

Doctoral Life in Metaphor: A Corpus-Assisted Analysis of Social Media Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into how the PhD experience is conceptualised metaphorically in social media discourse. Through the use of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and a corpus-based approach, a small-sized corpus of social media posts was compiled and analysed. The social media posts were taken from social media platforms like Threads, Facebook, and Reddit. Social media posts that contain the word “PhD” were manually compiled and thematically selected to focus on PhD students’ personal experiences. Through the use of LancsBox, keyword and concordance analyses were implemented to detect recurring metaphorical patterns. The findings indicate prominent framings of the PhD experience metaphors that include JOURNEY, CONTAINER, WAR, ENTITY, BOOK, VEHICLE, SPORTS, and JOB. Each of the identified metaphors highlights different positive and negative perspectives of doctoral study. These framings of metaphors indicate the PhD students’ challenges and motivations which shed some lights in understanding how these researchers metaphorically construct their academic identities in social media discourse. The research contributes to an understanding of academic experiences through metaphors and highlights the significance of metaphor in destigmatising academic pressure and normalising vulnerability in doctoral life.

Keywords: PhD experience, metaphor, corpus-based analysis, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the life and experience of PhD students has been researched through multiple perspectives that include case study (e.g., Sukhnandan, 1997), narrative (e.g., McAlpine, 2010), and phenomenographic (e.g., Akerlind, 2008) approaches. In these research, metaphors have been used by the authors to describe the essence of the researchers’ lives. Nevertheless, a systematic analysis of the metaphors used in describing PhD experience among the researchers has not been published yet (Turner, n.d.). One of such research by Pitcher and Akerlind (2009) found metaphors used by PhD students to describe their conceptions of research. Event though numerous studies have extensively looked into the structural and institutional aspects of doctoral education (Cardoso et al., 2020; Schmidt & Hasson, 2018), the metaphors used to depict experiences of PhD students communicated through the social media platforms remain scarce and require further investigation. Social medium platforms are online platforms, websites, or mobile applications that allow their users to create and share content, communicate with one another, and participate in online communities (Kokke, 2025). Presently, PhD students use social media platforms to express their unfiltered thoughts and feelings with regards to their challenges and achievements of their PhD experience which offers a great source of data for examining metaphors.

Language is vital to how PhD students make sense of their experiences, especially at times of uncertainty, frustration, and persistence. In this regard, metaphors are especially revealing as they do not simply decorative in nature but they offer a powerful way on how people communicate their experiences (Wan & Low, 2022). Existing works on metaphors in academic discourse have provided insights into how experiences and attitudes on research, supervision and academia are talked about (Kwan, 2019). Nevertheless, prior research focus mainly on interviews and formal institutional texts, therefore, less is known on how PhD students articulate their struggles, achievements, hopes, and coping strategies in less regulated and peer-oriented online platforms.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a corpus-based methodology to examine how PhD students metaphorically frame their experiences on Threads, Facebook, and Reddit. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and supported by corpus analysis using LancsBox, the present study identifies dominant metaphorical framings of PhD students' lived experiences through the recurring metaphorical patterns and what they suggest about the emotional, social and cognitive dimensions of doctoral life.

Problem Statement

Going through a PhD experience can be considered to be both demanding and transformative process as it is filled with unforeseen challenges, emotional fluctuations, and evolving personal growth. Due to this, the complex nature of PhD experience is emphasised by high levels of anxiety and depression among postgraduate students (Evans et al., 2018). The students' experiences with regards to time pressure, self-doubt, and confusion can significantly impact their overall wellbeing, hence, contribute to attrition (Di Benedetto et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2018; Stanley, 2015). Within this context, metaphors serve as powerful tools to articulate and understand this complex doctoral experience. This is because they allow students and supervisors to translate abstract aspects of the research process in more tangible ways (Glade-Wright & Smyth, 2023). In addition, metaphor is particularly valuable in mentoring settings due to its recognisability and familiarity (Nacey, 2022). Since existing qualitative studies has delved into PhD students' experiences via interviews and reflective narratives, such studies are typically situated within formal academic contexts.

Presently, there has been a rise of social media platforms, such as Threads, Facebook, and Reddit, that offer new spaces where PhD students can express and share spontaneous and informal reflections on their academic lives (Aleisa, 2022; Draper et al., 2016; Guha & Pande, 2021). These posts frequently employ metaphorical language in expressing complex emotions, cognitive dissonance, and social realities linked to pursuing a PhD. Despite the prevalence and communicative power of metaphor in these digital expressions, limited research has examined how metaphors function within social media discourse about the PhD experience. Most of past literature (e.g., Baptista & Huet, 2012; Carter & Pitcher, 2010; Hughes & Tight, 2013; Marila & Vuori, 2025; Marshall, 2010; Phyo et al., 2023) mainly depended on interviews or narrative analyses rather than social media communications. Additionally, corpus-based approaches in identifying and analysing these metaphors remain underutilised.

To address this gap, the present study uses a corpus-based approach to investigate the metaphorical language used in social media posts about PhD experience. Through the use of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU), and corpus tools, the present study aims to identify recurring metaphorical patterns and their underlying conceptual structures that can offer understanding into how metaphors frame PhD experience, in terms of its emotional wellbeing and the sociocultural dimensions.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the dominant metaphorical expressions used in social media posts about the PhD experience.
2. To determine the conceptual metaphors identified from these metaphorical expressions and frequent source domains mapped onto the PhD experience.
3. To investigate in what way these metaphors reflect the emotional, social, and intellectual dimensions of doctoral life as portrayed in the selected social media corpus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, a metaphor is understood as a literary tool that is mainly used in literary works and many people assume that it does not play a significant role in their daily life. However, many people fail to see that metaphor plays a prominent role in conceptualising abstract and complex experiences. In the book "Metaphors we live by", Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explained that metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but significant to human thought as it allows people to comprehend abstract and complex experiences through more tangible or simpler notions. This cognitive view of metaphor has informed extensive research across educational, psychological, and sociocultural contexts (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Semino, 2008).

In higher education, metaphors have been extensively used to understand more about the PhD experience. For example, Hughes and Tight (2013) highlight the dominance of the JOURNEY metaphor, which represents PhD experience as a process of progress, struggle, and transformation. By referring to the Pilgrim's Progress, the JOURNEY metaphor managed to grasp important aspects of the PhD experience, alternative metaphorical framings such as work or labour provide a more grounded view of the complexity of PhD experience. Similarly, in Carter and Pitcher's (2010) study, metaphors such as STORY and JOURNEY were noted as commonly used to describe both the challenges and rewards of the PhD experience. Nevertheless, Marila and Vuori (2025) argue that these process-oriented metaphors have been criticised for oversimplifying the complex PhD experience.

In another perspective, McCulloch (2013) states that the JOURNEY metaphor indicates a clear beginning, endpoint, and predictable route, which do not reflect the reality of the PhD experience. Instead, he proposes the QUEST metaphor to effectively describes the uncertainty, emotional fluctuations, and nonlinear progression of the process in getting a PhD. Marshall (2010) offers a similar notion by introducing the DOUBLE HELIX metaphor to describe creative arts PhD, in which the intertwined strands of praxis and exegesis represent the iterative relationship between creative practice and critical reflection. The spiral form symbolises continuous cycles of creation, analysis, and learning.

Meanwhile, Baptista and Huet's (2012) study expands the metaphorical repertoire by identifying metaphors like SHINING EYES to depict motivation, RADIOACTIVITY to describe collaboration and societal impact, and OUT OF THE BOX to conceptualise creativity and innovation in PhD experience. This finding reflects the emotional, social, and intellectual dimensions of the process in doctoral learning. In a recent study conducted by Phyo et al. (2023), 255 doctoral students' metaphors for academic writing were examined and they managed to identify both aspirational and negative conceptualisations of the doctoral experience. For the aspirational metaphors, e.g., SERVING A GOOD MEAL or BUILDING A JENGA TOWER, writing process was portrayed as constructive, purposeful, and rewarding, emphasising growth and achievement. Conversely, a smaller number of negative metaphors, like TORTURE, NIGHTMARE, or HELL, reflected frustration and emotional strain in the academic process.

All in all, these existing research show how metaphors reveal the multifaceted emotional and cognitive perspectives of the PhD experience and process. However, most of the past literature mainly relied on interviews or narrative accounts rather than large-scale corpus evidence. Therefore, to address this gap, the present study employs a corpus-assisted discourse approach to learn how PhD students describe their experiences through the use of metaphors in social media discourse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which posits that metaphors structure our understanding of experience by mapping elements from a source domain (concrete, familiar) onto a target domain (abstract, unfamiliar). In this research, the target domain is the lived experience of doing a PhD, while the source domains include concepts such as WAR, JOURNEY, and GAME.

The identification and analysis of metaphors are further supported by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and adapted in this study using the MIPVU variant (Steen et al., 2010). This methodology offers a systematic framework in determining whether a lexical item is metaphorical based on semantic tensions between the dictionary definition and contextual meaning.

Additionally, the present study follows the principles of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) (Partington et al., 2013) that highlight the triangulation of corpus-linguistic techniques with qualitative discourse analysis. Through the combination of keyword, collocation, and concordance analysis with metaphor theory, this methodological framework offers both empirical pattern identification and rich qualitative insights. All in all, this framework offers the necessary tools to identify, categorise, and interpret metaphorical language in a systematic manner. Hence, it enables a richer understanding of how social media users linguistically conceptualise their PhD experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employs a corpus-based approach, a combination between Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), to investigate metaphorical framings of the PhD experience in the selected social media corpus. The research design integrates both quantitative (e.g., keyword and collocation analysis) and qualitative (e.g., metaphor coding and categorisation) approaches.

Data Collection

1. Firstly, a purposive sampling method was used to compile a mini-corpus of social media posts written and posted about PhD experiences, mainly by PhD students on mainstream social media sites. The publicly accessible posts were compiled from three major social media sites, namely Threads, Facebook (public pages and groups), and Reddit.
2. Then, the social media posts were retrieved using these keywords: “PhD”, “PhD life,” “doing a PhD,” “PhD journey,” “PhD student,” “thesis writing,” and “dissertation”.
3. To preserve authenticity and relevance to the aims of the study:
 - a. only English-language posts were selected.
 - b. only original posts (excluding shared posts) were included.
 - c. only posts that reflected first-person experiences or commentary on PhD life/experience were chosen.

Based on these steps and listed criteria, the final corpus comprises of approximately 600 posts, with 58978 tokens, 6000 types, and 6638 lemmas. This compiled min-corpus is henceforth referred to as the PhD Experience Social Media Corpus (PhD-ExpSMC). The corpus name reflects the study’s focus on PhD experiences and the source from which the corpus were drawn.

Corpus Preparation

In preparing the corpus, all posts were first anonymised and saved into pdf files. Then, the corpus was ‘cleaned’ by removing any irrelevant symbols like Emojis or punctuations like hashtags as the analysis only involves words. Additionally, duplicates, bot-generated content, and irrelevant material (e.g., advertisements) were also removed from the corpus.

Analytical Tools and Procedure

In the study, analysis was performed in four stages:

Keyword Analysis

LancsBox 6.0 (Brezina et al., 2021) was employed to generate the keyword list of the PhD-ExpSMC corpus. The concordance tool in LancsBox 6.0 allows the identification of recurring patterns of the keyword PhD. This tool facilitates the examination of the keyword’s contextual use across the examined corpus. Table 1 shows the keyword list generated from the mini-corpus. The analysis began with a frequency list that highlights keywords that are significant in the PhD-ExpSMC corpus. These significant keywords provides a basis for the subsequent qualitative analysis.

Table 1: Keyword list generated from the PhD-ExpSMC corpus

Terms	Frequency
I	1932
to	1830
and	1710

Figure 2: Concordance lines of “PhD” in the PhD-ExpSMC corpus

Left	▼ Node	Right
choose to believe YOU Can DO the	PhD...	Take the leap of faith and jump
what you need before you start a	PhD).	I have found other mentors, but it
therapy at university (as part of my	PhD)	and it had helped a lot.
dangers of being "only focused on the	PhD."	Surely that is way easier in terms
for the articles they need for their	PhD.	I've done this for 1 person, which
my annual review today to progress my	PhD.	I have suffered with some home life
met all the graduation requirements for my	PhD.	Patience is a virtue, but wow— this
I congratulate you on finishing your	PhD.	I am starting my PhD and completed
I did not intend to get a	PhD.	Never even considered it. I was in
years or however long to do your	PhD.	Noone is expecting you to be an
lockdown I said I would do a	PhD.	4 years later I successfully defended. I
and also at the end of my	PhD.	So much resentment and disillusionment about this
to be the hardest part of the	PhD.	There are times when it has been
Those are the ugly truths of a	PhD.	I am not trying to scare you
up getting to pursue joy with our	PhD.	Anger, depression, spite, and existential dread? Yep.
other required activities). Don't do a self-funded	PhD.	Simply not worth it. I disagree with
I don't resent my	PhD.	While my PhD supervisor was a difficult
and myself within the topics of my	PhD.	For me, it's not "I'm not worthy",
That being said, I don't resent my	PhD.	It takes too much energy and dwelling
am very, very much done with my	PhD.	I love my topic, but I am

As shown in Figure 2, the concordance lines illustrate the range of contexts in which PhD occurs across the dataset. These examples provide the basis for identifying recurring phraseological patterns and potential metaphorical expressions for further analysis.

Metaphor Identification

Metaphorical expressions were identified using a modified version of the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) developed by Steen et al. (2010). The procedure involves:

1. Determining the contextual meaning of a lexical unit.
2. Identifying its more basic, concrete meaning.
3. Comparing the two meanings.
4. Labelling the unit as metaphorical if the basic meaning is distinct and can be conceptually mapped onto the target meaning.

Each metaphor was categorised into a source domain (e.g., WAR, JOURNEY, GAME) and mapped onto the target domain of “PhD experience.”

Categorisation and Thematic Grouping

Once identified, metaphorical expressions were grouped into conceptual metaphors (e.g., PHD IS A BATTLE, PHD IS A JOURNEY). Each category was analysed to determine its frequency, variation across platforms, and the positive or negative framing it provided.

Ethical Considerations

Although all data were publicly available, ethical precautions were observed:

1. Posts were anonymised and paraphrased in any publication or presentation to protect user identity.
2. No direct quotations were used without consent if the user could potentially be identified.
3. Platform-specific terms of service were respected.

FINDINGS

Dominant Metaphorical Expressions

To address the first research question, the concordance lines were examined to identify recurring metaphorical expressions associated with the PhD experience. 186 instances from the total of 772 concordances retrieved were identified as metaphorical. Table 2 presents a list of the most frequent metaphorical expressions with their raw frequencies and example of concordance lines. These recurrent metaphorical expressions emphasise how the PhD experience was described through metaphors. To maintain focus on the identified recurring patterns, only expressions with a frequency of four and above were included in the analysis. Meanwhile, the expressions with less frequent instances (≤ 3) were not considered to be further analysed in the qualitative analysis. This process reduced the total of 186 metaphorical instances to 162 that provides the foundation for further analysis. At this analysis stage, the focus remains on documenting the surface-level patterns of metaphorical use rather than interpreting the underlying conceptual structures.

Table 1: Dominant metaphorical expressions of the PhD experience

Expression	Frequency	Example Concordance Line
PhD journey	34	“at the end of my PhD journey.”
PhD object/entity	22	“I should drop my PhD”
chase PhD	16	“my wife chase her PhD while raising a family”
PhD person	14	“the PhD was coming to rob us”
PhD path/route	10	“I had a rough PhD path”
PhD as a container	10	“jumping into a PhD program”
PhD substance	10	“to get through my PhD”
PhD place/destination	8	“a PhD was really nowhere on my radar.”
PhD battle/fight	8	“you fight through the PhD battle.”
PhD job	8	“treat my PhD like a job or side gig”
land/drive a PhD	6	“landed a PhD offer.”
PhD adventure	4	“doubts, fears, and anxieties the PhD adventure produces”
PhD progress	4	“to progress my PhD”
PhD tale/chapter	4	“closed my PhD chapter with a remarkable happy ending.”
PhD sports/game	4	“Ramadhan isn’t a sprint. Neither is a PhD. They’re both marathons”

As presented in Table 2, the analysis identified several dominant metaphorical expressions for the PhD experience. As can be seen, the top five most frequent metaphorical expressions were PhD as a journey ($n=34$), followed by PhD as an object/entity ($n=22$), PhD as an entity of pursue ($n=16$), PhD as a person ($n=14$), and PhD as a path/route, PhD as a container and PhD as a substance all three share the same frequency with 10 instances.

Meanwhile, the metaphorical expressions with the least instances, though still significant, were expressions such as PhD as an adventure ($n=4$), PhD as a progress ($n=4$), PhD as a tale or chapter in books ($n=4$), and PhD as a sports/game ($n=4$).

These results show that while a variety of metaphorical expressions were employed, the PhD is most prominently conceptualised as a journey, with object/entity and pursuit metaphors also play a significant role.

Conceptual Metaphors and Source Domains

For the second research question, the dominant metaphorical expressions were grouped into broader conceptual metaphors, following the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Each metaphor reflects a mapping from a familiar source domain (e.g. travel, place, conflict, physical objects, or attainment) onto the target domain of the PhD experience. This categorisation demonstrates how social media users conceptualise doctoral study through a limited set of recurrent figurative frames. Table 3 summarises the conceptual metaphors identified in the data, with representative expressions and illustrative concordance lines for each category.

Table 3: Conceptual metaphors identified in the PhD-ExpSMC corpus

Conceptual Metaphor	Source Domain	Concordance Lines	
PHD IS A JOURNEY	journey	“to start to get on my PhD journey” “PhD journey” “Just starting my PhD journey” “at the end of my PhD.” “setting early on during and after a PhD journey.” “embark on a PhD” “so many ups and downs in my PhD journey.” “smooth end to the PhD journey” “My PhD journey was an extended one” “my milestones during my PhD” “The end of my almost 4-year PhD journey.” “PhD is a highly individual journey”	
	adventure	“challenge the PhD adventure. Enjoy the journey!” “doubts, fears, and anxieties the PhD adventure produces”	
	a pursuit/chase	“to pursue PhD” “in pursuing a PhD” “pursuing a PhD” “my wife chase her PhD while raising a family” “pursued a/the PhD”	
	path/route	“PhD maybe isn’t a good route to consider.” “goes the easy crappy way to the PhD” “I had a rough PhD path”	
	place/destination	“PhD can be a very lonely place” “secure an offer of a PhD place.” “a PhD was really nowhere on my radar.” “this job is a bridge between my PhD and a postdoc”	
	moving forward	“to progress my PhD” “affect your PhD progress”	
	PHD IS A CONTAINER	vessel/space	“to be sucked out of the PhD program” “many of you ended up in a PhD programme” “jumping into a PhD program” “I came into the PhD” “other stuff is happening outside of the PhD”
	PHD IS A WAR	fight/battle/warrior	“Being a PhD mom? It’s a war in disguise.” “you fight through the PhD battle.” “Hey PhD and Master’s warriors.” “choosing your PhD survival guide.”
	PHD IS AN ENTITY	physical object	“I should drop my PhD” “to shop around a cheap PhD from a cheap school” “unlocked by your PhD experience”
		person	“PhD adventure will be your travelling companion”

		“the PhD was coming to rob us” “before the PhD entered our lives.” “your PhD trained you in some applied skills” “the PhD doesn’t pay my bills” “PhD trains you to think critically” “pursue joy with our PhD.”
	substance	“to get through my PhD” “through my entire PhD.” “throughout my time through the PhD” “throughout the struggling PhD years” “my comfort reward throughout PhD.”
PHD IS A BOOK	tale/saga/chapter	“another tale of a 9-year PhD saga” “closed my PhD chapter with a remarkable happy ending.”
PHD IS A VEHICLE	plane	“to land a fully funded PhD” “landed a PhD offer.”
	car	“Faith is also the driving wheel in PhD”
PHD IS A SPORTS	marathons/mind game	“finishing a PhD is more a mental game” “Ramadhan isn’t a sprint. Neither is a PhD. They’re both marathons”
PHD IS A JOB	job/side gig	“Treat your PhD as a salaried job” “treat my PhD like a job or side gig” “to treat PhD as like a regular 9-5 job” “treat your PhD like a job”

Positive and Negative Framings of the PhD Experience in the PhD-ExpSMC corpus

The third research objective deals with how metaphorical expressions contribute to positive and negative framings of the PhD experience in the PhD-ExpSMC corpus. Based on metaphorical framing theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2004), the analysis identified several recurring source domains—JOURNEY, CONTAINER, WAR, ENTITY, BOOK, VEHICLE, SPORTS, and JOB—each of which structures how doctoral candidates conceptualise their experiences. These frames are evaluatively flexible: the same conceptual metaphor may convey either empowerment and growth or stress and constraint, depending on its linguistic realisation and context of use. Table 4 presents the framing of the identified conceptual metaphors.

Table 4: The framings of the identified conceptual metaphors of the PhD experience

Conceptual Metaphor	Framing	Explanation
PHD IS A JOURNEY	Positive / Neutral	Frames the PhD as a meaningful path involving growth, discovery, and persistence. Emphasises progress and transformation but may also imply endurance through uncertainty.
PHD IS A CONTAINER	Neutral / Negative	Conceptualises the PhD as a bounded or enclosed space—sometimes a space of immersion and focus, but often one of confinement or isolation.
PHD IS A WAR	Negative	Constructs doctoral study as conflict or survival, evoking exhaustion and competition within academia. Highlights emotional strain and endurance.
PHD IS AN ENTITY	Negative / Neutral	Personifies the PhD as a powerful or antagonistic agent. Reflects ambivalence: it can empower (training, transformation) or disempower (draining, consuming).

PHD IS A BOOK	Positive	Depicts the PhD as a personal narrative of achievement and closure, symbolising accomplishment, meaning-making, and self-authorship.
PHD IS A VEHICLE	Positive	Positions the PhD as a means of mobility and progress—suggesting forward movement, purpose, and professional advancement.
PHD IS A SPORT	Positive	Frames doctoral work as a test of resilience, pacing, and endurance, portraying success as achievable through sustained effort rather than struggle.
PHD IS A JOB	Neutral / Negative	Represents the PhD as structured labour—routine and disciplined, but sometimes detached from intrinsic motivation or creativity.

The metaphorical framings identified in the PhD-ExpSMC corpus reveal how doctoral candidates use familiar source domains to make sense of complex academic and emotional experiences. The most frequent frame, PHD IS A JOURNEY, depicts the process as a purposeful progression marked by challenge and growth, often carrying an optimistic tone. The JOURNEY metaphor constructs the PhD as a path of growth and perseverance. It often signals personal transformation and directionality, as challenges are portrayed as part of meaningful progress. However, phrases like “tough but fulfilling” also suggest moments of uncertainty and exhaustion along the way. Similarly, metaphors drawn from VEHICLE, SPORTS, and BOOK domains convey positive framings, associating the PhD with movement, mastery, and closure. The VEHICLE metaphor symbolises purpose, direction, and progress. It positions the PhD as a means of movement—professionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Expressions like “driving wheel” evoke control and agency, aligning the experience with aspiration and mobility. These metaphors highlight agency, perseverance, and eventual accomplishment, framing the doctoral experience as transformative and rewarding. Meanwhile, the SPORTS metaphor conceptualises doctoral study as disciplined endurance. It evokes competition and stamina but with a constructive tone, portraying success in PhD as achievable through consistent effort and perseverance. In the meantime, The BOOK metaphor depicts the PhD as a personal narrative with closure and coherence. It conveys accomplishment and meaning-making that turns hardship into part of one’s life story, as in “another tale of a 9-year PhD saga”.

In contrast, negative framings emerge from metaphors of WAR, CONTAINER, and ENTITY, which emphasise struggle, confinement, and loss of control. The WAR metaphor frames the doctorate as conflict and survival, reflecting psychological and emotional strain. Expressions such as “fight through” or “battle” foreground competition and pressure, presenting doctoral life as adversarial and exhausting. The CONTAINER metaphor conceptualises the PhD as a bounded space that one enters or escapes from. It conveys immersion and commitment but also entrapment and isolation, particularly in expressions like “sucked out of the PhD,” where candidates feel consumed by the experience. Meanwhile, the entity metaphor personifies the PhD as an agent capable of acting upon the candidate. In negative framings (“coming to rob us”), it becomes antagonistic and draining; in neutral ones (“teaches discipline”), it is portrayed as a transformative force that shapes the candidate’s identity. Neutral metaphors like JOB occupy an intermediary space, representing the PhD as disciplined work but also can be a negative metaphor as it can signal burnout or loss of passion, particularly when framed as “side gig” or routine labour.

Overall, these framings reveal a dual conceptualisation of the PhD as both transformative and taxing. The coexistence of positive and negative metaphors suggests that candidates negotiate their academic identities through dynamic shifts between empowerment and endurance. Metaphor thus functions not only as a cognitive mapping but as an effective strategy through which individuals articulate and reframe the realities of doctoral life.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how doctoral candidates use metaphorical language on social media to conceptualise and communicate their PhD experiences. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and

a corpus-assisted discourse approach (Partington et al., 2013), the analysis demonstrated that metaphors are central to how individuals represent, negotiate, and emotionally process the challenges of doctoral study. The corpus revealed that candidates use metaphor not merely as a descriptive tool but as a cognitive and affective resource to articulate struggle, motivation, identity, and resilience.

The findings show that candidates frequently draw from familiar source domains such as JOURNEY, WAR, SPORTS, CONTAINER, VEHICLE, and JOB to express the complexity of their academic lives. These domains, grounded in physical and social experience, allow candidates to make sense of the abstract nature of doctoral research. Consistent with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument that metaphors structure understanding through embodied experience, the PhD is conceptualised as both movement and endurance, reflecting dynamic interplay between aspiration and adversity. The JOURNEY metaphor, the most dominant frame, captures this duality effectively. It presents the PhD as a long and transformative path marked by progress and setbacks, aligning with previous studies that view doctoral research as a narrative of change and discovery (Hughes & Tight, 2013; McCulloch, 2013). Yet, in contrast to interview-based studies, the social media data reveal that the JOURNEY metaphor is often deployed in communal discourse to balance encouragement with realism, functioning as a shared language of perseverance.

Metaphors such as SPORTS and VEHICLE similarly project positive framings of the PhD as goal-oriented, disciplined, and purposeful. These expressions reinforce agency and progress, echoing Phyo et al.'s (2023) observation that academic work is often represented as structured effort with clear objectives. They highlight doctoral study as a process of training and movement, toward intellectual independence or professional growth. Conversely, metaphors drawn from WAR, JOB, and CONTAINER domains foreground exhaustion, isolation, and emotional strain. Expressions like "fight through the PhD battle" and "sucked out of the PhD" present the doctorate as adversarial and confining, reflecting the psychological toll and competitive pressures within academia. Such negative framings resonate with Baptista and Huet's (2012) and Evans et al.'s (2018) observations that candidates often experience anxiety, fatigue, and disillusionment under institutional and emotional pressures.

This duality of framing supports McCulloch's (2013) critique of the linear JOURNEY metaphor and his proposal of the PhD as a quest—a nonlinear, unpredictable process involving risk, failure, and transformation. The findings from the PhD-ExpSMC corpus affirm this more complex representation, revealing how candidates oscillate between empowerment and exhaustion in narrating their progress. Metaphors in the corpus function not only as cognitive mappings but also as social and emotional acts: they make private experiences intelligible and shareable within a community of peers. In this sense, metaphor performs a relational function, as noted by Cameron and Maslen (2010), enabling solidarity and empathy through shared imagery of struggle and perseverance.

The study also provides evidence that social media discourse adds a new dimension to metaphor research in academic contexts. Unlike traditional reflective accounts, social media posts are spontaneous and conversational, allowing metaphors to emerge organically in response to lived emotion. This aligns with Guha and Pande's (2021) observation that online spaces enable academics to express vulnerability and humour while negotiating their scholarly identities. Metaphors such as "PhD battle scars" or "crossing the finish line soon" exemplify this performative use, combining humour, resilience, and community affirmation. The social nature of metaphor use online thus supports Cameron's (2010) view that metaphors are interactional phenomena shaped by discourse context rather than fixed conceptual mappings.

The findings also extend Conceptual Metaphor Theory by demonstrating how metaphors in digital discourse serve evaluative and identity-building functions. While CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) primarily emphasises conceptual mapping, this study shows that metaphor in doctoral narratives is also affective and rhetorical, employed to shape self-perception and elicit social support. This reflects Semino's (2008) and Cameron's (2003) call for a discourse-oriented approach to metaphor that accounts for variation, evaluation, and interaction. Methodologically, the integration of corpus tools and the MIPVU procedure (Steen et al., 2010) demonstrates how large-scale, data-driven analysis can be combined with qualitative interpretation to uncover both the frequency and function of metaphors in naturally occurring online discourse. This approach contributes to the

development of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies by showing how metaphorical framing operates across digital genres.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings offer valuable insight into how supervisors and educators might interpret and respond to the language doctoral students use to describe their experiences. As Nacey (2022) observes, metaphors in mentoring contexts can serve as powerful communicative tools because they make abstract struggles recognisable and discussable. Awareness of students' metaphorical framings can help supervisors identify early signs of discouragement or isolation, while encouraging positive reframings, such as viewing the PhD as a journey rather than a battle, can foster resilience and self-efficacy. Similarly, recognising metaphors that frame the PhD as labour or burden may prompt institutions to address workload expectations and provide better emotional and structural support.

At the sociocultural level, the patterns observed in this corpus reflect broader discourses surrounding academia. The prevalence of JOB and WAR metaphors reveals the influence of neoliberal ideologies that frame scholarly work as competition and productivity, echoing concerns raised by Hughes and Tight (2013) and Kidd and Murray (2020). At the same time, metaphors of JOURNEY and BOOK preserve a more humanistic view of doctoral study as self-discovery and narrative completion. This coexistence of discourses highlights the contradictory positioning of the PhD in contemporary higher education, as both a personal quest for knowledge and a professional performance under institutional constraint.

Overall, the discussion underscores that metaphors in social media discourse provide a vivid lens into the lived realities of doctoral life. Through metaphor, candidates articulate the tensions between motivation and fatigue, autonomy and control, creativity and conformity. These linguistic patterns reveal that the PhD experience is not merely a cognitive challenge but an emotional and sociocultural negotiation, continually reframed through metaphorical language. By combining corpus-based analysis with metaphor theory, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how doctoral identity and wellbeing are discursively constructed, and how metaphor functions as both a mirror and mediator of academic life.

LIMITATION

One limitation of this study is that the corpus is relatively small, mainly due to the manual data collection process and the constraints and challenges of working within a small research team. As a result, the data may not fully represent the experiences of all PhD students in general. Additionally, since the present study depends on selected social media posts, it may highlight more emotional or intense experiences, while more neutral or everyday academic reflections are less likely to be captured.

CONCLUSION

The present research demonstrates that metaphors offer valuable insights into how doctoral students conceptualise and communicate their lived experiences. The analysis on social media discourse reveals that metaphors are not only descriptive but also performative which serves as a medium for connection and coping. Metaphors like journey, battle, and vehicle are common metaphors used to depict how PhD experience is framed as both an opportunity for growth and a site of struggle that reflect the emotional and cognitive difficulty of the academic experience.

Apart from that, the findings display pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural significance. By recognising PhD students' metaphorical framings, it can help supervisors and educators to better understand their students' insights and encourage constructive reframing that can bolster their motivation, resilience, and wellbeing. On the other hand, negative metaphors highlight institutional pressures that contribute to stress and attrition among the postgraduate students that highlight the need for more supportive academic environments. On a broader level, the identified metaphorical patterns mirror the society's perceptions of academic world, suggesting that shifting these framings and narratives may encourage a healthier and more collaborative research environment and practice.

From the theoretical perspective, the finding of the study extends Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies by displaying how metaphor can vividly illustrate academic identity and emotional stance in digital discourse. It is suggested that future research expand the scope of the present study by analysing corpora across cultures, disciplines, and digital genres to trace the evolution of metaphors within these diverse discourses. Such research could also explore interventions that deliberately employ empowering metaphors to enhance doctoral engagement and wellbeing.

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