Journalistic Tactic and Intercultural Deficit: Post-publication Audience Engagement in a Finnish News Case Study

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Abstract: This study examines audience interaction under a Finnish news article on Facebook, scrutinizing the influence of clickbait headlines and their contribution to Intercultural divisions. Utilizing positioning theory and the concept of 'othering,' the research enriches our comprehension of media framing, post-publication gatekeeping, and audience conduct in the digital realm. The comment analysis indicates that the audience primarily reacts to the headline, positioning in regard to the incident, often employing sarcasm and emojis to underscore their points. The media entity abstains from participating in post-publication conversation. The study accentuates additional significant insights and scrutinizes the scant presence of rational–critical reasoning, proposing strategies for its augmentation on digital platforms. By examining these dynamics within the digital milieu, the research offers a more layered portrayal of the perceived 'other' and addresses detrimental positioning.

1. Introduction: News, Social Media, and Society

In today's digital media economy, the competition for audience attention often takes precedence over the quality of information (Terranova, 2012). Social media platforms have transformed the dissemination of news, enabling direct interactions between news producers and audiences as well as among audiences themselves through features like comments, shares, and likes. These platforms shape the visibility of news content, rewarding engagement—driven metrics. However, this pursuit of engagement through sensationalism and clickbait raises concerns about the erosion of neutrality in news delivery and reception.

Scholars have extensively examined the consequences of sensationalism in the media. Billings and Parrott (2020) highlight how exaggerated or dramatic portrayals, particularly of marginalized groups labeled as the 'Other,' often garner heightened engagement by reinforcing stereotypes and provoking emotional reactions.

More recently, attention has shifted to the trajectory of news after publication. Hermida (2020) and Salonen et al. (2023) describe this phenomenon as post-publication gatekeeping, where audiences reinterpret and reshape information through their interactions, effectively acting as secondary gatekeepers. This process, allowing participation in the conversation, can also amplify pre-existing beliefs, contributing to societal polarization (Arendt, 2023). Especially so when the news provided fails to pertain to high journalistic quality. Arendt (2023) further emphasizes how media consumption dynamics can reinforce societal divisions, underscoring the role of audience selectivity in shaping media impact.

Despite these insights and evidence-based calls to focus on intercultural contact and knowledge to mitigate such practices (Mansouri & Vergani, 2018), studies that examine post-publication gatekeeping in digital space from an intercultural communication perspective are, to our knowledge, virtually non-existent.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the interplay between post-publication gatekeeping and intercultural communication within Finland's digital media environment. Using a case study, it examines audience responses to a news article published in a Finnish technology magazine and its subsequent reception on the magazine's Facebook page. Drawing on positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) and the concept of 'othering' (Said, 1978), the study analyzes how online discussions and reactions reflect societal dynamics, with a particular focus on the representation and marginalization of groups in digital discourse.

By investigating the post-publication gatekeeping in the form of audience engagement with a Finnish news article on Facebook, focusing on the impact of clickbait headlines, we aim to contribute to the discussion of gatekeeping in general, 'conversational gatekeeping' (Salonen et al., 2023) in particular.

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The necessity for this study is becoming more apparent due to the increasing polarization, dehumanization, and, in extreme cases, conflicts that we witness on social media these days. Many instances of polarization have been associated with perceived discrimination (Nshom, Sadaf, and Ilkhom, 2022) and perceived threat (Nshom, Khalimzoda, Sadaf, and Shaymardanov, 2022), leading to real-world violent consequences, as evidenced by recent violent incidents targeting individuals of foreign backgrounds (Reuters, 2024). The growing concern over low–quality journalism, shrinking trust in mainstream media (Betakova et al., 2024; Khalimzoda and Siitonen, 2022), echo chambers, and disinformation (Schirch, 2021) exacerbates these issues. Although it might seem unlikely for a Finnish news article to be a source of disinformation, the risk remains. For instance, Farkas and Xia (2023) who examined how disinformation intertwines with audience engagement, emphasized the overlap between sensationalism and the strategic shaping of public opinion. Such practices, while driving audience interaction, risk deepening societal divisions and fostering xenophobia (Khamis, 2021). Furthermore, the quality of journalism plays a crucial role in maintaining public trust and mitigating these risks. Research highlights the importance of preserving quality journalism to serve as an independent monitor of power and a servant of citizens (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). This study, therefore, aims to shed light on the dynamics of positioning in an online discourse, examining the journalistic tactics and intercultural challenges present in the case under study.

2. Literature Review

The term 'Inshallah' was prominently featured in the news article under study and contributed to the post-publication 'Othering' effect. We therefore found it essential to briefly address this before proceeding to the main literature review. The news article was published with the headline:

'' 'We will succeed, Allah willing.' said the pilot of the Airbus A320 — Then followed a completely reckless flight and finally a total disaster that led to the deaths of 98 people.''

The journalist's choice to construct the title as embedded within the 'other' identity, presenting the communicative expression 'Inshallah' (meaning 'God willing') does not seem to be a coincidence. The journalist tends to claim this term was used by the pilot in communication with the tower before the accident, turning it relevant, then he gives the impression that it was the possible lead to the accident, if not the most important reason. First, as its translation, 'If Allah Wills', is chosen instead of 'If God Wills' (which we assume has an intentional and effective role in positioning), followed by an assertion of "…complete reckless flying" and adding more emphasis with "…and destruction."

'Inshallah' is widely used in both casual and professional communication across Muslim-majority countries, reflecting a belief that activities and destiny are under God's will. It expresses anticipation and hopes about future actions. This term is ingrained in everyday interactions, expressing anticipation and hope about future actions. It is also used to transition between topics in conversation. Misunderstandings of 'Inshallah' are common among non-familiar people, particularly in Western contexts, where it is often interpreted literally and negatively. Studies by Masliyah (1999) and AL–Hawi (2018) highlight these misunderstandings, attributing them to cultural differences, language barriers, and lack of contextual experience.

The tactical instrumentalization of Inshallah to frame this particular accident within a cultural or religious identity distorts its meaning, reducing a multifaceted term to a symbol of perceived recklessness. In a similar accident within a Western context, where a pilot might use comparable jargon, it wouldn't be considered the cause of the accident. For instance, the Tenerife Airport Disaster in 1977, the deadliest aviation accident in history, involved two Boeing 747s operated by KLM and Pan Am colliding on the runway at Los Rodeos Airport (now Tenerife North Airport) in the Canary Islands, Spain, resulting in 583 fatalities. It was reported that the pilot exclaimed, ''There he is, that goddamn son of a bitch is coming, he's coming'' (National Transportation Safety Board, 1978). However, no news report framed this exclamation as the cause of the accident. The primary cause of the disaster was determined to be a miscommunication and misunderstanding between the KLM crew and air traffic control, leading the KLM aircraft to take off without proper clearance (Aviation Safety Network, n.d.).

This echoes broader patterns of bias in digital media, where complex cultural terms are misrepresented to align with pre-existing stereotypes. Such narratives contribute to the 'Othering' described by Brons (2015), reinforcing dichotomies between 'us' and 'them'

Such articles are chosen and served by choice, by the gatekeepers. Traditionally, the gatekeeping process in mass media involves stages like sourcing, filtering, and presenting news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). With social media hosting news organizations and driving traffic, audiences now play a crucial role in interpreting and debating content. This dynamic allows news organizations to either engage in the ensuing discussions or remain detached from the outcomes of their published content. This shift has led to the concept of 'post-publication gatekeeping' (Hermida, 2020). Ferreira (2018) also argues that traditional models are insufficient for modern journalism, which is influenced by digital platforms and user-generated content. Nee and Santana (2021) found that social media has shifted gatekeeping power to users and algorithms, impacting news quality and fostering misinformation. Following this, Salonen et al. (2022) analyzed Finnish newspapers' Facebook posts, introducing 'conversational gatekeeping,' where journalists and audiences collaboratively manage content through social interaction.

Despite advancements in gatekeeping and post-publication conversation studies, significant gaps remain, particularly concerning clickbait articles that lack accuracy. Economic pressures drive media outlets to prioritize clicks and ad revenue over journalistic integrity (Betakova et al., 2024). Audience engagement with clickbait, amplified by social media algorithms, creates a feedback loop rewarding sensationalism (Coates Nee, 2022). While post-publication gatekeeping research is emerging, the current study takes it to the next arena, into the field of intercultural communication, where the inaccurate depiction of the perceived 'Other' and how audiences position themselves in that regard sets the avenue to explore.

This leads us to look closer at Positioning Theory, which views positioning as a dynamic process, an alternative to the concept of role, encompassing human interaction and communication as social phenomena (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). It focuses on the patterns of reasoning in human interactions, connecting to the local moral domain through beliefs and the dichotomy of rights and duties (Harré et al., 2009). This theory facilitates a transition from individual engagements to interactions among nation-states, with discourse as the primary medium (Harré et al., 2009). Positioning involves assigning fluid roles in personal narratives, reflecting a person's moral and personal attributes (Harré, 2015). The 'dialogical' approach emphasizes that meanings are generated through symbolic exchanges (Hermans & Hermans–Jensen, 1995). In social media discourse, audiences take positions based on content, sometimes aligning with or opposing the narrative, and creating the 'Other' in the process.

Othering, as suggested by De Beauvoir (1949), involves constructing an opposed entity to create the 'Self'. Crang (1998) describes it as a process where identities are set up in unequal relationships. Mead (1962) and Charon (1992) conceptualize othering as a dynamic process central to role-taking and constructing the self/in–group and the other/out-group in mutual opposition. This process identifies desirable traits in the in-group and undesirable traits in the out-group, implicitly establishing superiority (Brons, 2015). Lister (2004) defines othering as a process of differentiation that establishes the social distance between 'us' and 'them'. Harmer and Lumsden (2019) discuss 'online othering', which examines the motivations behind online discrimination and prejudice. Our study explores how othering occurs on social media and the strategies users employ to create the 'Self' and 'Other'

3.   Methodology

Our positionality as authors should be made transparent before presenting the case study and methodology. As the first author and a recent Ph.D. graduate in Intercultural Communication, I bring expertise in community building, host–immigrant relations, and efforts to counter othering and dehumanization. My work in media pluralism and promoting improved intergroup relations informs my interest in this topic. While my previous research has focused on diaspora communities, I now find it important to study the broader society—particularly through social media— while acknowledging that more constructive segments of the population may not be active in online comment sections. As such, our focus on social media may overlook other significant aspects of public discourse.

The second author contributed their expertise by supporting the analysis and interpretation processes, while the third author added value by offering both specific and broader perspectives across different contexts, helping to situate this study within the wider body of relevant literature. While the inclusion of multiple perspectives can complicate data analysis and interpretation, our collaborative approach has enabled us to remain conscious of potential biases throughout the research process—from its design to the final conclusions.

Beyond the insights gained through this study, our primary objective is to constructively examine the case by analyzing the digital discourse generated in response to an 'exclusive' news report. By presenting these findings, we aim to deepen the understanding of human behavior and decision-making, which may, in turn, contribute to raising awareness and improving intergroup relations.

3.1. The Case Study

In this study, we examined a Finnish-language news article that was disseminated by a Finnish tech news magazine with a following of 23,000. Our focus was specifically on the reception of the news on social media after its publication. The Facebook post, mirroring the web version, bore the same title. This post initially garnered interest due to its tactical framed headline, possibly designed to attract readers with strong assertions. Such an approach is notably rare in Finnish mainstream journalism, excluding the so-called yellow press. Although the article is currently behind a paywall (as of December 2024), it was freely accessible upon its initial publication, allowing us to read and subsequently decide to study it. The article's popularity may have elevated its perceived value after the surprising attention to it. Next, upon thorough examination of the news story, it became apparent that the main text did not fully align with the headline. It was not evident that the phrase 'inshallah' led the pilots to reckless flying and eventual destruction. To verify, we cross-referenced the investigation cited in the news article. This discrepancy sparked further curiosity about audience reactions, forming an interest in this study.

After reviewing the comments, discussing the story with colleagues, and deciding to examine it further, we identified this article as a promising case study for post-publication gatekeeping in the field of intercultural communication. This potential was further reinforced by the significant engagement it garnered, as evidenced by the number of likes, comments, and shares it received, which the following paragraph will provide in detail for a descriptive overview.

The post was published on March 1, 2024, and was one of 41 Facebook news posts made that day. For the general description of all other posts, these 42 posts exhibited a wide range of engagement levels, from no reaction to high interaction. To put it into perspective, we categorized the engagement level for the 41 posts as 'low' (5–10 likes), 'moderate' (30–40 likes), and 'high' (50–80 likes), based on the observed range of engagements at the time. The post under study, the 26th of the day, outperformed all others within a week of its publication, garnering 337 likes, 127 comments, and 27 shares, knocking out the range of engagement three times. No other post came close to this level of engagement. Metrics such as likes, comments, and, shares are commonly used to measure social engagement (Mishnick and Wise, 2024). It's important to note that the audience's interest wasn't due to a fascination with airline accidents. On the same day, another aviation–related news post (number 16) about a new Boeing plane accident involving a sudden hole in the plane's body received only four likes, no comments, and no shares. Had it been a Russian jet, the incident would probably have dominated the front pages of numerous media outlets. This stark contrast in engagement highlighted the significance of the post under study, making it a valuable case for examining post-publication gatekeeping in intercultural communication.

3.2. Analysing The News Article

In this study, the data comprises of the comments under the Facebook post (news story). Our analysis of the comments is done taking the lens of positioning theory into account. However, analyzing comments in isolation, without considering the context of the story and the justification for this case study, would be insufficient. Therefore, in addition to analyzing the primary data, we also present a brief analysis of the main story.

The news article under study cited and seemed to be based on the 160-page report published by the Aircraft Accident Investigation (AAI) Board of Pakistan on April 20, 2023. It is worth noting that the original published report included a disclaimer on page 2, stating:

"*Extracts may be published without specific permission provided that the source is duly acknowledged, the material is reproduced accurately, and is not used in a derogatory manner or a misleading context.*"

Upon reviewing the report, we found the primary causes of the accident outlined in the following chapters:

3.2.1: The aircraft made a gear–up landing where both engines' nacelle made contact with the runway. Both engines were damaged, causing a loss of engine oil and lubrication, which failed both engines during the go–around.

3.2.2: There was non–adherence to SOPs and disregard of ATC instructions during the event flight.

3.2.3: There was a lack of communication between the ATC and the flight crew regarding the gear–up landing, particularly once the aircraft was on the runway.

From our reading of the original accident report, the phrase 'inshallah' was neither decisive nor significant in the accident. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the news article's title was chosen in a hurry, or, for reasons other than objectively reporting the incident, that is for sensationalism and clickbait.

3.3. Analysis of The Comment

The comments, as the main dataset, were analyzed and codes were allocated following three coding steps (Holton, 2007).

1) Initial Close Reading: In the initial close reading of the data, we made notes on key themes and patterns related to positioning theory. This involved identifying how individuals position themselves and others within the post-publication conversation.
2) Open Coding: During open coding, we broke down the data into discrete parts and labeled them with codes that reflect different aspects of positioning, such as 'self–positioning,' 'other–positioning,' and 'moral positioning.'
3) Axial Coding: In axial coding, we identified the relationships between the initial codes. We grouped the codes into categories and subcategories, such as 'religious positioning,' 'moral orders,' and 'rational-critical reasoning.'

Although a five-step coding process is considered ideal (Holton, 2007), we opted for a streamlined three-step approach due to the following reasons:

1) Manageable Dataset: The relatively small dataset was manageable with the first three steps, allowing us to achieve a thorough and meaningful analysis.
2) Focused analysis: The selected steps were sufficient for a focused and in-depth analysis of the data. By concentrating on open and axial coding, we were able to identify key themes and relationships without overcomplicating the process.
3) Practicality: The three-step coding process was efficient and practical. It enabled us to maintain a clear and organized analysis while ensuring that all relevant aspects of positioning theory were addressed.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, we relied on the (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) following strategies:

a. Independent Coding: The authors independently coded the data to prevent bias and ensure diverse perspectives.
b. Consensus Meetings: We held regular meetings to discuss and resolve discrepancies in our coding. This collaborative process helped achieve a consensus on the interpretation of the data.
c. Refinement of Codes: The coding frame was refined iteratively based on the discussions and agreements reached during the consensus meetings. As a result, the authors discussed the data thoroughly together, enabling us to identify the overarching themes (Bamberg, 2012) present in the dataset.

4. Results

Taking into account the principles of positioning theory, the coding process classified the audience comments into three main categories: 1) Religious positioning, 2) Moral orders, and 3) Rational critical reasoning at play. Religious positioning as the most prevalent category is further divided into three sub-categories: Islamophobia, Religious Hate Speech and Mockery, and Toxicity Triggers (with fictional references).

This classification is accompanied by the identification of various rhetorical devices, which we recognize as discursive features within the comments. These are: Sarcasm, Metaphor, Flashback, and Hypothetical reasoning. In addition to revealing the categories into which the comments fall, we also provide excerpts and offer detailed explanations of these comments in relation to the theory and the context of the news post.

4.1. Religious Positioning

In various comments, it was evident that the commenters were positioning Allah ('God' in Arabic) as a figure who could either be made fun of or labeled as a bad pilot. In many of these comments, sarcasm is used as a rhetorical device. We have further divided religious positioning into three subcategories to help better explain the variety of religious positioning in the comments.

4.1.1. Islamophobia

Islamophobia, as defined by Bleich (2011, p. 1581), refers to 'indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims.' This sentiment is evident in the way commenters (re)produce Islamophobic discourses. For instance, they derogatorily use the name of the sacred Muslim entity 'Allah,' suggesting that Allah is an incompetent pilot or lacks the training to fly a plane. Sarcasm is a common rhetorical tool in these comments. Additionally, the use of emojis often alters or amplifies the messages conveyed. The data shows numerous instances where commenters employ emojis to enhance their points.

Excerpt 1

Comment: *Allah doesn't have type training for the A320. If the captain lets Allah fly, the captain is gone, even if he gets it down intact.*

Comment: *Allah is a bad pilot.*

Comment: *God will help, for example, Rome attacked Israel in 70, Moses didn't come to help, but the Roman gods did... and everything was destroyed* 😱.

These comments show how religious entities are positioned in the discourse. Labels are also seen to be used to convey the position the commenters take and simultaneously position Islam in the discussion. Labeling discourse can profoundly influence both individuals and communities by cultivating a dichotomous mindset, commonly characterized as an 'us versus them' mentality (Cherney & Murphy, 2016).

4.1.2. Religious Hate Speech And Mockery

Expressing hate through the use of words and emojis has been prevalent in the comments. Religious hate speech is understood as the use of provocative and divisive language intended to incite hatred and violence against individuals or groups based on their religious affiliation, often spread through digital platforms and online spaces (Albadi, Kurdi, & Mishra, 2018). Many commenters appeared to express negative sentiments towards the religion, often using mocking language and laughter emojis. Excerpt 2 illustrates how commenters use uncivil language to express their views, often targeting Allah or Islam. Their comments frequently mock these subjects. According to Hatfield (2013), laughter can signify a form of detachment, suggesting that the person feels superior to the subject of their humor.

Excerpt 2

Comment: *Hard to believe in that imaginary man who has never helped in anything.*

Comment: *You shouldn't leave that to Allah.*

Comment: *Allah and airplanes are not a good combination.*

Comment: *It's not better to confuse religion with flying because* 😊*apparently Allah can't fly.*

Comment: *Allah did NOT help in this case.*

In the excerpt above, it is evident that the commenters are using expressions that can be triggering for believers.

4.1.3. Toxicity Triggers And Fictional References

Upon examining the data, it was found that the comments primarily focus on the headline, influencing various dimensions, one of which is toxicity. Toxicity is triggered using language, metaphorical depictions of norms (Pergola, Gui, & He, 2019; Weninger, Zhu, & Han, 2013), and mockery directed toward sensitive issues. This toxicity is considered a contagion that contaminates healthy online discussions (Mohan et al., 2017). Similar triggers can be observed in the comments, where commenters divert from the actual discussion to references such as Aladdin's Disney character, who uses a flying carpet. Additionally, the religious aspect is subtly addressed as the character is depicted as Muslim in the film. Various examples of such comments are presented in Excerpt 3 below.

Excerpt 3

Comment: *Fairy tales don't help in real life*

Comment: *Allah has the capability to be a magic carpet pilot.*😡😡😡*About time has passed since that course as well. 1500y ??*

Comment: *That plane is probably a bit different to fly, than the carpets they are used to flying on.*

Comment: *The feeling when you're next to a fairy tale book character at a height of several thousand kilometers.*

The analysis also shows that these and other comments have used sarcasm as a rhetorical device. Along with this, the toxicity triggers happen to be references to fairy tales and Allah has the ability to fly a magic carpet in the comments.

4.2. Moral Orders

Another thematic finding was the concept of moral order, which, according to Harré (1987), is a "system of rights, obligations, and duties obtained in society, together with the criteria by which people and their activities are valued" (p. 219). Wuthnow (1987) defines it as 'what is proper to do and reasonable to expect' (p. 14). Individuals evaluate each other based on criteria they establish in their minds when positioning themselves and others. These criteria also relate to the rights and duties people attribute to themselves and others in various situations and contexts (Harré, 1984). Thus, it concerns what people judge as good and bad, which in turn relates to rights and responsibilities. A moral order constitutes a structured system of duties that regulate interactions among individuals, and this system is considered a fundamental element of a society's cultural framework (Douglas, 1999). In Excerpt 4 below, commenters adopt the stance of having a moral duty and obligation to communicate what was proper and expected from the pilots. Most of the comments that fall under this theme also use the rhetorical device of sarcasm. For example, in the comments below, commenters judged the pilots as lacking discipline or as talking and not working while flying. Similarly, a commenter goes further and makes a judgment about morals, asserting that honest work helps significantly. All these comments consider the pilots to be inadequate workers. The commenters also judge immigrants and relate the idea of honest work to them, which is connected to the rights and responsibilities of the 'Other' in the comments.

Excerpt 4

Comment: *Here's a great story about these professionals that we also have coming to Finland and who are wanted here by the government. I wonder if the first thing in integration should be emphasized here in real life, but learning and working, so honest working helps a lot.*

Comment: *Insha Allah I will get a job.......*

The comments above illustrate how an incident occurring far away is reframed within the Finnish context, associating the pilots' 'unprofessionalism' with migrants in Finland. The discourse swiftly invokes moral order, emphasizing rights and duties, and suggesting that integration programs for newcomers should encompass elements that imply honesty and professionalism are inherently Finnish traits. It also includes sarcasm which may relate to the assumption that a migrant is jobless, as well as the danger if the migrant gets a job.

Excerpt 5

Comment: *'Flying without discipline.' China banned pilots from playing Mahjong during a flight. During the week, 2 planes from Kai Taki to the sea.*

This comment positions the pilots as lacking discipline, which is framed as a moral failing. By referencing China's ban on pilots playing Mahjong, the commenter implicitly contrasts this behavior with what is perceived as acceptable professional conduct. This reinforces the idea that discipline is a crucial component of professional integrity, which is expected in the Finnish context.

Excerpt 6

Comment: *At the workplace, they weren't working but talking.*

Comment: *Allah and airplanes are not a good combination…*

Comment: *I wonder if Allah is in the game.*

Comment: *Allah usually does not allow...*

This comment above questions the professionalism of the individuals involved, suggesting that they were not fulfilling their duties. It positions the act of talking instead of working as a breach of moral and professional standards. This aligns with the notion that honest and professional work is a valued trait, and any deviation (including believing in God) from this norm is seen as a failure to uphold one's duties.

In addition to the discussions surrounding the rights and duties of commenters and pilots in the news stories, commenters also assume the right and duty to judge other commenters. As seen in Excerpt 7 below, commenters target each other in the comments, thereby positioning themselves as correct while demeaning the others.

Excerpt 7

Comment: *What a bunch of horrible crowd*

Reply to the comment: believers are

Comment: *Or the kapu assumed that God would allow a safe landing.*

Succeeded before, so why suddenly God does not help?

Reply to the comment: *missed a prayer so Allah got angry*

Reply to the comment: *Hard to believe in that imaginary man who has never helped in anything.*

4.3. Rational—Critical Reasoning at play

It is observed in social media discourse that negative comments take more space as compared to positive comments (Robertson, Douglas, Maruyama, and Semaan, 2012). During our analysis, one of the findings was that there was less prevalence of rational discourse, which could be positive, or that the foundation of the discussion is tolerance. The initial comments were more negative and at one point it was believed by the authors that no critical, rational, or well–reasoned comment used any kind of justification for it. But towards the end of the comment chain, there were more responsive comments. Excerpt 8 shows a few examples of rational comments that are well-reasoned and justified.

Excerpt 8

Comment: *Finnish racism is blooming again in the comments, congratulations for showing it with the effective headline Tekniikka & Talous (2022) and the author of the article Mikko Pulliainen (2024).*

Comment: *I'm not a believer myself. But words and combining them create imaginations, and this headline creates an image that, in my opinion, confirms the Finnish racist perception that Muslims would somehow be worse or dumber than representatives of other religions/atheists, etc. In my opinion, it is very harmful and wrong in this political situation.*

Comment: *Feedback sent: Hello! I would like to give some feedback on the Tekniikka&Economy purchase and the Facebook post, which has been commented on very racially because of the headline. Islamophobia is already blooming in Finland, ... I think journalists should be expected to be aware of the impact their work has on society. As the extreme right comes to power around Europe (and also in Finland), everyone should take into account the well-being of their fellow humans, in this case, Finnish Muslims. Thanks for your attention, hoping for a more anti-racist future.*

Excerpt 8 is entirely characterized by a single individual's repeated comments, demonstrating rational–critical thinking that extends beyond the news headline. This individual responds not only to other audience members but also addresses the media organization. This instance underscores the importance of post-publication conversation gatekeeping, as the commenter explicitly seeks a reaction from the journalist.

Excerpt 9

Comment: *Most often the reason for a plane crash is the sum of many things that went wrong, if it's not a terrorist attack etc.*

Comment: *or loose/missing door bolts...*

Comment: *Many commentators seem to be missing something irrelevant. Could it be cultural blindness?*

In some cases, a lower level of rational–critical thinking could indicate factors such as low digital literacy, which hampers the ability to critically evaluate content, or information overload, where audiences are cognitively

overwhelmed (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010). However, in the context of Finland, where a news story with a clickbait title frames a distant incident, it is more likely due to echo chambers and confirmation bias. In such environments, audiences are exposed to information that reinforces their existing prejudices, leading to confirmation bias. This bias causes individuals to favor information that confirms their preconceptions and dismiss information that challenges them, discouraging rational–critical thinking and encouraging the 'othering' of perceived out-groups (Brown, 2021). Consequently, individuals find it difficult to engage in deep, rational–critical thinking and instead rely on heuristics or mental shortcuts, making them more susceptible to clickbait headlines (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010).

The aforementioned comments are a few examples of rational discourse that effectively brought forward justifications, employed critical reasoning, or looked beyond the headline of the Facebook post. At the societal level, rational discourse is expected to enhance comprehensibility, foster common understanding (Bächtiger et al., 2009; Jensen, 2003), and improve decision–making (Wessler, 2008). A rational–critical discourse requires participants to present well–reasoned arguments (Graham, 2009). These findings align with those of Santana (2019) and Stroud et al. (2015), who discovered that justifications with verifiable evidence appear less frequently in their research.

5. Discussion

Tactics in Media, Intercultural Relations, and Expressing Uncivil Views in Civilizations' Times

The study reveals a connection between media framing and the portrayal of the 'other,' which negatively influences recipients. This dynamic shifts responsibility to the audience, who often engage with clickbait headlines and exercise their conversational gatekeeping role, predominantly through religious positioning. While such stories engage audiences in record numbers, they fall short of the 'Guidelines for Journalists' (Journalists' Union of Finland, n.d.). Moreover, these narratives have the potential to exacerbate intercultural divides (Arendt, 2023; Khalimzoda, 2022; Khamis, 2021). Media organizations and journalists could mitigate these negative impacts by adhering to journalistic guidelines and engaging in post-publication gatekeeping to shape the reception of the news (Salonen et al., 2023).

The extensive use of sarcasm and mockery as rhetorical devices creates a sense of detachment and superiority over the subject of ridicule. The concept of moral orders, as discussed in the study, resonates with Harré's (1987) and Wuthnow's (1987) definitions of moral systems that regulate societal interactions. Commenters' judgments about pilots and immigrants reflect broader societal attitudes and biases (Nshom, Sadaf, Khalimzoda, 2021). In the context of intercultural relations, these findings underscore the role of inaccurate reporting in amplifying existing biases. Media representations that mock or demean communicative practices of perceived 'Others' can deepen intercultural divides.

A significant number of societal practices and battles over meaning-making have recently transitioned to the sphere of social media (Farkas and Xia, 2023). Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017) underscored that social media has catalyzed the emergence of various public spaces for opinion exchange. These spaces often bypass conventional political expression norms by continuously challenging and expanding the boundaries of publicly acceptable language. This phenomenon has led to the development of what Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017) term as 'borderline discourse,' a strategic ambiguity between 'civil' and 'uncivil' conversation (Farkas and Xia, 2023). Such discourses, including those in this study, often contain elements of toxicity triggered by language and metaphorical depictions of norms.

These practices align with the concept of conversational gatekeeping (Salonen et al., 2023), where social media audiences determine the norms of the conversation and whether news content is liked or disliked. Furthermore, social media audiences not only 'build mutual understanding and create norms' (Salonen et al., 2023) but also adopt a moral duty to communicate what is proper, judge each other, and position themselves as correct while demeaning others.

The comments also exhibit a trend of expressing dislike and mockery towards religion, particularly Islam. This can be seen as a form of detachment, placing the commenter in a higher position relative to the subject of mockery. Despite the obvious 'hijacking' (Farkas and Xia, 2023) of the airline accident for clickbait purposes by the journalist, most commenters reveal their pre–assumptions, holding tight to the trend of positioning God (Allah) in a negative light, often using sarcasm. This can be seen as a manifestation of Islamophobia, defined as indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims (Bleich, 2011; Khamis, 2021; Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018), which is also visible in connecting the pilots to immigrants in Finland.

Although this research centers on comments from a single Facebook article with a suggestive title, anti–Muslim bias, and narratives are not confined to this instance. For example, Äystö (2024) examined public discourses on Islam and race in Finland, emphasizing high–profile hate speech cases, especially in recent years. This bias is prevalent across many Western countries (Cesari, 2013; Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018), from the United States (Lajevardi, 2020) to Europe (Abdelkader, 2017; Finlay & Hopkins, 2020; Simon & Tiberj, 2018) and Australia (Mansouri & Vergani, 2018). It reaches across many domains of life: social media (Awan, 2014), finding a job (Fernández-Reino et al., 2023; Di Stasio et al., 2019; Weichselbaumer, 2020), even mere interactions with

people on the street (Choi et al., 2021), and much more (Helbling & Traunmüller, 2018; Meer & Modood, 2012). Muslims are also underrepresented in national legislatures (Hughes, 2016), especially in France and Germany (Aktürk & Katliarou, 2021, p. 393). Many voters stereotype Muslim politicians (van Oosten, 2022), political parties struggle with including Muslims within their ranks (Dancygier, 2017, 2014), and voters are much less likely to vote for Muslim politicians (van Oosten, 2023). Research in Denmark shows that voters penalize candidates with an Arabic (versus Danish) last name (Dahl & Nyrup, 2021, p. 209), though they are not likely to do so with politicians from regions not associated with Islam (van Oosten, 2024, van Oosten, 2023: 14).

The comments in this article are from the sphere of social media, where social desirability bias plays less of a role than in surveys or in-person interactions. However, it is still a context that interacts with the real world, where people are also eager to disclose their dislike of Muslims. The social distance between groups, as proposed by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), exists but is not primarily caused by in-group favoritism; instead, it is caused by stereotypes of civil norms held by Muslims (Choi et al., 2022: 6). These assumptions are inherently political, and they provide legitimacy for discrimination (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar, 2020). Mobilization of civil norms makes discrimination against Muslims more palatable, though it is unclear whether mobilization of civil norms is a cause or a consequence of anti-Muslim bias.

There is a wide range of so-called 'civilizationist' topics. The term 'civilizationism' encompasses femonationalism, homonationalism, and other 'civilized' causes such as secularism, philosemitism, individual freedoms, and freedom of speech that political actors mobilize to fuel anti-Muslim sentiment (Brubaker, 2017). There are many other potential causes that could be included under this umbrella, such as animal rights, as suggested by the tendency of far-right parties to support animal rights while opposing immigrants who are perceived as not being animal–friendly (Backlund & Jungar, 2022): called animeauxnationalism.

Media portrayals of Muslims, including the narratives and framing, significantly shape public opinions and intergroup conflicts (Turnbull-Dugarte & Lopez, 2023). Online platforms, which often lack moderation, can amplify these biases, leading to hostile and prejudiced comments. This, again, highlights the powerful impact of media framing on public opinion and its potential to incite hate speech in digital spaces.

It is important to highlight the presence of rational and critical perspectives within the conversation. These instances show that some audience members went beyond the headline, recognizing the misleading nature of both the story and the comments. Such critical engagement is exactly what the digital space needs more of.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The study focuses on comments from a single Facebook article, which limits the generalizability of the findings. We acknowledge the role of algorithmic boosts in increasing engagement but do not delve deeply into how algorithms might selectively amplify certain types of content over others. Our findings are based on a specific time frame, which may not capture the evolving nature of social media interactions. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to observe changes over time. The study is context–specific to Finland, which may limit its applicability to other cultural or regional contexts. Comparative studies across different countries and contexts would enhance the understanding of media framing and audience responses. The story and the comments were originally in Finnish. Authors, despite all the technological accessibility, may have had a better chance of evaluating the data with highly proficient Finnish–speaking co-authors.

Future research could explore the role of intercultural communication within media organizations. Investigating multiple similar clickbait headlines and conducting interviews with editors and journalists would provide valuable insights. Such studies could also examine the potential for post-publication gatekeeping in the future. Future research could also investigate the gatekeeping practices of social media group administrators. By using similar approaches, such studies would uncover important practices that are not immediately apparent. This would provide a deeper understanding of how group admins influence the flow of information and maintain norms within their communities. Future research should consider examining the digital environment within Muslim–majority contexts to determine if similar forms of othering are prevalent. From the gatekeeping perspective, it certainly would be of interest to see if other platforms such as Meta or news media are more reactive in moderating or participating in such post-publication practices. Such an investigation could uncover the broader necessity for community building, better reporting, and intercultural education for everyone, especially for journalism professionals to foster a more inclusive digital space and contribute to a more harmonious future for all.

7. Conclusions

This study offers a glimpse into how audiences' preconceived notions shape their interpretations of a Finnish technology news article and its Facebook comments. While many are swayed by the clickbait title, some astutely recognize the suggestive framing upon closer inspection and oppose the conversational gatekeeping by the other audience members. By this, the study theoretically contributes to the understanding of conversational gatepeeking and answers to the call (Salonen, et al., 2023) to apply the concept in the field of intercultural communication. This research highlights the prevalence of biased discourse in Finland and the powerful role of framing, pointing to a potential rise in xenophobia which is not an easy task for the large platforms to detect, both for the reason that the definitions of hate speech and discriminatory language differ in various country legislation as well as due to

the fact the platforms are not effective in removing content in smaller language segments. Previous research has established that media framing significantly influences public opinion and policymaking by shaping how information is presented and interpreted (KhosraviNik, 2022). This study extends these findings by specifically examining how media framing of the 'other' – particularly through clickbait headlines and religious positioning – negatively impacts recipients and exacerbates intercultural divides.

Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of continuous intercultural communication and community building in society to combat prejudice and hate speech. Ethical Guidelines for Journalists and policies could have a clear emphasis on these matters as continuous efforts in cultural sensitivity and professional intercultural awareness are essential for all parties involved in shaping reality. Social media's dual role in reinforcing and challenging stereotypes is evident, prompting reflection on which side prevails.

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