Securitization theory and its empirical application: a literature review

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ABSTRACT **Introduction:** Securitization theory posits that securitization happens when actors frame political agenda issues as existential threats through their discourse, prompting states to take action in response. This article explores the challenges in the empirical application of the Copenhagen School's securitization theory in International Relations research. **Materials and methods:** We conducted a systematic review of articles published in journals indexed in the Scopus database with an impact factor in the first quartile. Initially, we selected 260 articles that mentioned the term "securitization/securitisation" in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. After excluding those lacking an empirical application of securitization theory, 184 articles remained. We then carried out a content analysis of the logical structure of these articles' arguments, categorizing how each one applied the concept of securitization according to the stages of the process (non-politicized, politicized, securitized, securitizing actor) and its variables. **Results:** Out of the 184 articles, 110 set out to apply securitization theory, but only 11 successfully did so in a way that clearly confirmed securitization. These 11 studies showed how topics were securitized by following the stages outlined in the original theoretical framework. **Discussion:** The challenges in empirically applying securitization theory arise from two main factors: the researchers themselves and the theory itself. Many articles faced methodological hurdles and lacked rigor in operationalizing the theoretical elements required to confirm the securitization of a topic, revealing limitations among the researchers. Additionally, the theory demands a high level of empirical evidence, which makes its application more difficult. This indicates a need to revisit the theory and consider integrating models that facilitate empirical studies on securitization.

I. Introduction[1]

The use of the Securitization Theory from the Copenhagen School increased during the 2000s in international security studies, where the theoretical framework of the School represented a critical turning point. However, although the new theoretical approach offers the possibility of addressing contemporary themes in the security agenda, securitization theory has been, and continues to be, heavily criticized even after over 25 years since its introduction.

The theory explains the process by which a theme to enter a country's security agenda and has become a reference point in international security studies. However, strong critiques suggest the existence of challenges in the empirical operationalization of the theory. Therefore, the first research question guiding this work was focused on these problems, assuming that the theory had flaws. Nevertheless, after collecting and analyzing 260 articles, in a process that will be described below, the research question was redefined to identify the problems academic papers face in operationalizing the theory: Why do academic papers in the field of international relations struggle to empirically apply the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School?

As mentioned above, the initial research path was based on the hypothesis that securitization theory was flawed. With this in mind, we selected, from among 260 articles that mentioned the term securitization in their titles, abstracts, and keywords, 184 studies that specifically addressed the empirical application of the securitization theory in international relations. It was expected that the systematic analysis of these articles would provide evidence of the points where there were flaws in the empirical application of the theory, issues that would be subject to criticism. However, the analysis of the studies revealed that it was impossible to systematize theoretical flaws.

Therefore, the research changed focus, but not to claim that the theory is perfect. It may have flaws in its empirical application. We do not intend to suggest to the authors are exempt from responsibility for failing when applying the theory or that there is no need for theoretical updates and adaptations. Instead, this work argues for the necessity of a preliminary debate before asserting that the theory is flawed.

When reflecting on these initial questions, it is essential to resume the concept of theory. Using the seminal work by Thomas Khun (2017), every theory has two essential characteristics. First, its achievements were unprecedented, to the point of attracting a lasting group of supporters. Second, its accomplishments are open to contribute to practitioners in the field, allowing them to address a wide range of problems. Securitization theory undoubtedly embodies these two essential characteristics, which lead us to the following concerns.

How rigorous is the application of the securitization theory in international relations articles? How precise were the authors in addressing securitization theory? Also, how much attention have international relations analysts paid to methodology in their scientific work? Finally, how can one assert that securitization theory is flawed if it has not been applied as described by the scholars who developed it?

This article was structured around these questions. Unfortunately, many studies that aim to demonstrate the existence of securitization processes encounter difficulties with empirical verification. These issues relate to two main aspects. The first is the lack of precision in adopting the concept of securitization and carrying out the analysis as determined by securitization theory. The second is the need for methodological rigour in studies published in scientific journals.

Securitization Theory primarily involves hypothetical and counterfactual arguments about future alternatives. The statements always include two predictions: what will happen if securitizing action are not taken, and what will happen if they are. Research on securitization is qualitative in nature, involving the analysis of three stages: nonpoliticized, politicized and securitized. In addition, its development requires (i) identifying the securitizing agent and the discourse they use to socially construct the threat; (ii) analyzing the capacity of this discourse to convince a specific audience of the risks of the threat; and (iii) studying the emergency policies and actions that states adopt to confront the threat. In other words, empirical evidence of securitization involves an analytical roadmap that demands, from the researcher's perspective, a focus on securitizing discourses and their ability to convince an audience of the need to adopt emergency measures.

This study addresses the issue through an exploratory methodology, adopting a systematic bibliographic review. The research mapped scientific articles that used the securitization theory framework and examined its empirical operationalization. The articles were sourced from international relations jour-

nals indexed in the Scopus database, with research impact classified in the first quartile.

The article is structured into five sections, including this introduction. The following section presents the theoretical and methodological elements of the research, while the third and fourth sections systematize and discuss the findings of the study. Finally, the fifth section critiques the results based on criticisms of securitization theory, bringing the article to a conclusion.

II. Theoretical and methodological elements

This section explains the theoretical and methodological elements of the study. The research examined articles that used the securitization theory, published between 2000 and 2016, and sourced from journals indexed in the Scopus database. The search focused on journals with a research impact classified in the first quartile, identifying 100 journals in the fields of (a) social sciences and (b) political science and international relations. The term "securitization/securitisation" was used to find articles that adopted the word in the title, abstract, or keywords, resulting in 260 articles which were divided into four categories (Figure 1).

The articles that developed the *empirical application* of the securitization theory, identified as having an empirical object in the title, abstract and keywords, formed the first category, which was analyzed in this research. The critical category brought together all the articles that did not have an empirical object in the title, abstract or keywords. Its aim was to provide a critical reading of the theory. The *authors* of this category identified the articles published by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap Wilde, and Lane Hansen. Finally, the articles allocated to the '*economics*' category used the term securitization in economic terms and without any reference to the theory of the Copenhagen School (observed by examining the bibliographical references of the articles).

Figure 1 - The flow of the collection of international articles
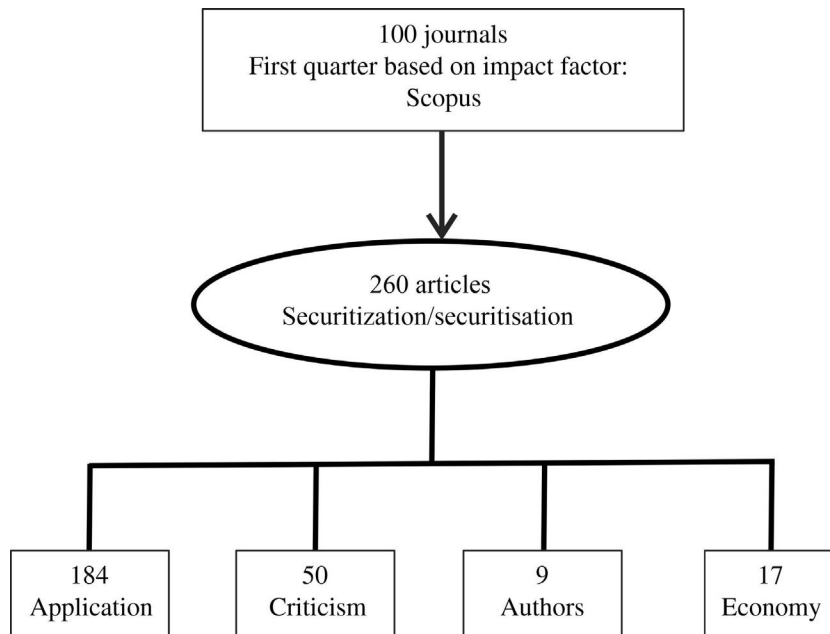
Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

The period from 2000 to 2016 was selected considering that the first book presenting the theory, _Security: A New Framework of Analysis_, by Buzan, Waever, and Wilde, was published in 1998. After that, the research community started to use the premises presented in the book, publishing the first studies in the main scientific journals in the early 2000s.

The decision to end the research period in 2016 was made by observing the annual stability in the number of articles from 2014-2016 (Figure 2). In those three years, about 20 articles per year mentioned the empirical application of securitization theory, which suggested its consolidation in international relations and its subarea of international security.

As mentioned above, the argument developed in this study begins by analysing the articles classified as _applications_. The database for this category proved to be quite diverse. The data in Table 1 shows the articles organized by journals.

Forty-eight of the 100 journals ranked in the first quartile published articles presenting an empirical application of securitization theory. Sixty percent of the articles were concentrated in only ten journals. Another interesting fact is the concentration of articles by country, observed according to the country of the first author's university (Figure 3). Ten articles had three authors, and 42 had two authors.
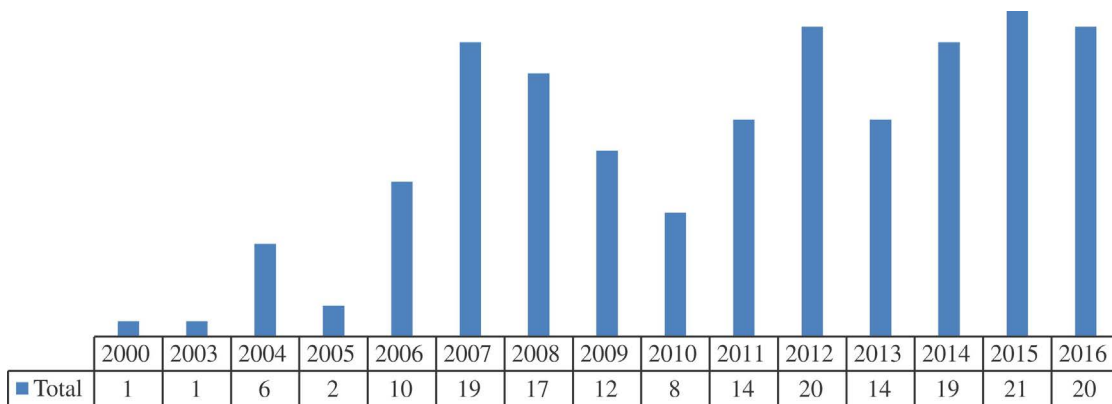
Although the theory originated in Denmark, only two authors are linked to Danish universities. There was greater representation in the United Kingdom. Figure 4 shows the distribution of articles according to region (considering the country of the first author's university).

Finally, the preliminary analysis attempted to separate the articles by theme. The separation was based on the titles. As a result, the articles were divided into the following themes[2]: Conflicts, Energy, Gender, HIV/AIDS, Environment, Migration, Politics, Health, Terrorism and Trafficking.

This classification by themes was based on the titles of the articles. The titles were examined to verify what the authors were analyzing. We chose to frame the articles according to what the authors stated in the titles of their articles. Thus, all articles that mention _conflicts_ were classified as such, while _energy_ included all articles that mention the analysis of some energy source.

[2] The articles were classified by theme rather than sectors, as the Copenhagen School proposed. This decision was made considering the themes observed in the sample, revealing the research topics' diversity. In addition, the sectors proposed the school

Figure 2 - Frequency of publication per year

	2000	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
■ Total	1	1	6	2	10	19	17	12	8	14	20	14	19	21	20

Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

Table 1 - Articles organized by journal

Journal	Total	Journal	Total
Security Dialogue	42	International Studies Quarterly	2
Geopolitics	17	International Studies Review	2
Citizenship Studies	10	Journal of Contemporary China	2
Millennium: Journal of International Studies	10	Journal of European Integration	2
Cambridge Review of International Affairs	7	Journal of Strategic Studies	2
Mediterranean Politics	6	Capitalism Nature Socialism	1
European Journal of International Relations	5	Comparative European Politics	1
International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics	5	Democratization	1
Journal of Common Market Studies	5	European Journal of International Law	1
Australian Journal of International Affairs	4	European Union Politics	1
International Feminist Journal of Politics	4	Foreign Policy Analysis	1
Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics	4	Global Crime	1
Journal of International Relations and Development	4	Information Society	1
Journal of Peace Research	4	International Studies Perspectives	1
Asian Security	3	Journal of Conflict Resolution	1
Global Governance	3	Journal of Eastern African Studies	1
International Peacekeeping	3	Nationalities Papers	1
International Relations of the Asia-Pacific	3	Politics	1
Perspectives on Politics	3	Post-Soviet Affairs	1
Review of African Political Economy	3	Revue Française de Science Politique	1
Review of International Political Economy	3	Space and Polity	1
Security Studies	3	Survival	1
Contemporary Politics	2	Terrorism and Political Violence	1
Critical Social Policy	2	World Politics	1

Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.
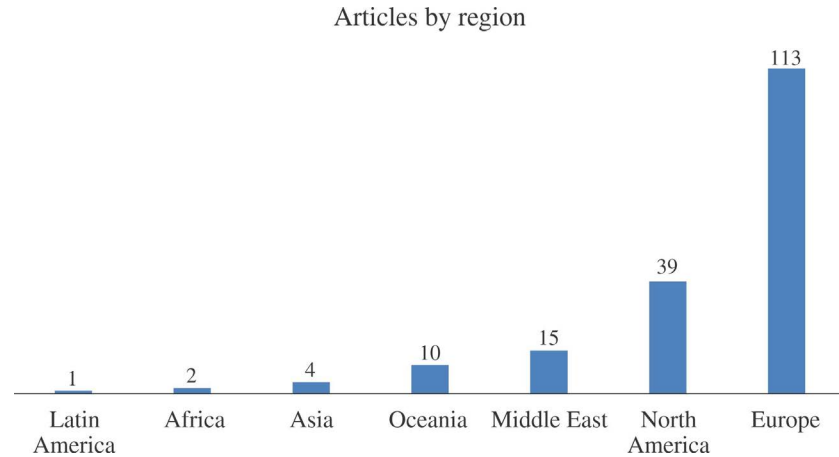
Figure 3 - Country of the first author's university

Country of the first author's university
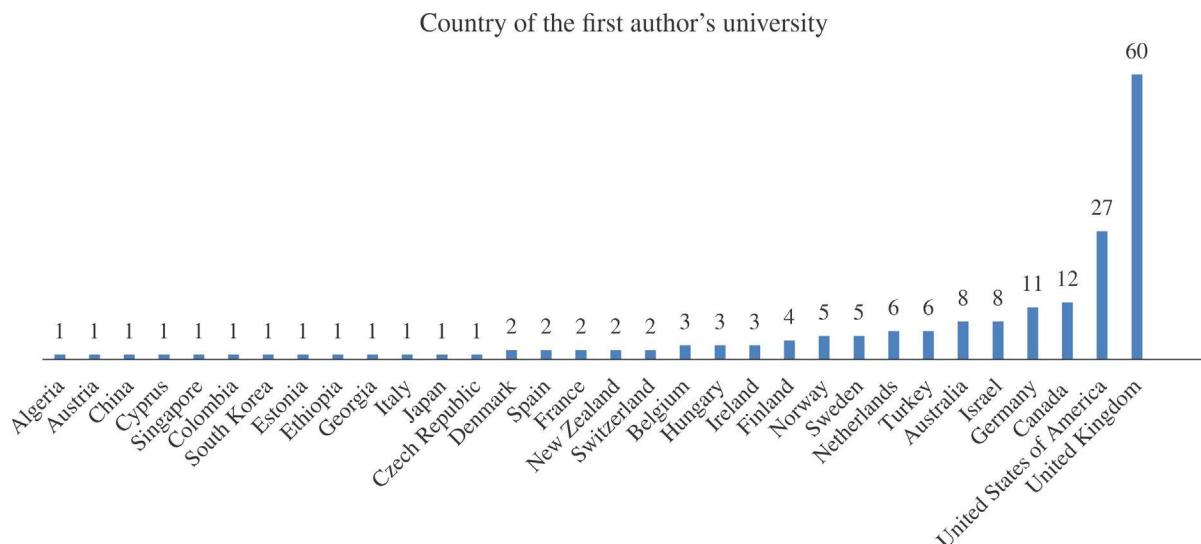
Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

could be revised and adjusted
to current international policy,
which address topics that the
original proposal needs to
contemplate.

Figure 4 - Articles by region

Articles by region

Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

Articles that mention gender or feminism were classified as *gender*, and those that mentioned *HIV/AIDS* in the title were classified as such. Studies classified as *migration* mentioned the terms migration or borders. Articles that mention environmental issues in the title were allocated to the *environment* category. All articles that mentioned the name of a specific state were classified as *politics*. Articles that mentioned health, disease or hunger were categorized as *health*. Articles that expressly mentioned *terrorism* were classified as such, and any article that mentioned something related to trafficking was classified as *trafficking*.

In addition to the eight themes, a specific category *that does not apply* was included, designating those articles that did not apply securitization theory empirically. The analysis regarding the non-application was conducted using content analysis after reading the articles. Figure 5 shows the articles according to their classification by themes, including the category that *does not apply*.

After the content analysis, which identified the articles classified as *does not apply*, the previous classification based on the titles was rearranged, resulting in the data shown in Figure 3. Thus, we excluded the 74 articles that did

Figure 5 - Classification of articles by themes

Classification of articles by themes
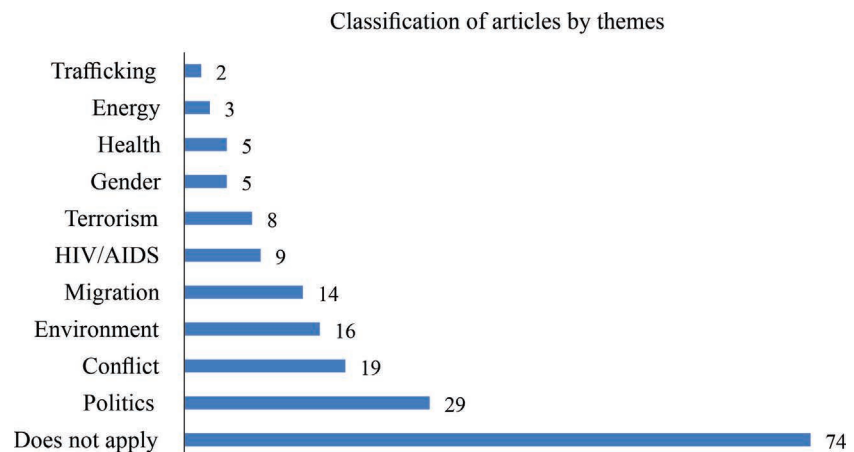
Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

not empirically apply the concept of securitization. The final sample therefore totalled 110 articles, which will be examined in the following sections.

This section offers technical aspects of the database and presents significant inferences for the analysis. One is the capillarity of the theory, which was spread beyond Europe, reaching other regions without the same intensity. Another inference is the importance of the securitization theory for international relations. The theory is present in about 50% of the 100 international relations journals indexed in the Scopus database, with research impact classified in the first quartile.

Finally, the first reading of the articles revealed the most important inference. Seventy-four articles did not empirically apply the securitization theory, despite the fact that the term was mentioned in the title, abstract and keywords, which indicates the need for great commitment from authors with the use of the theory.

Reflecting on these 74 articles is an exercise that is independent of the securitization theory. Instead, it is a reflection that tries to understand why authors cite a theory and an empirical object as essential elements of their articles (mentioning them in the title, abstract, and keywords of the work) while failing to use the theory throughout the study effectively. Again, this phenomenon demonstrates that the problem lies with international relations analysts rather than securitization theory.

It is important to remember that questioning theories is an essential scientific practice. As Khun (2017) has shown, scientific revolutions are disintegrating complements of the tradition of scientific activity. Theories are connected to scientific tradition because professionals can no longer avoid anomalies. Studies must be conducted to guide professionals to a new set of commitments and grounds to support scientific practice.

However, Kuhn (2017) also states that effective research rarely begins until a scientific community believes it has answered questions such as: what are the fundamental entities that form the analysis? How do these entities interact with each other, and in what sense? What questions can legitimately be asked about these entities, and what techniques can be employed in the search for solutions? For the author, "questions like these are firmly embedded in the educational initiation that prepares and licenses the student for professional practice. Because this education is both rigorous and rigid" (Kuhn, 2017, p. 696).

Although the trajectory of science indicates the need for scientific revolutions, this revolution must be guided by rigour and technique, elements that were not observed in the articles that formed the sample analyzed.

III. Results: content analysis

This section presents the results of the content analysis of the 110 articles that applied the securitization theory. The objective is to gain a general understanding of the corpus analyzed and provide an in-depth analysis of the empirical application of the theory. We read all articles and took notes on sheets indicating the variables to be observed during the reading. In this way, we were able to verify the process of empirical application of securitization theory in the articles examined.

The variables used in the analysis were defined according to the essential elements of securitization theory. The theory establishes a *continuum* to show how a nonpoliticized issue can become an existential threat based on the speech made by a securitizing agent and addressed to an audience (see Silva & Pereira, 2019, p. 4). This audience needs to be convinced of the urgency of adopting emergency measures by the state to deal with the threat. We chose to follow the structure established by the Theory to empirically prove that a certain topic was securitized. Therefore, the variables were: *securitizing agent* (if the authors identify the securitizing agent); *nonpoliticized* (the description of the object/theme before it became a topic on the government's agenda); *discourses* (identification of the securitizing agent's discourse about the theme under analysis); *public policies* (the identification of a political act, with the definition of policies on the object/theme); *extrapolation* (the definition of the policy limit and when that limit was exceeded); *emergency action* (defining the policy limit and how, what action, which political movement demonstrated that the limit had been exceeded); *speech act* (the specific discourse that separates the politicized object/them from the securitized object/theme).

The partial results are presented by variable. Also, the result of the analysis demonstrates the attempts at empirical operationalization of the securitization theory. Figure 6 presents the analysis by variables.

Figure 6 shows the total number of articles that proposed applying the securitization theory. The most occurring variable was the *securitizing agent*. Although it is the most frequent variable, it was present in 54 articles, i.e., only 49%.

The second most frequent variable was *extrapolation*. According to the theory, this is a crucial element of securitization. However, only 45% of the articles demonstrated this variable. The *public policies* variable was present in 42 articles (38%) and *emergency action* in 33 (30%). Finally, the least frequent variable was *nonpoliticized*. Only 29% of the authors identified their issues before they entered the government's agenda, i.e., when the theme still needed to be politicized.

With this analysis, the criteria established by the securitization theory for its empirical operationalization still needed to be fully met by the sample analyzed in this study. Furthermore, there was no consensus on any proposed variables, as none occurred in 50% of the articles.

The analysis considering the classification of the articles in themes represented a significant contribution to the research, providing individualized

Figure 6 - Variables of the securitization process
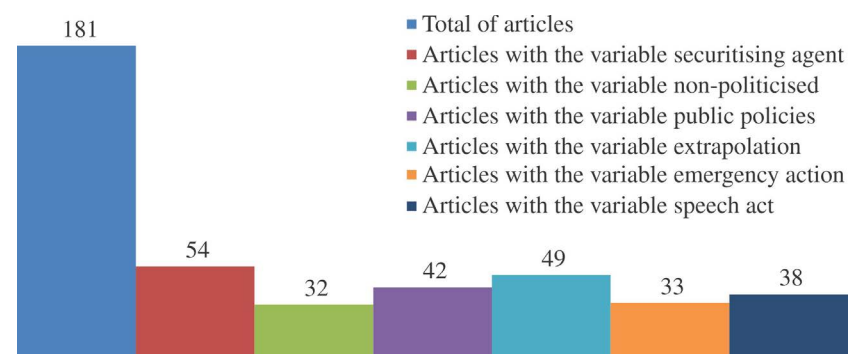
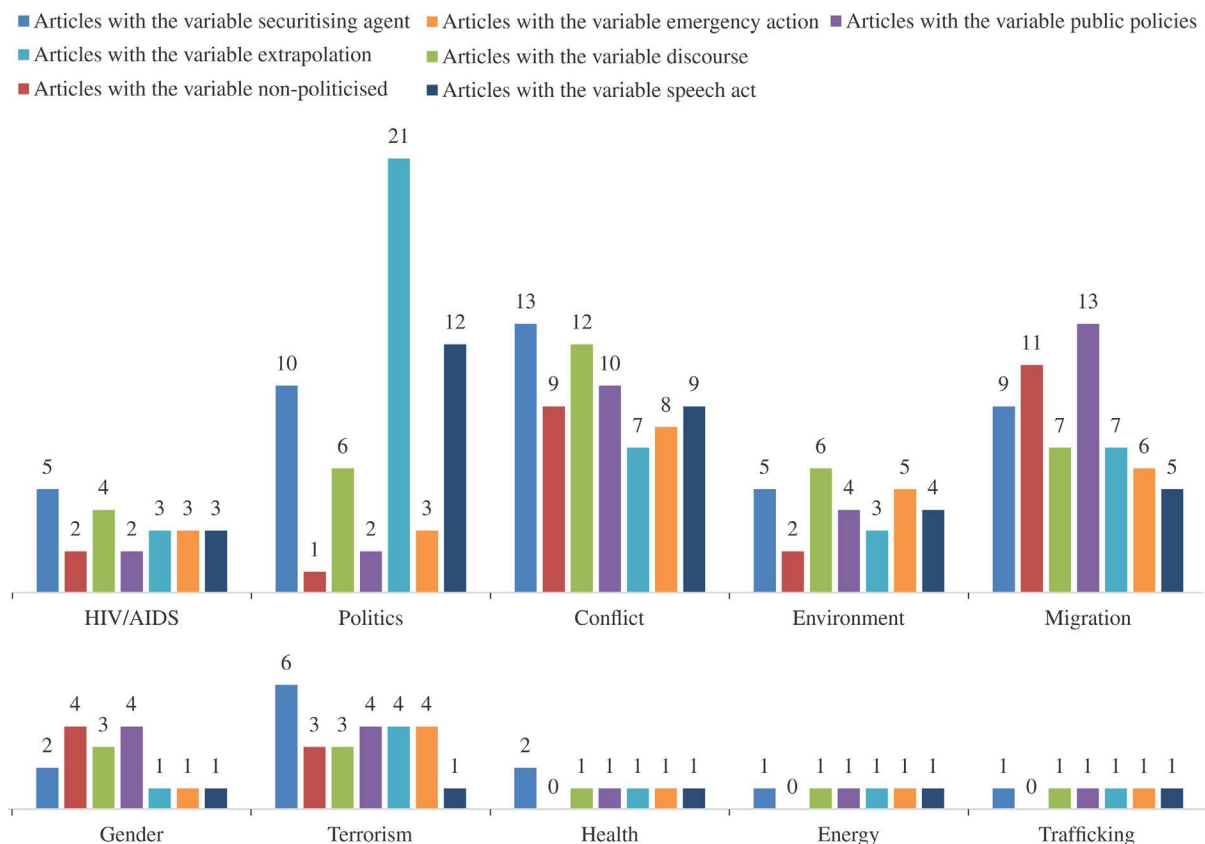Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

arguments. In addition, the analysis showed different challenges in the operationalization of the Securitization Theory. Figure 7 shows the presence of variables in the articles according to the theme.

Few studies have included the themes of *energy*, *health* and *trafficking*. With the low number of articles, these categories need to clarify the difficulties in operationalization. The themes 'environment' and 'politics' demonstrated that, although they comprise the environmental and political sectors in theory, they still need to be at an advanced stage of operationalization. The themes of *conflict* and *terrorism* categories are linear and do not show a large discrepancy between the variables. Finally, the themes that performed better than expected were *gender*, *HIV/AIDS*, and *migration*, demonstrating better results in operationalizing the securitization theory.

The last vital piece of data for the research is the number of articles that effectively demonstrated all the variables. Of the 110 articles, only eleven presented all the variables. They are summarised in Table 2.

The articles that present all variables tackle five of the ten themes categorized and analyzed. The five themes are Conflict, Gender, HIV/AIDS, Migration and Terrorism. The other categorized themes are Energy, Environment, Politics, Health and Trafficking. Two themes were not represented in articles containing all variables that are classic subjects in the securitization theory: Environment and Politics. In the next section, these results will be discussed in-depth, focusing on reading notes and comments based on the articles.

Figure 7 - Results of the presence of variables in articles, per theme

Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

Table 2 - Articles containing all variables

Author	Country	Journal	Article title	Year	Theme
Tsering Topgyal (Topgyal, 2016)	United Kingdom	Asian Security	The Tibetan Self-Immolations as Counter-Securitization: Towards an Inter-Unit Theory of Securitization	2016	Conflict
Bezen Balamir Coskun (Coskun, 2010)	Turkey	Cambridge Review of International Affairs,	History writing and securitization of the other: the construction and reconstruction of Palestinian and Israeli security discourses	2010	Conflict
John O'Brennan (O'Brennan, 2006)	Ireland	Cambridge Review of International Affairs	'Bringing Geopolitics Back In': Exploring the Security Dimension of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union	2007	Conflict
(Diana Ojeda Ojeda, 2013)	Colombia	Geopolitics	War and Tourism: The Banal Geographies of Security in Colombia's "Retaking"	2013	Conflict
(Luca Mavelli Mavelli, 2013)	United Kingdom	Millennium: Journal of International Studies	Between Normalisation and Exception: The Securitization of Islam and the Construction of the Secular Subject	2013	Conflict
(Axel Heck Heck & Schlag, 2012)	Germany	European Journal of International Relations	Securitizing images: The female body and the war in Afghanistan	2012	Gender
(Colin McInnes McInnes & Rushton, 2011)	United Kingdom	European Journal of International Relations	HIV/AIDS and securitization theory	2011	HIV/AIDS
(Benjamin J. Muller Muller, 2004)	United Kingdom	Citizenship Studies	(Dis)qualified bodies: securitization, citizenship and 'identity management.'	2004	Migration
Alexander R. Arifianto (Arifianto, 2009)	United States of America	Politics	The Securitization of Transnational Labor Migration: The Case of Malaysia and Indonesia	2009	Migration
(Asli Ilgit Ilgit & Klotz, 2014)	United States of America	Security Dialogue	How far does 'societal security' travel? Securitization in South African immigration policies	2014	Migration
(Christoph O Meyer O Meyer, 2009)	United Kingdom	Cambridge Review of International Affairs	International terrorism as a force of homogenisation? A constructivist approach to understanding cross-national threat perceptions and responses	2009	Terrorism

Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

IV. Data analysis and discussion

This last section aims to analyze the data presented so far and compare it with the theoretical aspects. In order to understand the difficulties of applying securitization theory operationally, our argument has three pillars: 1. Methodology, 2. Authors' responsibilities on the operationalization, and 3. The critics of securitization theory. This counterpoint will be established in the face of the updated instruments of the securitization theory, in view of the criticisms of the Theory and our own research findings. In order to carry out this analysis, data and quotes from the reading sheets will be examined to illustrate the argument.

This section is divided into subsections. The first presents the problems related to the articles' methodology, identifying the authors' responsibility in facing the challenges for the empirical operationalization of the securitization theory. The second subsection shows the specific characteristics of the analyzed studies, which may have hindered the empirical operationalization demonstrating the author's flaws when applying the theory. The third section

will present critiques made to the securitization theory and analyze the articles in counterpoint to the main criticisms that the Theory has been receiving over the years. A section will be provided to discuss the data on overcoming theoretical problems.

IV.1. Methodological characteristics of the articles

The research examined the methodological procedures of the 110 articles, observing the methodological robustness required in the empirical application of the securitization theory. It requires a step-by-step verification of the theme's progress within the securitization process.

The 110 articles in the sample carried out an empirical application of the securitization theory; therefore, they were expected to present the methodology adopted. Figure 8 shows the result of the work to identify the methodology in each article based on reading the studies and taking notes.

The first significant data is the number of articles that do not present a methodology for the application of securitization theory. Of the 110 articles, 42 did not mention the methodology they used to empirically apply the theory to their research subjects. This means that 38% of the articles do not mention a methodology. The analysis also showed a large number of articles that only presented a literature review.

It is essential to point out that securitization theory establishes an analysis script for researchers to follow in order to prove or disprove the securitization of an object. It is a predetermined roadmap that inevitably leads to the need for a combination of methodologies capable of analyzing the discourse and showing the emergency measures adopted.

Methodologies are an inevitable result of the script the theory establishes. More than a literature review is needed to illustrate the theme within the securitization process. The theory requires a combination of different methodological tools to demonstrate this process. However, only fourteen articles made this combination in the analysis. Three articles align content analysis with interviews (Tromble, 2014; Salter, 2008; Seckinelgin et al., 2010). Salter (2008) mentioned in his work that the use of two methodologies is an "attempt to remedy the flaw in CS methodology: an overreliance on speech acts to the detriment of the social (Salter, 2008, p. 327). Nine of the articles used discourse analysis along with content analysis (Diez & Squire, 2008; Urquijo

Figure 8 - The methodology used in the article
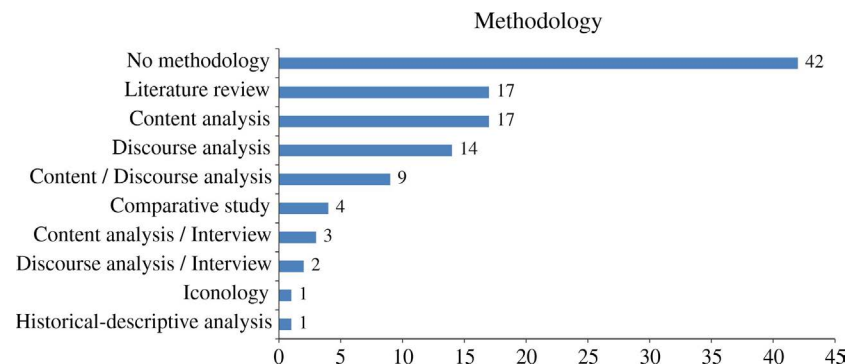
Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

et al., 2015; Schulze, 2018; Nyman, 2014; Gebresenbet, 2014; Kaliber, 2005; Aras & Polat, 2008; Jackson, 2006, Lacher, 2008). And two articles combined discourse analysis and interviews (McGahern, 2016; Greaves, 2016). Therefore, the main combinations were between content analysis, discourse analysis and interviews.

Therefore, the authors needed to adopt appropriate methodologies for the empirical application of the securitization theory. Another analysis looked at the data separated by themes to verify whether the empirical application differs between the topics the articles addressed. Table 3 shows the results.

The theme with the most articles indicating the methodology is *politics*. However, as shown in the previous section, the empirical operationalization of the securitization theory in this category did not yield good results. The articles addressing the theme failed to confirm securitization and showed considerable misalignment in terms of identifying the variables adopted for properly characterizing securitization. In contrast, the theme with the best performance regarding empirical operationalization was *migration*, although only 36% of the articles indicated the methodology adopted.

The article 'How far does 'societal security' travel? Securitization in South African immigration policies' (Ilgit & Klotz, 2014) is a good example of the importance of the methodology on operationalizing the securitization theory. In that article, the authors were able to prove the securitization of immigration

Table 3 - Classification of the methodology adopted in the articles by theme

Methodology	Conflict	Energy	Gender	HIV/AIDS	Environment	Migration	Politics	Health	Terrorism	Trafficking
Content analysis	5%	33%		11%	19%		24%	40%	25%	
Content analysis / Interview	5%			11%			3%			
Content / Discourse analysis	5%	33%			6%	7%	14%			50%
Discourse analysis / Interviews	5%						3%			
Discourse analysis	5%			11%	19%	7%	28%			
Historical-descriptive analysis							3%			
Comparative						21%			13%	
Iconology			20%							
Literature review				33%	25%		17%	40%	25%	50%
No methodology	74%	33%	80%	33%	31%	64%	7%	20%	38%	
Articles adopting a methodology (Total)	26%	67%	20%	67%	69%	36%	93%	80%	63%	50%

Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

policies in South Africa, and the methodology adopted was a comparison. The authors go further and already, in the abstract, mentioned, "Keeping in mind that no theory is without weaknesses, we recommend wider integration of the societal security concept into comparative studies of immigration policy, especially in democracies outside Europe" (Ilgit & Klotz, 2014, p. 137).

The analysis showed that the themes that most used methodological tools were *trafficking*, *energy* and *politics*. However, according to the previous section, *politics* was a theme where articles presented fundamental challenges, and *trafficking* and *energy* were less significant themes that did not contribute largely to a reflection on operationalization. It is therefore necessary to be critical when adopting methodological tools, considering whether they are being applied correctly.

Eight of the eleven articles that proved securitization did not mention the methodology adopted. The other three articles mentioned different methodologies: content analysis, iconology, and comparative study. In addition, these articles addressed the themes '*conflict*', '*gender*' and '*migration*'.

Despite the methodology, it is possible to observe that citing it does not mean a successful result in the securitization of a topic. This is also an important critical analysis of the articles. The most recent data demonstrate that, in the sample analyzed, the authors use the terminology of securitization theory, but do not necessarily apply the theory they cite, indicating a possible structural flaw in the area by not using the concept of how it was built, as we will see in the next subsection.

IV.2. Commitment to the securitization theory

The previous subsection critically reflected on the methodology the articles adopted to understand the challenges related to the empirical operationalization of the theory without exempting researchers from possible flaws in applying the securitization theory. This subsection emphasizes the need for precision in the application of securitization theory, exploring other nuances regarding operationalization challenges, observing how the authors built their argument. The assumption is that before criticizing the theory, it is necessary to be sure about the precision of its application, observing if the research adequately follows the theoretical proposal. If the author claims to be using the securitization theory, he should effectively follow the appropriate steps to empirically prove the securitization of a given theme.

When analyzing the sample articles, the first flaw observed referred to the use of the term securitization in a different way than it means in the securitization theory, but as a synonym with security. This occurred in six articles, for example (Hindess, 2004; Jennings, 2008; Oelsner, 2009; Verhoeven, 2014; Donnelly, 2015; Burgess et al., 2016).

For instance, the article by Burgess et al. (2016), although the authors mention the word securitization in the title of the paper, the objective of the article is not to apply specifically the securitization theory, but rather to adapt the concept of securitization, and thus not to use the state as a reference object. In the last section, the authors make a parallel, which evolves well in the first categories but ends up neglecting the evidence of securitization. The authors do not confirm securitization. They demonstrate how the issue of water in India is a vulnerability, assimilating the concept of "securitization" to vulnerability.

Another critical point was that some authors presented more than one general objective. In these cases, the authors aimed to prove securitization while seeking answers related to the analysis of their research object. Sixteen articles that sought more than one objective ended up failing to prove securitization (Ingram, 2005; White, 2007; Dobrowolsky, 2008; Elbe, 2008; Maclean, 2008; Seckinelgin et al., 2010; Corry, 2012; Parker, 2012; Tezcür, 2012; Hayes, 2012; Fischhendler & Katz, 2013; Frowd, 2014; Methmann & Oels, 2015; Fischhendler, 2015; Ji, 2016).

It is important to note that the securitization theory presents an operationalization model resulting from the development of the security area. The theoretical proposal is therefore not simple. It requires a great deal of commitment from the researcher and significant effort in terms of searching and organizing data. However, the analysis shows that this is not an issue associated with the theory, but a problem related to the choices and work of the authors.

For example, Parker's (2012) publications, does not focus on demonstrating the securitization of the treatment of Roma in France in 2010 (the deportation). Securitization is not addressed centrally in the text, which aims to address the relationship between national policy and community policy. Frowd (2014) publication the concept of securitization of Copenhagen School is used marginally in the article; the purpose is to show the relevance of Queer theory in explaining the United States practice of restricting the movement of people with HIV/AIDS; securitization is a secondary theme in the article, although the author mentioned there was the securitization of AIDS in the USA through an attempt to control immigrants.

This last group of articles in this section misapplied securitization theory. In these cases, the authors failed to establish criteria for operationalizing the theory and followed the theoretical proposal with little rigour.

Twenty-eight articles did not adequately follow Securitization Theory. They assume that their subjects are securitized, without demonstrating the securitization process or data to prove securitization (Slade, 2007; Chan, 2010). Other authors leave a gap between the theoretical explanation of the concepts and the effective operationalization of securitization. For example, they have an entire section explaining how the theory works and its concepts but do not apply it to the object of study (Ryan, 2007; MacKenzie, 2009; Mackenzie, 2010; Kaya, 2012; Fox & Akbaba, 2015; Weinthal et al., 2015; Ragazzi, 2017).

Other articles have chosen only one aspect of the securitization theory. They worked only with the discourse (Kaliber, 2005; Bicchi & Martin, 2006; Sjöstedt, 2008; Nourzhanov, 2009; Gebresenbet, 2014; Von Lucke et al., 2014; Østbø, 2017); or chose to present only public policies (Keukeleire & Raube, 2013; Urquijo et al., 2015). Diez & Squire (2008) also follow this pattern, excluding the variables *securitizing agent* and *speech act* from their analysis. Jansson (2017) does not identify the *securitizing agent* or *emergency actions*.

Finally, articles that did not explain or apply the theory or use the theoretical concepts stand out. This was the case in the studies of (Kostakopoulou, 2000; Williams, 2003; Malmvig, 2005; Grove, 2015; McGahern, 2016; Schäfer et al., 2016). While still contributing to international relations, the articles prove that these international relations analysts were not as rigorous and committed to the theoretical application of securitization theory, as they claimed.

In addition to identifying methodological problems and a lack of rigour and commitment to Securitization Theory, this research found that only eleven out of the 110 articles of the sample (10%) managed to prove securitization of a theme, thus achieving their objective and effectively operationalizing the theory. Furthermore, we observed that in 50 articles, the authors failed to build their analysis, either because they used the term securitization as a synonym for security or because they deliberately and consciously did not follow the theoretical proposal. Another reason is that the authors propose to achieve two goals in a single article and fail to achieve either. Nevertheless, 49 articles in the sample did not prove the securitization of their themes, which makes it impossible to ignore possible difficulties in the empirical operationalization of the theory itself.

These operational difficulties have led to criticism, and attempts have been made to combine theories or offer analytical models that may contribute to overcoming the challenges and improving the securitization theory. The next and final section of this article problematizes these difficulties on the basis of critiques of the theory.

IV.3. Criticisms of Securitization Theory

As pointed out in the previous section, 49 articles (44%) of the sample did not manage to prove securitization, and we did not find any flaws in the authors' work. Therefore, it is important to discuss the elements highlighted in the sample articles that presented criticisms of the theory, which occurred in 18 studies.

For example, Tromble (2014) does not present all the elements of the securitization process. However, the author formulates her critique by highlighting the difficulty of empirical operationalization in states that are not liberal-democratic. This was one of the first criticisms of securitization theory, made in 2003 by Williams (2003) and Aradau (2004a). This kind of criticism resonated throughout academia, and Wæver tried to address this aspect in a study on securitization in Egypt (Greenwood & Wæver, 2013). In the study, the authors applied the theory to an object in a non-liberal democratic state. Notwithstanding, the criticism persisted, as did the difficulty of empirical operationalization in these states, as Tromble (2014) pointed out.

Another criticism concerns the problematic classification of threats in existing sectors. A group of authors, including Knudsen (2001), Neocleous (2006), Watson (2011) and Sheikh (2014), problematized the existing sectors and suggested the creation of new ones. The movement to create new sectors was also observed within the Copenhagen School, with the text by Hansen (2011a) and her proposal to create the cyber sector.

Another example is the work of Christou & Adamides (2013). The argument of the article is that energy security should be analyzed in the context of the Middle East region and considering conflicts and political relations. In this sense, the article assumes that it is necessary to develop an intersectoral analysis of securitization; considers that the securitization process already exists but does not follow the script of theory to demonstrate it empirically.

IV.4. Proposals to combine theories

Finally, the difficulties of empirical operationalization have led some authors to link theoretical proposals to the analysis of securitization processes. In all the articles, the attempt to combine theories aims to solve problems found in the empirical operationalization of securitization theory. These complementary theoretical proposals reinforce the difficulties found in the articles analyzed here. If there is a need to combine theories, this reinforces the existence of difficulties in the empirical demonstration when using the Copenhagen School concept of securitization. In this sense, it is crucial to examine the theoretical contributions of the authors. Table 4 presents the reading sheets of the articles that sought to couple theoretical proposals to the securitization theory.

In all articles, the attempt at theoretical coupling seeks to solve problems in operationalizing the securitization theory. The proposed couplings were: i. Paris school of security studies; ii. Images; iii. Balzacq and hearing; iv. Dramaturgical Analysis; v. Michel Foucault; vi. Historical Analysis. Of all the

Table 4 - Reading sheets - theoretical coupling

Author	Observation
Luca Mavelli	In the introduction, the author indicates an intention to apply securitization theory, acknowledging, however, that this theory cannot fully encompass the complexities of the empirical object at hand—namely, the securitization of Islam. To address this limitation, the author proposes to complement securitization theory with concepts drawn from the of security studies.
Axel Heck	The aim of the article is to advance theoretical discourse by presenting the possibility of securitization through visual figures. Just as discourse plays a key role in securitization, the author argues that images can serve a similar function within the securitization process. The approach is both innovative and compelling, as the text positions *The Times* as an active agent and supports the entire securitization process based on the premise of the image functioning as a speech act.
Frank Möller	The central objective of the article is to demonstrate the potential of desecuritization through photography and to explore the extent to which visual media can contribute to desecuritization processes. While the author presents a solid argument for the role of photography in these processes, the article lacks a specific empirical case study of a securitization event.
Colin McInnes	The authors then propose an analysis of the securitization of HIV at the United Nations, while also expressing their alignment with Balzacq's critique of the securitization theory. In response, they apply the theory with the support of other methodological tools. The article is divided into three main sections: the first introduces the concept of multilevel securitization. At each level, the securitization agent and the target audience change, which raises the question about the audience. The second argument is that securitization is not binary (it is securitized or not) and suggests that securitization is a continuum that can be partial with different audiences. Finally, the authors use a critique of Balzacq to build an argument about the speech act. At the end of the article, the authors suggest advances in the securitization theory.
Mark B. Salter	The article suggests using Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. In other words, it places him alongside other authors who consider the empirical difficulties of demonstrating securitization.
Claudia Aradau	The concept of securitization is employed to a limited extent in the article; Michel Foucault representing the principal reference. The text intends to critique the securitization, but does not provide empirical evidence to demonstrate how this occurred. The text offers a critique of the discourse and policy surrounding human trafficking.
Matti Jutila	The author illustrates how historical events can be employed as a rhetorical tool in the securitization discourse. The text illustrates how this was achieved in Finland in 2011, when a report from a university identified a Russian movement on the border. The media then used this report and aspects of the history of the Winter War to advance the discourse of maintaining a broad and active army. In the concluding section, the author demonstrates that the object has not yet been effectively securitized but is on its way. The text is fascinating and lucid when using the securitization theory.

Source: elaborated by the authors, 2023.

suggested couplings, Salter's (2008) proposal for dramaturgical analysis seems to be the only innovative one. The others have already been seen and cited in other articles.

In order to prove the concept of securitization, Mavalli (2013) selected the theory put forth by the Paris school of security studies, which aligns with the sociological approach of critical international security studies. It is noteworthy that Mavalli's article is among the eleven articles that demonstrate the securitization of the empirical object under analysis.

Two articles, by Möller (2007) and Heck & Schlag (2012), particularly emphasize using images to represent the securitization process. In contrast to the findings of Möller (2007), Heck & Schlag (2012) provided empirical evidence to support the securitization hypothesis. Their study is among the eleven articles that have successfully demonstrated the empirical validity of this hypothesis. The suggestion was made by critics of the Copenhagen School that the securitization theory should be combined with other theories. Moreover, scholars such as Vuori (2010) and Hansen (2011a) have employed and endorsed the utilisation of visual materials to substantiate the securitization process.

The combination of theories proposed by McInnes & Rushton (2011) lacked empirical evidence due to the author's decision not to evaluate the target audience. The author's strategy is noteworthy for its originality and demonstrates a clear affinity with the critiques of the Copenhagen School. Additionally, Balzacq proposed integrating the securitization theory with other theoretical frameworks on three distinct occasions: in 2005 and 2008, and again in 2014, when a critical examination of the securitization theory was conducted in a forum format (Balzacq, 2005, 2008; Balzacq et al., 2015).

Aradau's proposal (2004a) of bringing Foucault's concepts into the securitization theory is not unique. To illustrate, the Copenhagen School advanced this possibility in Hansen (2011b), demonstrating the securitization within this combined model in her 2011 article. Nevertheless, Aradau (2004a) does not provide evidence to support the securitization of the object, despite employing a combination of theoretical approaches.

The last proposal is by Jutila (2015), combining historical analysis with the securitization theory. This proposal likely favoured some criticisms of the securitization theory, not necessarily with the explicit naming of the methodological tool, but with the criticism of the need to think better in the context of the securitization process. Vuori (2008), McDonald (2008) and Bourbeau (2014) raised the theme.

The analysis of the strategy of combining the securitization theory with other theories demonstrated that, of the eleven articles that effectively demonstrated the efficacy of securitization, three of them employed a combination of approaches to achieve their objectives, while two made constructive critiques of the securitization theory. Of the 110 articles, only six demonstrated the efficacy of securitization without identifying shortcomings in the theory or employing complementary tools.

Similarly, the proposals put forth by the Copenhagen authors are not consistently taken into account in the empirical operationalisation. Nevertheless, the relevance of the theory and its extensive application in contemporary security studies necessitate theoretical reviews and methodological suggestions to enhance its contribution. In this regard, theoretical reformulations may prove indispensable for the advancement of the field of international relations.

IV.5. Discussion

As we have seen throughout this section, the analysis of 110 articles showed a problem with the empirical operationalization of securitization theory. Only 11 articles successfully demonstrated the securitization process. This led us to argue that the issue with operationalization stems from two sources: 1. the researchers; and 2. the theory itself.

On the researcher's side, we identified four main difficulties: 1. Methodology: 42 articles either did not present methodology or lacked rigour in its application; 2. Multiple objectives: 16 articles had multiple objectives, relegating securitization to a secondary focus; 3. Securitization as a synonym: 6 articles used the term 'securitization' as a broad synonym for security; 4. Securitization criteria: 28 articles did not follow the criteria established by securitization theory as outlines in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan et al., 1998).

Although we identified issues for which researchers were responsible in the empirical application of securitization theory, we cannot absolve the theory itself from its responsibility in the operationalization of its concept. Scholars such as Aradau (2004a, 2004b), Balzac (2005, 2008, 2015), Vuori (2008, 2010), and Floyd (2011, 2016) have led extensive debates on the vulnerabilities of securitization theory. In this article, we focused on two main critiques 1. The operationalization in non-liberal-democratic states, and 2. The limitation of the analysis to the five sectors.

Advancing the debate on securitization theory, we propose an idea to overcome these challenges: combining securitization theory with a second framework, which we called theoretical coupling. Based on the articles analysed, and the critical arguments presented, some of the theoretical couplings include: i. Paris school of security studies; ii. Imagery; iii. Balzacq and Hearing; iv. Dramaturgical Analysis; v. Michel Foucault; vi. Historical Analysis, and vii. Dramaturgical Analysis.

V. Final considerations

International relations analysts must acknowledge the importance of methodological rigour and approach research design with care. This study has made it clear that some of the issues with the empirical application of securitization theory are due to unsatisfactory work by researchers, as evidenced by the fact that 45% of the articles claiming to follow the Copenhagen School's theory did not actually do so. In addition, the research revealed a general need for more methodological rigour. Even among the 11 articles that successfully demonstrated securitization, four failed to clarify their methodology.

This study contributes to the academic community by highlighting these problems. Furthermore, these findings alert to the international relations scientific community, emphasizing the need for more attention to methodology and the development of theories. This discussion echoes Kuhn's reflections, which emphasized the responsibility of the researchers to improve theories, particularly when working to empirically apply specific theories designed to advance our understanding of reality. As scientists, we are responsible for identifying the shortcoming of theories and seeking solutions that may emerge from the empirical application of concepts.

To truly contribute to science, particularly in international relations, we cannot be content with merely describing and analyzing the facts. Therefore, it is crucial to build theoretical knowledge in international relations and promote methodological developments capable of understanding the particular nature of the objects of study.

In conclusion, this study does not seek to argue that securitization theory is flawed. On the contrary, it calls for reflection on the theory and the tools it provides, to enable the recognition of problems and advance in the production of knowledge about international relations. Furthermore, it is essential to emphasize that the process of demonstrating the securitization of specific issues according to the theory is demanding and involves mobilization of various concepts and methodological resources. Therefore, following Kuhn's suggestion, the challenge is to improve securitization theory and other international relations theories as we advance in the production of empirical research.

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A teoria da securitização e sua aplicação empírica: uma revisão da literatura

Palavras-chave: teoria de securitização, Escola de Copenhague, análise de conteúdo, revisão sistemática da literatura, aplicação empírica.

RESUMO **Introdução:** A Teoria de Securitização afirma que a securitização ocorre quando agentes transformam temas da agenda política em ameaças existenciais por meio de seus discursos, levando os Estados a adotar medidas para enfrentá-las. O artigo analisa os desafios da aplicação empírica da teoria de securitização da Escola de Copenhague em estudos de Relações Internacionais. **Materiais e métodos:** Realizamos uma revisão sistemática de artigos publicados em periódicos indexados na base Scopus com fator de impacto no primeiro quartil. Inicialmente, foram selecionados 260 artigos que mencionavam o termo "securitization/securitisation" em títulos, resumos ou palavras-chave. Após a exclusão dos que não apresentavam aplicação empírica da teoria da securitização, restaram 184 artigos. Análise de conteúdo foi aplicada à estrutura lógica dos argumentos desses artigos, classificando como cada um utilizou o conceito de securitização com base nas etapas do processo (não politizado, politizado, securitizado, agente securitizador) e suas variáveis. **Resultados:** Dos 184 artigos, 110 se propuseram a aplicar efetivamente a teoria de securitização e apenas 11 estudos realmente aplicaram a teoria de forma adequada, comprovando a securitização. Esses 11 artigos demonstraram a securitização dos temas seguindo as etapas estabelecidas pela estrutura teórica original. **Discussão:** A dificuldade em aplicar empiricamente a teoria da securitização se deve a dois fatores principais: os pesquisadores e a própria teoria. Muitos artigos enfrentaram problemas metodológicos e falta de rigor ao operacionalizar os elementos teóricos para confirmar a securitização de um tema, refletindo uma limitação dos pesquisadores. Já a teoria, por sua vez, exige um alto nível de comprovação empírica, o que dificulta sua aplicação. Isso aponta para a necessidade de revisar a teoria e considerar a incorporação de modelos que facilitem o desenvolvimento de estudos empíricos sobre securitização.