

The shadow drama

Metaphor, affect, and discursive polarization in Norwegian extreme-right representations

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This study examines how discursive polarization between majority populations and so-called non-Western immigrant identities is enabled via verbal and visual metaphors in outputs by the Human Rights Service (HRS), a prominent Norwegian extreme-right media outlet. Focusing especially on the HRS's use of visual primary metaphors of cold and darkness, a contribution is made to the existing literature regarding how right-wing outlets construct an image of immigrants and Muslims as threatening Others. As such, the potential polarizing outcomes of the HRS's visual primary metaphors are theorized to arise from a capacity to invite certain forms of embodied cognition and implicitly associate the target identities with a range of negative emotions. Ultimately, the HRS's visual primary metaphors of cold and darkness are best understood as polarization vehicles that tacitly support anti-social biases by leveraging the rapidity and efficiency with which subjects can respond emotionally to visual information—especially fear triggers.

Keywords: Human Rights Service, metaphor analysis, discourse, dehumanization, racism, Islamophobia

1. Introduction

Immigration has become a highly contentious issue in democracies across Europe and beyond, giving rise to fierce discursive struggles over the types of attitudes and policies that should prevail. The reactionary right, in particular, has featured prominently in public debates on both sides of the Atlantic, promoting polarizing narratives in which migrants from the Global South are routinely represented as markedly different and problematic in relation to majority populations. A host of online platforms has emerged for this purpose, often disseminating discourses

structured around “politics of fear” (Andreassen 2020; Ekman 2015; Wodak 2015). In Norway, one such platform that has gained significant attention is the previously state-funded organization, the Human Rights Service (HRS). The HRS has been widely debated in Norwegian mainstream media and criticized for promoting divisive ideas about *us* and *them* concerning so-called non-Western immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and especially Muslims (henceforth abbreviated to ‘target identities’). Given the HRS’s extensive state funding and its longstanding societal mandate to address the public from a powerful enunciatory position, its outputs offer a highly relevant case for examining how discursive polarization is enabled in the Norwegian mediated public sphere. Focusing specifically on the role of metaphors, the present article asks: What are the dominant types of verbal and visual metaphors used by the HRS in relation to the target identities, and how may these metaphors enable processes of discursive polarization?

Adopting a discourse analytical approach (van Dijk 1998, 2006) in combination with Ahmed’s (2004) work on affective economies, I examine metaphors in the important upper structures in 720 HRS articles (the text in the headline and the image that features in each output). With attention especially on the HRS’s use of source domains of *cold* and *darkness*, the main argument explores how visual primary metaphors regarding primal, embodied forms of negative emotional experiences invite an affectively charged divide between *us* and *them*. Through this analysis, a contribution is made to the existing literature regarding how right-wing outlets and movements construct a polarizing image of so-called non-Western immigrants and Muslims by inviting negative affective associations into the hermeneutic framework through which the target identities are interpreted. Herein, the potential polarizing outcomes of the HRS’s visual primary metaphors are theorized to arise from a capacity to systematically invite forms of embodied cognition that involve rapid and largely unconscious ‘simulations’ of bodily experience that are intertwined with undesirable emotional significance in relation to the target identities.

2. Background

An extensive body of research has examined how metaphors can interfere with the way people understand and relate to a wide range of issues, suggesting that metaphors play an important role in tweaking and negotiating social realities (Chkhaidze, Buyruk, and Boroditsky 2021; Lakoff and Wehling 2016; Landau and Keefer 2014; Landau, Sullivan, and Greenberg 2009; Schlesinger 1997; Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011; Utych 2018). Many previous studies have also specifically

dealt with how verbal metaphors carry hidden affective loads and thereby contribute to the polarization of attitudes toward immigrants, especially from the Global South. As discussed by, among others, Barker (1981), Charteris-Black (2006), and van Dijk (1991), foundational and inflammatory metaphors related to immigration, such as *swamped*, *flood*, and *invasion*, have a long history of leveraging negative sentiments in public political discourse, including their infamous use by Margaret Thatcher in 1978.

Adopting a historical perspective, Taylor (2021) has recently shown how animal, invader, and weight metaphors have come to dominate contemporary British media representations, supplanting more inclusive frames that previously invited a view of immigrants as an economic resource. Assessing the use of dehumanizing metaphors regarding immigration in blogs, online fora, and mainstream newspapers, Musolff (2015, 41) identifies a number of recurrent categories, including ‘parasites’, ‘leeches’, and ‘bloodsuckers’, which are used, he suggests, with “a high degree of ‘deliberateness’ and a modicum of discourse-historical awareness.” Highlighting the importance of studying the emerging discourses in the online blogosphere, Musolff’s study shows that dehumanizing metaphors’ potential for aggressive argumentation is asserted to a significantly greater degree in blogs than in the mainstream press. Gonçalves (2023), on her part, compares British and Brazilian media representations, arguing that immigrants are mostly dehumanized in current discourse, while nations are framed as endangered containers or houses. Similar affectively charged verbal metaphors were identified by Charteris-Black (2006) in a study of how legitimacy in right-wing political communication on immigration policy was constructed through natural disaster and container metaphors.

Vezovnik and Šarić (2020) expand the analysis by focusing on multimodal representations in Eastern European mainstream media. They show how visual metaphors and metonymy are used to compare immigrants and refugees with lifeless objects rather than human subjects. Similar findings regarding immigrants and immigration depicted as *aliens*, *floods*, and *invasions* in contexts ranging from European mainstream media to federal court decisions in the US have been presented throughout the years by Ana (1999), Arcimaviciene and Baglama (2018), and Cunningham-Parmeter (2011).

Illustrating the direct impact of metaphorical language on societal attitudes through experimental research, Chkhaidze, Buyruk, and Boroditsky (2021) demonstrate how media representations using negatively valued metaphors, such as *vermin* and *invasion*, lead to increased anti-immigrant attitudes. However, as Hart (2020) shows, extreme and inflammatory metaphors may also draw an audience’s attention to the framing effort so that, rather than reinforcing negative sentiments, metaphors may be actively resisted. Similarly, metaphors are not

interpreted universally or in a vacuum; the process of decoding meaning (Hall 1980) depends on several variables including subjective experience and cultural literacy.

All the above studies—and many more—collectively highlight the significant role metaphors play in shaping how people think and reason regarding such issues as immigration and diverse cultural groups, often by inviting and reinforcing negative emotional associations. The present study contributes to an already rich body of existing research as no previous studies, to the best of my knowledge, have addressed the role of the visual primary metaphors of *cold* and *darkness* in public political discourse on Islam and immigration. This is arguably an important topic to examine not only given the increasingly pervasive influence of visual imagery in shaping societal attitudes and perceptions but also because strikingly high levels of anti-Muslim sentiments circulate amongst cultural majorities in Norway (Døving 2020). The systematic dissemination of visual primary metaphors relating to the earliest forms of undesirable experiences (*cold* and *darkness* in the case of HRS), deserves attention in this context as they may be particularly effective in supporting the formation of anti-social biases and rigid in/outgroup distinctions in a manner well-suited to bypass rational reflection. Before presenting the theoretical basis for this assumption in more detail, however, an introduction to the HRS is necessary.

2.1 Human Rights Service

The HRS, founded in Oslo in 2001, describes itself as a political think tank concerned with democracy, freedom of speech, religious freedom, migration, and integration. Its stated aim is to influence policy in these areas, describing its work as “especially centered on the gathering of documentation, information, and analysis to shed light on different aspects of the field of immigration and integration” (HRS 2023). The rise of the HRS can be understood as part of a broader anti-Muslim backlash that followed 9/11.¹ As shown by the Pew Research Center (2019), among others, a significant increase in anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment ensued, including the creation of various internet platforms that promoted these views in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Before this event, there was not much of an organized movement against Muslims in the US or Norway, compared to other groups. However, post-9/11, a cottage industry of online (mis/dis)information peddlers and polarization entrepreneurs has emerged, aiming to depict Muslims as fundamentally dangerous. Notable examples include *Jihad Watch*,

1. Islamophobia did not, however, suddenly come into being after the events of 9/11. Like anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia, it has a long historical trajectory (Lean 2017).

launched by Robert Spencer through the David Horowitz Freedom Center, and *ACT for America*, founded by Brigitte Gabriel, which eventually became the US's largest anti-Muslim group. Similarly, Pamela Geller, in association with Spencer, launched an anti-Muslim blog called *Atlas Shrugs*, that, like the HRS, engaged in the dissemination of one-sided anti-Muslim narratives. As argued by Lean (2017), the growth of anti-Muslim political rhetoric, policies, and far-right ideology is often supported by organized financing and networking, amounting to what has been termed a "global Islamophobia industry".

The main activities of the HRS unfold via the webpage *Rights.no*, which disseminates online publications that typically highlight perceived cultural conflicts and issues with crime regarding immigration or speculative commentaries about an imminent threat of a Muslim takeover/population replacement. The scarce research that has been done suggests that the HRS's publications use discursive techniques of "antagonistic anonymity" (Andreasen 2020) to invite fear and suspicion regarding Muslims and immigrants, systematically depicting Muslim individuals/communities as a subversion of the culture and human rights values of Western societies.

Given its unbalanced and highly negative focus, the name *Human Rights Service* is best understood as a persuasive device that positions audience engagement within an overarching framework of human rights concerns and liberal democratic values (Andreasen 2020). In addition to its name, the HRS's logo bears a strikingly close resemblance to that of Human Rights Watch, a well-known human rights organization, suggesting how the HRS's identity is carefully constructed to fit the image of humanitarian interest. As such, the HRS employs a meta-framing of human rights concerns to raise its credibility and persuasively influence the audience's interpretation of its messages.

On the surface, the HRS's self-image suggests it to be an institution concerned with social justice and the protection of vulnerable groups. The HRS can, however, be characterized as an extreme-right organization and what Sunstein (2000) terms a "polarization entrepreneur", given that its publications repeatedly encourage aggressive and micro-humiliating behaviours against the target identities (Andreasen 2020). Such appeals are often tacit, with more overt examples including the HRS issuing a call for its audiences to survey and submit photos of Norwegian Muslims in Norwegian public spaces to be published on its main webpage to document Islam's presence as a threatening "cultural revolution" (HRS 2017). A similar overt act of dehumanization occurred when the HRS published an output with an image showcasing the face of Norwegian poet and public figure Sumaya Jirde Ali next to a large insect in 2020. Ali's face was portrayed in grey tones, pixelated to blur otherwise humanizing facial distinctions, and the visual comparison

to an insect constituted an instance of multilayered vilification of Ali and Norwegian Muslims in general (Andreassen 2022).

What makes the HRS stand out as a particularly interesting and important case is the fact that the organization received extensive state funding between 2005 and 2021 (more than 26 million NOK) under a mandate to inform the public about the challenges and possibilities of integration and immigration in a Norwegian context. Even though public funding to the HRS was withdrawn in 2021 because the organization no longer provides serious, balanced analyses, the HRS has for many years had a powerful position to disseminate its ideology, supported financially by the Norwegian state.

An important research gap exists regarding the character of the HRS's discourse and how it invites the public to relate to issues concerning immigration and Islam. Despite it being a contentious organization with content that has been criticized in Norwegian mainstream media and publications by the Norwegian Centre for Anti-Racism (e.g. Steen 2016), no previous research has examined its use of verbal and visual metaphors. A systematic analysis of the HRS's rhetoric is important not only as a knowledge foundation for future funding policy but also for informed debate on the role of online media platforms as mediators of increasingly polarized positions and public attitudes in an age in which the deterioration of common grounds for meaningful public discourse in democracies across the globe are serious concerns.

3. Metaphors, affect, and discursive polarization

In line with Brüggemann and Meyer (2023), I use the concept of *discursive polarization* to refer to the verbal and visual rhetoric of actors in the mediated public sphere that systematically emphasize problematic differences regarding designated others, pushing public perceptions towards those of rigid in/outgroup distinctions and irreconcilable conflict. The concept suggests that discourses not only reflect existing societal divisions but that media platforms, such as the HRS, may actively support processes of social differentiation by constructing the conceptual and affective basis for understanding self, Other, and nature of perceived differences (van Dijk 1998, 2006). Following van Dijk (2006), processes of discursive polarization can typically be broken down into four key elements, forming an "ideological square": (1) highlighting the positive aspects of the in-group, (2) emphasizing the negative aspects of the out-group, (3) downplaying the in-group's negative traits, and (4) ignoring the out-group's positive traits.

van Dijk's (2006, 115) model suggests that discursive polarization tends to involve the construction of biased views as in-groups emphasize their own good

attributes and properties and the bad ones of the out-group while mitigating or denying their own bad ones and the good ones of the outgroup. As such, the concept provides a set of clear criteria to analytically identify elements of discursive polarization in visual and verbal rhetoric. For instance, it suggests how discursive polarization is enabled as the HRS systematically engages in a differential representation that one-sidedly invites sympathy and identification with the in-group. It is not, however, well suited to describe the role of emotions in this process or the relationship between affect and discourse as such.

To clarify these aspects, which I have come to see as critical for explaining how the metaphors of online actors, such as the HRS, work, I find Ahmed's (2004) cultural theory of emotions inspiring. Ahmed (2004) examines why and how certain identities come to be perceived collectively as a threat, exploring the emotional and discursive mechanisms underpinning phenomena, such as racism and xenophobia. Ahmed (2004) argues that emotional and affective experiences regarding various identities are always embedded in political and discursive histories of articulation and naming that shape how people perceive specific aspects of the world. In her model, feelings cannot simply be explained as individual psychological states or spontaneous, idiosyncratic prejudice. They are, rather, the result of complex social interactions and the effects of the repeated allocation of affective value within broader cultural narratives and the tacit interpretive repertoires they enable (e.g. how asylum seekers have gradually become associated with terrorists or bearers of disease).

When thinking with Ahmed (2004, 134), an important aspect of discursive polarization pertains to how emotional associations are gradually distributed in relation to various identities, symbols, or ideas, in what she terms "affective economies." The concept suggests that collectively shared repertoires of interpretation and feeling are created and negotiated, especially via the mediated public sphere, as emotionally charged signs, such as *crime*, *illegal*, or *terror*, are repeatedly articulated together in relation to identity concepts, such as *asylum seeker*. In this way, Ahmed suggests, social categories can become 'sticky' with affect through a metonymic sliding between the signs, and an accumulation of emotional value that "generate or make likeness: the asylum seeker is 'like' the terrorist, an agent of fear, who may destroy 'our home'" (Ahmed 2004, 136).

Ahmed (2004, 45) further explains this process in terms of a "rippling effect" of emotions. The human mind, she suggests, rapidly registers and interprets various aspects of the world through layers of internalized narrative that have become inaccessible for conscious reflection. Thus, seemingly spontaneous emotional reactions involve a rapid, extensive dive into memory as the subject reopens "histories of past association" (Ahmed 2004, 45) and signification that has been psychologically displaced in the perception of the present.

In this way, the relationship between affect and discourse is understood as economic, meaning that objects and identities can gradually become sticky or saturated with affect through processes of affective distribution and accumulation (Ahmed 2004, 44). However, Ahmed does not make a distinction between more or less powerful signs and symbols for shifting and distributing emotions within affective economies. I suggest that some forms of signification, especially visual metaphors that leverage the human ability to quickly respond to visual cues and which invite an associative link to primal forms of negative emotional experiences, are likely to have a heightened capacity to accumulate affect in the manner described by Ahmed. Thus, what characterizes visual and verbal metaphors in this context, and how do they relate to processes of discursive polarization?

Metaphors have repeatedly played a central role in the propaganda of genocidal political movements ranging from the atrocities committed by the Hutus against the Tutsis in Rwanda (*cockroaches*), via Nazi Germany's systematic killing of Jews (*rats*, *parasites*, and *filth*), to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime mass killing of civilians (*microbes*) (Smith 2011). As Sapolsky (2017) argues, the ability of metaphors to incite violence arises, fundamentally, because human cognition is metaphorical: we do not merely speak with metaphors but also use them to think and feel. Over time, especially if people live in a context that renders them susceptible to such rhetoric, dehumanizing metaphors can erode the social and psychological boundaries between verbal aggression and physical violence by exploiting the human mind's tendency towards literal-metaphorical substitution and emotional contagion. Theoretically, this 'cognitive confusion' about the literal and metaphorical is believed to give metaphors significant power to influence how people think and feel when a social group is systematically compared with, say, insects or dirt.

Verbal metaphors are defined here as instances when a word or phrase is applied (source domain) to an object (target domain) to which it is not literally applicable to suggest a resemblance (Askeland and Agdestein 2019, 19). They often enable the mind to grasp concepts of an abstract and complex character regarding more concrete forms of life experience. To determine the relationship between discursive polarization and metaphors, I will argue that metaphors fundamentally work to present topics so that certain features are highlighted in people's cognitive processing and memory as a conceptual basis for interpretation and reasoning while others are backgrounded. In both visual and verbal metaphors, it is this selective, or filtering function, that has implications for discursive polarization insofar as they may thereby influence "which aspects are foregrounded, and which are backgrounded, what inferences are facilitated, what evaluative and emotional associations triggered, what courses of action seem to be possible" (Semino 2008, 91). In line with Ahmed's (2004) emphasis on the role of affect

in the social emergence of us/them distinctions, metaphors can facilitate the tacit distribution and accumulation of affective value around the target identities through a selection of specific, yet contingent source domains as a conceptual basis for understanding the target domain.

A visual metaphor is, similarly, defined as the use of a visual element (source domain) to represent or describe something else (target domain), thereby implying a comparison and often conveying a message that goes beyond its literal interpretation. Unlike verbal metaphors, which are based on language, visual metaphors rely on imagery to create an analogy or association between two different entities. Nevertheless, both types of metaphor essentially work by providing a selective conceptual filter to interpret the target and can, thereby, influence the types of evaluations and associations that are typically invoked.

Metaphors can be distinguished into two main types, namely complex and primary metaphors. Complex metaphors are elaborate and typically built upon a combination of primary metaphors or more abstract concepts. They often involve a multifaceted transfer of meaning from one domain to another, and their understanding may require a more sophisticated grasp of both the source and target domains. For example, a complex metaphor is *time is a thief*, which combines several underlying conceptual metaphors (e.g. time being an entity that can take things away, similar to a thief). Understanding this metaphor involves not only grasping the basic idea of time and theft but also how they conceptually relate to loss and irretrievability.

Primary metaphors, however, are usually more straightforward and involve a direct mapping from one domain to another. They represent a specific type of metaphorical inference based on early forms of embodied experience and a set of experiential-semantic connections believed to be internalized on a neurophysiological level (Lakoff 2014a, 2014b). Primary metaphors, thus, involve basic, often directly experiential source domains from people's bodily experiences. Some of these are thought to be deeply embedded in people's minds as cognitive-semantic templates and are considered learned connections between abstract concepts and subjective experiences as they are repeatedly associated through bodily perceptions in the early stages of life (e.g. perceiving darkness and feeling afraid) (Lakoff 2014a, 2014b).

To clarify this, two primary metaphorical binaries that feature prominently on a visual level in the HRS outputs provide good examples: *affection is warmth/disaffection is cold* and *light is goodness/darkness is evil*. The first type of primary metaphor is thought to work under the premise that recurrent experiences of affection, love, and attention, together with warmth during infancy (being held close to a warm, life-giving body under conditions of care), have given rise to the basic cognitive-interpretive template *affection is warmth/disaffection is cold* that

underlies numerous, often unconscious, instances of everyday reasoning about social interaction/proximity (e.g. *he greeted me warmly, she gave me the cold shoulder, and to freeze him out*).

Similarly, in the second primary metaphor, repeated early perceptions and primary scenes of light/darkness associated with experiences of safety/fear during the early years of life have given rise to the basic cognitive-semantic template *light is goodness/darkness is evil* (Lakoff 2014b, 6). This template also structures many common forms of reasoning about abstract social states (e.g. *I'm in a dark mood, a radiant smile, and a dark heart*). An important distinction here is that primary metaphors rely on rapid forms of direct experiential understanding related to bodily perception, while complex metaphors are more abstract, often requiring a higher, and as such slower, form of cognitive processing to understand and interpret their meaning.

My analysis works under the assumption that the HRS's visual primary metaphors of *cold* and *darkness* enable discursive polarization between *us* and *them* by inviting certain forms of embodied cognition, that is, thinking that integrates mental processes with physical and emotional experiences. In line with the theorization of primary metaphors above, embodied cognition implies an interaction between the human senses and deep-seated emotional associations. For instance, the bodily experience of physical warmth or coldness has been shown to significantly increase (warmth) or decrease (cold) feelings of interpersonal liking during social encounters, without the person's awareness of this effect (Williams and Bargh 2008). I assume that repeated perceptions and associations of coldness/darkness in others, mediated by visual metaphorical constructs, support the internalization of an interpretive framework that similarly suppresses positive expectations and predisposes towards negative emotional associations of *them* as unfeeling, dangerous, and uncaring. If this theoretical assessment is correct, the HRS metaphors may work as polarization vehicles and 'fear triggers' that leverage the human tendency to quickly process and respond to visual cues (especially concerning danger and fear)² and in this way make a range of negative emotional associations stick to the target identities on an almost visceral level in the sense of Ahmed (2004).

Overall, the analytic framework directs attention to how metaphors used by media actors, such as the HRS, play into an affective economy of negative emotions that tacitly underpin and reinforce perceived *us* and *them* divides. In what follows, I move on to review the method for identifying and categorizing metaphors before the findings are presented and discussed regarding the three

2. This argument is supported by, among others, LeDoux (1996).

most prevalent types of verbal and visual metaphors used by the HRS in relation to the target identities.

4. Method

This study presents an analysis of visual and verbal metaphors in the headlines of 720 online outputs published by the HRS under the three thematic categories of ‘immigration’, ‘Islam’, and ‘crime’ on its main webpage, *Rights.no*. A stratified sampling method was used to construct a data basis that supports diversity in the sample, including all headlines from outputs published within two seven-month periods, November 2018–May 2019 and November 2019–May 2020. These periods align with the peak of the HRS’s influence, indicated by high levels of audience engagement quantified through metrics like Facebook shares, likes, and reactions to articles on the HRS webpage (Bergsaker and Skipshamn 2020; Nyhetsåret 2021). The analysis focuses on these intervals, which are presumed to encompass the most important and impactful moments in the organization’s history, reaching a wide Norwegian audience and potentially influencing public opinion regarding target identities. While this sample may not cover the entirety of the HRS’s discourse spanning over two decades, the chosen intervals account for content variations and provide a comprehensive view of the metaphors used by the HRS during peak public engagement.

The selection of HRS headlines as primary data was premised on their role as the first point of engagement for readers, often influencing whether an article is read in full. This approach is substantiated by Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011), who find that metaphors introduced at the start of a text can significantly shape the reader’s interpretation of its entire content through the mechanism of the “anchoring bias” (Kahneman 2011). Headlines, therefore, act as critical frames, guiding the reader’s understanding of subsequent information. The potential limitation of focusing solely on headlines was addressed by a selective full read and assessment of articles associated with particularly prevalent or ambiguous metaphors. As such, this helped validate the representativeness of the headlines and understand the context of the metaphors.

To discern verbal metaphors, a manual analysis of each headline was conducted, guided by the metaphor identification procedure outlined by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). This process entailed manually analysing each HRS headline, following the suggested guidelines in the metaphor identification procedure. This involved the following considerations to determine metaphorical expressions:

1. I read the entire HRS article in each instance to establish a general understanding of the meaning of the text.
2. I determined whether the headline ascribed meaning to Islam/non-Western immigration on a textual level. If so, I determined the word units used in the headline.
3. For each word unit in the text, I established its meaning in context (i.e. how it applied to Islam/non-Western immigration in the situation evoked by the text). I then assessed, with help from the Cambridge dictionary, whether there were words that had a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts and, thus, created semantic tension or had a non-literal meaning regarding Islam/non-Western immigration.
4. If so, the word unit was considered a metaphorical expression. Such expressions were listed and grouped in a table with conceptual categories (see Table 2) based on the source domains used to map meaning regarding the target identities.

To identify visual metaphors, I followed the visual metaphor identification procedure (VISMIP) proposed by Sorm and Steen (2018). Using the principles of VISMIP, I began by establishing a general understanding of the visual image for each of the HRS's publications in the corpus to determine (a) whether it ascribed meaning to Islam/non-Western immigrants and (b) whether it displayed any visual elements that were inconsistent with this general meaning, which then enabled interpretation by comparison and/or contrast. This involved assessing whether each image in the headlines was a representation of Islam/immigration that encouraged the viewer to interpret these concepts in relation to other objects/symbols and if there were visual cues and objects used in a non-literal way that supported a transfer of meaning regarding the target identities. The narrative contexts of the publications were important when coding visual metaphors. For example, a damaged flag might not inherently signify anything about a particular group; however, it acquires specific connotations when used alongside text that portrays Islam as a revolutionary threat.

All the identified visual/verbal metaphorical expressions were eventually grouped into conceptual categories based on similarities in the source domains used to describe the target identities. For instance, a significant number of verbal metaphors that convey a violent struggle via source domains, such as *clash*, *full attack*, *frontal assault*, and *politicians go for Islam's throat* was categorized as 'violent confrontation/war-like situation'. However, especially two cases gave rise to some ambiguity. I will argue here for why the coding was done precisely this way and provide some examples to support my argument. The first was visual metaphors categorized as 'population replacement' in which the central motifs

are Muslim/immigrant women with strollers and/or children. In such cases, the narrative context was important in interpreting and coding the metaphor. Specifically, the HRS often alludes to the notion that white/Christian Norwegians/Europeans will soon be outnumbered and replaced in a secret cultural revolution and because of Muslim women having a high fertility rate. For instance, a publication titled 'In two generations the West will be eradicated by Islam' (HRS 2018b) speaks about a civilizational war in which 'the most dangerous weapons are the high fertility rates of Muslims' (HRS 2018b). The output shows an image of two faceless, dark Muslim women with a stroller against a background with scratch and dirt texture (as seen below). Another similar example is a publication titled 'A deliberate replacement of own people' (HRS 2020d) featuring a black, faceless figure representing a Muslim woman with a stroller in an image with a cold-blue background colour.



Figure 1. HRS (2018b). Example of a layered visual metaphor coded as *population replacement*, *darkness*, and *dirt*

As both Figure 1 and 2 illustrate, another layer of complexity in the coding process pertained to the often-layered character of the HRS's images in which multiple source domains are used to ascribe meaning to the target identities simultaneously. In general, such images have been filed under several different visual metaphor categories because they rely on multiple source domains. In the case above, for example, the image was coded as a visual metaphor making use of three source domains: *population replacement*, *darkness*, and *dirt*. Another

ambiguous case pertains to the visual metaphors of *economic expense*. In this case, it was also the narrative context that was a decisive factor when coding.



Figure 2. HRS (2018c). Example of layered visual metaphor coded as *economic expense*, *darkness*, and combination of *darkness* and *cold*

As the above example illustrates, several HRS representations showcase the target identities against a background with Norwegian money bills, describing the economic burden they supposedly pose for society. Because of this widespread narrative, images featuring money in this manner have been categorized as *economic expense* rather than a more neutral category, such as *cash* or *finance*.

Finally, the analysis produced two tables showing how HRS headlines employ visual and verbal metaphors regarding the target identities. In what follows, I present the results and discuss how discursive polarization between majority populations and target identities occurs via the three most prevalent types of metaphors found in HRS headlines, namely, the primary visual metaphors of *cold*, *darkness*, *pollution/dirt*, and verbal metaphors of *violent conflict*.

5. Results

5.1 Primary visual metaphors of cold and darkness

Figures 3 and 4 below demonstrate how visual primary metaphors are used in HRS outputs, particularly how audiences are invited to interpret the target domain *Muslim* through source domains of *cold* and *darkness* or a combination

thereof (282 out of 423 instances). These images align with what Andreasen (2020, 347) describes as “antagonistic anonymity”—minimal representations of target identities, with a focus on darkness and anonymity, and lacking human characteristics like facial expressions. This is not an isolated trend; as Table 1 below shows, more than 50 percent of the visual metaphors identified in the sample depict the target identities via images that are dark, cold, or a combination thereof, indicating their overall significance in HRS’s discursive polarization.

Table 1. Number of visual metaphorical expressions in HRS headlines

Metaphorical categories (visual) and number of metaphorical expressions	
“Non-western immigrants”/Islam are ...	
Darkness/shadows/blackness	194
Combination of cold and darkness/shadow/blackness	51
Pollution in the nation/damages to flags	76
Cold	37
Impurities/dirt	24
Population replacement/fertility	21
Humiliation/disrespect	13
Virus	3
Aliens	2
Collapsing house	1
A train/large size object	1
Total:	423

Primary visual metaphors using *darkness* and *cold* as source domains typically depict the target identities with bluish or black shades added to their bodies or against backgrounds featuring these colours. In this way, the HRS often layers multiple source domains to construct meaning in relation to the target identities. For example, in one image (HRS 2019g), a Muslim woman is shown as a black figure against money bills with an artificial blue and icy tint, thereby combining the metaphors of *cold/darkness* with the economic implications symbolized by money (similar to Figure 2). Another common type of primary visual metaphor shows mosques as a symbol of the target identities and their otherness, presented as black constructs, or displayed against a background of bluish-cold colours. We can examine the HRS’s use of visual primary metaphors in further detail by considering the examples represented by Figure 3 and 4:



Figure 3. HRS (2019b) depicts the target identities through the primary visual metaphor of *darkness*

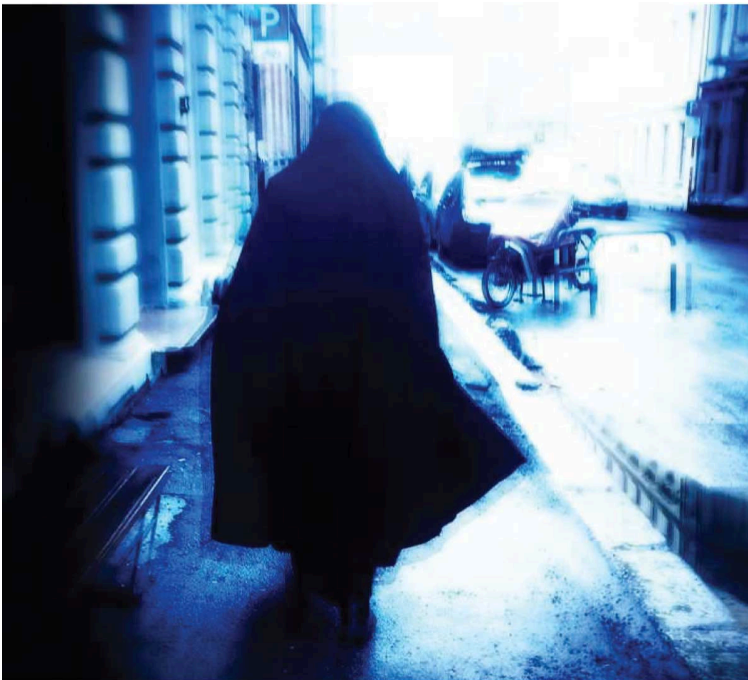


Figure 4. HRS (2019a) depicts the target identities through a combination of the primary visual metaphors of *cold* and *darkness*

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate how the HRS's outputs construct an affectively charged divide between *us* and *them* by depicting the target identities as abstract, dark, anonymous, and sometimes blurry figures, often incorporating a bluish or cold colour scheme. These images are not isolated outliers but illustrate how, with some variation, the HRS typically invites audiences to engage in certain forms of embodied cognition and interpret the target identities through experiences of darkness and cold. I will refer to both types of images with the concept the 'HRS shadow drama'. The depictions in the shadow drama use source domains of temperature (blue = cold) and the absence of light (black/shadow/grey = darkness), extending the logic of the two primary metaphors and their semantic properties onto the target identities: *cold is disaffection* and *darkness is evil*.

Both images are characteristic of how darkness is used as a source domain and a manifestation of the *evil is darkness* primary visual metaphor. They show veiled Muslim women, depicting them as black, faceless figures merging with the surrounding shadows. As such, the images suggest that Muslims/immigrants are synonymous with darkness and, by metaphorical extension, evil and negativity. Darkness often implies fear or anxiety, contrasting with light, which symbolizes goodness, intelligence, and purity. Its cognitive effectiveness makes darkness a common narrative tool in popular culture, where it is often used to structure emotions and moral meanings and differentiate between good and evil characters (e.g. 'the *dark* lord Sauron' versus 'Gandalf the *White*') (Forceville and Renckens 2013). The images thus also suggest how the HRS's use of visual primary metaphors relies on deep-seated cultural associations with darkness, inviting a certain emotional and moral reading of the target identities as an archetypal figure of evil.

Figure 4 illustrates how visual primary metaphors are used to invite affective responses and meaning making based on the experience of cold. By portraying a faceless Muslim woman as an object of icy disaffection, the metaphor of *cold* encourages a reading of *them* as disconnected from positive emotional and social properties while inviting a reduction in *warm* emotional reactions like sympathy or compassion. If one looks closely, it is also evident that Figure 3 has been modified so that the dress of the Muslim woman has a tacit, bluish tint. These effects are particularly important, given that warmth and coldness appear to be the most powerful personality traits informing social judgment and thus one of the most potent ways in which people can be unconsciously primed to either evaluate others in more positive or negative ways (Williams and Bargh 2008). Fiske (2018) convincingly shows that perceiving a group as warm signals and increases empathy and solidarity, while the perception of coldness is a proxy for negative feelings like contempt or disgust. Experimental research confirms this relationship, showing that people simultaneously process both physical temperature and perceived warmth (trust) information in others during social interaction. For example, participants

holding warm coffee tended to view others as warmer and friendlier compared to those holding cold coffee (Williams and Bargh 2008). Perceptions of warmth can in this way influence social interactions regarding perceived emotional closeness (Fay and Maner 2012; Ijzerman and Semin 2009). It alerts to the condition that experiences of physical warmth or coldness will either increase or decrease feelings of interpersonal liking, without the person's awareness of this influence. Conversely, perceptions of coldness in others, mediated by discursive constructs, are likely to similarly suppress positive expectations of interactions and predispose towards negative emotional associations.

The analysis suggests how primary visual metaphors, manipulating the two most critical dimensions of social identification (facial recognition and warmth perception), are central to enabling discursive polarization in the HRS's outputs. They do so, first, by speaking to the cognitive unconscious, tacitly inviting a form of thinking that involves rapid and largely unconscious 'simulations' of bodily experience that are intertwined with undesirable emotional significance in relation to the target identities. Second, it leverages the human cognitive tendency to quickly process and respond emotionally to visual information and fear triggers. Finally, the shadow drama can be understood as an affective economy in the sense of Ahmed (2004), in which associations of cold and darkness and their metaphorical extensions of *badness*, *fear*, and *disaffection* are systematically put to work to transfer and reinforce affective readings of the target identities as a 'sticky' object of negative emotions. In this sense, the shadow drama works as a pervasive discursive figure that is made to circulate on the HRS platform, accumulating a broad range of negative affective values as it confronts audiences under various antagonistic narratives and metaphors, such as the publication "In two generations the West will be eradicated by Islam" (HRS 2018b).

5.2 Verbal metaphors of violent conflict and the 'big' enemy

By far the most prominent type of verbal metaphor in the HRS's headlines (45 out of 91) draws on source domains of *physical assault* and *war*, describing violent confrontations between the target identities and majority populations as the generic condition. Salient examples include: "The government will strangle economic support for mosques in Norway" (HRS 2019c), "Finally! Erna in full attack against the mosques in Norway" (HRS 2019h), "A punch in Islam's face" (HRS 2019d), "The government in full attack against sharia marriages" (HRS 2020a), and "The Islamization is marching onwards" (HRS 2019b).

Table 2. Number of textual metaphorical expressions in HRS headlines

Metaphorical categories (textual) and number of expressions	
“Non-western immigrants”/Islam are ...	
Violent confrontation/war-like situation	45
Burden on the nation/welfare state	10
Humiliation/oppression (of majorities)	7
Big/growing entity	5
Natural disaster/powerful force	5
Fire	1
Train/Big approaching vehicle	1
Epidemic	1
Liars	3
Nightmare	2
Objects	2
Lawlessness	1
Animals	2
Mental illness	1
Economic expense	5
Total	91

Metaphors of confrontation suggest that *our* and *their* realities can only meet in violent forms, conveying the idea of aggressive struggle particularly intensely through the source domain *to kill*. Some of the abovementioned metaphors fall within this category, while additional examples include: “The final blow: You [immigrants] can go home again” (HRS 2020b) and “Top politicians go for Islam’s throat” (HRS 2020c). In other cases, the degree of aggression is similarly reinforced and emphasized through descriptive terms that add conceptual weight to the metaphor, such as “full attack” or “frontal assault”: “Sweden in full attack on extreme Islam” (HRS 2019i), “Toward frontal assault against Islam’s wicked view of women” (HRS 2019j), and “Full Christmas clash in Seljord” (HRS 2019e).

By repeatedly evoking the image of an adversary that is *finally* engaged in an attack (‘strangle’, ‘full attack’, ‘punch’, ‘final blow’, ‘go for the throat’, ‘frontal assault’, and ‘clash’), or with a strike to the most vulnerable areas of the body (face/throat), the HRS’s verbal metaphors enable violent, rejective responses to appear as a legitimate and necessary act of self-defence. An accumulation of aggressive

affective value is invited towards the figure of an invasive enemy against which violence gains positive, almost pleasurable, connotations: a differentiation between us/them in which *they* (dark, cold, and faceless) are constituted as legitimate targets of a righteous aggression that in turn glues *us* together within an imagined resistance community.

Importantly, metaphors of violent conflict do not occur in a vacuum but resonate with widely shared mental representations of the occupation and resistance against Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The narrative of an unprovoked attack on a small, peaceful country and its heroic resistance against the occupation is a central part of Norwegian cultural memory and national identity, with many Norwegians sharing similar views on the issue (Corell 2011). In this sense, widely shared feelings associated with a morally just, heroic resistance during the occupation may act as a reservoir for making sense of the metaphorical references. In other words, the HRS metaphors of violent conflict may draw on the moral legitimacy of past struggles to enable the polarization of current attitudes toward immigrants and Muslims to be perceived as similarly justified.

Discursive polarization is similarly enabled by less prominent verbal metaphors depicting the target identities through source domains, such as *big/growing entity* (5), *natural disaster/powerful force* (5), *fire* (1), *train/big approaching vehicle* (1), *epidemic* (1), *objects* (2), and *nightmare* (2). These less common, albeit classic, anti-immigration metaphors support affective associations about loss of control and overpowering forces. *They* are likened, for instance, to a pervasive ‘knife epidemic’, an unstoppable ‘Islamization train’, an all-consuming ‘Islam fire’, an incessant ‘migrant stream’, and an engulfing ‘wave of Islamic missioning’. Source domains, such as *wave* and *stream*, suggest a risk of drowning and a flood that one cannot control, while *epidemic* and *fire* imply a rapid, uncontrollable spread of dangerous elements. Likewise, oncoming waves, approaching trains, epidemics, and fires reflect size, intensity, and force, evoking experiences of standing in front of a dangerous, massive entity. Terms frequently used by HRS, such as *mega-mosque*, *power Islam*, and *extreme-mosque*, similarly invoke a sense of vastness and dominance, further emphasizing an effectively weighty sense of being overwhelmed.

As acts of discursive polarization, these metaphors alert to the condition that it might not necessarily be feelings of superiority or positive in-group biases that most powerfully motivate antagonism or exclusion. On the contrary, the impulse to reject or harm others may derive more powerfully from feelings of humiliation, vulnerability, and the fear of the Others’ strength. As such, the material from this case suggests that a fifth dimension could be explored in relation to van Dijk’s (2006) notion of the ideological squaring regarding self-victimisation or vulnerabilisation.

5.3 Visual metaphors of dirt and pollution danger

In this final subsection, I discuss the third dominant category of metaphors identified in the HRS's headlines, namely, visual metaphors that associate the target identities with *dirt* and *pollution danger*. This category includes two types of prominent visual metaphors: *pollution in the nation/damage to flags* (76 out of 423 instances) and *impurities/dirt* (24 out of 423 instances). As shown in Figure 5, the first type of visual metaphor connotes pollution danger in the target identities by depicting them with scratches, stains, dirt, contamination, and other forms of damage on Scandinavian flags.



Figure 5. HRS (2018a) depicts target identities through the visual metaphor of *impurity* and *pollution danger* with a Scandinavian (Danish) flag

Figure 5 depicts a layered visual metaphor, suggesting that the target identities are damaging and polluting cultural identity and, as such, contaminating the national community. As the main symbol in the Scandinavian flags is the Christian cross, the image implies a complex layer of signification. In particular, the dirty marks on the white cross on the flag suggest damage or defilement of both something 'clean' and 'innocent' as well as a cultural/national identity and Christian heritage.

As shown in Figure 6, moral concern with (im)purity is also a core theme in the second type of visual metaphor which depicts the target identities as impure either by directly presenting their bodies as tainted, grimy, and scarred or, more tacitly, by showing them against a background with scratches and the texture of dirt. In this way, such images invite the metaphorical assumption that they

are *dirty* and thus *morally bad*. Figure 6, for instance, depicts a Muslim woman presented against a scratched background surface in cold colour tones and as having dirty/scratched skin and clothes. In some cases, the target identities are portrayed as if they are spreading/whirling up dirt to convey that they are carrying or spreading filth.



Figure 6. HRS (2019f) depicts target identities through the visual metaphor of *impurity/dirt*

As illustrated above, the images in this category give their targets a ragged or grimy appearance, enabling the interpretation that they are dirty and immoral. Morality is often expressed and linguistically constructed in terms of physical purity (e.g. through expressions like ‘foul/dirty play’, ‘clean conscience’, ‘spotless appearance’, and ‘filthy lies’). Herein, cleanliness typically represents order and is preferable, linking moral *purity* and *impurity* with *cleanliness* and *dirtiness*, respectively. Visual metaphors that suggest physical impurity in the target identities thus ultimately reinforce assumptions of moral corruption.

By depicting the out-group as a source of pollution, the targets become a source of danger that is transmitted by contact (Douglas 1966, 5). As such, these metaphors invite a perceived need to ‘restore’ order regarding the in-group’s ‘cleanness’. It suggests an underlying racist logic of ethnic segregation or even ‘cleansing’ of ‘dirty’ populations that cannot be stated directly within the bounds of contemporary civic discourse in Norway. However, it can be tacitly expressed, and perhaps even more effectively so, with the “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak 2015, 115) of metaphors. As such, it illustrates how the HRS, in equating minority groups with darkness, dirt, and disease, aligns with an old vocabulary and history

of racist rhetoric as a language of aggression that mobilizes antagonistic anxieties amongst majority populations of the 'pure' national body being 'dirtied' by *them*.

6. Conclusion

This study has documented and discussed how the HRS discursively constructs a polarizing image of immigrants and Muslims as threatening Others via three dominant types of metaphors featured in the headlines of their publications: (1) visual primary metaphors of *cold* and *darkness*, (2) verbal metaphors of *violent conflict*, and (3) visual metaphors of *dirt* and *pollution danger*. By showing how the HRS most significantly uses visual primary metaphors to construct meaning, the analysis suggests that the HRS systematically invites their audiences to engage in embodied cognition to think about the target identities in relation to primal, negative experiences while simultaneously leveraging the human capacity to quickly process and respond emotionally to visual cues. As such, the analysis shows how visual primary metaphors are used as polarization vehicles, promoting an affectively charged divide between *us* and *them* in a manner well-suited to bypassing rational or active reflections. Despite its paradoxical self-image as a humanitarian liberal think tank and not a right-wing news site, HRS clearly relies on an aggressive strategic rhetoric to promote a racist agenda that works to undermine the human rights ideals (e.g. religious freedom and freedom from racial discrimination) it purports to serve.

Overall, one is left with the impression that the HRS's practices of discursive polarization resemble other organized forms of propaganda and preconditioning campaigns that attempt to persuade citizens to develop a hostile mind against a designated enemy. The power of metaphors to shape hostile imaginaries in this context depends, in part, on the extent to which they remain invisible and unchallenged. By making explicit how the public is encouraged to disengage their moral standards concerning specific categories of people, it becomes easier to actively resist these efforts and support basic human rights to religious freedom and protection against racial discrimination. This implies, first, a need for counter-framing that humanizes and reveals the social complexity of those who are systematically targeted by vilification campaigns. The most effective way to do this, I suggest, entails showing the target identities as warm, competent, and in relations of solidarity with cultural majorities. Second, it warrants a political response that demarcates a clear boundary against human rights infringements. In this context, the recent withdrawal of state funding to the HRS emerges as a significant and legitimate decision that should be sustained.

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