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## **HUMOR, HARM AND HATE: THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST MEMES**

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### **Background**

The paper presents initial findings from an ongoing research project that investigates the discursive construction of race, gender, and sexuality in the visual culture of three online far-right extremist platforms in Scandinavia. This interdisciplinary project brings together feminist theory of humor and harm with digital media research into memes and the far-right in order to explore the hateful discourse in the online humor of the far-right.

The paper has the following research question:

- How is race, gender, and sexuality discursively constructed in the humorous visual culture of the Scandinavian far-right?

Following Butler's (1997) notion that violent language does more than just stand in for violence: "it enacts its own form of violence" (Butler, 1997 p. 9), the paper extends this notion to that of humorous language. As such, rather than dismissing online humorous communication (such as memes) as "just a joke" and therefore harmless, the paper makes the case for taking humor seriously.

Following Billig's (2005) research into humor as a social act with the ability to simultaneously unite and divide, the paper investigates how the humorous visual content discursively creates insiders and outsiders. The paper then builds on previous research into how humor can work to create exclusion and "othering" of those who are the butt of the joke (Kramer, 2011; Kuipers, 2009) which often applies particularly to marginalized people, i.e., women, people of color, as well as sexual and gender minorities (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010; Shifman & Lemish, 2010).

Going beyond current focus on the importance of definitions in relation to memes (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; Shifman, 2013), I characterize the visual posts on my selected

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platforms as visual culture (McSwiney et al., 2021) encompassing a multitude of visual content including but not limited to strict definitions of memes.

Much research has been conducted into the far-right online visual culture – especially the use of memes in the promotion of far-right ideology (Askanius, 2021; Askanius & Keller, 2021; Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; DeCook, 2018; Greene, 2019; Peters & Allan, 2022; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018). While research has investigated the overlap of racism with sexism and misogyny as well as racism and homophobia in far-right visual culture (Bland et al., 2023; Brigley Thompson 2018, Dickerson, 2021; Harlow et al., 2020; Kanai, 2016; Milner, 2016; Nicholas & Agius 2017), this paper explores the scarcely researched overlap where racism meets both sexism/misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.

## **Methods**

The data was collected in January and February of 2024. The scope of the data set extends over the full year of 2023, and it consists of visual content posted to three different social media platforms: one Swedish, one Norwegian, and one Danish.

The Swedish data set is from the Swedish part of the Nordic-wide association, The Nordic Defense League (Nordiske Motståndsørølsen). The Norwegian data set comes from the Facebook page Avviklingen av Norge (The Elimination of Norway). The Danish data is from the website Trykkefrihedsselskabet (the Free Speech Society).

The three platforms were chosen because they each represent some form of right-wing extremist discourse, because they produce (or a part of their platform consists of) visual content (e.g., memes, satirical cartoons, and other types of visual content), and because parts of this communication is humorous or satirical.

Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I first familiarized myself with the data (reading and re-reading the data). Second, I coded the data into several themes before applying a discourse analysis to the data set.

## **Expected findings**

As the paper discusses work in progress, the findings of the project are limited at the time of writing. Thus, I am unable to provide a list of the exact themes emerging from the project. However, the initial coding of the data set reveals similar themes across the three websites in relation to: (1): the function of humor in the visual content, (2): far-right ideology, and (3) in the overlap between racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. In the following, the expected findings across these themes are discussed:

(1) The role of humor on the three platforms produces a discursive creation of insiders and outsiders (Billig, 2005) on two levels. First, it reveals how the ingroup is reaffirmed by the boundary creation to the imagined “others”: women, people of color, as well as sexual and gender minorities. Second, it reaffirms this boundary through the use of memes, tropes, and imagery which is based on a certain (sub)cultural knowledge of far-

right online visual culture. In order to be included in the discursive “us” of the platforms one must thus both belong to the racial, gendered, and sexual norm and possess knowledge of the in-group’s visual culture and tropes.

(2) The paper expects to discuss the visual content on the three platforms in relation to far-right ideology. This includes the discursive construction of the “ideal” Scandinavian citizen as a white man via the discursive “othering” of the racialized (mostly Muslim) non-citizen. This othering is expressed via a characterization of the non-European outsider as barbaric, sexually perverted, and culturally backward.

(3) The overlap of racism with sexism, homophobia and transphobia is expressed through an anti-woke discourse that is prevalent across all three platforms. This is expressed through anti-gender (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018) discourse, ridicule of women’s rights (to e.g., bodily autonomy), ridicule of feminism, and through questioning of the existence of trans lives. While sometimes subtle and other times expressed explicitly, the Nordic man is centered as the norm while non-white, (often) Muslim, sexual and gender minorities are discursively othered.

While the paper specifically discusses three Scandinavian cases of far-right visual culture, the paper will be of interest to AoIR scholars as the themes deriving from the data reproduce or mirror International far-right tropes and ideology. As Scandinavian societies are often (undeservedly) put on a pedestal and viewed as particularly accomplished when it comes to equality and diversity – to the point where it is almost viewed as a feminist and socialist utopia – it is particularly important to shed light on the ongoing and very prevalent discourse of xenophobia and anti-wokeness that permeates extremist as well as mainstream online discourse. This paper aims to shed light on and take a critical approach to the racist, misogynist, homophobic and transphobic discourses that is often diminished and hidden under the guise of humor.

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