Article – Theme section

Extremist narratives in the digital mainstream
Exploring online discussions about migration in Sweden

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Abstract

This article employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the narrative articulation of crises in discussions around immigration and integration on Flashback Forum in Sweden. Using a combination of topic modelling and narrative analysis, it follows a two-step research design. First, topic modelling helps to identify key topics in the data and select a corpus for qualitative analysis. Second, drawing on Berger's (2018) extremist crisis typology, we explore the crisis-narrative constructions around these topics, highlighting the extremist components within these. Our findings show that the prevalent topics in these discussions are not about immigration per se – rather, they address societal issues where perceived crises with immigration at their root are articulated in terms of how they disrupt everyday life in Sweden. Our analysis reveals how mundane concerns around immigration ventilated on Flashback mix with overtly extremist discourse and conspiracy beliefs, explicating Flashback as a site of everyday extremism.

Keywords

extremist narratives, immigration, topic modelling, narrative analysis, social identity theory, everyday extremism

Introduction

During the 2014-2015 period of significantly increased migration from the Middle East and Africa (MENA) to Europe, dubbed the "European migration crisis", Sweden received over 163,000 asylum seekers – more per capita than any other EU country. The then center-left government took pride in that fact, reaffirming Sweden's international image as a "humanitarian superpower" (Sveriges Radio, 2015). In subsequent years, however, the country underwent an "identity crisis" – the inclusive "Swedish model", entailing its long-standing socialist tradition, state feminism, and inclusionary multiculturalism, gradually deteriorated (Rothstein, 2023). With this development followed a discursive shift in media representations of migrants and migration, the mainstreaming of anti-immigration senti-ments, and a significant increase in support for far-right populism (Ekman, 2020). These recent shifts in public and political migration discourse and politics make Sweden an interesting case study for understanding how (perceived) crises and crisis narratives affect migration attitudes and, by extension, the intricate relations between public debate, atti-tudes, and political action.

Since first entering parliament in 2010 with 5.7% of the votes, the Sweden Democrats party (SD), with roots in the late 1980s neo-Nazi grassroots movement, has been steadily growing, and even more so after 2015. For years, SD has fueled the idea of Sweden-in-crisis and societal collapse under the weight of multiculturalism and an alleged "Islamiza-tion" of the country (see e.g. Åkesson, 2009). In the 2022 general election, SD became the second-largest party with 20.5%, assuming a kingmaker position with the right-wing bloc dependent on their support to govern. In October 2022, the new governing coalition and SD signed the Tidö cooperation agreement, which promised a 'paradigm shift' in Swedish politics marked most significantly by restrictive immigration policies such as limiting the number of immigrants to the lowest permitted by the EU, intensifying efforts to promote voluntary remigration, tightening rules for labor and family immigration, and investigating possibilities for revoking residence permits and citizenships (Rothstein, 2023).

Given these developments, the political discourse opposing immigration in Sweden has been subject to extensive scholarly attention, with particular focus on the rhetoric of SD (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019), news media (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021; Ekström et al., 2020), and far-right actors' use of mainstream social media (Ekman, 2014, 2018; Wahlström et al., 2021), alternative far-right media (Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021), and offi-cial propaganda channels (Askanius, 2021). We know less, however, about the nature of anti-immigration discourse in vernacular conversations in online public spaces, and the potential penetration of extremist ideas and narratives into what we might refer to as 'the digital mainstream' (Åkerlund, 2022). One such space significant to the context of Sweden is Flashback Forum – an anonymous online discussion forum used by an estimated third of the Swedish population (Internetstiftelsen, 2019). Considering its popularity, this space for online deliberation is important as its overt dedication to 'protecting free speech'

allows for radical and potentially extreme ideas to enter everyday conversations (Åkerlund, 2021a).

The present study examines a corpus of 33,731 online comments posted between January 1 - July 1, 2023 in Flashback's section "Immigration and integration". Drawing on a combination of topic modelling and qualitative narrative analysis, the paper follows a two-step approach. First, topic modelling helps identify key topics in contemporary discussions around immigration on Flashback. Second, through narrative analysis of a computationally selected sample of comments within the identified topics, we explore the narrative construction of crises and highlight the extremist components within these. In doing so, we focus on the discursive construction of 'Sweden in crisis' as articulated through contemporary issues, here in relation to migration.

The research questions informing the study are:

What are the key topics related to contemporary discussions of migration and integration on Flashback?
How is crisis articulated in extremist narratives emerging around these topics?

In addressing these questions, this study contributes to scholarly debates on the role of anonymous discussion forums, and online media more generally, in spreading and normalizing extremist narratives and anti-democratic ideas around issues related to migration. Building on ongoing work within a larger project tracking the contemporary evolution of oppositional ideologies (Askanius et al., 2024; Askanius & Stoencheva, 2024), we propose the theoretical concept of *everyday extremism* and argue for its relevance through our empirical case – bringing attention to the key components of extremist narratives around migration-related discussions on Flashback. In doing so, we demonstrate how *everyday extremism* occurs in relation to mundane conversations on open public platforms that are not dedicated to or organized by any particular political group or agenda per se. Our findings thus contribute to knowledge about the increasing penetration of exclusionary, stigmatizing, and violent discourses into 'the digital mainstream' and how these work to normalize extremist beliefs.

Understanding extremist narratives online

In recent years, scholars have acknowledged the proliferation and increasing normalization of exclusionary, extreme, and/or radical ideas in diverse public settings (i.e. Ebner, 2023; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Miller-Idriss, 2018; Wodak, 2021). In digital media, narratives, language, and symbols rooted in extremist beliefs circulate freely on public online platforms, aided by the internet's ease of shareability. Frequently, these take the form of what Krzyżanowski (2020) calls 'borderline discourse' – discourse that falls short of overt extremism or hate speech, but rather 'disguises' violent rhetoric i.e. as 'rational opinions'

or 'jokes'. The prevalence of such 'borderline discourse' on mainstream social media contributes to its further normalization, in turn broadening its reach and potentially acting as a 'gateway' into engaging with more radical ideas for any user willingly or unwillingly exposed to it (Åkerlund, 2021b). The increased societal tolerance and acceptance for violent language moves the bar for what is considered extreme – and, by extension, legitimizes potentially violent behaviors.

Following this line of thought, we take an interest in the ways in which *extremist narratives* are woven into contemporary discussions about migration, its causes and consequences. Drawing on the work of Berger (2018), we understand these to be narratives based on group identity constructions, whereby the extremist *in-group* suggests a *solution* to a threat-based *crisis* that is rooted in the existence of *out-groups*. The notion of a *crisis* is central to extremist narratives. The alleged 'crisis' suggest that out-groups cause the suffering of the in-group both through their inherent traits (how they *are*), and through their actions (what they *do*) (Baele, 2019). While extremist actors typically integrate current political crises into their narratives, their crises are not framed as contingent on circumstances but rather as intrinsically inherent from the disparity between in-group and out-group definitions. Constructed in such a way, these crises only become solvable through either domination over, or permanent elimination of the out-groups. Thus, an extremist crisis narrative becomes a motive legitimizing extreme counteractions (Baele, 2019; Berger, 2018). Therein lies the distinction between extremist and populist language: while populist narratives, too, rely on discursive group identity formations categorizing people into in- and out-groups, in extremist narratives the us/them distinction is constructed around a value proposition of hostility and/or violence which breaches democratic principles and human rights, ultimately posing a threat to democracy itself.

Indeed, recent research on extremism consistently highlights the importance of narratives as the core element of extremist worldviews, and the necessity of their existence to motivate group-based violence (i.e. Baele, 2019; Berger, 2018; RAN, 2019). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Berger (2018, p. 44) suggests a definition of extremism as "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an outgroup".

Everyday extremism

Dovetailing Berger's definition of extremism, we propose the concept of *everyday extremism* as a way of reflecting on the increasing presence of extremist messages and symbols in people's everyday lives, in both online and offline settings (Askanius & Stoencheva, 2024). The term offers a lens to recognize instances of extremism resulting from the entanglement of two distinct but interrelated phenomena: the mainstreaming and normalization of extremist ideologies. Despite their often synonymous use (Rothut et al., 2024), these concepts entail slightly different processes. Mainstreaming, on the one hand, refers to *where* these circulate – i.e., their spread outside of fringe environments

into popular, well-attended physical and/or digital spaces not solely dedicated to political or ideological content (Åkerlund, 2022; Ebner, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2018). Previous studies have shown how extremist groups intentionally develop strategies to facilitate mainstreaming by repackaging their messages to broaden their reach and appeal (Rothut et al., 2024). Normalization, in turn, considers *how* people perceive these – the proverbial shifting of the Overton window, the process through which what was previously considered extreme becomes acceptable and uncontroversial (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023; Wodak, 2021). By integrating these perspectives into existing scholarship on extremism, the notion of *everyday extremism* helps us look beyond the fringes or *the extremes of extremism* to instead capture the development and proliferation of extremist narratives, sentiments, and attitudes in the wider public. This involves making explicit the many ways in which the extreme is rendered normal, and, by extension, violence is presented as banal or benign (see e.g. Askanius & Keller, 2021). An integral part of this process are the everyday practices, discourses and interactions – in which anyone could potentially engage – that reproduce hostile 'us'/'them' oppositions as rational or 'common-sense', or alternatively, cloak them in humorous or satirical framings (Askanius & Stoencheva, 2024). Taking an everyday approach to extremism thus compels us to consider extremism beyond the production of political ideology and focus on its penetrations into people's lives – i.e. through culture and entertainment, or seemingly 'mundane' discussions on navigating life and society.

This term makes our research agenda explicit, which is twofold. First, we aim to broaden the focus of extremism research moving beyond explicitly violent organized actors and actions, to include the more pervasive and mainstream forms of extremist discourse that ordinary citizens encounter and engage with in their daily lives. This requires applying the lens of everyday extremism on different sites of analysis than those traditionally examined by extremism research, instead looking at *public* spaces and places to understand where, when and how people come into contact with extremist narratives. By doing this, we can illuminate how extremist narratives' penetration into public discourse blurs the boundaries between mainstream and extreme, thus proving it ineffective to think of extremist beliefs as those that lie outside a supposedly 'moderate' mainstream/center. Second, rather than focusing exclusively on direct (physical) violence, we strive to highlight the symbolic and cultural aspects of violence that create the necessary conditions for enacting structural and direct violence. These include, but are not limited to, the use of hostile language, dehumanizing imagery, and exclusionary rhetoric against social groups.

In the following analysis, we draw on these critical perspectives on extremism to offer an empirical analysis on what everyday extremism looks like on an open online forum.

Understanding Flashback Forum

One of the oldest and largest online platforms in Sweden, Flashback – an anonymous forum used by an estimated third of the Swedish population – has only recently become the subject of scholarly attention. Long overlooked as a mundane, 'outdated' internet 'corner' from the early days of Swedish internet, Flashback has proven itself a relevant site of analysis due to recent findings highlighting the platform's significance for spreading hate speech and far-right content (i.e. Åkerlund, 2021a, 2021b, 2023; Askanius et al., 2023; Blomberg & Stier, 2019; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). Similarly to international online discussion platforms such as Reddit and 4chan, Flashback allows users to anonymously engage in vernacular conversations with strangers about anything from cars and cooking to drug use and extremist ideologies. To post on the forum, one needs an account with a username (which can be anonymous), but no registration is required to access and read any thread. The lack of 'boosting' capabilities like upvoting or sharing ensures that discussions remain chronological.

However, Flashback stands out from other online discussion forums in its overt commitment to 'protecting free speech'. The forum's slogan, "Free speech for real," emphasizes this dedication – it prides itself on its policy of non-interference with user content, which goes as far as forbidding users from editing or deleting their own posts and accounts (Åkerlund, 2023). Through their devotion to keeping content on the forum (which has demanded they move their servers outside of the EU to avoid adhering to Swedish hate speech regulations), and limiting moderation to cleaning up duplicates, spam and troll/off-topic posts, Flashback becomes a space where views ranging from uncontroversial to extreme circulate freely and openly. For example, Åkerlund (2021b) shows Flashback's significance in popularizing and normalizing the far-right anti-immigration term 'culture enricher' in Swedish society, and Askanius et al. (2023) demonstrate the prevalence of misogyny and anti-feminist sentiments on the platform. The affordance of anonymity further enables extremist content on the forum, as users have been found to express themselves more radically on anonymous platforms than they would with their name and picture attached to their posts (Åkerlund, 2023; Brown, 2018; Hagen & Tuters, 2021).

As an established and popular platform, Flashback often appears prominently in search engine results for a wide range of inquiries, driving traffic of unengaged lurkers to the forum – as much as 33% of Swedes read Flashback 'occasionally', while only 1% are there 'daily' (Internetstiftelsen, 2019). Consequently, with its affordances and popularity, Flashback holds "discursive power" in shaping public attitudes (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016, p. 409). By allowing and actively preserving radical and extreme discourse on the platform, Flashback both contributes to its normalization and potentially becomes a gateway into it for people who accidentally stumble upon such content (Åkerlund, 2021a).

The topic of immigration has been high on the agenda for Swedish society, particularly following the 2014-2015 migration 'crisis', and its popularity on Flashback reflects its societal significance. As of March 2024, "Immigration and integration" is the fourth-largest

section on the forum with over 2,3 million comments. Several studies on Sweden during the period leading up to the electoral success of SD and current political situation demonstrate that immigration is a hot-button issue polarizing public opinions and fueling the spread of anti-immigration extremist discourses on Swedish-speaking social media (Ekman, 2019; Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018; Wahlström et al., 2021; Yantseva, 2020). In light of these studies, we consider it critical to continue to assess the extent to which extremist narratives permeate public sentiments in relation to immigration in Sweden and follow their development over time. The affordances outlined above make Flashback a fruitful site of analysis for our purpose, as it operates in the space between the fringe and the mainstream by appealing to a certain type of audience through its specific affordances while also attracting a large number of viewers to consume or engage in everyday negotiations.

Methodology and research design

This study draws on a mixed-methods approach in a two-step research design combining topic modelling and qualitative narrative analysis. Using this approach, we join recent efforts to bridge methodological boundaries between qualitative and computational research methods in the humanities and social sciences. Among others, Lindgren (2018) calls for combining methods from the qualitative and computational realms in a strategic 'methodological bricolage' to understand what goes on in the data, to find patterns, but also to explain why they arise and what happens to the outliers – that is to say, complementing 'big data' with 'thick data'. Computational methods can enhance digital media research in two meaningful ways: they can help validate and refine observations derived from qualitative examination of a limited sample, while also revealing overarching trends and patterns that might remain concealed during close readings of specific text segments (Baele et al., 2021). In particular, topic modelling has proven useful in enhancing qualitative inquiries into the linguistic elements of contention in discourse around politically charged topics such as migration, gender, and vaccination (Askanius et al., 2023; Hammarlin et al., 2024; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016).

Topic modelling
Large language models (LLMs) are computational tools built to understand and generate human-like language, trained on large amounts of textual datasets to 'learn' patterns, grammar, and context. One such LLM, developed by Google, is BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers). In this study, we utilize the topic modelling tool BERTopic, which builds on BERT's abilities. BERTopic can assist in identifying themes within a text collection by analyzing documents and grouping them into topics based on meaning (Grootendorst, 2022).

While various methods exist for topic modelling, BERTopic offers unique benefits. One key feature is its ability to sort documents within topics by 'representativeness'. The process looks as follows. First, each piece of text – also called a document – is transformed into a high-dimensional vector using word embeddings, capturing the document's overall meaning. Next, documents with similar vector representations are grouped, forming a potential cluster. The researcher determines the appropriate number of clusters (topics). Each cluster contains words with varying frequencies that help identify the keywords that best represent the specific topic. Finally, the documents in each cluster are sorted by 'representativeness' by calculating the similarity of their individual vector representations to this of the overall topic (Grootendorst, 2022).

In this study, we used BERTopic to enquire into the most prevalent topics within our data in a quantitative way, with the goal of mitigating bias potentially emerging from our previous knowledge of migration discourse in Sweden. Our data corpus was extracted with a manually-created Python script. Standard steps for data preprocessing were undertaken, such as removing stopwords and excluding irrelevant text (i.e. links, numbers, and unknown characters). After cleaning duplicate posts, posts with no text (i.e. those containing only images/links) and posts becoming empty after our preprocessing, 1170 comments were removed for the corpus. After several iterations to the number of topics, we opted for 15 topics, which seemed to accurately and clearly capture coherent and interpretable thematic clusters. Further, we sorted the documents within each topic by 'representativeness' in order to obtain a smaller sample for the narrative analysis. Next, we manually named each topic after reading its 50 most relevant keywords and 20 top comments. While the primary focus of this study lies on the qualitative analysis of narratives, topic modelling facilitates the creation of a feasible yet diverse corpus for this analysis that ensures to cover the broad range of themes that exist within the data, and avoid "cherry-picking" (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016, p. 409).

Narrative inquiry into topics

For the second analytical step, we sampled a total of 750 comments – the 50 most 'representative' comments identified by BERTopic for each of the 15 topics. Three operational questions guided the qualitative inquiry for identifying extremist narratives in the data:

Who are 'we' (the in-group)/'they' (the out-groups)?
What is the constructed 'crisis'/'threat'?
What are the proposed solutions?

We approached the sample by asking each of these three questions for each comment, in order to determine the presence or absence of extremist narrative(s) within it. In the cases where all three questions could be answered, the comment was deemed an example of an extremist narrative, and the answers were noted down.

Next, focusing solely on the comments where extremist narratives were present, we took a closer look at their narrative components. To explore the crisis narrative constructions within the data, we lean on Berger's (2018) crisis typology, outlining six different types of crises inherent to extremist narratives:

Impurity. This crisis entails the in-group 'contamination'. This could mean that in-group members increasingly become more like the out-group, assuming out-group traits, beliefs, or practices. By consequence, a crisis of impurity can also entail in-group 'infiltration', whereby the out-group occupies spaces and (societal) roles that should have been reserved for in-group members.

Conspiracy. Conspiracy crises promote the belief that out-groups engage in secret actions to oppress the in-group. Conspiratorial narratives rely on selectivity to construct a simple, coherent, and comprehensive story that 'proves' the in-group oppression. Often, they frame selected in-group members as "sole holder[s] of truth" (Baele, 2019, p. 712) about the origin of this oppression, thus diminishing trust in official, legitimate information sources.

Dystopia. Dystopian crises pose that out-groups strive – or have succeeded to – reshape society to the in-group's disadvantage. Usually, they paint a picture of a 'societal collapse' looming in the not-too-distant future, manifesting, for example, in a corrupt 'regime' favoring the out-group(s) and designed to cause suffering to the in-group. Often within these, the in-group is criticized for being too passive, thus enabling the dystopian outcome.

Existential threat. According to this crisis narrative, one or several out-groups threaten the very survival of the in-group. An existential threat can take many forms (i.e. military, cultural, or racial), but it is usually perceived to mean an imminent destruction of the in-group.

Apocalypse. Going beyond solely threatening the in-group, the crisis of apocalypse entails a threat to the entire world as we know it. In essence, it encompasses the fear that out-groups or their actions will soon precipitate the end of human society.

Triumphalism. Unlike the other types of crises outlined above, which are all founded on grievances and entail that the in-group experiences current disadvantages, the crisis of triumphalism stresses the in-group's success(es), thus positioning it as superior to the out-group and fostering in-group pride. As such, the out-groups' presence and/or ways of being become undesirable to the self-perceived triumphant in-group.

For each of the crisis narratives identified in our sample, we asked whether and how it fits within any of these categories. Further, to better understand their narrative components, we additionally considered the proximity of the identified out-groups to the in-group. Baele (2019, p. 711) identifies four "archetypal actors" responsible for the in-group's crisis to various degrees, whose relevance we assessed in our sample: far out-groups (those at the core of the crisis that 'pull the strings' and orchestrate the plot against the in-group from a distance), close out-groups (those who enact the direct in-group oppression), and

two types of 'hybrid groups': traitors (originally in-group members serving the interests of the out-groups, often for their own personal gain) and contaminated in-groups (in-group members manipulated in various ways to serve the interests of the out-groups, not realizing the harm they inflict on their in-group). Lastly, we paid attention to whether the violence in the proposed solutions was overt or implicit, and whether it concerned direct/physical or structural violence.

Ethics and limitations

In accordance with the general guidelines of AoIR to protect the privacy and integrity of internet users (franzke et al., 2020), we collected comments without metadata/account information to prevent exposing personal data on the individuals who produce or engage with these. This poses a limitation in terms of the extent to which we can utilize computational methods to analyze the data – for instance, we do not know the exact number of users who participated in discussions on this forum section and are thus unable to provide any results as to, e.g., the network properties between users, or topic development over time. Given this limitation, as well as the anonymity that Flashback affords its users, to try and account for the authors of the comments in our sample would be mere speculation. Arguably, they would not be representative of the broader public opinion in Sweden, nor do we try to imply that they are representative of the type of online content that people in Sweden generally produce or consume. Nevertheless, we consider their presence and accessibility on the open internet as both indicative of, and contributing to, the increased societal tolerance for violent language. Hence, the focus of this study is on broader narrative patterns in the discussions taking place on the platform rather than individual users' political opinions. Therefore, we opted for sampling a period of time strategically tied to specific political events in Sweden. The time frame for data collection was the first six months of 2023, when many of the new government's migration policies took into effect.

Results

The 15 topics most prevalent in the data are presented in an intertopic distance map (Figure 1) – a BERTopic-generated visualization of the semantic proximity between the topics. Closer bubbles indicate similar topics, and the size of each bubble reflects the prevalence of its corresponding topic in the dataset. Here, we see three clusters of related topics – most 'mundane' topics such as "Employment" (T4), "Education" (T7), "Healthcare" (T12) and "Elderly care" (T13) overlap with the topic of "Swedishness" (T1); closely adjacent to these are "Biological racial differences" (T3) and "Climate" (T10), which are likely clustered together due to shared references to science, nature and biology; while topics containing heavy political/ideological references, such as "Immigrants in media"
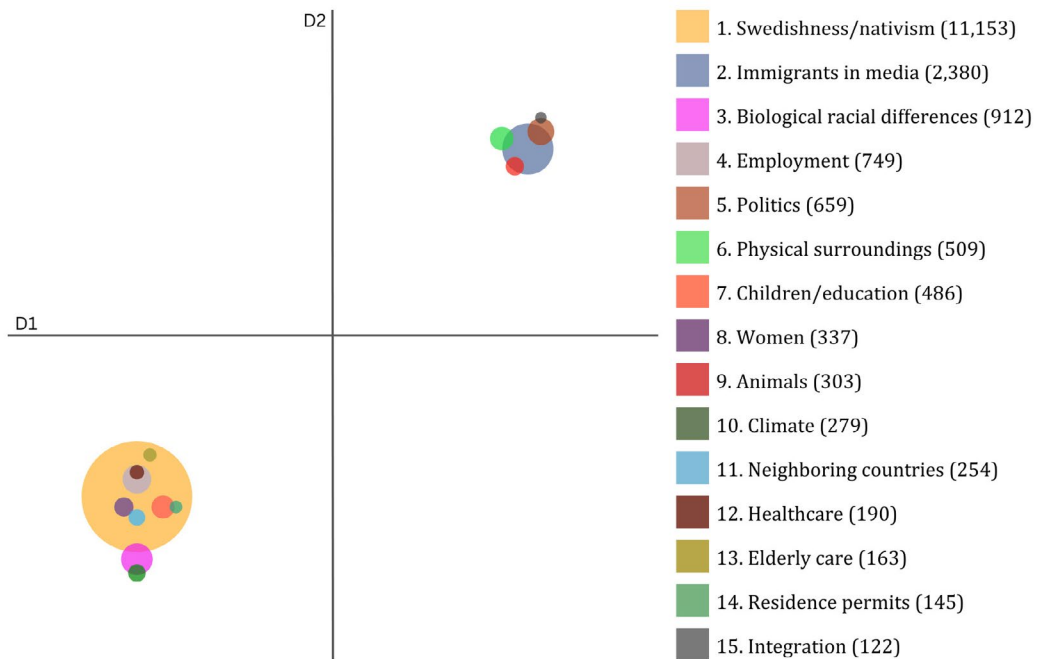
Figure 1. Intertopic distance map

(T2), "Politics" (T5), "Physical surroundings" (T6), "Animals" (T9) and "Integration" (T15) are grouped in a separate, distant cluster. 13,920 comments were not assigned to a topic.

What stands out with these topics is that most of them do not directly address immigration per se – rather, they mostly discuss broader societal issues where perceived crises (such as Islamization, organized crime, or gang violence) are articulated in terms of how they destroy societal structures and disrupt everyday life in Sweden.

A notable exception from this observation are two topics that feature instances of overtly extremist language: T3 and T9. In T3, "Biological racial differences", immigrants (particularly those of African and Arab origin) are regularly portrayed as genetically inferior to Swedes and/or Western Europeans. While in some cases this extreme view is slightly disguised (e.g. justified with historical successes rather than biology per se), the sample from this topic features overt claims arguing for the inherent superiority of the white race. These often echo various forms of scientific racism, e.g. attributing alleged differences in intelligence, behavior, and other traits as consequences of inbreeding, which in turn is depicted as a cultural norm for these societies. Additionally, much of T9 "Animals" revolves around the portrayal of immigrants-as-animals – from being called "hyenas" (for "attacking in groups" and "picking weaker targets – children, women and elderly") and "monkeys" (for being "uncivilized" and/or "uncultured"), to having their value compared to the value of animals (like in the straightforward comment "I value dogs more than Somalis").

Also noteworthy is by far the largest topic in our dataset (T1), which deals with the notion of "Swedishness", often in a nativist manner. These comments focus on delineating the in-group (Swedes) against out-group(s), deliberating on the conditions under which someone may be considered Swedish.

Crisis narratives

In this section, we outline some of the most prominent narratives in our qualitative sample focusing on the 'crisis-solution constructs' articulated in the online discussions. Although not all of our examples fit into the types of crisis narratives outlined above, here we focus on four types that did emerge as particularly present in our dataset: impurity, conspiracy, dystopia, and existential threat. It is important to stress that these narratives are not evoked separately, but often intersect with one another and work to legitimize immigration at the root of these crises (whether as a cause or a result) and mobilize (sometimes violent) action. Notably, the comments in our qualitative sample were generally negative towards immigration. While comments such as those exemplified below are not completely uncontested, comments challenging anti-immigration discourse appeared much more seldom.

Crises of impurity are articulated in the sense of ideological impurity and ethnic/racial impurity. Ideological 'contamination' is claimed on multiple levels – by the immigrants themselves (the *close* out-group), but also by either *hybrid* in-groups or *far* out-groups.

A typical example of in-group 'infiltration' by the *close* out-group is the narrative that immigrants to an ever-larger extent occupy official positions. "They have successfully infiltrated our society", one user writes. "Their tentacles are in everything – the police, the Migration Agency, the parliament, even the government" (T14). From there, they are said to "slowly but surely shift Swedish society from within" by driving "anti-Swedish" policies that benefit them at the expense of native Swedes. Sometimes, this narrative is overtly employed to drive political mobilization, calling for voting (far-)right in order to change the political landscape towards more immigration-restrictive policies, or policies favoring those born in the country.

When it comes to ideological contamination, one of the *contaminated in-groups* invoked in the comments is that of "Leftists" – a *hybrid* group consisting of Swedes with progressive, left-wing, pro-immigration values. In addition to being pro-immigration, these Swedes are said to be "corrupting" Sweden by supporting "cultural Marxism" – a far-right conspiratorial umbrella term encompassing support for gender equality, political correctness, LGBTQ+ rights and multiculturalism. The "Leftists", often referred to as "woke" or "PC" ('politically correct'), are described as both *traitors* and *contaminated*, as one user explicitly articulates: "Libtards do not count as Swedes, they are traitors, except for those who are really just brainwashed" (T1). "Leftist ideology" is described as "oppressive" and/or "fanatic" – and opposition to it as the rational counteraction. "I'm against racism, but I'm at least as much against fanatic leftism where people are harassed

until they say the right pronoun, or forced to obey a state that has the full right to their freedom", one user writes (T13). The contempt towards "Leftists" catalyzes a wide range of hostile/violent propositions – many directed towards "Leftists" themselves. "These fine people only care about the consequences of the multiculturalism they support if they themselves suffer them. Hope they or their wives, daughters or sons get gang-raped by the culture enrichers", a user proclaims (T5). Nevertheless, a portion of the commenters direct their (sometimes, as exemplified below, explicitly violent) solutions at the out-group (immigrants), despite seeing "Leftists" as the real cause of the crisis:

> Why does the Left think people are stupid? If this development continues, ethnic Swedes will become a minority in Sweden in 20 years, says [SD party leader] Jimmie Åkesson. The only way to prevent this is to ethnically cleanse Sweden of people with a foreign background or sterilize foreign men. (T1)

Another 'contaminated' *hybrid* group is that of Swedish women. This group is evoked in crisis narratives of both ideological and racial impurity. In terms of ideological impurity, they are depicted as "brainwashed" and "manipulated by the Left" to support immigration. This is said to be proof that women are naturally "naïve" and thus don't belong in the political sphere. Commenters call for returning to traditional gender roles, where women take responsibility over home and children, and men – over economy and politics. In terms of racial impurity, women are depicted as "race traitors" for entering interracial relationships and having children with non-Swedes. While this narrative is sometimes articulated in a gender-neutral manner, it is generally assumed that it is predominantly Swedish women that have children with foreign men. This 'crisis' is said to have several implications – the 'contamination' of the Swedish race, the sexual deprivation of Swedish men and the 'corruption' of future generations. In the former example, in addition to being blamed for enabling a "Great Replacement", it is implied that mixed-race children would not only be negatively affected in their own development but would also negatively affect the genetic development of the entire nation. The following comment captures elements of this narrative:

> It's damn funny that our beautiful country is being invaded by people with IQ so low that they are considered severely retarded. And it's them that white women want to have children with?! Sweden has an average IQ of 97, the lowest of all Nordic countries. What is this due to? Why is our average IQ falling unit by unit every year? Yes, because Swedish blondes are enchanted by men classified as idiots and produce retarded children who are so low-talented that they become dangerous to society. (T3)

Further, the narrative concerning Swedish men's sexual deprivation echoes discourse from the manosphere and Incel movements (Askanius et al., 2023). By selecting foreign over Swedish partners, Swedish women are said to jeopardize the future of the Swedish race – in addition to producing mixed children – by causing mental suffering to Swedish men.

Reports and statistics highlighting men's declining wellbeing, such as suicide rates among men are invoked to articulate the fault of Swedish women. Lastly, Swedish women, themselves 'impure', are accused of ideologically 'contaminating' the next generation by raising children in accordance with "Western liberal values". However, despite the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Swedish women, our data sample did not feature calls for direct or indirect violence against them. Instead, the narrative implies that they would be the ones to suffer the consequences of the immigration that they enabled – consequences ranging from gang-rapes becoming an everyday occurrence to having women's rights retracted by Islamists taking over Sweden.

In terms of far out-groups, those accused of ideologically 'impurity' are "mainstream media" and Swedish politicians. In the case of media, the Swedish public service and several big news outlets are implicated with left-wing bias, and thus an "agenda" to portray immigrants positively. Media are accused of "glorifying terrorists" or "criminals" in "sob reports" and "censoring" diverging opinions, and positive representations of immigrants are understood as "political propaganda". This is said to threaten individual freedom and democracy:

> You need to remember that many media outlets in Sweden censor – if a journalist so much
> as mentions the negative effects of uncontrolled immigration, they might lose their job.
> This is how the Swedish brainwashing works. The story about Sweden being a functioning
> democracy is a lie. (T2)

Swedish politicians, too, constitute a *traitor* group. One narrative articulating this view implies that the "elite" economically benefits from immigration. Some comments implicate Swedish politicians in corruption schemes, leveling allegations that they e.g. collect large amounts of taxpayer money to accommodate asylum seekers in properties owned by themselves or their friends/relatives or take bribes for e.g. issuing residence permits. While the suggested consequences for implicated media outlets are limited to avoiding them in favor of alternative sources, the proposed solutions against politicians vary from moderate (e.g. calls for protest) to extreme (e.g. abolishing the state):

> The state's betrayal of the people is becoming more elaborate each day. Those who still
> believe that Sweden's problems can be solved by parliamentary means are hopeless idiots.
> Our politicians are a collection of incompetent, corrupt and destructive bastards. The rot
> that has settled in our government is so stubborn and all-pervading that the entire country
> must be abolished and restarted from the ground up. (T5)

Crises of conspiracy rest on narratives claiming to expose hidden powers plotting the destruction of Sweden through orchestrating a "Great Replacement". Such narratives, sometimes borrowing elements from the conspiracy theory of a 'New World Order', mainly deal with the *far* out-groups responsible for enabling or even stage-managing the crisis caused by the *close* out-groups (immigrants). Notions of "white genocide" and "cul-

tural Marxism" are evoked in relation to these narratives, and the *far* out-group responsible for this crisis is described as "the global Left" – "elites" with unlimited economical means, "puppet masters" pulling the strings from a distance (for further discussion of the mainstreaming of the Great Replacement theory in the context of Sweden, see Ekman, 2022).

This conspiracy narrative is articulated through several crises. For one, "the state" is said to purposefully "import undesired immigrants". For the other, media, scientists and politicians are said to work together in an elaborate "system" to conceal the "truth" that the Great Replacement is indeed taking place:

> It's a fact that there is a Great Replacement happening in Germany and Sweden, and your multicultural newspapers celebrate it. Swedish parliamentary parties, apart from SD, are full of traitors who want to destroy Sweden through a Great Replacement. (T2)

The proposed solutions are manyfold, but they all include restricting immigration to the highest possible extend, and preferably to only (white) European nations. In addition, it is suggested that the (white) Swedish population should be encouraged to procreate, for example through childbirth subsidies. Suggestions go as far as overt calls for violence: "When you expect invasion, you barricade yourself and defend what's yours. This is what Europe should also do, i.e. abolish the right to asylum from Africa and MENA", proclaims one user (T10), while another states: "We don't need to blame one or the other for the state of affairs – machine guns at the border work" (T6).

Crises of existential threat also tie into the Great Replacement narrative but argue instead that the "white genocide" would take place through actual physical violence rather than softer means. In this narrative, immigrants are portrayed as naturally violent and prone to crime. Their aggressive and uncultured 'essence' is said to explain the recent years' increased crime rate in Sweden. The clearest articulation of this narrative portrays an imminent racial war looming in Sweden: because of the alleged fundamental differences between races, cohabitation is deemed impossible and a future civil war between Swedes and immigrants is painted as inevitable. In this upcoming civil war, immigrants' violent nature is said to constitute a physical threat to Swedes, as given their raw survival instincts, they would use violence under threat without hesitation. Proposed solutions to this scenario vary in their degree of violence: from suggestions to immediately give the police more power and better weapons, all the way to calling on Swedes to take up arms: "Physical violent invasion cannot be opposed in text form on Flashback!" (T3).

In *crises of dystopia* on the forum, societal collapse is articulated in a myriad of different ways, but there is little disagreement that it is indeed happening. Dystopian narratives take shape around ideas of immigrants' involvement in the collapse of the Swedish welfare system and in extension Swedish society, the destruction of physical surroundings (nature and cities), the oppression of Swedes on their own ground, or the compromising of the future of the country through "feminist propaganda".

On the surface, the *close* out-group themselves are said to be the cause of a societal collapse in multiple ways. A common trope on the forum is that of the so-called "welfare migrants." In this narrative, immigrants are said to have chosen Sweden due to its generous welfare policies, with the sole goal of living on state subsidy. Thus, this group is framed as unwilling to work and contribute to society. The constructed crisis around this narrative poses that the Swedish welfare system, created to protect disadvantaged Swedes, is on the verge of collapse due to the large amount of such "welfare migrants", whose presence affects various aspects of everyday life such as work, housing, childcare and schooling:

> I complain about people who destroy my surroundings, pulverize social cohesion, destroy schooling for Sweden's youth, force ordinary people who don't want chaos around them to white flight, cheat with welfare benefits, etc. I complain about the stupidity of taking in an unimaginable number of people who don't have jobs or anywhere to live. It disturbs me that it's considered racist and offensive to say out loud that one shouldn't have more children than they can support, when actually it's an absolute no-brainer and anything else is really what's weird. (T1)

Among the proposed solutions is letting immigrants qualify for benefits, for example through working and paying taxes, or even reserving benefit allowance for citizens.

The immigrant out-group is also said to wreak havoc on Sweden's nature and cities. This is most elaborately articulated in T6 "Physical surroundings". This narrative paints a dystopian picture of Sweden, from central stations full of homeless people to rat-swarming garbage mountains in city centers and complete chaos in department stores. "Swedes should start shopping somewhere else than IKEA", one comment proclaims, "because their stores are packed with foreigners of various kinds. It feels a bit sad to be a minority when you're out shopping, and quite unpleasant that the IKEA brand becomes associated with immigrants in this way" (T6).

A more elaborate dystopian narrative involving multiple out-groups is that of a state-driven "feminist propaganda". This narrative implies that by promoting and encouraging non-conforming gender roles, the Swedish state causes a deep-rooted identity crisis for both men, women and children. This is said to have serious consequences, among which the emasculation of men, the promiscuity of women, the perversion of society and the destruction of the Swedish nuclear family. According to some commenters, many Swedes would eventually reject this norm. However, the "danger" with this development would be that due to Swedish secularity, Islam would be the most accessible alternative for those seeking to live a "traditional life", causing the Islamization of Swedish society instead.

The role of the woman in Swedish culture is sometimes discursively compared to the role of the woman in other cultures. Within this narrative, Swedish women are portrayed as sexually promiscuous and infidel:

> Swedish men don't make any demands on their women, it's perfectly fine if the Swedish
> woman wants to be a living sperm bucket until she's tired at the age of 32, and then have
> children and start a family with some tragic loser who she then divorces when she is 40.
> Has it been a successful concept for the pathetic Swede who can be totally controlled by
> a state, who fists the ears of children with feminist propaganda and crushes the idea of
> having an identity and belonging? (T1)

Immigrant women, on the other hand, are depicted as holding traditional family virtues, valuing fidelity and childbearing: "They are faithful to their partners, women are faithful to their husbands. There is very little sexual promiscuity, women give birth to many children. Women and their role in society are respected, unlike how it is here in Sweden" (T8). However, this is not always understood as positive – having many children is often negatively described as 'unswedish', mainly in the context of immigrants' assumed dependence on the Swedish welfare system to provide for them.

In turn, the "feminist state" is said to threaten the future generation of men, whose only choice would be to either succumb to the propaganda and become "feminized", or join criminal gangs. Thus, "feminist propaganda" is said produce a generation of "rebels" seeking out engagement with organized crime – the only setting in Sweden where "men are allowed to be men". This 'identity crisis' for men is articulated with the lack of common understanding of what a 'Swedish man' should be like. Since native Swedish men are emasculated, boys growing up in immigrant-dense areas would have criminals as a single reference point for "true" masculinity:

> It is not natural to be totally harmless and weak as a man. In a society where boys are
> raised by a feminist, man-hating state, it's natural for some young men to have enough and
> become rebels. (T1)

Another thoroughly discussed narrative poses that there is widespread racism against Swedes in Sweden, and consequently that (particularly Muslim/MENA) immigrants' unwillingness to integrate stems from the fact that they look down on Swedes and Swedish society. Additionally, there is an alleged "shame culture", whereby it is considered unacceptable or "racist" to be proud of Swedish culture and traditions, while criticism against other cultures is "taboo".

> Many non-Swedes, as well as many Swedes, operate on the assumption that all cultures
> must be respected, except for the Swedish one. Everything that is in some way connected
> to Swedish culture – our flag, national anthem, Vikings, etc., is seen as racist. If a person
> wears the Swedish flag on a shirt or cap, people even want to hurt him. (T1)

According to some users, this "shame culture" enables and encourages both Swedes and immigrants to openly discriminate against Swedes and Swedish culture. In more overt conspiratorial narrative-building, it is said to be imposed on Swedes by "elites" (i.e. politicians, journalists) to weaken Swedish society. "In the long run, this has led to the incred-

ibly low self-esteem and emptiness that exists among a great many Swedes today", one user articulates, and concludes: "Sweden has been robbed of its entire identity" (T1).

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we set out to identify the key topics discussed in conjunction with immigration and integration – a current issue of high political relevance – in 'the digital mainstream' in Sweden (Åkerlund, 2022), and explored articulations of crisis in extremist narratives emerging around the identified topics.

The narratives outlined above, albeit not explicitly ideological, fit the narrative construction of an extremist narrative. As Berger (2018) and Baele (2019) also suggest, extremist narratives tend to intertwine real issues, grievances or crises with selective representations of these, exaggerated details and false claims, which is also the case here. The way these narratives are entangled and mutually reinforced to paint a larger picture of 'Sweden-in-crisis' corresponds to Berger's (2018) observation of extremist practices – that extremist movements tend to employ multiple crisis narratives, either independently or in combination, simultaneously or sequentially. Interestingly, there was little mention of the current political situation in Sweden or the present government's tightened migration policies in the comments we analyzed. This points to another feature of crisis framing within extremist narratives – not as dependent on circumstances, but rather as integral to the in-/out-group dynamics (Berger, 2018).

Further, our results show that anti-immigration discourses tie to anti-establishment and anti-feminism sentiments, producing myriad out-groups to solidify the macro-level extremist narrative(s). Depending on the nature of these narratives, the 'us' vs. 'them' divides are at times constructed using explicit derogatory language, at other times more concealed. The different types of crises articulated in the discussions taking place on the forum touch upon grievances of identity and belonging, reflecting fears of cultural dilution, economic strain, and risks for safety and wellbeing posed by immigrants, who are often seen as potential threats to social cohesion. These anxieties then find outlet in narratives that, taken together, paint a larger picture of a looming societal collapse threatening Swedish society, and hence catalyze exclusionary and/or violent solution propositions. In this way, extremist narratives pray on sentiments of dissatisfaction and anti-elitism to foster distrust in democracy and its official representatives.

Our findings reveal how the mundanity of the concerns around immigration ventilated on Flashback is mixed with overtly extremist discourse and conspiracy beliefs. The fluctuation between the sensational and the mundane in the narratives outlined above blurs the boundaries between everyday discussions of contemporary issues and extremist rhetoric. The ways in which societal concerns, i.e. about healthcare, employment, schooling, or politics often intertwine with anti-immigration sentiments reveal the complex societal tensions embedded within these topics, turning them into potential 'gateways'

to extreme ideologies and enabling their mainstreaming (Åkerlund, 2021a). The extremist character of the narratives saturating these everyday conversations constitutes the *everyday extremism* occurring on a platform such as Flashback. The broad societal relevance of the matters discussed in *borderline* language toeing on hate speech and violent rhetoric (Krzyżanowski, 2020) brings these ideas closer to people's everyday lives, thus working to normalize them. In this way, this new 'everyday' form of extremism seeps into more general expressions of discontent, presenting itself just as banal as the topics it addresses.

It is worth reflecting on how the structural and technological affordances of Flashback affect these findings. Qualitative reading shows that discussions on Flashback are highly event-driven – most threads circle around concrete current events and/or news reports. This could be explained with Flashback's structural emphasis on maintaining the chronological order of posts, comments, and threads, which produces temporalities that users must adhere to if they want to stay relevant on the forum. As such, the articulation of extremist narratives intensifies around the release of news, government reports or statistics related to migration. However, despite communicated in the context of current events, a closer look into the anti-immigration narratives on Flashback reveals that they echo familiar themes and long-standing far-right ideological ideas that European societies are collapsing under the weight of enforced multiculturalism and/or that European/white populations are being replaced by immigrant communities and in particular Muslim "invaders" (Ekman, 2022).

Building on these results, future research could utilize computational methods to study the fluctuation of topics over time and assess the extent to which the changes in nature of the prevalent topics affects extremist narratives' emergence, intensifying or subsidence. Further, it is worth comparing these results to other mainstream social media platforms to track the spread and adaptation of extremist narratives across the digital mainstream. Finally, while we propose *everyday extremism* as a term to describe the phenomenon emerging as a consequence of the continuous processes of mainstreaming and normalizing extremist narratives, more conceptional work is needed in developing ways to operationalize the term for empirical enquiry. In this article, we lean on existing literature on extremism and extremist narratives, but we encourage future research into understanding everyday extremism's distinct characteristics beyond existing knowledge on extremist narratives.

Notes

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