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Jagat Bahadur Kunwara

School of Business and Economics, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

jagat.bahadurkunwar@abo.fi

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7612-5841

Discursive Boundary-Making and Contested Legitimacy: A Multicultural Center in Vernacular Publics

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Abstract: This study examines how organizational legitimacy is contested in vernacular publics by focusing on Saaga, a municipally funded multicultural center in Kouvola, Finland. Using the discourse–historical approach (DHA), it analyzes online forum discussions alongside municipal and media texts that offered institutional framings but were largely revoiced and inverted in the vernacular debate. The analysis identifies nine boundary-making logics, grouped into ontological instability, moral economy, and symbolic–material order. Through rhetorical and affective strategies—such as parody, irony, nostalgic comparison, and fiscal misrepresentation—Saaga was recast as being fictive, corrupt, undeserving, or misplaced. Rather than rejecting multiculturalism outright, publics mobilized notions of fairness, efficiency, and common sense to re-signify inclusion as being wasteful or elitist. This study reveals how legitimacy is unraveled in everyday discourse, with ridicule, resentment, and sarcasm operating as tools of delegitimation. It contributes to legitimacy research by foregrounding vernacular publics as agents of discursive boundary-making, to multiculturalism research by showing how civic organizations materialize cultural ideologies and become condensation symbols in public discourse, and to discourse methodology by extending DHA into irony-rich online arenas. It also highlights the symbolic vulnerability of multicultural institutions in the context of demographic decline and political polarization.

Keywords: vernacular publics, organizational legitimacy, multiculturalism, discourse–historical approach, boundary-making

Introduction

Language is a core medium through which cultures, institutions, and organizations are judged and consequently trusted or challenged. Cultural discourses about migration and diversity can therefore shape how a relevant organization's legitimacy is negotiated in civic life by defining its organizational purpose, signaling values, and mediating social position (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). In organizational studies, legitimacy has been positioned as

a narrative and discursive accomplishment (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Motion & Leitch, 2009), a symbolic performance (Brown, 1994), and a material practice (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2023). Multicultural and multilingual contexts accentuate these dynamics as language moves beyond a mere means of communication to become a forum for constructing and challenging legitimacy and identity (Pettersson & Nortio, 2022).

There is a gap in legitimacy research for the challenges to multicultural organizations in vernacular publics, which in this study are understood as non-elite arenas of everyday discourse where legitimacy is contested outside official or institutional channels. These include online forums, grassroots debates, and informal civic talks (Graham, 2015; Hauser, 1999). While studies have examined how organizations secure external legitimacy through narratives (Golant & Sillince, 2007), discourse strategies (Barros, 2014; Vaara & Tienari, 2008), and category-spanning (Lo Verso, 2025; Zhao et al., 2013), most have focused on institutional and elite arenas. Vernacular publics—such as online forums, comment threads, and community discussions—remain underexplored despite their growing influence. Institutional discourse is not simply echoed through these media but rather reinterpreted, parodied, and inverted to create alternative legitimacy frameworks that directly challenge organizational standing (Symon, 2005; Topal, 2009). Analyzing such spaces could extend legitimacy theory by showing how organizations can be challenged from the “outside-in”.

This study focuses on the legitimacy of a municipally funded multicultural center in Finland, Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga (Saaga) (Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga, 2025), which was established in Kouvola to support migrants' integration through language education, cultural events, and social programming. Beyond its service provision, however, Saaga has become a condensation symbol (Wodak, 2001), having been invoked in public debate to channel anxieties about immigration, civic entitlement, and social cohesion and reframed as being inefficient, elitist, or symbolically excessive (Good, 2009). To analyze these dynamics, this study conceptualizes vernacular contestation as a boundary-making phenomenon (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008) in which discursive logics classify Saaga as being fictive, corrupt, wasteful, or undeserving (Radoynovska, 2018; Zhao et al., 2013). The discourse-historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak,

2001) was applied to show how rhetorical and affective strategies—such as irony, grotesque metaphors, and ridicule (Ahmed, 2014; Barros, 2014; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022; Symon, 2005)—amplify this delegitimation in vernacular publics. The guiding research question was this: How do rhetorical and affective strategies in vernacular publics mobilize boundary-making logics to contest organizational legitimacy? While institutional texts present Saaga's legitimacy in policy and media discourses, this study focuses primarily on how vernacular publics contest that legitimacy.

This study contributes to multiculturalism research by revealing how diversity is not just debated in abstract policy terms (Kivisto & Wahlbeck, 2013) but also in relation to organizations that become contested civic symbols (Good, 2009; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022). It also extends legitimacy theory by examining vernacular publics and looking at how lay actors exert rhetorical and affective effort to contest organizational legitimacy, thus complementing work on external stakeholder sensemaking (Chen & Kwitonda, 2021; Elsbach, 1994; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Methodologically, it contributes by applying the DHA to vernacular discourse to reveal how evaluative logics, rhetorical tropes, and affective stances converge to regulate organizational legitimacy. These insights have relevance for both researching organizational legitimacy and analyzing cultural discourse in relation to migration, multiculturalism, and civic belonging.

This article proceeds by first reviewing the literature on organizational legitimacy, boundary-making, and discursive strategies for delegitimation. It then outlines the methodology and data corpus before analyzing the nine boundary-making logics, which are grouped into three clusters. The subsequent discussion considers the implications for legitimacy theory, vernacular publics, and multicultural organizations.

Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy and Identity in Multicultural Organizations

Organizational legitimacy refers to socially constructed judgments about appropriateness within broader normative and cultural orders (Suchman, 1995).

Organization studies have analyzed legitimacy as a narrative accomplishment (Golant & Sillince, 2007), a symbolic and political performance (Brown, 1994), or precarious identity work (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). Hybrid entities, such as municipal multicultural centers, are especially vulnerable because they must balance symbolic inclusion against fiscal discipline, bureaucratic accountability, and linguistic expectations (Brickson, 2005; Chen & Kwitonda, 2021; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Elsbach, 1994). This can lead to ontological insecurity (Clegg et al. 2007) when identity and legitimacy need to be continuously negotiated with diverse publics (Drori & Honig, 2013).

In Nordic contexts, standards of civic modesty, economic rationality, and linguistic homogeneity are often taken for granted (Stokke, 2013), so multicultural organizations incur additional symbolic burdens. Indeed, they are expected to simultaneously embody cohesion, neutrality, and cultural representation. As research on language-sensitive management has shown, language is not a neutral medium but rather a moral and political landscape through which credibility is earned and challenged (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Karhunen et al., 2018; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). Multilingualism, tone, and rhetoric therefore become proxies for legitimacy, so organizations must consider not just their actions but also how they “sound”, whom they are addressing, and the context. Legitimacy is also inseparable from identity, because both must be accomplished by interacting discursively with the public (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2023; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2011; Motion & Leitch, 2009).

Boundary-Making Logics and Categorization

Legitimacy is often disputed by using symbolic boundaries to classify actors into hierarchies of worth (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008). These boundaries operate across moral, cultural, and economic dimensions to define who deserves support, recognition, or space, with this often solidifying material inequalities by shaping access to resources (Faist, 2013; Pachucki et al., 2007). In multicultural governance, heterogeneity is frequently framed as something “risky”, with inclusion being conditional on productivity and docility (Faist, 2013; Stokke, 2013).

Organization studies have shown that an organization's legitimacy is affected when it crosses categories. This "illegitimacy discount" reflects how category-spanning actors often lose credibility due to their audiences struggling to understand hybrid models (Zhao et al., 2013). Some overcome this through cultural entrepreneurship (Lo Verso, 2025), but others face delegitimation when the boundaries are reinforced (Radoynovska, 2018). Public hearings and policy forums discursively institutionalize symbolic distinctions, often in the name of the "general public interest" (Topal, 2009), with studies showing that legitimacy rests not just on alignment with established norms but also on how boundaries are constructed, inverted, or closed.

This study introduces the expression "boundary-making logics" to capture how publics draw on recurring evaluative frameworks to justify inclusion or exclusion. The label builds on scholarly studies of symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008) and organizational boundary processes (Radoynovska, 2018). Here, however, it is developed inductively from the case material. These logics go beyond individual opinions by codifying moral, spatial, economic, or cultural criteria into classificatory schemes that define whether organizations are positioned as legitimate or illegitimate. In the Nordic setting, concepts of cohesion and reciprocity accentuate these boundaries (Kivisto & Wahlbeck, 2013; Stokke, 2013). As such, multicultural centers are tolerated when they appear useful and modest but disdained when they are perceived as excessive, wasteful, or symbolically intrusive.

Discursive Strategies for Delegitimation

Discursive approaches treat legitimacy not as a fixed resource but rather a performative accomplishment achieved through language. The four core strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis have been commonly identified in legitimation studies (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Moreover, such strategies manifest not just in elitist and political discourses but also in vernacular publics that contest the legitimacy. Rhetorical resources—such as metaphors, narratives, and

irony—influence legitimacy judgments by linking organizations to broader ideological formations (Barros, 2014; Biscaro et al., 2025; Vaara & Monin, 2010).

In contested forums, these strategies are often adapted for delegitimation. Online forums have been widely studied as sites for legitimacy and identity to be challenged through everyday discourse. Research on social media and online communities has also shown how legitimation is achieved through dialogue with publics (Barros, 2014; Glozer et al., 2019), as well as how irony and affect circulate in forum interactions (Pettersson & Nortio, 2022). Broader studies of online publics have also emphasized how dynamics like echo chambers and hate speech can structure the circulation of legitimacy claims (Sunstein, 2018; Titley, 2019). Such studies highlight how in online arenas, legitimacy is contested in vernacular publics not in abstract terms but rather through concrete discursive strategies where such terms are adapted and revoiced.

Such resistance emerges through the use of parody, irony, and counter-arguments (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Symon, 2005) to present the official discourse as corrupt or absurd (Bauvois et al., 2022; Sakki & Hakoköngäs, 2022). Vernacular critiques operate affectively through ridicule, sarcasm, and grotesque metaphor, not just to highlight disagreement but also attach emotional weight to reshape organizational worth (Ahmed, 2014; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022). Studies of organizational discourse have demonstrated how stylistic and affective registers—such as tone, modality, and pronouns—can mediate the credibility of institutional claims (Crilly et al., 2016; Wodak, 2015). Affect is therefore not isolated from rhetoric but rather embedded in discourse as a tool for delegitimation.

Taken together, the above mechanisms present an opportunity for analyzing contested multicultural organizations. Legitimacy and identity are discursively accomplished in hybrid institutions, while symbolic boundaries regulate belonging and deservingness. Rhetorical and affective strategies then shape public evaluations. Although these mechanisms have often been studied in isolation, their convergence in vernacular publics remains underexplored. This study therefore integrates the insights from research on legitimacy, boundary-making, and discourse to reveal how language serves not only for communication but also as a means for symbolic control in contested civic

spaces. Online forums are particularly relevant here, because they articulate framings and affective registers that are not confined to small communities but rather circulate into the wider public debate, thus shaping common views about immigration and the legitimacy of multicultural initiatives (Glozer et al., 2019; Sunstein, 2018; Titley, 2019). From a discourse-historical perspective, online arenas can be seen as sites of interdiscursivity and intertextuality, ones where media reports, political statements, and civic commentaries are revoiced and reframed to shape the wider debate about legitimacy claims.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopted the discourse–historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak et al., 1999; Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2015), which is a strand of critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001) for examining how language produces, reproduces, and transforms power relations in a particular context. It approaches discourse as something both socially constituted and socially constitutive, and its analytical practice is explicitly normative. Its critique operates at three levels: immanent critique, which identifies contradictions within texts; socio-diagnostic critique, which links discursive features to broader ideological structures and institutions; and prognostic critique, which considers alternatives aimed at justice and inclusion. The approach also distinguishes four overlapping macro-functions of discourse—namely constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive—that together highlight how discursive practices shape institutions and collective life (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

A defining feature of DHA is the theorization of the context across four interlinked levels, namely immediate co-text, intertextual and interdiscursive relations, institutional and situational frames, and the wider sociopolitical environment. These levels are regarded as being recursive rather than hierarchical, so methodological triangulation is needed to connect micro-linguistic features

to macro-level ideological functions. This triangulation also extends across data types, theoretical tools, and discursive levels, thus reinforcing the validity of the interpretation through cross-checking.

This contextual orientation makes DHA particularly suitable for analyzing contested organizational legitimacy. In organization studies, legitimacy is established, or destabilized, through discursive practices among multiple sites and actors. DHA is sensitive to intertextuality and interdiscursivity, thus enabling us to study how institutional discourses, such as municipal policy strategies or media reports, are revoiced, inverted, or parodied in vernacular publics. Previous research has shed light on how organizations are discursively legitimized or delegitimized through authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), as well as through irony, parody, or affective registers (Barros, 2014; Glozer et al., 2019; Symon, 2005). In line with this literature stream, DHA provides a means for linking rhetorical strategies to broader ideological positions while considering the circulation of texts among forums, policy arenas, and media commentary (Motion & Leitch, 2009; Vaara & Monin, 2010).

Data Corpus

The data corpus was compiled between April and July 2025, with it comprising 13 primary documents relating to Saaga, a municipally funded multicultural center in Kouvola, Finland. A primary document here refers to a complete forum thread with a full comment chain, a news article with associated coverage, or a municipal policy document, with each being treated as a discrete unit of analysis. For analytical clarity, the 13 documents were grouped into five categories (see Table 1), specifically three Suomiz4 threads, six Hommaforum threads, two Reddit threads, 13 news articles treated as a single document, and three municipal policy documents again treated as a single document.

The bulk of the corpus comprised 756 posts drawn from the three abovementioned online forums, which together represent distinct segments of Finnish public discourse. More specifically, Suomiz4 is the country's largest general-purpose forum with an active "Society" section where social and

political issues are discussed anonymously in everyday language (Suomi24, 2025). Hommaforum, meanwhile, was established in 2008. It is a politically oriented platform associated with nationalist and anti-immigration perspectives, and posts there are typically longer and ideologically structured (Hommaforum, 2025). Finally, Reddit/r/Suomi attracts a younger and more diverse user base, so it provides a hybrid record of discussion (r/suomi, 2025). Threads from each platform were identified through keyword searches in both Finnish and English (e.g., “Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga”, “Saaga multicultural center”, “Kouvola Saaga”). Threads were selected when they directly referenced Saaga or its activities; contained explicit evaluations of legitimacy, belonging, or deservingness; and garnered sufficient engagement to constitute a debate.

For contrast with these forum discussions, 13 news articles mentioning Saaga were selected from YLE and *Kouvolan Sanomat*, with these covering events, controversies, and other recognitions between 2015 and 2024. The policy component, meanwhile, comprised the City of Kouvola’s *Kaikkien Kouvola* multicultural strategy (2019–2030) and its two interim reviews (2019–2022; 2023–2025), which are publicly available documents articulating the municipality’s integration goals (City of Kouvola, 2025). Taken together, the policy texts and media articles “present” Saaga’s legitimacy, while the forum threads overwhelmingly contest it. The resulting imbalance reflects the discursive environment, where the supportive framings remain largely institutional and generic, while contestation dominates in the vernacular publics.

The sources cover both vernacular publics and institutional framings, so they allow legitimacy to be analyzed from the “outside-in” (Symon, 2005; Topal, 2009). Background demographic and electoral data from the Official Statistics of Finland (OSF, 2025) and YLE Results Service (Ylen Vaalikone, 2025) were also consulted for context, although they were not analyzed directly. Overall, the corpus totaled some 31,384 words, which is equivalent to about 105–125 double-spaced pages of raw text in word-processed format.

All forum posts were translated from Finnish into English, anonymized, and stripped of identifiers. All quotes are presented in anonymized form, with the original Finnish being retained where the rhetorical nuance depends on language play. All the considered forum material was publicly accessible at

the time of collection, but no usernames are reported here. Table 1 presents the corpus by category, including approximate word counts.

Table 1. The grouped data sources and their analytical function within the DHA

Source	Data type	Description	Volume	Word Count (approx.)	Analytical function
1	Forum (Suomi24)	Threads discussing Saaga's funding and activities	107 posts	4206	Framing of fiscal burden and cultural authenticity
2	Forum (Hommaforum)	Threads on Saaga's launch, events, and recruitment	407 posts	16229	Populist and nationalist tropes; moral order
3	Forum (Reddit r/Suomi)	Discussions of multiculturalism and Saaga	242 posts	3769	Broader demographic perspectives; ironic registers
4	Media (YLE, Kouvola Sanomat)	News coverage of Saaga, 2015–2024	13 articles	3340	Institutional and media framing
5	Municipal policy	City of Kouvola multicultural strategy 2019–2030, with interim reviews	3 documents	3840	Institutional anchor and policy legitimization

Source: Author's own work.

Data-Analysis Procedure

Building on the DHA's framework, as outlined above, the analysis proceeded sequentially. The coding drew on the full corpus of public online forums (Suomi24, Hommaforum, Reddit/r/Suomi), news media (YLE and *Kouvolan Sanomat*), and the municipal policy documents outlined above. The debate around Saaga was rooted first within Kouvola's demographic decline, diversification, and municipal integration policies, thus providing the background for contesting organizational

legitimacy. The material was then examined for recurring discourse topics across forums, media, and policy texts. Illustrative quotes were found to depict Saaga as fictive, corrupt, wasteful, or threatening, thus providing the thematic basis for subsequent coding.

These topics were analyzed using DHA's heuristic categories (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2001). Nomination strategies revealed how actors and institutions were labeled, while predication strategies showed how qualities—such as inefficiency, elitism, or danger—were attributed. Argumentation schemes drew on topoi such as fairness, burden, threat, efficiency, authenticity, justice, responsibility, competence, scarcity, and caution, while perspectivization revealed stance-taking through irony, sarcasm, and appeals to common sense. Finally, intensification or mitigation indicated how affect was modulated through ridicule and grotesque metaphor. These strategies provided the linguistic evidence for linking individual choices to recurring evaluative frames.

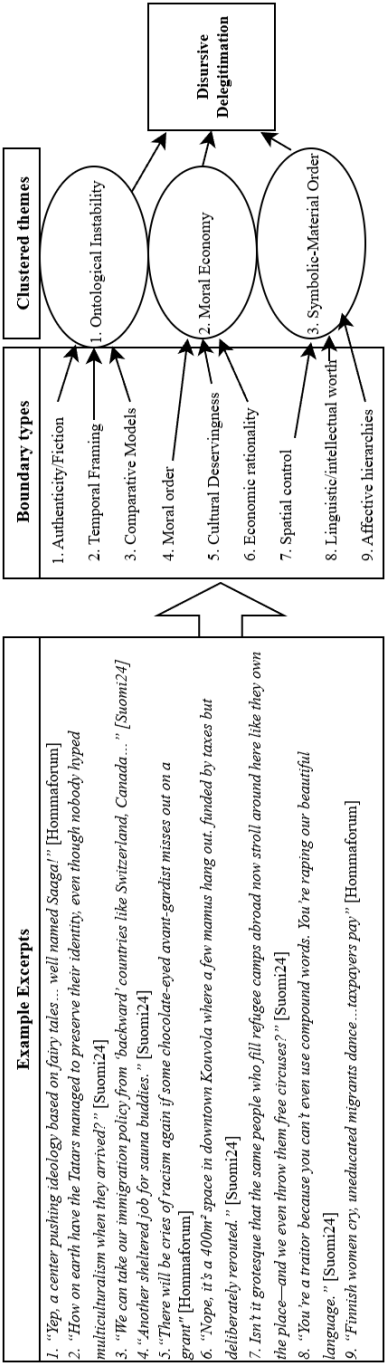
Intertextuality was then traced through participants citing, mocking, or revoicing headlines, budget figures, and municipal slogans. These references moved beyond their original context, with them often being inverted through parody or accusation. These intertextual inversions were central to the contestation. Attention was also paid to interdiscursivity, showing how discourses about welfare, migration, gender equality, national decline, and security were recontextualized within the Saaga debate, such that that organizational legitimacy was determined at the nexus of multiple discursive domains.

Through a recursive process, nine boundary-making logics were inductively generated: authenticity versus fiction, temporal framing, comparative models (global–local), moral order, cultural deservingness, economic rationality, spatial control, linguistic and intellectual worth, and affective hierarchies. This study introduces the term “boundary-making logics” to describe recurring evaluative frameworks that classify organizational worth and justify inclusion or exclusion through identifiable strategies, topoi, and affective registers. For clarity, these nine logics were collected into three broader clusters to reflect their evaluative orientation, namely ontological instability (authenticity/fiction,

temporal framing, comparative models), moral economy (moral order, cultural deservingness, affective hierarchies), and symbolic-material order (economic rationality, spatial control, linguistic and intellectual worth). Empirical details for these clusters are presented in the findings.

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical pathway from quotations to discourse topics, through DHA's heuristic categories, and ultimately to the nine boundary-making logics and their clustering.

Figure 1. Analytical pathway from quotations to discourse topics, boundary-making logics, clusters, and discursive delegitimation



Source: Author's own work.

Table 2 complements this figure by detailing each logic together with its discursive function, associated strategies, underlying topoi, typical linguistic realizations, intertextual references, and illustrative quotations.

Table 2. Boundary-making logics and illustrative strategies

Boundary type	Delegitimizing function	DHA strategies	Illustrative topoi	Example excerpt
1. Authenticity vs. Fiction	Saaga framed as theatrical or illusory	Nomination (“immigrant office”); predication (fictional); perspectivization (truth-tellers); irony/parody	Definition; Burden; Deception	“Yep, a center pushing ideology based on fairy tales... well named Saaga!” [Hommaforum]
2. Temporal Framing (Past vs. Present)	Narrative of nostalgic decline	Binaries (“before/now”); irony; synecdoche	Decline; Nostalgia; Continuity	“Before, Finns managed without projects... Now schemes suck taxpayer money” [Suomiz4]
3. Comparative Models (Global-Local)	Finland/Kouvola as naïve vs. “pragmatic” others	Comparative irony; model minorities; Sweden-as-cautionary-tale	Realism; Caution	“We can take our immigration policy from ‘backward’ countries like Switzerland, Canada...” [Suomiz4]
4. Moral Order (Clean vs. Corrupt)	Linked to nepotism, elite collusion	Nomination (closed circles); predication (parasitic, cronies); grotesque metaphor	Justice; Responsibility	“The small circle keeps spinning, all Saaga-paid hires are the same people” [Suomiz4]
5. Cultural Deservingness	Migrant beneficiaries depicted as idle/undeserving	Nomination (racial slurs); predication (lazy, parasitic); contrastive grievances	Fairness; Utility; Deviance	“My own child didn’t get into art academy... but these migrant artists get all the support” [Hommaforum]

Boundary type	Delegitimizing function	DHA strategies	Illustrative topoi	Example excerpt
6. Economic Rationality	Framed as fiscally irresponsible and wasteful	Predication (automatic spending machine); sarcasm; synecdoche	Burden; Efficiency; Scarcity	“Saaga is funded by taxes, but the issue is hidden” [Suomi24]
7. Spatial Control	Downtown presence reframed as intrusion	Nomination (Somali clans, city center); containment tropes; irony	Invasion; Ownership; Burden	“Property value drops if ‘enrichment’ moves in” [Suomi24]
8. Linguistic/Intellectual Worth	Migrants depicted as incompetent	Predication (skill-less, layabouts); language policing; ridicule	Competence; Utility; Fairness	“All these nonsense projects where someone writes ‘Finland’ wrong and it’s counted as art” [Hommaforum]
9. Affective Hierarchies	Migrants undeserving of empathy	Sarcasm; parody of compassion; epithets	Justice; Threat; Ridicule	“Finnish women cry, uneducated migrants dance... taxpayers pay” [Hommaforum]

Source: Author’s own work.

This study was conducted by a single researcher who is himself an immigrant to Finland with proficient Finnish and familiarity with Saaga through local networks and participation in its activities. This position provided some sensitivity to linguistic nuance and organizational practice, but it also required reflexive awareness of potential interpretive bias. Translations and coding decisions were aimed at preserving irony, idioms, and rhetorical nuance, with the original Finnish being retained where the meaning depended on local phrasing. It is also worth noting that the reliance on Finnish-language forums inevitably foregrounds native-speaker perspectives in which contestation was far more common than support. Supportive comments did appear, but they were rare, fragmented, or playfully framed. This asymmetry is in itself a key empirical finding, because it reveals how legitimacy

work in vernacular publics is heavily skewed toward contestation, while affirmative legitimacy work is largely confined to institutional discourse. The analysis was therefore informed by the researcher's standpoint while remaining grounded in how the publics themselves constructed and contested Saaga's legitimacy.

Contextualization: Saaga and Kouvola

Finland is the broader institutional and political setting within which Saaga's legitimacy is contested. Despite the country ranking highly in international integration indexes (Huddleston et al., 2024; MCP, 2025), narratives of inclusion coexist uneasily with discourses that emphasize cultural homogeneity (Keskinen et al., 2019). Diversity is frequently framed as something that disrupts national unity and contrasted with values like gender equality and welfare solidarity (Menard, 2016; Tuori, 2007). Since 2008, the Finns Party has mainstreamed a nationalist-welfare discourse that positions immigration as a threat to both welfare provision and national identity (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Similar discourses circulate widely in traditional and social media, with multiculturalism critiques often being presented as rational concerns (Keskinen et al., 2019; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022).

In Kouvola, a medium-sized city in southeastern Finland, such discourses resonate strongly at the municipal level. Kouvola's population has been declining since the early 2000s, with this being accompanied by rising dependency ratios and weak economic growth. Simultaneously, linguistic diversity has risen from 1.4% to nearly 6% of residents in 2024 (OSF, 2025). In a context of demographic decline and fiscal constraints, multicultural initiatives are frequently portrayed as a burden on local welfare capacity. Moreover, electoral results reflect this tension, with support for the Finns Party in the city having risen from 6.8% in 2008 to 21.5% in 2021. While its support has since declined in the 2025 projections, its discursive influence continues (Ylen Vaalikone, 2025). Debates about municipal funding further reinforce the volatility. For example, Saaga received nearly €940,000 in municipal and national funding between 2017 and 2023, although some project proposals, particularly those aimed at visibility and

media presence, were rejected (STEA, 2025). Online discussions often frame such selective funding as evidence of ideological bias or favoritism.

Within this context, the Saaga multicultural center is municipally funded to support inclusion through language education, translation, youth work, and intercultural events. It is a central plank of Kouvola's official integration strategy, *Kaikkien Kouvola* (2019–2025) (City of Kouvola, 2025), with it being positioned both as a service provider and a symbol of openness. This symbolic role has exposed Saaga to criticism, however, with events like “Iraq Night” being interpreted more as boundary violations than cultural exchanges. As such, Saaga is seldom seen as a pragmatic service provider responding to demographic needs. Instead, it has become a symbolic node where anxieties about immigration, demographic decline, and elite moralism converge. Saaga therefore exemplifies how an organization can become a condensation symbol (Wodak et al., 1999), one where local practices acquire disproportionate symbolic weight. Its contested nature represents a compelling case for analyzing how an institution's legitimacy can be challenged and undone in vernacular publics.

Findings: The Boundary-Making Logics of Legitimacy

This section presents nine boundary-making logics that were identified from the data. They are grouped into three clusters, namely ontological instability, moral economy, and symbolic–material order. Figure 1 and Table 2 present the analytical pathway and detailed coding schema that guided the presentation of these findings.

Ontological Instability

Forum discussions repeatedly belittled Saaga's very existence as a credible civic institution. Rather than evaluating its programs, however, forum users framed the center as being fictive, anachronistic, or globally misaligned.

One recurring theme depicted Saaga as something fictional or theatrical rather than a “real” civic actor. Through nomination and predication, it was labelled a “fairy-tale aunt”, a “fantasy project”, or “an extension of the immigrant office”. Even its name was targeted: “Yep, a center pushing an ideology based on fairy tales... well named Saaga!” [Hommaforum]. Forum users presented themselves as taxpayers or whistleblowers unmasking deception, while ironic exaggerations were applied to intensify the critique, such as by sarcastically suggesting a “nation-shaking catastrophe” should Saaga were to close. These strategies drew on the topoi of definition (“storytelling is not real work”), burden (“a waste of taxpayers’ money”), and deception (“multiculturalism means only Muslim-themed events”). Municipal slogans about “bridge-building” were revoiced as “synergy bridges” devoid of meaning, thus exemplifying the intertextual inversion.

A second logic relied on temporal framing: Critics contrasted the disciplined, industrious “before” with a lazy, wasteful “now”, thus presenting structural change as a sign of decline. One poster remarked: “Before, Finns managed without migrant pampering and endless projects... Now these schemes suck up taxpayer money” [Suomiz4]. Nostalgic binary positions painted the past as coherent and self-sufficient, while the present was portrayed as parasitic and fragmented by “project culture”. Empty downtown buildings were used as symbols of civic decline.

The third logic positioned Saaga within global-local comparisons, with forum participants using international benchmarks to present Kouvola’s policies as naïve. Switzerland, Canada, Australia, and Japan were praised for their “healthy, self-interested” immigration policies. Moreover, such countries were sarcastically described as “backward” to highlight the perceived folly of Finland: “We can take our immigration policy directly from ‘backward’ countries like Switzerland, Canada, Australia, and Japan... They have healthy, self-interested principles” [Suomiz4]. Sweden was also invoked as a cautionary tale, while the Tatars were celebrated as a “model minority”.

Moral Economy

While the first cluster challenged Saaga’s very existence, the second set of logics disputed its moral standing and economic justification. Forum users framed

the center as being corrupt, undeserving, or fiscally parasitic. These critiques rarely invoked any overt ethnic exclusion but rather mobilized the language of fairness, justice, and responsibility.

One logic portrayed Saaga as being plagued by cronyism. Through nomination, familiar figures were identified in phrases like “the same people rotate in these circles”, with predication casting them as self-serving parasites. One poster expressed: “The small circle keeps spinning—all Saaga-paid hires are the same people” [Suomi24]. Perspectivization, meanwhile, was used to position the critics as betrayed taxpayers or whistleblowers, with grotesque metaphors like “ghosts lingering in politics” intensifying the critique. Arguments were rooted in the topoi of justice (“jobs are already decided”), responsibility (“taxpayers betrayed”), and abuse (“the city even pays rent twice”). Municipal records and media coverage were revoiced as evidence of corruption, thereby inverting the official intention.

A second logic tool took aim at the beneficiaries, with migrants being labelled with pejoratives like “matu” (a Finnish slur derived from *maahanmuuttaja*, meaning ‘immigrant’) or other racialized slurs and presented as being idle or frivolous. Programs were trivialized by reducing a broad set of activities to things like “scribbling and dancing”. The critics also presented themselves as parents to claim moral authority: “My own child didn’t get into the art academy...but these migrant artists get all the support” [Hommaforum]. Arguments drew on the topoi of fairness (“our children are overlooked”), utility (“they never learn Finnish”), and deviance (“uneducated layabouts as artists”). Irony and ridicule were used to further intensify these claims and present exclusion as common sense.

A third logic portrayed Saaga as being fiscally irresponsible. Nomination emphasized its role as a “multicultural business”, while predication cast it as an “automatic spending machine” and “hobby society”. The critics positioned themselves as aggrieved taxpayers uncovering wasteful practices: “Saaga is funded by taxes, but the issue is hidden” [Suomi24]. Hyperbole was also used to inflate relatively modest sums into “tens of millions”. The argumentation drew on the topoi of burden (“few benefit, many pay”), efficiency (“no return on investment”), and scarcity (“our poor neglected”). Users selectively cited budget figures from municipal and media reports to reframe them as evidence of waste. Fiscal metaphors and sarcastic comparisons then transformed the economic critique into one of moral condemnation.

The Symbolic–Material Order

Beyond its very existence and moral standing, Saaga was also challenged about its location in the city, its linguistic practices, and the affective registers circulating around it. Such criticisms highlight the symbolic–material dimensions of legitimacy, showing how worth is judged based not just on policies or services but also physical presence, communicative forms, and emotional positioning.

One prominent thread targeted Saaga's downtown location. Spatial markers like "the city center" or "former commercial buildings" were presented as being degraded by the migrant presence, with them portraying downtown Kouvola as becoming a "future ghetto" or "landfill". The critics positioned themselves as property owners or guardians of order: "It would be concerning if a big empty building was next door... property value drops if 'enrichment' moves in" [Suomiz4]. This was then intensified through irony and grotesque metaphors, such as in a quip that the old Chinatown "could hold Somalis by the clan". Arguments drew on the topoi of invasion, ownership, and burden, thus casting Saaga as an illegitimate use of civic space. Municipal rhetoric about "safe spaces" and "everyone's Kouvola" was also inverted and reframed as privilege.

A second logic centered on language and intellectual worth. Migrants associated with Saaga were labelled with pejoratives like "layabouts" (*gutaleet*) and "skill-less migrants" (*taidottomat mamut*). They were portrayed as being incapable of making meaningful contribution, with misspellings, "scribbling", and "simplified Finnish" (*selkokieli*) being mocked as symbols of incompetence: "All these nonsense projects where someone writes 'Finland' wrong and it's counted as art...what's the point?!" [Hommaforum]. Critics positioned themselves as the guardians of standards or taxpayers demanding value for their money, with ridicule and derisive humor intensifying the debate. Arguments invoked the topoi of competence ("those who cannot master Finnish should not be supported"), utility ("interpreters at night are wasteful"), and fairness ("our own unemployed youth get less support").

A third logic used affective hierarchies to challenge legitimacy. Migrants were framed as being undeserving of empathy, while native Finns were positioned as neglected victims. Sarcasm mimicked the official compassion in order to invert it:

“Finnish women cry, uneducated migrants dance... taxpayers pay” [Hommaforum]. The perceived imbalance was therefore dramatized by contrasting emotional indulgence on one side with deprivation on the other. Arguments drew on the topoi of justice (unequal distribution), threat (imbalanced compassion undermining cohesion), and composure (rationality being the marker of deservingness). Intensification occurred by using parody and epithets to reinforce exclusion: “There will be cries of racism again if some chocolate-eyed avant-gardist misses out on a grant” [Hommaforum]. Municipal and media reports of Saaga’s events were sarcastically presented as evidence of indulgence or naïveté.

Discussion

The above analysis demonstrates how Saaga, as a municipal multicultural center, became a condensation symbol through which broader anxieties about immigration, cohesion, and governance were expressed. The findings resonate with prior research that has shown how organizational existence is discursively precarious, so it needs to be continually negotiated in public arenas (Brown, 1994; Clegg et al., 2007; Drori & Honig, 2013; Golant & Sillince, 2007).

Ontological instability was evident in the way in which online users framed Saaga as fictive, decadent, or globally naïve. Legitimacy was also undermined by semantically mocking the center’s name and purpose. Narratives of civic decline were also interdiscursively linked with national debates about immigration, cohesion, and degeneration (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Global–local comparisons were deployed to portray Kouvolaa’s policies as naïve, with Switzerland, Canada, or Japan being invoked as “healthy” contrasts (Clegg et al., 2007; Drori & Honig, 2013). The strategies of ironic nomination, parodic predication, nostalgic perspectivization, and interdiscursive comparison thereby converged to destabilize Saaga’s ontological grounding and symbolically exclude it from being recognized as a credible civic actor.

The findings extend the research on discursive legitimization strategies. Prior studies have identified authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis as central mechanisms (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Van Leeuwen

& Wodak, 1999). In vernacular publics, however, moral evaluation and rationalization were the most prominent mechanisms. Critics appealed to senses of fairness, justice, and fiscal responsibility (Fortier, 2010; Lamont & Molnár, 2002), often positioning themselves as taxpayers or guardians of order, while economic rationalizations were used to frame multicultural initiatives as wasteful or parasitic. Authorization and mythopoesis, normally frequent in elite discourse, were largely absent.

The second cluster emphasized moral economy, with Saaga being depicted as corrupt, undeserving, or fiscally parasitic. This resonates with studies showing how accusations of collusion and moral contamination undo legitimacy without any overt ethnic rejection (Douglas, 1966; Lamont, 2002; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Vernacular critiques also echoed the trope of the “integration business” (*kotouttamisbisnes*), linking local disputes to broader discourses of deservingness (Faist, 2013; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Economic critiques reframed Saaga as a “spending machine”, in line with prior work showing how financial rationalizations serve as neutral-seeming justifications for exclusion (Clegg et al., 2007; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Drori & Honig, 2013; Elsbach, 1994; Motion & Leitch, 2009). These mechanisms challenged legitimacy through fairness and fiscal discipline, redirecting sympathy away from migrants toward “real” Finns.

The third cluster concerned the symbolic-material order. Saaga’s downtown location was presented as a civic intrusion, echoing previous findings about how geography mediates exclusion (Clegg et al., 2007; Cresswell, 1996; Wimmer, 2008). Its linguistic and intellectual worth was also questioned by mocking migrants’ simplified Finnish or artistic expressions, confirming how symbolic reductions undermine credibility (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Karhunen et al., 2018). Affective hierarchies further positioned migrants as undeserving of sympathy and Finns as neglected victims, in line with research showing how ridicule and emotional registers regulate legitimacy (Ahmed, 2014; Symon, 2005; Vaara, 2014). Indeed, emotional registers like resentment, sarcasm, and ridicule (Ahmed, 2014; Fortier, 2010) were not incidental but rather central to defining boundaries around undeserving migrants, corrupt elites, and betrayed taxpayers. Legitimacy was therefore challenged through Saaga’s locations,

communicative forms, and affective positioning, revealing how themes of space, language, and emotion converge for symbolic delegitimation.

The DHA framework helps explain how these boundaries were established through language. Nomination and predication labelled Saaga as fictive and corrupt, while argumentation invoked the topoi of burden and fairness. Perspectivization used irony and sarcasm to express stance, while ridicule and grotesque metaphors intensified affect. Boundaries were not abstract categories but rather discursive accomplishments, being drawn, reinforced, and contested through linguistic choices. This underlines the social materiality of discourse, with names, slogans, spaces, and even misspellings becoming tokens in legitimacy contests (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2023), thus demonstrating how symbolic resources acquire political weight in vernacular publics.

The findings also bring the multiculturalism debate into focus. Organizations like Saaga realize multicultural policy in everyday life, thus becoming condensation symbols for the multicultural ideology. Vernacular publics, however, reframe such initiatives as fictional, corrupt, or intrusive. Rather than rejecting diversity outright, critics mobilize concepts of fairness, efficiency, and common sense to re-signify multiculturalism as parasitic or misplaced. Thus, multiculturalism is not debated in abstract policy terms but rather through everyday notions of fairness, spatial propriety, linguistic competence, and affective worth. A neutral integration program then becomes a question of who deserves space, resources, and empathy. This mirrors Nordic and European research showing how multiculturalism is presented as a threat to cohesion and welfare solidarity (Faist, 2013; Keskinen et al., 2019; Tuori, 2007). By showing how multiculturalism is discursively contested through organizational symbols, this study highlights how legitimacy efforts go beyond political elites into everyday publics.

Conclusions

This study revealed how the legitimacy and identity of Saaga, a municipally funded multicultural center in Kouvola, Finland, were contested in vernacular

publics. Through a discourse–historical analysis of forum discussions, media reports, and municipal policy documents, it identified nine boundary-making logics regulating legitimacy across ontological, moral, and symbolic–material dimensions. Rather than being evaluated simply as a service provider, Saaga was recast as fictive, corrupt, parasitic, or misplaced, demonstrating how legitimacy can be undone in everyday discourse.

Theoretically, this study advances legitimacy research by introducing a framework that captures how publics rearticulate evaluative criteria across authenticity, fairness, spatial propriety, temporal nostalgia, economic rationality, and cultural deservingness. In doing so, it extends prior accounts of legitimation (Drori & Honig, 2013; Suchman, 1995; Vaara & Tienari, 2008) by demonstrating how vernacular publics, rather than just elites, discursively redraw organizational boundaries. It also highlights how affective hierarchies like resentment, sarcasm, and ridicule serve as mechanisms for civic sorting, thereby extending affect theory (Ahmed, 2014; Fortier, 2010) to the study of organizational legitimacy.

The analysis also shows how civic organizations can become condensation symbols for wider ideological struggles in multiculturalism debates. Saaga was used to express anxieties about fairness, belonging, civic decline, and national identity. These were framed within everyday criteria of fairness, spatial propriety, linguistic competence, and affective worth, showing that support for multicultural inclusion is not determined just by policies or programs alone—it is also mediated by rhetorical and affective strategies in public arenas. In this sense, this study contributes to multiculturalism research by showing how civic organizations become key sites for condensing and contesting cultural ideologies.

Methodologically, the study applies the discourse–historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2001) to irony-rich online forums where anonymity facilitates parody, semantic destabilization, and intertextual inversion. This demonstrates the approach's value for analyzing dispersed publics and connecting organizational legitimacy studies with cultural discourse analysis in digital contexts (Barros, 2014; Glozer et al., 2019).

The findings have implications for municipalities, civic organizations, and policymakers. For municipalities, legitimacy cannot be assumed to follow from

endorsements or branding. Indeed, projects perceived as “project culture” or fiscally wasteful can be easily contested, making transparent communication about funding, siting, and programming essential. For civic organizations, language politics are central: Symbolic slogans are vulnerable to ridicule, so legitimacy depends on adapting communication to how publics revoice discourse and demonstrating reciprocity by emphasizing benefits for both migrant and host communities. At the policy level, legitimacy should be viewed as an ongoing accomplishment rather than a given. Integration strategies should therefore foster dialogue with publics and use participatory forums to address grievances, diffuse polarized emotions, and reinforce civic belonging.

This study is not without limitations, however. It was restricted to publicly available online data, thus ignoring the participants’ underlying intentions and offline interactions. The translation from Finnish to English may have also affected stylistic nuance despite efforts to retain key terms. The single-case design also prioritized depth and contextual fit, with any transferability resting on theorized mechanisms rather than local specificity.

It is important to note that the analyzed material predominantly reflected critical or ironic voices. Supportive or affirming comments appeared only sporadically, and their relative absence partly results from the choice of Finnish-language forums, which tend to attract native-speaker publics already integrated into local life. Including English-language discussions or migrant-authored narratives could have introduced more balanced perspectives. This asymmetry, however, is itself analytically meaningful, revealing how delegitimation dominates vernacular arenas.

Future research could explore whether more supportive publics counter or reframe delegitimation logics, how online and offline discourses interact in shaping legitimacy, and whether similar dynamics occur in less welfare-oriented contexts. By focusing on vernacular publics, this study positions organizational legitimacy within broader cultural debates about migration, multiculturalism, and civic belonging, thus offering a transferable framework for analyzing contested multicultural institutions in post-industrial societies.

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