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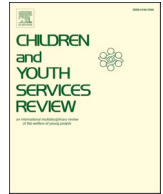
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Exploring claims in disinformation – The shared story of ‘the Swedish child welfare services’ kidnapping migrant children’

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ABSTRACT

In the early 2020s, the Swedish child welfare services (CWS) were accused in social media of kidnapping and placing migrant children in foster or family care, without their families' knowledge or permission. This debate became referred to as a large-scale disinformation campaign, which can be understood as a discursive struggle between different versions of truth. This study explores social media content about the Swedish CWS in Arabic between 2021 and 2023. The material consisted of Facebook and YouTube posts and comments in Arabic. The analysis departed from the narrative genre of shared stories, and focused on claims about the CWS and how such claims are made credible. The findings show three types of claims within the shared story of ‘the CWS kidnapping migrant children’: families are victims of CWS’ malpractice; affected children suffer; and migrant families fear the CWS. These claims are made legitimate and credible by constructing the teller as an expert using time, place, and details while constructing the testimonies to invoke an emotional response. In conclusion, this study highlights how social reality is constructed and negotiated on social media, where migrant families’ testimonies of wrongdoings and fear become intertwined with larger stories of good and bad, truth or falsehood. It is therefore essential that claims made online is treated as signals of perceived vulnerability and institutional distance, rather than as “falsehoods” to be corrected, while CWS’ procedures and legal thresholds are clearly conveyed.

1. Introduction

Narratives or stories exist in all societies, are cultural artefacts, and impact on discourses. Sometimes, these narratives or stories merely tickle people’s imaginations or appeal to their ethical compass; at other times, they are systematic and deliberate attempts, by states or interest groups, to influence public beliefs or attitudes toward individuals, institutions, or countries – i.e., as disinformation “campaigns” or propaganda (Cummings & Kong, 2019).

Disinformation can be pursued systematically and deliberately, and can grow and spread spontaneously and organically, by word of mouth and multiple media (including social media) (Cummings & Kong, 2019; Guess & Lyons, 2020). Hence, disinformation campaigns can be coordinated efforts to convey narratives to a wider public and are typically made up of a mixture of facts, fabricated accounts or testimonies, false information, and lies to make such narratives communicable, credible, and effective. Thus, disinformation needs to be understood as more or less systematic efforts to influence or manipulate public opinion by

constructing an alternative “truth” to achieve ideological, political, or religious goals (e.g., Guess & Lyons, 2020; Pavlikova & Mares, 2020; Morkūnas, 2023). That said, not every component of a disinformation campaign is necessarily untrue or fabricated – nor can such a campaign be understood merely along a “truth-untruth” continuum. For this reason, the content in disinformation campaigns needs to be disentangled to understand intentions, dynamics, and outcomes.

This study examines social media content that has been described as part of the ‘LVU campaign’, which has been labelled by researchers as a large-scale disinformation campaign directed at Sweden (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023). Rather than adjudicating truthfulness, we analyze how posts and comments co-produce a shared story and how claims are made credible within that story. It contains numerous social media posts and comments about migrant families’ children being relocated to foster or family care by the Swedish child welfare services (CWS) under the jurisdiction of the LVU Act (the Swedish “Care of young persons (special provisions) act”; SFS 1990:52), abbreviated to LVU). These posts and comments began to spread around the year 2021 when Facebook groups

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were established targeting affected parents, encouraging them to share experiences and support (Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023). This led to political debate in Sweden and abroad, headlines in international news media (Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023) as well as the execution of countermeasures from the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) targeting the Swedish public (The Swedish government, 2023). Given the campaign's international outreach and its implications for trust in the CWS, it is relevant to disentangle its main topic or 'shared story, i.e., "the Swedish CWS kidnap migrant children," and explore claims made and how these were constructed as legitimate and "true". Importantly, we analyze claims and narrative construction in social media content, not the factuality of individual cases.

In Sweden, child welfare is primarily organized around family support and preventive services, with interventions ideally guided by voluntariness, proportionality, and the principle of least intrusive measures (Lundström et al., 2025). Coercive care under the LVU Act is an exceptional measure used when legal thresholds are met and voluntary measures are deemed insufficient; decisions are subject to formal procedures and legal review in the administrative courts (SFS 1990:52). National statistics show that out-of-home care constitutes a minority of child welfare interventions overall, and that most child welfare contacts concern support and services without removal (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2024a).

1.1. Literature review

Criticism of the CWS is not new, in Sweden or elsewhere. For decades, the social services (in which CWS are a part) have been negatively depicted in the media (Schönfelder & Holmgaard, 2019; Lonne & Gillespie, 2014; Blomberg, 2017; Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019; Lundström et al., 2021). In the Nordic countries, stories of unfair treatment of children and families and of incompetent social workers have been reported repeatedly in the media (Blomberg, 2017; Lundström et al., 2021; Schönfelder & Holmgaard, 2019), depicting a social service in crisis. Still, in the last decade, reporting of malfunctioning and unfair treatment by the Nordic CWS has shifted, from being a concern of the public to increasingly focus on migrant families (Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019; Pavlikova & Mares, 2020; Schönfelder & Holmgaard, 2019). Although CWS' mistakes, incompetence and unfair-treatment in investigations in cases involving children in migrant families was reported in Sweden in the 2010s (Blomberg, 2017), the "LVU campaign" spread to reach a wider public using social media, where official reports were intertwined with migrant parents' posts about their experiences (Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023). Digitization allows messages and stories to be disseminated instantly, cheaply, and quickly to millions of people (Stier, 2021), providing unprecedented opportunities for spreading online disinformation.

Since the early 2000s, and particularly in the 2020s, research on digitalized disinformation campaigns has increased (Pérez-Escobar et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). It shows that disinformation on social media influences public perception and sense-making, for instance, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine hesitancy (Boberg et al., 2020), terrorist attacks (Innes et al., 2021), public health messages (Karami et al., 2021), and climate change (Treen et al., 2020). Users also turn to specific and alternative social media forums to discuss concerns about health, government, and news when they feel fear and desperation and seek information (Zimdars et al., 2024). Paradoxically, research shows that discussions on such forums reinforce people's fear and distrust of societal systems. Additionally, contents are more likely to be shared and spread if social media users hold attitudes consistent with the messages conveyed (Buchanan, 2020). Given historically negative news media portrayals of the CWS, additional unfavorable content and sheer disinformation may thus reinforce concerns about the CWS and their interactions with families.

The distribution of such disinformation is problematic, as research indicates strained relationships between social workers and migrant

families in various European countries (e.g., Norway – Terrefe, 2023; Fylkesnes et al., 2018, and Britain – Okpokiri, 2021). This strain relates to issues of trust in the CWS, access to services, and communication barriers between families and social workers (Gustafsson et al., 2023; Nunes et al., 2021). In conjunction with disinformation, already strained relationships lead social workers to report negative effects on work environment and mental health (Vision, 2023). Disinformation fuels distrust and public resentment, causing social workers to be threatened, harassed, or attacked offline and online (Burns et al., 2024; Gustafsson et al., 2023). This may erode professional engagement and prevent social workers from fulfilling professional duties and providing support to those in need (Lewig et al., 2010). Moreover, disinformation affects migrant families' engagement with social services, which is manifested in fear of the authorities or lack of awareness of available services (Bråten et al., 2020) and contributes to shaping discourses (Maci et al., 2023).

1.2. Aim

This study aims to explore how the shared story of "the Swedish CWS kidnapping migrant children" is constructed in Arabic-language social media content. This is done by addressing two questions:

- What recurring claims are made about Swedish CWS in Arabic-language posts and comments (2021–2023)?
- What rhetorical and narrative resources are used to make these claims credible and legitimate?

Content in Arabic was chosen as this language was most frequently used in Facebook posts and comments when the "LVU campaign" was most intense and active.

1.3. Theoretical and methodological stance

This study has a theoretical and methodological stance that views language as action – i.e., to speak or write is to do something, with or against someone, with a purpose and associated consequences (Potter, 2016). It is further posited that something is always at stake when someone speaks or writes – prestige, power, or precedence of interpretation. The approach also implies a regard for the multiplicity of realities constructed through stories (Bruner, 1986), and for how language is used to convey truthfulness or "realness" of these stories.

Drawing on Bruner's (1986) notion of multiple realities, the analysis focuses on how such realities are collectively constructed within the narrative genre of 'shared stories'. The genre builds on discursive narrative analysis and small story analysis (Page, 2018) and defines a shared story as "a retelling, produced by many tellers, across iterative textual segments, which promotes shared attitudes between its tellers" (Page, 2018p. 18). Narratives are shared stories that are co-constructed by several tellers, reflecting the collective nature of what is constructed. Co-construction allows for the open-endedness of narratives (also called distributed linearity), as social media content does not conform to traditional narrative norms (i.e., that there should be a start, a middle, and an end) nor to a linear storytelling chronology. Rather, the assembling of content may be based on interest rather than chronology. Shared stories are mediated and constructed in relation to the specifics of the social media used, and the online format provides an intertextual embeddedness by connecting the stories, using technical features of hashtags, re-postings, etc., to other stories and re-using or retelling the content in a new context of use.

Aligning with the shared stories genre, the study uses a discursive, narrative approach. Thus, the empirical material is analyzed, focusing on the rhetorical and narrative resources that the tellers use in their storytelling to pursue their argumentation and make it credible and true. Rhetorical resources are used to accomplish actions, and these include the use of details, self-reported speech, facts, metaphors, and time

references (Potter, 1996; Blomberg, 2017). In this study, rhetorical resources pertain to references to time and details (accentuating the storyteller’s trustworthiness), active-voicing (retelling what has been told or experienced in somebody else’s voice), and emotions (appealing to be reader’s emotional response). Narrative resources are direct or indirect retellings of events (testimonies). They also evoke strong emotions by being linked to feelings in the past.

2. Method and material

As Facebook was the primary platform for sharing and distributing content related to “the Swedish CWS kidnapping migrant children” from the campaign’s onset (see Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023), it served as the main data collection source. YouTube was added, as several of the Facebook posts re-posted YouTube content. The empirical material consisted of written Facebook and YouTube posts and comments in Arabic between January 2021 and December 2023. The posts and comments were published and made accessible for anyone in open forums and pages.

2.1. Data collection and empirical material

Initial Facebook searches, using keywords such as “Sweden,” “Social services,” “Children,” “Removed,” and “Kidnapped” (in Arabic) identified several Facebook pages. These were scanned for relevant content by DS, and identified pages were discussed by all researchers to agree on which pages to include. Included Facebook pages were those that contained content on ‘the Swedish CWS kidnapping migrant children’ and were administered in Sweden, such as “Children’s Rights” (1.1 thousand followers). These pages were then scanned for the most influential

content, i.e., posts and comments with the most interactions. Inclusion criteria for Facebook posts consisted of posts:

- with more than 100 interactions (i.e., likes, shares, referrals, reposts, and comments),
- being published on open Facebook pages,
- containing written text on the topic (i.e., not only being a video or reel).

Due to the structure of Facebook pages, multiple posts by the same user were included in the material, and the content in posts sometimes related to previously mentioned posts by the same or another user. Once a post had been selected, published comments to the post were explored in relation to the following inclusion criteria for comments:

- receiving many interactions (exceeding 20 Facebook interactions or 50 YouTube interactions) or
- illustrating a recurring theme in the responses.

Comments on testimonies by parents that only showed support and compassion, such as “God bless you, and I hope your children return safely”, were not included. Replies to comments were also read through and replies with the most interactions were included.

Besides containing posts and comments, included Facebook pages contained reposts of YouTube content published by influencers. For these reposts, the original YouTube posts were scanned in relation to inclusion criteria for comments, as the posts primarily contained videos. In addition, a search was conducted on YouTube using the same keywords as for the Facebook searches. This resulted in a playlist of 88 posted videos on “What is happening with the children in Sweden”.

Table 1
Overview of included material.

Post	Platform	Author (Influencer/ User/ Playlist)	InteractionShares (S)/ views (V)	Likes	Comments	Followers (YouTube)	Included comment	Included replies to comments
1	Facebook	Influencer 1	1.6 K S	6.1 K	815		4	
2	Facebook	User 1	33 S	57	21		0	
3	Facebook	User 2	140 S	237	94		0	
4	Facebook	User 1	499 S	1.2 K	1 K		1	1
5	Facebook	User 3	109 S	340	198		0	
6	YouTube	Influencer 2	1.02 M V	55 K	8.1 K	869 K	8	1
7	Facebook	User 4	132 S	184	68		0	
8	Facebook	User 5	183 S	890	197		2	
9	Facebook	User 2	44 S	386	169		0	
10	Facebook	User 1	61 S	123	14		0	
11	Facebook	User 2	172 S	390	132		0	
12	Facebook	User 6	5 S	119	20		0	
13	Facebook	User 1	18 S	113	17		0	
14	Facebook	User 1	12 S	122	22		1	
15	Facebook	User 3	45 S	1 K	456		3	
16	Facebook	User 7	4 S	141	36		1	
17	Facebook	User 1	66 S	218	287		0	
18	Facebook	User 8	411 S	267	389		0	
19	Facebook	User 9	123 S	226	86		0	
20	Facebook	User 10	123 S	400	107		0	
21	Facebook	Influencer 3	14 S	122	34		0	
22	Facebook	User 3	16 S	92	45		0	
23	YouTube	Influencer 1	577 K V	37 K	4.7 K	1.78 M	10	
24	YouTube	Influencer 1	16 K V	1.2 K	150	78.3 K	3	
25	Facebook	Influencer 1	160 S	898	29		1	
26	Facebook	Influencer 1	462 S	2.3 K	143		7	
27	Facebook	Influencer 1	2.9 K S	26 K	1 K		18	
28	YouTube	Influencer 3	30 K V	2 K	297	1.24 M	19	
29	YouTube	Playlist	181 K V	6.5 K	1.1 K	1.24 M	8	2
30	YouTube	Playlist	361 K V	10 K	1.8 K		21	
31	YouTube	Playlist	557 K V	16 M	4.8 K		24	6
32	YouTube	Playlist	20 K V	1.7 K	142		10	
33	YouTube	Playlist	362 K V	11 K	2.6 K		25	
34	YouTube	Playlist	223 K V	5.3 K	838		8	
Total			(S): 7.332(V): 3.347 000	16.171.625	29.906	5.207.300	174	10

Notes: K in the table illustrates thousands and M millions. This table is also published in (Sofi et al., 2025).

From this playlist, a strategic sample of posts were chosen, including the oldest, newest, shortest, and longest posts, as well as the posts with the most interactions. These posts were then scanned in relation to the inclusion criteria for comments.

For an overview of the included material, see [Table 1](#). All included material was translated into Swedish using Google Translate and ChatGPT, as this was the common language among the researchers. After that, chosen quotes were translated into English. DS validated the translation from Arabic into Swedish and English and made adjustments when necessary. Since translation is a complex endeavor, this was done carefully, in several loops to ensure “translational quality”.

2.2. Analyzing data

Inspired by [Potter \(1996\)](#) and [Page \(2018\)](#), the material has been analyzed in several steps. First, it was read and reread multiple times to identify themes pertaining to the CWS and Sweden. This iterative process generated themes illustrating the types of claims made, presented in the Results section: (1) victims of CWS’ malpractice, (2) removed children suffer, (3) migrant families live in fear, and (4) countering with facts about CWS’ practice. Secondly, posts and comments were read with a focus on how these claims were legitimized and made credible. To understand how the claims were made credible, the analysis focused on the rhetorical resources of time, emotion, detail, active-voicing, and testimony. Lastly, posts and comments considered typical of the claims were chosen to be presented as quotes illustrating examples of what claims were made and legitimized.

2.3. Ethical considerations and reflexivity

The empirical material stems from publicly accessible Facebook groups and YouTube posts, where users openly share posts or comments with any readers. Given that such content may be used without consent if researchers carefully consider the context in which the data was shared, the expectations of privacy, and risks of harm to individuals ([Markham & Buchanan, 2012](#); [Townsend and Wallace, 2017](#)), informed consent was not sought from the tellers. To prevent traceability and maximize confidentiality, identifying information has been omitted, anonymized, or paraphrased. The traceability of the quotes is also limited as they have been translated from Arabic into English.

By referring to the ‘LVU campaign’ as disinformation, ethical considerations arise. Tellers of CWS’ actions in cases of child removal may not see themselves as part of a disinformation campaign. Thus, describing posts and comments as disinformation may imply that they are false or fake. However, the aim has been neither to assess truthfulness nor to investigate if posts and comments relate to any specific case. Instead, posts and comments together are seen as forming a shared story that is told and retold, impacting people’s lives (see [Page, 2018](#)). We also acknowledge that storytelling in minoritised communities can function as meaning-making, mutual support, and knowledge-sharing, particularly under conditions of vulnerability, marginalisation, and mistrust (e.g., [Handulle & Vassenden, 2023](#)). Accordingly, we caution against interpreting these narratives solely through a deficit lens (e.g., as ‘disinformation’ only), and instead treat them analytically as social practices through which experiences and concerns are communicated and negotiated.

Moreover, it should be noted that the researchers in this study live in Sweden. Both EW and HB identify as women, were raised in Sweden, with no experience of migration, and are social work researchers. EW works as a senior lecturer and HB is an associate professor in social work. JS identifies as a man, was raised in Sweden with a father of German descent, and is a sociologist and professor of social work. DS identifies as a man, was raised in Kurdistan-Iraq, is a sociologist, and works as a senior lecturer in Sweden.

3. Results

The shared story ‘the Swedish CWS kidnapping migrant children’ contains a variety of accounts pertaining to children being removed from their families by the CWS and placed in alternative care (e.g., foster care). The tellers describe child removal incidents from the perspective of the migrant families (their *testimonies* of own experiences or events) or the perspective of relatives, friends, neighbors, etc. (*indirect testimonies* of events by others than those who experienced them). These testimonies portray the migrant families’ pain, agony, and helplessness following the CWS removing their children, as illustrated by an affected parent’s testimony (post 5):

“Since 2019, they have deprived us of her [eleven-year-old daughter] and prevented us from getting her back, even though her two siblings have already returned. There is no reason at all why she should be kept away, neither near nor far. The girl was taken when her mother went to social services in 2019 after taking her two older siblings from school. [...].

Now, a few days ago, the girl met her mother, and the mother saw wounds on her hands. When she asked her about them, she [the girl] was afraid to tell the truth because of the presence of these low people and the ban on speaking Arabic. [...]. When they said goodbye, she whispered and said: ‘I am sick, mother. I have hurt myself with a knife because they give me sedative tablets because I cry a lot!’ Imagine how low these wretches have sunk in terms of contempt, meanness, and lack of compassion! [...].

I ask you all to take these issues seriously and work to save our kidnapped children from the grip of evil and humiliation, as they have changed their [the children’s] characters and planted fear in the hearts of children. I truly confirm that these are terrorist organizations, [...].” (Post 5, published in a Facebook group)

Although the post tells a story of a parent and her distress, it also illustrates three types of claims within ‘the CWS kidnapping migrant children’ story presented below; the families are victims of CWS’ malpractice, the children suffer, and migrant families fear the CWS.

3.1. Victims of CWS’ malpractice

In the shared story, migrant families are portrayed as victims of CWS’ malpractice. In post 5 this is shown by the parent, testifying about how they (as parents) are kept in the dark about CWS’ reasons for removing their children. This is reinforced when the parent claims that the children were removed without a “convincing reason,” positioning the parents as victims of negligence, and suggesting CWS’ malpractice. Similar depictions frequently reoccur in posts and comments, occasionally in longer segments, (as in post 5) or in short references to child kidnapping, child removal without a just cause, untrue accusations of family violence or CWS’ corruption (as in posts 18 and 31). Thus, such posts and comments build upon and add to “truths” established by other tellers and contribute to the shared story’s (re)construction, in line with [Page \(2018\)](#).

By using time (related to recollection and experience) and emotions, claims of CWS’ malpractice are made legitimate and credible. Time, related to the recollection of events, is used to give the testimony credibility, as in post 5, where the event points to the problem’s actuality and the lack of bias in the recollection of the events. In addition, the reference to a specific year is a temporal reference for the posited development of the girl’s experiences and character. This reference positions the teller as credible – by referring to both the “objective” fact of time passing and the teller’s direct experience of the events, as an expert. Time is also used by tellers offering shorter indirect testimonies of CWS’ malpractice to convey credibility. In such indirect testimonies, the teller’s credibility is quickly established, as in the comment on post 31:

“I have lived in Sweden for almost 35 years, and I know many families whose children were taken away for the slightest reason, and

they said that there is violence in the family, but everything is a lie. An infidel country that has no mercy or humanity. May God strengthen you and return your children to you, and we are with you in everything you do to the corrupt government.” (Comment on post 31. Post 31 is an interview with a parent whose children have been removed by CWS, and is included in a YouTube playlist on the theme of what is happening to children in Sweden.)

Here, the teller’s credibility is instantly established by referring to extensive experience, i.e., having lived in Sweden for 35 years. This substantiates the knowledge of Swedish conditions and of other affected families, giving the teller a role of expert, which gives the testimony legitimacy. In turn, the testimony’s legitimacy justifies categorizations of the CWS as a terror organization, the social workers as evil, non-compassionate, and full of contempt, or Sweden as devoid of mercy and humanity. These categorizations are then used as retellings of ‘facts’ established outside this shared story, to give legitimacy to CWS’ malpractice claims and to invoke the reader’s emotions.

As another approach to establishing credibility in the parents’ position as victims of CWS’ malpractice, appealing to the reader’s emotional involvement with the content is used. Tellers use phrasings such as “imagine how low...” (post 5) or “Of course, we all know that a woman who recently gave birth...” (post 18) to refer to a shared knowledge of vulnerability and the emotions attached to it. This referral strengthens the parents’ credibility as victims of CWS’ malpractice:

“Swedish social services, together with the Swedish police, kidnapped a child from his mother at the moment of birth. Of course, we all know that a woman who has recently given birth is at risk of her health deteriorating due to difficult childbirth, and what if the police and social services were there when she gave birth to the baby? What state is she in at this moment, knowing her child will be taken captive and that she will never see her again? I wonder if these criminals are humans or animals. I don’t think animals do things like this.” (Post 18, published in a Facebook group along with a video of what is portrayed as the events described).

In post 18, the teller engages the reader’s compassion by invoking emotions related to vulnerability and motherhood, making the affected mother’s victimhood credible. The mother as a victim of CWS’ malpractice is also constructed by mentioning the police’s brute force, using the word “kidnapping,” and emphasizing category-bound activities relating to being a “mother of a newborn child”. As a mother of a newborn, she is portrayed as physically, psychologically, and emotionally vulnerable and thus unable to protect her child. This vulnerability highlights her helplessness in the encounters with the CWS and the police, underscoring her victimhood while legitimizing the categorization of the CWS and police as criminals and (worse than) animals. The post’s credibility is further strengthened by an accompanying video showing a mother in a hospital bed surrounded by police officers, which complements the written testimony.

By relating to the testimonies and indirect testimonies, other tellers reinforce and legitimize these claims. This is done by voicing support for the parents:

“[...] What is the meaning of life when they kidnap the flower of our life, which is our children???”

Fleeing Swedish social terrorism has become a humanitarian necessity before it is legitimate and logical.” (Comment on post 23. Post 23 is a video on YouTube by an influencer.)

Yet, building on the established claims of malpractice, the comments more emphasize on invoking emotions and calling for action. The comments contribute to sharpening the claims by invoking emotions of despair (e.g., what is the point of life) and legitimizing calls for fleeing Sweden.

3.2. Removed children suffer

The shared story contains claims of severe consequences for children being removed by the CWS. CWS’ malpractice outcomes are the focus of

these claims, by referring to their lack of monitoring the children’s well-being after family or foster care placement. References are also made to the CWS’ complicity in a deliberate transformation of children from well-behaved and wholesome to misbehaved and immoral.

Claims about well-being convey the horrors faced by the children placed in family or foster care. In post 5, a mother makes claims of harmful consequences, as she describes injuries in the child’s hands, and the child’s fear of being unable to communicate how she feels. Quoting the daughter (active voicing), provides credibility to the parent’s testimony and invokes compassion for the parents. Active-voicing also conveys the parents’ sense of helplessness and of being unable to safeguard their child. It also evokes intense emotional responses, i.e., empathy for the family and a sense of urgency.

The harmful consequences of the CWS removing the child from its family also center on the unwanted transformation of children:

“They say that the daughter of Iraqi parents was forcibly taken away four years ago, and their daughter was 14 years old. A few days ago, they returned her to her parents. She is a professional liar and steals, drinks alcohol, is addicted to drugs, and is friends with bad young people” (Comment on post 26. Post 26 contains a picture of a rally in Stockholm on CWS’ removal of children in migrant families with an accompanying text.).

“I got a call from my little daughter while she was talking to her brother without the knowledge of the Swedish family and social services until they caught her. And from that day until today they even changed the child, changed her name and her religion, and took her to another family in another county, and so far they have changed her house five times. She was eight years old, and he was 11, and she’s still kidnapped.” (Post 22, published in a Facebook group).

The quotes depict a shift from a good, well-behaved child with high moral values, raised to be a good Muslim, into an infidel or Christian child, disrespectful of her parents, with low moral values and a bad lifestyle. Abducted girls are portrayed as being transformed into cheap girls without honor or morals. CWS’ malpractice has thus destroyed family structure and stolen the children’s innocence and future. Since family and family bonds lose importance and value for the children, the ‘sacred’ family structure disintegrates. These consequences add to the image of the CWS as heartless bandits that ruin families by removing their children.

Transformation claims are made credible and legitimate by stating that the changes in the child range from changing names, religions, and addresses (in post 22) to changes in behavior (comment on post 26). These changes are described in detail (i.e., change of house five times or providing a detailed list of aspects of the girl’s new behavior) to emphasize the credibility of the statements. Time is also used to increase the credibility of the statements about change. In a comment on post 26, the girl’s transformation into a liar and addict, socializing with the wrong people, is argued to be a consequence of being removed from her family several years previously. Here, an “indirect” testimony of a family’s experience is used, and a reference to time (14 years old and four years) to make the claims credible. In post 22, time is also used when pointing out a starting point, but not an end – the girl being eight years old at the time of removal and still being detained. This openness can be understood as an attempt to invoke the reader’s imagination about additional (negative) changes as this situation progresses.

Claims of harmful consequences build upon claims about CWS’ malpractice within the shared story, while simultaneously (re)constructing these claims. Post 22 describes the transformation as a result of what is portrayed as an innocent conversation between a brother and a sister being discovered by the (evil) Swedish family and CWS. This description appeals to emotions of unfairness and injustice toward the family and the girl, making the harmful transformation claim credible by relating it to CWS’ malpractice. Similarly, in the comment on post 26, the CWS are described as “they” who “returned her to her parents” and “violently/forcefully removed,” and are implicitly blamed for the girl’s

transformation.

3.3. Migrant families in Sweden live in fear

Claims about the CWS and their interaction with migrant families are positioned in a larger narrative of the life of a migrant (Muslim) family in Sweden. The everyday life of migrant (Muslim) families in Sweden is connected to claims of CWS' malpractice and harmful consequences by articulating emotional responses to the posts and comments. Migrant (Muslim) families are described as living in fear of losing their children:

Thank God for your safety, and congratulations on this decision. May God reward you with all the best. I lived in Sweden for 15 years, and thankfully, I left it three months ago, honestly, not because of the problems that happened, but because I was filled with fear and dread, and I know many people and close friends who took their children for trivial reasons or for no reason at all. I left because I wanted peace. I raise my children comfortably, and not like you said, yet I remain scared and terrified that my turn would come and they would take the most precious thing in my life. I do not regret this decision at all. What you say is 100% true, and in fact, if you live in this country all your life, you will always feel like a stranger, no matter how much you try to adapt and understand their mentality. People there are alive and don't live. Neither the person who works is comfortable nor the person who is in the social services is comfortable. Sweden has unfortunately become a horror movie, with its moral decay and encouragement of corruption in the name of personal freedom" (Comment on Post 6. Post 6 is a video published by an influencer on YouTube.)

Similar to CWS' malpractice claims, these claims of fear (illustrated in Post 6) are made from a position of experience or expertise and legitimized through time and place references (living in Sweden for 15 years in the comment on post 6 or past tense referrals in the comment on Post 32). The immediacy of the teller's decision to leave Sweden for somewhere else also legitimizes the claim. Using time and place references gives testimonies legitimacy in just a few sentences. The teller in the comment on post 6 also invokes their role as an expert by referring to the indirect experiences of friends who were also victims of CWS' malpractice. Once established as an expert, the tellers testify about emotional distress when raising children in Sweden, legitimizing fear as a justifiable emotional response to CWS' malpractice. CWS.

Depictions of fear are stated both explicitly (as shown in the comments on post 6 and 32) and implicitly by suggesting it was necessary to flee from Sweden to save their family (in the comment on post 34).

"We were in Sweden and left it because we were afraid of raising our children there." (Comment on post 32. Post 32 is a video containing descriptions of Swedish law proposals and is included in a YouTube playlist on 'What is happening to children in Sweden'.)

"My advice to Ana's mother is that they should not wait for the law to return her daughter to her. And try to take her and escape with her however they can, without waiting for the laws and courts to act. Because their laws only work in their favor. And to try to smuggle her other children out and leave the country before they fall into the hands of the social services" (Comment on post 34. Post 34 is a video containing testimony by a parent and is included in a YouTube playlist on 'What is happening to children in Sweden'.)

This fear is intertwined with a tension between the depiction of a caring parent doing the right thing and what is described as exclusionary and discriminatory practices embedded in Swedish society. This imbalance is shown in the comment on post 6 re-positioning the migrant parents as strangers unable to fit in and be accepted into society, despite being good parents. Similarly, the description of fear when raising their children, in the comment on post 32, implicitly refers to malpractice claims and harmful consequences for children. This legitimizes leaving Sweden as a reasonable action. In the comment on post 34, the fear of the children being taken by the CWS and the statement that the law only favors the CWS position the mother as a victim of injustice. This injustice, combined with the use of the word 'fleeing', invokes fear and makes

fear a credible reason for leaving Sweden. Although the fear connects these claims to claims of CWS' malpractice, the emphasis and consequences of the fear are not related to the CWS but to Sweden as a country. Thus, the shared story extends beyond the CWS' malpractice and harmful consequences for children, enabling the tellers to make claims about Sweden as a country and about life in Sweden (being like a horror movie, filled with moral decay and corruption in the comment on post 6). This extension is used as a reason for legitimizing emotional responses of fear and calls for actions to leave this country of terror and exclusion.

3.4. Countering with facts about CWS' practice

Although most posts and comments add to the shared story of the CWS kidnapping migrant children, there are a few comments that respond to the claims of malpractice, harmful consequences, and fear by stating "facts" about the CWS' work and Swedish legislation:

"[...] I have children and they have grown up in Sweden, and have lived there for 33 years, and I have never once feared for my children. Social services remove children [from their families] for only three reasons. First, when children are beaten. Second, when the family is addicted to drugs. Third, when they leave the children at home a lot without anyone being with them. These are the reasons. The rest is ongoing work in something called investigation, which means investigation, and this takes three months. If it is clear to the social services that there is a danger to the children, the investigation is closed without the children being returned. There's no need to be afraid if you don't hit the kids, leave them alone at home, or, God forbid, give them drugs." (Reply to comment on post 4. Post 4 is a video of a rally where politicians and families speak about the CWS' interactions with migrant families.)

These comments are descriptive in tone, portraying contents as "facts". Portrayed as "facts", the claims describe what are "legitimate" reasons for children being removed from their families as well as the CWS' working process. The claims' legitimacy is constructed by using time and details. E.g., the reference to the teller's 33 years of living in Sweden provides truthfulness for claims made in the reply to comment on post 4. Furthermore, the detailed description of the CWS' reasons for child removal and the CWS' working process construct the teller as a knowledgeable and credible source. Similarly, in the reply to a comment on post 6, this is done by referring to the many years of living in three countries, which adds to the teller's legitimacy as one who "knows" parenting practices in these regions. The teller's credibility is further enforced by references to their knowledge of Muslim parents and beliefs. The established credibility of both tellers positions them as experts on the CWS and life in Sweden as a migrant family and as legitimate sources of the "facts" in replies.

Other comments respond by referring to migrant parents' child-rearing practices and relating them to the "Swedish" view on "accepted" child-rearing practices:

"Many people I know are Muslims and raise their children with an Islamic upbringing. They live their lives normally, and no one has taken their children away from them. But unfortunately, there are those who want to raise their children by using violence, threats, and prohibitions. They will lose their children, because these parents consider their children as slaves and that they have the right to do whatever they want with them. Honestly, I'm happy with Sweden. I have lived in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria for many years, and honestly, Sweden is better than these countries when it comes to not interfering in people's private lives, clothing, or when they come home or leave home. Of course, there are many good things in these countries, as people are social and help each other in need. In any case, Sweden does not work for those who are religiously engaged because they will have a hard time here. [...] These people must remain in countries that allow such an upbringing. May God help the children and relieve them from such parents." (Reply to a comment on post 6. Post 6 is a video published by an influencer on YouTube.)

As in the “factual” description of the CWS’ practice, Sweden and Swedish child-rearing practices are described in a tone conveying a sense of “factuality”, as in the reply to a comment on post 6. Still, the “factual claims” implicitly invoke normative ideas of “good” Swedish parenting – i.e., not using physical punishment, not leaving the children unattended at home or providing them with drugs, and not being an addict (described in the comment on post 4), using violence or treating the children as “slaves” (reply to comment on post 6). When distinguishing between “good” and “bad” parents, tellers associate “bad” parenting with religious practice (Islam). This is done by stating that religious parents will have a hard time in Sweden and should stay in countries that allow violence in child-rearing (in the reply to a comment on post 6). The last sentences of the same reply highlight accepted forms of parenting by underlining the wrongfulness of parenting that allows violence and the use of children as “slaves”.

Both types of comments relate to parents’ fear of losing children and relate such emotions to the “facts” provided. The emotions are used as a backdrop to “factual claims”. The informative descriptions of “facts” take precedence and appeal to logic and reason to construct the CWS as protecting children from maltreatment and promoting “good” parenting. By presenting these “facts”, the tellers may counter claims of CWS’ malpractice and reduce parents’ fear of losing their children, yet the “factual claims” reproduce normative parenting ideals in Sweden, which may add to parents’ fear of not meeting ideals of “good” child-rearing. Thus, the factual claims add to the shared story of the CWS kidnapping migrant children, causing children to suffer and the families to live in fear.

4. Discussion

Negative media coverage about the social services is not a recent phenomenon (Schönfelder & Holmgaard, 2019; Lonne & Gillespie, 2014; Blomberg, 2017; Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019; Lundström et al., 2021). Neither is distrust in the CWS limited to a specific group of people. In the Nordic countries, the media have reported frequently about unfair treatment of children and families and of incompetent social workers (Blomberg, 2017; Lundström et al., 2021; Schönfelder & Holmgaard, 2019). Recently, such media coverage have focused more on cases involving migrant families (Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019) and such cases have been systematically distributed via social media and combined with personal social media posts by parents, relatives, friends, and bystanders on the wrongful actions of the CWS. This has led researchers to claim that these narratives are part of disinformation campaigns (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023). From this it follows that the contents shared and spread on social media are portrayed as stories without a factual basis, filled with misconceptions, and aimed at harming or intentionally misleading (Cummings & Kong, 2019). Still, whether social media content can be categorized as disinformation can be questioned, as research shows strained relationships between migrant families and the CWS (e.g., Terrefe, 2023; Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Okpokiri, 2021).

The findings in this study shows that the shared story of ‘the CWS kidnapping children in migrant families’ is told and retold in multiple posts and comments, specifically by making and legitimizing families’ claims of malpractice victims, where children suffer and migrant families fear the CWS. The first claim depicts migrant families as CWS’ malpractice victims – i.e., as objects of (intentional) wrongdoing. Although these claims resemble how the media have described the CWS and social services (Blomberg, 2017; Lundström et al., 2021; Schönfelder & Holmgaard, 2019), this study does not engage with traditional media. Instead, here story-making relies on the direct or indirect ‘testimonies’ of events where children have been removed and placed into alternate care. These testimonies are provided by tellers in posts and comments on social media platforms and contribute to perspectival co-ordination (Fraser, 2021), re-aligning the readers’ opinions to those conveyed in the post. The convergence in how claims

are made in the studied shared story suggests such coordination, which gives legitimacy and credibility to the claims. This resonates with findings showing that social media contents are likely to be shared if users hold attitudes consistent with the messages conveyed (Buchanan, 2020). Similarly, the claim of victimhood can be seen against the backdrop of children born abroad being overrepresented in reports of suspected child maltreatment to CWS (Kalin et al., 2022) and how minority parents use interactive strategies to avoid reports of child maltreatment (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021). By drawing upon such experiences, the claims’ legitimacy is further intertwined with experiences of vulnerability in interaction with authorities while reconstructing the alleged malpractice as “truthful”. Yet, it also should be noted that CWS’ removal of children born abroad or having two parents born abroad on the basis of the LVU Act (SFS 1990:52) is less common than among children born in Sweden or having one or two parents born in Sweden when controlled for parental socioeconomic status (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2024b).

The second claim conveys the severe consequences of CWS removing children from their families. This is done by discrediting the CWS, referring to their insufficient attention to the children’s well-being, or deliberate attempts to negatively influence them. This claim is linked to CWS’ malpractice claims but targets the affected children. It focuses on the dimension of good and bad, where the removed children’s caregiver is positioned as bad or evil and the parents as good. The contrast between good and bad is emphasized through the negative (bad) behaviors shown by children returning from alternative care, compared to the positive (good) behaviors attributed to migrant children. This dimension of good and bad is used to legitimize claims that children suffer, where time and details are used to establish credibility of the claims. By linking claims of suffering to the good-bad dimension, the claims’ legitimacy interlinks with emotions. Given that the emotions conveyed in the material are fear, sadness and frustration – amplified if written posts are accompanied by multimedia content (Chaudhuri et al., 2025) – the emotional tone further supports a perspectival coordination (Fraser, 2021).

The third claim positions the CWS and their interaction with migrant families within a larger narrative of migrant (Muslim) family life in Sweden. Connections are made between this narrative and the claims of CWS’ malpractice and harmful consequences through the articulation of emotional responses to the posts and comments, particularly fear. Fear of the CWS is both expressed in the material and implicit, yet it is made credible in the tellers’ testimonies. The tellers position themselves as experts, referring to time and place to legitimize their position and thus what is being told. Still, the response of fear relates to a larger discourse transgressing national borders or pertaining to migration status. Parents seem to have similar experiences of the CWS regardless of nationality, showing anger, sadness, fear, and anxiety, particularly during their initial interactions with the CWS (Tembo & Studsrød, 2019). Yet, for some migrated parents and second-generation migrant parents, fear of the CWS is more tangible (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Handulle & Vassenden, 2023; Okpokiri, 2021). Fear is re-constructed in social networks by spreading child removal stories, positioning the children as a lifeline, and interlinking the stories with adversity and marginalization. These stories also facilitate social bonding to cope with adversity and marginalization and are important for the social relations between families (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021). The claim of ‘migrant parents living in fear’ is thus not just a claim made in the shared story of ‘CWS kidnapping migrant children’; fear is a reality for some migrant parents. This reality legitimates claims of fear and calls for action (e.g., fleeing Sweden before it is “too late”), and positions the tellers as credible when making other claims relating to this fear. However, it is important to note that the present material captures discussions among highly engaged users in particular Arabic-language social media spaces and does not allow inferences about minority groups in general.

In summary, all three claims within the shared story of ‘CWS kidnapping migrant children’ build upon social media testimonies

provided by tellers. Testimonies are made legitimate and credible by constructing the teller as an expert, using time, place, and details, while constructing testimonies to invoke an emotional response. The legitimization relies on larger narratives of good versus bad, as well as on minority parents' vulnerability and fear of the CWS. Even when claims are met in posts with "facts" and counterarguments, they are reinforced, not reduced. By referring to normative ideals of "good" and "bad" parenting, these counterarguments legitimize CWS' practices, constructing other child-rearing practices than those of "good Swedish parents" as problematic. This places migrant families in a "deficient" position (Tembo-Pankuku & Studsrød, 2022). That is, even if the aim is to provide "facts" to counter what is framed as disinformation, claims in the shared story are further reinforced and legitimize the response of fear.

All in all, this study shows that, although being framed as disinformation (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023), the shared story of 'CWS kidnapping migrant children' reflects and reproduces realities. The posts and comments making up the story are not merely online testimonies disconnected from social reality, but shape interaction and social reality (Bruner, 1986). Overall – and drawing upon existing research (see Tembo & Studsrød, 2019; Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Handulle & Vassenden, 2023; Okpokiri, 2021) – the claims in the shared story impact on the interaction and relationships between the CWS and migrant families. A Swedish survey shows that 40 percent of social workers report negative effects of the 'LVU-campaign' on their work environment, 23 percent report adverse effects on mental health, and 8 percent have refrained from making intervention decisions due to fears of defamation, threats, or violence (Vision, 2023). In addition, social workers report that such negative portrayals impact public opinion of social services (Nilsson et al., 2025). In turn, this might have repercussions on the children in question, who are already vulnerable, in urgent need of placement due to abuse, negligence, or social isolation.

Since the shared story is constructed online, it might further contribute to the heated emotional responses, as people turn to alternative forums because they are afraid, desperate, and in need of trustworthy information (Zimdars et al., 2024). These forums may help migrant parents to feel support and connection, while legitimizing and reinforcing feelings of distrust, negative perceptions, or concerns related to the government. At the same time, the polemic and aggravated social media culture might tie into conspiracy theories, narratives, and (other) disinformation campaigns and social tensions. Thereby, it fuels and elevates polarization between groups or between citizens and public institutions and authorities (Del Vicario et al., 2016). In turn, this can fuel public distrust and conflict, and may erode social cohesiveness. In addition, both migrant families and social workers can be exposed to othering, harassment, threats, and violence.

4.1. Implications for child welfare practice and public communication

What is at stake is not only the public image of child welfare authorities but also the perceived legitimacy and credibility of child welfare interventions—conditions that shape the practical possibilities for child protection work and, ultimately, children's best interests. Trust influences whether families seek help early, whether professionals can assess situations effectively, and whether coercive interventions—when necessary—are accepted as legitimate. In the analyzed online material, emotionally compelling testimonies and repeated claims contribute to a shared story that may amplify fear and avoidance of contact with social services among some audiences, while also intensifying hostility toward professionals. The potential impact is therefore not merely reputational: reduced help-seeking and strained cooperation can undermine preventive work, complicate investigations, and increase the risk that children and families do not access support and protection in time.

Our findings also suggest that responses centered solely on factual rebuttals may be insufficient, because "facts" can be recontextualized within the shared story (cf. Section 3.4). A key lesson from the

sentiments expressed online is therefore to treat these narratives as signals of perceived vulnerability and institutional distance, rather than only as "falsehoods" to be corrected, while still communicating clearly about procedures and legal thresholds. Child welfare organisations may benefit from combining accurate information with trust-building, multilingual communication, addressing recurring concerns directly, and acknowledging the emotional and moral stakes expressed in the material. Collaboration with trusted intermediaries (e.g., civil society organisations, cultural mediators) may strengthen reach and credibility in minoritized-language online spaces, and organizations should also support professionals exposed to online harassment and ensure coherent communication across agencies. At the same time, the present material reflects highly engaged users in specific online spaces and does not allow generalizations about minority groups as a whole; nevertheless, monitoring recurring claims and the rhetorical resources that make them persuasive can help anticipate concerns, tailor communication, and strengthen conditions for constructive encounters with families.

4.2. Limitations

People have numerous reasons for, or intentions in, communicating on social media. These reasons or intentions are neither possible to discern nor the concern of this study. Instead, the focus is on claims made in a shared story and how these are constructed as legitimate and credible. Accordingly, we do not assess the veracity of specific allegations (e.g., 'kidnapping') or whether any post corresponds to a particular case; we examine how such claims are made credible within the shared story. The study departs from the stance that multiple realities exist, allowing claims to be explored as one version of reality (see Bruner, 1986). This stance implies that claims and the shared story are not assessed or understood along a "truth-untruth" continuum. In addition, there are limitations to this study. Firstly, the material has been chosen purposefully to collect posts and comments with the most interaction. The material therefore represents highly engaged users in specific online spaces and cannot be taken to represent minority groups as a whole, nor the prevalence of distrust among minority communities more broadly. Threads of communication between tellers are left out, along with posts and comments receiving less interaction. Still, choosing the material that prompts the most interaction may show the main patterns of claims and how they are constructed as legitimate and credible in the shared story. In addition, the material in this study is limited to primarily the main social media platform where the 'LVU-campaign' was most active (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023), i.e., Facebook, with some additions from Youtube primarily based on re-posting at Facebook. This focus was made to capture the main tendencies in the content related to the campaign, thus the study does not aim to cover the totality of platforms where related content has been shared. Including other social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok or even traditional news media may have resulted in slightly different findings and that is yet to be explored in other studies. Still, given the content analyzed in this study and the overarching understanding of content at the included platforms reached through the selection process, the tendencies may not be that different from the findings in this study. Secondly, the material has been translated between languages (Arabic to Swedish for analysis and then for publication into English). This translation may affect the syntax of sentences and the wording in the material. Still, DS, who is fluent in Arabic, has checked all translations for accuracy to make sure that no content is misrepresented. The choice of focusing the analysis on content rather than on linguistic structure also mitigates potential distortions introduced by translation across languages, supporting the trustworthiness of the findings (Temple & Young, 2004).

5. Conclusions and further research

This study shows that the shared story of "CWS kidnapping migrant children," although labeled as disinformation, relates to shared

experiences of marginalization, mistrust, and vulnerability among migrant families. The legitimacy of these claims is derived not only from their content but also from the personal testimonies, references to time and place, and strong emotions. These claims contribute to a shared understanding and emotional alignment between tellers and readers.

Social media is emerging not only as a platform for communication but as a space for constructing and negotiating social reality. Testimonies shared online gain traction and legitimacy when they resonate with broader experiences of vulnerability, parenting norms, and perceived injustices in interactions with welfare institutions. Attempts to counter these claims with factual arguments often risk reinforcing the original narrative, especially when such counterclaims are perceived as delegitimizing or othering migrant families' parenting practices in contrast to dominant societal norms.

This has significant consequences. Trust in the CWS can be undermined, complicating efforts to protect children, fueling polarization, and eroding trust between citizens and public institutions. Further research should explore how social workers perceive and are affected by these narratives, and how they manage mistrust in interactions with migrant families. It would also be valuable to investigate how the CWS adapt their practices and communication in an era of heightened media scrutiny and disinformation.

6. Consent to participate

Given that data is published openly in Facebook groups and Youtube pages accessible to anyone, no informed consent from the tellers has been sought or obtained. The use of openly available data published in social media has been assessed in relation to guidelines on ethics in social media research.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 6; Townsend and Wallace, 2017, p. 11–12). All identifying information has been anonymised or paraphrased to prevent traceability of included material and to uphold the principle of confidentiality.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations of traceability and confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emmie Wahlström: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Helena Blomberg:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **Dana Sofi:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Jonas Stier:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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