

## Vocabularies of motive for Will Smith's slap: From chivalry to hegemonic masculinity

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### **Abstract**

*The name Will Smith has been on everyone's lips after the Academy Awards on the 27th of March, 2022. The violent behaviour of the actor was explained and justified by the general audience through multiple vocabularies of motive, invoking rational or emotional considerations. This article identifies several of the dominant vocabularies, as they are encountered in public accounts given by peers and other journalists and celebrities. I selected the articles included in the study based on their popularity by reference to the number of hits or views, aiming to capture the typology of voices who publicly expressed their opinion on this event. Public discourses have invoked a variety of accounts, that can be characterized as: vocabulary of hegemonic masculinity, vocabulary of love and chivalry, vocabulary of trauma, vocabulary of feminism, vocabulary of growing popularity, and vocabulary of racial discrimination.*

### **Keywords**

*Vocabularies of motive; Gender; Hegemonic masculinity; Academy Awards;*

### **Introduction**

Interpersonal relationships between men and women can vary widely at social and individual levels, some characterized by mutual respect and equality, and others by power imbalances and abuse, with a wide spectrum of in-between combinations. Masculinities and femininities inform these relationships through values and norms that orient behaviour. Hegemonic masculinity portrays men as strong, aggressive, and dominant, thus generating and justifying asymmetrical relationships between partners in a relationship

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(Connel, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity and a higher status for masculinity are produced and reproduced in the social system of gender, through interpersonal interactions and ongoing gender socialization (Ridgeway, 1999). Ideological beliefs about masculinity and femininity are part of the social structure of gender (Risman, 2004). These characteristics can be seen in other representations. For example, men may be shown as leaders and decision-makers in business, politics and other areas, while women can be often relegated to supporting and background roles.

Mass-media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards masculinity and femininity. It is important to critically examine how hegemonic masculinity is perceived and resisted nowadays. In this article I analyse the public interpretations of Will Smith's violent gesture at the 2022 Academy Awards ceremony, which aroused strong reactions and divided the audience into several discourse categories. The ceremony was broadcast live worldwide and was watched by millions of people. Actors, journalists, sociologists and psychologists have thought at least once about the slap received by comedian Chris Rock from Will Smith. The American Film Academy sanctioned Will Smith for his violent behaviour, banning him from participating in the Academy Awards for the next 10 years.

The incident and ensuing public controversy started at the Academy Awards on March 27, 2022. As Joseph Harker from The Guardian describes, before the Oscar presentation for best documentary film, Chris Rock made some jokes about the audience members, and one of the jokes was about the lack of hair of Jada Pinkett Smith, the partner of Will Smith, who suffers from alopecia. In that moment Smith broke out. Although the actor's first reaction was to smile at Chris Rock's joke, after looking at his wife who seemed disturbed by the joke, Will Smith suddenly burst to the stage and slapped Chris Rock in front of millions of spectators. A couple of minutes later, Will Smith won Best Actor Oscar for playing Richard Williams. He apologized to the organizers of the Academy Awards and the audience for his violent reaction, but did not include Chris Rock, or Jada Pinkett Smith in his discourse.

The day after the incident, Will Smith apologised to Chris Rock. Smith wrote on his Instagram page that “any form of violence is poisonous and destructive, and admitted that the behaviour toward Rock has been unacceptable and shifted into a world of kindness and love”. Although the note sounded better that time, Smith continued his speech in the same direction, adding that “all the jokes made against him came bundled with the profession he has, but a joke about his wife's medical problem was too much to bear and he reacted emotionally”.

### **Literature review**

The dynamic between men and women can vary depending on cultural, societal, and individual factors. In many cultures, traditional gender roles have defined men as strong, assertive and unemotional, while women are socially construed as weak, passive, and emotional, but these roles have transformed and changed over time. In some societies, men and women have balanced opportunities and rights, while in others, women may face

significant discrimination and inequality. Interpersonal relationships between men and women can vary widely, some characterized by mutual respect and equality, and others by power imbalances and abuse.

Over the past years, women have gained greater access to education and employment opportunities and are no longer limited to traditional roles. Today, men and women can have diverse careers and share responsibilities in childcare and household tasks. However, gender discrimination and stereotypes still exist in some societies and women may still face barriers to achieving equality in the workplace and other areas of life.

Gender studies represent an interdisciplinary field that examines the social construction of gender and its impact on individuals and society. It encompasses a wide range of topics, including gender identity, gender roles, gender inequalities and the intersectionality of gender with other social identities such as race, class and sexuality. Gender studies are important because they help social actors understand how gender shapes their experiences and allows them to critique and challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes, working towards creating more equitable societies. The field of gender studies plays a vital role in shaping public policy and practices, as well as guiding activism efforts to achieve gender equality.

If we are to make an incursion in time, one of the most representative books for gender studies is *“The Second Sex”* written by the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in 1949. The book is a foundational text in feminist theory and is considered one of the most important works of feminist philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues that women are not inherently inferior to men, but are made to feel inferior by society. She contends that women have been relegated to the status of “the Other”. She examines various aspects of women's lives, including motherhood, love and sexuality, arguing that these areas have been constructed by society in ways that are detrimental to women. Overall, *“The Second Sex”* is a powerful critique of patriarchal society and a call for women's liberation.

With a focus on the social construction of masculinity, R. W. Connell introduced and defined the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in the book *“Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics”*. In her book, launched in 1985, Connell argues that traditional ideas of masculinity are not biological, but are shaped by social and cultural factors. She contends that there is not one specific type of masculinity, but multiple masculinities constructed and reinforced through social interactions and institutions. Hegemonic masculinity is the socially dominant version of masculinity, reinforced and perpetuated through social norms and practices. In contrast, other forms of masculinity are often socially disincentivized and even stigmatized.

Prior to R. W. Connell, Antonio Gramsci, an Italian philosopher and the co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, developed the concept of “hegemony” to describe how a dominant social group or ruling class maintains power and control over society. According to Gramsci, the ruling class achieves the power by creating a shared cultural and ideological framework that is accepted and internalized by the rest of society. He also believed that the concept of masculinity plays a key role in maintaining the hegemony of the ruling class. *“Hegemonic masculinity”* is a term used to describe the dominant, socially-constructed

ideal of masculinity promoted and upheld by the ruling class. This ideal is characterized by physical strength, aggression, and dominance and is used to justify the patriarchal power structures in society. According to Gramsci, men who conform to this ideal are rewarded with social and economic power, while men who do not conform are marginalized (Gramsci, 1971).

Hegemonic masculinity is not the same as the masculinity of any particular individual, but rather the dominant and idealized version of masculinity that society promotes and upholds. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is often used to highlight how other forms of masculinity are marginalized or stigmatized, and how the power imbalances between men and women are shaped and reconstructed, under the influence of social norms and identities.

In 1985, Connell, Carrigan and Lee studied and reviewed the “male sex role” literature and published the article “*Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity*”, introducing the concept of “multiple masculinities” and “power relations”. Besides the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”, which refers to the dominant form of masculinity valued throughout history, they also identified other types of masculinity that exist in opposition to or outside of hegemonic masculinity, such as subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinities. This idea was later incorporated into a broader sociological theory of contemporary gender identities.

It is important to note that these forms of masculinity are not only individual experiences, but they are shaped and reconstructed by social institutions such as family, education and media. The subordinated, complicit, and marginalized masculinities can also intersect with other forms of identity such as race, class and gender, creating multiple and complex forms of masculinity. For example, family and education can shape a boy's understanding of what it means to be a real man. Media, such as movies, television shows and advertisements, or various forms of social commentary, can also sustain societal expectations of masculinity, often depicting men as strong, successful, always in control. The way masculinity is portrayed in the media can also have an impact on how men view themselves and how others perceive them. Subordinated masculinities that do not conform to dominant norms of masculinity are seen as less powerful, less successful and less in control than hegemonic masculinity. Men who embody subordinated masculinity may be seen as weak, passive or unmanly. They may be held to different standards and expectations of masculinity and experience feelings of inadequacy and lack self-esteem.

Gender can be conceptualized as a social system (Ridgeway, 1999) or a social structure (Risman, 2004), reproduced through interaction and socialization, through activities of doing and undoing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987), of aligning or distancing oneself from particular gender identities and portrayals.

According to Ridgeway (1999) the gender system encompasses processes that differentiate males and females in socially meaningful ways and legitimize inequality based on this differentiation. Unlike other forms of social inequality, gender involves frequent interaction between men and women in families, school, group of friends, and other role relations. This raises significant questions about how such interactions can either reinforce or challenge the beliefs underlying gender difference and inequality. Any theory on gender

must account for three essential research findings on interaction: (a) gender differences are considered by most of the people to be omnipresent in interaction, (b) interactions among peers with similar power and status do not reveal many gender differences in behaviour, and (c) generally, men and women interact within a structural framework of unequal roles or status relationships.

People's behaviours and reactions create gender identities and reproduce or disrupt the gender structure by performing specific actions such as language, dress code, household activities, career etc. Gender is not simply a matter of individual identity or biology but a system of social practices and cultural meanings that organize social life. Gender is embedded in institutions, such as the family, education, and the workplace, and shapes individuals' opportunities and constraints (Risman, 2004).

Gender roles and expectations vary across different social contexts. Gender is not a fixed, universal category but varies depending on cultural norms and social expectations. For example, roles and expectations differ across different ethnic and racial groups, being shaped by class and economic factors. It is important to recognize gender as a social structure, and the need for ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and challenge gender norms and expectations (Ridgeway, 1999).

C. Wright Mills argues that human actors often fail to see the connections between their personal problems (what he calls "private troubles") and larger social issues (what he calls "public issues"). The "vocabularies of motive" is a concept introduced by Mills in 1940 in *"Sociology of language"* and developed later in *"The Sociological Imagination."* The concept "vocabulary of motives" refers to the language and terms that individuals use to explain and understand their actions and the actions of others. These vocabularies can include personal reasons, motivations, and justifications for one's actions, as well as the explanations that people give for the actions of others. Mills suggests that people often use "personal troubles" as a vocabulary of motive to explain their actions, rather than recognizing the larger social and historical forces that shape their lives. He argues that by understanding these connections and the social and historical forces that shape their lives, social actors can better understand themselves and the society they live in (Mills, 1959).

Other sociologists who wrote about the vocabularies of motive are Richard Hoggart and Erving Goffman. In his book *"The Uses of Literacy - Aspects of Working-Class Life,"* Richard Hoggart defines "vocabularies of motive" as different manners in which people express themselves and their motivations through language. He argues that different social classes have distinct vocabularies of motive, revealing important insights into the values and experiences of those classes. Hoggart also suggests that language can be used to reproduce social hierarchies and obscure the true motives of those in power (Hoggart, 1998).

Erving Goffman wrote the book *"Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour"*. It was published in 1967 and presents Goffman's sociological theory about face-to-face interaction, focusing on the rituals people use to establish and maintain social relationships. Goffman's theory is based on the idea that people are constantly engaged in a process of "face-work", where they present themselves in particular ways to others to maintain a desired image or reputation (Goffman, 1967).

“*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*” is a book by Goffman in which he explores the concept of “face-to-face interaction” and how individuals present themselves to others in everyday social situations. In the book, Goffman introduces the concepts of “impression management” and “self-presentation”, meaning that individuals actively work to control how others perceive them through their behaviour and presentation of self. He argues that individuals use specific “vocabularies of motive” or sets of words and phrases to explain their actions, depending on the situation and their audience. The book also describes how people use front and back stages to control the image they present to others and how props, costumes and other artifacts can enhance the presentation of self. He also develops the idea of “face” and how individuals can lose or gain face in social interactions. Overall, the book provides an in-depth examination of how individuals navigate the social world and the role that impression management plays in this process.

Goffman argues that people use different “vocabularies” or sets of words and phrases to explain their actions, depending on the situation and their audience. He claims that these vocabularies of motive reveal important insights into social interaction and how individuals navigate the social world. Different vocabularies represent specific actions of impression management, where individuals attempt to control how others perceive them.

Vocabularies of motive are used to give meaning to specific events, which do not have an intrinsic significance. Thus, vocabularies of motive are shared attempts to make sense of usual and unusual occurrences, to classify them as desirable or undesirable, normal or deviant. This is how vocabularies of motive play an important role in the functioning of social institutions, the socialization of community members through shared understandings and explanations of the world, and the transformation and reproduction of social norms. In what follows, I will investigate the vocabularies of motive through which prominent voices have attempted to make sense of the unusual violent event at the 2022 Academy Awards. I will also discuss how these vocabularies invoke and thus reproduce divergent conceptions of gender roles and identities.

## **Methods**

For this study I chose the method of exploratory thematic content analysis, in a qualitative approach. The concept of thematic analysis was first introduced by British psychologists Ernest G. Bormann and Lucille B. Northrop in the 1970s. Thematic analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data to identify patterns, vocabularies or themes that provide insights into the subject of analysis. It is a widely used approach in the social sciences due to its objectivity and can be used to gain a deeper understanding of complex topics. One of the main strengths of thematic analysis is its flexibility. There is no fixed procedure for conducting a thematic analysis and researchers can tailor the method to fit the needs of their study. This allows them to highlight what is most relevant and meaningful to their research question. It is important for researchers to be transparent about their coding decisions and to keep a record of their thought process throughout the analysis to increase the trustworthiness of their results. Overall, thematic analysis is a useful tool for

uncovering patterns and meaning in qualitative data. When done rigorously, it can provide rich insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

In this essay I will explore the method of thematic analysis, highlighting the importance of distinguishing the social worlds of participants. It means that thematic analysis does not simply involve identifying patterns and vocabularies in the data. Still, it also involves a process of interpretation and analysis of the broader social and cultural contexts in which the data was produced. Rughiniş's approach draws attention to the importance of reflexivity and self-awareness in the research process, and encourages researchers to be open to unexpected or contradictory data (Rughiniş, 2022).

Chelcea (2021) emphasizes the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to social research, which combines various methods to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena. Chelcea argues that no single method can provide a complete picture of social reality. Researchers should draw on various techniques to build a more nuanced understanding of the social world. After Chelcea, content analysis is a central method used in sociology, which involves systematically analysing written or visual materials, such as books, newspapers, films or social media posts. Content analysis can identify patterns, themes and trends in cultural or social discourse. It can provide insights into the ways that social actors construct and communicate their views of the world (Chelcea, 2001).

Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in social research can be challenging. Quantitative methods involve statistical analysis to quantify and measure social phenomena. In contrast, qualitative methods focus on exploring the meanings and interpretations that people attach to their social experiences. By combining these two approaches, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social world. They can draw on the strengths of each method to build a more nuanced and detailed picture of social reality. Chelcea also stresses the importance of reflexivity in social research, which involves being aware of the researcher's assumptions, biases, and values, and considering how these may influence the research process and findings. Reflexivity can help to ensure that researchers are aware of the potential limitations and biases of their work and can help to promote a more critical approach to social research (Chelcea, 2001).

Overall, the methods used in sociology are diverse and are shaped by individual researchers' particular research questions, contexts, and theoretical perspectives. By drawing on various methods and approaches, sociologists can build a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the social world. They can provide insights into the complex and dynamic nature of social phenomena. It is important for researchers to be transparent about their coding decisions and to keep a record of their thought process throughout the analysis to increase the trustworthiness of their results. Overall, thematic analysis is useful for uncovering patterns and meaning in qualitative data. When done rigorously, it can provide rich insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

To identify the main vocabularies of motive used to interpret Smith's slap, I examined public statements with wide circulation, made in the immediate temporal proximity of the event. The units of analysis are the newspaper articles debating the

incident from the Oscars ceremony on March 27, 2022. I selected the most popular articles from the international press by comparing the first 25 entries on Google search, using the key words: “Reactions to Will Smith’s slap”, “Will Smith’s slap”, “Will Smith’s slap articles”. Afterwards, I analysed the speeches from the international publications of the most representative people who reacted about Will Smith’s slap at the Academy Awards: relatives and friends, actors, co-workers and influencers. Analysed articles are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Articles included in analysis**

<b>Author and publication</b>	<b>Title</b>
Hannah Yasharoff, USA Today, April, 2022	<i>Chris Rock's mom speaks out on Will Smith slap: 'When you hurt my child, you hurt me.'</i>
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, The Ankler, March 2022	<i>Will Smith Did a Bad, Bad Thing.</i>
Connie Schultz, USA Today, April, 2022	<i>We heard the joke. We saw the slap.</i>
Sana Khan, International Business Times, March, 2022	<i>Kathy Griffin Worries Slapped Audience Might Imitate Will Smith Slapping Chris Rock.</i>
H. Colleen Sinclair, The Conversation US, April, 2022	<i>Will Smith's slap shows 'honour culture' is alive and well.</i>
Hannah Yasharoff, USA Today, April, 2022	<i>Jada Pinkett Smith breaks silence, promotes 'healing' after Will Smith, Chris Rock slap.</i>
Brian Logan, The Guardian, May, 2022	<i>Chris Rock in a hard place: will he make comedy gold out of Will Smith's slap?</i>
Sian Cain, The Guardian, June, 2022	<i>Jada Pinkett Smith hopes Will Smith and Chris Rock will 'reconcile' after Oscar's slap.</i>
Neil Roberts, The Conversation, April 2022	<i>Revisiting Will Smith's slap and what it means to protect a loved one.</i>
Amanda Devlin, The Sun, March 2022	<i>'Real reason' why Will Smith slapped Chris Rock, according to Good Morning Britain's Susanna Reid.</i>
Chelsea Bailey, BBC News, March 2022	<i>Oscars: What Will Smith's slap says about him - and us.</i>
Chas Danner & Margaret Hartmann, Intelligencer, April 2022	<i>The Complete Guide to Will Smith Slap Takes.</i>
Caitlin O'Kane, CBS News, March 2022	<i>Celebrities react to Will Smith slapping Chris Rock on Oscars stage.</i>
Rosa Sanchez & Dani Maher, Harper's Bazar, April 2022	<i>It says so much about toxic masculinity.</i>
Adrian Horton, The Guardian, March 2022	<i>Violence isn't OK: Hollywood reacts to Will Smith slapping Chris Rock.</i>
Chantal Da Silva, NBC News, March 2022	<i>Celebrities react to Will Smith slapping Chris Rock at the Oscars.</i>
Matt Watts & Barney Davis, Evening Standard, March 2022	<i>Oscars 2022: Celebrities react to Will Smith slapping Chris Rock at Oscars.</i>
Jess Sharp, Sky News, March 2022	<i>Oscars 2022: 'Ugliest Oscar moment ever' - celebrities react to the Will Smith slap.</i>
Emma Specter, Vogue, March 2022	<i>6 Celebrity Reactions to the Will Smith/Chris Rock Oscars Slap, Ranked.</i>
Chelsea Bailey, BBC News, March 2022	<i>Oscars: What Will Smith's slap says about him - and us.</i>



Allyson Chiu, The Washington Post, March 2022	<i>Why a single slap struck so many.</i>
Michelle McGahan, US Magazine, October 2022	<i>Celebs React to Will Smith Slapping Chris Rock at Oscars 2022: Jada Pinkett Smith, Amy Schumer and More.</i>
Ryan Gajewski, The Hollywood Reporter, August 2022	<i>Zoe Kravitz on Her Reaction to Will Smith's Oscars Slap: I Wish I Had Handled That Differently</i>

### Vocabularies of motive regarding Will Smith's slap at the Academy Awards

Connie Schultz writes in the USA Today (April, 2022) that everyone heard the joke and saw the slap. Still, above everything, Jada Pinkett Smith is the one who matters the most in that situation and she can speak – implying that her interpretation of the event would carry more weight than others. A week before the Academy Awards, Jada spoke on her Tik Tok account about alopecia, saying, among other things, “that she doesn't care what others think about her hairstyle as long as she likes it” (Pinkett Smith, apud Yasharoff, USA Today, April, 2022). Jada has embraced her alopecia with dignity, repeatedly implying that she has accepted it and lives in harmony with her vulnerability. However, Jada Pinkett Smith made no statements about her husband's decision to slap Chris Rock at the Academy Awards. The only remark of hers regarding the incident was posted on her Instagram a couple of days after the incident, where she wrote: "this is a time of healing". Other public voices shaped the debate, advancing diverging vocabularies of motive.

It is unknown if Rock was aware of Jada's condition when he made the joke, and such discussion would have been interesting. Still, the debate that has exploded on social media after that night revolves around the question of justifiability: Did Will Smith do the right thing, or the wrong thing, by acting in reference to his wife in the way he did? Conversely, was Chris Rock's joke justifiable, or unjustifiable? Discourses are broadly divided into two sides: the category who is pro Will Smith and the category who is pro Chris Rock. By observing discourses developed around that incident, we can notice that several groups resonate either with vocabularies of hegemonic masculinity, chivalry and popularity, or with vocabularies of feminism, trauma or racial discrimination.

The diversity of public opinion and voices was also noticed and taken hold of in mass media. In the article of the former American basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, “Will Smith did a Bad, Bad Thing”, there are highlighted several patterns in the speeches of the stars who expressed their opinion in the public space about the slap that Will Smith gave to Chris Rock, as follows.

Actress Tiffany Haddish, who performed alongside Jada Pinkett Smith in the comedy *Girls Trip*, said that Will Smith's gesture is “one of the most beautiful things she has ever seen because it made her believe that there are still men who care about their wives”, embracing the vocabulary of romantic chivalry, which denotes that the husband can have full rights over his wife, who belongs to him (Haddish, apud Abdul-Jabbar). However, editor Abdul-Jabbar embraced the feminist dimension and interpreted Will Smith's slap as a slap against femininity, symbolizing his wife as somebody in the position of a woman incapable of defending herself in the face of a verbal offense. Although Abdul-Jabbar describes Jada Pinkett Smith as an intelligent, strong and capable woman -

analysing her behaviour over the past few years - the patriarchal, over-protective attitude that Will Smith displayed makes women, in general, seem puerile and defenceless, constantly needing strong men capable of defending them, as Jabbar relates. Abdul-Jabbar recalled the message released some time ago in the film *Kai Kobra* – “words are for losers” – a message that Will Smith also tended towards through his behaviour, attracting new dislikes against the community of people of colour.

Another statement resonating with the vocabulary of chivalry came from the son of the Pinkett-Smith couple, who encouraged his father's behaviour by calling it what needed to be done or an act of honour by exclamation – “this is how we do it”. Former General Surgeon Jerome Adams said, “as a black man I hate to see what happened between Will Smith and Chris Rock. But it can be a teachable moment” (Connie Schultz, *USA Today*, April, 2022). Kathy Griffin also draws the attention to the upcoming appearances of those who consider Will Smith a superhero to his stewardship – “now we have to worry about who the new Will Smith will want to be in the theater and in the comedy clubs” (Khan, *International Business Times*, March, 2022).

According to psycho-sociologist H. Colleen Sinclair, Will Smith's violent act make many people nostalgic for the values associated with the culture of honour and placed themselves on Smith's side considering him a hero of women (Colleen Sinclair, April, 2022). The culture of honour is defined by the specialists in the psychology of violence, Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen - the defence of territory, partners or children by males, whose reputation has a leading place among their priorities and it is found in certain religious groups, subcultures and ethnic groups. These cultural differences (for and against the violent act of Will Smith) can be easily seen in the speeches of journalists and the statements of common people, registering a greater predisposition towards defending the actor among the inhabitants of the southern areas compared to those in the northern regions (Nisbett, 1996).

According to Hanna Yasharoff from *USA Today*, Rose Rock, motivational speaker and the mother of the comedian Chris Rock said that, when Will Smith hit her son, he also hit her. She then added a comment in reference to Jada Pinkett Smith: “Your wife turned her eyes over her head, and you transformed her day, making her day” (Yasharoff, *USA Today* April, 2022).

At the time of the event, the audience was looking forward to Rock's reaction. It had even been speculated that the slap he received from Will Smith could have somehow staged, given that Chris Rock's reputation has taken on an extraordinary momentum. Brian Logan, editor of “*The Guardian*” released the question: “Will Chris Rock's notoriety increase in the world of comedy following this event?” The price of the tickets from his last shows reveals a huge increase compared to the price before the Academy Awards. If a regular ticket at Chris Rock's show cost around 46 euros before the Academy Awards on March 27, it cost over 400 euros, and the number of spectators increased exponentially, the seats being sold out very fast (Logan, May, 2022).

As for Jada Pinkett Smith, after two months of silence, she made a statement about her desire for reconciliation between “those two intelligent people, after they have healed and become able to talk about that delicate subject”. She went on saying that Will and she

continue to cohabit as they did over the last 28 years (Cain, *The Guardian*, June, 2022). The first statement made by Jada Pinkett Smith about the incident at the Academy Awards from 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2022 was published on 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2022 in the article of the editor Sian Cain from *The Guardian*.

**Table 2. A synthesis of vocabularies of motive identified in popular accounts of Will Smith's gesture**

Vocabularies	Example	Source
Vocabulary of feminism	Jada Pinkett Smith said that “she doesn't care what others think about her hairstyle as long as she likes it”.	Hannah Yasharoff, USA Today, April, 2022.
	Kareem Abdul-Jabbar considers Will Smith's slap as “a slap against femininity, putting his wife in the position of a woman incapable of defending herself in the face of a verbal offense”. He also recalled the message released some time ago in the film <i>Kai Kobra</i> – “words are for losers”.	Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, <i>The Ankler</i> , March 2022.
	Comedian Amy Schumer told to her audience: “All of a sudden, Ali was making his way up”, referencing Smith's role as Muhammad Ali in 2001. Then she continued: “All I can say is that it was really sad, and I think it says so much about toxic masculinity. It was really upsetting”.	Rosa Sanchez & Dani Maher, <i>Harper's Bazar</i> , April 2022.
Vocabulary of racial discrimination	Jerome Adams said, “as a black man I hate to see what happened between Will Smith and Chris Rock. But it can be a teachable moment”.	Connie Schultz, USA Today, April, 2022.
	Neil Roberts, professor of African Studies and Political Science, Williams College, argues that “the slap represents a third genre of protection: men declaring themselves their spouse's protector. In the Smith case, it appears that people who are objects of protection don't always have a say in the actions of their declared protectors... Race plays a role in the perceptions of both the protectors and the protected”.	Neil Roberts, <i>The Conversation</i> , April 2022.
Vocabulary of hegemonic masculinity	Kathy Griffin claims: “now we have to worry about who the new Will Smith will want to be in the theater and in the comedy clubs”.	Sana Khan, <i>International Business Times</i> , March, 2022.
	According to psycho-sociologist H. Colleen Sinclair, “Will Smith's violent act made many people nostalgic for the values associated with the culture of honour and placed themselves on Smith's side considering him a hero of women”.	H. Colleen Sinclair, <i>The Conversation US</i> , April, 2022.
	The son of Jada and Will Smith tweeted after “the slap”: “And That's How We Do It.”	Caitlin O'kane, <i>CBS News</i> , March 2022.

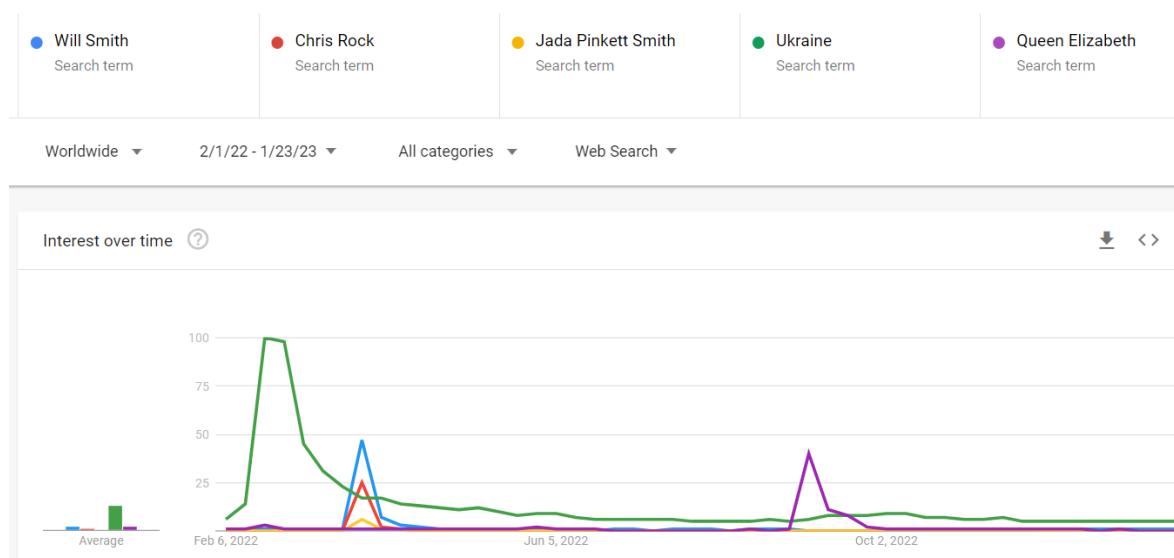
Vocabulary of trauma	Rose Rock said: “Your wife turned her eyes over her head, and you transformed her day, making her day. When he slapped Chris, he slapped all of us. He really slapped me. [...] Because when you hurt my child, you hurt me”.	Hannah Yasharoff, USA Today, April, 2022.
	According to the journalist Sian Cain, “after two months of silence, Jada made a statement about her desire for reconciliation between those two intelligent people, after they have healed and become able to talk about that delicate subject”.	Sian Cain, The Guardian, June, 2022.
	Radio host McKelvey said: “I care about Chris Rock and Will Smith, two legends. Two Gods. I don't like seeing that between two black men, personally”. McKelvey said. “We all laugh but that's still another human on the other end of that slap”.	Chelsea Bailey, BBC News, March 2022.
Vocabulary of recklessness	According to Bailey, in a since-deleted tweet, director Judd Apatow said: Smith “could have killed” Chris Rock and that Smith had “lost his mind”. There were even calls for the actor to be arrested and charged with assault.	Chelsea Bailey, BBC News, March 2022.
	Sophia Bush Hughes criticized both actors, saying that: “Violence isn't ok. Assault is never the answer. Also?... Punching down at someone's auto-immune disease is wrong. Doing so on purpose is cruel. They both need a breather”.	Chas Danner & Margaret Hartmann, Intelligencer, April 2022.
	Director Judd Apatow expressed strong criticism of Smith's actions, saying: “He could have killed (Rock). That's pure out of control rage and violence”. He deleted it afterwards.	Chantal Da Silva, NBC News, March 2022.
	LaKeith Stanfield said. “I don't know, it was crazy. It was surreal”.	Emma Specter, Vogue, March 2022.
Vocabulary of shock	Apryl Alexander, professor of psychology, argued: “For many viewers, watching live or following along on social media, the slap was initially met with genuine shock... The complexity right now does center around the talks and discussions we're having around race, gender and disability and survivorship”.	Allyson Chiu, The Washington Post, March 2022.
	Mila Kunis said: “Not standing up, to me, was a no-brainer, but what was shocking to me was how many people did stand up”. She continued: “Wow, what a time we're living in that rather than do what's right, people focus on doing what looks good.' It's insane to me”.	Michelle McGahan, US Magazine, October 2022.
	Zoe Kravitz explains why she removed her first reactions to the slapping incident, as it follows: “It's a scary time to have an opinion	Ryan Gajewski, The Hollywood Reporter, August 2022.

	or to say the wrong thing or to make controversial art or statements or thoughts or anything. I'm torn about what to say right now, because I'm supposed to just talk about it; I have very complicated feelings around it."	
Vocabulary of growing popularity	Brian Logan declared: "If a regular ticket at Chris Rock's show cost around 46 euros before the Academy Awards Gala, it ended up costing over 400 euros".	Brian Logan, The Guardian, May, 2022.
Vocabulary of love and chivalry	According to Good Morning Britain's Susanna Reid, Will Smith "felt bad for laughing at the joke". She claims: "I don't think it was about the alopecia joke... If you see his first reaction to the joke, he doesn't react in an angry way... It was his wife's reaction. There are other things going on and there's a lead up to this."	Amanda Devlin, The Sun, March 2022.
	Ayanna Pressley tweeted and deleted a defence of Smith: "Alopecia nation stand up! Thank you Will Smith Shout out to all the husbands who defend their wives living with alopecia in the face of daily ignorance & insults".	Adrian Horton, The Guardian, March 2022.
	Singer Nicki Minaj wrote, defending Smith: "You just got to witness in real-time what happens in a man's soul when he looks over to the woman he loves & sees her holding back tears from a 'little joke' at her expense. This is what any & every real man feels in that instant. While y'all seeing the joke he's seeing her pain".	Matt Watts & Barney Davis, Evening Standard, March 2022.
	Jameela Jamil argued: "A man big enough to absolutely floor him, slapped him softly enough that Chris barely moved because he made fun of his wife's alopecia on a world stage".	Jess Sharp, Sky News, March 2022.
	Tiffany Haddish spoke to the importance of protecting women: "When I saw a Black man stand up for his wife, that meant so much to me", Haddish told People Magazine in the aftermath. "As a woman, who has been unprotected, for someone to say, 'Keep my wife's name out your mouth, leave my wife alone,' that's what your husband is supposed to do, right? Protect you".	Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, The Ankler, March 2022.
	Tiffany Haddish said Will Smith's gesture is "one of the most beautiful things she has ever seen because it made her believe that there are still men who care about their wives."	Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, The Ankler, March 2022.

## Patterns of public interest in Google Trends

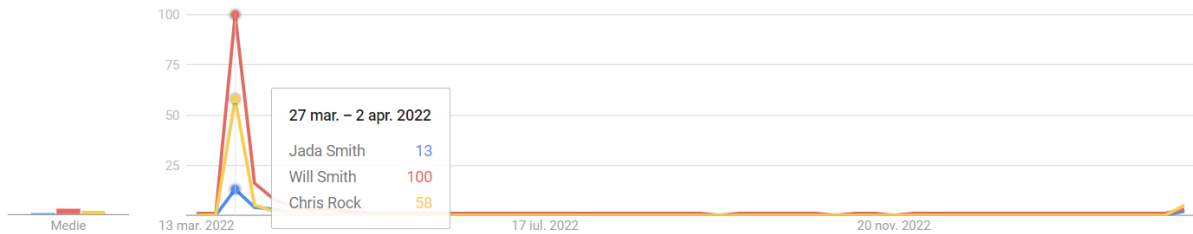
The violent incident at the 2022 Academy Awards received public attention and online interest. For example, it reached about 40% of the level of search queries that the war in Ukraine had elicited in the spring of the same year. At the time of the Academy Awards, the war was generating fewer searches than the incident, though, in time, the event subsided from public attention. Smith's slap had a comparable level of public notoriety with the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

**Chart 1. Level of interest in Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith, and Chris Rock compared with the war in Ukraine and Queen Elizabeth.**



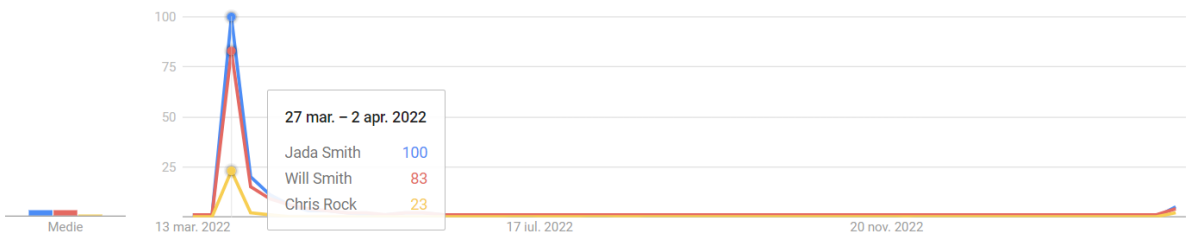
Although the Google Trends search engine places Will Smith in first place in terms of popularity, Chris Rock in second place and Jada Pinkett Smith in third place, the public faces' statements within the international press reveal that Rock surpassed the Smiths in terms of public admiration, managing to attract more sympathies than the two of them. Most actors and journalists strictly commented on the incident at the Academy Awards, without analysing the overall picture of the Pinkett-Smith's couple and the problems they struggled with in the past years.

**Chart 2. Level of interest in Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith, and Chris Rock compared with other topics of wide public interest on Google Trends search engine - All categories, Web search.**



Interpreting the data from the chart above, Google Trends at “All categories - web search” shows that Will Smith has the highest popularity, where the number 100 represents the maximum value regarding the number of searches / views, and not a percentage. Chris Rock is in the middle of the ranking and Jada Pinkett Smith is in last place, with the lowest score. Media and search visibility continue to reinforce hierarchies of value aligned with hegemonic masculinity, in that the perpetrator of the violent act has the highest visibility compared to the victim and the woman who was the reference of this gesture.

**Chart 3. Level of interest in Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith, and Chris Rock compared with other topics of wide public interest on Google Trends search engine – News, Web search.**



By changing the criteria “All categories” on Google Trends and replacing it with “News”, it appears that Jada Smith occupies first place in terms of popularity, Will Smith the second one, and Chris Rock occupies, by far, the last place on the popularity ranking.

**Chart 4. Level of interest in Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith, and Chris Rock compared with other topics of wide public interest on Google Trends search engine – News, Web search.**



In the last chart, analysing exclusively the news that appeared online between March 13, 2022 and March 13, 2023, by controlling the variables “News” and “Google news”, we can see that Jada Smith is the most popular of them, immediately after her comes Will Smith and Chris Rock occupies the last place in terms of popularity on Google news.

After analysing and interpreting the results extracted from some of the most popular articles in the public space that have debated the controversial topic of Will Smith's slap at the Academy Awards on March 28, 2022, we can draw the following conclusions:

During the 27<sup>th</sup> of March and 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2022, the popularity of the three actors fluctuated in the online environment depending on the information dissemination channels:

- analysing the "all categories" section, Will Smith is the most popular, followed by Jada Pinkett Smith, and Chris Rock came last in the ranking (Source Google Trends – All categories)
- in terms of "online news", Jada Pinkett Smith enjoyed the highest popularity, followed by Will Smith, and Chris Rock was the least popular (Source Google Trends – News & Google News).

Polling conducted immediately after the 94th Academy Awards in March 2022 reveals that 60% of Americans have expressed their disapproval of Will Smith's act of slapping Chris Rock, after his joke. However, some categories of people believe that Rock was at greater fault than Smith in the altercation that took place during the Oscars ceremony. Furthermore, these findings are not the only ones presenting contradictory outcomes. According to a YouGov survey of 1,319 Americans, 61% of respondents deemed Will Smith's action of hitting Chris Rock as inappropriate. Only 21% of the participants thought that he was not wrong, while 19% were unsure of their position. The survey results revealed significant differences among age groups, with 72% of individuals aged 65 and older considering Will Smith's action wrong, while only 46% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 34 shared the same view.

Additionally, 27% of the younger age group believed that Smith act was right. To sum up, 59% of adults in the United States expressed that it is never acceptable to resort to physical violence in response to something someone said (Ordoná, 2022).

Interpreting the data gathered through the Google Trends search engine, it appears that Will Smith consistently ranked in first or second place in the charts that measured the popularity of the three actors. On the other hand, the positions held by Jada Pinkett Smith and Chris Rock alternated in the rankings depending on the source of information. Jada's popularity was highest in the "News" category, while Chris Rock's popularity scored well in the "All categories" section.

## Conclusions

To sum up, two main perspectives that interpret divergently Smith's gesture stand out in the article: one is centred on hegemonic masculinity, interpreting the gesture through the lenses of chivalry and essential differences between masculinity and femininity, while the



other one appeals to alternative masculinities, conceptualized through feminism and accounts of trauma or racial discrimination.

The vocabularies discovered in this study contribute to the ongoing transformation and reproduction of gender as a social institution. Specific vocabularies of motive include: vocabulary of hegemonic masculinity, vocabulary of love and chivalry, vocabulary of trauma, vocabulary of feminism, vocabulary of growing popularity, and vocabulary of racial discrimination. Looking at the frequency of the vocabularies, the most common reactions are recorded around "trauma," but voices that encourage the idea of exercising "hegemonic masculinity" are frequent too. However, most voices have been in favour of the feminist ideology.

Masculinity, particularly hegemonic masculinity, is not an inherent or a natural characteristic but is produced and validated through social interaction. On one hand, this process can create a self-perpetuating cycle, where men who embody hegemonic masculinity are more likely to transmit it to their children, strengthening the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and perpetuating the cycle. On the other hand, more and more people nowadays are aware of the important role of social processes in shaping notions of masculinity and gender and develop more inclusive and intersectional approaches in their everyday life.

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