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Your everyday hero: media representations of civic safety engagements

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how civil society-based safety engagements are represented in Swedish news media, and how these representations are mediated through emotions. In a political climate where "increased safety" has become a dominant goal, we analyze how media narratives construct emotional regimes around safety and responsibility. Drawing on Stuart Halls work on representation and theories of emotions, we show how news media not only reflect but help (re)produce emotional and spatial geographies of (un)safety through personalized storytelling and emotive language. Focusing on personal portrayals of grassroots safety initiatives, such as women-led taxi services and local volunteer efforts, we demonstrate how emotions such as fear and frustration are articulated as morally productive and politically legitimate responses to unsafety. These narratives represent engagement as a matter of individual initiative and personal responsibility, often along gendered and racialized lines. Women are depicted as self-governing subjects whose emotional investments justify their civic actions, aligning with neoliberal ideals of responsibilized citizenship. Media participates in an emotional politics that valorizes agency and affective community while depoliticizing broader issues of inequality and exclusion. These representations risk obscuring the structural causes of unsafety by recasting safety as a matter of personal duty rather than collective or institutional responsibility.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, a powerful discourse on safety in public space has emerged in Sweden (Sahlin Lilja, 2024; Brandén, 2022; Hermansson, 2018). While there has been a decline in youth-related crime since the 1990s (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024), gun-related crime and violence have escalated during the last decade, with perpetrators becoming increasingly younger (Brå, 2024, 2025). Concurrently, national and international news media have increasingly portrayed Sweden marked by rising unsafety and fear of crime, particularly among women (Hall and Levinsson, 2024), frequently citing escalating rates of shootings and violent crime (DN, 2023; BBC, 2023). Within this context the imperative to counteract feelings of unsafety has become a central and uncontested political objective in Sweden, put forward as good for everyone (Brandén, 2022; Sahlin Lilja, 2024). However, political measures targeting unsafety often involve enhanced monitoring and control over public space, disproportionately affecting and excluding certain - often racialized and marginalized - groups, identified as disturbing normative ideas of social order (Brandén, 2022). Contemporary political debate and media reports have at the same time become increasingly polarized, focusing on specific suburban areas problematized as breeding grounds for criminal or "antisocial" behavior among youth (Dahlstedt, 2019), and representing gang violence and immigration as principal threats to public safety (Shahrad, 2024; Sager and Mulinari, 2018). However, civil society organizations and actors have counteracted and questioned these problem-oriented and stereotyped representations of certain suburbs in Sweden (Sjöberg and Kings, 2022).

In Sweden, the notion of (un)safety "trygghet" has historically been linked to social and structural wellbeing in a broader sense, often in relation to the welfare state (Olsson and Rönnblom, 2020). However, previous research has highlighted how the meaning of (un)safety in Sweden has become narrower and more individualistic, now primarily connected to fear of crime (Brandén, 2022). The Swedish welfare state has also undergone a substantial transformation through which ideals of universal welfare and equality have largely been suppressed by neoliberal ideals of individualism, competition and profit (Larsson et al., 2012; Suhonen et al., 2021). This process has included massive cutbacks and privatizations of welfare services, growing inequality (Suhonen et al., 2021), segregation (Delmos, 2021), and an increased civic responsibility for issues of welfare and safety. This shifting responsibility is illustrated

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already in Sweden's first crime prevention program entitled "Our collective responsibility", emphasizing the importance of encouraging citizens and communities to engage in local safety work (Swedish Ministry of Justice, 1996). Considering these welfare state changes and recent developments of increased gun-related violence (Brå, 2024), segregation and polarization, we argue that civil society's engagement for safety plays a particularly significant role, often highlighting dimensions that public politics fail to address.

In this paper we are interested in exploring how different forms of civil society-based engagements for safety are represented in contemporary Swedish news media and how these representations are mediated through emotions. Given the media's reliance on emotional storytelling to capture public attention, such representations offer valuable insight into the cultural values and political ideologies that underpin societal understandings of (un)safety (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Media plays a significant role in shaping the public's emotions of unsafety as well as societal discourses on fear of crime (Hall, 2013). As Hall (2013) argues, media does not merely report events but contribute to the social construction of those events by selecting, framing, and amplifying certain issues while marginalizing others. In this way we consider the media as part of (re)producing power structures and ideologies connected to safety. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 1) suggests, through the use of emotional narratives, news media plays a critical role in shaping collective emotional responses - emotional regimes. Emotional narratives, we argue, are central to media logics: they structure how stories are told, whose experiences are foregrounded, and which responses are deemed appropriate. Consequently, media does not only shape feelings of fear and insecurity but also contributes to define who is positioned as responsible for managing unsafety and fear of crime.

We approach media representations of civic safety engagements as connected to wider societal developments and a growing social and political emphasis on safety that is part of what Stuart Hall (2013) has called a historical conjuncture, that is partly shaped by media. This means that, in the context of media, we consider safety to have become a focal point of cultural concern and debate in Sweden. In line with Halls perspective, our analysis will thereby consider the narratives of the news articles collectively as part of a broader moment of a hegemonic focus on (un)safety, which has surfaced in news media as well as in political discourse and social movements, in particular civic-based engagements.

Against this backdrop, our aim in this paper is to analyze how civil society-based engagements for safety are discursively represented in Swedish news media. The analysis will particularly focus on articulations of safety through emotional narratives and the gendered and racialized dimensions of safety that are (re)produced through those articulations.

2. Previous research

Research on fear, safety, and media highlights how emotional geographies are shaped not only by actual crime events but also by mediated narratives that influence how people perceive space, difference, and belonging. As England and Simon (2010) argue, geographies of fear are socially and spatially produced through lived experiences and imaginaries, with media playing a central role in shaping these perceptions.

In the Swedish context, safety has become a central political concern, increasingly articulated through emotional appeals (Sahlin Lilja, 2024). At the municipal level, Brandén (2022) shows how diverse social problems, such as homelessness and segregation, are portrayed as "unsafety problems," become detached from structural issues and constructed as individual or community failures. Parallel to this, Hermansson (2022) demonstrates how criminal policy discourse invests in collective feelings of unsafety, while Sjöberg and Giritli Nygren (2021) show how urban safety governance increasingly manages feelings of fear through spatial ordering and the removal of perceived "disorders" from the cityscape.

Media representations are a key arena for these articulations. Research shows how media both reflect and reproduce perceptions of crime and unsafety (Hall, 2013; Sandstig, 2010). Studies underline how news coverage often amplifies fear, particularly among women and marginalized groups (Hollis et al., 2017; Rosenberger et al., 2023), while associating danger with suburban or racialized spaces (Heber, 2011; Dahlstedt, 2019; Backvall, 2019; Sandberg, 2020). This produces symbolic boundaries between safe and unsafe areas and contributes to racialized and gendered discourses of exclusion. Rosenberger et al. (2023) and Hollis et al. (2017) underline how mediated fear is shaped by race and gender.

Several studies also show how media discourses construct civic and institutional responses to unsafety. Uhnoo and Hansen Löfstrand (2018) highlight how volunteer safety initiatives are depicted as positive complements to the police, thereby normalizing citizen-led surveillance. Schlarek Mulinari (2017), by contrast, shows how journalists sometimes contest dominant crime narratives in Malmö, revealing tensions within media practices and their role in shaping public discourse. Malmö is Sweden's third largest city and one of the most ethnically diverse urban areas in Scandinavia. Shahrad (2024) illustrates how Malmö is discursively divided into desirable and dangerous neighborhoods, a dynamic echoed by Schwarze (2022) in Chicago. Stjernborg, Tesfahuney and Wretstrand (2015) further show how the politics of fear shape mobility discourses in Malmö, while Sjöberg, Berglez and Gambarato (2023) examine police attempts to counter negative imaginaries via social media. Together, these studies point to how safety is articulated at the intersection of media, space, and emotion, and how media become actors in governing discourses of safety.

Taken together, this research highlights how media discourses contribute to the construction of emotional and spatial understandings of, and responses to (un)safety, often through gendered and racialized articulations. In other words, it illustrates how media and policy discourses on crime centers individual and collective feelings of fear or unsafety where certain neighborhoods, particularly suburban or racialized areas, are constructed as inherently unsafe. Fear is disproportionately associated with women and marginalized groups, and unsafety is commonly linked to racialized communities. Our study contributes to this field by shifting attention from how media report crime to the ways in which civil society safety initiatives are represented discursively. Empirically, we focus on exploring how such initiatives are articulated through emotional narratives. The analysis shows how these narratives are linked to broader societal discourses of responsibility, belonging, and risk.

3. Media representation and emotions: theory and analytical approach

Through the concept of representation (Hall, 1997) we draw attention to how meaning is constructed and communicated in and through media narratives. We understand representation as a constitutive process involving the production of meaning through language. We consider representation as a site of struggle, where meanings are (re) negotiated and reflect broader social and political issues (ibid).

Our focus on safety here primarily refers to a feeling or emotion (Sager and Mulinari, 2018). Emotions, as a relational phenomenon, are constructed through collective action, with individuals acting together to develop shared emotional repertoires (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In this sense, we consider emotions as socio-cultural practices that are relational and closely intertwined with gendered and racialized power relations (Ahmed, 2014). Media plays a vital role in the formation and dissemination of shared emotional repertoires. News relies on *emotional narratives* to engage audiences, thus revealing insights into societal values and ideologies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Following Wahl-Jorgensen (2019), drawing on Massumi (2002) distinction between affect and emotions, affect is best understood as a physical feeling in the body, a response to something intense, but

without being consciously recognized or interpreted. On the other hand, emotion is a personal experience shaped by social and linguistic norms. It is when this intensity is recognized and labeled in a way that gives it meaning that it becomes identifiable. Thus, emotion is affect that is understood, named, and inserted into systems of meaning (Massumi, 2002: 28). In this way, emotions can be studied as a collective formation through their public naming and articulation (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 8).

We also draw on Sara Ahmed's theory of emotions (2014), which conceptualizes emotions as "a cultural and social practice" (2014: 9). According to Ahmed, emotions are productive in that they establish boundaries (2014: 10) and reinforce adherence to social norms (2014: 12). Our focus is thus not on the nature of emotions themselves, but on the effects they produce.

In our analysis of how media represents safety engagements, we focus on emotive language, emotional narratives, and how different representations of emotions construct different understandings of safety, with a certain focus on gendered and racialized processes. We demonstrate how media articles, and their emotional repertoires, together illuminate the specific forces working within the discourse of safety. We employ Hall's (1986) concept of *articulation* to examine the reciprocal construction of safety and emotions in news articles about civil society's engagements for safety and how the practice of articulation positions various signs in relation to one another. This enables us to make visible dominating representations of safety through emotions and highlight alternative and marginalized understandings. Articulation is helpful in analyzing the connections between different meanings, the attribution of new meanings to specific concepts, and the potential political and social ramifications of such reshaping of meaning.

4. Empirical material and the selection process

This study explores how civil society-based engagements for safety are discursively represented in Swedish news media. To capture the breadth and possible shifts in these representations, we selected a ten-year period (April 2014 to June 2024), allowing us to trace changes in discourse in relation to broader societal developments. We made a deliberate choice to include both national and local newspapers in our search. National papers often reflect broader political narratives, while local ones more often offer insight into everyday experiences and community-based initiatives. This combination allowed us to explore how safety engagement is represented across different contexts, and how emotional narratives are engaged both by broader debates and local concerns. We conducted a search in the digital archive *Retriever*, covering all national newspapers, local newspapers, and niche publications in Sweden. This inclusive approach aimed to capture a wide range of safety engagements, from established organizations to informal, community-based initiatives.

The initial search used broad keywords such as "increased safety AND civil society," "increased safety AND voluntary," and "increased safety AND neighborhood," yielding approximately 1800 articles. This distant reading phase (cf. Jänicke et al., 2017) involved briefly scanning the material to identify texts that focused on civil society. This initial scan narrowed down the number of articles to 379. We then split the 379 articles between the authors for closer reading of recurrent themes connected to representations of safety in emotionally meaningful ways. During our close reading, we all took notes separately and had regular meetings discussing recurrent themes. Through our discussions it became clear that personal portraits were a central media logic, that we decided to focus specifically on. Individuals, often women, were portrayed as emotionally driven actors responding to fear, frustration, or vulnerability. Furthermore, by comparing notes we became aware of certain words that were especially prominent and recurrent in many personal portraits. To ensure that we had captured as many personal portraits as possible within these themes, we conducted a follow-up search using the refined keywords such as "dedicated individual" (eldsjäl) and "girl taxi" (tjejtaxi). These terms helped identify six additional articles where safety engagement was narrated through personal experience and emotional storytelling.

In the end, we selected 33 articles for final analysis, 27 from local press, and 6 from national media (see Table 1). All texts were in Swedish, and selected excerpts were translated by the authors. This focused sample thus emerged through a phase of narrowing down the material, where the broader search and coding process helped situate these stories within a wider media landscape. A majority of the final 33 articles were published in local newspapers, which means that our data primarily offers insight into every-day, place-based perspectives on safety and civic engagement through personal portraits.

Methodologically, we draw inspiration from Braun and Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), which emphasize the researchers' active roles in interpreting data. The analytical process was guided by a thematic coding scheme developed in relation to our aim and research questions. Coding categories included, for example, triggering events, initiative descriptions, individual portrayals, definitions of safety, and spatial context. We considered spatial context in terms of how specific places were represented, emotionally charged, socially situated, and embedded within broader societal narratives. The coding process was particularly attentive to how emotions of fear and safety were represented in the material. In other words, we mapped specific text extracts focusing on emotional expressions connected to fear and safety. This approach allowed us to examine how media texts construct and circulate understandings of safety, and how emotional storytelling contributes to shaping both place imaginaries and civic roles and responsibilities. From our coding, the following themes were identified; 'Gender and emotions: when unsafety gets personal', 'Unsafe areas: collective engagement and counter-narratives' and 'Doing something: The good engagement and the responsible citizen'.

5. Analysis: representations of unsafety through emotional narratives

5.1. Gender and emotions: when unsafety gets personal

Through our distant reading of the material, the personal portrait emerged as a central media logic in the representation of civil society's engagement for safety in Swedish news media. The focus on personal experience within the portraits is noteworthy; in many cases, the story is driven by highlighting the individual's experience of feeling unsafe (cf. Hollis et al., 2017). For instance, Matilda articulates her involvement in a "girls' taxi" initiative and driving people home from a music festival by referencing her own experience of feeling unsafe: "I've also jogged home from the bus stop while talking to a friend on the phone, just hoping to get home safely" (Article 3).

Lisen is also involved in a "girls' taxi" initiative, offering rides to other girls and women returning home from nightclubs. Her engagement is described as originating from her own experience of being raped while returning home after a night out (Article 18). Similarly, Filippa began driving women home at night after being molested (Article 28) and Teresa's commitment to women's safety was catalyzed by her experience of being raped at a music festival (Article 25). These women's accounts are presented in the articles with considerable detail, often recounting the specific circumstances of the events. Their personal experiences of fear and vulnerability are explicitly represented as the driving force behind their engagement in promoting the safety of other women. As Neda explains:

> It all started one evening when I was on my way home and heard a report about a rape. I went from walking to suddenly realizing I had started running because I felt scared […] It was the police statement saying that we girls should avoid parks and not walk alone that pushed me to create this initiative out of pure frustration," she says. (Article 12)

Table 1
Empirical material: Selected news articles.

No.	Headline	Newspaper	Date
1.	Sofie skjutsar hem tjejer som inte vill åka taxi.	*Expressen* (National media)	November 3, 2016
2.	Rebecca, 25, skjutsar hem tjejer gratis.	*Expressen* (National media)	December 16, 2016
3.	Matilda kör tjejtaxi på Yran.	*Västerbottens Kuriren* (Local media)	June 3, 2022
4.	Initiativ vill öka kvinnors trygghet i Borås mörker.	*Borås Tidning* (Local media)	October 4, 2021
5.	Jenny från Uppsala blev årets nattvandrare.	*Upsala Nya Tidning* (Local media)	April 30, 2022
6.	Skjutningarna kommer definitivt att öka.	*Svenska Dagbladet* (National media)	February 5, 2022
7.	Vi behöver ett systemskifte.	*Expo* (National media)	September 24, 2020
8.	Kävlingebo är landets mesta nattvandrare.	*Lokaltidningen Kävlinge* (Local media)	June 13, 2020
9.	Bjuvsbo får det första nattvandrarpriset.	*Helsingborgs Dagblad* (Local media)	April 4, 2018
10.	Stor oro efter bilbränderna - men också ny gemenskap i Södra Ryd: "På något sätt har vi kommit närmare varandra".	*Enköpings Tidning* (Local media)	May 13, 2020
11.	Hon lär tjejerna rätt sätt att slå sig fria.	*Upsala Nya Tidning* (Local media)	November 3, 2019
12.	Efter våldtäkterna i Uppsala: 17 000 boende går ihop Neda Ameli tröttnade på att vara rädd – startade Uppsala Gäris.	*Upsala Nya tidning* (Local media)	August 24, 2019
13.	Halil och Klody vill öka tryggheten.	*Hem & Hyra* (National media)	September 20, 2021
14.	Brobygget: "Vi måste ta tillbaka vår stadsdel".	*Eskilstuna Kuriren* (Local media)	November 23, 2021
15.	Umeåbo agerar: Ska hjälpa tjejer att ta sig hem tryggt från Yran.	*Västerbottens Kuriren* (Local media)	May 21, 2024
16.	Nattvandraren Annelie, 45, slår larm om ökad oro i Tynnered,	*GT Västsveriges kvällstidning* (Local media)	March 12, 2018
17.	Han offrade händer och jobb för nattvandringen.	*Eskilstuna Kuriren* (Local media)	November 22, 2023
18.	Nattskiftets uppgift: skapa ökad trygghet.	*Norran* (Local media)	March 1, 2017
19.	Det handlar om framtidstro och klyftorna i Göteborg.	*ETC Göteborg* (Local media)	June 5, 2017
20.	Ökat intresse för att nattvandra.	*Mitt i* (Local media)	May 14, 2022
21.	Lajvandet ska bli tryggare.	*Göteborgs Fria* (Local media)	June 10, 2016
22.	En natt i Bollnäs - vi tar rygg på nattvandrarna.	*Ljusnan (*Local media)	December 16, 2022
23.	Larmapp ska ge ökad trygghet.	*Helsingborgs Dagblad* (Local media)	October 16, 2017
24.	Ett tryggare grannskap - tack vare epa-förare.	*Eskilstuna Kuriren* (Local media)	June 28, 2021
25.	Teresa har tröttnat på övergreppen.	*Kvällsposten* (National media)	July 4, 2016
26.	Kämpar för säkrare barnidrott.	*ETC Göteborg* (Local media)	June 18, 2021
27.	Gunnar öppnar sitt hem för unga med trasig tillvaro.	*Eskilstuna Kuriren* (Local media)	December 14, 2021
28.	Hon skjutsar hem ensamma kvinnor på kvällen.	*Aftonbladet.* (Local media)	September 20, 2019
29.	Inget kommunalt stöd till Oscars trygghetsinitiativ.	*Skaraborgs Läns Tidning* (Local media)	January 22, 2020
30.	Hon startade trygghetschatt efter våldtäkterna.	*Sveriges Radio Malmö* (Local media)	January 13, 2018
31.	Ica-chefen rånad dagen efter trygghetsinitiativ i Mellringe: Signal om att det är tid för handling.	*Nerikes Allehanda* (Local media)	December 3, 2020
32.	Nattfotbollen i Skäggetorp kan vinna 175 000.	*Östgöta Korrespondenten.* (Local media)	August 29, 2017
33.	Nytt initiativ ska stärka säkerheten i Hedemora: "Vi vill bidra till ett tryggare samhälle".	*Dala-Demokraten* (Local media)	April 16, 2018

The articulations of safety engagements are structured through an emotional repertoire (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) centered on feelings of fear, vulnerability and unsafety, often culminating in frustration. When the experience of unsafety becomes emotionally proximate, it is described as a catalyst for action, a dynamic that reflects how fear of crime is mobilized as a political and moral project in Sweden (Sahlin Lilja, 2024; Brandén, 2022; see also Hermansson, 2022). However, this emotional proximity is not solely described as rooted in one's own direct experience, it was also linked to incidents affecting someone close. For instance, Sofie explains that many of her friends have been sexually assaulted while taking taxis, which motivated her to start driving women home.

> They've been groped, had a hand placed on their thigh, or received inappropriate comments. I've personally hated it and felt afraid of what might happen. Sofie felt she wanted to help more people than just her friends. (Article 1).

Similarly, Rebecka, who also engages in driving other women home at night, is described as:

> … tired of the fact that women feel unsafe when heading home at night. She had read numerous stories about women being assaulted and wanted to do something herself. So, in a local Facebook group, she posted a message offering free rides home to women living in Nyköping. (Article 2).

The origin of Emilie's commitment to promoting safety, through organizing power walks with women, is similarly framed:

> It was last autumn that Emelie Rosengren noticed how she and many of her friends increasingly talked about feeling unsafe going out to exercise as the evenings grew darker. "It's absolutely crazy that it has to be this way. And it's a terrible development if more people are experiencing the same thing," she says. (Article 4)

The feelings of fear and unsafety are in this manner portrayed as initiating the engagement, and the frustration that "It's absolutely crazy that it has to be this way" (Article 4), is a shared emotional repertoire (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) in these articles. The proximity of unsafety is also linked to being a witness to incidents. In the story about Klody and her engagement for safety in Botkyrka, a suburb to Stockholm, her experience of seeing a girl being offended at the subway is described as that one time when unsafety *came too close* (Article 13). The start of Emma's engagement in walking girls' home after a festival was presented in a similar manner:

> I was at [a festival] when I was 19, and on the way home from the festival, my friends and I found a girl crying alone outside the festival grounds. She was very drunk, didn't know where she was, and had been left behind by her friends. We helped her onto the bus and then to her hotel. (Article 15)

Witnessing an event that "could have been", a near-miss or potential threat, is also depicted as a pivotal moment, marking the point at which the protagonist chooses to act. This is a recurring theme in representations of women's safety engagements. Media portrayals of women-led safety initiatives consistently anchor the narrative in personal experiences of fear and unsafety, whether as direct victims or as witnesses to abuse or harassment. These representations tie the notion of being a responsible woman to the capacity to regulate one's emotions and to translate affective responses into actions that serve the safety and well-being of other women (cf. Moran and Skeggs, 2014).

Women's engagements are represented as emotionally driven projects. Through the articulation of an emotional regime characterized by terms such as "frustration" (Article 12), "disgust" (Article 1), "fear" (Article 1), "scary" (Article 4), "unsafe" (Article 4), and "tiredness" (Article 2), often articulated alongside a key turning point, the moment when the protagonist has "had enough", the initiatives are depicted as affective responses. This illustrates a context where emotions are not

only expressed but channeled in a purposeful and socially productive manner (Ahmed, 2014).

Emotions such as fear and frustration, often portrayed as deeply personal, can also be understood as politically significant. Ahmed (2011) argues that anger and discomfort can possess productive and creative forces. In the media narratives analyzed here, the emotions expressed by women; fear, frustration, and unsafety are not only triggers for engagement but also mobilizing forces that contribute to the collective well-being and safety of other women. At the same time, the women portrayed are positioned as "good, responsible, self-governing" citizen-subject (Moran and Skeggs, 2014: 12), taking individual responsibility for managing their own and others safety. In this sense, emotions are not only politically productive but also operate within neoliberal logics of individualization and responsibilization.

5.2. Unsafe areas: collective engagement and counter-narratives

The media portraits further highlight a perceived decline in local safety also stigmatizing areas as unsafe, motivating more collective and community-based engagement. A central theme regards the emphasized need for more adults in public spaces. This concern is portrayed through a temporal discourse of decline: "This affects everyone. Even if you are not affected today, you may well be in 10 years, if these developments continue" (Article 17), and "That's the general feeling, that society has become more unsafe" (Article 33). Similarly, the headline concerning a neighborhood in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city: "Increased unsafety: The night walkers in Tynnered started after people expressed a perceived increase in unsafety" (Article 16) illustrates how feelings of unsafety are depicted as widespread and escalating (cf. Dahlstedt, 2019; Backvall, 2019), prompting collective initiatives aimed at reclaiming public space.

The representations convey emotions such as frustration and concern about perceived changes in local communities, described as having become unsafe and increasingly unfamiliar to residents. For example, a night-patrolling parent in Bollnäs, a small town in middle Sweden, states that "Bollnäs is still a good place, but I feel that something has happened in recent years. It has become rowdier" (Article 22). Similar to the narratives surrounding women's safety initiatives, these community engagements are represented as emotionally driven, motivated by fear and worry. This is also present in statements from the same group of parents, who remark: "It has gone so far that we are afraid of our own children" (Article 22). Likewise, Annelie, who initiated a local night patrol, describes those recent developments to "raise the alarm about increased worry," stating, "I worry for my children," and expressing an "increased feeling of unsafety" in her neighborhood (Article 16). The articulations of safety engagement are here structured through an emotional repertoire (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) centered on temporal perceptions of increased feelings of unsafety, unfamiliarity, and worry.

Media discourses around fear also reinforce symbolic boundaries and spatial imaginaries of danger (Stjernborg et al., 2015). In the media articles, expressions of pride, solidarity and collective responsibility are represented as closely linked to emotions of (un)safety and the re-negotiation of neighborhood identity. These representations are primarily tied to socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods where safety initiatives are depicted as community-driven movements. Many of these neighborhoods are also classified by the Swedish police as "vulnerable areas" facing social challenges and elevated crime, which is often put forward in the media articles. In Swedish media and political discourse so called "vulnerable areas" are frequently connected to problems of segregation and integration and stigmatized as "risky" and unsafe. They are also often portrayed as disconnected from mainstream society and problematized as threats to social cohesion (Dahlstedt, 2019). To emphasize the structural conditions in these areas often including poverty, exclusion, and limited access to welfare services, we instead use the term *socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.*

One example of collective engagement in such an area regards the organization "Building Bridges" described as "working to create community and work for increased safety in one of the country's most vulnerable residential areas", stating that: "People here are scared into silence. But we work to ensure that no one feels alone. Together we create safety and take back our neighborhood" (Article 14). Safety initiatives are in this way articulated not only as responses to unsafety but also as efforts to improve everyday life through acts of collective care and involvement. This resonates with Sjöberg et al. (2023), demonstrating how media and policing strategies in Malmö, Sweden's third largest city, aim to build a sense of safety and reshape place identity. Safety is constructed as a shared project, emphasizing mutual responsibility. For instance, in Järva, a suburb of Stockholm, residents express a strong sense of solidarity in the face of growing unsafety in another previously consider safe suburb, Skarpnäck:

> Järva residents recognize themselves in what Skarpnäck is now experiencing and people have said 'We need to show our solidarity with Skarpnäck' and the reports continues "People from two neighborhoods will meet for a common cause (Article 20).

Similarly, in Södra Ryd, a district in a small town in southern Sweden, a series of arson incidents was described to have sparked alarm and increased community involvement. As reported in the media: "The recent spate of car fires in Södra Ryd has caused a lot of concern, where hundreds are now out on night walks to increase safety" (Article 10). In this context, media emphasizes how collective emotions, particularly fear and frustration, are transformed into community action, with residents mobilizing to reclaim public space and restore a sense of safety. This emotional investment in the local environment is further illustrated by statements like: "Somehow the turmoil's have become something that unites" (Article 10). Similarly, in the article about the organization "Building Bridges", powerlessness and desperation is tied to emotional solidarity and collective agency:

> I love this neighborhood. But many powerless, desperate parents now live here. It is so important that all of us adults work together to show that this is our country, our city, our neighborhood. The criminals should not be allowed to take over. We must not meet violent crimes with silence but take our streets back (Article 14).

The portraits convey a strong sense of community through collective articulations like "we struggle" (Article 10) and "this concerns everyone" (Article 19), alongside calls for "The ordinary citizens must reclaim the streets" (Article 16), and "The criminals should not be allowed to take over" (Article 14). These expressions construct a narrative of a unified 'we', the engaged responsible citizens, positioned in opposition to 'them', the criminals. This dichotomy not only distinguishes the community from perceived sources of threat, but also symbolically separates residents from the broader problem of unsafety. As Dahlstedt (2019; see also Backvall, 2019; Sandberg, 2020) argues, such media representations are part of a wider discourse in which the urban periphery is depicted as a space of exclusion, outside the norms of mainstream society and in need of intervention.

At the same time, the emotional narratives portrayed in the analyzed material contain frustration, hope, and belonging, thus offering an alternative story, focusing on resistance and solidarity. The portrayals in that sense contribute to re-negotiating place identity, presenting a counter-narrative to the broader public discourse associating these areas with threats and unsafety (cf. Rosenberger et al., 2023). At the same time, safety is articulated in the articles as an individual responsibility, rather than being situated within broader structural or societal power relations. As one article states: "In Botkyrka everyone is encouraged to take responsibility in their everyday lives and contribute to safety" (Article 13). Such representations risk contributing to de-politicizing unsafety, by articulating it as a local problem to be solved through individual and community efforts rather than through political change.

The perceived separation of these socioeconomically disadvantaged areas from the rest of Swedish society is in our material frequently

articulated as the root cause of their unsafety. Calls for unity and integration, such as those responding to "the social divides in Gothenburg" (Article 19) suggest that fear is not only directed at crime, but also at the imagined racialized otherness of these neighbourhoods. As Ahmed (2014) argues, fear is not a neutral response to threat; it is shaped by existing social discourses and works to position some bodies as dangerous and others as vulnerable. This dynamic is visible in in descriptions of areas like Södra Ryd as "having a reputation as unsafe" that "cannot be washed away" (Article 10), representing the idea of danger as a fixed attribute tied to place. This aligns with Hubbard's (2005) analysis of how spatial imaginaries are used to accommodate otherness at a distance where fear of the racialized or marginalized other becomes attached to specific locations, legitimizing exclusion and reinforcing privilege.

5.3. Doing something: the good engagement and the responsible citizen

The portraits foreground the individual behind the initiative, the person who acts, assumes responsibility, and engages in the name of safety. Embedded within this representation is an ideal of what we conceptualize as, *the responsible citizen:* a self-governing subject who takes responsibility for both personal and collective safety, addressing broader societal issues like sexual abuse, poverty and segregation. These media narratives emphasize the importance of action, often articulated through statements such as: "For me, this seemed like a good way to raise the issue of unsafety, but also to do something about it" (Article 4), and "If I can help someone get home safely, I'd rather drive than just sit at home" (Article 3). Here, the act of 'doing something' becomes synonymous with taking responsibility for safety, both personal and collective.

The theme of personal sacrifice recurs throughout our material. The construction of the responsible citizen is sustained through emotional narratives of passionate individuals making sacrifices for the greater good. These narratives do not simply celebrate civic action but also emphasize the moral value of responsibility, reinforcing an ideal of the engaged, caring, and committed citizen:

> Sofia drives every Friday and Saturday night, between nine and five. She works full-time on weekdays and tries to catch up on sleep during the holidays. When they tell me about how they were grabbed by taxi drivers, it makes me really sad, but it also makes me want to drive even more (Article 1).

Emotions are articulated as key motivators for engagement, reinforcing the image of the responsible and self-sacrificing citizen. Sofia's emotional response is portrayed as driving her commitment; she sacrifices sleep to drive girls' home and listening to their stories makes her "really sad". Similarly, Neda, who devotes all her free time to the safety of women and girls, is quoted as saying:

> The last two weeks I've only slept about five hours a night because it's been so much work, but it's definitely worth it when I see everything we've created. (Article 12)

Despite the physical and emotional toll described, individuals frequently emphasize that their sacrifices are worthwhile given the outcomes of their engagement. Filippa (Article 28), is portrayed as fully committed, remaining on call 24/7 to support other women. Similarly, the story of Abdikadir Ali illustrates this dynamic: he is reported to have suffered frostbite, losing the use of both hands and his job as a result of night patrolling his neighborhood. Yet, his efforts are depicted as meaningful and necessary because they allow him to "save our children. Help our youth" (Article 17). Such narratives underline how emotional and physical sacrifice is articulated as essential elements of meaningful safety engagement.

These representations create a sense of urgency, portraying a crisis that demands immediate response from ordinary individuals rather than political leaders or institutions. This reflects a media logic that constructs decisive individual and community action as leading to positive change. It further reinforces a moral binary between those who act, the responsible, engaged citizens, and those who do not, that are framed as passive or criminal. Action is thereby articulated as a marker of moral and civic worth (cf. Sjöberg and Giritli Nygren, 2021).

The media representations can be read as emotional narratives, designed to elicit affective responses from readers. As such, they offer valuable insight into the gendered and racialized societal values and ideological frameworks that both shape and are shaped by discourses on (un)safety (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Following the portraits of responsible citizens is the surrounding society's reaction to their safety initiatives, which is predominantly depicted as positive. Individual engagement is articulated as giving rise to feelings of agency among the active citizens but also as evoking emotional responses from those around them. Positive media attention frequently accompanies stories of civic engagement, particularly night patrol activities. Jenny is named "Night Patroller of the Year" for being "so committed and a passionate role model" (Article 5), while Camilla is described as a central driving force and awarded for her dedication to developing night patrols that provide safety and support for local children and youth (Article 8). The term *eldsjäl*, a Swedish expression denoting a passionate and tireless community actor, appears frequently, emphasizing civic commitment as both a practical and emotional investment, signifying care and responsibility for others.

As reported in Sofie's case of driving girls home, "the response she received was overwhelming - so many girls have contacted her" (Article 1) or in Emma's case, where it is explained how she announced on Facebook that she wanted to help girls home from a music festival: "The post received a great response and within a couple of hours several people had expressed interest in helping" (Article 15). Neda, who initiated an initiative to help girls and women home safety, says in her media portrait that: "Many express their joy in having a forum where they can reach out to other girls in the city" (Article 12). The centrality of these positive reactions in the media, we argue, serves as validation for the engagement, suggesting that civic safety initiatives fulfill a crucial societal need, reinforcing the image of *the responsible citizen* as an engaged citizen.

The response to safety initiatives is often described as overwhelming and also surprising, something bigger than the initiators could have imagined. The overwhelming nature of the public's feedback is illustrated in the narrative about Filippa (Article 28), who started a closed group on Facebook arranging girls' taxi. While she only expected a couple of hundred members, the group today has nearly 2000 followers. The reader is provided with an image of the project, Filippa's personal engagement, but also other people's willingness to engage in her initiative. The will of others to engage serves as an indication of success. This is also visible in the case of night patrolling for solidarity, after the murder of Swedish rapper Einar, where it is stated that: "Every day we receive calls of interest from people who want to join" (Article 20). Similarly, Oscar's initiative, despite lacking municipal support, is validated by the interest from various community members (Article 29). These examples highlight the initiatives' necessity and value through public engagement.

Societal recognition thus contributes to the construction of a collective sense of community, of a shared commitment to resisting unsafety. This 'togetherness' is articulated through positive emotional responses to individual engagement. This representation also implicitly critiques passive bystanding. Rebecca, who organized rides for girls after a music festival, reflects on the discrepancy between verbal support and actual involvement: "I really got a great response with many nice comments. Tonight, it remains to be seen how many people get in touch." (Article 2). Camilla, a night patroller with over ten years of experience, observes: "It's hard to get people involved. You often get a pat on the back, people think we are good, but you want people to participate in the walks" (Article 8). Similarly, Daniel humorously identifies "the TV-sofa" as their biggest competitor (Article 22). These

reflections portray frustration among engaged citizens who face the limitations of symbolic recognition without collective action. The responsible, active citizen is implicitly contrasted with the disengaged other, not participating. This distinction creates a normative construct of community that celebrates action and critiques passivity, reinforcing a binary between those who contribute to safety and those who do not.

Recognition from institutional actors, such as politicians, law enforcement, and local leaders, further consolidates the media representation of the responsible citizen. Annelie, a night patroller, is reported to receive "great support and encouragement from police, traders and public" (Article 18), positioning her actions within a framework of broad social legitimacy. Filippa's efforts are likewise endorsed by local leadership, who describe her initiative as "a very good and important initiative" (Article 28). Such portrayals of official and communal recognition elevate the moral value of civic engagement, reinforcing safety initiatives as inherently commendable. Within this moral consensus, actions undertaken in the name of safety are rarely subject to critical scrutiny and are instead positioned as synonymous with care, responsibility, and good citizenship (cf. Ahmed, 2000). These media narratives not only celebrate civic engagement but also construct it as accompanied by both sacrifice and reward. In this dual logic, the responsible citizen is represented as a subject of heroic selflessness, someone who acts for the collective good, even at personal cost. The responsible citizen is represented as embodying *both* sacrifices and rewards, characteristics often associated with "a hero" who selflessly dedicates themselves to the greater good.

6. Conclusions

We have shown how media representations of safety engagement construct and reinforce specific norms surrounding gender, racialization, and responsibility. A central media logic shaping gendered representations of the engaged citizen focuses on individual experiences, particularly those articulated through emotions. For women, emotions are not only present but depicted as catalysts for civic engagement. Whether through personal experiences or by witnessing others, unsafety is consistently portrayed as a turning point for action, often narrated through a before-and-after logic.

Underlying these portrayals lies an ideal of the responsible woman as a self-governing subject (cf. Ahmed, 2000), taking responsibility not only for her own and other women's safety but also for broader societal issues gendered violence and sexual abuse. This reflects a neoliberal logic linking emotional experience to moral responsibility and civic action (Moran and Skeggs, 2014). Personal experiences thus illustrate how emotional regimes underpin the representations of women's safety engagements and foreground a broader societal expectation of women's individual responsibility. The engaged women taking action are represented as ideal neoliberal self-governing subjects, aligning with Ahmed's (2014) emphasis on the political productivity of emotions.

Civic engagement is also represented as a means to challenge dominant discourses of place, particularly in media portrayals of night patrols in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas marked by stigmatization. These representations illustrate how certain emotions are legitimized and mobilized in specific contexts, while others are depoliticized or dismissed. Media narratives participate in this meaning-making by re-articulating stigmatized areas not only as sites of risk but also of agency and community. Drawing on Ahmed (2014) emotions such as fear and frustration help construct community by delineating boundaries between "us" and "them". At the same time, the demarcation of who belongs in the safe community necessarily excludes deviating, feared and suspicious "others" (Ahmed, 2000).

Our analysis shows how portrayals of engagement in primarily socioeconomically disadvantaged and racialized areas emphasize how emotional expressions of care, responsibility, and solidarity function as collective responses to unsafety and exclusion. These portraits disrupt dominant depictions of suburbs as disconnected or deviant, instead positioning residents as agents of change. This challenges the division between "normal" society and the suburb as a "parallel society," as described by Dahlstedt (2019), by offering alternative narratives that resist this binary framing. At the same time, as Backvall (2019) notes, leading newspapers continue to rely on dramatic and moralizing language, depicting suburbs as inadequate or undesirable through stories of violence, hopelessness, and cultural alienation. In some cases, it is residents who are feared; in others, the area itself is constructed as dangerous. Yet, both residents and neighborhoods are positioned not as threats but as emotionally invested actors and spaces working to reshape how they are seen, experienced, and valued within the broader societal landscape, thereby re-articulating the meaning of safety (Hermansson, 2022). The emotional language used contributes to renegotiating place identity, offering counter-narratives to stigmatization (cf. Rosenberger et al., 2023). Narratives of frustration, hope, and belonging foreground resistance and solidarity, thus opening space for alternative stories.

In line with Ahmed's (2014) discussion of the language of fear, the language of engagement can also be understood as articulated through emotions. Whereas the language of fear secures relations between subjects and objects, the language of engagement emphasizes responsibility, with unsafety as its backdrop. Women's engagement in supporting other women is frequently narrated through personal experiences of unsafety, while civic engagement in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas is framed through emotional investments in meaningful action, often grounded in personal ties and imaginaries of place. Such engagement involves renegotiating perceptions of neighborhoods, from unsafe and stigmatized to respectable and worth protecting. In this way, the language of engagement remains entwined with the language of fear, establishing distinctions between those "engaged and taking responsibility" and those depicted as "problems".

Our analysis demonstrates how emotions are intertwined with ideals of gender, race, place, and responsibility. Through emotional regimes, these representations contribute to shape the subject of *the responsible citizen*, particularly the engaged woman and local community member, whose emotional responses are translated into moral and civic action. While these narratives highlight agency and initiative, they simultaneously sideline the need for structural and political change by framing safety primarily as an individual or community responsibility rather than a welfare state concern. In this way, our study also contributes with increasing the understanding of how safety is given meaning in contemporary Sweden, a country which has undergone a substantial neoliberal transformation. It illustrates how emotional regimes not only express or evoke feelings of fear, care, or community but delimits meanings of responsible citizenship and the responsible citizen. The study thus highlights how emotions operate discursively in the media, contributing to shifting the responsibility for safety from the welfare state to individual citizens. Our findings call for further research that critically analyze how emotional discourse is mobilized in relation to safety interventions beyond news media and what such interventions should entail.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Johanna Lauri: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Josefin Olsson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Linda Sandberg:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jennie Brandén:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used AI-assisted language tools (Copilot and Deepl) to support the translation of selected quotes. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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