



# UPPSALA UNIVERSITET

## How Facebook Comments Reflect Certain Characteristics Of Islamophobia: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Master Programme in Religion in Peace and Conflict

Master thesis 30 credits

Spring 2019

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**Thank you:**

I am extremely grateful to my supervisor, Mia Lövheim, who was patient with me, advised me, and send insightful comments and suggestions even when she had the flu, so I could finish on time. I could not have done it without you. Thank you.

I also like to say thank you to my husband, and my sweet daughter, who both supported me by giving me enough time and space, to finish my work.

**Abstract:**

This study is a contribution to the limited knowledge of how different types of media content (about Muslims and extremism) posted and shared on Facebook might influence corresponding user comments. Through analyzing the discourse of user comments this study aims to identify how comments might reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia, and to which themes in Facebook posts commentators relate to the most. The linguistic analysis is guided by the use of critical discourse analysis. For the purpose of this study, three different types of articles/video and the corresponding comments are analyzed. Two of the articles/video that I will analyze are from unreliable media sources, and one of the articles is from a credible media source. The linguistic analysis showed that the majority of commentators expressed that they believe the claims made in the articles/video about Muslims and extremism are true. The discourse analysis further showed, the majority of articles/video and the majority of the analyzed corresponding comments reflected the [in the study] defined characteristics of Islamophobia. My findings confirmed similar studies done in the past.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Muslim, Moderate Muslim, Islam, Social Media, Facebook, Comments, Extremism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Habermas, Communicative Action Theory, Structural Change of the Public Sphere, Characteristics of Islamophobia.

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## 1. Introduction

*"Social media is something of a double-edged sword. At its best, social media offers unprecedented opportunities for marginalized people to speak and bring much needed attention to the issues they face. At its worst, social media also offers 'everyone' an unprecedented opportunity to share in collective outrage without reflection."*

-Roxane Gay

I remember reading a news article on the *Daily Mail* Facebook page about a 15 year old Muslim girl from the UK that had joined ISIS and now wanted to come back home. At the time of the article the girl was stuck in a UN camp and unable to return to England. I felt sorry for her and about her situation. In my opinion, she was just a young teenage girl and teenagers make mistakes. I did not believe she should be banned from returning home. But after reading the corresponding comments, I soon realized I was one of very few people who felt sorry for the girl. The vast majority of the over 6000 commentators felt quite different towards the girl and expressed their opinions mercilessly.

"Sorry sweetheart but there are some "mistakes" you don't get to walk away from and joining I S I S is one of them. Here's hoping a bomb lands right on you."

"Please stop giving her publicity she needs shooting that would shut her up"

"If this woman likes heads in baskets so much, let her become one."

After I read most of the comments, I wondered if articles posted on Facebook pages provided a social sphere where semi-anonymous people can state in comments whatever they like without fearing social pressure and backlash from the real world. Social pressure often stops people in everyday face to face communications to say what they want because they worry about societal backlash. But online a person can say what they want, and if the reaction from other online users is not liked then the person can just go offline and ignore any repercussions. The online world is

not as complex as the offline world, because offline people are diverse and a person has to face up to differences (Gandini, 2015).

After reading many of the comments, I was shocked about the cruelty and hatred because only a few people had supporting words for the teenager. I further wondered if the commentators read other people's comments? Would people say such cruel things if they would sit across from the girl looking into her eyes? Did commentators believe the stereotypes of Muslims that were discussed and presented in the article and the corresponding comments? Did commentators understand that the girl might be a Muslim but she is also a British citizen and therefore should have the right to come home? Did commentators understand that one can be British and a Muslim? Were commentators really scared that a teenager can be a threat to Britain? But my main concern was, where is the prejudice against Muslims coming from?

There are over 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. Muslims live peacefully in different countries, societies, social systems, and different socio-cultural factors should make it clear that there are a multitude of different living identities within Muslim communities. However, by consuming western media outlets one can easily get a different idea about Muslims. This has been, especially, the case with the media portrayals of Muslims, Arabs, and people from the Middle East, who for the most part are linked to violence and terrorism across different media outlets such as newspapers, television, movies, web games, and video games (Alsultany, 2012; Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007; Powell, 2011; Šisler, 2008; Shaheen, 2009; Van Buren, 2006)

In the wake of recent extremist terror attacks in France, Belgium, and England, the use of the media selection and salience to report mainly on Muslims in regards to extremism can be referred to as framing. In essence, "the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text," for instance when the media focus is placed only on stories involving Muslims and extremism (Entman 1993, p. 51). And although the media is presenting the complex relationships between extremism and its claim to Islam, it seems as some media outlets find it more lucrative to portray Muslims in a worst-case scenario, instead of a complex group of diverse people who happen to share a religion.

Prejudice against Muslims in western countries precedes the 9/11 attacks. Since then, terror attacks have created a climate that helped to increase anti-Muslim attitudes in many

countries (Amnesty International 2012; Badaracco 2005, 119,126; Morey and Yaqin 2011, p. 1-2). Even though it is Muslims who continue to bear the brunt of terrorism (Fas.org, 2019, p. 14).

There is a large body of research that concerns itself with Muslims and how Islamophobia (Islamophobia definition page 13) is portrait in classical media. However, there is less research when it comes to social media and how social media platforms might contribute to Islamophobia? It is important to try to answer this question because in Europe alone, 166 Million people regularly use social media websites, such as Facebook (Statista 2017). Especially, young people tend to get their news from social media sites. A study has shown that 88% of young people in the United States get their news from Facebook or other social media sites (Clark and Marchi, 2017, p. 8). Social media networks play an increasingly important part in how news is defined (Clark and Marchi, 2017, p. 5). Young people define for themselves what news are worth discussing (Clark and Marchi, 2017, p. 5). This new generation will define news in the years to come; therefore, it is paramount to study how social media sites might contribute to Islamophobia.

For all the reasons above, I chose to do a critical discourse analysis (CDA) on Facebook users comments to contribute to the scientific body of knowledge on how different types of text published and shared on Facebook might contribute to the rise of Islamophobia. I will do so by trying to answer the following research questions.

## **2. Research questions**

### **2.1 Aim of research**

This study wants to contribute to the limited knowledge of how articles and videos shared on Facebook about Muslims and extremism, influence the corresponding comments. Will the comments reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia? Through studying the discourse of user comments this study aims to identify and analyze if comments reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia. By using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as a method, this study hopes to understand how Facebook comments reflect categories of Islamophobia.

### **2.2 Research question and subquestions**

Main research question (RQ):

How do Facebook posts and comments about Muslims and extremism reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia?

The Subquestion (Sub-RQ) that I will try to answer is as followed

To which themes and language, in the Facebook posts, do commentators relate the most?

### **3. Contextualizing and defining key concepts and terms**

This part contextualizes and defines concepts and terms for a better understanding of the issues presented in this paper.

#### **3.1 Media authority and people in society**

Generally speaking, to comprehend the news media influence on people's perceptions one needs to understand the concept of perceived media authority. Most people perceive the media as a form of authority, a common source of believable knowledge, which means people take information provided by the media as face value and do not questioned the source of the information (Adler and Clark 2011). The majority of people perceive news reporting as truthful because they assume the media presents facts as opposed to opinions and editorial facts. As McCombs has stated in his book *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*, almost all information, a person consumes is created and structured by journalist's and their reports about a particular news event (McCombs 2014, log. 384). Which means, the news media establishes salience among the public by placing an issue or current event on top of the public agenda, so it becomes the focus of the public (McCombs 2014, log. 384). The media daily selection of what kind of news story to publish and how to word it influences the public's attention and perceptions of what the most important issue of the day is (McCombs 2014, log. 370).

Aside from linguistic tricks, the media uses different cues to communicate the salience of news stories. For example, it matters if a news story appears on the front page in big bold letters or if the story is printed on the back page in a normal size font. The bold, front story will always seem more important and more interesting than the story printed on the back of the newspaper. There are several such ways in which the media communicates the salience of a news story, but by far the most powerful tool is the repetition of a news story, or similar stories, day after day (McCombs 2014, log. 382).

So it is not a surprise that after terror attacks in Paris, Berlin, and London by extremist groups that the media attention increased on reporting about the issues and the role Islam plays in the formation of terror groups, such as ISIS. However, it is problematic if the average Muslim clearly distances him or herself from extremist terror groups, but the news media narratives does not mirror that distance. Rather, the media further contributes to the Islamophobic narrative by fueling the social and political aura of the dangerous Muslim (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007; Powell, 2011; Shaheen, 2009).

The media is one of the most important sources of information, especially in relation to issues that the general population lacks access to. Consuming media allows a person to participate in society even if they are not experiencing it directly.

### **3.2 Social media and social change**

Historically, organizations have been the motor of social movements by coordinating collective actions. Today's access to social media makes it possible for people to surpass "vertical hierarchies" (Lindgren 2017, p. 183). The media environments today are more complex because new technologies are introduced frequently (Lindgren 2017, p. 4). This evolution seems to be working of technology, which has become progressively more accessible, and made new communication dynamics possible.

Social media has become an indispensable part of everyone's life. Towards the end of 2014, out of three billion internet users two billion people had active social media accounts, which accounted for 42 percent and 29 percent of the world's population (Dencik and Leistert, 2015). Five hundred million tweets are sent every day, and yet Twitter is not the most popular social media platform - Facebook is the one that leads the field (Dencik and Leistert, 2015).

In January 2015, the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie became a trending topic on the social media platform Twitter. In half an hour, more than 21,000 tweets appeared, commemorating the 12 victims of the attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine (Dencik and Leistert, 2015). The following weeks, more people took to the streets, holding up signs with the #JeSuisCharlie slogan, supporting the victims and signaling the unconditional adherence to the basic values of Western democracy, above all the freedom of the press (Dencik and Leistert, 2015).

The organizing power of social media has brought on social change which is often initiated by the fast exchange of data and information that social media platforms provide. The focus on a micro-interactional level of collective action in relation to social movements is not new but what has changed through social media is the extent of direct individual interactions, their frequency, and their size (Dencik and Leistert, 2015). In addition, the social sphere and the visibility on such a micro-interactional level helps to foster solidarity and helps to disseminate protests and facilitates reporting.

### **3.3 Facebook posts and the media**

In my opinion, Facebook provides a platform where users can privately exchange messages and publish posts only for friends, or join private groups. I also believe that Facebook provides a public platform where users can publish posts publicly, join public groups, and even promote a business. If a user uses Facebook privately or in a more public capacity depends often on personal settings. Therefore I argue that Facebook as a social media platform can provide a private and a public space for users to connect with either friends, family, or maybe even strangers who share the same interest. That being said, Burkell et al. did a study where they investigated how social media users treat their own information and that of other users. The results reveal that online social spaces are indeed “loci of public display” (Burkell et al., 2014, p. 974).

Facebook has over the years increasingly expanded their services by providing not just a platform for users to communicate, but also for corporations to advertise their services, and news media platforms to provide news to their Facebook followers. All Facebook users have to do is like and follow their favorite Facebook news page to keep up on current world events. After, Facebook users do not even have to go to these Facebook pages, the news is directly delivered to the users Facebook news feed mixed.

According to Statista (2018), with 2.2 billion active monthly users Facebook is the number one social media platform on the world-wide web. And since part of society is held together by structures, in which people interact with each other in multiple ways, social media platforms such as Facebook, has become a major tool to interact for people and therefore plays a key role in society (Lindgren 2017, p. 27, 32). Social media platforms “are about sociality”

which enables “processes of mediation” so individuals can connect to other individuals by interacting, and if they like they can form groups which then helps build society (Lindgren 2017, p. 32).

Almost everything can be shared on Facebook via a post (status update), personal statements, images, media articles from credible news papers, opinion based articles from private owned websites, blogs, videos, memes, and much more. It does not matter if media articles shared via Facebook are from a credible news source or from a private blog, everything can be shared. I would argue that Facebook provides great opportunities, but one has to be careful because it is often difficult to differentiate between credible news information and opinion based information. Opinion based journalism, also known as “Interpretive journalism” makes no claim of objectivity (Soontjens 2019, p. 952). “Interpretive journalism” is characterized by reporters expressing opinions, without referring to facts or statements from news sources (Soontjens 2019, p. 952). Although distinguished from advocacy journalism, both types of journalism feature a subjective viewpoint, usually with some social or political purpose.

Facebook has made life, for many of its users, very convenient in recent years because all kinds of different media content are shared on a Facebook users news feed. For the most part, the information shared on Facebook is free and found in one space which makes it convenient to access. Every established news media outlet has a Facebook page in which articles are shared for free with Facebook users who had liked the media’s page. This is great for Facebook users because most major newspapers require a subscription to read all its content. For example, the *New York Times* lets every person read five articles (in a month) for free before they require a paid subscription to read more content on the *New York Times* website (Smith 2018). At the same time a *New York Times* article that is shared on Facebook can be read for free, no matter if a Facebook users has already read the number of free articles (McCormick 2018). This and other reason is probably why “67% of Americans report that they get at least some of their news on social media” (Shearer and Gottfried 2018). Additionally, Facebook users often see articles that were liked or commented on by their Facebook friends, making it possible for certain media information to reach people that would not be reached otherwise.

Literally, anything can be shared with the exception of information that violates Facebook community standards, which is clearly defined by Facebook and is mainly of sexual or violent nature (Facebook.com 2018).

### **3.4 Facebook comments and anonymity**

For the purpose of this study, I argue that comments on Facebook posts can be a means to express the Facebook users opinion, no matter if positive or negative. This allows Facebook users to negotiate their point of view with the topic expressed in the post and what stance they have adapted in regards to the topic.

In Gandini's 2015 documentation *The Swedish Theory of Love*, Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, argues that the lack of face to face discussion that online life provides could potentially influence online users to be more outspoken about their real feelings towards certain topic because there is no real human interaction (Gandini, 2015). Bauman further argues that real human contact might stop a person from saying everything they think because they might receive backlash, but online they are anonymous and do not have to fear any direct consequences (Gandini, 2015). For example, Facebook has become a popular space to gather in online communities or hate groups to share Islamophobic narratives in an attempt to create a hostile environment for Muslims, which can even carry over to the real world (Awan 2016). Hence, it can also be assumed that some online users do not stick to social norms and might not behave politically correct because they are anonymous (Arancibia and Montecino 2017, p. 597). It is important for the purpose of this study that the concept of anonymity does not necessarily mean to be nameless, but rather to be unidentifiable. Therefore, unidentifiable applied to this study is the concept that a Facebook user can be unknown to other Facebook users in terms of identifying personal details, such as location, occupation, or other personal information (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012, p. 435).

Other studies have found psychological restraints that serve to conceal emotions and undisclosed needs are lowered in various online interpersonal behaviors (Chiou, 2006; Joinson, 2007; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008). This phenomenon is referred to as "the online disinhibition effect," which is defined "as a lowering of behavioral inhibitions" in an online environment (Joinson, 2007; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012, p. 434). The "negative online



disinhibition effect” usually manifest itself in aggressive behaviors, such as acting-out, online flaming, verbal attacks, or damaging the images of others that would not be exhibit in a similar scenario in the *real world* (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012, p. 434).

### **3.5 Definition and current context of Islamophobia and its characteristic**

For the purpose of this study, and to understand the phenomenon better one has to set Islamophobia in the right context. The Oxford dictionary (2018) defines Islamophobia as the “dislike of or prejudice against Islam or Muslims, especially as a political force,” which I argue is not a sufficient explanation and fails to educated the average person to see how deeply rooted Islamophobia is. Some scholars even argue there is no Islamophobia, and although there is no globally accepted definition that allows researchers to systematically analyze and compare the phenomenon of Islamophobia there is definitely an “emerging comparative concept in the social sciences” on Islamophobia (Bleich, 2011, p. 1582).

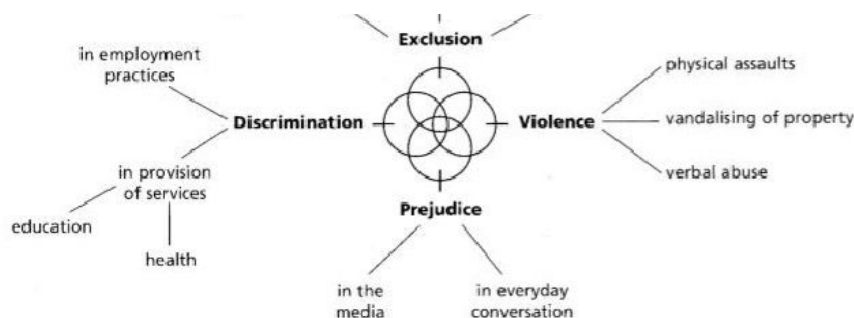
One comprehensive definition comes from Dr. Chris Allen, a british sociologist, who has being doing research in the field of Islamophobia for the past 20 years, and who said in a podcast that Islamophobia is the “unfounded hostility and hatred that shines towards Islam and Muslims as individuals, that can cut across a whole range of things from the way we speak about Muslims and Islams to the way we sort of approach them, the sort of perceptions we have [towards Muslims and Islam], and the sort of social and institutional prejudice and practices that clearly discriminates against Muslims” (University of Birmingham, 2018). Meaning, Islamophobia creates a reality in which it is normal to see Muslims as fundamentally different from non-Muslims and therefore treat them unequally. According to Allen, Islamophobia as an ideology constructs Muslims and Islam as the negatively connoted *Other*, hence excluding Muslims from the group with which they identify themselves (Allen 2010). Islamophobia unilaterally disseminates negative views of Islam and Muslims and discriminates against them. Muslims identify them on the basis of alleged or actual characteristics and idiosyncrasies of Islam, and not based of the self-image of the persons involved. Allen emphasizes that Islamophobia is not always explicitly expressed, it often presents in everyday practices and discourses, without the people involved having to necessarily understand themselves as hostile

towards Islam (Allen 2010). The discrimination of Muslims is also expressed in actions and statements that are taken for granted by all involved.

Islamophobia aims to establish negative perceptions of Muslims and Islam as *Knowledge*, meaning, statements that are considered to be objectively true (Allen 2010). At the same time, Islamophobia aims for political and social discrimination of Muslims in society.

To be more specific and to help identify the characteristics of Islamophobia it is helpful to visualize it. According to research Islamophobia has four different characteristics that overlap and mutually reinforcing one another (Conway 1996). The characteristics are exclusion, violence, prejudice, and discrimination. The model below shows how the four characteristics interlink. The model below gives examples that help identify certain characteristics of Islamophobia, and how these characteristics can be expressed in social media, and how these characteristics can be expressed in social media comments.

Figure 1:




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(Conway, 1996)

### 3.6 Extremism and Islamic extremism

Extremism describes something that goes beyond the normal and ordinary. In a political sense, extremism identifies positions that are at the very edge of their respective political attitudes, for instance all right or all left. And I argue, persons or groups with radical *religious* attitudes and/or political agendas who try to convert people of other faiths/beliefs or force their political ideas up on others, are called extremists. Religious and/or political extremists usually do

not tolerate other opinions and for the most part do not stand for ideologies that are incompatible with the rules of democracy. Therefore, extremism as a term has a normative and pejorative function because there is no exact legal definition. However, most western countries would define extremism as a form of a *definitio ex negativo* as a “fundamental rejection of the democratic constitutional state” (Kailitz 2004, p. 212). According to the *Center for Strategic and International Studies* there are several key factors that try to explain extremism and Islamic extremism (Csis.org, 2019). For example, non-ideological factors are a mixture of civil failure and violence, repression, and division (Csis.org 2019, p. 26).

Extremism and terrorism are only critical factors when a state fails to protect its population and extremism takes over (Csis.org 2019, p. 26). This can only happen with any level of success when states fail to the “level where they can either cannot win broad popular support or suppress opposition even with authoritarian violence” (Csis.org 2019, p. 26). In almost all cases in which extremism and terrorism became serious threats, the state had failed to the point “where it is perceived to be a serious threat to a significant part of its own people” (Csis.org 2019, p. 26).

## **4. Literature review**

### **4.1 News media and Islamophobia**

Since 9/11, terms such as “Islamic terrorist, Muslim fundamentalists” are used extensively in American media, and additionally the print and broadcast media have increased the use of these terms exponentially (Badaracco 2005, p. 125). A study by Ogan et al., (2013) showed that U.S. respondents who were exposed to negative news stories about the building of an Islamic community center (referred to as Park51) in New York City were less likely to support it than people who were not paying as much attention to the media stories. Further, the authors stated the reporting on the Park51 stories were predominantly negative and unbalanced and “the U.S media might have contributed to the more negative perceptions of Muslims and Islam among Americans,” in 2010 (Ogan et al. 2013).

## 4.2 Social media and Islamophobia

In the wake of the terror attacks in France, the *Center for the Analysis of Social Media, Demos*, has conducted research on anti-Islamic (in the English Language only) tweets on Twitter. The research was part of a broader study to understand the nature of the use of social media that could be socially problematic (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018, p. 2). This particular study looked at the social media platform Twitter for five months and the amount of Islamophobic tweets. The study defined a tweet as Islamophobic if it showed “the illegitimate and prejudicial dislike of Muslims because of their faith” (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018, p. 16). Furthermore, the researchers found that Islamophobia can take on different forms which can make it challenging to identify (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018, p. 16). For the purpose of the research four categories of Islamophobia were identified: (1) Islam is the enemy; (2) the conflation of Muslim population with sexual violence; (3) to blame all Muslims for a terror attack instead of only the terrorist themselves; (4) the general use of anti-Islamic slurs and derogatory descriptions of Muslims (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018, p. 16). By using these definitions of Islamophobic tweets the researchers found an average of 4972 islamophobic tweets every day, which amounted to a staggering of 215247 tweets in July 2017 alone (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018, p. 12).

Awan in 2014 analyzed 500 tweets from 100 different users to look for patterns emerging about Muslim communities on Twitter. To be more specific, the author used the hashtags #Woolwich, #Muslim, and #Islam to examine patterns in regards to online Islamophobia. Awan found that “over 75 percent of the tweets examined showed a strong Islamophobic feeling, used to stereotype and blame all Muslims on a particular issue” (Awan 2014). Therefore, the author states that positive ways to deal with such issues will “require a multifaceted partnership approach” and to counter cyber hate a policy on a governmental and policing level is much needed.

In another study, Awan examined “100 different Facebook pages, post and comments and found 494 instances of online hate speech directed against muslims” (Awan, 2016, p. 1). The author wanted to find out how Muslims are being viewed and targeted on Facebook. To do so Awan used a content analysis utilizing qualitative data and additionally a gathering technique

embedded in grounded theory. Furthermore, with the use of software the author created a word cloud of the collected Facebook data of posts, comments etc., and so was able to obtain key words that depicted Muslims in prejudicial way (Awan, 2016, p. 7). Awan was also able to propose five different types of offenders who have engaged with Facebook to target Muslim communities online, which then was used as a framework for Islamophobia on Facebook (Awan, 2016, p. 7). Awan used the analysis and the framework to come up with “The Five Walls of Islamophobic Hate” which are “Muslims are Terrorists, Muslims as Rapists, Muslim women are a security threat, a war between Muslims, and Muslims should be deported” (Awan, 2016, p. 10). Awan concludes that this is how Muslims are being demonised online and that had “manifested through negative attitudes, discrimination, stereotypes, physical threats and online harassment which all have the potential to incite violence or prejudicial action because it disparages and intimidates a protected individual or group” (Awan 2016, p. 1).

Another study that utilized a qualitative analysis of 2005 tweets used the hashtag #Brexit (Evolvi 2019). The tweets analyzed were sent in the aftermath of the 2016 British referendum of the European Union, known as Brexit. The analysis shows how the social media platform Twitter helps to “articulate identities in opinion-based groups” and that these tweets tend to be antagonistic (Evolvi 2019, p. 396). This means that tweets allow opinions to be stated by keywords, which “facilitates the creation of groups based on agreement or disagreement” (Evolvi 2019, p. 396). Further, the qualitative analysis showed that “while in theory Twitter can function as a public sphere in exposing users to different viewpoints,” social media users often use hashtags to communicate with like-minded users and to avoid conversations with members of opposing groups (Evolvi 2019, p. 396). And lastly, Evovi’s analysis shows that the “emotional character of certain tweets is antagonistic” because it “displays sarcasm, anger, and fear” which seems to aim in belittling minorities. This is probably facilitated to express hateful opinions in an anonymous and mostly unchallenged manner (Evolvi 2019, p. 396).

## 5. Theoretical framework

For this thesis, I chose two of Jürgen Habermas’s theories as frameworks. Habermas’s earlier work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and his later work, *The*

*Communicative Action Theory*, the latter is build on the earlier work. The two theories will help frame the general analysis of the discourse of Facebook comments, and the theories will be utilized to analyze the social spheres in which discourse takes place. By looking through the lenses of Habermas's concepts of the ideal public sphere, speech acts, and validity claims, I hope to be able to comprehend the discourse of user comments. That being said, the main goal is to utilize both theories to analyze and identify how Facebook comments reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia, and to understand to what themes and language (from the articles/video posted on Facebook) commentators relate to the most. Additionally, to apply Habermas's theory of the public sphere in a more contemporary fashion, I am adding Terje Rasmussen interpretation of Habermas's public sphere, and how the theory can be applicable to discourse on the internet (Rasmussen 2008).

### **5.1 Social sphere**

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* is a theory by Jürgen Habermas published in 1962, which is regarded by some researchers as still applicable today (Çela, 2015; Rasmussen 2008; Papacharissi 2002). In the theory, Habermas describes a comprehensive social process in which mass media, politics, bureaucracy, and the economy shape the emergence of modern society. This social process is important for this study because it can help identify how contemporary public spheres created by social media sites such as Facebook might shape today's modern societies.

A central term in Habermas's public sphere concept is the "bourgeois public," which according to Habermas developed since the early European period from a previously monarchically dominated "representative public" (Habermas 1991, p. 14, 9, 11, 12) With the term "public" Habermas proves that all production of human existence, the ones that are of general importance, and the ones that concern all members of a group, and thus everything is subjected to negotiation and regulation processes. In contrast to this is the private sector, which is fundamentally governed by the rule of individuals and protected from interference by the general public, be it governmental or social in nature (Habermas 1991, p. 278). The respective relations between state and society as well as between monarchical and democratic

representation complete Habermas's understanding of the relationship between the public and the private sphere (Habermas 1991, p. 138).

According to Habermas, the ideal public sphere should fulfill three conditions. First, public access for all social groups, and openness for all necessary subjects which is important to public discourse (Habermas 1991). Second the principle of discursivity. In the public, discourse is the process of the rational justification of norms through speech acts in the form of arguments (Habermas 1991). During this process, arguments should be exchanged and used to convince other participants (Habermas 1991). There should not be any constraints except that of the better argument. Habermas believes that public opinion is the product of discussion and should not be based on a compromise but on the best arguments (Habermas 1991). And third, a legitimized function of the public sphere in politics (Habermas 1991). Understanding these three principles will help to comprehend the public spheres created on Facebook pages and posts. Further, understanding these three principles will also help to comprehend if social media platforms (on Facebook), according to Habermas, will be an ideal public sphere. Because Habermas argues that public discourse should bring decision-making resources to the political elite and legitimize political decisions in public discourse, thereby creating more democracy.

To apply Habermas's theory of the public sphere in a more contemporary fashion, I will also utilize Terje Rasmussen interpretation of Habermas's public sphere and how it can be applicable to internet discourse (Rasmussen 2008).

With that said, Habermas has himself never applied the theory of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to the internet, aside from a footnote (Habermas 2006, p. 423). Yet, there are several researchers who have applied the concept of the public sphere onto the online sphere, or they have argued social media allows individuals to discourse in public (Çela, 2015; Rasmussen 2008; Shirky 2011; Papacharissi 2002). For example, Çela argues that the development in communication technology has led to transformation in the public sphere and public discourse, and that social media platforms such as Facebook are new fields of communication used by "public factors" to communicate with the audience (Çela, 2015, p. 195).

Rasmussen makes the case that the public sphere could be applied to the internet and argues threefold.

First, “the use of the Internet contributes to the diversity of views and broadening participation, but complicates observation of the political public sphere from the point of view of politics and the state. In this, the Internet seems to reverse the effect of commercial mass media. Second, the public sphere should be seen as consisting of two epistemic dimensions or ‘faces’, each oriented towards different solutions and problems. Third, an updated understanding of the public sphere would benefit from a network-analytic approach” (Rasmussen 2008, p. 74).

Rasmussen argues digital media, in comparison to historic public spaces of the mass media, provides a wide variety of communication tools such as social movement activity. By using for instance blogs; and/or possibilities of discussion in chat-rooms; and/or better access to public authorities, via email; and/or connecting via networking sites such as Facebook; and/or user generated content via tv, radio, web etc., (Rasmussen 2008, p.76). All these new forms of media provide a more “diverse media scape” with broader topics than the mass media, and with a larger number of different types of “voices” (Rasmussen 2008, p. 77). This multitude of internet communication takes part in a more niche based public sphere, that reflects different and more extreme viewpoints, which can be more resistant to censorship (Rasmussen 2008, p. 77). For that reason, the value of communication is questioned because often these seem to be missing basic civility (Rasmussen 2008, p. 77). This last argument Rasmussen makes could be applied to Facebook pages that pose as news media outlets but have a proven record for using non-credible sources and/or opinion based ideas to publish and share stories, which can definitely be resistant to censorship.

Still Rasmussen argues that online forums fulfill basic requirements of a public sphere because they try to improve social conditions, enable, reflect free speech, and free dialogue (Rasmussen 2008, p. 77).

Rasmussen further explains that the public sphere possesses two faces, which he describes using Habermas’s terms, a moral and an ethical existential face. And although it is difficult to differentiate between the two faces it should be “assumed analytically in order to see functions of the public sphere”(Rasmussen 2008, p. 80). Rasmussen then explains that one should see the “public sphere as a medium between individual voices of a public on the one hand, and the political apparatus on the other” (Rasmussen 2008, p. 80). Therefore the “public sphere can transform and transfers individual opinion into public opinion for the political system to take into account”(Rasmussen 2008, p. 80). For this to happen the public sphere must engage both people



and politics. This is done by negotiating and juggling issues as moral and ethical-existential between the two (Rasmussen 2008, p. 80).

Meaning, the public sphere transforms and transfers opinions from individuals to public to the political system (Rasmussen 2008, p. 80). The first face enhances pluralism of topics in society, and the mass media represents what could potentially “become the agenda for formal politics” (Rasmussen 2008, 82). Hence, various media “types tend to coincide with the two dimensions of the political public sphere” (Rasmussen 2008, p. 82). Thus, I argue that the discourse happening through user comments has the potential to penetrate the political sphere causing real life changes.

## 5.2 Communicative action

The second theory I am utilizing to answer my RQ’s is Habermas’s theory of communicative action. At the center of the theory is the realization that speech is always communicative action. The basic unit of linguistic communication is the production of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act. This is essential because Facebook users, use comments as a means to communicate, thus communicative action.

Habermas states that the normative foundations of society lies in language, which as an interpersonal means of communication makes social interaction possible (Habermas 1981). This communicative rationality adopted in language forms the basis of social action and overtakes the concept of purposive-rational action (Habermas 1981). It further starts from a teleological model of action and does not recognize the rationalization-capable aspects of linguistic understanding within interpersonal relationships (Habermas 1981). And although Habermas’s theory does not concerns itself with social media platforms, researchers have argued that the theory is very much applicable to the communication that happens on social media platforms as well as in *real life* (Bohman, 2004).

So to understand Habermas’s communicative action theory better it helps to understand that in linguistics one distinguishes between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Korta and Perry 2015). Syntax examines the relationship of the linguistic signs in relation to each other. Semantics is the theory that governs the relationships between the signs and the objects analyzed. Pragmatics is the doctrine of linguistic action, it examines the relationship between linguistic

signs and the use of the signs, which in speech is generally understood as a form of human action (Korta and Perry 2015). It is about the questions how one can use words, it is not about the utterance of the words, but how words affect the content (Korta and Perry 2015). For example, Facebook users who write comments perform a speech act, hence action through communication. This means Facebook user comments are not just words and sentences that express an opinion, comments are also social actions that can have real consequences outside the online sphere.

Also, for Habermas the term discourse distinguishes between two levels of communication. The level of communicative action with its validity claims and the discursive level that becomes necessary when one of the validity claims turn out to be problematic (Habermas 1981). In discourse, the validity claims are to be restored and to return to the level of communicative action (Habermas 1981). For the purpose of this study, I argue that most Facebook users have an unconscious lifeworld-related frame of reference, language, and culture which enables understanding in the first place. Because for one's communication to make sense, one has to assume that one's interlocutor meets all validity claims. When one questions and problematizes a validity claim, one emerges from the mill of everydayness, in which one must always act and react quickly. Then one takes a distance to the things and to oneself and asks oneself what is true and correct, so one starts to speak, discuss, or argues about it.

Ultimately, there are four possible validity claims, which should be reference points for arguments. These are: truth, accuracy, truthfulness, and comprehensibility (Habermas 1981). Habermas argues that rule-free communication can only be rational when it comes from these four validity claims (Habermas 1981). For Habermas these four validity claims correspond and overlap with the concept of intersubjective truth. Intersubjective truth means every theoretically possible discourse participant could agree with the statement/proposition. Habermas further argues that optimal discourse is reflected in an ideal speech situation if the speech situation is without distortion of communication (Habermas 1981).

Therefore, I believe Habermas communicative action theory can be useful as a tool to analyze if Facebook users comments and other interlocutors will [try to] fulfill Habermas validity claims. Because in an ideal public sphere, if a Facebook user would challenge within a comment one or more validity claim, other users would react and act quickly. This way social

media users would discuss in an ideal public sphere, review validity claims, and if necessary restore these validity claims utilizing communicative action.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, Facebook comments are considered speech acts. Speech act is a term that Habermas adopted from the terminology of John Austin (Austin developed the speech act theory). A speech act differentiates between an illocutionary and locutionary act (Austin, 1962). The relationship aspect of statements is determined by the illocutionary component of a speech act and is therefore responsible for the generative power of the speech act. According to Habermas, this generative power of the illocutionary part causes the speech act to succeed or fail, since its use attempts to establish a relationship between speaker and listener. If this attempt fails, the understanding fails, but if the listener accepts the implied form of the relationship of the illocutionary part, the attempt will be successful.

Habermas knows that the ideal speech situation does not exist in reality, he still argues that one must at least implicitly implement the idealization before any discourse (Habermas 1981). Only then can it come to the peculiarly casual compulsion of the better argument. Hence the results of communicative reasons and organisations of actions are communicative actions.

Thus, a social media platform on Facebook could have a reasonable based discourse if all validity claims are fulfilled, and if everyone involved in the discourse would observe the rules of the ideal speech situation. Because only an ideal speech situation enables a discourse in which truth and moral correctness can arise.

## **6. Research design**

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze Facebook user comments on Facebook posts that are about Muslims and extremism. CDA as a method is associated with the ideas and writings of Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk. There are more authors who have concerned themselves with CDA as a means of qualitative content analysis, but although these authors use different approaches they all believe that language is a means of social construction, which then shapes and is shaped by society (Machin and Mayr 2012). To be more specific, “CDA assumes that power relations are discursive” therefore, studying how power relations are negotiated and utilized in discourse can help identify “cultural process and

structures” (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 4). This study plans, through a qualitative content analysis, to see how Facebook user apply semiotic choices in their comments. Through a linguistic analysis, I will be able to identify recurrent patterns of concepts, themes, stereotypes and/or biases that could potentially reveal certain characteristics of Islamophobia.

### **6.1 Method and material**

To try to answer the research questions this study will analyze the corresponding comments of Facebook posts about Muslims and extremism. The Facebook posts can be anything, such as shared articles from websites, or shared opinion based blogs, images, or just personal Facebook status updates, as long as the overall theme of the post is about Muslims and extremism. The focus will be on the comments to see if the comments reflect characteristics of Islamophobia.

I choose three different Facebook posts for the comment analysis. By doing so I hope to see if the comments analyzed reflect different public spheres, which are created by the different types of media sources. I hope to see if there is a distinction within the corresponding comments on the different types of Facebook posts, and if the comments reflect characteristics of Islamophobia, especially in comparison to the other comments from the other Facebook posts.

For the comment analysis, I chose different Facebook pages where each media source is known for a different range of media credibility. The first post, and the first set of comments were shared by an extreme right wing Facebook page called Eagle Rising. The page is considered a questionable source and exhibits extreme bias, promotion of propaganda/conspiracies, poor or no sourcing to credible information, and a complete lack of transparency (Media Bias/Fact Check 2018). The second post was published by the New York Times (NYT) Facebook page. The NYT Facebook page is an established news media source on Facebook where comments are moderated. Moderating comments is a way for Facebook pages to control the language used on their page. The Facebook page of the NYT informs its user in the about section that they will not tolerate abusive comments such as personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, or profanity. Overall, the NYT moderately favors the left, but is highly factual and is considered one of the most reliable sources for information due to proper sourcing and well respected journalists/editors (Media Bias/Fact Check 2019). The third post was published by an

organization called PragerU. PragerU is a very questionable extreme right wing source. It promotes propaganda and the use of poor sources that have failed fact checks. It further misleads information about several controversial topics, such as migration (Media Bias/Fact Check 2019).

To do a thorough analysis, I will first present a short content summary of the information provided in the Facebook posts and its overall message on Muslims and extremism. Then I will do a critical discourse analysis using semiotic choices. Semiotic choices can help to analyze the data presented in the comments, and to understand if and how comments might reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia. Since some comments utilize more than one semiotic choice, the same comment could be applicable to different parts in the analysis. Therefore the same comment could be utilized to explain data more than one time.

## **6.2 Data analysis process**

I used the two keywords, Muslim and extremism, to search on Facebook for public posts about Muslims and extremism. At first, I tried to search for the two terms utilizing #hashtags. Hashtags “help people more easily to discover what others are saying about a specific topic and participate in public conversations” (Balasa, 2017). And hashtags utilized as a tool makes it easier to locate Facebook posts with specific topics. Initially, everything went well. In the search field I wrote #Muslims and #extremism and clicked on search. The search provide several results, but a second search to confirm the first first results lead to a message from Facebook (across the screen) that read “*Sorry, we couldn’t understand this search, please try saying this another way.*” At first, I thought my computer was responsible for the lack of verification of the first search result. Still, after several other searches over a period of a week, in which I tried different computers, and searches from different Facebook accounts, the results were always the same. Nothing! The second search would always lead to the same generated no results message from Facebook. It seemed as Facebook blocks second search attempts with hashtags such as Muslim and extremism.

Facebook did not allow me to search for #Muslims and #extremism. So, I did some research about Facebook potentially blocking users from multiple searches on Muslims and extremism, or related keywords, but I could not find any information. That was until Mark Zuckerberg during his congressional hearing on the 11th of April 2018 said that

Facebook has done something to prevent terrorism and extremism misuse on Facebook (BBC News, 2018). Unfortunately, Zuckerberg failed to give specifics (BBC News, 2018).

Consequently, I am unable to provide any further information on the search problem. My solution for the search problem was that I optioned for a search without utilizing hashtags which provided me with results that I was able to replicate on multiple occasions.

To make sure my search was as unbiased as possible I used a technique called sampling. Sampling can be used to learn something about a large population (in this case articles posted on different Facebook pages) without having to study each member of that population (Adler and Clark 2011, p. 101). To be more specific, I utilized probability sampling (Adler and Clark 2011, p. 104). Probability sampling does not ensure a sample is representative of a given population, but these samples tend to be more representative than non-probability samples, and therefore are less likely to be biased (Adler and Clark 2011, p. 104).

To find three posts for this content analysis, I logged onto Facebook and wrote the words Muslim and extremism into the search field and searched. After the initial results, I clicked on the tap *Posts* to further limit the amount of data the search provided. Then I utilized probability sampling and picked articles that had at least 100 comments and more than 100 shares. A large amount of comments and shares can be an indicator that Facebook users find the information posted in the Facebook articles interesting and socially relevant. From the first initial results that had at least 100 comments and 100 shares, I chose 3 articles from a variety of different Facebook pages.

By choosing three articles from different Facebook pages, I hope to see if there is a distinction in the corresponding comments of each article. The first Facebook post I chose was a shared article from a far right-wing website called Eagle Rising. The website is known to be an extreme right-wing biased news source that exhibits “extreme bias, overt propaganda, poor or no sourcing to credible information and/or is fake news” (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2018 [1]). According to *Media Bias*, the sources Eagle Rising is using are questionable, may be untrustworthy and should therefore always be checked (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2018 [1]). To counter the extreme right wing Eagle Rising website, and to get a different perspective, the next Facebook article I choose was posted by the New York Times (NYT) Facebook page. The NYT

is a well known left-centered news sources (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2018 [2]). According to Media Bias, sources used by the NYT are generally trustworthy but can carry moderately liberal biases because articles often utilize loaded words in an attempt to influence readers to favor liberal causes (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2018 [2]). For the last and third Facebook article, I choose a video clip about Muslims and extremism which was created and posted on Facebook by PragerU, which stands for Prager University. The name of the organisation is misleading because it carries the word university, but PragerU is not a university. The word university carries a lot of weight because it stands for higher learning and is a symbol for accuracy and credibility. Therefore, information published under the university umbrella is perceived as correct and empirically verified. However, this is not the case with PragerU. According to PragerU's own website the following information is correct "Prager University is not an accredited academic institution and does not offer certifications [sic] or diplomas" (PragerU 2018). And according to *Media Bias* PragerU is a highly conservative digital media organization that publishes five minute video clips of different content (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2019 [3]).

To analyse the comments of each article, I will first provide a content summary to describe what the information in the articles and video is about. To do so, I will utilize the help of linguistic resources to do a CDA on how Facebook user comments reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia. Since the study is limited, I will only analyse the Top 100 Comments of each Facebook post. Top 100 comments are the comments that have received the most likes and replies, and are therefore the most active comments in the discourse. To analyze the comments I will apply five different semiotic choices, which in CDA is "referred to as representational strategies" (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 77). Representational strategies means communicators have a range of semiotic choices available to represent social actors in a favorable or unfavorable light. These representational strategies are often used by Facebook users, maybe unintentionally, to place Muslims in the social world and to "highlight certain aspects of identity," and to "omit" other aspects of Muslim identities (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 77). This can have the effect of associating sets of ideas, values, and activity of Muslims that are not necessarily true (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 103). I will also check the comments for signs of online flaming. Online flaming is the negative manifestation of toxic online disinhibition.

Online flaming is the most common type of deviant behavior because it includes all “offensive, rude and abusive language, as well as insults and threats” (Jiyeon et al. 2016, p. 211). And last, I further strengthen the analysis by looking for recurring statements and other emerging patterns, stereotypes, biases, or ideas that possibly depict Muslims in a prejudicial way.

### **6.3 Semiotic choices and online flaming**

To identify how Facebook user comments might reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia, I choose to utilize five different semiotic choices and look for online flaming in the comments. Semiotic choices and online flaming can be representational strategies of speech acts. Speech acts according to Habermas’s communicative action theory are used for strategic action or more generally of teleological action, which refers to an action that is directed to a purpose or to bring about a desired state. Thus, user comments might utilize semiotic choices and online flaming to rational justify their instrumental and strategic actions. Habermas’s theory of communicative action is a great framework to further analysis how semiotic choice and online flaming in comments can reflect characteristics of Islamophobia.

#### **6.3.1 Individualization versus collectivisation**

In this semiotic choice, the focus lies on how participants are described either as individuals or as part of a collective. For example, if a terrorist is described as a Muslim the terrorist potentially becomes part of a collective, meaning part of a whole group of people. This association of a terrorist with such a large group of people (Muslims) becomes problematic because then all other Muslims who are not terrorists might be associated with terrorism as well, even though they are not. Hence, the representation of an individual as part of a group can have a dehumanizing effect.

#### **6.3.2 Specification and genericization**

This semiotic choice explains if participants are represented as specific individuals or as generic types. For example, a media outlet would publish either one of these headlines.

*Muslim man arrested after challenging a police officer.*

*A young man, Ahmed Hanadi, arrested after challenging a police officer*

In the first headline, the man who challenged the police is presented as a generic type, a Muslim. The use of such a category in the media can potentially place a story in a much broader context,



notably after the 2015 refugee crisis, in Europe. The use of such generic terms can give a news story a racial slant, even if the source distance itself from any “racist stance” (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 81).

### 6.3.3 Nomination or functionalization

Participants can be nominated in regards to who they are, or they can be functionalized by pointing out what they do (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 81). For example:

*Ahmed Hanadi has attacked another man in a public bus.*

*A Muslim man has attacked another man in a public bus.*

In this case, the use of functionalism reduces a person to a specific role, and at the same time depicts a person in an unfavorable light. Instead of saying just the name of the man who attacked another man the second line points out the man is a Muslim. The term Muslim is a loaded word, at this moment in time, and could be perceived as a stereotype that implies all Muslims are violent.

### 6.3.4 Aggregation

Aggregation as a semiotic choice is often used to quantify participants, meaning treating participants as statistics (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 83). For example, statements such as *thousands of refugees came to Germany illegal*. This representation of numbers is utilized to give the impression of scientific credibility when in reality no specific numbers are given (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 83).

### 6.3.5 Us versus them division

The human mind has a tendency to categorize people into social groups. Often these social groups create an *us versus them* mentality towards people who might be different in some way (race, gender, age, nationality, culture, religion, values, or socioeconomic status). Pronouns such as *we* or *them* are used to align participants alongside or against one another (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 84). Other words and phrases in discourse can also create an identity that portrays Muslims as the enemy (them) and Facebook users as (us). For example, a statement such as

*They (Muslims) are a danger to our western values.*

Headlines like it, evoke the idea of the otherness (*them*) which then portraits as the opposite to the values *we* have in the West.

### 6.3.6 Online flaming

Online flaming is considered a manifestation of negative online disinhibition (Derks, Fischer, & Bos 2008). It is defined as the use of hostile expressions toward others in online communication. Typically it includes the use of aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and inappropriate sexual comments. Additionally, flaming behavior can also be utilized with the use of capital letters and an increase in question marks or exclamation points (Turnage 2008).

### 6.4 Limitations

There are serious limitations in using and analyzing data via Facebook. A different person on a different computer could possibly use the same two keywords to search for public Facebook posts and could come up with different results. That is because a Facebook search depends on several different factors that are mainly based on one's physical location, search history, and cookies. According to Josh Constine from *techcrunch.com*, a Facebook search will provide suggestions for keywords strings trying to complete what one searched before and at the same time matching the searches of other people (Constine 2018). Once a person has entered their search they will get a result based on 200 different factors including what one likes, has engaged with previously, and information known about one's identity (Constine 2018). Therefore, it is fair to say that a politically liberal person, who is searching for information on Facebook, will most likely receive different search results when compared with the Facebook search results of a conservative person. For that reason, I, as a liberal mind, had in the weeks leading to my research liked several very conservative media outlets on Facebook to try to counter a possible too liberal Facebook search result.

I also would like to mention that during the time I was writing this study, I clicked a lot back and forth on the Facebook pages that I had chosen to analyze. And at some point, I saw that each of these different Facebook pages had a link to my Facebook page, either one of my Facebook friends liked the page, or one of my Facebook friends had commented on a post on that particular page. It seems as a Facebook search will always be linked to the user who is doing the search. Therefore, the search results are always based on what the Facebook user liked, and maybe also on what the user's friends liked and/or interacted with. This discovery let me believe

that a biased free Facebook search is impossible. So, it is important to mention that my search results on Facebook might not be easily replicable.

## **7. Facebook comment analysis**

### **7.1 First Facebook post and analysis of comments**

#### **7.1.1 Article info**

This article was shared on a Facebook page named *Eagle Rising*. The page itself has over 680000 likes and describes itself as a media/news company. The article is titled: *American Muslim Olympian Bashes America and then Mocks Victims of Muslim Extremism*.

It can be found <https://www.facebook.com/theEagleisRising/posts/536980809838765>

At the time of the analysis the article had been shared 1096 times, had 1400 likes, and 431 comments. [By the time this study was finished the *Eagle Rising* Facebook page was deleted, by the Facebook administration]

#### **7.1.2 Article summary**

The article is about Ibtiyah Muhammad, an American Muslim woman living in New York City, who is an athlete (champion fencer), and who participated for the United States at the 2016 Olympic games. The article quotes Ibtiyah Muhammad about feeling unsafe in New York City because she had been harassed on the streets because she wears a *hijab* (veil worn by some Muslim women). The author of the article then talks about how ridiculous it is that Ibtiyah Muhammad feels unsafe in America considering that she does not have to fear crimes such as rape, or woman circumcision that are common in other Muslim countries. The author further states as an American, Ibtiyah Muhammad, has the freedom to do how she pleases such as driving a car, going out without male supervision, all things who are supposedly forbidden in other Muslim countries. The author ends the article with the words, while Ibtiyah Muhammad is worried about being mistreated for being a Muslim, extremists have killed thousands of people worldwide including people in the U.S. Therefore, the author states, if Ibtiyah Muhammad has reason to fear anti-Muslim sentiment in America than America has a vastly greater reason to fear Muslim flooding into the West.

The article is headed by an image, in which the female athlete is wearing a hijab holding a *épée* (thin sword used for fencing) against another woman's throat (who is also wearing a hijab). The article states that the athletes pose mocks killings by radical extremist by implying that Muhammad will kill the other woman in the same manner.

### 7.1.3 Comment analysis

From the 431 comments, I analyzed the top 100 comments. The top 100 comments are the comments that have the most likes and replies, which indicates that Facebook users are more likely to be interested in the discourse of the article. From the 100 different users who commented only 2 people were somewhat neutral and left comments that were neither positive nor negative. Only one commentator questioned the article's content. The majority of the commentators seemed to believe the information presented in the article is true. For example, the following comment sanctioned that the photo of the athlete is enough proof that Ibtihaj Muhammad seems to agree with the atrocities committed in her Muslim faith.

“That photograph of her mocking the atrocities committed daily in the name of her Muslim faith speaks volumes about her. It is offensive and does not speak to the character of most of our Olympic athletes. She laughs at the horror so many have experienced, making it a joke ~ so don't tell me again how "unsafe" you feel in our country and, please, close your big mouth.”

In the following comments analysis, only three of the five semiotic choices were applied because there were no comments that stated or implied either *nomination* or *functionalization* or *aggregation*, so these two choices are not part of the first Facebook post analysis.

### Individualization versus collectivisation

27 Facebook users wrote comments that utilized the semiotic choice of *individualization versus collectivisation*, which they expressed by statements that described the woman athlete as a Muslim, a member of a collective group, instead of an individual woman whose actions do not necessarily reflect the actions of all other Muslims. In these comments, Muhammad was referred to as a Muslim, who is part of a collective group, and therefore acts according to the groups perceived, expected behavior. The user comments did not seem to perceive Muhammad's behavior as an act of an individual person. See the following examples:

“I am a firm believer that you can't be American and call yourself Muslim our culture and beliefs are way to conflicting so take that American Muslim crap and shove it... you're either American or you're not period!!!”

“Muslims DO NOT represent the US! Never have, hopefully never will. Olympics were not the place to air her ignorant Muslim trash! Don't like it Hijab, get the hell out of here , and don't come back”

“then they wonder why Americans are against the muslims”

“Who let her even compete..They should have some sort of screening of some kind in place so a person can't embarrass us the way she did ..That is just something a Muslim would do, so ungrateful to the USA,what a shame!!!!”

### **Specification and genericization**

23 Facebook users wrote comments that utilized the semiotic choice of *specification and genericization*, which was often expressed by Facebook user statements that see the woman athlete as a certain type of person and not as a specific individual. Most commentators saw Muhammad's specific behavior and applied it to the perceived generic type of what they assume a Muslim beliefs. It becomes clear when reading the following comment:

“Who let her even compete..They should have some sort of screening of some kind in place so a person can't embarrass us the way she did ..That is just something a Muslim would do, so ungrateful to the USA, what a shame!!!!”

The athlete Ibtihaj Muhammad is not seen as the individual woman she is. A woman who has trained to be a professional fencer and most likely qualified through several channels to participate in the Olympic Games. No, she is just seen as a certain generic type, a Muslim woman. Another example in which Muhammad is seen as a generic type and not an individual woman is found in following comment:

“She is full of it, last time I looked Muslim were doing all the violence in America!”

The Facebook user who wrote the following comment does not see Muhammad as a specific woman who is an athlete who happens to have a certain religious belief; no, Muhammad is just seen as a member of a group, and this generic group becomes her whole identity. The following comment states outright that as a Muslim, Muhammad is a type of wild animals who is demonic and inhuman.

“And we refer to this Islamic demons as people they are not human they are wild animals who follow an evil cult”

### **Us versus them division**

The semiotic choice, us versus them division, had by far the most comments. 33 Facebook users wrote comments that utilized the *us versus them division*, which was then

expressed in two different ways. Some of the commentators stated outright that they believe Muhammad was not part of the *us* group by using pronouns such as *us-them* (or we-they, ours-your etc.) to emphasize the division. See the following examples:

“One thing about America...we won't stop you from going someplace else to live if you find it distasteful here. Please pick a place that would make you happy and move there at the first opportunity.”

“She is a Muslim and that is why they wanted her to carry the flag in the Olympics. So you see how they think of us and their bringing in more of them into our country!”

“Why is this tolerated. We are America and allow this to represent us..”

In all of this examples, the commentators draw a clear distinction between themselves and Muhammad, by using dividing pronouns. Muhammad is portrait as the other (Muslim) who is not part of the *us* group (in this case Americans). Facebook users used this distinction to align themselves or against a subject/object, leaving a clear divide. However, users are not always straightforward in their *us* versus *them* comments, but it becomes clearer when one looks at comments that approach semiotic choices in a much more subtle way, by using nouns and not pronouns. For example:

“She made such a fool of herself by loosing immediately [sic].... Im glad she didn't represent Americans!!- But muslims!”

“And Muslims think, we the people, are stupid enough to trust any of them at this point I need time? Think again!”

Some commentators only used one of the pronouns, which is a subtle but still a powerful way of drawing a distinction between themselves and others.

“She's not American but a Traitor to our Country !!”

The second way user comments expressed the *us* versus *them* division was even more subtle. Commentators used only one of the terms (*us*, *we*, *ours*, or *them*, *they*, *yours* etc.) and implied the other term using nouns.

### **Online flaming**

*Online flaming* is an abusive technique that is used on various online platforms to intimidate, insult, and confuse people. Users who use such techniques are often referred to as

cyber bullies. In the analyzed comments were 11 examples in which Facebook users left hostile expressions as either written words or images. The following is an example:

“Her 2 minutes are over... Nobody cares... She should have devoted more time to her sport. She failed and is a champion of nothing... If or when she rejoins civilized society, she might be forgiven for her treason. I wish her a Muslim husband to make her life unbearable..”

This users clearly implies that he or she hopes that Muhammad will be the recipient of violence by her husband. Additionally, the comment implies that Muslim men are all dangerous because they make their wife’s lives unbearable.

Other examples of online flaming are Facebook users who were threatening violence:

“There's a couple blades layin round [sic] that wouldn't hesitate to try to separate a muslim vermin's head from its body...yall rest assured...they will have no hesitation applying this to you and your family...”

“I heard there's isis plane leaving in the morning. They need babies.”

#### **7.1.4 Summary of the Eagle Rising comments**

Through a linguistic analysis on how Facebook users have applied semiotic choices in their comments, I am able to summarize recurrent patterns of themes, stereotypes and/or biases that reveal certain characteristics of Islamophobia. These recurrent patterns express certain social identities and power relations.

One of the concepts that emerged from the comments suggests in a multitude of ways a conflict between Muslims/Islam and Americans/United States. The largest similar pattern in the comments that emerged from different users suggestion (33 comments) was that Muslims should leave the country because Muslims/Islam has no place in America.

See the following examples:

“You don't represent America....There is no such thing as an American muslim....You are either one or the other....Either you are for us or against us...And you have proven that....We serve a mighty God...the One and Only true God....allah is Satan....We are the People of The United States of America....ONE NATION UNDER GOD!!! Get out of our Nation....get to steppin' “

“You can't be a devout Muslim and live in America for sure”

“She needs to LEAVE AMERICA NOW!!!!!!”

“if you don't like where you live pack your stuff and find another country to live in, maybe Iran or Syria where you would have really had the opportunity to be a fencer like you did here. I think its ironic that her special skill is working with a sword.”

There were also similar patterns of the same concept found in 13 different comments. In these comments, users suggested in one way or another that a person cannot be American and a Muslim, and that the two religion, Christianity and Islam, do not mix well. The concept that emerged within the comments clearly shows that Facebook users believe these two religions cannot be part of the same society.

“Muslims can't be real Americans. Their vile book of despair does not allow it. Islam is and always has been a cancer to the world”

“You can't be a devout Muslim and live in America for sure”

“no such thing as an American muslim...”

Further, there were 12 different comments that suggested a Muslim should not compete, for the United States, in the Olympic games.

“Why is this tolerated. We are America and allow this to represent us..”

“Why was she even competing for the US? She undoubtedly does not give a hoot for our country or she would not be acting out this way!”

There were also 11 different Facebook users who commented in regards to the U.S flag and how Muhammad came in second to Michael Phelps in the vote for who will carry the U.S. flag.

“And somebody wanted this loser to carry our flag in Rio instead of Phelps, who now has won 22 Gold Medals?”

The comments of 7 users suggested in different ways that Muslims/Islam are/is generally violent.

“Islam pure evil all should be destroyed.”

Several other beliefs emerged from the comments. Such as the idea that Islam is the cancer of society, Muslims are uneducated, or that Muslims are uncivilized and therefore Muslim women have no rights. Five comments even suggested violence towards Muslims, by stating the athlete should be beaten.

The majority, 64 out of 100 commentators used either one or more of the four different semiotic choices in their comments. Additionally, commentators also used the four defined



characteristics of Islamophobia (exclusion, violence, prejudice, discrimination) which are expressed in a multitude of different ways, within the top 100 comments.

Some commentators used both the different semiotic choices to express how they perceive Muslims, and one or more of the four characteristics of Islamophobia. See for instance the following comment:

“Typical, Muslims hate us! They are here to destroy. Hope she's treated like the POS SHE IS 🗨️”

This comment utilized both the characteristics of Islamophobia (violence), and at the same time the comment used the semiotic choice *us versus them* to point out that Muslims hate everyone. One recurring pattern in the comments is that Muslims are perceived as violent. In these comments, Muslims are portrait as radicals, extremists, violent, wild animals, and uncivilized people.

Commentators also use prejudice and exclusion by implying that all Muslim women are oppressed by their husbands.

“Her 2 minutes are over... Nobody cares... She should have devoted more time to her sport. She failed and is a champion of nothing... If or when she rejoins civilized society, she might be forgiven for her treason. I wish her a Muslim husband to make her life unbearable..”

The comment clearly expresses prejudice against Muslim women. The commentator assumes that all Muslim women are oppressed and are subjected to their husbands control. This bias against Muslim woman “is connected to the idea of binary oppositions in Western feminism” meaning there is only “a one dimensional model” of the modern and liberated woman who does not need to wear a veil (Schønemann 2013, p. 58). Muslim women who wear a veil are seen as “backwards and traditional” the opposite of an independent modern liberated woman and therefore are oppressed (Schønemann 2013, p. 58).

Exclusion was an other characteristics of Islamophobia that was expressed in user comments. From the top 100 comments, 33 comments used the *us versus them division* as a semiotic choice to alienate people which becomes clear when looking at the following comment:

“She's not American but a Traitor to our Country !!”

The comment implied that one cannot be a Muslim and an American; as a matter of fact, 15 of the commentators expressed the same ideology. Also, several comments excluded Muslims by alienating Muslims as the *other*, making it clear that the alienated person (Muslim = them)

does not share the same social identity and because of it is excluded from (our) society. In sociology, *Otherness* is a condition of disenfranchisement (from society). People who are labeled as *Others* are excluded from the center of these societies and pushed to the sidelines (Zevallos 2011).

Also, several patterns emerged within the comments. The largest pattern that emerged was: Muslims should leave the country because they and their religion have no place in America. Another recurrent pattern was the belief that Islam and Christianity cannot coexist in one society. Other patterns found were as follows; Muslim should not be able to compete for the U.S in the Olympics; the U.S flag was mentioned several times; Muslims are violent.

It is important to note that the analyzed article itself utilized 3 of the 4 characteristics of Islamophobia (violence, prejudice, discrimination). Muslims are portrait as violent and discriminating against their own kind. The article further portrays prejudice on how Muslim women are treated by generalizing all countries with a Muslim population as sharing the same values and religious customs. See excerpts of the text of articles below.

“140 million girls are forcefully circumcised in these countries. Women are not allowed to drive or own property in some of these countries. Women are murdered for falling in love, having sex, or even being raped in some of these countries. Women can’t leave home without a male leading the way in some of these countries. Women are beaten for speaking out of turn in some of these countries.”

“While Muhammad is so worried about being mistreated for her faith, violent Muslim extremists have slaughtered thousands of people around the world (and in America) over the last 15 years.”

“Yea, that’s her playfully being beheaded by a friend with a sabre (sword) while this actual thing is happening all across the Muslim world as we speak. It’s not funny.”

## **7.2 Second Facebook post and analysis of comments**

### **7.2.1 Article info**

The second article was shared on the *New York Times* (NYT) Facebook page. The social media page has over 16 million likes and describes itself as the NYT community page. The page has a mission statement that states only thoughtful comments are valued. These comments can represent a range of views, but the NYT will not tolerate personal attacks, based on obscenity, vulgarity, or profanity. The page further states that comments are moderated and that administrators deserve the right to delete any comment that is perceived as abusive.

The article is titled: *Anti-Muslim Extremists Retweeted by Trump Are Convicted of Hate Crime*. The article can be found at the following link:

<https://www.facebook.com/nytimes/posts/10151510708849999>

At the time of the analysis the article had been shared 2062 times, had over 8000 likes, and 432 comments.

### **7.2.2 Article summary**

The article is about two leaders of the British anti-Muslim extremism group *Britain First* who have been found guilty of hate crimes and were sentenced to prison. The two drew international attention for helping Trump get entangled in a diplomatic dispute. Both, Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen, were convicted on counts of religious aggravated harassment because they posted online videos on how they harassed Muslims. They posted the videos during a rape trial that involved three Muslim men who had raped a 16-year old.

The anti-Muslim group believes that Islam is destroying their country, so they use different tactics to present their viewpoint, such as publicly confronting or harassing Muslims. During the above mentioned trial, the group recorded videos that were posted on social media sites about harassing homes they expected the Muslim defendants to be at. They went as far as yelling at pregnant women and children and warning against Muslim pedophiles who supposedly are touching children. The chief prosecutor said that both, Golding and Fransen, had not exercised their rights to freedom of speech instead they had aimed at religiously based aggravated abuse at innocent members of the public.

It is mentioned that the group has 1000 members, and was not known outside of Britain until President Trump tweeted links to the groups anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim media content. Trump's tweet was debunked by several political leaders and human right groups.

The article is accompanied by an image that shows the defendants followed by people who are not identified. The woman, Jayda Fransen, is walking and holding documents under her right arm. She is dressed in black, wearing a visible cross around her neck. The male defendant, Paul Golding, who is walking besides Fransen, is holding up two fingers symbolizing the peace sign. Golding is dressed in a suit wearing a military hairstyle.

### 7.2.3 Comment analysis

From the 437 comments, I analyzed the top 100 comments. In this article, five of the six semiotic choices were applied to the analysis because I was unable to identify any comments that stated or implied *aggregation*.

And although the article was mostly about the two leaders of the anti-Muslim group being convicted for harassing Muslims, 49 out of the 100 comments were in regards to Donald Trump. All of these 49 comments were either insulting Trump or wishing him to go to jail too. For example:

“I am sad that our president is such a fool as to read and retweet the garbage that these folks put out. He is such a moron!” or “Now its [sic] time to put the Orange Dictator behind bars!”

The two anti-Muslim leaders were mentioned in 14 comments. For instance:

“Glad they were convicted” or “Woohoooo! Good Show!! Should have slapped them with far more jail time though, alas.”

And in only 2 comments were the words Islam or Muslim mentioned. See following comment:

“True heroes [the two anti-muslim leaders]! A couple of months for spreading the truth about Islam. I wonder how I can send them some money to put on their books?”

### Individualization versus collectivisation

13 Facebook users wrote comments that utilized the semiotic choice of *individualization versus collectivisation*. These commentators expressed both their approval or their disagreement of the two anti-Muslim leaders going to jail. Below are sample quotes of commentators who believed that freedom of speech should have allowed the two leaders to express themselves without facing any legal consequences. And instead of referring to the two leaders as individuals commentators used such terms as *people* to dehumanize. This way commentators have collectivised every individual person to just one large group. Maybe trying to point out that everyone’s rights have been violated. This association with a larger group can become problematic because it is dehumanizing everyone in the same group. For instance, just because some people are criminals does not mean that all other people are criminals too.

“People can't stand up for what they beleave [sic] in without getting sent to prison because of someone's feelings. What a joke.”

“The evil controlling British society.... freedom of speech is DEAD !!! Today, in this crazy world, the people that fight for what Is right are punished when it should be the other way.”

“Do I understand this correctly. There are people here that think it is OK to go to the home of a family at random ( or in this case go to the wrong address) have a demo, harass the residents ( including a child) make false accusations and then claim that this is freedom of speech.”

Other keywords that were utilized to dehumanize the two individual leaders were *hate groups* and *opposition*.

“That's one way to get rid of the opposition! Put them in jail! Who else tried that? Anybody? Back in the old days? Jailing the opposition?”

“Good, that’s what should happen to members of hate groups : jail time. Good job Great Britain.”

### **Specification and genericization**

From the top 100 comments, 18 comments utilized the semiotic choice of specification and genericization. The use of generic types can help give a statement a wanted or unwanted association. For example, the word *left*, (*see below first quote*) which many might associate with socialist views. In recent years, socialism has become a term that is often used to spark controversial views of the right and left wing parties in the United States. One commentator utilized the generic term *left* to express that there is no free speech and that one cannot speak freely without having to fear punishment.

“So much for free speech. The hypocrisy of the left strikes again. I suppose we should throw antifa members into prison for their hate mongering.”

“In before whiney old white fake profile trolls crying about ‘free speech’ with nary an understanding of how it works in real life.”

Other comments utilized such generic types as *heroes*, *extremists*, *criminals*, or *lawless bandits* to narrate their opinion on the matter. Two commentators used the word *hero* to show their disagreement with the conviction.

“Hero’s do not go to jail, they fight for people’s rights in society”

“True heroes! A couple of months for spreading the truth about Islam. I wonder how I can send them some money to put on their books?”

The other commentators all used generic types in different ways. These commentators showed their support for the verdict by using generic words that connote the two leaders did something bad and deserve their punishment.

“That's our Pres, siding with extremists.....”

“Eh...not like it's a surprise he [Trump] enjoys being around criminals.”

“In most genuinely democratic countries - eventually Justice catches up with the lawless bandits”

### **Nomination or functionalization**

I found 9 comments that utilized the semiotic choice of *nomination or functionalization*. By using this semiotic choice participants can be nominated in regards to who they are, or they can be functionalized by pointing out what they do. This becomes clear in the following comment, where President Trump is reduced to a specific role, and at the same time Trump is depicted in an unfavorable light by pointing out he is orange like a dorito chip.

“Now its [sic] time to put the Orange Dictator behind bars!”

The color association with a Dorito chip is based on the many memes found online that ridicules Trump. Additionally, the term dictator is associated with complete autocratic control. And although a dictator by definition is not necessarily a cruel and oppressive ruler, most dictators in recent history have been. Hence, it is obvious that this commentator not only dislikes Trump but also tries to discredit him by ridiculing Trump's position and looks.

Other comments used the semiotic choice of nomination or functionalization to point out what Trump does, or does not do. These comments, sometimes clearly other times subtly, point out that Trump fails to behave appropriately. Specifically, in regards to Trump's official role as the leader of the free world, in which he is expected to behave in a moral and sound manner, according to behavioral norms.

“Gotta love our thoughtless president”

“And yet, the president of the us is not held accountable for the same crime because the Republican congress ignores his crimes.”

“That's our Pres, siding with extremists.....”

In all of the above comments, Trump's behavior is depicted as deviant not acting in a manner that would be expected from a President.

No comment in the semiotic choice of *nomination or functionalization* is actually referring to the main context of the article, which is the conviction of the two extremist group members.

### **Us versus them division**

In the top 100 comments there were 7 comments that utilized the *us versus them* division. In the following comments, the *us versus them* mentality is created by specifying the differences in Britain's law and by using pronouns to differentiate between Britain and the U.S. This is mainly expressed by the use of pronouns such as we, them, or our. The following 4 comments use the pronoun *we* to point out the different hate speech laws in Britain. Two comments agree with the different applications of hate speech laws, and 2 display disagreement.

“We need similar laws in the US. It would decimate the GOP...but I consider that a GOOD thing”

“so hmm if we had a similar law here,, then perhaps our pathetic president might be also found guilty of religiously aggravated harassment? One can only hope...”

“if only Clinton had won.... we could have the same anti-constitutional laws here... Alas [sic], she promised to nominate SJWs to SCOTUS to take care of these 'issues'.... Brits don't have any such rights to free speech...Hurt an incompatible's [sic] feels in Britain, it's a crime... IS it a crime fro[sic] the incompatibles to hurt a Brit's feels”

“The evil controlling British society.... freedom of speech is DEAD !!! Today, in this crazy world, the people that fight for what Is [sic] right are punished when it should be the other way.”

One comment uses the *us versus them* division to declare that Britain is applying hate speech laws better than the U.S.

“Im [sic] glad Britians [sic] can differentiate between free speech and hate.”

One comment used the pronoun *our* and cynicism to disagree with the application of hate speech laws in Britain.

“Our jails are overcrowded....it's not fair! Also Libs: Hell yeah! Let's throw people in jail for yelling mean things at people like they do in GB!!!”

### **Online Flaming**

*Online flaming* in the top 100 analyzed comments is very subtle. The reason for this might be the NYT moderation of its Facebook page and the deletion of any comments using aggressive language. However, this is purely speculative, and the reason for the subtle *online*

*flaming* in these comments might be because the NYT attracts a different kind of reader.

Furthermore, most comments in this section are in regards to Trump.

Out of the 12 comments in this section, 11 comments were about Trump. These 12 comments utilized online flaming by using either hostile language, capital letters, an increase in question marks or exclamation points, or by using emojis.

The use of emojis was interesting because even though the majority of comments used rather cute emojis, such as clowns, fruit, or laughing smiles the comments were not meant to be nice. On the contrary, the emojis were always utilized to insult President Trump.

“Sadly no surprise that this is the (virtual) company he keeps. 🤡🤡🇺🇸🇺🇸🙄”

“✌️👉 except for anyone who isnt [sic] a male and white and Christian 😂😂😂😂 where does chump find his friends? Racistdouchefinder.com”

There were altogether 3 comments that used the word orange or an orange emoji to insult Trump’s skin color.

“Ugh please god or whomever supreme being there is get rid of this orange 🍊🍊 baboon!! Have to ask ourselves don’t we deserve better???”

“Now its [sic] time to put the Orange Dictator behind bars!”

The use of capital letters and an increase in question marks or exclamation points were also utilized by commentators to show their disagreement with Trump’s actions.

“He only surrounds himself and praises "THE BEST PEOPLE!" ha ha ha.Putin, Kim Jun Un [sic], Duarte, KKK, and every other white nationalist and dictator.”

“LMAO No Worries. "precedent" Bonespurs [sic] will pardon them and try to fire Theresa May.”

“Not to worry, the orange one may also be convicted of hate crimes, as well as other things. Mueller Time is coming, as is the BLUE TSUNAMI.”

Other comments just used classical name calling to insult President Trump.

“I am sad that our president is such a fool as to read and retweet the garbage that these folks put out. He is such a moron!”

“Yep, making America proud again...one scandal after another.  
His supporters have been standing in manure so deep they can’t smell his sh\*t.”

“Un-Freaking-Believable. 45's pals and supporters are, truly, deplorable people. Not a H Clinton supporter, but she was spot on.”



#### 7.2.4 Summary of the anti-Muslim extremists retweeted comments

Recurrent patterns in comments can express certain social identities and power relations. I am able to summarize these recurrent patterns of themes, stereotypes and/or biases that reveal certain characteristics of Islamophobia because of the linguistic analysis on how Facebook commentators applied semiotic choices.

The article was mainly about two people who were convicted, in Britain, for hate speech, but the majority of the comments focused solely on Trump. That being said, there were still emerging patterns shared by all comments.

One such pattern was in regards to free speech, and the question if free speech should be punishable by law. All together there were 31 comments on free speech. From these comments, 13 believed that free speech should not be punishable. Here are a couple of examples:

“Britain has become an undemocratic nation where expressing personal opinions and fears can lead to severe punishments such as these. It is an appalling stain on a once-pristine judicial system.”

“Europe is criminalizing controversial political discussion. A dangerous trend that can turn and bite back.”

“People can't stand up for what they beleave [sic] in without getting sent to prison because of someone's feelings. What a joke.”

“Censorship, coming to a neighborhood near you”

Out of the comments on free speech, 9 agreed with the free speech laws in Britain, and these comments expressed their approval for the leaders to be convicted of hate speech. See below:

“We need similar laws in the US. It would decimate the GOP...but I consider that a GOOD thing”

“And a good riddance! If only we had the laws that the UK and most of Europe have, we can get rid of the far-right scum on our soil as well.”

“Im [sic] glad Britians [sic] can differentiate between free speech and hate.”

The biggest pattern that emerged was the focus on Trump. All together there were 35 comments on Trump. Of these comments, 16 want to see Trump go to jail for his association with the hate group (Trump had tweeted links to the groups anti-immigrant/anti-muslim media content).

“Now its [sic] time to put the Orange Dictator behind bars!”

“Now if only we can get Trump and his henchmen convicted.”

“Hoping trumpity bumpity will join them soon...”

17 comments straightforward insulted Trump, and 3 comments use the color orange to insult Trump. Some comments made direct insults by name calling. Other comments were more subtle hinting that Trump is unintelligent.

“Need we say more? Trump loves racists because he is one.”

“Word is Trump offered to pardon them but didn't realize that he wasn't also the king of England...”

“Now its [sic] time to put the Orange Dictator behind bars!”

One emerging pattern was the agreement with the convictions of the two extremist leader. See below:

“Glad they were convicted”

“Woohoooo ! Good Show! Should have slapped them with far more jail time though, alas.”

“Good, that’s what should happen to members of hate groups : jail time. Good job Great Britain.”

The majority, 57 out of 100 comments used one or more of the five different semiotic choices. However, none of the comments used the 4 defined characteristics of Islamophobia (exclusion, violence, prejudice, and discrimination). As a matter of fact, there were only 2 comments that even mentioned Muslims and Islam, and neither one of these comments used the 4 characteristics of Islamophobia. See below the 2 comments that mention Muslim and Islam:

“True heroes! A couple of months for spreading the truth about Islam. I wonder how I can send them some money to put on their books?”

“And Muslims still minding their businesses.”

The analyzed article even mentions a rape case in which three Muslim men were convicted of raping a 16 year old girl. Still, there is no comment that either refers to the rape in the article or expresses any hate towards Muslims or Islam. Additionally, no patterns were found in regards to Muslims or Islam.

However, there were several patterns that emerged in regards to President Trump. This is somewhat surprising considering that the article was mainly about the leaders of the anti-Muslim group, and Trump was just mentioned in regards to his tweets about the convicted leaders. Still, 49 out of 100 comments were about Trump. It seems as the readers of the NYT rather focused on Trump than the content of the article.

Another emerging pattern was free speech and that the misuse of free speech should be punishable by law. All together, 31 comments discussed free speech. Another pattern that emerged was the discussion if Trump should go to jail.

It is also worth noting that the article itself did not utilized the four characteristics of Islamophobia, which might be the reason that the comments did not reflect any of the 4 characteristics either. However, the public sphere of the NYT Facebook page appears to be different from the other two Facebook pages that I have analyzed. Maybe because the NYT moderates the comment discourse on their page? There is no way of knowing if comments were deleted from the NYT Facebook page. It is also possible that the NYT moderating policy encourages Facebook users to comment within reason, since they have to fear comments being deleted.

Another reason for the lack of comments about Muslims and Islam could be that the NYT is a newspaper that is considered to have a slight to moderate liberal bias (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2019). But it appears that the comments on the article seem to be more on the liberal side, which might explain the overall focus on Trump instead of the convicted anti-Muslim leaders.

### **7.3 Third Facebook post and analysis of comments**

#### **7.3.1 Video clip info**

The video clip analyzed is titled: *Where are the moderate Muslims?* It was shared on the Facebook page *PragerU*, which stands for Prager University. However, it is essential to note that *PragerU* is not a University, nor is it an educational institution. PragerU is a U.S non-profit organization that creates videos on various political, economic, and philosophical topics from a conservative or right-wing perspective. PragerU Facebook page itself has over 3.3 million likes and describes itself as offering knowledge and clarity on life's biggest topics.

The video clip was shared on the PragerU Facebook page on January 28th, 2018. A man named Hussein Aboubakr is moderating the video. At the time of the analysis the video clip had been shared one Facebook 329 times, had over 700 likes, and 239 comments. To watch the video clip the Facebook page links to the *PragerU* website. On the website it states that the video clip was watched over 4.6 million times. Additionally, the video clip was published on *YouTube* on April 27th, 2017. There the video was viewed over 1.1 million times and received over 9000

comments. The post and comments that were analyzed for this analysis can be found following this link: <https://www.facebook.com/prageru/posts/1681523078557208>

### 7.3.2 Video clip summary

In the video, the viewer is introduced to a man named Hussein Aboubakr who moderates the video clip. The context of Aboubakr monologue is supported by animated pictures and pie charts to help the viewer visualize the data presented in the video. Aboubakr talks about politicians and how they always assure people, after an extremist terror attack, that of the 1.6 billion Muslims only a tiny fraction are extremist, and that all the other Muslims are law abiding citizens. Aboubakr also states that people are told by politicians that the majority of Muslims hold moderate views. Aboubakr counters this by talking about his personal upbringing in Egypt and what it means to be a *Moderate Muslim*. Then Aboubakr gives examples of what *Moderate Muslims* believe. For example, according to Aboubakr people who leave the Islamic faith should be killed, and that the *Moderate Muslim* he knows were happy when 9/11 happened. Aboubakr also talks about that his upbringing is typical for a *Moderate Muslim*, and according to the Pew Research Center there is data to back up his claims.

Aboubakr continues to explain why *Moderate Muslim* do not denounce Islamic terror because moderation as the average person understands it does not apply, and that the values of the West and the values of Islam are not compatible. Aboubakr concludes, ignoring the problem only prevents the West from effectively fighting Islamic terror, and that Islam needs to reform itself.

### 7.3.3 Comment analysis

From the 239 comments, I analyzed the top 100 comments. In the following comment analysis, only four of the five semiotic choices were applied because there were no comments that fell in the semiotic choice of *aggregation*. Thus, *aggregation* is not part of the third comment analysis.

#### Individualization versus collectivisation

There are 42 comments that reflect the semiotic choice of *individualization versus collectivisation*. The narrator in the video clip repetitively uses the term *Moderate Muslim(s)*, so there is a chance that the commentators might be more likely to use the term as well. From 42

comments that utilized the semiotic choice of *individualization versus collectivisation*, 16 comments used the term *Moderate Muslims*. For example:

“The only difference between a Moderate Muslim and a Jihadist is patience. 😊”

“NO such thing as a moderate muslim.”

“No such thing as moderate, get it?”

“They do not wear a t-short [sic] that says moderate Muslim. You have probably met some and did not know it.”

“The moderate Moslem [sic] is a myth. PragerU would do well to remove this one from the rotation”

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists.”

Of these 42 comments, 12 have used just the word moderate to refer to *Moderate Muslims*. See some samples below:

“The ones going back for more ammo [sic] are the 'moderate' ones....”

“The moderates are afraid of their crazies. Too”

“They dont [sic] exist... "Moderate" moslems [sic] exist to pave the way for devout moslems [sic]...”

“NO moderates..snakes in the gras [sic]..they all read their evil book@@@”

And from all the comments that used the term *Moderate Muslims* or *Moderates*, the majority stated in one way or another that *Moderate Muslims* do not exist:

“The moderate Moslem [sic] is a myth. PragerU would do well to remove this one from the rotation”

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists.”

“That is like asking “where are the moderate democrats?”. No such animal.”

“No such animal as a moderate Muslim”

“Theres [sic] NO SUCH THING!! THAT SCUMBAG IN ORLANDO WAS A " MODERATE" I. know because i knew him and his family!”

A few comments also utilized the semiotic choice of *individualization versus collectivisation* without using the term specifically, but it is clear that the commentators seem to believe that there are no *Moderate Muslims*. All these comments tend to present Muslims not as individuals but as a group of entities that share or are motivated by the same radical ideology.

“They are funding and cheering on the ‘radical’ muslims.....”

“Are they hiding from all their peaceful extremist brothers”

The majority of the commentators seem to agree that there are no *Moderate Muslims* and that the majority of Muslims hold radical views that do not harmonize with the western world.

Further, Islam as a religion is questioned and referred to as a cult or generally seen as problematic. The *Quran*, and *Sharia Law* are also perceived as sources of radical thought.

“Islam will not change until it is put under the microscope by the media. Firstly we can look at the civil war between the Shia and Sunni sects that started the day Mohammed died.”

“I see no religion, only a cult. Extremists following their Quran's murderous ways and so-called moderates unaware of all the horrid things in their own book.”

“Well Hmmm....From what I basically understand is that a Moderate Muslim Has to Navigate the "Quran" like going through an Obstacle course to fit Modern society whereas it generally says that ANY ACT (example:Lying, Murder, Beheading, Rape, Torture,Burning Alive etc...) against a NON-Muslim is NOT a Crime but actually encouraged, (please...Do Your Own research, Don't take my word for it, I Could be wrong!!) Which makes me wonder that if you have to ignore many parts of a Religion, is it really a religion [sic] you'd want to follow? Are they simply setting aside True [sic] beliefs until the right time?? Even The Holy Bible evolved to fit Modern [sic] society with "Jesus Christ" and the New Testament , FORGIVENESS, Turn the other cheek, Judge Not, LOVE each other, help each other as yourself etc..., etc...!...just something to research and think about!!”

“NO moderates..snakes in the gras..[sic] they all read their evil book@@@”

“There are none since ALL muslims want sharia law [sic]”

“It sounds like Islam needs some major reform. I pray for this.”

### **Specification and genericization**

This semiotic choice helps to explain if participants are represented as specific individuals or generic types. However, the language used by commentators widely overlapped with the last semiotic choice *individualization versus collectivisation*. This is because the term *Moderate Muslim* can be used for both either to describe a collective group or explain the representation of a generic group.

There are 31 comments that utilized the semiotic choice *specification and genericization*. Most of these 24 comments used the term *Moderate Muslims*, and how the term could possibly reflect the extremist views *Moderate Muslims* have of the western world. See the following examples:

“So many times our troops have been shot in the back by 'good muslims'.”

“Theres [sic] NO SUCH THING!! THAT SCUMBAG IN ORLANDO WAS A " MODERATE" I. know because i knew him and his family!”

“They dont [sic] exist! Todays "moderate" is tomorrows [sic] terrorist!”

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists.”

“So why aren't prominent members of the "moderate muslim majority" telling us that the atrocity does not represent their true beliefs? Silence by the moderates is seen as acceptance of the extremism in their midst. There is no middle ground. Either they oppose extremism (LOUDLY AND PUBLICLY) or they do not oppose it.”

Further, two comments implied that *Moderate Muslims* are equal to Jihadist, which shows that the commentators seem to believe that Muslims are threatening the western world.

“The only difference between a Moderate Muslim and a Jihadist is patience. 😊”

“The moderate Moslems [sic] are the ones sitting back and cheering on the Jihadists.....”

The comments below also show that Muslims are represented as a generic group that are generally dangerous and a threat to the way of life in the western world.

“They are the ones in the crowd cheering when the extremists are cutting peoples heads off.”

“So many times our troops have been shot in the back by 'good muslims'.”

“Are they hiding from all their peaceful extremist brothers?”

“It’s not a question of being a “moderate” Muslims or a zealot one. The question should be, are there any ‘secular’ Muslims that can accept modernity and Jeffersonian democracy? After reading their creed, there is doubt.”

“I see no religion, only a cult. Extremists following their Quran's murderous ways and so-called moderates unaware of all the horrid things in their own book. Until a global reformation and denouncement of all the utterly evil things in their precious Quran reasonable people will never truly trust a Muslim.”

“They dont [sic] exist! Todays "moderate" is tomorrows [sic] terrorist!”

There was only 1 comment in this semiotic choice that has a different opinion on what is considered a *Moderate Muslim*, countering the definition of the video clip.

“I’m baffled by his starting statements that “I was raised in a moderate Islamic family” and then says he was thought that “everyday living without a caliphate is a sin, ..., we must concur [sic] new land, kill ...” so I didn’t bother listening after that since his perception of what is “moderate” is f—d up. I was raised, until 15, in a moderate Muslim family and with Muslims, in school, in the neighborhood, and in town all around me. I do not recall a single one having such RADICAL views that this f—d up guy considers moderate.”

### Nomination or functionalization

By using this semiotic choice participants can be nominated in regards to who they are, or they can be functionalized by pointing out what they do. There are 5 comments that utilized the semiotic choice of *nomination or functionalization*, and all of the comments overlap with the two prior semiotic choices. In all of the following comments, Muslims are believed to function as a means to violence, either as Jihadists, extremists, or terrorists.

“The only difference between a Moderate Muslim and a Jihadist is patience”

“The moderate Moslems [sic] are the ones sitting back and cheering on the Jihadists.....”

“They dont [sic] exist! Todays "moderate" is tomorrows terrorist!”

“They are the ones in the crowd cheering when the extremists are cutting peoples heads off.”

### Us versus them division

Humans can categorize people into social groups by creating an *us versus them* mentality towards people who might be different. Language can provide such a means to distance oneself from people who are different (in this case the difference is the religion). For example, the commentators in this analysis used *they*, *us*, and *them* to align participants alongside or against each other. In this semiotic choice, 37 commentators have utilized language to make the distinction between Muslims and themselves. Of these 37 comments, the word *they/them* was used 29 times. From these 29 comments, 8 comments used the words *they/them* to express or imply that there are no *Moderate Muslims*.

“They dont [sic] exist! Todays "moderate" is tomorrows [sic] terrorist!”

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists.”

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists.

“They dont [sic] exist... "Moderate" moslems [sic] exist to pave the way for devout moslems... [sic]”

11 comments used the *us versus them division* to express the believe that all Muslims are violent and dangerous to western societies.

“They are funding and cheering on the "radical" muslims [sic].....”

“They are the grass that hides the snake !!!!!!!”



“NO moderates..snakes in the gras [sic]..they all read their evil book @@@”

“sorry their [sic] are none , they all want one thing world domination . and if Hillary would of [sic] won Sharia law would all ready [sic] be in place ..”

“They're in the back quietly sharpening the knives.”

“So why aren't prominent members of the "moderate muslim majority" telling us that the atrocity does not represent their true beliefs? Silence by the moderates is seen as acceptance of the extremism in their midst. There is no middle ground. Either they oppose [sic] extremism (LOUDLY AND PUBLICLY) or they do not oppose it.”

3 commentators also aligned themselves against Muslims by using pronouns such as *we*, *us*, and *our*.

“They expect the rest of us to save their asses because they can’t even stand up to their own! Screw that, fight for yourselves as we patriots did!”

“So many times our troops have been shot in the back by 'good muslims.' ”

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as moderate muslim exists.”

There was only 1 comment that used the semiotic choice of *us versus them division* to imply that Muslims are an integrated part of the larger society and should not be judged.

“They are everywhere. They serve our nation in forward operations, in intelligence departments, not to mention how many contribute to the economy. I'd be very careful to disparage an entire group of people especially when a few follow and support Praeger [sic].”

## Online Flaming

*Online flaming* for the top 100 comments was barely represented in this comment analysis. Only 5 commentators used language that is considered online flaming, and of the 5 comments only 2 used hostile language, the other 3 comments were more subtle, indirectly insulting Muslims. Emojis can also be used as a means for online flaming, and although a couple of comments had utilized emojis none used hostile emojis. See below the comments that used hostile language:

“Theres [sic] NO SUCH THING!! THAT SCUMBAG IN ORLANDO WAS A "MODERATE" I.[sic] know because i knew him and his family!”

“No such goatfucker!”

Although no hostile language was used, the 3 comments below indirectly implied that Muslims are either violent, weak, or low on the socioeconomic ladder and therefore are serving others.

“They are the ones in the crowd cheering when the extremists are cutting peoples heads off.”

“They expect the rest of us to save their asses because they can’t even stand up to their own! Screw that, fight for yourselves as we patriots did!”

“Serving up my kebab.”

### 7.3.4 Summary of the “where are the Moderate Muslims comments”

As mentioned before, recurrent patterns can express certain social identities and power relations. And the linguistic analysis on how Facebook users applied semiotic choices in their comments make it possible to summarize recurring patterns of themes, stereotypes and/or biases that reveal certain characteristics of Islamophobia. In the top 100 comments of the third analyzed Facebook post, only one pattern emerged from the comments. From the comments, 42 of the 100 expressed in different ways that there are no *Moderate Muslims*. See some examples below:

“NO moderates..snakes in the gras..[sic] they all read their evil book@@@”

“The moderate Moslem [sic] is a myth.”

“Why are the "moderates" not speaking out? Why do they not report suspicious behaviour, even in their own families? Because they do not exist?”

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists.”

“They dont [sic]exist... "Moderate" moslems [sic] exist to pave the way for devout moslems...[sic]”

The majority, 66 out of the 100 comments utilized one or more of the five different semiotic choices, and 37 comments used at least two or more of the semiotic choices. See two samples comments of the multiple use of different semiotic choices below:

“Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists.”

“So why aren't prominent members of the "moderate muslim majority" telling us that the atrocity does not represent their true beliefs? Silence by the moderates is seen as acceptance of the extremism in their midst. There is no middle ground. Either they oppose [sic] extremism (LOUDLY AND PUBLICLY) or they do not oppose it.”

The commentators seem to believe that if *Moderate Muslims* accept other Muslims to be violent then all the Muslims are violent, because they can only be either or.

Additionally, the 100 analyzed comments utilized two of the four (exclusion, violence, prejudice, and discrimination) defined characteristics of Islamophobia, prejudice, and violence. Of the 100 comments, 22 mentioned or implied prejudice against Muslims, and 12 comments

mentioned or implied that Muslims are violent. Below you find two samples of comments in which the two characteristics of Islamophobia either overlap or are both mentioned.

“I see no religion, only a cult. Extremists following their Quran's murderous ways and so-called moderates unaware of all the horrid things in their own book. Until a global reformation and denouncement of all the utterly evil things in their precious Quran reasonable people will never truly trust a Muslim”

“The moderate Moslems [sic] are the ones sitting back and cheering on the Jihadists.....”

The first comment is clearly prejudice and supports the claim of the video clip that Muslim are violent. In the comment, Islam is recognized as a means for violence. By choosing the word cult, a word that comes with a bad connotation of religious followers that are socially deviant, the commentator is expressing intense dislike towards Muslims. Further, the commentator believes that the Quran is a book that is enticing Muslims to be violent, and since Muslims are not reasonable they do not understand and therefore cannot be trusted.

Some commentators used both the different semiotic choices to express how they perceive Muslims, and one or more of the four characteristics of Islamophobia. See for instance the following comment, which is prejudice and at the same time implies aggression.

“Moderate Muslim”: A Muslim who holds a grudge for only seven generations.”

Commentators seemed to believe the video clip’s message that Muslims who have moderate views are violent and are incompatible with the way of life in western societies. The recurring theme that emerges within the comments portrays *Moderate Muslims* as radicals, extremists, and violent.

“They're in the back quietly sharpening the knives.”

In regards to recurring patterns, one pattern that emerged was the overwhelming belief that there are no *Moderate Muslims*.

“NO moderates..snakes in the gras..[sic] they all read their evil book@@@”

Furthermore, the narrator of the video clip, Hussein Aboubakr, talked about statistical evidence to back up his claims about *Moderate Muslim* and what *Moderate Muslim* believe and stand for. And although Aboubakr elaborated and visualized numbers he allegedly pulled from the Pew Research Center, none of the comments mentioned any of the information.

Also, it is worth noting that Aboubakr himself used two of the four characteristics of Islamophobia (violence and prejudice) in his 5 minute video clip. Aboubakr used the term

*Moderate Muslim*, (or a variation of it) 11 times in the clips 5 minute narration, which might have been mirrored in the comments because 17 of the comments used the term *Moderate Muslim*, or a variation of it as well.

Lastly, only 3 comments pointed out that PragerU is not an accredited educational institution but a rather small organization with 22 employees. PragerU only creates short videos on various political, economic, and other relevant topics from a right-wing perspective.

“By the way, this prager u is just a propaganda [sic] machine, research before you swallow this kool aid.”

“Hey, if I apply for a job and under "Education" I put "Prager U," does that mean I'll get in?😂😂😂”

## 8. Analysis and findings

In the beginning, I asked the RQ: How do Facebook posts and comments about Muslims and extremism reflect certain characteristics of Islamophobia?

The linguistic analysis showed that the articles/video and the analyzed corresponding comments all reflected the previously defined characteristics of Islamophobia. In all three executed analyses, each top 100 comment section mirrored a similar tone than the articles/video did. For example, if the article utilized the 4 characteristics of Islamophobia then so did the comment section (see the first and third analyses). This is also evident in the second analysis, where none of the 4 characteristics of Islamophobia were present, and the comments did not reflect any characteristics of Islamophobia as well.

In the table below one can see how many times comments utilized 1 or more of the 4 characteristics of Islamophobia:

Figure 2:

Characteristics of Islamophobia	First article top 100 comments	Second article top 100 comments	Third video clip top 100 comments
exclusion	32		
violence	19		20
prejudice	22		23
discrimination	5		

Further, the majority of commentators expressed with the help of semiotic choices that they believed the claims made in the articles/video about Muslims and extremism are real. In the comments, this was expressed by utilizing different semiotic choices. For instance, commentators used the semiotic choice *individualization versus collectivization* to express that Muslims are members of a collective group, a group in which all members are having the same extremist values and beliefs. In this case, Islamophobia seems to be encouraged and emphasized when commentators generalize and portrait Muslims as just one large group, instead of different people who just share a belief system that can differ greatly between individuals/societies.

For more details see Figure 3 below. In each of the analyses, the majority of the top 100 comments utilized one or more of the semiotic choices. Overall, all semiotic choices were used, aside from *Aggregation*.

Figure 3:

Semiotics Choices	First article top 100 comments	Second article top 100 comments	Third video clip top 100 comments
Individualization versus collectivisation	26	13	39
Specification and genericisation	23	18	31
Nomination or functionalization	1	9	5
Us versus them division	33	7	37
Online flaming	12	12	5

The semiotic choices commentators used are representational strategies of speech acts. Commentators used these representational strategies as a means to represent social actors in a favorable or unfavorable light, as they did with Muslims and extremism. Speech acts according

to Habermas's communicative action theory are used for strategic action or for teleological action, which refers to an action that is directed to a purpose or to bring about a desired state. In this analysis, user comments utilize semiotic choices for their instrumental and strategic actions. Thus one can argue that the communicative action from commentators on Facebook pages could form the basis of social actions, according to Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1981).

The different Facebook pages, where the analyzed articles/video were shared and debated, could be seen as contemporary public spheres. Because, according to Habermas, a public sphere is an area in social life where individuals come together to discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action (Habermas, 1981). That being said, the public sphere that each Facebook page represented does not fulfill Habermas's ideal public sphere. Because Habermas argues that for the public sphere to work, three conditions need to be fulfilled. First, access for all social groups and all subjects, second the principle of discursivity, and third a legitimized function of the public sphere in politics. And although at first glance, it seems that all social groups have access to all Facebook pages, in reality, Facebook's algorithms connect Facebook users and Facebook pages according to the users' likes and dislikes. Also, each of the analyzed Facebook pages seems to post only articles of a certain political bias. This exclusion of diverse opinions leaves no space for openness to all subjects, and therefore does not allow for a rational based exchange of opinions and discursive action according to Habermas.

Habermas's second principle of discursivity is also not fulfilled. Habermas argues that in the public, discourse is the process of the rational justification of norms through speech acts in the forms of arguments, and these arguments should be exchanged and/or used to convince other participants (Habermas, 1991). And in critical discourse analysis, semiotic choices are used as representational strategies. This allows for social actors (Facebook users) to be placed in a social world where certain aspects of their identities are either drawn attention to or omitted (Machin and Mayr 2012, p. 77). There should not be any constraints except that of the better argument. And although all representational strategies are fulfilled most analyzed comments agreed with the message of the corresponding articles, meaning there was no exchange of arguments to

convince or challenge other participants (comments) on the rationality of the discussed article. That is because it appears that the public discourse that happened within the comments does not seem to bring decision-making resources to the political elite and/or legitimizes political decisions in public discourse, thereby creating more democracy.

To further analyze the discourse presented in the comments Habermas's four validity claims will be useful to operationalize the comments discourse. There are four possible validity claims, which should be reference points for arguments. These validity claims are: truth, accuracy, truthfulness, and comprehensibility (Habermas, 1981). Habermas argues that rule-free communication can only be rational when it comes from these four validity claims (Habermas, 1981). I would argue, in the analyzed comments this was generally not the case. The reason for this is that the content of the articles were not always based on accuracy or truth, and the comments that mirrored the content were not based on truth or accuracy as well. One could also argue that the validity claim of comprehensibility was also not met, as many commentators did not understand that the content presented in the articles and video were not based on real facts or credible sources. Because for Habermas these four validity claims correspond and overlap with the concept of intersubjective truth (Habermas 1981). And although Habermas's arguments for intersubjective truth could, in theory, be applied to the claims made in the Eagle Rising article, it is still not fulfilling the validity claims because Habermas argues that every, theoretical, possible discourse participant needs to agree to the statements/propositions. And even though, most analyzed comments agreed with the content of the articles and video, not every theoretical comment will agree with the statements made in the articles/video. Therefore, the discourse is not rational because it does not come from the four validity claims.

In regards to the second RQ: To which themes in the Facebook posts do commentators related the most?

I would argue that the themes and language used in the articles/video connected with the themes and language used in the corresponding comments. It was obvious that if the articles/video carried an anti-Muslim bias then so did the comments. If the analyzed articles/video did not carry an anti-Muslim bias then neither did the comments. Thus, the language of the comments always mirrored the language of the articles/video. This was

especially prominent in the third analysis, in which the narrator used the term *Moderate Muslim* several times, and the vast majority of commentators also used the term *Moderate Muslim* or a variation of it.

In two of the three analyses, (first and third) Facebook commentators reacted and debated the underlying themes that Muslims have generally extremist views and their religion cannot coexist within the lifestyle of the western world. However, in the second analysis commentators literally ignored the main theme and focused on the secondary theme. The main theme was about two anti-Muslim leaders who were convicted of hate crimes, and the secondary theme was that Trump had tweeted about the two leaders and their hate group.

In all three of the top 100 comments analyzed, there were only a small number of comments that differed in opinion or questioned the legitimacy of the information presented in the articles and video. The overwhelming majority of comments just accepted the content of the articles and video, with no questions asked. This behavior of acceptance, without questioning the legitimacy of the articles/video, could indicate that Facebook posts have the potential to influence perceived realities, negative or positive. After all the phenomenon of perceived importance of topics is well documented in the classical news media. McCombs, co-founder of the Agenda-Setting-Theory, argues in his book *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion* that what general society understands is based on the media narrative (McCombs, 2014). This means, issue prioritized and deemed important by the news media influences public opinion (McCombs, 2014).

Also that the overwhelming majority of comments accepted the content of the articles/video, with no questions asked, could further indicate that the internet only contributes in theory to the “diversity of views and broadening participation,” but in reality “the Internet seems to reverse the effect of commercial mass media” (Rasmussen 2008, p. 74). Because the different types of internet communications (in this case Facebook) that take part in a “more niche based public sphere” can reflect different and more extreme viewpoints, which can be “more resistant to censorship” (Rasmussen 2008, p. 77). This is definitely the case on Facebook pages that post articles which are based on nothing but opinions without credible sources, as it is the case on the



Eagle Rising Facebook page and the PragerU Facebook page (Media Bias/Fact Check 2018) [1], [3]).

In regards to the reflection of certain characteristics of Islamophobia in comments, I also like to discuss Awan's content analysis in which the author used qualitative data and a gathering technique to come up with a framework for Islamophobia on Facebook (Awan, 2016, p. 7).

Awan used the research results to come up with what he called "The Five Walls of Islamophobic Hate" which are "Muslims are Terrorists, Muslims as Rapists, Muslim women are a security threat, a war between Muslims, and Muslims should be deported" (Awan, 2016, p. 10). After my analysis of the three articles/video and the corresponding comments, I am able to present findings that are similar to Awan's "Five Walls of Islamophobic Hate" In 2 of 3 analyzed articles/video (first and third analysis) the majority of commentators also utilized some form of the "The Five Walls of Islamophobic Hate" see sample comments below:

"Until we hear them condemn their terrorist neighbors, I'm going to assume that no such thing as a moderate muslim exists."

"Well Hmmm....From what I basically understand is that a Moderate Muslim Has to Navigate the "Quran" like going through an Obstacle course to fit Modern society whereas it generally says that ANY ACT (example:Lying, Murder, Beheading, Rape, Torture,Burning Alive etc...) against a NON-Muslim is NOT a Crime but actually encouraged."

"She [Muslim female athlete] should never be able to represent America in any kind of sport event ever again and I would like to see her sent back to her homeland immediately as a threat to Americans."

"Her [Muslim female athlete] 2 minutes are over... Nobody cares... She should have devoted more time to her sport. She failed and is a champion of nothing... If or when she rejoins civilized society, she might be forgiven for her treason. I wish her a Muslim husband to make her life unbearable..."

Additionally my findings also reflect a study executed on twitter, in which tweets were identified as Islamophobic if they showed "the illegitimate and prejudicial dislike of Muslims because of their faith" (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018, p. 16). In this study, similar to Awan's study four categories of Islamophobia were identified: (1) Islam is the enemy; (2) the conflation of Muslim population with sexual violence; (3) to blame all Muslims for a terror attack instead of only the terrorist themselves; (4) the general use of anti-Islamic slurs and derogatory descriptions of Muslims (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018, p. 16). The finding of this study are similar to my findings because 2 of 3 the analyzed articles/video and corresponding comments reflect one or all of the above identifier of Islamophobia. See sample comments below:

“I THINK SOMEONE SHOULD BUY HER A ONE WAY TICKET TO HER WONDERFUL MIDEAST SHARIAH LOVING HOMELAND. WHERE SHE CAN BE TAUGHT TO SIT DOWN AND ONLY TALK WHEN TOLD TO BY THE MUSLIM MEN OF HER ISLAM RELIGEON [sic].”

“And we refer to this Islamic demons as people they are not human they are wild animals who follow an evil cult”

## 9. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to contribute to the limited knowledge of how articles and videos shared on Facebook pages about Muslims and extremism influence corresponding user comments. The linguistic content analysis of the discourse presented in the Facebook comments showed that comments reflected certain characteristics of Islamophobia. My findings confirmed similar studies that were done in the past to analyze the presence of Islamophobia in social media discourse, mainly on Twitter (Miller, Smith and Dale, 2018); (Awan 2014); (Evolvi 2019). For the future, it is definitely necessary to do a more comprehensive study on the discourse presented in Facebook comments and the relation these comments have to articles and videos posted on Facebook.

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