The Fundamental Error: Harmful Community Building Through Othering Practices on the Facebook Page of the Most Popular German Newspaper

Luisa Conti

Abstract *This chapter addresses growing concerns surrounding polarization, misinformation, and the erosion of social cohesion in many societies by examining dynamics within digital spaces that reinforce anti-cosmopolitan attitudes, thereby endangering social peace. Utilizing a multimodal approach that combines netnography with experiential hermeneutics, the study explores the Facebook page of the German newspaper Bild, focusing on news posts that may stimulate discussions revealing (anti)cosmopolitan sentiments. The analysis reveals a convivial atmosphere characterizing this space, where othering practices foster easy consensus and act as a form of social glue, facilitating community building, a sense of belonging, and the internalization of anti-cosmopolitan sentiments and culture. The oversimplification present in the posts and their comments, often intersecting with scapegoating and essentialist reasoning, prevents individuals from grasping the complexity of social dynamics, while deepening instead their engagement with neo-tribal nationalist narratives. This distorted imaginary is identified as a fundamental error, as it creates a scenario in which the "imagined community" is perceived as endangered, undermining the foundations of society by legitimizing a disregard for the constitutional principles of pluralistic democracy. The paper concludes by calling for more research on strategies that promote digital cosmopolitanism in communities echoing neo-tribal nationalism.*

1. Introduction

August 2024. The United Kingdom experiences a surge in far-right violence, with protests and riots targeting non-white citizens erupting across several cities. This violence is part of a broader pattern, in which racist and anti-democratic riots are stimulated by incitement and (dis-)information in social media: Dublin 2023, Chemnitz (Germany) 2018, but also the similarly riotous events of 6 January 2021 at the Capitol in Washington which were inherently intertwined with social media discourse, including conspiracy theories and patently false information. The current

situation reflects a resurgence of xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes and a disillusionment with democratic institutions, reaching far into the mainstream of society (Zick et al., 2011: 104–106; Zick et al., 2023).

This phenomenon is closely linked to the digital space, as it facilitates the emergence of "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2001), reinforcing polarized discourses, contributing to the spread of misinformation and extremist ideologies (Benkler et al., 2018). The present chapter seeks to shed light on how interpersonal experiences, collective identities, and shared narratives converge in digital spaces, potentially reinforcing tribal mentalities and shaping perceptions of social reality. It aims to explore these dynamics by examining the discourse on the Facebook profile of Germany's most-read newspaper, *Bild*, with a focus on the comments section below the news posts. As a major player in the German media landscape, the tabloid newspaper *Bild* has a significant online presence, and its Facebook page is a microcosm which reflects some of the broader discussions taking place in the digital public sphere. The findings will underscore the critical role that media platforms play in either mitigating or exacerbating societal divisions in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

The chapter opens with the presentation of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework organized in three sections. Section Two entitled "Identity and Power" explores key socio-psychological mechanisms that drive identity and group formation, reflecting on their interplay with societal power structures. Section Three "The National Arena" examines contemporary forms of nationalism against the backdrop of postmigrant and cosmopolitan theoretical perspectives. Section Four "The Postdigital Context" addresses the impact of digitalization on identity and community formation, with a particular focus on online hate speech. Thus, theories of identity and categorization, nationalism and nation-building are brought together with theoretical reflections on postdigitality – and platformization – and reflected on anew in relation to the ubiquitous intertwining of social media and the lifeworld.

The empirical study, whose design is presented and reflected on in Section Five, is presented through the detailed analysis of two examples that illustrate the complex dynamics at play in this digital space (Section Six). In the conclusion (Section Seven) the findings and their broader implications will be discussed, relevant for media professionals, policymakers, and researchers concerned with the impact of social media on public discourse and social cohesion.

2. Identities and Power

Identity formation is a cultural process that takes place in the world of our everyday experiences, our "Lebenswelt" or lifeworld (Husserl, 1936/1970): An inherently diverse and multifaceted hybrid space made up of overlapping cultural spheres. As

we move through different cultural groups, contexts, and fields of action, we actively engage with and internalize a variety of cultural elements, rather than passively absorbing a singular cultural influence. This process of *lifewide learning* affects human beings cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally (Conti, 2024: 20). Consequently, identity is more culturally hybrid than we may perceive, being the ongoing result of the complex interplay between individual agency and the diverse cultural landscape of our lifeworld (Conti, 2012: 141–143).

Despite this natural, shared and ubiquitous hybridity, human beings tend to categorize 'the others' by simplifying the complexity of human identities and essentializing them to a large extent. This tendency towards categorization, which has an influential impact on interpersonal relations and social cohesion, is a natural cognitive process. In exploring the dynamics underlying the categorization of the self and of the other, Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel (1978) and expanded by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals define their identities also in relation to social groups. Three interconnected psychological mechanisms are in play: social categorization, the process of assigning oneself and others to social categories; social identification, the adoption of the imagined characteristic identity and norms of the group; and social comparison, the comparison of one's own group with others. This self-definition process often results in in-group favouritism and out-group bias as individuals seek to maintain a positive self-concept through their group memberships and this can imply the projection of negative characteristics to 'the others' (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 40–41). The "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977) contributes to this by leading people to overemphasize personality traits and underemphasize situational factors when evaluating others' behaviours. The "ultimate attribution error" (Pettigrew, 1979) extends this bias to groups, attributing negative actions of outgroup members to their inherent traits while viewing similar behaviours by ingroup members as situational. These biases reinforce stereotypes and exacerbate divisions.

Building on SIT, Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner 1987; Turner et al. 1987) elaborates on how and when people define themselves as individual or group entities, and on the implications of these self-definitions. SCT explains that individuals shift between personal and social identities, as well as among different social identities based on the context, employing a process of categorization which is contingent as it depends on the interpretation of the context (Turner 1987: 50). This shift is influenced by factors such as the salience of the group, the presence of outgroups, and situational cues that make certain group memberships more prominent (Turner 1987: 43). As Turner and Reynolds (2012: 7) exemplify: "[...] different self-categories can become salient (e.g. myself as an individual, woman or Australian) and the content of a particular category can change as a function of the salient comparative context (Australians compared to Americans/Australians compared to Chinese) and ongoing change (e.g. the historically evolving nature of what it means to be Aus-

tralian)." Understanding both SIT and SCT is relevant because they together provide a comprehensive view of the mechanisms driving identity formation as well as individual and group behaviour. SIT explains why individuals form group identities and engage in in-group favouritism and out-group bias, while SCT explains how individuals cognitively navigate their multiple social identities and shift between them based on contextual factors. This dual framework helps in understanding the complexity of human identity and intergroup relations, offering insights into how to address issues of prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict.

The concept of "Othering" (Spivak, 1985), which has its origins in Hegel's master-slave dialectic (Hegel, 1807), strongly influenced by Edward Said (1978/1995) and its name-giver Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985), helps to show how historically evolved power relations are reflected in such socio-psychological categorization processes, becoming instruments of its reproductions. Both scholars, foundational figures in postcolonial studies, criticize the constructions of the West in opposition of non-Western societies, highlighting the power imbalance inherent in these categorizations and the imaginaries created, arguing that such an opposition serves colonial and imperial interests.

Constructing 'the other' is a strategy which helps to reinforce the identity and supposed superiority of one's own group. These processes of social categorization and Othering, which exist on a continuum from depersonalization to delegitimization and dehumanization, can lead to severe consequences for out-groups. *Depersonalization* involves perceiving the other primarily through the lens of group membership rather than as unique individuals. This process leads to the perception of individuals associated with an antagonistic out-group as interchangeable representatives, thus obscuring their individual uniqueness and autonomy (Tajfel, 1981: 258); *delegitimization* represents a severe form of social exclusion, where certain groups are not merely viewed negatively but are considered outside the bounds of acceptable societal norms (Bar-Tal, 1989: 65); *dehumanization*, the most extreme form on this continuum, involves denying out-group members the characteristics that define them as human beings (Billig, 2002: 183; Tileagă, 2007: 718).

Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated that social categorization and intergroup differentiation occur even in *minimal group* paradigms, where group membership is assigned based on arbitrary or trivial criteria (Tajfel et al., 1971: 153; Diehl, 1990: 267). This phenomenon underscores the strong human propensity to form group identities and engage in intergroup comparisons, even in the absence of substantive differences or conflicts of interest. While these minimal group studies reveal the ease with which group formation can occur, real-world social categorizations often coalesce around more salient and culturally significant dimensions (Fiske, 2018: 67). Crucially, group formation is often based on inherited prejudices and stereotypes, which have historically led to significant power asymmetries within and between communities (Dovidio et al., 2010: 4–5). These

inherited biases and stereotypes serve as cognitive schemas that influence social categorizations, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others within society (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Thus, the processes of categorization, differentiation and hierarchization – encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects – profoundly impact social experiences and perceptions.

These dynamics contribute to the formation of what Collins (2000: 227–228) describes as a "matrix of domination", a sociological paradigm explaining how intersecting systems of oppression operate at structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal levels, creating unique experiences of marginalization and resistance for different social groups.[1] The persistence of prejudiced social categories contributes enormously to the maintenance of social hierarchies and power structures, influencing interpersonal interactions, institutional policies, and broader societal norms. These processes often operate implicitly, perpetuating existing inequalities (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999: 31–33). In order to understand how multiple, interconnected systems of power and oppression shape individual and group experiences, an intersectional approach is essential (Cho et al., 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989). As intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights, 'race' is a key category around which power dynamics are organized. Systems of racial stratification and discrimination persist not only between dominant and marginalized groups but also among different racialized groups (Omi & Winant, 2014: 105–108; Molina, 2021).

In continental Europe, where the category of 'race' is very often avoided – especially in post-fascist contexts – due to the legacy of National Socialist ideology and concerns over the misuse of pseudo-biological concepts of race (Jugert et al., 2021: 4), the process of othering frequently draws on categories such as culture, migration background, or country of origin (Foroutan, 2016: 241–243; Moffitt et al., 2020). Racist ideologies and imaginaries are perpetuated by operationalizing race through the "natio-ethno-cultural" construct (Mecheril, 2002: 109–112), that is replacing biological notions of race with cultural differences as justifications for discrimination and exclusion (Balibar, 1988).

Understanding these complex dynamics is crucial for addressing systemic inequalities and promoting social justice. It requires the acknowledgement of the historical roots of prejudices, critically examining how they continue to shape social structures, and developing strategies to challenge and dismantle these entrenched power asymmetries. This approach recognizes that addressing inequality involves changing individual attitudes, but also transforming the social, cultural, and institutional systems that perpetuate traditional biases and stereotypes. In this context,

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1   For an example of how this matrix of domination operates, particularly in the context of the vulnerabilization of migrant students in Europe, see Conti (2022), who conceptualizes this as a "matrix of inequalities".

postmigrant theory, as articulated by Naika Foroutan (2016; 2018), provides a valuable framework for understanding the transformative processes needed in societies deeply impacted by migration in order to favour a recognition of diversity. Postmigrant theory challenges dominant discourses that often portray migrants and their descendants as perpetual outsiders. It does so by acknowledging the significant contributions and presence of migrants within national narratives, thus advocating for the reimagination of national identities. This reimagining aims to be more reflective of the actual societal compositions and histories, promoting a broader sense of belonging that includes everyone, regardless of their migration background (Espahangizi, 2021). Indeed, identity is described as a continuous process of negotiation and adaptation, influenced by both individual agency and structural factors (Conti 2012: 127). This perspective aligns with the earlier discussion of identity formation as a cultural process taking place in the hybrid "Lebenswelt" (lifeworld) and emphasizes the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader societal forces in rapid transformation. The perspective shift advocated by postmigrant theory entails not only acknowledging the structural and historical factors that contribute to social inequalities but also proactively challenging and dismantling the power structures that sustain them. By incorporating postmigrant perspectives, strategies to promote social justice can more effectively address the root causes of exclusion and marginalization, ensuring that social, cultural, and institutional systems are reformed to be genuinely inclusive and equitable.

3. The National Arena

The shift in perspective proposed by postmigrant theory involves recognizing and addressing the complexities of modern identity formation, moving beyond traditional national frameworks. The postmigrant theory shares significant commonalities with cosmopolitan theories drawn from the area of sociology and social theory, particularly in their emphasis on societal transformation, cultural hybridity, and the reimagining of social belonging in increasingly diverse societies. This alignment is evident in several key aspects of both theoretical frameworks. Firstly, both perspectives emphasize the transformative nature of cultural interactions in modern societies, thus Delanty (2019: 7) describes cosmopolitanism as "a transformative process in which new cultural models take shape and where new social realities are formed." Secondly, both theoretical perspectives highlight the importance of cultural mediation and competence in diverse societies: Vertovec and Cohen (2021: 3) argue that contemporary cosmopolitanism involves "the capacity to mediate between different cultures, a set of competences, and a mode of practice or a field of discourses through which diversity is constructed as an asset." Lastly, both postmigrant theory and critical cosmopolitan approaches challenge traditional notions of national

identity and belonging: Foroutan's critique of persistent othering in postmigrant societies finds a parallel in Glick Schiller and Irving's (2015: 5) call for a "critical cosmopolitanism" that "challenges the hegemony of methodological nationalism and ethnocentric conceptualizations of culture". Indeed, as Delanty in his contribution in this volume points out, "cosmopolitanism is a force in the world, as is anti-cosmopolitanism" (see: Delanty: 47).

The nation is today still a central arena where belonging is actively contested. Postmigrant and cosmopolitan theories highlight a key critical issue: The nation's capacity to promote either inclusive or exclusionary narratives of identity and belonging. This tension underscores the ongoing struggle between pluralistic conceptions of nationhood and more restrictive, ethno-centric visions, as Triandafyllidou (2020) explains. Her work distinguishes between two primary forms of contemporary nationalism: *plural* and *neo-tribal*. *Plural nationalism* "acknowledges mixity and interdependence" (2020: 799) allowing for a more nuanced and complex sense of belonging that can accommodate multiple identities and transnational connections, embracing change and diversity while still maintaining a sense of national cohesion. In contrast, *neo-tribal nationalism* is characterized by an exclusionary approach, based on a conception of national identity imagined as coherent and homogeneous. Neo-tribal nationalism "is predicated on a rejection of diversity" (Triandafyllidou, 2020: 800), often manifesting in nativist sentiments and resistance to immigration and cultural change, ignoring the fact that migration and cultural change are natural and inherent phenomena of human societies.

Amy Chua's (2018) concept of "political tribes" further elucidates this dynamic, highlighting how group identities and tribal instincts shape political and social landscapes. Chua argues that tribalism is not just about belonging but also about exclusion, where the instinct to form cohesive groups often leads to the marginalization of those perceived as outsiders. This perspective is crucial for understanding the resurgence of neo-tribal nationalism, which leverages these tribal instincts to foster a sense of unity against perceived external threats. Nationalism and racism are indeed often intertwined, with racism being leveraged to create internal others (minorities within the nation-state) and external others (foreign nations or other 'cultural' entities). As Valluvan (2020: 244) argues, "The often racialised practices of Othering […] act as the constitutive reference against which nationalist politics in the west orients itself." These forms of othering highlight how power dynamics are central to the process, with dominant groups using their position to define and marginalize others. This bidirectional process of othering serves to reinforce national identity by defining who belongs and who does not, often leading to discriminatory practices and policies. The tension between these two forms of nationalism reflects broader societal struggles in addressing the complexities of globalization, migration, and cultural change. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the resurgence of nationalism "oftentimes in an aggressive,

nativist and populist guise" (Triandafyllidou, 2020: 792) that we are witnessing in Europe and worldwide.

In the context of 21ˢᵗ century globalization and rapid social change, the nature of nationalism is evolving in complex ways. Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity provides a useful framework for understanding these changes, describing a condition of constant mobility and flux in relationships, identities, and global economics. This state of perpetual change and uncertainty has profound implications for how individuals and societies conceptualize belonging and national identity. However, the insecurities and anxieties produced by liquid modernity have led many to stop developing utopias and to seek solace in what Bauman (2017) terms "retrotopia" – an idealized vision of the past. This nostalgic turn reflects a desire for stability and certainty in an increasingly unpredictable world, manifesting in previously described resurgent forms of nationalism.

Eva Illouz (2023) adds an important dimension to this discussion by exploring the emotional underpinnings of national identity and populist movements. Illouz argues that emotions such as fear, disgust, resentment, and love play a pivotal role in shaping political attitudes and national sentiments. For instance, *fear* of the "other" can reinforce national boundaries, while *love* for an idealized version of the nation can foster strong in-group loyalty. *Resentment*, often directed at perceived elites or "outsiders", can fuel populist movements that claim to represent the "true" nation. *Disgust*, as Illouz notes, can be weaponized to dehumanize out-groups and strengthen in-group cohesion. Illouz's work highlights how these emotions interact with the narratives and discourses of nationhood, creating powerful affective bonds that can at the same time unite and divide populations. This emotional dimension adds depth to the understanding of how national identities are formed and maintained, showing that they are not just cognitive constructs but deeply felt realities for many individuals.

The nation continues to be a powerful source of identity and legitimacy, even as nation-states grapple with eroded sovereign powers and the transformation into what some scholars call "post-national states" (Triandafyllidou, 2020). Indeed, numerous scholars in the last decades have emphasized that the nation is of a constructed and performative nature (Balibar, 1990; Bhabha, 1994/2004; Brubaker, 1996; Calhoun,1997; Valluvan, 2020; Wodak et al., 1999/2009), as Anderson's (1983) influential concept of "imagined community" presents it. National identity creates an illusory sense of connection across diverse individuals who feel connected despite the absence of direct, personal interactions. Their communal identity is constructed through shared symbols, narratives, and cultural practices. Indeed the nation is constructed along two dimensions: the spatial one, fostering a sense of "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1983: 7), and the temporal one, staking a "claim on transhistorical time" (Valluvan, 2020: 245), whereby the "invention of tradition", as described by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), plays a crucial role as well as the selective

interpretation of history which serves to legitimize and naturalize the nation's existence. It requires critical examination of how such identities are constructed and maintained, and how power dynamics shape these processes in the postdigital society.

4. The Postdigital Context

Introducing the concept of "imagined community", Benedict Anderson (1983) argued that print capitalism played a crucial role in nationalism's development, as it favoured the widespread dissemination of ideas, of shared language, and the creation of common discourses which people could identify with (Anderson, 1983: 44–45). In the contemporary context, this process has been significantly amplified and transformed by digitalization, extending our lifeworld into a space that is both culturally and digitally hybrid. The concept of postdigitality, as articulated by Cramer (2014), provides a useful framework for understanding this new landscape. Cramer (2014: 12–13) argues that the digital has become so ubiquitous that it ceases to be a distinguishing feature, leading to a blurring of boundaries between digital and analog, online and offline experiences. Building on this, Knox (2019) posits that post-digitality represents a state of systematic interconnectedness (Knox, 2019: 357–358), where our lifeworld is inextricably linked with a variety of ideas and discourses, including those of the far-right.

In this postdigital context, our cultural and social spheres have expanded far beyond geographical boundaries, profoundly impacting identity formation processes through lifewide learning experiences (Conti & Lenehan, 2024). Recent research by Marino (2015) explores how social media usage affects the formation of "networked individualism", where personal identity is increasingly shaped by online connections rather than traditional community ties (Marino, 2015: 6). The paradox of increased global connectivity leading to local disconnection, observed by Hampton et al. (2011) and Turkle (2011), has been further examined in recent years.

The internet facilitates the creation of what can sometimes appear as a type of material placeless community, such as *digital tribes* that are communities characterized by strong internal identification, based on shared characteristics such as nationality, interests, or political views (Meharg, 2024: 237; Lietz, 2024: 239). These respond to the fundamental human need for social bonding and recognition among similar individuals responding to the growing sense of isolation and uncertainty characterizing our age of polycrisis (Meharg, 2024: 239–40). This aligns with an understanding of the digital world as an "extended lifeworld" (Zhao, 2006), which has been expanded upon by scholars such as Van Dijck (2013) in her work on the "culture of connectivity" (Van Dijck, 2013: 4): Online platforms are not merely neutral channels for communication but are active agents that influence social interactions

and cultural norms. She argues that the architecture and algorithms of social media platforms play a significant role in determining what content is visible and how users engage with it, thereby shaping the culture of connectivity itself. Building on this, Lindgren (2017) highlights the impact of digital media on all relevant aspects of life, focussing particularly on communication, identity and self-representation, community formation and social dynamics, political activism, and the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural content. Digital technologies have become inseparable from our identity construction and profoundly affect self-conception, social interactions, and our understanding of reality, as Floridi's (2015) concept of "onlife" emphasizes.

While online spaces offer apparent freedom of movement, they are, in reality, highly structured and constrained environments. As Lenehan in this volume points out, internet platforms exist as quasi-territorial spaces and the internet may be seen as a "patchwork of platforms" where user behaviour is shaped by the underlying architecture and logic of the various platforms (Lenehan: 59). The perceived unrestricted movement, even across linguistic barriers facilitated by translation tools, masks the reality of what Zuboff (2019) recognizes as "behavioural modification" through algorithmic curation and targeted content delivery. This algorithmic influence on user experience has significant implications for identity formation, often leading to what Pariser (2011: 9–10) famously termed "filter bubbles" and potentially driving users down ideological "rabbit holes". Social media algorithms, designed to maximize engagement, often prioritize provocative content (Gillespie, 2014: 167), inadvertently promoting hate speech and reinforcing tribal mentalities. Furthermore, the architecture of online environments, combined with internet anonymity – which emboldens individuals to express hateful sentiments (Suler, 2004: 321) – can amplify Othering discourses and create echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017: 5–6) that reinforce in-group/out-group distinctions (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017: 930) and amplify the reach of hate speech.

Hate speech, defined as a conscious and willful public statement intended to denigrate a group of people (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995: 159), manifests verbally, non-verbally, and symbolically (Nielsen, 2002: 265). It often employs ambiguous or metaphorical terms (Giglietto & Lee, 2017; Santa Ana, 1999) and uses emotional language to provoke public upset or action (Vargo & Hopp, 2020: 3). Crucially, hate speech helps establish social hierarchies based on inequality and domination (Paz et al., 2020: 2). Two recent studies in Germany (Dellagiacoma, 2023: 312; Das NETTZ, 2024: 34) reveal that online hate speech predominantly affects refugees and individuals with a migration background. This demographic also experiences severe impacts, including increased stress, fear, and self-censorship (Dellagiacoma 2023: 313, 315). These psychological effects extend beyond individual well-being, as Lumsden and Harmer (2019) argue, shaping social dynamics and influencing public opinion and policy decisions.

Matamoros-Fernández (2017: 931) introduces the concept of "platformed racism", demonstrating how platform architectures interact with user practices to shape the expression of racist discourses online. This phenomenon is further explored by Fielitz and Thurston (2019: 7, 11–13) in their work on postdigital cultures of the far right, highlighting how extremist ideologies adapt to and exploit strategically digital platforms. As Fielitz and Thurston (2019: 11) note: "For far-right actors, online platforms are not neutral communication tools, but rather catalysts for highly social processes where political opinions are formed and practiced." This strategic use of digital platforms has allowed far-right ideologies to spread beyond traditional extremist circles and into mainstream discourse, becoming a ubiquitous aspect of the extended lifeworld.

The immense presence of hate speech and tribalism online poses significant challenges to social cohesion in our onlife world. As Fielitz and Thurston (2019: 12–13) argue, "addressing these issues is crucial for maintaining healthy societal dynamics in our increasingly post-digital world". This complex interplay between technology, human behaviour, and social structures in the postdigital age underscores the need for developing effective strategies to combat online hate speech and promote online communities which educate to inclusion. In conclusion, the postdigital landscape has transformed the way imagined communities are formed and maintained, while also providing new avenues for the spread of far-right discourses and online othering. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the challenges they pose to social cohesion and democratic processes in our increasingly interconnected world.

5. Methodology

This study investigates online interactions on social media by analyzing user comments on *Bild*'s official Facebook page that directly respond to posts published by the editorial team. These posts typically consist of a title, followed by a picture, a subtitle (sometimes identical to the title), and the beginning of the article, which is available in full on *Bild*'s main platform. However, the articles are usually not accessible to users without a subscription. Every post is followed by a comment section, the users can choose to visualize "all comments", "most relevant comments" and "most recent comments".

The *Bild* Zeitung, founded in 1952, has been chosen as it is Germany's most widely read daily newspaper (IVW, 2024a). Known for its tabloid style and sensationalist content, *Bild* has had a significant influence on public opinion and political discourse in Germany. As of 2023, *Bild* has a daily circulation of approximately 1.03 million copies (IVW, 2024b). The newspaper also has a robust online presence, with its website, bild.de, attracting 5.67 million unique users per day (Schröder, 2022). On Face-

book, *Bild* boasts around 2.8 million followers (Facebook, 2024), making it one of the leading news outlets on the platform in Germany. The selection of Facebook as our primary platform was informed by a pilot study conducted on World Refugee Day (June 20, 2022), which indicated that Facebook offered a more interactive environment compared to other social media platforms, facilitating richer user-to-user engagement. This preliminary study also helped refine the data collection strategies.

The research methodology has been designed to provide a rich, multi-faceted analysis of online interactions, considering both social cues and transmitted content. This study employs a *multi-method netnographic approach*, a research methodology specifically designed for studying online communities and cultures (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, 2015; Hine, 2015). A key aspect of the netnographic research was the researchers' role as invisible observer, a non-participatory stance chosen to avoid influencing the natural flow of interactions. This approach, as noted by Kozinets (2015), provides valuable insights into authentic online behaviours. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in this study, though the public nature of the data mitigates many ethical concerns typically associated with online research, as participants have no reasonable expectation of privacy in this context (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Consequently, the presence of the researcher was not disclosed, nor were users informed that they were being observed. Approval for the approach was granted by the university's ethics commission, which confirmed the validity of the argumentation for conducting the research unobtrusively.

The data collection spanned a six-week period from February 27 to April 7, 2023, with an immersion in these online spaces for around 4 hours daily, excluding weekends. 73 news-posts on migration and other sensitive topics that stimulate discussions revealing underlying attitudes of racism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and pluralism have been selected for observation. Multiple data collection methods were employed, including journal entries, screenshots of Facebook interactions, original *Bild* Newspaper articles, and systematically export of comments using also the exportcomments.com tool. Personal diaries have been written to record reflections and experiences, aligning with both netnography's recognition of the researcher as an instrument of data collection and interpretation (Kozinets, 2015) and the experiential hermeneutic approach that has been applied.

But what exactly is meant by an experiential hermeneutic approach? Ethnography is the written product of a "palette of methods, but also a methodological approach in which participant observation is a critical element, and in which research is guided by experience unfolding in the field" (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 15). Central to Ethnography has always been the "understanding of cultural formations from an experiential point of view" (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2014: 2). This is also certainly true for Digital Ethnography, and includes the act of "lurking", as Marino (2021: 83) has argued, as a type of participant observation in which the same digital space is shared over a longer period, where scholars participate indirectly in people's lives,

begin to understand their (online) experiences, and to make sense of the norm generation inherent to digital spaces, as, as Blommaert writes (2018: 24), "people display an outspoken tendency to *create norms* (original italics) whenever they are absent or clearly unscripted", such as in online spaces. Lurking, as participatory observation, is not connected necessarily with "direct engagement and interaction" (Marino, 2021: 83) but can give a direct experiential edge to interpretive processes.

Hermeneutics is the "science, art or technique of the interpretation of written texts" (Outhwaite, 2007: 459) and hermeneutic methods are also central to ethnographic methodologies, as "interpretivists are more interested in understanding (from the inside) then in explaining (from the outside)" (Outhwaite, 2007: 460). As a participatory observer, even if a lurker, one is certainly on the inside and can experience a variety of digital community phenomena, such as personal dynamics, the creation of norms and the performance of rituals based around forms of language or images. These experiential methods were brought together with data hermeneutic methods, as especially espoused by Gerbaudo (2016: 99), which sees digital data as text and which has the synthetic aim of "interpreting, reconstructing and explaining the overarching narratives that underpin social media conversations." Data hermeneutics looks towards "close reading", for a "deep analytical engagement with a text" and emphasizes "language, tone, imagery, and rhetorical features". It is clear that this type of intensive interpretive approach, oriented towards the ascertaining of meaning, is simply more effective when *also experiential*. Hence the experiential hermeneutic approach pioneered in this study.[2]

6. Empirical Discussion

The analysis of the comment section on *Bild* newspaper articles, published as posts on Facebook, revealed a complex interplay of social dynamics that shape a racist and exclusionary discourse while simultaneously fostering a cohesive community largely characterized by a convivial environment. *Othering* emerged as a key mechanism that boosted participation and community building processes, benefiting from a space in which the principle of political correctness – intended to avoid offence or disadvantage to members of particular groups in society – is disregarded by the majority for the sake of free speech and idealized individual freedom. This is reflected in the corpus, which is full of statements that are rooted in depersonalization, delegitimization and dehumanization (see section two).

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2   This methodology, in its completeness, was developed by Fergal Lenehan and the author of this chapter in the context of the Study "(Neo-Nationalist?) Counter Public Spheres in the Comments Sections of British and German Online News Websites" carried out as part of the ReDICo project.

The following excerpts, drawn from the early days of observation, have been chosen as they illustrate patterns of interaction which came to be seen as typical for this online Facebook community and show how Othering is consistently used, presenting a simplistic imaginary which characterizes the perspective on others and society.

Excerpt 1

Fig.1. News post (excerpt 1)
Title: "The teenager was critically injured by shots fired by an 81-year-old man on Tuesday." Subtitle: "Bramsche: Sinan (16) dies after shooting rampage"
Picture: "breaking news".
Text: "After being shot in front of a school in Bramsche near Osnabrück. A 16-year-old boy has died according to the public prosecutor..."

Fig. 2: Comment section (excerpt 1)

Please not that these comments contain xenophobic and racist sentiments.

"I.S..: He must have been traumatized. "

U.H.:Giuseppe Del B. and Sinan

It's getting crazier and crazier in Germany thanks to other "cultures"

The comment section reveals a pattern of interaction where users reinforce each other's views, particularly in their othering of individuals perceived as non-German. This is evident in how both commentators focus on the speculated foreign origins of the victim (Sinan) and the perpetrator (Giuseppe Del B.), assumed on the basis of their names. The overall reaction to the news of an adolescent's death shows a striking lack of empathy. The victim's identity, as a presumed foreigner, seems to justify this absence of compassion in the commentators' minds, suggesting a belief that foreigners are somehow culpable for their own misfortunes.

I.S.'s sarcastic comment about trauma serves as an insider joke, critiquing both those who advocate for migrants and the migrants themselves. It sarcastically references the portrayal of refugees as traumatized individuals who cannot be held responsible for their actions. This humour bonds the in-group members while discrediting the out-group and their allies. For his comment, the author receives non-verbal feedback, including likes and laughing reactions; the angry reactions remain ambiguous in their intent.

U.H.'s comment further emphasizes the perceived foreignness of those involved by explicitly mentioning their names. This rhetorical strategy, consisting of placing the names of the perpetrator and the victim on an otherwise empty line, followed by the comment on Germany's negative development, creates a clear distinction between 'us' (native Germans) and 'them' (the ones who are not perceived as such), reinforcing the idea that the out-group is fundamentally different and that nationality is the source of problems. Interestingly, even the victim is implicated in this narrative, implicitly speculating about what he may have done to provoke the incident. U.H.'s statement that: "It's getting crazier and crazier in Germany thanks to other 'cultures'" explicitly blames cultural differences for what is perceived as a deterioration of German society. The mention of "culture" in inverted commas appears to

be an allusion to 'civilization', questioning whether it even qualifies as a "culture" and potentially delegitimizing it as such. This sentiment encapsulates the racist undertones present throughout the discussion, using "culture" as a proxy for race. This aligns with Balibar's (1988) argument that reference to 'cultural differences' is useful in justifying discrimination and exclusion.

Similar comments have filled the chat below this post, although it is worth noting that mainly Sinan has been the object of racist discussions, despite actually being the victim and a child. This discrepancy is an indication of potential bias in the perception of different migrant groups. In essence, these comments reveal a disturbing trend where the details of the incident and the humanity of those involved are simply disregarded. Instead, the event is used as a platform to reinforce pre-existing biases against perceived outsiders, demonstrating a complete lack of empathy or consideration for the tragedy at hand.
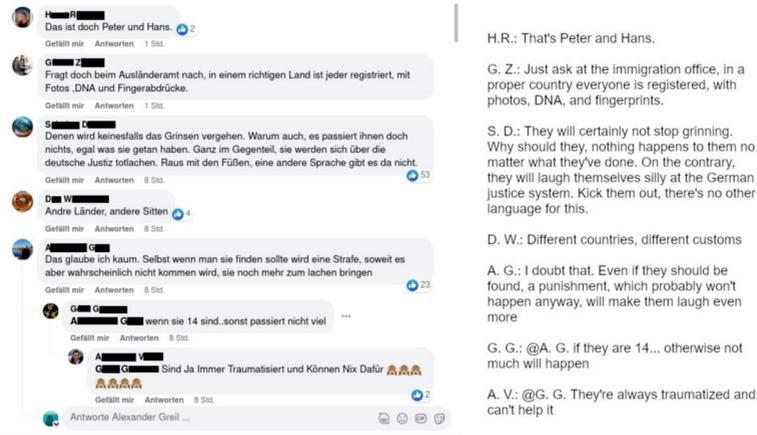
Excerpt 2

Fig. 3: News Post (excerpt 2)
Title/Subtitle: Cologne Police Search for Robber Duo – Your Grins Will Soon Disappear! Text: The robber duo is said to have mugged a school student (15) at the station forecourt in Cologne on January 18th...
The image has been blurred by the author to protect the identity of the persons portrayed in the picture.

Fig. 4: Comment section (excerpt 2)
Please note that these comments contain xenophobic and racist sentiments.

H.R.: That's Peter and Hans.

G. Z.: Just ask at the immigration office, in a proper country everyone is registered, with photos, DNA, and fingerprints.

S. D.: They will certainly not stop grinning. Why should they, nothing happens to them no matter what they've done. On the contrary, they will laugh themselves silly at the German justice system. Kick them out, there's no other language for this.

D. W.: Different countries, different customs

A. G.: I doubt that. Even if they should be found, a punishment, which probably won't happen anyway, will make them laugh even more

G. G.: @A. G. if they are 14... otherwise not much will happen

A. V.: @G. G. They're always traumatized and can't help it

H.R.'s joke "That's Peter and Hans" (which in the original German version is grammatically incorrect) is extremely popular in this online space, allowing users to easily join the conversation by simply thinking of two random names that sound 'typically German', thus achieving a creative task. This beloved joke encourages low-threshold participation and guarantees positive feedback. Its popularity reflects the normalization of referencing the presumed origins of individuals involved in the news, especially if they are perpetrators. Nationality is seen, based on racist ideologies, as the core characteristic underlying misdeeds, and the joke expresses anger about the situation in a lighthearted manner, providing an easy scapegoat for the community while simplifying complex issues.

G.Z.'s suggestion to consult the immigration office establishes a clear distinction between 'nationals' and 'foreigners', implying the need for greater scrutiny of the latter and assuming that these two adolescents – due to their appearance – are foreigners. The way the statement is framed ("in a proper country [...]") reflects a suspicious attitude towards the immigration office, suggesting it may not be doing its job effectively, or even towards the state, insinuating that the government is not able to maintain the public order. S.D. echoes this mistrust, calling for the forcible removal of migrants, illustrating how imagined cultural differences justify exclusionary practices. S.D. portrays migrants as cunning and unaccountable, mocking the overly benevolent Germans who are left unprotected by a non-functioning justice system, subtly suggesting self-justice if the state fails to intervene. The phrase "there is no other language for this" highlights that forced expulsion is perceived as the only viable measure. The essentialist perspective is so deeply ingrained that even

when discussing very young individuals, the possibility of re-education seems implausible. S.D.'s statement reveals an inability to view migrants as human beings with dynamic identities, capable of learning and whose actions are shaped by their circumstances. The comment posted by S.D. received the highest number of thumbs up among the selected comments. As shown in the screenshot (Fig. 4), most comments in this excerpt received non-verbal feedback, all of which were positive. This indicates a strong consensus within the community, reflecting a shared sentiment that resonates with the majority of users.

S.D.'s critique of the justice system is picked up by A.G., who, despite maintaining faith in the system, identifies issues at an earlier stage involving the institutions responsible for apprehending offenders. This perspective ultimately aligns with S.D.'s critique, as A.G. acknowledges systemic flaws that hinder effective justice. G.G., responding to A.G., highlights the justice system's limitations, noting that the individuals might escape punishment due to their youth. A.W. continues the thread by employing the cliché of refugees feigning trauma or being excused due to supposedly unfounded trauma. While this comment echoes I.S.'s remark in the previous examples, D.W.'s assertion "Different countries, different customs" parallels U.H.'s simplistic view on cultural differences. It suggests that criminal behaviour is normalized in "other cultures" (implying other countries), projecting negative attributes onto certain migrant groups.

The analysis of these two examples allows to show communicative dynamics characterizing the wider corpus and reflect on their impact:

1. Use of Emojis and Reactions:
    The use of non-verbal reactions such as emojis and thumbs-up is a common way for users to express agreement and belonging in online communities. The consideration of such cues is not only useful for identifying which ideas are widely shared but also for understanding how a sense of community is constructed. Affirmative feedback, through supporting follow-up comments, reinforcing direct responses, and positive non-verbal signals, gratifies users and possibly boosts their engagement and well-being in the online-space which feels like a community with common values, worldviews and communicative practices.
2. Repetition of Key Phrases or Arguments:
    The repetition of key phrases or arguments highlights that users share common ideas, creating a sense of insider status and reinforcing community belonging. This repetition also makes certain worldviews increasingly taken for granted, helping to create a shared narrative. In the examples provided, references to trauma are repeated, as is the use of the term "culture" as a proxy for race, reinforcing the group's essentialist collective understanding and bias.

3. Use of Insider Jokes or References:
    Insider jokes or references indicate a shared cultural understanding among in-group members. The ones based on othering serve not only to strengthen bonds within the group but also to delineate boundaries, effectively excluding and marginalizing those considered part of the out-group. In particular, jokes serve to entertain, enhance social standing by portraying oneself as likeable, and diffuse serious discussions, making it less likely for critical issues to be addressed thoroughly. This dynamic fosters camaraderie while maintaining the status quo within the group.

The excerpts convey the welcoming atmosphere characteristic of this Facebook community, which forms around the article posted by the editorial team of the newspaper *Bild*, clearly framing the discussion through the selection of news, the images used to represent them, and the wording employed. The prevalence of users sharing similar opinions makes this online space unappealing for those with differing views, resulting in a low probability of meaningful discussion and limited development of critical thinking among members. The digital field research undertaken reveals that when confronted with isolated counterspeech, community members often rally together, reinforcing their bonds and solidifying – at least verbally – their shared perspectives. Interestingly, dissenting comments which frequently receive verbal reactions, frequently receive non-verbal positive support through 'thumbs up' reactions, indicating that some users appreciate diverse perspectives even if they do not wish to openly express agreement. When multiple users engage in counter-discussion within the same chat, challenging the prevailing narrative, they prevent easy consensus: This kind of interaction stimulates critical thinking, as individuals face different standpoints.

  As far as could be observed, this platform's comment section functions mainly as echo chambers, where users can quickly align with like-minded individuals. This dynamic reinforces existing beliefs and worldviews, creating a cycle in which the group's shared narrative is continuously validated. The analysis of the corpus has shown that the focus on 'the others' – perfect antagonists to 'us' – facilitates the initiation of a chain reaction with positive effects both for increasing the feeling of belonging to the online community with neo-tribal national instincts and for spreading exclusionary perspectives. First of all, centring communication on taunting 'the others' provides an easy basis for *convergence*, as consensus on stereotypes and prejudices is, by their very nature, probable and simplified explanatory patterns which channel complex issues to a scapegoat are appealing. Othering-practices translate into a collective experience of bashing 'the others' while cheering each other through verbal and non-verbal communication. Othering-practices, offering a projection surface for negative attributes, produce *self-enhancement of the in-group's collective identity*; the positive interactions through which they take

form in such a 'rabbit-hole' community produce feelings of acknowledgment and appreciation which favour self-enhancement of the individual identity. Thus, collective othering practices foster well-being which signifies longer permanence and increased participation. This promotes *community building* and *a sense of belonging* as well as favours the *internalization of exclusionary contents and culture.* Such a mechanism can close off individuals to other perspectives and potentially contribute to their radicalization.

The collective emerging in this way on the Facebook profile of the German newspaper *Bild* can be understood as a digital tribe, sharing nationality, a clear worldview and communicative practices. This community forms through narratives of neo-tribal nationalism which, as explained, facilitate its flourishing. Members of digital tribes often emphasize a shared topic or ideology as a touchstone, marking their disapproval of the mainstream and creating a strong internal solidarity. This creates a clear boundary that separates them from the outside world, reinforcing a 'them against us' mindset. This specific community, building through the act of commenting on news – i.e. exchanging opinions on (mainly negative) things happening daily in Germany – repeatedly reflects together on problems, their sources and possible solutions. The simplistic explanatory models employed in this context lead to a narrow understanding of complex issues, primarily focusing on assigning blame to specific groups and individuals. This approach, which does not allow for diverse perspectives, results in a limited and bias-ridden view of the situation. By failing to incorporate a range of viewpoints, these thought models perpetuate a cycle of blame and hinder the development of a more nuanced understanding of the underlying issues. At the same time, repeated exposure to negative news, for which the same groups are held responsible and targeted in the comment section, further deteriorates their image and negatively impacts the emotional attitudes toward them.

Adopting Illouz's framework (see section three), the loyalty toward the "imagined community" is recognized in the corpus and appears to be viewed as essentially endangered, typically by migrants – representing 'the other cultures' – but also by democratic institutions, appearing as too weak or idealistic to counteract these threats in a context of rapid change (see Bauman's concept of Liquid Modernity and Retrotopia, as discussed in section three). The corpus reveals how fears and resentments foster both feelings of resignation and resistance among this large group of citizens who perceive their cherished "imagined community" as endangered and neglected by inadequate democratic institutions. The distorted perspective that emerges in this online space is rooted in a lack of information, critical thinking, and self-reflection. This environment fosters the spread of inhumane perspectives, legitimizing them paradoxically by pointing to the perceived dangers posed by 'the others' who, therefore, must be timely neutralized. The deconstruction of the 'us versus them' paradigm, crucial for understanding reality in its complexity, is made challenging by the existence of communities where the sense of "the imagined com-

munity" is very actively performed, on postdigital platforms. In these spaces, the imagined homogeneous group of 'the Germans' takes shape as people gather and, through the process of othering, identify themselves as the virtuous. They enjoy a sense of camaraderie, reinforcing their group identity and sense of belonging, while perpetuating a narrow and divisive worldview; there lies the real danger to peaceful and safe communities, and to democracy.

7. Conclusion

The study presented in this chapter reveals the intricate dynamics that contribute to the formation of a digital community, which simultaneously narrates the "imagined community" as a homogeneous group of 'good citizens' and creates the illusion of its existence. This illusion emerges through collective othering practices responding to alarming news-posts that foster convivial interactions among the in-group, while simultaneously heightening fears, disgust, and resentment toward those identified as threats to this idealized community.

As observed in the Facebook profile comments of the newspaper *Bild*, failing to consider complexity results in oversimplified explanations both on the reasons behind the events presented in the news and on the motivations for individual behaviours. Blame is placed on specific groups or individuals without understanding the broader circumstances. This process is facilitated by socio-psychological mechanisms such as the fundamental attribution error and the ultimate attribution error, where negative behaviours of individual and of outgroups are attributed to their inherent traits, ignoring situational factors.

The oversimplification detected in the posts can be defined as a *fundamental error*. It involves the illusion that reality is simple, that events have easy identifiable causes, and that there are inherently 'bad' groups. It also includes a false understanding of cultural identity as essentialist, leading to a dangerous simplification of complex interrelations. This distorted perception of reality is to identify as a *fundamental* error also as it erodes the foundation of society, dividing people and pitting them against one another. This dynamic hinders meaningful dialogue that could address problems at their root and tackle the underlying causes.

This research highlights how digital spaces can become fertile ground for spreading hate towards those labelled as 'others': The fundamental error creates an imaginary that feels absolutely plausible, and offers seemingly positive impacts. It simplifies the complexities of a fluid society, fostering bonds that create a sense of belonging to a self-enhanced larger whole. Additionally, it provides clear, albeit misguided, solutions to multifaceted crises, positioning individuals as those who have identified the culprits. The repetitive exposure to negative news and the inten-

sive experience of the collective 'bashing' of identified perpetrators amplify, though, emotional reactions that can easily translate into both online and offline crimes.

Unmasking the fundamental error requires individuals to relinquish the imagined community formed at the expense of others, reorient their personal and social identities, and restructure their frameworks for perception and attribution. To facilitate this process, support its implementation, and prevent individuals from unconsciously falling into the fundamental error, a multilevel effort is necessary. This effort requires diverse strategies implemented by various societal actors working in concert. Certainly, educational strategies fostering Intercultural Competence as the ability to engage constructively with the ubiquitous unfamiliarity and uncertainty inherent in complex cultural dynamics (Bolten, 2015: 109) are one of them.

Considering the news platforms' impact in fostering public discourse, opening citizens' forums and shaping their reflections on their country and that the framing of news significantly impacts these exchanges, initiatives like the project "Better Post"[3] which offers workshops to social media editors and community managers, are vital for promoting quality-driven, responsible and aware journalism. In an era in which so-called citizen journalism has gained a degree of prominence and digital platforms have changed the dynamics of news creation, it is essential to support efforts that improve journalism standards, ensuring that news contributes positively to informed discussions and societal engagement.

At the same time, as the study emphasizes, it is crucial to promote pluralism within echo chambers, developing strategies which can transform them into spaces for dialogue. The ultimative utopian but actually achievable goal is to reimagine the internet and to shift online communities that foster neo-tribal nationalism into areas of digital cosmopolitanism, where diverse perspectives coexist and enhance collective understanding in favour of a democratic pluralistic society.

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3   The project was presented at the ReDICo conference "Cosmopolitanism in a Postdigital, Postmigrant Europe, and Beyond". For more information please see: https://www.bosch-stiftung .de/en/project/betterpost-good-journalism-social-media and https://neuemedienmacher.d e/projekte/betterpost/

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