



AGGRESSION AND THREAT RHETORIC TARGETING MUSLIMS AND THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN FINLAND

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Findings

This study analyzes social media data from Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) collected between 2018 and 2022. Using natural language processing (NLP), network analysis, and qualitative methods, the findings reveal a significant increase in online hate speech targeting both LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities in Finland. Hate speech toward Muslims is 2–3 times more prevalent than against LGBTQ+ individuals, with spikes generally tied to events like media coverage and shocking incidents. In contrast, hate speech toward LGBTQ+ individuals shows a steady upward trend, independent of specific events.

However, hate crime statistics present a different picture. Police reports indicate that hate crimes against Muslims increased from 39 cases in 2021 to 55, and further to 60 in 2022. Similarly, hate crimes based on sexual orientation sharply rose, from 68 cases in 2021 to 126, and then to 140 in 2022 (Rauta, 2022, 2023). While no research in Finland has directly examined the link between online hate speech and offline hate crimes, existing literature suggests a strong correlation (Kotonen & Kovalainen, 2021; Müller & Schwarz, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021). This study aims to examine this association; however, potentially due to an unwillingness to cooperate, which may, in turn, be influenced by political factors.

Findings indicate that both LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities face persistent negative stereotypes online. LGBTQ+ individuals are portrayed as disruptive to traditional norms, while Muslims are framed as violent and threatening to Finnish and Western values, reflecting broader resistance to multiculturalism in digital spaces.

Social network analysis identified online communities that spread hate speech targeting both groups. These communities do not exclusively target LGBTQ+ people or Muslims but instead focus on both. While political actors do not directly engage in spreading explicit hate speech, certain accounts associated with the Finns Party feature prominently in discussions. These actors are aware of the tone and target of hate speech but refrain from overt endorsement, such as liking, commenting, or reposting. Notably, parliament members from all political parties were identified in online hate speech discussions, either through mentions or replies, indicating that they are directly exposed to and aware of such content.

Background

Radicalization has become a global concern, contributing to violence, hate crimes, and rising religious fundamentalism. Among its various forms, the radical far-right poses a particular threat in Finland (Kaakinen et al., 2021), gaining visibility with the electoral success of far-right political movements (Dite, 2020). This political shift, coupled with populist rhetoric, has fueled an increase in hate crimes, particularly targeting individuals based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability. While most reported hate crimes occur in public spaces, the internet is the second most common setting for such incidents (Ministry of Interior, 2021).

This study examines online hate speech directed at LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities in Finland. Although these groups are not entirely distinct, they are often politically categorized separately to serve ideological agendas. The rise of far-right rhetoric has intensified political polarization, particularly around immigration and LGBTQ+ rights, reinforcing divisive narratives. Finland, like other European countries, has witnessed a growing normalization of exclusionary discourse aimed at these communities.

Hate crimes against these groups have increased in recent years, highlighting the urgency of understanding the online environment in which such hostility is fostered. This study analyzes five years of data from two major social media platforms heavily used by Finnish society. It investigates how hate speech against LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities is conceptualized and disseminated, the methods and actors involved in its spread, the role of political parties in these discussions, and the extent to which media coverage influences the volume of hate speech and potential offline hate crimes.

Findings indicate that far-right narratives portray Muslims as fundamentally incompatible with Western values, a perspective also prevalent in Denmark (Farkas et al., 2018) and Sweden (Åkerlund, 2020).

This rhetoric is not confined to Finland but circulates transnationally among far-right groups in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy (Froio & Ganesh, 2019). Within these narratives, dehumanization and calls for violence are framed as defensive measures against perceived threats.

In the case of LGBTQ+ individuals, hate speech primarily revolves around identity markers such as gender expression and sexual orientation, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies are frequently portrayed as an out-group that threatens traditional societal values, contributing to social polarization. Online discussions targeting these communities also extend to politicians, media organizations, and public events that support LGBTQ+ rights, further amplifying hostility.

Nordic relevance

The rise of online hate speech in Finland reflects broader trends across the Nordic region, where digital hostility toward Muslim and LGBTQ+ communities is increasing. Despite their strong human rights records, Nordic countries face growing challenges in countering hate speech, particularly as right-wing populist rhetoric gains traction.

While Sweden and Finland share similar patterns of online hate speech, Denmark and Norway have taken more proactive legal measures. Finland, however, faces obstacles in addressing the issue due to political resistance and limited cooperation from law enforcement. The Finns Party's influence has further normalized exclusionary narratives, echoing nationalist movements in other Nordic nations.

This study advances Nordic research by employing data-driven methods to analyze hate speech dynamics. It highlights the urgent need for regional collaboration in policy development, balancing free expression with protections for vulnerable groups.

Recommendations

Strengthen Hate Speech Monitoring and Enforcement:

- Establish more effective collaboration between researchers, law enforcement, and social media platforms to monitor and address online hate speech.
- Encourage Finnish authorities to improve data-sharing practices to facilitate research on the link between online hate speech and offline hate crimes.

Enhance Legal and Regulatory Measures:

- Align Finland's hate speech laws with best practices from other Nordic countries, implementing clearer legal consequences for digital hate speech.
- Increase accountability for political actors and public figures engaging in or amplifying hate speech.

Promote Digital Literacy and Counter-Narratives:

- Develop educational programs to equip the public, especially youth, with critical skills to recognize and challenge hate speech online.
- Support civil society organizations in creating counter-narratives that promote inclusivity and social cohesion.

Address Political Polarization and Responsible Communication:

- Encourage political parties to adopt ethical guidelines for online engagement, reducing the spread of divisive rhetoric.
- Foster cross-party initiatives to counteract online hate speech and prevent its mainstream normalization.

Improve Social Media Platform Accountability:

- Advocate for stronger platform policies to curb hate speech, ensuring transparency in content moderation and algorithmic biases.
- Implement Nordic-wide cooperation to push for more effective regulation and enforcement on digital platforms.

Outputs

Peer review publications:

1. Unlu, A, Lac, T., Sawhney, N., Tammi, T. and Kotonen, T (2025) From Prejudice to Polarization: Tracing the Forms of Online Hate Speech Targeting LGBTQ+ and Muslim Communities in Finland. *New Media and Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444824131>
2. Unlu, A, Lac, T., and Kotonen, T (2024) Mapping the terrain of hate: identifying and analyzing online communities and political parties engaged in hate speech against Muslims and LGBTQ+ communities. *International Journal of Data Science and Analytics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41060-024-00571-4>.
3. Unlu, A., Kotonen, T. (2024). Online polarization and identity politics: An analysis of Facebook discourse on Muslim and LGBTQ+ communities in Finland. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 47, 199–231.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12270>

Conference and Workshop:

1. Ali Unlu and Tommi Kotonen. Analyzing the interplay of hate speech and political dynamics in Finnish Twitter networks, in the 6th Nordic Conference on Violent Extremism, Oslo, Norway, June 17-19, 2024.
2. Ali Unlu. Online Hate Speech and Radicalization. Presented at "AI: Understanding and Opportunities for P/CVE Practitioners" workshop, organized by the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) under the European Commission, Prague, Czech Republic, February 27–28, 2024.

Knowledge Gaps and future search needs

Despite growing research on online hate speech, significant gaps remain in understanding its long-term societal impact. While this study highlights the prevalence of hate speech against Muslim and LGBTQ+ communities in Finland, further research is needed to examine its psychological and behavioral consequences on targeted groups. Additionally, the lack of access to law enforcement data hinders efforts to establish a direct link between online hate speech and offline hate crimes, underscoring the need for greater institutional cooperation.

Future research should explore the role of algorithmic amplification in spreading hate speech, particularly how digital platforms facilitate the visibility and engagement of divisive content. Comparative studies across Nordic countries could provide valuable insights into policy effectiveness, identifying best practices for combating digital hate speech. Additionally, investigating the evolving rhetoric of political actors and their indirect endorsement of hate speech could help clarify the mechanisms through which hate narratives gain legitimacy in public discourse.

Recent policy changes on major social media platforms, such as the removal of fact-checking on Facebook and the shift toward unrestricted speech on X without account suspensions, may significantly influence the volume and nature of online hate speech. Ownership changes, such as Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, and broader political developments, including Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency, could further embolden hate speech actors and reshape digital discourse. Since our study was completed before these developments, future research should assess their impact on hate speech trends and engagement dynamics.

Finally, interdisciplinary research combining computational methods, qualitative analysis, and social psychology is needed to develop more effective interventions. Understanding the effectiveness of counter-narratives and digital literacy initiatives in reducing hate speech engagement would provide actionable insights for policymakers and civil society actors. Addressing these gaps will be essential for mitigating the growing impact of online hate speech on democratic resilience and social cohesion.

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