The sexually frustrated, the dumb and the libtard traitors: A typology of insults used in the positioning of multiple others in Irish online discourse relating to refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants

Anne Marie Devlin and Ciara Grant
University College Cork, Ireland

Abstract
Based on the framework devised by Korostelina, the purpose of the study is to explore the typology of insults used in the positioning of multiple others by Irish Facebook users in response to Irish Independent newspaper articles concerning the 2016 refugee crisis in Europe. While the main focus rests on positioning the voiceless refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, the study also illuminates how those with voices deploy insults to position each other. The study concludes that insults are deployed differentially both quantitatively and qualitatively depending on whether the recipient has a voice. In the online domain, the voiceless are subject to a greater number and range of insults.

Keywords
Computer-mediated discourse, Facebook, insults, refugees

Introduction
This study is couched against the backdrop of the largest migration crisis since World War 2 and the highest levels of displacement on record. Unlike previous large-scale refugee crises, the current one takes place in an ‘era of social media’ (Enli, 2017: 52)
where participatory journalism and social media provide a platform for many to express and share their ideas on the crisis. While this has had some incredibly positive effects reframing stereotypical discourse (Helfrich and Mancera Rueda, 2016) and facilitating the establishment of support pages and fundraising groups such as the GoFundMe fundraising page set up by Cork Calais Refugee Solidarity, a group formed on Facebook which raised over €80,000 (Horgan, 2015), it also allows for an often unedited outpouring of anti-refugee, asylum seeker, immigrant and migrant vitriol.

Refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants and the media

Previous work in the area of refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants (RASIM, Khosravinik, 2009)² and media discourse has centred on the content of the traditional press (Esses et al., 2013; Khosravinik, 2009, 2010, 2012; Teo, 2000). Such studies are limited to content created by paid journalists and edited and approved for publication. This is what Ceron (2015) refers to as ‘a top-down format … driven by political elites’ (p. 488). However, focusing on print media alone cannot give a complete picture of how RASIM is represented in the media or how those representations are engaged with. A study by Gottfried and Shearer (2016) found that 62% of US adults now get news on social media. This shift in behaviour is reflected in the increasing number of newspapers that have a social media presence. This facilitates greater interaction ‘constructing an intertextuality not only with the presenter but also with other commenters’ (Devlin, 2016: 54). According to Devlin (2016), this allows ‘lay participants the opportunity to challenge the hegemony of an omniscient presenter or journalist’ in such a way that online ‘commenters become not only consumers of political discourse but also creators and negotiators of it’ (p. 54). This study focuses on the discourse produced at the often fractious border between print media and the socially mediated domain where the online platform of Facebook redirects the principal locus of discourse away from the edited and sanctioned piece of journalism towards the often spontaneous, divisive, reactive and interactive exchanges between those who comment. It also adds to the small body of research which ‘exists on the role of the media in constructing Muslims and Islam as Other in the Irish context’ (Carr, 2016: 29).

Insults and online communication

The paradigm shift in the public’s interaction with current affairs and the concomitant prospect of what Jane (2015) refers to as ‘e-bile’ (p. 1) provide a perfect domain for the exploration of the process of othering. Since the early days of Web 2.0, it has been observed that ‘confrontation, misinformation, and insult […] characterize many public forums on the Internet’ (Katz, 1997: 190) which constitutes a major deviation from the utopian version intended to foster ‘communication, collaboration, sharing, helpfulness, and community …’ (Rushkoff, 2002: 26). As insults are the focus of this study, it is worth devoting some time to exploring factors which make them a prominent feature of online communication in user comment sections.
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The proliferation of insults is largely enabled by the online disinhibition effect – an effect that allows users to abandon the ostensible constraints which societal values and face-to-face communication can impose on dialogue. This skews in two distinct directions the first of which is referred to by Suler (2004) as ‘benign disinhibition’ (p. 321 italics in original) which may be positive or life-affirming. The inverse is known as ‘toxic disinhibition’ (Suler, 2004: 321) and is characterised by rude and harsh language, personal attacks on other users, even threats. Factors impacting on toxic disinhibition include dissociative anonymity, invisibility and asynchronicity (Suler, 2004). While engaged in threatening or aggressive behaviour, users can withhold personal information that would identify them, their offensive remarks are free from the disapproving faces or averted gazes of (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012), and they can deposit offensive content and then disappear.

Such toxic behaviour often manifests itself in insults used to create group identities while simultaneously positioning the other. As noted by Van Dijck (2009), ‘media use […] is strongly defined by emerging group identities’ (p. 44) which Hogg and Tindale (2005) note can be more powerful and salient than individual identities. The creation of group identities produces a fault line – an ‘us’ and ‘them’ where groups are delineated as an in-group or an out-group and, maybe unconsciously, embark on the process of othering – a strategy used by the in-group to distance those who are thought to be different; and to make their difference known to others (Jensen, 2011; Spivak, 1985; Weis, 1995) with the out-group often identified as a source of deviance and bad behaviour (Grove and Zwi, 2006).

**Othering RASIM**

The impact of media-based language in othering RASIM has long been noted in European media discourse. For example, Hartmann and Husband (1974) posit that for people who do not have personal experience with RASIM, the mass-media is their main source of knowledge. They detail how debate about immigration in Britain placed ‘coloured people’ at the centre as a ‘problem’ concluding that mass-media is one of the driving forces behind racist ideologies. These findings are paralleled in the media today with Polonska-Kimunguyi and Gillespie (2008: 36), in a study exploring the othering of Muslims by French media, stating that ‘Western media officially began their onslaught on Muslims in the post-9/11 era’ (p. 569) thus indicating that ‘othering’ non-Christian, non-White newcomers to Europe may be an ideology-driven policy in some branches of European media.

This is supported by studies emanating from a range of European countries. Khosravinik (2009) notes that negative and positive representations of RASIM in the British press fluctuate based on the group’s proximity to the United Kingdom and on how ‘dramatic’ the events surrounding the discussion are. He also notes that the most common themes used to other RASIM in discourse include ‘numbers, economic burden (abuse of welfare system, expenditure), threat (threat to cultural identity, threat to community values), danger, and law (legality issues)’ (Khosravinik, 2009: 493-494). In Khosravinik’s study, RASIM are given a group identity that is homogenous. All RASIM share the same motivations, background and economic status, all of which differ from
those of the in-group. Khosravinik (2009) found that the in-group normally constructs the RASIM stereotype as ‘different-looking (generally non-Caucasian), healthy (but lazy), adult, a young, single male with no or little education or professional skills’ (p. 36).

Andreassen’s (2005) work in Denmark found that discourse surrounding young Black Muslim males is often informed by cultural racism insofar as the stereotypical member of the out-group is portrayed as a violent criminal with a ‘dangerously high libido’ (p. 25). Both Jensen (2011) and Mercer (2013) foreground hyper-sexualisation as a common tactic for othering young minority males with Mercer (2013) noting that this portrayal of young Black Muslims as sexually dangerous has strong racist connotations as it is informed by historical narratives in the West which sexualised and fetishised Black male bodies.

In addition, the in-group may attempt to create moral panic in order to keep their own group identity and status intact. Moral panic involves the identification of a perceived threat by the in-group (in this case the arrival of RASIM into Ireland even though, as of April, 2016, Ireland had only accepted 264 of the 4000 Syrian refugees it pledged to take in\(^3\)). The in-group portrays this as a threat to the greater community’s interests producing a rapid build-up of public outcry until change is achieved or the status-quo is maintained (Baker, 2001; Atkinson, 1998). A further way of creating moral panic according to Grove and Zwi (2006) is to represent RASIM as lawbreakers who have arrived into the country illegally. This creates a divide between the in-group and the out-group based on values, thus rendering the in-group less willing to offer assistance. Creating moral panic with RASIM widens the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide initiating the idea that the nation is under siege and must be defended. This is extremely problematic since, as Grove and Zwi (2006) note, if an RASIM identity is constructed by the in-group as a threat to the security and well-being of the in-group, it results in real-world isolation of RASIM from the in-group through barriers, deportations, and detention camps.

Turning the discussion to an Irish perspective, all aspects discussed have been noted in the Irish media (see Breen et al., 2008; Carr, 2015, 2016; Haynes et al., 2005). Haynes et al. (2005) in their study on the othering of RASIM in the Irish press posit that one of the key tactics the in-group uses to other is to present the out-group as one amorphous mass without individual identities or stories. They found that ‘categorisation as irre-deemable (incapacity to integrate), as a cause of racial conflict, as undeserving (illegitimate), as unproductive, as criminal, immoral and diseased’ (Haynes et al., 2005: 15) were all significant elements of the identity the in-group used to other the out-group. Carr (2016) highlights the perceived threat not only to national security, but also to the ‘presumed homogenous values’ of the Irish people and further stresses the role of the media as ‘dominant actors in anti-Muslim reportage’ (p. 41).

When the above is taken into account, it is clear how the apparent ideological othering of RASIM by the professional media can facilitate the insults and e-bile which permeate online comment sections. However, the approach to the study of othering previously has been of a monolithic nature insofar as it has considered the means of othering to be qualitatively and quantitatively a whole. This study aims to broaden our understanding of othering by exploring how it is achieved through differential typologies of insult and by shifting the focus from the top-down media to the fractious border between professional and citizen output.
Study and methodology

The data used in this study were collected from comments made by users on the Irish Independent Facebook page in response to articles posted online between May 2015 and June 2016 and are intended to answer the following research questions:

- What categories of insults are used in the process of othering?
- Do the categories differ according to the group doing the othering?

The original news articles were written by journalists on the subject of the migration crisis and published to www.independent.ie. These articles were then shared by the Irish Independent Facebook page as posts and registered Facebook users could both comment on the post and reply to previous comments. Only comments which specifically related to RASIM or those made in response to a comment were selected. A total of 478 comments made by 278 users were collected. Comments were first analysed for anti-RASIM or pro-RASIM status and grouped accordingly. Anti-RASIM comments included content such as calls for the restriction of RASIM entry into Ireland, or references to negative behaviour of RASIM elsewhere. Pro-RASIM comments included expressions of support and sympathy for the RASIM plight, and calls for the government to accept more RASIM. The comments were subsequently categorised according to the taxonomy developed by Korostelina (2014) and compared for each group. In quoting from the data, all users’ names are anonymised and original spellings were preserved.

Taxonomy of insults

The taxonomy was devised by Korostelina (2014) in her paper analysing insults traded at the time of the Pussy Riot controversy in Russia. It is ‘based on insights from social identity theory and theories of power’ (Folkenflik, 2013) and constitutes ‘proposed theoretical concepts to the analysis of complex conflict dynamics’ (p. 214). An overview of the typology is presented in Table 1.

Groups

In the context of this study, two in-groups have been identified – one composed of Facebook users who identify themselves as Irish citizens and oppose offering asylum to RASIM. The other is a smaller group comprising those who self-identify as Irish, but who support RASIM. It is important that both groups are bestowed with the identity of in-groups as they both have voices which they deploy to position themselves and the others and which are representative of the majority community in Ireland. By contrast, RASIM form the out-group which is composed of a multitude of nationalities conflated to construct a single Muslim identity. The out-group remains voiceless throughout the debate and is positioned solely in terms of the comments from both in-groups.
Challenges

One challenge to data collection was a phenomenon known as astroturfing. Astroturfing involves companies, individuals or political parties paying online users to post comments supporting a particular ideology or cause (Cho et al., 2011). These users create multiple fake social media profiles and flood blog posts and comments sections with messages designed to appear as though the support is coming from real grassroots participants. This practice was reportedly employed by the Fox News network in the early 2000s. It is also a strategy used by extreme parties to drum up public support and make their party appear more salient in the media. When collecting the data, it was not apparent which profiles were genuine and which were astroturfing profiles.

Results

This section provides an analysis of the number and types of insults deployed uni-directionally by the larger in-group of Irish nationals towards the out-group comprising RASIM and bi-directionally by both in-groups as they trade slurs to position each other negatively. At this point, it is worth reiterating that the out-group is voiceless and unknown to the in-groups. The claims and the insults deployed remain unchallenged by them and while they inhabit a central position in the discourse, they lack agency to respond. Whether comments are negative or positive, what remains a constant is that the people towards whom the comments are directed, that is, the RASIM are solely positioned by others in a manner which others them from the in-groups.

We will start by examining the overall positioning of comments made in response to the *Irish Independent* articles.

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**Table 1. Taxonomy of insults.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity insults</td>
<td>Accusing the out-group of actions the in-group claims it would never do or ascribing negative traits or values to the out-group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projection insults</td>
<td>Projecting the negative traits or behaviours of the in-group onto the out-group in order to detract from the downfalls or shortcomings of the in-group, thus scapegoating the out-group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergence insults</td>
<td>Emphasising the otherness of the out-group in comparison with the in-group, thus constructing a perception of the out-group that is totally incompatible with the traits and behaviours of the in-group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative insults</td>
<td>The perception that the out-group is being granted an unfair advantage over the in-group which results in a lowering of in-group status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power insults</td>
<td>Maintaining the in-group’s power by discouraging social acceptance of the out-group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy insults</td>
<td>Legitimising the in-group and delegitimising the out-group with the aim of increasing the power and standing of the in-group, while reducing that of the out-group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Korostelina (2014).
As can be seen from Figure 1, comments made are dominated by anti-RASIM rhetoric with 81% being categorised as such. A mere 8% of the comments expressed positive sentiments with 11% falling into the other category, which is composed mostly of one word comments, agreeing with previous users and unrelated personal comments directed at individuals. Moving on to a breakdown of insults vis-à-vis typology, Figure 2 highlights the differential pattern utilised by each group.

**Typology of insults**

Insults used by each group compare differentially in terms of range and configuration. With regard to insults directly targeted at RASIM, all six typologies identified by Korostelina are present in the data. Relative insults dominate appearing twice as frequently as each of the remaining five categories and comprising 30% of the overall total. The remaining categories vary from 12% (projection and identity) to 16% (power). This pattern contrasts greatly with those of the insults traded bi-directionally between anti- and pro-RASIM commenters. The latter two groups are represented by only four of the typologies – identity, divergence, relative and legitimacy. Neither power nor projection insults were found in the data. Interestingly, both groups relied heavily on legitimacy insults, making up 50% and 47%. Differences occur in the use of identity, divergence and relative insults. With regard to identity insults, they comprise 20% of insults directed towards the anti-RASIM cohort. The identity of pro-RASIM commenters was attacked in 25% of cases. Divergence insults constituted the biggest raw difference between the groups with 27% of insults towards anti-RASIM falling into this category as opposed to 11% of insults towards pro-RASIM. Relative insults were levelled much less frequently towards anti-RASIM, whereas 17% of insults towards pro-RASIM fell into this category.
Starting with identity insults, these are operationalised when the in-group attributes to the out-group ‘negative features, evil motivations, or foul values or by accusing Group Y of performing destructive or erroneous actions’ (Korostelina, 2014: 217). This is particularly interesting as the deployment of such insults differs significantly depending on whether they are used uni-directionally against RASIM or bi-directionally between pro- and anti-RASIM commenters insofar as they represent 13% of insults used against RASIM yet 20% and 25% of those used bi-directionally. Identity insults used against RASIM focus on the RASIM as migrant. Irish people have a long history of economic and political migration; however, rather than this commonality giving rise to empathy, commenters utilise it as an opportunity to foreground that the current RASIM do not share the identity enacted by Irish emigrants and as such cannot be viewed in the same manner. Unlike the Irish emigrants of the past, today’s RASIM are portrayed as violent troublemakers:

The Irish went and settled all over the world worked hard and flourished without creating mass pandemonium or threatening to flood lands beyond its own with criminals It’s the people that come over thinking they are owed something so excuse you (name) … and the so called ‘big boys of Europe’ are the ones who reached out in the name of humanity to give these people refuge … this problem stems from the fact certain people are incapable of living in peace.

On the contrary, identity insults traded between pro- and anti-RASIM commenters share a focus on political/social outlooks. Those levelled at anti-RASIM commenters equate them with Nazis and Trump supporters. According to Korostelina, these are used to other by threatening ‘self-esteem and sense of dignity’ (Korostelina, 2014: 218):

You must be a TRUMP supporter!

Thats very NAZI of you!
When othering pro-RASIM commenters with identity insults, the over-riding narrative is to position the commenters as ‘liberals’, ‘libtards’ (a hybrid of liberal and retard) and ‘do-gooders’:

happy clappy ‘let them in’ deluded bleeding heart do gooders

libtard traitors

All you liberals who operate under the Gaelic version of your name, but don’t have the intelligence to recognise when your country is at risk.

In the minds of those accused, the traits assigned to the identity of Trump supporter, liberal or do-gooder may accurately describe the social values that a person truly holds – that is, national pride and tolerance of the other; however, in the domain of social media political discourse they assume negative identity values evoking a political identity of those who espouse racism or those who portray the world as an idealised version where nothing bad ever happens.

Projection insults constitute ‘an opportunity to eradicate the negative features of the in-group by imposing them onto an out-group’ (Korostelina, 2014: 220). This type of insult is found solely in the discourse directed towards the voiceless RASIM and is not utilised between pro- and anti-RASIM users. In this case, they take the form of sexual crimes. Like any country, Ireland is not immune to sexual crimes; however, in this domain, they have been construed as exclusively committed by the out-group. To the in-group, rape only became an issue when the migration crisis began:

… Those photos are of young sexually frustrated Muslim males. Good luck to German women … you will need it with the press and government you have …

Our girls, our ladies are ‘free to use’ for ‘Refugees’.

Divergence insults continue the process of othering. It is likewise a typology whose use differs according to the group. It is used primarily by the pro-RASIM group to other anti-RASIM commenters. It constitutes 27% of their insults. Anti-RASIM commenters direct it towards RASIM in 15% of cases and against pro-RASIM in 11%. However, as is apparent, the positioning of the other differs significantly. The aim of divergence results is to highlight incompatibility between groups. This is achieved by anti-RASIM commenters towards RASIM through foregrounding an insurmountable religious and moral chasm between a perceived Islamic way of life and Irish society. Examples of this include the following:

These people cannot integrate into civilised European society and Ireland should not let any of them into Ireland.

Let’s call a spade a spade. Their way of life is NOT compatible with ours. Mark my words, as soon as they get their feet in the door they will be making demands for Muslim schools, Mosques etc etc …
The use of pronouns such as ‘them’, ‘their’, ‘they’ and ‘ours’ frames the narrative by emphasising the distance between both groups. The other becomes ‘them’ – an impersonal mass. On the contrary, the language employed by the pro-RASIM group to other anti-RASIM commenters takes a different approach. There is a marked change in pronoun from ‘them’ to ‘you’ – congruent with shift of focus from the voiceless RASIM, who are positioned outside the narrative, to direct insults towards those who have the agency to answer back. What is emphasised is the others’ – that is, Irish opponents of RASIM – lack of empathy in comparison with those who voice support. In addition, direct comparisons are made between the others’ apparent willingness to engage in insults – a negative trait which the commenters deny in this case. Examples include the following:

You used Facebook to belittle people you happened not to agree with. Which one of us made best use of social media?

(Name) I think we are wasting our time with these Xenophobes. Just be happy that the educated are in the majority and don’t keyboard war with these people.

With regard to divergence insults directed towards pro-RASIM, another switch in pronominal choice is noted. Whereas in other groups, a clear division was established between ‘them’ and ‘us’ or ‘you’ and ‘us’, in this case ‘us’ is almost exclusively deployed to highlight a divergence in views. The pro-RASIM commenters are recognised and acknowledged as sharing a national identity with the larger group through the inclusive ‘us’; however, they are positioned as a deviant subsection whose opinions run counter to the majority. Examples include the following:

Only difference in Ireland is most of us don’t swallow everything the media tell us

Thank god the majority of us are not delusional.

Regarding relative insults, these also show a marked difference in use between anti- and pro-RASIM commenters constituting 32% of insults directed at RASIM and 11% of those directed at pro-RASIM commenters. Conversely, while it is part of the pro-RASIM repertoire, it is utilised in only 3% of cases. To recap, relative insults are deployed when the in-group perceive that they are being treated disadvantageously vis-à-vis the out-group and that this has led or will lead to discrimination and deprivation. Relative insults were used towards RASIM more than twice as frequently as any other insult type. A recurring theme is the plight Irish homeless who are perceived as being deprioritised in relation to prospective RASIM. Examples include the following:

thats a great idea now lets do that for those already homeless here. When that crisis is cleared up, we’ll take in the rest. We should take in more Syrians but our own mess needs to be cleared up first in the short term. You cannot have homeless irish squatting next door to a homed and supported Syrian family.

We r a former Colony never Colonised Anyone’s Country. Thousands of Our Own Homeless. Hospitals over crowded. Owe 42 thousand per head to the I. M. F. Sorry but Charity begins at home and 3 into 2 won’t go!!!
By highlighting the plight of native Irish homeless and emphasising the perceived shift in priorities that an influx of RASIM will result in, the group is introducing ‘a comparative perspective’ (Korostelina, 2014: 219) thus avoiding a direct insult on RASIM. This is significant as it shows that the biggest single means of ‘othering’ is not, in fact, an attack on RASIM per se, but an attempt to deflect from overt ‘othering’ by rationalising the views, intimating that the acceptance of RASIM into Irish society could at other times be feasible, but currently would result in the out-group being granted greater societal privileges than the in-group who will begin to suffer greater deprivation that before.

This theme of the degradation of Irish society is continued in the relative insults traded between pro- and anti-RASIM commenters. However, rather than focusing on the deprivation that a certain cohort of citizens will endure, they concentrate on the destruction of society as a whole. From an anti-RASIM perspective, it is the action of supporting the acceptance of RASIM into Irish society which will lead to a lowered status and standard of living for the native population:

Look at the 300 eejits out protesting in o’connell street.would make u wonder what is going on and what kind of country Ireland is going to be in years to come.

The same tactic is used by the pro-RASIM group – albeit the 3% represents a single relative insult:

The Irish used to have a reputation for being hospitable. Now the majority are just bitter and hateful. Such a shame, will probably affect the tourism to the country too.

The action of opposing RASIM is portrayed as a potential threat to the good reputation of the country, again, as a whole.

Power insults are solely used in the negative othering of RASIM and form the second most common insult type directed towards RASIM. They focus on diminishing social acceptance of the out-group by ‘stressing its low abilities or absence of rights’ (Korostelina, 2014: 220). In the data collected, two differential power insult themes are employed: RASIM as non-financial contributors to society and RASIM as threats to society. A primary means of emphasising their inability to contribute positively to society both from a personal and an institutional perspective is to portray RASIM who have already arrived in Europe as free loaders. Doing so comes with the implication that RASIM neither want to nor have the right to add to society:

The only reason why the refugees are demanding to go to Germany, Ireland, uk and other European countries, thousands of miles away from there homeland and refusing help from all other countries. They want new homes (they are constantly refusing camps and centres).they want handouts … money. And whatever they can get.

A further means of preventing social acceptance through power insults is by positioning RASIM as terrorists and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters in disguise:

It’s an Islamic invasion.
Der guna do da same 2 our country der doin 2 other countries as we speak … open ur eyes its invasion!

Such power insults create hysteria among the public and feed into the moral panic. Finally, the biggest differential inter-group use is noted within legitimacy insults. These are deployed primarily bi-directionally between pro- and anti-RASIM commenters (50% and 47%, respectively), but comprise only 12% of insults directed towards RASIM. Starting with insults directed towards RASIM, delegitimisation is achieved mainly through questioning the legal status of RASIM. Their movements are portrayed as contrary to international law. The Dublin Regulation requires refugees to apply for asylum in the first EU member state in which they arrive. As refugees from the Middle East and North Africa cannot travel directly to Ireland without crossing through other EU member states, online users are quick to point out that they are contravening the Dublin Regulation:

These people are queue jumpers, in effect. Rather then comply with the law, they have decided to force their way through the borders. We have no moral or legal obligation to these people. If we are to take any refugees, they should be taken from the camps. People who have registered with the UN and stayed within the rules. The queue jumpers should be returned and told to take their place in the queue.

Legitimacy insults are used to strip the RASIM of their refugee status. As they have travelled to Europe using illegal means and without following the proper procedure, they are not genuine refugees.

Turning to the delegitimisation of anti-RASIM commenters, two main categories are noted: questioning the source of the commenter’s information and the commenter’s overall intelligence. By doing so, othering is accomplished by implying that commenters have neither the intelligence nor reliable information to support their claims:

The majority (name)? Do you have data on this?

No one is questioning your opinion. Your stupidity and obvious lack of intelligence and education isnt in question either. You really are dumb though.

Othering occurs by positioning the ‘other’ as ignorant, someone who does not have the cognitive capacity to understand what they are talking about. The legitimacy insults levelled at the pro-RASIM commenters foreground a similar pattern in terms of both quantity and quality. However, they question the commenters’ authority on the subject not by challenging their knowledge or level of education, but by challenging their understanding of real life implications of mass immigration. That is to say, in contrast, that the ‘book smarts’ of the commenter is not questioned, rather the legitimacy of the comments is under attack because the commenter is positioned as lacking common sense, of lacking ‘street smarts’:

Stop using the term Nazi until you really know what it means

Check your facts mug
To sum up, the above analysis provides deeper insight into the complexity of means utilised to ‘other’ in an intertextual domain where not only the voiceless mass comes under attack, but one which also gives a voice to those who are prepared to challenge. By exploring typologically different insults, it can be seen that attacks levelled at RASIM and those traded between pro- and anti-commenters emanate from a multitude of perspectives. However, the range and configuration of insults is dependent on (1) the others’ absence or presence of a voice and (2) stance vis-à-vis RASIM. The full range of insults identified by Korostelina was directed at RASIM, whereas only four were traded between those with voices implying the absence of a voice gives rise to a more elaborate attack. While the majority of insults levelled at RASIM, when conflated, constitute direct insults, the single most common method for othering, relative insults, takes a different approach – a more covert attempt to disguise racist overtones by invoking potential degradations that the host society will experience due to the burden that accommodating RASIM may place on already stretched services. With regard to bi-directional othering not only does it invoke a smaller range of insults but also a different configuration. The most common method of insulting was the deployment of legitimacy insults which in both cases questioned the others’ grasp of the situation either by questioning their intelligence levels or their understanding of reality.

Discussion

First, it is imperative to foreground the insight gained from an exploration of insult typologies. It illuminates the multiple perspectives othering takes and emphasises the differential qualitative and quantitative means employed. If we return to the first research question, it can be clearly seen that all six insult types identified by Korostelina were present in the discourse. However, it is the answer to question 2 that provides more insight insofar as the insults are deployed differentially according to their origins and targets. The most complex set of insults was levelled at the voiceless RASIM. All six insult types in Korostelina’s typology were in evidence with relative insults constituting the single biggest type accounting for just over 32% of all insults. This is interesting insofar as it suggests that the in-group prioritises protecting its own status within society by implying that the acceptance of the out-group would lead to an erosion of the rights of the in-group due to scant resources. It’s an indirect insult, not based on the ethnonational or religious identity of the out-group, but rationalised through a call to put Ireland first, strongly implying that not to do so is to discriminate against the in-group within their own country. This is an aspect of othering of RASIM that, by taking a monolithic view of insults, has previously not been developed.

Looking at the research in this area, we can see that many of the findings of previous studies (Andreassen, 2005; Carr, 2015, 2016; Esses et al., 2013; Haynes et al., 2005; Khosravinik, 2010; Khosravinik et al., 2012) into the positioning of RASIM by
mass-media are replicated with respect to the remaining typologies of insult employed in social media interaction. They position RASIM as a lazy, illegal, hypersexualised, militarised, deindividualised mass of Muslims whose way of life is totally incompatible with Irish and European norms. Central to many of the insults is a version of Islam that the in-group has the privilege of constructing. This version is one that is violent, anti-women and backwards. Based on these findings, it may be surmised that the depiction of RASIM which has been put forth by mass-media since at least the 1970s has become an ingrained element of social perception.

Turning to the bi-directional insults levelled against targets with voices, targets who can and do respond, targets who share an ethnonational identity, differential patterns emerge. First, it must be noted that each group employs a smaller number of insults which covers four typologies. Neither group utilises power nor projection insults – possibly because each group recognises each other’s position as indigenous members of a common society. Of interest is that both groups mainly utilise legitimacy insults to position the other. The focus of both groups is primarily on delegitimising the opinions of the other by questioning their sources and challenging their ability to analyse the world. The anti-RASIM commenter is positioned primarily as an unintelligent, unempathetic supporter of non-Irish right-wing views who cannot underpin claims with data and who has the potential to lower the reputation of Ireland internationally. Overall, pro-RASIM commenters are othered from the same four directions to create an identity of an educated yet gullible minority who are far removed from reality and whose actions will lead to the erosion of Irish and European values. What is markedly different is the use of divergent and relevance insults. With regard to the former, these are a device used more often to other the anti-RASIM group. That is to say, that the pro-RASIM group is more interested in distancing itself from the other. It achieves this, not as has been seen, via an ‘us’ and ‘them’ discourse, but through a ‘you’ and ‘us’. They are positioned not as a mass, but as individuals. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that they have a voice in the debate and that individual comments can be individually challenged. However, pro-RASIM is positioned from a perspective of divergence, paradoxically, by stressing ‘us’. By drawing on the commonalities of ethnonational identity, the anti-RASIM group is stressing the almost traitor-like qualities of those who are in favour of RASIM.

Conclusion

Operationalising a complex model of insult analysis within the micro-domain of online comment sections sheds light on the differential means of othering the voiceless and the voiced. While the voiceless are positioned from a multitude of perspectives, the pattern mirrors that of more traditional media platforms. However, the voiced are in a position to challenge and retaliate in a way facilitated by features of the online medium such as anonymity and asynchronicity. Rather that this resulting in a more multi-faceted attack, it seems as if the prospect – albeit verbal – of retaliation may lead to less complex attacks.

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Notes
2. RASIM (refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants) is a term used by Khosravinik (2008).
4. REGULATION (EU) No. 604/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast). (Official Journal of the European Union, L (180/31), 29 June 2013)

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