

# Service, Solidarity, and Self-Help: A Comparative Topic Modeling Analysis of Community Unionism in the Boot and Shoe Union and Unite Community

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## Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of community unionism (CU) in two distinct historical and organizational contexts: the National Boot and Shoe Union (B&S) in the 1920s and Unite Community in the 2010s–2020s. Using BERTopic for thematic modeling and cTF-IDF weighting, alongside word frequency analysis, the study examines the extent to which each union’s discourse aligns with key features of CU—such as coalition-building, grassroots engagement, and action beyond the workplace. The results reveal significant differences in thematic focus and discursive coherence. While Unite Community demonstrates stronger alignment with outward-facing, social justice-oriented themes, the B&S corpus emphasizes internal administration, industrial relations, and member services—reflecting a more traditional, servicing-oriented union model. The analysis also highlights methodological insights, demonstrating how modern NLP techniques can enhance the study of historical labor archives. Ultimately, the findings suggest that while both unions engage with community-related themes, their underlying models of engagement diverge significantly, challenging assumptions about the continuity and universality of community unionism across time and sector.

## 1 Introduction

The central purpose of this article is to explore how far the concept CU, is appropriate to two case studies. Wills and Simms (2004) and Holgate (2021) argue that unions were historically more involved with communities. Therefore, one would expect there to be evidence of CU in a historic case. Moreover, Unite Community has been identified by Holgate (2021) and Holgate et al. (2021) as a modern example of CU. These cases provide an opportunity to re-evaluate the claims made about CU and compare how far each case contains features of CU. Therefore, these two cases should provide useful information about union community engagement in two different periods. Moreover, they are two different unions. The B&S was a ‘new union’ which focused on the shoe production industry. Unite is a general union, also predominantly in the private sector. This means both cases share private sector workers. Both unions were national level. A key difference is that Unite Community is a specific part of Unite, which will be covered in more detail further on. Archives contain new possibilities with the use of sentence vector-based approaches such as BERTopic. Part of the argument of this article is that this modern approach to topic models can make historical documents easier to access for research. Just as the efforts to develop a pipeline for OCR (<https://github.com/UnbrokenCocoon/OCR-evaluation>), will increase the speed at which text can be extracted from images of archives. This means that the task of undertaking an evaluation of all TU monthly reports, as Hosbsbawm (1960) suggests, would be valuable, is now more viable than during his time of writing. This means that an

approach that begins with the contributions of Hobsbawm (1960; 1964; 2015), that seeks to access wider amounts of textual data than he could, is more viable for future research.

## 1.1 Comparison of Top 20 Terms in Both Corpora

**Table 1:** Comparison of Top 20 Terms in Both Corpora

Word	Count <sub>bs</sub>	Percentile <sub>bs</sub>	Count <sub>uc</sub>	Percentile <sub>uc</sub>	Diff (uc-bs)
branch	3058	99.96	2631	100.0	0.04
member	6584	100.0	2144	99.99	-0.01
community	155	96.74	2081	99.98	3.24
unite	37	91.05	2023	99.97	8.92
report	3013	99.96	1893	99.96	0.0
meeting	2078	99.88	1851	99.95	0.07
campaign	79	94.6	1558	99.94	5.34
leeds	222	97.62	1329	99.93	2.31
support	630	99.29	1159	99.93	0.64
union	6311	99.99	1090	99.92	-0.07
work	6032	99.99	995	99.91	-0.08
york	77	94.51	810	99.9	5.39
action	574	99.14	769	99.89	0.75
group	133	96.37	765	99.88	3.51
council	3300	99.97	733	99.87	-0.1
local	878	99.54	704	99.86	0.32
event	158	96.82	664	99.85	3.03
national	2021	99.87	658	99.84	-0.03
people	1398	99.75	620	99.83	0.08
labour	4484	99.98	613	99.82	-0.16

As a pre-requisite for a comparison between the two corpora, I have provided a basic table which outlines the 20 most common words shared by the corpora and sorted by Unite Community. It includes a comparison by percentile, which indicates the rank difference of each term within its corpus. Unsurprisingly, terms associated with trade union administration as shared, such as ‘branch’, ‘member’, ‘report’, ‘meeting’ and ‘national’. Each of these terms shares a similar prevalence within the corpora, suggesting that meaningful comparisons can be made because of overlapping language. These corpora are similar types of documents with significant overlap in certain terms, just as there are overlapping topics which shall be explored further on in this article. ‘Campaign’, ‘community’ and ‘event’ all score significantly higher in Unite Community. This builds on the conclusions of the latter two chapters, where, on a lexical level, it Unite Community draws more similarity with CU than B&S does.

## 1.2 Comparison By Percentage of Overlapping Terms in Both Corpora’s Top 20 Terms

This graph provides a readable comparison between overlapping terms within the databases. It is calculated by subtracting the percentages of the top 20 most frequent terms, Unite Community – B&S. It furthers the evidence that B&S discusses ‘work’ and ‘labour’ issues more frequently than UC. This implies B&S would not meet the ‘beyond the workplace’ criteria, or at least, UC would be more likely to meet it.

An issue with lists like this is that they are hard to group into useful and more thematically relevant smaller lists. This is what the BERTopic model exists to solve. This was covered in more detail in the method section. Therefore, the important arguments to make about word frequency lists are that they give insight into the presence or absence of key terms. Grouping them thematically would work at the disadvantage of the bag-of-words model. Instead, it is useful

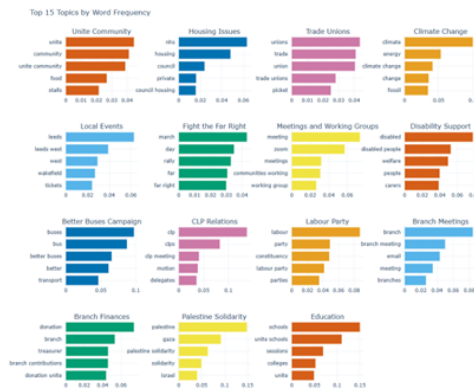
to note BS does not contain the term ‘community’ in its top 20 words, and Unite Community does. Yet, even this point is tempered by context, with chapter 5 demonstrating through bigrams that it matters what context ‘community’ is used in, especially when answering how far each case shows features of CU.

## 2 Topic Models

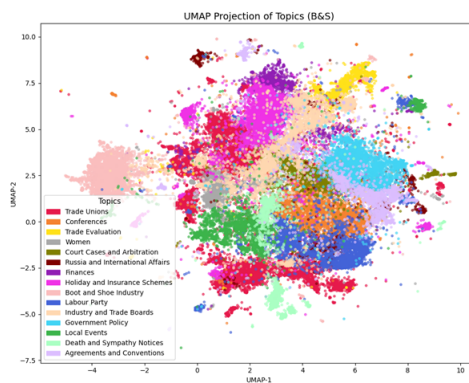
Table 2 provides context of the sentences which constitute both corpora. This information assists with understanding the differences in corpus size. It also demonstrates their normalisation to avoid potential cluster abnormalities caused by improperly chunked sentences.

Corpus	Total Sents	Avg Len	Min Len	Max Len	<5 Wds	>25 Wds
B&S	95,557	15.22	5	270	0	4,763
UC	16,864	17.64	3	535	1	1,202

**Table 2:** Corpora Overview: Sentence-level statistics.



**Figure 1:** UMAP Projection of Unite Community Topic Model



**Figure 2:** UMAP Projection of B&S Topic Model

### 2.1 Keyword Similarity

**Table 3:** Thematic Groups of Topics in the Unite Community Topic Model

Thematic Group	Topic Labels	Notes / Interpretation
Trade Unions	Unite Community; Trade Unions	Core identity and affiliation terms.
Campaign Issues	Housing Issues; Climate Change; Fight the Far Right; Disability Support; Palestine Solidarity; Better Buses Campaign	Outward-facing mobilisation topics reflecting CU’s social justice alignment.
Administration	Branch Meetings; Meetings and Working Groups; Branch Finances; Education; Local Events	Internal governance and coordination; ongoing organising infrastructure.
Politics	Labour Party; CLP Relations	Formal political relationships, party activism/motions; ties to party politics.

This table compares the overlapping keywords—those shared between the two topic models—to the total number of keywords (unigrams and bigrams) identified in each model, expressed as a percentage. This metric quantifies the relative significance of the shared terms within each corpus and supports the argument that the B&S corpus exhibits greater internal thematic consistency than Unite Community. The 15 overlapping keywords constitute 4% of the total keyword pool in both models, indicating a notable level of consistency across the corpora.

Despite the identical percentage, the absolute scale differs significantly: Unite Community’s total keyword count is 233,652, while B&S contains 1,003,459 keywords. Nonetheless, the fact that the shared terms reach 4% in both cases underscores their prominence. As emphasized throughout this article and the next, any term or group of terms exceeding 1% of a corpus is considered thematically significant. However, frequency alone is not sufficient for relevance—many high-frequency terms may be function words or contextually trivial. This is where topic modeling offers a distinct advantage: by clustering semantically related sentences and extracting characteristic keywords, it identifies terms that are both frequent and thematically meaningful, thereby enhancing the reliability of thematic interpretation.

Each graph presents a UMAP visualization of the sentence embeddings for each corpus, illustrating the top 15 topics identified by BERTopic. In these visualizations, each dot represents a single sentence, with colors indicating topic assignment. The spatial proximity between dots reflects semantic similarity—closer points indicate greater similarity in meaning, while greater distance suggests divergence. These positions are derived from sentence embeddings, which encode the semantic content of each sentence into high-dimensional vectors before dimensionality reduction via UMAP.

Notably, the Boot & Shoe (B&S) corpus displays greater internal cohesion and tighter clustering than the Unite Community corpus. This increased consistency likely stems from the curated nature of the B&S archive, which was edited and produced by union executives—possibly guided by internal style manuals or editorial standards. In contrast, the Unite Community corpus consists of documents authored by various volunteers, leading to a more heterogeneous range of writing styles, tones, and discursive practices. This variation may reflect a more open and decentralized mode of communication. Thus, the structural differences in production—centralized editing versus grassroots contribution—appear to be reflected in the semantic organization of the texts.

These visual and quantitative differences reinforce the idea that while both unions engage with overlapping themes, the nature and coherence of their discourse differ significantly, with implications for how we interpret their alignment with models such as Community Unionism.

### 3 Topic Comparison

The full topic tables for each topic model are included in the article. These tables list the keywords automatically assigned to each topic by the model, along with representative example sentences and the number of sentences clustered within each topic. For this section, the focus will be on visualizing the topic distributions and comparing the overall lists of topics generated by each model. In the following section, a more detailed analysis will assess how the content and word frequencies within each topic support or challenge the presence of Community Unionism (CU) features. Thus, this section serves as an introductory overview of the thematic structures and corpora—similar in scope and purpose to the previous section.

Both topic models identify “Labour Party” and “Education” as significant topics discussed by the unions. “Labour” appears as a top keyword in both corpora, although not all instances necessarily refer to the Labour Party; some may pertain to labor, the labor movement, or general work-related contexts. It could be argued that the topic model may not reliably distinguish between these uses—particularly in the B&S corpus. However, it is also unclear whether such distinctions were explicitly made within the original discourse itself, suggesting potential overlap in how the term was employed.

“Education” emerges as a salient topic in both models, despite not ranking highly in overall word frequency counts. This discrepancy indicates that while the term “education” may not appear frequently in isolation, related concepts and phrasings are thematically clustered and contextually significant. This highlights a key advantage of

topic modeling over simple word frequency analysis: its ability to uncover coherent themes that might otherwise be obscured by lexical variation. Notably, “community” itself does not appear as a distinct topic, which raises questions about the extent to which community-oriented concerns are thematically central. However, since topic labels are assigned by the researcher based on keyword and sentence interpretation, determining the presence or absence of “community” requires deeper qualitative investigation.

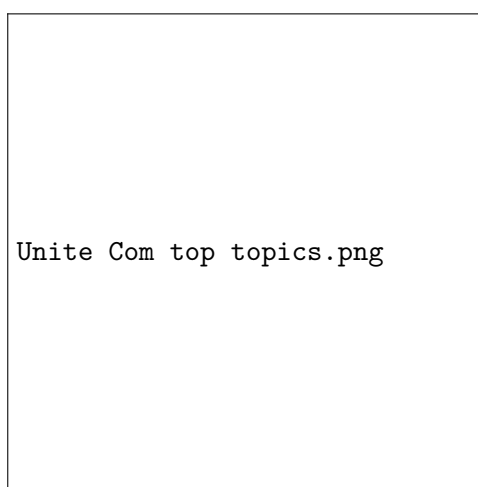
In terms of thematic structure, there are both similarities within and between the corpora. Using broad thematic groupings, the B&S topics can be categorized into four macro-themes: political issues, policies affecting workers, institutional communication, and broader industrial affairs. These overarching categories are sufficiently flexible to apply to both unions, though their interpretation depends on how membership is defined and which groups are considered central to the union’s activities.

## 4 Unite Community Topics

The graph reads from left to right, with topics ordered by their frequency in the corpus. This ordering will be further detailed in a table presented in the next section. As such, the topics should not be interpreted as being of equal size. The scale used is cTF-IDF (class-based Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency), which reflects the relative frequency of unigrams and bigrams within the sentences assigned to each topic. This means the measure highlights terms that are particularly characteristic of a given topic cluster, relative to the rest of the corpus. Accordingly, the listed key terms are not necessarily the most frequent across the entire corpus, but rather those that are most prevalent and distinctive within their respective topics.

The purpose of this visualization is to provide insight into the thematic content of each topic. It reveals administrative topics such as “Branch Meetings,” “Reports and Dates,” “Local Matters,” and “Unite Community,” which, while of limited thematic relevance to Community Unionism (CU), indicate a significant volume of communication dedicated to internal union administration. In contrast, topics like “Palestinian Solidarity,” “NHS, Disability and Universal Credit,” “Fight the Far Right,” “Housing and Council Housing Issues,” and the “Better Buses” campaign reflect the branch’s engagement with grassroots activism and initiatives that extend beyond the workplace.

In relation to Fairbrother’s (2008) criteria for community unionism, this distribution already suggests a degree of alignment, particularly with the dimensions of social movement participation and coalition-building.

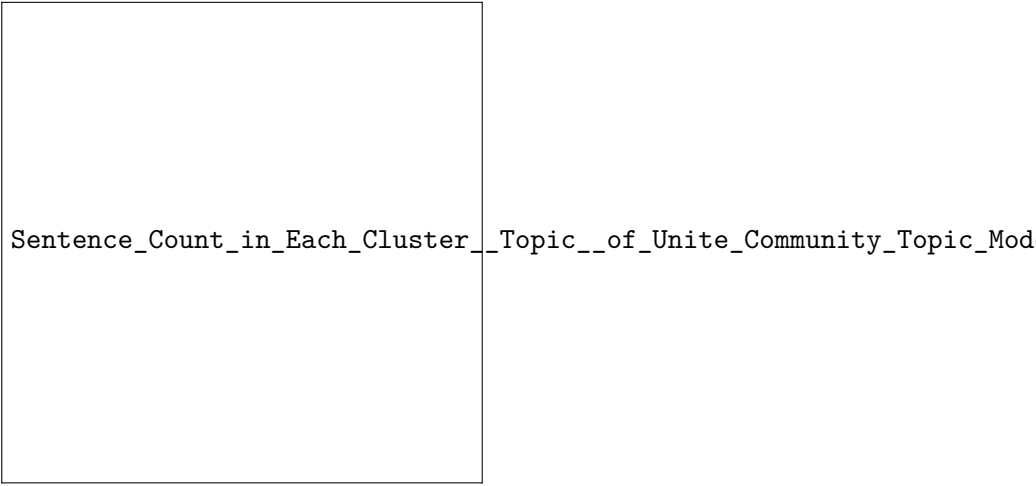


**Figure 3:** Sentence Count in Each Cluster (Topic) of Unite Community Topic Model

Therefore, the *Politics* and *Campaign Issues* thematic groups align with the coalition or alliance-building criteria outlined by Fairbrother (2008). Based on sentence frequencies, these appear to be the most prominent and significant dimensions present in the corpus. However, these categories must satisfy all aspects of the criteria to fully qualify as evidence of community unionism (CU).

Aside from “education” and potentially “local events,” the thematic groups related to *Administration* and *Trade Unions* reflect traditional union activities and formal institutional functions. This level of thematic separation is typical of a conventional trade union structure. While issues of equality and progressive politics appear within the *Campaign Issues* group, the overall thematic distribution does not strongly support a clear “beyond the workplace” orientation or a grassroots-driven model. Instead, it suggests a more ambiguous relationship, in which workplace-centered concerns permeate discussions—even those that might otherwise be considered community-oriented.

As discussed in the previous section, strikes are a major focus for the branch, and the National Education Union (NEU) is mentioned within the *Education* topic. This indicates that even seemingly external issues are often



**Figure 4:** Sentence Count in Each Cluster (Topic) of Unite Community Topic Model

**Table 4:** Thematic Groups of Topics in the Unite Community Topic Model

Thematic Group	Topic Labels	Notes / Interpretation
<b>Trade Unions</b>	Unite Community, Trade Unions	Core identity and affiliation terms
<b>Campaign Issues</b>	Housing Issues, Climate Change, Fight the Far Right, Disability Support, Palestine Solidarity, Better Buses Campaign	Outward-facing mobilisation topics reflecting CU's social justice alignment
<b>Administration</b>	Branch Meetings, Meetings and Working Groups, Branch Finances, Education, Local Events	Internal governance and coordination themes; reflect ongoing organising infrastructure
<b>Politics</b>	Labour Party, CLP Relations	Formal political relationships, party activism, and motions; ties to party politics

framed through the lens of union activity. Thus, the union may engage with what could be seen as “community” issues, but primarily from a trade union perspective. At the very least, it is difficult to argue that these initiatives lie entirely outside the union’s core workplace mandate.

Building on the analysis in the previous chapter, this topic model provides little evidence of a rank-and-file or grassroots-driven dynamic. This point will be explored in greater qualitative depth later in the article. Overall, the topic model does not yield substantially different conclusions from those drawn in earlier sections. Rather, it offers a more detailed view of recurring themes, reinforcing the ambiguity in the relationship between Unite Community and the ideals of community unionism.

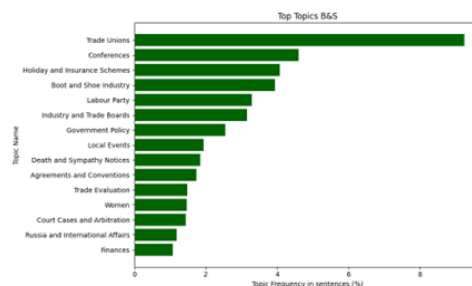
If the union has adopted certain contemporary practices—such as public demonstrations—these may reflect grassroots engagement when they are branch-led, as seen in the Palestinian Solidarity campaign. In contrast, initiatives like the Better Buses Campaign appear to reflect broader union strategy, with unclear levels of branch autonomy or initiative. This distinction highlights the hybrid nature of Unite Community’s approach: neither fully top-down nor consistently grassroots, but somewhere in between.

## 5 B&S Topics

This graph provides the same overview of the most frequent unigrams and bigrams from the topic models in B&S. They demonstrate the coherence of each topic and their similarity which each assigned label.



**Figure 5:** Sentence Count in Each Cluster (Topic) of B&S Topic Model



**Figure 6:** Sentence Count in Each Cluster (Topic) of B&S Topic Model

While there is thematic overlap—such as the presence of the “Labour Party” in both corpora—the majority of topics differ significantly. This divergence justifies grouping them into distinct thematic categories. For instance, *Industrial Relations* holds a more prominent position in the B&S corpus. Although UC discusses strike action, no distinct “strike” topic emerged, suggesting that such discussions were integrated into broader union-related themes. In contrast, B&S features separate topics related to various aspects of bargaining with employers, indicating that these were treated as distinct and significant issues.

Thus, not only does B&S engage more frequently with workplace-related topics, but its archives also delve into detailed discussions of workplace conditions, shared with members to highlight both the successes and shortcomings of union efforts. Moreover, the recurring topic of *Trade Evaluation* indicates that branches regularly reported on trade conditions, making this a consistent theme in their communications. In comparison, social activities and campaigning appear with lower frequency.

The political content within the *Politics* topic is primarily focused on international relations and government policy, rather than social issues. This emphasis may be attributed to the presence of a parliamentary reporter, as

**Table 5:** Thematic Groups of Topics in B&S Topic Model

Thematic Group	Topic Labels	Notes / Interpretation
<b>Administration</b>	Trade Unions, Conferences, Finances, Local Events	Internal structure and union governance dominate, reflecting a formal institutional focus.
<b>Member Services</b>	Holiday and Insurance Schemes, Death and Sympathy Notices	Indicates a mutual aid model: provision of benefits, welfare support, and recognition of members’ personal lives.
<b>Industrial Relations</b>	Court Cases and Arbitration, Industry and Trade Boards, Boot and Shoe Industry, Trade Evaluation	Focus on labor disputes, sector-specific regulation, and employment conditions, highlighting the union’s role in workplace advocacy.
<b>Politics</b>	Government Policy, Labour Party, Russia and International Affairs, Women	Engages with broader political discourse, including foreign affairs and gender issues; reflects ideological reach beyond immediate workplace concerns.

noted in the earlier section, who provided members with updates on current affairs. This suggests that the union served an informational role, particularly for members who might otherwise have limited access to such news. This focus aligns with broader historical trends: social movements gained momentum from the 1960s onward, shifting protest strategies and priorities (Munck, 2006). Therefore, the results of this topic model are not entirely surprising.

Crucially, this analysis does not yield additional evidence to support the claim that B&S exhibited the four features of *Community Unionism* (CU). Instead, the union appears more aligned with the *servicing model*, which has often been contrasted with the *organising model* in the literature (Fiorito, 2004). Since CU is commonly associated with the organising model, the findings suggest that B&S followed a more traditional, service-oriented approach.

## 6 Evaluation

The default sentence embedding model in BERTopic is ‘all-MiniLM-L6-v2’. However, Sentence Transformers contains alternative models that could produce superior embeddings. In this section, I shall explore my comparisons between different possible models which can be chosen and why ‘all-mpnet-base-v2’ was chosen.

**Table 6:** Topic Model Evaluation Across Corpora

Corpus	Gini Score	Appearance Percentage (%)	Topic 20 Size	PUV	Ngram Value
B&S	0.38	54.73	984	0.97	0.19
UC	0.28	58.33	261	0.95	0.27

The purpose of this table is to evaluate both topic models and justify their selection based on quantitative metrics. Using the outlined metrics, multiple topic models were assessed, and the one achieving the highest scores across these criteria was selected. These metrics were chosen to ensure that each model includes high-frequency *n*-grams or keywords (referred to as *Ngram Value*), indicating that the model captures commonly occurring phrases rather than favoring low-frequency terms due to artificial topic coherence.

The *Gini Coefficient* helps detect whether a model is artificially skewed. A highly skewed distribution may indicate poorly separated topics, whereas a more even distribution suggests greater topic coherence. PUV (Probabilistic Unique Value) measures how distinct each topic is; low-quality models often exhibit overlapping *n*-grams across different topics, suggesting inadequate grouping of semantically similar terms.

*Appearance Percentage* reflects the proportion of total sentences covered by the identified topics. After testing 211 models, it was found that Appearance Percentage is a nuanced metric: scoring too high or too low tends to degrade performance in other metrics. Therefore, the approach adopted was to constrain this value within 10% of the mean, defined as the *Error Size*. This value is derived from the  $-1$  topic in BERTopic, which captures sentences not assigned to any topic.



**Table 7:** Metric Explanations

Metric	Description
<b>Gini Score</b>	Measures how evenly topics are distributed across the dataset. A lower score indicates a more balanced spread of topic sizes, while higher values suggest a few dominant clusters. Values closer to 0 reflect good balance.
<b>Appearance Percentage</b>	The percentage of sentences/documents that were assigned a topic (i.e., not excluded as noise). Higher is better, indicating broader model coverage.
<b>Topic 20 Size</b>	The total number of documents belonging to the top 20 topics. This gives a sense of how concentrated the model is in its most prominent clusters.
<b>PUV (Pairwise Uniqueness Value)</b>	Indicates the uniqueness of topic assignment across sentence pairs. Values near 1.0 reflect high topic distinctiveness, meaning documents are not frequently assigned the same topic.
<b>Ngram Value</b>	A custom score reflecting how often top topic keywords appear in the dataset’s most meaningful bigrams. Higher values suggest better lexical coherence and relevance between topic keywords and the actual corpus.

The results from the B&S model can be compared against 41 unique configurations drawn from 421 runs with varying parameters. Note that many parameter combinations produce identical outputs, limiting the diversity of results and making it challenging to generate a significantly larger dataset.

**Table 8:** B&S Topic Model Compared to 41 Different Runs

Metric	B&S Model	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Percentage Appearance	54.73	53.44	3.81	48.56	65.38
Keyword_Freq_Score	0.19	0.18	0.01	0.15	0.20
Gini_Score	0.38	0.46	0.10	0.32	0.76
Topic_20_Size	984	793.05	251.98	117.0	1421.0

This table demonstrates how the outputs from the BS model outperform the mean from each of these outputs, where the Gini Coefficient and Error Size require smaller scores to demonstrate superior output. Whereas Topic 20 Size and Keyword frequency require high scores for superior output. From this, it is possible to argue that the outputs from the BS model chosen for this thesis are better than the average model.

## 7 Limitation

A limitation, it is fair to say it is difficult to prove definitively the broader community relations without access to broader documents. However, finding relevant documents would be difficult. In my research, I visited various archives within Northamptonshire, including the Labour Club, which was founded in the 1960s. Yet, there was not much appropriate information, nor was there much content related to the community approach of the union. Furthermore, they were in the process of archiving their material, so they may find the documents in the future, but they would be unlikely to find documents specific to my time period. Therefore, an approach which specifically targets regions with established local clubs with archives could be useful. Areas such as Durham, with specific union histories, may be appropriate here, but this would risk becoming more of a Geographic project and would have to attempt to balance representing community union relations in a specific region and studying community union relations more broadly. Future research could target unions that have more comprehensive archives, including letters and personal effects. These could provide a broader perspective, but may require a larger quantity of researchers able to visit more local archives and relationships with unions to gain access to private information. A potential advantage of the quantitative approach is that it may be more appealing to a union interested in keeping its data private, but the issue of union privacy would exist for any researcher, especially with unions such as Unite and seemingly BS not recording executive meetings. Therefore, the issue of incompleteness could be potentially reconciled, but the trade-off would be creating a more time and cost-intensive research project.

## 8 Conclusion

RQ: How far is community unionism present in both Unite Community (from the 2010s to 2020s) and the National Boot and Shoe Union (in the 1920s)?

The evidence from the topic models suggests that UC may fit into the features of Fairbrother's (2008) criteria, with coalitions and equality having strong relevance and 'beyond the workplace' and 'rank-and-file' being more ambiguous. The ambiguities in these will be further discussed in detail in This article, building on the previous data analysis and bringing more qualitative evidence to explore these themes further. On the other hand, BS to have a much weaker connection to any of the criteria. Moreover, the focus that to dominate is member services and industrial relations. These areas have little connection to the features of CU because they focus on the workplace or the members specifically, staying within the traditional focus of the union. There is no connection to social movement activity, despite there being some relation with the Labour Party and evidence of members being interested in changing society positively. As demonstrated, instead of seeking to change society through campaigns, this evidence suggests that BS members would be more likely to encourage 'self-help', putting it in a different than CU. Through triangulating quantitative and qualitative approaches, it has been possible to argue that BS's approach to CU differs from Unite Community's. This is because Unite Community focuses on campaigning and influencing public policy, whereas BS was interested in methods of self-help, such as educational classes and mutual insurance. With governments (Karn, 2007), and trade unions consistently demonstrating interest in community engagement, it could be useful for more research to study examples of good practice to see what unions can emulate. This is opposed to arguing that some unions are CUs and others do not follow this approach. Instead, recognising unions such as Unite Community and the BS contain some features, some patterns to emulate and perhaps approaches to community engagement to avoid.

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