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**Nation-Building from Below and De Facto Statehood: A Study of Online Communities
in the Somalia–Somaliland Dyad.**

MA thesis

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Authorship declaration:

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

Building upon literature on de facto states and nationalism studies, this study uses a bottom-up approach to the study of nation-building in contexts marked by contested statehood. Focusing less on the nature and content of nation-building projects, this study aims to bring ordinary people back into the picture by focusing on the ways they engage with such policies. For that purpose, the study utilises the Somalia-Somaliland dyad as a single case study. This thesis is embedded in everyday nationalism and everyday nationhood, which allows ordinary people to display a sense of agency in their interactions with the nation. Fox and Miller-Idriss's (2008) framework, centred around practices of nationhood, is utilised to determine how grassroots communities within the dyad engage with nation-building. The study benefits from textual and visual materials collected by the author within online communities on the following platforms: Reddit, Discord, Facebook and TikTok. Members of these communities were found to be engaging with nation-building projects, discursively engaging with their content and reproducing it by disseminating national symbols.

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1. Introduction:

This MA thesis situates itself in the literature on *de facto* states, which emerged in the late 1990s, initially focusing on their external relations (Pegg, 2017). These entities have been described as victims, but not pariahs (see Berg and Pegg, 2016), of stigmatisation on the international stage (Ker-Lindsay, 2018), beneficiaries of engagement without recognition (Ker-Lindsay & Berg, 2018b; Caspersen, 2018) or as clients in patron-client frameworks. When supported by patrons or quasi-patrons (Kosienkowski & Ženková Rudincová, 2022), *de facto* states seek external protection to ensure survival, potentially exercising a form of agency (Berg & Vits, 2018). Moreover, the scope and form of agency differ across policy sectors and depend on the international status of the parent state (Marandici, 2024). For instance, in their study of *de facto* States's responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic, as a common challenge such entities faced, Berg et al. (2025) were able to measure varying levels of agency.

It has been noted that *de facto* authorities aim to increase internal legitimacy through public services and political reforms (Caspersen, 2015). Additionally, explaining the survival and collapse of these entities (See Florea, 2017) has also been a focus of this field. Scholars have also examined internal dynamics of state-building without widespread recognition (See Scott Pegg, 2017). Case studies have explored state- and nation-building attempts in *de facto* states (See Johnson & Smaker, 2014; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008). Interestingly, nation-building projects have been associated with the legitimization of the *de facto* states' case for secession. Dembińska (2022, p.92) labels such projects "from-above-identity legitimization strategies". If top-down strategies to either gain legitimacy within the *de facto* state population or engage with nation-building are being discussed in the literature, the role of ordinary people in engaging with the latter has received less attention. However, Dembińska (2017, p.268) points out, "there is a need to study not only the elites' nation-building strategies (from above) but also the societal responsiveness to them (from below)". If some studies considered this dynamic, as regards state projects perceived in the population (See Bakke et al., 2018), this MA thesis posits that little attention has been paid to the role of these contested entities' population and their counterparts in the parent state. Furthermore, studies of nation-building in *de facto* states have been largely conducted using Eurasian cases (See Osipov & Vasilevich, 2019; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011; Marandici, 2020; Comai & Venturi, 2015; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012;

Dembińska, 2022). Using the Somalia-Somaliland dyad thus enlarges the present focus of the literature to conduct this study.

This thesis posits that they play a role in the way they engage with top-down nation-building attempts via their reaction to it. Populations of de facto states and their parents can ignore, reproduce or challenge narratives about shared identity, the (il)legitimacy of secession, and interpretations of history which are constructed and promoted by their authorities. Thus, this thesis adopts a bottom-up perspective on nation-building, which aims to bring ordinary people back into the picture. It suggests looking at the way grassroots communities in Somaliland and Somalia engage with the nation-building efforts of both these entities. This thesis seeks to answer the following research question: **How do de facto state and parent state grassroots communities engage with nation-building?**

This MA thesis is grounded in everyday nationalism, a subfield of nationalism studies that shifts focus from elites to the lived experiences and agency of ordinary people (Eleanor Knott, 2016). Less interested in delving into top-down frameworks, it shifts the focus of the study of nationalism to “visible daily practices, encounters, self-conceptions, specific idioms and common knowledge associated with individual nations.” (Howlett, 2023, p. 65). Here, the nation is less so taken as the result of policies from above but is seen as a “cognitive frame” (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 429) that shapes ordinary people navigating everyday life. It aims at capturing “quotidian practices by which ethnic and national identities are elaborated, confirmed, reproduced, or challenged” (Goode & Stroup, 2015, p. 718). In this study, online communities in the name of Reddit, Discord, TikTok and Facebook are considered as the locus of these practices. Using these theoretical lenses is key to the purposes of this study as it challenges top-down perspectives by analysing nationalism “from below” (Knott, 2016, p.1) and will allow us to answer our research question.

Within the broader subfield of everyday nationalism, Fox and Miller-Idriss’s focus on practices of everyday nationhood (2008) is used. Fox and Miller-Idriss consider that the way ordinary people envision the nation is crucial, as they are not necessarily following elite discourses (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.538). Therefore, Fox and Miller-Idriss’s framework is particularly helpful to understand how grassroots communities engage with nation-building and answer the

research question. Among the four ways “in which nationhood is produced and reproduced in everyday life” described by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, p.537), this thesis draws upon two of them: talking and performing. As for the latter, it is aimed at looking the way people (seen by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) as ‘producers’ of the national discourse) do “give discursive shape and content to their otherwise taken-for-granted understanding of the nation” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.539). The performative dimension highlighted by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, p.538) refers to the “everyday meanings and invocations of national symbols” and allows this study to take into account visual elements of everyday interactions on online communities associated with the dyad and ultimately, understand how they engage with nation-building projects. For that purpose, this thesis employs a single case study of Somaliland and Somalia as the *de facto* and the parent state are studied together in the form of a dyad.

As we alluded to earlier in this introduction, data was collected on several platforms conceptualised as online communities. The bulk of the data was collected on three subreddits (r/Somalia, r/Somaliland, r/Somalilanders). On Discord, the server r/Somalia was utilised. Additionally, two Facebook Groups and comments below TikTok videos were added to the data set. Data was collected using two main techniques. Central to data collection was purposive sampling, which was performed on the following loci: the subs r/Somalia and r/Somaliland, TikTok comment sections and Facebook groups. Additionally, a small-scale Nethnography (Kozinets, 2023) was conducted on the selected Discord server and mainly on the sub r/Somalilanders. The use of Nethnography as a method allowed the collection of three distinct types of data: immersive, investigative and interactive (Kozinets, 2023). As a result of the performance of both data-collection techniques, texts which sometimes included visual elements were extracted. To proceed with data analysis, Fairclough’s Three-dimensional model (1992) of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed in the thesis.

This thesis is structured as follows. After this introduction lies the theoretical framework chapter. It is aimed at conceptualising the phenomenon of *de facto* statehood, nation-building and their interrelations. It then delves into the discussion of the main assumptions of everyday nationalism, reflecting on its links with Billig’s Banal Nationalism (1995). The online dimension of this nationalism is then discussed. The next chapter introduces the study’s research design utilised and the case selection arguments. It is also concerned with the

transparent discussion of the nature of the data, its collection procedures and ethical considerations which come with the presentation of the findings. Central to this study is its fourth chapter, which, by utilising Fox and Miller-Idriss's "talking the nation" (2008, p.537), uncovers how users on the selected platforms discursively engage with the nation and, ultimately, nation-building. Subsequently, this thesis's fifth chapter is dedicated to Fox and Miller-Idriss's 'performing' the nation (2008, p.537) and brings into the picture how users within the studied online communities make use of national symbols, and especially, the national flag. The last chapter of this study consists of a conclusion, where findings are summarised, and limitations of the study are discussed.

2. Theoretical Framework: Everyday Nationalism, contested and de facto statehood, and Nation-building

To understand grassroots communities' engagement with their respective entities' nation-building initiatives, this study will utilise everyday nationalism as its theoretical framework. This section revolves around three interrelated dimensions on which this thesis's theoretical foundation is based: Nation-building and de facto-statehood, everyday nationalism and the digital realm of nationalism. Its first sub-section aims to explicitly state the understanding of *de facto* statehood this thesis subscribes to. Against this background, a detailed account of nation-building in this specific context is provided. After unveiling the ontological insecurity these state-like entities face, a link is then made with the main theoretical basis this thesis uses: Everyday nationalism. Lastly, the digital dimension of nationalism within which this thesis is based is discussed.

2.1 Nation-building and de facto statehood: the “soft” hand of nation-state consolidation

2.1.1. De facto and contested statehood: a conceptual introduction.

One of the widely accepted definitions of de facto states remains the one formulated by Scott Pegg et al (1998, p.1). He sees *de facto* states as secessionist entities possessing the following attributes:

« organized political leadership which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability; receives popular support; and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a defined territorial area, over which effective control is maintained for an extended period of time. » (Pegg et al., 1998, p.1).

Within the scholarship on *de facto statehood*, division over the way such entities should be defined reigns and as of now, no clear consensus can be found in the literature (Kosienkowski, 2022). This conceptual fuzziness affects case-selection processes, as definitions vary slightly depending on the criteria applied, thereby expanding or narrowing the range of cases to be examined. Despite the absence of consensus, this thesis does not aim to resolve the ambiguity

surrounding the concept. At the same time, methodological rigour requires the adoption of a working definition. To avoid semantic debates that would exceed the scope and goals of this thesis, it relies on broader conceptualisations of these entities. For that purpose, this research relies on Kursani's (2020) ontological definition of contested states, which lies on the combination of four constitutive dimensions. The first fundamental dimension, the presence of the State, is assessed through the Montevideo criteria (Kursani, 2020). It specifies that, to be a "person of international law" (Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933), an entity must fulfil four concrete criteria of statehood. These criteria, listed in the Montevideo Convention, consist of the presence of a permanent population, a defined territory, a government and the capacity to enter relations with other states. The fulfilment of these criteria, the absence of UN membership, and the contestation by another entity mark the changeover for a state-like entity to enter the contested dimension (Kursani, 2020). While partially or completely failing to fulfil at least one of the Montevideo criteria, contested states are at the same time limited in their ability to socialise in the international environment in comparison to *de jure* states, as they do not benefit from UN membership (*Ibid.*). Indeed, UN membership does protect full-fledged states from being violently incorporated by their *de jure* counterpart while contested states permanently face the threat of reintegration by their parent states (*Ibid.*). In addition to the first constitutive dimensions, to be considered as a contested state, Kursani adds that a given entity must be the target of existential contestation by another *de jure* state. On top of these first criteria, the presence of an independence claim, either implicitly through the publication of legal acts or a Constitution or explicitly through a formal declaration, completes Kursani's definition (2020).

2.1.2. Nation-building

As previously stated, this study aims to unveil how grassroots communities engage with nation-building strategies respectively designed by the *de facto* and parent state authorities. This MA thesis builds on Kolstø and Blakkisrud's distinction between state and nation-building, which originates from their study of nation-state construction in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Focusing on the strategies the authorities of such contested entities employ, their study allows one to distinguish between two complementary aspects of nation-state construction. Other authors, such as Caspersen (2013) and Talentino (2004), these processes appear to be less distinguishable from one another. For the former, state-building can

be divided into different phases: the establishment of control of the claimed territory within the parent state by the *de facto* authorities, the establishment of a Weberian monopoly of violence, and the development of state capabilities (Caspersen, 2013). Among these ideal-types, Caspersen describes nation-building as an additional aspect of state-building (2013). According to the latter, Talentino (2004), considers state and identity-building as being a facet of nation-building. As this thesis does not aim to contribute to issues of conceptualisations *per se*, a clear distinction is made between the two concepts along the lines of Kolstø and Blakkisrud's work (2008).

On the one hand, state-building encompasses the “establishment of the administrative, economic and military groundwork of functional states” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008, p.484). Within *de facto* states, such construction is marked by the centrality of distancing from the parent state, and for that purpose, authorities often focus on the development of security capacities to defend themselves against external threats (Johnson & Smaker, 2014). For instance, Somaliland's government labels the safety of its citizens as its “main concern” (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2025, p.12). Testifying in favour of this trend, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development of Somaliland (2025) declared spending around 210 billion SLSH for security in its 2025 budget. It can be noted that this figure accounts for around 38% of the declared national budget. On the other hand, this thesis focuses on nation-building, clearly distinguished from state-building by Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008). Labelling nation-building as consisting in the “softer aspects of state consolidation” (2008, p.484), Kolstø and Blakkisrud define nation-building as the:

“construction of a shared identity and a sense of unity in the state's population, through education, propaganda, ideology, and state symbols” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008, p.484).

Aimed at fostering a sense of nationhood within the population, it takes the form of a top-down process “pursued by state leaders, intellectuals, educators, and others who try to give a state the qualities of a nation-state” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008, p.484). They further specify that nation-building speaks to both the “*demos*” (political participation) and the “*ethnos*” (fostering a feeling of belonging to the nation) (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008, p.484). To foster this sense of unity, state authorities may attempt to impose a unique national language

via the education system, the celebration of military victories, and through the promotion of a shared history (Rutland, 2023).

Complementing Kolstø and Blakkisrud's understanding of nation-building, Dembińska, drawing upon Barth, equates it as a "group differentiation process involving boundary-making" (Barth, 1969, quoted in: Dembińska, 2022, p.82). Focusing on social boundaries, Barth argues against the assumption of classical anthropology that "cultural variation is discontinuous" (Barth, 1969, p.9). In other words, Barth argues that the maintenance of ethnic groups does not stem from their common features, such as culture, but rather identifies social boundaries between them as an explanatory factor of their survival. Rather than the intrinsic features of ethnic units, what defines such groups is the ethnic boundary as determinant of the group's social life's organisation (Barth, 1969). According to Barth, when interacting with other ethnic units, the boundary "canalizes social life" (1969, p.15) in two different ways. First, when group members interact with each other, boundaries do entail "criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion" (Barth, 1969, p.15). In the case of interactions with outsiders identified as "as strangers, as members of another ethnic group" (Barth, 1969, p.15), boundaries imply "a recognition of limitation of shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgement of value of performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest" (Barth, 1969, p.15).

As the dyad of study remains ethnically homogenous, ethnic identity, which is central to Barth's concept of boundary making (Barth, 1969), has to be related to clan identity. To make that link, it is possible to invoke de Waal's concept of "clan units" (2020, p.564). In studying such units' emergence and survival in war-torn and post-war Somalia, de Waal (2020) directly alludes to this potential link. According to de Waal, clan units in Somalia are "functionally akin to an ethnic group." (2020, p.365). More than referring to mere similarities, de Waal states that in Somalia, the "clan unit has become normatively the singular and overriding ethnic identity of each Somali" (2020, p.365).

Such boundaries identified by Barth (1969) create "socially constructed identity categories, which are infused with ethnic/national attributes (such as traditions, language, historiography) by ethnic organizations, intellectuals, and elites who provide for the category's

institutionalisation” (Dembińska, 2022, p.82). In comparing nation-building policies within four Eurasian *de facto* states, Dembińska posits that such “from-above-identity legitimization strategies” (Dembińska, 2022, p.92) are aimed at fostering legitimacy within the population and validating the arguments for secession put forward by these entities.

These strategies are closely related to Barth’s ethnic boundaries, and different actors may want to act upon them (Wimmer, 2008). According to Wimmer, actors may use five distinct strategies to redraw ethnic boundaries. Expansion, or the attempt to “shift a boundary to move to a more inclusive or a more exclusive than the existing one”, is of particular interest for this section (Wimmer, 2008, p.1031). Being one of these strategies, nation-building is labelled as “the best-studied strategy of boundary expansion”, which unfolds in three directions (Wimmer, 2008, p. 1032). First, incorporation consists of the “redefinition of an existing ethnic group as the nation into which everybody should fuse” by state elites. Besides incorporation, state elites may choose to create from scratch a brand new national category “through the amalgamation of a variety of ethnic groups” (Wimmer, 2008, p.1032). As in Switzerland, the third way of expanding the boundaries of an ethnic group consists of the superposition of a “higher layer of ethnic differentiation that corresponds to the population of a state and thus superposes existing ethnic, regional or racial divisions” (Wimmer, 2008, p.1032).

Within *de facto* states, such attempts to redraw ethnic boundaries have been discussed among scholars and an illustration of one of them is provided. In their study of the Republican Turkish Party (CPT) in Northern Cyprus’s school history textbooks, and embedded “mechanisms of cultural indoctrination” (p.133), Vural & Özuyanık (2008) found that the government-initiated attempts “redefining collective identity and the boundaries of the nation (Vural & Özuyanık, 2008, p.133). Their comparison of old and newly published history books during the CPT’s time in power in the TRNC at the time of publication offers an example of such attempts to reshape the boundaries of ethnic groups. Compared to old history textbooks, which used to “glorify ethnic boundaries claiming that the Turkish-Cypriot community originated solely from ethnic Turkish ancestors and has maintained its purity.” (Vural & Özuyanık, 2008, p. 149).

As demonstrated by the previous example, social boundaries, which create “socially constructed identity categories, which are infused with ethnic/national attributes (such as

traditions, language, historiography)” are diffused “by ethnic organizations, intellectuals, and elites who provide for the category’s institutionalisation” (Dembińska, 2022, p.82). By comparing nation-building policies within four Eurasian *de facto* states, Dembińska posits that such “from-above-identity legitimization strategies” (Dembińska, 2022, p.92) are aimed at fostering legitimacy within the population and validating the arguments for secession put forward by these entities.

As highlighted by Dembińska (2022) and Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008), nation-building is mainly understood as a set of strategies originating from the top of the political apparatus of these entities, which are aimed at fostering internal legitimacy. If Dembińska’s study focuses on top-down strategies, it also highlights the need to take into account how “targeted people respond to them” (Dembińska, 2022, p.92). In fact, this is what this study aims to achieve by looking at the way grassroots communities within the parent and *de facto* states engage with such policies. To achieve this goal, it is grounded in a constructivist understanding of nationalism and nationhood. It is situated within the field of everyday nationalism.

Lastly, it is worth specifying that while this thesis focuses on internal actors, nation-building can also be a matter of a wide range of actors, including external ones. According to Talentino, nation-building can also be seen as a “programme implemented by outsiders to rebuild collapsed states and extend principles of human rights and legitimate governance” (2004, p.558) as well as a purely internal process. For the purposes of this study, the choice has been made to focus on its internal declination.

2.2. From Banal to Everyday nationalism: bringing ordinary people to the table

2.2.1 Nationalism and nations

Nationalism and the nation have previously been thoroughly studied. Providing an extensive overview of definitional debates over nationalism, the nation and nationality does not fit the scope nor the aims of this MA thesis. Thus, it relies on Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez’s (2021) broad ways to define nationalism. The “conventional” understanding of nationalism concerns “clearly evident, often fairly extreme manifestations of nationalism, such as separatist movements, institutionalised forms of exclusion along national lines, or xenophobia and right-

wing extremism” (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 334). According to Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, the second perspective sees nationalism “from the perspective of everyday life, mundane practices and taken-for-granted assumptions and defines it as an ideology or as a particular way of seeing the world and acting in the world” (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 334). This view describes nationalism as an inherent dynamic to social life which “provides the basic ‘forms’ for thinking about the world” (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 335). In contrast, the conventional approach which is about the ‘content’ of the nation only becomes evident in particular events such as celebration (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). By using everyday nationalism as its main theoretical framework, this study is grounded in the second approach to the concept.

2.2.2 From Banal to everyday nationalism

Before delving into the details of what everyday nationalism consists of, one must start with Michael Billig’s foundational work on Banal Nationalism from which the former originates from. According to Skey and Antonsich (2017, p.2), Billig’s banal nationalism operates within the ‘discursive turn’ of nationalism studies initiated by Anderson’s “Imagined Communities”. As an imagined community, the nation is understood as a mental construction by its members who feel bonded to a symbolic identity which is reinforced by language, the use of symbols, as well as common history and myths (Candan & Hunger, 2008). Starting with the observation that the study of nationalism focuses on its most salient, hot forms, banal nationalism is aimed at exploring the reproduction of the nation via its unnoticed forms materialised by the image of the “national flag hanging outside a public building or decorating a filling-station forecourt” (Billig, 1995, p.38). To Billig, banal manifestations of the nation in the West “attract no special attention” (Billig, 1995, p.6). Billig argues that both the citizens of the nation state and scholars ignore banal manifestations of nationalism. Thus, the purpose of Billig’s book is to unveil such “ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced” (Billig, 1995, p.6). Billig’s main argument is the following: “Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition.” (Billig, 1995, p.8).

Applying Billig’s banal nationalism framework, Turkish press Yumul and Özkirimli (2000) were able to show how the nation is reproduced in different ways within the pool of

newspapers studied. Even before delving into the content of the newspapers, Yumul and Özkirimli observed that even the brand names (e.g., Turkish Daily News), the logos and slogans of the newspapers acted as a reminder of nationhood. Regarding the structure of the 38 Turkish daily newspapers studied, Yumul and Özkirimli note that they are organised along national lines, reproducing the division between the homeland and the rest of the world, leading the reader to “accept this division as natural” (Yumul & Özkirimli, 2000, p.790). Discursively, the authors found that the flagging of nationhood Billig evoked is, besides the structure of the newspapers, achieved through the invocation of a “national ‘we’” (Yumul & Özkirimli, 2000, p.791). Looking at the advertisements section, the authors use the example of one that displays the slogan ““join us in the celebration of Ramadan”” seen as a deixis of “homeland and nation-making” (Yumul & Özkirimli, 2000, p.792). Lastly, Yumul and Özkirimli’s analysis of the discursive reproduction of nationalism showed that the reproduction of the nation was conducted around several banal themes, such as sports, for example. In the article, the authors found that the great majority of the newspapers covered Turkish victories in the European Clubs Cup, which displayed obvious nationhood flagging. For instance, when Turkey beat Croatia, the authors extracted this sentence from a newspaper: “Our representative in the European League defeated the strong representative of Croatia”, displaying a “communal identification of those teams with the nation” (Yumul & Özkirimli, 2000, p. 800).

Shifting the focus away from the most salient forms of nationalism, “The separatists, the fascists and the guerrillas” (Billig, 1995, p.6), Billig establishes a central dichotomy by distinguishing the hot forms of nationalism from its banal manifestations. Using Banal and everyday nationalism to study nationalism under Franco’s Spain, Hernández Burgos’s (2021) helps exemplify this distinction. Firstly, Hernández Burgos notes that nationalism was central to Franco’s regime and distinguished four complexities. In Franco’s Spain, various nationalist projects cohabited within the same regime, a desire for uniformity accompanied by the creation “new national narratives, the creation of new symbols, the definition of national spaces and landscapes and the development of policies destined to (re)nationalise Spanish society” (Hernández Burgos, 2021, p.692) the importance of military victory, and the dissemination of policies and narratives around gender, class and religion. These features of Franco’s regime can be equated to the ‘hot’ face of the nationalism coin. However, to Hernández Burgos, the distinction between hot and banal made by Billig remains “not so defined and becomes

especially blurred when we pay attention to everyday life” (Hernández Burgos, 2021, p.694). Hence the presence of banal components within the hot components of Francoist nationalisms” (Hernández Burgos, 2021, p.694). One of the main examples given by the authors lies in fact that soldiers on the front during the Spanish Civil War, would both listen to “patriotic speeches of their officials and ceremonies of national and religious exaltation” and “to talks broadcast on the radio and read publications in which explicit nationalism existed alongside another more veiled” (Hernández Burgos, 2021, p.694). According to the author, the last year of the regimes constituted the peak of banal manifestations over hot ones as “the very official institutions charged with nationalisation found themselves partially banalised” (Hernández Burgos, 2021, p.696). For instance, ‘El Frente de Juventudes’ developed an “recreational aspect” (e.g dances, typical dresses) aimed at creating an image of brotherhood between the different region of Spain and performing an “informal nationalisation” (Hernández Burgos, 2021, p.696).

As it constitutes a foundational work in the study of nationalism, the argument formulated by Billig in *Banal Nationalism* stimulated scholarly work in several directions and attracted a huge number of critics. By arguing that in the West, the nation is reproduced by unnoticed “reminders of nationhood” (Billig, 1995, p.38) via the analogy of the unwaved flag, Billig’s banal nationalism shifted the focus of the field of nationalism studies from trying to answer the questions the question of what and when is the nation to how it is maintained (Skey & Antonsich, 2017). If Billig’s book succeeded in attracting attention from eminent scholars, it also received various critiques.

As the aim of this chapter is simply to introduce everyday nationalism as this thesis’s main theoretical framework, this section focuses on those who accused banal nationalism of overlooking individual agency. An exhaustive review of the various criticisms Billig received for his work will thus not be provided. Some scholars, such as Jones and Merriman (2009), criticise the distinction between hot and banal made by Billig. In their study of bilingual road signs in Wales, Jones and Merriman acknowledge that Billig’s focus on banal and quotidian ways nationalism is reproduced. However, their research puts forward the necessity to shift away from the hot/banal dichotomy introduced by Billig to redirect scholar attention to “the way in which nationalist discourses and practices are reproduced in everyday contexts” (Jones and Merriman, 2009, p.165). Such focus on the everyday is central to unveiling the way

grassroots communities do engage with their respective entity's nation-building. Jones and Merriman see the everyday as a context that provides ordinary people with "multiple opportunities for individuals and groups to resist state projects" (Jones and Merriman, 2009, p. 167), including the nation-building initiatives this MA thesis focuses on. As such, Jones and Merriman suggest that looking at the everyday "highlights the multiplicity of nationalist discourses and practices affecting and affected by individuals and groups within particular places at specific times" (Jones and Merriman, 2009, p.172). This focus on the "daily experiences of nationalism" (Jones and Merriman, 2009, p.169), which gives agency to ordinary people as they can resist state projects, has been identified as a shortcoming in Billig's approach. In other words, banal nationalism has been accused of overlooking the agency of people (Knott, 2016). It is such emphasis on the agency that distinguishes every day from banal nationalism that can be found in Antonsich's (2016) work on ordinary Italy and Italians. To him, the centrality of an unreflexive reproduction of nationalism in Billig's argument can lead to the forgetting of people's agency (Antonsich, 2016). In fact, Billig's framework, individuals are framed as passive recipients of the banal flaggings of nationhood (Rossetto, 2015), which in turn leads to the reproduction of an "objectified image of nationhood which seems to exist above and beyond the agency of individuals" (Antonsich, 2016, p.33). Furthermore, Billig is accused of emphasising its analysis on state institutions, rendering impossible the introduction of non-state institutions in the analysis (Hernández Burgos, 2021).

As a subfield of nationalism studies, everyday nationalism shifts the focus from elites to the lived experiences and agency of ordinary people (Eleanor Knott, 2016). Everyday nationalism is less interested in delving into top-down frameworks; rather, it shifts the focus of the study of nationalism to "visible daily practices, encounters, self-conceptions, specific idioms and common knowledge associated with individual nations." (Howlett, 2023, p. 65). Here, the nation is less so taken as the result of policies from above but is seen as a "cognitive frame" that shapes ordinary people navigating everyday life (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 429). It aims at capturing "quotidian practices by which ethnic and national identities are elaborated, confirmed, reproduced, or challenged" (Goode & Stroup, 2015, p. 718). Using these theoretical lenses is key to the purposes of this study as it challenges top-down perspectives by analysing nationalism "from below" (Knott, 2016, p.1) and will allow us to answer our research question.

2.3. De facto statehood: Everyday nationalism in Unsettled times

2.3.1. Ontological Insecurity in de facto and contested states:

In their study of everyday nationalism in unsettled times, Goode et al. (2020) put forward the idea that everyday practices and even banal nationalism have largely focused on “unnoticed forms of nationalism during settled times”, overlooking more “ontologically insecure moments when social and political institutions are in flux” (Goode et al., 2020, p.1). According to the author, unsettled times are “defined by the experience or perception of uncertainty regarding the future of social and political structures within which social practices take place and derive meaning” (Goode et al., 2022, p. 63). Using the Covid 19 pandemic as an example for these ontologically insecure moments, Goode et al. (2022) looked at everyday practices used by ordinary people as a way to make up for “disruptions in daily routines and seek a return to national normality” (2022, p.61). In this context, Goode et al. (2022) identify practices such as sequences of public applause for hospital workers in the UK in 2020, and analyse them as ways for ordinary people to foster national solidarity as well as coping with the effects of the pandemic on normalcy by supporting those who were fighting daily for its restoration (2022). During unsettled times, such practices were aimed “to recreate, reproduce, preserve, or maintain those routines associated with the nation’s normal existence” (Goode et al., 2022, p.63). As this thesis conceptualises the ontological security faced by de facto states as unsettled times, the ways grassroots communities engage with nation-building are analysed as everyday practices that aim to achieve normalcy. Indeed, within the de facto/parent states dyad, achieving normalcy can be attributed to ordinary people within the dyad support the cause of the parent state and negate secessionist’s arguments as well as secessionists aiming for recognition.

Here, a parallel can be made between de facto/parent states dyads, with these ontologically insecure moments shaping the way everyday nationalism is performed. In some sense, studying everyday nationalism within *de facto* states and their parents fits this idea of unsettled times. Both the terms de facto and contested states imply that such entities cannot exist and navigate in the international system the same way as recognised states do. These definitional features can both be analysed using ontological security and challenge some of its assumptions. According to Grzybowski (2021), the ontological security framework suffers from the

assumption that the studied actors are states in the traditional sense. To him, statehood can be understood as an “exclusive type of subjectivity that constructs a particular community and territory as a corporate person and delineated space, at the expense of all others.” (Grzybowski, 2021, p. 505). Therefore, widespread nonrecognition can unveil what Grzybowski calls the “fundamental ontological security provided by state subjectivity” (Grzybowski, 2021, p. 505). In other words, looking at *de facto* states reveals some sort of ontological security that is given by state subjectivity, which *de facto* states do not benefit from. Due to their contested status, *de facto* states are facing an unusual existential threat that pushes them to align their physical security concerns (as they are not protected under international law and often in conflict with the parent state) with ontological security ones, their desire for recognition (Grzybowski, 2021, p. 505). According to Grzybowski, ontological security concerns unfold in two directions: recognition and confirmation of their national identity (Grzybowski, 2021, p. 505). This thesis considers *de facto* states and their parents as evolving in an unsettled environment. This environment is characterised by some sense of stigmatisation emanating from the international community due to widespread nonrecognition by other states (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). *De facto* states are treated as illegal entities, which drastically reduces their possibilities to manoeuvre in the international system in comparison to recognised states (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). Scholars such as Visoka (2022) point out the crucial benefits provided by widespread recognition and show that these entities do not benefit from any protection by international law, cannot seek membership in multilateral organisations, or develop traditional diplomatic and economic relations. To deal with the consequences of stigmatisation, post-Soviet *de facto* states have allegedly attempted to pursue diplomatic relations with UN members such as Nauru, Vanuatu or Venezuela (Pacher, 2019). Looking specifically at Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Pacher argues that such relations with no apparent material benefits are ways for *de facto* states to attain ontological security (Pacher, 2019). By maintaining diplomatic relations with UN members, these entities are acting upon the stigma they face in international relations, achieving some sense of normalcy (Pacher, 2019).

2.3.2. The object of the study: Practices of everyday nationalism

To unveil the way in which communities within *de facto* states and their parents engage with top-down nation-building policies, this thesis sees nations in line with Hobsbawm's

understanding (1990). In his famous book “Nations and Nationalism since 1870” he highlights the necessity to think nations as a “dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist” (Hobsbawm, 1990, p.10). Hobsbawm’s emphasis on the necessity to approach the phenomena of nations from below is further developed within everyday nationalism, the theoretical foundations of our study.

To study the way grassroots communities within *de facto* states and their parents engage with nation-building, this thesis utilises, within the broader field of everyday nationalism, Fox and Miller-Idriss’s framework of everyday nationhood, which focuses on practices. They distinguish four different ways “in which nationhood is produced and reproduced in everyday life” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.537): ‘talking’, ‘choosing’, ‘performing’, ‘consuming’. To unveil the French and Italian anarchist exiles in London between the 1870s and 1914’s engagement with the nation, nationalism, and national belonging, Bantman and Di Paola (2022) applied the frameworks of banal nationalism (as an ideology) and everyday nationhood, which includes “daily practices in which nation and nationhood are enacted” (Bantman and Di Paola, 2022, p.176). The author found that while disseminating internationalists and cosmopolitan ideas and practices, anarchist exiles “negotiated, constructed and performed their own national identities in both their militant activities and daily lives” (Bantman and Di Paola, 2022, p. 177). In that sense, the text focuses on the anarchists as ordinary people and especially, “the everyday life and the social milieu of these political refugee groups” (Bantman and Di Paola, 2022, p. 177). For that very purpose, Bantman and Di Paola apply Fox and Miller Idriss’s framework, examining the four modalities. Choosing the nation consists of unveiling the relationship between nationhood and individual choices; it looks at how such a cognitive frame influences decisions (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). By examining this modality brought by Fox and Miller Idriss, Bantman and Di Paola found that if ideologically challenging the nation-state, anarchists did in their everyday lives contribute to the “production of their own nation” which persisted in their interactions (Bantman & Di Paola, 2022, p. 183). For instance, the authors observe that most exiles were monolingual and used their national language, and cohabitation was organised nationally in London. The naming of organisations is also an indicator of this persistence of these exiles’ own nation, as institutions such as “Università popolare italiana”, the “Section de

l'Internationale de la langue française" (Bantman & Di Paola, 2022, p. 185) or did use the national language.

For the purposes of this thesis, Fox and Miller-Idriss's first modalities: 'talking' and 'performing' (2008, p.538) have been chosen to unveil how ordinary people, grassroots communities within the Hargeisa/Mogadishu dyad, do discursively engage with the nation. The third dimension developed by Fox and Miller-Idriss, 'performing' the nation, refers to the "everyday meanings and invocations of national symbols" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.538). In the same study, Bantman and Di Paola specify that, along with their writings, which contested the nation-state, French and Italian anarchists exiled in London, their collective rituals "intentionally disrupted the construction of the nation" (Bantman & Di Paola, 2022, p. 181). For instance, the authors identify the use of "counter-symbologies" such as the replacement of the *Marseillaise* by *l'Internationale* or the tricolour flag by the anarchist flag aimed to "reflect and proclaim" their anti-nationalist stance (Bantman & Di Paola, 2022, p. 182).

As for the fourth dimension, consuming the nation, which was described by Fox and Miller-Idriss as the examination of "national distinction in the mundane tastes and preferences of ordinary people" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.538). In Bantman and Di Paola's article, this dimension is exemplified notably by media consumption, as they note that anarchist papers in London were mostly written in the language of the community they aimed to target (e.g Le Tocsin, l'Internazionale). Furthermore, French and Italian exiles were inclined to "consume goods and services within the native community in exile" (Bantman & Di Paola, 2022, p. 187), such as food and other national products.

Together with 'performing', Fox and Miller-Idriss's first modality, 'talking' (2008), has been chosen to conduct data analysis. To them, a huge share of the scholarship has "focused on the important role elites play in articulating and propagating visions of the nation that have the potential to both resonate with and shape popular perception of the nation" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.538). In contrast, works on the way such visions are envisioned by ordinary people have been overlooked (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.538). The way ordinary people envision these articulations of the nation is crucial to Fox and Miller-Idriss as they are not

necessarily following elite discourses (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.538). More specifically, “talking about the nation” is about its content, the way people (seen by Fox and Miller-Idriss as ‘producers’ of the national discourse) do “give discursive shape and content to their otherwise taken-for-granted understanding of the nation” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.539). In Bantman and Di Paola’s study, ‘talking the nation’ can be found within the anarchist exiles’ written production, within which they actively aimed to deconstruct nationalist rhetoric and patriotism. In fact, their explicit aim to “un-make the nation” (Bantman & Di Paola, 2022, p. 181) and the putting-forward of internationalism and cosmopolitan ideas clearly is an example of how the nation can be discursively subverted in everyday life.

2.3.3. The reproduction of nationalism online

As previously mentioned, discursive practices of everyday nationalism are the object of this study. Such practices will be unveiled to look at the ways grassroots communities engage with the nation-building policies of their respective entities. In other words, users are conceptualised as ordinary people, and their interactions on the selected online communities are considered as the site of observation of practices of everyday nationhood (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). More specifically, this study will be conducted within the digital environment. It draws upon social media platforms used by ordinary people to discuss mundane issues but also political ones. Focusing on the digital world allows us to take into account reconfigurations of mediated communications allowed by widespread access to the internet. According to Schneider (2018), reconfigurations of Web 2.0 promoted a more participatory logic which has an impact on nationalism. In fact, expanded permissions, a new architecture revolving around participation and new business models relying on the disclosure of data by users led to such a shift (Schneider, 2018), It is within this new paradigm that nationalism – in its banal and everyday forms – is being constantly reproduced (Schneider, 2018), According to Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021) the domain name system, algorithm bias and the formation of digital ecosystems are responsible for such reproduction. Most importantly, they note that nationalism within an open digital sphere allows a plurality of ways of “imagining and enacting” (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p.337) the nation. Because digital media can be described as potential contributors, hinderers of dominant discourse or promoters of “alternative forms of national imagination” (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p.337), looking at online

engagement with nation-building through everyday nationalist discursive practices is justified by the access it gives to rich sources of user-generated data. Placing this study within this sphere acknowledges the growing volume of content posted and read by users on an everyday basis by granting them the quality of agents who engage with their entity's nation-building policies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Single case study

This sub-section is aimed at explaining the student's rationale behind the choice of research design this thesis employs. In its most general meaning, a case study can be defined as "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units." (Gerring, 2004, p.342). In this study, dyads, or the combination of a *de facto* state and its parent, as the entity from which the former seceded, are understood as units. In this sense, it does not take *de facto* states as units within a larger pool of other *de facto* states but goes as far as extending the study of these entities in relation to their parent state and vice versa. To answer the previously posited research question, the Somaliland-Somalia dyad will be used in this study. This sub-section proceeds as follows. It first examines epistemological considerations which explain the selection of a single case study. The embeddedness of this thesis in interpretivism epistemology and specifically, the importance it attaches to context in meaning-making, led the author to opt for this category of case study. Subsequently, it delves into technical reasons which confirmed this selection. Here, time was identified as the main obstacle in comparing different dyads. Lastly, this sub-section reflects on the comparative dimension of this single case study.

As previously mentioned, the first argument backing the research design selection is related to the study's embeddedness into an interpretivist epistemology. By aiming to unveil the ways in which grassroots communities engage with attempts from the authorities in one or the other entity of the chosen dyad, this thesis aligns with one of the fundamentals of interpretivism: the emphasis on "the context in which social interactions occur" (William, 2024, p.2). In fact, in an attempt to unveil how grassroots communities either ignore, reproduce or reject top-down domestic nation-building initiatives, and specifically, by "talking" and "performing" the nation within online communities (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.537), this thesis relies on the meaning given users will attribute to nation-building initiatives (if they do so). Within this work, the interpretation these ordinary people make of nation-building is deemed central and is really the bulk of this study. A supplementary feature of the epistemological position that is being held in this thesis, interpretivism, is an emphasis on the conditions that shape these interpretations and beliefs (William, 2024) of and about the nation-building of the communities' respective

entities. In fact, interpretivist research is oriented towards “focus on meaning-making (instead of a priori model specification) and contextuality (rather than generalizability)” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 48). Against this need to truly consider the environment in which these interpretations are occurring and shaped by interpretivist positions, the choice to select a single unit, within a larger pool of available dyads, has been made. It is being argued here that conducting a small or large-N comparing compare several dyads is less consistent with the study’s emphasis on individual interpretation embedded in their respective context. In that regard, it is argued here that the concepts of *de facto* and parent states, if using to established criteria (although debated) encompass a wide variety of recognized and contested states (as potential cases) with various historical backgrounds, social organisations, geographical locations, size, and economies. As this study aims to look at the interpretations grassroots communities make of nation-building, it comes down to analysing how individuals interpret elite-made attempts to forge a common identity while being situated in a variety of contexts. For that reason, as generalisation is not the main purpose of this study; a single-case study has been preferred.

If the rationale behind the previous argument for the selection of a single case study is, in essence, a matter of desirability, the choice of such a research design over small and large-N studies, the second argument backing the selection of a single case-study research design lies within feasibility considerations. Extending the pool of dyads, even by conducting a paired comparison, would imply the extension of the data selection and analysis on five social media platforms to a brand-new case. Such an endeavour, at the time of writing, seems timewise unrealistically doable.

3.2 Case Selection: The Somaliland-Somalia Dyad

In this subsection, explanations of the student’s rationale for case selection as well as a background of the case will be provided. Instead of solely using

3.2.1 Case Background: Nation-Building in the Somaliland-Somalia dyad

As alluded to earlier in the discussion of Barth’s boundary-making (1969), the Somalia-Somaliland dyad is characterised by the centrality of clans in shaping society. In fact, it has

been noted that during pre-colonial times, “Somalis lived under decentralised, clan-based political systems” (Adam, 1992, p.15). Here, it is necessary to emphasise the influence of colonialism in order to understand later-occurring developments within the dyad. Pre-colonial times were, according to Samatar (1997), characterised by a society organised around households over which community elders had no control. Starting in the first half of the 19th century, which marks the start of the colonisation of Somali lands by Western powers, the organisation of political authority was shaken. According to Samatar, the British and Italians “instituted clan and tribal chiefs as vassals of their administration” and drew borders irrespective of clan affiliations (1997, p.694). Overall, Samatar argues that colonial control “emphasised clanism and nationalism” (1997, p.695). If within the previous sentences, the influence of colonialism on the societal organisation of Somali lands is referred to as a single unit, the internationally recognised borders of Somalia, which also constitute the boundaries of this case-study, were colonised both by Italy and the British Empire, while Djibouti was colonised by France. Within the dyad of study, Somaliland was colonised by the British Empire and constituted a protectorate, while before being occupied by British troops in 1941. What constitutes modern-day Southern Somalia was colonised by Italy and labelled *Somalia Italiana*.

According to McPherson-Smith (2021, p.203), Italian and British control constituted “radically different colonial regimes”, and their heritage is an explanatory factor of the sharp contrast between the present-day political situations within the dyad. In fact, this sharp contrast can be identified in the literature on Somaliland and the Federal Republic of Somalia. As a matter of fact, Somalia is often directly labelled as a failed state (see Hammond, 2013; Kaplan, 2010 ; Ingiriis, 2020). If last year, Somalia’s authorities were able to successfully organise their first election since 1969, the Mogadishu city elections held in December 2025 (Ali, 2025), security challenges remain numerous in Somalia. For instance, several organisations continued to point out security challenges caused by the presence of Al-Shabab in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2026), which still had in 2025, “control over vast rural areas in southern and central Somalia.” (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, p.3). As for Somaliland, if inter-clan conflicts remain an issue for Hargeisa (International Crisis Group, 2026), it mostly portrays the achievements of the entity as a success in terms of state and peace-building (see Kaplan, 2008; Ridout, 2012) as well as the democratic character of its political institution (see Yeshaneh, 2026)

The period spanning from the moment British and Italian Somaliland gained independence, respectively in June and July 1960, and their subsequent union, until Siad Barre's overthrow in 1991, has been described by (Sheikh et al., 2017, p.1) as "a crucial era in Somalia's efforts in its nation-building project". In their work, Sheikh et al. (2017), looking at factors which influenced Somalia's nation-building initiatives in that period, conclude that such projects failed due to internal factors such as Somalia's "poor leadership" (Sheikh et al, 2017, p.1) and external ones, such as the bipolarism characteristic of the Cold War period. In his work on the adoption of the nation-state model by Somali, Bayeh (2024, p.5) associates this period that follows the overthrow of Siad Barre with the beginning of a "protracted civil war". In the middle of this turmoil, Somaliland declared independence on May 18th of the year, 1991. According to Bayeh, "Somalia itself collapsed" and "created a breeding ground for the rise of clan-based warlords and Islamic militant groups." (2024, p.5), which was discussed in the previous paragraph. The following section is dedicated to the discussion of the rationale for the selection of the dyad among the wider pool of *de facto*-parent state pairs.

3.2.2 Arguments for selection

Firstly, it was considered that among other available *de facto* states, Somaliland is a consolidated *de facto* state as it fulfils the empirical criteria of statehood stated in the Montevideo Convention (Nelson, 2023), allowing, since 1991, *de facto* authorities to achieve nation-building. Furthermore, Somaliland does not have a patron state, limiting the independence of *de facto* authorities (Werner Bastek, 2019), offering more room for the latter to deploy nation-building policies than in other *de facto* state/parent state dyads.

The relative linguistic, ethnic and religious homogeneity of Somalia and Somaliland's populations is considered a strength compared to other dyads with a more salient separation. For instance, if looking at the dyad Republic of Cyprus/Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), one would be struck by the salience of the ethnic division of the island. According to Joseph (2009), the island's contemporary history can be divided into three distinct periods: the pre-independence period during which Cyprus remained a colonial issue; the 1960 - 1974 period characterised by the internal character of the dispute between Greek and Turkish

Chypriotes; the last period, starting from the Turkish invasion in 1974 onwards resulted in what is currently known as the ‘Cyprus problem’. Long ago, before the *de facto* division of the island and even before Cyprus’s independence, Greek and Turkish Cypriots were already linguistically, ethnically, culturally and religiously divided and “remained separate and distinct ethnic groups (Joseph, 2009, p. 378). After its independence from the United Kingdom, Cyprus adopted a constitution grounded on the principles of communal dualism and which institutionalised the separation of the Island’s inhabitants into two separate ethnic groups (Joseph, 2009). If this separation was present in the judiciary, legislative and executive, Joseph (2009) points out that this ethnic fragmentation within the state structures translated into polarisation at the grassroots level, leading to a reproduction of the enshrined ethnic division. Lastly, the post-1974 period marks the beginning of the physical separation of already virtually divided ethnic groups. Compared to Cyprus’s case, the salience of the division of the island breaks with the dissemination of clans all around the Somali lands.

Additionally, social media such as Facebook, TikTok and in the chosen dyad are allegedly widespread among the populations (Hassan, 2025). In the selected dyad, platforms such as Facebook are used widely by locals to discuss political issues and are seen by them as potential tools to influence political processes (Mohamed, 2018).

Another argument for selecting the Somalia-Somaliland dyad, besides its uniqueness, lies in the focus on the literature that has carried out studies of nation-building within *de facto* states. As a matter of fact, such studies have mostly focused on the study of Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In that enterprise, some authors favoured the study of nation-building by means of single-case studies mainly centred around Transnistria (See Osipov & Vasilevich, 2019; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011; Marandici, 2020) or the Republika Srpska Krajina (see Kolstø & Paukovic, 2013). Nation-building within *de facto* states has also been studied by means of paired comparison. For instance, Comai and Venturi (2015) compared Abkhazia and Transnistria’s language legislations as one of the available tools in the palette of nation-building tools authorities can choose from. Similarly, small-N studies have also been conducted. Dembińska (2022), for instance, compared nation-building processes in Abkhazia, Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In their study of South Caucasian *de facto* states, Blakkisrud and Kolstø (2012) compared state- and nation-building

initiatives within these entities. Lastly, O’Loughlin and Kolosov (2020) specifically focused on the analysis of political and cultural icons in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdniestria and Abkhazia. In that sense, nation-building within the Somaliland-Somalia dyad has been overlooked. Hence, explaining its selection.

3.3. Methods: Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis has been selected for its focus on the way language constructs social reality. CDA has been chosen as this thesis aims to show how individuals as members of these communities contribute to the social construction of reality and their perceptions of nation-building. According to Fairclough (2023, p.11), CDA “brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis a particular focus on discourse and relations between discourses and other social elements (including power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities)”. This connection between discourse, ideologies and social identities is of particular interest to this study as it allows us to unveil the way grassroots communities in the parent and the *de facto* state engage with nation-building.

Within the field, several approaches and models of CDA can be identified. For instance, one can mention Ruth Wodak’s model of Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA), which focuses on the way national identities are discursively constructed, maintained and transformed (Altaf et al., 2024). Besides this plurality, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) highlight five specificities they share. Firstly, Jørgensen and Phillips posit that these approaches are interested in looking at discursive practices as the ways “through which texts are *produced* (created) and *consumed* (received and interpreted)” (2002, p.61). Secondly, CDA approaches share the assumptions that discourse “both constitutive and constituted” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.61). Thirdly, CDA approaches highlight the importance of taking into account social context when studying language use (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.62). As for the last two common features, CDA, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) emphasise that discursive practices “contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups” (2002, p.63). Beyond unveiling power relations, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) add that CDA approaches think of

themselves as “ a critical approach which is committed to social change” (2002, p.64), not as a passive observer. These common features constitute the methodological basis of this study.

In this thesis, Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework for CDA, which encompasses “as text, discursive practice, and social practice,” (1992, p.62) is used to analyse how discourse will shape both the content and the structure of the analysis. A brief summary of the main assumptions Fairclough (1992) relies on to establish his model will be provided, and its main features will be presented. Additionally, a short discussion regarding the analysis and the use of visual materials is provided.

The first assumption Fairclough relies on is that language use constitutes “ a form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity” (1992, p.63). According to him, this implies two broad considerations. Firstly, Fairclough sees discourse as “ a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation” (1992, p.63). This assumption aligns with the goal of studying grassroots engagement with nation-building and the use of Fox and Miller-Idriss’s modalities of “talking” and “performing” (2008, p.537) the nation, as it is considered in this thesis that individuals as agents can and may act upon top-down nation-building initiatives by engaging with it discursively and by the use of national symbols. Secondly, according to Fairclough (1992, p.64), “discourse, social practice and social structure” are deeply interrelated.

As eluded to earlier, Fairclough’s (1992) framework for conducting CDA revolves around three dimensions: text, practice and interpretation, which will drive and shape the analysis. According to Fairclough, the first step of the implementation of this model of CDA is labelled “description” and consists of “the analysis of texts” (Fairclough, 1992, p.73). The second component of this model, practice, is dedicated to the “ analysis of discourse practice” (p.73). According to Fairclough, discursive practice “involves processes of text production, distribution, and consumption” (p.79). The final dimension of the model, labelled interpretation, embeds the “analysis of social practice of which the discourse is a part” (p.73)

In his work, Fairclough (1992) provides a visualisation of the three-dimensional model, which will be applied throughout the analysis. It was reproduced by the author for illustration (view Figure 1).

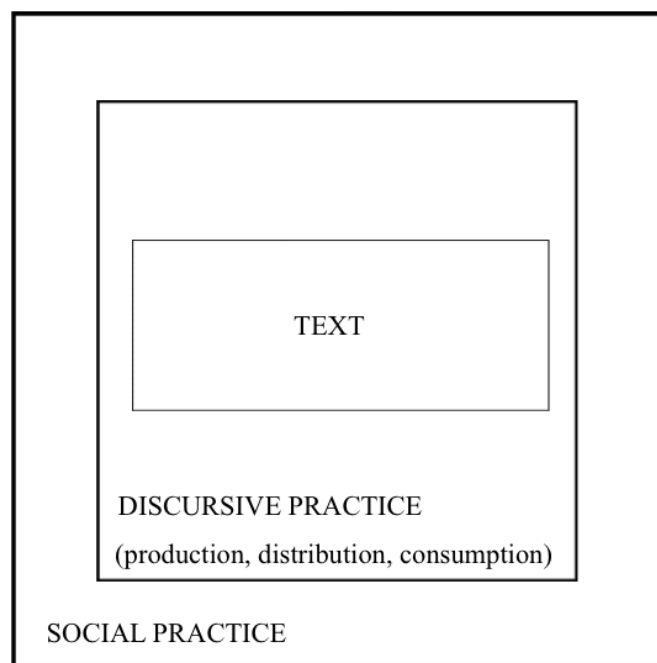


Figure 1 – Fairclough’s visualisation of the three-dimensional model (1992)

Throughout the analysis, particular attention will be dedicated to textual analysis, which will constitute the bulk. The second dimension of Fairclough’s model (1992) will mostly be discussed in the last section of the analysis. As for its third dimension, it will be discussed throughout the analysis chapters.

As online platforms such as Reddit, Facebook and TikTok not only display textual elements but also include visuals, CDA must be multimodal to efficiently analyse the data. In this sense, an understanding of discourse limited to "language in use in speech and writing" (Wodak and Meyer, 2001, p.5) would not allow a satisfactory analysis of the collected data. Hence, this study employs Fairclough’s inclusive understanding of texts that considers “multi-modal” texts composed of language and visual elements (Fairclough, 2023).

This thesis relies on utterances which were shared by users on the internet, understood here as being part of their own *genre*, as “semiotic ways of acting and interacting” (Fairclough,

2023, p.13). Reconfigurations of the internet and the new possibilities for communication allowed by the shift towards a Web 2.0 did lead to the enactment of a more participatory logic (Schneider, 2018). These transformations impacted nationalism by permitting its reproduction within the online sphere (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021), thus impacting the theoretical framework this thesis is built upon. Such shifts within Web 2.0 that increase possibilities for users to communicate and create data have an impact on the production of discourse itself. According to Majid Khosravini (2014), the new participatory logic of Web 2.0 empowers ordinary people by allowing them to produce text and share it. According to the former, CDA has traditionally been interested in decoding mass media discourses which were mainly unidirectional, breaking with the new participatory logic allowed by the web 2.0 (Majid Khosravini, 2014). Precisely, he posits that this new participatory logic breaks with the study of traditional mass media, as well as some of the traditional assumptions of CDA, which usually utilises “powerful texts and data sources” (Majid Khosravini, 2014, p. 288). Thus, studying discourse within the new boundaries of the reconfigurations of the web 2.0 “has arguably compromised the power behind discourse” (Majid Khosravini, 2014, p. 290), favouring a more agency-centred conception of power and discourse, the power in discourse.

3.4. Data collection

3.4.1. Locating the data: grassroots communities as online communities

Aiming to study the ways grassroots communities engage with nation-building, this thesis employs the concept of online communities, which is seen as the locus of user engagement with nation-building. According to Savolainen et al. (2022), online communities are formed and sustained through the Internet as the medium of interaction, where a sufficiently large number of people engage in public discussions with enough emotional investment to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. These communities require regular participation and communication, and include platforms like forums and chatrooms, where users can build meaningful connections (Savolainen et al., 2022). If both fit Savolainen’s definition, the latter relate to the study of phenomena whose existence is not confined to the internet and extends beyond it. Hence, this study utilises the concept of online communities as engagement with nation-building is not confined to the online sphere and extends beyond it. This study focuses

on online communities affiliated with either the parent state or the de facto state based on their platform names and stated purposes (e.g., in their description), which indicate whether they are meant to gather users from one side, the other, or both. In other words, online communities affiliated with one of the dyad's entities were selected on a thematic basis.

Within this study, the selected subs, hashtags, groups and the Discord channel are understood as being online communities. As a matter of fact, all of them do share the prerequisite identified by X to constitute such a community: "the possibility for potential participants to communicate with one another in a community-specific way" (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002, p.71). Beyond this necessary qualification, several ways for identifying online communities have been developed. For instance, Lazar and Preece (1998) note that their supporting software, their link with physical communities, their boundedness and some of their attributes are ways to typologise them. In this study, the theme they share, Somalia and Somaliland, has been identified as the common denominator to categorise them. Within Stanoevska-Slabeva's typology of user communities (2002), this commonality corresponds to communities of discussion of the sub-type of interest communities. Such aggregations are being understood as "emerging around a defined topic and attract participants interested in" (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002, p.79). To illustrate this point, one can take a look at the sub r/Somalia's description, which clearly states the community's purposes: "Welcome to /r/Somalia, a subreddit where you can share and discuss everything related to Somalia and Somalis." (r/Somalia, 2026).

3.4.2. Selecting the texts

The first step of this study's data collection process consists of the selection of samples within selected online communities, which will later be analysed using CDA. One of the fundamental questions that the researcher has to reflect upon when selecting suitable texts on which to conduct Discourse Analysis (including CDA) is the one formulated by Dunn and Neumann: "if discourse analysts read texts, how do they determine which texts?" (2016, p.91). Selection is a challenge this study is confronted with when facing the immensity of the data pool the internet represents, one that the researcher must tackle. In fact, the selection of texts deemed relevant ultimately delimits the analysis and delimiting the data pool does not come without problems (Dunn and Neumann, 2016). In the same book, Dunn and Neuman argue for the selection of "canonical texts" (2016, p.93). As previously mentioned, the embeddedness of our study within the online sphere and our focus on everyday people's discursive practices

instead of elites, ultimately lead this study to avoid this type of text. In fact, the texts this thesis will rely upon will be closer to utterances, as the smallest possible unit of discourse, rather than canonical texts (Dunn and Neumann, 2016, p.93).

Another question raised by Dunn and Neumann is the following: “When does one have enough material?” (2016, p.100). In fact, relying on too few texts would ultimately reduce the validity of the findings and thus, the quality of the study itself. Dunn and Neumann picture the ideal situation for a discursive analyst as the coverage of “a maximum of eventualities” (2016, p.101). Conversely, reducing the data pool risks the eviction of highly relevant texts which the analysis would benefit from (Dunn & Neumann, 2016, p.101). Being subject to time constraints, choices have to be made in order to reduce the data pool and exclude irrelevant texts. For that purpose, several strategies will be put in place for the selection of relevant texts. Firstly, a time frame for data (text) collection is set in order to significantly reduce the size of the data pool and render the study possible. This MA thesis will analyse user-generated data from 2020 to the first half of May 2026, including. A five-year period is justified by the sharp increase in internet use within Somalia, which determines access to social media platforms. Internet access was limited before 2020 (2.04% in 2017) but rose to 15% in 2020 and to 27.6% in 2022 (World Bank). Thus, selecting this time period ensures that sufficient online activity exists and that relevant texts are produced to analyse grassroots engagement. Secondly, to ensure that only relevant texts to this MA thesis’s objectives are being analysed, purposive sampling based on thematic considerations is conducted prior to the study.

Besides data collected via Nethnography, texts will be collected on two of the most popular social media platforms in Somalia and Somaliland: Facebook and TikTok (Hassan, 2025), as well as Reddit. It is worth specifying that the former constitutes the main data source for this study in both the posts selected and the Nethnography conducted in parallel. The decision to grant Reddit such a central role in this MA thesis, despite the challenges it introduces, was made for the following reasons. First, compared to the other platforms that have been selected to study the dyad, Reddit allows more reflexivity and more in-depth exchanges between users (Shah et al., 2025). Such a feature allows discussions that “resemble support group discussions or community town halls” (Shah et al., 2025, p.99). Secondly, Shah et al. (2025, p.99) in their study of conversations on alcohol on various Reddit subs, also note that unlike Facebook, the anonymity provided to users “reduces social desirability concerns and encourages users to

share authentic, often vulnerable narratives about addiction, recovery, and social norms around alcohol”. If the object of this study differs significantly from Shah et al.’s work (2025), it is posited that similar exchanges on even more sensitive and traumatic topics related to the civil war, for instance, are encouraged by anonymity on the platform. As populations within the dyad have been exposed to torture, rape and massacres from the 70s onwards and during the civil war (Morgan, 2020), which are relevant to the study of nation-building, the allowances provided by Reddit, which allow the study of these unbridled stories, further explain this centrality of the platform in the study. Lastly, compared to Reddit, content on TikTok is “less conducive to the type of text-based, community-driven, peer-to-peer dialogue” (Shah et al., 2025, p.99). As such, text-based data is favoured for the conduction of CDA, which further justifies the decision to grant Reddit a central role in this MA thesis.

If, given the volume and depth of content on these subs, groups and comment sections, manual selection was conducted. Within the multitude of platforms selected for the conduction of this study, Reddit and Discord are seen as the main sources of texts for the analysis due to the specificities of these platforms.

3.5. Collection procedure and selected sample

As a consequence of the plurality of features in each social media platform sheltering these online communities, this thesis could not rely on a unified data selection process. Hence, the development of an adapted procedure for each platform.

3.5.1. Reddit Posts

In their large-scale analysis of around 700 manuscripts which used Reddit as a data source, Proferes et al. (2021) noted a rising trend in the use of such data within the literature. In parallel, Proferes et al. (2021) established that a significant share of these studies (roughly 30%) proved to be lacking sufficient details regarding data collection procedures. Against this background, this sub-section consists of an attempt to describe the selection processes this study employs. As previously mentioned, the bulk of the collected data this thesis utilises originates from Reddit and more specifically, users’ discussions within subs. Reddit Subs are understood as “self-organised communities of interest created by users themselves” (Finlay, 2014, p. 19). By communities of interests, Finlay (2014) alludes to the idea that any sub on the platform is dedicated to a specific topic (e.g. r/Somaliland, r/canoeing, or r/birdwatching). Within the

website, an infinity of subs touching upon any imaginable topics can be found. For users, there are two main ways to access subs. If they can simply stumble upon a sub by clicking on a post recommended by the algorithm within their respective feeds (the top page), Reddit’s structure also allows them to directly access subs within the main search bar. Once entering a given sub, users are able to scroll through it and open any post they are interested in. After accessing a post, users can navigate through the comments posted by their peers, and if desired, they may comment as well. In an attempt to identify the main research directions on Reddit, Medvedev et al. visualised the platform’s structure using a tree model (2019, p.185, view Figure 2).

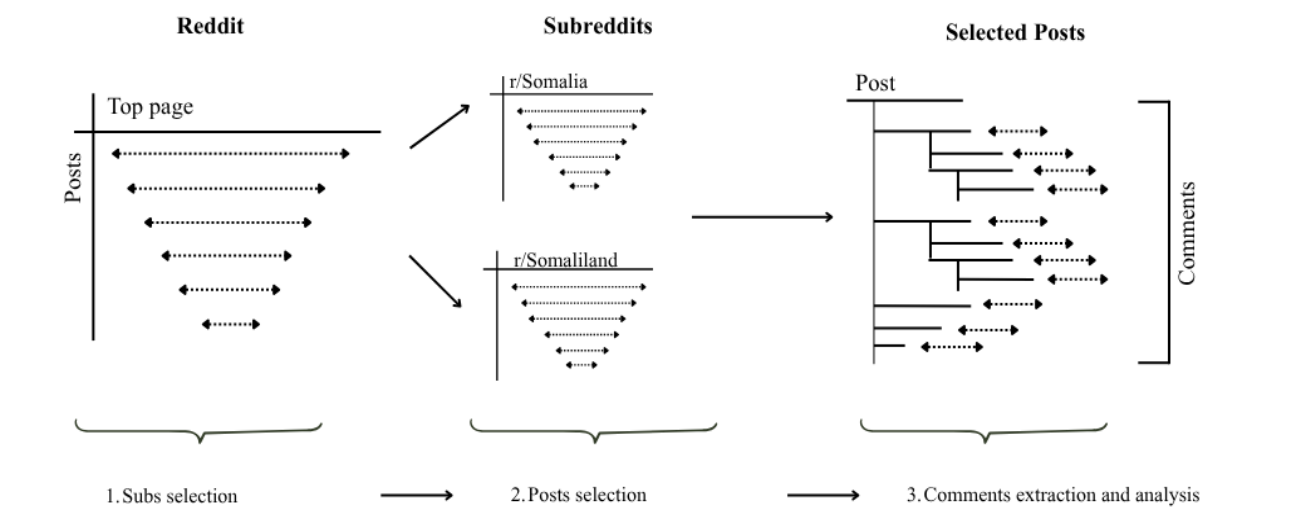


Figure 2 – Medvedev et al.’s Reddit Tree: Visualising the Study’s Data Source Selection

Adapted to our study, this tree structure sheds light on the different stages of the data-collection process. It has followed three main steps. Firstly, two subs were selected within a broader pool on Reddit’s top page: r/Somalia (<https://www.reddit.com/r/Somalia/>) and r/Somaliland (<https://www.reddit.com/r/Somaliland/>). These two subs were selected for their obvious affiliation with the two units forming the dyad that this study focuses on. r/Somalia has 44k members (as of April 2026). Users are invited to « share and discuss everything related to Somalia and Somalis. » (sub description) while having to abide by the sub’s own rules (such as no spamming, no baiting, or no islamophobia and Qabyaalad). The topics evoked there range from news, questions about Islam, and culture to dating apps in Somalia. An additional argument for choosing this dyad lies in the frequency of interactions within the subs, as Reddit

indicates around 3 500 weekly contributors. Somaliland-related subs allegedly gather fewer users, and fewer interactions occur within them. However, as r/Somaliland still gathers nearly 1 100 users and shelters a significant number of discussions, it was selected for this study.

The second step of this data collection process on Reddit consists of post-selection within the individual subs previously selected. At this stage, three main criteria were used. To ensure relevance with the research question, two basic hashtags (# Somalia and #Somaliland) were used in the search bar. After analysing the pool of posts selected using #Somalia and #Somaliland, the set was extended using four more hashtags: #Deen, #War, #Qabil, and #Isaaq in conformation with purposive sampling principles. If, according to Moser and Korstjens (2017, p.10), the researcher must “provide a description and rationale” for selection in a qualitative sampling plan, which is the aim of this sub-section, they also specify that “what emerges from data analysis will shape subsequent sampling decisions” (Moser & Korstjens, 2017, p.15)

Research results were then filtered using one of the filters provided by the platform: “Relevance”. Subsequently, it was ensured that the selected posts fitted the chosen timeframe for the study, as well as having a minimum of two comments. Such a minimum was chosen to avoid selecting posts without a sufficient level of interaction. The selected posts are displayed below in Appendices 1 and 2.

After having successfully isolated the individual posts corresponding to each selected sub, discussion threads were carefully read. It is worth noting that the entirety of the comments was selected for analysis. Those which have been chosen for this study were copied and transferred to a blank document for analysis. At this stage, another layer of criteria for selection was added before extraction and analysis. In the prolongation of the logic used to choose the posts, the fit between the topic of a given discussion within the comment sections of the selected posts guided the last step of this data-collection process. Beyond their relevance, attention to specific trends shaping discussion patterns on Reddit was also taken into account. For instance, trolling, which can be defined as comments that are posted for the purpose of creating “a rise out of the other people on the subreddits” (Fichman & Sharp, 2020, p.2), was avoided as much as possible. Additionally, longer comments were favoured over smaller ones to maximise the depth of the data left for analysis.

3.5.2. Facebook groups

On Facebook, two groups were selected for analysis. The Facebook search bar was used using Somalia and Somaliland as keywords, filtering by “groups”. No supplementary filters were added, and manual identification of the most popular and more active groups was performed.

Beyond its clear association with one of the dyad counterparts, the public group “Somaliland Recognition Forecast” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/379139468770714/media>) was included in the study for the high number of users it attracts (nearly 154 000 as of May 2026). The level of interactions was another factor that influenced this choice. As a matter of fact, metadata available in the “Activity” section of the page indicates that in April 2026, more than 8000 publications were made by users. The same logic was applied for the selection of the group “Somalia” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/318170783029018>), which gathers nearly 288 000 members as of May 2026 and sheltered more than 5000 publications in April of 2026. To ensure continuity between the dyadic logic embedded in the research design and the dataset, Facebook groups that did not follow this logic were avoided. For instance, the group “Somali online” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/501197507670231/about>), and its ambiguous title was not selected for this reason, despite counting nearly 2.5 million members.

Within both groups, the selection procedure can be described as follows. Due to a high number of posts, the selection process only used the most basic keywords to access content which matters to answer the research question. On “Somalia”, #Somaliland was used to access user-generated data while #Soomaaliya was used for “Somaliland Recognition Forecast”. As Facebook’s built-in features do not allow one to filter research by comments, likes or shares while using the in-group research tool, other criteria were used to display relevant content. In addition, results were filtered by year, starting from 2020, the starting year of this study’s timeframe. As the posts selected all Unlike Reddit, the great majority of the content posted on the chosen groups is in the Somali language and must be translated to English by the author. Therefore, an additional criterion was added to proceed with post selection: posts that consist solely of the reposting of videos or audio in Somali or Arabic from other accounts were excluded. Considering the criteria mentioned above, the first five posts of each year were considered for analysis. As posts within the chosen groups do not only touch upon topics which are relevant to the goals of this thesis, an ultimate criterion was added to exclude content unrelated to the studied dyad. Were also excluded from collection posts from news outlet which

solely reposted news. In other words, solely posts made by personal accounts were selected. Lastly, the data was exported to an external file for analysis.

It is worth specifying that due to the centrality of the Somali language to communicate within these groups, compared to Reddit for instance, #Somalia and its translation in Somali #Soomaaliya was used instead. As the term Somaliland is the same in both languages, no changes were made on that side.

3.5.3. TikTok Videos

The first step of this selection procedure consisted of the creation of a brand-new TikTok account to ensure the avoidance of any potential algorithmic influence. As TikTok does not allow users to easily access the most popular videos on a given # (e.g., Somaliland), the choice to manually select relevant accounts from which to select videos has been made. In fact, such a choice made video selection easier, as from any TikTok account, several filters (e.g. newest, oldest, popular) are available to sort the videos. To reflect the bottom-up understanding of nation-building this thesis is embedded in, only TikTok certified accounts from institutions in Somaliland and Somalia have been selected. When selecting these accounts, the popularity of the videos posted, which ensures a sufficient level of interaction, the institution they represent, as well as the presence of an official certification from TikTok, have been taken into account. On these accounts, ministers and state-owned media are able to spread a wide range of visual and audio content such as speeches, edits or official communications. For the Federal Republic of Somalia, the official accounts of the President, the Prime Minister and the office were selected. As for Somaliland, the accounts of the Ministry of Information, Culture and National Guidance, the Presidency of the Republic of Somaliland, as well as the Official Television of the Republic of Somaliland have been selected. On each of these accounts, manual selection using the filter “Popular” has been conducted. Videos selected were considered to have gathered enough comments to later be analysed. Appendix 3 displays the videos that were selected for analysis.

Subsequently, Apify's clockworks TikTok scraper, as well as a scraper originating from a public GitHub repository¹, were used to extract comments from the selected videos. This raw data was then exported in CSV files for analysis. If usernames were extracted alongside comments, they were not utilised in the analysis, which solely relies on textual data produced by these users rather than their online identity. Here, it is relevant to note that compared to the data collected on Reddit, texts consist of a majority of short statements or series of emoticons and long discussion threads within the comment section remain rare. As displayed above in the table, a high number of comments was retrieved from the selected videos. To cope with the depth of the data set and target specific topics, keywords were used within CSV files containing the exported comments. The following keywords were used to retrieve comments: Qabiil, Qabyaalad, Deen, Isaaq, Somaliland, and Soomaaliya. Selected comments were later moved into a blank document for analysis.

3.5.4 AI-Assisted Translation and Ethics

If the great majority of text read, selected and analysed on Reddit and Discord was originally produced by users in the English language, encounters with raw data on TikTok and Facebook were often characterised by the pervasiveness of Somali language. According to Abfalter et al. (2020), transparency regarding translation decisions can increase the quality of qualitative research. Conversely, not elaborating on that matter would reduce it. Hence, the aim of this section is to explain translation decisions as well as acknowledge the use of AI in assisting the author to translate text. It utilises Abfalter et al.'s framework aimed at serving "as a systematic guide for translation decisions in qualitative empirical research" (2020, p.482). In this endeavour, the researchers developed a set of questions and answering the most relevant for this study will increase its methodological rigour.

To the first question, they pose, "Why?" Translating (Abfalter et al., 2020, p.471), it is answered that, as the author of this thesis, besides a few words learnt during the research process, is not familiar with the Somali language, translation was required. As for "When?", translation of texts from Somali to English was performed before data collection (when exploring the potential online communities), during data collection, and during data analysis.

¹ st3lll4. (2026) tiktok-scraper [Source code]. GitHub. <https://github.com/st3lll4/tiktok-scraper> (retrieved April 10, 2026)

Such translations were not included in the bulk of the text in the form of quotations due to ethical considerations elaborated later in this chapter. Concerning the “What?”, texts extracted from TikTok comment spaces, Facebook posts and comments and anecdotally on Reddit when required were translated.

In the same framework, Abfalter et al. (2020) highlight the importance of specifying “the means and tools for translating’ (p.471). Here, it is necessary to describe and name the tools that were used to translate the above-mentioned texts. On the one hand, Google Translate and online dictionaries were used mostly on Reddit and Discord when the need to translate a single word (e.g. *Deen*) appeared. On the other hand, AI was used to translate bigger portions of text. Precisely, Microsoft’s large language model, M365 Copilot, based on the GPT-5 Model, was used in this thesis². It is important to add that the choice was made to exclude Google Translate since, after comparison with some of the available large language models, it has been determined that the quality of the translation was higher, especially for longer utterances. Such use complies with the updated guidelines for using AI for teaching and studies of the University of Tartu. To ensure transparency and compliance with the guidelines, the use of M365 Copilot will be referenced and acknowledged when displaying translation extracted from the chats.

A unique prompt was used in each of the instances of translation from Somali to English, which relied on M365 Copilot: “Translate the following Somali social media message into natural, fluent English. The text comes from Facebook or TikTok. It may include slang, shorthand, emojis, sarcasm, or humor. Preserve the speaker’s tone (joking, serious, emotional, rude, flirty, etc.). Do not censor or soften the language. Do not add explanations unless something is unclear. Somali text: [INSERT TEXT]” (Microsoft, 2026).

In this study, the great majority of the presented data originates from Reddit. Here, it is worth mentioning that on the platform, both public data (e.g., comments, posts, usernames) and non-public data (e.g. private messages) could have been collected. However, it is crucial to specify here that public data (posts and comments) is the only source of data upon which this study is

² Microsoft. M365 Copilot (GPT-5 Chat Model). 2026, <https://copilot.microsoft.com>. Large language model.

based upon. Such data is public according to Reddit's privacy policy, and when interacting, users are aware of the publicity of their data (Reddit, 2026). Hence, users' consent, which would have been impractical to gather, due to the high number of comments, was not sought. Users whose posts were directly quoted in the bulk of the text were anonymised so their usernames do not appear directly in this thesis.

Guaranteeing anonymity on TikTok, Facebook, and Discord, platforms which do not generate random usernames like Reddit, and where users often display highly personal and potentially sensitive information on their profiles, was deemed infeasible, and consent could not be sought. To avoid any possibility for a third party to trace back users of these platforms, which could potentially harm them, the choice has been made not to directly reference these posts in the text. However, this data still played a central role in the author's process of answering the research question of this thesis.

3.6. Small-scale Nethnography

To complement the CDA conducted on chosen texts on TikTok and Facebook, a small-scale nethnography will be conducted on two Reddit subs: r/Somalia and r/Somalilanders, as well as an associated Discord server r/Somalia (<https://discord.com/invite/GqyDJaW>). r/Somalia had been selected earlier following the procedure detailed in the previous subsection. It is worth noting that if conducting Nethnography on r/Somaliland was initially planned, it has been decided after the first session of observations to extend observations to a new Reddit sub: r/Somalilanders (<https://www.reddit.com/r/Somalilanders/>). This decision is justified by the high number of interactions occurring within it as well as its relevance to the purposes of the study. Additionally, it is posited that moving away from r/Somaliland, which already constitutes a central pillar of the data collection, is beneficial for this MA thesis as it broadens the data set, ensuring triangulation.

In terms of technical details, fieldwork was divided into sessions as the field was accessible at any time. The first session took place on April 6th, 2026, and the last one on May 10th of the same year. In total, a total of 8 hours were spent collecting data in the field.

It is worth noting that while other platforms will be approached through keyword searches, the conduct of Netnography will allow us to capture unexpected patterns, thus enriching our findings. According to Addeo et al. (2019), ethnography online is a qualitative approach that aims to capitalise on the rapid and constant developments occurring on the internet, and several labels such as ‘Cyber Ethnography’ or ‘Internet Ethnography’ have been used to describe it. Originating from Kozinets’s work, Netnography is, in short, “ethnography adapted to the study of online communities” (Kozinets, 2002, p.61). As it derives from ethnography, any of its online versions shares some of the qualities an ethnography contains. According to Hine (2015), an ethnographic approach has the following advantages: it allows one to observe phenomena in real time, to understand what the participants are doing, to have a prolonged presence in the field, the emergence of new themes while conducting research. To Hine, such benefits of using an ethnographic approach translate to the online environment and are: “as relevant to an ethnography of an embedded, embodied, everyday internet as they are to any other setting” (2015, p. 56). Furthermore, ethnography has been chosen in this study for its fit with the theory of everyday nationalism, as it allows researchers to “experience and explore everyday life in depth and detail” (Hine, 2017, p.412). This study specifically uses Kozinets’ netnography, “a qualitative research approach that transposes and adapts the traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques to the study of the online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets 2002, p.2). If it shares many common points with traditional ethnography, Kozinets’ netnography differs from it in several ways. Compared to ethnography, it is less time-consuming, does require an understanding of the specificities of the online world, increased field site possibilities, and is less intrusive (Addeo et al., 2019). As this study focuses on the Somalia-Somaliland dyad, travel would have been needed for data collection if a traditional ethnography had been conducted.

3.6.1 Procedural details

In this study, ethnography will take a secondary role and is used as a way to increase the validity of the findings by triangulation. According to Addeo et al. (2019), netnography can be divided into 6 steps: definition of the research question, selection of the field, access to the field, data collection, data analysis, and data presentation. To answer our research question, an adequate field to conduct netnography must be selected. Breaking with the traditional physicality of the ethnographic field site, the online ethnographer must provide a definition of the field he

immerses in (Hine, 2017). The concept of online communities, developed earlier, is used to define the field site of this Netnography. According to Kozinets (2010), the criteria to choose the field (and by extension, our online communities) are: relevance to the research question, activity, potential for interaction, heterogeneity of participants, and data richness. The subs r/Somalia, r/Somalilanders and the Discord server r/Somalia do fit this set of criteria and are suitable field sites for netnography.

To access the field, Addeo et al. (2019) distinguish between open and closed online environments. As r/Somalia and r/Somaliland are open online environments, gaining access to the field is not an obstacle to this study. Regarding the Discord server, registration was necessary. Before collecting information, netnography requires choosing between two main types of roles: covert access (the researcher does not disclose his/her identity) and overt access (identity disclosure) (Addeo et al., 2019). If the former might raise ethical debates, its benefits in terms of obtrusiveness make it an ideal choice (Addeo et al., 2019). The main potential ethical concern is analysing user-generated content without explicit consent in both fields. Since Reddit subs are public, we consider consent implicit: by creating an account and posting, users allow anyone, including researchers, to view their content. Still, we will not display usernames; they will be changed to ensure anonymity. Discord, being more restricted and not public, could raise further ethical concerns around anonymity. We will anonymise users as on Reddit. However, we do not plan to announce our presence and aim in this Discord to avoid affecting naturally occurring interactions. Regarding information collection, Kozinets (2023) posits that Netnography implies a rupture with the idea of field notes as the entirety of online traces and interactions might not appear useful for the purposes of a given study. It is replaced by an immersion journal, which “accounts for time spent and activities performed while experiencing, observing, and searching for digital traces.” (Kozinets, 2023, p.7). Using an immersion journal rather than field notes can also help deal with sensitive user-generated data by simply providing a description of it without directly saving it (Kozinets, 2023, p.7).

3.6.2. Data analysis

The conduction of netnography implies the collection of three distinct types of data: immersive, investigative, and interactive (Kozinets, 2023). The first one, collected in the immersion

journal, “captures cultural reality but also reflects the researcher’s perspective, positionality, knowledge, expertise, interests, and evolving understanding” (Kozinets, 2023, p.9). Immersive data is analysed “as introspection” (Kozinets, 2023, p.9). meaning the researcher reflects on their impression of the time spent in the field. The second type, investigative data, encompasses the entirety of the online traces found in the field, ranging from posts and comments to images and avatars. Such data has to be analysed “as discourse”. In this study, investigative data consists of Reddit and Discord-based online traces such as posts, comments, videos, links sent, etc. For this part of the analysis, CDA will be conducted on these online traces that are here, understood as discursive elements “shaping and being shaped by the prevailing norms, ideologies, and power dynamics of its milieu” (Kozinets, 2023, p.10). Lastly, Kozinets describes interactive data as “the result of social engagement with research participants and possesses a conversational character.” (Kozinets, 2023, p.10). To generate more data, interaction with users will take place within Discord and Reddit. Interacting as a covert ethnographer requires deep knowledge of the studied community so as not to be discovered by users and produce relevant data. For that purpose, Interaction will intervene at the end of the data collection process.

4. Talking to the Nation:

Within this chapter, the analysis of the studied samples has been organised in the following way: main discourses were identified, and their analysis was presented on a thematic basis. Using Fox and Miller-Idriss's "talking the nation" (2008, p.537), this section aims to uncover how users on the selected platforms discursively engage with the nation and, ultimately, nation-building. The way users, seen as agents, "give discursive shape and content to their otherwise taken-for-granted understanding of the nation" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.539) is the focus of this section. This chapter first delves into discourses invoking clannism. It then moves on to the use of religion in the studied texts, the framing of Somali historical events. Finally, it treats discourses surrounding recognition.

4.1. Clannism/Tribalism

In this sub-section, the conduction of CDA on the available portions of the raw data allowed the author to highlight two grand narratives deployed by users about the idea of '*qabiil*' (clan, tribe) and '*Qabyaalad*' (clanism, tribalism). This section posits that, unsurprisingly and on both sides of the dyad and their associated communities, clanism and clan identity are taken-for-granted and interiorised. On the one hand, *Qabyaalad* is framed as a threat to the Somali people as a whole. On the other hand, Somaliland is portrayed as an inherently clanist or tribalist project.

4.1.1. Naturalisation of the clan structure: '*qabiil*' as a given

Starting with the establishment of common grounds, the analysis of different posts and discussions unsurprisingly did not show any discursive contestation of the clan-based social structure. Overall, clanic structure is discursively reproduced in these users' interactions within the subs. Often used as a tool to validate claims, users frequently mentioned their declared clan belonging before stating their position: "Fully Isaaq just to clarify."(user1, 2025) ; "I'm warsangeli from sanaag." (user2, 2024). Markers of appartenance such as "fully" or "I'm" are often used to highlight this feeling of belonging:

"I love my isaaq people it's honestly makes my heartbreak seeing them wanting to separate." (user4, 2025)

Among other topics, clans are often discussed, and their existence is, in the texts analysed, not debated: “The Gadabursi clan who make up the majority in the region shares the same lineage as Isaaq. Both are part of the greater Dir clan.”(Deleted account1, 2025). Despite the acknowledgement of this plurality of social identities, *qabiils* are, in the studied corpus of texts, acknowledged along with the idea of a united Somali identity. For instance, a user, evoking the Isaaq clan members, stated:

“In qurbada we are neighbors, go the same mosque and even marry each other. There is no difference between us but when it comes to politics we are divided. In my eyes all Somalis are equal” (user4, 2025).

Here, the user first emphasises the idea of a shared religious daily life and the porosity of community boundaries when it comes to marriage. For this user, the existence of an “us” and a “we”, which is still used, has to be attributed to politics. Other instances of attempts to erase borders between various components of the Somali social body also include culture and language:

“And yet we're literally the same people, literally no difference when it comes to religion, when it comes to food, when it comes to culture, when it comes to language down to our genetics. Somalia is literally one of the few homogeneous countries in Africa”(Deleted account2, 2025)

In text, the user entails, by enumerating common features of the Somali community, that clannism is thus the last obstacle to unity. The user also replaces Somalia within the broader African space, and especially more ethnically heterogeneous countries (one could think about the Ethiopian neighbour).

Besides attempting to portray common grounds between all Somali people, which are evidenced here by looking at positions on the deictic axis, spatiality is also used as a means to invoke the idea of unity:

“I didn't even know until recently that my great grandfather was from Berbera. My mom told me that. I have family in Somaliland. I have family in Puntland. I have family in Jubaland. We intermarry. We travel. We are literally the same people. Same language. Same religion.

Same bloodlines. So when I see people online acting like we are completely separate civilizations it feels insane.”(Deleted account3, 2026)

In this case, bringing up Berbera and Somaliland as family heritage, the user attempts to put forward the ontological claim that Somali people, regardless of their geographic location, are the same people. As Somaliland and Puntland are, within the studied online communities, often reminding users about the latter’s secession, the reader’s standpoint, associated with secession and separation, is used as a way to give more credit to the subsequent argument made about unity.

4.1.2. Presenting clannism (*Qabyaalad*) as a threat to Somali unity

Besides the discursive reproduction of *qabiil* identity and Somali unity, *Qabyaalad* is then constructed as a direct threat to the Somali people as a whole. It is worth noting that this narrative was found to be predominant in online communities associated with Somalia. First, it is presented as a threat to the country’s prosperity. Here, a user is arguing that Somalia, without *Qabyaalad*, would be a more “prosperous and powerful nation if *Qabyaalad* didn’t exist.” (Deleted account4, 2022) Instead, the user argues that as a result of *Qabyaalad*, “Somalis are suffering in every corner of shanta somaaliyeed” (Deleted account4, 2022). Further, *Qabyaalad* is depicted as a threat to the security of Somalia as a whole. Clannism is, within the selected texts, often equated to disunity and subsequently, to a kind of vulnerability that the ‘West’ as a whole is willing and able to exploit to reach its own goals:

“clannism won't get us anywhere. We need to be realistic and clear headed. We cannot defend ourselves if our forces are dispersed, we must unite if we stand a chance at improving our people's conditions.”(user5, 2025).

As an external threat to the country, the West, ‘they’, is portrayed as a single actor that “want everyone other than themselves to be divided.” (user6, 2025).

4.1.3. Framing Somaliland: the “qabiil” enclave discourse

Within the selected texts, Somaliland, as a secessionist entity, is portrayed as a qabil enclave. It is equated to a project that was designed by and for the Isaaqs. Somalilanders are often equated to Isaaqs, either by simply stating it as an epistemic truth (e.g., “somalilanders = isaaq” (User7, 2025)) or by way of entailment (e.g. “Perhaps y’all could change ur name to Isaaqia or sth??” (User8, 2023)). Within the selected texts, it has been found that Somaliland’s name was transformed by users into “Isaaqland” (User9, 2023). The users added the suffix land to Isaaq, the proper noun designating the clan family (potentially including sub-clans such as the Haber Jeclo or Garhajis), which remains the “most populous group in Somaliland” (Bradbury, 2008, p.52).

The first layers of discourse portray clanism as a threat to the Somali people. Thus, equating Somaliland to a clanist entity leads to the entailment that Hargeisa is a direct threat to the Somali people as a whole and to Somalia. Furthermore, Somalilanders, as individuals, are portrayed as adopting qabilist/tribalist positions (e.g., “And then they try to gaslight us and say they are not qabilist” (User10, 2023)). Such discourse extends beyond mere accusations of tribalism and equates Somaliland’s bid for secession to a root in hatred for other clans:

“Somaliland's desire to separate from Somalia is rooted in hatred for the other clans of Somalia. The aim is to create a tribal enclave.” (User11, 2026).

Attempting to frame Somaliland as such, the analysis reveals that users often present themselves as being from there, in a move to give better credibility and validity to their claim:

“Stop saying "The north", say Isaaq or SNM. I'm from the North, SNM does not represent me or my people. What I resent the most about Landers and their allies is how they attempt to re-frame a nakedly qabilist project into a national project that isn't clan based.” (User12, 2025).

If for some users, Somaliland is a ‘qabiil enclave’, it is labelled by others as a narrative, a fallacy:

“And then comes the tired narrative that Somaliland is a one-clan enclave. It’s a lie and everyone repeating it knows it. Samaroons have held the presidency. Samaroon and Habar

Awal lead politically. We've had minorities serve as generals, ministers and in senior government roles even a half-Tanzanian and respected Madhiban figures. Compare that to the South, where minorities barely survive let alone lead." (User13,2025)

To support that statement, the evokes r/Somaliland and makes the ontological claim that Somaliland cannot possibly fit this qabiil enclave category by positing that Somaliland's political class was and is not exclusively composed of Isaaq politicians but also includes Samaroon and Habar Gidir representatives. Where Somaliland is portrayed by this user as an clanically inclusive entity, Somalia proper, labelled as the South, is also referred to as an entity which struggles to even guarantee the survival of its minorities.

To a lesser extent than the framing of Somaliland as within the analysed utterances, clanism is also brought up by users to frame Somalia proper. Where Somaliland is portrayed as a tribalist project or enclave by other users, this user's text contest previously analysed texts that invoke attributed similarities to the Somali people, and invoke clanism to negatively frame Somalia:

"Somalia is a Hawiye–Darood duopoly and a joint venture between these two tribes to create a Hell on earth. The irony of you mentioning we are the same people, race, language and religion is nothing new. This was the mantra used for decades to maximize political manipulation rooted in clan dominance. Ethnocentrism, religion, and language have been weaponized and monetized by this Duopoly, while genuine accountability, remorse, and a true sense of Somalinimo toward fellow Somali-speaking people has NEVER existed."
(User14, 2025).

Where Somaliland is portrayed as a tribalist project or enclave by other users, this user contests previously analysed texts that invoke attributed similarities to the Somali people and invoke clanism to negatively frame Somalia.

4.1.4. Clannism as an outdated mentality

Lastly, clannism is equated to a mentality, a cognitive framework:

"Nobody and i mean nobody truly wants division. However Qabil is ingrained deep in our hearts and mind." (User15, 2025).

To the stated claim that division is an outcome that he posits, no Somali desires, the user opposes clannism, as 'ingrained' in their mind. Following the logic of the sentence's structure,

it is entailed that such a cognitive framework is opposed to what he frames as people's true desires. There, clanism is presented as superceding one's willingness. In this sense, the individual agency of Somali people is diminished, and this statement seems to condemn them to navigation in their environment and understand the world guided by clanism as a structure. Using the deictic marker "our", the user suggests that such a characteristic is present in any Somali individual. If the user gives no detailed interpretation of the sets of beliefs clannism consists of, what material consequences are entailed, and may entail for Somali people are detailed:

"It's not what is right but what is necessary to avoid conflicts resulting in another Isaaq genocide." (User15, 2025).

If such a mentality is portrayed as a moral wrong (it's not right), the sentences uttered by users depict it as a facet of Somali that should remain in the past. This is explained by the following text:

"My point is that the youth—those under 30—must start thinking about their future and how to move beyond the clan mentality. Most people clinging to those identities are from the older generation (just look at our politicians as an example); it's time for change." (User16, 2024).

Here, Clanism, as a mentality, a cognitive framework, is posited as belonging to the past by being relegated to an attribute of past generations' identities. More than relegating clanism as an outdated mentality, it is portrayed as an obstacle to future change. Further, the user identifies younger generations as a part of the present and clearly distinguishes them from the past; clanism is relegated. Using the deontic marker "must", the user posits reflections on the future as a duty for young people. In this text, such reflections include moving beyond clanism as a cognitive framework.

"It sad to see qabyalaad is one of the most stupidest self destructive diseases that has sadly affected a lot of our people. People would sabotage and destroy their own country and people whilst working with clear enemies just for the betterment of their minuscule clan." (User17, 2026)

As highlighted in the previous paragraph, the concept of clanism (also referred to as tribalism in the studied data set) is generalised by some users as a cognitive frame that Somali people supposedly share. The idea of clanism as a Somali-spread mentality is also contested by other users in their utterances:

“Just know that most people are not tribalist, there is a vocal minority that get a lot of attention because people love polarizing ideas.” (User39, 2026).

4.2. Islam as a remedy against clannism.

In this second sub-section, the conduction of CDA, the analysis of selected texts has focused on users’ discourses around Islam. It highlights one grand discourse deployed by users regarding the relation between Somali people, Islam and *‘Qabyaalad’*. On the one hand, Islam is seen as a remedy against *Qabyaalad* and reinforces the idea of unity between the Somali people. Here, emphasis is put on intertextuality.

4.2.1. Deictic axis.

Within the selected texts, Islam, as a unifying factor for all Somali people, has been identified as a pattern, and users’ claiming to belong to this faith is often used to further discredit the idea of *Qabyaalad*.

Looking at the way users discursively construct Islam and their position towards it, an encompassing ‘our’ or ‘we’ is often used. Unsurprisingly, the analysis of the selected texts has shown that users tend to refer to Islam as their religion, “our deen”. When connected to Somaliland and its people, references to Islam are often directed to a critique of clanism and a rejection of nationalism.

For instance, one user, placing the “Deen” as an authoritative figure, which, to the users, legitimately dictates the good and the bad:

“Being nationalistic and hateful is never a good thing and our Deen warns against it.”
(Deleted account5).

In the same vein, religion is used to delegitimise the idea of borders, which does not belong to the category of things Somali people should focus on, as placed as irrelevant in the order of things wanted by Allah. For instance, one user declares:

“ Did you know these borders that we made for ourselves don’t mean nothing to Allah? What matter to Allah is how we conduct ourselves and living to please Allah.” (Deleted account6).

In this sense, Islam is portrayed as a factor of unity, placed above the Somali people, who, following this narrative, should not pay attention to earthly borders and focus on their faith. Besides the meaninglessness of borders portrayed by users, religion is also invoked to criticise clanism:

“Allah literally says tribes were made to recognize each other not to claim superiority, and I’d put that ayah everywhere not as decoration but as civic culture.”(Deleted account7)

Finally, Islam is opposed, among other factors, such as the existence of a common language to all Somali people, to tribalism, which is depicted as the sole explanatory factor for the division of the Somali people :

“Because Somaliland and Somalia are the same people with the same religion, same language, same culture, same customs and a shared history the only reason we have been driven apart is due to tribalism and thirst for power” (Deleted account8).

In denying the existence of Somaliland as a separate entity, the user also reproduces the previously identified discourse that portrays Somaliland as an Isaaq enclave by directly associating these two terms in the first sentence.

4.2.2. Intertextuality.

The analysis of the selected texts has shown that further narratives produced by users were using religion to target tribalism. Here, the analysis has focused on intertextuality, broadly understood as “the presence of actual elements of other texts within a text – quotations.”

(Fairclough, p. 39, 2003). Within the present sample, various direct quotations from several collections of Hadits from the Sunni faith can be found:

“Jubayr ibn Mut’im reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, ‘He is not one of us who calls to tribalism. He is not one of us who fights for the sake of tribalism. He is not one of us who dies following the way of tribalism.’ Source: Sunan Abī Dāwūd 5121 It was narrated that Jundab bin ‘Abdullah said: ‘The Messenger of Allah [SAW] said: ‘Whoever fights for a cause that is not clear, advocating tribalism, getting angry for the sake of tribalism, then he has died a death of Jahiliyyah.’” (Deleted account9).

Citing such sources, gives authority to the claim the users make and thus, helps furthering the critique of tribalism. In other instances, users directly use such authoritative sources to legitimise their argumentation towards other community members:

“Now to everyone who wants to claim I'm tribe motivated. I'm not, and if anything I'm against it. Allah SWT literally says in the Quran: O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ‘get to’ know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware So please my Somali people wake up from this stupidity” (Deleted account10, 2026).

4.3. Discussing and Somali History: The Act of Union and civilian massacres in Somaliland under the Siad Barre Regime³⁴.

This sub-section of the chapter is aimed at detailing how users interpret and discuss historical events within the Somalia-Somaliland dyad. It first delves into texts invoking the 1960 Union

³ Here, the label state civilian massacres are used to refer to atrocities perpetrated the Somali Government in Somaliland under Siad Barre culminating in 1988 with the bombings of Hargeisa resulting in the death of at least 40 000 (Reinl, 2014). It is important to specify that these state-led massacres have been considered as “state-sponsored genocidal campaigns leveled at the Isaaq clan-group” (Ingiriis, 2016, p.237). To Ingiriis (2016, p. 237), such campaigns “can be considered as a case of a “forgotten genocide.””. However, as the aim of this sub-section is to grasp how users discursively engage and frame historical events, it cannot afford entering legal debates around the characterisation of a genocide.

and later explores discourses around civilian massacres in Somaliland under the Siad Barre Regime.

4.3.1. The Act of Union.

Within Somaliland-associated communities, the act of Union signed in July 1960 has been identified by the author as one of the central themes of discussions between users.

“Please don’t distort history, and if you want proof of the legality of the union go read the constitution of 1960 and specifically the act of union, Article 1(a). It was written by the leaders of somaliland and passed on June 27 1960. I hate when people speak without knowledge.” (Deleted. Account11, 2023)

In the selected texts, the terms of the Union and subsequent events evoked by users to criticise the 1960 Union. In the following quotation, a user evokes a discrepancy between the initial terms of the union and what it then became:

“We didn’t sign a union to be controlled and wiped off the earth and be subjugated. We HAVE EVERY SINGLE RIGHT TO FEEL HOW WE FEEL. Your government violated its terms of agreement. What can’t you understand about that.” (User18, 2024).

In terms of deixis, the users, using an encompassing ‘We’, speak for Somaliland as a whole and express with intensity, frustration regarding what the Union became. If at first, one cannot solely based on grammar, identify who is responsible for control, subjugation and political violence, it becomes clear in the last sentences of the statement. In the second sentence, the use of capital letters appears as a stylistic choice to emphasise the injustice this user sees in the events subsequent to the signing of the union. Such a feeling of injustice expressed by the user is then clearly linked to Somalia’s government. Building a clear barrier between Somaliland and Somalia by using ‘Your government’, the user directly assigns responsibility to Somalia for violating the legal terms of the Union, political domination and violence.

In the same message, the user alludes to a discrepancy between initial expectations of Somalilanders in joining Somalia:

“We joined for a democratic country and a free society. Every single constitutional right was violated. SL was technically Free before Somalia and was recognized by 47 countries and the league of nations.” (User18, 2024).

Here, by using the same encompassing ‘We’, the user attributes democracy and freedom as a common goal for Somalilanders. To emphasise this discrepancy, the user repeats that the terms of the agreement were violated by Somalia. In the last sentence of this text, it emphasises that prior to signing the Union (was), Somaliland already existed as an independent country. To give depth and legitimacy to this ontological claim, the user evokes the idea of recognition by individual countries as well as the League of Nations.

Another quote from a text posted by a Reddit user reflects this discourse, labelling the Union as a mistake by Somaliland:

“Somaliland willingly joined Somalia in 1960. They willingly left in 1991 to correct their mistake.” (User19, 2026).

Here, the will of Somaliland to concretise the Union is, as in the previously analysed quotes, is acknowledged.

4.3.2. Re-labelling the Union.

If in the above-mentioned user-produced texts, the term Union is employed by users and is not contested, some users label this historical event as annexation within the studied texts. The following quote illustrates this point:

“Call it whatever you want, but if: there was no properly ratified union, sovereignty disappeared, troops from another former state controlled your territory, your political influence became marginal, and attempts to resist were crushed, then “annexation” is the only thing that this can be named as.” (User20, 2026)⁵

⁵ It is worth mentioning that this statement has been slightly modified for formatting purposes. Indeed, the initial text contained bullet points instead of commas after the colon.

In an attempt to label the 1960 Union as an annexation, this user enumerates several arguments. In this text, the user does not deny Somaliland's willingness to join the Union but exports the debate into legal terms. The use of the term properly implies that the Union technical details at the ratification stage rendered it impossible to call it a legal union. As in previously analysed texts, the user brings up political domination by Mogadishu and the subjugation of Somaliland.

4.3.3. Civilian massacres in Somaliland under the Siad Barre Regime.

In both of Somaliland and Somalia-associated online communities, the labelling of clan-targeted massacres is debated between users. During the data-collection process within the conducted small-scale Nethnography, the author of this study stumbled upon a video posted on r/Somalilanders which displays the Hargeisa Memorial. It commemorates State-led massacres in Somaliland during the Somali Civil War. If it is not planned to proceed with textual analysis of this video, the user posting it was using the English language, and filming and pointing directly at the memorial, framed these massacres as a genocide. In the following quote the word-by-word manually conducted transcription is displayed:

“This is the Holocaust Memorial for our people where 250 thousands people were systematically wiped out by the Somali government using airplaines, including several members of my own family. Today, we honour those who sacrificed their lives and those who resisted so we can be here in peace today, as we can see.” (User21, 2026)

In this text, the user does not leave any doubt to the audience regarding the framing of these massacres. The use of the word holocaust is charged in meaning as it directly creates an equivalence between the Shoah, also labelled as Holocaust, and genocide, as the systematic persecution and extermination of Jewish people by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The mention of aerial means made by the user directly refers to the Bombings of Hargeisa, which destroyed most of the city and killed, previously mentioned, at least 40 000 people (Reinl, 2014). Here, the user places themselves within this tragedy by mentioning members of their own family.

Other instances of similar labelling have been identified within Somaliland-associated communities. For instance, the term was invoked in a discussion which revolved around the

figure of Mohammed Said Hersi Morgan, who served as the Chief of Defence Force from 1990 to 1991, during the Bombings of Hargeisa in 1988:

“How dare you come to our sub Reddit and try to tell us the Isaaq genocide never happened.”(User22, 2024).

Here, reference is directly made to the sub this message was posted in, r/Somaliland. The use of ‘our’ indicates some sense of community as it refers to the idea of ownership of this sub by Somalilanders. This text posted by the redditor was a direct answer to a comment containing the following statement, using a provocative tone:

“1988 is the biggest joke and never happened, it was a lie.”(User23, 2024).

Here, it is difficult to gauge whether the user is simply denying the occurrence of the Hargeisa bombings or the term genocide in itself.

If in text, the user remains vague regarding the occurrence of massacres, other comments included in the data set did display a more in-depth argumentation when attempting to advocate against the labelling of these massacres as genocide:

“Multiple factions from different clans felt that the Siad Barre government did not benefit their clan. Each of these factions wanted to overthrow him so that someone from their own clan could become president. Siad Barre and his government were blocking multiple attempted coups. He eventually began imprisoning people who were related to members of these rebels.” (User11, 2026).

In the first sentence of this statement, an ontological claim is made by the redditor that several distinct factions of various clans developed grievances regarding Siad Barre’s government, seeing him as not beneficial for them. This first sentence lays down the foundations of the next claim as it already alludes to the idea of a multiplicity directing grievances towards the regime. In the subsequent ontological claims, the user posits that such grievances (without naming either the factions or the clans) even led to attempts to overthrow Barre’s regime. Without positing a direct causal link (‘eventually’), the user then posits that the Barre and the

government proceeded to imprison people who were associated with these clans and factions. The idea of multiplicity is invoked again by the user to specify that, among these people, the Isaaq did not constitute the only target of Barre's imprisonments.

"This includes isaaqs, majeertens, and many other clans. As you claim to be majeerten, I find it strange that you're not aware of this." (User11, 2026)

By referring back, in the quotation, to the author of the post, who referred to himself as "a Majeerteen", this redditor uses that information to further push forward his ontological claim that multiple clans, rather than the Isaaq alone, were involved. The final step of this line of argumentation leads to the contestation of the Isaaq-targeted character of Barre's actions, and ultimately, rejects the term genocide:

"Multiple members of various clans were targeted, not one single tribe and a genocide did not take place." (User11, 2026).

4.3.13.2. Trauma and reconciliation.

Within Somaliland-associated communities, personal stories and memories are shared by users when referring to the Hargeisa bombings. While acknowledging the sensitivity of such a topic, and combined with the anonymisation of the users, no details allowing one to trace back the authors of these comments are provided in the in-text quotes used as examples. On r/Somaliland, one user shared the following message:

"My grandpas told me that a lot of the youth these days are confused on what happened during the bombings. He said hargesia was filled with so many families from so many different clans. The day they got news of siad barre saying wipe out all of hargesia was the day they took up arms and witnessed the horrific massacre." (User24, 2024)

Another type of discourse relates to the idea of reconciliation. Several mentions of a need for reconciliation were found in the data. An exchange between two users on r/Somaliland is

brought here as an example. Answering to the main post, which poses the following question: ‘Why can’t we just become a federal state?’), one user answers:

“That’s a novel idea in principle, I agree. However, the powers that be in Somalia have never acknowledged the fact that a specific clan was targeted for extermination in 1988 until this day. Without a truth and reconciliation act like Rwanda’s, you can forget about fair treatment down south.” (User25, 2024).

In this text, official acknowledgement by Somalia of the clan-specific character of the Hargeisa bombings is posited by this user as a condition for reconciliation.

Another user answers directly to this comment:

“This is a job for the new generation of Somalis in general to attack. We can’t let the mistakes of our fore-fathers stop us from building our nation. We have to acknowledge what happened in the past learn from it and find a way to move forward together.”
(User26, 2024).

Here, a parallel can be drawn with discourses revolving around the need for the new generation to move beyond clan mentality. In this text, the user utilises an encompassing ‘We’ to refer to the entirety of the Somali youth, which is about making sense of the past to build a common future.

4.4. Outsiders and recognition: critics and support.

One of the remaining discourses identified on the studied platforms concerns outsiders, and especially, Somaliland’s recognition by Israel, which occurred at the end of the year 2025. The processing and study of selected texts revealed two major discourses, which this sub-section examines.

4.4.1 Criticising recognition:

The first discourse that was identified depicts Somalia and Somalis as trapped in a divide/conquer strategy. The powers identified as the architects of this strategy are depicted as beneficiaries of Somalia’s disunity and ultimately, Somaliland’s secession. Conversely, texts

analysed by users convey the idea that the dyad and Somali people, are the victims of these policies. Within discourse, Israel, as the first state to officially recognise Somaliland is identified by users as an actor of this grand strategy and criticise such recognition.

To illustrate this discourse, it is possible to start with the following statement which replaces the said divide and conquer strategy in a broader post-colonial context. On the sub r/Somalia, one user states:

“There’s a reason why external powers are doing everything in their power to divide somalia further and did everything in their power to prevent unity of all somali regions after the end of colonization.” (User27, 2026).

In this first bit of the text, the user lays down the foundations for the later identified divide and conquer strategy. It first makes the claim that some external powers, without naming them, aspire and are acting in the strongest way to divide Somalia. This first part of the text is placed within the present time, at the time these utterances were posted on Reddit. After the “and” which breaks the sentence in two distinct parts, another temporal marker “, did”, is used to further claim that these external powers’ aspirations and actions to divide Somalia date back to the end of colonisation. In the subsequent part of the posted comment, the user elaborates on the reasons for these previously identified external actors to divide Somalia:

The balkanization of all somali lands is extremely important to their world order and preventing us from ever being fully sovereign. The same way they want to balkanize iran, syria, iraq. A unified somalia, that’s that big is a genuine threat to western powers.”
(User27, 2026).

Moving away from the expression “divide Somalia”, the user uses the “balkanization of all somali lands”. First, one can notice a change in place, as all Somali lands refer to geographies that go beyond the study of this dyad and include, for instance, Djibouti and the Somali-populated regions of Ethiopia. Beyond this change in place, the user associates the outcome of this strategy, the balkanisation of Somali-populated regions, with reducing the agency of Somali people, as a unified whole. Without adding evidence, the user establishes a common

ground between Somali lands by enumerating countries which he identifies as potential victims of the willingness of external powers to divide their country. Beyond simply making the ontological claim that a willingness to divide Somalis and present-day Somalia, the user elaborates on the reasons for external powers to act this way. Replaced within a global context, the user equates “a unified somalia” as a threat to Western powers. Such a claim refers back to the beginning of the studied text, which labels the division of Somali lands as necessary for the Western Powers’ order. Looking at the deictic axis, using ‘their’, the user attributes ownership of the world order to external powers.

If the previous user uses the qualifier western to label external powers, other selected texts, while discussing the relation between the division of the Somali people and lands, extend this category to powerful state actors on the world stage:

“It's also very sad to see the desperation of Somaliland being exploited by the likes of Israel and UAE [...] Somalis need to realise that all we have is each other. The divide and conquer strategy is a playbook that we can't keep falling for. Now we're chopped up in little pieces and being served up to the super powers of this world. The Turks, the Ethiopians, the Israelis and the Arabs. They're all feasting on us.” (User28, 2026).

In this text, Türkiye, Ethiopia, “the Arabs,” and Israel are included in this broader set of external actors who are included by the user in the previously analysed category of external powers that aim to divide Somali and Somali lands for the benefit of “their” world order. Such a strategy, labelled by the user as “divide and conquer”, is described as a playbook. The expression “chopped up” used in the post is used to illustrate the idea of division of the “we”. They're all feasting on us.”: For a feast to take place, an abundance of sustenance is a precondition and indicates materiality. Using these utterances, the user entails that Somali people and lands are being divided by external powers to benefit from the richness of their material resources.

In this broader discourse, beyond the unity of the 5 Somali-populated territories, Somaliland is portrayed as a pawn in the broader strategy of these external powers, and specifically the US and Israel:

“Somaliland is just another project of US imperialism and the leaders of the project have prepared (brainwashed) their population well to completely align with US and Israeli interests.” (User29, 2026).

Here, Somaliland leaders are accused of having brainwashed ordinary Somalilanders to align with the US’s interests on the international stage. In this text, both leaders and ordinary people are devoid of any sense of agency.

4.2.2. Celebrating recognition.

On Somaliland-associated online communities, a certain number of texts displayed messages of support for the recognition granted by Israel:

“For so long it felt like just a distant dream. Something our parents talked about and something we carried quietly in our hearts. And now to see real signs and real possibilities and real momentum is overwhelming in the best way. The idea of going back home not as a visitor but as someone returning to a recognised homeland and a country that finally gets the respect it deserves is incredible. It makes all the struggle and all the waiting feel worth it.”

(Anonymous30, 2026).

In this comment, the recognition is discussed as being, in the past, as “For so long” indicates, a dream. To refer to recognition, the users invoke this dream, dating back to the previous generations of Somalilanders, something that Somalilanders, as a “We”, continue to carry in the present. Coming back to the time this post was written, recognition as an achievement is placed within the field of possibilities. The users entail that Israel’s recognition, giving “real signs and real possibilities”, might create a domino effect and lead other states to take this step. When evoking a return to a recognised Somaliland as its “home”, the user interestingly compares it to a return without recognition. Without recognition, the user describes this return as a visit. To the user, recognition, as a long-awaited event, “finally” places Somaliland in the domain of the legitimate. In this text, recognition does not consist of a mere diplomatic move by Israel but comes as a validation, to the international community, of Somaliland’s arguments for secession.

If in the previous text, the user discusses recognition as a concept and its meaning for Somaliland, it and does not directly elaborate on the bilateral relationship between Israel and the former this recognition also entails. Within Somaliland-associated communities, texts directly referring to Israel have been found:

“All 6 Milion of somalilanders are Celebrating and thanking to Israel, 🇮🇱🤝 the real ally we have.” (User31, 2026).

In this text, the users, by bringing a figure on Somaliland’s population and using “all” and “we” to encompass all Somalilanders in the statement, directly refer to Israel by thanking it for its diplomatic move. The use of an emoji which symbolises a handshake entails the idea of an agreement between two parties. Direct reference is made to Israel, and it is referred to as an ally of Somaliland.

When conducting Netnography, the author of this thesis attempted to interactive data (Kozinets, 2023). In other words, one of the Reddit subs, r/Somalilanders, has been selected, and a direct post was made by the author. As the post made was quite long and elaborated, mainly to maximise the number of answers, its entirety will not be displayed here. It ends with: “So I come to ask here what you guys and what Somalis think about the recognition by Israel, ahah.” It is displayed in this part of the analysis as it contrasts with the narrative on the agency given to Somalis, Somalia and Somaliland regarding external powers.

“We, Somaliland, welcome the recognition of Israel. We aim for the whole world to recognize us, not just Israel. In today's world, international relations are based on cooperation, diplomacy, and shared interests between nations. Every country makes decisions based on what it believes is best for its people, security, economy, and future.

At the end of the day, international relations are about interests. Nations act according to their national priorities and strategic goals, not emotions or personal feelings. There is nothing personal about it, every country looks out for its own interests.” (User32, 2026).

In this first chapter of the analysis, it has been possible to identify several discourses within the selected platform. As for clan identity, users engaging in forum discussions were found to be

reproducing this societal structure, portraying clannism as a threat to the Somali people as a whole. Later on, Islam has been understood as an authority that users may invoke while discussing political issues and especially, criticise clannism. Subsequently, the third section of this chapter highlighted the centrality of debates around the 1960 Union, and specifically its evolution after signing. As for state-led human rights abuses and massacres under the Barre regime, the first to last section posited that users engage in debates regarding the label of genocide. Issues of reconciliation between Somali from Somalia proper and Somalilanders were also discussed. Lastly, regarding Somaliland's recognition by Israel in December 2025, the former was mainly discussed by users as a pawn of a broader strategy of divide and conquer from the great powers or framed as a strategic move from Hargeisa.

5. Reproducing nation-building project: Embedding and sharing the flag.

This second chapter is dedicated to Fox and Miller-Idriss's 'performing' the nation (2008, p.537). It brings into the picture ways in which users make use of national symbols, and especially, the national flag. During the collection of texts on the different platforms that have been selected to conduct this study, non-textual data have been retrieved and are analysed in this section. Semiosis that has been selected consists of visual materials which were deemed relevant if analysed using Fox and Miller-Idriss's performing the nation (2008), which aims to unveil the "everyday meanings and invocations of national symbols" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.538).

To look at this dimension of Fox and Miller-Idriss's framework of everyday nationhood (2008), the use of flags by users in their interactions within the selected platforms. Within the broader literature on nation-building, flags have been described, notably by Elgenius (2011, p.186), as objects, together with national days, "used to present, represent, create, re-create, justify, glorify and model nations." This section focuses on the use of the flag, and studying national days is not part of the study. Beyond acting as symbols of the nation, flags are linked to nation-building and can be seen as short cuts to nation-building, being intimately linked to the expression of national history in graphic form and, by establishing links to the past, the existence of the nation justifies the state in the present." (Elgenius, 2011, p.186).

This chapter is divided into two sections. Its first part aims at unveiling which meaning Somalia and Somaliland authorities, via some of their governmental and ministerial websites, attribute to their official flags. Then, the following central argument of this chapter: authority-built nation-building projects are in the form of the flag, reproduced by users, which in several ways, disseminates.

5.1 Visual description and meaning making: Somalia and Somaliland's framing of the national flag

The way Somalia and Somaliland, on some of their official websites, efficiently illustrate these points. Concerning the latter, in the section National Symbols of the local e-

government portal of Somaliland, a description of the flag is provided: “The flag of the Republic of Somaliland consists of three horizontal, parallel stripes: green, white and red from top to bottom with the Islamic Shahada inscribed on the green and a black, five-pointed star centred on the white, middle stripe.” (Somaliland Government, 2026). Within this specific internet portal, Somaliland’s flag is simply described, and no elaboration of its meaning is provided. On other websites, which are the property of Somaliland’s MFA, such elaborations can be found in the section “National Flag and Emblems, the Symbols of Independence and Unity” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Somaliland, 2026). There, it is stated: “The current design incorporates elements that reflect Somaliland's identity, history, and aspirations,” establishing a direct relation to Elgenius’s point on the embeddedness of national history in the graphic design of the flags (2011). On this official website, the meaning behind the design of Somaliland’s flag is elaborated in more detail. For instance, the black star, which can be found in the middle of Somaliland’s flag, “symbolizes African unity and the difficult journey to independence” while the colours, green, white and red respectively “, represent the nation's Islamic heritage, peace, and the sacrifice of its people”. On the same official website, the flag is described as a symbol and what it symbolises: “national unity and pride, representing Somaliland's sovereignty and its commitment to peace, democracy, and development”.

As for the Federal Republic of Somalia’s flag, governments and ministries also engaged in elaborations regarding the meaning of the flag. Similar to the case of Somaliland, one can find a simple description of the design of the flag itself. On the government’s website, under the section “National flag”, it is described as such: “The flag of the Federal Republic of Somalia is a light blue rectangle in the centre of which is a white star with five equal points.” (Soomaali Government, 2024). Beyond visual description, Somalia’s official authorities also engage in specifying the origins of the symbol by placing it into its temporality and referring to its designer: “the national flag of Somalia was adopted on October 12, 1954, and was designed by Mohammed Awale Liban”. As it was done by the Somaliland *de facto* authorities, Somalia’s government elaborate on the meaning being visual semiotics embedded in the flag’s design. Here, they explicitly frame the meaning of the white star one can notice in the centre of Somalia’s flag: “the flag's five-pointed star represents the five regions in which Somalis reside.” In that sense, Somalia’s national flag embeds the boundaries of the nation, which

include modern-day Somaliland, Somalia proper, Djibouti, the Ethiopian Ogaden Region and the North-eastern Kenya region. On the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Federal Republic of Somalia, the role of the flag itself: “The Somali flag has been endowed with a profound capacity to symbolise and embody the essence and identity of the nation, embodying its history, culture and aspirations.” (2024). It is granted the status of national symbol and the capacity to embody characteristics of the Somali nation, and grounds it in its past, present, and future. Coming back to the white star, one can find on the same website an explanation by the authorities of the visual semiotics present on this national symbol: “The white star symbolises the Somali people’s love for peace and unity. The five-pointed star stands as a symbolic symbol of the historical divisions imposed by colonialism in the five regions of Somalia.” (2024). Somalia’s authorities refer to the idea of unity between the five previously mentioned Somali-populated regions and reference to colonialism.

These two dimensions of the meaning carried by Somalia’s flag, as alluded to on these websites by the authorities, align with the broader nationalist discourse on Somali unity described by Abdullahi (2022). According to the author, before 1991, this discourse “emphasized the homogeneity of people, religion, and culture and the right to self-determination” (Abdullahi,2022, p.86). After Somaliland declares independence, Abdullahi (2022) points out that such nationalist discourse was re-conceptualised and “is based on redefining the Great Somalia project from the point of view of cultural and economic integration of the countries in the Horn of Africa.” (Abdullahi,2022, p.86).

5.2. Disseminating the flag: User-generated reproduction of nation-building projects

During the data-collection process, three main ways in which the flag is used by users that lead to the reproduction of nation-building initiatives of their respective authorities have been identified. Firstly, nation-building initiatives are being reproduced within specific features of the platforms supporting the selected online communities. Secondly, while interacting with other users, the flag is disseminated by users within published text via the use of emoticons representing the national flag. Thirdly, users share content that concerns the meaning of the flag itself.

5.2.1. Embeddedness of the flag in the communities' supporting platforms

Using the example of the welcome page of two selected Reddit subs associated with Somaliland and Somalia, it is shown that national flags are embedded in the structure of the locus of users' discursive engagement with the content of the nation-building projects. Before interactions or discursive engagement, the users or even any visitor of these Reddit subs are already confronted with symbols of nation-building in the name of the flag.

On the subreddit *r/Somalia*, the chosen picture displays the respective constitutive units of the dyad of study's national flag (*r/Somalia*, 2026, see Figure 3):



Figure 3 – r/Somalia main page

On *r/Somalilanders*, the national flag is also present in the banner, as displayed below (*r/Somalilanders*, 2026, see Figure 4):



Figure 4 – r/Somalilanders main page

In these instances, one could argue that the displaying of the flags in the supporting platform of these online communities, namely the banner and the logo of these Reddit subs, could constitute an instance of banal nationalism, as an online version of Billig's example of the "national flag hanging outside a public building or decorating a filling-station forecourt" (Billig, 1995, p.38). It is conceded that such displaying, by being visible to the users who engage in community activities on the platform, constitutes an instance in which the nation is constantly "indicated, or 'flagged'" (Billig, 1995, p.8). In this sense, one could interpret such

instances using Billig's banal nationalism (1995) and the premise that "Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition." (Billig, 1995, p.8).

However, a major difference with Billig's banal nationalism (1995) lies in the agency users have in creating this environment. In other words, two categories of users, in this case, have agency in embedding the flag in the subs' profile picture and banner. The first category, in any sub, the Moderator that created the subreddit and those with specific permissions are able to choose the sub picture and the banner. In this sense, the great majority of the sub has no direct agency in such choices. As for the second category, it has been observed during one of the Netnography sessions that within one specific sub, r/Somalilanders, that users who are part of this "great majority" that can't directly change the picture and the banner were able to influence it indirectly. In fact, a sub-wide vote was organised by one of the moderators, and community members were able to share their opinion on the matter:

*"Should we switch to the official Somaliland flag, or keep our current one?
Instead of using a poll, we're asking all members to comment your vote below"* (User33, 2026).

After some time, the picture of the subreddit was changed from the 1991-1996 flag to the current version of Somaliland's flag. In the comment section, diverging opinions were formulated by users, which discursively engaged with the meaning of both flags as displayed below:

"Me personally I like our current flag. It's a part of our history. It's our first flag we adopted in 1991 and a reminder of our hard earned peace." (User34, 2026).

"Our official one. ❤️🤍💚"(User35, 2026).

In this sense, the two instances of direct and indirect agency in the choice of subreddit picture and banner show are cases of the user of Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) modality of performing the nation by choosing to embed it in the structure of their medium of communication.

5.2.2. Typing the flag: Flag emojis in online discussions

Instances of the reproduction of nation-building initiatives were also identified within the utterances embedded in user-to-user communications and posts content via the use of emojis. If replaced within the broader literature on online political communication, this finding in itself is rather unsurprising. For instance, when studying the use of flag emojis while examining political communication on the basis of a large database of German and US MPs, Kariryaa et al. (2020, p.367) conclude that “national flags are frequently used in political communication and are mostly used in line with political ideology.”

Beyond Reddit, it has been found that on Facebook groups, to a lesser extent but mainly within TikTok comments, the use of emojis referring to the national flag of both of the entities was widespread. Below the videos posted under Somalia’s official accounts, Somalia’s emoji flag was widely used within and often associated with utterances which expressed support for the country. Conversely, comments on Somaliland official accounts were following the same logic using emojis in a specific way, which is analysed later in this section.

On r/Somalia for instance, this user utilises the flag to add emphasis on personal support for a united Somalia:

“I support the unity and cohesiveness of Somalia. Full stop. 🇸🇴” (User36, 2026).

On r/Somaliland, instances such as the following one show that the Somali flag emoji is also used on Somaliland-associated online communities:

“Somalia is one—long live Somalia 🇸🇴, insha’allah.” (User37, 2026; Microsoft, M365 Copilot)⁶

To a lesser extent, and associated with the rest of the text and the location this message has been posted, using this emoji also entails contestation of Somaliland’s nation-building.

⁶ Copilot was used to translate the following sentence from Somali: “soomaaliya waa hal, soomaaliya hanoolato 🇸🇴, insha'allah”.

The fact that previous illustrations solely concern the use of Somalia's flag emoji and the meanings it entails lies in one simple structural reason. There is no available emoji which depicts the current flag of Somaliland in its official form. Coming back to Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA (1992) is an efficient way to make sense of this impossibility for Somalilanders to use an emoji which depicts their official flag. Thus, the author notes that users aiming to invoke Somaliland's nation-building project, which is embedded in its flag and the meaning it encapsulates, start with a structural disadvantage compared to other users, who simply need to select Somalia's flag within the available pool of emojis on their devices. Conscious of this unavailability, users wishing to invoke Somaliland's flag and convey what it symbolises are obliged to elaborate creative strategies to achieve this outcome. On TikTok, notably, users often make use of available emojis within to recreate some of the visual features of Somaliland's official flag in their comments, notably by using emojis that use the same colours as the flag (🟢🟡🔴⁷).

This instance is analysed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA (1992). At the level of textual analysis, three heart emojis display the colours of Somaliland's flags, depicting it. At the discursive practice level, Fairclough suggests that the researcher to focus on "text production, distribution, and consumption" (1992, p.79). Looking at the production dimension, this text, the user deconstructed Somaliland's flag by isolating its distinctive features and resignified it by using three heart emojis of the same colour. At the level of consumption, to the audience (any comment reader), this text conveys the meanings embedded in Somaliland's flag, as if such an emoji existed and was used in the comment.

Using the third dimension of Fairclough's model, where the researcher must proceed with an "analysis of social practice of which the discourse is a part" (1992, p.73) allows for discussing the reasons behind the absence of such an emoji, and the need for users to resort to such strategies. Fairclough's idea that "discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure" (1992, p.64) allows us to replace this individual comment with its broader context: the *de facto* character of Somaliland's statehood, which characterises the environment it navigates in. As previously mentioned in the non-empirical part of this paper, *de facto* states and their parents

⁷ To ensure anonymity and avoid any potential harm to these users, comments are not referenced.

are considered as evolving in an unsettled environment with specific ontological security concerns (Grzybowski, 2021). Such an environment is characterised by stigmatisation emanating from the international community due to widespread nonrecognition by other states (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). If recognition here designates recognised states as its sender and *de facto* states are receivers, literature on these entities already explored what has been labelled “digital state recognition” (Berisha & Kursani, 2025).

This concept allows us to link this lack of a Somaliland flag in the list of emojis to the broader Berisha & Kursani (2025, p.230), digital state recognition refers to “an acknowledgement of the existence of an entity as a state, separate from another state, in the digital landscape.” Within this framework, Berisha and Kursani distinguish between the “supply and demand sides of digital recognition” (p.220). To show the influence of non-state actors in this demand side of digital recognition, Berisha and Kursani (2025) use the example of a petition shared online to add the Abkhazian flag to the list of emojis. Linked to the Abkhazian example highlighted by Berisha and Kursani (2025), the specific instance found in this study’s TikTok database also demonstrates the effects of digital non-recognition: users from *de facto* states wishing to communicate support for their entity in the form of a flag emoji are not able to do so. In reaction, users resort to evasive strategies aimed at bypassing the unavailability of the official Somaliland flag emoji illustrated earlier.

Looking at this instance by means of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, which assumes the “Interrelation of discourse, social practice and social structure” (Fairclough, 1992, p.64), allows us to show how discourse within these online communities can be shaped (as evidenced by the textual analysis of this comment). The discursive practice allows us to show that even in a constrained environment, users manage to convey the meaning behind the flag emoji without being able to use it. Lastly, looking at social practice allows us to see that discursive practice and the text are shaped by the environment in which *de facto* states navigate. In that sense, it is posited that possibilities for users in online communities associated with the *de facto* states, to perform the nation (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) by using the flag emoji of their entity, are limited by the external environment these contested entities navigate in.

5.2.3. Sharing the flag

In the process of collecting Netnographic data, selected visuals shared by users were deemed relevant for the purposes of this section, as they consist of the dissemination of the flag in the form of purely visual content.

In an attempt to create investigative data (Kozinets, 2023), a post shared by a member of the sub r/Somalilanders caught the attention of the author. In this post, a video is embedded and directly accessible from Reddit.⁸ The setting of the video is described by the user in the title of the post as follows: “SNM fighter on the outskirts of Hargeisa explains in perfect words the meaning of our flag” (User38, 2024). By using the deictic marker “our”, the user entails a sense of belonging to the community that this flag symbolises. It is worth noting that the flag displayed consists of a slightly modified version of the current official Somaliland flag, which does not include the black star in the centre.

Being described in the video by the individual identified as an SNM fighter in Somali, an attempt to let a redditor frame the meaning of the Somaliland flag, it was decided to post a comment to ask for an English translation. The author of the Reddit post later answered to this public comment in the discussion thread: Colour by colour, the identified SNM fighter details the meaning of the flag to the audience:

“One is blood it’s the war we are in right now with the guns you see us have (he points to the follow soldiers with their fingers doing the peace sign). One of them is peace and safety (the white one) and one of them is the comfort that comes after (green one). Right now we are in the blood one, every man is there ready for the struggle, only that will be flowing today (the blood) and the sign written on the flag is god is great as you can all see.” (User38, 2024).

If the initial intent of this video is unknown, as its source could not be traced back, it is possible to affirm that it was originally aimed at a Somali-speaking audience. The narrated meaning of

⁸ If including a screenshot of the video for data presentation purposes was initially planned, its quality was deemed too low. Thus, only the quote from the post author comment was used to illustrate this point. Moreover, as it displays several soldiers which could still be alive, guaranteeing their anonymity would have required blurring their faces and decrease even more, the quality of the potentially displayed screenshot.

the flag in the context of the video is then associated with specific moments of Somaliland's struggle. No mention of the past is made, and the "struggle" and its violent character are placed in the present. The green colour, which is narrated as representing comfort, is temporarily placed after the struggle.

If this user-generated narration of the meaning Somaliland's flag carries slightly differs from what has been identified in the statements of official authorities, it remains an instance of performative reproduction of nation-building initiatives by users in online communities associated with Somaliland.

In this second chapter of the analysis, using Fox and Miller-Idriss's "performing" the nation modality (2008, p.537) allowed to identify several ways in which users reproduce nation-building initiatives. Grounding the chapter on the premise that the dissemination of the flag, as object of nation-building (Elgenius, 2011), this chapter was able to demonstrate how such projects are being reproduced via the dissemination of the flag. It has been shown that such dissemination is embedded in the structure of the subs, the medium of communication for users, via the dissemination of emojis and embedded content.

6. Summary of the findings and conclusions.

To summarise our findings, it is necessary to remind the reader of the research question that has guided this thesis: “How do de facto state and parent state grassroots communities engage with nation-building?”. Building upon the broader literature on *de facto* statehood, and especially studies examining nation-building in this context. This study sought to contribute to the understanding of grassroots communities and ordinary people’s attitudes to and engagement with nation-building projects in *de facto* parent-state dyads. Using the Somalia-Somaliland dyad as its case, such engagement was approached from the perspective of everyday nationalism and nationhood.

The locus for the study of Fox and Miller-Idriss’s practices of everyday nationhood (2008) resided on online communities identified on Reddit, Discord, Facebook and TikTok, where data was collected using purposive sampling and Netnography. The utterances and visual materials were then analysed using critical discourse analysis.

In its fourth chapter, the author employed Fox and Miller-Idriss’s “talking the nation” (2008, p.537) to uncover how users engage with the nation and, ultimately, nation-building. The thematic presentation of the grand discourses found in the selected data allows the author to posit that key issues of nation-building were discussed. By deliberating on clannism as a factor of division of the Somali people against other uniting factors, such as religion and language, and portraying Somaliland users advocating for Somali unity, discrediting Hargeisa’s legitimacy. Regarding the history of Somali lands, and specifically Somalia and Somaliland, the 1960 Union and especially its evolution, were criticised by users. On the sensitive issues of human rights abuses and civilian massacres under Siad Barre, it has been noted that users engaged in debates on the possibility of labelling them genocide. The final sub-section of this chapter highlights discourses around strategies behind Israel’s recognition. Here, a clear divide between Somalia and Somaliland-affiliated communities has been identified. On the one hand, Israel’s recognition was replaced by users in a context of “divide and conquer strategy” by the great powers. On the other hand, users in Somaliland-affiliated communities portrayed this recognition as a strategic character of this move, while some simply expressed their support and emotions towards it.

The Fifth chapter of the thesis, by using Fox and Miller-Idriss's "performing" the nation modality (2008, p.537), allowed the author to identify several ways in which users reproduce nation-building initiatives by using symbols. The flag, which was selected for its capacity to encapsulate the meaning of nation-building projects, acts as an object of reproduction of these projects. Users, in different ways, deployed the flag, disseminating their encapsulated meanings. It is concluded that on Reddit subs, the flag was embedded in the very structure users utilise to engage with nation-building via the sub banner and picture. Not only does it act as a banal reminder of the nation (Billig, 1995) for anyone lurking on the sub, but demonstrates that users, by being directly or indirectly involved in the choice of embedding the national flag, are truly agents in the way they interact with nation-building.

These two chapters analysed some of the many possible ways in which grassroots communities in de facto states and their parents engage with nation-building. However, it is worth noting that the dyadic structure characterising the case study was not completely reproduced online. The most salient proof of the existence of this study. Being able to collect data and conduct Netnography in these online communities shows how porous their imagined borders are. Pro-Somaliland users can easily comment on posts on r/Somalia and vice versa, rendering the attribution of specific discourses to specific spheres inconsistent among topics of these online discussions.

As for the limits of this thesis, it mainly relied on the extraction of data within various social media platforms: TikTok, Facebook, Reddit and Discord. The findings of this thesis, presented in the next chapter, must be read under the light of the critiques that could be of the origin of the data. Firstly, one could argue that the huge variety of platforms used to answer this thesis's research question undermines generalisation. Furthermore, ethical concerns led the author not to display TikTok Facebook based content, increasing the influence of Reddit on the validity of the findings. In fact, each platform selected for this study does present different features which shape and constrain users' experience within the community online (as well as the researcher's interactions with its object of study). On every platform utilised in this study, content is shared, produced and consumed according to what the given software allows. On TikTok, for instance, the algorithm has an increased influence on what users see as well as how researchers can access relevant data. On Reddit, intra-platform dynamics such as brigadging

are not present on TikTok or Discord. Such differences do shape data analysis as they determine selection. Here, an example would be the impossibility of seeing the most commented and viewed videos of a given hashtag on TikTok.

Additionally, the size of the samples studied remains relatively small compared to what has already been done within the literature on online communities. If time constraints were the main obstacle to the extension of the data pool, technical issues appeared to be a central problem for the researcher. For instance, extracting comments from a given video on TikTok remained a challenge for the researcher, as data scrapers usually require a financial transaction to take place after a certain amount of data is extracted. As much as such features determine data selection, the utterances extracted from these platforms differ in their genre. On Reddit and Facebook, for instance, comments generated by users are elaborated, much longer and embedded in other texts, while TikTok comments are much shorter in the database created for this study.

If this MA thesis aims to look at how grassroots communities engage with the nation-building of their respective entity, most of the platforms did not provide any way to prove where a given user was writing from. If a user claimed to be from Somaliland, Puntland or Mogadishu, the researcher had no reasonable way to check the veracity of this claim. If, by means of OSINT tools, the author would probably have succeeded in identifying a given user, such methods are not scalable to the infinity of users encountered during the research.

Lastly, as evidenced by the need to translate from Somali to English, understanding Somaliland and Somalia's histories, cultures, and social dynamics from a Western viewpoint might have been imbued with biases such as ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, or exoticization that might have affected data analysis and consequently, the validity of findings. If Reddit and Discord could be studied using English, Facebook and TikTok, translating from Somali was required. In the process, meaning might have been lost. Another comment related to the English language is that this thesis was almost exclusively based on literature. Hence, potentially missing valuable research written in Arabic and Somali, especially, regarding the understanding of nation-building within the dyad.

7. References

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Appendix 1 – r/Somaliland data set.

Post	Keyword used	Stats	Publication	Selection	Extraction
"Why all the hate for Somalia"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 44 Comments: 59	10 months ago	30/03	06/04
"Why do the people of r/Somalia [...]"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 7 Comments: 169	2 years ago	30/03	06/04
"To those lurking.[...]"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 35 Comments: 37	2 years ago	30/03	06/04
"Why are we Somalildiid?"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 43 Comments: 116	2 years ago	30/03	06/04
"I'm Done I'm Officially a [...]"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 40 Comments: 34	1 year ago	30/03	06/04
"What a good dream it is right! [...]"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 10 Comments: 2	2 years ago	30/03	06/04
"What if Somaliland takes over [...]?"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 4 Comments: 93	3 years ago	30/03	07/04
"Does Somaliland consider Awdal [...]"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 3 Comments: 9	3 months ago	30/03	07/04
"They prosper over our division! [...]"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 143 Comments: 149	3 months ago	30/03	07/04
"Somaliland State of Somalia"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 30 Comments: 52	2 years ago	30/03	07/04
"My grandfather [...]"	"Deen"	Upvotes: 6 Comments: 12	2 years ago	08/05	08/05
"LET'S BE HONEST SL [...]"	"War"	Upvotes: 30 Comments: 52	2 years ago	08/05	08/05
"Where Somaliland went wrong"	"Qabil"	Upvotes: 30 Comments: 52	4 months ago	08/05	09/05
"What do you think about [...]"	Isaaq	Upvotes: 13 Comments: 62	2 years ago	08/05	10/05

Appendix 2 – r/Somalia data set.

Post	Keyword used	Stats	Date	Selection	Extraction
"Why I no longer support [...]"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 196 Comments: 178	9 months ago	30/03	08/04
"I've never seen a stable Somalia [...]"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 47 Comments: 49	2 years ago	30/03	08/04
"Ethnic minorities in Somalia"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 12 Comments: 117	2 months ago	30/03	08/04
"Why has there been no effort [...]"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 25 Comments: 37	1 year ago	30/03	08/04
"The Psyop Against Somalia"	"Somalia"	Upvotes: 61 Comments: 41	1 month ago	30/03	08/04
"We need to wake up."	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 14 Comments: 50	20 days ago	30/03	08/04
"Landers are just wasting time [...]"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 48 Comments: 50	2 months ago	30/03	08/04
"Being recognized by Israel [...]"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 3 Comments: 9	3 months ago	30/03	08/04
"Somaliland indoctrinating kids [...]"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 68 Comments: 48	1 year ago	30/03	08/04
"TIL That the Somaliland [...]"	"Somaliland"	Upvotes: 4 Comments: 16	3 years ago	30/03	08/04
"This is what awaits Isaaqland"	"Deen"	Upvotes: 156 Comments: 71	2 months ago	08/05	08/05
"Why don't we have single [...]"	"War"	Upvotes: 10 Comments: 35	3 years ago	08/05	08/05
"Its hard being a isaaq unionist"	"Qabil"	Upvotes: 153 Comments: 97	3 months ago	08/05	08/05
"Are any other Isaaqs getting [...]"	"Isaaq"	Upvotes: 8 Comments: 24	3 years ago	08/05	08/05

Appendix 3 – TikTok datasheet.

Entity	Account	Comments	Likes	Saved	Selection	Extraction	Analysis
Somaliland	moicng_diinar	995	42100	5946	01/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	moicng_diinar	260	17 400	2433	01/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	moicng_diinar	602	7 147	1487	01/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	moicng_diinar	689	17 900	3387	01/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	moicng_diinar	152	10 000	1407	01/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	moicng_diinar	59	9 271	888	01/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	moicng_diinar	140	7 593	903	01/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	madaxtooyada_	6060	121300	20700	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	madaxtooyada_	4553	109000	20500	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	madaxtooyada_	4196	127000	24800	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	madaxtooyada_	10100	76300	15000	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	SLNTV	560	30700	5455	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somaliland	SLNTV	870	25600	4602	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	Opm Somalia	312	14700	2801	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	Opm Somalia	321	7554	1495	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	Opm Somalia	39	3526	465	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	Hamza Abdi Ba	1887	45600	8869	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	Hamza Abdi Ba	594	38200	5310	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	hassansheikhmc	6160	328000	51700	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	hassansheikhmc	6529	226800	44300	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	hassansheikhmc	7870	221200	46100	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	hassansheikhmc	10400	130800	25700	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	hassansheikhmc	7105	124000	21400	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	hassansheikhmc	4138	116400	21100	07/04	08/04	09/04
Somalia	hassansheikhmc	3156	96400	19100	07/04	08/04	09/04