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## Contrastive rhetoric and the discourse of second language learning across cultures: A critical synthesis of existing literature

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**Abstract:** Contrastive rhetoric is the field that studies how language and writing styles differ between cultures and how these differences affect second language learning. The article attempted to critically synthesize the existing literature on contrastive rhetoric and its implications for intercultural second language learning. As a branch of comparative linguistics, contrastive rhetoric involves the structured study of a combination of languages in order to solve the problems that learners face in transferring rhetorical patterns from a first language to a second language, thereby identifying their structural differences and similarities. However, the question of whether a learner's first language influences foreign language learning or not has remained a mystery to many second language acquisition scholars and researchers for many years. The article uses a systematic review approach methodology to discuss the origins and development of contrastive analysis, its theoretical foundations and assumptions, its applications and benefits to learning second languages and other fields, and the theory of contrastive analysis. The research shows that although contrastive rhetoric has been widely criticized for being overly simplistic and narrow, it has evolved to include interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches that serve to address linguistic diversity and inclusivity. The research shows that contrastive rhetoric is not only a starting point for educators but also a tool for addressing the rhetorical challenges that students face when transferring rhetorical patterns from their native languages.

**Keywords:** Contrastive analysis, First language, Language and culture, Rhetorical patterns, Second language

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### 1. Introduction

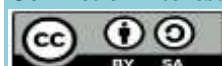
Contrastive analysis, also called contrastive rhetoric, means the comparison of two languages with a particular focus on the differences and similarities between the languages being compared. It was mainly used in the 1950s as a tool for educating learners of English as a foreign language. In this respect, it served to establish the variations and similarities among languages with a view to anticipating learning difficulties and how to deal with them (Lado, 1957). In the words of Grabe (1987), contrastive rhetoric involves the study of textual units, where contrastive rhetoricians undertake to examine the stylistic preferences of writing used by different discourse communities to organize their ideas differently across cultures. In this connection, contrastive depictions can exist at the phonological, orthographical, morphological, semantic, and syntactic levels of linguistic structure (Betti, 2002).

### 2. Historical origins and development of contrastive rhetoric

Contrastive linguistics emerged as a major branch of applied linguistics in the 1940s and rapidly gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, contrastive analysis was first proposed by Whorf (1941) as contrastive linguistics, a comparative study that emphasizes language differences. Lado's (1957) *Linguistics Across Cultures* is considered the seminal work that triggered the hypothesis of contrastive analysis, but it was Weinreich's (1953) and Haugen's (1953) work on immigrant bilingualism that inspired Lado's work. His seminal work laid the foundation for the theory and methodology of contrastive rhetoric. In his book *Intercultural Linguistics*, Lado (1957) supports the idea that systematic comparisons of students' languages and cultures are essential to effective language teaching. **Lado's emphasis on systematic comparisons of students' languages and cultures highlights the importance of**

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**understanding both linguistic and cultural contexts in language learning, which remains a critical aspect of effective pedagogy today.** The author assumes that when students are exposed to a foreign language, some aspects of that language are very straightforward and uncomplicated, while other elements are quite challenging and complex. The features of the language that are comparable to your first language will be more accessible and simpler to learn, whereas the elements that are dissimilar to your native language will be more challenging. Here, Lado believed that by systematically comparing the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students being discussed, he could predict and explain patterns that were likely to cause learning difficulties and those that were not. In the 1960s, contrastive analyzes showed that natural language experience in L1 (native/first language) impedes the learning and acquisition of a second language (Connor, 1996). In this context, comparative studies demonstrated that the errors committed by second language learners are primarily due to the influence of their native language, as the responsibility can be attributed to their linguistic backgrounds.

This theory further argued that the influence of the mother tongue on L2 learners should be reduced as much as possible when learning the target language. Therefore, proponents of contrastive analysis suggest that L2 materials can be created more effectively by comparing the two languages and predicting learner behavior and difficulties in the process. In an early study, Kaplan examined paragraphs in ESL students' essays, focusing on paragraph development and distinctive rhetorical tendencies (Kaplan, 1966). Contrastive analysis explores the similarities and differences between the writing of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners across different languages and cultural contexts, to enhance teachers' and students' understanding of cultural and rhetorical aspects when writing in a second language (Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

Therefore, the initial intent behind contrastive rhetoric was pedagogical, aiming to address the learning needs of international students who were striving to develop academic writing skills in English (Kaplan, 1966). Its first challenge at this stage was to study the second language writing of first-year university students. Kaplan argues here that languages and cultures have unique rhetorical conventions, and that an L1 student's rhetorical conventions hinder her ability to write ESL (Grabe & Kaplan, 1966, 1972, 1998). This means that L1 transfer influences second language acquisition. That is, features that are similar to the learner's first language are relatively easy to acquire, while the elements that are dissimilar or unfamiliar to the learner's native language are more difficult to acquire (Kaplan, 1966; Lado, 1957). These arguments were anchored on the hypothesis that the language learning process achieves the desired goals and has better outcomes when the learner's native language (also called the aboriginal language) and the target language being learned share more similarities. **This highlights a key observation: the success of language acquisition is not solely dependent on linguistic features but also on the underlying cultural frameworks that shape how language is used and understood.** In other words, similarities between the two languages facilitate the active transfer of knowledge from L1 to L2, making the overall learning experience more effective.

Although its relevance in the 1980s and 1990s was debated, contrastive rhetoric has diversified and expanded beyond its original focus on Linguistic systems (grammar and vocabulary), and has broadened to include pragmatics and discourse studies (Gast, 2012). This means that in addition to the study of the influence of L1 on L2 learning, contrastive rhetoric has broadened its scope beyond just analyzing differences in essay or academic writing, to encompass a wider range of text types and genres, as well as how cultural factors impact writing in professional and workplace domains. Here, justifications for different writing models have been put forward based on the cultural and linguistic background of the writer, with a focus on the discursive and rhetorical features employed within written texts. In this context, scholars began to integrate concepts of culture and logic into the field of applied linguistics to gain deeper insights into the organizational patterns and rhetorical conventions used in various forms of written communication.

However, the suitability of purely textual analysis as a basis for drawing conclusions beyond textual features has been questioned (Connor, 1996). That is, contrastive rhetoricians faced the challenge of moving from a simple comparison of texts (speech) to focusing on the key sociocultural and educational factors that influence the writing situation. In this respect, researchers needed to understand why and how people behave, rather than simply studying cultural artefacts and products (Connor, 1996). **This meant that researchers needed to develop an understanding of what is involved in the writing process, including not only the speakers, writers, and readers, but also the historical contexts that influence writing and readers.**

Contrastive rhetoric requires a contextual approach that explains a writer's textual choices (Connor 2004) and requires going beyond the text as an object to understand how it was created. Essentially, this required the creation of a more comprehensive text analysis model that could integrate rhetorical and linguistic analysis. In response, contrastive rhetoricians have quantified not only rhetorical features such as persuasion, argument, logos, pathos, and ethos, but also the linguistic features of linguistic composition (Connor, 2004). That is, contrastive rhetoric has expanded its scope to examine not just the cultural and rhetorical elements, but the content of essays as well, including the way language is used to create a clear and well-organized text. This includes how ideas connect smoothly (cohesion), how the essay makes sense as a whole (coherence), and how the arguments are structured (discourse structure) (Connor, 2004). In practice, this innovative approach fostered a culture of critical analysis within the classroom, prompting both educators and learners to question and evaluate their usual teaching and learning strategies. For instance, this was achieved by comparing and contrasting the writer's first language (L1) and target language (L2) to achieve the desired outcome (Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

However, the past two decades have been marked by a 'quantitative turn, particularly in linguistics and the social sciences in general. As such, in order to explain a particular linguistic phenomenon, its occurrence and characteristics are measured and taken into account by statistical methods (Janda, 2022; Renata, Defrancq & Jansengers, 2020). **This means that** contrastive rhetoric continues to face challenges in balancing qualitative insights with quantitative methods, hence

the need for a more comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of writing and communication across cultures.

### 3. Theoretical foundations of contrastive rhetoric

Building on its empiricist view, behaviourism evolved from the philosophical standpoint which emphasized that language learning ought to be conceptualized as the sequential acquisition of all individual linguistic components, as opposed to a more holistic process. Until the 1960s, the dominant theory of language learning was the behaviorist theory of imitation and habit formation. Here, children imitate the words of their parents/adults to acquire their mother tongue. In this case, using language correctly could earn one a reward/recognition and vice versa. Therefore, the more the child repeats utterances, the more encouragement and approval he or she receives from adults, which become the habitual behaviours and patterns that make up the language the learner is attempting to acquire. This hypothesis of habit formation theory not only explains how children acquire their first language, but has also been used to explain the acquisition of a second language. Furthermore, behaviourists believe that previous habits/behaviors that are ingrained in the child's mind as a first language have a great influence on L2 learning, in which case positive transfer occurs when the habitual behaviours and patterns in the learner's first language (L1) are similar to those in the second language (L2) they are trying to learn. In other words, differences between L1 and L2 lead to interference that causes learning difficulties and consequently errors (Tajareh, 2015). In Tajareh's words:

It has been common in second language teaching to stress the role of interference that is, the interfering effects of the native language on the target language...The saliency of interference has been so strong that CA has viewed second language learning as exclusively involving the overcoming of the effect of the native language (Tajareh, 2015: 1107-1108).

When teaching a second language, it is common practice to stress the role of interference - the detrimental influence of the learner's native language (L1) on the target language (L2). This focus is understandable, as native language interference is the most significant source of errors for second language learners. However, the assumption that second language (L2) acquisition is primarily hindered by interference from the first language (L1) is overly reductive. It is in this context that Tajareh (2015) posits that the emphasis on L1 interference has overshadowed other critical factors such as learner's agency, motivation, and the socio-cultural contexts that influencing L2 learning. Moreover, behaviourists ignore the fact that by framing second language learning solely as a struggle against L1 interference, teachers risk alienating learners and failing to recognize the potential for positive transfer from L1 to L2.

Furthermore, the original concept of contrastive rhetoric rooted in Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis suggests that different languages have different effects on thinking and cognition (Connor, 1996). Building on the significant impact of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Kaplan (1988) argued that the language a person speaks fundamentally shapes their worldview and perceptions. According to this view, the specific spoken language, underlying logic, and rhetorical conventions used within a culture are all deeply intertwined and unique to that cultural context. This understanding coheres with Filani's (2013) view that different cultures exhibit distinct rhetorical tendencies, which also shape their worldview, patterns of thought, and overall cognitive processes. In this context, however, though Connor (1996) and Kaplan (1988) unravel the interplay between language and worldview, their standpoint can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes about linguistic determinism. Likewise, such a stance risks oversimplifying the relationship between language and culture, thereby leading to a deterministic and instrumental view that undermines the dynamic nature of communication across cultures. Furthermore, the assertion that different cultures manifest distinct rhetorical tendencies, though, valid, calls for a more critical examination, considering that rhetorical practices are not static but ever-evolving and adapt in response to global interactions and individual agency.

As such, while behaviorism and the initial frameworks of contrastive rhetoric can be said to have contributed to our understanding of language acquisition, they need to be critically re-examined. That is, a more holistic approach that takes into account the complexities of cultural interaction, learner agency, and the socio-cultural dimensions of language use is imperative. This means that we have to move beyond the theoretical confines of behaviourism to foster a richer understanding of contrastive rhetoric that embraces the multifaceted nature of language learning and cultural exchange.

### 4. Previous research on contrastive rhetoric

Since contrastive rhetoric was founded on applied linguistics, its research agenda focused primarily on linguistic issues (Cho, 2010). In this regard, linguistic research mainly focuses on describing and investigating the stylistic form of written texts and related issues, such as linguistic aspects like arrangement, coherence, and different uses of language in expository writing and persuasion. **This narrow focus on linguistic aspects—such as arrangement, coherence, and stylistic forms of written texts, however, overlooks the broader socio-cultural influences that shape writing practices across different contexts.**

Throughout its development, the field of contrastive rhetoric has centred its focus on two main areas (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). The first area is contrastive textual linguistics, which examines the linguistic features, mechanisms of cohesion, and discursive organizational structures present in written texts. This involves studying the processes by which texts are constructed and understood (Wang, 2006). The second area is the investigation of writing as a multifaceted activity that is shaped by literary, sociocultural, and rhetorical factors. In this respect, the study of contrastive text linguistics utilizes methods of written discourse analysis to systematically investigate, compare, and contrast how texts are structured and interpreted across different languages and cultural contexts. While this is a step in the right direction, **the existing**

**frameworks still struggle to fully integrate these diverse influences, leading to a fragmented understanding of writing across cultures.**

Regarding writing, Connor (2004) emphasizes that contrastive analysis focuses on the social context of writing, hence **the need to delve into how meanings are constructed through cultural practices and individual agency.** This means that you not only need to analyze texts to determine their meanings but also understand how those meanings are constructed. In the same vein, Kaplan posits that writing style varies from culture to culture. People from different cultures not only write in different styles but also develop these styles through different ways of thinking and worldviews. Kaplan further suggests that one of the reasons for the aforementioned linguistic and rhetorical differences is rhetorical practice and how it is philosophically influenced (distinct rhetorical traditions). This understanding is evident in Leki's (1991) view:

It seems reasonable to assume that different cultures would orient their discourse in different ways. Even discourse communities within a single language such as those constituted by different academic disciplines, have different writing orientations.

However, despite the controversy surrounding the traditional study of contrastive rhetoric, Kaplan's discussion provides educators with a starting point to explore how language and culture are interdependent in writing. Hinds (1987) studied the rhetorical conventions of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean writing, where like other contrastive rhetoricians (Scollon, 1997; Kubota, 1998/2010; Eggington 2004), he identified four styles that characterize East Asian writing style, and many more, an introduction that initiates the situation, but without a thesis statement, the development of the writer's argument, and then the development of the sub-theme not directly linked to the theme and the last stage similar to the conclusion, but with a thesis statement implicitly indicating the writer's intention in the text.

Hinds also studies Korean academic writing, and confirms that it is not equivalent to English from the viewpoint of logic and consistency; both are used differently from how they are in English. This explains why native speakers of English perceive the Korean writing style to be disorganized (Eggington, 2004). In this context, Hinds (1990) investigated the textual characteristics of Chinese expository prose and found that his Chi-Chen-Juan-He model of China, similar to its Korean and Japanese counterparts, does not use a topic sentence and an explicit statement of purpose. This, he argued, made it difficult for non-native Chinese speakers to understand the author's intentions; thus texts are writer-centered and demand the reader to make an effort to interpret them. This also suggests that if teachers have an imprecise understanding of the basic knowledge of Chinese culture, they may not be able to understand the author's intentions.

Similarly, Ostler (1989) examined the Japanese rhetorical patterns, and endorsed Hinds's position regarding the textual characteristics of expository writing; the Ki-Sho-ten-Ketsu sequence of writing in Japanese is regularly employed, which displays the reader's responsibility. These contrastive rhetoricians further argue that because Japanese rhetorical patterns do not match English rhetorical patterns, English speakers perceive Japanese as disorganized and unfocused whenever they encounter Japanese rhetorical patterns writing (Hinds, 1990). Arguably, however, Japanese readers rely on their cultural knowledge to interpret (Hinds 1990). That is, in Japanese writing, the implied intention of writing, is normally placed, and given that essays at the end of the essay take neither the inductive nor the deductive mode, the native English readers find it hard to predict the intended meaning. Just like Hinds and Ostler above, Loveday (1982) examined the aspects of Japanese rhetorical traditions (communication strategies).

This study confirmed that Japanese rhetorical patterns emphasize interaction and aim to emphasize reciprocity; emotional aspects where the speaker's written intent is not clearly expressed are avoided. Moreover, the Japanese language avoids aggressive and offensive communication approaches. Loveday (1982) argues that the term 'no' almost always constitutes abuse in Japanese and is avoided in favour of more soft alternatives. This reflects the Japanese as embracing an implicit communication style which involves the use of rhetorical styles that promote social harmony. Thus, while the ideology of individualism dominates Western rhetoric, social harmony dominates Japanese rhetoric. **Arguably, the avoidance of directness in the Japanese language ought to be seen as a strength as opposed to a limitation, suggesting the idea that Western rhetorical ideals could not be universally applicable.**

Mercellino (2007) examines the various types of challenges faced by the majority of Indonesian academic writing students at the American-Indonesian Exchange Foundation. The scholar used contrastive rhetoric to analyze systematic textual differences in the English writing styles of Indonesian students compared to native English speakers. The research results showed that Indonesian writers' English texts are characterized by indirectness and non-linear development. In this context, writing a paper on a particular topic is usually approached from a variety of indirectly related perspectives. This style involves a "delayed introduction" in which the subject is implied rather than made explicit (Mercellino, 2007). The thesis statement on a particular topic is usually approached from a variety of indirectly related perspectives. Similarly, arguments tend to be delayed, and the thesis argument is often lost in the text. The rhetorician concludes that writing requires the ability to integrate procedural and substantive knowledge, which involves learning values, practices, and conventions.

Swale (2004) clearly shows that the rhetorical structure of a text is one of the elements underlying the overall characteristics of a genre. Other studies have investigated how the schematic structure of academic book reviews shapes the genre and makes it recognizable among experts in a discourse community. These include Wang's (2006) study of Chinese and Australian newspaper commentary on 9/11.

In this study, the researcher found that Australian texts use evaluative vocabulary twice as often as Chinese texts, by analyzing the behavioral resources of the two texts. This reveals that Australian writers are more evaluative and expressive in revealing their attitudes toward a subject than Chinese writers (Wang, 2006). Other

studies include Dos Santo's (2002) genre analysis of business letters, Martin-Martin's (2005) study of English and Spanish articles, and Petric's (2005) contrastive rhetoric in writing, among many others.

In the recent past, studies on contrastive rhetoric have focused on issues such as, Loanwords and Passivization in English and Arabic (El-zawawy, 2016); Requests in American and British English (Flock, 2016); coherence relationships and information organization in political speeches delivered from French Political Speeches (Lewis, 2017); comparative analysis of the characteristic sentence structures and grammatical patterns in IGBO language versus the Chinese language (Nwamaka, 2016); usage and functions of adverbial clauses within works of fiction and news articles written in both the English and Norwegian languages (Hasselgard, 2017); Mitigation of criticism in English and Chinese book reviews (Qian, 2018); Chinese and English Case Systems (Ping, 2019); English and Indonesian Idioms of the Human Body (Adelina & Suprayogi, 2020); the use of data and research methods in contrastive linguistics (Renata, Defrang & Jansengers, 2020); evaluative terms in Persian and English bed-time stories for children (Namaziandost et al., 2021); and Contrastive Rhetoric and its Implications for Bengali Learners of ESL (Arjumand, 2021). **However, the exploration of varied topics above can be said to suggest the lack of a cohesive theoretical framework, leading to fragmented insights that do not connect the dots between linguistic features and their rhetorical implications.**

In the Kenyan scene, among many other studies not mentioned herein, linguists have used the contrastive rhetorical framework to investigate issues such as the formality level of English in postcolonial Kenya and Great Britain based on the *International Corpus of English* (Budohoska, 2011); the language systems of Lumarachi and English languages, in terms of how their differences affect the Lumarachi learners English (Ouma, 2015); and contrastive Analysis of Dholuo translations of the Hebrew Canon (Kobimbo, 2020). In conclusion, therefore, while past studies on contrastive rhetoric have made significant contributions to our understanding of linguistic and cultural differences, they need to evolve beyond a mere focus on textual analysis to embrace a more holistic approach that encompasses the complexities of cultural identity, individual agency, and the ever-changing nature of communication.

## **5. Research methodology**

The study utilizes a logical review approach to elicit and examine the available literature on the communicative use of rhetorical discourse patterns and second-language writing in different cultures. An in-depth search of academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ERIC was conducted using keywords such as "contrastive rhetoric," "second language learning," and "intercultural communication." Inclusion criteria focused on past studies between 1941 and 2023, published in English and directly related to the research topic. This means that we only reviewed articles focusing on contrastive analysis/rhetoric and writing practices in the second language across cultures. Central to this review article is the development of an analytical framework that enables a structured analysis of key themes, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and empirical findings in the field of contrastive analysis and writing practices in the second language across cultures

## **6. Findings**

Our findings reveal several key insights into the origins, development, theoretical foundations and assumptions, and applications of contrastive analysis to the teaching of a foreign or second language and other disciplines across cultures (see sections 3-4 above)

## **7. Implications of the study**

Over time, contrastive rhetoric has been deployed to establish linguistic genealogies. For instance, it was utilized in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) during the 1960s and early 1970s to explain why certain features or aspects of a target language that learners are trying to acquire can be more challenging or difficult for them to learn compared to other language features. Together with behaviorism and structuralism (language as a set of models), contrastive rhetoric had a major influence on the development of the SLA Curriculum and language teacher training; it laid the theoretical foundations for audio-lingual methods.

Furthermore, contrastive rhetoric has maintained a lasting impact on approaches to teaching writing skills for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Cornor, 2008). The insights from contrastive rhetoric research, which examines how cultural differences influence written communication patterns, have informed pedagogical methods and materials used in ESL and EFL writing instruction. What is more, while increasing our knowledge of preferred writing patterns, it has also influenced our understanding of cultural differences in writing.

Despite its notable ground breaking theoretical position, however, contrastive rhetoric has received a series of criticisms against its assumptions. For example, Kaplan's original views on contrastive rhetoric faced criticism for placing an excessive emphasis on and exalting the writing conventions and rhetorical styles associated with the English language, against which the written discourse patterns of other languages and cultures are unfavorably compared. Kaplan himself rejected his own concept of contrastive analysis as a "concept" (Kaplan, 1987). Similarly, Kowal (1998) criticizes the tendency of contrastive rhetoricians' to define native speaker and reader expectations as rhetorical norms that reflect a normative orientation, thereby overlooking the pluralism and internal diversity within individual language groups. This criticism ironically contradicts the anti-essentialist perspective advocated by the influential Whorf hypothesis that called for a more nuanced, and reflexive understanding of the diverse cultures and languages across the world, to broaden human perspectives and horizons.

In addition, Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric, based on the Sapir Whorf's Hypothesis that language influences our thoughts and perceptions, has been criticized for focusing on a more limited, "weaker" interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, rather than the more prominent, stronger version of the hypothesis, and for overlooking other factors such as

cognitive, linguistic, developmental, social, political, and educational influences in L2 writing (Kubota, 1998; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Zamel, 1997). More significantly, despite criticisms for oversimplification and omission of key issues such as universal grammar, and the sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language use, contrastive analysis has evolved to incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches for exploring linguistic diversity.

## 8. Contributions of the study

The study shows that awareness of contrastive rhetoric can empower educators to design effective teaching strategies that cater for the specific needs of different groups of learners. That is, by incorporating multifaceted cross-cultural rhetorical awareness into language instruction, educators can better support students in developing their writing skills in a second language, thereby supporting their transition towards proficiency in the target language. It is in this respect that Connor (2008) and Canagarajah (2002) stress the need for contrastive rhetoricians to embrace a more holistic analytical approach, one that goes beyond written texts to encompass the broader contextual factors that shape and influence writing styles.

## 9. Recommendations and suggestions

Based on the above discussion, it can be argued that contrastive analysis has a long and established history, dating back to the mid-1900s when it was developed as a systematic approach for comparing different languages and examining the process of language transfer in second language learning. This broader perspective allowed for a more nuanced understanding of language comparison and the process of second language acquisition. Drawing on this understanding, this paper recommends the need for language educators and contrastive rhetoricians to understand the linguistic and cultural conventions in writing, as well as the theories of contrastive rhetoric, to help address the challenges faced by second language learners in multicultural contexts. Based on this understanding, future studies on contrastive rhetoric can focus on identifying inconsistencies and/or contradictions that underlie the current state of the field and directions for future research. This will greatly help to address the aforesaid discrepancies and contribute to its development.

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