

# R&D-Report

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## When the City Speaks Online

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Oliver Henk

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Nord University  
R&D-Report no. 138  
Bodø 2026

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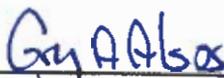
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## Executive Summary

Bodø's year as European Capital of Culture (ECoC) marked a historic moment for the city. The programme generated strong artistic engagement, broadened cultural visibility, and shaped a year-long public conversation that extended far beyond event attendance. This report examines how residents interpreted, contested, and assigned meaning to Bodø2024 within their own digital spaces. Drawing on a comprehensive database of posts, comments, and replies from three public Facebook communities throughout 2024, the analysis offers a grounded understanding of how the cultural year was woven into everyday civic discourse.

### Key findings

#### *A dual emotional climate shaped the year*

Residents expressed both admiration and frustration, often in the same threads.

- Overall sentiment was slightly negative (mean -0.06), driven not by hostility toward culture but by concerns over fairness and municipal priorities.
- Frustration was the most frequent emotion, accounting for more than one third of all contributions.
- Positive emotions (joy, appreciation, anticipation) grew notably during moments such as the opening ceremony, summer events, and recognisable local installations like the cloudberry.
- The discourse was emotionally dense: residents rarely commented without evaluative intent.

#### *Three conflicts defined much of the public negotiation*

The cultural year became a focal point for broader disputes about identity, governance, and public value.

- **Representation and belonging:** Sámi visibility triggered debates about recognition, local identity, and historical justice.
- **Allocation:** Cultural spending was evaluated against perceived neglect of essential services, often through moral, not technical, reasoning.
- **Cutbacks:** Structural austerity was interpreted through the contrast between cultural installations and disappearing everyday provisions, generating a strong sense of abandonment among certain groups.

The conflicts revealed competing expectations of what cultural investment should achieve and for whom.

*Discursive profiles reveal clear patterns of engagement*

Five discursive profiles emerged from the analysis: Critics, Snark Squad, Defenders, Sympathizers, and Problem-Solvers. The interplay of these profiles produced a debate that was lively, contested, and emotionally saturated.

- **Critics** and **Snark Squad** dominated the conversation and set much of the problem frame.
- **Sympathizers** formed the largest single group, anchoring discussions in lived experience, belonging, and community care.
- **Problem-Solvers** were few but highly constructive, offering proposals and pragmatic reasoning.
- **Defenders** intervened reactively, often supplying factual context or countering claims.

*Residents treated culture as both symbol and public good*

The thematic analysis shows that residents did not treat culture as a separate or decorative arena but understood it as a public good and a form of social glue. Many discussions described culture as something that binds people together through shared places, memories, and everyday participation. At the same time, culture appeared as a collective resource shaped by decisions on funding, access, and representation.

## Introduction

### **Bodø2024 as a civic moment, not only a cultural programme**

ECoCs are traditionally guided by a clearly articulated set of objectives established at the European level (Table 1), which emphasise cultural diversity, citizen participation, social cohesion, and long-term urban and regional development (European Commission, 2018). The framework provides a shared reference point for the host cities while allowing for local interpretation and strategic emphasis.

**Table 1. ECoC Hierarchy of objectives (European Commission, 2018)**

<i>General Objectives</i>								
Safeguard and promote the diversity of cultures in Europe, highlight the common features they share, increase citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural space (G01), and foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities (G02).								
<i>Specific Objectives</i>								
SO1: Enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities, including through transnational co-operation			SO2: Widen access to and participation in culture		SO3: Strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors		SO4: Raise the international profile of cities through culture	
<i>Operational Objectives</i>								
Stimulate extensive cultural programmes of high artistic quality	Ensure cultural programmes feature a strong European dimension and transnational co-operation	Involve a wide range of citizens and stakeholders in preparing and implementing the cultural programme	Create new opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural events	Improve cultural infrastructure	Develop the skills, capacity and governance of the cultural sector	Stimulate partnership and co-operation with other sectors	Promote the city and its cultural programme	Improve the international outlook of residents

The team of Bodø2024 further translated the overarching European goals into a coherent set of locally grounded objectives (Table 2) articulated in the bid book submitted to the European Commission (Bodø2024, 2019). The cultural year was framed as a long-term societal initiative rather than a temporary programme of events, with culture positioned as an instrument for social connection, use of space, professional development, and democratic engagement. The objectives reflected an ambition to reshape internal and external perceptions of the region, broaden participation in cultural life, and strengthen cultural infrastructure in ways that would endure beyond the title year.

In fact, the objectives signalled an understanding of culture as a social process embedded in everyday life. Cultural activity was expected to reach beyond established institutions, activate unfamiliar spaces, and connect with groups that traditionally remain at the margins of organised cultural participation. At the same time, the bid emphasised the importance of international collaboration, professional capacity-building, and freedom of expression, linking cultural practice to wider questions of opportunity, openness, and democratic values. The strategic framing therefore combined social, spatial, professional, and symbolic dimensions, setting high expectations for how culture would contribute to the city's long-term development.

**Table 2. Objectives of Bodø, the host for ECoC 2024 (Bodø2024, 2019)**

	<b>Strategic Objectives</b>	<b>Goals</b>
<b>1</b>	To reverse the image of Nordland – Internally and externally	More attractive and exciting to visit, and to study, work, and stay in
<b>2</b>	To widen the production base for culture	More producing, co-producing, and cross-working
<b>3</b>	To connect with groups still not engaged	Addressing issues like diversity, mental health, isolation
<b>4</b>	To make better use of unusual spaces	New cultural areas and venues, driven by where people live
<b>5</b>	To create a connected web of “hotspots” especially for young people	Facilities are improved to create a strong and widely recognised cultural region
<b>6</b>	To make our cultural offer more international	More international collaborations. Better links with European artists and institutions
<b>7</b>	To improve the careers and opportunities for cultural professionals	A major capacity-building focus, which improves skills and experience, and creates jobs
<b>8</b>	To address freedom of expression	With our democratic experience, include freedom of expression in future cultural events

To evaluate progress toward these objectives, the Monitor2024 evaluation team developed a structured set of key performance indicators (KPIs). The KPI framework operationalises both European and local goals through indicators related to participation, visibility, collaboration, organisational capacity, and anticipated legacy effects. The indicators form the core of the formal monitoring system for Bodø2024 and provide a basis for accountability, comparison, and strategic learning. Indicator-based evaluation remains essential in the assessment of cultural mega-events. KPIs allow systematic tracking of outputs and outcomes and support transparent reporting to funding bodies and public authorities. At the same time, such indicators have clear limitations. Quantitative measures capture what takes place and at what scale, yet they offer limited understanding into how cultural initiatives are interpreted, negotiated, or contested by those who live with their consequences (Gabarino & Holland, 2009).

The present report addresses this limitation by complementing the KPI framework with an analysis of public meaning-making. Rather than evaluating performance against predefined targets, the analysis examines **how Bodø2024 was discussed and understood by residents in their own communicative spaces**, and focuses on *interpretation, emotional orientation, and discursive patterns* that unfold outside formal evaluation channels. In doing so, the report adds an interpretive layer to the overall evaluation, shedding light on how stated objectives resonate in everyday civic life.

### **Why does social media matter?**

Local social media groups increasingly operate as part of the communication infrastructure through which communities narrate themselves, negotiate disagreement, and coordinate attention around shared concerns. Social media spaces can be defined as environments where visibility, persistence, and scalable interaction that shape public life and social practice, including how people interpret events of collective significance (Boyd, 2010). Similarly, research on digital citizenship emphasises that public engagement often develops through everyday communicative habits that blend personal expression with civic orientation, rather than through formal participation alone (Papacharissi, 2010). For place-based projects such as European Capitals of Culture, the relevance of such spaces becomes pronounced because meaning is formed in real time through informal interpretation, affirmation, and critique.

Communication infrastructure theory argues that civic engagement depends on access to local storytelling networks and opportunities for shared narration about community life (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Digital platforms can extend or reconfigure such storytelling networks by lowering barriers to participation, enabling rapid circulation of local accounts, and sustaining discussion beyond single events. Community-based social media use relates to civic participation across geographically diverse contexts, supporting the view that local social platforms can function as connecting mechanism in local public spheres (Bouchillon, 2019).

### **Structure of the report**

The report is organised to move from contextual grounding to analytical interpretation. Following the introduction, the methodology section outlines the analytical approach, including data collection, ethical considerations, and the combination of qualitative interpretation with computational analysis of posts, comments, and replies from local Facebook communities. Further, it presents descriptive patterns of public conversation across the title year. Temporal distributions illustrate how discursive activity developed in relation to key moments in the cultural programme and local public debate.

The report then examines emotional and affective orientations in the discourse. Analyses of sentiment and emotional composition provide understanding of how residents expressed enthusiasm, frustration, ambivalence, and concern in relation to Bodø2024. Building on these patterns, the report introduces a set of discursive profiles that capture recurring orientations in how residents engaged with the cultural year. The profiles help explain how different voices shaped debate and framed central issues.

Subsequent sections focus on thematic developments and conflicts in the discourse. The analysis maps dominant topics and examines how Bodø2024 became a focal point for wider discussions about culture, governance, representation, and everyday life. The concluding section articulates the key lessons derived from the findings and considers their relevance for cultural governance, communication strategies, and future ECoCs.

## Methodology

The study examines how residents in Bodø received the Bodø2024 title year when they communicated in their own digital communities. Earlier evaluations of cultural mega-projects often rest on the perspectives of organisers, institutions, and policy actors. Many reports emphasise economic return, branding ambitions, and inter-organisational cooperation. Citizen reactions usually appear only in short survey responses or isolated media quotations, presented as background material rather than as a central component of understanding public meaning (Nelaeva & Iermolenko, 2023). The present report takes a different point of departure. Local Facebook groups function as informal spaces where residents speak to one another without institutional framing. The aim is to capture how meaning around the cultural year developed in everyday online talk: how residents described the project, how they questioned it, how they defended it, and how they dismissed it when they debated among themselves.

Attention to citizen expression in digital dialogues offers an important counterbalance to supplier-oriented evaluation formats. A cultural year gains public visibility through large investments and strategic objectives, yet its social relevance grows through how inhabitants speak about it, contest it, and weave it into their understanding of community life. The analysis therefore focuses on the verbal handling of Bodø2024 within the ordinary communication of those who experienced the year directly.

## Data collection

### Netnography

The study followed a netnographic design (Kozinets 2010; Kozinets 2020). Three online groups in Bodø were examined as naturally occurring arenas of local discourse rather than as datasets assembled for research purposes. An overview of the communities appears in Table 3.

**Table 3. Online communities overview**

<b>Community</b>	<b>General Information</b>	<b>Conformity with the criteria</b>
Bodø I dag (Bodø today)	Public, visible group, app. 29,367 members, est. in 2014	Group for everyone interested in the events happening in the city of Bodø, group members post on average over 700 post per month
Bodø - politisk debatt (Bodø - political debates)	Public, visible group, app. 2238 members, est. 2012	Group for debates around the present and future of Bodø city, group members post on average over 20 posts per month
Hva skjer i Bodø (What happens in Bodø)	Public, visible group, app. 7307 members, est.	Group for sharing of the information related to and discussion of various events happening in the city of Bodø, group members post on average over 70 posts per month

Community selection rested on criteria that ensured relevance, interaction, scale, diversity, and descriptive depth (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, 2020; Fenton & Parry, 2022). Each of the chosen arenas centred on local life in Bodø and contained frequent references to cultural events, which aligned with the focus on how residents perceived the Bodø2024 year. Public visibility and lively exchanges indicated that the groups operated as dialogic arenas rather than as simple announcement boards. *Bodø i dag* sustained high traffic with reply chains that unfolded across numerous threads. *Bodø – politisk debatt* concentrated discussion on the city's present and future. *Hva skjer i Bodø* directed attention toward events and practical information, yet many threads expanded into broader conversations that reached beyond announcements.

Membership and activity reached a level that allowed identification of stable patterns rather than isolated anecdotes. *Bodø i dag* counted around 30K members (established 2014) and produced roughly 700 posts each month. *Bodø – politisk debatt* counted around 2,3K members (established 2012) and exceeded 20 posts each month. *Hva skjer i Bodø* counted around 7,3K members and averaged more than 70 posts each month. Such volume provided a foundation for tracing how meaning formed and shifted across the year.

Group composition reflected the diversity of the city. Parents, students, professionals, volunteers, artists, and small-business owners participated in the discussions, which broadened the range of positions present in the material. Threads contained multi-sentence posts, replies, references to local incidents, personal reflections, humour, irony, scepticism, pride, and signs of fatigue. That richness made the material suitable for qualitative interpretation rather and extended beyond superficial reaction analysis.

Fieldwork followed the principle of minimal interference in public online spaces. Only publicly visible groups entered the corpus, and no prompts or interventions shaped the

conversations. Personal identifiers were removed both during note-taking and in all subsequent extracts. The unit of analysis was the discussion thread anchored in a post that referred directly to Bodø2024 or to a closely related topic in local life. Temporal coverage spanned the full title year, which made it possible to observe development across time.

### **User contributions database**

A structured database of user contributions supported the qualitative analysis. In the study, **user contributions** were understood as *any textual expression generated by community members in the form of posts, comments, or replies*. No personal data were stored, extracted, or processed at any stage of the research. Usernames, profile information, and any identifiers linked to individual contributors were deliberately excluded from the database. The analytical focus remained exclusively on the substantive content of the contributions rather than on the individuals behind them. In this report, the representative quotes were translated and slightly paraphrased to ensure anonymity while preserving their original meaning.

Database construction followed strict inclusion and exclusion rules in order to maintain analytical clarity and avoid inflating the corpus with material that did not contain meaningful discourse. Only contributions that presented statements, arguments, reflections, or evaluations entered the database. Posts that merely announced events and received no further discussion were excluded. Visual material without discursive engagement, such as photographs followed only by brief remarks like *“beautiful picture”*, did not enter the corpus. Content that consisted solely of emojis or single-word reactions was treated in the same way. Visual material containing textual elements, such as screenshots of newspaper articles or posts accompanied by commentary, was transcribed and added when it provided interpretive cues relevant to the topic of discussion. The opening ceremony generated an exceptional volume of visual content. Residents shared photographs and short videos, many of which produced extensive comment threads. Visual posts that triggered substantive reflection were included. Examples include descriptions of the experience, assessments of organisational choices, or emotional reactions such as *“an overwhelming moment for the city”* or *“a strong feeling of collective pride”*. In contrast, posts that offered only aesthetic praise, *“fantastic picture”*, *“so nice”*, *“look at the colours”*, were excluded because they did not contribute to meaning-making around Bodø2024. Short reactions that framed the event as collective experience, such as *“fantastic experience to be there tonight”*, were retained because they expressed an evaluative stance toward the cultural moment rather than toward the image itself. Such distinctions were necessary to maintain a clear focus on contributions that shaped public interpretation of the cultural year rather than on routine social-media etiquette.

A particular point concerns contributions where residents shared personal experiences or addressed collective pain, especially in relation to Sámi identity and minority perspectives. Such expressions surfaced, for example, in discussions of the opening ceremony and the summer exhibition at the City Museum. Contributors used these moments to articulate historical, cultural, or emotional reflections tied to the events. All such contributions remained in the corpus regardless of length or rhetorical style, since they formed part of the wider discursive field around representation. Short replies such as *“well said”* or *“important point”* were kept when they signalled alignment with the underlying statement rather than functioning as compliments. The choice reflected a commitment to include minority voices and testimonies of lived experience as an integral dimension of the discourse. Tagging practices required careful handling. Posts where contributors only tagged other individuals were excluded, as the function served notification rather than meaning-making. Procedural interactions such as *“thank you for your comment”* were also removed to prevent inflation of the dataset with contributions that did not advance the argument or deepen interpretation. Reactions such as likes, hearts, or other emotive icons did not enter the analytical framework because their meaning cannot be reliably inferred. A single reaction may signal agreement, appreciation of tone, recognition of participation, or simple acknowledgement without interpretive content. Incorporating them would risk attributing stability to an ambiguous gesture. Through selective filtering, the database remained focused on contributions where residents actively constructed meaning, interpreted events, expressed disagreement, or articulated emotional stakes related to Bodø2024. The result is a corpus grounded in public discourse rather than in the procedural signals that accompany ordinary social-media interaction.

## **AI-supported data preparation and computational analysis**

The analytical process combined qualitative interpretation with a structured computational workflow supported by advanced language processing technology. The aim was to handle a large volume of citizen-generated material in a manner that preserved contextual details while enabling systematic analysis across multiple discursive dimensions.

### **Computational framework**

Analysis employed large language models accessed through the OpenAI application programming interface (API), specifically the GPT-4o model (Gilardi et al., 2023). The use of advanced AI language models enabled systematic examination of all 2,380 contributions according to consistent analytical criteria while preserving sensitivity to Norwegian language patterns, including dialectal expressions, irony, sarcasm, and culturally specific references. The batch processing approach (Zendel et al., 2024) allowed cost-efficient analysis at scale while maintaining high analytical standards.

Each contribution received simultaneous evaluation across eight analytical dimensions: sentiment and emotion, discourse quality, thematic content, conflict identification, entity recognition, political references, physical places, and cultural conceptualisation. Such multi-dimensional framework ensured that analysis captured the complexity of public discourse rather than reducing contributions to single categories.

### ***Sentiment and emotion analysis***

Each contribution received a sentiment score between -1 and +1, where negative values indicated critical, disappointed, or frustrated tone, positive values indicated approval, enthusiasm, or hope, and values near zero indicated neutral or ambiguous emotional orientation. Sentiment magnitude captured the intensity of emotional expression, distinguishing between mild concern and intense anger, or between cautious optimism and enthusiastic support.

Emotional content was classified into eleven categories: joy, hope, frustration, anger, fear, sadness, surprise, positive (general), negative (general), neutral, and mixed. The extended emotional palette proved necessary to capture the range of affect present in discourse about cultural initiatives, where frustration and hope often coexisted, and where general evaluative tone did not always align with specific named emotions. The model assigned a dominant emotion when one affective category clearly predominated within a contribution. Entries without clear emotional concentration were coded as mixed or neutral.

Norwegian language characteristics shaped the analytical procedure. Residents frequently employed understatement, indirect critique, and rhetorical questions that required contextual interpretation rather than surface-level sentiment detection. The language model's training on diverse online discourse enabled recognition of such patterns, though manual verification remained necessary for ambiguous cases.

### ***Discourse quality and stance assessment***

Each contribution received an evaluation of its constructiveness – the extent to which it advanced dialogue, offered substantive reasoning, or contributed to collective understanding. Contributions were classified as highly constructive when they presented explicit proposals, acknowledged multiple perspectives, or articulated careful reasoning. Constructive contributions shared useful information or reasonable perspectives without necessarily offering solutions. Neutral contributions stated opinions without substantially advancing or hindering discussion. Unconstructive contributions involved vague complaints, unelaborated irritation, or assertions without substantiation. Destructive contributions included personal attacks, pure negativity without argumentative content, or deliberate attempts to derail conversation.

Stance toward Bodø2024 was evaluated along a spectrum from strongly supportive through neutral to strongly critical, with recognition that many contributions expressed mixed views. The analysis distinguished between general stance toward the cultural capital concept and specific positions on particular events, funding decisions, or organisational choices. A resident might support cultural programming while criticising budget allocation, or appreciate certain exhibitions while questioning overall project management. Such details required attention to both explicit statements and implied positions.

### ***Sarcasm detection***

Sarcasm presented a particular analytical challenge in Norwegian social media discourse, where indirect critique through irony operates as a culturally established communicative pattern. The language model identified potential sarcasm through recognition of incongruent evaluative language, strategic quotation marks, juxtaposition of conflicting sentiment markers, and formulaic ironic constructions. Examples include “great decision” applied to outcomes framed as negative, exaggerated praise in contexts of complaint, or rhetorical questions implying critique. Manual review of high-confidence sarcasm classifications ensured that cultural context informed final categorisation.

### ***Thematic analysis***

Thematic analysis identified specific topics raised within each contribution. A single comment often addressed multiple themes simultaneously, for example, discussing road conditions, library closures, and budget priorities in one statement. Themes ranged from specific concerns (infrastructure quality, facility availability, ticket prices) to abstract questions (cultural representation, community identity, artistic value). Each theme received a separate sentiment score, capturing how residents felt about different aspects of the cultural year.

### ***Cultural conceptualisation***

A particular analytical dimension examined how residents understood and employed the concept of “culture” itself. Rather than assuming a shared definition, the analysis tracked whether contributions actually discussed culture (as opposed to governance, resources, or other topics), whether culture was explicitly defined or implicitly assumed, and whether cultural discussion carried positive valence (culture as valuable, enriching, necessary) or negative valence (culture as wasteful, elitist, unnecessary expenditure). The dimension proved essential when it revealed that only 28% of contributions in the corpus directly engaged with cultural content, while the majority addressed resource allocation, governance decisions, and community service provision.

## **Consolidation and pattern identification**

Initial analysis generated thousands of distinct themes and hundreds of specific conflicts. To render patterns visible without sacrificing nuance, similar expressions underwent consolidation through computational similarity analysis. For example, contributions mentioning *“poor road conditions”*, *“terrible roads”*, *“infrastructure neglect”*, and *“potholes everywhere”* were recognised as variations addressing a common concern. Semantic similarity models grouped related expressions, which were then reviewed manually to ensure that consolidation preserved meaningful distinctions while reducing redundancy.

The consolidation process employed vector representations of textual expressions (embeddings) to measure semantic proximity. Clustering algorithms identified groups of related themes and conflicts, from which representative labels were selected based on specificity, clarity, and frequency. Manual curation ensured that consolidated categories reflected the substance of resident concerns rather than imposing external analytical categories.

## **Validation and interpretive integration**

All AI-generated classifications were aggregated and stored in a relational database structure that preserved links between sentiment scores, themes, conflicts, entities, and the original textual contributions. Computational outputs were treated as systematic analytical indicators that enriched qualitative interpretation rather than replacing it. Manual cross-checks examined samples across all classification dimensions to ensure alignment between automated assessments and contextual reading.

Particular attention focused on ambiguous cases, contributions where sentiment appeared mixed, where sarcasm created interpretive uncertainty, or where cultural references required local knowledge to decode. For such cases, computational classifications served as initial hypotheses subject to revision through qualitative engagement with context. The integration of computational consistency with interpretive flexibility aimed to combine the strengths of systematic analysis with the sensitivity required for understanding culturally embedded discourse.

## **Limitations**

Several limitations accompany an analysis based on social media communication. Short comments often carry ambiguous meaning, which makes interpretation dependent on context that is not always visible. Many contributions respond to a photograph, a link, a headline, or an ongoing thread without explicit clarification. When a comment did not clearly address the visual element itself, it was treated as part of the wider event-related

conversation. Such choices introduce interpretive uncertainty, although they were necessary to maintain coherence in the dataset.

Social media environments also change continuously. Algorithms alter visibility, contributors delete or revise their posts, and administrators remove content for moderation purposes. The material therefore reflects the discourse available at the moment of data collection rather than a complete archival record. Contributions may have disappeared before the dataset was compiled, and others may have been edited in ways that cannot be fully traced. Such volatility is inherent to digital communication and places natural constraints on any attempt to reconstruct public debate from platform-based material.

Finally, computational methods introduce another layer of limitation. Automated classifiers perform well when patterns are stable but can misinterpret irony, humour, or emotional specificity in more complex cases. Manual checks mitigated such risks, yet full elimination of misclassification remains impossible. The quantitative signals should therefore be read as indicators that complement, rather than replace, qualitative interpretation.

The aforementioned limitations do not undermine the broader patterns identified in the analysis, but they do call for careful reading. The findings reflect the structure and texture of the public conversation as it unfolded in real time, within the natural constraints of digital communication.

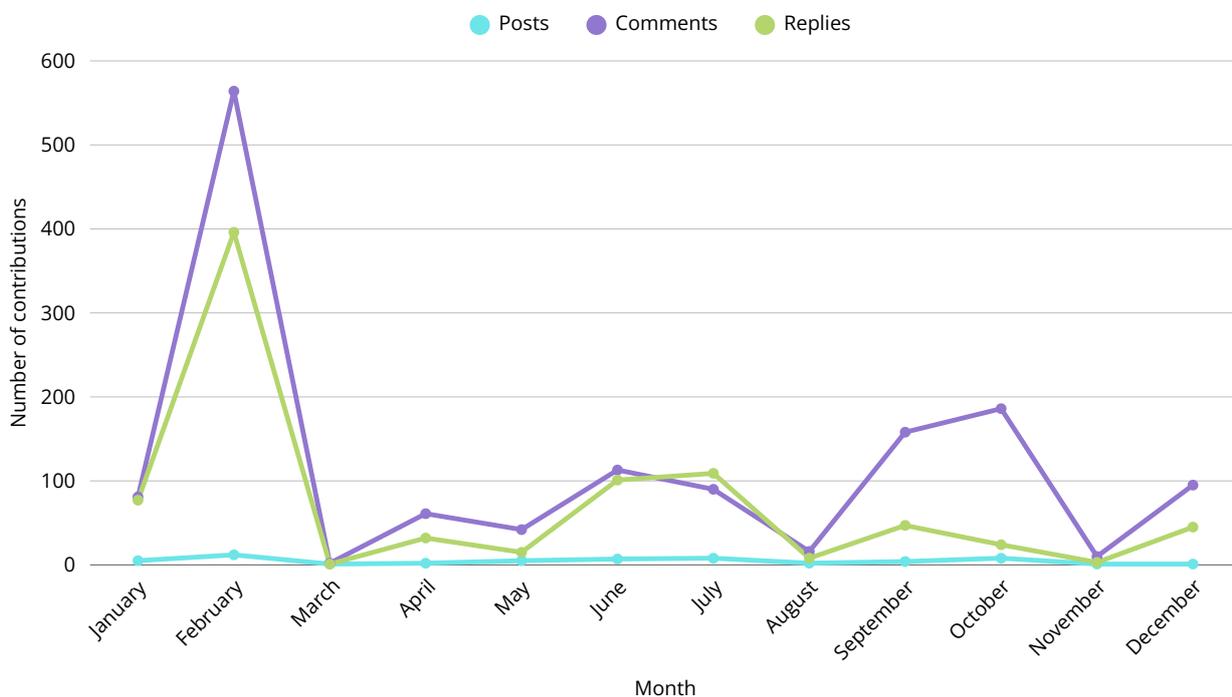
## **Contours of the Public Discourse**

The year 2024 carried exceptional significance for residents in Bodø, as the city approached a moment that blended celebration and scrutiny: its designation as the European Capital of Culture. Anticipation built gradually, yet the digital conversation revealed a deeper structure of public engagement that unfolded in recognisable waves. Online group discussions captured the texture of that engagement, with visible shifts in intensity as the cultural year progressed and as specific events or issues entered the public eye.

### ***Temporal patterns in the Bodø2024 discourse***

The monthly distribution of user contributions shows a pattern shaped by collective moments rather than steady, uniform participation (Figure 1). A pronounced spike appeared in February, when the opening ceremony acted as a catalyst for widespread conversation. Residents shared impressions, debated artistic choices, questioned organisational decisions, and reflected on what the event symbolised for the city. The

sudden rise in posts and comments signals that the opening sparked a moment of shared attention in which many sought to interpret what the cultural year meant for Bodø and for themselves.



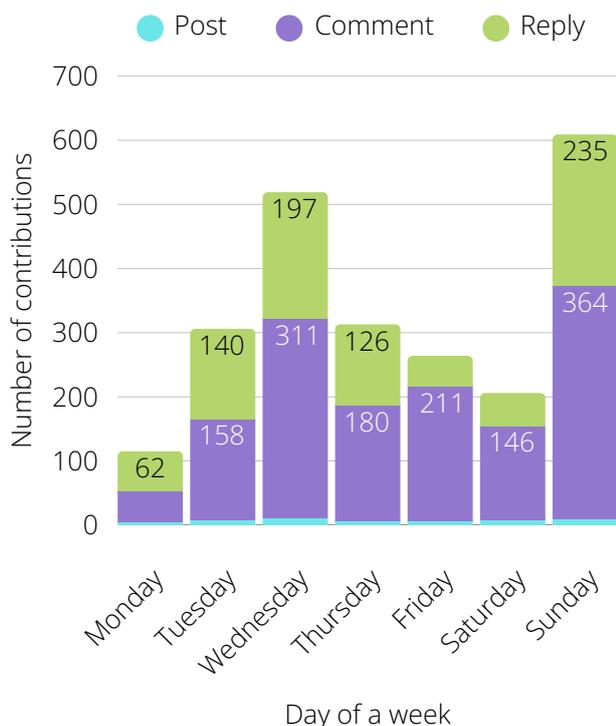
**Figure 1. Monthly distribution of user contributions**

Activity fell sharply after the opening yet did not settle into silence. Instead, the conversation moved into a sequence of smaller waves that corresponded to recognisable turning points in public life. Peaks in early summer aligned with large seasonal programmes and public reflections on how Bodø should appear to visitors. Later increases in September followed renewed debates about municipal finances and cultural priorities. Across these moments, engagement rose whenever cultural celebration intersected with questions of identity, belonging, or public resource allocation.

The flow of replies remained lower than the volume of posts and comments but carried interpretive weight. Replies often concentrated within particular threads, indicating that certain topics generated sustained, reciprocal dialogue even when general activity remained modest. Such depth suggests that meaning was not produced only through intermittent bursts of attention but also through ongoing exchanges where residents contested interpretations, defended positions, or worked through disagreements over representation, public spending, and the purpose of the cultural year.

## The social rhythm of online participation

The distribution of activity across the week reveals another dimension of the public conversation (Figure 2). Sundays appear as the most active day, followed by a secondary peak on Wednesdays, while Mondays register the lowest level of engagement. Such a pattern reflects an underlying social rhythm shaped by both platform behaviour and local routines.



Sunday activity often aligned with moments when residents had more time to reflect, upload images, or revisit debates that unfolded earlier in the week. Many cultural events took place during the weekend, and conversations on Sunday frequently carried traces of collective experiences that invited renewed interpretation. The midweek peak on Wednesdays likely reflects the influence of news cycles, municipal updates, and discussions that gained momentum once the working week settled into routine.

**Figure 2. Distribution of activity by day of week**

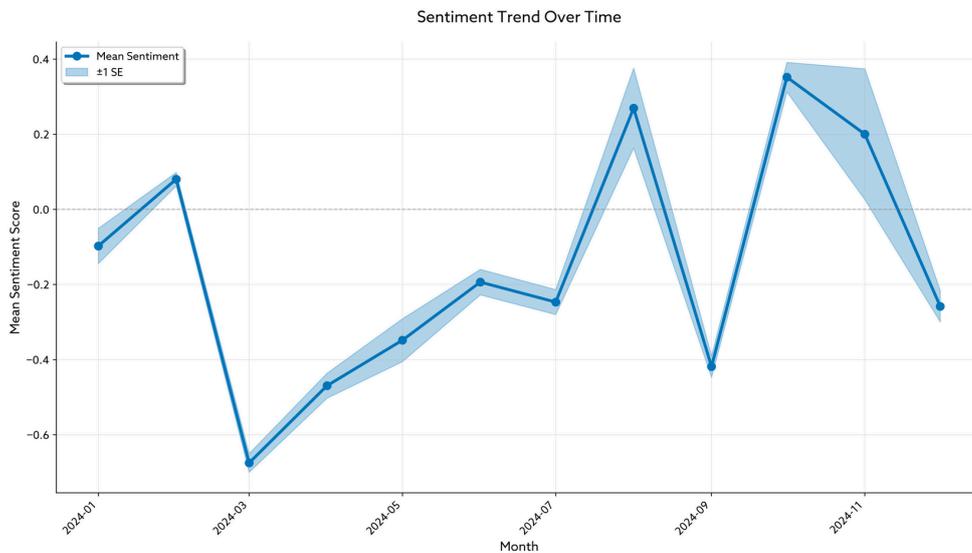
From Tuesday to Friday, engagement remains relatively balanced, with Saturday showing a moderate decline. The overall pattern suggests that online conversation around Bodø2024 became part of everyday life rather than a reaction confined solely to event days. Public dialogue intensified when particular symbolic or organisational moments captured attention, yet the underlying rhythm indicates that residents returned repeatedly to shared questions about identity, priorities, and community life.

## Sentiment trends

The sentiment analysis offers a second layer to understanding how the conversation evolved, complementing the temporal patterns described earlier. The trend displayed in Figure 3 shows how the tone of the public discussion shifted across the cultural year, with the shaded band indicating the degree of variation around the monthly mean.

The pattern reveals a fluctuating emotional field rather than a steady trajectory. The year opened with a moderately positive tone, shaped by pride, anticipation, and a sense

of collective arrival as Bodø entered its year as European Capital of Culture. The enthusiasm surrounding the opening ceremony, the shared visual impressions, and the early sense of cultural momentum contributed to this initial uplift.



**Figure 3. Sentiment trend over time**

A sharp downturn followed in March, marking the lowest point of the year. The decline aligns with the emergence of debates around municipal finances and concerns about how public resources were being prioritized and following mentions of schools and kindergardens closing. Conversations during this phase often combined frustration with anxiety about local welfare services, which shaped a distinctly negative emotional climate.

A gradual recovery appeared from April through June, driven by reflective and nostalgic contributions. Many users revisited memories from the opening months, shared appreciation for specific artistic events, and expressed pride in the cultural visibility the city had gained. The upward movement culminated in a temporary summer peak. Outdoor programmes and major performances, particularly the *Midnight Mystery* production, generated admiration for their creative scope and their resonance with residents' sense of place.

Late summer and early autumn marked another turning point. Renewed discussions about spending, infrastructure, and symbolic priorities triggered a fresh wave of scepticism. Conversations during August and September returned to questions of fairness, governance, and the widening gap many residents perceived between cultural investment and everyday services. The opening of the *Kunstkonten* exhibition intensified the shift. The installation was introduced at a moment when schools faced closures and free youth programmes were reduced, and its high cost became a focal point for frustration. For many, the juxtaposition of an expensive, provocative artwork with visible

cutbacks in basic services reinforced the sense that leadership choices were misaligned with the needs of the community.

Toward the final months of the year, sentiment rose again as attention shifted toward artistic expressions that resonated more directly with local identity and everyday experience. A notable contributor to this change was the *Cloudberries* installation in the city centre. Constructed from recycled materials and drawing on a symbol familiar across the region, the installation offered an accessible cultural reference point and invited a sense of recognition that many residents shared. The combination of sustainability, local symbolism, and visual generosity generated a marked increase in positive reactions.

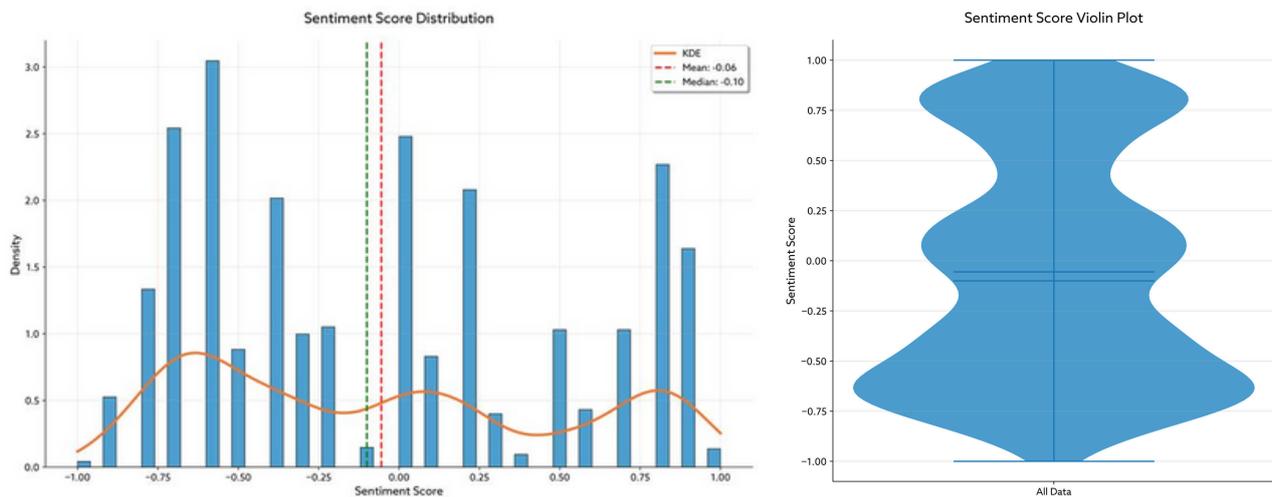
The uplift was, however, short-lived. As the cultural year approached its end, sentiment declined once more. Several threads voiced frustration that Bodø2024 seemed to fade from public view without a clear conclusion. Many residents had expected a sense of closure or a final collective moment that would frame the end of the year, and the absence of such communication produced disappointment. Criticism also surfaced around the final programme element, *Arctic Light*, which some felt received insufficient attention and inadequate visibility in the city's communication. The result was a final dip in sentiment shaped by a mixture of unmet expectations and a sense that the cultural year concluded more quietly than many had anticipated.

The sentiment trend demonstrates that emotional patterns in the Bodø2024 conversation were closely tied to moments where culture intersected with questions of identity, governance, and public value. The emotional arc of the year therefore reflects both the symbolic power of the cultural programme and the tensions that surfaced when celebration met everyday realities.

### **Sentiment score distribution**

To complement the temporal patterns described earlier, Figure 4 provides a statistical overview of sentiment scores across the entire dataset. The left panel depicts the distribution of sentiment values ranging from -1 (strongly negative) to +1 (strongly positive), while the right panel presents the same distribution as a violin plot that visualises concentration, variation, and intensity of expressed tone.

Each contribution (post, comment, or reply) received a sentiment score based on automated lexical analysis of its textual content. The mean sentiment score is -0.06, while the median stands at -0.10. The values indicate that the conversation leaned slightly negative on average, though not to an extreme degree. Many contributors voiced irritation, scepticism, or criticism, yet the overall tone remained within the range



**Figure 4. Sentiment score distribution**

of moderate discontent rather than outright hostility. The form of the distribution provides further details. Peaks near -0.5 and +0.5 suggest a bimodal pattern, indicating that contributions often leaned toward either positive enthusiasm or critical dissatisfaction. Neutral expressions formed a smaller portion of the discourse, which aligns with earlier observations that participants engaged with affective investment rather than detached commentary.

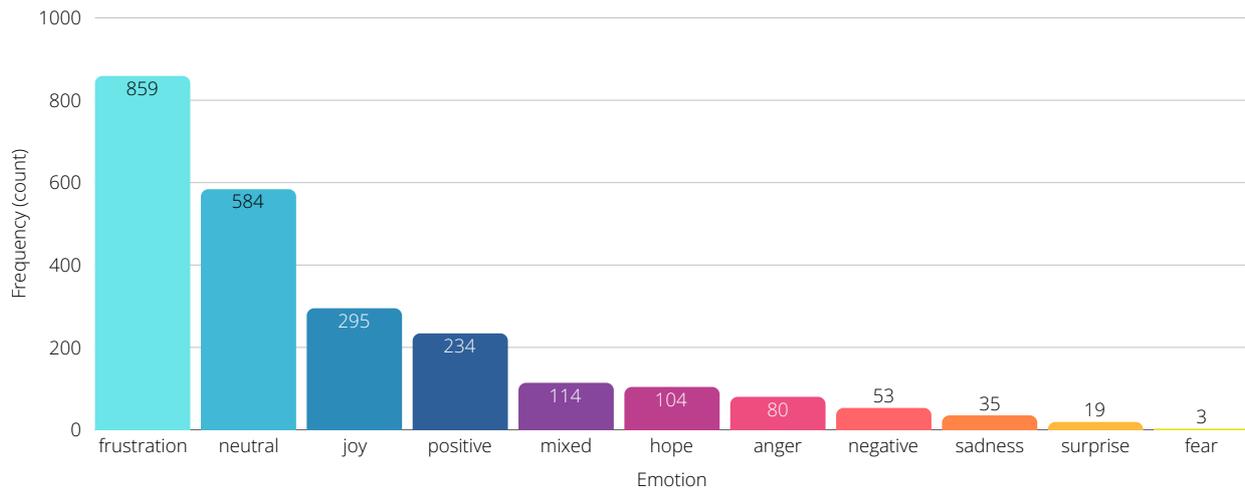
The violin plot reinforces this interpretation. The wider lower half reflects a modest skew toward negative sentiment, while the presence of extended tails on both ends of the scale captures the small number of highly emotional reactions, whether celebratory or intensely critical, that occurred during key moments of the cultural year. These included the opening ceremony, summer events, and the controversies surrounding cultural spending.

In such a way, the sentiment distribution shows a conversation shaped by evaluative intensity rather than apathy. The tone fluctuated between admiration and criticism, yet consistently reflected a public that remained attentive, emotionally engaged, and willing to articulate a stance. The distribution forms the quantitative foundation for the subsequent breakdown of emotional categories examined in the next section.

### **Emotional composition of the discourse**

Emotional expression formed a central dimension of the public conversation, and Figure 5 presents the distribution of emotion categories across the entire dataset. The distribution reveals a landscape shaped most prominently by frustration, which accounted for more than one third of all classified contributions (36.1%). Expressions of irritation, disappointment, and disillusionment appeared frequently, often linked to perceived misallocation of funds, insufficient attention to essential services, or doubts about municipal priorities. Such prominence signals that residents were invested in

evaluating the cultural year as a civic project rather than responding with indifference.



**Figure 5. Emotion distribution in Bodø2024 discourse**

Neutral expressions formed the second-largest category (24.5%). Many of these contributions provided factual clarification, practical information, or procedural updates. Such moments grounded the conversation by supplying reference points around which more evaluative exchanges unfolded. Positive emotions formed a meaningful counterbalance. Joy (12.4%) and positive appreciation (9.8%) appeared in discussions celebrating performances, exhibitions, public gatherings, and shared civic moments. These emotions were strongest during the opening ceremony and the main summer events, where residents articulated pride in the city’s visibility and cultural creativity.

Hope (4.4%) and mixed emotions (4.8%) introduced a reflective tone. Contributors engaged both with immediate experiences as well as with expectations for the future, the legacy of Bodø2024, and the long-term value of its artistic and infrastructural investments. Such expressions reveal a population that evaluated the cultural year as part of an evolving civic narrative and not as a separate event. Smaller categories, anger (3.4%), sadness (2.2%), and surprise (0.8%), surfaced in connection with specific controversies. Artistic provocation, debates about minority representation, and abrupt policy developments often triggered sharper emotional responses. Fear appeared only marginally (0.1%), suggesting that although the discourse was emotionally charged, it remained grounded in civic engagement rather than anxiety or perceived threat.

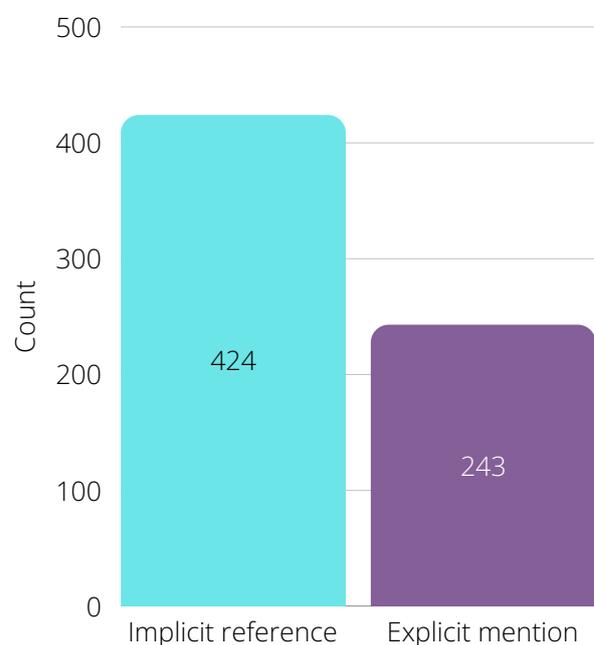
The emotional distribution portrays a conversation rich in affective meaning. Expressions of frustration and critique reflected care for the community rather than detachment, while moments of pride and joy underscored the cultural year’s capacity to inspire. Emotional expression therefore functioned as a civic contribution in its own right and as an active form of evaluation through which residents negotiated the significance of art, identity, and public leadership during Bodø’s cultural year.

## What Culture Represents in Everyday Life in Bodø?

Culture in Bodø appeared less as a formal category and more as a lived presence embedded into daily life. Residents speak about it through places they value, roles they hold, memories they share, and expectations they carry toward each other. The term itself surfaces less often than the experiences that give it meaning. The conversation therefore unfolds through the ways people signal who they are, what they protect, and how they understand their city.

Figure 6 captures such pattern clearly. Implicit reference dominates by a wide margin, nearly twice as frequent as explicit mention, which indicates that meaning grows from community life rather than from defined vocabulary by the organizers. Residents describe venues, gatherings, traditions, and shared routines without naming culture directly, and through that language they locate culture in practices that feel ordinary yet formative. Explicit references tend to appear only when money, priorities, or responsibility become contested, especially in discussions of Bodø2024, where the term “culture” becomes a rhetorical anchor for arguments about public value. The distribution points toward a core finding: *for Bodø residents, culture rests first in lived experience and only second in conceptual framing.*

The qualitative analysis reinforces further such layered understanding. Many contributors treat culture as *identity expressed through action*, not as a sector to be managed. References to the Sami, to heritage objects such as the *nordlandsbåten*, and to places filled with memory present culture as something carried forward through recognition and care. Pride accompanies depictions of practices that feel true to the region, while disappointment emerges when representation appears partial or tokenistic. Recognition becomes a measure of respect, and lack of recognition erodes legitimacy even when intentions remain positive.



**Figure 6. Forms of cultural reference in the discourse around Bodø2024**

A second layer portrays *culture as social glue*. Residents describe it as connection, dialogue, and continuity, grounded in family, children and youth, local venues, and moments of shared participation. The value lies in the sense of belonging created when community members meet each other through common experiences. Calls for broader

youth involvement and references to smaller, local artists highlight a preference for cultural life that includes wide participation rather than isolated showpieces.

A third layer places culture within the realm of *public goods* that compete for scarce resources. Debates around spending often shift the conversation from artistic judgement to questions of governance. When investments appear extravagant, misaligned with community needs, or executed with weak follow-through, frustration turns toward decision-makers rather than toward the cultural content itself. Supportive voices counter that cultural spending enriches civic life and strengthens the region's identity, arguing that such investment cannot be reduced to discretionary luxury. Culture becomes a proxy for deeper questions about trust, priority-setting, and public responsibility.

*Quality and authenticity* emerge as additional points of evaluation. Several comments assess artistic merit, craftsmanship, and the degree to which cultural expressions feel rooted in local values. Performances that resonate with audiences receive praise for emotional depth and relevance, while work perceived as generic, poorly curated, or detached from community identity draws criticism. Authentic local references carry weight because they signal that culture grows from within the city rather than arriving as an imported template.

The *Opening Ceremony* stands as the defining touchpoint in this debate. Supporters recall it as a moment of pride and emotional resonance, while critics see it as poorly curated, insufficiently representative, or misaligned with community expectations. Both perspectives reveal that the ceremony functioned as more than an entertainment event. It became a symbolic referendum on who belongs, which histories deserve visibility, and how public funds should express collective priorities. Through that lens, the ceremony served as a focal point where meaning, identity, expectations, and governance converged.

## **Discursive Profiles: Voices Behind the Conversation**

The public debate around the title year grew from the words of ordinary residents who returned to the same themes, questions, frustrations, and hopes. Their voices carried the project forward far more than any formal communication: they questioned decisions, defended efforts, called for clarity, offered support, used humour to soften or sharpen critique, and spoke about their city with affection or disappointment. They formed the living current of the conversation, and the inquiry sought to understand who they were and what shaped their tone. The aim was not to reduce people to categories, but to recognise patterns that helped explain why some voices called for accountability, why others focused on community value, and why many leaned on irony or sorrow to

express their position.

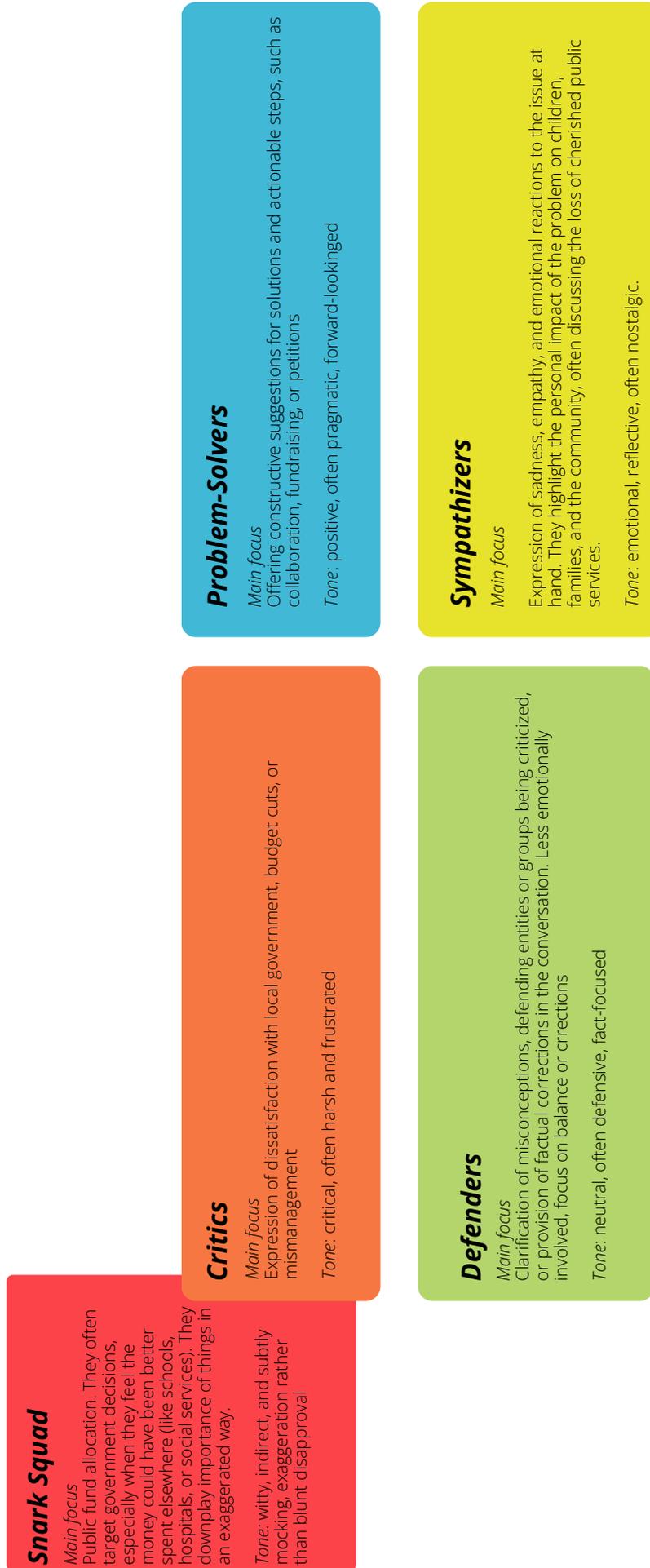
The clustering of the voices relied on four aspects that guided attention toward the structure of each contribution: the focus of the message, the tone, the engagement style that revealed how the writer interacted with others, and the recurrence of similar expressions over time. The assignment process drew strength from measurable cues that signaled how a contributor positioned themselves. Polarity and intensity pointed toward affection or frustration, while an emotion lexicon revealed the weight of particular feelings across the text. A constructiveness ratio captured whether the writer attempted to propose solutions, request evidence, coordinate efforts, or offer help. Stance markers signaled support or critique of organisations and decisions. Sarcasm, irony, scare quotes, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and ridicule markers helped to separate the sharp humour of the *Snark Squad* from the more direct voice of the *Critics*. Corrective phrases, references to rules, and factual framing tilted contributions toward the *Defenders*, while action verbs, petitions, and coordination language illuminated the *Problem-Solvers*. References to community impact, families, pride, or loss, often expressed through affective language without concrete proposals, pointed toward the *Sympathizers*. When signals pulled in different directions, the assignment followed the strongest operational markers, and uncertain cases moved to a final manual review. The overview over the profiles is presented in the figure 7.

## Critics

Critics speak from a place of dissatisfaction with public decisions, budget priorities, or what they perceive as weak management, and their voice often assigns responsibility directly to officials or organisations. They lean on anecdotes, headlines, or selective figures to justify an unfavourable assessment, yet rarely pursue a full alternative or a detailed remedy. The tone is literal and firm, marked by repeated negatives, strong contrasts, and short demands that call institutions to account. Replies usually defend the initial claim rather than open a wider space for dialogue, which keeps the exchange in a narrow argumentative frame. Border cases with the Snark Squad appear when irony enters the text, yet the absence of ridicule, memes, or theatrical exaggeration confirms a Critics label and reveals a preference for direct accusation over stylised humour. Their main contribution to the discourse lies in placing accountability and priority-setting on the public agenda, even though constant sharp polarity can exhaust readers who seek more forward motion.

## Snark Squad

Snark Squad contributors also direct frustration toward resource use and priority-setting, yet their rhetorical strategy rests on irony, ridicule, and exaggeration that transform anger into humour for an in-group audience. They use scare quotes, mock



- Focus of the comments and posts
- Tone of the engagement
- Engagement style (proactive vs reactive)
- Frequency of similar comments

**Figure 7. Discursive profiles overview**

contrasts, rhetorical questions, and hyperbole, often pointing toward emblematic expenditures or symbolic items that have become shorthand for irritation. Evidence appears only in selective flashes, employed mainly to sharpen a joke rather than build an argument. Engagement seeks reinforcement from like-minded readers through quips, punchlines, and dismissive asides that close discussions instead of inviting them. The sarcastic register, meme-like tone, and sharp humour separate them from Critics, who rely on literal accusation rather than theatrical commentary. Their analytical value lies in the signal they provide: legitimacy around a topic has frayed. Yet ridicule can deepen contempt and silence more constructive voices, which narrows the field of debate.

## **Problem-Solvers**

Problem-Solvers focus on remedies and next steps. They ask what could work, what information is still missing, and how a group might coordinate toward a result that serves the community. They present proposals in concrete form, request verifiable data, and point toward procedures or earlier decisions in order to clarify the pathway ahead. Their tone remains calm even in conflict, and language often includes conditional tests, modal verbs that invite cooperation, and explicit cost-benefit reflections. They tend to initiate threads, summarise the state of knowledge, and ask others for precise contributions that bring a solution within reach. Confusion with Defenders occurs when a corrective remark accompanies a proposal; the forward orientation and emphasis on coordination justify their placement among Problem-Solvers. Their value for organisers is clear, since proposals, evidence requests, and cues for collective action convert discontent into progress.

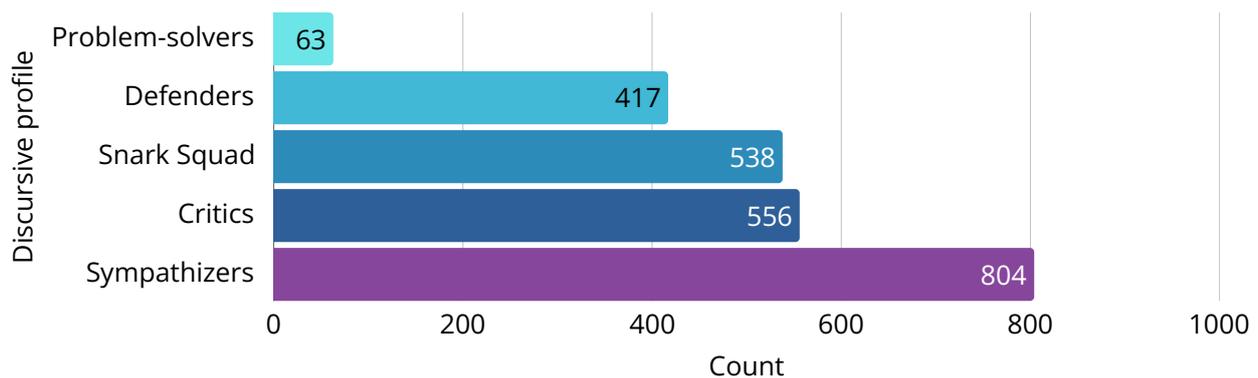
## **Defenders**

Defenders aim to correct factual inaccuracies and protect individuals or institutions targeted by criticism. They rely on budgets, minutes, rules, and prior commitments in order to ground their arguments in verifiable sources, and their tone stays measured until accusations escalate. They often reconstruct the timeline of a decision, clarify the authority behind it, or outline constraints that shaped the outcome, and through such reconstruction they show how a contested choice followed established procedure. Engagement is reactive by nature, because Defenders enter threads dominated by critique and attempt to restore balance before any move toward solutions. Proposals appear less often, yet careful citation of figures, units, and formal documentation signals a Defenders stance. Their contribution lies in stabilising debate and reducing factual drift, although reliance on procedural language may feel distant to readers who look for more empathy.

## Sympathizers

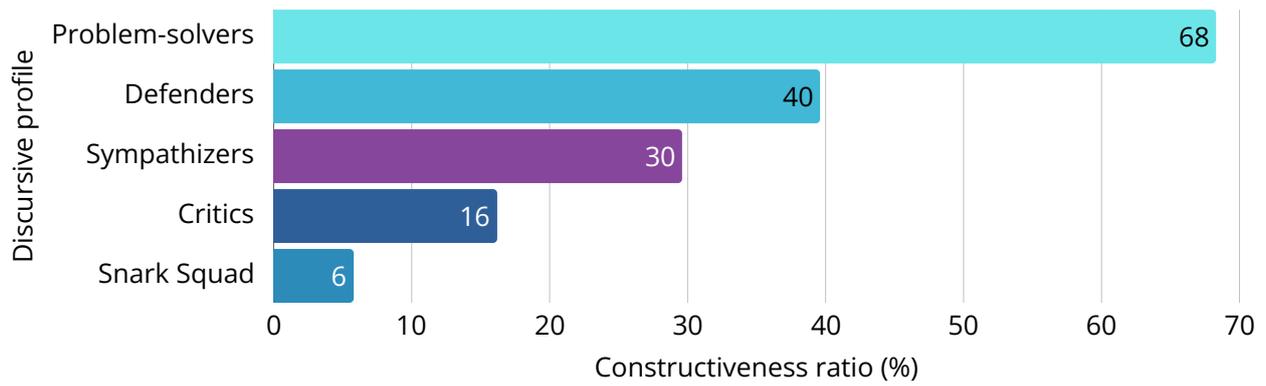
Sympathizers focus on human impact and the way cultural decisions touch daily life. They speak of families, children, heritage, and the meaning attached to local places, and their reflections often show affection, worry, pride, or sadness instead of anger. They rely on memories, personal accounts, and observations rooted in the city's flow of daily life rather than on formal documentation. Proposals may appear, yet they remain secondary to the effort to clarify what is at stake emotionally and morally for the community. Writers evoke locations, roles, and moments that reveal how a decision echoes through lived experience. Confusion with Critics may arise when grief moves toward blame; lower use of accusatory verbs and stronger attention to community bonds confirm assignment to Sympathizers. Their presence often softens polarisation and restores a sense of shared worth even when disagreements remain unresolved.

## Patterns that distinguish the discursive profiles



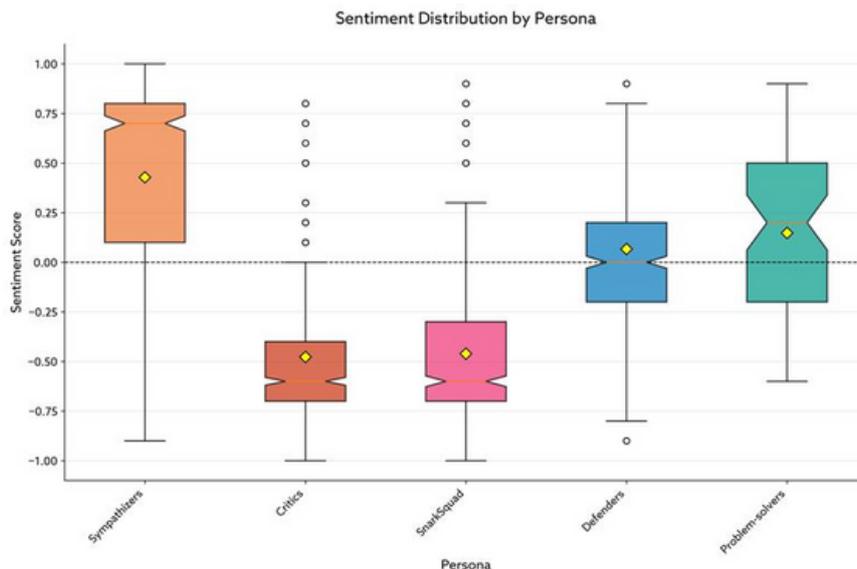
**Figure 8. Distribution of the public voices in the debate**

The distribution points toward Sympathizers as the largest single voice type, which may at first suggest that compassion and community concern dominate the debate. However, a closer interpretation views that Snark Squad and Critics form an oppositional bloc centered in dissatisfaction with Bodø2024. Their styles diverge sharply (irony and ridicule shape the Snark Squad’s contribution, while direct blame defines the Critics), yet both rely on negative polarity, limited constructiveness, and a consistent focus on contested allocations and priorities. In such a way, the oppositional bloc exceeds any single voice type and provides the dominant frame that sets many threads in motion. Defenders then enter reactively, offering correction, factual grounding, and procedural context. Problem-Solvers remain a smaller minority that directs attention toward remedies and practical steps. The overall pattern signals a polarized arena in which a strong critical presence shapes the agenda, attracts substantial engagement, and defines the tone for much of the public conversation.



**Figure 9. Constructiveness across discursive profiles**

Constructiveness varies sharply across the profiles. Problem-Solvers stand out as the only group that rises clearly above the fifty-percent benchmark, which confirms their steady focus on remedies, clarification, and actionable steps. Defenders rest just below that line, reflecting their priority on factual correction and procedural grounding rather than forward planning. Sympathizers, Critics, and the Snark Squad remain well beneath the benchmark, a pattern that reveals how much of the conversation centres on expression, frustration, and symbolic meaning rather than on steps that could move a conflict toward resolution. The gap between the groups shows that constructiveness concentrates in a comparatively small segment of participants, while the majority of contributions orient toward emotional presence, contestation, or rhetorical commentary. The distribution therefore illustrates why many threads gain momentum through reaction and polarity rather than through problem definition or collective progress.

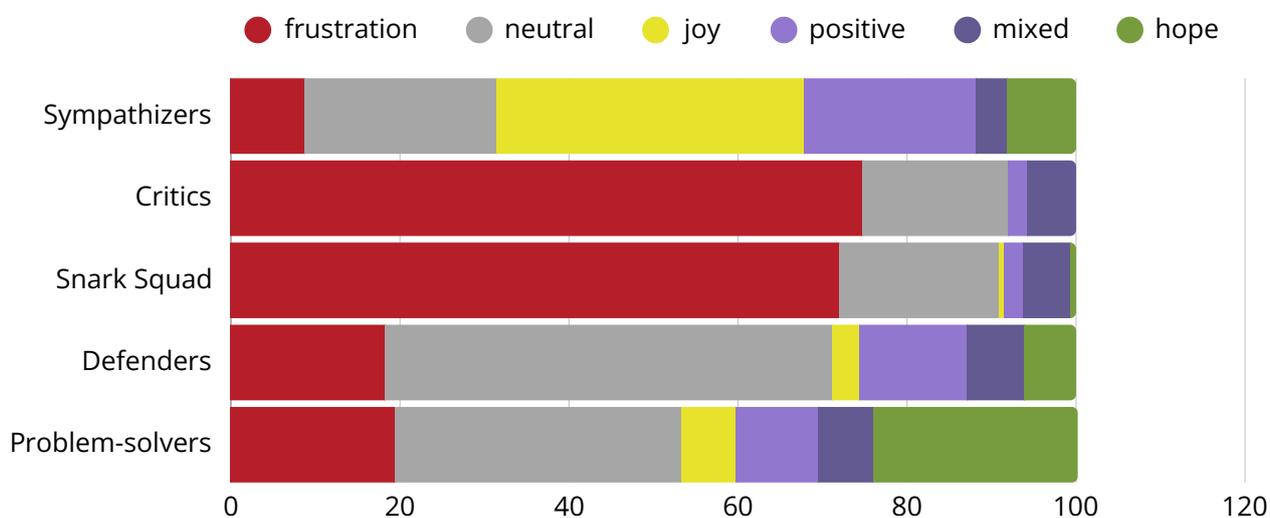


**Figure 10. Sentiment patterns across the discursive profiles**

Sentiment diverges sharply across the discursive profiles. Sympathizers stand as the only group with values that rise clearly above zero, and the long positive tail indicates a consistent presence of warmth, care, and community-oriented reflection. Critics and the

Snark Squad remain positioned well below zero, and the narrow interquartile ranges show how reliably negative their evaluations of the title year tend to be, regardless of the specific thread or theme. Defenders hover close to neutral with a slight negative pull, which reflects the reactive nature of their role: they enter discussions shaped by criticism and attempt to restore context rather than introduce emotional uplift. Problem-Solvers cluster near the neutral line with a modest positive skew, which aligns with their steadier tone and their attention to remedies rather than grievances.

The violin plot deepens the interpretation by displaying the density of sentiment across each profile rather than only central values. Sympathizers show a broad distribution above zero, which reveals how many of their contributions carry positive affect. Critics and the Snark Squad show substantial mass below zero, which confirms the dominance of negative sentiment across their comments and the relative stability of that negativity. Defenders remain concentrated around the midpoint with moderate spread, while Problem-Solvers show a slight expansion above zero that matches their measured and forward-oriented voice. The combined picture illustrates a split emotional climate in which a sizeable critical bloc shapes the negative charge of the debate, Sympathizers counterbalance with a more hopeful register, and Problem-Solvers maintain composure near the centre in a manner consistent with their higher constructiveness profile.



**Figure 11. Emotional composition of the discursive profiles (%)**

The figure (Figure 11) presents the distribution of the six most frequent emotions within each discursive profile and allows for a direct comparison of emotional composition rather than sheer volume. Sympathizers devote a substantial share to sadness and fear, with visible portions of trust and occasional joy, which corresponds to a register shaped by concern for community impact, loss of valued services, and attachment to places and traditions. Snark Squad concentrates heavily on anger and disgust and leaves minimal space for trust or joy, a pattern that reflects their reliance on ridicule, moral disapproval,

and symbolic exaggeration when expressing dissatisfaction. Problem-Solvers place weight on anticipation and trust, with moderate presence of joy and low levels of anger, which fits a mode of engagement that orients itself toward clarification, remedies, and collective steps forward. Defenders allocate a large share to trust and anticipation as well, although pockets of anger appear when they respond to claims they consider unfounded or unfair. Critics lean strongly toward anger and disgust with only faint traces of trust or joy, which reinforces the evaluative stance underlying their interventions.

The distribution reveals two emotional poles that shape much of the public debate. Anger and disgust dominate the oppositional cluster made up of Critics and the Snark Squad, while sadness and fear characterize the Sympathizers, who ground their contributions in lived consequences and community bonds. The more constructive profiles, Problem-Solvers and Defenders, rely primarily on anticipation and trust, which matches their attention to practical steps, factual correction, and procedural grounding. The emotional composition therefore complements the earlier patterns: the debate is driven by a mixture of sharp disapproval, heartfelt concern, and a narrower but steady current of solution-oriented engagement.

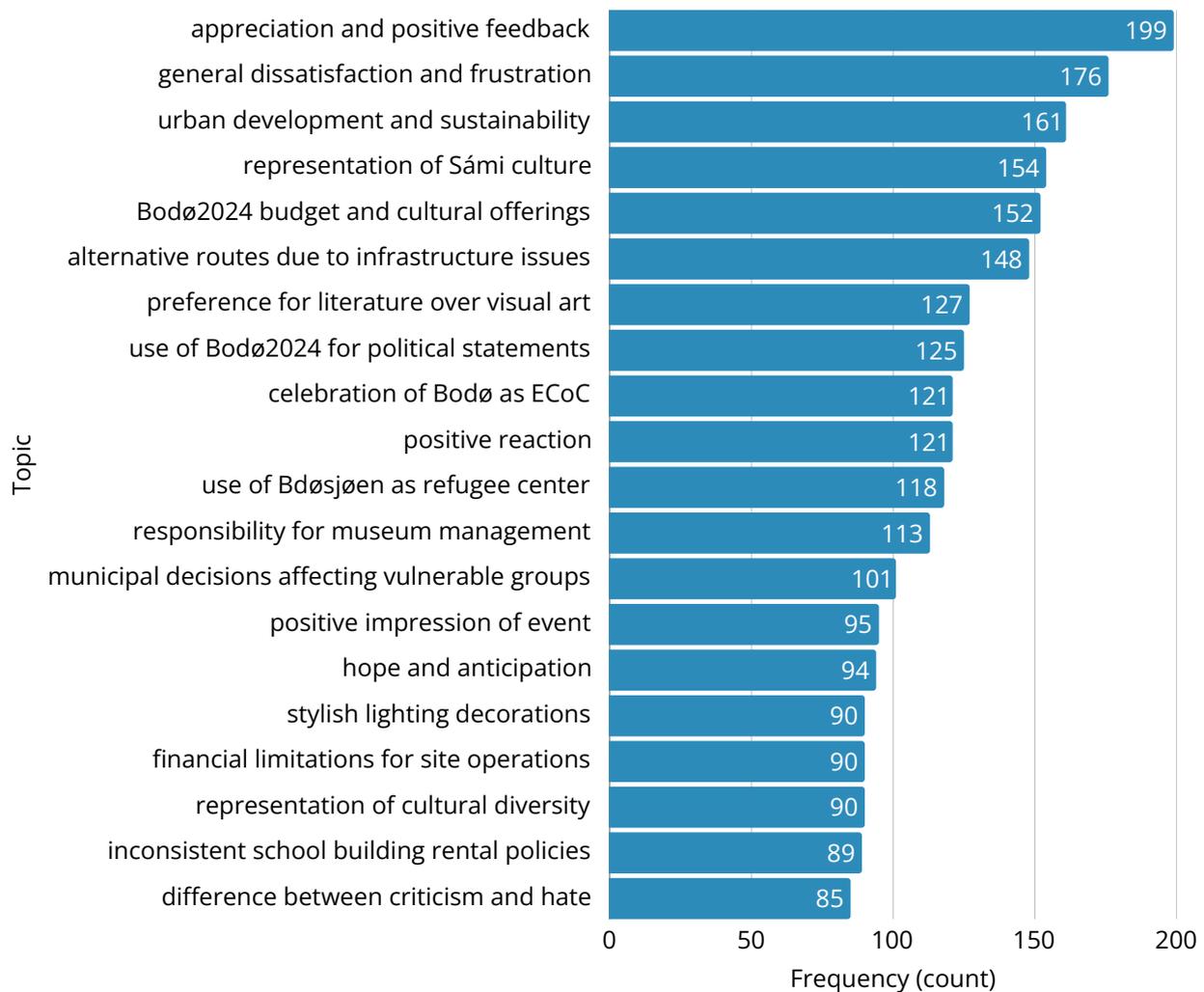
## **Motifs of Debate and Lines of Dispute**

Understanding the main concerns that shaped public conversation requires moving beyond sentiment and examining what residents actually discussed. The thematic structure of the discourse reveals the issues that facilitated participation, the topics that sustained attention, and the matters that returned repeatedly across the year. Rather than forming a single storyline, the discussions around Bodø2024 unfolded across a wide field of cultural, civic, and practical themes. The overview below presents the most frequently recurring topics and provides a foundation for the more detailed narrative analysis developed in the subsequent sections.

### ***What the residents chose to talk about***

Figure 12 presents the twenty most frequently discussed themes, consolidated from more than one hundred initial topic labels identified during the coding process. The distribution shows that the conversation around Bodø2024 did not revolve around one dominant storyline. Instead, it unfolded across a broad range of cultural, civic, and practical concerns.

At the top of the ranking stand appreciation and positive feedback and general dissatisfaction and frustration, which are two opposing but equally prominent strands. They they illustrate the polarity that shaped much of the public conversation: admiration for artistic ambition and collective achievement on the one hand, and discomfort with perceived misalignment between cultural spending and everyday priorities on the other.



**Figure 12. Top 20 consolidated themes in Bodø2024 discourse**

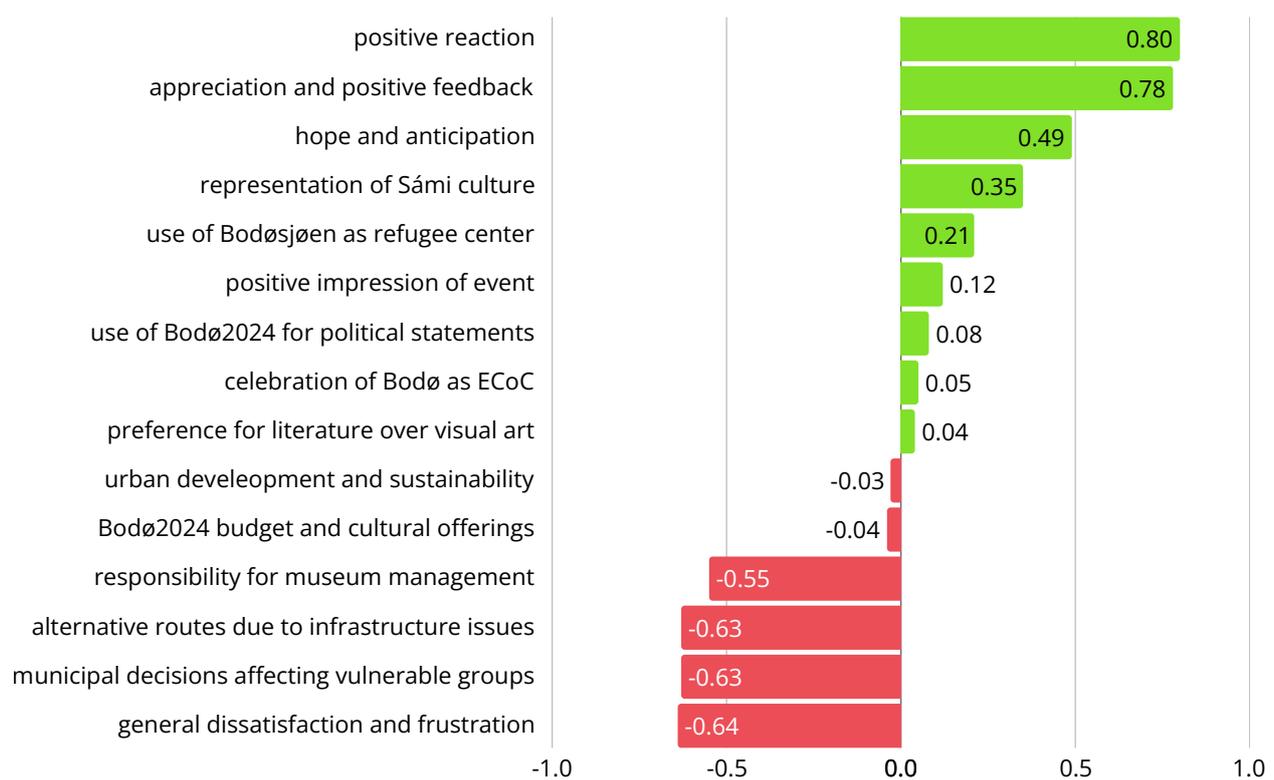
Substantial attention was also directed toward urban development and sustainability, representation of Sámi culture, and budget and cultural offerings. The topics show that residents engaged with both artistic outputs as well as with the structural and symbolic implications of the cultural year. Discussions of Sámi representation and the use of Bodø2024 for political statements demonstrate how the programme became a site where questions of identity, recognition, and fairness were openly negotiated.

Several highly ranked topics extend beyond culture in a narrow sense. Themes such as alternative routes due to infrastructure issues, responsibility for museum management, and municipal decisions affecting vulnerable groups indicate that the cultural year intersected closely with broader governance debates. Residents used Bodø2024 as a vantage point to articulate concerns about service provision, institutional accountability, and the everyday functioning of the city. Such an interplay illustrates that the cultural year operated as a discursive meeting point and a visible anchor that drew together discussions about cultural meaning, political legitimacy, and urban development.

Positive engagement remained present throughout. Themes such as positive impression of events, hope and anticipation, and stylish lighting decorations represented the moments of admiration, civic pride, and enjoyment. Although smaller in frequency, they reveal that many residents experienced Bodø2024 as a source of inspiration and emotional uplift. Their placement alongside more critical topics demonstrates the complexity of public sentiment: residents could appreciate the artistic ambition of the cultural year while simultaneously questioning its distribution of benefits and priorities.

### Emotional orientation across the central themes

Figure 13 shows how the central themes were evaluated emotionally. The patterns reveal that residents in relation to Bodø2024 positioned their reactions according to the symbolic and practical stakes attached to each topic. Clear contrasts emerge between themes that elicited enthusiasm and themes that activated frustration or disappointment.



**Figure 13. Mean sentiment by top 15 consolidated themes**

The strongest positive orientation appears in relation to positive reaction, appreciation and positive feedback, and hope and anticipation. Such themes reflect moments when cultural offerings created pride, aesthetic pleasure, or a sense of collective possibility. Discussions about representation of Sámi culture and the use of Bodøsjøen as a refugee centre also held a positive or balanced tone, and indicate that many residents approached questions of recognition and inclusion with empathy and civic-mindedness.

More critical sentiment concentrated around themes tied to municipal responsibility and everyday welfare. Discussions about municipal decisions affecting vulnerable groups, alternative routes created by infrastructure problems, and responsibility for museum management attracted some of the sharpest negative evaluations. Such conversations often framed frustration as a reaction to perceived shortcomings in governance rather than to the cultural programme itself.

Ambivalence appears in several high-frequency themes, particularly those related to budget and cultural offerings or to urban development and sustainability. Sentiment scores near zero suggest that residents approached such topics with mixed views, weighing pride in ambition against concern over priorities. The ambivalence is an important marker of public reasoning. It shows that residents did not settle into fixed positions for or against Bodø2024, but revisited their evaluations as the year progressed and as new events, decisions, and debates emerged.

The combined picture points to a discursive field defined by both admiration and critique. Bodø2024 acted as a reference point through which residents articulated broader concerns about governance, fairness, identity, and the future direction of the city. Positive and negative sentiments did not function as opposing blocs but rather as parallel expressions of civic engagement: one celebrating what the cultural year offered, the other questioning whether its benefits aligned with the needs of the wider community.

## **Dominating conflicts in the discourse**

### ***“You took too much space”***

#### ***The representation and belonging conflict***

Among the many themes that surfaced in the online conversations around Bodø2024, none exposed deeper historical layers than the debate over Sámi visibility. What started as disagreements about artistic balance and program choices gradually evolved into a confrontation about belonging, recognition, and the meaning of identity in Northern Norway. Residents did not simply react to performances; they reacted to what those performances signaled about the past, the present, and who the city wishes to become.

The initial tension emerged when program announcements and performances featured Sámi artists, languages, and symbols. For some contributors, it represented long-awaited progress: a long-overdue acknowledgement of an Indigenous culture that had lived through sustained pressure, assimilation, and erasure. For others, the same visibility appeared excessive, which is a sign that the cultural year had drifted away from

what they understood as Bodø's own identity. The disagreement created an early split between those who saw the inclusion of Sámi culture as necessary correction and those who interpreted it as overrepresentation.

Critics framed the emphasis on Sámi art as an *imbalance*. They questioned whether the cultural year had become politicized, pointing to repeated use of reindeer motifs, joik, and traditional dress as evidence of an agenda rather than artistic richness. Several argued that national attention focused on Sámi performers at the expense of what they considered "local culture," and some expressed frustration that Bodø's own artistic expressions seemed overshadowed. In their view, the cultural year had created a narrative that displaced rather than complemented other traditions. Supporters interpreted the same events differently. They viewed the increased Sámi presence not as excess but as long-delayed recognition. From their perspective, equal visibility cannot look symmetrical when one culture has endured generational suppression. What critics experienced as "*too much*" was understood by others as "*finally enough*". For those who supported Sámi inclusion, the programming choices were not political statements but steps toward healing and fairness.

As the year progressed, the debate took on a more personal tone. Irony, jokes, and memes began to circulate, often mocking Sámi music or aesthetics. What some considered harmless satire was interpreted by Sámi contributors as belittlement. Several pointed out how easily their language, traditions, or national dress became the object of collective amusement. The division between those who perceived satire as humour and those who experienced it as hurt exposed how unsettled the public conversation remains when historical trauma is still present.

A second dimension soon emerged beneath the surface – one of *legitimacy* and *belonging*. The conflict moved beyond programming to questions that cut to the core of collective identity: Who belongs here? Whose history counts as local? Who has the authority to define Northern identity? Some commenters minimized Sámi presence in Nordland or questioned its authenticity, while others responded with references to documented histories of settlement, exchange, and cultural coexistence. At this stage, the debate was no longer about performances but about recognition as a group with legitimate historical presence. The emotional intensity of the conflict stemmed partly from the stakes involved. For many Sámi contributors, visibility articulated continuity, dignity, and voice after decades of enforced silence. For critics, the same visibility could symbolize politicization, division, or perceived favouritism. A cultural year designed to signal unity therefore became an arena where different understandings of fairness and history collided.

The result was a fragmented discourse in which the same artistic program generated profoundly different readings. One side saw Bodø2024 as an opportunity to bring forward stories and languages that had been neglected. The other saw a cultural narrative that felt exclusive, imbalanced, or overly political. The disagreement was about what that content represented: for some, justice and long-needed recognition; for others, a narrowing of cultural space.

From a management and communication perspective, the conflict sheds light on the complexity of representing diversity in a way that feels fair to all audiences. In a city-branding project, culture functions both as experience and symbol, and representation becomes inherently charged. Sámi visibility was read simultaneously as reconciliation and as displacement, depending on the observer's historical awareness and sense of belonging. Without a shared understanding of the past, even well-intentioned inclusion efforts can be understood as exclusionary, and a celebration of culture can become a site where unresolved questions of identity resurface.

The following summaries and representative quotations illustrate how residents articulated the two main narrative positions in the debate. The original comments were written in Norwegian and have been translated and lightly paraphrased to preserve meaning while safeguarding the identity of the contributors.

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### ***"Whose culture is being celebrated?"***

#### ***Critical narrative***

*"Bodø's local identity is being overshadowed by national politics."*

*"Cultural programming feels one-sided and unrepresentative."*

*"Art and music should unite, not divide – politics don't belong on stage."*

*"Mockery and satire are harmless humor."*

#### ***Supportive narrative***

*"Local identity includes Sámi heritage; it was just hidden by assimilation."*

*"True balance requires amplifying the voices that were long unheard."*

*"For Indigenous artists, culture and politics are inseparable; silence is part of the problem."*

*"Humor that targets cultural symbols continues old patterns of disrespect."*

### ***Conflict type***

1. Representation and visibility – disagreement over the scope and form of Sámi inclusion.
2. Legitimacy and belonging – disagreement over whether Sámi identity is recognised as an integral part of Bodø's cultural landscape.

#### ***Underlying issue***

A clash between two narratives of fairness: a demand for equal visibility in the present versus an insistence on historical correction for past erasure.

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## **“You spend wrongly”**

### **The allocation conflict**

The financial debate surrounding Bodø2024 became one of the clearest examples of how large cultural initiatives can ignite disputes that reach far beyond questions of art or entertainment. Social media conversations framed the issue more than simply as disagreement over budgets, but as a wider reflection on values: what the city stands for, who benefits from public spending, and which priorities define fairness during a period of economic pressure.

The conflict gained force as soon as large price tags entered public view. Headlines about multi-million-kroner events, installations, and new cultural infrastructure triggered frustration across platforms. Residents compared those expenditures with what they described as the community’s urgent needs: aging school buildings, dark rural roads, strained healthcare services, and social care systems under mounting pressure. The figures themselves mattered less than what they appeared to represent. Many felt that political leaders were out of touch, committed to prestige projects while daily essentials received inadequate attention. The gap between symbolic investment and lived conditions set the tone for much of the debate.

The conversation shifted from technical budgeting to moral language. Terms such as “waste”, “luxury”, and “showpiece” appeared frequently. Healthcare workers and their supporters described cultural spending as “a slap in the face” to those working under cuts and staff shortages. From their perspective, public money directed toward culture during a period of austerity signalled not only poor judgement but disregard. The contrast between “life and health” on one side and “spectacle and art” on the other became the dominant narrative frame that shaped many thread dynamics.

Representatives from Bodø2024 and local authorities attempted to explain the structure of the funding. They pointed out that much of the budget was earmarked, co-financed, and time-bound, which meant that it could not be reallocated to hospitals or roads. They presented the *cultural year as an investment* in future development, with a mandate that extended beyond artistic output to youth participation, inclusion, and regional visibility. In their view, the expenditures had strategic purpose rather than symbolic extravagance.

Those explanations, however, rarely restored confidence. For many critics, the term “earmarked” read as bureaucratic deflection rather than a genuine justification. Each new headline, whether about a floating stage or a piece of public art, reinforced a belief that leaders consistently chose to spend on the wrong things. Sarcasm became a

common form of expression. Jokes, memes, and ironic references replaced policy arguments and expressed a deeper sense of alienation.

The debate revealed contrasting *notions of rationality*. For decision-makers, rationality involved long-term leverage, co-funding opportunities, and investments that could strengthen the city's reputation. For residents engaged in critique, rationality centred on distributive fairness and visible benefit. They evaluated spending through the lens of everyday economics rather than symbolic economics. Both logics carried coherence within their own frames, yet they existed at cross-purposes, which made the disagreement difficult to resolve.

The allocation conflict therefore exposed more than dissatisfaction with a cultural program. It functioned as an indirect referendum on governance, transparency, and trust. In a period marked by fiscal restraint, any highly visible expenditure became a symbol through which people expressed broader concerns about leadership legitimacy. When residents see bright lights against a dark road, the issue is not only culture; it is the perception of contradiction.

The following summaries and representative quotations illustrate how residents expressed the two dominant narrative positions in the financial debate. Similarly as earlier, the original comments were written in Norwegian and have been translated and lightly paraphrased to preserve meaning while protecting the identity of the contributors.

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### ***"Money, meaning, and the question of fair use"***

#### ***Critical narrative***

*"Millions go to culture while schools, roads, and healthcare fall apart."*

*"Prestige projects serve a small circle while ordinary residents carry the consequences."*

*"Leaders choose luxury over necessities."*

*"The numbers shift constantly; nothing feels transparent."*

#### ***Supportive narrative***

*"The funds are earmarked; they cannot be redirected to hospitals or roads."*

*"Cultural investments strengthen identity, youth participation, and regional visibility."*

*"Co-financed budgets create opportunities the city would not secure on its own."*

*"Complex totals reflect multi-level governance, not hidden agendas."*

#### ***Conflict type***

Allocation and legitimacy – moral disagreement over what constitutes responsible and fair use of public money.

#### ***Underlying issue***

High-visibility cultural spending clashes with perceptions of neglect in essential services. Residents interpret spending choices as evidence of misplaced priorities, where symbolic initiatives seem to override practical needs.

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## **“You let our needs disappear”**

### **The cutback conflict**

The cutback conflict grew alongside the allocation conflict yet carried a different emotional register. Where “*you spend wrongly*” expressed anger over what leaders chose to finance, “*you let our needs disappear*” voiced a deeper sense of loss. Here, residents mourned the disappearance of services and spaces that shaped ordinary life rather than simply judging the priorities. The dispute revolved around closures, reductions, and quiet withdrawals that took place during the same period the city presented itself as a European Capital of Culture.

Contributors described a city marked by striking contrasts. New installations, festivals, and celebratory symbols appeared in the centre, yet everyday services weakened around them. Several residents spoke of a shrinking welfare environment: neighbourhood libraries closed and replaced by a single institution in Stormen, youth facilities such as Bratten and Villa Vekst shut their doors, Bodøsjøen camping area decayed, and specialised programs for children who did not fit into mainstream schooling vanished. Even basic infrastructure, streetlights, waste management, and winter maintenance, stood as reminders of a slow retreat. One contributor captured the contrast by describing evening walks along rural roads in complete darkness while watching the city illuminate cultural displays.

The conflict gained strength because the examples touched everyone's daily routines. The missing bus shelter, the closed reading room, the cancelled after-school activity, or the unlit winter path became evidence of what residents felt they had lost. The phrase “*nei til kutt*” (eng. “*no to cut*”) carried emotional weight because it defended more than services – it defended dignity, safety, and a sense of belonging. When contributors opposed cuts, they voiced a concern that their community was thinning out beneath the celebration.

Social media amplified the *feeling of abandonment*. Parents shared accounts of children who lost meeting places, older residents described reduced support, and rural inhabitants contrasted their dark roads with well-lit stages in the centre. The tension also inspired acts of small-scale protest, such as youth-led T-shirt campaigns and local demonstrations. Each new closure added another thread to a narrative that presented the cultural year as an initiative that thrived while ordinary life eroded, even when no direct financial link existed.

The defenders of the changes attempted to explain that most cutbacks stemmed from structural conditions: declining revenues, demographic pressures, and national reforms.

They emphasised that Bodø2024 funding was ring-fenced through external partners and that no legal mechanism allowed redirection to welfare services. Yet explanations rarely shifted perceptions. Once Bodø2024 became the visible face of municipal ambition, it absorbed frustration directed at a broader climate of austerity. Cause and coincidence blended into a single moral storyline: *“they found money for celebration, but not for us.”*

The narrative endured because it matched the emotional logic of lived experience. Residents navigate what is open, closed, lit, or dark; they do not navigate budget frameworks. When losses accumulate, people search for agency, such as a decision-maker who could have chosen another path. Bodø2024, with its branding and visibility, became the *symbolic point* where many residents placed that hope and disappointment.

From a management perspective, the cutback conflict illustrates how symbolic investment and everyday services can become morally entangled under economic pressure. Local authorities faced a difficult position: encouraging pride in a cultural milestone while overseeing reductions in services that shaped daily life. Without careful communication, celebration appeared indifferent. And when trust in leadership is already fragile, explanations risk sounding like deflection rather than clarity. *“You let our needs disappear”* therefore captured more than a claim about municipal budgets. It expressed a feeling of being left behind with the sense that the cultural year cast light across the city while leaving parts of the community in shadow.

The following summaries and representative quotations illustrate how residents and supporters of municipal decisions articulated the two narrative positions in the cutback debate. As in the earlier sections, the original comments were translated and lightly paraphrased to preserve meaning while protecting the identity of the contributors.

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### ***“What residents feel when disappearing”***

#### ***Critical narrative***

*“The city celebrates while libraries, youth centres, and essential programs close around us.”*

*“Money appears for fireworks but not for streetlights along the roads our children use.”*

*“Vital spaces disappear for youth, for older residents, for those who rely on support.”*

*“Everyday life becomes poorer because leaders choose celebration over care.”*

#### ***Supportive narrative***

*“Service reductions result from structural deficits and national-level budget pressures, not from the cultural year.”*

*“Cultural funds are earmarked and cannot be redirected to welfare or infrastructure.”*

*“The municipality must manage essential services within long-term fiscal constraints.”*

*“Bodø2024 offers opportunity and visibility, even during a period of austerity.”*

### **Conflict type**

Service decline and legitimacy – disagreement over responsibility for closures, reductions, and visible disparities between cultural investment and everyday services.

#### *Underlying issue*

A sense of abandonment arises when symbolic celebration coincides with losses in daily life. Residents attribute structural austerity to an easily recognisable project, which transforms a complex financial environment into a moral narrative of being left behind.

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## **Conclusions: Lessons from Bodø2024's Digital Conversations**

### **Lesson 1. Culture as a shared civic resource**

In 2024, Bodø served as the European Capital of Culture, marking the first time the distinction was awarded to a city north of the Arctic Circle. The Royal House of Norway emphasised at the opening ceremony that Bodø2024 invited everyone to “*create rich and beautiful communities*”, and the official report quoted the Queen’s belief that culture “*creates strong communities... shapes identity and fosters belonging*” (Bodø, 2024).

The digital conversations confirmed those aspirations while also revealing where they strained. Many residents spoke about culture through memories, everyday venues and symbols, treating it as a form of social glue rather than a set of events. Positive engagement surfaced around moments that resonated with local identity: the opening ceremony, the summer programmes and installations built from recycled materials, which together produced enthusiasm and pride. Such episodes show that cultural programmes can knit a community together when they connect to familiar markers and invite participation. Yet the same channels gave voice to frustration when culture appeared detached from daily life. Several controversies, whether over representation of Sámi culture, the cost of the Kunstkanten installation, or municipal cutbacks, underscored that culture is also experienced as a public good funded by taxpayers. When the benefits seemed unevenly distributed or poorly communicated, admiration quickly gave way to dissatisfaction.

A key lesson emerging from the findings here is that the success of **a cultural mega-event does not depend on public agreement about every artistic or financial choice, but on whether residents understand why these choices were made and how they relate to broader civic aims**. Organisers are not responsible for defending municipal investments or persuading residents to support every expenditure. However, they share responsibility with local authorities for communicating the strategic rationale behind the cultural year clearly, consistently, and early in the process. Such communication must extend beyond the formal goals articulated in the bid book submitted to the European

Commission. It should be translated into accessible, locally grounded messages that explain the intended cultural, social, and developmental benefits of the initiative, and why cultural spending often follows earmarked, co-financed structures that cannot be redirected to other municipal purposes.

The findings show that, in the absence of such early communication, residents tend to interpret cultural investments through the lens of their immediate lived experience: the condition of schools, the availability of youth services, or the visibility of declining infrastructure. When strategic aims are not articulated clearly, symbolic investments become vulnerable to misinterpretation. People fill communicative gaps with their own assumptions, often concluding that culture competes with, rather than complements, essential services. Transparent, proactive communication from the start of the project can therefore help ensure that cultural initiatives are framed as part of the city's long-term development rather than as isolated prestige projects. It allows residents to see not only the events on the surface but also the underlying logic, opportunities, and anticipated benefits that drive such mega-events.

## ***Lesson 2. Discursive profiles as guides for strategic communication***

The discursive profiles identified in this study correspond closely to the personas identified in the People's Jury by the Monitor2024 team, reinforcing the conclusion that residents relate to Bodø's cultural life in different ways, shaped by varying understandings of what culture is and what it should do. The overlap between these independently derived typologies strengthens their validity and suggests that the local public sphere contains recognisable roles that repeatedly shape how cultural initiatives are perceived and interpreted. The implication is clear: public engagement cannot rely on a single narrative voice or a one-size-fits-all message. Instead, communication and audience strategies must be diversified to reflect the heterogeneity of the local civic environment.

From a strategic perspective, the profiles offer concrete opportunities for more targeted communication. Groups resembling Defenders and Problem-Solvers can be supported by providing accessible factual material, clear explanations of decision pathways, and opportunities for co-creation through channels where their constructive orientation can be activated rather than left undeveloped. Sympathizers, who interpret culture through lived community experience, call for communication that foregrounds stories of belonging, local memory, identity, and inclusion. Their orientation shows that emotional resonance and recognition matter as much as artistic quality.

At the same time, the report illustrates where scepticism takes shape and why it persists. The persistent presence of Critics reflects civic concern about fairness, transparency, and distributive priorities. Ignoring such voices risks deepening mistrust. Their objections are not obstacles to be dismissed but signals of where communication must be clearer, earlier, and more contextually grounded. Snark Squad contributions, although rhetorically sharp, function as early warnings: humour shading into disdain marks moments where legitimacy becomes fragile. Such reactions indicate that gaps in communication or misalignment between symbolic initiatives and residents' expectations have begun to widen.

The profiles point to a central lesson: ***meaning-making around large cultural projects is not only about what is done, but about how it is explained, with whom, and through which channels.*** Future marketing and communication strategies can use this knowledge to diversify tone, format, and narrative emphasis. Instead of broadcasting a single celebratory message, campaigns can tailor strands that speak to different orientations: factual clarity, practical benefits, community stories, artistic ambition, and long-term value, while also addressing areas where scepticism is legitimate and where residents seek reassurance. By aligning communication strategies with the discursive profiles present in the community, planners and organisers can strengthen trust, broaden engagement, and create conditions where cultural initiatives are recognised as shared, rather than externally imposed, civic projects.

### **Lesson 3. Conflicts as expressions of underlying societal divides**

The conflicts identified in this study show that culture functioned less as a source of new tension and more as a catalyst that illuminated societal divides already present long before Bodø received the European Capital of Culture title. The debates around Sámi representation, cultural spending, and municipal cutbacks did not originate with Bodø2024; the cultural year yet provided a highly visible arena where longstanding questions of identity, belonging, and distributive fairness resurfaced with renewed intensity. The cultural programme thus acted as a stage on which deeper conflicts, historical, political, and emotional, became publicly articulated.

While earlier lessons in this report address the importance of transparent communication and early strategic clarity, another dimension demands attention: the role of stereotypes, pre-knowledge, and expectation management in shaping how cultural experiences are received. Cultural mega-events do not occur in a vacuum; audiences arrive with pre-existing images, assumptions, and emotional histories. The Sámi-related controversies illustrate how fragile the context becomes when artistic

expression interacts with unresolved historical wounds and when organisers underestimate the weight of collective memory. Designing cultural experiences therefore requires systematic attention to the pre-knowledge that residents carry into the event: what they expect, what they fear, and how they interpret symbolic choices.

However, limiting artistic freedom or avoiding complex subject matter is not the purpose of the argument. Rather, the suggestion is that freedom of expression must be balanced with informed sensitivity to historical context and social perception. Cultural institutions often defend provocation as a necessary artistic tool, yet the Sámi controversies show how easily provocation can be read as disregard when audiences lack contextual framing or when past injustices remain insufficiently acknowledged. Early, proactive work on expectation management, through contextual storytelling, educational material, or curated pre-communication, can prevent symbolic gestures from triggering large-scale misunderstanding or resentment.

The findings therefore highlight a central lesson: ***mega-cultural events can amplify tensions a society already carries***. When organisers recognise such amplification effect, they can design experiences that help mediate differences, deepen understanding, and reduce the risk of cultural expressions unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes or social divides. Far from being a constraint, such awareness strengthens the transformative potential of cultural initiatives, and potential culture to function not only as celebration, but as a space where recognition, respect, and mutual understanding can grow.

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