

Euroscepticism in Online Discussions

The Framing of Opposition to the EU by Dutch Citizens on Facebook.

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Abstract

This research aimed to understand what frames are used by Dutch citizens when expressing Eurosceptic attitudes in online discussions. Previous research on public opinion mainly analysed the levels of Euroscepticism among citizens. This research instead focuses on the frames used in online discussions by ordinary people to better understand the reasons and arguments behind opposition to the EU. By analysing the comment sections of four Dutch newspapers – *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf* and *De Dagelijkse Standaard* – using a qualitative content analysis the most frequently used frames for expressing Eurosceptic opinions in online discussions on EU-topics are defined. A total of 732 comments were studied, covering a variety of EU-topics in the area of politics, culture and economics. The main frames were the Anti-elite and Power threat frame, followed by the Responsibility, Economic threat, Injustice and Cultural threat frame. Contrary to expectations, the Cultural threat frame was the least frequently used and more aimed at protecting individual cultures from one overarching EU culture, than it was aimed at the threat formed by other cultures. The Anti-elite frame was the most frequently used frame illustrating a strong distrust among citizens towards politicians, who are seen as prioritizing their own interests above those of the nation. Overall, this research shows the importance of transparency of decisions by the EU towards citizens and the role of trust between politicians and citizens.

KEYWORDS: Euroscepticism, Facebook, Framing, Online discussions, Qualitative content analysis

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1. Introduction

Euroscepticism is a political doctrine which is about concerns towards European integration and increasing powers of the European Union (Harmsen & Spiering, 2004). Over the years criticism towards the European Union has progressed, resulting in politicians having to deal with increasing public scrutiny (Bijsmans, 2017). In the Netherlands specifically, Eurosceptic attitudes have increased among both the higher and lower educated between 1990 and 2008 (Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011). In 2019 approximately 39% of the Dutch people believed the EU weakened the national economy and 55% stated they want the EU to be less powerful than it is now (Lubbe, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019). Some argue that Euroscepticism has in general become more mainstream, more salient and over time more legitimized in Dutch society (Bijsmans, 2017).

Many researchers wonder why Euroscepticism has increased, while the European Union has provided both political and economic benefits to its members. Some studies have looked at the major issues facing the EU, such as migration, terrorism and Brexit and found only a limited effect on Eurosceptic attitudes (Daniel, Arne, Doris & Johanna, 2019; Larsen, Cutts & Goodwin, 2020; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2017). Others focused on the vulnerability of citizens towards populist messages of politicians (Krouwel & Abts, 2007; de Vries & Edwards, 2009) or the impact of media coverage in reinforcing Euroscepticism (Bijsmans, 2017; de Vreese, 2007) and the effect of a 'spiral of cynicism' prevailing in EU news (Galpin & Trenz, 2017). These studies found more support for their findings as both media coverage and political campaigns transmitting critical attitudes towards the EU are considered effective in stimulating Euroscepticism among citizens.

Thereby, numerous individual-level factors have been found to influence Eurosceptic sentiments. For instance, strong feelings of nationalism increases Eurosceptic attitudes, whereas higher levels of education in fact decreases Eurosceptic attitudes (Abts, Heerwegh & Swyngedouw, 2009). Also, there are important differences found in the forms of Euroscepticism between countries. Eastern European countries are more concerned with the economic consequences of EU membership, whereas Western European countries focus more on the preservation of their own identity and culture (Guerra, 2017). According to Lubbers & Jaspers (2011) the cultural threat has even become the most prominent factor in explaining the increase in Euroscepticism in the Netherlands. Additionally, both media and populist politicians have enhanced beliefs of the EU as a threat to the national government's individual power (Hooghe & Marks, 2007; de Vreese, 2007).

Yet, the media landscape has changed and citizens are no longer merely influenced by the rhetoric of politicians and journalists. Citizens can also influence each other through public debate, which has been stimulated by the growth of social media websites. 40% of Dutch social media users say their main reason for being active on social media is to stay informed (CBS, van Beuningen &

Kloosterman, 2018). In a survey conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2016, over half of the respondents consider social media as their primary news source (Galpin & Trenz, 2017). In Western Europe 73% of people aged 18-29 get their daily news online and of people aged 30-49 this is 68% (Pew Research Center, 2018). Social media networks provide citizens with a public environment where they can stay informed and freely react to each other, thereby stimulating dialogue and debate between citizens (Heft, Wittwer & Pfetsch, 2017; Trilling, Bos, van Rensburg & de Groot, 2016). These user comments are a distinct form of user-generated content that have thus changed the interactivity between citizens (Collins & Nerlich, 2015). It has created new ways of participation and interaction that has contributed to both more actor and issue diversity in online news distribution (Heft et al., 2017; Prochazka, Weber & Schweiger, 2018; Walter et al., 2018). All of this has been stimulated by news outlets who have progressively moved their comment sections from their own website to social media networks (Trilling et al., 2016).

Within these comment sections citizens express their opinions on public issues which can in turn influence the opinions of others (Katz, 2015; Walter et al., 2018). According to the 'two-steps of communication' theory, the news is not directly conveyed from the mass media to their audience. Rather, it is regulated by *opinion leaders* who are specifically interested in a topic. Citizens who are less informed about an issue tend to turn to opinion leaders to inform them (Katz, 1957; 2015). They may function as regulators, conveying their own opinions in addition to the necessary information about an issue (Katz, 2015). These opinion leaders thus set the tone for the overall public debate and can increase the saliency of an issue by introducing it to the public agenda (Perloff, 2014).

So far, research has focused mainly on frames used by politicians and journalists in addressing EU-topics, and how these frames may have shaped public opinion (Galpin & Trenz, 2017; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Yet, research on frames used by citizens on EU-topics is lacking. This study will help to understand what issues are prioritized among citizens and what frames are being used to address these issues. It contributes to an overall understanding of all aspects and sides of Euroscepticism within the Dutch society. Thereby, over the years the EU has changed their communication strategy to a focus on the benefits of the European Union for citizens and tried to strengthen feelings of togetherness across Europe (Caliendo & Iannario, 2009). This study will provide insight as to whether this strategy can be successful or whether a different direction might be more profitable. Therefore, the research question of this study is: *What frames do citizens use concerning the European Union in online discussions?*

To answer this research question I will conduct an inductive qualitative content analysis of over 700 comments from four different Facebook pages of newspapers in the Netherlands, namely *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Dagelijkse Standaard*, *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant*. As will be explained more detailed in the methodology section, these newspapers are chosen to achieve topic coverage,

as the sample will incorporate different sides of the political spectrum in the Netherlands. *De Volkskrant* represents left-oriented opinions, *Algemeen Dagblad* represents centre-oriented opinions, *De Telegraaf* right-oriented opinions and *De Dagerijkse Standaard* is chosen to represent more radical-right oriented opinions. The analysis of the comments will show what frames are used by citizens. As the theoretical section of this study focuses on frames that are found to be commonly used in both media and political messages concerning the EU, the discussion also briefly discusses whether the results of this study are similar to frames found by previous research on media and politicians, what other frames might be equally or even more important and whether certain frames might bear a different meaning when used by citizens.

The next section discusses the theory of framing and previous research about the use of frames in relation to European Union issues in both the media and among politicians. The third section will explain in more detail the methods for data sampling and analysis. The fourth part shows the main results of the coding process of the comments with examples to illustrate the various frames that have been found. The last section will include a discussion of these results, answer to the research question and a conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Framing Theory

To describe the perspectives used by individuals concerning their attitude towards the European Union, this research relies on framing theory. Framing refers to the, sometimes deliberate, choice to depict a story in a certain way (de Vreese, 2005). Frames are often considered tools for portraying a story in a particular way (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992) with the purpose of putting emphasis on certain aspects while ignoring other aspects of a story (Gitlin, 2003). The framing of stories can influence individual attitudes towards the topics at hand. This way, the media do not only determine *what* people talk about, but also *how* people talk about a topic (de Vreese, 2007; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

One often used frame in the media concerning political topics is the Strategic frame (de Vreese, 2007). When using this frame one prioritizes on the competition between political actors in news stories (de Vreese, 2007). When this frame is adopted by journalists for discussing EU related topics it has been shown to increase Euroscepticism among individuals, as it stimulates distrust and cynicism (de Vreese, 2007). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five news frames used by media in discussing European politics, namely the Responsibility, Conflict, Human interest, Economic

consequences and the Morality frame. Their content analysis of several Dutch newspapers showed that the responsibility frame was the most common in European politics news (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The use of the responsibility frame indicates that a story primarily concentrates on the question who is held responsible for an arisen situation or for providing a solution.

The media are not the only ones using frames and shaping attitudes. Frames are used by all kind of communicators, in politics and even in daily life (de Vries & Edwards, 2009; Hobolt & Wratil, 2015). Between 2002 and 2017 an overall increase in references by political parties 'against' the EU was found, indicating an increase in Eurosceptic positions in Dutch politics (Hargitai, 2012). Mainstream and centre parties are often in favour of the European Union, whereas both radical-right and -left wing parties are considered to be more sceptical. This is often referred to as the inverted U-curve hypothesis (Meijers, 2017). Although their reasons for opposition differ, both radical-right and -left wing politicians influence their voters with their negative stance on the European Union by using cues to emphasize a frame. These cues are adopted by citizens and sometimes used as heuristics in forming their opinion (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Katz, 2015).

Framing theory is often used in relation to the news media or politicians to describe how certain topics are portrayed to the public. However, this research uses framing theory to get a better understanding of the most prevalent perspectives in Dutch society. While research has shown the influence of media frames on citizens attitudes (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) it is important to recognize that citizens can also use framing to influence each other (Neuman et al., 1992; Trilling et al., 2016) and even the media or politicians, to express what issues are most important to them (McDonalds, Mendes & Budge, 2004; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Wolfsfeld, 2011).

2.2 Different Perspectives towards Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is a complex concept that is expressed in various forms. People can have different reasons for being critical. This research specifically focuses on distinguishing the reasons that drive Euroscepticism among the Dutch population. Research focusing on Euroscepticism in public opinion in the past has mainly used quantitative data to determine the levels of Euroscepticism among the public. Yet, social media networks present the opportunity to review communication between citizens on certain topics more in-depth, without the intervention or preceding bias from the researcher (Ampofo, Collister, O'Loughlin & Chadwick, 2015). Thereby, new techniques in text mining and software tools have made it possible to efficiently gather data from social media for analyses (Ampofo et al. , 2015).

Early research on Euroscepticism focused mainly on citizens' economic reasons for disapproving of the European Union (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993, Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Especially for radical left-wing parties economic reasons are still the main argument for opposing to the EU. They often draw attention to economic losses as a consequence of further European integration (de Vries & Edwards, 2009). Individuals who focus on the economic aspects are said to employ a 'self-interest' argument that uses an individual cost-benefit analysis to justify their support or opposition towards the EU (McLaren, 2002). However, this argumentation presumes a great deal of awareness from citizens on EU policies and their impacts, while not everyone is familiar enough with the EU to make such analyses. Therefore, others argue it is more about a perceived realistic threat, whereby citizens are scared for a scarcity of resources that will develop as a consequence of increased immigration due to the European Union (Verkuyten, 2009; Wirtz, van der Pligt & Doosje, 2016). This idea of individuals experiencing a perceived realistic threat explains how people can use an economic frame in being critical of the EU, without being completely aware of all the consequences of EU policies.

However, over time the focus on the cultural aspect of Euroscepticism has become more prevalent and even equally important in research on public opinion (Hooghe & Marks, 2007; McLaren, 2002). Cultural issues, such as national identity and immigration are found to have become increasingly decisive in shaping Eurosceptic attitudes (McLaren, 2002; Leruth, Kutiyski, Krouwel & Startin, 2017). The cultural threat of the EU even became one of the strongest indicators of Euroscepticism in 2008 (Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011), although this may have changed again over time. The cultural aspect is especially salient for radical right-wing parties that focus on national identity and cultural sovereignty as their main argument against the EU (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Hooghe & Marks, 2007). Citizens who demand to put a stop on further European integration, or even prefer leaving the European Union, are usually citizens who do not feel connected with the European identity. Instead they have a strong national identity (Weßels, 2007). These individuals often perceive a symbolic threat posed by other cultures, due to different values, beliefs and norms, that could undermine their own culture (Verkuyten, 2009; Wirtz, van der Pligt & Doosje, 2016). Both the realistic and symbolic threat stem from a desire to protect once's 'in-group', while responding negatively towards members from outside (Verkuyten, 2009; Wirtz, van der Pligt & Doosje, 2016). However, the former leads to a focus on the economic aspects of European integration, whereas the latter focuses on the cultural aspect.

Other studies show a correlation between Euroscepticism and a lack of trust in the political system. Both left- and right-wing populist parties have propagated a discourse of the European system as being insufficiently democratic (Abbarneo & Zapryanova, 2013; Krouwel & Abts, 2007). The current government is portrayed as incompetent and unable to protect national interests, while at the same time the power of the European Union has been extended (Abts et al., 2009; de Vries & van

Kersbergen, 2007). This rhetoric stimulates ideas of the EU as a power threat, taking away sovereignty of individual countries and neglecting national preferences. At the same time, populist parties often use an anti-establishment rhetoric, portraying the EU as an elitist organization which prioritizes their own interests at the expense of national interests. This discourse has become increasingly common and powerful over the last few years in contemporary European politics (Polk & Rovny, 2017).

Some researchers state that Euroscepticism has not increased in the total sum of people who are Eurosceptic, but rather that the reasons for opposing have become more diverse and the debate more complicated (Bijsmans, 2017; Down & Wilson, 2008). Data has also shown that European issues have become increasingly important for national elections (Down & Wilson, 2008) making Euroscepticism more and more salient. The increased salience of European issues among the public is referred to as the shift from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). With the politicization of European issues, it has become increasingly important for politicians to consider public opinion in policymaking (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). European politicians are now more than ever held accountable for their decisions, which could lead to increasing use of what Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) call the Responsibility frame and the Morality frame. The former focuses on attributing responsibility to politicians for current problems. The latter is aimed at discussing whether certain policies, situations or responses of politicians can be considered morally good or bad.

In sum, it can be expected that both the economic and cultural aspects will play an important part in expressing Euroscepticism in online discussions. Yet, as the cultural threat has become an increasingly important predictor of Eurosceptic attitudes over the years (Leruth et al., 2017; Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011) it is expected that a cultural frame will occur more often than an economic frame. Furthermore, while the radical-left focuses on cultural arguments and the radical-right on economic arguments, both sides make use of an anti-elite and/or power threat discourse. Therefore, one of these types of discourse might instead be the most frequently used overall. Lastly, if Eurosceptic attitudes have indeed become more diverse (Bijsmans, 2017; Down & Wilson, 2008) then public discussions will not focus solely on economic, cultural and power aspects, but perhaps will also include other frames, such as the Responsibility and Morality frame or even a frame that has not been discussed so far.

2.3 Online Discussions and Public Opinion

People are nowadays increasingly relying on news websites and social media networks to inform them on current affairs, while the importance of traditional news media reduces (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Galpin & Trenz, 2017; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press,

2012). They provide a way for news outlets to distribute their content which people do not only consume, but to which they can also add their own ideas and opinions (Himmelboim, Gleave & Smith, 2009). The use of online comment sections have increased online discussions and created a new type of public sphere where the political debate is open for everyone to participate in (Trilling et al., 2016). This has changed the relationship between journalists and readers, but also between readers. It gives citizens the opportunity to voice their opinion without restrictions, to add information they consider relevant and to react to one another (Hille & Bakker, 2014; Prochazka, Weber & Schweiger, 2018; Walter, et al., 2018).

People have different reasons for engaging in online discussions. Some follow media outlets that are perceived to be followed by the most people as an indicator of trustworthy news (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015). Whereas others purposely seek out different opinions than their own in order to educate themselves (de Koster & Houtman, 2008; Mutz, 2002). Those who regularly read the news are able to contribute to a more balanced discussion, as they often express different opinions than those of journalists (Galpin & Trenz, 2017). Some argue that individual choices on what to read leads to selective exposure, especially on social media, as people consume information compatible with their own opinions (Sergeant & Tagg, 2019; Walter et al., 2018). This increases polarization, as people are constantly reinforced in their ideas (Sunstein, 2009). Data shows that individuals who are more oriented to the political right choose different news outlets to follow than individuals who are more left-oriented (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015). In fact, Leruth et al. (2017) showed a significant difference in political orientation between readers of the Dutch newspapers *De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant*. Readers of the *De Telegraaf* are most likely to vote for a right-wing party, readers of *NRC Handelsblad* tend to vote for a centre/right-wing party, and those that read *De Volkskrant* often vote for a left-wing party (Leruth et al., 2017). Because of this, one can also expect differences in frames used between commenters from different news pages.

Social media has become increasingly important for news consumption. 40% of social media users state that their main reason for being online is to stay informed (CBS, van Beuningen & Kloosterman, 2018). Due to the increasing importance of social media for news distribution, various news outlets have moved their comment sections to social media platforms as Twitter and Facebook (Hille & Bakker, 2014). On the one hand, this shift has been found to personalize and civilize discussions (Hille & Bakker, 2014; Kim et al., 2018; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014). As these comment sections enhance more personal discussions, this could lead to the use of a Human interest frame. This type of frame focuses mainly on the use of personal examples from daily life and uses emotional arguments to illustrate the consequences of a situation or policy (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). On the other hand, social media discussions have been found to contain more negative arguments than

positive ones. In the case of the European Union, in these discussions Eurosceptic arguments usually prevail (Galpin & Trenz, 2017).

In short, the possibility of online discussions has given citizens more opportunities to engage with the news and to voice their opinions. This opportunity to add one's own perspective alongside the perspective taken by the media could lead to more variety in the ways people convey their scepticism. This therefore leads to the same expectation as mentioned in the previous section, that the public debate will include a variety of frames that may have not been extensively considered before (Bijsmans, 2017; Down & Wilson, 2008). Also, the move from comment sections by news websites to social media networks has made online discussions more personal, which could lead to a consistent use of the Human interest frame in expressing Eurosceptic attitudes.

3. Method & Data

In order to answer the research question, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of Facebook comments on posts of four newspapers in the Netherlands. Qualitative content analysis is a research technique that allows for a systematic interpretation of a text and its context through distinct codes and categories (de Vreese, Peter & Semetko, 2001). It provides insights into the meanings that people attribute to a specific topic or issue (Krippendorff, 2004) and can, therefore, be used for acquiring an in-depth understanding of citizens perspectives and attitudes towards the European Union. Attitudes that they might not be able to, or dare to voice in an interview or survey, but which they more easily express through social media platforms.

3.1 Newspaper Selection

This study focused on the newspapers *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Dagelijkse Standaard*, *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant*. These four newspapers have been chosen to represent the political spectrum in the Netherlands from the radical-right to the left. *De Volkskrant* is characterized as a politically left-wing newspaper that often publishes progressive news (Bakker & Vasterman, 2007; Dirickx & Gelders, 2010). *De Telegraaf*, on the other hand, is generally described as a politically right-wing newspaper (Bakker & Vasterman, 2007) whereas *De Dagelijkse Standaard* defines itself more as radical-right (van de Ven, 2019). The latter therefore adds some more nuance to the sample, since the other three newspapers are considered to be relatively elitist in their reporting (Akkerman, 2011). Research has shown that individuals with different political orientations choose different news outlets to follow that align with their ideology (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015) and the distinction in ideology between these newspapers is also evident in readership demographics. Readers of *De Volkskrant* most likely

vote for the political left-wing oriented party PvdA and one-third of the readers of *De Telegraaf* tend to vote for CDA, while another twenty per cent vote for the VVD (Algemeen Dagblad, 2015). Both are considered centre-right/right parties. The newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* brands itself as a newspaper for the average citizen, and their readership is more spread in voting behaviour between VVD, CDA, PVV and SP (Algemeen Dagblad, 2015). Although it can be argued that *Trouw* and *NRC Handelsblad* might be more situated in the centre, this study has chosen to analyse *Algemeen Dagblad* instead as the former two are often mainly read among higher educated citizens, while the latter is read among both higher and lower educated (DPG Media, 2020), making it better comparable with the other three.

As individual-level factors are not available for analysis, it is impossible to make any claims about the representation of the population in terms of gender, nationality or educational level. However, the goal of this research is not to reach a full representation of the population, but rather aims for *topic coverage* (Schober et al., 2016). Topic coverage can be achieved without aiming for a complete representation of the population. By analysing different outlets that, due to their different backgrounds, focus on a variety of topics and attract different audiences, it is possible to still provide a fairly accurate representation of the collective opinion about the EU in Dutch society (Schober et al., 2016). Although not everyone comments on social media, those who do are able to serve as opinion-leaders (Schober et al., 2016; Katz, 2015). The ideas which they express can be treated as a representation of their social circle, reflecting the attitudes of themselves, their friends and family, as they are more inclined to engage with topics and express opinions about public issues that are also interesting to their own social group (Schober et al., 2016). In this case, topic coverage entails the analysis of comments in relation to several aspects of the EU. The sample that has been taken includes posts on the European Union that deals with economic, political and cultural issues. The sample may not directly represent all classes, ages and nationalities in society, but it does analyse public opinion on the European Union from various angles, making it possible to draw general conclusions from the results (Schober et al., 2016).

In short, in order to achieve topic coverage this research has analysed comments from different newspapers with different audiences and a diversity in topics that are discussed. From this a random sample has been taken to ensure that the diversity in topics in the sample is proportional to the diversity in news reporting in reality. This way the sample is varied in both audience and EU news topics.

3.2 Data Sampling

To gain insight into the most recent online discussions, a sample of posts is taken from the period between January 1st of 2018 and December 31st of 2019. A Facebook scraper was made¹ using the programming language Python. This script was able to retract the first hundred posts from the news outlets' Facebook pages that mentioned the European Union (or EU). Only public posts, available for anyone, and non-personal data is sampled from Facebook by the script. As this data is publicly available the data can be managed for external use (Facebook, n.d.) This led to four sets of data, one for each news outlet with each one hundred sampling units, containing the link to the Facebook post, the link used within the post, the text, the date of the article, the number of shares and comments the post has and the approximately first fifty comments. These are the comments that are shown by Facebook immediately without clicking on 'see more'. The first comments shown are those that are ranked by Facebook as the most relevant as they have the most number of likes, replies or are considered most engaged with a post. On a personal Facebook account the ranking is also influenced by personal preferences (Facebook, n.d.). Therefore, the Facebook scraper made use of a newly created account, specifically made for the purpose of this research. Hence, it was not influenced by personal preferences of the researcher. The scraper was not able to also retract replies on comments, as it would make the script too complicated for the given timeframe of the research.

From all of this, the posts that matched the date range from 2018-2019 were selected and all assigned a number. Four random numbers per newspaper were generated to randomly select the articles that would be used for the analysis. This led to a total of 16 articles between the time period of June 17, 2018 until June 24, 2019 and 732 comments for manual coding: 190 comments from *Algemeen Dagblad*, 143 comments from *De Dagelijkse Standaard*, 204 comments from *De Telegraaf* and 195 comments from *De Volkskrant*. Table 3.1 gives an overview of the posts that have been selected.

3.3 Coding Process

Coding was done using an inductive approach. With an inductive approach the frames emerge from the data and there are no frames defined prior to analysis (Thomas, 2006). This way, there is

¹ The Facebook scraper was written specifically for this research in cooperation with Bas Schoenmaker, BS Computer Science from Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. The script can be found [here](#) on his Bitbucket account

Table 3.1*List of articles posted on Facebook which have been used for this research*

Newspaper	Date	Linktext^a	Topic	Nº of Comments
<i>Algemeen Dagblad</i>	2-6-2019	Trump weet precies wat de Britten moeten doen: stap uit overleg met de EU	Politics	50
<i>Algemeen Dagblad</i>	2-4-2019	Forum voor Democratie stemt tegen nexit	Politics	56
<i>Algemeen Dagblad</i>	17-11-2018	Red het oerwoud: Frankrijk boycot producten die worden gelinkt aan houtkap	Economy	52
<i>Algemeen Dagblad</i>	25-7-2018	Trump wil handelsbarrières VS-EU opheffen	Economy	32
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	24-6-2019	Meer asielaanvragen in Europese Unie	Culture	53
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	2-6-2019	Trump adviseert Britten: stuur Farage naar Brussel voor Brexit	Politics	52
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	24-1-2019	Rutte haalt hard uit naar Brussel	Economy	49
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	11-1-2019	'Brexit gaat mogelijk helemaal niet door'	Politics	50
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	24-8-2018	Denemarken is buitenlandse studenten zat: 'Wij kunnen niet het onderwijs van andere landen faciliteren'	Culture	52
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	11-4-2019	Wéér is de Brexit uitgesteld: May heeft nu tot 31 oktober	Politics	49
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	21-2-2019	Baudet corrigeert partijgenoot: 'Forum voor Democratie wil wél een Nexit'	Politics	50
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	6-5-2019	'Wij willen na jarenlange onderdrukking niet worden gemastermind uit Brussel'	Politics	44
<i>De Dagelijkse Standaard</i>	18-5-2019	Filmpje! Update van Mark Rutte: "Europese raad is het politiek sturende orgaan van de Europese Unie"	Politics	37
<i>De Dagelijkse Standaard</i>	23-3-2019	Knap hoor! Carola Schouten (CU) regelt wel drie maandjes uitstel voor pulsvisserij!	Economy	33
<i>De Dagelijkse Standaard</i>	19-9-2018	Peiling: alleen FVD'ers en PVV'ers willen dat Nederland de EU verlaat	Politics	39
<i>De Dagelijkse Standaard</i>	17-6-2018	Vluchtelingen die door Italianen zijn geweigerd komen aan in Spaans Valencia: verdeeldheid neemt toe	Culture	34

^aLinktext refers to the headline of the article that appears with the clickable link in a Facebook post.

room for the development of new frames, without the bias of predefined frames, which may have not been discussed in the literature so far, but which might be equally important.

Inductive coding follows a path of three 'rounds' of coding, called open coding, axial coding and selective coding, whereby in each round the number of codes are reduced (Thomas, 2006). Open

coding focuses on analysing approximately 33 per cent of the data and assigning text codes that encompass the main argument(s) of the comments. This resulted in the coding of 248 comments and a total of 109 different codes. These were reviewed and similar codes were grouped together which led to a list of 46 different codes that were then used as a start for the second round of coding.

For the axial coding 346 comments were coded, which have not been used in the open coding process, to test the applicability of the previously established codes. During the axial coding new codes could still emerge when it was found that certain arguments were not correctly represented by the first set of codes. After the axial coding a total of 594 comments were analysed. Based on an evaluation of these results a final codebook was established for the selective coding, which consisted of 34 codes and 8 categories – 26 codes and 6 categories if you exclude the categories ‘Neutral/Positive’ and ‘Irrelevant’. The frame ‘Neutral/Positive’ consists of all comments that are not outspokenly against the European Union or even in favour of the organization. The category ‘Irrelevant’ was used to distinguish comments that were not related to the EU or Euroscepticism. Although the results from the Neutral/Positive frame will not provide in-depth insights into the specific reasons or arguments used for positive attitudes towards the EU, it will illustrate the scope of positive attitudes expressed in online discussions. An overview of the final codes, categories and descriptions can be found in Appendix A. With selective coding all 732 comments were coded based on the previously found codes and categories. This resulted in the final results which are discussed below.

4. Results

In Table 4.1 the distribution of the frames are presented. Some comments contained multiple frames as they consisted of multiple arguments. Comments that did not contain any argument or were aimed at other actors outside of the EU were coded as ‘Irrelevant’. Comments which were positive or neutral about the EU were coded as ‘Neutral/Positive’. When not taking into account these comments, the Anti-elite frame was the most frequently used frame in expressing Euroscepticism, followed by the Power threat, Responsibility, Economic threat, Injustice and Cultural threat respectively. I will discuss the usage of these frames in the following paragraphs. Detailed results of the separate codes per frame can be found in Appendix B.

Although this research did not aim to discern the reasons for supporting the EU, some insights were gained from the Neutral/Positive and Irrelevant comments. The most frequent code in the Neutral/Positive frame was ‘disagree with anti-EU’, meaning that a comment opposed an Eurosceptical statement. However, these comments were merely neutral about the EU or critical of Eurosceptics. Only a small part of these comments were coded as ‘agree with the EU’ (seven

Table 4.1

Percentages of frames used by commenters in online discussions on topics related to the European Union.

Frame	N	% of all comments	Frame	N	% of all comments
Responsibility	95	13,0%	Power threat	102	13,9%
Economic threat	91	12,4%	Cultural threat	11	1,5%
Injustice	85	11,6%	Neutral/Positive	85	11,6%
Anti-elite	138	18,9%	Irrelevant	284	38,8%

Note: Percentages based on total number of comments that have been coded (n=732). These percentages do not add up to 100% as some comments have multiple frames connected to them.

comments) or 'benefits of the EU' (eight comments) and can thus be considered positive towards the European Union. The data thus supports former research which showed an overall tendency towards negativity prevailing in online discussions (Galpin & Trenz, 2017). As for the comments in the Irrelevant frame, almost half of these comments were coded as 'empty', containing no specific arguments. Another big part of the Irrelevant frame were comments not directed at the EU, but at politicians from the United States or the United Kingdom. For the detailed results of these frames, see Appendix B.

4.1 Responsibility frame

The Responsibility frame primarily consisted of comments aimed at one of three issues, namely immigration, Brexit negotiations and climate issues. Although climate issues are sometimes characterised as a cultural (Kriesi et al., 2006) or economics issue (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), in this analysis it was a part of the 'Responsibility' frame as the comments made references to the EU and the politicians being responsible for solving the problem or for not doing enough. For example, one commenter said:

"Why starting in 2030? That is still another 11 years! Do you know how much forestry they can wipe out in that time?"²

² Original comment: 'Waarom pas vanaf 2030? Dat duurt nog ruim 11 jaar! Weet je hoeveel bos ze in die tijd om zeep kunnen helpen?'

Other comments in the 'Responsibility' frame were aimed at the EU's incompetence to solve certain issues. This was almost always related to the immigration issues or the failure of the Brexit deal for which the EU was to blame. Concerning immigration in particular, commenters blamed the European Union for welcoming too many immigrants at the expense of EU citizens.

"Housing shortages, the welfare is failing, roads are too full, according to the left the climate is failing, and yet we are still open for more. More and more people. This is incomprehensible, because getting more people automatically leads to more housing shortage, so more nature has to disappear to build houses somewhere, there will be more cars driving around (which are terrible polluting things according to the left) etc. Stop bringing in more people here, full is really full."³

4.2 Economic threat frame

The economic frame was often used in combination with other frames: 26,4% comments with an Economic threat frame were solely focused on the economy. All the other comments were often a combination of this frame with either the Responsibility, Anti-elite, Power threat or Injustice frame. Various reactions mentioned the financial damage that EU membership has on the national economy. However, most comments portrayed citizens as financial victims of EU policies, the main argument being that citizens have to bear the expense of EU policies in financial terms, whereas multinational corporations, other member states or immigrants reap the benefits. This is clearly illustrated in these two comments:

'And the Netherlands remains with the EU, we love to pay for Greece, the Spanish and of course we will take in some extra fortune seekers. Simple,

³ Original comment: 'Woningen tekort, welvaart naar de knoppen, wegen te vol, volgens links het klimaat naar de knoppen, en toch maar open blijven staan voor meer. meer, meer mensen binnenhalen. Onbegrijpelijk want met meer mensen binnenhalen, krijg je automatisch meer woningtekort dus zal er toch echt groen moeten verdwijnen om de woningen ergens te kunnen plaatsen, zullen er nog meer auto's (vervuilende rottingen volgens links) gaan rijden etc. Stop met binnenhalen van nog meer mensen vol is toch echt vol.'

without any complaints do we, the Dutch, pay some extra, because well, the EU is so beneficial for ordinary citizens!⁴

“Indeed, and that will cost us, among other things, our retirement money. Interest is knowingly kept low by Draghi and his companions. The Italians will just continue to waste money and make debts. Rutte make a fist if you are a man!!! Stand up for the Netherlands for once.⁵”

4.3 Injustice frame

The Injustice frame contains comments that identify particular behaviour of actors as wrongfully ignoring or restraining the public (Akkerman, 2011). This frame has some affinity with the Morality frame as used in the media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The Morality frame’s main focus is on the question of whether something is right or wrong. The Injustice frame, in this research, calls for acknowledgement of what has been done wrong and requests change. These reactions often call for more attention towards public opinion and national interest, as the actions of EU politicians do not do justice to the needs of citizens, while they prioritize the interests of weaker member states, multinationals or even their personal interests. In addition, the Injustice frame was used when commenters expressed distrust of other EU member states, considering them as exploiting the system at the cost of the bigger member states. In contrast to the Economic frame, these comments do not emphasize the consequences or costs for citizens. Rather they focus on the actors disregarding citizens’ needs. For example, one commenter stated:

“A Nexit is good for nothing, the EU does need to be radically reformed. The organization has a lot of improvement points. The Netherlands has to exert more influence on the EU as one of the biggest net payers. Getting a good job at the EU shouldn’t be the goal of our politicians, but preserving our own

⁴ Original comment: 'En Nederland blijft gezellig bij de EU , wij betalen met liefde mee aan de Grieken, Spanjaarden, en natuurlijk vangen wij nog wat extra gelukzoekers op. Gewoon zonder enkel gemor betalen de Nederlanders nog wat extra , want tja van de EU heeft de gewone burger zo ontzettend veel profijt!'

⁵ Original comment: 'Klopt en dat kost ons Nederlanders ons pensioen oa. Rente bewust laag houden door die Draghi en zijn kompanen. De Italianen gaan gewoon door met geld verkwisten en schulden maken. Rutte maak eens een vuist als je een vent bent!!! Kom eens op voor Nederland.'

interests and searching for common interests of all EU citizens should be the priority.⁶

4.4 Anti-Elite Frame

The Anti-elite frame, which turned out to be the most frequently used frame, consists of four separate codes. Table 4.2 shows the frequency of the codes, the percentage of the 'Anti-Elite' framed comments that used that code and the percentage it was used in all of the comments. Distrust of the national government was the most important code in this frame, followed by distrust of the EU and/or its politicians. Especially related to the Brexit issue there was quite some referencing to the complexity of the system, which is seen as a deliberate choice by the EU to make it harder for the member states to exert influence.

Table 4.2

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Anti-elite frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of Anti-elite frame	% of total
Distrust EU (politicians)	42	30,4%	11,6%
Distrust national government	61	44,2%	16,8%
Elitist view of EU	13	9,4%	3,6%
System complexity	22	15,9%	6,1%
Total	138		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Eurosceptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

The distrust in the EU (politicians) or the national government both refer to being suspicious of politicians involved in the EU policy and decision making. They are, for example, seen as liars, corrupt or dishonest. In this case, Euroscepticism doesn't follow from disagreeing with the organization or a specific policy, but rather stems from distrusting those who are responsible for the decision making. As one commenter says:

⁶ Original comment: 'Een next is nergens goed voor, de Eu moet wel radicaal veranderd worden. , die organisatie heeft erg veel verbeterpunten. Nederland moet veel meer invloed op de Eu uitoefenen als een van de grootste nettobetalers. Het krijgen van een mooie baan bij de Eu moet niet de doelstelling van onze bestuurders en politici zijn, maar het waarborgen van onze eigen belangen en zoeken naar gezamenlijken belangen van alle Eu burgers moet de prioriteit zijn.'

“All those “established” parties get more and more money! The common people can pay for their exorbitant lifestyle! They have their caviar and the most expensive champagne while the ordinary people have to do with a dry piece of bread! [...]”⁷

The code of ‘system complexity’ refers to the difficulty of getting out of the European Union or to exert influence as an individual country. Comments focused on the system complexity were often related to the Brexit and blamed the EU for the failure of the deal.

“He is right. The EU makes it almost impossible for the British with all the demands they make. They are scared that if people see how well the British are doing the EU will fracture and they will lose their nice expensive jobs.”⁸

This latter comment also refers to the corruption at the EU level, claiming these politicians only care about their own salary, rather than what is best for the EU and its members. Also important is that these commenters do not blame Britain for leaving the EU or the failures of the negotiations. Instead, they put the responsibility entirely on the EU. This same comment has therefore also been coded as ‘incompetence EU’ which falls under the Responsibility frame.

4.5 Power threat frame

The Power threat frame also consists of four codes, shown in Table 4.3, which all refer in some way to the EU being a threat to national sovereignty. ‘Decreasing EU influence’ only appeared in 5,9% of all the comments that use the ‘Power’ frame. On the other hand, the largest code was ‘incompetence national government’, which makes up 42,2% of the ‘Power’ frame.

In contrast to the code ‘distrust national government’ which is part of the Anti-elite frame, the code ‘incompetence national government’ focuses on the national politicians being too weak or

⁷ Original comment: “Al die “gevestigde” partijen zien hun eigen portemonnee verder gevuld worden! Het gewone volk mag betalen voor hun exorbitante levensstijl! Zij kaviaar en de duurste champagne en het volk op een droog stuk brood sabbelen!...”

⁸ Original comment: “Hij heeft gelijk. De eu maakt het de Britten bijna onmogelijk met de eisen die ze stellen. Ze zijn bang dat als mensen zien dat het goed zal gaan met de Britten de eu gaat klappen en ze hun mooie duurbetaalde baantjes kwijtraken.”

inadequate to properly represent the Netherlands in the EU. Consequently, people become sceptical about the EU membership as they feel the Netherlands' interests are neglected or ignored.

“The EU is getting more and more dangerous. Apparently a lot of people don't see this. If the UK even remains in the EU I hope the British will set several strong conditions. That is what NL (and actually every EU member state) should also be doing, but well, NL is and will always be weak and a follower.⁹”

Table 4.3

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Power threat frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of Power threat frame	% of total
Decrease EU influence	6	5,9%	1,7%
EU as authoritative	30	29,4%	8,3%
Incompetence national government	43	42,4%	11,8%
Requesting Nexit	23	22,5%	6,3%
Total	102		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Eurosceptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Other commenters do not necessarily consider the national government's incompetence as the main problem. They put the blame on the EU itself as the organization is seen as too authoritative. These comments emphasize that the EU is too powerful or too dominant, leading to diminished national sovereignty.

“Please note that the EU decides that we cannot do pulse fishing in our own waters / our part of the North Sea. A strange entity is deciding things for us. Let that settle in... That is the EU.¹⁰”

⁹ Original comment: “De EU wordt ook steeds gevaarlijker. Blijkbaar snappen veel mensen dit niet. Als de UK al in EU zal blijven hoop ik dat de Britten en flinke portie voorwaarden gaan stellen. Dat zal NL (eigelijk elk EU lidstaat wel) ook moeten doen maar ja NL is en zal altijd zwak blijven en meeloper zijn.”

¹⁰ Original comment: “Let wel de eu bepaald dat wij in onze wateren / ons stuk Noordzee niet mogel pulsvissen. Een vreemde mogendheid bepaald dingen voor ons. Laat het ff op je inwerken... Dat is dus de eu.”

This code was often, although not always used in combination with the code 'Requesting Nexit'. This code was sometimes used in short comments that, without any additional arguments, called for the Netherlands to leave the European Union. Yet, this code was part of the Power threat frame as expressing a desire for the Netherlands to leave the European Union is an indication of wanting to reclaim power and attribute it to the national level.

4.6 Cultural threat frame

The cultural frame was used only eleven times, making up only 1,5% of the comments. This might be explained by the fact that only three posts were culture-related, but it is still surprising. Especially considering the literature on Euroscepticism stressed the increasing importance of the cultural threat (Hooghe & Marks, 2007; Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011; McLaren, 2002) as a result of the increased diversity within the EU (Leruth, Kutiyiski, Krouwel & Startin, 2017). An interesting comment related to culture was the following:

“‘Brussel’ sees themselves as the owner of what are ‘European values’. In fact should ‘European values’ be a greatest common denominator of the cultures in all the member states (that is why they are member states: as participating country you have something to say about how the EU should look). It seems that the European Commission failed to resist the lure of increasing power in all the countless EU enlargements, at the expense of the sustainability of relations with Eastern countries.¹¹”

This statement is not so much against other cultures within the EU, but rather against an overall dominant culture that will suppress national cultures. While literature usually focuses on the perceived threat of other cultures (Verkuyten, 2009) it seems the threat actually stems from one dominant culture at the expense of the national identity. The commenter of this example actually prefers to maintain the diversity of other cultures in the European Union. This does not mean the cultural threat as explained in the literature does not exist. It is just not the main reason for people to be sceptical about the EU.

¹¹ Original comment: “Brussel’ ziet zichzelf als eigenaar van wat ‘Europese waarden’ zijn. In feite zouden ‘Europese waarden’ een grootste gemene deler moeten zijn van de culturen van alle lidstaten (daarom zijn het ook lid-staten: als deelnemend land heb je iets te vertellen over hoe de EU eruit moet zien). Het lijkt erop dat de Europese Commissie bij al de talloze EU-uitbreidingen geen weerstand kon bieden aan de verlokking van toenemende macht, ten koste van de duurzaamheid van de relaties met de oosterse landen.”

Overall, the main problem concerns the politicians. They are seen as responsible for what is wrong, as dishonest about their intentions, as ignoring public opinion, or as either too corrupt or too weak to make proper decisions about the EU and its member states. This perception of politicians is what seems to be the main driver of Euroscepticism among citizens.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

The main goal of this research was to learn what frames are used by citizens concerning the EU in online discussions. To answer this I have conducted a qualitative content analysis of 732 comments from *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Dagelijkse Standaard*, *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant*. The coding was done by using an inductive approach, meaning that the codes and frames emerged from the data. This eliminated bias in the frames and opened up the possibility to compare the frames used by citizens with those described by previous studies on Euroscepticism in media and politics. The following results stand out:

First, results indicate that the Anti-elite frame is the most prominent, followed by the Power threat, Responsibility, Economic, Injustice and Cultural threat frame respectively. There was no use of the Human interest frame, which entails employing personal anecdotes or arguments that appeal to one's emotion. Although online discussions on social media are shown to be more personal than anonymous discussions on news websites (Kim et al., 2018; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014) and the Human interest frame is found to be important in media stories about the EU (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) it was not observed as an important frame in the online discussions on the European Union. Instead, people seemed to address the consequences of policies for the nation or used statistics about the population to strengthen their argumentation. Perhaps this was a deliberate choice of commenters to increase engagement with others. Yet, future research aimed at discovering the rationale behind the use of certain frames will have to determine whether this is the case.

Second, in contrast to expectations, the Cultural frame was by far the least frequently used frame. Although several studies indicated the increased importance of cultural issues (Hooghe & Marks, 2007; McLaren, 2002) and some even stated it had become more prominent than economic arguments (Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011) the results of this analysis showed that the cultural threat of European integration is perhaps not as relevant as it was before. Thereby, even when the Cultural threat frame was used, it was primarily about being afraid the national culture would decrease in importance as a consequence of a dominant European culture. It is not so much about directly feeling threatened by other cultures or other member states, but rather these results show a new aspect of the cultural threat frame. Similar to comments that employ the Power threat or the

Economic frame is that people are anxious of being controlled by a powerful entity that could diminish nations individual authority.

Third, the Power threat, Responsibility, Economic threat and Injustice frame were all found in approximately 11-14% of the comments, supporting the idea of Down and Wilson (2008) that the debate of Euroscepticism is indeed diverse and touches upon several aspects that are considered equally relevant. However, despite this somewhat balanced debate, the Anti-elite frame was by far the most frequently used frame. One explanation for the prominence of the Anti-elite frame could be the frequent use of an anti-establishment discourse by both left- and right-wing populists parties. Whereas left-wing populists focus on the negative economic consequences of EU membership (de Vries & Edwards, 2009; Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993; Hooghe & Marks, 2005), and right-wing populists generally focus more on the threat to the national culture (de Vries & Edwards, 2009; Hooghe & Marks, 2007; McLaren, 2002; Leruth et al., 2017), both sides reinforce the idea of corruption and dishonesty by EU actors (Abbarneo & Zapryanova, 2013; Krouwel & Abts, 2007). Thus, these results indicate an overlap in frames that are used by populist politicians from both sides of the political spectrum, as well as by Dutch citizens.

Fourth, there seems to be little overlap between frames used by the media and citizens. Whereas the latter are shown to focus more on an anti-elite perspective, three of the four newspapers in this study, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant*, are considered to align with elitists perspectives (Akkerman, 2011) and are therefore unlikely to use an Anti-elitist frame in their reporting. Thereby, Dutch media in general make most use of Responsibility, Conflict and Economic consequences frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Whereas for citizens the Responsibility frame is the third most frequently used after the Anti-elite and Power threat frame. Thus, the frames used by Dutch citizens do overlap with those of Dutch populists parties, but do not immediately overlap with frames of news outlets.

This research has had several limitations. First of all, there is no guarantee that the sample is a general representation of society as individual-level factors could not be taken into account. However, instead of population coverage, the goal of this research was to achieve topic coverage. This was done by sampling from four distinct newspapers, attracting different ideological audiences with different ideological stances. By using a random sampling strategy a diversity in topics was achieved which was in proportion to the distribution of these topics in daily news reporting, leading to political topics being more prominent than cultural topics. Secondly, the script used for collecting the data wasn't able to retract more than the first approximately fifty comments, nor the replies from the comment sections as the script would become too complicated within the timeframe of this study. This resulted in an algorithmic bias, as the comments deemed most relevant were selected

according to Facebook's algorithms. Therefore some of the comments contained a lot of data which was irrelevant to the research topic. However, even after excluding these comments, enough data was available to interpret and discover interesting insights. Thirdly, the sample of the data is from a period of one year in which several European Union topics were discussed. The data and results therefore do not show any trends throughout time or provide insight as to why these frames have developed. This could be solved by repeating this study over a longer period of time and comparing the results between years to find patterns and/or shifts in the use of certain frames, for instance, with the help of software tools for automatic content analysis and text mining techniques (Ampofo et al., 2015). Lastly, an important limitation is the differences in topics discussed by the four newspapers. It can be argued that the topic of the post reinforces the use of certain frames, which might explain partly the little use of the Cultural frame. However, the topics discussed in the media can also be seen as a representation of what topics are considered relevant in society. The fact that political and economic topics were more common than cultural topics in relation to the European Union in the news can be seen as a reflection of the current public agenda (Schober, et al., 2016). Therefore, one could argue the influence of topic choice for topic coverage will be limited. Nevertheless, replications of this study using different news posts or outlets are needed to confirm this.

The research on individual attitudes on the European Union is still not complete. This study focused on Eurosceptic attitudes across society. Although the inclusion of comments from *De Dagerlijkse Standaard* made it possible to analyse some more radical perspectives on the EU debate, it showed only the main arguments used by Dutch citizens, without insights on where these attitudes come from. One way of getting a better insight of the more radical attitudes in Dutch society is by doing a survey among those who follow radical news outlets or social media pages. Another option is to conduct in-depth interviews to gain better insights as to where these attitudes originate from. Also, while this research did code for neutral and positive attitudes towards the EU, it did not look extensively at the reasons behind this support. Future research could focus specifically on people who have altered their opinions over the years and see what brought on the change in attitudes. These could all be interesting starting points for future research to enhance our overall understanding of what drives Euroscepticism.

As this research has shown, there is a big problem of trust towards political actors of the EU. When reaching out to Eurosceptic citizens, it is important to address specifically these concerns and doubts (Perloff, 2014). Trust could be earned by increasing transparency about policy decisions to citizens, as transparency opens up the conversation and gives citizens the feeling they are heard and that their concerns are acknowledged. At the same time it can also make them better understand

what the benefits are for them (Brüggemann, 2010). While the EU over the years has tried to convey the advantages of the EU membership for countries, their communication strategy also focused on strengthening feelings of 'togetherness' across Europe (Caliendo & Iannario, 2009) which might have had a reversed effect as the Cultural threat frame in this study showed citizens felt threatened by an overall European culture. Additionally, more transparency will give populists and other Eurosceptics fewer means to propagate their anti-establishment discourse and could possibly decrease Euroscepticism overall. Aiming at improving trust between citizens and politicians should be the main goal in countering Eurosceptics. Only from there one can address and successfully discuss the more practical reasons for opposing to the European Union, such as economic and cultural issues.

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Appendix A – Codebook

Code	Code group	Description
Distrust EU (politicians)	Anti-Elite	Either the EU system or EU politicians are said to be corrupt, untrustworthy or liars.
Distrust national government	Anti-Elite	Distrustful of the national government. They either consider them to be corrupt, untrustworthy or liars.
Elitist view of EU	Anti-Elite	Portraying the EU politicians as elitist and therefore not considering the interests of citizens, but only the interests of themselves or multinationals.
System complexity	Anti-Elite	Focus on the complexity of the system, thereby making it hard to get a Nexit or to make a successful Brexit deal. Putting the blame of Brexit on the EU.
Decline national culture	Cultural threat	The Dutch national culture declining in importance as a consequence of either further EU integration, EU's lack of cultural values or rising immigration.
Citizens as victims	Economic threat	Comment stating that citizens have to bear the expense of a certain policy in financial terms.
Costs of EU	Economic threat	Focus on the costs of any EU decision or policy, not necessarily linked to the Netherlands.
Economy damaged by EU	Economic threat	EU membership having a bad influence on the country's national economy.
Economy prioritized	Economic threat	Arguing the EU prioritizes the wellbeing of the economy at the cost of other issues, such as health or climate.
Lack of benefits	Economic threat	Focus on the lack of benefits from EU membership for the Netherlands. Not necessarily about damaging a country, but about not adding anything valuable in financial terms.
NL compensating	Economic threat	Comment referring to Netherlands having to pay for other 'weaker' or poorer member states.
Citizen involvement	Injustice	Requesting more citizen involvement or supporting a certain political actor as they promote citizen involvement.
Distrust EU members	Injustice	Wanting other countries to leave the EU as they are corrupt, free riders, nondemocratic or untrustworthy.
Immigrants as terrorists	Injustice	Comment that sees immigrants as terrorists and the EU as naive for letting them through and thereby threatening the safety of the EU citizens.
Immigrants prioritized	Injustice	Arguing the EU prioritizes immigrants wellbeing over their own citizens.

Prioritize NL	Injustice	Requesting or demanding national politicians should focus more on national interests, what is best for the Netherlands.
Public opinion ignored	Injustice	Comment focusing on national politicians that don't consider or ignore public opinion and national interests to please EU, multinationals or their own interests.
Decrease EU influence	Power threat	Comment that states the EU should be concerned with less issues. Comment stating the EU should only concern itself with trade (e.g. that it should go back to the EEG).
EU as authoritative	Power threat	Comment that also focuses on EU being too powerful or too dominant, which leads to diminishing national sovereignty.
Incompetence national government	Power threat	Seeing the national government as weak or incompetent in the EU political arena.
Requesting Nexit	Power threat	Requesting that the Netherlands leaves the European Union.
Climate issue	Responsibility	Considering the EU responsible for the climate issue and/or for solving the climate problems.
Immigration responsibility	Responsibility	Blaming the EU system or politicians for the immigration problems.
Incompetence EU	Responsibility	Either the EU system or EU politicians are seen as incompetent, inefficient or weak, which makes the system fail or easily influenced by countries outside of the EU.
Policy disapproval	Responsibility	Disapprove or disagree with a new EU policy or claiming there is not enough public support from EU citizens for that specific policy.
Policy lacking	Responsibility	Stating that a certain EU policy is lacking in effectiveness or implemented too late. The EU is not doing enough.
Agree w/ EU	Neutral/positive	The comment agrees with an EU decision.
Benefits EU	Neutral/positive	Comment stressing the benefits of EU membership, often stating the EU is not 'all bad'.
Disagree w/ anti-EU	Neutral/positive	The commenter disagrees with a statement by an outspoken anti-EU actor or an anti-EU statement itself
System Improvement	Neutral/positive	The comment is neither in favour or against the EU, but suggests room for improvement of the system
Empty	Irrelevant	No specific argument is made or the comment is not related to the EU in any way
Media/journalists	Irrelevant	A comment is aimed at the news source or journalists.

Non-EU actors	Irrelevant	A comment is aimed at non-EU actors (often, although not always, this is the UK or the US).
Unclear	Irrelevant	The comment makes a point, but it is unclear whether it is pro- or anti-EU. It is not clear how the comment is meant.

Appendix B – Overview of results

Table 1 – All frames

Percentages of frames used by commenters in online discussions on topics related to the European Union.

Frame	N	% of total	Frame	N	% of total
Responsibility	95	13,0%	Anti-Elite	138	18,9%
Power threat	102	13,9%	Cultural	11	1,5%
Injustice	85	11,6%	Neutral/Positive	85	11,6%
Economic	91	12,4%	Irrelevant	284	38,8%

Note: Percentages based on total number of comments that have been coded which is 732. These percentages do not add up to 100% as some comments have multiple frames connected to them.

Table 2 – Anti-elite Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Anti-elite frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Distrust EU (politicians)	42	30,4%	11,6%
Distrust national government	61	44,2%	16,8%
Elitist view of EU	13	9,4%	3,6%
System complexity	22	15,9%	6,1%
Total	138		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Eurosceptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Table 3 – Power threat Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Power threat frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Decrease EU influence	6	5,9%	1,7%
EU as authoritative	30	29,4%	8,3%
Incompetence national government	43	42,4%	11,8%
Requesting Nextit	23	22,5%	6,3%
Total	102		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Euroscptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Table 4 – Responsibility Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Responsibility frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Climate issue	9	9,5%	2,5%
Immigration responsibility	16	16,8%	4,4%
Incomptence EU	25	26,3%	6,9%
Policy disapproval	18	19,0%	5,0%
Policy lacking	27	28,4%	7,4%
Total	95		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Euroscptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Table 5 – Economic Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Economic frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Citizens as victims	29	31,9%	8,0%
Costs of EU	20	22,0%	5,5%
Economy damaged by EU	18	19,8%	5,0%
Economy prioritized	6	6,6%	1,7%
Lack of benefits	5	5,5%	1,4%
NL compensating	13	14,3%	3,6%
Total	91		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Euroscptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Table 6 – Injustice Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Injustice frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Citizen involvement	9	10,6%	2,5%
Distrust EU members	26	30,6%	7,2%

Immigrants as terrorists	1	1,2%	0,3%
Immigrants prioritized	14	16,5%	3,9%
Prioritize NL	18	21,2%	5,0%
Public opinion ignored	17	20,0%	4,7%
Total	85		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Eurosceptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Table 7 – Cultural Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Cultural frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Decline national culture	11	100,0%	3,0%
Total	11		

Note: % of total is calculated taking the number of comments that actually expressed Eurosceptic sentiments, thereby excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Table 8 – Neutral/Positive Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Neutral/Positive frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Agree w/ EU	7	8,24%	1,0%
Benefits EU	8	9,41%	1,1%
Disagree w/ anti-EU	65	76,47%	8,9%
System Improvement	5	5,88%	0,7%
Total	85		

Note: % of total is calculated based on all comment, and thus not excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Table 9 – Irrelevant Frame

Frequency and percentages of codes related to the Irrelevant frame in online discussions

Code	N	% of category	% of total
Empty	131	46,13%	17,9%
Media/journalists	13	4,58%	1,8%
Non-EU actors	106	37,32%	14,5%

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Unclear	34	11,97%	4,6%
Total	284		

Note: % of total is calculated based on all comment, and thus not excluding comments that fall under 'Irrelevant' or 'Neutral/Positive'.

Appendix C – Ethics and Privacy Checklist



CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Euroscepticism in Online Discussions among Dutch citizens

Name, email of student: Sandra Post; 446200ap@student.eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Cecil Meeusen; cecil.meeusen@kuleuven.be

Start date and duration: April 3rd, 2020 until June 21st, 2020

Is the research study conducted within DPAS

YES

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: TYPE OF RESEARCH STUDY

Please indicate the type of research study by circling the appropriate answer:

1. Research involving human participants. **NO**
If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES -
NO
Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).
2. Field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. **YES**
3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). **NO**

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

(Complete this section only if your study involves human participants)

Where will you collect your data?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES -
NO
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES -
NO
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - NO

4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES -
NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES -
NO
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? YES - NO
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - NO
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES -
NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES -
NO
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES -
NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Part IV: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

After collecting all the comments from the Facebook pages I will store them all as separate files on my laptop and personal hard-drive.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Only me, the researcher (Sandra Post)

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

The data will be backed-up once on my laptop upon collecting the data and afterwards on my personal hard-drive to secure no loss of the data.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

The personal data in this case are people's names. These names are irrelevant for analysing the data and are therefore not stored. The comments will each be given a number for storage purposes.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Sandra Post

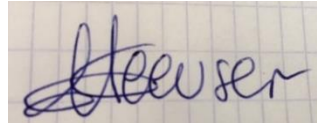
Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Sandra Post

Name (EUR) supervisor: Cecil Meeusen

Date: 17-03-2020

Date: 18-03-2020

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'SPost', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Meeusen', written on a piece of lined paper.