

Xenophobic and Homophobic Attitudes in Online News Portal Comments in Malta

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Abstract. In this paper, we present part of the research carried out at the Institute of Linguistics and Language Technology of the University of Malta under the auspices of the EU-funded C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project¹. The present study, which followed the common methodology of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium, focuses on the verbal expression of discrimination in Malta. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, we seek to identify the extent to which comments posted online in reaction to news reports in local portals can be found to encompass discriminatory attitudes towards two target minorities: migrants and members of the LGBTIQ community. The obtained results indicate that, while both xenophobia and homophobia can be detected in some of the comments, the former is a much more prevalent than the latter. In an attempt to further probe into the reasons for the emergence of such discriminatory discourse online, we additionally administered an online questionnaire and conducted focus group interviews, which provided us with some insight as to why discriminatory attitudes appear to have recently been on the rise in relation to migrants, while, at the same time, have correspondingly been contained in the case of the LGBTIQ minority group.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, online comments, xenophobia, homophobia, hate speech

1 Introduction

When one speaks of discrimination in its broadest sense, one typically refers to prejudice based on any minority identity, be it tied to religion, nationality, race, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other

trait that legal terminology pertaining to hate speech and hate crime commonly calls a ‘protected characteristic’. Regardless of whether or not a discriminatory incident is indeed prosecutable by law, the underlying idea is that some person is discriminated against when they are singled out – and potentially insulted or even threatened – because they share some identifying feature with other members of a particular minority group.

In Malta, both the Constitution (Article 45) and the Criminal Code (Article 82) directly outlaw any form of discrimination (with the Press Act, the Broadcasting Act and the Employment and Industrial Relations Act also comprising further provisions in relation to it). Beyond the legal remit of discrimination, however, community perceptions are also quite complex. As the MGRM (Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement) pointed out to us in our communication with them, before the relevant amendments to the Constitution and Criminal Code in 2013, when the Civil Union Act was ratified, society’s perception of the LGBTIQ community was ahead of legislation; there was more tolerance from society than was reflected in policy. Now, however, the converse seems to be the case; policy is quite ahead in terms of LGBTIQ rights and protections, and people need time to catch up. Similarly, a great source of contention for the Maltese is the problem of irregular migration in the Mediterranean, with the 2016 Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2016) enlisting migration as the highest concern locally. This seems to be spurring much of the discrimination against migrants on the Maltese islands, where irregular migrants, alongside anyone perceived to be one on the basis of their physical characteristics, are often categorised as one group of ‘Others’, regardless of their nationality, language, religion, or ethnic background (cf. Lutterbeck, 2009; Cassar & Gauci, 2015; Repeckaite, Cassar & Gauci, n.d.).

¹The full *C.O.N.T.A.C.T. National Report for Malta* can be accessed here: http://staff.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/328903/CONTACTNationalreportforMaltaUM-Malta.pdf

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Against this background, the 2-year EU-funded C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project (cf. Assimakopoulos, Baider & Millar, 2017) aimed at investigating and developing tools to combat hate crime, with a particular focus on hate speech, in a number of EU countries. These tools included an online facility and dedicated smartphone application where members of the public could report hate incidents, as well as various media and training events across the consortium (for more information visit: <http://reportinghate.eu>). And while the local reports we received through our dedicated online facility will not be analysed in this article, they still suggest that the focus of the project on hate speech seems to be particularly relevant. As Figure 1 indicates, as of October 2017, out of the 112 reports received for Malta, the largest proportion had to do with instances of verbal abuse, with online hate speech also featuring quite high in the list.²

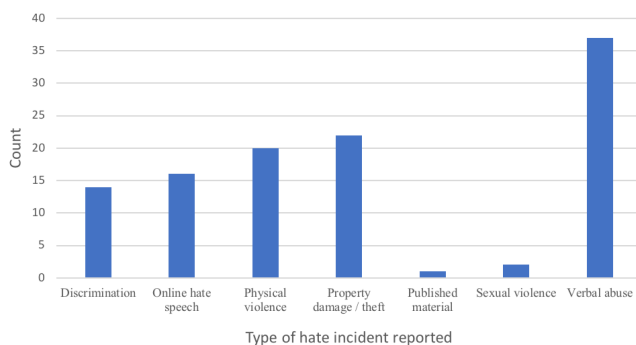


Figure 1: Reports of hate incidents in Malta on the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. website.

In this respect, the present study aimed to investigate the extent to which xenophobic and homophobic³ attitudes can be seen to emerge in online discourse produced by the general public. To this end, adopting a critical discourse analytic approach, we examined the language used in comments posted in reaction to news reports in various local media portals with a view to uncovering the underlying ideologies associated with these two types of discrimination in Malta. In this setting, ideology can be roughly defined as a “an interrelated

²Clearly, this is not meant to be taken as a general statistic applicable to the whole population residing in Malta; yet, it is still indicative of a tendency that should not be overlooked.

³Throughout this article, ‘homophobia’ will be used as an umbrella term that encompasses homophobia, transphobia, biphobia and any other discriminatory attitude towards LGBTIQ individuals. Similarly, the term ‘xenophobia’ will be used as an umbrella term to refer to any discriminatory attitude against a person or group of persons on the basis of their race, religion, country of origin, and ethnicity. Although this is a somewhat inaccurate use of the two terms, as will become clear through the following discussion, the aforementioned characteristics are also often conflated by members of society.

set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality” (Hunt, 1987: xi); that reality being, in the present context, the existence of migrants and LGBTIQ individuals in Malta. Therefore, going beyond the mere identification of current trends in discriminatory attitudes towards the two minorities under question, we also sought to ascertain, in an empirically grounded way, the ideological background against which these trends can be taken to have emerged.

Critical discourse analysis is an area of research that is rooted fundamentally in critical linguistics (Teo, 2000). As such, it moves beyond the mere description of language and offers explanations and evaluations as to how and why discourses are produced. In this way, it seeks to ascertain the role that various discourses can have in the production and reproduction of sociological phenomena such as dominance, power, and belief (cf. Fairclough, 1995). That is precisely why it has been widely applied to the study of discrimination, since it allows researchers to link the linguistic structures and units adopted in discourse with the hidden ideologies imbued therein (see, for example, van Dijk, 1987, 1991; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Baker et al., 2008, among many others). For example, van Dijk (1992: 228) shows how forms of understatement, such as mitigation and euphemism, do not only offer semantic and rhetorical functions to discourse, but often also serve to “avoid negative judgements of the hearer about the ethnic attitudes of the speaker”, thus, implicitly downplaying the racist stance that a certain remark may communicate. And indeed, even from common experience, it should be easy to identify instances of talk, where a speaker starts off with the hedge “*I am not racist but...*” and then goes on to pass a racist comment. Along similar lines, in his analysis of the portrayal of homosexuality in African newspapers, Reddy (2002) notes that the negative evaluation of homosexuality therein is often underpinned by an anti-European and anti-West argumentation, hence implying that homosexuality is ‘unAfrican’.

While most previous research in the area has predominantly focused on the communication of discriminatory attitudes in newspeak and media talk, the recent emergence of Web 2.0 as a principal platform for the exchange of ideas concerning minorities (in the form of social media platforms such as Facebook, and newspaper forums, for example) clearly necessitates the investigation of the relevant attitudes in the interactions of internet users too (cf. Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012; Brindle, 2016). So, in the interest of understanding the driving forces behind the general public’s production of remarks that reveal a discriminatory attitude towards migrants or members of the LGBTIQ community in Malta, we created two

balanced corpora of articles and comments related to the two minority groups under question, and annotated them in terms of the attitudes they reveal as well as the means used to communicate these attitudes. Then, with a view to approximating the general public's perception of such discriminatory comments, we administered a questionnaire online and ran four follow-up focus group interviews. In this respect, we employed the principle of triangulation, fundamental for several strands of critical discourse analysis, "which enables the researchers to minimize any risk of being too subjective," given "its endeavour to work on a basis of a variety of different data, methods, theories, and background information" (Wodak, 2015: 2). As we will see in the following sections, this enabled us to ascertain the local presence of a negative attitude towards both minorities, and identify at the same time its more particular ideological underpinnings in each case.

2 Materials and Methods

The common methodology used across the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium, and its underlying rationale, is available in Assimakopoulos et al. (2017: Chapter 2), but for the sake of transparency we will briefly outline it below too, taking note of those steps in which we deviated from the original plan, given Malta's particular linguistic landscape. Before we turn to this though, it is essential to point out that, while the focus of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project was indeed on hate speech, we are in no position, as researchers of language and ideology, to accuse particular commenters that they have committed what amounts to a crime in the eyes of the Maltese law. So, all the statistical analysis and especially the examples⁴ provided in this article should not be perceived as constituting hate speech in the legal sense of the term. Rather, they are emphatically meant to represent instances of discourse that encompasses a discriminatory attitude towards migrants or members of the LGBTIQ community, and therefore provides an idea of the axiological values that underlie this attitude.

2.1 Analysis of Online Comments in the Maltese Online Press

2.1.1 Data Collection

In order to build our corpus for the first stage of our research, we needed to identify articles that could potentially trigger readers to post comments pertaining to the migrant and LGBTIQ minorities underneath them. To this end, following the common C.O.N.T.A.C.T. methodology, we looked for articles related to the top-

ics of hate speech/crime, migration and LGBTIQ matters, by identifying particular keywords that are relevant in these domains. Still, the bilingual character of Malta, where both Maltese and English are official languages, necessitated a number of important decisions in the process. Firstly, as can be expected, exact translations of terms from/to Maltese are sometimes difficult to come by; for example, the lexical item '*asylum seeker*', translates only periphrastically to '*persuna li tfitteq il-kenn*' (literally: person who is looking for shelter) – in which case we opted to search for articles containing the more generic keywords '*kenn*' and '*ażil*' (asylum) in Maltese-language news portals. Secondly, particular attention needed to be paid to words containing Maltese-specific graphemes. The Maltese and English alphabets both make use of Latin characters; yet, the Maltese alphabet differs marginally from the English one as it does not have a <y> and additionally has the following characters: <ċ>, <ġ>, <għ>, <h>, and <ż>. The reason that these graphemes became relevant at this stage of data collection is that Maltese characters are not consistently used in Maltese-language press. For example, the word '*ażil*' also returned results with its 'Anglo'-spelling '*azil*'. Finally, both the singular and plural forms of countable nouns were used in the database search, under the assumption that linguistic choice between the two forms may have ideological consequences that could become apparent during the qualitative analysis of the data. Against this backdrop, Table 1 shows all keywords that were used to identify articles for the Maltese C.O.N.T.A.C.T. dataset.

We then used the EMM NewsBrief platform (<http://emm.newsbrief.eu>), which has been developed by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission to monitor news reports across the globe, to look for articles from local media portals by performing searches on the basis of our selected keywords. We collected the titles and URLs for all retrieved articles, in both English and Maltese, over two time periods, which were preselected across the consortium for reasons of feasibility: April–June 2015 and December 2015–February 2016. Once we retrieved all articles and their respective urls for each keyword, we selected the keywords that would be used for the population of our actual corpora on the basis of the number of articles that each keyword returned during our initial search. While the rest of the consortium populated their corpora with content pertaining to 8 keywords on migration and 6 on LGBTIQ matters, we chose to create a more balanced corpus by using the 8 keywords that returned most hits in each domain. Table 2 shows the overall number of hits of the keywords selected, which were also the keywords with the most number of hits across the board, returning more articles than any of the keywords in the hate speech/crime domain.

⁴All examples of online comments have been reproduced in their exact original form, so any apparent grammatical mistakes are taken verbatim from the original writers.

Table 1: Keywords used for data collection in Malta.

Domain	Keywords searched for
Hate speech /crime	IN ENGLISH: discrimination, hate, hate crime, hate crimes, hate speech IN MALTESE: diskriminazzjoni, mibegħda, reat ta' mibegħda, reati ta' mibegħda, diskors ta' mibegħda
Migration	IN ENGLISH: asylum, asylum seeker, asylum seekers, black, blacks, immigrant, immigrants, immigration, migrant, migrants, Muslim, Muslims, push-back, pushback, race, racial, racism, refugee, refugees, shelter, xenophobia IN MALTESE: azil, azil, persuna li tfittex il-kenn, persuni li jfittxu il-kenn, iswed, l-iswed, immigrant, immigranti, immigrazzjoni, migrant, migranti, Musulman, Musulmani, push-back, pushback, razza, razziali, razzizmu, refuġjat, refuġjati, refuġjati, refuġjati, kenn, ksenofobija
LGBTIQ	IN ENGLISH: civil union, gay, gays, gender identity, homophobia, homosexual, homosexuals, lesbian, lesbians, LGBT, LGBTIQ, queer, queers, sexuality, sexual orientation, trans, transgender, transgenders, transexual, transexuals IN MALTESE: unjoni ċivili, unjoni civili, gay, gays, identità tal-gġeneru, identità tal-generu, omofobija, omosesswali, liżbjana, lesbjana, liżbjani, lesbjani, LGBT, LGBTIQ, queer, queers, sesswalità, orjentazzjoni sesswali, trans, transgender, transgenders, transesswali

At first sight, even from the number of hits alone, one can easily see that media discourse related to the topic of migration is far more prominent than that related to LGBTIQ matters, with the keyword registering the highest number of hits in the LGBTIQ category returning fewer hits than the keyword that was last in our list for the migration domain.

Once the 8 keywords per topic area were selected, we went back to our list of articles and discarded all articles that did not contain any of the selected keywords. Since the EMM Newsbrief tool does not provide any information about articles with associated comments, we added to our list of the remaining article URLs a separ-

Table 2: Keywords used for the population of the Maltese corpus.

Domain	Keyword	Sources in English	Sources in Maltese	Total number of hits
Migration	migrant/s	2227	35	2262
	refugee/s	1116	241	1357
	immigrant/s	334	811	1145
	asylum (seeker/s)	424	0	1100
	Muslim/s	776	176	952
	immigration	485	403	888
	race	826	58	884
LGBTIQ	black/s	745	111	856
	gay/s	322	51	373
	LGBT/LGBTIQ	123	33	156
	homosexual/s	98	54	152
	sexual orientation	71	55	126
	gender identity	116	2	118
	transgender/s	70	12	82
	homophobia	20	53	73
	lesbian/s	58	5	63

ate column with the number of comments that each one of these articles had received. At the end of this process, we had a list of all the articles with comments over the designated temporal period, along with the number of comments each article had received. At this stage, we were ready to start compiling our corpus.

Since the next part of this research included a more nuanced qualitative analysis, the Maltese C.O.N.T.A.C.T. corpus had to contain a smaller, albeit representative and balanced sample of the collected articles. So, while the rest of the consortium used a more randomised sampling method, we developed a method that we felt would ensure that the collected comments would include ideologically-marked language. Identifying those articles with the largest number of user comments was pivotal in this respect. Using both already available text-mining software and an additional computational method developed by Albert Gatt, another member of the University of Malta team, all articles retrieved from the previous step of the process and their accompanying comments were collected and organised according to the number of comments received per article. Then, we collected the first 5,000 words worth of article content – as well as an associated 5,000 words worth of comments content – per keyword, on the basis of the number of comments received per article. Care was taken not to select partial articles or cut off individual comment threads. Therefore, the data for

Table 3: Overview of the Maltese corpus.

		Article source language							
		English				Maltese			
	Keyword	No. of articles	Size of article corpus (in words)	No. of comments	Size of comments corpus (in words)	No. of articles	Size of article corpus (in words)	No. of comments	Size of comments corpus (in words)
		Migration corpus	asylum seeker/s	16	4800	147	5108	3	887
black/s	7		5264	137	5096	0	0	0	0
immigrant/s	7		4877	147	5064	19	5216	114	3125
immigration	10		4853	130	5252	11	3818	44	920
migrant/s	11		5073	156	5257	0	0	0	0
Muslim/s	13		5246	169	5009	12	2572	55	1629
race	5		4877	141	4961	1	354	1	12
refugee/s	9		4809	103	5273	8	2466	25	1033
TOTAL	78		39799	1130	41020	54	15313	240	6729
LGBTIQ corpus	gay/s	14	5070	142	5051	5	961	21	520
	gender identity	8	4960	163	5012	0	0	0	0
	homophobia	9	5100	133	5176	0	0	0	0
	homosexual/s	9	5843	169	5120	5	1237	14	356
	lesbian/s	13	5688	116	5008	0	0	0	0
	LGBT/IQ	10	5260	136	5021	0	0	0	0
	sexual orientation	7	4737	114	5268	0	0	0	0
	transgender/s	10	5615	136	5268	0	0	0	0
	TOTAL	80	42273	1109	40924	10	2198	35	876

most keywords in the corpus ended up containing either slightly more or less than 5000 words (cf. Table 3).

Overall, as Table 4 shows, the Maltese C.O.N.T.A.C.T. corpus ended up containing an array of articles from several major local news portals, as the EMM NewsBrief platform automatically crawls the vast majority of news portals in the country.

2.1.2 Data Annotation

The next step involved the annotation of both our articles and comments subcorpora in the two domains in terms of polarity. The objective here was to identify whether each article/comment communicated a positive, negative or neutral stance towards the minorities under question. What is particularly important to note in this regard is that during this evaluation, which was undertaken by two individual annotators to ensure reliability, we focused exclusively on the attitudes expressed in relation to migrants and members of

the LGBTIQ community, marking any content that related to a different target, such as politicians or other commenters, as irrelevant. So, following the common C.O.N.T.A.C.T. methodology, once a comment was labelled in terms of polarity, the discursive tactics used by the writer of the comment to communicate a positive or negative stance towards the targeted minority groups were pinpointed through a closer analysis that involved the following categories, as these stem from the relevant critical discourse analytic literature:

- Use of positive words and derogatory terms to refer to the minority under question, e.g. *“That’s because we’re not simply importing destitute people. We’re importing a discredited, disheveled and destructive culture.”*
- Insults against the minority under question, e.g. *“If anyone is lacking, it is you guys for lacking a sense*

Table 4: Local news portals taken into account for the Maltese corpus.

Portal	Portal name	Used	Reason for exclusion from corpus
English	<i>Bay</i>	✗	Articles expire after 2 weeks
	<i>Malta Star</i>	✗	Redirects to onenews.com, and all articles therein are now in Maltese.
	<i>Malta Today</i>	✓	
	<i>The Malta Independent</i>	✓	
	<i>Times of Malta</i>	✓	
Maltese	<i>Grajjiet Malta</i>	✗	Website down
	<i>Illum</i>	✓	
	<i>iNews Malta</i>	✗	No comments found under retrieved articles
	<i>Kullhadd</i>	✗	No comments found under retrieved articles
	<i>L-Orizzont</i>	✗	Redirects to iNews
	Malta Right Now (changed to Net News)	✓	
	<i>TVM</i>	✗	No comments section available

of decency. Just look at the costumes worn at gay parades to prove my point.”

- Metaphorical associations of the minority under question, e.g. *“Illegal immigration is a cancer which if not eliminated will bring the downfall of Europe and European culture.”*
- Generalisations/sweeping statements about the minority under question, e.g. *“It is sadly getting to the point where being transgender will be a compulsory requirement. This has gone far enough.”*
- Remarks based on a stereotypical representation of the minority under question, e.g. *“Homosexuals who indulge in homosexual acts are committing grievous sins too because any sexual act outside of marriage is a grievous sin.”*
- Suggestions about a plan of action in relation to the minority under question, e.g. *“meta eu sejra tokkupa il costa tal libja biex ma halluhomx jitolqu it tort kollu tal eu nies bla ba d”* (When is the EU going to go occupy the coast of Libya to stop them

from leaving? The fault is with the whole of the EU, people without balls.)

- Implicit communication of a negative or positive attitude towards the minority under question, in terms of implicature⁵, e.g. *“Will the treatment given to this “Human Being” [referring to a migrant] be given to me if I do the same? Or since being Maltese I will be discriminated against?”*
- Agreement with and/or endorsement of previous negative or positive comment towards the minority under question, e.g. *“Well said !! A very stupid idea . When are we going to draw a line to these outlandish laws [regarding trans, gender variant, and intersex students] and behave normally again ?”*
- Counterargument to a previous negative or positive argument in relation to the minority under question, e.g. *“If you want to be credible, enlighten us how ‘pushback’ is showing solidarity??!”*

Much like in the aforementioned cases of van Dijk (1992) and Reddy (2002), a further analysis of these strategies and the patterns in which they emerge in this particular discourse setting allowed us to identify how commenters “use language and grammatical features to create meaning, to persuade people to think about events in a particular way, sometimes even to seek to manipulate them while at the same time concealing their communicative intentions” (Machin & Mayr, 2012: 1).

2.2 Perceptual Study

In the second part of the present study, we carried out an assessment of the perceptions of the local population in relation to actual examples of discriminatory discourse from our corpus, and then sought to gain further insight into the obtained results on the basis of a series of follow-up focus group interviews. Needless to say, ethical approval for this part of the research was sought and obtained from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants of both the questionnaire and focus group interviews.

2.2.1 Questionnaire

The relevant questionnaire, which was again developed following the common C.O.N.T.A.C.T. methodological approach, was circulated on Google Forms both in English and Maltese and distributed using multiple University of Malta mailing lists and Facebook group posts. In

⁵The term implicature, famously coined by Grice (1975), is used to denote meaning that is communicated over and above what is actually expressed by the use of an utterance. As such, it encompasses a host of related phenomena, such as irony and sarcasm or the use of discourse markers, which we will not go into in the present article due to space restrictions (see, however, Vella Muskat & Assimakopoulos, 2017).

its first section⁶, respondents were given six examples of online comments in reaction to news stories pertaining to migrant and LGBTIQ minorities and were asked to indicate how acceptable they think it is for people to post such comments online. Our selection of the relevant comments from our corpus followed the consortium’s guidelines and included in turn: (i) a comment with a discriminatory statement that is directly offensive with regard to the relevant minority group, (ii) another one that carries a discriminatory statement without explicitly offensive language and, (iii) a comment that, while negative in its polarity, includes some argumentation that would not necessarily qualify as discriminatory against the group under question. The relevant items used in the domain of xenophobia (1–3) and homophobia (4–6) were the following:

1. *“The German authorities tried to suppress this massive crime but with the number of women assaulted now at 200 and counting, it had to come out. The cat is now out of the bag and there is no way it will be bagged again. Immigration from third world countries destroys western societies.”*
2. *“Immigrants are not stupid. They love the freedom and rights they have over here. This is nothing but arrogance and it is what we should expect from them in the future. Maybe it’s you who’s in denial, but wake up and smell the coffee because it is starting to smell.”*
3. *“Multiculturalism as is being advertised by the pseudo liberals has failed BADLY. It is like putting the starter, main course and dessert in a liquidiser and eating everything together. It simply destroys the palate. European culture should be preserved in Europe; Arabian culture in Arab countries; Asian cultures in Asia, etc etc. This way all cultures can be appreciated without one culture subduing the other. We are ignoring the fact that some cultures are downright INCOMPATIBLE, and to try to impose cultural integration is asking for trouble.”*
4. *“The practice of homosexuality qualifies as a “disease” because by definition “disease is a disorder of the normal function of an organism”. The complicated anatomical structure and physiology of the sex organs leave no doubt that its normality consists in the fecundation of the female ovum by the male sperm and the further development of the zygote in the mother’s womb to produce a new separate living human organism.”*
5. *“These homosexuals are embarrassing us because*

⁶In the second part of the questionnaire, which we will not be dealing with in the present article, respondents were requested to provide information about their own experiences of hate speech in Malta, while delving further into the reasons why such incidents are often underreported.

they want the UNNATURAL be made NATURAL and they want it recognized as such.”

6. *“The gay community has become arrogant and aggressive towards achieving a one sided political agenda, completely in their favour, at the expense of all others’ human rights to live and procreate as nature intended.”*

The number of respondents totalled 199 for the English version, and 10 for the Maltese version of the questionnaire, i.e. 209 overall. Even though the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. methodology targeted only people from 18 to 35 years of age, we collected data across all age groups (cf. Fig. 2) with a view to gaining a wider understanding of the ways in which the general public as a whole conceptualize discriminatory discourse.

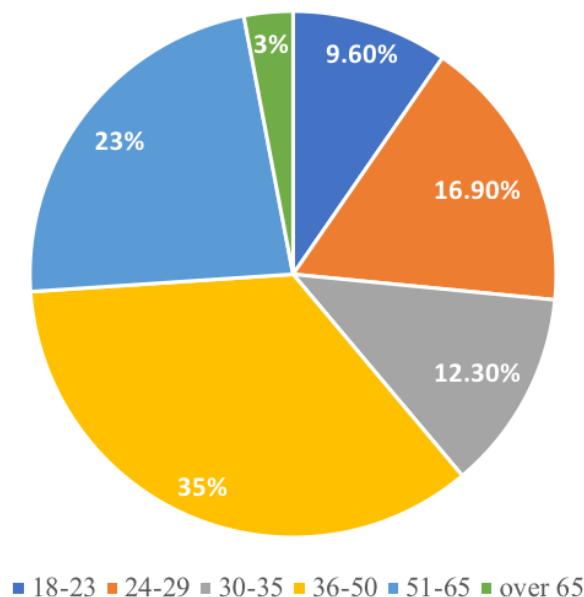


Figure 2: Questionnaire respondents age groups.

Regarding our respondents’ demographic information, 116 participants identified as female, 91 as male and 2 identified themselves in non-binary terms. Regarding their nationality, 181 respondents were Maltese (or held dual citizenship that includes Malta), 23 were non-Maltese EU nationals, and 5 non-EU ones. When it comes to religion, 137 of our respondents identified as Christian, 60 stated that they do not assimilate with any religion, while 7 assimilate with a faith that was not listed in the options provided in the questionnaire; yet, notably, none of our respondents were of Muslim faith. Turning to sexual orientation, 176 respondents identified as heterosexual, 22 as LGBTIQ and 4 as other. Finally, in terms of their level of education, the vast majority of our participants have reached a level of higher educa-

tion, with only 6 participants having reached secondary education alone.

2.2.2 Focus group interviews

After analysing the obtained questionnaire responses, we ran semi-structured focus group interviews with members of the general public who responded to our respective call for participants. These interviews were meant to help us probe into the particular answers that were collected through our questionnaire and approximate, in this way, the general public's opinion regarding the trends noted. Importantly, our interviewees were not asked to justify their own answers in the questionnaire (if, that is, they had already taken part in it in the first place); rather, they were asked to discuss the overall results obtained through the questionnaire administration. To this end, we conducted four focus group interviews with 21 participants, 11 female and 10 male, in total. Here, however, most participants were under 35 years of age, with 5 of them being older, while the groups comprised 13 Maltese, 6 EU and 2 non-EU nationals.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Xenophobic and Homophobic Attitudes in Online Comments

Our analysis of the collected articles revealed a predominantly neutral attitude towards the minorities under question, probably because all of them merely reported on current affairs pertaining to the two domains under study. Yet, our analysis of the comments posted underneath these articles painted a rather different picture, as the pie charts in Fig. 3 indicate⁷.

In view of these results, it is clear that while there is, in our corpus, a presence of a negative attitude towards both minorities that we are dealing with, this attitude is far more prevalent in relation to migrants than it is in relation to members of the LGBTIQ community, in which case, actually, the comments that were marked as positive significantly outnumber the negative ones.⁸ Still, the results obtained regarding xenophobic attitudes in the analysed comments present a rather dramatic situation, with negative comments being almost double in number

than those that defend this particular target group.⁹

Turning to the most prevalent trends that were identified in our analysis of the discursive tactics of commenters posting negative comments, we can get a better idea of the particular ideological stances that underlie xenophobic and homophobic attitudes locally.

To begin with, it is worth pointing out that an overwhelming majority of the comments that revealed a xenophobic stance had to do with a particular subgroup of migrants – i.e. the one comprising predominantly migrants of Muslim faith. The following examples of views that generalise over the relevant population showcase this, especially since each of them employs either the pronoun *they/them* or the determiner *these* to establish a clear *us versus them* dichotomy. In effect, this serves to expound the message that Muslim migrants are separate and different from the Maltese and, moreover, that they pose a threat to the traditional values and homogeneity of the island, in addition to bringing disease, crime, and degradation with them.

1. “... Wait another 5 years and see how **these Muslims** will change Malta...”
2. “... Turning a blind eye until such time as there are thousands around and the government has to raise taxes to support them, when **they** start building mosques next to **our** churches. Start positive discrimination in their favour? Start thinking before it's too late...”
3. “... Many epidemic diseases are brought from **their** shores such as AIDS, and the Ebola Virus, then because of the already lack in employment opportunities you will see a rise in Violent crimes in order for **them** in desperation to self support...”
4. “... just back from Florence and the city is full of **them**, soon **we** will be having organised crimes committed **by these people**...”

Then, even with respect to the group of Muslims, there appears to be a of conflation of identities whereby Muslims and sub-Saharan migrants are one and the same, with most negative comments targeting specifically those migrants who have not been granted legal residence status in Malta¹⁰. Although not all asylum

⁷It should be noted that these percentages have been calculated on the basis of the comments that were collected from English-language portals alone. This was necessary for the purposes of comparison, since, as is evident in Table 3, our search in Maltese-language portals did not yield enough comments.

⁸Interestingly, Malta was the only country in the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium to obtain such a result, as all other national datasets revealed a more pronounced negative attitude towards both minority groups (cf. Assimakopoulos et al., 2017: 12–13).

⁹In fact, the situation becomes even more dire, if we also factor in that even more negative remarks about migrants, which we did not take into account here due to our methodological constraints, were also found in the LGBTIQ corpus – and importantly in response to articles that had nothing to do with migration or LGBTIQ members of the migrant community for that matter. Quite worryingly, this appears to suggest that in some cases xenophobia has a way of entering even seemingly irrelevant discussions.

¹⁰This group of migrants is commonly referred to as ‘illegal immigrants’ in most of the comments analysed; yet, the term ‘illegal immigrant’ is strictly speaking a misnomer since Maltese Law only refers to the notions of illegal entry and illegal stay (Bugre, 2017, September).

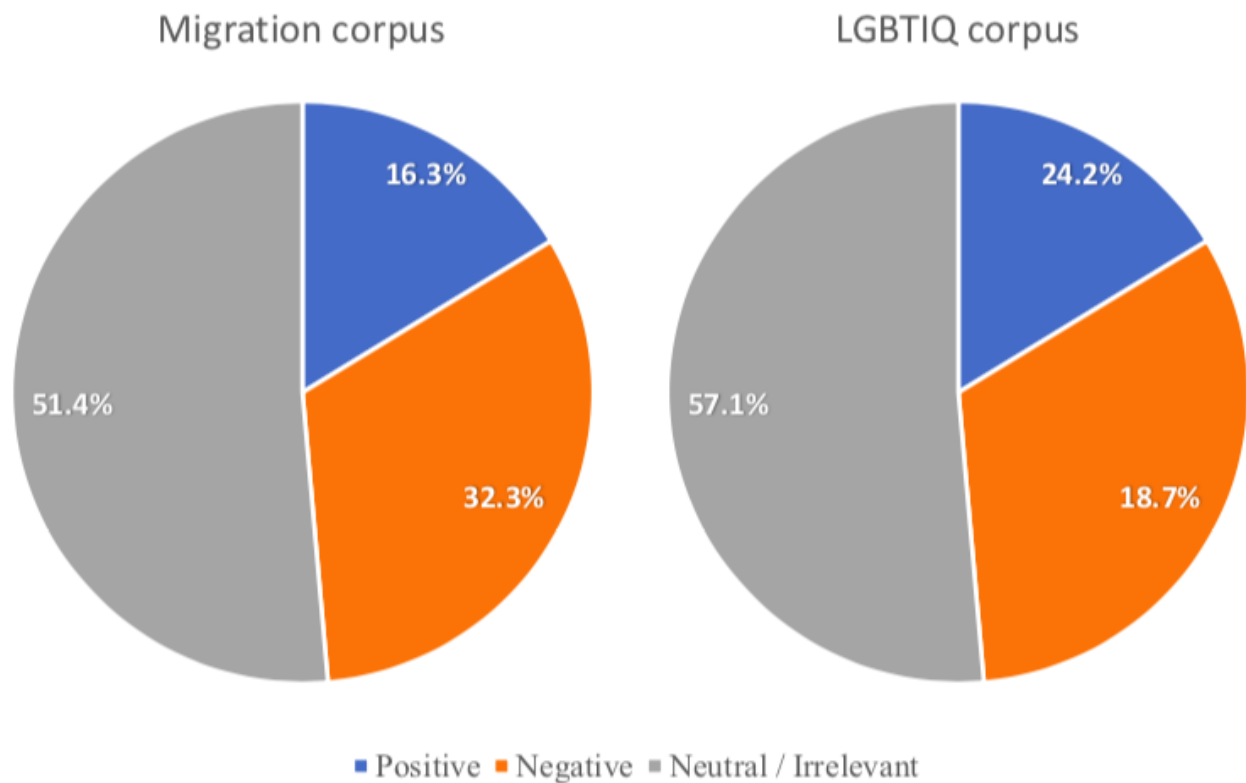


Figure 3: Polarity evaluation of sample comments.

seekers in Malta are Muslim, there is a common perception that all sub-Saharan migrants are Muslim. It becomes apparent, therefore, that there is a hierarchy of discrimination of sorts, whereby Muslims are discriminated against first and foremost, followed by sub-Saharan Africans, and that the identity higher on the hierarchy of discrimination subsumes the identities further down.

5. "...the same cannot be said for **muslim immigrants who have nothing in common with the Europeans...**"
6. "...you must also acknowledge that there is a massive difference between lets say Turkish or Egyptians Muslims and Somali or Pakistani ones. **We're not getting the right sort of Muslims unfortunately...**"
7. "...There are cultures, and then there are other cultures, which despite us not being a pure race, we never had problems with any of them, its only now that we talk about minorities, and their integration, why now, because you know damn well that **these people don't integrate. full stop...**"
8. "...Do let us **distinguish between migrants and Islam**. While we should be humane to migrants let us not forget, despite what some would want us to believe, that Islam preaches death or

servitude to ANYBODY who does not convert to Islam..."

All in all, the most common theme in the negative comments targeting migrants was the perception that they pose an imminent threat for the local population; a perception that was even explicitly expressed in some of the comments we analysed. In fact, the most pervasive metaphor in our corpus of comments was the metaphor of invasion.¹¹ As the following examples demonstrate, lexical items such as 'take over', 'over run', 'explode in numbers', 'protect ours', 'lose our culture', all contribute to the implicit metaphor that migrants are invading our land and that we need to treat them as a threat.

9. "...Beware **they are gradually taking over Malta...**"
10. "...**Do we really want this country being over**

¹¹According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), humans perceive the world around them in terms of conceptual metaphors, which become apparent through language use. In this way we conceive of time as a forward and backward motion as evidenced in expressions like 'need to get ahead', 'fall behind' or 'move forward'. For a more detailed account of the ways in which lexical choice and metaphor can be shown to reveal discriminatory stances in the presently analysed corpus, see Assimakopoulos and Vella Muskat (2017).

run, first they want to pray where they want. What next ban bacon, ban feasts...

11. "...This is because there is an expectation that these groups will explode in numbers. **Bye bye Marsascala ghal Maltin. Persona non grata ser nispicaw...**"
12. "...we are protecting our country from losing our culture, language and most important of all – freedom..."

Turning to the axiological values that underlie comments with a negative attitude towards members of the LGBTIQ community, the most prevalent motivation for them seems to be related to religious concerns, and more specifically the assumption that these individuals lead a life that does not conform with some Divine will.

13. "...we sold our souls on ideologies that go against the word of god. There is a higher law above that of people. That of God himself, and who fears god looks at those laws not the ones on earth. Anyway there is no authority on earth that will not have to kneel in front of the only sultan. He is the only way, truth and life..."
14. "...The Bible, however, is quite clear, not just in specific passages but throughout the sacred text, that **same sex unions are disapproved by God** (i.e. God calls homosexuality "sin"), and unless God by His grace grants the homosexual repentance, the homosexual-like the adulterer, the thief, the pedophile, the liar, etc... will find himself facing the wrath of God upon death..."
15. "...that is why God left them to their filthy enjoyments and the practices with which they dishonor their own bodies since **they given up Divine truth...**"
16. "...the more they get informed about sexuality the more they want to do it. Why don't the education teach the LGBTIQI **THE NORMAL way as god wants...**"

The last comment in the examples above also shows another common conception that appears to spur negativity against the LGBTIQ community, and especially homosexuality: the idea that any deviation from heteronormative values is abnormal. In the following examples, one can see how this particular perception can give rise to comments that range from viewing homosexuality as abnormal behaviour to conceptualising it as a disease, in a metaphorical association that is regularly found in homophobic discourse (cf. Hart-Brinson, 2016). Again, drawing on the lexical make-up of the comments, lexical expressions such as 'natural', 'pretend', 'disease', 'normal function' and 'disorder' call to mind a normative value that some other belief deviates from. In addition, words such as 'organism', are neutral,

and can further contribute to a metaphor of nature and, within this context, the implication that homosexuality opposes it.

17. "...I just totally disagree with them **pretending to be normal couples...**"
18. "...Natural law makes it **impossible to equate a homosexual relationship to a heterosexual relationship...**"
19. "...**The practice of homosexuality qualifies as a "disease"** because by definition "disease is a disorder of the normal function of an organism..."
20. "...**'gay persons' Most of these people have disordered condition...**"

Still, an even more common metaphorical allusion used in negative comments towards the LGBTIQ community was that of doom, which is hardly surprising if one takes into account that most negative comments in this corpus are triggered by religious concerns in the first place. Expressions like 'hell on earth', 'bridges of hell', 'Sodom and Gomorrah' all bring to mind the sort of biblical doom that features in stories such as Noah and the great flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. This makes evident the strength of traditional Christian values on the island and the disdain of an LGBTIQ identity as something that challenges God and for which the LGBTIQ community should seek divine redemption.

21. "...Sorry to say ,but we have **HELL on EARTH...**"
22. "...**Sodom and Gomorrah alive and well in Malta!...**"
23. "...Today it's gays, then transgender, then gender fluid, then polygamy, then, then, then – **bridges to hell...**"
24. "...**degeneracy of the world, I tell you... muh prunouns, and snowflake genders. Yep. It's tumblr-grade bullshit...**"

3.2 Approximating the General Public's Perception

3.2.1 Questionnaire Responses

Turning to the first part of our perceptual study, which involved the online administration of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. questionnaire, the respondents' evaluation of the representative examples selected from the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. corpus (see 1–6 in Section 2.2.1 above) in terms of their acceptability can be visualised as shown in Fig. 4.

It is evident from the above pie charts that our respondents were considerably more prone to accept comments expressing a negative attitude against migrants

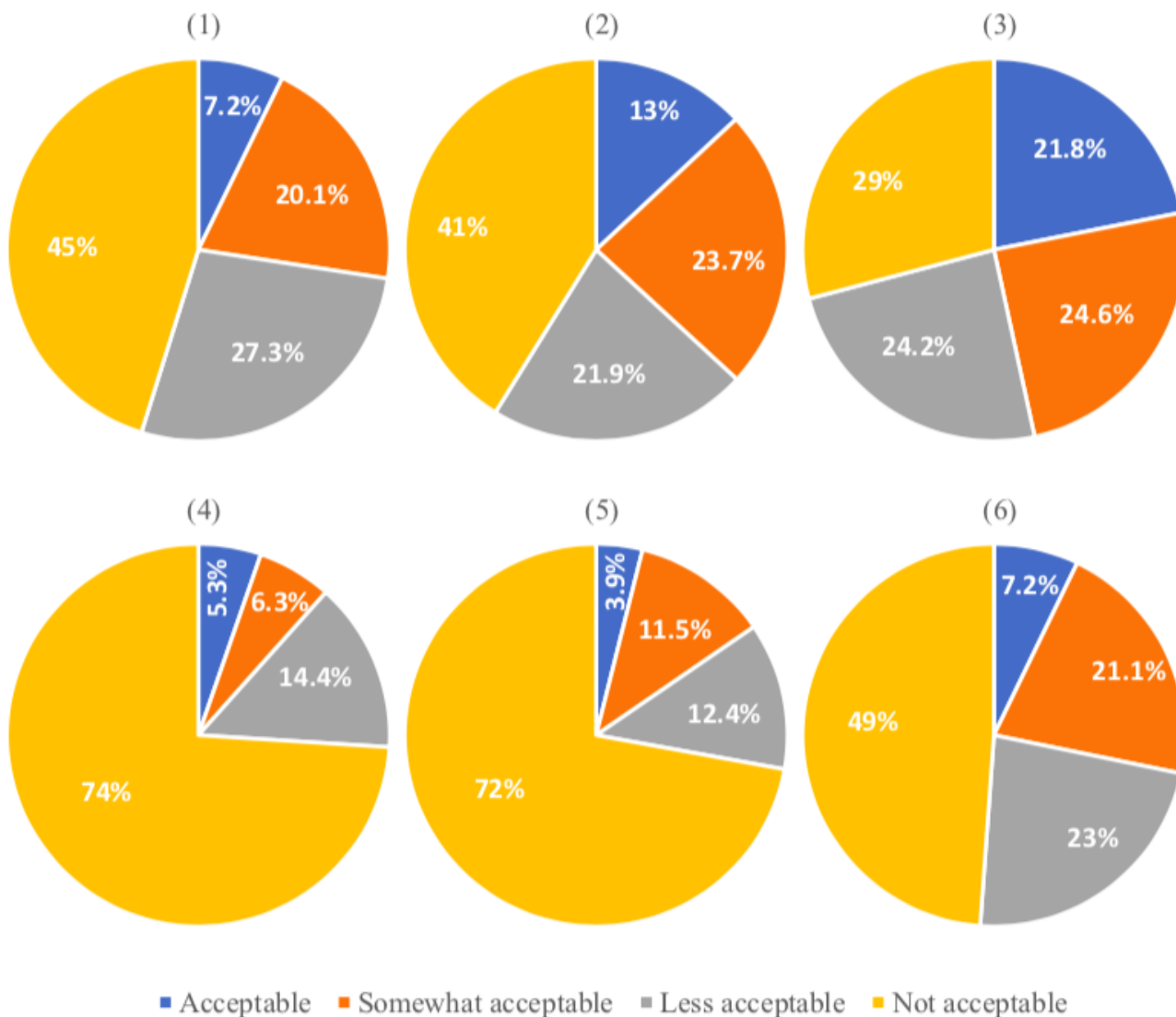


Figure 4: Evaluation of representative comments by the questionnaire respondents.

than those doing the same with respect to the LGB-TIQ community, which, in line with our qualitative analysis results, seem to suggest that, locally, sensitivity to xenophobia is nowhere near sensitivity to homophobia. Also, when asked whether their evaluation would have been any different if the relevant comments had been produced in a private context, such as in an e-mail exchange or chat or on a private Facebook page, the vast majority (79.9%) noted that this would not have made a difference to their answers, indicating in this way that their responses were, for the most part, not affected by considerations of political correctness when an opinion is publicly shared.

Still, while the responses collected from the administration of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. questionnaire are indic-

ative of the noted trends in relation to discriminatory discourse in Malta, they are not enough on their own to provide us with a clear idea of the rationale with which our respondents provided the answers they did. To this end, we will now turn to the discussions that took place during the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. focus group interviews, as a means of probing further into the ideological background against which the local asymmetric perception of the two minority groups under study has emerged.

3.2.2 Focus Group Discussion

The conclusion that xenophobia is a far greater issue than homophobia in Malta seemed to keep cropping up during all stages of this research; it was evident both in the comment data that we analysed, as well as in

the questionnaire responses, which indicate that participants are less prone to label a xenophobic comment as unacceptable than a homophobic one. The focus group interviews provided an extra opportunity to confirm this. One participant, who is originally from a non-EU country, stated:¹²

25. *“because the first time actually I came here it was in 2009 for my studies and people were very accepting at that moment. I think that I was kind of, that’s the reason that I actually fell in love with Malta, cause I felt welcomed here and when I came back four years ago um, I actually saw, I noticed a difference here you know. People were more... less welcoming and um, there’s as well the idea of um you know the skin colour because... you are different, you look different so basically you can, actually I can actually see the difference between when they look at me or, some people I mean, and when I actually speak and I, you can actually clearly see hear my French accent and they’re like there’s something that change in the way they behave”*
(Interviewee 9, Focus Group 2)

Another, Maltese this time, participant noted:

26. *“... when I was in Edinburgh in the 90s people used to ask me... They’d often ask ‘is there racism in Malta?’ and I would say ‘well not really, but we are very homogeneous and we’re not tried and tested. Let’s wait until a situation like we have now tried and tested.’ And I have definitely witnessed... I live in St. Pauls Bay and there is an... it’s an area where you can rent for relatively cheap and there is... people will not sit next to a black guy on a bus. For example, if there’s nowhere else to sit, they might just stand. So there’s these kind of... this kind of behaviour is there now...”*
(Interviewee 13, Focus Group 3)

This highlights the perception that even when racial minorities are not faced directly with hate speech or hate crimes, they still face discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis. But the focus group discussions also revealed a number of explanations for the rather disparate perception of the migrant and LGBTIQ minority groups locally.

3.2.2.1 On the Differences Between the Two Minority Groups

During the focus group interviews, participants generally agreed that the main reason why racism is the most

¹²Much like online comments, all examples of quotations from the focus group interview participants are taken verbatim from the interview transcripts.

common form of discrimination is that unlike sexual orientation, race is something that one cannot hide. This is further complicated by the habitual conflation of racism with anti-migrant sentiments. As already mentioned previously, in Malta there tends to be widespread discrimination against migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. That can be attributed to the fact that Africans and Arabs from the Middle East are often visibly different from the local population – not only racially and ethnically, but also culturally, as these groups sometimes use distinct attires and follow different religious practices.

27. *“but, I think skin colour you can never hide isn’t it?”*
(Interviewee 12, Focus Group 3)
28. *“There is a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment around, I think, but then there is, does seem to be everywhere in Europe at the moment...”*
(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)

Moreover, racism can be seen as something that often happens in the open in Malta, and has thus desensitised people with regards to how they refer to the relevant minorities,

29. *“yeah, I do remember my landlord telling me not to leave my window open in Msida because of all the blacks there and I was just like ‘what?’”*
(Interviewee 2, Focus Group 1)

which is particularly alarming when one takes into account that racist sentiments are not limited to some particular generation, but can be seen across the board:

30. *“it is worrying ah. I’ve met university students who are rabidly, you know, far right I like to call it and you think that these students in their 20s would know better, would be a lot more progressive, but...”*
(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)
31. *“and, coming from the older population, you, not expect it, but you tolerate it more, but for example, I had a lecture a couple of months ago where a student said that, mmm, we were renting to some Arabs and now we have cockroaches in the flat and we will never rent to Arabs again. And you don’t exp... to see this from a university student that’s you know 26 years old, it’s surprising.”*
(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)

This contrasts with the use of homophobic discourse which is generally less acceptable:

32. *“I think as he said, like we assume that with sexist comments, like, people will generally accept it and*

be ok with it, um, so I guess we have this like pre-conceived notion in our minds that if we say something that is sexist like there will be nobody else that jumps in and kind of argues against. Whereas with sexist... whereas with homophobic comments, um, we're more kind of um, scared to say something".

(Interviewee 17, Focus Group 4)

Indeed, all interviewees suggested that, in their experience, homophobia has become less of an issue in recent years and provided a number of reasons for this. For one, Malta has taken large steps forward in recent years, to the point where Malta is now one of the leading countries when it comes to accepting sexual and gender minorities. As our interviewees noted, the relevant legislation changes occurred after a long and strong campaign by the Maltese LGBTIQ community, which not only exposed legislators and the general public to LGBTIQ issues and needs, but also gave the community widespread exposure. As one participant characteristically pointed out, *"nowadays because of the acceptance culture developing, we need to accept minority groups. Gay and homosexuality was at the forefront of that movement, has always been at the forefront of that movement"* (Interviewee 20, Focus Group 4). Beyond the recent exposure that the LGBTIQ community has received, however, participants also pointed out that it is becoming increasingly common to be directly related to a person of LGBTIQ or Q identity through friendship or family. Therefore, while LGBTIQ persons might indeed form part of their own minority group, they are still ultimately part of the Maltese 'in-group'. So, while, in the mind of some LGBTIQ people are still 'one of us', migrants are not and will never be:

33. *"Because you know before people used to be very conservative so basically... because my grandmother, I think that she was kind of conservative but now that in her family her grandson or granddaughters are themselves homosexual she accepts it more openly you know, even if she has a little bit of a problem, but you know, now she's open to listen, she's open to, you know, she's more open to the idea and to the idea of accepting this, you know because it's involves Maltese you know it doesn't involve somebody else living, you know I mean another person coming to the country, or another nationality you know. So that's the reason why maybe they are more accept... how do you say?"*

(Interviewee 9, Focus Group 2)

Along similar lines, another participant also attributed the rise in racism to the fact that racial minorities are quite new in Malta, which, in conjunction with the increased visibility of the LGBTIQ community, has shifted the focus towards migrants.

34. *"it's um... I think the reason is that until recently, you know, say 20 years ago, um, the country was quite racially homogeneous. People did not really talk about sexual difference much, so it would be difficult for somebody to be... It would be less likely that somebody's gonna be the target of insults."*

(Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3)

3.2.2.2 On Othering Migrant Minorities

Turning to the widespread conflation of migrants with Muslim individuals as a reason for the expression of discriminatory opinions, we were able during the interviews to ascertain why this is. The main reason seems to be related to the invasion metaphor described earlier, whereby migrants are perceived as invading the island and changing the landscape and culture.

35. *"... this is a very sensitive issue I think. Um, even for people who are, have no problems with Muslims per se, but then, when you start seeing your, I guess, people feel nervous when they see their neighbourhood being transformed um, you know, with the appearance of a mosque for instance, um, they feel uncomfortable with that. So, less people would be inclined to say, you know, that, less people would be inclined to defend immigrants who are calling for these changes."*

(Interviewee 1, Focus Group 1)

According to our interviewees, part of the fear of migrants is that they will take jobs that would otherwise go to Maltese people and will, therefore, have a negative impact on the economy and life in general. While migrants are seen as a threat to the stability of the country, LGBTIQ persons do not pose the same threat and do not have a direct impact on one's life. Although one might not agree with their lifestyle, it appears to have little effect on one's everyday existence. This is not the same for migrants, who are seen as a true threat to the Maltese way of life and stability:

36. *"I think most people in Malta, I mean with immigration, they see immigrants like 'ah they're taking what's ours' so that's why it effects. Like you said I mean homophobia's just a mind-set 'I don't accept you' or 'I accept you' and it doesn't really affect me in general. I mean some people are uncomfortable by it, I don't know why, but I mean it's, they're not taking something away from them."*

(Interviewee 6, Focus Group 2)

Then, it was also pointed out that this is not a product of Maltese mentality alone. Mainstream political discourse plays a role and reinforces the sort of xenophobic discourse often used to speak about ethnic, racial, and

religious minorities, and in particular African, Arab and Muslim migrants. In contrast, the mainstream media further strengthens the general positive stance toward the LGBTIQ community. Hence, most people are far more exposed to negative discourse towards migrants, and thus less likely to rate it as unacceptable:

37. *“But the mainstream political discourse on the subject of multiculturalism and immigration actually reinforces racism.”*

(Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3)

Evidently, multiculturalism is a hot issue that has been widely debated in recent years. Some argue that multiculturalism and acceptance of various cultures can contribute to a society where diversity is not only respected, but also embraced, and where people of different backgrounds can come together to live in a colourful society of various languages, practices, religions, and even cuisines. On the other hand, others argue that multiculturalism is not possible and creates animosity and distress to those living in such a society. Hence, within the scope of multiculturalism, there appeared to be a general tendency in the focus group interviews to defend opinions that were taken to be protecting the Maltese culture. In this view, multiculturalism might not be negative by virtue of what it stands for; what makes it particularly negative is its ability to push aside the Maltese culture as the dominant and most visible culture of the country. As one participant put it, while giving their opinion about the low acceptability rating received for one of the comments, *“in the other one he’s attacking directly the people rather than just analysing the situation from a ‘I want to protect my culture’ point of view”* (Interviewee 20, Focus Group 4). As this remark suggests, it may be considered less acceptable to directly attack a person on the basis of a minority identity, but if one is trying to defend and protect one’s culture, it is more acceptable to use such rhetoric.

Finally, when discussing African, Arab, and Muslim migrants as opposed to migrants from Western and Northern Europe, the issue that came out most prominently was that of assimilation and integration. Participants pointed out that while African, Arab, and Muslim migrants often face discrimination in Malta, migrants from Western and Northern Europe do not generally face the same intolerance. According to most interviewees, it was because of this that the participants of the questionnaire might have been less likely to rate Islamophobic or racist comments as overtly negative. In other words, Western and Northern Europeans seem to ‘blend in’ *“because it’s easier for them to assimilate”*, whereas African, Arab, and Muslim migrants stand out both physically and culturally, when the Maltese *“expect them to assimilate, not integrate”* (Interviewee 3, Focus Group 1). In fact, the common perception seems to be

that Western and Northern European migrants have a very similar culture to that of the Maltese:

38. *“because they’re the same, I think because, maybe in terms of culture, there’s a lot more similarity between a Maltese and a European.”*

(Interviewee 1, Focus Group 1)

3.2.2.3 On Othering LGBTIQ Minorities

Honing in on the LGBTIQ community now, even though the general public is less willing to accept homophobic discourse, our analysis has already shown that at least some negativity still exists in Malta. In this regard, in line with the linguistic analysis of the relevant comments, and the prevalent metaphor of doom, our interviewees pinpointed a main reason why this might be. It was thus noted that people might be less inclined to mark a comment as discriminatory if that comment somehow involves the church. In other words, if the comment is in line with the church’s doctrine, the comment must be right, or at the very least, make sense:

39. *“Perhaps as well, the last one, the third one is more acceptable to people because it’s, the context is less religious. The other two are religious stories, the first one about the church’s commission, and the second one about um, the Dominican order, but the third one is about legislation, so it may be that um people find it more acceptable. . .”*

(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)

What this effectively suggests is that people are less willing to accept discrimination against LGBTIQ persons on the basis of legislative freedoms than they are on the basis of religious argumentation.

4 Conclusion

The central finding of the research reported in this paper has been that xenophobia appears to be a far greater issue than homophobia in the Maltese context. Even within the domain of discourse about migrants, however, there is a particular subset of the relevant population that seems to be the main target of discriminatory attitudes; a group that is characterised by its Muslim faith and an Arab or African ethnic origin. What is particularly notable, in view of our analysis as well as the discussions that arose during the focus group interviews, is that there is also a widespread tendency to conflate religion with ethnicity, with instances of both Christians being categorised as Muslims because of their skin colour and Muslims being categorised as Arab/African by virtue of their faith alone. This local prevalence of xenophobia in comparison to homophobia can also be discerned in the existence of far more discriminatory comments pertaining to migrants than members of the

LGBTIQ community in our sample analysis, as well as in the tendency of our survey participants to find xenophobic remarks more acceptable than homophobic remarks that were commonly marked as completely unacceptable. This latter point can even be seen in the following comment that was actually left as feedback in the questionnaire by one of our respondents: “*The proliferation of immigrants and their culture is generating fear as well as inconveniences in some areas in Malta and reprisals are sometimes understandable.*”

Turning to the quite prominent positive attitude towards members of the LGBTIQ community, as we have seen, this has been attributed by our focus group interview participants to the inclusion of the relevant group in the Maltese in-group. Additionally, the role that recent legislation on LGBTIQ rights has played in this vein could also be a contributing factor; after all, as already noted above, Malta was the only country in the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium where the positive stance towards the LGBTIQ minority was higher than the negative one in the online comments analysis, when it also ranks first in legal and policy human rights of LGBTIQ people in Europe (ILGA-Europe, 2016). Even so, some negativity, predominantly connected to religious concerns, still lurks in the background.

All in all, this article adds to the growing body of literature which suggests that the discursive strategies employed in discrimination are not always made explicit by speakers. By means of an in-depth critical discourse analytic investigation, we have shown that the underlying ideologies of these strategies can be exposed. In this way, the relevant research can go beyond the mere investigation of the language of discrimination and uncover the values and beliefs that are imbued within it. That said, a caveat is in order: while research of the sort that is pursued in this study is revealing, it cannot, in this particular context, make any claims as to whether or not the identified implicit markers of ideology are used consciously by the commenters at hand. Instead, it provides insight into the intricate relationship between language and ideology as well as various systems of belief. And to the extent that the results obtained through the perceptual study allows us to do so, we believe to have indeed shown that critical discourse analysis is a worthwhile venture that goes beyond the study of linguistic structure and can have far-reaching sociological and political implications.

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