Authoritarianism in the discourse of online forums

A study of its articulations in the Swedish context

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this study is to explore the authoritarian dimension in the far-right discourse of online forums. The study argues for a focus on the articulations of authoritarianism to understand the dynamics of far-right discourse. Four central features of authoritarianism are identified and explored: 1) the authoritarian values underlying articulated opinions on diverse issues; 2) the emotional dimension of authoritarianism; 3) the coexistence of civil and uncivil articulations of authoritarianism; and 4) the role of mainstream news as reference for and trigger of authoritarian responses. The qualitative study is based on data from two Swedish forums, Flashback and Familjeliv [Family life], and consists of 79 threads related to three issues on the agenda: disorder in school, gang crime, and transgender. The results show expressions of authoritarian–liberal value conflicts, and, most significantly, the vigour of an authoritarian culture on the forums, with implications for the normalisation of far-right discourse.

KEYWORDS: authoritarianism, online discourse, emotions, far-right, normalisation

Introduction

Online- and social media are central to the communication and normalisation of far-right discourses in contemporary society (Krzyzanowski et al., 2021; Åkerlund, 2021, 2022). Research has documented the widespread articulation of key elements of far-right discourses: radical nationalism, xenophobic and racist opinions, anti-feminism and misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia (Agius et al., 2020; Ekman, 2019; Patrona, 2020; Saresma & Tulonen, 2023; Törnberg

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& Törnberg, 2016; Åkerlund, 2022). The discourses reflect the political and ideological projects of diverse parties and movements representing what Mudde (2019) has described as the extreme right and the radical right. However, far-right discourse not only depends on political projects but on the more general authoritarian values and worldviews underlying opinions on immigrants, gender, and sexual minorities, articulated in authoritarian responses on issues in public discourse. Authoritarian responses here refer to the evaluations of issues based on authoritarian values, and the related expressions of authoritarian opinions (Feldman, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The overall aim of this article is to explore the authoritarian dimension fundamental to far-right discourse by analysing the articulation of authoritarian responses in two online forums.

While authoritarianism is widely theorised and investigated in political and social psychology (Adorno et al., 1950/2019; Duckitt, 2015; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Fromm, 1941/2011; Stenner, 2005), and referred to as a key component of the far right (Mudde, 2019), the authoritarian dimension is often downplayed and rarely conceptualised in research on the far right in online- and social media. This is a significant shortcoming, where this study aims to contribute. There are several reasons why the concept of authoritarianism provides important explanatory power in this context.

First, as I argue and demonstrate in this study, authoritarian values – conformism, authoritarian submission, aggression (Feldman, 2003; Norris & Inglehart, 2019) – are a common denominator behind articulated opinions associated with the far right. By focusing solely on the propagation of particular opinions, we risk missing the dynamics of the underlying pre-political authoritarian values (Stenner, 2005), potentially explaining intersections of xenophobia, misogyny, and homophobia in far-right discourse (Saresma & Tulonen, 2023). However, important to clarify, this study focuses on the authoritarian dimension of opinions in online discourse, not the correlations of values and attitudes in a general population (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Schäfer, 2022).

Second, research provides evidence of the central role of emotions in far-right discourse, and especially so in online contexts which allow and promote the communication of heated emotions (Ekman, 2019; Saresma & Tulonen, 2023; Åkerlund, 2022). Drawing on literature on the politics of emotions (e.g., Ahmed, 2013), and in particular the work by Nussbaum (2013, 2018), this study investigates the emotional dimensions of authoritarianism, focusing on the expressions of disgust, anger, and hate in online forums.

Last, the diverse and widespread authoritarian responses on issues on the agenda, in public discourse and news media reporting, form an important context for the normalisation of far-right discourse (Brown & Mondon, 2021; Krzyzanowski & Ekström, 2022). Research has identified critical processes in the normalisation of uncivil and racist discourses, related to the recontextualisation of the extreme into mainstream media and civil political spaces (Ekman, 2019; Krzyzanowski et al., 2021). As Åkerlund (2022) has noted, far-right discourses are propagated not only in dedicated far-right online enclaves, but increasingly so in mainstream online spaces. Krzyzanowski and colleagues (2021: 8) furthermore

explained the normalisation referring to the borderline discourse that typically includes a combination of "unmitigated radical statements" and "politically correct language". This study contributes by shifting the focus to the broad spectrum of authoritarian responses articulated and communicated in online public discourse – from rather uncontroversial opinions to the extreme of hateful and uncivilised discourse (Krzyzanowski & Ekström, 2022). The diverse and coexisting expressions of authoritarianism in settings frequently visited by a wider public, including people not at all affiliated with the far right, is understood as significant to the normalisation of the far right.

The study contributes a systematic account of authoritarianism articulated in the discourse of online forums, focusing on four central features: 1) the authoritarian response as a common denominator of diverse opinions articulated in response to issues on the public agenda; 2) the emotional dimension of authoritarianism and the related dehumanisation of the other; 3) the online forums as public settings for the articulations of coexisting civil and uncivil forms of authoritarianism, with implications for the normalisation of the extreme; and 4) the role of mainstream news reports in activating authoritarian responses in online discourse.

The analyses of these features are grounded in empirical data collected from two of the most frequently used and well-known forums in Sweden: *Flashback* and *Familjeliv* [*Family life*] (see section on method and data). To enable the analysis of general features of authoritarian responses, the study focuses on discussions of three issues on the agenda: disorder in primary schools, shootings and gang crime, and transgender and gender dysphoria. The following sections present previous research, the theoretical approach on authoritarianism, and the method and data, before moving to the analyses.

Research on the far right in online and social media

Over the past decade, extensive research has explored the dynamics and impact of the expanding far-right media activities on social media accounts, online forums, and alternative online news media (Ekman, 2019; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Haanshuus & Ihlbaek, 2021; Roberts & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022; Saresma & Tulonen, 2023; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021; Åkerlund, 2022). Online and social media have been recognised as contexts in which far-right politics and related xenophobic and uncivil discourses are efficiently mobilised and propagated (Fuchs, 2017; Wahlström et al., 2021; Åkerlund, 2021) through a multiplicity of practices including rhetorical strategies (Blomberg & Stier, 2019), recontextualisation of discourses (Ekman, 2019), and hyperlinking (Törnberg & Nissen, 2022).

Moreover, research has provided evidence of the role of online- and social media discourses in the normalisation and mainstreaming of far-right opinions and ideology (Krzyzanowski et al., 2021; Winter, 2019; Åkerlund, 2022). Online forums cultivate uncivil discourse and facilitate expressions of opinions stretching the boundaries of norms in the socio-political landscape (Krzyzanowski & Ledin, 2017). A central mechanism in the normalisation of the extreme is what Åkerlund (2022: 12) has described as "the penetration of far-right discourse

into […] mainstream online setting". It is thus essential to study not only the extremist sites and accounts, but the forums regularly visited by a wider public, which is the focus of this study.

One of the forums investigated in this study (*Flashback*) has been the subject of in-depth analyses focusing on protagonists of far-right organisations on the forum (Blomberg & Stier, 2019), the propagation of far-right content by influential users (Åkerlund, 2021), and the articulations of, for example, anti-immigration and anti-feminist opinions (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021; Yantseva, 2020). Research on the far right in online and social media across countries seems to suggest that features of authoritarianism (the belief in traditional, rigid, and hierarchical orders; the intolerance of difference; and aggression) are central to the well-documented xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, and the related dehumanising rhetoric (Ekman, 2019; Saresma & Tulonen, 2023; Wahlström et al., 2021). However, so far, the authoritarian dimensions have not been conceptualised and accounted for in empirical analyses. While authoritarianism is analysed in the style and rhetoric of political leaders in social media (e.g., Gounari, 2018), a systematic account of authoritarianism in citizens' online discussions is mainly missing. This is notable given the substantial evidence of the authoritarian–liberal value cleavage as a central dimension in political debates across Western democracies, increasingly explaining people's different attitudes and support for the far right (Feldman, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Shehata et al., 2022). Research shows that authoritarian values tend to predict people's attitudes on, for example, immigration, gay rights, and gender equality (Feldman, 2020; Richey, 2012).

The concept of authoritarianism

Authoritarianism is the key concept in this study, and in this section, the theoretical concept is presented. Other concepts are introduced in connection with the specific analyses.

The idea of authoritarianism as a pre-political disposition for certain political opinions (in, e.g., fascism) was introduced in Fromm's (1941/2011) and Adorno and colleagues' (1950/2019) seminal studies on the authoritarian character and personality, revised and developed in contemporary political psychology. Scholars have essentially agreed on the core of authoritarianism, although the theoretical foundations have been debated (Duckitt, 2015; Feldman, 2020; Mudde, 2019). The idea of a particular authoritarian personality is replaced by a concept of authoritarian values and beliefs, referring to enduring dispositions assumed to guide individuals' evaluations and responses to circumstances and issues in society. Authoritarian responses thus transcend various issues and are manifest in shifting attitudes (Feldman, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stenner, 2005).

A core aspect of authoritarianism is the belief in a strictly morally ordered society and commitments to traditional norms and authorities. Based on this, three components of authoritarian values are identified: conformism, authoritarian submission, and authoritarian aggression (Duckitt, 2015; Feldman, 2003; Norris

& Inglehart, 2019). Conformism refers to the belief in a rigid adherence to cultural conventions, traditional norms, "natural" and hierarchical relations (in nativism, binary gender systems, etc.), and a related intolerance of difference in progressive identities and lifestyles. Cultural diversity is perceived as a threat to order and stability in society. Authoritarian submission refers to the belief in loyalty, obedience, and respect for authorities (parents, teachers, political leaders). Social cohesion and security in society is assumed to be dependent on submission and the determination of strong leaders. Finally, authoritarian aggression refers to the belief in harsh measures and punishment for those who disobey, to prevent and respond to social disorder and insecurity. Aggression is a primary way to teach individuals that they should follow the rules. To be noted, these values contrast with basic liberal values: Conformity contrasts with cultural diversity and the rights of minorities; submission and obedience is in contrast to personal autonomy and independence; aggression is in contrast to compassion. In this study, the conceptualisation of authoritarian values forms the main theoretical impetus for analysing the discourse shaped in the online forums.

The case, data, and method

The data consist of 79 threads including 5,154 posts on two forums: *Flashback* (www.flashback.org) and *Familjeliv* (www.familjeliv.se). The selection aims at a rich and broad empirical base enabling careful generalisations to similar contexts. Three characteristics of the data are important to recognise:

1. It is a study of Sweden, one of the liberal democracies in which liberal–authoritarian value-related conflicts have intensified in recent years in relation to issues of immigration, crime, and LGBTQIA+ rights, and where far-right politics has been successful, primarily represented by the Sweden Democrats (Mudde, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Widfeldt, 2018).
2. The forums studied – *Flashback* and *Familjeliv* – are among the most popular in Sweden. They regularly gather millions of visitors and publish thousands of posts daily on diverse topics. *Flashback*, recently described as "one of the largest web forums in the world" (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021: 771), is considered somewhat controversial, with a policy of anonymity that enables a partly uncivilised discourse. Both forums have a diversified user base, unlike profiled political forums; however, while *Familjeliv* gathers more women than men and has a certain profile towards privacy and family, *Flashback* is male-dominated and contains frequent posts with more extreme far-right views. Two forums are included to enable the analysis of diverse authoritarian responses across contexts and groups of users. I added *Familjeliv* to include a forum without any recognised connections to the far right. While the analyses show differences between the two forums, the main aim of the study is to explore central features of authoritarianism in online discourses in general.
3. I selected data to cover three topics on the public political agenda that are

extensively reported in the news media: problems with disorder and rowdy students in primary schools; shootings and gang crime; and transgender and gender dysphoria. The data include all threads on these topics published on the forums in 2020–2022. The topics are well represented in the 79 threads.

The topics have been selected to represent areas of political debates which involve tensions between authoritarian and liberal views. Disobedience in school and gang crime are, for example, perceived by some as threats to authority and social order which require a policy of tougher measures and punishments, in potential conflict with liberal values of humanism. The debate on gender dysphoria and the right to gender reassignment involves tensions between conformism and minority rights. In general, the Swedish political debate shows a high degree of consensus regarding tougher measures (an authoritarian orientation) to solve disorder in schools and the threats from gang crime, and a widespread consensus on liberal values regarding the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. Hence, the topics are differently positioned in the socio-political landscape. However, the political parties in Sweden have different opinions and proposals on the three issues, reflecting their positions on the liberal–authoritarian dimension. On the issue of crime, the solutions propagated within the radical far right – harsher punishment, minimal immigration (and repatriation) – has become increasingly mainstream. In LGBTQIA+ issues, the far right creates recurring political conflicts that challenge dominant liberal values.

The study applies a qualitative approach with detailed analyses of *how* authoritarianism is articulated on the forums. The analyses are based on a theoretically informed close reading and coding of all posts. Conceptualisations of authoritarianism have functioned as interpretive frameworks, guiding the analyses. The approach thus follows the principles of abduction (Danermark et al., 2019). A selection of examples from the posts are presented to illustrate and substantiate the conclusions. I use the abbreviations FB (*Flashback*) and FL (*Familjeliv*) to indicate where the posts were made. The posts are in Swedish and the quotes in the article are translated into English.

Although the analyses aim to identify qualitative features, I occasionally use a language of vague quantifications. "Frequent" and "recurrent" mean that something happens significantly more often than in a few cases. I also present a few quantitative descriptive data, where I found this relevant for the transparency of the study.

Analysis

The below analysis is structured according to the four central features of authoritarianism: 1) the authoritarian response, 2) the emotional dimension, 3) the coexistence of civil and uncivil expressions, and 4) the role of mainstream news in the activation of authoritarian responses.

1. The authoritarian response: A common denominator of diverse opinions

In this section, I present evidence of authoritarianism (and the related authoritarian–liberal value conflict) as central to the discourse on the online forums. The three issues studied triggered discussions that were, in general, clearly related to this value conflict. As illustrated in Table 1, the general components of authoritarian values are reflected in diverse issue-specific opinions. Note that conformism is manifested in, for example, the beliefs in natural and binary relations for ethnicity and gender, and an intolerance towards different identities and constructed out-groups. It is a factor underlying xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia. Hence, as indicated in the examples (see Table 1), statements are not *either* authoritarian *or* xenophobic, but both. Moreover, there are various relations between the components of authoritarian values, which are given more attention in the analyses below.

TABLE 1 Authoritarian opinions on the different topics (examples from the two forums)

Components of authoritarianism	Disorder in school	Shootings & gang crime	Transgender & gender dysphoria
Conformism: the importance of conventions, natural relations, uniformity, and a related intolerance of difference.	"Use uniforms at all schools. Nicely dressed, no fuss!" (FB) "Parents must teach their children to fit in […] adapt to rules and norms". (FB)	"Multiculturalism must go; there are no other solutions". (FB) "Less subsidy immigrants, less crime, a better society!" (FB)	"The human body is not a laboratory where one can pretend to be one or the other, according to the mood of the day". (FB) "It's pretty obvious that it's wrong and unnatural to want to change gender". (FL)
Submission: the importance of obedience, discipline, and loyalty to authorities; intolerance of individual autonomy.	"The problems come when the student does not show respect for the teacher and as a brat refuses to stop arguing". (FB) "In school you must respect the teacher, otherwise you will be locked out or beaten". (FB)	"What if the fucking bitch [a mother] had taken some responsibility and raised them to be real people […]". (FB)	"The thing about everyone's right to be who they are has gone too far". (FL)

Aggression: the importance of harsh measures and punishment; intolerance of tolerance.	"Rough! Sometimes only tough love helps […] the time for educative talk is over". (FL) "I am pissed off at the laxity in Sweden today […] Cuddling and petting the children is never successful". (FL)	"What is needed is tougher punishment, skip the insane penalty discount". (FL) "Criminal foreigners must leave and with them the whole clan". (FB)	"Sterilise the parents at the same time; if they can't even teach their children what reality looks like, they shouldn't have any more children!" (FB) "Absolutely insane […] those responsible for this madness should be lynched". (FB)

Comments: The studied forums are *Flashback* (FB) and *Familjeliv* (FL). The gathered data was published between 2020 and 2022.

Across the three issues, there are opinions on the forums in clear contrast to the authoritarianism illustrated. Participants adopted a more liberal stance related to values such as tolerance of diverse identities, rights for minorities, equality before the law, individual autonomy, and humanism. Children's rights are emphasised in posts criticising repressive measures in response to the disorder in school. In the discussions about transgender, participants opposed conformism in arguments that affirm diversity and individual autonomy: "Children do not have to learn to fit into stereotypical norms at all. Children must learn to like themselves and respect others for who they are" (FL). In the discussions about gang crime, there were posts criticising the proposed tougher measures as a violation of liberal principles of human rights and the rule of law.

However, authoritarian opinions are frequent across forums and issues. They are more dominant in *Flashback* compared to *Familjeliv* (see Table 2). The threads in which authoritarian opinions are almost completely absent are related to different issues in the two forums. In *Flashback*, these are five threads on shootings, primarily oriented towards a collaborative investigation of crime cases, without much explicit articulation of values or attitudes. In *Familjeliv*, authoritarian opinions are infrequent or absent in threads discussing transgender and gender dysphoria, primarily referring to participants' private life experiences. In contrast, the threads about transgender in *Flashback* are totally dominated by conformism and intolerance. On this issue, the forums thus represent parallel discourses dominated by opposite values.

TABLE 2 Authoritarian opinions in two forums on three topics (number of threads)

		Familjeliv			Flashback		
		disorder	shootings	trans-gender	disorder	shootings	trans-gender
Authoritarian opinions	Dominant	2	0	0	16	9	11
	Mixed	5	8	4	6	6	1
	No	1	0	5	0	5	0
Total number of threads		8	8	9	22	20	12

Comments: I have separated between threads totally dominated by posts articulating authoritarian attitudes, threads with a mixture of authoritarian and non-authoritarian, and liberal attitudes and threads from which authoritarian attitudes are almost completely absent.

The discussions show different dynamics with regard to the contrastive authoritarian–liberal values, of which three are of particular relevance to the object of this study: the balancing of authoritarian and liberal values, the articulated disputes, and the consensus and escalation of authoritarianism.

The contrastive values are not necessarily incompatible in peoples' opinions. On the contrary, the appropriate balancing of such values can be understood as crucial in democracy (Stenner, 2005). Posts on the two forums provide examples. In a post (FB) about disorder in schools, a person, for example, refers to his experiences as a teacher, agrees with previous posts advocating disciplinary measures to handle unruly children, but argues for tolerance and care of the children. Another example of balancing is indicated in posts defending people's right to change gender but also arguing that this has gone too far. Although this balancing occurs, the contrasting values are more salient on the forums.

There are examples in both forums of discussion where participants respectfully negotiate authoritarian and liberal opinions on an issue. More frequent, however, are the disputes where opinions are confronted and participants stick to their positions. Strong opinions are frequently articulated in a language of impoliteness and mocking the opponent's view.

As indicated in Table 2, authoritarian attitudes dominate numerous threads, particularly on *Flashback*. These discussions indicate a consensus on underlying values. Participants mainly confirm each other (explicitly or implicitly) in what can be described as an authoritarian culture. They add opinions, arguments, and examples in threads where authoritarianism is affirmed and escalated in more radical forms, partly expressed in uncivil language and intolerance related to racism, homophobia, and misogyny. The civil and uncivil discourse is analysed in more detail later.

2. The emotional dimension of authoritarianism

This study provides evidence of emotions as a key feature of authoritarianism. The observed authoritarian responses are often infused with strong feelings. Individuals and groups are constructed as objects of anger, disgust, and hatred.

Emotions are multidimensional phenomena, theorised as bodily and psychological states, sociocultural and political practices, linguistic constructs, and products of discourse (Ahmed, 2013; Hall & Ross, 2019; Nussbaum, 2019). Theorising the relationships between these realities is beyond the scope of this study; however, to understand the dynamics of the authoritarian responses, I suggest that four aspects of emotions are critical. First, as Nussbaum (2019) emphasised, emotions are shaped in value-laden evaluations of what matters in life. What people have – and express – strong feelings about is what they ascribe personal importance to. An example is the authoritarian response of anger and hate, triggered by a percieved significant threat that others (identities or behaviour) pose to one's own values and beliefs. What matters – and what people perceive as a threat – is related to social and cultural practices.

Second, in the expression of emotions, actors take a stance on and construct others as objects of emotions. As Ahmed (2013) argued, emotions are intentional and relational in being directed towards objects or people, shaping attachment or distance to the other. Emotions promote the sharp distinction between in- and out-groups in authoritarianism.

Third, to understand the emotional dimensions of authoritarianism, we must recognise the social and public nature of emotions (Ahmed, 2013; Hall & Ross, 2019; Saresma & Tulonen, 2023). Emotions create social cohesion. Groups are bonded in collaborative performances of feelings, not least in an online context in which the language of heated emotions tends to be normalised (Ekman, 2019; Åkerlund, 2022).

Finally, the construction of others as objects of feelings (in public discourse) has political foundations and implications. As Hall and Ross (2019: 1360) have argued, popular emotions may refer to psychological responses, but their basis often lies in "politically or ideologically charged assumptions". Emotions are mobilised and politicised in condemnations of out-groups and the legitimation of far-right politics (Ekman, 2019; Milani & Richardson, 2021; Saresma & Tulonen, 2023).

My analysis is primarily inspired by Nussbaum's (2013, 2018) analysis of three generic emotions – anger, disgust, and hate – that I found particularly significant in the expressions of authoritarianism on the forums. As I show, they are often interrelated in discourse, although comprising different dynamics in the construction of others as objects of emotions.

Anger is a response to what Nussbaum (2018: 73) describes as "significant damage, pertaining to one's own values or circle of cares". Below, I show how anger is expressed in response to the damaging of the authoritarian values of conformism and subordination. When anger is directed towards others, it is typically associated with blaming and calling for retribution (Nussbaum, 2019). Anger tends to be translated into demands for punishment, justified by a logic of retribution. This logic makes anger central to the aggressive dimension of authoritarianism.

Disgust is an intense aversion that causes people to avoid contact with objects with disgusting qualities (Nussbaum, 2018, 2019). Nussbaum distinguishes primary and projective disgust. Primary disgust refers to an immediate (sensory or cognitive) reaction to bodily qualities, fluids, and particular animals; avoidance is the main response. Projective disgust refers to the cultural transfer of disgust to objects in discourses and semiosis. Of particular social and political importance are the projections to groups of humans represented with perceived disgusting properties. Disgust, Nussbaum (2019) argued, typically focuses on the qualities of categories of people rather than particular wrongful acts. As will be illustrated, disgust is evoked in the performance of authoritarian intolerance of difference, in dehumanisation of others, and justifications of discrimination and non-acceptance of equal rights for certain groups.

While the main object of anger is what people do, or the perceived wrongdoings, hatred is an intense emotion directed towards the entire being of a person or a group of people (Nussbaum, 2019). Hatred can thus be fuelled by both anger and disgust. In authoritarianism, hatred typically relies on prejudice against groups, based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion. Hatred is an extreme in the construction of out-groups in authoritarian conformism, although in some threads on the forums, it is common and almost normalised.

Below, I present examples of how anger, disgust, and hatred are expressed in the discussions of the three topics studied in the data. They are selected to illustrate the general interrelatedness of particular emotions and authoritarianism *and* the mix of intensified emotions. Emotions are expressed using linguistic representations of actors, intensifying adverbs, interjections, capital letters, swear words, and so on. To further clarify the distinctive emotional components of authoritarianism, I end this section by discussing some contrastive emotions in anti-authoritarian responses on the topics.

Making categories of people the object of anger, disgust, and hatred

Characterising the authoritarian responses on the forums are the recurrent blame and anger directed towards individuals and groups. The objects of anger vary depending on the issues: children in school, perpetrators and victims in cases of shootings, and individuals challenging gender norms. Values of conformism and submission are implied or explicitly stated as standards for the identification of wrongdoings. Anger is also directed towards those who are accused of being responsible for various threats to society and the categories of people who represent "incorrect" opinions on the topics discussed (feminists, left-wing politicians, the government). Within and between the threads, the expressions of anger shift in intensity.

Anger is manifest in the naming and the qualities attributed to the Other. Children are frequently referred to as "kid" (in Swedish, "unge"), which, in this context, indicates a dehumanising meaning, as in this example (FB): "why does every other kid today have gender dysphoria?" Children blamed for disorder in

school are referred to in rude and aggressive language: "kid bastard", "whore", "pig", as well as in racist categories. The anger turns into hatred, expanded beyond the particular perceived wrongdoing into a global emotion directed towards a general out-group.

Across the discussions on the three studied topics, there are posts expressing anger at parents for not properly raising their children (see Table 1). In a thread started by a parent who complains about a teacher who has confiscated his son's mobile phone, the anger is turned against the parent: "Why is the young bastard using his mobile phone at school in the first place? Absolutely sick that you defend a kid who disrupts the teaching instead of raising him" (FL). People with transgender identities are referred to with a vocabulary of disgust ("fucking freak"), and the anger is directed at the parents who fail to raise the children to accept conventions and "reality": "if they cannot even teach their kids what reality looks like, they fucking should not have more kids" (FB).

In discussions on shootings (primarily FB), individuals are frequently transformed into objects of disgust and hatred. Enacting a racist discourse, criminals are repeatedly categorised as "immigrants" or specific ethnic groups ("Somalis", "Muslims", etc.), and then referred to with a vocabulary of projective disgust associated with obnoxious bodily qualities and animals. "Parasites" and "dregs" are labels metaphorically and derogatorily used in constructions of "disgusting" individuals.

Values of conformism are implied in anger and disgust directed toward those who represent or defend non-traditional gender identities. In one example (FB), the thread was started by a person who tells about a co-worker who is planning a gender correction. In a response post, the person uses intensifiers and interjections to express his feelings: "There is something extremely distasteful about people who boast that they are actually transgender people. Obnoxious!" In a following post by another participant, the construction of disgust takes a more elaborate form. The person posts a link to pictures of completed gender corrections and prepares readers for the disgust: "Finish eating before you click […]". In the following posts, participants express harsh anger and hatred towards those who are supposed to defend gender corrections.

Aggression is a component of authoritarianism that manifests in multiple ways. Harsh measures are suggested to address the identified problems in society: unruly students must be suspended; immigrants should be deported; imprisonment should be longer, and the treatment of prisoners should be ruthless and brutal. Aggression is manifest in arguments for retribution. A morality is invoked where those who are responsible for wrongdoings must also be punished. The anger is in some cases amplified in the wish for the most aggressive and uncivil forms of punishment (see Table 1).

Moreover, aggression is directed towards politicians, who are blamed for not solving the problems of society, and it is justified in narratives of amplified threats and hatred to out-groups representing the threat: "Damn, always this petting with the imported criminal part of society. Imagine if they could give ordinary Swedes the resources that this waste gets. Sweden is getting sicker and sicker. Damn, I'm just saying" (FB). Note the disgust articulated in metaphors of cleaning and diseases.

Finally, as indicated above, the emotional representations of the Other are, as such, aggressive actions. Intensifiers and hostile and dehumanising language are used when others are transformed into objects of anger and disgust.

Compassion and love: The emotional enemies of authoritarianism

While the authoritarian responses are frequently expressed in anger and disgust, emotions of compassion and love are absent in these responses. Compassion means to suffer together with someone, and it relies on empathy, or an understanding of another's situation. However, as Nussbaum (2013) argued, compassion also includes an action component – a desire to help, to alleviate suffering – which makes compassion an enemy to aggression and retribution. Love is an emotional relationship that basically involves a deep sense of closeness and care and is thus incompatible with the disgust and hatred in the authoritarian constructions of out-groups. I present two examples.

First, in the discussions on gang crime, compassion is indicated in posts arguing for preventive measures to cope with the segregation and poverty assumed to draw young people into crime and violence. However, in the authoritarian call for the tougher punishment of criminals, there is no room for compassion and empathy. This also applies in discussions about the victims in gang crime. In one thread (FB), participants discuss a young boy who was shot: "So tragic, he seemed to be a nice guy. My thoughts go to loved ones". The next post stated: "I hope you're ironic". Then there follow posts joking about the idea of a criminal as a nice guy worthy of any kind of compassion.

Second, in the authoritarian responses to disorder in school, there are posts explicitly opposing any compassion or love directed towards disobedient children. Parents are criticised for defending their kids in misdirected love. What is discussed as a major problem are parents who always take their children's side, who claim that the children are offended when they should actually teach the children to follow rules and respect the teacher.

The discussions on the forums show distinct emotional profiles of authoritarian and non-authoritarian responses related to the intolerance or tolerance of difference. In the data, there is one context where tolerance, compassion, and love are frequently expressed: the (non-authoritarian) threads on one forum (FL) where participants tell about and ask for advice with reference to their own children and relatives. It is a discourse about close relationships. An example is a thread started by a mother who tells about a teenage son who wants women's clothing, and now the mother does not know how to handle it. In the response posts that follow, she receives advice that encourages a form of compassion, for example: "Just be supportive […] you do not have to love this, but you love your son no matter what clothes he has, I guess". Others tell about their own experiences, noting, for example, that they naturally love their children and support them even if they sometimes have to struggle with their feelings.

3. The coexistence of civil and uncivil expressions of authoritarianism

Characterising authoritarianism on the social media forums is the coexistence of rather ordinary opinions, articulated in a civilised language and echoing what is often heard in the public political debate, *and* uncivilised expressions of extreme opinions. The culture of incivility in online and social media has been widely recognised (Kenski et al., 2020; Rossini, 2022); I focus on the coexistence with civil discourse, which makes the forums a potentially powerful environment for the normalisation of far-right authoritarianism. The uncivil discourse occurs alongside the civil and often without being confronted in criticism or condemnation.

The empirical analysis presented in this section focuses on the discussions about measures in response to identified problems of shootings in gang crime and disorder in primary schools. The posts vary in the tone of the language. Incivility is manifest in crude and vulgar expressions and the harsh and disrespectful tone in discussions and the naming of people (Kenski et al., 2020; Rossini, 2022). The arguments also vary on a spectrum from moderate to extreme in terms of authoritarian aggression.

In threads discussing gang crime, harsher punishments, such as longer imprisonment, are frequently proposed, in accordance with common opinions in the current political debate in Sweden. Some posts also note that this must be combined with various social and preventive efforts. However, in the same threads, the demands for harsher punishment are expressed in posts articulating extreme forms of authoritarian aggression. Here is an example from *Flashback*:

The thread starts referring to a news report (*Expressen*, 17 September 2020) on a political proposal from the Moderate Party (the largest right-wing party in Sweden) to enable the deportation of gang criminals without a conviction. Several response posts agree that this is a good suggestion, while others criticise the idea for going too far and threatening the rule of law. However, the proposal also activates extreme aggression and is defended based on a logic of retribution, basically disregarding the principles of liberal democracy. One post says that this is as obvious as if "I kick a guest out of my house if I don't like him". The proposal is justified with reference to the threat that this "abominable" group poses to Swedish society: "It sounds against the law but at the same time as a solution to the problem. State of emergency is for crises […] just get them out and we'll deal with the bureaucracy later. All in all out with the rabble". Note how the deportation is constructed as a reaction to objects of disgust (to get rid of it) in a discourse of dehumanisation.

The analysis of the discussions on punishment on the forums identifies five components of the extreme of authoritarianism. The punishment as such is expanded towards the extreme (1), and presented as the simple and only way to deal with the problem (2). The objects of punishment and retribution are dehumanised in expressions of hatred, intolerance, and pure racism (3) as well as in an uncivil tone of language (4). Finally, arguments disregard central values and principles of a liberal democratic rule of law (5). Below are examples from posts in the two forums (the components indicated with the numbers given above):

> "All my suggestions are as follows: Mass repatriation. Problem solved". (1, 2)
>
> "Lifetime deportation must be mandatory for crimes where imprisonment is on the punishment scale. No 'humanitarian' considerations are to be taken". (1, 5)
>
> "Go hard with tear gas, rubber bullets and surveillance cameras, etc. The dregs will not have a quiet moment". (1, 3, 4)
>
> "I don't think that one should always act democratically or according to human rights, especially not with people who themselves don't care about it". (5)

The discussions about disorder in schools on the two forums demonstrate a corresponding mixture of milder and extreme, civil and uncivil, expressions of authoritarianism. Most threads indicate a high degree of consensus in the understanding of the problem as fundamentally related to a lack of respect for teachers, and obedience and discipline in school. Proposals for zero tolerance for bad behaviour and suspensions from school are mixed with proposals for repression far beyond the limits of the law.

As an example (FB), one thread begins with a post asking for advice on how he as a teacher should handle rowdy and provocative children. In the responses, various solutions are suggested, all related to respect and obedience. There are opinions and advice that seem to be fairly uncontroversial: "Students clearly respect leadership. Unfortunately, it is missing in the Swedish school"; "I offer them [students] to do some boring task outside the classroom if they don't want to join in and follow the rules […] Adults decide, and children obey".

In the same thread, this is mixed with extreme aggression and dehumanisation, as in this example:

> No wonder Swedish schools lose quality compared to the rest of the world. We must feel sorry for students […] instead of throwing them out. The only right thing is to send the pigs home and let the parents pray on their bare knees for the young bastard to come back.

I suggest there are likely several processes of normalisation at work, related to the characteristic mixture of authoritarian responses. First, on the forums, the spectrum of civil and uncivil responses expands the normative boundaries of what can be said (and heard) in public discourse. Second, the diverse and blended expressions make the threshold for the extreme sometimes hard to distinguish. Third, and partly in contrast to the previous point, the extreme aggression, hatred, and racism create a contrast in relation to which less extreme (but still intolerant) views can appear as legitimate and not remarkable at all.

4. The role of mainstream news in the activation of authoritarian responses on the forums

News published in legacy media is a recurrent reference on the forums. News items are reproduced and commented on in the opening of the threads and the

discussions that follow. The recontextualisation of mainstream news is a general pattern observed in the far-right discourse in online and social media (Haanshuus & Ihlbaek, 2021; Ekman, 2019; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021; Åkerlund, 2021). In this section, I explore two questions:

- What characterises the news that activates authoritarian responses?
- How is news used as a resource in the articulation of authoritarianism?

Some clarification about the frequency of the objects of study is required. In total, 58 per cent of the 79 threads start with references to news, and this is more common in the discussions on *Flashback* (72%) compared with *Familjeliv* (28%). Additional threads include links and comments on news items not presented in the opening post.

Although the numbers are small, the descriptive statistics show patterns indicating that news media are important resources in the expression of authoritarianism on the forums, especially on *Flashback*. The threads that start with news or repeatedly link to news are the ones most often dominated by authoritarian opinions (see Table 3).

TABLE 3 News references and authoritarian opinions in the threads

		References to news items	
		Yes	No
Authoritarian opinions	Dominant	35 (66%)	4 (15%)
	Mixed	13 (24%)	16 (62%)
	No	5 (9%)	6 (23%)
	Total	53	26

Comments: "References to news items" means that the thread starts in a post reproducing a news item or that several other posts contain links to news items. For "Authoritarian opinions", I have separated between threads totally *dominated* by posts articulating authoritarian opinions, threads with posts articulating a *mixture* of authoritarian and more liberal opinions, and threads from which authoritarian opinions are almost completely *absent*.

It is beyond this study to investigate any causal mechanisms explaining the impact of the news media agenda on people's discussions. My focus is on the news that tends to activate authoritarian responses and how news is used and referred to. Hence, the analysis resembles the uses and gratification approach in asking what the participants on the forums do with news rather than what the news media do to these people. The news items that activate authoritarian responses on the forums tend to share the following characteristics:

- Threats to the societal order: Most of the news referred to focuses on events likely to be perceived as a threat to societal order. Crime and disorder are foregrounded in headings such as: "Every other teacher exposed to violence – called 'whore' and 'idiot'" (FB, refers to *Samnytt,* 19 October, 2021);

"Here the police is surrounded by a group of gang criminals" (FL, refers to *Expressen*, 4 September 2020). The news frames events as examples of increasing problems in a more general development in society. Perceived threats are amplified in line with traditional news values, as in this example of a heading with linguistic intensifiers: "Explosive increase in teenagers undergoing gender reassignment" (FB, refers to *SVT News*, 12 February 2020). The observation of such news inspiring authoritarian responses is consistent with the general argument in the literature suggesting that authoritarian values are typically activated in responses to circumstances of threat to norms and social order (Feldman, 2020; Stenner, 2005).

- Moral discourse: The news discussed in the threads typically invokes a moral discourse in foregrounding wrongdoings. The news tends to invite the reader to condemnations that may turn into both anger and hatred. The framing of several news items referred to in the discussions on schools suggests that the students are to be blamed (see above), in some cases even though the legal process is directed at the teachers, suggesting that law and norms in society may be out of step. Note in this heading how a court case, with a claim for damages to the student, is related to the seemingly mild action of the teacher (represented as "lifted […] away"): "Teacher lifted student away, now the case is being tried in the Supreme Court" (FB, refers to *TV 4 News*, 28 May 2020).
- The foregrounding of ethnic minorities and progressive identities: A particular category of news that provokes strong reactions is that which gives voice to and a positive framing of people and identities that pose a cultural threat – a threat to conformity – in an authoritarian imagination. News about social efforts to get criminals to leave gangs rouses anger towards something argued to be extremely expensive for society and a form of "coddling" criminals when they should really be punished and thrown out of the country (assuming it's only about immigrants). News foregrounding parents of young people with gender dysphoria, who are worried about an announcement that hormone treatment for people under the age of 15 is planned to be stopped, is linked and introduced in the following way by the person who started the thread: "Of all the sick things going on in society, I think this using hormones and surgery to permanently change confused teenagers in puberty is among the worst and most disgusting […]" (FB).

Making use of the news

So what do participants do with the news? Without claiming to provide a comprehensive answer, I present some recurrent practices. In the opening post of the threads, news are reproduced and framed as something to react to, with comments and questions directed towards the intended audience, most often without the news texts being discussed in any detail. The news is an *activator* in two respects: It has provoked thoughts motivating the person to publish the initial post, and it is posted to trigger responses from participants on the forum.

In the discussions, the news text itself typically fades into the background when participants contribute their opinions on the subject.

Although some news is reproduced almost literally in the opening post, news items are recurrently recontextualised in ways that promote authoritarian responses. Elements of the original framing of the news are modified, and interpretations are explicitly articulated. The magnitude of indicated problems is further amplified in participants' alarmistic wordings and interpretations of the news as evidence of a more general development. News about gang criminals is referred to as an example of "Sweden just getting worse and worse […] the criminals are taking over" (FL). News about disorder in school becomes examples of teachers not being allowed to do anything anymore (FB) and "a school in disrepair" (FL). News about age restrictions for gender correction from The National Board of Health and Welfare is referred to in a post where gender correction is described as a "madness" that has "exploded" in Sweden (FB).

News items are recurrently used to address "wrongdoings" and for blaming. The moral discourse implied in the news is more explicitly articulated in the reframing and questions presented. The news presented above about a teacher subject to judicial review after lifting out a student provides an example. The opening post clarifies that it is not the teacher who is to be blamed but the parents who reported this, and ultimately the liberal mentality that dominates in society: "Who wants to work as a teacher today? When the hell is Sweden going to wake up from the climateLGBTQweloveall mentality? […] What sane parent reports this?" (FB).

The questions asked in the post are in some cases framed as rather neutral invitations for discussion on right and wrong. But most often, they are tilted towards a blaming that fits the authoritarian values of conformism and submission. The recontextualisation of the news provides a platform for discussions in which anti-immigration scapegoating and racism are frequently articulated. For example, a news item about installed alarm systems in a school is linked and supplemented with the following questions (FB): "What do you say about this? Who are the ones who put teachers in threatening situations […] should one rather remove those who are behind the threats against the school?" In the thread that follows, the blame is repeatedly placed on "immigrants".

The news triggers frequent discussions on measures and solutions, regardless of this being not in focus nor in the news under discussion. The data document a general tendency to call for tougher measures in the posts. With reference to an alarming news item about the increased number of shootings in Sweden, an introducer (FL), for example, asks: "How do you feel when you read about another shooting […] Is it possible to turn back this violence and stop the progress of the gangs?" In the thread, preventive measures are emphasised by some, but most seem to agree on the importance of tougher measures and punishment.

Authoritarian responses to the news also document a backfire mechanism. Participants vigorously oppose the views in the news reports. An example is a news story about a Somali woman who tells about the problematic situation for immigrants in the suburbs and the anxiety for her two sons who have been drawn

into crime. The opening post describes the article as a "sob article", and questions her right to be in Sweden at all: "What is she doing here? Peace reigns in Somalia". In the posts that follow, anger and disgust are directed towards the mother, and the news media are criticised for making "these crying mothers" big news.

In summary, news published in the mainstream media has a central role in the activation of authoritarian responses on the forums. This is not to suggest a simple news-framing effect on the opinions. The news invoked certainly frames circumstances of threat that make authoritarian opinions applicable, but authoritarianism is also expressed in opposition to frames promoted in the news. Occasionally, news triggers discussions based on contrasting authoritarian and liberal views. But the news is also recontextualised and tilted towards the confirmation of authoritarianism, and used as evidence for authoritarian-oriented arguments. Finally, the study confirms previous research showing how seemingly neutral news is transformed into a dehumanising, racist discourse on online platforms (Ekman, 2019).

Conclusion

This study identifies four central features of authoritarianism in the discourse of two major online forums in Sweden: 1) the underlying authoritarian values, 2) the emotional components, 3) the coexistence of civil and uncivil discourse in moderate and extreme forms of authoritarianism, and 4) the activation of authoritarianism in responses to mainstream news. Each of these calls for more in-depth empirical research across issues and forums. In this study grounded in rich empirical data, I have prioritised the synthesis of the four to fulfil the overall aim of exploring the authoritarian dimension of far-right discourse in online media.

The study shows how values of conformism, submission, and aggression are manifest in authoritarian opinions expressed on the forums, across the three topics investigated. This includes a spectrum of fairly uncontroversial opinions *and* radical expressions of xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny typically associated with the far right (Mudde, 2019). The authoritarianism articulated on the forums is frequently infused with highly affective practices of anger, disgust, and hatred. The emotions appear to be central in authoritarian responses to progressive identities and threats, and are concurrently mobilised as political arguments. It is beyond the scope of this study to thoroughly analyse the relations between emotions, values, and political opinions. The study, however, seems to confirm Nussbaum's (2013: 115) argument that "each political ideal is supported by its own distinctive emotions". The emotional profile of authoritarian responses is distinct from the non-authoritarian or liberal responses. This applies to *what* people have strong feelings about (Nussbaum, 2019) and *how* others are transformed into objects of feelings (Ahmed, 2013). The dehumanising expressions of disgust and hatred, and the related calls for retaliation, are opposite to liberal values and ultimately corrosive to liberal democracy.

The critical role of online forums in the propagation and circulation of far-right opinions is demonstrated in extensive research (e.g., Fuchs, 2017; Saresma

& Tulonen, 2023; Åkerlund, 2022). This study shows an example of an ongoing radicalisation of authoritarianism in online media (Krzyzanowski & Ekström, 2022). One of the forums studied offers a public environment where authoritarian views are frequently articulated even in the most extreme uncivilised forms of dehumanising language and arguments for aggressive retaliation. Individuals and groups of people are regularly made objects of disgust, anger, and hatred. Important to note is that the discourse shaped is extreme *and* ordinary. The extreme of authoritarianism is not only tolerated on the forum, but collaboratively produced by participants, as an ordinary public discourse, even if uncivil expressions are sometimes condemned and alternative discourses exist on the forums. The extreme is made ordinary. As shown in previous studies, recurring expressions of anger and hatred in social communities tend to create a sense of normativity, suggesting that this is how participants can talk and should feel about groups of people (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). The boundaries of social communities have not been analysed in this study. The online forums host different social communities, partly bonded in values and language. However, the extreme of authoritarianism is concurrently exposed to large groups of regular visitors who value the forums as a venue for public discussions even if they do not hold the extreme opinions articulated (Åkerlund, 2022).

As noted in the analyses, the characteristic mixture of moderate and extreme forms of authoritarianism on the forums may have different normalising implications. Normalisation does not refer to unequivocal shifts, where the abnormal becomes normal, but rather the practices through which the boundaries of the normal and legitimate are established, shifted, and widened. On the forums, the boundaries are widened with expressions of radical views and uncivil discourse, but normalisation is also manifested in the frequent milder authoritarian responses to current social and political issues and news reports (Krzyzanowski & Ledin, 2017).

How does this impact the development of national politics? This is a complex issue that mainly remains to be studied, even though research has discussed and has provided evidence of the central role of social- and online media in the propagation and mainstreaming of far-right politics (Fuchs, 2017; Gounari, 2018; Krzyzanowski & Ekström, 2022; Åkerlund, 2022). Evident in the Swedish case is that the normalisation of authoritarian responses in the two prominent forums, on issues on the agenda, coincides with a shift towards authoritarianism in mainstream politics. This study suggests further analyses of the authoritarian dimension of the far right to contribute to a better understanding of the values and worldviews expressed in public discourse and appealed to in the propagation of far-right politics. In Sweden and other Western democracies, the appeal to authoritarian values is not restricted to extreme-right political parties. Orientations towards authoritarianism are manifest in a broader spectrum of parties, including those who have renegotiated their positions towards the far right and contributed to a general mainstreaming of such politics (Mudde, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Widfeldt, 2018).

Finally, to further develop the research on authoritarianism in online discourse and politics, I suggest a focus on three aspects: activation, articulation, and

circulation. This study has shown how authoritarianism is activated in relation to three issues on the public agenda, involving potential threats to traditional norms and social order. Mainstream news often serves as a trigger of authoritarian responses on the forums. More research, both large-scale longitudinal and in-depth qualitative, is required to understand the circumstances under which authoritarianism is activated, and how so, in the interplay between news media and online media discourse.

Authoritarianism is manifest in diverse articulations of opinions, attitudes, and emotions. One of the forums studied, *Flashback*, serves as a context for the cultivation of uncivil articulations of authoritarianism, including bluntly dehumanising, racist, and homophobic discourse. The question of how more or less controversial authoritarian views are discursively articulated and cultivated in different media contexts is an important subject for future research.

Lastly, I suggest more research focusing on the circulation of authoritarian views, and positions on authoritarian–liberal value conflicts on various issues, across media contexts and political debates. Previous research has provided evidence on the activities of far-right actors and the propagation of far-right politics in online media (Blomberg & Stier, 2019; Ekman, 2019; Åkerlund, 2021). However, much remains to be researched in order to understand the uptake and circulation of authoritarian views and arguments in the interplay between online discourse, news media, and formal politics.

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