

DCC2203 Global Trends and Culture in Creative Content

Platforms and Audience Behavior

Teaching Handout · Platform Logics, Audience Choice, Discovery, Engagement, Fandom, and Metrics

Core idea

Audiences do not simply “use platforms.” Platforms organize visibility, choice, interaction, and monetization, while audiences actively select, interpret, participate in, and move across media environments. Understanding contemporary audience behavior therefore requires studying both human motives and platform logics.

Session overview

This session examines how digital platforms reshape audience behavior and how audiences, in turn, shape content circulation. It moves from foundational audience theories to contemporary platformed behavior: algorithmic discovery, attention, participation, fandom, creator relationships, subscription choices, cross-platform journeys, and data-driven measurement. The aim is not to reduce audiences to “metrics,” but to understand how people make choices, construct meaning, form communities, and respond differently within platform environments.

Learning outcomes

1. Explain how platforms influence content discovery, visibility, engagement, and monetization.
2. Apply key audience theories—including uses and gratifications, encoding/decoding, participatory culture, parasocial interaction, and audience fragmentation—to contemporary media behavior.
3. Analyze audience behavior across different platform logics and identify how user intent changes by platform and context.
4. Distinguish between demographic, psychographic, behavioral, cultural, and platform-based audience segmentation.
5. Interpret common audience metrics without confusing visibility or engagement with meaningful audience relationships.
6. Develop an audience persona and map a cross-platform audience journey for a creative-content idea.

Guiding questions

- Why does the same person behave differently on TikTok, YouTube, Netflix, Instagram, Spotify, or a fan community?
- How much of content discovery is a user choice, and how much is shaped by algorithms and interfaces?
- What makes people stop, watch, share, follow, subscribe, buy, or become fans?
- How should creators use audience data without reducing audiences to numbers?
- How do culture, identity, age, community, and context affect audience interpretation and platform behavior?

1. From the “Mass Audience” to the “Platformed Audience”

Traditional mass media often imagined audiences as large populations gathered around a limited number of channels: cinema screens, radio stations, television networks, newspapers, or major publishers. Digital media greatly expanded choice. Audiences can now move among streaming services, social feeds, creator channels, games, music platforms, podcasts, messaging apps, fan communities, and ecommerce environments within the same day.

This does not mean mass audiences disappeared. Major cultural events can still produce large-scale shared attention. However, contemporary audience behavior is more fragmented, personalized, and cross-platform. Webster (2012) argues that digital abundance changes how public attention is distributed across media options; fragmentation should therefore be studied from an audience-centered perspective rather than assumed to mean that people are sealed inside completely separate media worlds.

Key shift

The audience is no longer only a receiver. A contemporary audience member may be a viewer, searcher, subscriber, commenter, sharer, remixer, reviewer, purchaser, fan, community member, and creator—sometimes within the same media journey.

1.1 Five characteristics of the contemporary audience

- **Active:** people select media based on needs, habits, identities, moods, and contexts.
- **Datafied:** clicks, watch time, completion, shares, searches, skips, and purchases become signals used by platforms and creators.
- **Networked:** audience behavior is influenced by friends, creators, fandoms, communities, trends, and recommendations.
- **Cross-platform:** discovery, consumption, discussion, and purchase may happen in different places.
- **Participatory:** audiences can alter circulation and meaning through comments, remix, memes, fan work, ratings, and community interpretation.

2. What Is a Platform?

A digital platform is more than a website or app. It is an infrastructural environment that connects different groups—users, creators, advertisers, rights holders, businesses, and service providers—while setting rules for visibility, participation, data collection, and monetization. Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe platformization as the penetration of platform infrastructures and economic logics into cultural production, affecting how content is produced, distributed, circulated, and continuously adjusted.

Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) further emphasize that platform societies are organized through interconnected systems of data, algorithms, business models, and governance. For creative-content students, this means that “where content lives” is not a neutral decision. Platform design influences what audiences see, how they interact, and what kinds of content creators are encouraged to produce.

3. Four Platform Logics That Shape Audience Behavior

Platform logic	What it means	Audience effect	Creative implication
Datafication	Behavior is recorded as data: views, clicks, time, searches, shares, purchases.	Audiences receive increasingly personalized interfaces and recommendations.	Creators must understand metrics, but should not confuse measurable behavior with complete audience meaning.
Algorithmic selection	Systems rank, recommend, suppress, or prioritize content.	Different users can encounter different media environments.	Discovery depends on relevance signals, retention, interaction, and platform-specific ranking systems.
Monetization	Platforms connect attention to advertising, subscriptions, transactions, tips, or commerce.	Users face different trade-offs: payment, ads, data, convenience, or exclusivity.	Format, frequency, sponsorship, and calls to action can be shaped by revenue models.
Governance	Platforms establish rules, moderation systems, copyright procedures, and community standards.	Audience participation is enabled but also constrained by platform rules.	Creators must design within technical, legal, and community boundaries.

Important distinction

The platform does not completely control the audience, and the audience does not behave independently of the platform. Audience behavior emerges from the interaction among user motives, cultural context, social relationships, interface design, algorithms, and available content.

4. Foundational Theories for Understanding Audience Behavior

4.1 Uses and Gratifications: What Do People Use Media For?

The uses and gratifications tradition shifts the question from “What does media do to people?” to “What do people do with media?” Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) argued that audiences actively select media to satisfy social and psychological needs. This approach is highly relevant to platform behavior because the same user may open different apps for different purposes.

- Information and learning: searching for explanations, tutorials, news, reviews, or practical knowledge.
- Entertainment and escape: relaxing, filling time, mood regulation, humor, music, drama, or fantasy.
- Social connection: maintaining relationships, participating in communities, or sharing experiences.
- Identity and self-expression: signaling taste, values, lifestyle, fandom, expertise, or belonging.

- Utility and transaction: shopping, comparing products, navigating places, finding services, or completing tasks.

Classroom example

A person may use TikTok to fill spare time, YouTube to learn a skill, Instagram to maintain identity and social presence, Netflix for immersive long-form entertainment, and Discord or a fan group for community. “The audience” is therefore not a single stable behavior.

4.2 Encoding/Decoding: Audiences Do Not All Read the Same Meaning

Hall (1980) proposed that media messages are encoded within frameworks of meaning, but audiences decode those messages from their own social and cultural positions. Audiences may accept a preferred meaning, negotiate it, or oppose it. In platform environments, this becomes visible through comments, reaction videos, fan interpretations, criticism, memes, and counter-content.

- Dominant reading: the audience broadly accepts the preferred meaning.
- Negotiated reading: the audience accepts parts of the meaning but modifies it according to context or experience.
- Oppositional reading: the audience actively rejects or reinterprets the preferred meaning.

4.3 Participatory Culture: Audiences Help Content Travel

Jenkins (2006) describes convergence culture as a media environment in which content flows across multiple platforms and audiences actively participate in that circulation. Contemporary audiences do not merely watch a text; they can extend it through fan edits, commentary, subtitling, memes, reaction videos, fan fiction, playlists, community events, and recommendations.

Participation changes the value of content because attention is no longer only measured by the original view. A piece of content can gain cultural life through what audiences do with it after viewing. This is especially important for franchises, music, games, series, fandoms, and creator communities.

4.4 Parasocial Interaction: Feeling Close to People We Do Not Personally Know

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the concept of para-social interaction to describe the sense of intimacy that audiences may experience with media performers despite the relationship being one-sided. Social media intensifies this possibility because creators speak directly to cameras, post frequently, disclose everyday experiences, reply to comments, and appear in informal settings.

Parasocial connection is not automatically harmful; it can support loyalty, learning, community, and emotional attachment. However, creators and audiences should remain aware of boundaries, authenticity performance, commercial influence, and the difference between perceived familiarity and reciprocal personal relationship.

Current evidence—use carefully

Deloitte’s 2026 U.S. survey found that 33% of respondents overall said they felt a stronger personal connection to social-media creators than to TV personalities or actors; among Gen Z respondents, the figure was 52% (Deloitte, 2026). These findings describe U.S. consumers and should not be treated as a universal global percentage.

4.5 Audience Fragmentation and Cross-Platform Repertoires

Digital choice creates fragmentation, but people also assemble “media repertoires” that combine several platforms. In other words, audiences are fragmented at the level of options, yet individuals themselves often move across services. This is why a creator should not assume that the target audience belongs to only one platform.

5. Current Evidence: How People Use Platforms in 2026

Global data underline the scale and diversity of platformed media behavior. DataReportal’s April 2026 update estimates 5.79 billion active social-media user identities worldwide, equivalent to 69.9% of the global population, while also warning that “user identities” do not necessarily equal unique human individuals (Kemp, 2026).

The Digital 2026 Global Overview Report also reports that online adults used an average of 6.75 social platforms per month in GWI’s Q2 2025 data, illustrating that platform use is typically a portfolio rather than a single-platform habit (Kemp, 2025).

Evidence	What it suggests	Important caveat
5.79 billion social-media user identities worldwide in April 2026 (DataReportal).	Social media is embedded in mainstream global media behavior.	User identities are not the same as unique individuals; access remains unequal by region and demographic group.
Average of 6.75 social platforms used per month by online adults in GWI Q2 2025 data reported by DataReportal.	Audience behavior is cross-platform; creators should think in platform portfolios.	This is an average across surveyed online adults and masks major age, country, and behavior differences.
50.2% of adult social-media users globally cited keeping in touch with friends/family as a reason for use; 39.7% cited filling spare time (DataReportal, 2025).	The same platforms satisfy social and entertainment needs simultaneously.	Motives vary significantly by platform, age, culture, and market.
52% of U.S. fans said social media is their primary discovery route for new entertainment; 73% among Gen Z fans (Deloitte, 2026).	Discovery may happen on social platforms even when full consumption occurs elsewhere.	U.S. survey of 3,575 consumers; fan-specific measures should not be generalized globally.
55% of U.S. fans said fandom leads them to engage across multiple platforms; roughly 70% among Gen Z and millennial fans (Deloitte, 2026).	Fandom is a cross-platform journey, not a single viewing event.	Self-identified fan sample; different definitions of fandom produce different results.

Interpretation

The most useful insight is not that one platform is “winning.” It is that audiences move among platforms according to different needs: discovery, deep viewing, social connection, community, search, identity, fandom, and purchase.

6. The Platformed Audience Journey

A useful way to study contemporary behavior is to map the sequence of actions through which a person encounters and builds a relationship with content. The journey is not always linear; audiences may enter at different points, skip stages, or move backward and forward.

Stage	Audience question	Typical behavior	Creator implication
1. Discover	Why did I encounter this?	Feed recommendation, search, friend share, creator mention, trailer, meme.	Design for discoverability and immediate recognition.

2. Select	Why should I stop or click?	Scanning thumbnail, title, first seconds, social proof, familiar topic.	Make value, emotion, or curiosity clear quickly.
3. Consume	Will I stay?	Watching, listening, reading, skipping, bingeing, background use.	Match pacing and format to platform and context.
4. Engage	Is this worth reacting to?	Like, save, comment, share, rate, replay.	Create meaningful reasons for response—not only empty calls to action.
5. Participate	Can I do something with this?	Remix, duet, fan art, theory, review, community discussion.	Design open spaces for participation and interpretation.
6. Follow / Join	Do I want an ongoing relationship?	Follow creator, subscribe, join community, save playlist.	Build consistency, trust, and recurring value.
7. Convert	Will I exchange money, data, or effort?	Subscription, ticket, merchandise, donation, purchase.	Align the offer with audience value and trust.
8. Advocate	Will I bring others in?	Recommend, invite, create fan content, defend or promote.	Strong audience relationships can generate organic circulation.

7. Platform-Specific Audience Behavior

A person does not carry exactly the same intention from one platform to another. Platform culture, interface, content format, social norms, and recommendation systems shape expectations. The table below is illustrative rather than permanent; features and user practices change over time.

Platform / environment	Common audience intention	Dominant discovery path	Typical engagement	Creative design implication
TikTok / short-form feed	Entertainment, discovery, trends, quick learning, identity expression.	Algorithmic “For You” style feed, search, shares.	Watch time, replays, shares, comments, remix.	Immediate context, strong opening, vertical composition, modular storytelling.
YouTube	Search, learning, entertainment, creator followership, deep viewing.	Search, home recommendations, subscriptions, suggested videos.	Watch duration, comments, likes, playlisting, subscriptions.	Balance discoverability with depth; title/thumbnail and sustained retention matter.
Instagram	Identity, social connection, aesthetic inspiration, creator/brand discovery.	Feed, Reels, Stories, Explore, social graph.	Saves, shares, DMs, comments, follows.	Strong visual identity, shareability, social relevance, and continuity across formats.
Netflix / SVOD	Immersive entertainment, premium long-form viewing.	Homepage personalization, genre rows, recommendations, external buzz.	Viewing completion, continuation, return behavior.	World-building, episode flow, franchise/fandom potential, external discovery strategy.
Spotify / audio streaming	Music, mood management, discovery, routine, background use.	Search, playlists, algorithmic recommendations, social sharing.	Saves, repeats, playlist adds, follows.	Think about mood, sequencing, repeatability, metadata, and discoverability.
Discord / fan community / group space	Belonging, conversation, coordination, identity, fandom.	Invites, community links, existing fandom networks.	Conversation, contribution, events, peer support.	Community management and trust matter more than broadcast reach.

Creator lesson

Do not ask only “Where is my audience?” Ask “What is my audience trying to do in this environment?” Platform choice should follow audience intention and content purpose.

8. Key Audience Behaviors in Platform Environments

8.1 Discovery is increasingly hybrid

Discovery may come from algorithms, deliberate search, social recommendations, influencers, fandom communities, advertising, news coverage, or offline events. Deloitte’s 2026 U.S. fan research illustrates this hybrid journey: more than half of fans reported social media as their main way to discover new entertainment, but many then moved elsewhere to watch, listen, or purchase the full version (Deloitte, 2026).

For creators, this means discovery content and consumption content may be different objects. A 20-second clip can function as the doorway to a 90-minute film, a live concert, a game, a podcast, or a paid product.

8.2 Attention is contextual, not simply “short”

It is tempting to say that audiences now have “short attention spans,” but this oversimplifies behavior. People can spend seconds on one item and hours on another. What changes is the threshold for choosing where to invest attention. In high-choice environments, audiences quickly evaluate relevance, trust, entertainment value, and effort.

- Snackable attention: short, low-commitment moments during waiting or spare time.
- Focused attention: tutorials, long-form commentary, gaming, cinema, or series when the user intentionally commits time.
- Background attention: music, podcasts, livestreams, or video playing while another activity occurs.
- Social attention: content watched mainly because it is being discussed within a group or community.

8.3 Engagement is not one behavior

A “like” is different from a save; a save is different from a share; a comment is different from joining a community; and all of these are different from purchase or long-term loyalty. Creators should interpret engagement according to the audience goal.

Behavior	Possible meaning	Caution
Like / reaction	Low-effort approval, acknowledgment, identity signaling.	May not indicate deep attention or future behavior.
Save / bookmark	Future utility, reference value, desire to return.	Not all saves become later consumption.
Share / send	Social relevance, usefulness, humor, identity, advocacy.	Can be positive or critical circulation.
Comment	Interpretation, emotion, debate, question, community participation.	High comment volume can reflect controversy rather than satisfaction.
Follow / subscribe	Expectation of recurring value or relationship.	Follower counts do not equal active audiences.
Purchase / subscribe / attend	High commitment and perceived value.	Conversion can be influenced by price, timing, access, and trust.
Fan creation / advocacy	Deep identification and cultural participation.	May include unauthorized derivative work or conflict over ownership.

9. Audience Segmentation: Beyond Age and Gender

Demographics remain useful, but they are insufficient for creative-content strategy. Two people of the same age and income can have very different motivations, identities, cultural references, and platform habits. Strong audience analysis combines multiple segmentation lenses.

Segmentation lens	Examples	Why it matters
Demographic	Age, gender, education, income, life stage.	Helps describe population patterns but not motives by itself.
Geographic / cultural	Country, language, region, urban/rural context, cultural norms.	Shapes humor, symbolism, values, references, accessibility, and platform availability.
Psychographic	Values, interests, aspirations, lifestyle, personality, attitudes.	Explains why a person may care about a story or creator.

Behavioral	Frequency, loyalty, search habits, purchase behavior, bingeing, sharing.	Shows what people actually do rather than only who they are.
Platform-based	Preferred platforms, devices, formats, discovery routes.	Reveals where and how to design the encounter.
Need-state / context	Relaxing, learning, commuting, socializing, escaping, shopping.	Audience intention can change by moment, even for the same person.
Community / fandom	Genre community, creator fandom, gaming guild, subculture, hobby group.	Shared identity can be a stronger predictor of participation than broad demographics.

10. Building a Useful Audience Persona

A persona is not a fictional stereotype. It is a structured synthesis of audience evidence used to make design decisions. A good persona should connect identity, goals, behavior, platform habits, barriers, and cultural context.

- Who: age/life stage only where relevant; location and cultural context.
- Why: core motivations, values, needs, and frustrations.
- What: preferred genres, formats, creators, topics, and aesthetics.
- Where: platform repertoire, device use, discovery routes.
- When: typical contexts of use—commute, bedtime, study break, weekend, social event.
- How: watch, listen, scroll, search, save, share, participate, buy.
- Trust: who or what influences decisions—friends, creators, reviews, communities, institutions.
- Barrier: price, time, language, access, overload, skepticism, cultural mismatch.
- Desired outcome: what the audience wants to feel, learn, solve, express, or become.

Avoid persona stereotypes

A weak persona says: “Gen Z likes TikTok and short videos.” A stronger persona says: “A second-year design student uses short video during transit for discovery, saves tutorials for later, trusts niche creators more than celebrity endorsements, and moves to YouTube when a topic requires depth.”

11. Audience Metrics: What They Measure—and What They Do Not

Platform analytics make audiences visible through numbers, but every metric is a partial representation of behavior. Metrics should be interpreted in relation to a creative objective. A campaign seeking awareness should not use the same success indicators as a fan-community project or a subscription product.

Metric	What it can indicate	Useful for	What it cannot prove
Reach / unique viewers	How many accounts or people were potentially exposed.	Awareness and distribution.	Whether people paid attention or cared.
Impressions	How often content was displayed.	Frequency and exposure.	Unique audience size or quality.
Watch time / average view duration	Depth of viewing and retention.	Video and long-form content.	Why people stayed or left.
Completion rate	Share of viewers reaching the end.	Short-form, ads, episodic content.	Emotional impact or long-term loyalty.
Engagement rate	Relative amount of visible interaction.	Comparing posts or community response.	Positive sentiment or real-world action.
Shares / sends	Circulation and social relevance.	Virality, advocacy, utility.	Whether the sharing is supportive.

Saves	Perceived future value or usefulness.	Tutorials, inspiration, reference content.	Whether the user returns.
Follower / subscriber growth	Growing ongoing audience relationship.	Channel-building.	Active attention or retention by itself.
Churn / return	Audience loss and re-entry.	Subscription services and memberships.	The full reason for leaving or returning.
Conversion	Action such as purchase, sign-up, ticket, or subscription.	Commercial outcomes.	Cultural value, emotional meaning, or long-term advocacy.

Critical rule

Do not optimize a creative work for the easiest metric to increase. Choose metrics that match the actual learning, communication, cultural, community, or business objective.

12. Culture Changes Audience Behavior

Platform infrastructures may be global, but audience interpretation remains culturally situated. Language, humor, social norms, family structures, gender expectations, class, religion, fandom culture, political context, and local media history all affect how people interpret content and how they behave around it.

This means that a creator cannot assume that a successful format will produce the same response in every market. Even when an interface is identical, the cultural meaning of participation may differ. For example, public commenting, self-disclosure, humor, criticism, or influencer trust can vary by context.

12.1 Questions for cross-cultural audience analysis

- What cultural references does the audience need in order to understand the content?
- Which emotions or themes are widely relatable, and which are locally specific?
- How does the target audience express agreement, criticism, humor, or fandom?
- Are there local norms around privacy, public self-expression, authority, family, gender, or status?
- Does localization require only translation—or adaptation of tone, symbols, pacing, casting, or platform strategy?
- Which groups may be excluded by language, price, access, interface design, or representation?

13. The Creator–Platform–Audience Feedback Loop

Contemporary creative production is increasingly iterative. Creators release content; audiences respond; platforms record behavior; algorithms redistribute content; creators observe metrics and comments; and the next content decision is influenced by that feedback. Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe cultural commodities in platform environments as increasingly contingent and continuously reworked in response to platform and user data.

Feedback loop

CREATE → DISTRIBUTE → AUDIENCE RESPONSE → DATA + INTERPRETATION → ALGORITHMIC REDISTRIBUTION → CREATIVE ADJUSTMENT → CREATE AGAIN

This loop can support experimentation and responsiveness, but it can also create creative dependency. If creators follow metrics too narrowly, they may repeat what performs well until the work becomes formulaic. The professional challenge is to use feedback as evidence without allowing the platform to become the only creative director.

14. In-Class Workshop · Audience Journey & Platform Fit

Duration: 35–40 minutes · Group size: 3–4 students

Task

Choose one creative-content idea: a short film, series concept, music artist, social campaign, branded content idea, documentary, podcast, game concept, or creator channel. Define one primary audience segment, then map how that audience is likely to discover, consume, engage with, and continue the relationship across platforms.

Step A · Build a mini persona

7. Who is this audience, and what cultural or life context matters?
8. What need or motivation brings them to this type of content?

9. Which platforms do they regularly use—and for what different purposes?
10. Whose recommendations do they trust?
11. What could stop them from engaging?

Step B · Map the journey

12. Discovery: where do they first encounter the content?
13. Selection: what makes them stop, click, or sample?
14. Consumption: where does the main experience happen?
15. Engagement: what action would be meaningful—save, share, comment, follow?
16. Participation: can they remix, discuss, review, or contribute?
17. Continuation: what brings them back after the main content ends?
18. Conversion: if relevant, what could they subscribe to, buy, attend, or support?
19. Advocacy: why would they recommend the content to someone else?

Expected output

- One audience persona card.
- One cross-platform audience journey map.
- A two-sentence explanation of why each selected platform fits the audience behavior.
- One metric that matters at each major stage of the journey.
- One cultural or ethical risk the creator should monitor.

15. Connection to Course Assignments

This session directly supports the course’s audience and platform analysis work. Students can use today’s framework to strengthen the audience dimension of the Trend Observation / Trend Mapping assignment and later develop a more complete Audience & Platform Strategy Sheet for the final creative-content proposal.

Component	What students should demonstrate
Audience definition	A specific segment based on more than age or gender.
Audience need	A clear motivation, problem, aspiration, emotion, or cultural tension.
Platform fit	A reasoned explanation of why a particular platform supports the audience intention.
Discovery path	How the audience is likely to encounter the content.
Engagement design	What meaningful action the content invites.
Metrics	Indicators that match the actual objective.
Cultural consideration	How language, identity, representation, access, or norms may affect response.
Cross-platform logic	How one platform can lead to another rather than duplicating the same content everywhere.

16. Key Takeaways

20. Audiences are active, but their choices are shaped by platform design, algorithms, social relationships, and cultural context.
21. The same person can behave differently across platforms because needs and platform logics differ.
22. Discovery, consumption, engagement, participation, fandom, and conversion are different behaviors and should not be measured with the same metric.
23. Demographics alone are insufficient; audience strategy should also consider motives, behaviors, culture, community, context, and platform repertoire.
24. Algorithms influence visibility, but audience interpretation remains diverse and culturally situated.
25. Strong creative strategy connects audience need to platform fit rather than posting the same content everywhere.
26. Audience data is evidence—not a complete definition of human experience.
27. The goal is not to “hack the algorithm”; it is to design meaningful content that understands both people and the systems through which they encounter it.

Closing question

If your audience sees your content on one platform, where should the relationship go next—and why would they choose to continue it?

Discussion questions

- Are audiences really more active today, or have platforms simply become better at predicting and shaping behavior?
- Is an algorithm a new form of media gatekeeper?
- Why might a creator have millions of views but a weak community?
- When does personalization become helpful, and when does it narrow cultural discovery?
- What makes a creator feel “authentic,” and can authenticity itself become a performance?
- Should creators design for metrics if the metric may reward content that is repetitive, sensational, or culturally reductive?
- What is more valuable: a large audience, a loyal audience, or a participatory audience?

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Instructor note on current statistics

Platform metrics and market statistics change quickly. The global figures in this handout use DataReportal's Digital 2026 reports; the fandom and creator-connection figures use Deloitte's 2026 U.S. consumer survey. When reusing this handout in a later academic year, refresh the evidence snapshot while retaining the conceptual frameworks.