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moralities in online discussions about violence towards refugees

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“Despicable, disgusting, repulsive!!!”

Public emotions and moralities in online discussions about violence towards refugees

## Abstract

*This article analyses the affective-discursive work that the image of an anti-asylum seeker demonstrator dressed like a member of the Ku Klux Klan and waving a Finnish flag generated in online platforms in Finland. Specifically, it focuses on how the vocabulary of disgust served to draw boundaries between “us” and “others,” thus reconstructing hierarchies of human worth and deservingness. The aim of the article is to discuss the role of disgust and related emotions in relation to what has become known as the European refugee crisis and whether the language of disgust allows for solidarity with the plight of asylum seekers.*

## Introduction

On the evening of October 2015, the image of an anti-asylum demonstrator dressed like a member of the Ku Klux Klan and waving a Finnish flag gave a disturbing face to protests against asylum seekers in Finland.<sup>1</sup> A small group of demonstrators had gathered in front of an old army barracks, converted into a reception center for asylum seekers in Hennala, Lahti, to protest against the arrival of asylum-seekers. A still image taken from a video was published in major international news outlets and resulted in public debate about racism, national reputation and responsibility towards asylum seekers and refugees in Finland. While not a unique incident of racist violence against refugees and asylum seekers, nevertheless, in the historically relatively Caucasian and homogenous Finland, the image can be seen as a disruption to Finnish people’s sense of national identity, which is built on discourses of tolerance and equality.

Extraordinary in its racist symbolism, the image needed to be publicly renounced. In a statement released following the protest, the Finnish government asserted that “Finland is an international, open and tolerant country whose vast majority of the population is positive towards immigrants” (“The Finnish Government strongly condemns racist protesting” 2015). As Alana Lentin (2016) has noted, publicness permits the recognition of an act as racist but, then again, such “snapshots” of racist incidents also allow for the distancing of extreme forms of racism from the behavior and everyday life of “normal” people. Clearly, the statement worked to distinguish the majority of “good” citizens from the few bad seeds in order to restore the nation’s tarnished reputation. Public expressions of disgust were a prominent way of responding to the image and condemning the rally, but perceptions about what exactly was disgusting differed wildly. In an interview with Finland’s Yle Radio 1 (Finland’s public service broadcaster), the Foreign Minister and leader of the anti-immigration Finns Party (formerly True Finns Party), Timo Soini, expressed his disapproval by saying that, “The Ku Klux Klan is a racist and misanthropic organization. [...] Linking the Finnish flag with it is disgusting”. Some, however, insisted that it was the hurling of

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, a 19-year-old man dressed up in the KKK outfit was suspected of public agitation, desecrating the Finnish flag and illegally disguising himself—other demonstrators were suspected of incitement against an ethnic group. In May 2016 the YLE journalist who took the images was also suspected of desecrating the flag because it was claimed he handed the flag over to the demonstrator for the photo. In September 2016 the prosecutor decided not to charge the protestor or the journalist.

fireworks at a bus filled with asylum seekers, among them young children and infants as well as throwing stones at Red Cross workers, that demanded to be defined as disgusting, rather than the linking of Finland's national flag with the racist group.

This article analyses how the controversy generated by the image played out on Finland's various online platforms, the moral and political positions it generated through the displays of disgust as well as the related emotions. Disgust is often routinely expressed in debates on divisive social issues such as racism. Clearly, emotions, their expression, incitement and management, play an essential part in the crafting of public morality and reproducing social hierarchies (Ahmed 2004; Nussbaum 2015; Pedwell 2014). It is a starting point of this article that that different emotional discourses are mobilized for different purposes, with various political and social implications. In the literature on media and moral spectatorship, the focus has been on the emotion of compassion that is seen to motivate an investment in those in need. Consequently, the potential of media representations of suffering to elicit feelings of compassion and empathy towards victims and move national or global audiences to help them has been widely discussed (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006; Höjjer 2004; Kyriakidou 2015; Moeller 1999; Silverstone, 2007). While this article concerns mediated morality, it departs from previous research in several respects. First, the focus is not on geographically distant others but on those who have physically moved inside the nation state. The politics of asylum seekers and refugees is one of the most emotive issues of our times and we have witnessed how the "European refugee crisis" is testing the limits of compassion. Second, rather than examining emotions and moralities inscribed in or shaped by mainstream media representations, I engage with the "affective-discursive practices" (Wetherell et al. 2015) in online discussions. Conceptualizations of audience practices have become more complex in a hybridized media environment as the interaction of traditional media formats and online platforms creates a host of new opportunities to publicly comment on, interpret and evaluate social events and news stories. What is important here is that "moral publics" are not constituted by a specific media form or text but by the public act of making meaning and displaying and mobilizing emotions within various media platforms. Finally, departing from the predominant focus on discourses of compassion, I examine responses that are loaded with negative affect. Affective practices such as being disgusted are relevant for understanding how boundaries between "us" and "others" are defined and maintained (Ahmed 2004, 93; Miller 1997, 50; Tyler 2013; Wetherell et al. 2015).

### **The European refugee crisis: media framings and anti-immigration politics**

Since the beginning of 2014 an extraordinary influx of refugees and asylum seekers has arrived in Europe. The complex reasons for the "European refugee crisis" include the war in Syria, continued unrest within North Africa and the Middle East as well as logistical reasons (new migration corridors providing safer and cheaper routes). The refugee crisis, in particular the negotiating and coordinating of a joint political response, has become one of the dominant issues in the political agendas of the EU states and gained a great deal of news coverage. Ideas about how the responsibilities should be shared has generated, as Kelly Greenhill (2016, 317) writes, "very different, sometimes schizophrenic, policy responses among European Union (EU) member states, with many states prioritizing national interests over European solidarity". Clearly, the crisis has divided member states with some, like Germany and Sweden, initially allowing large numbers of asylum seekers to enter the country, and others, like Hungary and other former Eastern Bloc countries, closing their borders. What we have seen is the emergence of contradictory discourses

being taken on the rights and deservingness of asylum seekers and refugees (Holmes and Castaneda 2016).

It is clear that the construction of “refugee crisis” needs to be understood in particular contexts, within which the meanings attached to asylum seekers are produced and in which feelings of solidarity or xenophobia are evoked. At the same time, it should be noted that expressions and arguments surrounding asylum seekers and refugees are often assembled in and from discourses circulated in a transnational digital media environment (Lentin and Titley 2011, 152). Different political and moral positions on the refugee crisis have been evident in European mainstream media. Recent studies show that while the refugee crisis is first and foremost perceived as a “European crisis,” as opposed to a massive humanitarian crisis calling for solidarity, the journalistic and political cultures in the given countries have an effect on the ways in which the issue has been covered. Study on the coverage of the quality and tabloid newspapers in Spain, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom and Sweden shows that asylum seekers and refugees have most often been presented as a security, cultural or economic problem, and accordingly the number of stories highlighting the positive impacts, or stories discussing the causes for being a refugee and giving refugees a voice to articulate their own stories were rare (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore 2016). These results echo the findings of a long line of research on media representations of asylum seekers: news media often use images and rhetoric that produce fear and othering (Bleiker et al. 2013; Gale 2004; Horsti, 2016; Innes 2010; Moore 2013). Such representations may, in turn, authorize tougher responses by political decision-makers and may encourage people to take matters into their own hands against the perceived threat (ICAR 2004, 25; Tyler 2006). In contrast to the extant literature, which mostly indicates that news on immigration reduces immigrants to anonymous threats and objects of fear, a study comparing Finnish, Belgian, French and British newspapers during January 2016 showed that newspapers reported on the refugee crisis in neutral and objective tones—with the negative connotations arising from statements made by politicians and national authorities. In most of the newspapers the editorial choices concerning, for example, expert interviews and commentaries by journalists, shifted the tone in a more positive direction (Sumuvuori and Vähäsöyrinki 2016).

A study on the coverage of *Helsingin Sanomat* during the summer of 2015, Finland’s biggest national daily and an influential political voice, similarly concluded that the impacts on national security and the economy received the most attention (Vij 2015). This study is relevant as it focused on the period preceding the KKK incident. It shows how the discussion shifted from European policies to national issues in late summer 2015, which is when the number of asylum seekers significantly increased in Finland and the discourse on restricting their numbers intensified. In *Helsingin Sanomat* the discussions about the refugees were ideologically ambivalent and divided between views that emphasized helping the refugees and those focusing on refugees as a problem, implying the pressure on journalists to balance human rights and security frames. While the coverage generally followed official policy lines, the paper also exercised the watchdog function by closely scrutinizing the acts of the representatives of the right-wing and populist Finns Party. *Helsingin Sanomat* also promoted anti-racism as a key element of Finland’s national self-image; racism and the struggle against anti-immigration views were recurrent themes due to some high-profile racist statements and derogatory comments.

The ambivalent discussion in *Helsingin Sanomat* is illustrative of the changes in the wider public debate over refugees. Finland, a country of roughly 5.5 million people, has a very short history of accepting refugees. From 1973–2013, around 40,000 refugees moved to Finland, most of

them from Chile, Vietnam, Iraq and Somalia. During 2015, over 32,400 applied for asylum—the largest number ever (for instance, the figure was 3,651 in 2014). In the same way as in other Nordic countries, the rise of a right-wing populist party has fueled increasing political polarization and social divisions in terms of attitudes towards immigration (Etzold 2016). While Finland has pursued a restrictive immigration policy since as far back as the 1990s, it was not before the electoral success of the Finns Party in the municipal elections in 2008 that immigration became an intensely debated topic in Finnish politics and nationalistic and racist views gained access to the Finnish media (Keskinen 2009). The mainstreaming of anti-immigration politics culminated in 2015 with the Finns Party entering into government coalition for the first time. The center right government has called for tough asylum rules changes, the large amount of those seeking refuge in 2015 provided a suitable context to justify legislation that aims to make Finland a less attractive destination for refugees (Pallander 2016).

Since 2015, and matching the increased number of asylum seekers in Finland, the number of xenophobic demonstrations and violent attacks on refugees and refugee centers has risen. Importantly, internet forums and social media have provided a new context for mobilizing anti-immigration and racist attitudes and the politics of fear. They have become homes for the expression of “old racisms,” in other words, places where opinions and emotional reactions that are not socially acceptable in mainstream society can be expressed (Cisneros and Nakayama 2015). This is illustrated by the fact that in September 2015 several Finnish news organizations disabled or limited online comments on news about immigration and the refugee crisis because of the escalation of hateful comments (Toivonen 2015). Obviously, the new media environment also creates novel forms of organizing support for refugees as well as sites of solidarity and sympathy. Recent empirical studies examine how citizens across Europe have responded to the “refugee crisis” and used social networks to challenge exclusionary policies or to mobilize a wide range of support for refugees (e.g. Koca 2016; Rygiel 2016).

### **Moral emotions and social hierarchies**

The images of the anti-asylum demonstration beside the refugee center constructed a scene of anti-refugee violence that Finnish viewers did not expect to see (Image 1). The acts of violence combined with the Finnish flag as well as banners that had nationalistic slogans (such as “Hyvä Suomi,” (“Go Finland!")) and, most of all, the white robe and hood worn by one of the protesters took the Finnish audience by surprise. These images were difficult to dismiss because of the combination of conflicting symbols. Arguably, the combination of racist attire and national flag and emblems functioned to enlarge the scope of anti-refugee violence from the singular act of ignorant or unscrupulous individuals to a wider political and moral issue. By hinting at the culpability of the broader national community, these images disturbed the division between the marginal mob and the social mainstream (cf. Ohl and Potter 2013). Consequently, they prompted audience members to respond to the image across numerous media platforms displaying and stirring emotions and questioning the political meaning that could be given to the event.

PLACE IMAGE 1 AROUND HERE

*Image 1* Photo by Heikki Ahonen / YLE / Lehtikuva

As social movement theorists have stressed, some emotions work as “hot buttons” that motivate people to react to a perceived injustice (Gamson 1992, 2). Here, however, the focus is not on the felt personal emotions but on the discursively constructed emotions and accompanying evaluations about the meaning of the event and the value of certain social actors. So called “negative” moral emotions—contempt, anger and disgust—are defined as emotional reactions to the moral violations of others (Rozin et al. 1999, 575).

What do these moral emotions do? What can be the effects of public expressions or outpourings of disgust, contempt or shame? As noted in the literature, emotions are attached to processes of constructing social order and social relations and forming communities (Miller 1997; Nussbaum 2009; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 2004; Tyler 2006). Negative moral emotions are routinely used in public discourses and political campaigns for drawing moral boundaries between social groups: to include some and to exclude others (Sayer 2005). Indeed, disgust has been defined as an “emotion of social rejection” (Schnall et al. 2008) for the reason that it is often accompanied by the marginalization of people that are imbued with negative social value or are seen to violate accepted norms of behavior (Hatemi and McDermott 2012; Lawler 2005; Rozin, Haidt and McCauley 2000; Tyler 2013). Both disgust and shame responses have been seen as important mechanisms in the shaping public notions of the worthiness and deservingness of certain groups (Hancock 2004; Lawler 2005; Skeggs 2004). Importantly, such notions of deservingness—that are inevitably tied to media discourses and mediated affective practices—have material consequences as they shape welfare policies (Lawler 2005; Sayer 2005; Soldatic and Pini 2009).

Disgust has been accused of blocking sympathetic identification and therefore being dehumanizing emotion (Nussbaum 2009). However, disgust also occurs in response to unjust discrimination, such as racism, and because of its capacity to increase the severity of moral judgments, it may come with the potential for motivating opposition to injustice. As Pedwell (2014, 18) suggests, emotions are not simply “good” or “bad” but ambivalent and can be employed to serve different interests. For instance shame, as Probyn (2005, x) states, can be a productive, democratic force that has the power to transform notions of who we are as well as challenge inequality and address past wrongdoings.

Importantly, emotions gain their meaning in relation to discursive practices and through their interactions with other emotions. Thus, the lines between disgust and other negative emotions like contempt, shame or anger are not clear because in public discussions moral disgust appears along with related negative emotions. As Nabi (2002) states, the layman’s comprehension of the word “disgust” is in fact a combination of disgust and anger. In discourses about the suffering of distant others the cultivation of compassion has been central to countering public indifference and structures that are dehumanizing. Compassion’s spectatorial nature thus contains an invitation to evaluate a person’s suffering (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006). Images that focus viewers’ attention on suffering are believed to elicit compassionate feelings, especially when the suffering is seen to be undeserved. In contrast, viewing images of the perpetrators is expected to draw attention to the injustice, and increase feelings of resentment or anger.

This article examines online discussions concerning an incident of anti-immigrant racism as affective-discursive practices that “construct relations of proximity and distance, affiliation and detachment, and inclusion and exclusion” (Wetherell 2013; Wetherell et al. 2015). It aims to highlight the inseparability of emotions from the communicative practices of making meaning and evaluation.

## Material and methods

Online discussion about refugees and asylum seekers tends to be highly polarized and display negative emotions. Savolainen (2015) studied information sharing regarding immigration on the discussion forum Suomi24 (Finland24). He showed that over 20 % of the comments contained explicit emotional expressions and that about 91 % of the emotions were negative and contemptuous, with anxiety and fear being the predominant emotions. Clearly, the characteristics of online communication create different thresholds for expressing emotions and have an impact on their valence; negative statements tend to follow negative statements and higher levels of emotions in the beginning of a discussion thread tend to lead to longer discussions (Chmiel et al. 2011). In online environments, emotional reactions are fostered by the fast distribution of information, the anonymity of the users, the nonlinear connections between individuals, and the reduced visibility of emotions compared to face-to-face situations, all of which facilitate the expression of negative emotions and critical evaluations (Savolainen 2015; Derks et al. 2008).

Different discussion forums and social networking sites have different users and to ensure a full range of views and emotional reactions data was collected from several Finnish online sources: It consists of messages posted on a discussion forum, comments on newspapers' websites and tweets.

*Tweets.* Twitter has been defined as an elite media in Finland because it enjoys a high adoption rate among urban middle-class users in Finland, especially among politicians, experts, journalists and other media professionals (Vainikka & Huhtamäki 2015). There is no systematic analysis in Finland about Twitter users but it has been estimated that only around ten percent of Finns use Twitter (Nummela 2016). All Finnish tweets containing #kkk between 09/24/15 and 10/25/15, as well as all tweets with the hashtags #hennala and #rasismi (racism) between 09/25/15 and 10/28/15 were collected using a custom python script to capture data through the Twitter application programming interface using these hashtags as search terms. The total number of tweets came to 1,002 of which 286 contained visual images.

*Messages posted to Suomi24.* The Suomi24 social media site is Finland's largest topic-centric discussion forum as well as one of the largest non-English online discussion forums in the world. Around 1.4 million Finns use the service every week. In spring 2016, 15,000 to 20,000 messages were posted on the Suomi24 discussion forum in any given day (Lagus et al. 2016). The participation in the discussion is anonymous and some subforums and threads on controversial topics become easily heated and need to be moderated (Lagus et al. 2016). For this study, twenty discussion threads, containing 625 postings, between 09/24/15 and 10/25/15 related to the keywords "Hennala" and the "KKK" were collected using a custom-written python script.

*User comments on news sites.* Two news sites were selected: *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* is the most read newspaper in the Lahti area where the rally took place and the seventh most read daily newspaper in Finland, with approximately 248,000 daily readers of the printed and online edition. *Helsingin Sanomat* is the most widely read daily quality newspaper in Finland with approximately 707,000 daily readers of the print and digital facsimile. Both newspapers require readers to register before posting comments but do not require them to attach their actual names to their comments. In *Helsingin Sanomat* comments are pre-moderated, while in *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* they are post-moderated. Two comment threads (including 73 comments) from *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* and one comment thread (including 480 comments) from *Helsingin Sanomat* on news of the KKK-incident were manually collected.

The analysis first inductively identified attitudes (anti-asylum/racist, anti-racist and neutral comments) and expressions of different emotions (disgust, contempt, shame, fear and empathy) after a careful reading of all postings to provide an overall understanding of the affective dynamics of the online discussion. This initial coding was done by a research assistant and the author together to reach an agreement. Coding the presence of individual emotional reactions drew on previous literature which shows that in online communication emotions can be expressed in several ways: they can be directly expressed verbally and by using visual intensifications like emoticons or capitalization, or they can be described by the use of emotive words such as “disgusting” (Langlotz and Locher 2012). Moreover, emotions can also be delivered implicitly through lexical connotations, metaphors and irony (Langlotz and Locher 2012; Savolainen 2015).

The lines between disgust and contempt were difficult to draw because they belong to the same continuum and are therefore mixed with other emotions, such as anger and hatred. Disgust and contempt both involve evaluations of inferiority of an individual or a group and moral judgments of some failing or moral transgression. Here, contempt was defined as a bitter or sarcastic expression with the intent of showing low regard or ridiculing, while disgust manifested in more straightforward revulsion at actions and people who violated the ideals and norms of the community. Shame, too, is a response to something that is perceived morally wrong, but it involves the idea of a judgmental other (Ahmed 2004; Probyn 2005). Here, expressions of shame were less predominant than those of disgust and contempt and were typically articulated in relation to Finland’s reputation. This level of analysis formed the basis for identifying the main affective-discursive threads in the online discussion, that is, recurring ways of talking about and evaluating the event (Wetherell et al. 2015). The analysis was concerned with the construction of emotional subjects and emotional others, as well as the entwined moralities, that is, the conceptions of the issues of justice and human worthiness regarding the refugee crisis and anti-asylum hostility. In the following, I focus primarily on the anti-racist discourses and on the articulations of disgust, contempt and shame.

## **Analysis**

### *Politics of disgust and contempt*

There were considerable differences in the affective-discursive practices between the different fora. Disgust was the dominant emotional response in all platforms (approximately 35 % of all messages), but it involved different political projects and constructed different subject positions as well as positions for others. While disgust worked as an expression of severe moral judgment against the violence expressed in the comments posted on Twitter and news sites, on the Suomi24 forum the disgust was often disconnected from the event and concerned with the perceived wrongdoings and ridiculousness of the politicians, mainstream media and “tolerants”, public figures associated with the green and leftist parties or with multicultural ideals and women in particular. The distribution of racist and anti-racist postings similarly varied, with racist posts being highest on the Suomi24 forum (almost 40% of the messages) and almost nonexistent on Twitter.

Thus, the objects for the publicly articulated disgust varied greatly depending on whether the commentators framed the incident as a transgression of social norms or as an example of media bias and failed immigration politics. In the anti-asylum comments, disgust was often extremely racist and misogynist. Anti-asylum messages used the controversy around the incident to



put forward their view that it was an example of the pro-immigrant bias of politicians and the mainstream media (often referred to as “enemy media”), the unfair distribution of resources and political correctness gone mad (cf. Garner 2015). Here is a typical example: “Goddamn laughing at the reactions of those muslim-cock-sucking wankers namely the politicians from the cloud-cuckoo-land to one sheet.” (Suomi24) The favorite object of disgust was novelist and public intellectual Jari Tervo, who—in his blog response (2015) to racist violations against asylum seekers in Finland—mobilized the emotion of disgust against racism by employing the marginalizing term “white trash” (a term not normally used in Finland), which thus publicly characterized the perpetrators of the racist acts as objects of disgust.

Predominantly, commentators in all platforms except on the Suomi24 expressed disgust for the violent *act* of the demonstrators. Disgust was deployed to register moral condemnation of violence and justify claims for harder sanctions and preemptive measures to prevent such transgressions of social norms. Special attention was paid to the fact that women and children were targets of the aggressive behavior. The following tweet illustrates how verbal expressions of disgust worked to magnify moral judgement and disapproval: “Now Finns WAKE UP! This #racism is disgusting.” Commentators “doing disgust” typically based their moral evaluation on the conviction that violent attacks should not have any role in a democratic country or be confused with the freedom of expression.

I support freedom of expression but that sort of white-sheet fear-mongering is immoral. (*Helsingin Sanomat*)

Second, disgust was expressed for the *perpetrators*. Disgust for the perpetrators was articulated by name calling and by referring to their perceived morally deficient nature. Harsh conclusions about the supposedly inferior mental faculties of the demonstrators were prominent, especially on Twitter and on *Helsingin Sanomat*. In the local paper *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*, the comments were more “in-your-face” in their condemnation and written in a more colloquial style.

a group of idiots attacked children and it doesn't matter if there was 1 or 50 kids on the buses I don't give any pity points to those fucking idiots. economic refugees I don't ACCEPT but if somebody really comes from a country where one must fear for one's own and one's family's lives then why wouldn't they be welcome here in finland?? (*Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*)

Should we mobilize and go to protect reception centers from idiots? A counter-act to the street patrols proposed by the SVL [Finnish Resistance Movement, a militant neo-Nazi group] #lahti #kkk (Twitter)

Racists were unequivocally pictured as idiots but at the same time the discussion also had a wider political scope as the commentators explicitly invoked moral categories, such as responsibility or duty of care. In this sense, the discourse did not follow the typical script in which the focus is on individual “bad subjects” (Lentin 2015) and racism becomes distanced from normal behavior as well as from the political context.

Disgust has been defined as a “phlegmatic” emotion which induces political weariness rather than political fuel for change-oriented action (Abrams 2002; Miller 1997, 204). Among the anti-racism camp, however, the language of disgust and contempt was strongly linked to an active political stance. The criticisms of the anti-racism camp were directed at the government, specifically at the leaders of the governing parties, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Timo Soini, the

Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and the Minister of Finance Alexander Stubb, who were publicly characterized as objects worthy of contempt. On Twitter, in particular, the discussion revolved around the failure of the political elite to react properly to racist acts and utterances. Specifically, the expressions of contempt were targeted at the Finns party because it was seen as giving shelter to those expressing racist ideology rather than unequivocally denouncing racism vis-à-vis asylum seekers. Moreover, the other governing parties were criticized for working with the Finns Party and for not being critical enough of its racism (Image 3). Clearly, government policy and official condemnations were not seen as satisfactory responses to the anti-immigration violence: “Everyone, but especially all leaders should strongly denounce #racism. People look at their leaders. @MTVHuSu #pakolaiset”. Several tweeters also tagged the MPs’ official twitter accounts in their tweets, asking them to comment on the current state of affairs and demanding that they take responsibility for the rise of racism in Finland.

PLACE IMAGE 2 HERE

*Image 2 A popular Photoshop reaction on Twitter. It presents the protestor in the Klan garb as occupying Timo Soini’s place alongside the leaders of the two other government parties. The text says, “Does the government of Finland consist of racists and two ‘useful idiots’?”*

At the core of the public expressions of contempt towards politicians was the unmasking of the duplicity or volatility of official attitudes to racism regarding asylum seekers. A particular target of ridicule in this case was the Minister of Finance, Alexander Stubb. Responses to a tweet by Stubb, addressed to Soini, are illustrative of the condemnation that addressed the gap between the words and the actions of Finland’s government in its responses to the rise in racist acts. In the morning following the rally in Hennala, Stubb tweeted, “A public declaration against violence and racism in a Joint Declaration by all parliamentary parties. Kokoomus [The National Coalition Party] supports.” The Minister’s tweet was met with an avalanche of contemptuous and sarcastic postings, such as “on paper everything works out”, aiming to reveal the minister’s hypocrisy.

#### *Disgust and deservingness*

The evaluation of the perceived value for society, deservingness and undeservingness, of the different groups was a prevalent theme in the online discussions and anchored in the language of disgust. The emotional responses generated a stark juxtaposition between those deemed worthy or unworthy of care and social support. Similar to the media narratives depicting asylum seekers as undeserving, bogus or economic migrants that abuse asylum and welfare systems (e.g. Moore 2013), in the online discussion, the “racist other” was identified and defined as undeserving.

Within internet forums the disgust was directed at the figure of the racist through labels such as scum, ignorant, uneducated, redneck, unemployed, social benefits user, alcoholic, criminal and marginalized. The affective figure of the racist which emerged from the online responses extended the offenders in Lahti and can be seen a part of a larger process of “class making” (Tyler 2008, 18) in which the good citizens are distinguished from the unproductive underclass (Mäkinen 2016a; Tyler 2008, 2013). The “racist other” constituted in the comments was

seen as a burden on social expenditure and as lacking moral standards and the capacity for responsible citizenship:

Lahti has never been the cradle of intelligence in Finland. Could this sheet-dude think about how he himself would feel about such actions. He most likely doesn't have enough intelligence for that. Most likely this person is a client of the social services and fears for the termination of his own benefits. (*Helsingin Sanomat*)

Like the verbal comments, the visual images on Twitter presented the protesters as unintelligent hicks devoid of sense or logic, but used humor to underline the ridiculousness of the protesters and employed laughter to unify those who found the racists repulsive (Billig 2005, 194; Tyler 2008, 23; Mäkinen 2016b). Laughter was then combined with disgust, serving to create distance from the racists, for instance, by utilizing the negative stereotypes associated with Finnish culture such as alcohol abuse. The image of the hooded demonstrator became the most popular image macro on Twitter—where the incident was discussed more often through humor than it was on other platforms—and was circulated with a number of humorous texts, such as “Daddy, why do we sleep without a sheet tonight?” Overall, the argument was that people like the demonstrators in Hennala belong to a social underclass that has failed the moral imperative to improve themselves and are living on taxpayers' money. In other words, they do not deserve the understanding of society because they have brought about their own frustration or misery and are now venting their anger by committing racist acts (cf. Lentin 2015, 38) (Image 3).

PLACE IMAGE 3 AROUND HERE

*Image 3 An edit of the Internet meme “Baton roue” (“Stick wheel”) relies on irony in its construction of the racist figure as a person for whom racist rants are outlets that obscure the origins of self-inflected frustrations.*

It is in this framework of deservingness that the plight of asylum seekers was occasionally addressed. The question about the worthiness of human lives and the media created hierarchies of recognition—that the suffering of people “like us” touches us more than the pain of those who are culturally or ethnically foreign—are themes that have been intensely discussed by ethics scholars (Butler 2010; Chouliaraki 2006; Nussbaum 2004). Butler (2010) argues that normative frameworks of human worthiness based on the similarity of others to us may be broken or altered, the ideal being that all humans are recognized as equally worthy because of their shared vulnerability. The affective relations produced by disgust reactions, however, worked against ideas of common humanity or equitable distribution of public aid. Within online forums, the deservingness of asylum seekers is measured against the moral blame attributed to the racist underclass. In the following example, the disgust towards the demonstrators contains a moral assessment that asylum seekers—who did not bring the suffering on themselves—are more deserving than the demonstrators with their beer-bellies and destructive lifestyles:

When it comes to the news itself, Finns continue on their path of self-humiliation. I would rather pay taxes for refugees than for Finns suffering from lifestyle diseases. You can actually hear how the heart is pounding and the sugar levels are bouncing when you look at the pictures of those demonstrators. (*Helsingin Sanomat*)

As the example above illustrates, asylum seekers were seldom discussed in terms of their needs but as the antithesis of the supposedly self-inflicted misery and unproductiveness of their enemies. Overall, the perspective or presence of asylum seekers was not common in the online discussion. For instance, only a handful of images shared on Twitter directly depicted asylum seekers. One such tweet echoed the juxtaposition of deservingness by pairing the image of a refugee family entering the reception center and anti-immigrant protesters holding cans of beer.

Obviously, the evaluation of deservingness was a central practice in the anti-asylum seekers comments, too. The by now familiar affective-discursive canon of anti-immigration activists is that refugees are prioritized over Finnish citizens and that unreasonable political correctness is hindering “honest” discussion (Mäkinen 2016a; cf. Garner 2015), as illustrated by the following excerpt from a Suomi24 posting:

Finland’s contemporary atmosphere has gotten really sick because of the marginalization of FINNS and fucking “racism” stalking, a sick high-tax, cutting the benefits of their own citizens and pampering economic refugees... (Suomi24)

Disputing asylum seekers’ deservingness was justified by referring to the difficulties faced by Finnish people, and the special condition of refugees as people fleeing persecution was almost completely erased. In the anti-immigration comments, rhetorics of disgust and hatred remobilized the “class struggle” in terms of the betrayal of national citizens by the political elite — who were held responsible for seeing refugees as worthier than native Finnish people—and the racialized belief that the majority of asylum seekers are undeserving.

### *National shame*

References to national or personal shame are not common in the public discussion on migration, which is usually geared towards constructing asylum and refuge into objects of fear and consequently framing hostility toward asylum seekers as symptoms of “legitimized fear” (see Huysmans 2006). This incident, however, was framed in terms of (national) shame both in the mainstream media and popular online discussions. In the literature on moral emotions disgust, anger and contempt are defined as “other-condemning emotions” while feeling shame is related to thinking of “being seen through the eyes of another” (Taylor 1985, 57). Here, public expressions of shame stood alongside expressions of disgust; in fact, expressions of shame can be seen as rhetorical tools with which to condemn the attack and people who brought disgrace upon the country.

This is not to say that articulations of shame and disgust have the same moral and political purposes and social consequences. Importantly, expressions of shame also directed attention to the suffering of the asylum seekers rather than solely focusing on the describing of the morally inferior “other”. Probyn (2005, xiv) argues for using collective shame to rethink our relations to others. Discourse of shame fueled the debate about what Finland’s national values are and what is expected from Finns; typical reactions were to disassociate oneself from the actions that had sullied the national community.

Goddammit I was ashamed to be Finnish when I read the day’s papers, I can’t believe this amount of racism is real #rasismi #pakolaiset #lahti

For the first time I'm ashamed to be Finnish. Zero tolerance towards #racism has to be absolute.

In the above examples the commentators expressed shame on behalf of the national community. However, some comments focused only on Finland's reputation, typically making references to the attention the Klan outfit received in the international media, thus separating and distancing themselves from the shameful individuals and yet missing or downplaying the experience of the asylum seekers.

According to YLE, the police will also examine whether there is reason to suspect incitement against an ethnic group, so a tough prosecution is coming and that's good because Finland's international reputation has received a bad blow. (Suomi24)

Nothing is dumber than combining Finland's blue cross flag and KKK clothing. # Shame #idiots #kkk

Comments contemplating only the disgrace brought to the national flag and national coat of arms, however, were met with criticism from other commentators. Focusing on the national emblems was not seen as the morally and emotionally appropriate response, as the following example shows:

When the #racist dressed in a #kkk-sheet hurled fireworks at children, I didn't understand I should be hurt by him holding the Finnish flag in his hand.

Some comments shifted the focus onto the plight of asylum seekers and used the discourse of shame to intensify their moral judgement. Both examples below illustrate the underlining theme in the anti-racist messages—racism is not only an attribute of hicks but belongs to “us” and we all are responsible.

People escaping war and persecution travel for months to get their children to a safe, civilized country. Volunteers in Germany and Sweden greeted them with Welcome signs and food. We rain fireworks and stones down on them. (*Helsingin Sanomat*)

I would say that you are a cowardly gang, all of you, fierce and mouthy boys when you get to scare little kids. Half of the refugees are children—many have lost their parents in the war, and now Finnish sons demonstrate alcohol-fueled courage and frighten these children by setting off explosions and thus rightly ruining Finland's reputation as a civilized country. President Niinistö said that this spoils the reputation of Finland and Finns in a “dreadful way”. And when I read your writings, I can only say that it really deserved to be spoilt. The next time millions of people go shopping, they will remember the instruction “boycott Finnish goods—do not support racism”. (Suomi24)

While references to personal and collective shame were used to denounce those responsible for spoiling the national community and reputation they were also the most prevalent channel for expressing compassion towards refugees and, more generally, reflecting on national identity and values vis-à-vis the refugee crisis.

## Conclusion

Devastating images of dead, suffering and displaced refugees are pervasive now. The pictures from a small anti-asylum rally in a small Finnish town—in which nobody suffered bodily harm—may seem trivial. However, these widely circulated news images of anti-asylum hostility can also be regarded as symbols of the European refugee crisis. Such images ask how we should respond to actions that express hate toward a vulnerable group and how we want to live with others.

Here the focus has been on the affective-discursive practices of disgust, contempt and shame and their potential to carve out political space in which racism is denounced and concern for refugees can be formed. The photo of the protestor wearing the Klan robe and holding the Finnish flag made the racist violence against asylum seekers in Finland both a visible and an urgent issue; it caused citizens to assess the political meaning of these pictures in multiple ways. As the picture of the Klan impersonator with a Finnish flag rhetorically implicated the fellow citizen as a participant, audience members were also made to reflect on their and their government's involvement in racist violence. In previous research that has mostly focused on the USA and Australia, it is claimed that while Twitter and other social media may act as a space where racist ideologies are challenged, this challenge remains limited and works to reinforce the hegemony of post-racism by avoiding discussions of racism (e.g. Cisneros and Nakayama 2015; Oh 2016). In Finnish online discourse, racism was explicitly addressed and critiqued, through expressions of disgust, contempt and shame. Importantly, the anti-racist affective-discursive practices in the online discussions did more than confront this single case of racism—they expressed shared revulsion about the lack of moral consistency and political efficacy exhibited in official attitudes and the paucity of action to combat racism.

However, the democratic potential of publicly articulated disgust is limited in the struggle against racist violence. As Nussbaum (2004) argues, disgust typically represents certain groups or individuals as less than human. As seen, expressions of disgust were not only focused condemning the offending acts, offenders or the politics supporting them but were also employed to position the figure of the racist as belonging outside the community—as an object of disgust and national shame. Moreover, it allowed very little space for compassion to the plight of asylum seekers. In the assessments of moral and social worth, anti-asylum demonstrators were negatively compared to asylum seekers and refugees. Miller (1997, 180) notes that it is difficult to give voice to moral judgment “without having recourse to the idiom of disgust”. In online discussions, characterizing perpetrators as objects of disgust reconstituted social and moral boundaries that separate worthy and unworthy humans (cf. Abrams 2002). The language of disgust then does not simply define but also creates subjects and objects of disgust, adding to the further polarization of discussion around the refugee crisis.

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