

Framing Punishment in the Digital Arena: Political Discourse and Public Support for Alternative Sanctions in the Netherlands

A Content Analysis of Dutch Political Social Media and User Responses

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Abstract

This study investigates how the political framing of national (in)security on social media influences public discourse and support for alternative sanctions in the Netherlands. While empirical evidence consistently demonstrates the effectiveness of alternative sanctions in reducing recidivism, political discourse often emphasizes "law-and-order" rhetoric. Drawing on mediatization theory, cultivation theory, and affective polarization, this research employs a mixed-methods content analysis of 45 political posts and 193 user comments from five major Dutch political parties (PVV, VVD, CDA, D66, and GroenLinks) on the platform X (formerly Twitter).

The findings reveal that Dutch political parties across the spectrum rely heavily on moral-retributive (33.3%) and public safety (44.4%) framing, with 84.4% of posts containing "insecurity markers" that emphasize threat and vulnerability. User responses were overwhelmingly negative (77.8%), characterized by high levels of anger and institutional distrust. Results indicate that while insecurity markers do not necessarily increase the volume of negative sentiment, they significantly intensify the emotional volatility of the discussion. Furthermore, the discourse frequently shifted from policy effectiveness to identity-based scapegoating, particularly under populist and progressive posts alike. This study concludes that the "platform logic" of social media facilitates a retributive feedback loop that marginalizes evidence-based criminal justice policy in favor of emotionally charged, polarized debate. These findings suggest that the digital public sphere currently poses a significant challenge to the communication and implementation of rehabilitative justice measures.

Keywords: *Alternative sanctions, Social media framing, Mediatization, National insecurity, Affective polarization, Dutch politics*

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1. Introduction

“Finally, ensure significantly more police presence and harsher penalties, and arrest all these criminals and put them behind bars.” This post on X by Geert Wilders leaves little room for interpretation: criminals in the Netherlands should be punished more severely. The underlying assumption is that the harsher the punishment, the lower the crime rate will be. Opinions on this issue are, however, deeply divided across political parties. For instance, GroenLinks and the PvdA emphasize preventive measures in their 2025 party platforms, whereas the PVV program advocates a zero-tolerance approach, enforcing extremely severe penalties (Redactie DIT, 2025). All parties, of course, share the overarching goal of reducing crime rates in the Netherlands.

It is unsurprising that politicians are focused on tackling crime, given that in 2023, one in five residents fell victim to traditional crimes. Traditional crimes encompass offenses occurring in the physical world, such as theft, burglary, or acts of violence (Huijsman, 2024). Furthermore, perceptions of safety in the Netherlands have deteriorated in recent years, with women (44.1%) and young people (44%) feeling particularly unsafe (Moons, 2024). Yet, the question remains which approach is most effective in addressing this issue.

1.2. Harsher Punishments?

One frequently proposed approach is the imposition of harsher penalties, as this ostensibly serves the deterrent purpose of punishment. Between 1989 and 2000, support for stricter sentencing in the Netherlands increased sharply by 42%, before declining to 13% in 2005 (Van Kesteren, 2009). However, harsher penalties can also produce unintended consequences. For example, imposing custodial sentences on drug couriers instead of fines can make their role more dangerous and consequently more lucrative. The higher potential gains intensify competition among offenders, potentially escalating the cycle of violence (Verandering Nodig in Strafrecht: “Strenger Straffen En Korte Gevangenisstraffen Werken Niet,” 2025).

Empirical evidence does, however, support the positive effects of alternative sanctions. Alternative sanctions include fines, community service, electronic monitoring, and other measures. Their benefits include reduced prison populations and associated costs, improved rehabilitation, lower recidivism rates, and the preservation of social and familial integration (Doko, 2024). Studies indicate that recidivism rates are, on average, 10–20% lower among individuals who have undergone alternative sanctions compared to those who have received custodial sentences. Moreover, 70% of individuals

subjected to alternative sanctions were successfully reintegrated within two years, compared to less than 50% of those who served prison sentences (Pântea, 2024).

1.3. The Role of Politics on Social Media

Mediatized politics and social media have become key arenas in the debate over sentencing, where arguments and counterarguments circulate rapidly and often overwhelm the public. Social media is influential not only due to the media effects it produces but also because it facilitates direct interaction between political parties and citizens.

A central tension in this debate lies in the contrast between evidence-based policy and political discourse. While there is substantial scientific evidence supporting the effectiveness of alternative sanctions, the law-and-order framing continues to dominate public discourse. This highlights a knowledge gap: While existing research shows that framing affects punitive attitudes, we know little about how platform-specific political framing shapes user-generated discourse around empirically supported alternatives. This study seeks to address this gap. The central research question is:

How does the political framing of national (in)security on social media influence public discourse and support for alternative sanctions among users in the Netherlands?

The following sub-questions are addressed:

1. How do Dutch political parties across the ideological spectrum (e.g., PVV vs. D66) frame alternative sanctions in their social media posts?
2. To what extent do upping-the-ante "insecurity markers" in political posts correlate with punitive (negative) sentiment in the subsequent user comments?
3. What specific arguments (e.g., recidivism, justice for victims, costs) dominate the digital discussion under political posts regarding alternative sanctions?

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

This chapter reviews relevant literature to establish the theoretical framework for this study. It examines key concepts including the mediatization of politics and social media logic, the framing of crime and punishment, cultivation theory, and affective polarization in online interactions.

2.1. Mediatization of Politics & Social Media Logic

Mediatization is defined as a social change process in which media have become highly influential and deeply integrated into various spheres of society. The mediatization of politics has been a long-term process, during which the importance of media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations, and actors has increased (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). In earlier stages, traditional mass media such as television and newspapers acted as the primary gatekeepers of political information. Political actors were largely dependent on journalistic selection criteria, including newsworthiness, conflict, and personalization, to gain public visibility. Over the past decade, however, the rise of social media has introduced both opportunities and constraints, requiring political actors to adapt their communication strategies accordingly.

In the current phase of the mediatization of politics, political communication is increasingly shaped by the logic of social media platforms rather than by traditional political or journalistic norms. Platforms such as X prioritize visibility and engagement through algorithmic systems that favor emotionally charged, conflict-oriented, and simplified content, commonly referred to as *platform logic* (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Political actors adapt their communication accordingly, framing complex issues like crime and punishment in terms of threat and national (in)security to maximize reach (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). This strategy is visible across the ideological spectrum and often privileges symbolic toughness over evidence-based approaches such as alternative sanctions (Kreiss, 2018). Importantly, social media also function as interactive arenas where political frames are immediately reinforced or contested through user responses, contributing to the amplification and normalization of emotionally charged interpretations of crime and punishment (Theocharis et al., 2016).

2.2. Framing Crime, Punishment and National (In)Security

Framing plays a central role in shaping public perceptions of societal issues such as crime. Politicians strategically use framing to highlight or omit specific elements of an issue in order to persuade the public of their position on crime policy. This can involve appealing to societal context and voter

concerns, employing metaphors and symbolic language (e.g., the "War on Drugs"), and constructing narratives that link causes and solutions through causal stories (Stone, 1997).

In contemporary criminal justice discourse, four distinct framing strategies have emerged as particularly influential in shaping public attitudes toward punishment and alternative sanctions. These frames differ fundamentally in how they construct the problem of crime, assign responsibility, and justify specific policy responses.

Moral-retributive framing constructs punishment primarily as a matter of moral accountability and just deserts. This frame emphasizes that offenders must suffer proportionally to the harm they have caused, positioning punishment as a moral imperative rather than a pragmatic tool (Carlsmith et al., 2002). The frame operates by highlighting perceived injustices in sentencing, portraying lenient sentences as moral failures that dishonor victims and undermine societal values. Research demonstrates that moral-retributive frames are particularly powerful in activating emotional responses, especially when paired with vivid victim narratives or references to heinous crimes (Gerber & Jackson, 2013). Empirical studies show that exposure to retributive framing increases punitive attitudes and reduces support for rehabilitative interventions, even when participants are presented with evidence of recidivism reduction (Nagin et al., 2006).

Public safety framing constructs punishment as a functional tool to protect society from dangerous individuals. This frame emphasizes incapacitation, deterrence, and risk management, arguing that the primary objective of the criminal justice system is to prevent future victimization (Roberts & Hough, 2005). Public safety frames typically invoke statistics about repeat offending, reference specific vulnerable populations requiring protection (children, women, elderly), and present punitive measures as necessary barriers against ongoing threats (Garland, 2001). The persuasive power of this frame lies in its appeal to self-interest and collective security: voters respond to arguments that directly address their personal safety concerns (Maruna & King, 2009).

Utilitarian framing presents crime policy as a matter of pragmatic problem-solving focused on cost-effectiveness, institutional efficiency, and societal benefits. This frame emphasizes empirical evidence regarding what works, highlighting metrics such as recidivism rates, cost savings, and resource allocation (Piquero et al., 2016). Utilitarian arguments might stress that short prison sentences are expensive and counterproductive, that community-based sanctions preserve family stability and employment, or that drug regulation reduces violence more effectively than criminalization (MacCoun & Reuter, 2001). Research demonstrates that utilitarian frames are most persuasive among educated,

politically moderate audiences who prioritize evidence-based governance (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Rehabilitative/prevention framing constructs crime as a social problem requiring therapeutic intervention and root-cause mitigation rather than punishment. This frame emphasizes offender reintegration, treatment for addiction or mental health issues, and early intervention to prevent criminal trajectories (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). Rehabilitation frames often invoke narratives of redemption and second chances, arguing that society benefits when offenders become productive citizens rather than warehoused in prisons (Maruna, 2001). Research shows that rehabilitation framing can increase support for treatment programs and community sanctions, particularly when paired with evidence of success stories (Applegate et al., 2000).

Beyond these specific punishment frames, crime itself is frequently deployed as a political instrument rather than addressed solely as a policy problem. Scholars argue that crime serves as a symbolic resource through which political actors can articulate broader societal anxieties, assign blame, and present themselves as protectors of public order (Beckett, 1997; Garland, 2001). By framing crime as an urgent threat to national security or social cohesion, politicians can legitimize specific policy agendas and distinguish themselves from ideological opponents. This instrumentalization often emphasizes visible, punitive measures, such as harsher sentencing or zero-tolerance policies, because these resonate emotionally with voters and signal decisiveness, even when their effectiveness is empirically contested (Tonry, 2004).

Research on framing effects demonstrates that how an issue is framed fundamentally shapes not just policy preferences but also the underlying values citizens invoke when thinking about crime (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames interact with individual predispositions, those already inclined toward punitiveness respond most strongly to retributive and safety frames, while those favoring leniency resonate with rehabilitation and utilitarian frames (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). This creates opportunities for political actors to activate latent attitudes through strategic frame selection, particularly on platforms where algorithmic systems reward emotionally engaging content (Bakshy et al., 2015).

2.3. Cultivation Theory & Perceived National Insecurity

Cultivation theory examines the long-term effects of media exposure on individuals. The theory posits that the danger of media, particularly television, lies not in shaping opinions about specific issues, but in influencing people's broader moral values and general beliefs about the world. This process can lead to

a “mean world syndrome,” whereby individuals perceive the world as more dangerous and threatening than it actually is. Within cultivation theory, national decline narratives refer to recurring media and political frames that depict society as being in a state of continuous deterioration, characterized by rising insecurity, loss of social control, and moral decay. Repeated exposure to such narratives can cultivate perceptions that the nation is increasingly unsafe, even when empirical evidence suggests otherwise, thereby fostering support for punitive crime policies (Mosharafa, 2015). In contemporary contexts, social media play a central role: 78% of Dutch youth aged 18–24 follow the news via social media platforms (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, n.d.). The constant availability of news on mobile devices may intensify cultivation effects, which could help explain why comments under social media posts about criminal justice policies often reflect more negative sentiment toward alternative sanctions and greater support for stricter punishment.

2.4. Affective Polarization and Online Interaction

Reactions in online comment sections are often highly emotional and polarized, influenced by social identity dynamics, framing, and affective mechanisms. Affective polarization is defined as the extent to which partisans increasingly dislike, distrust, or feel animosity toward members of opposing political groups (Wagner & Iyengar, 2025). In the Dutch multiparty context, this polarization is fragmented: hostility is distributed unevenly across parties, creating complex patterns of inter-group conflict rather than a simple left-right divide (Harteveld, 2021).

Political actors frequently frame crime and punishment in terms of “soft left” versus “tough right” approaches, presenting rehabilitative policies as lenient and punitive policies as strong and decisive. Such framing signals partisan identity and elicits strong emotional responses, especially anger or fear, which reinforce in-group loyalty and out-group hostility (Garrett et al., 2014; Weeks et al., 2017). Social media architecture further amplifies these responses, as algorithmic sorting and visibility incentives expose users repeatedly to ideologically congruent content, increasing the likelihood of echo chambers and heated debates (Sunstein, 2001; Bail et al., 2018). Together, these dynamics help explain why discussions about criminal justice policies online are often emotionally charged, sharply divided, and focused more on group identity than on evidence-based policy.

2.5. Theoretical Expectations

Drawing on mediatization theory, framing research, cultivation theory, and affective polarization, this study formulates several theoretical expectations regarding political communication on social media

and user responses. First, due to platform logic favoring emotionally salient and conflict-oriented content, political actors are expected to rely heavily on moral-retributive and public safety framing, frequently accompanied by insecurity markers that emphasize threat, danger, and vulnerability. These frames are expected to generate more negative sentiment toward alternative sanctions in user comments than utilitarian or rehabilitative frames.

Second, consistent with cultivation theory, posts containing insecurity markers are expected to amplify emotional intensity in public discourse, particularly anger and fear, by reinforcing perceptions of national insecurity and systemic decline. Rather than increasing overall negativity alone, insecurity markers are expected to intensify affective responses and reduce the salience of empirical, evidence-based arguments concerning sanction effectiveness.

Third, drawing on social identity theory and affective polarization, framing crime in terms of public safety and moral responsibility is expected to activate identity-based reasoning in user responses. This is likely to shift discussions away from policy effectiveness toward group-based blame, demographic categorization, and partisan conflict, especially in highly polarized online environments. As a result, evidence supporting alternative sanctions is expected to be increasingly disregarded once discourse centers on offender identity and moral deservingness.

Finally, these dynamics are expected to differ by party positioning. Posts by progressive parties advocating alternative or preventive approaches are expected to elicit more polarized responses, combining supportive reactions with intense hostility, whereas punitive frames by conservative parties are expected to generate more homogeneous, reinforcing comment patterns. Together, these expectations suggest that social media framing not only reflects public attitudes toward punishment but actively structures and escalates punitive discourse in ways that undermine evidence-based criminal justice policy.

3. Research Design & Methodology

4.1. Research Design & Data Collection

This study employs a mixed-methods content analysis to examine how politicians frame communication about alternative sanctions and public safety, and how these frames affect audience

responses. Data were collected from X (formerly Twitter), focusing on the five largest Dutch political parties: PVV, VVD, CDA, D66, and GroenLinks. Given that GroenLinks-PvdA had recently merged with limited historical posts on this topic, data were collected from the standalone GroenLinks account to ensure sufficient temporal coverage. Posts were identified using keyword-based searches covering safety-related discourse from 2020-2025. Since X's transformation from Twitter has restricted scraping capabilities, manual keyword searches were employed. For each post, the first 10-15 comments were collected and subsequently filtered for relevance to crime, punishment, and alternative sanctions, resulting in a final dataset of 45 posts and 193 comments.

This study relies exclusively on publicly available social media data. To protect user anonymity, all identifiable information has been removed or masked, and direct quotations are paraphrased or anonymized in findings.

4.2. Operationalization

The stimulus (political party posts) was coded for:

- **Frame type:** Moral-retributive (just deserts, proportional suffering), public safety (protection, incapacitation), utilitarian (cost-effectiveness, pragmatic outcomes), or rehabilitative/prevention (reintegration, root causes). Mixed frames were also identified.
- **Insecurity markers:** Presence (1) or absence (0) of explicit/implicit references to threat, danger, or vulnerability (e.g., crime statistics, emotive language about decay, vulnerable victim references).

The responses (user comments) were coded for:

- **Sentiment:** Negative (-1, opposing alternative sanctions/demanding stricter punishment), neutral (0, factual without normative position), or positive (+1, supporting alternatives/criticizing punitiveness).
- **Emotions:** Dominant expressions including anger, fear, frustration, contempt/disgust, sarcasm, or other affects.
- **Argument types:** Identity-based (linking crime to demographics), safety (protection failures), political bias (selective enforcement), fairness (double standards), policy (effectiveness debates), institutional critiques (judiciary distrust), deportation, costs, victims, or deterrence.

Quantitative analyses determined category frequencies and assessed relationships between post characteristics and comment responses through R Studio. Qualitative analyses explored how specific frames connected to emotional responses and argument types in user comments.

4.3. Methodological Limitations

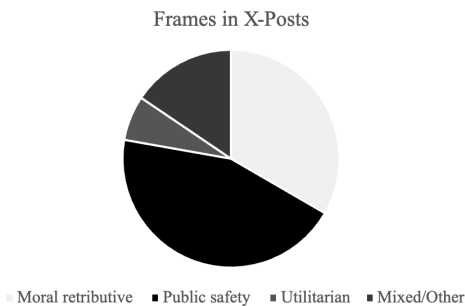
Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, content interpretation depends on coding framework and researcher judgment, potentially introducing subjectivity despite consistency efforts. Content analysis captures primarily manifest content and may overlook latent meanings or contextual nuances. Second, keyword-based collection introduced systematic biases. Parties vary in keyword usage frequency, resulting in overrepresentation of law-and-order focused parties (PVV, VVD) and underrepresentation of others. This limits generalizability of party-specific findings. Third, comment filtering for relevance created uneven distribution across posts. While initial sampling targeted 10-15 comments per post, relevance filtering yielded highly variable counts (2-15 comments per post), meaning the 186 analyzed comments don't represent equal sampling across all 51 posts. Posts generating focused on-topic debate are overrepresented while those with limited relevant discussion are underrepresented. Fourth, analyzing only the first 10-15 comments introduces temporal and visibility biases. X's algorithm prioritizes comments by engagement rather than chronology, and posts with extensive discussion (100+ comments) are undersampled. On the other hand, these comments are most visible and therefore most politically relevant. Fifth, the GroenLinks-PvdA merger necessitated using the standalone GroenLinks account, which may not reflect current merged positioning. Sixth, the study period (2020-2025) encompasses significant contextual shifts (COVID-19, civil unrest, electoral realignments) that may influence framing and responses in ways not fully disentangled. Finally, exclusive focus on X creates platform-specific limitations. X users skew younger, more politically engaged, and ideologically extreme than the general Dutch population. Findings on sentiment and emotional intensity may overestimate polarization in broader public opinion.

Despite these limitations, the systematic comparative approach and mixed-methods design enable robust analysis of framing strategies and their immediate discursive effects within the digital public sphere.

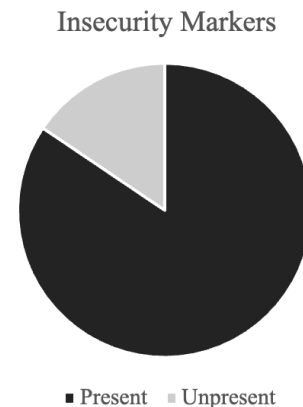
5. Results

Analysis of Political Party Posts (N = 45)

Analysis of 45 X-posts from five Dutch political parties revealed distinct framing patterns: PVV (n=8), VVD (n=15), CDA (n=10), D66 (n=5), and GroenLinks (n=7). Moral-retributive framing dominated, appearing in 15 posts (33.3%). These emphasized punishment as moral imperative, highlighting perceived injustice of lenient sentences and demanding proportional suffering. Examples included "bread and water" conditions (Post 2) and chemical castration calls (Post 8). Public safety

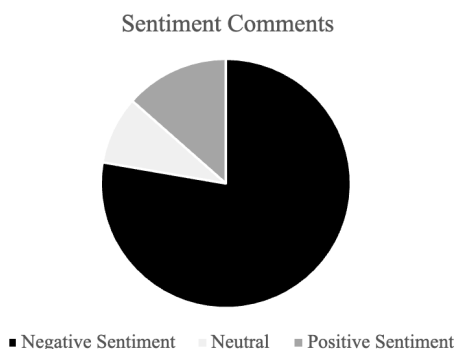


framing appeared in 20 posts (44.4%), constructing punishment as functional protection against dangerous individuals through measures like "life means life" sentencing and area bans. Utilitarian framing (6.7%) presented pragmatic solutions like drug regulation to reduce violence. Mixed/prevention frames accounted for 15.5%. Critically, 84.4% of posts (n=38) contained insecurity markers, explicit references to threat or danger. These ranged from statistics ("90% recidivism") to emotive language ("every week again") and vulnerable victim references.

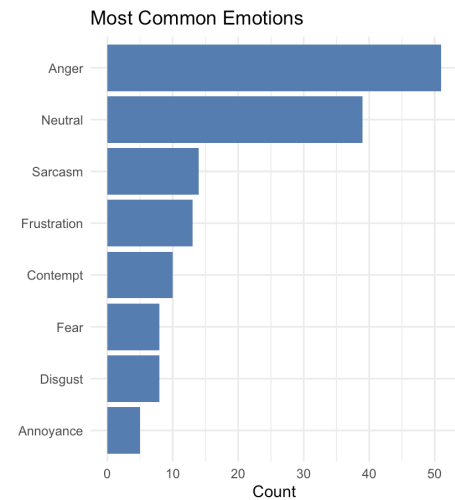


User Comment Analysis (N = 193)

Comments revealed overwhelmingly negative sentiment: 77.8% opposed alternative sanctions or demanded stricter punishment, while only 13.4% expressed positive sentiment (typically defending rule of law or criticizing populism). Neutral comments (8.8%) provided factual corrections or legal clarifications. Anger dominated emotional expressions (26.3%), directed at lenient justice systems, hypocritical politicians, demographic groups blamed for crime, and perceived elite protection of criminals. Frustration (6.7%) expressed fatigue with unfulfilled promises, while fear (4.1%) concerned personal safety and societal collapse. Contempt/disgust (9.3%) employed dehumanizing language, and sarcasm (7.2%) mocked insufficiently harsh proposals.

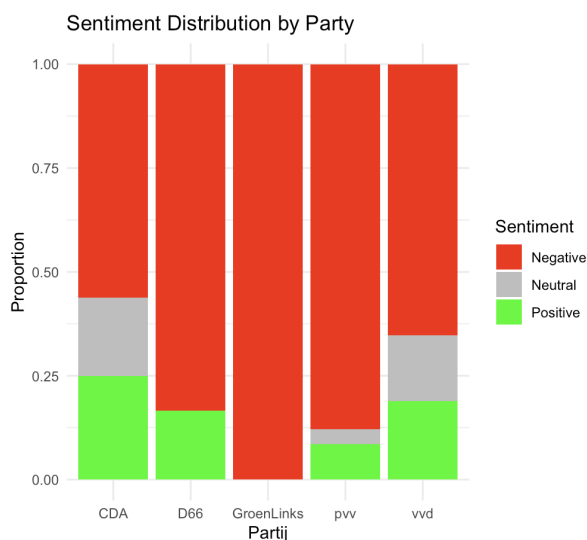


Identity-based arguments were common (10.3%), linking crime to asylum seekers and Moroccan-Dutch individuals while demanding mass deportation. Safety arguments (8.8%) emphasized protection failures, while political bias arguments (4.6%) accused parties of hypocrisy and selective enforcement. Fairness arguments (6.7%) claimed sentencing double standards based on identity or political connections. Policy arguments (10.9%) debated effectiveness, and institutional critiques (6.7%) expressed judiciary distrust.



Party-Specific Patterns

PVV posts used moral-retributive framing almost exclusively (87.5%) with 87.5% insecurity markers and inflammatory language referencing offender ethnicity. Comments showed highest negative sentiment (87.8%) with 37.8% anger. Arguments focused on fairness/double standards, identity-based scapegoating, and deportation. **VVD** posts combined public safety (60%), moral-retributive (33.3%), and utilitarian (6.7%) frames with 73.3% insecurity markers. Comments (65.2% negative) emphasized frustration (10.1%) and anger (13%). Institutional critique dominated, highlighting decade-long government participation without policy implementation and contradictory budget cuts. **CDA** posts showed most diverse framing: prevention (20%), public safety (50%), moral-retributive (30%), with 80% insecurity markers. Comments displayed the lowest negative sentiment (56.2%) and contained diverse responses with anger (31.2%), fear (12.5%), and disgust (12.5%). Arguments focused on



effectiveness, political accountability, and institutional functioning. **D66** posts combined public safety (60%) with utilitarian harm reduction and moral-retributive frames (each 20%), all containing insecurity markers framing health/systemic violence rather than immediate threats. Posts generated second highest negative sentiment (83.3%), reflecting polarization: progressive supporters defended evidence-based policy while opponents characterized D66 as dangerously soft. Anger dominated the comments (25%) Identity arguments were most

present together with rule of law arguments. **GroenLinks** posts used predominantly public safety framing (57.1%) with prevention elements, all containing insecurity markers citing violence statistics. All posts generated negative sentiment and most extreme emotions (26.6% hate/disgust/bitterness). Identity arguments were highest (26.6%). Central contradiction: minority protection advocacy met accusations of importing populations blamed for violence against those minorities.

Post-Comment Connections

The analysis of framing and sentiment reveals strongly negative reactions across all categories. Moral-retributive framing generated 85.7% negative comments (n=91), with 30.8% expressing anger. Public Safety framing resulted in 67.8% negative reactions (n=87) with 24.1% anger. Notably, Mixed framing (100% negative, n=4) and Prevention/Rehabilitation framing (100% negative, n=2) generated entirely negative responses, although these categories involved small sample sizes. Utilitarian framing likewise showed 80% negativity (n=5), suggesting that pragmatic approaches receive little support in public discourse.

Insecurity Markers

Contrary to expectations, posts *without* insecurity markers generated more negative comments (82.8%, n=29) than posts with markers (77%, n=165). However, posts with insecurity markers led to substantially more anger expressions (27.9% vs. 17.2%). This suggests that insecurity markers do not primarily influence the amount of negativity, but rather intensify the emotional tone of reactions. The presence of explicit threat or danger references apparently mobilizes stronger affective responses.

Party-Specific Patterns

The logistic regression demonstrates significant differences between political parties in generating negative sentiment. PVV posts significantly predict more negative comments ($\beta = 2.70$, $p = .009$), consistent with this party's strongly punitive and identity-based framing. GroenLinks posts likewise show a strong association with negativity ($\beta = 18.07$), though this effect is not significant due to the small sample size (n=4) and resulting high standard error (SE = 1850.36). D66 and VVD posts show no significant effects on negative sentiment.

This finding confirms that right-wing populist parties like the PVV systematically elicit polarizing reactions through their framing and rhetoric, while progressive parties like GroenLinks also generate

strong - albeit non-significant - negative reactions, possibly due to ideological opposition from their base.

Model Fit and Limitations

The logistic regression model displays warnings for perfect separation (fitted probabilities 0 or 1), evident in the extremely high standard errors for frame variables (e.g., SE = 3765.85 for Moral-retributive). This indicates quasi-complete separation: certain frame categories predict negative or positive sentiment almost perfectly, which limits the reliability of these specific coefficients. The significant PVV finding remains robust despite this model issue.

The Null deviance (205.25) versus Residual deviance (162.43) shows the model performs significantly better than the null model, though explained variance remains limited. This suggests that other factors beyond party, frame, and insecurity markers - possibly such as specific issues, current events, or interaction effects - are also important for understanding sentiment in online reactions to criminal justice discussions.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a sobering look at the digital discourse surrounding criminal justice in the Netherlands. The central research question sought to understand how political framing on social media influences public support for alternative sanctions. The results suggest that the digital environment, governed by platform logic and affective polarization, creates a "hostile architecture" for evidence-based policy discussion.

Mediatization and Platform-Driven Framing The dominance of moral-retributive (33.3%) and public safety (44.4%) frames across the political spectrum confirms that Dutch parties have adapted to social media logic. By prioritizing "symbolic toughness" over utilitarian or rehabilitative arguments, politicians trigger immediate emotional engagement. The high prevalence of insecurity markers (84.4%) suggests that even progressive parties feel compelled to "frame-signal" awareness of danger to remain relevant in the attention economy. This supports the mediatization theory: political actors are no longer just communicating policy; they are performing security to satisfy algorithmic demands for high-arousal content.

Accelerated Cultivation Effects in Digital Environments The results offer a modern extension of Cultivation Theory. While traditional cultivation suggests a slow "drip" of media influence, this study found that posts with insecurity markers immediately intensified emotional responses, particularly anger (27.9%). Interestingly, the absence of these markers did not reduce negativity, but it did reduce the *intensity* of the emotion. This suggests a "Mean World Syndrome" that has become a baseline for Dutch social media users; they do not need to be told the world is dangerous to react negatively to alternative sanctions, they already assume it. The digital environment has cultivated a permanent state of perceived national insecurity where rehabilitative measures are seen as a betrayal of public safety.

Identity Activation and Discursive Redirection A significant finding was the shift from policy effectiveness to identity-based reasoning. Especially in the comments under PVV and GroenLinks posts, the discussion frequently bypassed the merits of alternative sanctions to focus on the demographics of offenders (e.g., asylum seekers). This confirms the expectations regarding affective polarization: crime is no longer a policy problem to be solved with data, but a "wedge issue" used to reinforce in-group/out-group boundaries. For many users, support for harsher punishment is not about lowering recidivism (utilitarianism) but about "protecting our own" against a perceived "other."

Institutional Distrust and Democratic Implications The "frustration" and "institutional critique" found in VVD and CDA comments highlight a growing gap between political rhetoric and perceived reality. Users criticized the VVD for "talking tough" while failing to implement policy over years of governance. This suggests that while punitive framing may garner likes and shares, it may also be eroding long-term trust in democratic institutions when the "safety" promised by politicians fails to manifest in the lived experience of citizens.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that political framing of national (in)security on social media significantly hampers the public's willingness to engage with alternative sanctions. The interaction between moral-retributive framing and social media logic creates a feedback loop that rewards emotional punitiveness and punishes evidence-based nuances.

The analysis shows that:

1. Dutch political parties rely heavily on safety and retributive frames, with even progressive parties adopting the language of "insecurity" to gain visibility.
2. Insecurity markers function as emotional accelerators, transforming general disagreement into active anger and outrage.
3. Public discourse is characterized by a "retributive default"; evidence-based arguments regarding cost-effectiveness or recidivism are largely ignored or mocked in favor of identity-based blame and demands for "just deserts."

The results suggest that simply presenting more "facts" about the effectiveness of alternative sanctions is unlikely to change public opinion in digital spaces. When a post is framed through the lens of threat, the "rational" brain is bypassed in favor of the "affective" brain. For policymakers and progressive parties, the challenge is not just to provide better data, but to find new ways of framing rehabilitation that resonate with the public's deeply held values of justice and security without triggering the "mean world" response.

Future Research Future studies should explore whether "humanizing" frames, focusing on the success stories of rehabilitated individuals, can bypass the defensive anger triggered by current safety-focused framing. Additionally, comparative research across platforms (e.g., X vs. Instagram) could reveal if the "hostile" nature of criminal justice discourse is a universal digital phenomenon or specific to the text-based, conflict-prone architecture of X.

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