

Talking Facts and Establishing (In)Justice: Discussing Public Matters on Instagram

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This study considers Instagram comment sections, drawing on an in-depth investigation of 400 comments. It identifies forensic rhetoric, so far largely overlooked in online communication research, entangled with epideictic rhetoric, reflecting talk about truth and justice entailing moral positioning. Although participants are oriented toward shared truth construction across disagreement, they are not explicitly oriented toward changing their own opinions or views. This article discusses what this implies in terms of deliberative democratic perspectives, and highlights the need to move beyond stages of proclamations to reach practical reasoning in public conversation. It shows that rhetorical approaches may help elucidate intricacies of online conversations and that forensic rhetoric may emerge to meet pertinent topics of what is true and just. It also contributes to filling the gap of scarce research on Instagram comment sections as places for public conversation.

Keywords: online communication, rhetoric, public conversation, social media, forensic rhetoric, epideictic rhetoric, deliberative democracy

How people talk together online has long been of interest to media scholars (e.g., Moore, Gathman, & Ducheneaut, 2009; Zerrer & Engelmann, 2022). Although research has revealed that social media discussions rarely meet deliberative demands (Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2020), the pertinent question of how people discuss public matters online persists. This is particularly evidenced by scholars' and citizens' more recent concerns that social media plays a crucial part in people's alleged decreased orientation toward shared understandings of truth (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021; Su, Suk, & Rojas, 2022). Although research has debunked concepts such as "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021), people's lack of interaction with disagreeing or differently positioned others is an ongoing topic (Habermas, 2009), reflected in discussions about "post-truth," "fake news," and political polarization (e.g., Ambrosio, 2022). Theorists have claimed that being accustomed to truth uncertainty, prompted by an abundance of information in current media environments, may breed truth-relativism or -apathy (Keane, 2009; Wight, 2018).¹ Consequently, as people may rely on their subjective feelings of what is true (Wight, 2018) or

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¹ Concerns of how people deal with information surplus is, however, not something that first appeared as result of recent technological developments (see, for example, Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004).

“truthiness,” as termed by comedian Stephen Colbert (Newman, Garry, Bernstein, Kantner, & Lindsay, 2012), they may not search for a common understanding as a public.

When investigating Nordic Facebook and Twitter discussions, scholars have found that conversations are dominated by epideictic rhetoric and, hence, moral positionings (see Andersen, 2020; Vatnøy, 2017). Although this illustrates the benefits of looking beyond strict and idealized measurements of public conversation, questions remain as to whether these tendencies, or other rhetorical configurations, transfer to the social media platforms that have emerged in recent years. First, the social media platforms that have emerged in recent years have often been multimodal and visually oriented, with Instagram as one example. Instagram is, however, an understudied platform with regard to public interaction, especially when considering its prominence (Caliandro & Graham, 2020). Although studies have used Instagram comment sections as data corpora (see, e.g., Li, 2022), the platform has, until recently, not been investigated as a space for public interactions with the same eagerness as other social media platforms. Second, while the forensic rhetorical genre carries characteristics that are inherent to discussions about truth and justice and the state of guilt or innocence, studies highlighting the genre’s presence beyond a court-of-law setting are generally scarce (Harris & Werner, 2021). To the author’s knowledge, it has never been used as an analytical lens when approaching online conversations. This is remarkable, as it, when mobilized as an analytical lens together with the two other classical rhetorical genres, may help reveal some of the intricacies of public conversations. Research employing rhetorical lenses to investigate online public engagement is generally still scarce (for exceptions, see Andersen, 2020; Vatnøy, 2017). Asking “What rhetorical genres are used when participants are engaged in conversations about public issues on Instagram?” this article demonstrates the benefits of combining the three classical rhetorical genres of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic as analytical tools. Specifically, it conducts an in-depth analysis of how public issues were discussed in comment sections drawn from two Norwegian public figures’ Instagram posts. The study employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), conducting a close reading of comments ($n = 400$).

After the theoretical framework and the method section are presented, the analysis shows that the participants sought shared truth construction across disagreements but were seemingly not inclined toward changing their own minds. Participants also condemned or praised others’ opinions, views, and behaviors. The discussion emphasizes that while engaging in discussions about what is true may contradict concerns about truth-relativism and truth-apathy, the findings reflect proclamations of truth rather than talk traditionally considered democratically valuable. Conjunctional, forensic and epideictic rhetoric may contribute to sustaining contradictory opinions and views about what is factual rather than resolving tensions and bridging understandings. In particular, the forensic genre is highlighted as a relevant but overlooked genre in communication research.

Rhetorical Genres and the Public

Although the three classical rhetorical genres of the epideictic, forensic, and deliberative offer models of ideal rhetoric and are often not empirically separable (Garver, 2009), they provide fruitful analytical tools “to uncover some of the complicated relationships between speaker (or writer), text, audience and occasion” (Harris & Werner, 2021, p. 620). The epideictic rhetorical genre is commonly

employed in commemoration settings (Condit, 1985). Thus, it often appears as moral evaluations of selves or others and attempts to position someone or something as deserving of praise or blame. As such, it is a useful rhetorical tool to affirm shared values and norms and to reinforce devotions to values underlying political action (Hauser, 1999; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971).² Forensic rhetoric, on the other hand, is used to determine what is just; hence, it is most often confined to the court of law. Through accusing or defending, it aims to establish whether a crime has been committed (Levi, 2013; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971). Speakers often present themselves as objective spokespersons, and audiences are “jurified” as witnesses (Evans, 2021; Palczewski, 2005). When speakers proclaim what is true, ontological contests are invited. These may entail disputes about what has happened, what is continuously happening, or what issues are about. Thus, forensic rhetoric relies heavily on factual claims and providing “proofs” (Harris & Werner, 2021; Pâquet, 2018).

Discussions that entail factual claims and arguments about what is true can be distinguished as a distinct form of reasoning termed “theoretical reasoning” (Kock, 2018). Separating this as a distinct form of communication is useful because arguments about what is true differ from arguments oriented toward future decisions or actions, concerned with what to do regarding an issue (Kock, 2018). The latter kinds of arguments are found in the deliberative rhetorical genre, which places itself in the political realm, being “forward-looking” and concerned with “what should be” (Andersen, 2012, p. 199). Thus, the deliberative genre is considered the most suitable for social transformation. Deliberative argumentation weighs different considerations to reach a decision about future action, relying on an Aristotelian understanding (Kock, 2018), and thus places itself as a subcategory of “practical reasoning.” In practical reasoning, a suggestion or a choice can be deemed right or wrong but “not either true or false” (Kock, 2018, p. 3).

The deliberative rhetorical genre is echoed in the deliberative democratic tradition and its emphasis on publics’ decision-making processes (e.g., Habermas, 1981/1984). Ideally, according to the deliberative tradition, discussions consist of people who speak together across different opinions and life situations (Jakob, Dobbrick, & Wessler, 2021) while listening to each other and giving up their argument if someone provides a better one (Cohen, 2009). Although it makes no sense to *deliberate* about truth, if relying on an Aristotelian understanding (because something is either true or false), the deliberative democratic tradition recognizes theoretical reasoning. It is ideal that people share assumptions about the world and what they regard as true to agree on their shared situation *before* moving to ideal forms of public discussion (Habermas, 1981/1984). In instances of theoretical reasoning, it can thus be beneficial to employ ideals inherent to the democratic deliberative tradition, such as listening to others and providing clear claims that can be understood and (potentially) verified (Wessler & Rinke, 2014). The term “cognitive dissonance” has come to describe the difficulty people may have in altering their views when presented with opposing information, thus illuminating challenges to the fulfillment of these ideals. People are inclined toward making things fit their preconceptions (Festinger, 1962). Nevertheless, while “truth” has never been found in absolute ways (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021), less emphasis on or

² This function is however two-sided. See for example Condit (1985, p. 289) on how constructing community and a “we”—as inherent to the epideictic genre—may have polarizing effects.

concern with “facts” as something to reach for in joint attempts and co-create would directly counter deliberative democratic processes (Habermas, 2009).

Recognizing theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning as distinctly different kinds of argumentation shows that public conversations that are not explicitly oriented toward future decision making or future action may carry other societal functions (Hauser, 1999; Wessler, 2018; Young, 2002). This theory section has emphasized that a range of communication forms are relevant to society’s public conversations and that they cannot be evaluated according to the same set of procedures. Furthermore, ideal notions of a certain form of communication are rarely met empirically (Fishkin, 1995). It is vital to recognize these insights to understand publics’ meaning making and conversations. This article aims to follow these insights by mobilizing the three classical rhetorical genres as analytical tools. This enables unwrapping of different kinds of public conversations while staying empirically sensitive to their blurred boundaries.

Methodology

At the time of data collection, in late 2019, two public figures³ had become known to create controversies in the Norwegian public because of their Instagram posts. One of them (initially known to the Norwegian public as a member of a soccer team whose daily activities were featured in a televised reality show) was particularly known for criticizing other influencers and bloggers for their social media activities. His posts often centered on revealing celebrities’ treacherous or immoral behavior while humorously addressing larger societal issues. The other was known as an actor in the Norwegian TV show *Skam* (see Lindtner & Dahl, 2019) and had taken on a role as a spokesperson for feminist issues. Her Instagram activities were often oriented toward issues of gender inequality. Both secured the selection criteria of topic (orientation to public issues) and popularity (number of followers). Selecting their posts as providers of comment sections thus relied on a purposive sampling rationale (Campbell et al., 2020): Engendering public debates about public issues, the posts’ comment sections were considered valuable venues for investigating online conversations on Instagram.

Posts within each public figure’s account were coded into two sheets, respectively, providing a descriptive overview of the posts’ characters and concerns. Here, concern described what a post addressed (for example, sexualization). Posts’ characters describe the means of expression used in the post (e.g., music or video). Three posts were purposefully selected from each public figure, aiming for different cases from each individual’s account (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Next, the two posts from each individual with the most comments in their comment sections were chosen for data reduction purposes. Sifting out the comment sections with the least comments, one from each creator, for a “selective reduction” (Mayer, 2015, p. 61) to reduce data was appropriate for the purpose of the study. This selection process fits the study’s objectives to provide in-depth description and understanding (Grønmo, 2016), rather than seek quantitative representation. See Table 1 for a sample overview.

³ Names of which are not mentioned in this article to strengthen the anonymization of comment section participants.

Table 1. The Sample: Comment Sections, by Post.

The post: Issue being addressed & features		Number of comments
"If I were a boy" (personal communication, January 5, 2019)	Gender equality An image where the creator is depicted with facial hair and a shorter hairstyle than usual, with the caption "Finish the sentence: If I were a boy"	1,364
"Showing skin" (personal communication, May 10, 2017)	"Rape culture," sexualization A video where the creator shows and points to different areas of her body, often by "revealing" it from under her clothes. A song by the artist Silvana Imam is playing in the background. The caption is about showing skin not being indicative of whether one wants to be sexualized or engage in sexual intercourse.	2,164
"Celebrity kiss" (personal communication, March 5, 2019)	Gender equality A screenshot depicting a female artist kissing a young boy in the audience. The caption problematizes the artist's behavior, and the newspaper reporting on the incident (not being critical), by presenting a narrative where genders are turned around.	314
"The tent" (personal communication, September 5, 2018)	Power and responsibility Two images depicting before and after an "influencer" has edited a photo to change the appearance of her body. The post's caption criticizes the influencer's editing, emphasizing that the influencer cannot be excused for the editing because her social media activities are a part of her brand and business.	918

All comments from the four Instagram posts were collected ($N = 4,760$) except for comments stemming from private and deleted profiles, for ethical purposes. The comment sections were handled ethically as "public forums" (Elgesem, 2015), as they were public and adhered to celebrities' public profiles, which were often discussed in the mass media. I rewrote all examples shown in this article for anonymization purposes (Elgesem, 2015) and did not retrieve any information about participants (except for their comment-section contribution). At the time of data collection, comment threading was not a feature implemented on Instagram, so this study relied only on one-level comments.

After importing the comments to the NVivo analysis software, comments where participants engaged in a conversation about a public matter were identified ($n = 734$) from the overall data corpus. This means, for example, that comments consisting of an "@" ($n = 2,456$), occasionally with an emoticon or one or two words ($n = 1,395$), were not used for further analysis from this stage because they did not entail much verbal expression. Rather, comments that proclaimed something or that engaged in

discussions with others (directly, by "@" or indirectly, e.g., "all of you") were considered relevant. The first 100 comments from each comment section within this category were used for further inquiry ($n = 400$). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to detect tendencies in the comment sections without creating a predetermined coding scheme (see Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). This enabled an exploratory approach to the comments, where tentative categories first appearing in the process of ordering the material could be discarded, changed, merged, and clarified as the analysis evolved. A qualitative category-by-category focused analysis, revising and changing categories and subcategories, rendered a close reading of these comments and helped develop categories close to the material. Following the theoretical recognition outlined above, the categories were never mutually exclusive (Tesch, 1990). I used theory and previous research as analysis evolved, going back and forth between theory and the material (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). Eventually, all three rhetorical genres were employed as lenses, and themes were finally identified as relevant overarching "repeated patterns" across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). In line with thematic analysis, themes were not constructed as "quantifiable measures," but through an in-depth qualitative analysis, aiming to capture "important elements" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) of the comment sections regarding the research question.

A plurality of voices were present in each comment-section sample drawn for in-depth reading. Despite some participants occasionally being more active than others, a theoretical saturation point was considered reached, as no substantive additional revelations appeared by adding more voices (i.e., comments from new users) to the analysis. The 400 comments are reported as one case (Grønmo, 2016) because this approach to comments was deemed useful as the analysis evolved. Occasions in which the four comment sections yielded different patterns are reflected consecutively, as categories are presented in the next section, followed by an in-depth discussion.

Findings

Expressions in the comment sections were generally concerned with what was true rather than what to do about an issue, placing themselves as theoretical reasoning. The state and extent of issues, such as gender inequality, sexualization of women, sex crimes and rape culture (including sexualization of women and victim blaming), civility, authenticity, truthfulness, and public accountability, were discussed frequently across the comment sections. Largely delivered as proclamations about the reality of the social world to convince others, these are operationalized as ontological contests. Conversations also entailed moral positioning of the self and other(s). Although entangled—a comment concerning the "reality" of gender inequality in Norway could, for example, simultaneously employ or discuss morality—discussions about truth and morality as focal points each rest on the inherent features of forensic and epideictic rhetoric. The details constituting the forensic and epideictic presence in the data of this study are presented in the following sections, followed by a description of the identified traces of reciprocity, justification, and the deliberative genre.

Forensic Rhetoric: Conversations About Truth and Justice

The forensic genre's inherent features include speakers' orientations to truth, justice, and ascription of guilt or innocence. In the comment sections, these features were found in the following categories: factual claims, rule/case reasoning, accusations of cases or persons, and defenses of cases or persons (Evans, 2021; Levi, 2013; Pâquet, 2018). In the first category, factual claims, participants often proclaimed "what kind" of issue a public matter was. This included what the facts were, what was happening or had happened, and what was (im)moral. Comments in this category were thus statements or explicit attempts to convince others of "the one correct" understanding of an issue: "@username ok whatever. Every one and a half day there is a woman being killed here. Last year there were almost [number] a month. One can only imagine how many are not included as they are not being reported" (From the comment section adhering to "If I were a boy," my translation; personal communication, January 5, 2019).

In this comment, the speaker proclaims what the facts are (concerning the extent and scale of women being murdered) by presenting themselves as objective spokespersons; they are simply a provider of the truth, reflecting traits of the forensic genre (Harris & Werner, 2021; Palczewski, 2005; Pâquet, 2018). Although factual claims were spread across comment sections, the comment section adhering to the "If I were a boy" post stood out. Over half of the comments drawn for in-depth inquiry from this comment section could be placed in this category. For example, disputes about the realities of gender (in)equality were common here:

@username women earn more than men because men do more dangerous work. Besides, almost all fatal accidents at work happen to men. The reason why there are differences in salaries in men's football and women's football is because men's football has a higher level and therefore is more entertaining to watch. (personal communication, January 5, 2019; my translation)

In this example, the commenter contests another participant's claim that unequal pay exists structurally between men and women in men's favor. The commenter provides "proofs" of how social reality "really is" (pertaining to the consequences men face in the workplace and their abilities in sports, as opposed to women's work conditions and sport abilities). Up until now, these examples have also illuminated the fact that conversations were oriented toward matters of justice. Justice was, however, fought over on a level of social recognition—that is, aiming to make others *recognize* the factuality of matters as laying the grounds for (in)justice.

Another feature of the forensic genre identified in the comment sections w rule/case reasonings (Levi, 2013). In this study, rule-case reasoning is operationalized to capture negotiations of rules by employing cases beyond legal reasoning into the realm of vernacular and everyday talk. While it can follow a linear three-step process of identifying a rule from one case and then relating that rule to another case (cf. Levi, 2013), the category also captures when people use cases to work through, understand, or point out rules (in a broad sense) that guide and regulate the public. Cases, in the form of, for example, stories or statistics, were used to prove or challenge a "rule" or a "law" in social life, that is, *social* rules and laws, or customs (seeing custom as a widespread practice in a community), framed as either blameworthy and unwanted, or supported and appraised. Although in some instances, a rule could be employed as an

unquestioned "good" (e.g., civility), in other instances, a rule could be heavily criticized as an unwanted but widespread and ongoing practice. An example from the comment section adhering to the post "If I were a boy" illustrates the latter. In this example, "rape culture" as a custom functions as a rule:

@username the dark figures of how many women that experience assault are HIGH. I am going to court against my abuser in a month or so. I can name [number] friends that have also been raped but haven't dared to report it [...]. How can it be, that SO MANY have experienced abuse and that so many jump to the conclusion that the victim is a blaming part? [...] I understand that many may have the IMPRESSION that abuse is something that doesn't happen that often. But don't talk about it as if it's facts, cause it's really not. (personal communication, January 5, 2019; my translation, information omitted for anonymization purposes)

This comment exemplifies the presence of "the personal" in the comment sections. Participants occasionally provided personal stories or examples from their own lives when attempting to convince others of the reality and the extent of an issue (Young, 2002). In the example above, several cases are utilized to create evidence that sexual assault and abuse are not infrequent, nor can they be blamed on victims as singular individuals. The problem must lie elsewhere. Namely, it must lie in a "rule" of unjust, ongoing, unquestioned sexualization of women and victim blaming.

Accusations and defenses were also prevalent across comment sections, although directed at different kinds of (claimed) offenses (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971). Sometimes, accusations took the form of an ongoing offense. At other times, accusations proclaimed that something in the past was a crime. Often, accusations were directed toward a continued wrongdoing by "society," "people," "men," "women," or "feminists," as guilty of upholding offenses: "@username no no, you see, assault AGAINST men done BY women is not possible in modern society. I want to thank today's feminists for fighting for this 'equality'" (From "Celebrity Kiss"; personal communication, March 5, 2019; my translation).

These comments blame "men" and "feminists" for the existence and silencing of sexual assaults against men and women, respectively, by presenting their cases as the "real truth." Oftentimes, utterances attempted to establish that something had happened or was happening, as the offensive nature of that "something" was implied to be taken for granted. Defenses were similarly often oriented toward whether something that was happening or had happened was an offense. When defending someone, participants defended someone or something they perceived as being put on "trial" by the creator of the post or other participants in the comment sections. Defenses thus unfolded as claims of innocence or counterattacks as well as trivializations:

@username She didn't like the picture—she changed it... get over it. The fact that she has young followers is not her fault, and blaming influencers is not taking responsibility as a parent. It is much worse showing your kids that you can criticize and judge what you disagree with or do not like. (personal communication, September 6, 2018; from "The Tent"; my translation)

The example above illustrates comments where the happening itself is not fought over, but rather how to understand what has happened as an offense or not. In the comment, the participant claims that what has happened (specifically, an influencer editing a picture to change their bodily appearance while being a role model to young people) is not a moral offense, as claimed by another speaker. Rather, the other speaker is positioned as morally questionable. The accusations and defenses illuminated the contested views on these topics. As the existence of “wrongdoings” and crimes were not seen as settled matters, neither was a guilty party.

Epideictic Rhetoric: Moral Positionings

Acts of praise and condemnation are inherent features of the epideictic genre (Condit, 1985). Across comment sections (and particularly in “The Tent” post’s comment section, with over half of the comments captured), the category “condemnations” reflected moral evaluations and moral stance taking. A participant uttering disgust about the sexualization of girls provides one example: “(This is just like) school dress codes. We aren’t allowed to show (any) skin because men (see it as) sexual, and we are (forced to) dress for them. Ugh disgusting” (personal communication, May 10, 2017; from “Showing Skin”; sections and details omitted for anonymization purposes).

This comment exemplifies that expressing feelings, in this case disgust, can function as acts of condemnation in epideictic rhetoric (see Andersen, 2020). In the comment above, the speaker implicitly argues not just that the grounds on which men’s perception of girls’ bodies are incorrect (“men see it as sexual”) but positions themselves morally through a strong separation from such views through disgust (Andersen, 2020). This illustrates that epideictic rhetoric can work as a tool to affirm shared values and norms through distinction, simultaneously criticizing others’ values or norms (Hauser, 1999).

The praise category was, on the other hand, particularly present in the comment section adhering to the “Showing Skin”-post. Comments in this category captured participants cherishing others. The target of appraisal could be either the creator of the post, the post itself, or a participant in the comment section:

@nameofcreator if anyone can stop women from being discriminated, exploited and raped, and worse, it is YOU! [thumbs up emojis, bicep emojis and smiley face blowing kisses emojis] you have the power and the humor to fight it [smiley face blowing kisses emojis]. (personal communication, May 10, 2017; from “Showing Skin”; my translation, rewritten for anonymization purposes)

In the comment above, the speaker praises the creator for being a promising force in the fight against discrimination, exploitation, and sexual assault, particularly through communicative amplification (seen in emoticons, together with caps lock and exclamation marks; Garver, 2009). As people were frequently proclaimed guilty or innocent of a moral violation through praise and condemnation, features of forensic rhetoric overlapped with features of epideictic rhetoric, exemplifying that genres are often not empirically separable (Garver, 2009). This further illustrates that rhetorical genres are used as analytical tools and that comments may fit variably to each of their respective characteristics; they are put in analytical boxes to better understanding them.

Reciprocity, Justification, and the Deliberative Genre

Occasional attempts at justification and reciprocity were traced in the comment sections. As mentioned, these ideals describe acts of acknowledging and considering other people's arguments before providing arguments in return (reciprocity), which are justified and can potentially be verified (justification; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). However, the two ideals were mostly concerned with the issue of what was true or what was morally right or appropriate. To this end, they are best understood through the overarching rhetorical genres of epideictic and forensic rhetoric.

Attempts of reciprocity were operationalized generously, including all comments in which a speaker somewhat explicitly considered someone else's argument or viewpoint and gave a statement back (see Wessler & Rinke, 2014). A speaker did not have to, however, explicitly recognize the full depth or extent of another participant's claim: "@username Yes, sure. The case is, however, that this person is a public figure, and a role model for many young people. They are contributing to body image pressure if you like it or not" (personal communication, September 6, 2018; from the comment section adhering to "The Tent"; my translation).

The comment above includes acknowledgment of another person's claim ("yes, sure") before presenting new information as a fact ("the case is..."), seemingly ending with a contradiction of the other person's claim ("if you like it or not"). This generous interpretation allowed capturing comments that did not methodically consider or fully write out other people's arguments and are hence best understood as reciprocal attempts and/or nuances. Justifications (especially verifiable ones) are seen to facilitate the accuracy and transparency of views and utterances and, hence, potentially receivers' understandings of positions and arguments (Wessler & Rinke, 2014). In the category named "potentially verifiable justifications," participants either provided direct routes to their sources, named their sources, wrote that they could send their sources, or provided information that was easily verifiable/refutable (publicly available information). Only the "If I were a boy" post sample had comments fitting into this category. One example of a comment was given by the creator herself, answering a comment addressing the issue of gender privileges: "@username women attempt to commit suicide three times as often as men do, but men are responsible for two thirds of the suicides committed in Norway" (personal communication, January 5, 2019; my translation).

In this comment, the creator provides numbers that can be easily verifiable/refutable by looking at publicly available statistics and sources. This comment exemplifies a comment that did not provide or offer to provide a direct source. The deliberative rhetorical genre, on the other hand, operationalized as oriented toward solving issues and future decision making, was detected in only 6% of the data corpus for in-depth analysis. For example, in answer to a statement from another participant concerning gender differences in salary, one participant wrote: "@username if you experience getting a different salary than a male colleague, you can report your employer to the correct institution" (personal communication, January 5, 2019; from the comment section adhering to "If I were a boy"; my translation).

In this comment, the participant orients another participant toward a solution to an issue. The comment illustrates, however, that orientations to future problem solving often framed problems as

individual responsibilities (as opposed to structural, in turn in need of societal action). Moreover, orientations to future problem solving often included downplaying matters. Such comments proclaimed that since something was not an issue or offense, the correct way to solve the dispute was simply to “calm down” or “stop caring.” To that end, *orientations* to problem solving, as a minimal requirement, did not capture comments necessarily conducive to social transformations and political change (Andersen, 2012).

Instagram Posts as Context

The slightly different settings for passing judgment or “judicial settings,” due to the Instagram posts, may have yielded different patterns on some occasions. The creators played a role in shaping “trials,” as their “accused” differed between specific individuals (as representations for larger issues) and less tangible offenders, that is, social structures upheld by the public. The posts may have impacted the distinctive features of the comment-section conversations on three occasions. “The Tent” post deals with the antagonistic behavior of two individuals (the celebrity criticized and the creator himself), which may particularly invite condemnations. Known for pointing out Norwegian influencers’ “treacherous behaviors,” debates concerning the creator’s activities and behaviors have also emerged in the Norwegian public. As opposed to the “Celebrity Kiss” post, where one individual’s behavior is explicitly stated in the post’s caption as the representation of broader societal issues, in “The Tent” post, the audience is left to negotiate or fight over such a potential connection, and its meaning, themselves. “The Tent” post may especially invite conversations about morality with two tangible public behaviors as a point of departure (i.e., influencers and the creator). The prominence of the other creator’s “Showing Skin” post in the praise category can further be understood by looking to her demonstrative and humorous dancing, her choice of music (by feminist activist Silvana Imam), and her caption, all constituting a kind of feminist online activism. Finally, in the “If I were a boy” post, the creator requests claims based on lived experiences, which may explain the several factual-claim comments. Participants were, however, engaged in discussions about societal issues, guilt and innocence, and immoral views and behaviors across comment sections. These tendencies connecting the material are discussed below.

Discussion

The comments demonstrate theoretical reasoning (Kock, 2018), of which forensic rhetoric in particular outlines characteristics. The domination of forensic rhetoric in public discussions may not just indicate that discussions are concerned with truth and justice, but also reflect a high presence of theoretical reasoning over practical reasoning. That is, that expressions are concerned with what is true, rather than what to do about an issue.

It is of great concern to scholars within the deliberative democratic tradition if people are increasingly disinterested in a common truth. Decisions made based on informed opinions would consequently decline. The comment sections scrutinized in this study, however, prove interest in shared conceptions of reality and facts. Participants responded to and contested each other’s truth claims. Convincing others of “the correct truth” *mattered*, as seen in how participants contested others’ claims. To that end, the comment-section participants represent how fears of an enduring truth-uncertainty prompting truth-apathy or truth-relativism (Keane, 2009; Wight, 2018) may be too gloomy (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). People do not exclusively seek the comfort of like-minded discussions, rely merely on personal experience as truth or relativize truth to an extent where it

does not matter (Wight, 2018). As Michailidou and Trenz (2021) argue, there is "resilience of the public sphere" (p. 13479).

One could expect that the comments would take the shape of preference-driven talk "among like-minded individuals" (Jakob et al., 2021, p. 3), as social media enables people to "follow" certain profiles and, and due to platforms' personalization logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2014), both potentially supporting like-mindedness. As the comment sections rather reveal that (active) participants were engaged in "problem-centered" or "issue-driven" (Jakob et al., 2021, pp. 3, 6) debates across opinions and perspectives, fears that social media have become "silos" and that people merely discuss matters of public concern in like-minded arenas online (Habermas, 2009) due to technological features are also further challenged. Technological features of platforms do not deterministically force fragmentation (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Despite these seemingly uplifting findings, the ontological contests that the comments demonstrate indicate that the comment sections are best understood as places for a particular kind of societal conversation.

Epidictic and Forensic Entanglement: A Breeding Ground for Clashing Truths?

The rhetorical genres of the forensic and the epideictic delineate that the discussions revolve around truth, justice, and morality, or in other words, how things are and how things should be. The state of justice and appropriateness were inherent in the discussions. Despite the lack of truth-apathy/relativism and like-mindedly-confined discussion, an explicit *cooperative* negotiation of truth was missing. In the comment section, participants were oriented toward convincing others of *the truth* of a public issue or incident. They took on roles as providers of "objective facts" (e.g., Palczewski, 2005, p. 128) but were seemingly not open to acknowledging or reflecting on different truth claims or changing their own minds (Cohen, 2009). Utterances were rather largely expressed to demonstrate that others had made false truth claims; "truths" were clashing. While contradicting truth-relativism and -apathy (Keane, 2009; Wight, 2018), which can describe the lack of belief in the existence of one truth or a lack of belief that truth matters, the debates may reflect truth uncertainty in public life (Keane, 2009). The latter can be described as a lack of shared and taken-for-granted truths. Considering why epideictic and forensic rhetoric may be present in public conversations and the functions of their entanglement may help explain these tendencies.

When speakers proclaim what is true, as in forensic rhetoric, ontological contests are invited. The ontological contests demonstrated in this study further show the role of the forensic genre through participants' orientation to setting straight realities of (in)justice (Evans, 2021; Harris & Werner, 2021). Participants, for example, proclaimed that something had in fact happened as proof that something was (in)just or that someone should be accused or defended of something (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971). Offenses were placed in the hands of influencers, other participants in the comment sections, the creator of the post in question, a group in society (for example, "men," "feminists"), or society entirely ("people," "we"). This illuminates attempts at responsibility attributions necessary to make problems concrete and create pathways to justice (Harris & Werner, 2021). The need to establish guilt is especially pertinent in questions of social change because "assigning guilt provides a connection between the problem and agency" (Harris & Werner, 2021, p. 630). Epideictic rhetoric, however, seen, for instance, in participants' praising or condemning each other (Condit, 1985; Hauser, 1999), may uphold and sustain such ontological contests by

strengthening diverging positions. Finding more epideictic rhetoric in public conversations indicates finding more moral positioning (see Andersen, 2020; Vatnøy, 2017). That is, placing others and/or self according to morality. While genres are thus delineated conceptually, they are often empirically tied in the comment sections. For example, orientations to truth were closely tied to attempts to position someone or something as violating (or reinforcing harmful) norms, customs, rules, and values. Here, the forensic genre appears in its orientation to truth and attempts to prescribe guilt for a violation, while the epideictic genre is present through condemning and morally positioning others (Andersen, 2020) for conducting, supporting, or overlooking the violation in question.

The comment sections may illustrate that when injustices prevail due to not being sufficiently recognized in a public, guilty parties may be confined to people's *views* and *customs*, inviting an empirical entanglement of epideictic and forensic rhetoric. When people do not acknowledge claims that a violation has been committed, they may be blamed for upholding or disregarding injustice and thus be morally positioned through condemnation. To move toward a solution to an issue of injustice, disagreeing parties need to agree that a problem exists, on its facts, and to its extent. The lack of orientation toward future action in the comment sections makes sense, considering the diverging perceptions of what the facts were, concerning what had happened in the past, or what was continuously (not) happening. As the public issues discussed in the comment sections pertained to social (in)justice that was still in need of others' recognition, an orientation toward future decision making and a public debate in the views of Habermas (1981/1984) would be premature. While the comments are concerned with truth, disproving truth-relativism, they remain proclamations.

Transcending From Ontological Contest

To the ontological contests of this study, the question remains about the state of democratic listening (see Wessler, 2018), something beyond what this study can allude to. In general, without democratic listening, the public sphere could become a place of proclamations of several versions of truth, resulting in "polarization of different 'trust communities' that diverge in how they interpret the value of information" (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021, p. 1346). If people were to never transcend and move forward from a stage of ontological contest as shown in this study, through finding common ground on the existence or reality of public issues, public conversations would have a hard time moving away from a display of opinions where people rather than considering arguments cheered on the side they belonged to (Andersen, 2020).

This illustrates the point that reciprocity and justification matter to theoretical reasoning from a deliberative democratic perspective. One may come closer to a shared truth through their presence in discussions. It is an ideal of the deliberative democratic tradition that people share assumptions about the world and what they regard as true to agree on their shared situation (Habermas, 1981/1984), before starting or continuing deliberation. This does not mean that deliberation in an Aristotelian sense (i.e., weighing different reasons in discussion about future action or decision making) does not occur empirically without truth consensus. Rather, the point is that it is *valuable* to the democratic quality of discussions that people have similar conceptions of reality and facts. This is also the stage that needs to be passed in order for injustices to be recognized (Harris & Werner, 2021) and for opposing positions to be fruitful in a

democratic deliberative sense, as it can make positions clear (Jakob et al., 2021). Proclamations can be fruitful in distinguishing and clarifying disagreeing parties, but agreement that a problem *exists* needs to be sought before this stage.

Scholars have demonstrated the presence of epideictic rhetoric in online public conversations, explaining it as partly resulting from the inherent features of social media platforms (Andersen, 2020; Vatnøy, 2017). Blurred boundaries between what is public and what is private may invite conversations where 'the personal' is focused on and employed, and that concern issues that "involve reflections on the social norms and values that form the basis for social life" (Vatnøy, 2017, p. 68). These are issues where people can easily form an opinion and draw on personal experiences and their sense of what is right or wrong. In these circumstances, when discussing "what is true" (Kock, 2018), contradicting information may be challenging to consider (Festinger, 1962). Negotiating one's conception of what is true, especially when issues pertain to "social norms and values" (Vatnøy, 2017, p. 68), may require more effort and self-examination than negotiating one's views on already established public matters. When discussions concern what is true, a prevalence of moral positioning of discussion participants (as may be particularly invited on social media; Andersen, 2020; Vatnøy, 2017), may prevent cooperative theoretical reasonings (Kock, 2018), that is, where people aim for a shared understanding about reality. Furthermore, as the logics of social media emphasize not just the personal but movement of content (e.g., Klinger & Svensson, 2014), social media may not facilitate that people follow conversations as they develop. It is here, then, that the most vital role of social media platforms in theoretical discussions and conversations regarding what is true may be shown. To be clear, I do not suggest that the simultaneous presence of epideictic and forensic rhetoric would necessarily impede deliberative rhetoric in all instances. Rather, they together pose challenges to resolve tensions and bridge understandings, as they may not invite reciprocity. In forensic rhetoric, for example, speakers typically present themselves as objective spokespersons and providers of evidence for "the one truth" (Palczewski, 2005). The genre invites proclamations. As has been pointed out, epideictic rhetoric has been shown to unfold as the moral positioning of others and selves between conversations' participants on social media (Andersen, 2020). The genre may thus strengthen opposition between such "others" and "selves" (Condit, 1985). Although forensic rhetoric and epideictic rhetoric do not necessarily impede deliberative rhetoric simply by their existence in conversations, they represent challenges to reciprocity, perhaps especially when occurring in conversations on social media platforms.

While scholars have long used deliberative rhetorical lenses when investigating public discussions (e.g., Gastil & Levine, 2005), and in later years have also increasingly recognized the value of employing epideictic lenses (e.g., Andersen, 2020), forensic rhetoric has been given less attention. It is still considered "an under-theorized vehicle" in public communication (Harris & Werner, 2021, p. 619). As the participants grappled with contested realities in public matters related to social injustices upheld by (largely unquestioned) social structures, forensic rhetoric also demonstrates its relevance outside formal legal contexts (Pâquet, 2018). Identifying ontological contests entailing moral positionings in the comment sections, this study contends not just that epideictic rhetoric, but also forensic rhetoric may emerge in contemporary online conversations. This study also reflects, however, that forensic rhetoric does not necessarily resolve the tensions that may spark its presence—disagreements about truth and (in)justice—by establishing agreement, especially when combined with epideictic rhetoric.

While relying on a small sample of comments drawn from four comment sections, this study illuminates an increased demand for justice that emerges simultaneously as there are challenging circumstances for shared realities and facts in the Western world (Ambrosio, 2022). The urgency to identify and understand the circumstances in which irreconcilability of truth positions emerge and prevail, where condemning “the other” for morale violations is inherent, is, for example, evidenced in the overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* court decision by the Supreme Court in the United States as of June 24, 2022.

This study demonstrates that combining rhetorical genres as theoretical lenses provides useful tools for understanding communicative circumstances and functions. The approach used in this paper facilitates more closely capturing and understanding the range of communication forms that are relevant to society’s public conversations (Wessler, 2018; Young, 2002), while being open and sensitive to how they appear empirically as possibly entangled, imperfect, and “incomplete” (Fishkin, 1995). In particular, it shows that forensic rhetoric is useful for capturing the presence and shape of expressions that are concerned with what is true, as opposed to expressions that are concerned with what to do about an issue. It enables the tracing of the shapes and functions that theoretical reasoning takes (Kock, 2018).

Limitations

Some comments were not included in this analysis ($n = 178$), as I did not export comments from “private” users or comments adhering to shut-down or deleted profiles. Furthermore, the ways in which content travels on social media likely made the four Instagram posts reach certain individuals. Rationales for distributing content for maximum exposure and attention likely make certain content (more easily) available to specific users (Klinger & Svensson, 2014), hence impacting the conversations in the comment sections. The Instagram posts’ audience and active participants may represent more than what this study can inquire about also due to who uses Instagram and for what purposes. This study does not evaluate *why* people engage in online discussions or *who* participates and what motivates them. What is witnessed in this study is simply visible traces of social interaction. To that end, as this study does not aim for quantitative representativeness, the findings do not represent Instagram conversations about public matters at large.

Conclusion

This study identifies the presence of the forensic rhetorical genre in online discussions, highlighting a genre generally overlooked beyond court-of-law settings. Furthermore, it demonstrates the presence of forensic and epideictic rhetoric on Instagram, which is a scarcely examined platform with regard to public conversations. The conversations can be understood as theoretical reasonings in which ontological contests entailing moral positionings dominate, revolving around truth, justice, and evaluations of the appropriateness of views and behaviors. As an analytical tool, the forensic genre helps reveal intricacies of public conversations where ontological contests—that is, disputes about what is true—are prevalent. This is demonstrated in this study, where such intricacies manifest particularly as guilt being prescribed to people’s views and customs when (in)justice is seen as not sufficiently recognized by others.

Although the comments contradict concerns of truth-relativism and truth-apathy, they simultaneously illustrate proclamations of truth rather than conversations traditionally considered fruitful to deliberative democratic publics. Forensic and epideictic rhetoric may, when overlapping, work to uphold contradictory opinions and views rather than to bridge understandings. One's "truth" and worldview, and hence justice claims, may be framed and understood as part of one's persona. "Others" may be alienated, and similarly minded people may be "cherished" (Andersen, 2020). This may be especially true in online environments, where boundaries are blurred between one's opinion and self (Vatnøy, 2017). This article shows the potential of combining the three rhetorical genres as theoretical lenses when studying online communication. It may help pinpoint what rhetorical configurations contribute to *preventing* people from reaching common truths and grounds. Such matters are crucial to future research, given that political polarization and diverging reality conceptions continue to be a worry to both citizens and scholars.

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