principles, and appealing to texts or prayers. My primary focus was the soldier's mind—that was what I was serving.

The cultural tools and resources that MC 9 used in his moral pastoral care approach to recreate and nurture a socially constructed *Me* were drawn from the Greek Catholic tradition to which he belonged as both a priest and an MC. This tradition encompasses theology, ethics, moral principles, pastoral wisdom, biblical narratives, rituals, prayers, sacraments, religious aids such as rosaries, sacred objects, medallions of the Blessed Virgin and the Angel Michael, prayer books, and more. It represents a timeless cultural knowledge that, through generations and in previous European wars, aims to uphold a Christian moral-ethical compass. This moral *Me* provides guidance to individuals in their relationships with themselves, others, right and wrong, and good and evil during war. Pastoral work provided military personnel with approaches and rituals for healing that went beyond and complemented military medicine (Illich, 1977).

The moral *Me* belongs in a social everyday context, which provides the *Me* with a certain sense of coherence—SOC, as Antonovsky (1987) describes—which war more or less brutally and profoundly disrupts. The concepts of comprehensibility,

manageability, and meaningfulness become extremely strained by the war's dissolution of the everyday life's sustaining norms, values, and behaviors. Precisely because war uproots military personnel from their social contexts and distances them from these familiar surroundings, there arises a need to focus on their sense of coherence and everyday sense of *Me* to sustain morality, ethics, purpose, motivation, resilience, and the endurance of the human soul.

Most Western societies, regardless of secularization, can be said to have such an implicit moral-ethical *Me* or compass deeply embedded in the culture that underpins society. Societies seek to teach and instill such a moral *Me* in their citizens through socialization (Mead, 1934/2015). This *Me* shapes human character, organized around values and norms vital to society. However, war threatens to entirely dissolve these norms and rules encapsulated in the socio-cultural everyday Me, that is, to dissolve the socio-cultural *Me* carved out in a society shaped by peace, law, justice, ethics, and order. As such, the war poses acute stress to the part of the human soul here conceptualized as *Me*.

Defending the humanity of military personnel who have lost their socio-cultural everyday reality in the service of war and killing

Although a stark departure from a peaceful society, the killing of other combatants is a natural part of war (French, 2005; Goldstein, 2001; Strachan, 2006; Verrips, 2006; Wilson, 2008). It is morally expected and required of a military *Me*. Yet even this is governed by the laws and conventions of war in order to maintain a kind of ethics and order in war. This not only concerns creating conditions for comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, but also aims to harmonize a military *Me* with a socio-cultural (civilian) *Me* to a greater extent within the human soul. An important way to maintain this is to nurture the integrity of a value-based view of humanity in a situation that threatens to completely dissolve morality and ethics, which, in turn, threatens to dissolve the socio-cultural *Me* that can be said to make people human and socio-cultural beings.

MC 9 (Greek Catholic) explained his approach to this process:

> In the military, you have to do your job, and that involves fighting for your mission aims, your despairs, and your moral injuries, so to speak, but always according to certain principles and laws. This allows you to stay human in a situation that demands the collapse of humanity. I often say that war is the world beyond our measures. Of course, it is the greatest threat to humanity, especially this war.

It is important to follow laws and regulations because they protect the humanity from completely collapsing in war. This, in turn, would mean that the foundation for the *Me*, and thus the *Me* itself, depends on how well laws and regulations protect morality and ethics in a situation that seeks to collapse the socio-cultural conditions for comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Deviations from the laws of war—abuse, brutality, torture, killing of civilians, bombing of civilian facilities and infrastructure, and so on—risk entirely dismantling the moral and ethical framework intended to organize human relationships in a wartime context. The witnessing and experiences of death, killing, and the ever-present threat of not seeing the next day, combined with the growing distance from everyday life and the everyday *Mes* that military personnel lived and upheld before the war, deeply affected them. The prolonged nature of the war further undermined the morality, values, and social identities learned in peacetime society. This erosion of values can have deeply undesirable consequences for the health of military personnel, the discipline and morale of units, and, ultimately, strip military personnel of their human *Me*.

The participants in the study testified that the war deformed soldiers and veterans (Grimell, 2025b). Of course, there were positive aspects, such as camaraderie and fellowship. However, the stresses of war, combined with the dissolution of morality, ethics, and sense of coherence, could lead soldiers to become war animals. A war animal referred to someone who had lost their human qualities, including the capacity for rational behavior and thought (Grimell, 2025b). Another highly experienced participant, who, like MC 9, had been on the frontline since the war broke out in 2014, had been a volunteer MC for much longer. He spoke about how challenging it was to handle the moral issues, maintain humanity, and avoid becoming a war animal.

MC 6 (Orthodox) recounted:

> It requires long conversations, and it's not certain that it helps. This is one of the absolute hardest things, because many put on a mask in front. And some go completely crazy, "the top comes off" (explains the interpreter in Swedish), their heads explode. And this is difficult. The situations can be very complicated. We try to observe early signs of this, both chaplains and psychologists. Often, it happens in the form of excesses related to alcohol consumption, alcohol and all that stuff, then the activities they come up with themselves can completely spiral out of control, but we try to observe such things early.

The expression *mask* resonates particularly well with Wertsch's (1991) concept of *the mask of the warrior*, where she problematized the functions of the warrior mask: secrecy, stoicism, and denial, as well as alcohol abuse to relieve pressure. A warrior needs a mask (or military identity) to fulfill the role of a soldier, but the mask also has a downside that can have negative implications for mental health.

In a similar way, another very experienced participant emphasized the conversational approach in combination with monitoring negative mood in order to pastor military personnel.

MC 10 (Greek-Catholic) explained:

> I listen and support the conversation. I monitor negative mood manifestations, and if they occur, I try to take appropriate measures based on the situation.

For the MCs in the study, staying vigilant and actively working to combat or mitigate the erosion of morals and character was a vital responsibility. Both in the immediate operational environment and over the long term, such losses of humanity posed a significant

challenge for a military society engaged in waging war, as well as for a civilian society tasked with caring for its veterans. For military personnel and veterans, it was about the support and care of the integrity of their human soul.

Another very experienced MC explained that his main focus gravitated toward supporting military personnel so that, instead, they would activate and practice seeing the beautiful and uplifting aspects of war. This was a kind of pastoral method against being completely consumed and losing oneself in the darkness and destruction of war. The pastoral approach aimed to build resilience and prevent them from being broken down, and in the worst case, becoming a war animal.

MC 5 (Orthodox) stated:

> It is my main job to work on this; I do it all the time. In situations like these, I try to highlight for the soldiers in dialogue what is good, what is working, camaraderie, the sky is blue, that there are many things around them. One has to try to find and articulate these things, even though it can be difficult.

MC 9 also applied a similar approach to counteract the destructive and degrading effects of war on the human being. The ability to seek and find meaning in a dynamic and changing situation, to identify a sense of coherence regardless of what was happening, was considered very important to protect and maintain one's human capacity and resilience.

MC 9 (Greek-Catholic) recounted:

> Beauty is the most important thing. Once you are part of such a destructive force for such a long period of time, you don't know when something beautiful will appear around you—something that speaks to your heart rather than your mind. In such situations, you can easily lose yourself and cause irreparable damage to your humanity. To me, this is an important behavioral state and sense: to have a taste of life, to see a sense in what is going on, and to sustain mental wellbeing, especially in the combat zone. I usually offer some exercises to the military to increase their resilience by enhancing their taste for life, their appreciation of death, and how to find meaning in what is happening. For many people, faith does this: it provides avenues to reconstruct reality by finding meaning in whatever is happening around you and in the routine.

Among the MCs, there was a clear emphasis on preserving the individual humanity of military personnel and upholding broader human ethics in the context of war, where human dignity was often severely challenged.

MC 2 (Orthodox) recounted:

> It is very important to maintain the human side of oneself, even when external circumstances are very challenging.

This applied not only to individual soldiers in relation to their emerging ethical mindset, actions, and character, but also to military commanders. The MCs described the importance of making commanders aware of the ethical dimension in their decisions, how to act toward the enemy, and the need to resist giving in and losing the good ideals and ethical norms (Grimell, 2025b).

Intense emotions and the drive for revenge in relation to prisoners of war

The erosion of morals and character, and its implications, can be particularly challenging when the enemy becomes captive. Regardless of whether the Russian soldiers taken prisoner were personally responsible for the killing of battle buddies, colleagues in other units, or attacks on civilians, they became a concrete symbol of the killing, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and potential violations of the laws of war committed during the conflict. The feelings and desire for revenge could be palpable in such situations. However, for several reasons, maintaining a strong moral *Me* and character in such situations was crucial.

MC 4 (Orthodox) recounted:

> Something that is also a major issue, and that we talk about a great deal, is how soldiers should relate to their adversary, to the enemy, and when they capture them. That is, the people who have tried to take their lives, those of their children and families, and so on—how they should approach that and them. We've worked on this quite a bit. I explain the consequences of revenge and how it can affect a person. But also that it is not to Ukraine's advantage to take the life of a prisoner, because a prisoner can be valuable. I also highlight the importance of, and explain to the soldiers, that destructive actions can make things dangerous, especially for your comrades when it comes to the handling of prisoners. As a priest, I don't talk about bad people but rather bad actions. It is the bad actions I address as a priest.

These types of MC experiences from the war in Ukraine highlight how essential it is to prepare for and continuously work on the handling of prisoners of war from moral, ethical, and character perspectives. This is especially urgent when the laws and rules of war are violated, battle buddies, families and close relatives have died, been injured, or subjected to bombings, artillery, and drones, combined with rapid media dissemination and disinformation.

This is not only about how moral transgressions can lead to moral injuries that are difficult to live with in the aftermath of war (Shay, 2002, 2003; Litz et al., 2009; Koenig et al., 2023). It is also connected to critical intelligence information, the West's perception of Ukraine, and the integrity of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Ultimately, this is about protecting the moral character and integrity of the individual, the armed forces, and the nation as a whole.

Practicing pastoral care through narratives that create a sense of coherence

Many participants used a narrative approach in the pastoral care they practiced and the moral education and character-building efforts they undertook. This narrative approach could draw its

material from various biblical sources. It was a way to connect a soldier to a Christian tradition and culture with sacred undertones, creating a sense of coherence, purpose, and meaning, as well as providing spiritual comfort and solace for soldiers facing various challenges. Or simply as a confirming biblical narrative for an already focused soldier or group in preparation for their mission.

MC 12 (Protestant) explained that he used the following Bible stories when practicing pastoral care for combat military personnel on the front lines in various situations:

> Gospel stories of faith in Jesus: there are two different centurions who saw and believed in Jesus; there is Cornelius the centurion in the Book of Acts; there is David the warrior and his many psalms, especially Psalm 91; there is Peter walking on water and then drowning in the storm, with Christ reaching out a helping hand in response to his urgent prayer; there are the apostles in dire straits in the storm, and Jesus asking them, "Where is your faith?"; there is Paul in Romans 13 talking about "the minister of God," that "he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to [execute] wrath upon him that doeth evil." Finally, there is the Prodigal Son returning to the Father.

MC 10 (Greek-Catholic) stated:

> The most authoritative source of wisdom is the Holy Scriptures.

These authoritative Christian cultural scripts offered both relevant themes and biblical characters with whom military personnel and veterans could identify. The opportunities provided by the religious frameworks could be employed to mitigate struggle, hardship, suffering, and pain, and nurture healing. Religion as culture can provide frameworks and clues on how pain and suffering should be endured through stories, symbols, and examples. There is actually research on biblical combat veterans that has not been used in this context but could be highly relevant for a type of pastoral care that is open to employing such an approach (Grimell, 2022).

Another very important narrative element in the pastoral care practiced by the participants, and conveyed to military personnel, was, of course, the broader narrative of their role as protectors of the country, civilians, and the next generation. Such a grand narrative served several functions. It was about creating a strong moral narrative for the role of a soldier, which included sacrificing one's life for something greater than oneself (the independence of the country, the safety of civilians, and the next generation being raised in a democratic and independent society). Thus, the narrative aimed to instill the will and courage to sacrifice oneself for something larger—that is, a willingness to fight and die.

This narrative approach also emphasized standing behind military personnel, showing solidarity, and spiritually strengthening them. At the same time, the narrative raised the religious, moral, and legal legitimacy of using violence. The narrative was also employed to pastorally care for and assist those who were sad, scared, and filled with anxiety in their role as combatants (see also Grimell, 2025b).

MC 6 (Orthodox) recounted, with his 10 years of experience in frontline military chaplaincy:

> Soldiers are worried about the future and how this will end. Simply about Ukraine's future. But it also happens, although not very often, that soldiers question the use of weapons and what right they have to take the lives of others. In those cases, I try to explain their role as protectors, which might make it easier for them to cope with it.

MC 8 (Greek-Catholic), with equally long experience, explained:

> In the situation Ukraine is in right now, where we are so heavily attacked by Russia, the church's content has changed so that songs and prayers are primarily dedicated to strengthening the armed forces. The most important task for the soldiers is to act as protectors of Ukrainian society, civilians, the territory, and, indeed, the next generation.

From a theological perspective, Ukraine's situation also aligns well with the theory of a just war, which encompasses two general clusters of principles – *Jus ad Bellum* (the right to go to war) and *Jus in Bello* (justice in war) (Holmes, 2005). The first stipulates that the following criteria must be met for a war to be initiated for a just purpose: (1) a just cause (e.g., a country is attacked by an aggressive opponent and must defend itself), (2) legitimate authority, (3) right intention, (4) proportionality (the war must not cause more harm than good), (5) assurance that it is a last resort, and (6) a purpose to achieve peace. *Jus in Bello*, on the other hand, aims to limit the scope and conduct of war once it has started. For a war to be conducted justly, two criteria must be met: (1) adherence to the principle of proportionality (relating to weapons and the extent to which they may be used) and (2) discrimination between combatants and non-combatants.

Since these principles can be said to be fulfilled in Ukraine's case, and because the Western world, which provides weapons to Ukraine, also tends to limit the use of certain potent weapons (at least so far), an especially important control mechanism for *Jus in Bello* exists. If the principles of just war had not been fulfilled, it might not have been quite as straightforward to use both biblical sources and the broader narrative to strengthen and legitimize the sacrifice of oneself and the killing of other combatants in the name of independence and freedom. This, in turn, would potentially have made military personnel more vulnerable to what is referred to as spiritual injury (Berg, 2011) and moral injury (Shay, 2002, 2003; Litz et al., 2009; Koenig et al., 2023).

Recreating a sense of coherence that provides *Me* with meaning and *I* in a moral context

To activate, uphold, and protect the humanity of military personnel and others whose existence had been shattered by the war was crucial to the MCs. As already showcased, the protection of humanity encompassed, among other things, moral and ethical

education, the shaping of moral character, and exercises and reflection to identify the uplifting, beautiful, and meaningful in a destructive, dark, and changing situation. Additionally, this also involved recreating reality, establishing a sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987), and reinstating a value-based meaning and direction in life using the cultural tools at his disposal.

MC 9 (Greek-Catholic) explained:

> To recreate reality—this is so important to me. This is a priority task for a chaplain: to be there with a story, with a prayer, with a Bible story, with whatever, with ethos, but to provide certain types of reality, to reconstruct reality with some moral orientations, with something value based. But once again, protecting humanity.

The *Me* that society provides to an individual encompasses the morals, values, meanings, and practices that constitute a person within a social context (Mead, 1934/2015). A war and the traumatic events that follow risk dissolving the *Me* that forms the social human being. If this *Me* erodes or even dissolves entirely, ceasing to hold any relevance for a person, it becomes difficult to exist, to orient oneself in life, or to live. This is not merely an emotional trauma but something much deeper. The dissolution of a *Me* equates to an existential erosion of life, threatening life itself and the will to live (Tillich, 1952/2014).

This also means that the *I* is left entirely unanchored, without a cultural context that provides the *I* with a surface to hold onto or push against morally, meaningfully, and in terms of actions. The uniqueness of an *I* is tied to context and culture, which are embodied by one or more *Mes*. If the meaning of such a cultural structure in the self dissolves, the question of the *I*'s originality and uniqueness is at stake. *I* is only unique and original in relation to culture and context; if this is dissolved, *I* is deprived of its existential being in life (Tillich, 1952/2014). The mutual dependence between *I* and *Me* for the human soul cannot be overstated, as one needs the other and vice versa.

The participants in the study were acutely aware of the importance of monitoring and counteracting the dissolution of morals, norms, rules, and character using the religious and cultural toolkits at their disposal. Thus, the Ukrainian MCs could be described as *the defenders of the human soul* among military personnel, veterans, families, and others they supported within the scope of their mission.

Discussion

There are several takeaways from the analysis that need to be discussed further in this concluding part of the article.

The disintegration of everyday reality in war goes far beyond medicine's solutions

War has always proven to be a brutal social reality that dismantles the social order and structure of peaceful societies, particularly among military personnel (French, 2005; Goldstein, 2001; Strachan, 2006; Verrips, 2006; Wilson, 2008). Values, norms, meaning, and practices change radically during wartime; previously held beliefs no longer apply to either soldiers or civilians. This challenges and erodes a socio-cultural *Me*. The self-transformation to war and the struggle to find a way back after war is a turbulent and taxing process for both society and the individual combatant (Lifton, 1992; Shay, 2002, 2003; Tick, 2005).

Military personnel must also cope with the constant threat of death, killing other combatants, witnessing and losing battle buddies, experiencing abuse and war crimes, losing the familiarities of everyday life, and being separated from loved ones (Grimell, 2025b), among other challenges. All these stresses and the suffering that follows affect the mental health and wellbeing of military personnel and veterans (Figley and Nash, 2015; Lifton, 1992; Shay, 2002, 2003; Tick, 2005). However, the negative existential, ethical/moral, social, and relational effects of war on health cannot be confined to a purely medical perspective (Koenig et al., 2023; Shay, 2002, 2003). On the contrary, the disintegration of the peaceful society's everyday reality in war—which is reflected in the disintegration of a socio-cultural *Me*—extends far beyond the solutions medicine offers for health problems. This type of challenge may perhaps be best approached by a broad existential cluster that encompasses issues tailored to the social, cultural, ethical, moral, *Me*, and what it means to be human.

MCs—priests, pastors, imams, rabbis, religious and humanist representatives—represent the cultures on which societies are built; in other words, what can be called our human, culturally and socially constructed reality (Grimell, 2025a). Indeed, MCs may take a more traditional, specific approach in some aspects of their profession, such as administering sacraments and leading worship. But as the analysis clearly illustrates, the participants in this study expressed that a significant part of their work involved upholding and protecting morality, ethics, character, and the human aspect among military personnel in war. War dismantled the values, norms, and rules that made up the soldiers' human dimensions. This dehumanizing process was a direct threat to mental health. MCs described themselves as protectors of humanity in war, and this approach to military personnel was general, tailored to individuals, and context-specific situations.

In light of the conceptualization presented earlier, I describe them as the defenders of the human soul. With the support of their cultural religious traditions and the toolkit at their disposal—including biblical stories and the broader narrative as protectors of the country—they helped military personnel activate, uphold, and protect the human aspects, or everyday Me, throughout the war. When military personnel lost their sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987), MCs helped recreate a sense of coherence that provided meaning and moral context. This was a hard and continuous task that had no checklists or evidence-based procedures (Grimell, 2025b). Despite their extensive experience in wartime military chaplaincy, they needed to improvise and meet each soldier from their unique identity, perspective, and situation. An important aspect that facilitated such a pastoral approach and conversations was that MCs had confidentiality, unlike medical staff, who had a duty to report if anything affected a soldier's mental fitness for service (Grimell, 2025b). In line with Illich's (1977) argument, it can be said that the MCs' pastoral approach to military personnel enhanced their natural capacity to cope with existential mental health challenges during the war.

The role of poetic interpretation in supporting the human soul

A critical perspective on modern medicine, illness, and suffering—often employed within medical sociology, medical anthropology, and medical history—was put forward by Illich in his influential and thought-provoking book *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis – The Expropriation of Health* (1977). Illich argued that modern medicine, despite its achievements, could become destructive by over-medicalizing life and undermining people's natural capacities to cope with illness and suffering. He contended that medical institutions frequently created new problems, including iatrogenic illnesses (caused by doctors' medical interventions), and fostered dependence on professional care at the expense of individual autonomy and alternative cultural understandings. The reliance on medical expertise and interventions during times of suffering can overshadow the search for a *poetic interpretation* of one's predicament or the admiration of those who have learned to endure suffering. Other cultural approaches to addressing suffering were gradually displaced by an overly dominant medical paradigm.

Illich took his critique of modern medicine (also see Conrad, 2005; Conrad et al., 2010; Bradby, 2012) and pharmacology's growing dominance, power, and vast economic interests quite far. A key aspect of his thought-provoking argument about medicine's position of power is the erosion of people's—and indeed entire socio-cultural systems'—capacity and empowerment in managing suffering (Illich, 1977, also see Kleinman, 2014). As soon as suffering arose, expert knowledge was and is primarily sought within medicine.

The medical dominance interacted with a socio-cultural process commonly referred to as secularization (Casanova, 1992, 1994). In secular Western societies, where medicine holds a dominant position, only a small fraction of the society's former ritual healing roles remain. This is highly unfortunate, as, for instance, major religions reinforce resignation to misfortune and provide a rationale, a style, and a communal setting in which suffering can be transformed into a poetic and dignified experience (Illich, 1977; cf. Higgins, 2020, 2024).

The opportunities provided by the acceptance of the soul's suffering are interpreted differently across major religious traditions: as karma accumulated through past incarnations, as an invitation to Islam—the surrender to God—or as an opportunity for closer association with the savior on the Cross. Religion is culture, and throughout history, religions have always provided examples of how pain and suffering of the soul should be endured—whether through the Buddha, Christ, the saint, the warrior, or the victim (Illich, 1977). Religions stimulate personal responsibility for healing, summon consolation that is sometimes pompous yet sometimes effective, provide saints as role models, and typically offer a framework for the practice of folk medicine. However, the medicalization of suffering and pain has led to a hypertrophy of just one of these cultural modes while accelerating the decline of the others.

From Illich's perspective, the need for alternative cultural understandings of human suffering, beyond medical practices and discourses, highlights the important role and function of military chaplaincy services (Carey et al., 2016; Grimell, 2023; Koenig et al., 2023) and chaplains in a medical context (Bradby, 2016). In particular, within a military medical context, the need for alternative cultural perspectives—represented by MCs—has gained increasing relevance in light of major Western joint operations in the early 21st century (Grimell, 2024).

War attacks and dissolves prevailing norms, values, and cultural foundations, exposing military personnel to severe existential and mental strain, leading to deteriorated mental health, suffering, and pain (Figley and Nash, 2015; Grimell, 2025a,b; Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2002, 2003). The dissolution of culture's norms, values, and character is the reason why the human soul is significant and an important concept for understanding MCs' work in war. They work just as consciously to combat and prevent the dissolution of the cultural human part of the soul (*Me*), as they do to support and pastor the unique and original part of the soul (*I*). The horrors of war are equally destructive to both *Me* and *I*. MCs are the defenders of the human soul, a concept that deepens the understanding of their work, which goes far beyond merely practicing pastoral care and performing rituals (Grimell, 2025b).

War is existential—one of life and death—both on an individual level and a societal level. People die, and the victor defines the social system, ideology, and culture that will prevail once the war ends. A full-scale war is therefore profoundly existential, not pathological or medical. If the implications of war on humans are addressed solely from a military medical perspective, then, as Illich (1977) put it, only a small fraction of a society's traditional healing roles is being utilized.

The cultural knowledge and wisdom of MCs can be far more pertinent and advanced than, for example, a medical clinical understanding of the existential, spiritual, and moral experiences, including suffering, that military personnel and veterans encounter during and after war (Bobrow et al., 2013; Brock and Lettini, 2013; Koenig et al., 2023; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018; Wortmann et al., 2017).

Advancing the understanding of war-related moral and spiritual injuries

Finally, war provides a particularly fertile ground for existential struggles and moral issues (Figley and Nash, 2014). This is something that has relatively recently come to be referred to as moral injury (Shay, 2002, 2003) and spiritual injury (Berg, 2011). This complex of problems has been understood and addressed to varying degrees within Western healthcare, although it may look quite different in different countries. The cultural knowledge and wisdom of such issues among wartime MCs can be far more pertinent and advanced than, for example, a medical clinical understanding of the existential, spiritual, and moral experiences—including suffering—that military personnel and veterans encounter during and after war (Berg, 2011; Bobrow et al., 2013; Brock and Lettini, 2013; Koenig et al., 2023; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018; Wortmann et al., 2017).

Moral and spiritual conflicts and injuries are linked to a domain of character (Atuel et al., 2021; Shay, 2002, 2003) and to one or

more *Me's* that have clashed, been violated, or broken (Grimell, 2023). The MCs' work with ethics, morality, character, stories, and narratives explicitly and implicitly aimed to prevent and avoid the deep-seated moral and spiritual injuries from arising as much as possible. A particularly difficult and conflict-laden area was the family domain. At the time of the interviews, the full-scale war had been ongoing for 2.5 years, which meant significant strain in maintaining a *Me* that originated from and emanated within a family context. The theme of family, conflict, and frustration was something that participants in the study experienced as a challenging issue that could not be resolved as long as the war continued. How extensive the moral aspect of this struggle will be once the war eventually ends remains to be seen, as well as how recovery from the suffering it has already caused and may continue to cause can be supported.

Limitations and future research

When it comes to the conceptualization of the human soul and its application in the analysis, *Me* (Mead, 1934/2015) has been used as a generic term for the culturally and socially constructed part of the soul in the self. A person obviously has many *Mes*; different civilian *Mes* or social identities (e.g., as a man, married man, father, son, football player, etc.) and, of course, a military *Me*. The point of the analysis was not to illustrate the interaction between different *Mes*, as the methodology does not allow for this. Rather, the idea was to relate the strong focus on protecting morality, ethics, character, and the human aspects—that is, the socio-culturally constructed Me (Mead, 1934/2015)—to the human soul. *Me* is something that can be empirically derived from socio-cultural identity claims. *I*, on the other hand, represents the spiritual aspect of a person, *I* operates on the theoretical level, and cannot be empirically captured, but may be described by a subject. The soul remains an inseparable part of the human (socio-cultural *Me*) of a person.

A central observation from this study, drawn from the participants' reflections on themselves and others, is that exceptions are an inevitable part of wartime. These exceptions must be understood within the broader context of large-scale war, the professionalization and institutionalization of military chaplaincy, and the inherent constraints of qualitative research methods (Grimell, 2025a,b).

The purpose of a qualitative study is to deepen our understanding of people's experiences and to explore the phenomenon being examined—in this case, the roles, responsibilities, and insights gained by MCs during wartime. From this perspective, the study can be deemed successful, as it involved highly experienced interviewees. However, there were language barriers that were addressed through the use of an interpreter, which added a layer of mediation between the firsthand experience and its translation. Given that this is a qualitative study, readers should exercise caution when making generalizations. The experiences shared by these participants may not reflect the experiences of all MCs. A recurring conclusion from the interviews was that exceptions are a constant feature in wartime.

A field-based study could also offer deeper insights into the interactions between MCs and churches or religious communities. Expanding the research to include interviews with priests, military commanders, veterans, and families would further enrich our understanding—especially from their perspective—of the importance and role of military chaplaincy during conflict. Such an expanded study would also highlight the urgent need to address the issues faced by veterans, a responsibility that churches, religious communities, and MCs would be well-placed to focus on.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Study Reference Number 2023-05049-01). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

JG: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1559023/full#supplementary-material

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The 3T model of military veteran radicalization and extremism: exploring risk factors and protective strategies

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In the aftermath of several wars within the last century, seminal research forewarned against the rising tide of radicalization and violent extremism (VE) among military veterans. Building on the pioneering work, the current study explores risk and protective factors related to military veteran extremism. Utilizing the retrospective thick description approach, the study utilized both primary (e.g., interviews) and open-source (e.g., court transcripts) data to examine and contextualize the VE trajectory across the military lifecycle (premilitary, military, postmilitary), as informed by people from various social networks (e.g., family, civilian/premilitary). The select sample comprised 30 VE veterans and 30 VE civilians who committed/planned a VE act between 2003 and 2019, and a comparison group of 10 non-VE veterans (i.e., veterans who resisted radicalization and VE). Directed content analyses results yielded a conceptual model reflecting three general risk factors (*Transmission of Prejudice, Trauma and Adversity, and Transition*) common among civilian and veterans alike. In addition, behavioral and cognitive strategies related to three general protective strategies (*Resistance against Transmission of Prejudice, Addressing Trauma and Overcoming Adversity, Navigating Transitions*) were found to steer veterans away from radicalization and VE across the military lifecycle. Implications for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

radicalization, violent extremism, military veterans, risk factors, protective strategies

Introduction

> *"The country does not know it yet, but it has created a monster, a monster in the form of millions of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence….men who have returned with a sense of anger and a sense of betrayal which no one has yet grasped…."*
> -Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War (1971)

The argument can be made that the January 6, 2021 insurrection (J6) was bound to happen. More than 70 years ago, against the backdrop of the Holocaust, five research projects were commissioned to understand the individual dynamics of prejudice: *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950) explored personality traits to illuminate conformity to the point of violence; *Dynamics of Prejudice: A Psychological and Sociological Study of Veterans* (Bettelheim and Janowitz, 1950) examined the wartime experiences of former servicemembers; *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder* (Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950) investigated the clinical correlates of anti-Semitism; *Rehearsal for Destruction* (Massing, 1949) provided the historical progression of Nazi anti-Semitism that was used as propaganda to gain political and economic

advantage; and *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (Lowenthal and Guterman, 1949) analyzed the persuasion techniques used by authoritarians to manipulate the masses. While each study provided unique insights, a holistic understanding of prejudice leading up to mass violence required an integration of the findings (Horkheimer and Flowerman, 1950).

This set of studies was intended to advance a research agenda that provided practical solutions to prevent the atrocities of the past. Because almost all of the U.S.-based social scientists (i.e., psychologists, sociologists) who led these efforts were émigrés who fled Nazi Germany, they saw similar conditions brewing in their adoptive country as World War II drew to a close. It was only a matter of time when these individual-level factors came together and conspired, this time, to threaten American democracy in the 21st century.

While J6 has generated significant interest in radicalization and violent extremism (VE) among people with a military background (hereafter referred to as veterans), this research area is still in its infancy. However, *prior to J6*, seminal veteran studies provided insights that could explain the radicalization process and, by and large, forewarned the rise of VE among veterans. The present study is situated within this literature and builds on the early work as well as a few contemporary studies, to which we briefly review.

Radicalization and violent extremism among military veterans

Pioneering work

Civil War and World War I

Waller (1944), a World War I veteran, pointed out the pattern of experiences and grievances that fueled 'counterrevolutions' among veterans of early wars (pp. 6–16). In some cases, these rebellions are modern-day equivalents of terrorism, as exemplified by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the aftermath of the Civil War. Broadly, veterans' sense of bitterness against institutions (e.g., government) arose from failure to secure basic (e.g., employment) and psychological (e.g., persistence of military identity) needs. In turn, these grievances culminated in seeking like-minded others, with the goal of disrupting the status quo even through violent means. Well aware of the variance within the veteran population with the majority being able to reintegrate successfully, Waller (1944) advocated for an interdisciplinary approach to veteran studies that includes examining the interactive effects of civilian temperament (premilitary), military service, and veteran experience (postmilitary). Written during the rise of fascism in Europe in the last century, Waller (1944) cautioned that veterans are a ready tool for a demagogue (p. 188) who will capitalize on veteran grievances and offer to provide solutions to their problems.

World War II

Toward the close of World War II, Bettelheim and Janowitz (1950) examined the wartime experiences, and the anti-Semitic and anti-black people/persons/person attitudes of a sample of U.S. veterans. The focus on a veteran sample was based on historical accounts that World War I German veterans who faced civilian transition challenges were the "chief promoters and followers of the anti-Semitic movement" (p. 4) and "had a strong desire to see violent change in the structure of a society which they felt had let them down" (p. 5). More than 70 years ago, the study authors were aware that preventing Nazism from taking root on U.S. soil required assessing the attitudes and situations of veterans during their civilian transition.

The sample comprised 150 Army veterans, all white males, discharged from service between 6 and 8 months previously, living in metropolitan Chicago, and interviewed for almost 8 h using an open-ended questionnaire. Based on participant responses, the sample was categorized into four groups: *Tolerant* (i.e., endorsed few stereotypes of Jews [41%] and black people/persons/person [8%]), *Stereotyped* (i.e., expressed various stereotypes of Jews [28%] and black people/persons/person [27%]), *Outspoken* (i.e., held unfavorable stereotypes and expressed hostility against Jews [27%] and black people/persons/person [49%]), and *Intense* (i.e., exhibited spontaneous hostility against Jews [4%] and black people/persons/person [16%]). It is noteworthy that while everyone in the sample demonstrated outgroup stereotyping, only some expressed outgroup hostility.

Of relevance are the findings for the Outspoken and Intense subgroups: perceived future economic deprivation and downward social mobility were associated with greater intolerance of Jews and black people/persons/person. A look at the qualitative results revealed the reference point for downward social mobility was the premilitary/civilian status. The authors explained these subgroups of veterans felt their military service justified the expectation of better employment opportunities, and not receiving special treatment for their military service was perceived as a mistreatment by society. Specifically, Jews and black people/persons/person were perceived as threats to the veteran's own economic advancement.

Other notable findings revealed that the Outspoken and Intense subgroups (1) held stereotypes of Jews and black people/persons/person *prior* to their military service, (2) had a history of poor adjustment in civilian society prior to military service, (3) avoided reality testing by adopting stereotypic thinking through the acceptance of conspiracy theories, (4) held anti-government beliefs, (5) felt the government was not doing enough for veterans, and (6) felt disconnected from the broader society.

Vietnam War

Retzer (1976), a Vietnam War Veteran, conducted an in-depth examination of the radicalization of his veteran peers. The findings revealed that while all participants were not radicals prior to military service, their post-war experience equally divided them between non-radicals and radicals. Among radical veterans, a pattern of results emerged for the premilitary and military phases. Prior to military service, the radical veterans reported a growing sense of community alienation. To cope, they challenged community norms and practices based on alternative principles or values. In other words, they were already on the fringe and learned to navigate life from this marginalized standpoint. During their military service, they found themselves betrayed by their leaders and appalled at their own complicity as executioners of amoral orders (p. 355). Hence, the war experience was the impetus for engaging in previously learned attitudes and behaviors (from the premilitary phase). Radicalization among veterans, then, appears to be a product of premilitary norms and values interacting with military combat experiences, values, and norms.

Briefly, what could have been a robust multidisciplinary field (see Waller, 1944) seemed dormant for decades. We raise this issue because in 2009, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis (2009) similarly

forewarned that veterans experiencing civilian reintegration difficulties are fertile ground for extremist ideology to flourish. In the interim, few studies were conducted, in part, to address more recent historical VE events.

Contemporary studies: resurrecting the military experience

In the aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing led by Timothy McVeigh, an Army veteran, and the 1995 Fayetteville murders of a Black man and woman by three white servicemembers, Curtin (1997) conducted one of the few studies on white nationalist extremism among servicemembers. He observed certain common demographics among servicemembers who joined these groups. These included being a young adult (18–25) and living in impoverished circumstances during childhood years, or being middle-aged and having a middle-class lifestyle. When mapped onto the military career trajectory, these results suggest that those who are in the early stages or transitioning into or in the later stages or transitioning out of military service are at-risk of joining extremist groups.

A closer look at exit from military service, Simi et al. (2013) used sociological frameworks to explain the relationship between military service and far-right violence. Results from their case study approach suggest that exit from the military appears to be an initial pathway to far-right extremism leading up to violence. Among Vietnam War veterans who voluntarily exited from the military, the unwelcome climate of civilian society made the transition experience a difficult one, creating social stress (e.g., anger), which was a gateway for recruitment into far-right extremist groups. On the other hand, veterans who involuntarily exited from the military (e.g., failure to advance in rank), experienced identity incongruence (i.e., they saw themselves as warriors rejected by the military), which motivated them to seek extremist groups with a para-military arm to reinforce their warrior identity.

Finally, in a review of findings from various studies funded by the National Institute of Justice's Domestic Radicalization to Terrorism program, Smith (2018) observed that people who commit violence, in general, shared potential risk factors with people who engaged in domestic terrorism. Common risk factors include having a history of criminal violence, having a criminal history, having military experience, having psychological issues, being unemployed, failing to achieve one's aspirations, and being male. Moving forward, one recommendation was for future studies to combine secondary analyses of available data and conduct primary data collection (e.g., interviews) to gain deeper insights for the development of risk assessments.

Summary

The early sociological and psychological work among Civil War and World War I (Waller, 1944), World War II (Bettelheim and Janowitz, 1950), and Vietnam War (Retzer, 1976) veterans laid the foundation for understanding and identifying factors that put veterans at-risk for radicalization leading up to VE. Foremost, the radicalization process appears to follow a trajectory similar to the military lifecycle, with initial exposure to radical narratives and beliefs occurring before military service, during military service, and after military service. In addition, military life experiences, especially related to war, coupled with postmilitary transition difficulties (e.g., basic needs) can inform veterans' grievances to associate with radical groups. Meanwhile, contemporary sociological and psychological studies have added to the empirical base by identifying entry into and exit from the military as critical transition timepoints (Curtin, 1997), identity incongruence among veterans as a motivating factor for radicalization (Simi et al., 2013), as well as psychological vulnerabilities and criminal propensities (Smith, 2018).

Taking these findings as directives, we pose the following questions: Who introduced veterans to extremist ideas? Their family, civilian friends, military comrades, or veteran peers? Do veterans who engage in VE share similar risk factors as civilians who engage in VE? Given the tempo of military and postmilitary life, what other military experiences (i.e., beyond war and in between entry and exit into military service) and other postmilitary experiences (i.e., beyond transition challenges and identity incongruence) could be related to the radicalization of veterans?

The present study: the military radicalization (MRad) project

Broadly, the present study comparatively explored veterans and civilians who engaged in VE, allowing for an examination of similarities and differences in risk factors between VE veterans and VE civilians. Given that VE is considered a "low frequency, high impact" event means that the majority of veterans have not engaged in VE. Simply put, VE is an exception, not the norm among veterans. Hence, the project also explored similarities and differences in risk factors between VE veterans and non-VE veterans, and protective factors among non-VE veterans.

Theoretical frameworks

We borrow from several lines of theory and research that have a direct bearing on the current study including the Quest for Significance Theory (Kruglanski and Fishman, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2013, 2014, 2018; Webber et al., 2017, 2018), the military lifecycle depicted in the Military Transition Theory (Castro and Kintzle, 2018), research on the social networks within the military lifecycle (Atuel et al., 2016), and Veteran Identity Theory (Atuel and Castro, 2018a, 2018b).

Quest for significance

Based on decades of research with both ideological and violent extremists, Kruglanski et al. (2013, 2014) developed a psychological theory of VE that primarily takes into account an individual's motivation to satisfy a dominant need and ability to carry out violent activities. The theory holds that people have varying types of needs (e.g., basic, social) and strive to fulfill those needs within the constraints of the mainstream. When a particular need becomes dominant (e.g., hunger), it may compel people to engage in deviant behavior (e.g., stealing) where normative behavior that would satisfy that need appears to be unavailable.

In the case of VE, the dominant need pertains to a loss of worth, esteem, or meaning which, owing to our social nature, has negative

implications for people's self-concept or social standing within the mainstream. When people are consumed by this dominant need, all other needs become inhibited (Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2013, 2014). As a consequence, the constraints those needs exercise on behavior are removed or significantly weakened. This permits extreme behaviors to be enacted that formerly were constrained and hence prohibited.

Obviously, the quest for significance is not a sufficient condition for violence. In addition, people should subscribe to an ideological *narrative* that portrays violence as the path to significance. Typically, too, the violence-significance link must be supported by a social *network*—such as the one formed by McVeigh, Nichols, Fortier during basic training in the Army—that validates the narrative and rewards those who implement it in action (by practicing violence against targets identified in the narrative). Within the radical network, VE is reinforced and even rewarded, thereby setting a standard for members to follow or emulate. What mainstream considers as deviant, the radical network deems as normative.

In sum, the quest for significance leading up to VE reflects an individual who has the ability to carry out a violent act that is justified by an extreme ideology and supported by a radical network. While this theory has been used to explain VE among the civilian population, it has yet to be applied to the veteran population, particularly to the military lifecycle, to which we now turn.

Military lifecycle

The Military Transition Theory (Castro and Kintzle, 2018) aims to describe and predict important aspects of transitions that occur throughout a servicemember's life (premilitary/civilian, military, postmilitary/veteran).

Premilitary refers to the civilian life prior to enlistment in military service (Brookover, 1945; Hollingshead, 1946). During the premilitary phase, people have a civilian social network reflecting familial ties and friendships that provide informational (e.g., advice), emotional (e.g., safety), and instrumental (e.g., finances) supports (Beardslee et al., 2013; Wadsworth et al., 2013). Because most recruits are in their late teens (Bachman et al., 2000), their close relationships are tied to their school, religious organization, or various community organizations.

When civilians enlist into the military service, they enter the military phase, which is characterized by a series of indoctrination and trainings (e.g., basic, combat) aimed at preparing them for war (Castro and Hassan, 2023). It is during this period that civilians are transformed into warriors, an identity that is unique to the military, eventually setting them apart from their civilian peers. Three factors interact to define the boundaries delineating military and civilian cultures, and provide critical information on the military social network and military identity.

Chain of command structure

The organizational structure of the military is comprised of a power hierarchy known as the chain of command (Brotz and Wilson, 1946) that revolves around a succession of commanding officers differentiating superior and subordinate roles. This power hierarchy is critical in identifying servicemembers' rightful place and dictating appropriate behavior based on servicemembers' role and status. In other words, the chain of command is a social network of interdependent roles within an ordered power hierarchy.

Military norms

As a cultural group, the military has its own history and norms (Atuel and Castro, 2018a). Military norms encompass the spectrum of beliefs, values, traditions, behaviors, and events directly related to military service and life, as well as the language used in communicating within the chain of command. Simultaneously, servicemembers learn the values of honor, integrity, commitment, loyalty, respect, and devotion to duty.

Military identity

The military is often described as a "warrior culture," whereby servicemembers are in a constant physical and psychological state of "combat readiness" (Castro and Adler, 1999). Unlike most civilian jobs, military service is a 24-h, 7-day occupation. Additionally, even while not in uniform, servicemembers are expected to uphold military laws (e.g., Uniform Code of Military Justice), norms, and rules of conduct (Coll et al., 2012).

Ultimately, military service comes to an end, ushering the postmilitary phase. Veteran status means withdrawal of military protection and support (with the exception of veteran benefits), and providing for one's self in the civilian setting. Exit from the military means fending for oneself in the civilian world. As veterans, their premilitary social network (e.g., civilian friends) regains importance and, typically, they acquire a veteran social network through their receipt of veteran benefits or affiliation with community-based veteran groups. At times, veteran social networks have been found to be a greater source of information and emotional support during the civilian reintegration process (e.g., Demers, 2011).

Veteran identity

Emerging evidence has uncovered the day-to-day struggles some veterans face in their civilian transition including employment, housing, finances, and access to health care (Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Castro and Kintzle, 2017). Moreover, navigating through the difficulties of transitioning back into civilian life is compounded by a deeper struggle pertaining to the perseverance of the military identity in the civilian context (Atuel and Castro, 2018b; Atuel et al., 2016). Early research has identified this as one of the root causes of difficulties in the civilian transition (Hollingshead, 1946). Some can even be categorized as dogmatic veterans/reluctant civilians (Atuel and Castro, 2018b). This occurs when veterans have not yet formed or failed to form a civilian identity that is a source of self-esteem similar to that of the military identity. A special case that would fall into this category as well is when veterans have formed a civilian identity, but found it to be relatively insignificant as a source of self-esteem compared to the military identity. In all these instances, this subgroup of dogmatic veterans or reluctant civilians psychologically "stay" in the military group.

Quest for significance: implications for the military lifecycle and veteran identity

Significance Quest Theory interfaces with that of the military lifecycle in addressing the varying conditions and possibilities of fulfilling the significance need across the various phases. Presumably, joining the military is motivated by significance need, either through the ideal of serving one's country, acquiring the status of warrior/hero, and/or through the educational and training opportunities the military offers (e.g., Miller, 2010; Ngaruiya et al., 2014). The military

identity initially acquired at training and strengthened during service is a highly positive one and is a great source of esteem and pride (Hall, 2012; Lancaster and Hart, 2015). The military network, as a whole, subscribe to the overarching narrative that military service is honorable, prestigious and widely respected, thus augmenting servicemembers' self-worth and significance.

Servicemembers' sense of personal significance may change once they leave active duty. As veterans, people may part ways with the cohesive social network of military camaraderie, consequentially lowering veterans' sense of personal significance in comparison to its level during active service. If in addition veterans may encounter difficulties in finding significance lending employment, they might be susceptible to radicalizing narratives that advocate violence against the government or other targets as a path to significance.

Research questions

Hence, we posed two overarching research questions:

In comparing civilians and veterans' trajectory toward VE, what were the needs, narratives, and networks that put them at-risk for violence, as informed by people from their various social networks (i.e., premilitary, military, postmilitary)? To strengthen the research design, a group of veterans who have not engaged in VE (non-VE veteran group) served as a comparison group. Second, among non-VE veterans, what were the needs, narratives, and networks that made them resist radicalization and VE across the military lifecycle?

Method

The study utilized a retrospective thick description approach (Geertz, 2008) to examine the VE pathway among civilians and veterans. In doing so, we are able to contextualize the trajectory from "biographical, historical, situational, relational, and interactional" (Denzin, 2001, p. 10) perspectives, thereby allowing for an in-depth examination of risk factors across an individual's life history. Moreover, this method advocates for triangulated and multiple sources of information that can reflect the social networks of people as they change across time.

Samples and procedure

Institutional review board

The study was approved by the University of Southern California Institutional Review Board (UP-20-00969).

VE civilian, VE veteran, and non-VE veteran samples

VE civilian and VE veteran samples

Prior to obtaining the social network informant sample, we decided to focus the study on a select sample of civilians and veterans who enacted/planned a VE act between 2003 and 2019. One justification for the timeframe and the limited number in the sample is to provide continuity to a previous study (see Atuel and Castro, 2024) that examined civilians and veterans who were indicted for domestic terrorism by the U.S. government between 1980 and 2002. Second, a sample size of 30 civilians and 30 veterans falls within the acceptable range (between 25 and 30) to reach saturation and redundancy in qualitative research (Dworkin, 2012). Admittedly, other civilians and veterans can be included in the list, but for purposes of this exploratory study, the sample is limited to 30 in each group.

Briefly, far-right ideologies (i.e., White Supremacy, Anti-Government) were predominant among VE civilians (81%) and VE veterans (70%), followed by Radical Islam (20% for VE civilians and VE veterans). Meanwhile "Black" nationalism among VE veterans (10%) could be a historical artifact given the VE veterans in our sample committed their act in retaliation against high-profile killings of black people/person/persons between 2003 and 2019.

Non-VE veteran sample

Veterans exposed to and resisted radical ideologies (e.g., White Supremacy, Anti-Government) served as a comparison group. This sample was recruited from a combination of snowball sampling (i.e., one veteran knew of another veteran who was exposed to and resisted violent ideology), outreach to various community-based veteran organizations (e.g., Veterans Village), and social media outreach to active-duty and veteran forums.

Non-VE veterans provided informed consent for the virtual interview using the Zoom platform, and notified that interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Interviews lasted between 60 and 180 min and participants were provided with a $50 e-giftcard stipend at the end of the interview.

Social network informants

The sample comprised persons situated within the respective networks of each VE civilian/veteran. Networks contained individuals (e.g., friends or classmates for the premilitary network) who provided information about the VE civilian/veteran through open-source data (e.g., court transcripts, media outlets) or by participating in an online interview conducted by the study team.

Social network informants who initially provided information through open-source data were contacted and recruited to participate in the study. Participants provided informed consent for the virtual interview using the Zoom platform, and notified interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min and participants were provided with a $50 e-giftcard stipend at the end of the interview.

Final informant sample

There were 92 family informants, 108 civilian/premilitary informants, 64 military informants, and 31 postmilitary informants (see Table 1). Of the 30 VE civilians and 30 VE veterans, 25 VE civilians and 26 VE veterans self-disclosed through writings (e.g., screeds, self-published books) or interviews (e.g., investigative journalism). As mentioned, 10 non-VE veterans served as the comparison group.

Measures

Interview data

For the VE civilian/veteran samples, semi-structured interviews were developed for the family, premilitary, military, and postmilitary informants. Broadly, the interview contained questions that asked the

TABLE 1 Types and frequency of social network informants for VE civilians (N = 30), VE veterans (N = 30) and non-VE veteran (N = 10).

Type of social network	VE civilian	VE veteran*	Non-VE veteran
Self[a]	25	26	10
Family[b,g]	48	43	1
Civilian/Premilitary[c,g]	76	32	0
Military[d,g]	N/A	64	0
Postmilitary[e,g]	N/A	31	0
Other[f,g]	44	29	0

[a]Self data derived from interviews or writings (e.g., self-published books, manifestos, screed, suicide notes).
[b]Family refers to parents, (ex-)spouses, children, and other relatives.
[c]Civilian/Premilitary refers to friends, neighbors, classmates, or teachers in a civilian setting/prior to military service.
[d]Military refers to peers, supervisors, friends, or neighbors during military service.
[e]Postmilitary refers to friends, neighbors, supervisors, peers after military service.
[f]Other refers to attorney statements, clinical evaluations, unclassified FBI/LE report.
[g]Data derived from interviews, court exhibits/transcripts or interviews given to various media outlets.
*Per one of the reviewers, the informant sample for the VE veteran group should be noted as referring "to their highly subjective assessments of family relationships, childhood, school years, aspects of their military career and post-military issues, which could be distorted by memory errors".

informant to recall their knowledge of the VE civilian/veteran's premilitary life (e.g., family relationships, childhood, school years, aspirations, motivations), military life (e.g., specific duties, achievements, getting in trouble), postmilitary life (e.g., educational experience, employment experience, grievances), and radicalization and VE engagement (e.g., exposure to radical/extremist beliefs or individuals, content of radical/extremist beliefs).

Another set of semi-structured interviews were developed for the non-VE veteran sample and their social network. Generally, similar questions were asked of the non-VE veteran and their social network informants in terms of the non-VE veteran's premilitary life (e.g., family relationships), military life (e.g., getting in trouble), and postmilitary life (e.g., employment experience). Additional questions for the non-VE veteran pertained to exposure to and resistance to extremist beliefs (e.g., content of radical or extremist beliefs, cognitive and behavioral resistance strategies).

Open-source data

The study team also compiled data from open sources including court documents (e.g., transcripts, exhibits), media outlets (e.g., investigative journalism, interviews), peer-reviewed articles in academic journals, reports released by established organizations (e.g., Southern Poverty Law Center, Anti-Defamation League), unclassified government/law enforcement reports, and self-published books or writings.

Data analytic strategy

After culling through all available interview and open-source data, the research team utilized directed content analysis (DCA; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) to analyze the data. Using DCA allowed for the use of *a priori* coding categories (i.e., needs, narratives, networks) and the creation of new coding categories and sub-categories during the analysis process. The analyses were conducted in two stages, with the first stage focused on analyzing data within a phase (e.g., premilitary/civilian), and the second stage directed toward analyzing data across transition phases (e.g., from military to postmilitary).

The overall coding process was iterative. First, each VE civilian/veteran and non-VE veteran file that contained all interview and open-source data was coded by 3 independent raters that included one of the PIs. Regular research meetings involving all raters and the 2 study PIs were held to discuss emergent findings. Second, the PIs held several meetings directed toward finalizing the categories/subcategories within and between transition phases, bringing in raw data when necessary for further exploration and clarification, to finalize the categories/subcategories.

We provide examples of the various coding processes in Tables 2–4, with each table reflecting raw data excerpts, initial coding excerpts, and final category and subcategory excerpts for each person case. Table 2 reflects transmission of prejudice coding within the premilitary phase across the three subgroups. Meanwhile, Table 3 reflects the transmission of prejudice coding across the military lifecycle for a VE veteran. Lastly, Table 4 reflects resisting transmission of prejudice coding across the military lifecycle for a non-VE veteran.

The final qualitative coding underwent further reduction and transformed into quantitative variables that are part of the datasets submitted to the National Archives of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD_NIJ-194832). For purposes of the current research, we present the final categories and subcategories that informed the risk factors and protective strategies contained within the 3T model of military veteran extremism.

Results: demographic and military characteristics

Demographic characteristics

The non-VE veteran group was older than the VE civilian and VE veteran groups (see Table 5). Also, non-Hispanic white males were the majority across all three groups.

Military characteristics

While the mean age at entry into military service was identical, VE veterans were slightly younger and had fewer years of service compared to non-VE veterans (see Table 5). Also, while both veteran groups had relatively similar percentages of deployment and military indiscipline, slightly more VE veterans had marital problems and alcohol abuse problems compared to non-VE veterans. Finally, the Army and Marine Corps branches are overrepresented among the VE veteran sample while the Navy/Coast Guard are overrepresented among the non-VE veteran sample.

3T model of military veteran extremism: risk factors and protective strategies

We discuss results in two sections. The first section will introduce the emergent general constructs as risk factors among VE civilians, VE veterans, and non-VE veterans. Building on the emergent constructs, the second section will examine behaviors and cognitions that served as protective strategies among non-VE veterans.

TABLE 2 Coding examples of transmission of prejudice within the premilitary/civilian phase (n = 1 VE civilian, 1 VE veteran, 1 non-VE veteran).

	Raw data excerpts	Initial coding excerpts	Final category and subcategory excerpts
VE civilian	"… [VE civilian] *had already written to the court to say that [their] racist views had formed during [their] childhood as mother frequently used hateful racist language at home*" "… [VE civilian's mother] *admitted she had used the racial terms* [their child] *had outlined in* [their] *letter. She apologized for lying and for the miseducation of* [child]. *She stated that her racial views had been planted by her family during her formative years.*"	- Network: Family - Narrative: Hateful, racist language	Category: Transmission of Prejudice Subcategory: Exposure through Family
VE veteran	"…[parent's name] *was highly influential in forming* [VE Veteran's name] *antigovernment views.*"	- Network: Family - Narrative: Antigovernment	Category: Transmission of Prejudice Subcategory: Exposure through Family
Non-VE veteran	"…[father] *was still prejudiced. He still said n**** all the time. That was just a word he grew up and he used it commonly.*"	- Network: Family - Narrative: Prejudice; racist language	Category: Transmission of Prejudice Subcategory: Exposure through Family

TABLE 3 Coding examples of transmission of prejudice of a VE veteran across the military lifecycle.

	Raw data excerpts	Initial coding excerpts	Final category and subcategory excerpts
Premilitary/ civilian phase	"*Uncle* [name] *died before I got involved in White racist groups, but he and I shared the same racial and political views, and spoke together for hours on end during my weekend visits…I came to know him well while I was growing up…*"	- Network: Family	Category: Transmission of Prejudice Subcategory: Exposure through Family
Military phase	""*Hitler was a White racist and so was I. And, like him, I wanted to unite, organize, and educate the White masses….In many ways, I would try to emulate Hitler's methods of attracting members and supporters….It had been successful with Hitler, and I felt it would be successful with me.*" "*Also joining…were several dozen active duty Marines from* [name of installation]…… *and we had three active Dens in that area….*"	- Network: Military	Category: Transmission of Prejudice Subcategory: Exposure through Military
Postmilitary phase	"[Name of U.S. Army veteran]….*first visited me… and after several hours of feeling me out and satisfying himself that our political and racial views were compatible joined….*"	- Network: Veteran	Category: Transmission of Prejudice Subcategory: Exposure through Veteran

3T model of military veteran extremism risk factors

The overall findings revealed three general constructs—Transmission of Prejudice, Trauma and Adversity, and Transitions—that situate civilians and veterans alike at-risk for radicalization and VE (see Table 6).

Transmission of prejudice

> "…[VE Civilian] *formed racist views during childhood…had been motivated by own mother, who frequently used racial and hateful language at home….*"
>
> -VE Civilian Other Informant

> "*Within two minutes of browsing through this 16-page tabloid* [given by father who obtained it from a neighbor], *I knew I had found a home within the American White Movement. I was ecstatic. Here was formal, articulate confirmation of my own political and racial views. And, more important, it represented an organized group of White people, and an organization, to which I myself could join.*"
>
> -VE Veteran

> "…[father's] *racist attitudes towards Asians was so bad….at this restaurant…*[an Asian] *family came and sat next to us. It was just so bad I left because he is racist….I think he was probably very racist growing up, and I'm ashamed to tell you this even, but they always flew the Confederate flag at his parent's house.*"
>
> -Non-VE Veteran

Transmission of prejudice is the first factor and reflects narratives and networks. This is because at the root of violent ideologies are prejudicial attitudes toward others who are different from the self in terms of social categories such as race/ethnicity, gender/sexual orientation (e.g., Perliger, 2019). Moreover, prejudicial attitudes are learned early in life from families and close relationships such as friendships (Allport, 1954), and among veterans, continued exposure in the military and after military service (e.g., Curtin, 1997) suggests ideological messaging has a longer incubation period and stronger reinforcement given its occurrence in various contexts (e.g., civilian, military).

Trauma and adversity

> "…[VE Civilian] *basically couldn't cope with everyday life, couldn't make ends meet, couldn't pay the bills and didn't know why he couldn't do that. And someone told him that if he didn't pay his*

TABLE 4 Coding examples of resisting transmission of prejudice of a non-VE veteran across the military lifecyle.

	Raw data excerpts	Initial coding excerpts	Final category and subcategory excerpts
Premilitary/civilian phase	"*Both my parents were anti-fascists and I still am…*" "*I was a reader….Science fiction. I read science fiction, which is basically a lot of, it's sociology, which is a real interest of mine, and some politics….My favorite book when I was a kid was A Wrinkle in Time. It was on the sixth grade shelf and I read it in fourth grade….You read books in your head.*"	- Network: Family (Note: Father was a WWII veteran) - Narrative: Anti-fascist - Narrative: Science fiction, sociology, politics	Category: Moral Foundation Subcategory: Family values; family resistance Subcategory: Reading as a habit
Military phase	"*…I went to* [name of military] *academy….the guy that was doing the racist crap….I told him, I said, stop that. It's nasty. It's not nice. Please do not do that. It offends me. That did not stop him. That was pouring gas on a fire for that guy.*"	- Network: Military - Narrative: Racist language - Response: Speak up against racism	Category: Moral Foundation Subcategory: Courage (doing the right thing)
Postmilitary phase	"*…from Oathkeepers. It was a piece of paper and it was like upholding your oath that you took and I thought about that….but there's no ETS on my uphold and defend the constitution thing I said….The next time I heard about* [Oathkeepers], *it was like, no, I'm staying away from these guys. I dunno what happened to piece of paper. I probably recycled it long ago. I've managed to avoid getting suckered into those groups and that's the way I see it as getting suckered in. Because you do not have the ability to think rationally and say, wait a minute.*"	- Network: Veteran - Narrative: Oathkeepers, antigovernment - Response: Think rationally, avoid group	Category: Moral Foundation Subcategory: Justice (knowing the right thing); Temperance (avoidance of extremes)

> *federal taxes, if those taxes were left in his check, he could make ends meet. And then he started investigating that and someone told him that it wasn't ratified properly in the Constitution, that it was illegal. And he went from there and got into anti-government, got into the militia…*"
>
> -VE Civilian Family Informant

> "*…the loss of a grandparent and a divorce is no reason to get involved in that* [radical group]*….It's easy to bring somebody in that's not doing well. Pat them on the back. Hey, you wanna talk about it? Hey, come here, man. Hey, why don't you come out with me and the other guys….in the military, people that are not doing well and struggling personally, professionally, they are easy prey for anybody that wants to predate them for any reason*"
>
> -VE Veteran Family Informant

> "*…the CO said, 'if you can find some way in the regs to get out, I suggest you do that'….and I found an article called Apathy. I didn't exactly fit the bill, but I fit it well enough, and at that point, I was feeling pretty apathetic towards the military and so they gave me the general under honorable conditions….*"
>
> -Non-VE Veteran

Trauma and adversity are the second factors, reflecting needs that could potentially inform grievances steering people toward radicalization and fueling VE. What is meant by trauma are adverse life events (e.g., childhood sexual abuse) that can potentially lead to a mental disorder (e.g., PTSD). Along with but distinct from trauma is adversity, defined as challenging life experiences (e.g., stressful job) that may not necessarily lead to clinical impairments. While adversity across the lifespan is a universal human experience, trauma can be a one-time experience or, in the case of compounded trauma, a series of experiences. Among veterans, military life experiences can be a source of trauma or adversity (e.g., combat, deployment) that, left unaddressed, can lead to greater postmilitary life challenges (e.g., illegal substance use).

Transitions

> "*…more importantly this prompted me to type in the words 'black on White crime' into Google and I have never been the same since that day.*"
>
> -VE Civilian

> "*Serving in the military is not always easy and brings along many hardships and burdens; it changes people.*"
>
> -VE Veteran Military Informant

> "*I was brought in as an undesignated, no guarantees, no nothing….E1…I hated it. I was so angry…had I seen [the recruiter] I would gutted him…In retrospect, that was life-changing and character building…I no longer feel that way* [angry at recruiter]*….*"
>
> -Non-VE Veteran

Transitions is the third factor and reflect narratives as well as needs that can become the basis for grievances. By transition, we mean situations or events that changes a person's identity. From a criminological life course approach, these events are turning points in a person's life that could be considered as usual (e.g., marriage) or unusual (e.g., crime) (see Sampson and Laub, 2017). As previously mentioned, military service, no matter how short or long, has a beginning and an ending. To a large extent, there is a predictable pattern inherent in the military lifecycle.

TABLE 5 Means (standard deviations) and percentage of select demographic and military characteristics of VE civilians (*N* = 30), VE veterans (*N* = 30) and non-VE veteran (*N* = 10).

Characteristic	VE civilian	VE veteran	Non-VE veteran
Demographic			
Age			
Mean (SD)	30 (13.04)	34 (16.77)	57 (18.75)
Range	17–59	20–88	22–81
Sex/gender			
Male	80%	100%*	80%
Female	20%	–	20%
Race/Ethnicity			
White (non-Hispanic)	97%	77%	80%
White, Hispanic	3%	3%	–
Black people/persons	–	13%	20%
Asian/Pacific Islander	–	3%	–
Unknown	–	3%	–
Military			
Status			
Failed basic training	–	10%	–
Active duty	–	27%	20%
Separated from Service	–	63%	80%
Mean age			
At entry	–	20	20
At exit	–	26	29
Means years of service	–	6	10
Deployed	–	53%	50%
Military indiscipline	–	50%	50%
Marital problems	–	27%	20%
Mental illness	–	23%	30%
Alcohol abuse	–	30%	20%
Branch			
Army/National Guard	–	67%	40%
Navy/Coast Guard	–	10%	60%
Marine Corps	–	23%	–

SPSS 28 was used to run descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, mean).
*The VE veteran sample is 100% male, which is a limitation of the present study.

Servicemembers start off as civilians, are transformed into warriors after joining the military, and become veterans as they transition back into civilian communities (Atuel and Castro, 2018b). But, even within the usual pattern of the military lifecycle, unusual events can still occur such as experiencing military indiscipline (e.g., being demoted) while on active duty, or homelessness during the postmilitary phase.

We note that while military service seems to mask the absence of civilian criminality, military laws operate and point to troubled behaviors within the military context. During postmilitary life when veterans are no longer governed by military rules and regulations, VE veterans either persist with old troubled behaviors or acquire new behaviors that increase their risk of coming into contact with law enforcement.

TABLE 6 Predisposing/risk factors across the military lifecyle*.

Premilitary phase	Military phase	Postmilitary phase
Transmission of Prejudice - Prejudice and ideology exposure/formation through family and civilian peers - Membership/ affiliation with radical group (e.g., online; in-person)	*Transmission of Prejudice* - Prejudice and ideology exposure/ formation through military peers - Membership/ affiliation with radical group (e.g., online; in-person)	*Transmission of Prejudice* - Prejudice and ideology exposure/formation through postmilitary peers - Membership/affiliation with radical group (e.g., online; in-person)
Trauma and Adversity - Childhood stressor/ adverse childhood experience - Juvenile alcohol/ drug use	*Trauma and Adversity* - Military-related moral failure experience or trauma that fuels military grievance (e.g., hazing/ bullying/ discriminated against; deployment; combat; military sexual assault) - Marital problems - Alcohol abuse/ illegal substance use	*Trauma and Adversity* - Postmilitary moral failure experience or trauma that fuels postmilitary grievance (e.g., discharge status) - Marital problems - Alcohol abuse/illegal substance use
Transitions - School discipline - Juvenile contact with LE	*Transitions* - Military Indiscipline (e.g., ART 15, demotion, extra duty); Perceived rejection (e.g., inability to be promoted)	*Transitions* - Postmilitary transition challenges that fuels postmilitary grievance (unemployment, homelessness)

*Adopted from Table 5 of the Final Research Report for 2019-ZA-CX-0002.

The 3T model of military veteran extremism protective strategies

> *"All around our society you see immoral behavior…lying, cheating, stealing, drug use and alcohol abuse, prejudice, and a lack of respect for human dignity and the law. In the not too distant future, each of you are going to be confronted with situations where you will have to deal straight-up with these issues. The question is…what will you do when that happens? What action will you take?…will you DO what you know is right? It takes moral courage to hold your ideals above yourself. It is the DEFINING aspect of your character. So, when the test of your character -of your moral courage comes -regardless of the noise and confusion around you, there will be a moment of inner silence in which you must decide what to do. Your character will be defined by your decision…and it is yours and yours alone to make."*
>
> -Retired General Charles Krulak (1997), 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps,

The 3T Model of Military Veteran Extremism Protective Strategies reflects three overarching approaches across the military lifecycle—Resisting Transmission of Prejudice, Addressing Trauma and Overcoming Adversity, and Navigating Transitions (see Table 7). Each general strategy share commonalities across the military lifecycle (e.g., intergroup contact for premilitary, military, postmilitary) and unique approaches within each phase (e.g., Finding the new you during the postmilitary phase), to which we now turn.

Resisting transmission of prejudice

> "*…the stoking of hatred was commonplace….While I was in the military and before the military, but the greatest impact was before the military.*"
>
> -Premilitary Phase

> *"Did I hear about people that were racist crap and stuff like that? Oh, yeah. It's part of the system….When I was at* [name of installation]*, I did not participate but they blanket party a lady and I think if she'd been white, it would not have happened…."*
>
> -Military Phase

> "…[the plant managers] *would have their Dixie flag flying out in their front porch….Occasionally, they would query me as to if I had any interest in joining their cause…."*
>
> -Postmilitary Phase

In spite of ideology exposure across the military lifecycle, the non-VE veteran sample resisted prejudice/hate, or influence stemming from radical/VE groups. And it was their moral foundation and intergroup contact that informed their cognitive or behavioral resistance.

Moral foundation

What is meant by moral foundation are fundamental notions of good or bad, or right or wrong that a person internalizes as part of their value system (Haidt, 2008). People's moral foundations are initially shaped by the family, reshaped by the military, and can potentially be reinforced or recalibrated by the civilian transition experience.

Before military service, family values can influence resistance against prejudice (e.g., "*My mother was a hero of World War II…I am my mother's son. I am sewn in my baby blankets anti-fascist, and anti whatever supremacist…*"). Also, community norms/members function as moral surrogates to reinforce family values (e.g., "*….we had a sense of community, where everybody whooped you. If they saw you doing something wrong, they would not wait and tell your mother. They spank you, and then tell your mother*)….".

Also, reading as a childhood habit appears to be a protective factor for a variety of reasons. For some, books contain fictional characters displaying moral behaviors to be emulated (e.g., "[Louis Lamour books]*…as a kid, I focused on, hey, these guys do the right thing….they help anybody that needs help. They have values. They have integrity. They tell the truth….I think I've picked up a lot of my values from those books…*"). For others, books provide real-world exemplars of success (e.g., "*My parents subscribed to a book series about successful people and I read every book…it helped me focus.*").

During military service, military values are inculcated, situating the servicemember to a level of identification directly tied to national ideals (e.g., "*…you take the oath of office and you raise your right hand and it says nothing about male or female, gay, straight, racial. It's just you supporting the ideals of the constitution…*"). The superordinate military identity is a national identity that supersedes or subsumes diverse social categories (e.g., race, gender).

Moreover, the military identity is a value-based identity, whereby military values define servicemembers, in and out of uniform. Of all the military values, from antiquity to modern times, courage is the cornerstone (Castro, 2006). Courage is more than bravery or steadfastness in the battlefield (Moran, 2007), and can also mean doing the right thing regardless of the situation (Pigliucci, 2017). When applied to the transmission of prejudice, it means saying 'no' when an opportunity arises (e.g., "*…in my experience, people with mindsets like that aren't interested in having a conversation. They're interested in creating a conversion. I'm not willing to be converted. I know my values. I know who I am, and I know what's right and wrong…It's a decision that was made before the conversation happened…*"), or reporting someone to the proper authorities (e.g., "*I reported someone the other day for having a three-percenter bumper sticker on their car on base…*").

After military service, it appears that courage continues to manifest in civilian communities (e.g., "*I stood between the proud boys and this* [homeless Vietnam Veteran] *on the ground and I said, what can we do to increase the peace in the community? Their answer to me was, you should join the proud boys because we are gonna secure the safety and peace of the community. My answer to them was, I'm now taking a picture of your license plate, and if you advance toward this man, you are gonna have to mess with a decorated Vietnam veteran….I will never give up helping veterans…*").

Other values seem to be cultivated on the veteran's own volition including justice (i.e., knowing the right thing, Pigliucci, 2017) and humanity (i.e., thinking the bigger picture, Peterson and Seligman, 2004). As described by a veteran, "*…more aware of the bigger picture and realized if you are going to have peace you have to have justice….which means there has to be social justice, so we are aware of things like Blacks Lives Matter, which we support…*". Finally, there is moderation or avoidance of extremes (e.g., "*I think that's how hate spread, with half truths. The truths that you can attach to and the untruths, since you do not know about it, you assume that's true too….l I got educated on what these things people were talking about, I saw the half-truths….I do not go to extremes with the untruths*").

Values are learned in many ways from different sources across the military lifecycle. During the premilitary and military stages, there was greater reliance on others to lay the moral foundation (e.g., family, military). Once set, veterans appear to cultivate other values on their own during the postmilitary phase. The point here is that the premilitary and military years till the moral soil and shapes the moral landscape for other moral values to flourish in the postmilitary years.

Intergroup contact

Meanwhile, intergroup contact involves exposure to and interactions toward different others in a variety of settings across the military lifecycle.

Before military service, family can be intentional about cross-cultural exposure that can include school and extra-curricular

TABLE 7 3T model (resisting transmission of prejudice, addressing trauma and overcoming adversity, navigating transitions) of military veteran extremism protective strategies*.

Stage	Transmission of prejudice	Addressing trauma and overcoming adversity	Navigating transitions
Premilitary	*Moral foundation* - Family resistance - Community norms - Wide-reader/Reading as a habit *Intergroup contact* - Friendships - Empathy	- Persistence - Emergence of the true self - Learning who you can trust	Setting expectations
Military	*Moral foundation* - Military values and norms (incentivized suppression of radical beliefs) - Courage (doing the right thing) *Intergroup contact* - Perspective taking - Openness to learning - Outgroup heterogeneity - Political and historical awareness of inequities	- Mental health and sobriety. In these instances, courage (doing the right thing) means asking for help.	*Pivoting* - Learn what it takes to get the job done *Understanding tradeoffs* - Choose what you can live with *Navigating military discipline* - You made a mistake. Learn, change, and move on. *Good mentor* - Find one *Separating military and civilian life* - Have one foot out the door.
Postmilitary	*Moral foundation* - Humanity (think bigger picture) - Justice (know the right thing) - Temperance (avoid extremes because they contain untruths or half-truths) *Intergroup contact* - Reconnect with old or make new friendships - Address inequities (speak up; do something)	- Mental health and sobriety programs at the VA (if you can find it). Military cultural competence matters. - Decompressing means destressing from military life.	*Finding the new you means:* - Revisit old dreams or pursue new ones. Dreams change. - Be Gumby if need be - Try or learn new things.

*Adopted from Table 4 of the Final Research Report for 2019-ZA-CX-0002.

activities (e.g., "*Looking back in retrospect,* [mother] *did a really good job ensuring that we got the proper schooling, that we were exposed to different cultural things*"). In other cases, the community itself is culturally diverse, which can facilitate cross-cultural friendships (e.g., "*My best friend, I think, for a couple of years in elementary school was Colombian. Most of the kids in our neighborhood were Hispanic or Latino …*"). Interestingly, these early interracial friendships can come at a cost such as name-calling (e.g., "*Then I was a n**** lover*)….".

During military service, the racial/ethnic diversity within the military itself becomes salient and appears to function as a forced stimulus (e.g., "*…in the military is when I was the first that I was really up close in quarters, living with, working with, eating with folks of other races from other places. It was definitely a learning experience to go from having this belief in diversity and equality to being just shoved right into a situation where it was what it was*").

For some, military service provides the initial opportunity for cross-cultural exposure and contact, and one way to address prejudice in this situation is to adopt an openness to learning (e.g., "*…quite frankly, my first experience in dealing with people of other races, ethnicities…. I had experiences that I never would have had otherwise with other Americans from other backgrounds. It was really illuminating to deal with some of the Black soldiers who could be from more urban, well, for that matter rural environments. Learned a little bit about their lives. Not to mention Asian Americans in service…*"). Openness to learning can also occur when servicemembers are stationed overseas (e.g., "*I have a lot of experience that other people do not. I've lived in Africa, I was stationed there, and I probably do not have the same prejudices, but also those life experiences made a lot of difference*)".

With greater contact comes outgroup heterogeneity or the awareness and recognition of individuated traits among different others (e.g., "*…basic training was I met the first, not the first Black person I'd ever met, but the first Black person that I actually admired, and he was my drill sergeant….He had wisdom. He knew when to push and he knew when to back off. He knew people, how to work with people*)".

In other cases, perspective-taking and a growing awareness of political and historical inequities can stem from shared experience of historical events (e.g., "*One of the biggest, I guess, examples was George Floyd….For me it was really eye opening in that….Really there has not been a discussion and there was just no awareness of the different cultures and then the injustices that people face. It really is injustice….I think the injustice part I'm learning more about that and just seeing the inequality in new ways*").

Interracial friendships can also develop and, similar to the premilitary phase, come at a cost which, in this instance, was disapproval from peers (e.g., "*One of the Black guys and I became friends….they got really upset about that. Why are you talking to the Black guy?*)".

During the postmilitary phase, positive intergroup contact can occur in several contexts such as reconnecting with friends before

military service (e.g., "*…then I renewed my friendship with* [names of friends], *and* [names of friends] *made sure I had everything I needed socially and financially and food wise. Then I got a job…*" a Veteran describing support of adoptive black people/persons/person family), or intentional cross-cultural learning after military service (e.g., "*I've learned more from the Native Americans in the last five, six years…. learn more about the Native American Lakota way of understanding the earth and the way they see things and trying to reshape my thinking pattern more like theirs 'cause theirs makes sense*").

In the civilian workplace, positive interracial interactions can come at a cost of being ostracized by people in authority (e.g., "*…I feel privileged, that I was ever invited* [to lunch by Black coworkers], *but as a result of that, I was basically kicked off the plant by the plant manager who was in fact, a white supremacist…* [manager] *said, get the fuck out of my world, to be very crude about it*").

Several strategies to counteract racism include calling it out (e.g., "*Now, when I hear it, I tend to take more action against it to speak up against it*"), or simple avoidance (e.g., "*I'd avoid the people that were acting that way, the racist people. I just stay away…*").

Intergroup contact, especially between people of different races/ethnicities, is inevitable across the military lifecycle. With early research (Allport, 1954; Sherif, 1954/1988), mitigating prejudice across the military lifecycle includes the development of interracial friendships. Also, cross-cultural learning, which can begin with an open attitude while in the military, can be more intentional after military service. With greater positive contact, cognitive empathy toward different others or recognition of positive traits among different others, are possible building-blocks for postmilitary behavioral resistance that includes directly challenging racist comments, or avoidance of people perceived as racist.

Addressing trauma and overcoming adversity

> *"….*[Mother] *was terminally ill by the age of 9 for me….taking care of her until the age of 12 when I was removed from the home because of her terminal illness….*[stepparent] *used the loving father trope….sexually assaulted me for two years…."*
>
> -Premilitary Phase

> *"There was no shortage of stress. There was no shortage of pressure."*
>
> -Military Phase

> *"Once I got out, I went full on with* [drugs]*….Again it was all my own choice at the end of the day, those were just excuses that I used. Divorce and just depression, getting outta the military, losing my vocational, everything…."*
>
> -Postmilitary Phase

Again, in spite of risk factors, these non-VE veterans demonstrated resilience by addressing their trauma and/or overcoming their adversity.

Before military service, persistence in overcoming adversity was found to be a critical trait that applied to various situations. In some cases, persistence was learned on one's own to overcome challenges at school (e.g., "*…when we started writing cursor, I'm practicing, practicing…taught me best I can so I took pride in my handwriting now because* [teacher's name] *said I was from the devil* [for being left-handed]"), or during extra-curricular activities (e.g., "*…I was on the basketball team and people would harass me from the stands. I set a new record for the most free throws completed in a row that still stands at that school because I had to learn to ignore these idiots…*"). At times, persistence was modeled early on which, in time, became a life skill (e.g., "[Father] *just persisted in many things and that ended up being a theme through our lives and how we get through things…*").

In challenging situations, people come to know a part of themselves or who they really are. In childhood, bullying situations appear to be the battleground whereby people came to experience the emergence of the true self (e.g., "*I'm a tall person…I was bullied quite a bit…I do not think it warped me. I'm a pretty secure person and, even though I was quiet and unsure in those days, I was still pretty secure*"; and, "*It bothered me to be bullied…most of that stuff, I just worked out on my own….I knew who I was…I developed that sense of self*").

Sometimes, recognizing one's own problem resulted in reaching out to someone who can help. In the case of childhood adversity, learning who to trust means seeking out a supportive person within one's own community (e.g., "*…around the time I graduated from high school, I needed some counseling 'cause I was starting to have some problems with my* [parent]*, and I saw a priest who has remained a lifelong friend….*").

In the case of childhood trauma, help-seeking more likely occurs during the adult years, with assistance found in para-professional organizations (e.g., "*….It was shell shock my father had. They did not talk about it and this greatest generation, how they managed to survive with the shit they were carrying….My father became an alcoholic and it got worse as he aged. I'm an ACOA* [adult child of an alcoholic]*…I've been through some counseling….I'm sure I went into the military with PTSD*"). In other cases, (compounded) trauma results in a clinical diagnosis requiring professional clinical services (e.g., "*My current psychiatric diagnoses which go back are complex PTSD…. my doctors have told me…unfortunately you are too wounded…*").

During military service, mandated services appear to be the norm rather than voluntary help-seeking (e.g., "*We went on deployment… we got high, it was PCP. When we got back they tested us….they sent me through drug and alcohol treatment…*").

After military service, mental health services were sought for different reasons. Foremost is marital counseling, which appears to be a gateway for future counseling services. This trend was observed among those who went to a VA facility (e.g., "*…I wish that I'd gotten counseling earlier because….that poor* [ex-spouse]*….I could have done a hell of a lot better….I have been going counseling for the past 30 years…That's through the VA….I did go to counseling for myself, for anger management. I went to parenting counseling and it was good that I did*"), or a civilian provider (e.g., "*When I first sought out counseling…. one of the questions was asked…'what are you feeling?' I realized that I did not have a clue….in retrospect I see that's a massive red flag….that was all they needed to know, basically about me, that here's a guy who needs some help over here….started out to be marriage counseling with* [ex-spouse]*….After the marriage, I committed talking to a therapist….I was able to have a real epiphany….become much more in touch with myself as a person. Much, much, much more happy*").

However, seeking help from a VA (vs civilian) facility seems more appropriate for military-related issues such as disability (e.g., "*I was recently granted 100 percent service connection….it took me 21 years, but as Steve McQueen said floating on the coconut bag in the movie Papillion, 'I'm still here you bastards'*"), or even discharge status (e.g., "[from general discharge to honorable]*…a VA guy…did all the*

groundwork and got me a copy of this new discharge thing. [VA guy] *was appalled that I had this thing and that I had met some prejudice along the way*").

Military culturally competent care in the VA is further underscored when receiving clinical services. As one veteran shared of their experience with a civilian therapist, "*…no understanding of veterans….rated me as impulsive, having a death wish, as a violent person, and it was – I have no idea where* [therapist] *got what* [therapist] *got. I've never committed an act of violence, even on active duty.*" When this same veteran connected with the VA, they described the experience as "*…the VA is what turned things around for me. I was able to get connected with the SARP* [Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation Program] *Program.*"

In addition to seeking mental health services, some expressed decompressing as destressing from military life (e.g., "*I went through some pretty rough times and I stayed afloat. I do not have the stressors in my life anymore and you do not realize how stressful that military is… decompressing. That took a while. Took a couple of years to totally be out of it and decompress and stop.*").

At times, destressing occurs within a supportive network and in pursuit of a new purpose (e.g., "*My mental health, from my PTSD from the military, I think is helped by my social justice activism. I focus on other people's problems more than my own…. My kids help me with my mental health and being a father helps me with my mental health and my social justice helps me with my mental health and my stress from the military*").

People experienced adversity across the military lifecycle. Early on, acquiring certain life skills can prove to be useful over time. When one leaves the military, gaining and appreciating a new rhythm opposite to the tempo of military life, or finding a new purpose in the civilian world are strategies to overcome military-related stress. Regardless of where one is in the military lifecycle, personal challenges are overcome with the presence of a social network that is a source of emotional, moral, and/or social support.

However, for trauma, especially when left unaddressed, there is the increased potential of developing clinical disorder(s) that can escalate into compounded trauma stemming from childhood (e.g., abuse) and military (e.g., deployment) experiences. This means seeking out appropriate healthcare services found within the military health system and when applicable, continuing into the veteran health system (VA). The importance of VA services cannot be understated because military cultural competence matters. Simply defined, military cultural competence "pertains to a provider's attitudinal competence, cognitive competence, and behavioral competence in working with servicemembers and veterans" (Atuel and Castro, 2018a, p.77). Admittedly, one of the significant barriers to help-seeking is the stigma around mental illness, especially while a servicemember is on active duty, yet it needs to be overcome before therapeutic services are rendered. Hence, VA access becomes more imperative in addressing mental health issues. Access, though, is not synonymous to successful engagement, and successful engagement is not a one-time visit. For some veterans, it is safe to assume that successful engagement with the VA is an adversity in and of itself, a challenge that can be overcome with persistence.

Navigating transitions

> *"….when I graduated from HS, I did not have any ambition to do anything, but my folks were not gonna let me sit on the couch. I did not wanna get a job…go to school. I figured, I'll join the Army….my Dad was a reserve officer in the Army…."*
>
> -Premilitary Phase

> *"They flagged me 'cause I was overweight….My automatic promotions stopped immediately."*
>
> -Military Phase

> *"…*[when 20-month old child died] *I just lost it. That's when I went to Skid Row….I became homeless…I just gave up…."*
>
> -Postmilitary Phase

Yet again, in spite of risk factors, these non-VE veterans demonstrated resilience in navigating their various transitions across the military lifecycle.

Before military service, some people set expectations for military service such as pursuing educational opportunities (e.g., "*Well, primarily it was I needed to go to college*"), or pursuing one's ideals (e.g., "*…I joined the military to organize against the war…*"). In other cases, enlistment was to escape from an adverse situation (e.g., "*I needed to get outta my city cause was my city was rough, and I did not wanna die on purpose or by accident*"), or simply the last option at that time (e.g., "*I did not join the military out of patriotism. It was really the last option for me. Patriotism and that national pride developed afterwards. I say national pride, but I wanna be very clear, not nationalist*").

During military service, people managed military life by engaging in several strategies to keep up with the tempo of military life. By and large, these were cognitive/behavioral approaches to navigate military life in alignment with military values and culture.

The first strategy is pivoting or learning what it takes to get the job done. Pivoting can reflect thoughts or actions in response to direct military orders (e.g., "*…they made me a mail clerk….I learned how to forward mail….box mail….sort mail….change mailbox combinations. I learned how to do everything but accountable mail…*"), military educational offer (e.g., "*…scholarship was for something else, so that made me pivot…*"), or personal career choices (e.g., "*For a long time, I guess, there were two things that I had considered career wise. One was to be a doctor and the other I really wanted to be* [name of elite operations]*…and that was not gonna be possible….my focus shifted to – I needed a career that I felt as a* [parent] *and* [spouse] *could put food on the table…so I just transitioned to* [healthcare occupation]…").

Related to but distinct from pivoting is understanding tradeoffs or choosing what you can live with (e.g., "*…two of us were in 2nd place trying to choose the 2nd best option, everything after that was junk. How do you resolve this? Well, I looked at the options and realized that some of these bad options were for very short periods of time….I'll take one of these 1 year tours. I chose Turkey*").

Like everyone else, servicemembers commit errors, professional or personally. When this occurs, navigating military discipline may entail recognizing that one has made a mistake, learning from that mistake, and/or moving past that mistake (e.g., "*Those things happened, and there was some difficult breakups and difficult things, but for the most part, I saw my part in it. Either just accepted and moved on, and made the changes and moved on…*"). Interestingly, military discipline could turn out to have positive unintended consequences (e.g., "*…I can tell you that I did clerical work for a while, I was*

disciplined at one point and they made me a male clerk, which was fine, I kinda liked that").

Another strategy is to find good mentors, which the chain of command within the military provides ample opportunities for servicemembers to be guided by others who can help navigate life, military-specific or in general (e.g., "*Early on, a particular officer pulled me aside because I was struggling. He said, I remember to this day, he said, 'You cannot hide a goat in a flock of sheep. People are gonna see you for who you are, and people are gonna see them for who they are. It might take some time, but they are gonna be seen. Everybody is seen for who and what they are'. That has stuck with me my entire life*").

Because military service comes to an end, another strategy is to have one foot out the door. This could mean delineating space between military and civilian life (e.g., "*I refused to go to military housing…I do not wanna live with military people while I'm not in the military space. I wanted to close the door on that, my 9 am to 5 pm…and have my civilian life…*"). Or, when the time to separate from military service is fast approaching, having a plan in place makes the transition something to look forward to (e.g., "*…I have a job lined up…I wanna see if I can translate all of my military experience, see what I've learned and see if I can get in and see if I can make a difference….I'm looking forward to my new work and perhaps a new social group….*").

After military service, finding the new you is perhaps one of the most pressing and enduring challenges of the civilian transition. While this 'new you' could pertain to the self as situated in a new job, new neighborhood, or with new friends, above and beyond basic needs (e.g., housing) was the pursuit of an identity that provided meaning and purpose to life.

One strategy involved dreams or aspirations, which meant revisiting old dreams/pursuing new ones (e.g., "*My interest had shifted a little bit, so I dropped out of art school….got a BA in psychology…. worked as a* [VA] *social worker. During that time, I took some evening classes in art….one of 'em was a pottery class, and I just got hooked…. Then, using the GI Bill money, I quit my job….started selling pottery……*"). The point here is people acknowledged and allowed their dreams to change (e.g., "*I wanted to be a doctor my whole* [military] *career….I did all my pre-med….I couldn't get past organic chemistry because I think my PTSD, I couldn't get past organic chemistry. I've taken the tests to go to medical school, and I didn't do well on them….I came out of the military and spent my time since then, social justice. It's a whole new me and whole new purpose….*").

Pursuing a new sense of self also means being gumby if need be or being flexible. For the most part, this strategy was observed during the early stages of the civilian transition when people did not have concrete plans as of yet or just trying to get their bearings back in the civilian world (e.g., "*…Then I got a job…fixing Xerox machines….Then I felt like it was time to move on…Then I found a job which required me to live in, it was a singles hotel, and so I kinda went from there….worked for the* [name of newspaper]*…went back to* [midwestern state] *where I could go to school for free…*").

Related to this approach is trying or learning new things (e.g., "*…I used my GI Bill to get my first degree……I could dumpster dive for food…I still dumpster dive once in awhile just to stay in practice…*"), which can have positive associated effects in that one acquires new skills, professionally and socially (e.g., "*… have gained, what do they call it? It's like social IQ…it's that social ability to work with people, ability to get along with people. That has grown very much since I left the military 'cause it doesn't happen in the military. I don't think*").

With greater engagement in civilian life, comes an enlargement of the sense of self reflecting both the military and non-military identities (e.g., "*I am coming to a place where my military identity is an important part of my life, but it's no longer an identity. My identity now is as a* [profession 1]*, as a* [parent]*, as a* [profession 2]*. I can count being a veteran as part of who I am, but not who I am. The release of that identity is actually making it easier for me to get through….*"). The military identity, which is still part of the overall self-concept, can become salient though under certain conditions (e.g., "*I don't tell them I'm a veteran until it comes up, and we just do the job. I don't lead with my service….I am a veteran and if you're messing and screwing over veterans and they're homeless and their mental health and all that stuff, you're gonna hear from me. I don't lead with it, but I own it*").

While the military identity was critical within the military environment, navigating civilian life after military service will require other ways of defining the self *in addition* to the military identity. The military identity is not a lost identity, but co-exists with other identities that acquire more importance during the civilian transition process (Atuel and Castro, 2018b). Just as military identity dictated military life, the military identity takes on relative importance after military service and can exist side-by-side with new ways of describing the self. This was the case for our sample who were able to find new anchors, broadening who they were above and beyond their military identity.

Navigating transitions pertains to learning and adopting a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors normative to civilian life, military life, and veteran life. It is also about setting and managing expectations across the military lifecycle. Owing to the predictability of the military lifecycle, transitions can be planned, to a degree. Owing to the unpredictability of life, in general, it appears people acquire a degree of flexibility toward accommodating changes in their life.

As a related consequence, the sense of self is broadened through the accumulation of diverse experiences. What emerged are open-minded veterans (Atuel and Castro, 2018b): while the military identity continues to define the self, it is relegated as part and parcel of the constellation of identities that enable veterans to thrive and flourish in their respective roles and professions as civilians.

Concluding remarks

> *"But above all we should decide who we want to be, what we want to be like, and what way of life we want to lead. This is the toughest of all our deliberations…nevertheless, whether it is by a kind of good luck or by innate goodness or by parental training, some do pursue the right path through life…the decision comes down entirely to each person's individual nature…."*
>
> -Cicero (2008), *On Obligations,* 1.117,119

Thus far, we have found individual-level strategies that steer veterans away from the radicalization pathway leading up to VE. What then can be done at the group-level?

Strengthening the civilian-military collaboration

> *"…catch 'em I think when they are young. It takes proper education in a lot of things…."*

In the aftermath of J6, Retired General Peter Chiarelli reasoned that the military represents a cross-section of American society where all forms of extremism thrives, "….we get these people when they are 18, sometimes older, so we are battling to change all the prejudices and wrong things they have learned up until they put on a uniform" (Fanz, 2021). Prejudice is, foremost, a civilian community problem. And who exactly is the civilian community? Here we invoke Allport (1954) and look to families, schools, and places of worship and, more importantly, place the greater burden of intercultural education on the school to "set before the child a higher code than is learned at home" (p. 511). Indeed, the field of intercultural education (e.g., Coulby, 2006) has evolved and continues to seek multidisciplinary best practices (e.g., Holliday, 2018) to address the changing cultural and global dynamics (e.g., migration patterns) that affect schools (e.g., increase in migrant children).

Meanwhile, U.S. public schools and libraries are currently being challenged with a book ban and textbook censorship movement. Given that habitual reading before military service was identified as a protective factor, it is not far-fetched to imagine that a consequence of the censorship movement is the raising of a generation of K–12 students with a narrower view (at best) or no view (at worst) of intercultural education. Obviously, from this pool will come the next cadre of servicemembers who will comprise the military force.

Relatedly, the current state of affairs in the military is to turn a blind eye to the extremism problem. But, prejudice is and will continue to be a challenge to the military, especially if little is done at the civilian/premilitary phase. Elsewhere, we argued that as the intermediary status between civilian and veteran, the military is the most potent influencer of change (Atuel and Castro, 2024). The military is a value-based institution that has the power and authority to shape and reshape norms, values, and identities. It is at the crux of instilling codes of honor and duty (e.g., Castro, 2006) above and beyond military service.

Instead of taking a siloed approach to addressing the issue, there needs to be a concerted effort among different communities, especially between the school and the military, to work together. What is at stake is the moral foundation, which is a work in progress, where values can and should be reinforced across the military lifecycle. This is a long-term investment that needs to be made across institutions.

Creating a military culturally competent workforce

> *"Mental health is an issue, and I wish that I'd gotten counseling earlier…."*

Some veterans experience trauma before military service (e.g., abuse) and/or stemming from military experiences (e.g., deployment). Regardless when trauma occurred, it needs to be addressed. A recent review (see Barr et al., 2022) identified clinical (e.g., Cognitive Processing Therapy, Resick et al., 2016) and non-clinical approaches (e.g., Moral Injury Reconciliation Therapy, Lee, 2018; see Koenig and Al Zaben, 2021) used to treat trauma, most of which are available in the Department of Defense Military Health System (2020) or Veterans Affairs Hospitals.

In an all-volunteer force, there are fewer servicemembers and veterans in our midst compared to previous wars and conflicts. This civilian-military divide is more than numerical, it is a cultural gap one as well. Hence, behavioral health providers within the military, veteran, and civilian health settings need to develop military cultural competence, defined as a provider's attitudinal (e.g., beliefs about the military), cognitive (e.g., knowledge of military culture), and behavioral (e.g., skill set) competence in working with servicemembers and veterans (Atuel and Castro, 2018a). There is no better time for behavioral health providers to expand their toolkit to include assessing and monitoring for radicalization and VE. Short term, civilian-based threat assessments for extremism being used in operational, correctional, or forensic mental health (Logan and Lloyd, 2019; see Scarcella et al., 2016 for a review) could be adopted. The long-term goal will be measurement development and implementation within systems of care for the military and veteran populations.

Forging military-veteran mentorships

> *"….if you joined the military, immediately join a veterans organization, immediately, and a veteran organization that is focused on making sure that whatever happens to you in the military is addressed properly….there should actually be national legislation that requires any member of the military to be involved in a veteran's active duty support organization right off the top, not after, but right off the top"*

As mentioned, there is a predictability to the military lifecycle with military service having a discharge date. With this end in mind (not sight), it seems prudent for servicemembers to begin the transition process early on by connecting with a veteran group. A recent review (Mercier et al., 2023) found that veteran peer support groups can potentially positively influence the well-being of veterans, servicemembers, and their families, particularly in the areas of health, life skills, and social integration (p. 11). Specifically, informal support groups (e.g., breakfast clubs) function to provide mutual support of shared military service and civilian transition experiences (e.g., McDermott, 2021).

It is never too early to plan for transition. For starters, establishing veteran connections while still on active duty could be seen as a type of mentoring. Earlier, we reported on mentoring opportunities within the military chain of command as a protective factor against radicalization and VE. Now we are advocating for a veteran-active duty mentoring to proactively address transition challenges. A related issue is these mentoring interactions need to be conducted in a group. Generally, the civilian transition process is a solitary experience (Atuel and Castro, 2018b). For while the military identity was formed in a group, the veteran identity, for the most part is an individual activity. Hence, veteran groups can function as new anchors of identity, values, and a sense of purpose. This mentoring across transition phases is a long-term agenda for the military and veteran communities to invest in. Short-term, we recommend vetting different veteran groups for inclusion in the Transition Assistance Program as resources for informal support.

Directions for future research and limitations of the present study

Future avenues pertain to the limitations of the present study. The sample size of this qualitative study is small. Future research should replicate with a larger sample size that is recruited from a more representative pool of the veteran population (e.g., in collaboration with the VA) to attenuate the sampling bias of the snowball and online

recruitment methods used in the study. Another limitation is the inclusion of open-source data that could be a source of measurement error; hence, future research should focus solely on primary data collection. Nevertheless, the results of the present study offer insights into individual-level factors that motivate and situate veterans to outright resist hate, prejudice, or violent ideologies.

Future research should also reflect the full spectrum of radicalization and VE, with comparison groups that include veterans who hold radical/VE beliefs privately, but do not act on them (cognitive radicals), veterans who provide instrumental/financial support to radical/VE groups, but not part of them (supportive radical), veterans who join radical/VE groups but do not act violently (non-violent radical), and veterans who used to belong to radical/VE groups and later denounced the group (former radicals).

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found below: Quantitative variables are part of the datasets submitted to the National Archives of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD_NIJ-194832).

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of Southern California Institutional Review Board (UP-20-00969). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

HA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CC: Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Sustainable strategic nation branding through sports: leveraging soft power via mega-event hosting

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Introduction: This study examines the strategic management of nation branding from a soft power perspective, focusing on Qatar's use of sports mega-events to enhance its global image. In contrast to hard power, soft power, in the realm of national or public diplomacy, refers to using cooperation rather than coercion to influence the impressions and preferences of others. Our research highlights the efforts by the government of Qatar to leverage sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup, to boost international visibility, enhance cultural exchange, and attract tourism and investments.

Methods: Using document analysis and semi-structured interviews, we investigate how global sports serve as a unique soft power vehicle for nation branding, building the attraction and appeal of a nation.

Results: Our findings deepen insights into how nations can strategically and sustainably use globally known and popular sports to cultivate soft power, heighten national pride, and project a positive identity on the world stage.

Discussion: We contribute to the literature on soft power by developing a systematic conceptual framework for understanding how mega-sports events can be strategically managed to support nation branding and public diplomacy.

KEYWORDS

soft-power, sustainable nation branding, strategic management, sports events, Qatar, international relations

1 Introduction

Strategic decisions made by organizations rely on organizational capabilities to design systems that protect organizational units from external forces (Grewatsch et al., 2023). While organizations—whether firms, nations, or other collective entities—can be construed as having agency in decision-making or capability-building, such actions and capabilities ultimately derive from individuals, systems, processes or governance within the organization. Such systems enable organizations to address societal challenges effectively based on the strategic management of organizational processes (Bryson et al., 2024). Strategic management involves developing ideas, processes, and hierarchies in a manner conducive to both innovative and holistic thinking (Xia et al., 2023) and is therefore a crucial discipline at multiple levels. For example, businesses of varying sizes and as well as nations can benefit from holistic thinking guided by strong strategic intent (Bryson et al., 2024). Nations can benefit from strategic thinking rooted in a clear understanding of the processes required to support nation branding,

which refers to deliberate actions to enhance the image of a nation through marketing and communication (Nicolescu and Barbu, 2024a; Nicolescu and Barbu, 2024b; Hao et al., 2021). These branding endeavors require both intent and resourcefulness, underscoring the critical role of public policymakers (Rojas-Méndez and Khoshnevis, 2023). In the branding literature, such national branding efforts resonate with normative control (Müller, 2017), which reflects the exercise of soft power (Günek, 2018).

This paper contributes to both national branding, also sometimes referred to as place branding, and strategic management literatures by exploring the mechanisms through which nations translate strategic intent into soft power initiatives. While national branding emphasizes the further improvement of the image of a country through deliberate marketing and communication efforts, strategic management focuses on the systems and processes enabling such efforts. By integrating these perspectives, we highlight how strategic management principles underpin successful nation branding practices and impact in competitive global contexts. Our dual focus provides an enhanced framework for understanding how nations use strategic capabilities to achieve soft power objectives.

Extending on the seminal work of Nye (1990), soft power is commonly understood as the ability to obtain desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Globalization has resulted in increased competition between nations and has made it imperative for governments to focus on the magnetism of a nation to attract and influence foreign audiences (Lee, 2015; Moharrak et al., 2025). Thus, the concept of soft power has gained traction in recent years as countries increasingly strive to enhance their national appeal. However, wider interest in soft power does not necessarily mean wider understanding. The definition of soft power, and its implementation, relevance, and required resources remain contested in the literature and researchers to date have not delivered a comprehensive model or explanation of the complete dimensions and implementation of soft power (Bae and Lee, 2020; Grix and Brannagan, 2016). A notable gap persists in investigation of the practical mechanisms that enable the operationalization and realization of soft power. Moreover, the relationship between soft power, nation branding, and public diplomacy remains underexplored, as existing research often treats these concepts as distinct or somewhat overlapping, but without clearly defining their interconnections. Based on these gaps in the research regarding the relationships and mechanisms underlying soft power, our study enhances understanding of how nation branding and public diplomacy contribute to the achievement of soft power. Providing a clear understanding of the concept and strategic intent behind soft power can guide managers and policymakers toward more thorough and successful implementation (Abdullahi and Othman, 2020). To clarify the interrelationship of soft power, nation branding, and public diplomacy, we examine the soft power strategy of the nation of Qatar through the hosting of sports mega-events, which provide a compelling setting for the analysis of soft power principles and practice.

2 Soft power, national cultures, and strategic action

2.1 Strategic shift from hard power to nation branding

Hard power can be a currency of world politics (Trunkos, 2013), but such coercive agents are increasingly ineffective in a rapidly evolving worldwide context dominated by social media and global culture (Kashif and Udunuwara, 2024). Modern interconnected societies enable individuals to easily share perspectives, thereby easily falsifying some traditional notions of hard power (Daßler et al., 2019). Technological advances further highlight the need for strategic changes in political approaches (Pinto, 2023). Rest apart, hard power can lead to national disasters (Desmidt and Meyfroodt, 2021; Mouazen et al., 2023), indicating a strong role of strategic management among public policymakers (Bryson et al., 2024). Moreover, this also supports the thesis of this paper that holistic and more sustainable agenda (i.e., nation branding) is possible when policymakers are understanding and implementing strategic management initiatives (Desmidt and Meyfroodt, 2021). Focused strategic action in globally popular domains helps build trust, encourage foreign investment, and strengthen global trade and bilateral agreements (Lee, 2015; Moharrak et al., 2025; Sertyesilisik, 2021), positioning nation branding and public diplomacy as a key component of sustainable national development.

We examine and seek to further provide and deepen a systematic understanding of how the hosting of mega-sport events can escalate the soft power of a nation, emphasizing strategic, political, and policy development aspects, as well as emotional and sociocultural dimensions. Previous research on mega-sports hosting from the Arabian Gulf countries or nearby emerging markets has particularly studied collective emotional impacts and long-term sociocultural transformations. For instance, Sullivan (2018) investigated the impact of the collective pride and unity generated during the South Africa 2010 FIFA World Cup to show how emotional contagion—the sharing and spread of emotions—plus the propagation of common national goals increased the sense of national agency and societal cohesion. Along similar lines, Ishac et al. (2018, 2024) and Ishac et al. (2022) revealed how the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup by Qatar built community pride, attachment, and support for the Qatari 2030 national vision throughout demographic groups in the nation. Further underscoring the social and psychological dimensions, subsequent research found that these reactions of residents to mega-sport event hosting in Qatar could inform the plans for and benefits of future hosting initiatives (Al-Emadi et al., 2024). An ongoing and futuristic perspective on sport mega-event hosting underscores the sustainability perspective of such events. Also drawing on the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup by Qatar, Al-Muhannadi et al. (2024) examined the evolution of innovations in environmental and cultural sustainability elicited by the international spotlight on the hosting of mega-sport events, while calling for further analysis of the long-term durability of these effects.

While the above research showed how mega-sport events advance soft power through emotional, social, and sustainability impacts, some inferences can also be drawn about policy development with respect to sustainability, community engagement, and cultural grounding. Environmental innovations such as carbon-neutral technologies and modular stadium designs that occurred as part of the Qatar 2022 FIFA hosting suggest a potential for ongoing sustainability initiatives (Al-Muhannadi et al., 2024). Results achieved in building community pride and attachment offer guidance for possible social sustainability policies to enhance resident inclusion in event planning (Ishac et al., 2018, 2022, 2024). Finally, the development and continuation of policies grounded in Gulf faith and culture while also promoting intercultural awareness and understanding can be considered as a means of maximizing both cultural sustainability and global support

(Al-Emadi et al., 2024; AlShamali and AlMutairi, 2023). As there is still a need for more comprehensive frameworks for long-term soft power implementation and attendant policy development, we pursue further insights based on the hosting of mega-sport events.

2.2 Sports as a catalyst for nation branding

Nations can effectively leverage sports as a tool for nation branding and public diplomacy, given the integral role in sports globally in social life (AlSarraf and AlMutairi, 2025; Nicolescu and Barbu, 2024b; Kashif et al., 2019). Major sporting events attract tourists worldwide and stimulate economic growth (Vrondou, 2023), reinforcing the connection between sports and national development. Contemporary evidence suggests that hosting particularly large, international sports mega-events enhances the image of a nation and contributes positively to nation branding (Li et al., 2024). Successful event organization not only boosts national pride but also serves as a strategic example of governance branding (Gulavani et al., 2024). A case in point is the use of rugby to establish a national brand identity in various Commonwealth countries, demonstrating how government branding can revolutionize strategic thinking (Kahiya et al., 2023). This earlier outcome highlights the importance of strategic management by policymakers in using sports to advance nation branding agendas, as reflected in impressions formed by key opinion leaders as well as the general public (Vila-López and Küster-Boluda, 2024).

Nation branding extends beyond sports to include the broader concept of cultural positioning, an essential part of national brand management at the macro level (Schühly, 2022). Culture, encompassing art, music, sports, and folklore, provides what can be termed the natural identity of a nation (López Hernández, 2022). Countries such as the US, UK and Canada differentiate themselves through distinct cultural markers compared to nations in the Middle East or Africa, reflecting varying national agendas. Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions model—considering of factors such as individualism, risk tolerance, and power distance—provides a framework to analyze national identity. Additionally, elements such as local heritage, language, and literature contribute to national cultural branding (Albuloushi and Algharaballi, 2014; AlMutairi and Yen, 2022; Brewer and Venaik, 2012; López Hernández, 2022). Strategic management of these cultural assets is crucial for projecting a cohesive, attractive, and appealing national image.

Mega-sport events can play a pivotal role in nation branding and public diplomacy by building the national image alongside strengthening emotional and social connections. Sullivan (2018) demonstrated how collective emotions such as pride and unity, generated during mega-events, contribute to a sense of national transformation, aligning with nation branding goals. Ishac et al. (2018, 2024) and Al-Muhannadi et al. (2024) highlighted how hosting events such as the FIFA World Cup intensifies community attachment while also exhibiting sustainability initiatives, upselling the appeal of Qatar to international audiences. It is furthermore valuable to encompass various resident and visitor groups in shaping perceptions critical for effective public diplomacy (Al-Emadi et al., 2024) and to encourage foreign investments into new products through trust (Al Reshaid et al., 2024). In these ways and more, mega-sport events have the power and potential to project soft power and advance both nation branding and public diplomacy objectives.

2.3 Political values and global collaboration

In addition to national culture, political and moral norms and values also play a key role. Modern political systems are evaluated by other nations through public media, tourism, and sports events (Sertyesilisik, 2021). Foreign policy also remains a cornerstone of modern nation branding, reflecting state collaboration strategies and international goals (Northedge, 1968). Globalization has further amplified the importance of cooperation, with countries increasingly coordinating interests and pooling resources to achieve shared, desired outcomes (McClory and Harvey, 2016). These efforts highlight the need for public policymakers to integrate political, economic, and cultural strategies into holistic nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power initiatives.

Holistic thinking among policymakers is critical for the successful execution of nation branding agendas, particularly through sports event organization. For instance, the Olympics in China exemplify strategic governance, showcasing the potential of well-orchestrated global events to reshape international perceptions (Diodato and Strina, 2023). Similarly, efforts by South Korea to host sports events have created strong emotional bonds with international audiences, elevating the national brand (Kim and Kim, 2024). In Africa, strategic sports event organization has countered negative stereotypes and helped to create a more positive image of the continent (Quansah, 2024). These examples demonstrate that sports-based nation branding requires substantial effort as well as a well-rounded strategic approach. Ultimately, such initiatives underscore the importance of visionary policymaking and a commitment to sustainable nation branding strategies.

2.4 Generating soft power

Since soft power derives from attraction and persuasion rather than force, it can be argued that generating non-coercive influence primarily relies on positively framing the mindsets, perceptions and emotions of target audiences in ways that can influence their behaviors. Foreign policy specialist Mark Leonard notes that attracting tourism, increasing inbound investments and trade, and encouraging public support for national positions are examples of national objectives which rely on soft power since audiences cannot, or at least should not, be coerced into visiting, investing or supporting a nation (Leonard and McLaren, 2002). He further reasons that behavioral influence can be achieved through the pillars depicted (Figure 1).

Although not explicitly mentioned in his model, it can be reasoned that 'encouraging people to subscribe to national values and see the country as an attractive destination for tourism, trade, education etc.' resembles the concept of soft power as it relies on influencing and persuading foreign audiences to behave in ways that fulfill national objectives, while each of the underlying stages of influence can be achieved through nation branding and/or public diplomacy initiatives. The latter two concepts essentially serve as 'mechanisms of image-building and building a platform for dialogue and trust… which have been used to describe the process of persuasion' (Nygård and Gates, 2013, p. 2). Upon examining the various definitions and aims of nation branding and public diplomacy initiatives throughout literature, this paper proposes the following definitions for each:

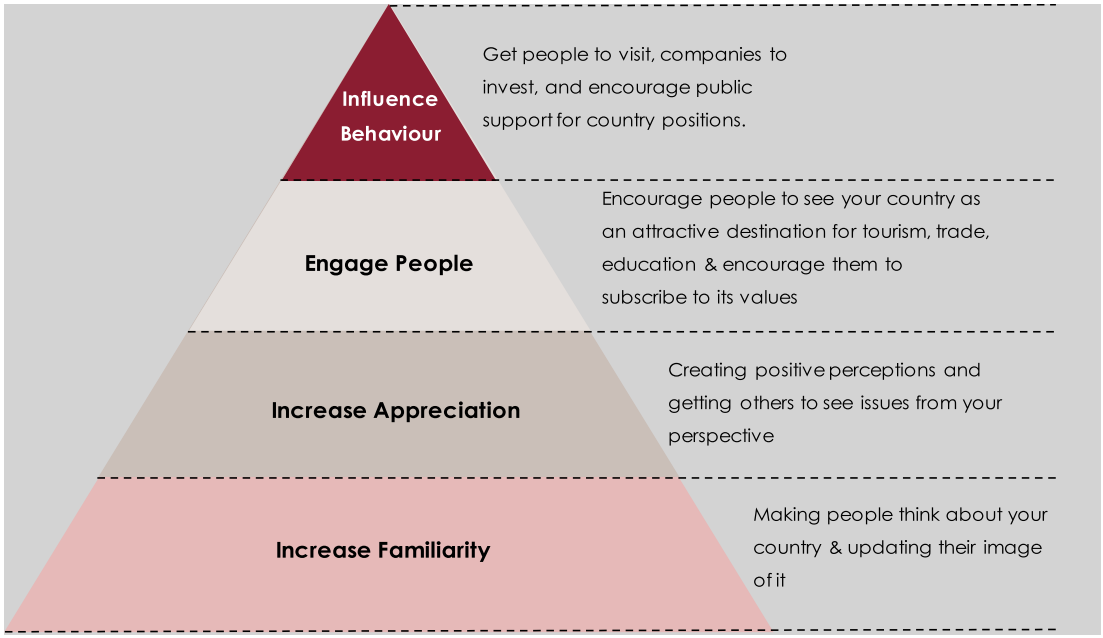

FIGURE 1
Behavioral influence pyramid. Source: adapted from Leonard and McLaren (2002).

Nation branding is the repetitive promotion of simplistic messages, images and information directed at mass audiences to increase familiarity and generate top-of-mind associations regarding a country's existence, image, identity, and/or competitive advantage.

Public diplomacy is the strategic communication and engagement process which conveys complex messages tailored toward target audiences to cultivate understandings, build trust and credibility and foster relationships between governments and foreign publics.

Given that nation branding aims to increase awareness about a nation, (re)mold its image/identity and promote its competitive advantage(s), it has been reasoned that the former two aims primarily relate to the familiarization pillar of the pyramid as they increased awareness of a country and its image irrespective of others. These initiatives mainly disseminate the name of a country on a global scale, or inform others about the current nature of a country through slogans that foster an awareness of a "friendly" population or a nation that has modernized.

Although the latter aim of promoting competitive advantages can also serve to increase familiarity, it has been reasoned that it primarily relates to increasing appreciation for a nation since it distinguishes a country from others in a way that allows for it to "stand out of the crowd." As noted by Nye, it is the unique cultural elements of the U.S. that make it seem attractive, exciting and admirable by others. Thus, through promoting a country's unique culture, business environment, tourism industry, etc., nations can make others not only know about them but appreciate them for matters such as tourism or investment. Therefore, the aims of nation branding can be transposed onto the bottom third of the behavioral influence pyramid.

Overlapping with nation branding in the appreciation pillar are the public diplomacy initiatives which rely on one-way communication channels to explain policy decisions or cultural contexts. It can be argued that through increased understandings, foreign audiences may begin to appreciate a culture that was once considered "closed" or "different" or begin to appreciate policy decisions that they once viewed as rash and unreasonable due to a lack of understanding. Due to the one-way nature of these explanatory initiatives, this part of public diplomacy does not transcend into the engagement pillar.

However, public diplomacy initiatives which consist of two-way exchanges to build trust or cultivate long-lasting relationships have been categorized under the engagement pillar. These exchanges allow for first-hand experiences, the chance to engage in constructive dialogues and are highly subject to individual interpretations. Due to these characteristics, two-way exchanges are viewed as more credible sources than scripted messages conveyed via one-way channels and are more effective in transforming the mind-sets of foreign audiences if managed strategically. Based on these understandings, nation branding and public diplomacy initiatives have been transposed onto the behavioral influence pyramid to develop the Soft Power Hierarchy as follows (Figure 2).

Understanding this phased approach between nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power can help nations establish a holistic strategy toward generating soft power.

3 Methods

Qatar has been identified as a prime case study setting to develop a thorough understanding of how sports mega-events can be used to fulfill each of the pillars of the soft power hierarchy, based on the challenging notion of strategic management of a nation. Thus, to develop a 'holistic' picture of the soft power framework and correlated objectives outlined above, documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews were conducted to unveil the overarching goals and strategies which must be adopted by Qatar to strategically position a nation brand. This is in line with the suggestions made by qualitative

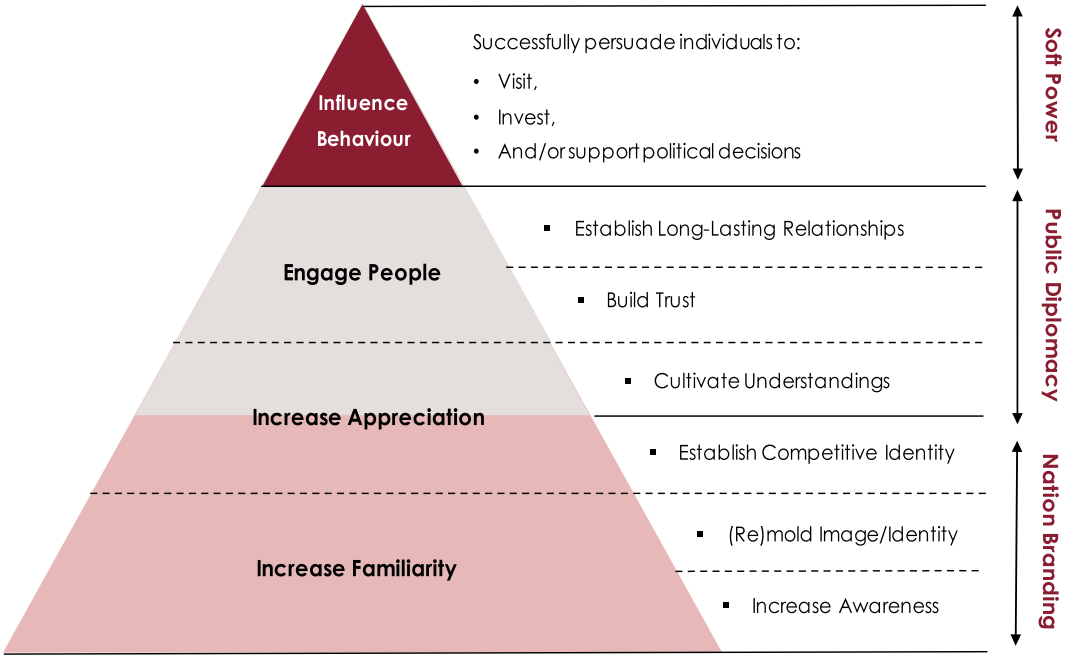

FIGURE 2
Soft power hierarchy. Source: adapted from Leonard and McLaren (2002).

market researchers, investigating branding issues and challenges (Kashif and Udunuwara, 2024).

Since context-driven data was required, the research team opted for a qualitative case study investigation (Edwards and Holland, 2013). In this regard, researchers recommend using triangulation as a useful technique to strengthen the methodology of the study (Kashif and Udunuwara, 2024). An underlying assumption of data triangulation is that 'data collected in different ways should lead to similar conclusions, and approaching the same issue from different angles can help develop a holistic picture of the phenomenon (Crowe and Sheppard, 2012). It therefore helps guard a researcher against the accusation that their findings are simply an artifact of an unreliable method or source (Patton, 2005). As such, the researchers triangulated the data collected from the document analysis and the semi-structured interviews to ensure consistency of our findings.

3.1 Document analysis

The first objective of this study was to understand the pre-determined goals of the nation and the way in which sport event strategies are positioned to fulfill soft power ambitions. Thus, a thorough documentary analysis was conducted as this method is known to '*help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding and discover insights relevant to the research problem*' (Merriam, 1988). Depending on the topic at hand, the documents reviewed can range from personal memos and letters to official government documents (Grix, 2010). While it is beneficial to have access to a wide array of documents from different levels and sources, the primary focus should be on the reliability of documents and their relevance to the purpose and design of the study rather than the quantity and breadth of documents (Bowen, 2009).

Due to this latter point, the main focus of this method will be on official government documents relating to the country's long-term national vision and its respective sport strategies. Thus, national sport strategies and relevant reports and publications were extracted from official government websites. In cases where strategy documents were not made available, however, relevant online articles which disclosed details from interviews with government officials of local sports councils were used in addition to reports provided by personal contacts within local sports organizations. The publication dates and time periods of each document were also accounted for to track any changes in the strategies adopted by Qatar. This helped to determine whether the nation was shifting their focus from internal ambitions to external ambitions.

Despite the relevance of these findings which provide important backgrounds and contexts, policy documents such as these are stagnant in nature as they are published at a specific point in time, are forward-looking and cover a timespan of at least 5-years. Thus, they fail to account for today's rapidly changing environment unless frequent update reports are released (Bowen, 2009). To address the stagnant nature of document findings and build on the details unveiled throughout this process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key officials, as advised by qualitative researchers (Patton, 2005).

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are key to obtaining primary data and can provide researchers with the opportunity to understand the socially constructed realities and perspectives of individuals (Patton, 2005; Kashif and Udunuwara, 2024). Semi-structured interviews consist of a general outline of questions and topics to be covered but is not

meant to rigidly guide the discussion (Bryman, 2008). This allows for the interviewee and the respondent to have more liberty in asking and answering questions, but it remains imperative that the interviewer keeps informants on track to obtain relevant answers (Kashif and Udunuwara, 2024).

Semi-structured interviews were therefore employed throughout this study to further build on the findings obtained from the document analysis. A combination of criterion-based sampling which relies on identifying 'a sample that has the characteristics relevant to the research question' (Nastasi, 2014) and snowball sampling which 'typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to study' were used to identify interview candidates throughout this research (Creswell et al., 2006). The initial approach of relevant interview candidates was facilitated by one of the researchers' networks. The use of these initial contacts helped establish a sense of trustworthiness amongst the interviewer and interviewees, while also allowing snowball sampling to occur after the interviews were concluded. The research team ensured the maintenance of neutrality in the sampling process by ensuring the criterion-based sampling was met with each interviewee.

It is also important to note that due to familiarity with the mentality of Gulf citizens, the researchers were able to tailor their approach in ways that helped optimize response rates. The mentality of Gulf citizens was taken into consideration when initiating contact with interview candidates. Also, despite being an expat the physical features of the primary researcher closely resemble those of Gulf citizens which enhanced credibility and acceptance amongst interview candidates as it fostered a sense of trust. Rather than being viewed as a "Westerner" looking to gain insider information, the researcher was treated as a local who had genuine interest in bettering the sporting industry of the Gulf. This resulted in more open communication and facilitated their willingness to share information and put the researcher in contact with other interview candidates in the region.

The foundational criteria for interview candidates for the study relied on two main points. The first requirement was that individuals worked within the local sport council, National Olympic Committee, or a local organizing committee of a top-tier sport event within Qatar due to their direct relevance to the objective at hand. The second point was that candidates should be working as a manager or above to maximize the depth of knowledge obtained throughout the interview process. This criteria is inspired by qualitative market researchers, exploring similar issues of brand management (Kashif and Udunuwara, 2024). However, a contingent point was offered in which candidates who were below manager level but had a minimum of 5 years' work experience in their role could be interviewed due to their relevant expertise and depth of knowledge that may have been obtained over time but may not be represented in a job title such as "officer." While this criterion was established prior to initiating contact with certain individuals, it also applied to the "snowball sampling" candidates which were recommended by initial contacts (Parker et al., 2019). All interviews occurred face-to-face and relied on notetaking and voice recording based on written consent.

To protect confidentiality and anonymity of interview candidates, participants were informed prior to the interview that their personal and organizational information will remain anonymous and thus verbal and written consent was obtained by the participant at the start of each interview. A coding system was developed to avoid disclosing interviewee names and job titles. The name of each organization and department is provided, however candidates are classified under levels according to their title and/or years of work experience. Officers or individuals with 5 years of work experience will be classified at Level 1; Experts, Senior Officers or those with 7 years of work experience will be classified at Level 2; Managers and those with 10+ years of experience; will be classified at Level 3, and Directors, Board Members, or Executives with 15+ years of experience will be classified at Level 4. Table 1 below is a true depiction of our sample.

TABLE 1 List of interviewees in Qatar.

Qatar interviews organization: name level and department code			
Governing sports bodies	Qatar Olympic Committee	Level 4 Strategic Planning and Project Management	Q1QOC
	Qatar Olympic Committee	Level 4 Marketing	Q2QOC
	Qatar Olympic Committee	Level 4 International Relations/Events Planning & Operation	Q3QOC
	Qatar Olympic Committee	Level 3 Operations	Q4QOC
	Qatar Olympic Committee	Level 3 Operations	Q5QOC
Event specific organizations	2022 Supreme Committee	Level 3 Media Relations	Q6SC
	2022 Supreme Committee	Level 3 Public Relations	Q7SC
	2022 Supreme Committee	Level 2 Media Relations	Q8SC
	2022 Supreme Committee	Level 3 Tournament Operations and Planning	Q9SC
	2022 Supreme Committee	Level 3 Stadium Project Manager	Q10SC
	International Centre for Sport Security	Level 4 Communications	Q11ICSS
	International Centre for Sport Security	Level 4 Planning Coordination and Legal Affairs	Q12ICSS
	Sheikh Khalifa Stadium	Level 1 Project Welfare	Q13SKS
	Sheikh Khalifa Stadium	Level 3 Health and Safety	Q14SKS
	Jusoor Institute	Level 3 Project Management	Q15JI
Other	Qatar University	Level 3	Q16QU

4 Results

A thematic analysis approach was used for data analysis. The first step of thematic analysis requires that a researcher familiarizes themselves with the data by reading through it many times so that patterns and themes begin to take shape in their subconscious minds (Spencer et al., 2003). After the "passive" reading process, researchers may begin to generate codes as they "actively" search for meanings and patterns throughout the data sets. Some of these codes may be inductively driven by the data itself, while others may be deductively developed according to *a priori* set of codes that are directly related to the research questions (Crabtree, 1999).

Due to the subjective and interpretive nature of coding, these codes were validated by third parties (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Once codes were generated (and approved by the author team), they were then grouped under broader themes and sub-themes to identify commonalities and differences within and across sources (Gale et al., 2013). Some initial codes may serve as a theme or sub-theme in itself, whereas others may be discarded as they are found to be irrelevant to the main patterns that have been identified from the findings or placed under a "miscellaneous" category (Tuckett, 2005). Each point within these themes were then reviewed and re-adjusted until 'candidate themes adequately capture the contours of the coded data… [after which] a thematic map can be established from the outcome of this refinement process to display how they fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Themes were inspired by the framework presented above. This deductive and inductive reasoning in which priori themes and new emergent themes from the data were used are the modern ways to construct a pragmatic investigation. A combined approach is appropriate when the project has some specific issues to explore but also aims to leave space to discover other unexpected aspects.

After reading, re-reading, highlighting and annotating each document thoroughly, critical inferences were developed in regard to Qatar's strategic approach and common themes were noted. This allowed for the researchers to tailor interview guides that specifically addressed the strategies adopted by the nation. Interview recordings were then transcribed using *transcribe.wreally.com* which is an online platform that offers an integrated audio player and text editor within the same page. Following the transcriptions, the authors reviewed the transcriptions to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions. Given that the interview questions were built off document analysis findings, the data obtained from the interview recordings was analyzed in accordance with the pre-determined document analysis framework. This concurrent analysis either validated or corrected for what was noted throughout the examined policy documents and allowed for the researcher to solidify certain inferences.

4.1 Document analysis

In October 2008, Qatar launched the Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV 2030) which outlined the nation's overarching aim and the fundamental pillars on which the strategy was built. In 2011 and 2019, the country also released 5-year National Development Strategies (NDS reports) to reaffirm or redirect the nation's focus while also providing updates on the progress that has been made. These reports were significantly more detailed than the 2030 Vision and were useful in understanding the intricacies of Qatar's overarching vision. In regards to sport-specific documents, the nation has released the 2011–2016 Sport Sector Strategy (SSS) and the 2023–2030 strategy to date. Thus, the following sections will draw on the soft power themes that have emerged from each of the aforementioned documents.

Prior to delving into these details however, it is imperative to highlight that Qatar's 2030 National Vision begins with the following overarching aim:

> *'The National Vision aims at transforming Qatar into an advanced country by 2030, capable of sustaining its own development and providing for a high standard of living for all of its people for generations to come' (*General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008*, p. 1).*

When reading this statement independently, it is easy for one to infer that the strategy is primarily inward looking as it explicitly notes the intention to serve the local population and future generations. When looking at it through a more analytical lens however, the mere mention of "transforming Qatar into an advanced country" points toward an outward looking and soft power-related ambition. The phrasing implies that Qatar's current status is lagging behind nations that are considered "advanced" and thus requires a *transformation*.

Upon adopting a thematic analysis to review the details presented within each strategy document, it was found that Qatar is undoubtedly striving to advance its soft power and that sports play a pivotal role in achieving this goal. The nation also demonstrated a rather comprehensive understanding of the key pillars identified within the Soft Power Hierarchy as it was found that the country aims to: (a) increase its international visibility, (b) distinguish itself as a regional cultural hub and a global sporting hub, (c) foster deeper understandings with foreign audiences via dialogues and exchanges, (d) adopt commonly accepted global norms and standards to enhance its credibility on the international front, and (e) increase its cooperation and influence on the international stage while attracting tourism, investments, aid and trade.

4.1.1 Increasing international visibility

When reviewing national documents, it became apparent that Qatar was determined to increase its visibility on the global front. This intention has been expressed manifold throughout the first National Development Strategy (2011 NDS) and the Sports Sector Strategy in particular. In fact, both documents identify sport as a primary way of disseminating Qatar's name on the international stage. For example, the 2011–2016 National Development Strategy states that: 'at the international level, sport events and athletes help raise Qatar's regional and global profile' (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011, p. 202). Echoing these perspectives, the sport strategy documents reason that fostering local talent to participate in world championships such as the World Cup and Olympics, can further disseminate Qatar's name on the global stage to foster an awareness of its existence. These strategic decisions are directly linked to the awareness objectives of nation branding initiatives that aim to instill a country in the minds of foreign audiences and are in line with the arguments made by previous scholars who have argued that countries use SMEs to "place themselves on the map" and "increase their international visibility."

4.1.2 Distinguishing Qatar as a regional cultural hub and global sporting hub

As discussed in the literature review, it can be difficult for nations to generate cohesive brands or simplistic messages that cut across various sectors. To address this limitation, they can focus on establishing "sub-brands" that are industry-specific and work toward attracting specified target segments such as tourists or investors which can collectively contribute to the nation's overall brand. Qatar has clearly adopted this approach by selecting culture and sport as the main sub-sectors in which they aim to distinguish themselves from regional neighbors.

Throughout each document, various explicit references have been made to establishing the nation as a "cultural destination," a "centre of cultural exchange," a "cultural hub," a "sport hub," a "centre for sport," and a "first-class sport destination." Not only are these words used multiple times, but they have been identified as specific targets that have driven strategic decisions as can be seen in the comments below:

> *'Target: Establishing Qatar as a hub of Arab culture through distinctive national identity, strong community cohesion and a vibrant and creative culture' (2011 NDS).*
>
> *'[Qatar] is also strategizing to become a global sports hub with an array of first-class facilities and a host of regional and international sporting events' (2011 Sport Sector Strategy).*

The 2011 NDS further notes that the 'government will improve branding of the country's global image using cultural exchange programs and regional arts initiatives to promote Qatar's culture', it also emphasizes that a 'global branding project will be implemented to improve the visibility of Qatar's cultural sector.' It is for these reasons that the nation heavily invested in the establishment of a wide array of museums and cultural initiatives to instill Qatar's heritage within the nation, while also promoting it abroad.

Unlike the Arab culture which may not be universally understood, sports is known for being a universal language that appeals to a wide audience. Establishing Qatar as a "global sports hub" can be classified as a two-way image transfer process known as co-branding 'whereby image elements from one entity, say for example the Olympic Games which can either be positive, neutral or negative, transfer onto another. In this regard, "sport hub" can serve *as the* brand or as a key facilitator of promoting Qatar *as a* brand. Aside from serving *as the* brand, sport can be a key facilitator of promoting Qatar *as a* brand in itself through disseminating Qatar's name on the global front as was described earlier.

4.1.3 Foster deeper understandings of the nation via constructive dialogues and exchanges

Further building on these foundations, explicit references are made to the concept of public diplomacy as each document emphasizes the importance of fostering relationships and deeper understandings via constructive dialogues and first-hand exchanges. In fact, one of the key outcomes identified throughout the 2030 Vision is to develop a spirit of tolerance, *constructive dialogue* and openness toward others at the national and international level. Supporting this objective, the 2011 NDS also focuses on the intensification of cultural exchange with Arab people in particular and with other nations in general to create a positive image for Qatar and enhance international relations.

The following passage also demonstrates Qatar's intentional use of sport to fulfill the public diplomacy aim of relationship-building which has been identified within the soft power hierarchy presented earlier:

> *'International sport is also a powerful tool for international engagement and diplomacy through tourism, aid and trade… and [Qatar] is using sports to forge friendships and improve relations between nations worldwide' (SSS 2011).*

Based on these comments it is clear that Qatar has adopted the soft power rationale associated with SMEs. It does not shy away from admitting to the underlying intention of using one-way and two-way communication channels that are generated by such initiatives to foster an understanding amongst foreign audiences and perhaps bridge the gap that exists between Qatar and neighboring nations, as well as those from afar.

4.1.4 Enhance trust and credibility by conforming to globally accepted norms and standards

Drawing on the objectives outlined in the 2030 National Vision, the cultural growth section begins with the following quote: 'the state of Qatar will preserve national heritage and enhance Arab and Islamic values and identity' (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011, p. 204). This point is raised due to the inevitable impact that globalization and popular culture has had and will continue to have on Qatari society (ibid). Furthermore, as the nation attempts to transform and open its doors to expats and foreign tourists, it stresses on the importance of finding a balance between modernization and the preservation of Qatar's Arab identity.

Despite the intention to retain Qatar's cultural identity however, the National Development Strategy underlines that 'social tolerance, benevolence, constructive dialogue and openness toward other cultures' must also be instilled in the minds of all citizens as 'the country's population grows and diversifies, as a new generation ages in a more open society and as private and international interests invest in Qatar's future' (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011, p. 162).

Further linking this concept to their sport strategy, the nation believes that 'by developing an array of first-class sports facilities and continuing to host regional and international competitions and events, Qatar will be well positioned to meet QNV 2030's goal of spirit of tolerance, constructive dialogue and openness through the common sporting principles of teamwork, fairness and aspirational excellence' (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011, p. 196).

Another point clearly exhibiting the point of maintaining credibility through the adoption of commonly accepted norms is the infamous labor rights case that has surfaced since Qatar won the right to host the 2022 World Cup. Again, relating to the concept of soft power, a country's policies have the ability to generate likeability, respect and admiration amongst foreign audiences which can directly or indirectly lead to influence. However, if a nation adopts controversial policies, this can harm its credibility and lead to resentment or resistance on the international level.

4.1.5 Attracting tourism, investments, and trade and increase cooperation on the international stage

In recent years, Gulf nations have increasingly tried to diversify their economies away from oil revenues. In order to do so, Qatar has

prioritized tourism, foreign direct investments (FDI) and trade as ways to diversify its economy. These objectives rely on persuasion rather than coercion as individuals cannot (or at least should not) be forced into visiting, investing or trading with a nation.

Linking these objectives to sport, the 2011 NDS explicitly identifies sport as a powerful diplomacy tool which can attract tourism, investments and trade to lower Qatar's reliance on oil and gas revenues (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011,). Echoing these perspectives, the SSS also states that 'the provision of quality sports facilities and services, including outdoor recreation facilities, also makes Qatar an attractive place to work, live and visit' (Qatar Olympic Committee, 2011, p. 14).

The 2030 QNV explicitly states that 'Qatar will continue to build upon its role in the international community by assuming an increased regional role economically, politically, and culturally, particularly within the framework of the GCC, the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference' (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008,, p. 12). These intentions are directly linked to the concept of soft power as Qatar clearly indicates *how* they intend on becoming influential and relative to *whom*.

4.2 Interview analysis findings

As shown in the Table 1, a total of 16 interviews were conducted in Qatar. Five themes have emerged from the interview process, which include: (a) increasing Qatar's international visibility through sport, (b) fostering deeper understandings amongst foreign audiences, (c) establishing strategic relationships and networks, (d) enhancing Qatar's credibility as mega- event hosts, and (e) "soft disempowerment."

4.2.1 Increasing Qatar's international visibility through sport

As noted in the soft power hierarchy, the first step toward gaining soft power is to generate an awareness about the existence of a nation and its identity which can be done through simplistic messaging and branding techniques that generate top-of-mind awareness across audiences. Throughout the interview process, various candidates expressed that those who resided in countries outside of the Middle East were typically unaware of Qatar's existence let alone its characteristics. Thus, sport has been identified as a key tool for promotion and publicity, alongside other branding initiatives, due to the competitive advantage it can give the nation. For example, one candidate stated:

> *People used to confuse Qatar and not know where it is. Qatar distinguished themselves by using sport because that's what the other countries did not really go after. Dubai has an economic and tourism distinction and we do not want to compete with them in that sense (Q1QOC).*

The candidate also highlighted that sport is meant to complement other branding efforts that are in place:

> *QTA has a strategy in which they try to promote Qatar in every occasion. They even launched the tourism logo in a way that promotes Qatar not only in the region, but internationally. They have their own campaigns and branded taxis in London for example. It's creating a brand for Qatar. It was a very strategic move on their part to brand the nation (Q1QOC).*

These statements reaffirm Qatar's explicit intention of branding the nation through sport and using it as a unique selling point. Prior to investing in such branding initiatives and winning the right to host the 2022 World Cup, Qatar lived in the shadows of its regional neighbors as international audiences hardly knew of the country. In recent years however, the country has been at the forefront of international discussions and if it is not known for its national airlines, Al Jazeera/Bein broadcasting network, or investments in football clubs, it is most definitely known as the host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Speaking from personal experience, another candidate added:

> *Before I came here, when I tell people I'm going to Qatar they ask where is that? If you mention the word Dubai, everyone knew it. The perception is that Qatar was a desert without anything but now everyone knows where Doha is… or almost everyone (Q2QOC).*

Further building on this, and relating to the point of establishing a competitive identity to increase appreciation toward a nation, one interviewee provided the following perspective:

> *The main motive earlier, behind Qatar's bid in the 2000s for the Asian Games was to put Qatar on the map because we all know before then, Qatar only had oil related revenues. They decided to put Qatar on the map through sports events because basically the country could not offer anything more at the time (Q3QOC).*

Worth mentioning here is that this particular statement was made as the interview candidate introduced his position and discussed his experience during the Asian Games. No explicit question was asked regarding Qatar's motives behind sporting bids, nor its intent to promote the nation's image or raise its profile. Without probing, another specialist provided the following perspective:

> *From a sporting perspective, there are a number of reasons why countries bid and host mega-events. Some bid for major sports events with the intention of using it to leverage the bid to showcase the city or country as a whole: bidding for biddings sake. From the perspective of Qatar as well, obviously bidding and hosting mega-events is a perfect opportunity to bring media to the country to communicate what the country is about (Q16JI).*

These responses point toward a consistent ideology disclosed within the strategy document in which the nation strategically uses sporting events to foster an awareness of its existence and establish a competitive advantage. While one candidate attributes an increased awareness of Qatar to the 2022 World Cup, another one credits the Asian Games (a second-order event) for being the turning point.

4.2.2 Fostering understanding

Throughout the interview process, various candidates expressed the way in which Qatar is commonly misunderstood or misrepresented on the international front particularly since it is associated with negative and outdated stereotypes.

Respondents highlighted that the mere staging of sport tournaments, particularly the 2022 World Cup, is a sign of progress and openness in itself:

> *The 2022 World Cup will be the first time the tournament has ever been hosted in an Arab or Muslim country. It is an opportunity for the Arab World to unite and showcase its true, peaceful nature to the rest of the world. It is an opportunity for the region to be in the headlines for reasons other than conflict. It is an opportunity for people to travel to the region and go beyond the stereotypes (Q7SC).*

Similar to BRICS nations that have used first-order events as a way to signal their arrival onto the world stage, Qatar views sport events as a way of signaling its transformation into a more progressive state. Furthermore, through stating that Qatar wants to "be in the headlines for reasons other than conflict," "go beyond stereotypes," and "dispel misconceptions and build understandings" as it "can still be looked upon as a closed culture," it is evident that the nation is struggling from stereotypes that are not in-line with current contexts or intended narratives.

Reaffirming this notion, respondents have also articulated the significance of first-hand exchanges as a way to portray a more accurate picture of the nation especially since the media has painted a distorted picture:

> *Misconceptions are created when people just follow news. They're just following Western news which might not depict an accurate picture of what is truly happening (Q12ICSS).*

> *There's a perception that you'll be living under same system that KSA are living under for example or the other extreme, the Emirates; but that's not the case (Q9SC).*

In regards to commonly accepted morals and values, other respondents also reaffirmed that Qatar will continue to preserve its identity, accurately portray it through sport events and also demonstrate that despite the differences, the nation is open, accepting and tolerant toward others as shown in the comments below:

> *We are trying to retain and preserve our identity, yet we are leaving room for other cultures to come and showcase what they have. At the end of the day Qatar has its own identity, it is a Muslim/Arab country and there are a few things we cannot get rid of (Q10SC).*

Key stakeholders have absorbed the logic that first-hand exchanges serve as a more credible source of information than the media; however, news travels faster to foreign audiences than audiences do to foreign nations. Thus, Qatar has pinpointed sport as a way of attracting foreign audiences to their nation so that they can engage in first-hand experiences which depict a more accurate picture of the nation and replace the negative or outdated stereotypes that are portrayed via secondary sources.

4.2.3 Establish strategic relationships and networks

Another key point linking SMEs to the concept of public diplomacy is the way in which they can result in the establishment of relationships and networks. Without probing for such answers, interview candidates within Qatar disclosed that sport events were in fact being used to facilitate relationships and networks with pre-determined markets, organizations and businesses. This particular point has actually been a key driver of Qatar's event selection criteria as one member from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) stated:

> *Our strategy was based on a matrix. We wanted to identify federations and events, we selected federations that had the most power within the IOC… we listed their influence within the IOC and listed what major events they have to offer for us to host. We also assessed events based on TV exposure- participation by countries, which countries are most developed? (Q2QOC).*

Instead of selecting events that fulfill inward looking ambitions such as promoting active lifestyles or facilitating the development of advanced infrastructure, the QOC selects events based on their significance within the IOC, their extended reach to a global audience and the participation of developed countries within the tournaments themselves. Each of these criterions can be classified as outward-looking ambitions in which Qatar is striving to engage with external parties. A project manager at Josoor explained that:

> *Although workshops are designed for mid-level and above, we gather speakers from around the world and we try to maximize their stay here by tailoring fringe events around the workshops to broaden their impact but also show them more of Qatar (Q16JI).*

Whether it is through bringing international experts to train locals, or through sending locals abroad, Qatar has managed to extend its reach and network beyond its regional premises. It can be argued that these international exchanges were made possible by FIFA's affiliated network which has allowed for Qatar to engage directly with other nations that have hosted a World Cup in the past.

Aside from Josoor Institute, the International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS) was also established with the primary purpose of transferring knowledge by bringing in international expertise. However, through leveraging its affiliated media network, the presence of this entity has helped Qatar tap into key target markets as explained in the comments below:

> *We had mixture of sports journalists and international media from different markets and made sure of showcasing anything the journalists wanted to see in particular such as our new modern convention center (Q12ICSS).*

Thus, the ICSS has allowed for Qatar to leverage its existing network of foreign media representatives to positively showcase the nation in external markets. This can enhance the effectiveness of Qatar's strategy for two reasons. First, foreign press is likely to have a more "trustworthy" or credible relationship with entities that they have worked with in the past; and second, foreign audiences are more like to accept information from their local media sources rather than Qatar itself as they are deemed as more credible. Another key point that has emerged from these comments are the key target markets that Qatar wishes to engage with to bridge potential gaps that exist due to

cultural differences, misunderstandings or a lack of awareness about the nation.

4.2.4 Establishing credibility as mega-event hosts

In addition to increasing familiarity, generating deeper understandings, and fostering relationships through sport mega-events, interview candidates in Qatar also highlighted the importance of enhancing their credibility as mega-event hosts. As noted in an earlier section, countries that host first-order events typically establish their credibility by hosting second and third-order events first. Qatar has also absorbed this hosting mentality as interviewees explicitly stressed on the role of smaller scale events in securing the right to host the 2022 World Cup.

When discussing the selection criteria above, the interviewee pinpointed that the Arab Games was an exception as it did not follow the criteria outlined in the strategy matrix:

> *In 2010, we hosted the Arab games which was a unique story, it followed a different strategy. During 2009 and 2010, Qatar was bidding to host the 2020 Olympics. To do that we wanted to show the IOC that we have the capabilities to host an Olympic-like multisport event (Q2QOC).*

By labeling this as a unique story and one that followed a different strategy, it can be inferred that the Arab Games is not viewed as a tournament that is "significant" within the IOC; and due to its regional scope, it does not have the wider global reach that Qatar wants nor does it involve the developed countries that Qatar would like to engage with. Relating to this, another candidate stated:

> *The Arab Games showed the region and the IOC what we could do. I think it really raised our profile a lot and at the same time we were bidding for other events with the federations. As those federations came and saw the work and facilities and hospitality that we have, they knew about us (Q4QOC).*

In addition to the Arab Games, other interviewees stressed on the importance of using the Handball Tournament, Asian Games and other events as a stepping stone to establish Qatar's reputation as credible mega-event hosts and also to build their hosting expertise:

> *Before the Asian Games, Qatar hosted smaller events to build the experience, the profile, etc. There have been more than 40–50 events a year and it maintains also what we started with the Asian Games. The Asian Games to me is what turned Qatar around. It proved Qatar can organise sports events and go to any length needed to have such tournaments (Q3QOC).*

Interviewees from each organization have expressed the way in which Qatar's labor force has benefitted from hosting a wide array of mega-events over the years. Initial tournaments relied on a higher number of foreign expertise, but with time, the transfer of knowledge to Qataris has led to a rise in the number of locals working in Qatar's sporting industry. Thus, the country has slowly managed to enhance their capabilities internally and readjust perceptions externally through the hosting of second and third-order events.

4.3 Theoretical model as an outcome

Understanding these characteristics helped unveil the way in which soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding fit into the Soft Power Hierarchy. This theoretical model served as a guide to analyze how Qatar utilized sports mega-events to enhance its soft power. Throughout the strategy documents and interview process in Qatar, various comments were made in regard to using sport to emerge from the shadows of its local/regional neighbors (namely Dubai and Saudi Arabia) and to correct for negative/outdated stereotypes. Qatar's strategy was explicitly linked to the concepts of nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power which exhibited that the country had a clear understanding of the relationship between sport events and each of the soft power components. As summarized in Table 2, sport events were being used to place the nation on the map, signal its transformation, establish its competitive identity as a sporting hub, showcase its culture, enhance its credibility, and foster long-lasting relationships to extend its global influence and increase inbound tourism and trade, all of which have been highlighted as key components of the Soft Power Hierarchy. Thus, Qatar serves as a prime example of an emerging state that is using sport to extend its international influence through adopting a holistic approach.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Based on the document analysis, it has become evident that Qatar clearly intends on operating across all the levels identified in the soft power hierarchy. Although the documents do not present these initiatives in the sequential order of the soft power hierarchy, they each acknowledge the need to establish a brand and fostering an awareness of the nation via one-way image-projection channels (nation branding). They also place a special focus on hosting cultural exchanges and sporting events to engage in constructive dialogues and foster deeper understandings between countries, both of which fall under the public diplomacy umbrella. The country has also outlined its intent to adopt commonly accepted norms and values and conform to international standards to enhance its credibility amongst foreign audiences. It is only upon doing so that the country can position itself as an influential economic, political, and cultural leader within the region and begin to extend its influence to an international audience.

Each of these objectives have been linked to sport as well as the country explicitly states its overt intention to use sport as a nation branding and public diplomacy tool to enhance its soft power. Sports events and athletes have been identified as a way to "raise the nation's regional and global profile," international sport events have been labeled as a "powerful tool for international engagement and diplomacy" and credited for "forging friendships and improving relations between nations"; and the establishment of sporting facilities and hosting of mega-events has been linked to making Qatar an "attractive place to work, live and visit."

Despite the internal benefits that sport may bring to the nation, it has also become evident through interview responses that through hosting mega-events, the nation ultimately aims to fulfill external objectives relating to the concepts of nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power. Respondents expressed the way in which Qatar has managed to successfully put itself on the map through

TABLE 2 Qatar document analysis and interview findings in relation to soft power hierarchy.

	Qatar		
	Soft power hierarchy pillars	Doc analysis	Interview analysis
Soft power	Attract Tourism	☑ Attract international tourists particularly via sport events	☑ Primarily target audiences from developed nations
	Attract Investment/Trade/Business	☑ Diversify economic revenues and attract FDI	☒ N/A
	Obtain Political Support	☑ Increase regional and international cooperation and influence	☑ Events associated with influential federations in IOC, events in which developed & loudest countries participate
Public diplomacy	Establish Long-Lasting Relationships	☑ Build strategic partnerships and business networks	☑ FIFA affiliated network, ICSS affiliated network, Jusoor network, etc.
	Build Trust/Credibility	☑ Instill values of tolerance, benevolence & openness, & reform labor laws to conform to international standards	☑ Showcase hosting capabilities by hosting smaller scale events, open to other cultures, ammended labor laws
	Cultivate Understandings	☑ Engage in exchanges to foster deeper understandings	☑ Exchange programs, showcase Qatari culture, tackle negative criticism
Nation branding	Establish Competitive Identity	☑ Sporting hub and Cultural hub	☑ Sporting hub
	(Re)mold Image/Identity	☑ Modernized and developed nation	☑ No longer a desert, transforming
	Increase Awareness	☑ "Place Qatar on the map"	☑ "Place Qatar on the map," brand the nation

Source: The table has been developed by the authors.

hosting mega-events, and that branding the nation was a primary driver behind their sport event strategy.

At the public diplomacy level, the event selection criteria were strategically tailored to select events that are popular in the developed countries with which Qatar seeks to further engage an develop relationships, and their affiliated marketing mechanisms were also directed at establishing a dialogue with these audiences in hopes of creating and readjusting their perceptions through first-hand visits. Furthermore, the nation intentionally selected events based on their significance and potential influence in the IOC. The constant need to be affiliated with advanced nations and influential powers at the political and sporting level points toward Qatar's soft power ambition of rising above its "small-state status" to be seen as a global player and one of the "big guys" regardless of its size.

Upon successfully doing so, the nation realized the way in which the negative press and cultural divide between Western and non-Western nations may impact its ability to attract spectators and hinder its reputation. Therefore, various measures have been implemented to bridge these gaps and create an understanding amongst foreigners that Qatar is in fact open to tolerating different cultures while maintaining its own traditions, and that it is a friendly, warm and hospitable nation contrary to the alleged conservative environment it hosts and the alleged negative terrorism and labor rights reports that have surfaced in recent years. The Gulf Crisis, between Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia between 2017 and 2018, has also posed an additional challenge for the nation as it has severed ties between regional neighbors and impacted Qatar's reputation on the global front. Nonetheless, the nation remained relatively optimistic that the 2022 World Cup will not be impacted by the Gulf Crisis and that building bridges with those from developed countries and Western nations remains their primary objective as they are the main target audiences.

There are several interesting outcomes based on the findings of data collected for the purpose of this study. The discussion of these findings is classified into three broader elements. First, soft power can be exhibited through attracting tourism toward nations. This is in line with the findings of previous studies where attraction of tourists has helped nations in establishing and to strengthen their image (Avraham, 2020). However, a more focus on attracting sports tourism is a unique aspect of this study, underexplored by previous researchers. Another manner which evolved from the data is via investment in business and trade. There are several studies where investment and trade options are outlined to develop nations. However, from the perspective of our study, these opportunities can help in establishing soft power for nations. In this way, our study contributes to previous findings which were focused more on organizations rather than nations (Sertyesilisik, 2021; Grewatsch et al., 2023). Extending on this point, it also paints an image of strategic intent which is required among policymakers to chalk-out strategies which establish strong national image. Another element of soft power is bilateral ties/relationships with other nations. There is a strong need felt to collaborate with other country states. However, slightly diverging from the extant literature, we position political support to collaborate in a more holistic yet sustainable manner which can outline a positive way forward.

We have reflected on the potential of mega-sport events to enhance a nation's soft power based on increased global visibility, enhanced international relations, and competitive business advantages (Anholt, 2007; Leonard and McLaren, 2002). Venturing deeper, we more profoundly surface the internal and regional impacts of hosting sports, including creating community pride, promoting cultural exchange, and enhancing the nation branding. Events like the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar illustrate how nation branding and public diplomacy intertwine to present

a modern and progressive identity, dispelling outdated stereotypes and reinforcing regional solidarity (Nye, 2004; Szondi, 2008). In the Arab world, such investments not only serve economic goals but also project values of cultural richness and unity, deploying soft power to strengthen both internal cohesion and global influence (AlBuloushi et al., 2024; Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Mattern, 2005). The accomplishments of Qatar as nation increasing in prominence on the global stage underscore the strategic role of mega-events in reframing narratives and advancing sociocultural and political aspirations n a highly competitive global attention arena.

While sport and hosting mega-sport events represent noteworthy tools of soft power for Qatar, they are part of a broader, multifaceted strategy. Qatar also uses cultural diplomacy, education initiatives such as the establishment of global university campuses, media platforms like Al Jazeera, and diplomatic networks to enhance its soft power reach (Nye, 2004; Szondi, 2008). We note these complementary approaches alongside the use of mega-sport events to provide a balanced understanding of how Qatar strategically projects its influence on the global stage. The synthesis of approaches indicates a commitment to cultivating a well-rounded and resilient soft power identity.

Another important domain is public diplomacy which plays a key role in building mutual trust and friendly relationships among nation states (Daßler et al., 2019; Sertyesilisik, 2021). A key feature of this element is strategic thinking, based on the principles of strategic management (i.e., setting long-term goals, thinking holistically, outlining an inspiring vision, and implementing and learning from the implementations). An important part of public policy is openness toward others which is not frequently discussed in extant nation branding literature, particularly in instances where a strategic management agenda inspires implementations. Reinforcement is particularly used by brand marketers to strengthen brands (Avraham, 2020) however, our agenda is more macro in its perspective, thus, steering away from the extant literature. A key to partnerships is a strong reinforcement strategy which supports dialogue at all levels. This includes political leaders and even strategists, engaged in the process of implementing the strategies. This way, it can deepen understanding among key stakeholder groups.

The 2022 FIFA World Cup represents a significant case for examining the impact of nation branding on soft power, particularly in the Arabic-speaking world and the GCC region. Prior to the event, sentiments were mixed, with criticism centering on the suitability of Qatar as a host due to its size and cultural differences (Nye, 2004). However, during the event, extensive cultural diplomacy efforts and Qatar's emphasis on its Arab identity helped foster regional pride and solidarity, shifting perceptions positively among neighboring nations (Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Szondi, 2008). Post-event analyses indicate that Qatar relied on and benefited from the World Cup not only to enhance its global visibility but also to bolster regional unity and reshape its image as a hub for cultural and sporting excellence (Anholt, 2007). Comparing public sentiment across these time periods highlights how strategic soft power initiatives can alter perceptions over time.

Finally, another theme which is emphasized as part of this study is nation branding. Although much has been said about it, nation branding from our perspective is missioned around building a desirable global image of a country, inspired by elements of the national identity, while polishing the existing stereotype and heightening stakeholder awareness. Various sports can help build this new image for Qatar and to steer away from unjustified stereotypes. Such a transformation becomes possible when policymakers understand key components of nation branding, interwoven with strategic thinking, and forging a way forward to develop and implement a sustainable soft power-based agenda. With such insights, our study extends and amplifies extant research on nation branding (Rojas-Méndez and Khoshnevis, 2023).

In conclusion, our study has highlighted Qatar's strategic use of sport as a central tenet in advancing its soft power, nation branding, and public diplomacy. By leveraging globally renowned sports mega-events to attract international audiences, build multilateral relationships, and intensify intercultural understanding, Qatar has developed a capability to mine the complexities of global perceptions while also handling challenges such as the Gulf Crisis and periodic negative media coverage. The findings emphasize the importance of strategic intent and holistic public policymaking in reshaping national identity and bridging cultural divides. Qatar's example underscores how integrating strategic management principles with nation branding efforts can transcend traditional approaches, positioning a nation as a competitive and advantageous player on the global stage. Ultimately, our research contributes to the broader understanding of how soft power, grounded in culture, diplomacy, and strategic vision, can transform a nation's global image and redefine its role in international relations.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Loughborough University Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

LE-D: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original

draft, Writing – review & editing. FA: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KP: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. NA: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. AA-E: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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