

## Online Eudaemonic Spaces for Students During COVID-19: A Cross-National Comparison of Confession Discourses on Facebook

OFER SHINAR  
Karlstad University, Sweden

ELAD SEGEV  
Tel Aviv University, Israel

In this study, we analyzed students' confessions during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, comparing Facebook Confession Boards (FCBs) from universities in 4 countries. Themes were interpreted through the framework of eudaemonic media entertainment (EME). Using semantic network analysis, we map the central themes in students' confessions and use qualitative content analysis to explore them further through eudaemonic lenses. Our findings reveal three main cross-national themes: personal life, university life, and romantic relationships. While COVID-19 was a relatively less central topic across all countries, it was present in every aspect of students' lives. In different countries, sentiments and topics varied according to cultural differences and national policies vis-à-vis the pandemic. Many confessions contained eudaemonic elements, as students used FCBs for support and personal growth, as well as to address sensitive topics. The anonymity and peer-group context of FCBs fostered open discussions on taboo subjects, creating sympathetic communities and facilitating collective meaning making during a global crisis.

*Keywords: confessions, eudaemonic media entertainment, Facebook, COVID-19, students, semantic network analysis*

Recent decades have seen profound shifts in how we communicate, build communities, and share personal experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these changes by isolating many individuals and increasing reliance on communication technologies (de Souza e Silva & Xiong-Gum, 2023). Despite varying national responses to the crisis, social media emerged as a crucial platform for expressing needs, anxieties, and fears, aiming to maintain social connections (He & Zhang, 2023). Confessions published on various digital platforms offer a unique opportunity to explore these concerns.

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Ofer Shinar: ofer.shinar@kau.se

Elad Segev: eladseg@tauex.tau.ac.il

Date submitted: 2025-05-07

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This article investigates a contemporary practice of confessions by examining their social media presence during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by heightened uncertainty and collective meaning making (Brown, 2020). The pandemic, as an unprecedented global phenomenon in the digital age, prompted individuals to reconfigure priorities across personal, social, and institutional domains (Todorova et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, this study adopts a cross-cultural perspective, analyzing confessions posted on Facebook Confession Boards (FCBs) by students from universities in various countries, selected to balance geographical diversity and contrasting national policy responses to the crisis: Israel, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

We employed a eudaemonic media entertainment (EME) framework, which is grounded in the philosophy and psychology of eudaemonic well-being (Meier & Reinecke, 2023; Raney et al., 2020). While early EME research focused on audiovisual mass media like films and television, recent studies have expanded to social media (Rieger & Klimmt, 2019). Still, studying eudaemonic content in anonymous contexts, such as online confession groups, remained largely overlooked. One reason could be an implicit assumption that such spaces attract users less inclined to engage with eudaemonic narratives (Appel et al., 2019). As a result, platforms like FCBs may be perceived as unlikely hosts for meaningful eudaemonic discourse. Nevertheless, before advancing theoretical arguments on the effects of online EME on well-being, it is essential to examine whether and how such content manifests in those settings.

We consider confessional discourse a promising site for examining eudaemonic well-being in digital contexts. These informal, anonymous settings may foster candid expressions of personal insight, vulnerability, and growth, key ingredients of eudaemonia. To examine how EME is represented in FCBs, we employ semantic network analysis, which enables us to identify central eudaemonic-related words (including prominent emotions, self-meaning, and social connections) and to map the recurring themes in anonymous settings. In this way, the current study expands the scope of EME research, laying the groundwork for future inquiries into their impact on well-being.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Eudaemonic Entertainment and Confessions***

The eudaemonic nature of confessions is rooted in the concept of eudaemonic well-being. Originating from ancient Greek philosophy, it is understood as a continuous pursuit of self-fulfillment (Waterman, 1993), with eudaemonic content often involving identity development and fostering self-actualization (Meier & Reinecke, 2023). At its core, EME invites reflection on life and human experience through a wide range of emotions, moral questions, and cognitive evaluations. Distinct motivations like a high need for cognition, reflectiveness, and a search for meaning in life were found relevant to people who tend to consume more EME (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021). A sense of interconnectedness with others, valued as a form of self-transcendence, also motivates engagement with this type of media (Janicke & Oliver, 2017). Entertainment, in this case, is not only appealing because of its potential to provide joyful and pleasurable escapism but also because it has the power to elevate us, inspire us, and serve as a tool for reflecting on meaningful events and thought-provoking ideas (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010).

Positioned in contrast to earlier emphases in media research, the EME framework highlights media's potential benefits, drawing from positive psychology (Raney et al., 2020). Furthermore, as Oliver and Raney (2011) propose, it challenges the concept of hedonic happiness, which underpins several theories centered on short-term pleasure and psychological effect. Instead, EME highlights the more meaningful and fulfilling experiences that media content, especially serious, poignant, and somber, can provide over the long term, leading to more prosocial outcomes (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021). Complementing the uses and gratification theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), it points to alternative forms of gratification that audiences choose to engage with and suggests that satisfaction can arise from sources beyond purely joyful media experiences. In essence, it explores the positive effects derived, among others, from negative emotions, making confessions during COVID-19 particularly suited to this theoretical approach.

At first, confessions might not seem like prototypical EME content. Neither conventional entertainment nor an obvious method for well-being, confessions have long implied an unequal power dynamic, positioning the confessant as vulnerable (Stewart, 1980) and the confessor as an authority who may judge, console, or discipline, thus reinforcing social control (Foucault, 1978). However, beyond this disciplinary role, confessions can also serve therapeutic and moral functions, such as restoring social competency (Couch et al., 2019) and fostering introspective reflection (King, 2008). These overlapping functions reveal the complex dialogical dynamics of the practice: on one hand, preserving social hierarchies; on the other, enabling strategic self-representation in pursuit of social repair (Archer & Parry, 2019). It is precisely this blend of vulnerability, moral engagement, and potential for personal growth that connects confessions to the principles of EME.

Accordingly, confessions have also become increasingly commercialized (Mandziuk, 2001), shifting from the church's sale of redemptions to modern media investments. Because most confessions are acknowledgments of "trivial violations of a personal ethical code" (Matthews, 2007, p. 442) rather than criminal acts, they often lack the sensationalism that sells. In contrast, scandalous and gossip-driven confessions—what Bok (1989) termed "inappropriate secrets"—thrive in mass media, transitioning from private to public spheres through their ability to evoke a mix of sympathy, hatred, envy, and pity. As Georg Simmel (1906) noted, "Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession" (p. 466).

The powerful emergence of the confession genre as a cultural product (Mandziuk, 2001) marked a turning point in the presumed connection between confession and truth telling. Confessions have come to be seen less as straightforward "first-person accounts of intimate problems and true experiences" (Gerbner, 1958, p. 29), but instead as rhetorical mechanisms that help construct consensus around what is valued as truth (Vaughn, 1984). Accordingly, they are best evaluated not by their factual accuracy but by the authenticity they convey through linguistic and emotional cues (King, 2008; Stewart, 1980).

Confessions should not be understood only as shallow, sensational, and hedonistic but also as eudaemonic entertainment. Confessions can act as means for self-fulfillment: By daring to reflect on and reveal what seems to truly matter, we step forward in understanding our own mind and spirit. Much like the elements discussed above in the EME field, confessions and self-disclosure can foster connectedness—for instance, by "developing trust in the observations made by others" (Fonagy et al., 2017, p. 200)—inspire

readers, as anonymous sharing may encourage others to voice similar experiences (Zhou et al., 2022); and invite contemplative, thought-provoking moments of self-realization through the creation of a public sphere that “link[s] the personal and the public” (Matthews, 2007, p. 445).

### ***Confessions on Social Media***

Together with the adoption of social media, confessions today can reach audiences far and wide, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. Computer-mediated platforms offer new public and private spaces where users negotiate how confessions are created, consumed, and understood (Sharon & John, 2018). Some platforms offer high anonymity, while others, like vlogging platforms, encourage identified confessional communication (Bickart et al., 2015). Anonymous cleavages within identified social media platforms remain an important aspect of confessions in designated groups.

One popular form of these groups is FCBs, pages centered around specific topics or organizations that serve as social, cultural, and political hubs where people with shared traits congregate. These pages allow the confessants’ identities to remain anonymous, while other users engaging with the post are identified. Anchored to a recognized institution (though not officially affiliated), FCBs limit anonymity to imagined borders, resembling a “masquerade ball” (Sharon & John, 2018). This creates a space where users imagine the writers as “someone” they might know rather than “anyone” (p. 4190). The appeal arises from anonymous discourse within a peer group, building a sense of community that fulfills emotional, cognitive, and social needs (Sacks et al., 2021; Yeo, 2021).

Stemming from these contextual aspects, FCBs can also serve as a fertile ground for supportive communication, through which individuals offer and receive social and emotional support (Jones & Bodie, 2014; MacGeorge et al., 2011; Rains & Carter, 2025). While the EME framework focuses on how meaningful content affects recipients, supportive communication often begins with a call for help (MacGeorge et al., 2011; Nozaki & Gross, 2025). This makes the supportive communication lens a valuable complement to the EME framework, particularly in the context of FCBs, where personal disclosures often invite direct responses and emotional reciprocity.

These dynamics of support seeking and response are enabled and shaped by the unique structure of FCBs. They combine the benefits of anonymous communication, such as freedom from sanctions for controversial opinions and the ability to discuss personal or taboo subjects, with the advantages of non-anonymous interaction. These include accountability, reduced trolling and disinhibition, and the fostering of trust among users (Birnholtz et al., 2015). Despite their name, FCBs are not only platforms for confessing but also for building communities (Birnholtz et al., 2015; Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2017). Aligned with user-generated content (UGC) principles, they promote authenticity, creativity, and collaboration (Shifman, 2016). Posts often involve haggling, complaints, or mundane actions (Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2017), but their true significance lies in their ability to offer a platform for confessions that are not necessarily grievous or dramatic, but can also be trivial or burdensome to share in person (Yeo, 2021).

Universities serve as the primary hubs around which FCBs are established. These pages provide students with an anonymous platform to share experiences or opinions and seek help for issues that may

not have found an audience elsewhere. Taboo topics, particularly related to sexual relationships, are common, reflecting students' concerns, fantasies, and experiences (Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2017; Paul et al., 2021). Additionally, most confessions focus more on local and personal issues such as exams, graduation, or personal frustrations, rather than global events (Barari, 2015), and revolve around day-to-day challenges, such as group projects or procrastination, reflecting the immediate context of student life (Sacks et al., 2021).

### ***Students Facing COVID-19 Around the World***

More than 1.5 billion students shifted to remote learning during the first wave of the pandemic (Aristovnik et al., 2020), facing academic disruptions (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), psychological strain (Browning et al., 2021), unstable employment (Aristovnik et al., 2020), and uncertainty about their future (Manor & Yrachi, 2023). Limited social interaction and concerns for family and society further intensified this, making students a particularly vulnerable group (Cohen et al., 2020).

Alongside these difficulties, students had one key advantage: access to mobile communication networks and digital literacy (de Souza e Silva & Xiong-Gum, 2023). Social media platforms helped them cope, providing spaces to express emotions like fear, anxiety, and anger (Adikari et al., 2021; He & Zhang, 2023). This digital fluency allowed students to adapt relatively quickly to pandemic-induced disruptions, highlighting an intriguing balance between their vulnerability and flexibility.

The global pandemic further offers a unique opportunity for international comparative research, unfolding on global, national, and personal levels (Manor & Yrachi, 2023). Each country implemented its own policies, shaped by confirmed cases, geopolitical factors, and demographics. For instance, Israel and New Zealand acted relatively early on implementing measures like border closures and lockdowns, even before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, unlike the United Kingdom and the United States, which experienced higher infection rates during the first wave (Ginzburg et al., 2023). Varying policies, including differences in public communication, restrictions, and political dynamics, influenced how users from different countries use social media to share their experiences (Bennett et al., 2020; Kahlawi et al., 2025). It is therefore expected that the social media content in countries such as Israel and New Zealand, which introduced early lockdowns, would reflect those changes. Together with different national policies, cultural differences can further explain variations in eudaemonic content on social media, yet there is a lack of cross-national studies examining eudaemonic content on social media, underscoring the need for more systematic comparisons (Meier & Reinecke, 2023).

To address this lacuna in literature, the current research explores online confession practices through three innovative lenses: (a) examining FCBs during COVID-19 from (b) an EME framework and (c) a cross-cultural perspective. Those lenses manifested in the following three research questions:

*RQ1: Which personal and collective issues were central to students' confessional discourse during the early COVID-19 pandemic?*

*RQ2: Which eudaemonic features expressed on FCBs during a crisis, and what do they reveal about the platform's function?*

*RQ3: To what extent did the confessional discourses on social media differ across countries with different COVID-19 policies?*

University-centered FCBs are expected to remain focused on student life, even during a global pandemic. However, COVID-19 and the measures taken to contain it significantly shaped university experiences. A predominance of negative sentiment is likely, reflecting shared challenges across all countries studied.

Based on the different national responses mentioned above, we anticipate some overlap in pandemic-related discourse between Israel and New Zealand, and between the United Kingdom and United States. Still, the emotional tone of these differences remains unclear, depending on whether early restrictions inspired hope or provoked frustration before the virus's full impact was understood.

## **Methods**

### ***Sample***

The study corpus included all posts in the FCBs of 19 universities in four countries—Israel, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as collected retrospectively from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic between March 1 and May 31, 2020. All the data analyzed were publicly available and anonymously published, ensuring no privacy breaches. Two main factors influenced the selection of countries for this analysis. Most importantly, those four nations were chosen because of their contrasting crisis management policies (Ginzburg et al., 2023). Additionally, their global spread (four distinct continents) allows for a worldwide approach in line with a global pandemic. Language proficiency, which is critical for effective network analysis and text interpretation (Segev, 2022), was another criterion.

We focused on the first wave of the pandemic, a period of unprecedented uncertainty often described as a heightened meaning-making event (Brown, 2020; Todorova et al., 2021). Todorova et al. (2021) note that the pandemic spurred changes in self, relationships, daily life, and views of society, government, and the environment (p. 849), while increased time for self-reflection fostered self-appreciation, growth, and self-knowledge (pp. 843–844). Together, these characteristics, coupled with the unique affordances of FCBs, create an ideal framework for EME.

A total of 17,622 posts were retrieved: 8,610 from the United States, 3,375 from the United Kingdom, 688 from New Zealand, and 4,949 from Israel. Posts in the format of images (e.g., memes) and those written in languages other than English or Hebrew were excluded. Table 1 presents the sample in elaboration.

To explore and map the topics discussed among students in those FCBs, we employed semantic network analysis. Semantic network is a particularly useful approach for the current study. Not only does it

highlight the main topics discussed (Segev, 2020) but it also helps researchers to identify the most central keywords in the discussion, which enables us to further explore the content qualitatively in light of EME theory. This process allows us, therefore, to identify frequent words that correspond to the theoretical concepts.

**Table 1. List of the Covered Countries.**

<b>Nation</b>	<b>Universities</b>	<b>Confession Posts</b>	<b>Words</b>	<b>Words/Post</b>
United States (USA)	5	8,610	593k	69
United Kingdom (UK)	5	3,375	168k	50
New Zealand (NZ)	3	688	156k	227
Israel (ISR)	6	4,949	391k	79
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17,622</b>	<b>1,309k</b>	<b>74</b>

### ***Choosing Relevant Words***

First, we generated a list of word frequencies, removing stopwords (prepositions, conjunctions, etc.) and irrelevant words and merging multiword phrases (e.g., “mental-health” or “break-up”) into single tokens. Thus, for example, the word “COVID-19” appeared 863 times in the American discourse, followed by “help” (673 times) and “alone” (253 times). To determine the relevance of the words, we manually inspected the context in which words appeared in the text, making sure each word conveyed a specific meaning.

### ***Construction and Analysis of Semantic Networks***

Based on frequent words, we built networks of word pairs appearing in the same post. For each nation, two networks were generated: one for the first six weeks of the first wave (March 1–April 15) and another for the following six weeks (April 16–May 31). Although COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in early March (World Health Organization, 2020), substantial lifestyle changes and new perceptions of reality emerged only later (Manor & Yrachi, 2023). Online discourse reflects this shift, moving from infection cases and travel restrictions to issues like mental health and welfare policies (Adikari et al., 2021). Because semantic networks are static, dividing them into two periods enables exploration of the discourse’s dynamic qualities. The rationale is that awareness of the pandemic alone was unlikely to spark confessions; rather, its tangible implications (e.g., guidelines, restrictions) made it central to students’ disclosures.

### ***Network Sparsification and Analysis***

Following Segev (2020), networks were sparsified by deleting less frequent word pairs. To account for differences in total word counts across countries (see Table 1), pairs with fewer than six co-occurrences in the United States and three in the other countries were removed. This yielded clearer, more readable networks for visualization and interpretation. We then calculated centrality measures (degree and betweenness) and applied Louvain modularity (Blondel et al., 2008) to detect clusters of words. Previous studies (Segev, 2020, 2022) indicate that this method, which measures edge density within communities, is particularly effective for analyzing social media content.

### Qualitative Analysis

Semantic networks provided descriptive maps of students' discourse, which we then examined in greater depth. Beyond the specific topics within FCBs, we analyzed the communicative function (e.g., asking for advice, commenting), general tone (e.g., criticism, sarcasm, humor), and eudaemonic aspects of the posts.

Relying on the literature of EME, mainly in traditional media (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021; Meier & Reinecke, 2023; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), we concluded seven topics that were relevant to the context of social media and UGC for further qualitative investigations (Table 2). We divided those topics into two categories: characteristics and usages of the content.

**Table 2. EME-Related Topics for Qualitative Investigations.**

Category	Topic	Definition
<b>Characteristics</b>	Meaningfulness	Emphasizing the importance and salience of things in one's life
	Inspiration	Evoking belief in one's ability to set or achieve goals; sense of competence
	Thought-provoking	Questioning existing stances relative to established norms
	Contemplative	Evaluating or re-evaluating issues that remain unclear
<b>Usages</b>	Self-reflection	Examining one's life, past and present
	Self-actualization	Realizing wishes by focusing on progress
	Self-transcendence	Aspiring to do good for others beyond self-serving outcomes

### Findings

The discourse in all countries was highly emotional. The most central words (Table 3) reveal that the discourse in Israel included more negative words, such as "frustration," "difficult," and "afraid," while in New Zealand, there were more positive words, such as "fun," and "hope." In general, there was a greater variety of words expressing negative sentiment in all networks. Positive words were prevalent mainly in confessions dealing with romantic relationships. The initial two examples exhibit the different emotions one can encounter among the various confessions posted by students.

- 1) "To my old best friend, I miss u. To everyone reading this, connect with old friends, they probably miss u too" (NZ, personal communication, May 14, 2020).
- 2) "Is it bad that talking to my friends gives me anxiety?" (UK, personal communication, May 16, 2020).

These confessions depict two distinct eudaemonic characteristics that were also prominent throughout the discourses. Confession 1 is both inspiring and meaningful. The confessant communicated their wishes to reconnect with a valuable person from the past while simultaneously trying to inspire others to do the same. Confession 2 showcased contemplation over their social relations about their own mental state.

The next three sections present key findings from the semantic network and qualitative analyses. The analysis begins with a broad overview, exploring prevailing themes in students' confessions. It focuses on the networks' clusters and the central words that compose them. The subsequent sections delve into the unique case of the pandemic and the platform dynamics, including their eudaemonic functions. We end the analysis by highlighting similarities and differences across nations. Together, these sections reveal the urgent concerns preoccupying students during the onset of a global crisis and demonstrate how FCBs served as a coping mechanism in times of distress.

### ***Prevailing Themes in Students' Confessions***

Our analysis reveals three overarching clusters, corresponding to three prevailing themes common to all countries: romantic relationships (red cluster), university life (blue cluster), and personal life (green and yellow clusters). The clusters of university life and romantic relationships were often in different poles of a network, or in other words, relatively distant discourse domains, while the personal life cluster(s) were typically the ones connecting them (Figures 1 and 2). The personal life clusters remained the focal point in nearly all networks' configurations.

***Table 3. Most Significant Words Based on Betweenness Centrality in the Students' Discourses During the First COVID-19 Wave.***

<b>Israel</b>		<b>New Zealand</b>		<b>United Kingdom</b>		<b>United States</b>	
<b>Word</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Word</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Word</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Word</b>	<b>%</b>
afraid	12.1	work	13.9	change	11.2	Work	11.3
Facebook	6.4	thought	11	people	8.3	Help	12.5
reason	6.4	hope	8.2	miss	8.1	Parents	7.5
life	6.1	course	7	advice	7.2	Full	6.6
faculty	6	COVID-19	6.6	story	5.9	Life	6.1
frustration	5.2	experience	6	parents	5.9	Class	5.9
difficult	4.7	science	5.6	problem	5.2	Feelings	5.6
Zoom	4.3	fun	5.5	help	4.7	Semester	5.6
guy	4.2	class	5	lecture	4.5	Group	5.1
COVID-19	3.9	relationship	4.9	safe	4.1	Close	4.8









Confession 3 dealt in a humorous way with the problem of adapting to the new remote learning environment and the feelings of stress that accompanied it, while confession 4 gave a more sincere and difficult peek into one's struggle. Those two types were common in all countries. Confession 4 also presented a eudaemonic aspect of usage, as it is a means of self-reflection: the acknowledgment of a troublesome situation and the realization of the struggle.

The personal life clusters exhibit the most diverse topics and therefore were usually composed of two neighboring clusters. In all countries, the topic of household and kin concerns was a recurrent subtheme within this cluster, yet with different intensity and sentiment. The topic of family became more prominent toward the latter period, when all countries introduced policies of quarantine and social isolation. Among the countries examined, the discourse in Israel was found to be the most family-oriented, and words such as "mom," "dad," and "grandma" were frequently mentioned together with "home." The discourse depicted a transition between two worlds—that of "home" and family and that of "university" and peers. An example is this meaningful confession from Israel:

- 5) I'm living with my grandmother at home; she has had a lung disease for many years. I am afraid to go to university, get infected, and pass it on to her without knowing. She is one of the most precious people to me in this world. Please, university [board of directors], take responsibility and exempt us from mandatory attendance. My grandmother's life is more important to me than my studies 😊" (ISR, personal communication, March 11, 2020)

Confessions about family-related topics were almost always accompanied by emotions. This was also the case in the United States, the second after Israel in terms of the number of family-related words. The word "hate" was connected to all family words in the early period in the United States, as well as the word "toxic":

- 6) I never realized how toxic my family is and how bad my mental health becomes when I'm with them. I've broken down in tears at least 4 times this week, and every time I become useless for the rest of the day. Even though I miss my family when I'm at school, I'm a better me when I'm there, but now I don't know. (USA, personal communication, March 30, 2020)

In the confessions, home was at times depicted as a "toxic" place while university was safer and freer. This negativity was not a universal pattern, as in New Zealand, for instance, family-related words were less critical and mostly linked with positive sentiments. Confession 6 depicted both a eudaemonic content characteristic (contemplation) and usage (self-reflection). Critically recalling recent life experience helped assess the situation, not concluding, but rather focusing on the process of becoming a "better person." The confessant is at a point of revelation and not yet reconciliation with the confession's object.

In the United Kingdom and United States, networks were much more involved with one another (Figures 3 and 4), reflecting the greater diversity of topics. For example, one distinct cluster in the United Kingdom in the earlier period (Figure 5) dealt solely with the elections for the national student union (gray cluster). In the early period in the United Kingdom, the elections were a more significant issue than the

pandemic. Students from various UK universities expressed their dissatisfaction with the union's conduct, especially about the elections and their outcomes.

- 7) "Any law students fancy applying for a breakdown of the SU [student union] election results using a freedom of information act request? That way we might get to see quite how corrupt this institution has become" (UK, personal communication, March 12, 2020).
- 8) Whether you're on the side of the SU or RON [Re-Open Nominations], we should be showing each other more compassion, given that all of us are going through a global pandemic. There are bigger issues at the moment. Please, you can fight when it's over. (UK, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Confession 7 presented a genuine concern about corruption and irregularities in the elections to the student union (Parker, 2020) and therefore constitutes a thought-provoking attempt to question the organization. Confession 8, on the other hand, addressed the new pandemic in the context of disputes about the student union, urging others to see the bigger picture. It therefore serves as a meaningful attempt to express what matters most and also acts as a self-transcending confession. The confessant's orientation was beyond themselves and toward society at large. Confessions like these indicate the student union election was an important issue despite the writer's opinion that it should not be so central, considering the current pandemic situation. In the later period, more pandemic-related words appeared in different clusters, integrating into various domains, including studies, relationships, and personal life, aligning with the stance expressed by confessant 8.



- 10) Response to Confession 16106: I'm also a girl who is attracted to both sides and have been looking for someone to have fun with for a long time. Tinder is full of stressful girls, and I would be more than happy to get in touch with you. I liked your post, look for me (;. (ISR, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

Besides communicating with each other via the FCB, those posts can also be seen as self-actualization eudaemonic content. The confessants indeed revealed their struggles in the romantic domain, and hence possess the confessional aspect in them, but at the same time, took a stand to solve it. Requesting advice, calling for action, and raising attention appeared together with personal confessions, transforming the monologue into a dialogue that facilitates discussion. The frequent use of question marks in confessions (e.g., in confessions 2, 7, 9, 11) also invites members of the group to answer. All these communicative actions that elicit responses illustrate the confessants' intention to seek support. The anonymity of the confessants on the one hand, and the identifiability of the respondents on the other, creates a comfortable setting for users to share their vulnerabilities with a real community.

### ***Cross-National Differences in the Wake of COVID-19***

Throughout the analysis, we observed cultural differences in confessions. Here, we narrow the focus to COVID-19, a topic where both cultural context and national policy may have shaped how students articulated their experiences. While the discourse on COVID-19 was prominent across various themes, it rarely emerged as a standalone theme, apart from the early period in New Zealand (Figure 6). This cluster included terms such as "COVID-19," "sick," and "cough." Likewise, pandemic-related words from neighboring clusters, such as "lockdown" (appeared in the university life cluster) and "wash hands" (appeared in the personal life cluster), were also connected to this cluster. The fact that only one in eight networks featured a pandemic cluster supports the idea that COVID-19 was, from the very beginning, perceived as influencing other domains of life rather than a separate issue. Pandemic-related words were dispersed across different clusters in each network, with an average of 4.6% of the global discourse in the examined countries containing such references.



want treatment for fear of quarantine. How should I go about self-treatment and not infecting others?" (personal communication, March 7, 2020).

In the later period, "quarantine" moved from the personal life cluster to the romantic relationships cluster. Besides the United States, "quarantine" also appeared in the romantic relationships cluster in the later period in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Students mentioned the lack of social interactions and provided specific stories about their experiences in lockdowns as they attempted to adapt their lives, as this confession from the United Kingdom shows: 12. "Day 247 of quarantine: today I shaved one of my legs so it felt like I was spooning a girl in bed" (personal communication, April 16, 2020).

This confession humorously captured the social challenges of quarantine, especially about interpersonal relationships. In New Zealand and the United Kingdom, "quarantine" was peripheral in the networks, while in the United States, it was slightly more central.

Overall, considering the different types of words identified in the networks—sentiments, themes (e.g., university, relationships, family, COVID-19), and engagement cues—it becomes clear that FCBs go beyond merely hosting self-expression or purely hedonistic posts. They are process-oriented, inclusive spaces for meaning making through self-disclosure, fostering EME for those who choose to engage.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed at deepening the understanding and conceptualization of confessions and their eudaemonic features on social media platforms. Its main contribution is in presenting a significant case of content engagement, using the context of COVID-19 to show how students used FCBs to seek support and create meaning in the midst of uncertainty. Using semantic network analysis, we identified central words representing the core of collective discourse, with three recurring themes across all countries: university life, romantic life, and personal life. These themes reflect the main aspects of student experience and directly address RQ1. Confessions about romance and academic concerns were common even before the pandemic (Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2017; Sacks et al., 2021), suggesting that university-affiliated FCBs remain foremost a space for students to share and address their difficulties.

As demonstrated, the university life and romantic relationships clusters were often positioned at opposite poles of the semantic network, while the personal life cluster(s) frequently served as the bridge connecting the two. This mapping makes sense, as the discourse on university life is public, whereas the discourse on romantic relationships is more private. The personal life cluster of words is their point of connection, and confessions are about exposing personal life.

COVID-19 appeared as a distinctive cluster only once, but otherwise spread across topics in all countries. Considering the vast changes in life and the strict policies imposed by governments, it was rather surprising that students around the world did not discuss more about pandemic-related issues. This indicates and reinforces the assertion that FCBs do not serve as a venue for discussions of current affairs (Barari, 2015), a pattern our findings confirm across all countries.

Moreover, our findings affirm that negative emotions were prevalent during this period, consistent with other studies examining student communications across digital platforms (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Browning et al., 2021; He & Zhang, 2023). However, it seems crucial to recognize that the emotional landscape is not entirely uniform among student populations. In some instances, students might have intentionally employed positive emotions to discuss challenging realities, suggesting a nuanced approach to their emotional expression. Notably, positive sentiments were more frequently tied to discussions of romantic relationships, implying that love and connection may have offered solace amid widespread uncertainty. This renewed appreciation for relationships aligns with broader meaning-making processes observed among self-isolating individuals in various countries during the first wave of the pandemic. Prompted to reflect on life changes brought by the new reality (Todorova et al., 2021), many turned to emotionally positive narratives in this domain.

### ***Eudaimonic Spaces for Media Engagement***

To address RQ2, the qualitative analysis of confessions led us to highlight an important function of this platform. We found that FCBs, rather than being sources of mere pleasure or relief, serve as spaces generating content aimed at personal growth and deeper meaning, positioning the platform as a eudaemonic space. While not all posts in FCBs are inherently eudaemonic or confessional in nature, the environment appeared to foster engagement with content that encouraged self-reflection.

Two intertwined factors seem central to this affordance. First, the dialogical dynamic between anonymity and nonymity among confessants creates a concealed peer group discourse (Sharon & John, 2018). This dynamic encourages users to deal with taboos and redefine the boundaries between what is socially acceptable and what is not, while feeling comfortable in safe environments (Grønning & Tjora, 2018).

Second, confessional content is reconstructed as "hidden and ordinary" (Matthews, 2007, p. 442) within the FCBs context, after decades of being sensationalized in mass media (Archer & Parry, 2019). Unlike hedonistic content, which typically focuses on satisfying individual desires, eudaemonic content is thought to be rooted in values that arise from the social sphere and depend on intersectional contexts (Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020). Therefore, the continuous flow of perceived authentic, unscripted posts about personal struggles might encourage readers to reflect on their own values, virtues, and flaws, potentially prompting deeper contemplation through ongoing engagement with peers' shared experiences and morally conflicted content. These two features are hard to replicate elsewhere: anchored anonymity without a spectacle, where local peer recognition meets ordinariness.

Much of the confessional discourse that facilitated eudaemonic content was also directed toward the community as a means of seeking support. Across the spectrum of eudaemonic confessional characteristics, from inspiring and meaningful to thought-provoking and contemplative, all showed potential to serve this support-seeking function. Two distinct forms of support seeking emerged in the discourse: emotional and instrumental. Emotional support seeking appeared more often, as it usually does (Nozaki & Gross, 2025), conveyed through sentiment-rich confessions, while instrumental support was usually marked

by engagement-enhancing words such as “advice” and “help,” which were recurrent, particularly in the United Kingdom.

### ***Policy’s Influence on Eudaemonic Discourse***

Despite overarching similarities in the themes of student experiences across countries, we also sought to identify differences in how students expressed themselves, particularly in relation to their respective governments’ approaches to managing the pandemic (RQ3). Following Bennett et al. (2020) and Kahlawi et al. (2025), we posit that the varying governmental policies in each country (and particularly the early introduction of lockdowns in Israel and New Zealand) would shape the discourse on FCBs.

In terms of themes, the personal life cluster was a prominent example, as it contained different words in different countries. For example, in Israel, family plays a central cultural and religious role compared with other Western individualistic societies (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the pandemic and the introduction of lockdowns were more than once discussed in relation to their impact on family and caring for those most at risk (Brown, 2020; Cohen et al., 2020). Another example is the inclusion (and overshadow) of a political event in the UK confessions, illustrating how students processed the pandemic through local lenses minimizing the virus’s severity.

In terms of sentiments, we believe the relatively hopeful tone in New Zealand’s confessional discourse was similarly aligned with the government’s effective communication strategy and decisive containment measures (Jamieson, 2020), suggesting that clear policy and public messaging can shape the emotional outlook of young populations. Israel also responded relatively early and decisively, yet the confessions revealed more negative sentiment. This contrast may be linked to fluctuating levels of public trust in government at the time (Bodas & Peleg, 2021). In the United Kingdom and United States—countries with slower or more inconsistent initial responses—the tone was markedly different. COVID-19 was often treated dismissively in early posts, with sarcasm or nonchalance surfacing in the discourse. In the United Kingdom, students frequently use humor to express themselves, adding nuance to their emotional communication.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

Several limitations should be noted. Our analysis emphasized semantic content, leaving the role of platform affordances only marginally addressed. Although we speculated that anonymity/nonymity dynamics and the reframing of confession as ordinary experience may help cultivate eudaemonic expression, future research should examine these affordances more systematically. In addition, various metrics such as likes, shares, and comments were not considered. These data could help assess user engagement in the FCB ecosystem that combines anonymity/nonymity dynamics. Such a juxtaposition may reveal how confessions are received and whether they evoke support or criticism, thereby contributing to the supportive communication perspective through the listener’s role (Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Future research should also move beyond semantic analysis to examine the roles of message sources (confessants), audiences (confessors), and especially administrators, who ultimately shape the

space by deciding which confessions are published and by enforcing community rules. Addressing these limitations will deepen the understanding of eudaemonic expression in non-normative platforms.

Another limitation of this study was its narrow sample. FCBs are equally prevalent in South and Southeast Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia) and in Arabic-speaking countries (e.g., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan). Thus, parallel research in those nations can yield a more universalistic understanding of the phenomenon in addition to pinpointing the uniqueness of those virtual spaces with their eudaemonic characteristics.

Lastly, prior research on confessions in various media and platforms highlighted gender as an influence on content and interaction styles (Stewart, 1980; Zhou et al., 2022). Although this study did not address gender differences because of the data's original limitations, future studies might explore this, allowing for deeper insights into how gender might affect confessional discourse in FCBs.

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