"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!": Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

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Abstract

For several decades, mainstream media have positioned Muslims as cultural, political, and social outsiders to Denmark. Danish Muslims confront and navigate this exclusionary racial project of hegemonic Danishness in a host of ways, including through online communication and social media practices. This article is a qualitative study of Danish Muslims who produce discursive interventions on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram in direct and indirect relation to mainstream media discourses on Muslimness. Their social media practices are conceptualized as part of an emerging, online Danish Muslim counterpublic where features that afford interactivity shape the counterpublic to be communal in distinct ways. This digital counterpublic provides direct challenges to hegemonic Danishness' one-dimensional representation of Muslimness. Particularly when it comes to questions of gender and claims to ordinariness through quotidian posts on life as a Danish person who just happens to be Muslim, these social media practices are racial projects that undercut hegemonic Danishness' racialization of Muslimness as non-Danish, monolithic, and culturally deficient.

KEYWORDS: Media Studies, racialization, Gender Studies, social media, digital counterpublics, Danish Muslims

Introduction

Through constant and ubiquitous racial projects, racial formation plays out across Danish culture, politics, and everyday life, shaping and reproducing hierarchies of people. In this article, I situate *hegemonic Danishness* as a dominant racial project that divides people living in Denmark into groups that belong or not depending on their imagined proximity to a socio-cultural and racialized understanding of what it means to be Danish. Analyzing a case study of how Danish Muslims experience and relate to hegemonic Danishness through public social media practices, the article provides insights into an emerging Danish Muslim counterpublic that uses social media platforms to challenge a central presupposition of hegemonic Danishness: that Muslimness is culturally incompatible with Danishness and that Muslims therefore do not belong in Denmark. Negative perceptions of mainstream media representations of Muslimness vis-à-vis Danishness lead the participants of this study to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram, where they seek to represent what it means to be Muslim and Danish more fully. Through content that directly sheds light on the problems with mainstream media representations of Muslimness as well as typical slice-of-life social media content that showcases the ordinariness of being Muslim in Denmark, the counterpublic troubles the narrow, homogenizing, and negative representation of Muslimness at the core of hegemonic Danishness.

Muslim individuals in Denmark live in a political, social, and cultural context where Muslimness and those who embody it are figured as fundamentally out of place in the country they call home. Manifested through media discourses, this racial project centers cultural and religious differences as what make groups of people intrinsically different, even oppositional (Balibar 1991). Ferruh Yılmaz (2016) demonstrates how for several decades, Danish media has distributed and legitimized right-wing interventions that have constructed Muslimness within an oppositional nation-in-danger discourse through a host of intersecting and co-constitutive registers and

dynamics. Danishness is continually juxtaposed with an imagined Muslimness considered to be incompatible with life in Denmark due to Muslim people's alleged distance from the nation's majoritized population and culture. This has produced and maintained a widespread conceptualization, or 'common sense' understanding, of Danishness as a meaningful category that must be policed and protected from intruders (Hall 2016; Hervik 2019).

This project emerges from the intersections of Media Studies and Gender Studies, and the Danish Muslim participants were primarily asked to reflect on media consumption and production including how they perceive mainstream media's framing of Muslimness. Their insights illuminate a recognition among Danish Muslims of a racializing and exclusionary dynamic that produces Muslim identity as un-Danish. I explore how they use social media platforms to produce discursive interventions that navigate, challenge, and circumvent hegemonic Danishness and contribute to creating a counterpublic where Danish Muslims and Muslimness can be represented in ways precluded by hegemonic Danishness which is dominant across mainstream media.

This article contributes to a growing research agenda on how Muslims respond to living in Danish society where hegemonic discourse, political hostility, and other patterns of marginalization exclude them from belonging. I argue that this project's informants do not attempt to dismantle Danishness, but rather engage in racial projects themselves to broaden Danishness so as to include Muslims and Muslimness. I approach this through the lens of racial formation theory, which posits that racialization is a constantly ongoing process and a "synthesis […] of the interaction of racial projects on a society-level" (Omi & Winant 2015, 127). Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) identify racial projects as anything from wearing dreadlocks or participating in a Black Lives Matter protest to white supremacy itself. In this article, I consider some of the "vast web of racial projects" that occur in Denmark specifically (ibid.). Conceptualizing social media practices as racial events illustrates that racial formation is dynamic and subject to change and challenge. In

Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

other words, I excavate a dominant racial project, hegemonic Danishness, through analysis of racial projects that directly and indirectly navigate, respond to, and challenge it and the racial meanings it (re)produces. These racial projects play out in a counterpublic that is mainly digital so I also consider how social media platform infrastructures engender distinct modes of communication that in turn shape the counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1990, 67).

Hegemonic Danishness as exclusionary racial project

As Denmark becomes a multicultural society, hegemonic Danishness emerges to construct Muslims as a unified group that does not fully belong to Danish society. It is a wide-ranging racial project—one of the "building blocks in the racial formation process […] taking place all the time, whenever race is being invoked or signified, wherever social structures are being organized along racial lines" (Omi & Winant 2015, 13). In the manner of many dominant racial projects, hegemonic Danishness obscures complex and perplexing realities of genuine social, economic, and political transformations wrought by the inequalities of global capitalism and attendant dynamic migration patterns (Golash-Boza, Duenas & Xiong 2019). As a technology of power, hegemonic Danishness responds to this historical juncture by providing a framework that is simple in its identification of the problem as well as its solution. Rather than facing complex responsibilities accompanying the realization that modern migration patterns result from centuries of Western exploitation, hegemonic Danishness offers a more one-dimensional answer where immigrants generally, and Muslims in particular, are figured as *intrinsically different than Danes.* Hegemonic Danishness proposes that whatever issues Denmark faces, none are more significant or destructive

than this foreign presence that can be, if not eradicated, then at least scapegoated.

Hegemonic Danishness is tied to the immigration of people from majority Muslim countries beginning in the 1970s and responds to a sense of loss of an imagined Danish nation and culture prior to this modern moment of transformation (Hervik 2011). In a process co-constitutive with historical and current racializations of Muslims across the Western world, hegemonic Danishness positions Muslims as simply out of place in Denmark and therefore undeserving of, even a strain on, the generous welfare state perceived to define Denmark's egalitarian spirit (Rana 2007; Hervik 2011; Mouritsen & Olsen 2013; Yılmaz 2016; Razack 2022). This racial project is dynamic and historically situated and responds to material conditions and the distribution of power. In other words, while hegemonic Danishness is largely discursive, it emerges as a response to material changes and has material effects.

As a racial project, hegemonic Danishness aims to restore previous power hierarchies through claims that increasing Muslim presence in Denmark threatens traditionally dominant social and cultural norms. But it has other functions and contours and might also be identified as immanent in many other dominant formations concerning a host of norms constructed as distinctly Danish from sexuality to political culture. In this article, I discuss only its Danishness-Muslimness binary where practices from eating pork to shaking hands are mediated as distinctly Danish and represented politically and in mainstream media as a Danish cultural and social order that must be protected (Yılmaz 2016; Lindhardt 2021). The racial logics of hegemonic Danishness have distinct material effects including discrimination of individuals categorized as Muslims in arenas such as the labor, housing markets, and public administration (Herby & Haagen Nielsen 2015; Dahl & Krog 2018; Andersen & Guul 2019). The democratic drawbacks include diminishing the sense of political belonging among Danish citizens with Muslim backgrounds (Simonsen 2018), and hegemonic Danishness' notion of a nation-in-danger has played a central role in advancing a right-wing

turn in Danish politics (Mouritsen & Olsen 2013; Rytter 2018).

Like most systems of oppression, hegemonic Danishness relies on normative constructions of gender and sexuality and for instance situates Muslim women and queer Muslims as victims in need of saving. This can refer to individuals needing rescue from other Muslims, or a more abstract perception of the group lacking agency due to the supposedly inherent misogyny of Islam and Muslim culture. This article emphasizes how Danish Muslim women navigate hegemonic Danishness, which reduces them to their relation to an imagined Islam depicted as inherently hostile to their agency and selfhood (Ahmad & Waltorp 2019). When hegemonic Danishness construes Muslim women as culturally inferior and in need of saving, it also subjects them to the structural racism embedded in the Western tradition of producing distinct groups as a danger to society in need of discipline (Foucault 2003). As such, hegemonic Danishness erases the individuality of Muslim women as it figures them as lacking the agency imagined to be embodied by white, Danish women. Intersections of gender and race common in racial formations manifest here by positioning Islam and Muslims as intrinsically misogynist; an image of Islam that is then held up against the alleged equality of Danish culture and society and, underlining the contradictions of race, works to make all Muslims, particularly women, subject to discipline and discrimination (Andreassen 2005; Christensen & Siim 2010; Rognlien & Kier-Byfield 2020; also see article by Brodersen & Øland, this issue).

Navigating hegemonic Danishness

I employ the term hegemonic Danishness (Stormhøj 2021, 98) to describe my study's findings. None of the informants directly addressed this concept, but the concept's premise, that Danish Muslims are aware of and navigate majoritarian dynamics that situate them as not fully belonging in Denmark, has been demonstrated by previous research across disciplines and confirmed in my interviews with participants. In a qualitative study of young Muslims, sociologist Amani Hassani (2022) found her interlocutors resisting the racialization of Muslims as an underclass by claiming a middle-class position. Hassani (2022, 68) also points to how the research participants "could challenge, rephrase and reframe the presumptions of their political subordination, but they were not necessarily able to dismantle, disempower or circumvent these structures of power." Educational psychologist Iram Khawaja (2017, 103, my translation) similarly found that in schools Muslimness functioned as a "sociocultural category" with a host of effects on individuals' daily life and social positioning. In political science, Kristina Bakkær Simonsen (2018, 135) has shown that second-generation immigrants from the Middle East, most of whom are Muslim, experienced "unequal access to belonging" in Denmark. Like the patterns of discrimination cited above, this awareness of being made Other is a result of hegemonic Danishness' racial project of sorting people according to a racialized Danishness-Muslimness scale.

One of the ways Danish Muslims navigate hegemonic Danishness is through online communication. Karoline Marie Donskov Dige (2022) has analyzed how Danish Muslims may use Facebook to come together and address the distinct challenges they experience as Muslims in Denmark. Focusing specifically on religion, Dige (2022) addresses how questions of identity and belonging are reflected in Danish Muslims' online lives. Karen Waltorp (2015, 64) has shown how young Muslim women use social media to navigate the many intersecting fields of their lives and evocatively concludes that this generation of Danish Muslims is "turning the smartphone into a portal to other possible lives, ways of relating, and experimental acts." Research in other European countries such as Norway, Germany, and Italy similarly shows Muslims, and Muslim women in particular, using social media and the internet to traverse and contest the exclusion they experience (Eckert & Chadha 2013; Engebretsen 2015, Evolvi 2017). This article contributes to that body of research by exploring how Danish Muslims utilize online spaces for discursive interventions

that address, navigate, and challenge how they are racialized via hegemonic Danishness.

While Danish Muslims can and do challenge their marginalization through dominant institutions like mainstream media, those very channels of communication play a major role in racialization. Mahvish Ahmad and Karen Waltorp (2019) speak to the gendered nature of this double-bind and how it especially situates Muslim women through a host of expectations they must fulfill before being accepted. As some informants of my study argue, Muslim women must relate to certain stereotypes if they want to be widely understood in the dominant public sphere (El-Tayeb 2011). Iram Khawaja, Tina W. Christensen, and Line Lerche Mørck (2023) analyze how such racializing double-binds stemming from the narrow conceptions of who deserves to be considered a full citizen and human, and attendant effects such as feelings of injustice, have distinct psychological implications. Simonsen (2018) has found that some young Muslims forgo public debates on issues that concern them because they do not feel entitled to participate in a public they experience as exclusionary. The informants in this study, on the other hand, recognize that social media affords discursive resources less restrained by hegemonic Danishness and make their complex multilayered identities legitimate and legible to audiences in a way that mainstream media generally appear unable to do.

Counterpublics in digital space

Jürgen Habermas' (1989) public sphere theory sheds light on the ways in which individuals and groups change society by making their voices heard. This article is informed by Nancy Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas, arguing that publics and counterpublics should be considered in the *plural* and as continually constituted through complex struggles over meaning beginning from and in relation to the dominant public. If hegemonic Danishness is the dominant public discourse, then, counterpublics must exist in relation to it. I suggest that Danish Muslims engage social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter in ways

that conform to Fraser's understanding of a counterpublic as an entity that, among other things, provides alternative knowledges. Sarah Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles (2015, 933) have shown how online counterpublics on social media platforms like #BlackLivesMatter may serve marginalized citizens as "unique sites and methods that members of these groups use to produce nondominant forms of knowledge" not available in mainstream media. The next section delves into the informants' perceptions of mainstream media's role in producing notions of Danishness and Muslimness and how those perceptions are central to their motivation to turn to social media to create the kind of alternative knowledges offered in any counterpublic (Fraser 1990).

The specific modes of communication present on social media platforms shape racialized digital counterpublics in ways tied to the various platform features and architectures, including how they enable communal labor and solidarity (Brock 2012; Florini 2014). The efficacy of online counterpublics like #BlackLivesMatter, for instance, is tied to features such as retweeting being used to highlight distinct events and issues as well as movement leaders (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles 2020; Lowenstein-Barkai 2022). The meanings and effects produced on these platforms cannot be separated from their underlying infrastructures (van Dijck 2013). Characteristics like persistent multidirectional communication between audience and producer set social media platforms apart from the more unidirectional modes of communication dominant in mainstream media. Such characteristics proved to be crucial to the informants' social media practices as they helped produce a distinct sense of community, even intimacy, in the Danish Muslim counterpublic (Andreassen et al. 2018). In this article, I point to how features such as commenting and direct messaging afford an interactive, multidirectional communication mode that shapes the informants' experiences and content (Bucher & Helmond 2018).

Tensions exist between the liberatory potential of online practices and what Christian Fuchs (2014, 92) calls the "colonized internet" where

"actual practices of data commodification, corporate media control, as well as corporate and state surveillance limit the liberal freedoms of thought, opinion, expression, assembly and association." Like all users of major social media platforms, the individual Danish Muslims in this study invariably participate in a "platform imperialism" that is connected to broader structures of capitalism and oppression reflected in exclusionary dynamics such as hegemonic Danishness (Dal Yong Yin quoted in Fuchs 2014, 93). Despite such paradoxes and contradictions, I suggest that social media does contain potential to host and solidify a Danish Muslim counterpublic where questions of belonging and racialization can be critically interrogated.

Methodology

This article is based on qualitative interviews with ten individuals who use social media to produce public content directly and/or indirectly related to their identity as Muslims living in Denmark (Kristensen 2022). Qualitative interviewing is a "process of knowing through conversations" that "is intersubjective and social, involving interviewer and interviewee as co-constructors of knowledge" (Brinkmann & Kvale 2014, 18). The open-ended interviews, conducted in Danish, started from an interview guide provided to the informants prior to the interview. Taken together, the total of 16 hour-long interviews, two with each participant, produced hundreds of pages of transcripts.

Through several cycles of holistic, initial, and pattern coding and sub-coding using the software nVivo, I categorized the interview transcripts and discovered dozens of discrete and overlapping patterns and themes relevant to the study (Saldaña 2013).

Research instruments shape the research in direct and indirect ways and in this case, the research instrument is me: a white, majority-Danish, non-religious cisgendered man trained as an academic in the US. That positionality and background invariably shape my scholarly interests and practices, including the preparation, performance, and analysis of these interviews. I may, for instance,

have asked different questions informed by my own experiences as a minoritized person had I had those experiences. Conversely, it is possible that the informants would have responded differently in conversation with someone with lived experiences that aligned more with their own.

The informants were recruited based on preliminary desk research into Danish Muslims who used their social media platforms to produce public-facing content—i.e. the participants all used social media to purposefully address the public. A protocol adhering to ethical research principles was developed in collaboration with the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign's Office for Protection of Research Subjects. This protocol included a consent form outlining the research participants' rights and obligations, which all informants signed prior to the first interview. As the research project revolves around public social media practices and content and the informants are generally easily identifiable from the interview material, most informants agreed to forgo anonymization.

While all informants provided interesting insights that speak to the themes of this article, in order to provide a stringent analysis in a limited amount of space, I quote only four informants whose narratives and experiences complement each other well while also showing the variation of different positionalities and ways of using social media among the study participants. The following informants are quoted in this article: Özcan, age 32, who uses Facebook and Instagram to post about a variety of things from political analyses over humorous observations on fatherhood to marketing his published works of poetry; Ayan, age 38, former editor-in-chief of a volunteer-run publication, *Ethniqa*, an online magazine by and for women of color living in Denmark, who now uses her blog, Twitter, and Instagram to document her life, often centered on motherhood, and frequently addresses racism and other issues related to her intersectional identity; Saeid, age 33 who was recruited due to his involvement with the online magazine *Respons*, which produces citizen journalism from a minority point of view, although the interviews mostly ended up revolving around Saeid's use of Facebook,

Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

where he participates in debates on immigration and related issues; and Ellie, age 39, a well-known comedian and actor who produces several shows on YouTube, and uses Instagram and Facebook to promote those, participate in the political debate as well as share posts about her daily life.

The diversity of content types and personal backgrounds among the informants illustrates the heterogeneity of Danish Muslims as a group. It also illustrates that the participants should not be seen as *representatives* of the counterpublic conceptualized in this article, but *examples* of its heterogeneous nature since there are certain similarities across this group of informants that are not uniform across the group of Danish Muslims. For instance, all the participants are generally well-educated and have careers in the private sector. This might speak to the general profile of people who engage in public debates in Denmark, but it nonetheless affects the analysis at hand and its findings.

Mainstream media and hegemonic Danishness

Counterpublic media practices tend to relate to mainstream media, and this was certainly the case for the informants in this study whose reflections and experiences inform this section. Across the board, they identified mainstream media's representation of Muslims as frequently inaccurate, and to various extents, they described their social media practices as responding to or supplementing the dominant discourse as it relates to Muslimness, Islam, immigration and other similar subjects. None described their social media practices as generally being in outright opposition to mainstream media, which they also consider as a potential site of discursive interventions. Indeed, several informants have or hope to contribute to mainstream media, and some explicitly positioned their social media activities as an avenue into mainstream media participation. This paradoxical relationship to mainstream media can be understood as reflecting a hope to become included in Danishness *as* Muslims—even if that racialized

category's hegemonic nature has been constructed on the basis of *excluding* Muslims (Hassani 2022). This is not to say that the informants never openly criticize Danish media discourses in their social media content. They certainly do. But such explicitly counterpublic practices do not stand alone. Another key element of this counterpublic is how the participants' presentation of their own personhood on social media through slice-of-life posts shapes the counterpublic's racial project. That content demonstrates that the fact they are Muslim does not mean that their lives are not 'ordinary' in the Danish context. This stance confronts the homogenizing, individuality-erasing racialization of Muslims as outsiders prevalent in hegemonic Danishness, and while its counterpublic character might be less direct than the overt challenging of dominant narratives, both types of content, the slice-of-life and the challenging of mainstream media discourse, are equally important to what makes this counterpublic distinct.

Hegemony distributes the power that decides "the point at which the conversation begins" (Hall 2016, 171). So, when hegemonic Danishness conditions a 'common sense' image of Muslimness, Muslims that do not conform to the dominant image of Muslimness are less able to challenge that image (ibid., 138). Such representation of complex individuality appears to be in excess of the "ontological distinctions," assumptions of what Muslims are and do, from which most Danish mainstream media operate when they cover Muslim lives in Denmark (Yılmaz 2016, 50). The informants' perception of a distinct limit to how mainstream media allow them to express and represent themselves were often brought up during the interviews as the opposite of social media's advantages of autonomous and holistic self-expression.

Saied attaches a structural critique of media representation and its potential effects on Muslims and/or immigrants to his explanation of turning to social media to offer alternative knowledge on Danish Muslims: "The issue is that so many people get their information from the media and probably do not meet Ali and Fatima in their daily lives," he argues. "Then that becomes their image

of reality. That's the core of the whole problem." This perception of the public's media-dependent, warped image of Muslims and immigrants motivates him to provide a different take on those subjects. For instance, as seen in fig. 1, during the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, he challenged negative media coverage and politicians blaming alleged cultural differences for the disproportionately high number of positive cases in areas with many immigrant inhabitants. In a tangible example of how digital counterpublics provide alternative knowledges, Saeid provided a fact-check, arguing that the disproportionality may stem from higher population density. Titling his Facebook-post "A few 'forbidden' numbers about the COVID-19 situation in Vollsmose," (my translation) Saied addressed a perceived inaccuracy in mainstream media's coverage that reproduces negative framing of immigrants. Referencing housing dynamics to explain the high number of cases in Vollsmose, a neighborhood where many racial and ethnic minoritized Danes live, Saied's post went directly against the culturalized explanations on offer in the dominant public sphere.

Trained as a journalist, Ayan's recounting of why she founded *Ethniqa Magazine* in 2011 also identifies mainstream media as the issue, in this case, the lack of members of minority groups within newsrooms and that disparity's effects on the coverage: "We can't just have people write *about* us. We must grasp the pen and write our own stories," she explains.[8] The informants generally agree that the binary framework of us-and-them at the heart of hegemonic Danishness in large part can be traced back to media discourses. To Ellie, anti-Muslim racism is "mostly a media-thing; it's not something I encounter out in the streets with people yelling 'go back to your own country' and such."[9] Özcan, on the other hand, describes the dissonant public, informed by media narratives, as "very divided: either you are with Muslims or you are against Muslims." And so, the informants to varying degrees identify Danish media representation of Muslims as inaccurate and damaging to the way they are perceived as a group, and they situate that representation centrally to explain why they engage in what I conceptualize as counterpublic social media practices.

Figure 1

Hegemonic Danishness hinges on a generalized, monolithic Muslimness as its negative referent and the informants are conscious of this as immanent in how the media covers Muslims, Islam, and related issues. A major motivation for their social media practices is being able to counter this homogenizing representation by expressing *individual* identities; to demonstrate that their personhoods are not at all encapsulated by the one-dimensional, often negative stereotypes they believe circulate in the dominant public about Muslims. Several informants observed that such illegibility confounds individual Muslims' ability to challenge this image of Muslimness through mainstream media. In their experience, if an individual Muslim's identity is counter-stereotypical, they are less likely to be invited to contribute to mainstream media. Ayan succinctly expresses how media framing erases individuality, particularly in gendered ways: "We are never allowed to just be ourselves!" Muslim women, instead, "always get locked into this specific role," she says.

An interview Ellie gave to *Berlingske*, a national newspaper, illustrates how individual stories may be in excess of the public discourse imposed by hegemonic Danishness and how such excess may contribute to the racial project's function of separating Muslimness from Danishness. In the interview, Ellie was asked whether she would mock the Quran or Allah. This question has been a perennial theme in Denmark since the cartoon crisis in 2005 culminated in an anti-Muslim political climate in which the Danish 'we' was moored to humor and respect for democracy while the implicitly Muslim 'them' was seen as the opposite; incapable of grasping and performing Danish humor and culture (Hervik & Boe 2008). Ellie's response, that she would not mock the Quran, became the headline of the interview as well as the subject of an opinion piece in the same paper by well-known columnist Adam Holm. Holm (2019) claimed that Ellie's refusal to mock the Quran was because of a "self-applied Islam-muzzle." Ellie recounts, in paraphrase, Holm's argument as well as her response:

'Muzzled by Islam. And she refuses to mock the Quran or Allah. She is against us.' Then suddenly, I'm given this completely different role in the debate. Suddenly, I'm made into this extremist rather than a person who responded to a challenge [by the interviewer] and said 'Well, I just [personally] don't need to [mock Islam]'.

Ellie expresses how such treatment in the press, both by Holm and the framing of the initial interview, headlined "Comedian Ellie Jokar: 'I would never mock the Quran or Allah'" (Balslev 2019), may cause her to be less willing to be interviewed by mainstream media: "Because then I'm thinking, no matter what I say, it will be twisted into something I don't actually believe." Cultural values embedded in hegemonic Danishness here appear mobilized in opposition to Ellie who in turn feels that she is represented as an exemplar of homogenous Muslimness rather than an autonomous individual with agency. The experience highlights how media framing works to the detriment of Muslims in co-constitutive ways. Framing through hegemonic Danishness entails that Danish Muslims who choose to contribute to mainstream media, even when interviewed as individuals, risk erasure of that individuality. And then this erasure may end up solidifying the very stereotype that situated them at risk of being stereotyped in the first place.

An ordinary counterpublic

Ayan also brought up erasure of individuality as a key issue and argues that to her, most mainstream media representation of Danish Muslim womanhood appears stereotypical. Highlighting the malleability of racializing discourse, Ayan points out that the gendered stereotyping is widespread and elastic (see also Andreassen 2005; Hervik 2011). She says that "earlier, it was the oppressed woman," but "now it is the woman who gave her culture and parents the finger" she sees represented in Danish media. The Muslim woman depicted as liberated from her parents' oppressive culture may appear to be the opposite of the oppressed Muslim woman. Both figures, however, reify hegemonic Danishness' narrative of Islam as fundamentally oppressive to women, in contrast to the supposed openness and gender equality at the core of Danish values.[10] While acknowledging that

Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

some Muslim women are oppressed, Ayan wishes that Danish media would dispatch the narrow representation in favor of showcasing the diversity of experience of Muslim women. In the absence of such representation, she turns to Instagram and Twitter to present a multilayered individuality where she is a wife, a mother, a daughter, a Muslim, a Somali-Dane, a television casting agent and all kinds of other intersecting identities at once. The distinctly individual-centering nature of social media shines through in this counterpublic.

In her Instagram posts, Ayan narrates an aspect of this identity, describing how she simultaneously faces pressures from hegemonic Danishness as well as challenges from within her community—echoing previous research on how Danish Muslims navigate expectations from the dominant culture alongside other expectations like those from their families and local communities (Waltorp 2015; Galal & Liebmann 2020;

Hassani 2022). Fig. 2 shows how Ayan took part in a hashtag campaign, #DelDinSkam (*share your shame*), meant for minoritized women to discuss the shame they might feel about not living up to the expectations of their parents, their community, or Danish society-at-large (Eriksen 2021). In this post, Ayan discusses the shame she felt at being unmarried, how she found peace with her unmarried status, and how things started looking up once she "let go of her shame."

Ayan's contribution to the hashtag highlights how individual social media practices overlap with broader online counterpublics in that the hashtag campaign was initiated by two women, Nilgün Erdem and Souha Al-Mersal, who hoped that it would help minoritized women, who may encounter what they call a distinct "culture of shame" in their communities, realize that "they are not alone in having this feeling" as they explained in an interview (Eriksen 2021). As founders of the campaign,

Figure 2

they describe the community created through this hashtag as a "safe space where you are not reduced to a media headline" (ibid.) This echoes the informants' statements on why they seek out social media to provide fuller representation of their racialized gender identity, which mainstream media rarely allow.

Features of social media, like the above hashtag, afford community between audience and content producer and are central to digital, networked modes of communication (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards & Sandvig 2018). Other features, such as commenting or liking, also make interactivity central to this mode of communication and add a communal aspect to the counterpublic. Özcan, for instance, identifies comments on his posts as important markers of support and community: "So when people write 'Wow, that is so well put' and compliment what I have said because they feel the same way […] then I know I hit upon something through social media that the newspaper would not have been able to accomplish." Ayan points to how she often receives private messages on Instagram in reaction to specific posts that struck a nerve with her audience. She relates how the positivity of messages from her audience are no less meaningful when presented in private. Indeed, due to the controversial nature of some issues Ayan addresses, for example dating across religious affiliations, it seems unlikely that she would receive such affirmation without these private channels. Public affirmation matters to her as well. In the comments of her #DelDinSkam post, Ayan later expressed how happy she was at the positive response her post had generated, illustrating the importance of communication between her and the audience. Further illustrating the intensely personal nature of these media practices and their intersections with gendered issues, Ayan discusses a decision to share the traumatic and very personal event of having a miscarriage. She points out that "I have to, like…I have to know that I am not alone. I have to know that there are other women who have been in this situation so we can help each other." These posts are part of a multidirectional communication that Ayan knows provides real relief to members of her audience. That sense of community is key to Ayan's decision to share very personal and delicate issues—and, on a more general level, speaks to why we must consider even intensely personal and individual social media content as participating in broader structural discourses.

Such examples are not the kind of counterpublic discourse that is explicitly political or even always overtly speaking back to dominant narratives. Some of the content does engage in direct challenges of dominant discourse and I have discussed some of it above, but much of the informants' social media content is what most social media users produce: quotidian insights into what the individual happens to be doing or thinking at that moment. A random day's sequence of stories on Ellie's Instagram illustrates how such content can be understood as a counterpublic racial project.[11] In ten stories, as seen in fig. 3, Ellie documents travels with her production crew; advertises a new episode of her YouTube interview show, *Den Lyserøde Taxi* (*The Pink Taxicab*), where she talks with two young Muslims about issues like wearing the headscarf or living in a so-called ghetto; and shares a video of a performance by African-American gymnast Nia Dennis.

Seen in isolation, this can hardly be described as creating a counterpublic. Juxtaposed to her perception af how mainstream media have framed her as an exemplar of monolithic, un-Danish Muslimness, however, these posts documenting Ellie's ordinary individuality demonstrate how social media discourse may stand in contrast to mainstream media representations. In these digital spaces, Ellie expresses some of the many layers of her individuality. Such content, like Ayan's statement that she started her blog, in part, to "show that women like me are also just totally ordinary Danish women," put forth claims to ordinariness that confront hegemonic Danishness' demands for a uniform Muslim identity. In this context, we can understand these social media practices as counterpublic racial projects that resist hegemonic Danishness' reproduction of a homogenized Muslimness, which has little to do with Danish Muslims' actual lived experiences.
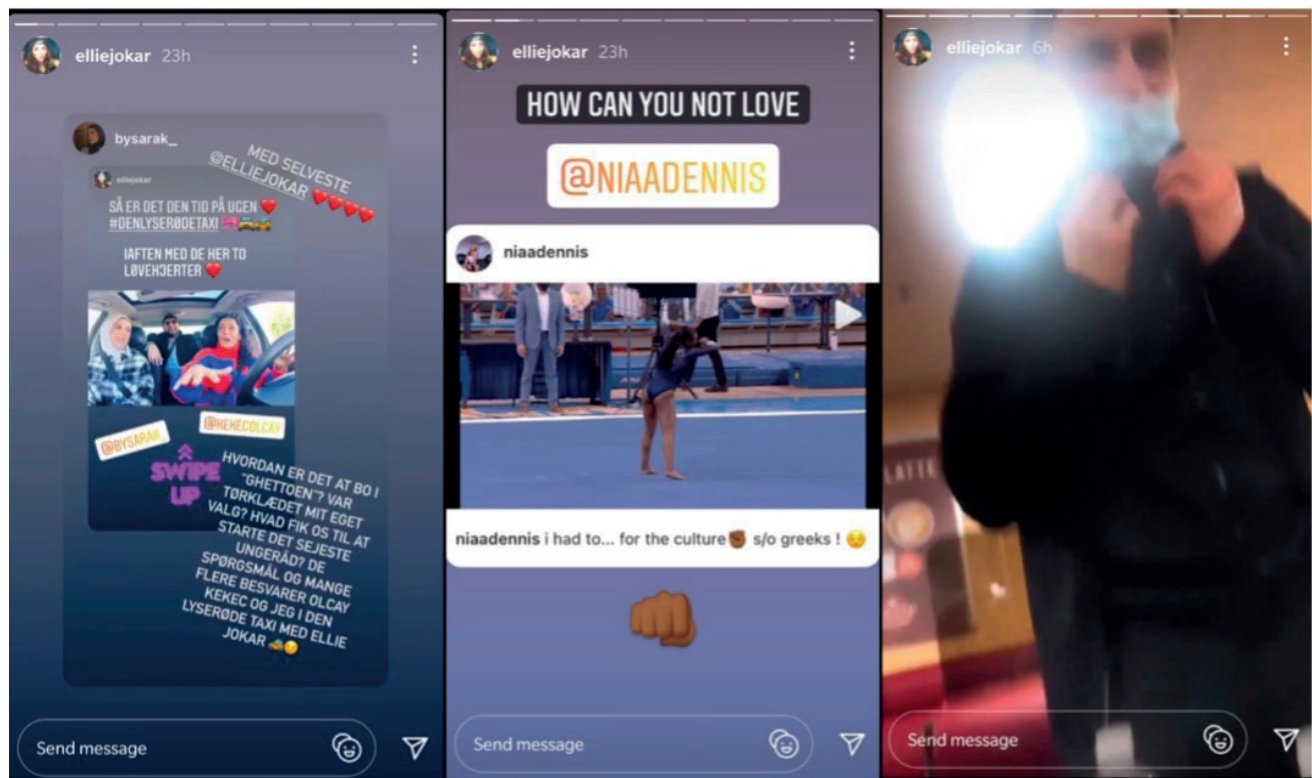
Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

Figure 3

Concluding discussion

In this article, I argue that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram host a Danish Muslim counterpublic. I conceptualize a sample of Danish Muslims' social media practices and content as racial projects grappling with the dominant project of hegemonic Danishness, which racializes Muslims as interlopers in Denmark. The focus has been on informants' reflections on their social media practices in relation to the representation of Muslimness they experience in mainstream media, a central catalyst for hegemonic Danishness. The findings suggest that despite their inherent attachment to capitalism and other modes of oppression, social media platforms do function as sites for circulating alternative knowledges and discourses that directly and indirectly challenge the dominant public's representation of Muslimness and, in turn, hegemonic Danishness' racial project of producing Muslims as un-Danish. This is most apparent when informants directly counter and supplement what they consider inaccurate or stereotypical narratives

of Muslims and Muslimness presented in Danish mainstream media. But they also engage in counterpublic racial projects by simply sharing snapshots of daily life, narrating a Danish Muslim individuality that troubles hegemonic Danishness' one-dimensional construction of Muslimness.

So, when Saeid uses Facebook to critique a media narrative about immigrants' and Muslims' cultures making them inherently susceptible to the novel coronavirus, he engages in a racial project that seeks to amend, but not eradicate, the racialized category of the Danish Muslim. Such content provides the kind of explicit discursive intervention one would expect from a counterpublic, challenging hegemonic Danishness' 'common sense' notion of Muslims as culturally foreign. Similarly, informants like Ayan also engage in racial projects when they put forth representations of their own complex negotiations of expectations from the Muslim community and Danish society-at-large. Highlighting racial formation's intersections with gender, Ayan's rejection of the stereotypical representation of a woman oppressed by Islam does not dismantle '(Danish) Muslim woman' as a

Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

meaningful category. Instead, Ayan undercuts the simplistic and stereotypical character of that category by narrating an identity in which Muslim is just one of many identity markers. The interactive nature of this digital counterpublic helps create community by for instance connecting Ayan to the audience through direct messaging, where they recognize and encourage her resistance to the racial project that constructs the 'Muslim woman' as a monolith. In her content, Ayan presents herself as a wife, mother, and woman whose Muslimness is important to, but not wholly definitive of, her identity.

When these informants post excerpts from their daily lives, as we saw with Ellie's use of Instagram for example, they subtly claim ordinariness not as Danish Muslims but as people living in Denmark who happen to be Muslim. Ellie herself experienced the consequences of hegemonic Danishness when she felt as if her choices about how she satirizes religion were obfuscated in mainstream media and instead presented as the result of coercion tied to her identity as a Muslim. On intrinsically individualistic social media platforms like Instagram, however, Ellie has more control over how she is represented. On social media, the informants experience autonomy and representational independence not available to them through mainstream media outlets. They use these sites to engage in counterpublic practices and "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1990, 67). In the context of hegemonic Danishness, simply embodying a Danish identity where Muslimness is present without fully defining it troubles a dominant public discourse in which Danish and Muslim are mutually exclusive.

I conceptualize these social media practices as racial projects that adjust and expand racial formation in Denmark to include the huge diversity of lived experiences among *Muslims who live in Denmark*. The informants accept Danishness as a meaningful category that they can be included within *as* Muslims—or rather as Danes who happen to also be Muslim. This conforms to extant research on how Danish Muslims navigate their positionality outside Danishness by seeking inclusion within it rather than seeking its destruction (Hassani 2022). But the counterpublic identified in this article posits a more optimistic stance than has been expressed by other young Muslims in Denmark, whose feelings of non-belonging according to previous research might cause them to forgo participation in political discourse (Simonsen 2018).

The interactivity of this counterpublic, afforded by commenting and messaging, complicates meaning-making and community-building and situates this article's findings as preliminary. This online counterpublic is innately dynamic and continuously evolving, and this article can only offer a snapshot of a moment in time. As they build a shared sense of community through resistant discourse, we might conceptualize these informants as part of an *emergent* counterpublic. Their activities exist in and contribute to an interactive space that may either grow into a more coherent community or splinter into a host of Danish Muslim counterpublic*s*.

My findings corroborate extant research by demonstrating Danish Muslims' awareness of an exclusionary dynamic attached to their identity as Muslims in Denmark, in this case particularly as it relates to mainstream media representation. The study's focus on social media practices contributes an additional perspective to a promising research agenda on how members of this group experience and engage this dynamic, and the success of campaigns like #DelDinSkam suggests that the online counterpublic I have identified may be populated by many more individuals than the study's informants. Rejecting the negative representation of Muslimness inherent to hegemonic Danishness while refusing neither Muslimness nor Danishness, the informants in this study reveal the contradictions of racialization and its erasure of individual personhood. In response to a dominant public where hegemonic Danishness situates Muslims as fundamentally Othered vis-à-vis life in Denmark, I have argued that even expressions of ordinariness so characteristic of social media content can be understood as a counterpublic move when performed by Danish Muslims. In these online spaces, Danish Muslims might find novel and

Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

distinctly communal ways to navigate and trouble hegemonic Danishness as they utilize social media's potential for mediated self-expression to more fully represent their complex identities as people living in Denmark who happen to also be Muslim.

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Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

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Notes

[1] I use "generally" here to acknowledge that especially in recent years, some mainstream media outlets appear to be engaging a fuller and more complex representation of Muslimness.

[2] Including one two-interview sequence with two informants producing content together as part of a group. Informant quotes drawn from the transcripts are translated by me.

[3] It should be mentioned that while including the rest of the informants would provide additional perspectives, none would have significantly altered this article's conclusions as the major findings presented here were found, with minor variations, across all interviews.

[4] The descriptions of the informants' social media activities position them at the time of the interviews in late 2019 and early 2020. Informant ages listed here are also at the time of the interview.

[5] As this is not a study of religion, and Muslim is conceptualized as a racialized category rather than a religious identity, informants were not asked to address their religiosity. I did make it clear to them during the recruitment process that the project revolves around people who identify as Muslim and their experiences of what it means to be categorized as "Danish Muslim" in contemporary Denmark.

[6] A 2020 report of nine national newspapers showed that while academics only make up about 13

Morten Stinus Kristensen

"We are never allowed to just be ourselves!":
Navigating Hegemonic Danishness in the Online Muslim Counterpublic

percent of the Danish population, members of this group author more than two-thirds of all published opinion pieces in those outlets (Sonne Nørgaard, Korshøj & Pilegaard Petersen 2020).

7 While not all immigrants or their descendants in Denmark are Muslim, many are, and it is this dynamic Saeid is speaking to here when he uses Muslim and immigrant interchangeably and uses the names Ali and Fatima commonly held by Muslims to denote average immigrants.

8 In this article I mostly address discourse, but hegemonic Danishness is co-constitutive with material realms such as labor relations so, it bears mentioning that while ethnic minorities in 2021 made up 14 percent of the population, they only appeared as 3.5 percent of news sources in surveyed media outlets (Jørndrup 2022) and only 5.6 percent of employees in the media industry in 2019, even though this population is 12.3 percent of the overall workforce in Denmark (Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen 2020).

9 Ellie does also suggest that a reason she does not encounter such direct racism is that those who would target her if they realized she was Muslim might consider her to be ethnically ambiguous.

10 These issues with journalistic coverage are not due to Danish journalists being bad at their job, but the structures and norms of journalism as a profession. Referencing Herbert Gans' work, Shoemaker et. al. (2009, 77) point out that "the construction of news" is to be found in "the process by which all parts, routines, and arrangements of the [news] organization are engaged for the creation of news." In other words, it is not individual failings of journalists (although those probably occur as well), but journalistic professional norms such as how one selects sources or frames certain issues that generally explain these problems.

11 Instagram Stories are posts set to self-delete after a given amount of time, usually 24 hours.