

‘This is neither Swedish nor Western and doesn’t belong here’

Responses to retail stores’ social media advertisements addressing Ramadan

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Abstract

This article analyses written online responses to Swedish retail stores’ social media advertisements broadly addressing the Muslim celebration of Ramadan. It is based on a selection of 19 social media advertisement posts that together generated a total of 2988 responses in discussion threads. The customer responsive comments are analysed through the theoretical lens of race and racism in the digital society and theories of everyday nationhood and nationalism. At large, the result shows that the social media platforms can be seen as facilitators of anti-Muslim racism. However, the advertisements and the responses to them, which express dislike of as well as support for the retailers, Muslim traditions and the Muslim community, illustrate a negotiation of nationhood which is characterized on the one side by racist anger and fear of loss of nation, and on the other side by support for inclusion. Inspired by the concept of ‘predatory inclusion’, the article argues that this paradoxical phenomenon illustrates both inclusion and exclusion. The retail stores’ social media platforms are not only spaces of hatred against Muslims but also a space in which resistance to anti-Muslim racism is articulated and where constructions of Swedishness are challenged.

Keywords: Social media platforms, Digital consumer spaces, Anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia, Nation and nationhood, Exclusion and inclusion, Retailers’ advertisement

1. Introduction

Today is the start of Ramadan, a precious time for Muslims around the globe. We want to celebrate this! The shop is stocked up and the prices are awesome.

Welcome! 😍

(Retail shop’s social media advertisement post)

This is neither Swedish nor Western and doesn't belong here.

(Customer response)

Open-minded and clever of you to think about other cultures. Thank you! ❤️

(Customer response)

Be it of foods or other retail goods, consumption is a central and habitual everyday practice for most people. Today, many consumer practices take place online and the digital arena is a space where retailers communicate with potential customers (Rydström, 2024). As part of this development, Swedish retail store chains have recently begun acknowledging the Muslim celebration of Ramadan on their social media websites to attract customers to their stores. The advertisements are generally informal posts on Facebook, like the above excerpt; for instance wishing happy celebrations and emphasizing certain items or foods and offering discounts. In this article we are predominantly interested in examining the (sometimes vast number of) customer responses to such initiatives. Such responses are articulated in discussion threads below the retail store's social media announcements, as exemplified in the second and third examples above.

That Muslims are racialised and exposed as customers in physical retail settings has been illustrated in Alkayyali's (2019) study, which shows that Muslim women who wear headscarves experience racial profiling such as invisibilization and objectification as consumers in French retail settings. One coping strategy revealed in the material is that the women choose to do their shopping online to avoid such experiences. The Internet cannot be seen as a space free of racism, even if the subject of Internet (still) tends to be separated from the subject of race: 'the mechanisms of color-blind racism are interwoven in fantasies of the Internet as a raceless utopia' (Daniels, 2015, p. 1388, see also Matamoros-Fernández, 2017).

Employing Tressie McMillan Cottom's (2020) sociology of race and racism in the digital society and her understanding of platform capitalism and racial capitalism as intersecting, as well as Fox & Miller-Idriss' (2008) theories of everyday nationhood and everyday nationalism, the article explores the complex mechanisms at play in customers' responses to retail stores' social media advertisement posts addressing Ramadan. The overarching research question posed is: how can the online responses to social media advertisement addressing the Muslim custom of Ramadan be understood in relation to constructions of nationhood and anti-Muslim racism? The article untangles how the advertisements and the online responses to the advertisements follow a (market) inclusive logic (you are welcome to do your shopping here), as well as a highly exclusionary nationalist and racist logic. The latter is connected to co-customers' negative reactions to the inclusive approach of the advertisements. This, we argue, needs to be understood in connection to anti-Muslim racism and nationalist tendencies in Swedish society more broadly (Muftee, 2023). The article makes visible a tension within racial capitalism, where profit-makers, though diversity strategies, try to enhance the market, while customers seek to uphold and guard racial hierarchies in the marketplace. In addition, and importantly, the article displays how customer responses are not uniform; instead, anti-Muslim expressions are contested, and the construction of Swedishness is negotiated and challenged.

Sweden is currently experiencing a political right turn; among other things, the government is seeking to drastically reduce the number of migrants who can enter to the country, increase repatriation of migrants, and introduce stricter conditions for family member immigration as well as stricter requirements for low-skilled labour immigration and for obtaining Swedish citizenship (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). As in many other European countries, anti-Muslim racism has been central in legalizing this turn (Fekete, 2009). Racism against Muslims in Sweden is often articulated as a conflict of culture

and values (Kundnani, 2023). As argued by Fekte (2009), since September 2001, Islam has been defined as the central threat to Europe, and Muslims are defined both as an ‘enemy within’ and a threat to Europeaness and Swedishness itself. While what people eat or put in their shopping basket might appear trivial issues, as will be discussed in the article, the debates related to Ramadan on the retail stores’ social media platforms exposes the connection between consumption and larger questions of nationhood and race.

2. Racialisation in physical and digital consumer spaces

American ‘shopping while black’ literature shows that racial profiling and racial discrimination affect African Americans’ experiences as consumers, and that anti-black bias manifests itself in retail settings; as a result, black consumers are forced to deal with racial hierarchies, which affects the shopping experience negatively (Pittman, 2020, see also Francis & Robertson, 2021). Bennett, Hill & Daddario (2015) in turn have found that different racial minority groups in America experienced similar levels of perceived marketplace discrimination. Research investigating Muslims’ experiences in particular show that Muslim women wearing headscarves are exposed to gendered and Islamophobic violence in public spaces (Listerborn, 2015), experience perceived discrimination while participating in leisure activities in public places in the Netherlands (Kloek, Peters & Sijtsma, 2013), and develop different strategies to negotiate their ‘Muslimness’ and to handle ‘anti-Muslim acts’ in Paris (Najib & Hopkins, 2019). Muslim consumer experiences in retail settings are less studied, as pointed out by Alkayyali (2019) who conducted 20 in-depth interviews with veiled Muslim women in Paris. Among other things, the results show that the women experience harassment as well as ‘bullying’, and that co-customers have a central role in this treatment. Alkayyali’s (2019) study shows that many expressions of racism in retail settings are blatant rather than subtle; Alkayyali underlines the importance of recognizing this tendency, as it may ‘re-become the norm for many racialised groups’ (2019, p. 101).

Hussein (2015) analysed a social media ‘scare’ campaign against Halal-certified food from an Australian perspective and argues that there has been a shift in the racialisation of Muslims, maintaining that Muslims have gone from being portrayed as ‘a visible, alien presence to a hidden, covert threat’ (2015, p. 85). In the attacks against the campaign, Muslims are accused of being infiltrators and for ‘blending in’, for instance through the discreet presence of halal-certified foods in Australian shops. While ‘ethnic foods’ have largely become a central element of ‘everyday multiculturalism’, connected to cosmopolitanism and tolerance, halal certification of foods (for instance shown by product labels) does not speak to ‘culinary multiculturalism’ and is instead thought to have a hidden agenda (Hussein, 2015). Wright & Annes (2013) have explored how meanings of halal foods are contested in media discourse in France in relation to a fast-food chain introducing halal hamburgers on their menu. The responses contained some acceptance of the halal menu due to free-market logic or cultural diversity. But above all, the media engaged in a form of defensive ‘gastronationalism’, as they framed the halal hamburger menus as threats to French identity and the presumed core values of the French nation. In line with this, Nussbaum (2012) draws attention to bans of kebab shops in some Italian cities in 2009, purportedly due to health concerns and for the preservation of Italian food traditions.

Research primarily focusing on racialisation in online retail settings is lacking in a Swedish context; however, studies more broadly examining experiences of racism in Swedish society address consumer spaces to some extent. A study by Mulinari et al. (2024) that examined the prerequisites and obstacles for Roma life showed that shops are one sphere where Swedish Roma most frequently experience blatant antiziganism. In a study about (im)mobilities in public spaces among teenagers racialised as non-white in Stockholm and Malmö, Sixtensson & Hagström (2024) show that participants frequently experienced being subject to control and surveillance in shops and shopping malls (see also Kalonaityté et al., 2007). Moreover, Listerborn’s (2015) study focusing on Muslim women’s experiences in public spaces show among other things that the women experienced violent encounters in different retail settings. The article

contributes to the understanding of racism in present-day Sweden. Specifically, it adds new knowledge about how racism, and particularly anti-Muslim racism, is constructed in digital Swedish consumer spaces. The following section will explore more closely the topic of the digital sphere in general, and social media platforms in particular, as a contested (racialised and nationalistic) consumer space.

3. Digital (marketing) logics, race and constructions of the nation

The representation of Islam and Muslims in social media is wide-ranging, however, social media users more often portray Islam and Muslims negatively than in a positive way (Hashmi, Rashid & Ahmad 2020). In a study about representations of Muslims in Swedish social media discourse, Törnberg & Törnberg (2016) show that Muslims are represented both as violent and extreme. Pointing towards the need to extensively examine hate crimes on social media platforms, Awan (2016) studied how Muslims are being viewed on the social media platform Facebook by analysing Facebook pages, posts, and comments. The study shows that Muslims are subjected to negative attitudes, stereotypes, discrimination, physical threats, and online harassment. Awan (2016) also discusses social media's lack of action against racial hatred. Obler (2016), in turn, examines the normalization of hate against Muslims through the use of the social media platform Facebook and maintains that online Islamophobia is a problem that social media companies need to take seriously and act upon. Matamoros-Fernández (2017) proposes the concept of 'platformed racism' to understand the particular forms of racism that derive from social media platforms and in the theoretical piece 'Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society', McMillan Cottom (2020) argues that new theoretical frameworks are needed to study race and racism in the digital society (see also Daniels, 2015). To understand its specific logics, we need to turn to theories of racial capitalism, which captures the relationship between global and local processes, and how these intersect with platform capitalism. According to McMillan Cottom (2020, p. 444), platform capitalism, as a 'specific and current stage of capitalism' has the capacity to expand markets; in fact, internet technologies have become a major tool of capitalism because they *can* expand markets and consumer classes. However, platform capitalism also engages in predatory inclusion: 'the logic, organization, and technique of including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms' (McMillan Cottom, 2020, p. 443), thus both expanding and excluding. According to McMillan Cottom (2020), Gargi Bhattacharyya's (2018) theories of racial capitalism are specifically suited for the study of race and racism in the digital society, since Bhattacharyya emphasizes how the logic of racial capitalism on the one hand works through the use of coercive power, and on the other also mobilizes desire, for instance to gain status or to feel belonging. Moreover, once again drawing on Bhattacharyya's thinking, McMillan Cottom (2020, p. 446) claims that platform capitalism has in turn 'monetized' all those human desires by 'capturing both space and place'. Unlike other theories that highlight the violent nature of race and racism, racial capitalism in the digital society appeals to our human desires, operating in a less obvious, but still highly effective way.

Marketers' strategies to reach out to certain assumed ethnic groups of customers, so-called 'ethnic marketing' (Licsandru & Cui, 2018, p. 330) or 'multicultural marketing' (Burton, 2002), aim to expand markets (Cui, 1997; Peñaloza, 2018). Ulver & Laurell (2020) examine online consumer resistance against multiculturalism in advertising in a Swedish context; they argue that far-right resistance is highly evident in these marketing contexts. According to Siddiqui & Singh (2016), social media functions as communication platforms that enable interaction, or even dialogue, between companies and their customers. They are used in different ways to attain business goals; for example, companies advertise on their social media platforms to attract customers. As Siddiqui & Singh (2016) argue, a positive effect of communicating with customers in this way is that social media interaction with customers may facilitate understanding of their desires and disapprovals. It also helps companies reach out to new customers. At

the same time, business social media strategies may well also lead to negative effects for companies, for instance through negative comments and opinions posted by followers on the platforms.

Wei & Bunjun (2020) maintain that the subject of consumer nation-building in relation to branding is under-researched by critical race scholars, and they studied how consumers on Twitter respond to the attempts of the brand New Balance to distance itself from associations to white nationalism through claims of diversity. Three customer responses emerged in their material: punishing the brand; advising the brand; and defending the brand. Moreover, the digital responses were pronounced with, and through, ‘circulation of affect’ (such as indignation and hope) and connected to nation-building, as consumers positioned themselves as ‘speakers of the nation’:

Analysis reveals that consumers are constructed and construct themselves within an elevated status as ‘rightful’ citizens and speakers of the nation, as of value and belonging to national spaces of discussion. In doing so, consumers position themselves as managers, who are willing and able to punish, advise, and defend, not just the brand but also the nation. (2020, p. 1271)

Sara Ahmed (2000) follows the path deriving from Anderson’s work on nations as imagined (Anderson, 1983), describing the nation as a fantasy and a ‘material effect’. The production of the nation, Ahmed argues, involves image and myth-making such as the reproduction of ‘official’ stories of descent, but also ‘the everyday negotiations of what it means ‘to be’ that nation(ality)’ (Ahmed, 2000, p. 98). The nation is thus both a place and a person – and individuals both *have* and *are* a nationality. Moreover, the nation comes into being through ‘the recognition of strangers’, which lets the nation ‘imagine itself as heterogeneous’. This recognition of the strange and familiar, of who or what does or does not belong, takes place in everyday encounters but it is also part of ‘rehearsed’ public discourses of nationhood (Ahmed, 2000, p. 96-99). Fox & Miller-Idriss (2008) argue that nationhood and nationalism are produced and reproduced in everyday life, and that ordinary people are active in the production and reproduction of nations. Four practices of how this takes place are suggested: 1) ‘Talking the nation: the routine construction of the nation through routine talk in interaction’, which means that ordinary people help define discourses about the nation through talk and interaction in contexts of everyday life. 2) ‘Choosing the nation’ suggests that nationhood forms, and is formed by, people’s choices. 3) ‘Performing the nation’ means that nationhood is given meaning in ritual and symbolic collective performances of everyday life. 4) ‘Consuming the nation’ refers to the way national difference and sameness are constructed and transmitted (and materialize) through everyday routine consumption habits. This can be understood as a ‘commodification of the nation’, where selected literature, music, food, or costumes offer people ‘nationally marked (or markable) products for their national consumption needs’ (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 551). As will be discussed further, advertisements connected to Ramadan on retail stores’ social media platforms become an arena where conflicts around what the nation is unfold.

4. Method and material

This study is a non-interfering analysis of online archival data. Such data may be, as in this case, comments generated from public social media posts or videos (Kozinets, 2015). We have analysed written online responses to Swedish retail stores’ social media advertisements that broadly address the Muslim celebration of Ramadan. The authors became aware of the phenomenon of retail stores either addressing or not addressing Ramadan through a news report and became interested in observing how this was reflected on their social media platforms. We began manually searching for posts related to Ramadan on the Facebook pages of the retail stores. The phenomenon of addressing Ramadan in retail stores’ advertisements is not widespread, which meant that many searches did not yield any relevant posts. After identifying posts from 16 different stores, the decision was made that saturation had been reached. This

decision was based both on the content and the quantity of comments generated by the posts. A total of 19 social media advertisement posts highlighting Ramadan that together generated 2988 responses in discussion threads have been included in the study. So-called ‘likes’ are not included. The advertisement posts originate from 16 unique local retail store chains with different geographical locations in Sweden, and one included post comes from a national retail store chain’s social media website. 17 of the social media advertisement posts included originate from grocery store chains. The other two posts are from a retail chain that sells groceries as well as other goods. The selected advertisement posts mainly contain special offers for certain items but also may include holiday greetings wishing a happy celebration, photos of foods or other items on sale, and/or photos of staff holding up items or posters. The number of responses generated by the 19 posts varied (from eight to 1,600) and did not always contain negative remarks towards Muslims (14 posts contained negative remarks, five contained no negative remarks).

The advertisement posts included were published on the stores’ social media websites between 2018 and 2023. The time frame was chosen to ensure the study’s temporal relevance; however manual searches also revealed that posts were rare before 2018. The responses contain written comments, emojis, links and memes/pictures; only written comments have been included in the analysis, however. When collecting archival online material (Kozinets, 2015) originating from social media websites or forums, one must take into account the risk of including non-human generated comments. As the material was analysed manually and all comments on the social media platforms were linked to personal social media accounts, we saw no obvious indications of this being the case. Unlike in Ulver & Laurell’s (2020) study, advertisement posts and responses included in this study originated in forums that are not known for attracting any specific group of people other than customers as such. We believe that this might further reduce the possibility of bot-generated comments or comments produced in so-called troll factories. Total certainty of this is impossible, however. Here we lean on Ulver & Laurell (2020, p. 481), who maintain that: ‘inside the specific cultural context, it does not matter if some of these posts are artificial or created by, say, bots, because they are still repertoires that give meaning to the debate and in the end may have political consequences.’

We have applied a thematic content analysis to analyse the empirical material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The material was coded manually and subsequently categorized into content-related categories. Prominent themes deriving from this work are presented in the article and analysed in dialogue with theories and relevant previous research. The analysis followed an abductive approach, where theory and empirical data continuously informed each other. Due to the iterative process, some overlap between the themes occurred. The excerpts presented in the article should be understood as representing patterns in the material. At times, the excerpts contain emojis, such as hearts, flowers or other symbols used by the commenters to emphasise the written message or to show some kind of emotion or reaction. The emojis have been preserved in order to remain close to the social media websites as an interactive phenomenon; other than that, they are given no analytical significance. As previously stated, the social media websites from which the data is collected are public and can be visited by anyone. The comments generated from the retail stores’ advertisements are thus public, however, generally come from individual’s private social media accounts, where most users use their own names. A major ethical concern has been preserving the anonymity of individuals whose comments are included in the study. To prevent extracts in the article from being traced back to any individual, we do not disclose the name of the retail companies and their social media platforms included in the study. We have also omitted any information that could be connected to the individuals behind the comments. Moreover, the translation of the comments from Swedish to English further adds to the non-traceability of the comments (Sylwander, 2019). The names of the retail stores and their geographical locations have been omitted from the article for the same reason. Throughout the analysis, we have chosen to refer to the individuals behind the comments on the social media platforms as customers, co-customers or commenters¹.

¹ The research project has been given ethical clearance by the regional ethics board in Sweden (EPN 2022-00782-01).

5. Analysis

5.1 Food, nation and anti-Muslimness

Ramadan is coming up! We're celebrating this with super offers on halal beef and chicken. Welcome!

Sales on different foods are naturally often the centre of attention in the retail stores' advertisement posts, as exemplified above, where a local grocery store is offering discounts on halal meat. Foods and food practices are also common features in the responses to such advertisements and seem to be used symbolically to make different anti-Muslim statements, but also to manifest Swedishness. A food that is recurrently referred to in customer replies in such a way is bacon or more generally pork, a food customarily avoided by Muslims. These remarks often carry an ironic undertone, as in the following comments:

I'll be celebrating it with lots of delicious bacon!

No discount on bacon?

Have you lowered the price on pork?

Besides making sarcastic, but yet implicit statements with the mention of pork or bacon, more direct opinions on halal practices and halal certified foods are central in the discussion threads. The negative comments related to halal range from aggressive: 'Great information, we other customers will avoid your store. Many of us don't accept halal!!! 🤢🔥', to more specifically pointing out that the practice is not Swedish: 'Advertising non-Swedish culture and halal food. I won't be coming back'. Comments such as the latter, drawing on (non-)Swedishness, recall Wright & Annes' (2013) findings, which show that the presence of halal food on a French fast-food menu was construed as a threat to both nation and nationality. Based on an analysis of a social media campaign against halal certification and -labelling of foods and products (i.e., not focused on slaughtering methods and animal welfare), Hussein (2015) in turn, found that the labelling of products as halal certified was perceived as a concealed threat, a way for Muslims and Muslim traditions to covertly infiltrate Australian society. Similar arguments are to some extent present in the material, as exemplified here:

We consumers demand that halal certification is labelled in a highly visible way, so that we can avoid the products.

According to Ahmed (2000), discourses about the strange as threatening lead to constructions of the figure of the stranger as dangerous ('stranger danger') and a risk for the imagined sense of 'we'. According to this logic, the stranger is a necessary condition for upholding the imagined 'we'. Implicit in the argument that halal labels on food in retail stores should be highly visible seems to be a notion that foods and human bodies represent a similar threat: concealing them threatens the logic and the status quo between the strange(r) and the imagined 'we'. Halal slaughtering processes are also frequently targeted: 'Halal slaughter equals animal torture!'. Other commenters point out the paradoxes inherent in comments that raise the issue of animal rights, or claim to support Swedish foods:

As soon as you read about halal, then all of a sudden you start to care about animal rights? You don't think about the well-being of animals when you buy your discount hot dogs. Can't believe people talk about us needing to buy Swedish foods and then go and buy a pineapple 🍌

One way in which people speak out against diverse forms of anti-Muslim racism in the material is by highlighting the inconsistency of arguments, often with a sense of humour, such as here questioning not only whether animal welfare is the issue, but also pointing out that people consume many things that are not ‘Swedish’. Besides featuring halal products, the foods that are featured in the advertisements vary to include for example rice, lentils, chicken, lamb, yoghurt, certain breads and pastries, greens and herbs such as mangold, parsley, and cilantro, tomatoes and onions, and fruits such as dates. While these products may typically be associated with so-called ‘Middle Eastern’ or ‘Mediterranean’ cuisine to an extent, they may also be considered part of standard stock in many Swedish grocery stores. Thus, even though these foods are part of an advertisement targeting Muslim customers, they are in fact special offers of which all customers can make use, for products they can eat or use in their cooking. Nonetheless, many perceive the offers as unfair, and as the below excerpt shows, a common argument is that the stores should make up for the advertisement and possible discounts by reducing the prices of ‘Swedish foods’, especially in relation to national holidays:

Okay, so then we expect discounts on Swedish holidays. On typically Swedish foods.

As long as we get discounts around our Easter. You wouldn’t want to be considered unfair, right?

The discussion threads on the topics of food and food practices following the advertisements are characterized by negotiations rather than expressing uniform views. Many speak up or rebuke negative comments, as shown in the two following statements:

What a nice initiative. I am a Christian and happy about this inclusive way of thinking, where there is space for food traditions from all around the world.

I realize there is a lot of ignorance in the comments, people are raging because [the store’s name] includes other cultures. It’s nice of them. People say they want to boycott, like it’s the first time they’re selling halal meat. That’s so narrow-minded. In that case you’ll have to boycott all other food stores as well. That’s all from me.

Now, I’m going to prepare my halal slaughtered chicken. 🍗

The first commenter here highlights their Christian religious views and their appreciation of the inclusive initiative of food traditions. The second draws attention to halal foods being widespread in Swedish stores – and points out that the phenomenon is not a new one. These comments demonstrate that constructions of difference and sameness manifested on the social media platforms are contested. Still, the display of Muslim food traditions and practices on the retail stores’ social media pages seem to trigger self-appointed ‘speakers of the nation’ (Wei & Bunjun, 2020; see also Hussein, 2015). The production of the nation involves everyday negotiations of what it means ‘to be’ a nation and a nationality (Ahmed, 2000). Similarly, Fox & Miller-Idriss (2008) argue that nationalism is an act of production, and some products are constructed as national products more than others. This, they argue, is the ‘commodification of the nation’. Food is one such product that ‘defines, demonstrates, and affirms the consumer’s national affinities’ (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008: 551). As evident in our study, previous research contributions have shown the symbolic significance of food or food traditions to protect constructed national values, particularly in relation to halal products – a form of ‘gastronationalism’, as Wright & Annes (2013) put it; there have also been ‘scare’ campaigns against halal certification (Hussein, 2015). In the phrasing of Hussein (2015, p. 93), this sends out a message to Muslims: ‘that, however discrete their presence, however well integrated they may believe themselves to be, they are not welcome here’ (Hussein, 2015,

p. 93). It is notable that even though food is considered an important product of the ‘commodification of the nation’ (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008), the retail stores, unintentionally or not, seem to challenge the boundaries of such imagined national products.

5.2 Contested (Swedish) traditions

We have everything you need for Ramadan! Eid Mubarak from all of us!

Many of the retail stores’ advertisement posts not only inform about special offers for Ramadan but also wish those observing it happy celebrations, as exemplified in the extract. One major point of criticism in the discussion threads that follow such advertisement posts is that non-Swedish traditions should not be ‘celebrated’ in Sweden, and the retail stores should not acknowledge such traditions or cultures.

Aren’t Swedish traditions good enough? Usually, if you move to a new country, you adapt to its traditions.

We live in Sweden and our culture doesn’t celebrate Eid or al-Fitr. No other country in the world would acknowledge Swedish culture or Swedish traditions. It is ridiculous that [the store’s name] includes Eid food in its range. So stupid!

As the two posts show, such comments address both individuals who practice non-Swedish traditions and the retail stores that recognize Muslim traditions and enable Muslim celebrations. Moreover, Swedish traditional celebrations such as Christmas, Easter and Midsummer Eve are frequently referred to in the comments by customers who want to highlight what the retail stores *should* address and celebrate. We see the recurrent references to ‘Swedishness’, Swedish habits and Swedish traditions in the material analysed largely as examples of how nationhood and nationalism are constructed, manifested and reproduced in everyday and everyday interactions (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008), which here take the form of written statements and interactions on the retail stores’ social media platforms. However, Fox & Miller-Idriss (2008) also maintain that nationhood is formed and given meaning by performing rituals and traditions, which further can explain the frequent mention of Swedish traditions. Commenters manifesting national values seem to do so to guard ‘Swedishness’, among other things pointing out that Muslims need to adapt, not the other way around. This is reminiscent of Wei & Bunjun’s (2020) findings regarding consumers who act as ‘speakers of the nation’. In parallel, the retail stores are assigned positions where they are seen as bearers of Swedish culture and traditions. Posting advertisements that acknowledge Ramadan thus appears as a violation of Swedish traditions and culture, a sort of non-performance of nationhood, to use the vocabulary of Fox & Miller-Idriss (2008).

The recognition of ‘strangers’ is central in the construction of the nation, as this helps the nation to stay close to the fantasy of it being heterogenous (Ahmed, 2000). In that sense, the ‘stranger’ plays an important role in the ongoing mythmaking of the nation as a place and a person. While some consumers can be understood as positioning themselves as ‘speakers of the nation’ (Wei & Bunjun, 2020), in that they express which traditions the retail stores should and should not support, the analysis also shows that the comments deriving from the retail stores’ addressing Ramadan result in directly anti-Muslim racist views that are directed towards Muslims as a group, as exemplified here:

Just go back to where you came from.

People mention that comments are filled with hate and ignorance, it’s kind of funny, since that’s just what Muslims are filled with.

Such statements are in line with previous research that has shown how Muslims, especially women wearing veils, are subjected to different anti-Muslim expressions in western European settings (Listerborn, 2015; Kloek, Peters & Sijtsma, 2013; Alkayyali, 2019; Muftue, 2023). Other studies show that Islamophobia is normalized on social media platforms (Awan, 2016; Obler, 2016). In our analysis, the retail stores' advertisements relating to Muslim customs and traditions, rather than the physical appearance of bodies racialised as Muslims, seem to trigger racist statements. The analysis shows that such comments, as exemplified in the excerpts, are sometimes directed to a specific commenter in response to another comment, and sometimes they are just statements without a particular recipient in the discussion threads, speaking instead to 'all Muslims'. An important note regarding to face-to-face encounters is that the scope of potential recipients of anti-Muslim racist statements might be far wider on a public social media platform, since anyone reading the comments is a potential recipient. Moreover, correlating with Alkayyali's (2019) findings of Muslim women's experiences of shopping in physical environments, many anti-Muslim racist comments in our analysis come across as highly blatant.

Anti-Muslim remarks are not left unchallenged; they are interspersed with comments by consumers who view the retail stores' advertisements in a positive, appreciative or supportive way:

We Swedes need to be more open-minded about other traditions. If I lived abroad and continued to observe Swedish traditions, no one would care.

I wonder why some write that retail stores should not make religious statements? What about Christmas? We should be happy for all people's holidays, not just our own. So many Muslims wish me Merry Christmas, I want it to be mutual, we should be happy for each other.

Thank you for having the courage to acknowledge a tradition that is celebrated by thousands of Swedes, that you unlike many others don't bow to hatred and Islamophobia. Respect.

Thus, consumers also voice objections to intolerant expressions in the comments. Arguments contain for instance responses to claims about maintaining 'Swedish traditions' in favour of more open-minded approaches to traditions and religious views or holidays, as in the first and second excerpts, also expressing support of everyone's right to celebrate their holidays. A recurring argument against the retail stores' acknowledgment of Ramadan is the thought that the retail stores should maintain religious neutrality; the consumer in the second excerpt objects, drawing attention to the role of Christmas in advertisements. The third excerpt shows support and appreciation of the retail stores' initiative and emphasizes the fact that Ramadan actually is celebrated by a large number of Swedes. Thus, negative views about Muslims as such and critical comments about the retail stores' inclusion of the Muslim group as customers through the advertisement are challenged. Moreover, constructions of nationhood, here primarily centring around traditions and habits (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) and what it is 'to be' Swedish (Ahmed, 2000), that occur in interactions on the social media websites following the retail stores' initiatives also seem to be under negotiation, rather than fixed.

5.3 A digital space of contradictions

This final analytical theme will focus on what has been touched upon in part in the two previous analytical sections: the mix of inclusive and positive comments on the one hand and spiteful, negative comments against Muslims, Muslim traditions, and/or the retail stores' practice of posting advertisements related to Ramadan on the other. We will provide examples of such ambiguities and also discuss how the social

media platforms may be seen as a facilitator of Islamophobia (Awan, 2016; Obler, 2016), as well as a space where such views might be challenged in different ways.

Negative comments are not only directed at Muslim customers, but also at the retail companies. Such comments describe the retail stores as money-driven, as political actors, or as performing shameful or morally wrong activities:

You'd do literally anything to make money.

Is business bad? It's wrong to bring religion into advertisement.

For money, you'll sell yourself to anyone.

It's shameful to see how far you go to make a profit.

Such comments are in line with Wei & Bunjun (2020), who argue that consumers who appoint themselves as 'speakers of the nation' also position themselves as having the right and ability to punish or lecture companies that make appeals to diversity or go against their perceived national values. In the extracts exemplifying this, the 'speakers' criticize the retail stores for prioritizing profit over gate-keeping the nation. Threats of boycotts are frequent:

I hope people boycott you!

Disgusting advertisement! Total boycott!

Well, now you've chosen your segment of customers. Good luck!

And with that I stopped doing my shopping at this place.

The alleged promises of boycott come across as aggressive and threatening. The statements indicate the potential risk-taking involved in the retail stores' initiatives on their social media platforms (cf Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). However, the analysis also shows that the retail stores might expect new customers who appreciate the gesture; such comments are many. As can be seen in the following excerpt, such commenters express not only gratitude for the customer inclusion, but also for the retail stores taking the initiative despite the possible risk of losing other customers:


Thank you for including Swedish Muslims despite hateful Islamophobia, we will support you in good and bad 🌹

There are also comments that point out the logic of the capitalist market in the analysed material. Such responses normally reply to negative comments, arguing that it is only logical that the retail stores include this large group of potential customers:

The store is a business that wants customers. It's as simple as that. A clever person would realize that it is possible to attract customers and make a profit if you acknowledge events in their lives. Since people are different, it is wise to include all kinds of events, regardless of whether they are connected to religion or something else. [...] Why should retail stores give up customers because they are celebrating other holidays than the majority of society does?

As seen from this extract, this commenter seems to want to enlighten other commenters who are critical of the retail stores' inclusion of Muslim traditions and draws a parallel between differences and profit. The analysis furthermore shows that the (market) inclusion of this group as customers partly gives rise to highly appreciative and grateful comments directed at the retail stores about being seen, thought of, and included. The appreciative comments go beyond being included as customers and emphasize a thankfulness for being included as members of society, or as part of, and belonging to, the 'Swedish community', as exemplified in the following two excerpts:

Thanks for the inclusion, it means a lot, especially for younger generations who can proudly feel that they belong in this beautiful country.

Very nice that you include us in your community , it warms the heart.

The practice of addressing Ramadan on the retail stores' social media websites/platforms seems to have a symbolic value that goes beyond a customer/company relationship, also representing a *promise* of acceptance and inclusion in Sweden and becoming Swedish (Ahmed, 2000). Thus, at the same time as the interaction between commenters on the platforms can be seen as transmitting both nationalist and racist discourses, the global logic of the capitalist market is also at play, creating a kind of paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, the advertisement itself transmits a message of inclusion of Muslim customers, which in the comments generates expressions of inclusion and belonging. On the other hand, the retail stores' (market) inclusion leads to aggressive comments from co-customers who question this 'inclusive' practice. Here, we wish to draw parallels to McMillan Cottom's (2020) sociology of race and racism in the digital society and the connection to racial capitalism. One key argument made by McMillan Cottom (2020) is that racial capitalism in the digital society talks to human desires, for instance, to consume, or to belong. A characteristic of racial capitalism in digital society is that it engages in 'predatory inclusion', a sort of inclusion by exclusion, a practice that only seemingly includes marginalized consumers. In this study, we have focused on the reactions generated by the retail stores' advertisements, but we have not analysed the retail stores' intentions or motives or people's lived experiences of this customer market inclusion. Thus, inspired by McMillan Cottom's (2020) thoughts on predatory inclusion, we choose to describe the phenomenon that occurs when the retail stores address Muslim celebrations and traditions in their social media advertisement as a form of paradoxical inclusion where marginalized consumer-citizens are targeted as both new customers and as deviant – a form of inclusion AND exclusion. Moreover, the retail stores' social media platforms not only are spaces of hatred against Muslims as a group; they also seem to be a space where resistance against anti-Muslim racism is articulated, and where constructions of Swedishness are challenged.

6. Discussion

The article shows, from a 'bottom-up' perspective, how everyday nationhood and nationalism (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) is constructed and reproduced on the digital platforms that serve as a link between retail stores and their customers. The advertisements and the responses to them, which display dislike as well as support for the retailers and the Muslim community, illustrate a negotiation of nationhood which is characterized on the one hand by racist anger and fear of loss of nation, and on the other by support for inclusion and expansion of the market. On the retail stores' social media platforms, Muslim consumers are targeted as both new and welcome customers and as deviant – a form of paradoxical inclusion.

Anti-Muslim comments tend to be overt in character. We suggest that this might be connected at least at part to the written format of commenting that is built into the system of social media platforms, but also to the normalization of racialised hate on social media platforms (Awan, 2016; Obler, 2016). The

racist anti-Muslim comments mirror current nationalist tendencies and political cultural conflicts within Swedish society at large. There is an obvious danger that racist and anti-Muslim comments will contribute to further stigmatization of Muslims in Sweden today, both on social media and elsewhere. However, the findings of our study also shows that negative comments are challenged, for instance via expressed support for a retail store's initiative or everyone's right to their traditions. In that sense, the social media platforms are a space in which both racist and nationalistic views and resistance to such views can be communicated. Such findings highlight the importance of exploring the digital arena of consumption as a contested space where conflicts over the meaning of what the nation is and who can belong to it are articulated.

Occasionally, the retail stores post responses to negative comments in the discussion threads; a few of these defend the advertisement or remark on the tone in the discussions. Such comments are infrequent, and we have thus chosen not to include them in the analysis. It is noteworthy however that the retail stores' comments are few, despite sometimes very long discussion threads containing anti-Muslim statements. Nor have the retail stores (or the social media facilitators Facebook or Instagram) shut down discussions, although they have the power to do so. Despite the retail stores' inclusive practice toward Muslim customers, the responsibility to this customer group seems to have its limits. This exposes the market forces that are inevitably in the background and may be related to McMillan Cottom's (2020) thoughts on how the capitalist logic of platforms entails that they not only have the ability to expand markets, but that they also engage in 'predatory inclusion', where the inclusion of marginalized citizens might be deceitful.

In summary, this article furthers knowledge of race and racism in the digital society as well as on racialisation in relation to consumption and how everyday nationhood and nationalism are reproduced and negotiated in digital consumer (social media) spaces. Research that investigates local retail stores' perspectives on including marginalized customers via advertisements on their social media platforms would add important knowledge to further understand the processes at play. In a similar way, research on marginalized customers' lived experiences of digital consumer (social media) spaces would be an important future research contribution.

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