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# Emotion Mobilisation through the Imagery of People in Finnish-Language Right-Wing Alternative Media

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## ABSTRACT

Right-wing populists' online communication relies heavily on images and their emotional appeal. In this article, we study how images of human actors are deployed to engender emotions in their viewers in an example of Finnish-language right-wing alternative media—MV-lehti. We focus on three news cases in the publication's immigration coverage over 2015–2017. We understand emotions as part of a larger societal meaning-making process that is consciously, culturally and socially produced. Using methods of visual content analysis and critical close reading, we find that the most exclusionary emotions evident in the imagery of people are fear, disgust, hate and distrust. Through these negative emotions, each group of people is represented as a scapegoat for the “distress of ordinary people.” By excluding these groups from “us,” MV-lehti identifies them as representations of Otherness. This goes hand in hand with a distinctive populist style arguing that society is separated into two antagonistic groups—“the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite.”

## KEYWORDS

Right-wing alternative media; visual communication; populist style; emotions; people; immigration coverage; recontextualised news

## Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of right-wing alternative online media has emerged. These media are characterised by strong emotional addresses aiming to appeal to their audiences. They oppose the mainstream media and employ right-wing populist communication practices (e.g., Haller et al. 2019, 3; Haller and Holt 2019; Wirz et al. 2018). Following Moffitt (2016, 45), we define the phenomenon of populism as a *political style* that features an appeal to “the people” versus “the elite,” “bad manners” and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat. For this study, thinking of populism in this way allows us to approach the phenomenon not only as a feature of highly organised structures of the party-political system but also as a phenomenon in grassroots political communication (Moffitt 2016; see also Taggart 2000). This is especially the case in the context of Finland, where the boundaries of party politics, anti-immigrant online activism and right-wing alternative media are indeterminate, and the actors effortlessly shuttle between them.<sup>1</sup>

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MV-lehti represents a prominent example of the Finnish-language right-wing alternative media landscape. The site reframes information to fit its anti-immigrant agenda and aims to give new meaning to content to underpin its ideology (see Ylä-Anttila 2017). We consider the outlet as a case of *right-wing alternative media*, as the definition has lately become more established within media studies (e.g., Haller and Holt 2019; Haller et al. 2019; Nygaard 2019). Right-wing alternative media see themselves as representing perspectives that they believe to be treated unfairly in the mainstream media (Haller et al. 2019), making them primarily “reactive” (Haller and Holt 2019). In addition, such alternative media understand their role as correcting mainstream media, which are seen as corrupted by, dependent on and uncritical of the establishment (Holt et al. 2019). In Europe, right-wing alternative media are aligned with populist anti-system, anti-immigration and anti-elite sentiments. Despite diverging ideological foci, they share the core message that hegemonic mainstream media conceal or distort information regarding the negative consequences of immigration (Haller and Holt 2019). In this study, we examine right-wing alternative media in terms of their oppositional interpretations of multiculturalism and immigration in their emotionally charged visual content.

Over the past decade, media studies scholars have begun to consider the role of emotion in media content, reflecting a so-called affective and emotional turn (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019; see also Lünenborg and Maier 2018; Nikunen 2019b). In this article, we consider emotions in images because visual content has become a powerful part of political communication in the age of digital and social media. Images offer an attractive medium for far-right political entrepreneurs to mobilise supporters, especially regarding fears of immigrants and refugees (Doerr 2017). On various social media platforms, radical right-wing movements share and circulate images, then comment on and react to them, expressing their emotions and political views. Such actions strengthen members’ sense of belonging and shared affective and political meaning-making (Hokka and Nelimarkka 2020). Images shape collective emotions by transforming abstract and complex concepts into concrete, simple representations (Hokka and Nelimarkka 2020; see also Prøitz 2018). Images also cross language barriers, connecting right-wing activists in different countries (Doerr 2017).

We investigate how negative emotions are mobilised to bolster right-wing populist messages via images of human actors. We focus on negative emotions because such emotions are essential to right-wing populist rhetoric framing issues like immigration and thus work as a tool for inflaming hatred and exclusion (Salmela and von Scheve 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). To accomplish this, we analyse the visual meaning-making process in MV-lehti’s stories surrounding three cases related to the so-called European refugee crisis during 2015–2017. The study contributes to existing research on the transformative role of images in journalism by investigating the visual communication of right-wing alternative media. In particular, our analysis advances understanding of how right-wing alternative media use recontextualised news by examining the relationship between visual imagery and textual framing of this imagery. The analysis demonstrates that MV-lehti uses recontextualisation to foreground emotions of fear, disgust, hate and distrust to enhance its ideological agenda. The prominence of these negative emotions bolster anti-immigrant and anti-establishment messages in the visual communication of right-wing alternative media.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this article draws on three research traditions—visual communication studies, populism research and the study of emotions. For a long time, journalism research positioned images in a supportive role to words (Zelizer 2010). However, in the digital age, the circumstances for producing news are changing, and the emphasis on reason may be less important than ever before (Zelizer 2010, 4). As Hall demonstrated, the significance of news images can be seen in their connotative configurations of meanings, which permit a sign to signify not just denotative but other meanings (Hall 2010). Hall refers to the ideological level of the photographic sign, which adheres the image to the realm of moral-political discourse in society. Thus, images can be used to underpin the symbolic side of a news story instead of only covering the world as it is (Zelizer 2010). Visual communication, therefore, allows alternative ways of relaying information via connoted themes and interpretations (see Hall 2010). Images are useful tools for right-wing populist communication because they can depict complex issues and circumstances via simplistic visual frames (see Zelizer 2010, 1). For example, research on the radical right's political discourse has shown that visual images can be used to reinforce anti-immigrant discourse and strengthen the bond with audiences (Doerr 2017).

Chouliaraki and Stolic (2019, 314) introduce the idea of photojournalism as a political encounter with arriving migrants, suggesting that photography as a political commitment proposes what we, as media witnesses, should think, feel and do about migrants. Media images thus constitute a fundamental site for political debates on refugees (Bleiker et al. 2013, as quoted in Kotilainen and Pellander 2021).

Here, our focus is on how such debate plays out in right-wing alternative media. Drawing on approaches from the field of political communication, we refer to the notion of populism as a style (see Moffitt 2016) that is typical of right-wing alternative media. Ylä-Anttila et al. (2019) found that right-wing alternative media work as the populist political power: They employ a particular political style to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. We understand political style as Moffitt (2016, 38) defines it—"the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance" that focus on how political actions are constructed. Becoming political means politicisation, a process where conflicting issues are brought to the public sphere from everyday life (see Herkman 2019; Mouffe 2005). For right-wing populist political parties and grassroots activists, imagery appears as a strong communicative element to politicise immigration (see Doerr 2017).

Right-wing populist communication may strengthen negative stereotypes of immigrants (see Matthes and Schmuck, 2017) and use persuasion to affect citizens' attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Hameleers et al. 2017; Wirz et al. 2018). These communication strategies can be characterised by several main core concepts, such as constructing the notion of "the people," appealing to "anti-elitism" and "the exclusion of out-groups" (Reinemann et al. 2017, 13–14). Right-wing communication combines populist content and style with anti-immigrant rhetoric (Wirz et al. 2018, 498). The usage of anti-elitist and people-centrist statements (Wirz et al. 2018, 501), blame attribution and scapegoating (e.g., Aalberg et al. 2017, 10; Schmuck and Matthes 2017; Wirz et al. 2018; Wodak 2015) is characteristic of populist *content*. The populist *style* is often built on highly emotional, colloquial, tabloid-style language (Bos et al. 2013;

Canovan 1999; Mazzoleni et al. 2003; Moffitt and Tormey 2014) and establishing a central binary between “us” and “them” (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). We recognise the distinct nature of the content and the style of right-wing populist communication but ultimately consider them inseparable. Therefore, we examine the populist style in which immigration-related content is visually communicated by alternative media.

We are particularly interested in how right-wing alternative media draw on emotional appeals. Some scholars use the concepts “affect” and “emotion” interchangeably. For example, Wetherell (2012) understands affect and emotion together as embodied meaning-making practices within social and cultural discourses, whereas Ahmed (2010) sees the concepts as cohering and sliding together in everyday life. Following Ahmed (2014, 9), we use *emotion* to refer to a socially and culturally produced practice that is a consciously experienced feeling of bodily change. Ahmed argues that emotions are relational, appearing in relation to certain objects and subjects that shape and are shaped by emotions. Emotions may also be sticky, as they can stick to some objects and reject others (Ahmed 2014). Emotions are cultural and historical in that some objects may impress us by cultural histories and memories (Ahmed 2014). Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) signals the importance of analysing mediated emotion precisely because it entails the public naming, articulation and circulation of affect. Such an analysis allows us to consider which emotions become important in the sphere, why and with what consequences. This shows how emotions are collectively and socially narrated for larger purposes (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 10).

Following this line of thought, we also see mediated emotions as performative and dependent on past histories connecting with conscious meaning-making processes (see Ahmed 2014; Nikunen 2019a; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019; Wetherell 2012). In particular, individuals are often motivated to act politically on negative emotions, such as disgust, hatred and fear towards groups that are discursively different or “Other” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 11). The rhetoric of right-wing populist parties frames such issues as immigration in terms of emotions that include fear, anxiety, anger and feelings of powerlessness (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, 572). In this respect, we find it crucial to examine emotion to identify the negative meanings it may produce. Hokka and Nelimarkka (2020) argue that national-populist thinking is spread through images that mobilise emotions and affects, including fear, anger and resentment.

However, this raises the question of how, concretely, this is done in the context of visual communication in alternative media. Here, by drawing on the theoretical elements described above, we aim to answer the following research question: *How and why does MV-lehti construct and exploit negative emotions to bolster right-wing populist messages through images of human actors in its immigration coverage?*

## Data and Method

MV-lehti,<sup>2</sup> founded in 2014, is the most well-known and controversial right-wing alternative news site in Finland. The online publication persistently criticises professionally produced journalistic media (Reunanen 2018), which is a common strategy of right-wing alternative media (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2021).<sup>3</sup> Measured by the number of headline clicks, MV-lehti experienced the height

of its popularity in 2015–2016 (Nieminen 2018). The peak performance occurred during the period when the public debate on refugees was the most inflamed in Finland (see Ylä-Anttila 2017).

MV-lehti is a reactive publication that comments on articles that have already been published in mainstream media (e.g., Noppari et al. 2019). This online publication typically extracts news material, such as news stories and images from the Web, reframing information to fit an anti-immigrant agenda with the aim of advancing particular political narratives (see Haller and Holt 2019; Noppari et al. 2019; Ylä-Anttila 2017). In addition, MV-lehti publishes articles and images from other right-wing leaning websites and marginal extreme organisations, such as the currently prohibited, neo-Nazi-glamorising National Resistance Movement, posts from bloggers aligned with the political preoccupations of the site and Facebook status updates.

Such practices are not unique to MV-lehti, but reflect a broader policy within right-wing alternative media (Farkas and Neumayer 2020; Haanshuus and Ihlebaek 2021; Haller and Holt 2019; Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017). These practices have been described as *recontextualised news*, understood as the movement of certain elements of language and discourse across different social locations (Krzyżanowski 2016). While the research on recontextualized news in right-wing alternative media has focused on linguistic elements, examined through critical discourse analysis, we are here interested in extending this analytical framework through a visual analysis. As Krzyżanowski (2016) has argued, practices of recontextualisation constitute acts of strategic reordering and ideological repositioning, and we can see MV-lehti's appropriation of visual images through this lens.

The research material consists of online articles on three news cases published in MV-lehti ([www.mvlehti.net](http://www.mvlehti.net)) between 2015 and 2017. The dataset was collected by manually inspecting the entire Open Access archive of MV-lehti for articles covering the three cases in any referential manner (textual or graphic), from the first published reports to the last one in each year. The full dataset comprised 226 articles—28 news stories related to the Hennala case, 68 stories on the Station Square case and 130 stories on the Turku attack case. Each case relates to the so-called European refugee crisis and its consequences in Finland. The *refugee crisis* refers to the unprecedented number of people seeking asylum in Europe from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, starting in 2014–2015. In 2015, the crisis had a significant impact on Finland, with 32 476 people arriving to seek asylum in the country. This number represented an all-time high by orders of magnitude; in the 2000s, the annual number usually varied between 1500 and 6000 asylum seekers. The cases of the first two years were included in the dataset because this represented the peak popularity of the website, combined with the height of the impact of the refugee crisis in Finland. However, for the comparison and further follow-up, we wanted to investigate a case from the third time period in 2017. By this time, Finnish citizens had already had two years to adjust to a new situation in which asylum seekers were staying around the country in accommodation centres. These cases illustrate the context of MV-lehti's visual communication, and we employ them as examples of the publication's immigration coverage in a three-year timeframe.

Following Chouliaraki and Stolic (2019), we focused on the groups of people as an active accomplishment of the visual meaning-making practice in each news case. If

**Table 1.** MV-lehti dataset.

	Hennala case	Station square case	Turku attack case	Total
Timeframe	24.09.2015–31.12.2015	17.09.2016–31.12.2016	18.08.2017–31.12.2017	
Images	24	19	51	<i>N</i> = 94

*N* = number of analysed images on cases

visual imagery of human actors is essential to framing the debate on migrants (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017), we are interested how such imagery seeks to elicit negative emotions.

**The Hennala case** involved a racist demonstration by Finns at the gate of Hennala's emergency accommodation centre, which received a bus full of asylum seekers on 24 September 2015. Among the demonstrators was a young man in a Ku Klux Klan costume. The news spread around the world with the picture of "the cloaked man" holding the Finnish flag. We included the Hennala conflict in our analysis because racism in Finland gained international visibility with the circulation of this image (Nikunen and Pantti 2018, 71). Because of the enhanced visibility of racism, the case has special significance, especially in the anti-immigrant context of MV-lehti. This case was selected as a starting point in terms of when large numbers of asylum seekers began to arrive in Finland, and the Finnish public was faced with an unprecedented situation.

**The Station Square case** was a violent incident that took place at Railway Station Square in Helsinki on 10 September 2016. A Finnish man, aged 28, was walking through the square with a friend during a demonstration of the neo-Nazi-sympathising National Resistance Movement. The man stopped in front of the demonstrators, who were standing with their flags and delivering flyers. He called them names and spat on the ground; subsequently, one of the activists kicked him in the chest. The man fell and hit his head, sustaining serious injuries, and later died in hospital. At the trial, the jury discussed whether the death was caused explicitly by violence. The demonstrator was sentenced to prison for two years for aggravated assault. This case unfolded a year after the arrival of the largest influx of refugees.

**The Turku attack case** was a terrorist incident that took place at Market Square in Turku on 18 August 2017. Two people died and eight were wounded when a 23-year-old Moroccan asylum seeker attacked a crowd of people with a kitchen knife. Before the incident, the attacker had written a political manifesto in Arabic and made a video in which he introduced himself as a soldier of ISIS—although ISIS did not take responsibility for the attack. Police caught the attacker promptly after the incident, shooting him in the leg. In June 2018, the defendant was convicted of two terrorist murders and eight attempted terrorist murders. He was sentenced to life in prison. In Finland, a life sentence is approximately 14 years and four months. This case was selected for the analysis as a cautionary tale about the consequences of the Finnish immigrant policy that anti-immigration discourses often mention.

The analysis focused on the visual material of the cases, aiming to investigate the negative emotions mobilised through the imagery of people. As shown in Table 1, the dataset comprised 94 images.<sup>4</sup> The Hennala case consisted of 24 images, the Station Square case of 19 images and the Turku attack case of 51 images. We selected only images featuring human actors, and the remaining visual material was discarded.



Although the body texts of the news stories were excluded, captions, memes and other graphic texts of the pictures added by MV-lehti were included in the analysis because the textual context guided the emotional interpretations that MV-lehti proposed to its readership. Selected images were categorised according to the prominence of the group of people depicted, such as people from ethnic minorities, ordinary Finnish citizens and politicians. We investigated which group of people was the most dominant in each case and focused only on this group. This selection was done because we wanted to examine those groups of people that MV-lehti depicted as prominently involved in the encounters with the newcomers. The discarded images depicting human actors contained an incoherent selection of pictures of, for example, authorities, police, journalists, demonstrators of the National Resistance Movement and a soldier of the Winter War; hence, they were not analysed as a category. By focusing only on the prominent groups of persons, we aimed to name the primary objects to which MV-lehti attaches meanings via its emotional communication.

As a methodological instrument, we applied visual content analysis to examine how MV-lehti guides the emotional interpretation and meaning-making process via the imagery of human actors for their readership. According to Krippendorff (2013, as quoted in Rose 2016, 87), content analysis is a way of understanding the symbolic qualities of texts as elements of a text always refer to the cultural context of which they are a part (Rose 2016). This approach fits our purposes because we investigated MV-lehti's visual communication in the right-wing populist context.

Ahmed (2014, 90–92) uses the concept of stickiness, which is activated when a sign is saturated by multiple meanings with different emotional registers. An image of an asylum seeker, for example, can activate various previously heard associations and reactions through cultural layers of ideologies that have evolved over time (Nikunen 2019a, 89). This was also the case in our study, as we focused on how MV-lehti utilised the imagery of human actors to construct negative emotions and to bolster its right-wing populist message. In other words, our aim was to analyse those emotions that MV-lehti proposes to its readership through visual communication. We traced especially emotions that can be used for exclusionary purposes, such as fear, disgust, hate and distrust. The analysis was motivated by the textual context that MV-lehti builds up with captions and other textual elements attached to images.

The data were analysed based on multiple close readings proceeding in two phases. Although these abovementioned emotions guided our analysis in such manner, overlappingly they could also be read inductively from the data. First, we examined who were depicted in the images, what their sex and ethnic origin were, were they active or inactive, what were they doing, who acted on whom and how, where their gaze was directed, what their facial expression was and what external markers they had (e.g., dressing, jewellery, watches). Second, we traced those emotional appeals that could be operationalised by our readings of the first phase and the textual context of the images. Our perceptions of negative emotions were guided by the combination of image and textual elements that MV-lehti added to the images. We drew our interpretations from associations, impressions, stereotypes, appearances and reactions that the readings induced in the context of right-wing anti-immigrant and anti-establishment thinking. Moreover, we focused on the repetition and circulation of



**Table 2.** Groups of people in the dataset.

	Hennala	Station square	Turku attack	Total
Images total in each case	49	109	194	352
Dominant group of people	Ethnic minorities <i>Asylum seekers</i> <i>Muslim men</i> <i>Soldiers</i> <i>Demonstrators</i>	Ordinary citizens <i>Young women</i> <i>Anti-racists</i> <i>“Tolerants”</i>	Politicians <i>Governmental parties</i> <i>Prime minister</i> <i>Finns Party</i>	
Number of images featuring the dominant group	24	19	51	94
Most prominent emotion	Fear Disgust	Hate	Distrust	

the same or similar images that strengthened the suggested emotions. Finally, we considered the comparisons between the different groups of people.

### Findings: Negative Representation of Depicted People

As shown in Table 2, in the Hennala case, the dominant groups of people in the images were ethnic minorities, including asylum seekers, Muslim men, soldiers and demonstrators. There were 24 images of ethnic minorities, and asylum seekers were the largest subgroup, comprising 16 images. In the Station Square case, the most distinct group was ordinary citizens, with 19 images, consisting primarily of young women, anti-racists and “tolerants”—that is, those who advocate multiculturalism. In the Turku attack case, the most prominent group was politicians, with 51 images, including both those from governmental parties and the right-wing populist Finns Party. These analysed groups of people can be seen as the target groups that MV-lehti charges with negative emotions and then introduces to its audience.

The examined emotion was chosen amongst a few other negative emotions that the active role of the represented human actors and the textual context engendered. We focused on one or two of the most evident and exclusionary emotions. In the Hennala case, the examined emotions were *fear* and *disgust*; in the Station Square case, it was *hate*; and in the Turku attack case, it was *distrust*. Below, we introduce the negative emotions and meanings they convey.

#### *Fear*

In the Hennala case, the emotion that MV-lehti attached most frequently to the group of ethnic minorities was fear. The emotion was derived from the fact that most of the human actors who were portrayed in the images were Muslim men who, according to MV-lehti, the Finnish people should be afraid of. This emotion was engendered from the representation of ethnic minorities as a threat by portraying them as masculine, militant, belligerent and defiant. Generally, fear is felt when something that is experienced as unpleasant becomes too close and intense. Thus, like pain, fear anticipates hurt or injury involving the intensification of threats that divides those under threat from those who threaten (Ahmed 2014). Research has demonstrated that journalism frequently portrays migrants as victims or threats (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2019). In

Hennala, fear was present, especially in images that expressed masculine supremacy evolving from the narrative of the “unique patriarchy of Muslim men.” This narrative has been significant in the racialisation of Muslim communities as the unintegrated Other, either the enemy within or the foreign invader (Greig 2019, 48; see also Kundnani 2014). In 2015, most asylum seekers arriving in Finland came from Muslim countries—specifically, Iraq and Afghanistan (Finnish Immigration Service). In Finland, the concern in the public debate on Islam and Muslims relates to developments external to Finland and can only be understood in a broader European and global context. As such, fear over Muslim radicalisation and Islamic terrorism has also emerged in the Finnish public debate (Martikainen 2019, 31–32).

Rettberg and Gajjala (2016) propose that the Middle Eastern man is often cast as a potential terrorist, and therefore, a person who should elicit fear. In the case of Hennala, fear is engendered in violence, illustrated through gendered imagery. MV-lehti strengthens the image of immigrants as potential terrorists by publishing, for example, a screenshot of a random male user’s Facebook post. The post comprises text in Arabic language and three images in which a young Middle Eastern soldier poses with a machine gun and warms himself from the flaming body of his victim. The soldier looks confident and excited. The Arabic language of the post underlines the soldier’s ethnicity as a Muslim man. The representation of a young Muslim soldier shows the brutality he is capable of and thus emphasises an impression of Muslim men as inhuman and heartless. Above the screenshot, MV-lehti has added a link to its previous article, which reports on “the fighters of the foreign countries as refugees in Finland” (MV-lehti 2015). The screenshot is likely to engender fear in its viewer, but the link is an obvious suggestion to the audiences of how they should feel about Muslim men. MV-lehti depicts young Muslim men as warriors whose acts give reason to believe that for them, killing infidels is a holy mission that cannot be rejected. Such images draw on established right-wing discourses when explaining why it is reasonable to feel fear when encountering asylum seekers. According to Ahmed, political talk and media texts increasingly equate asylum seekers with terrorism. This practice implies the so-called violent drift, presuming that asylum seekers who flee terror and persecution can be impostors—secretly, they are terrorists and persecutors (Ahmed 2003, 209–210). This strengthens stereotypes of Islam as a violent religion although only a small minority of Muslims have ever engaged in a religiously motivated armed conflict (see Gottschalk and Greenberg 2019).

In contemporary media imagery, the stereotype has posed Middle Eastern masculinity as something threatening and dangerous (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016). In the Hennala imagery, fear developing from this stereotype arises especially from the straight gaze of the young male asylum seekers, who defy the audience by looking shamelessly at the camera; this emphasises self-confidence, and by extension, the absence of any real need for help. This interpretation is compatible with Brune’s (2004) idea that the stereotypes of young male asylum seekers are an embodiment of foreignness, criminality and rootlessness (Horsti 2005). Since these young men have nothing to lose, they can start with an empty slate and no responsibility for their choices. In the far-right’s ethnonationalist imagery, the dangerous masculinity of the racialised Other embodies the threats to faith, family and nation (Greig 2019, 46).

## Disgust

The other striking emotion induced in the Hennala case was disgust, an aversive emotion “saturated with socially stigmatising meanings and values” (Ngai 2005, 11, as quoted in Tyler 2013, 21). Disgust was outlined from the stigmatising way of how these people were represented in the pictures. In the Hennala images, Nussbaum’s (2004, 107) idea of disgust “as a powerful weapon in social efforts to exclude certain groups and persons” is apparent in representations of strange actions, dirtiness and helplessness among asylum seekers. Overall, disgust is a social emotion used to establish distinctions between “us” and “them” (Cohen 2005; Tyler 2013). In the images from the Hennala case, disgust is built into images that display the strange activities of newcomers. According to Ahmed (2014, 85), like fear, disgust depends on contact, which is felt as unpleasant proximity when we find the object is too close. In the Hennala case, several images display male asylum seekers from the Hennala centre as a group of savages engaged in strange behaviour. In the first picture, men dance wildly in a circle around a short statured man. In the second, men chase each other in a corridor. The third image depicts a man washing his face over a sink and another one bent over him. Lentin and Titley (2011, 50) link such representations to racism. They suggest that, emerging from the discursive appropriations of the far-right in Europe since the 1970s, the cultural norms, values, traditions and lifestyles of outsiders appear problematic because of the current cultural nature of racism. In this “differentialist turn,” as Lentin and Titley (2011) refer to it, racism became a regrettable but natural result of too much uncomfortable proximity through immigration. Disgust also evokes a question of the relative worthiness of asylum seekers. MV-lehti approaches the topic by questioning asylum seekers’ legitimate need for help and presenting them in a suspicious light. Nikunen and Pantti (2018, 83–84) argue that whether asylum seekers’ deserve of help is judged not only by the concreteness of distress but also by whether they are grateful and humble.

Disgust is also operationalised by the combination of the image and text, with words framing a certain emotion. For example, one image of the Hennala case represents mostly male asylum seekers standing in a crowd in the yard of the Hennala accommodation centre. In the crowd, there is a smiling female asylum seeker, surrounded by small children and holding one in her lap. The image had been published in a regional newspaper, *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* (24 October 2015), which reported on the case using a heading retained in the MV-lehti story: “The studies of children accommodated in the Hennala centre will be delayed due to scabies.” The viewer understands the issue by reading the original title, but MV-lehti adds a further recontextualising comment: “Asylum seekers have also been diagnosed with other contagious diseases, such as tuberculosis and hepatitis. Contact with illegal immigrants should be avoided.” Scabies and other contagious diseases give an impression that people are dirty and incapable of taking care of their hygiene. Obviously, scabies must be addressed before children can go to school, but these other diseases would require an enormous effort from health care. The MV-lehti’s comment depicts asylum seekers as helpless and disgusting “Others,” whose integration into “our country” would require immense exertion. The native Finn, who is invisible in the image, has the helper’s role, which raises the question of power. As Horsti (2018, 170) remarks, helping

others never occurs unattached to power structures because giving help always actualises by recognising the other in need of help and compassion. Hence, helping asylum seekers also includes the idea that they should feel indebted to the host nation.

## **Hate**

In the Station Square case, the fundamental emotion that MV-lehti attached to the images of the dominant group, those of ordinary citizens who advocate for multiculturalism, was hate. The emotion was induced from an explicit reaction of how MV-lehti most often related to these people. Hate stemmed from an alleged betrayal of the “real” ordinary people. The betrayer was portrayed primarily in a group consisting of young and mostly white women demonstrating against violence and racism, representing a worldview that contrasts with MV-lehti’s. The response to the accused betrayer can be read through MV-lehti’s captioning, which sets up the site’s ideologically charged recontextualisation of the case. According to Ahmed (2014, 49), hate is an intense emotion that involves a feeling of “againstness.” Hate is always hatred of something or somebody, involving the negotiation of boundaries between selves and others and between communities, where “Others” are experienced as a threat to self’s existence (Ahmed 2014, 51). Greig (2019, 38) suggests that feminism is the “great social upheaval” that explains the meanings and emotional charge attached to narratives of a “crisis of masculinity.” This crisis is used by far-right movements, which benefit from emotionally manipulative narratives that rely on the alienation, anxiety, anger, humiliation and resentment of marginalised young men (Roose 2017). Drawing on the idea that far-right arguments have gendered roots, in the Station Square case, hate can be understood in terms of gendered imagery. Thus, an image of young women represents a threat to the “male gaze,” which has traditionally involved the privileged male dominating the passive female who is the subject of the gaze (see Arya 2012).

The “male gaze” is challenged in the image of three young women standing in a straight line and staring directly at the camera. Two are blonde, and look like they are likely Finns by birth. The third is dark-haired, and looks ethnically different. The first two have severe looks on their faces, whereas the third looks to be almost smiling, giving a slightly sympathetic impression. The caption states, “Pia Toivonen, Sumi Moreno and Hanna Ruax stated that, in their Finland, there is no room for hate.” This statement includes the word “hate,” implying that these women challenge the viewer to take their side or choose hate. The image was first published in the tabloid *Ilta-Sanomat*, and the original caption was retained in the MV-lehti story, with the following recontextualising addition: “Are Pia Toivanen, Sumi Moreno and Hanna Ruax, who were interviewed by the *Ilta-Sanomat*, able to understand who started the hatred?” MV-lehti indicates that the opposing sides are both motivated by hate, including both those who protest against immigrants and those who welcome refugees. When MV-lehti asks “who started that hatred,” the publication suggests, because “we” were not the starters, it is justifiable to hate back. Thus, in Station Square, those who defend the National Resistance Movement’s victim are accused of betraying ordinary people even though both the victim and his advocates are themselves ordinary citizens.

This idea is typical of right-wing populist rhetoric, which draws on claiming victimhood by shifting blame and victim–perpetrator reversal (Wodak 2015). In this case, the strategy of victim–perpetrator reversal detracts attention from the accused defendant, focusing instead on the shady behaviour of the young women. In a broader context, these women represent all the “tolerants”—those who plead for multiculturalism. MV-lehti strengthens the hate directed at these young, tolerant women and their companions by leaning on a strategy in which the victim becomes a perpetrator and vice versa.

### ***Distrust***

In the Turku attack case, the most evident emotion induced by the imagery of the politicians was distrust. Interestingly, the most prominent group comprised politicians instead of the main character of the case, the Moroccan asylum seeker. Distrust was explicit in the dismissive way of how governmental party politicians, who MV-lehti found responsible for the Finnish immigration policy, were represented. Distrust is an attitude that reflects suspicion or cynicism about the actions of others who have provided evidence that they cannot be trusted (Lenard 2012, 56). Increased insecurity and distrust are among the most important consequences of social and economic change in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This has provided a fertile breeding ground for radical right-wing populism (Salmela and von Scheve 2017; see also Bauman 2001). The representation of this emotion can be illustrated through a comparison of the two primary groups of politicians who were represented in the case. The first group includes governmental party politicians and elite decision makers, such as then–prime minister Juha Sipilä. The second group features the right-wing populist politicians of the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset). The Finns Party (formerly known as the True Finns) has been claimed to represent the new radical right and to be part of the radical right populist party family. During the first decade of 2000s, the party strengthened its anti-immigrant and anti-multiculturalism appeals, along with EU scepticism (Jungar 2016). In a 2019 opinion poll, the Finns Party gained over 22.7% of the support (Muhonen 2019), and it remains a major opposition party in Parliament.

Distrust is embedded in the MV-lehti’s representation of the elite politicians, in line with right-wing populist style. In established democracies, right-wing populist politicians claim to speak for ordinary people whose interests and opinions are allegedly overridden by “arrogant elites, corrupt politicians and strident minorities,” identified as dishonest and profit seeking by populists (Canovan 1999, 5; Iakhsnis et al. 2018). MV-lehti strengthens this accusation by depicting elite politicians in a suspicious light. The members of the National Coalition Party, which belonged to the coalition government at the time, were systematically depicted either at leisure or in an unfavourable context. For example, in one image from 2014, then–interior minister Paula Risikko, is lying on the ground in an evening dress, embraced by a man in a suit. She looks intoxicated, laughing uncontrollably. Even more startling is the recontextualising caption written by MV-lehti: “Paula Risikko under the strong influence.” At the time of publication, Ms Risikko worked in the government, which was strongly criticised by right-wing populists. The image was taken at a party congress of the National

Coalition Party. Ms Risikko had been abruptly pulled onto the dance floor by her colleague, parliamentarian Tapani Mäkinen, when they suddenly fell down. Ms Risikko was not reported to be significantly intoxicated. Still, *MV-lehti* published the same image in September 2016, with the headline, “Paula Risikko totally wasted.” Loading the image with such meaning depicts the interior minister as irresponsible and reckless. The image becomes a metaphor for the official Finnish refugee politics—careless, irresponsible and lacking in understanding of the consequences of decisions.

To elucidate the contrast between the images of the two political groups, it is illustrative that in *MV-lehti* images, members of the Finns Party, male or female, are depicted in surroundings that emphasise their knowledge, professionalism and trustworthiness, such as a television studio or House of Parliament. Most often, the images of this group feature the chairman of the Finns Party.

## Conclusions

In this study, we examined how a Finnish-language right-wing alternative media publication mobilised negative emotions to bolster right-wing populist messages through its visual communication frequently drawing on recontextualised content originally published elsewhere. In the imagery of human actors of *MV-lehti*’s immigration coverage, we identified three groups of people that *MV-lehti* excluded from the in-group—ethnic minorities, young women who advocate for multiculturalism and the elite politicians with generous immigration policies. These groups were represented as scapegoats for the “distress of ordinary people” and excluded by addressing negative emotions, including fear, disgust, hate and distrust. In the Hennala case, fear was stoked by emphasising the masculinity, militarism, belligerency and defiance of ethnic minorities. Disgust was induced by underlining the strange activities, dirtiness and helplessness of asylum seekers. In the Station Square case, hate was produced by representing tolerant women as a group that actively destabilises and threatens masculinity and manhood. Finally, in the Turku attack case, distrust was constructed by highlighting the unreliability of the elite politicians and representing them in informal contexts. In this meaning-making process, *MV-lehti* used unconventional visual communication strategies in a journalistic manner, including recycling images from other media, frequently repeating imagery and recontextualising images with textual elements to politicise the topic of immigration. These strategies draw from right-wing populist content and style by appealing to anti-elitism, producing out-groups, indicating threats and scapegoats and increasing polarisation (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Reinemann et al. 2017; Wirz et al. 2018; Wodak 2015).

Fear, disgust, hate and distrust appeared as divisive and exclusive emotions. We argued that *MV-lehti* actively produces negative emotions to engender exclusion and polarisation between the in-group and out-groups. *MV-lehti* attaches these emotions to constructed out-groups and identifies them as representations of Otherness, understood as a presentation of an out-group as different or deviant for the persuasion and mobilisation of an audience (Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 160). In other words, *MV-lehti* constructs negative emotions to persuade its audience to reject out-groups. Scholars suggest such attitudes motivate right-wing voting because they include negative

attitudes towards immigrants, favour the in-group over out-groups, mark different ethnicities as threats and increase political distrust (e.g., Salmela and von Scheve 2017).

This work contributes to academic debate on the transitioning boundaries of studying images in news in the digital age (e.g., Dahmen et al. 2021; Mäenpää 2014). MV-lehti applies visual communication strategies that challenge mainstream journalism's use of images in many ways. In particular, we have demonstrated the site's use of recontextualising visual content sourced from mainstream media. The study demonstrates that negative emotions bolster anti-immigrant and anti-establishment messages in the visual communication of right-wing alternative media. In the light of right-wing populist rhetoric (see Wodak 2015), MV-lehti depicts these represented groups as the Other, identifying the enemy that "we," the in-group, should be afraid of and despise and strengthening trends towards polarisation. Our research suggests the salience of understanding the role of emotion in the recontextualisation of news carried out by right-wing alternative media, as essential to the ideological project and journalistic practices of these outlets.

## Notes

1. For example, the populist Finns Party chairman Jussi Halla-aho attained notoriety in the early 2000s for his personal blog *Scripta*, which had a strong anti-immigrant tone (see Herkman 2019). In 2017, he was elected as a leader of the party after the former leadership was challenged by a faction that mobilised on social media and the online platform 'Hommaforum' (Palonen and Sunnercrantz 2021). Hommaforum was founded in 2008 by the active readers of *Scripta*, and in the party-political breakthrough of the Finns Party (then True Finns), one-third of those elected had a background in Hommaforum or Suomen Sisä, which is a far-right association (Jungar 2016). Moreover, the founder of MV-lehti, the late Ilja Janitskin, benefitted from the success of the right-wing alternative online site when he stood as a candidate in the 2019 parliamentary elections.
2. The title of MV-lehti literally means WTF-magazine, and it later received the new title of Uusi MV-lehti (New WTF-magazine). The current editor-in-chief, Janus Putkonen, launched the first right-wing alternative media in Finland in 2011 to confront mainstream media (Tuomola 2020). Previously, Putkonen was the head of the news agency of the Donetsk People's Republic in Eastern Ukraine.
3. MV-lehti has intentionally opted to stay out of conventional regulatory bodies of journalism. It is not affiliated with the Council of Mass Media (CMM), a self-regulating committee (press council) run by publishers and journalists with members from the public. The CMM operates in the field of mass communication with the task of interpreting good professional practice and defending freedom of speech and the press. Neither is MV-lehti committed to advancing the ethical principles defined in the guidelines for journalists (see MV-lehti, 13 January 2018), in contrast to almost every media outlet in Finland. The guidelines were drafted to promote self-regulation and concern all journalistic work.
4. After careful consideration, we decided to refrain from publishing images for ethical reasons. The analysed images represent human actors who are clearly identifiable, and some are displayed in an undesirable context; we find it unethical to increase their circulation.

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Created and Abandoned MV-lehti, and Now He Will Turn His Back to Its Advocates: 'I Have Had Enough of the Patriotic Scene, of Those Antics']." *Helsingin Sanomat*, February 18. [https://www.hs.fi/sunnuntai/art-2000005569875.html?utm\\_campaign=tf-HS&utm\\_term=3&utm\\_source=tf-other&share=90b782b3cebb61b32c2258cd671c15e3](https://www.hs.fi/sunnuntai/art-2000005569875.html?utm_campaign=tf-HS&utm_term=3&utm_source=tf-other&share=90b782b3cebb61b32c2258cd671c15e3).