

# “The Netherlands is the Netherlands no more”.

A critical study on far-right digital campaigns in the 2023’ Dutch elections.

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## Abstract

This paper explores how far-right parties instrumentalize migration and migrants to evoke a state of collective alarm in society during the election period, through an in-depth analysis of moral panic production. Moral panic prevails as social groups are demarcated into an in- and out-group through symbolic bordering building on the us-versus-them paradigm. The Other, in this case the migrant, is categorized as the folk devil, better understood as the threat to society. This study specifically focusses on TikTok posts and tweets of Dutch far right political parties, namely Forum voor Democratie (FVD) and Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), and their respective figure heads Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders collected using Discourse Centred Online Ethnography to investigate what strategies are employed and how digital affordances are used in moral panic spread around migration. Based on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, this study demonstrates that far-right parties amplify negative stereotypes circulating public discourse, including the migrant as disruptor of public order, ignitor of socio-cultural change and exploiter narratives. These stereotypes highlight differences and reinforce the boundaries of the in- and out-group. Furthermore, they heighten fear on the premise of what might be lost as well as stress the unpredictability that comes with the influx of migrants to articulate anti-(im)migration ideology in support of their political incentives, such as restoration of national identity. Despite the contentious nature of migration, this study argues that PVV and FVD construct fear discourses around migration by highlighting the direct negative impact migration has on the livelihoods of Dutch citizens, covering and magnifying events that stress deviancy of the out-group, which gives the in-group a feeling of protective negligence by the government. Next to that, it foreshadows fearful predicaments that come with migration endangering traditional ways of living, which legitimizes regulation and advocating for (institutional) change. This paper concludes that more established platforms, such as X, encourage top-down antipathy, and the up-and-coming platforms, like TikTok, are reshaping public opinion on migration from the bottom-up, thereby utilizing the interactive participatory platform tools to diversify the representation of the networked and therefore contested threat.

KEYWORDS: moral panic, migration, social media, far-right parties, political communication.

# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Abstract .....   | 2  |
| 1. Introduction .....  | 4  |
| 2. Theoretical framework .....   | 8  |
| 2.1 Conceptualizing moral panic .....                                      | 8  |
| 2.2 Social representation of migration as a source for (moral) panic ..... | 11 |
| 2.3 The role of platforms in spreading and (re)shaping moral panic .....   | 15 |
| 2.4 Introducing the case studies .....                                     | 17 |
| 2.4.1 <i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> - Geert Wilders .....                 | 17 |
| 2.4.2 <i>Forum voor Democratie</i> - Thierry Baudet .....                  | 19 |
| 3. Methodology .....   | 21 |
| 3.1 Data collection- Discourse-centred online ethnography (DCOE) .....     | 21 |
| 3.1.1 Research sample .....  | 22 |
| 3.1.2 Operationalization .....   | 24 |
| 3.2 Data analysis- Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) .....     | 25 |
| 3.3 Ethical considerations and limitations .....                           | 28 |
| 4. Results .....   | 30 |
| 4.1 Negative stereotypes of migrants .....                                 | 30 |
| 4.1.1 <i>Disruptor of public order</i> .....                               | 31 |
| 4.1.2 <i>Ignitor of cultural disruption</i> .....                          | 33 |
| 4.1.3 <i>Gelukszoeker</i> .....  | 35 |
| 4.2 Expectation of loss .....  | 39 |
| 4.2.1 <i>Deprivation of education</i> .....                                | 40 |
| 4.2.2 <i>Demographic transition</i> .....                                  | 40 |
| 4.3 Fear of the unknown .....  | 41 |
| 5. Conclusion and discussion .....   | 45 |
| 5.1 Implications for future studies .....                                  | 47 |
| 5.2 Limitations .....  | 48 |
| 5.3 Practical recommendations .....  | 49 |
| List of references .....   | 51 |
| Appendix A- Exemplary coding tree .....                                    | 57 |
| Appendix B- Exemplary MDCA .....   | 58 |

# 1. Introduction

The Dutch elections of 2023 evolved all around the contentious topic of migration. After the coalition collapsed in July over disputes on migration policies, it was no surprise that the cornerstone of the new political campaigns is asylum and migration (Bajja, 2023). Migration can be defined as (un)voluntary movements of people across borders (Avraamidou and Ioannou, 2023, p. 722; Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690). In this instance, however, migration is understood as an umbrella term, meaning topics concerning refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants all set the political agenda (Tong and Zao, 2018, p. 447). Over the last couple of years, the topic of migration gained great visibility in the Dutch political arena, which following an investigation from May 2023 by Ipsos, ran so high that 65 percent of the Dutch citizens even wanted to lower the number of incoming migrants to the Netherlands (Bajja, 2023). Political parties build on this heightened interest in migration and migratory policy, in using migration as their puppet to distinguish themselves from other parties and communicate their party ideals during the 2023 elections. To implement or not to implement the controversial “distribution law”, which would enforce municipalities to take up a certain number of asylum seekers (Bajja, 2023)? Whereas the left-wing parties often advocate for a fair distribution of the incoming migrants throughout the country, the opposition wants to centralize migrants to expedite potential deportation (Bajja, 2023). Their diverging ideas on migration in general, as well as regarding this specific “distribution law” created tension in society (Bajja, 2023). Since these tensions and political campaigns more generally are infused with power hierarchies, it is important to shed light on acts of-, and (in)justice through representation, especially of the social group these elections are all about – the migrants (Ahearn, 2012, p. 261-290).

Instrumentalizing fear and moral panic, better understood as a public response of anxiety to a phenomenon threatening societal standards in the Netherlands (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 691-692; Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021), are strategies in representing migrants often employed by far-right parties to articulate anti-immigration sentiment and spread their xeno- and Islamophobic ideology (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 700; Cohen, 2011, p. 27-40). This concept of moral panic was first coined by Stanley Cohen in 1942 (2011) as a way to identify people or phenomenon as folk devils or threats to society (Cohen, 2011, p. 1-278). Since migration is such a contentious topic with the potential to change the existing social order and labour market situation, migrants have been a source of fear and threat causing moral panic in society (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690). Given the fact that migrants upon entrance, need a place to stay and on the longer term need a place to work, they impact societal foundations. This increasing economic burden and socio-cultural pressure makes the dominant group feel threatened in their livelihood, which is causing fear and panic (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 691-692; Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021). For this reason, moral panic about migrants has

primarily been build on negative stereotypes, disaster narratives and other malfunctions in society for which they are scapegoated (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-706). However, foundational to constructing moral panic are often times political incentives, such as restoration and protection of national identity, which in turn is amplified through media outlets who articulate and amplify these discourses (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-700).

The media thus plays a prominent role in facilitating and (re)shaping the spread of moral panic. Digital media, especially social network sites (SNSs) are cultural arena's often used by far-right politicians to disseminate fear discourses, as it is an accessible and cheap communication mode that enables mass participation in the production of panic discourses (Walsch, 2020, p. 843; Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-705; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 336-339). These cultural arenas are home to processes of digital identity formation, impression management, exchange of ideas, and mobilization of support. Digital affordances, like sharing that come with the automation of digital platforms, allow for mass-to-mass communication, and enable the reproduction of exclusionary discourses (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 336). According to James P. Walsch (2020), the role of digital platforms on moral panic is, however, relatively understudied in the existing bodies of literature, which is why he advocates for more in-depth studies of moral panic in relation to digital communication means which include the impact of technological advancement (Walsch, 2020, p. 841). The impact of social media on moral panic production has been and continues to be a blind spot in literature. This study offers insight into this topic by highlighting their role in taking up this fear discourse, making moral panic platformed panic, better understood as the role of digital affordances to collectively shape, network and contest a public state of alarm (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 691). As platforms are acknowledged to be active actors in producing, circulating, and challenging the narrative of public debate can we begin to investigate why and how its digital affordances are employed in producing and spreading fear discourses for political gain. Only when the origin of panic discourses and the infrastructure guiding behavioural change is established can society begin to critically examine these exclusionary fear-based narratives and challenge them to be more inclusive.

In this paper, it will be examined how far-right parties instrumentalize migration and migrants for their online political campaigns to tap into this fear and spread panic narratives. In the existing bodies of literature specifically focussing on the rhetoric of political figures, including the influential study by Hameleers (2023) on debasing language use, we see that a lot of research has been done on established political figures and their tone of voice, yet not so much has been documented upon on the up and coming far right parties. Given the rise of far-right (extremist) ideology all over Europe, it is important to shed light upon the techniques employed by the up-and-coming parties to discern (new) trends in the political ecosystem (Bajja, 2023; Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70). This study aims to fill that void, in examining two Dutch case studies, namely the prominent party *Partij voor de Vrijheid*

represented by Geert Wilders and the up and coming political party *Forum voor Democratie* and figure head Thierry Baudet to investigate how the anti-migration narrative is kept up and possibly renewed as right-wing populism is on the rise, once again stressing the study's relevancy (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70). This analytical account of migrant representation in political campaigns further contributes to existing literature in migration- and media studies, as the socio-technical relationship illustrates the power of Dutch far-right politicians in articulating a narrative of migration which fuels moral panic through digital affordances to advocate for their party programmes. Particularly, the socio-technical relationship is relevant to the field of media studies, as it shows how the advancement of technological spaces can enhance and intensify collective alarm (Walsch, 2020, p. 842-843). Digital spaces, like social media, namely fuel an attention economy which urges users to attract attention through real-time interactions, which results in prioritizing emotional responses over rationalism. In this attention economy, ideas are legitimized based on sentiment rather than scientific, credible, proven information (Gerbaudo et al., 2023, p. 3). This makes social media an important player in igniting societal division and hostility (Walsch, 2020, p. 845). Therefore, this paper explores the question: *"How do far-right political parties, Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and Forum voor Democratie (FVD), construct online fear discourses about migration during the election period in the Netherlands?"* To be able to answer this question, this question is subdivided into two questions, namely on the level of content: *"What kind of strategies or discourses do the figureheads employ to construct fear discourses in society?"* to delve into the origin of panic discourses and subsequently on means of dissemination: *"How do they actively use the affordances of digital media to produce and spread fear discourses regarding migration during the election campaign period?"* to delve into the role of platforms in facilitating and shaping fear discourses. In short, in this study the social media accounts of the most prominent far-right parties *PVV*, *FVD* and their party leaders will be analysed on their most used platforms, namely X and TikTok using qualitative discourse-centred online ethnography to fully immerse myself, as a researcher in the digital ecosystems to observe and collect data on migration posts featuring platformed panic, while analysing the role of these platforms in spreading fear discourses.

To do so, this study is divided into three main sections. The first section is dedicated to existing foundational theories regarding moral panic, moral panic in relation to migration, the role of digital affordances in moral panic discourses and introducing the case studies guiding this analysis. In the subsection on moral panic, this study aims to introduce and contextualize the foundational theories underlying the concept, including criticism and adaptations. Also, it dedicates specific attention to the hybrid model of moral panics introduced in the study by Klocke and Muschert (2010), which is foundational to this research. In the second subsection, the relationship between moral panic and migration is examined, including acts of othering, the disaster discourse, and disparities in

representation of various migrant groups. The third subsection examines how political figures spread discourses of fear building on migration, linking it to common populist communication strategies (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710). This subsection also extends the argument to the digital realm, investigating platformed panic and the usage of digital affordances of social media platforms (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710). Furthermore, the second section presents the methodological approach of this study, which consists of qualitative discourse-centred online ethnography and qualitative multimodal discourse analysis. Moreover, the research findings and analysis are elaborated upon in the third section. Lastly, this study will discuss the main findings and reflect on the ways in which *PVV* and *FVD* construct fear narratives surrounding migration and how digital affordances benefit the production, distribution, and reception of these panic discourses.

## 2. Theoretical framework

To ground this research in broader sociological, migration- and media debates, this section aims to provide a detailed overview of the key concepts and theories guiding this analysis. In this section, moral panic is briefly introduced highlighting its relationship to migration. Furthermore, in this study the role of far-right politicians and (digital) platforms as key actors in panic production, amplification and dissemination are examined. In doing so, this study highlights the various ways in which digital media representations of migrants relate to fear and threat narratives, thereby examining political communication and the role of social media affordances in circulating and mobilizing discourses around migration and its potential threats to the host society.

### 2.1 Conceptualizing moral panic

“Make America great again”, “the Netherlands is the Netherlands no more”. These are just some examples of slogans by far-right politicians, respectively Donald Trump and Geert Wilders, which have been circulating online for the last decade, emphasizing a need for societal improvement. This need for improvement seems to suggest that something is currently stopping society from advancing, that something is putting a strain on development, something is threatening society and societal interests. To investigate why and how these slogans come into existence it is important to shed light on the underlying fear that is calling for a change of governmental rule. To understand how political (far-right) parties construct online fear discourses, it is essential to shed light upon the key sociological concept of moral panic and its uses. In empirical studies, moral panic is often regarded as a phenomenon posing a threat to the existing societal norms and values (Cohen, 2011, p. 1; Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 3). It deals with morality, meaning issues that are regarded as being right and wrong and that guide social behaviour or cultural practices. In turn, moral panic is frequently used to get support for policing crises, exercising social control, regulation, and reinforcing group boundaries in society (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 3). All these regulatory measures can create fragmentation and polarization in broader society (Walsh and Hill, 2022, p. 4; Young, 2011, p. 247). For this reason, it is important to understand how moral panic is constructed as it has far-reaching social consequences in terms of the social order and power dynamics in society (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 4; Cohen, 2011, p. 1-278).

The term “moral panic” was first coined in 1942 by Stanley Cohen (2011), as a process whereby folk devils, as he called the deviant group, are identified (Cohen, 2011, p. 1-278). The threat of this group to social well-being is exaggerated by media which causes social panic amongst the public, and consequently moral gatekeepers act on the threat until it flees society (Cohen, 2011, p. 1-4). In his analysis, he identified four main agents guiding the cultural process of moral panic,



namely moral entrepreneurs, those who detect deviant behaviour, mass media, in creating and exaggerating the fear, an overall culture of social control, including public institutions such as police, and the general public (Cohen, 2011, p. 9). In his study on youth subcultures, he specifically highlighted the powerful role of mass media in the creation and amplification of fear discourses, as they appeal to the broader audience through simplistic symbolic rhetoric and thus socially condition the general audience to be fearful of a social group (Cohen, 2011, p. 47-79). Engraining this imagined risk in public consciousness reinforces and even furthers the deviancy of the marginal, out-group from the dominant in-group (Cohen, 2011, p. 1-278). Together these agents condition a social group to be a threat, building on social divisions, and reinforcing stereotypes, leading to marginalization and ostracization. However, this model has been critiqued for this very process of conditioning a social group as it assumes to conflict information and measures upon a passive audience, instead of taking into account counter narratives and actions that could be produced by the deviant group (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 156-159; Garland, 2008, p. 10-12; Young, 2011, p. 247). Especially, with the rise of new media, which acts as an equalizer to information supply, it is important to notify that the audience can take on an active role in the production and amplification of information (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 295-309). In Cohen's model (2011), he focusses specifically on the societal reaction to this external threat, instead of taking note of the reactionary mobilization by the external threat itself.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) in turn build on this model yet offer an attributional model focussing more on the process of moral panics as a social construction (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 156-159). Their definition of moral panic build on five stages, namely concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 156-159). Despite clear similarities with the previous model by Cohen, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) stress the stage of consensus, where the conditions for panic are a collective agreement of what is good and what is bad, and what is considered that bad that it threatens societal values and interests (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 157). Taking on a constructivist approach, they forgo the critiques of Cohen's model as it acknowledges the meaning-making process which is subject to time and change. To concentrate more on the aspect of morality, Garland (2008) includes two additional elements, namely the level of the threat measured in the loss of traditional values, and the "symptomatic" origin of the threat, relating to the state of society before the threat emerged (Garland, 2008, p. 11). In their analysis, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) address various historical and geographical case studies and discuss possible causes for moral panic thereby covering these additional elements as proposed by Garland (2008). These causes are the grassroot model, where public anxiety is the source for threats, the elite-engineered model, where elites induce and exaggerate a threat to move away from their own lack of problem-solving, and the interest group model, where interest groups induce the fear of the threat

for personal gain (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 161-166). In general, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) consider moral panic, a state of alarm which has been socially constructed, meaning that it is not tangible, and the cause was not inherently a threat to society yet has been created by society to make sense of reality.

Despite Goode and Ben-Yehuda's efforts to focus more on the cultural processes guiding moral panic such as the stage of consensus, Klocke and Muschert (2010) argue that both of the above-mentioned models have to be criticised for their conceptual use of the models as they only define what moral panic entails yet not go in depth into how moral panic comes into being (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 295-309). Especially with the rise of new media which has changed the socio-technological mediated spaces to be more diverse and accessible, critics call for a newer model to investigate moral panic in digital networks, which examine the processes underlying normalization of the threat which again stresses the panic processes (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 295-309; Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710; Walsch, 2020, p. 845). Only when we have a model that depicts closely the constellation of facets leading up to a state of moral panic, can we shed light upon moral panic production in a digital realm subject to constant change and fleeting in nature, to investigate the role of all (new) media (prod-)users and the distribution of power permeating the digital domain (Walsch, 2020, p. 841). Therefore, in operationalizing this concept, this study builds on the hybrid model of moral panics as introduced by Klocke and Muschert, see *figure one* (2010, p. 302).

This hybrid model offers a framework sequencing the three stages of moral panic cultivation, operation, and dissipation, which help to distinguish who and how the idea of the threat came into being, flourished and deceased, also known as the processes guiding moral panic (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 295-309). Oftentimes, there is a form of crisis resulting in a societal problem, which gets media coverage, after which people become informed of this so-called threat. Then as time passes, the threat goes away or lessens in severity. This model, as presented in figure one, offers a combination of both foundational models by Cohen (2011) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), yet is adapted to the fast-paced media landscape disseminating the panic discourse. In opting for this model, categorizing the threat according to the stages of moral panic production, to investigate posts circulating social media helps discern the origin and symptomatic state of society. In fact, creating an overview of the sequence of posts and their purpose while keeping a close eye on societal response helps in disclosing the power of the moral entrepreneurs and potential power deficient in society (Cohen, 2011, p. 9). For example, in a dictatorship one could expect a fierce societal response to a post calling for action, amplified through censored media channels and sympathizers, which shows that the dictator has a lot of power over its people. Nonetheless, it could also show that despite of assumptions on power distribution, the existing hierarchy is challenged, either institutionally, through (shadow-)banning or censoring or by individuals on social media, like activists. In general, closely

monitoring social media posts through this model helps understand how panic is constructed, perceived, and responded upon in society (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 295-306). In doing so, this research extends the arguments by Cohen (2011) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) in showing how moral panic exposes broader power (as)symmetries in society, such as exclusionary practices (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302). The specifics as to how this model is used to interrogate moral panic in far-right political social media are further elaborated upon in the methodology section.

*Figure one.* Part of the hybrid model to examine moral panics in social media posts.

2. Operation: processes that function during a MP
  - a. Episode (C1, C2, G1) – coverage of the shocking event or series of events that identify the problem/threat
    - i. Distortion – descriptions of the event and the deviants are exaggerated
    - ii. Prediction – there is a prediction of future deviance
    - iii. Symbolization – dramatic images and symbols are attached to the problem behavior
  - b. Magnification (C3, G2, G3) – the period of intense attention and prolonged media coverage to the causes and consequences of the threat, represented by a shift from media inventorying the episode to value-laden sense-making activities
    - i. Moralization – identification of the folk devils and why they are a threat to the social order, and a typification of their behavior as representative of the danger they pose/problem they embody
    - ii. Officiation – increasing involvement of police, experts & officials, moral entrepreneurs, and community leaders through media interviews, press releases, public statements, etc
    - iii. Amplification – Coverage of the panic becomes themed and a re-occurring feature. Media focuses on heightened public concern evidenced by opinion polls, letters to editor, protests, web pages, blogs, etc
  - c. Regulation (C4, G4) – the advocacy of strong measures of social control through the media, to deter, manage, or eradicate the threat, often met with varying levels of resistance
    - i. Surveillance – calls for law enforcement, other officials and the public to be vigilant and to report suspicious behavior
    - ii. Mobilization – gathering of personnel and resources for civic, legislative, and law enforcement action to manage the problem, as well as the mobilization of resistance groups countering the demonization of the folk devils
    - iii. Institutionalization – implementation of new structures of governance or enforcement, creation of social movement organizations and counter-organizations, passage of new laws or tougher penalties. If resistant groups are successful in critiquing the MP, institutionalization will not occur

*Note.* By Klocke and Muschert, 2010, image.

## 2.2 Social representation of migration as a source for (moral) panic

Due to ever-lasting persistence of globalization, and thus flows of people across territorial borders, influx of migrants remains an undeniable reality in our contemporary society. Despite all the enrichment that migration brings to the world economy and welfare, migrants are often seen as the social group putting a strain on the job and housing market as well as misusing social benefits (Pijpers, 2006, p. 93). Migrants are often seen as unfamiliar, foreign individuals who are viewed as a potential danger, challenging the established moral framework, jeopardizing national security, and undermining cultural unity within a sovereign state. (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 691; Pijpers, 2006, p. 93; Cohen, 2017, p. 4-12). This can be regarded as the state of concern or cultivation stage for collective alarm (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 157; Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 295-309). In

turn, moral panic has been used to legitimize various modes of policing crises, through border control and practices of exclusion (Cohen, 2017, p. 6).

As illustrated in the previous section, politicians, especially right-wing politicians, are often times the initiator of moral panics, meaning they are moral entrepreneurs or claim makers as referred to by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994; Cohen, 2011, p. 47-49). Moral entrepreneurs can be defined as moral founders categorizing between good and bad, identifying issues as potential threats, and shaping public opinion while (in)directly influencing policy decision-making (Cohen, 2011, p. 49). Cohen (2011) addresses the influential role of moral entrepreneurs in his study when introducing the way they frame unfair sports competitions with (sometimes false or distorted) information including transphobic claims (Cohen, 2011, p. 47-49; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 156; Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 646-648). When we apply this process to migration we see that in identifying migration as a threat to social benefits building on a disaster narrative, the moral entrepreneurs can stress deviancy of a particular social group in an emotional charged way to advocate for more social control (Cohen, 2011, p. 47-49; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 156; Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 646-648). Despite the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, far-right politicians are still a minority in many political regimes, meaning that to voice their political views and policy changes they have to speak up and resort to low-barrier platforms, like social media to voice their concerns to the general public and media (Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 649). Pepin-Neff and Cohen (2021) exemplify the use of social media as a vehicle for moral panics and more generally policy-making, in discussing Donald Trump's presence on X when they state: "Trump's use of tweets as a vehicle to deliver a moral panic from the bully pulpit of the presidency is not simply an agenda-setting device, but rather a policy tool to spread exclusion, fear, untrue stereotypes, and second-class citizenship in ways that boost transphobia and mobilize transphobic extremism." (Pepin-Neff, 2022). Moral entrepreneurs thus alarm the general audience for potential threats to the social order, in stressing deviancy of a certain social group or event.

When someone categorizes the social world along the lines of an in- and out-group, meaning they reinforce the us-versus-them paradigm, it can be seen as a form of symbolic bordering (Georgiou, 2018, p. 46; Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010, p. 695-697; Boréus, 2021, p. 23). This form of bordering builds on acts of othering, better known as a process in which social codes are applied that demarcate between different social groups, which in turn leads to practices of (in- and) exclusion (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010, p. 695-697). In stressing differences rather than similarities between social groups, traditional media amplify this exclusionary discourse (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302). In covering the extreme cases, a skewed picture is given of the deviant social group. This can be exemplified when looking at the correlation between migrant and crime often drawn in the traditional news coverage. Headlines such as: "Vijf bewoners azc Budel vast voor steekpartij

station Maarheeze” (Nos, 2024) and “Asielzoeker krijgt 12 jaar cel voor verminking met kokendhete olie” (Nos, 2023a), are explicitly stating the crime has been committed by asylum-seekers which stresses their state of residency which does not serve as a notable perquisite for the description of crime. However, this does highlight the reoccurring theme of crime in relation to migration, which heightening concern about the influx of migrants in public consciousness (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 303).

In the political realm, it becomes evident that migration is instrumentalized in means of communication to reinforce forms of symbolic bordering and articulate their (anti-)migration ideologies (Georgiou, 2018, p. 45-56). Social representation of migrants as an out-group, Other or ‘them’, negatively shapes public opinion on migration. Social representation in general is “a specific way of understanding, and communicating, what we know already” (Tong and Zuo, 2018, p. 446), yet are reinforced through the use of symbols, language and visuals (Tong and Zuo, 2018, p.446-447). As Ahearn (2012) mentions choices in regard to such language in social representation reinforce (hegemonic) power relations and asymmetry (Ahearn, 2012, p. 261- 265). To resonate with the digital in-group, framing the message, articulating the story, or visualising an event, are an important analytical tool for highlighting or downplaying certain aspects of the out-group (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019, p. 891). It can be regarded as a form of social engineering, better understood as evoking emotional responses to amongst others migration (Gerbaudo et al., 2023, p. 3-9). To exemplify how language has been used to install moral panic and thereby reinforce power imbalance between society and migrants, this study turns to the disaster narrative, which reinforces negative stereotypes on migrants, while legitimizing social control.

Looking at evoking emotional responses, research has shown that (far-right) political parties often employ politics of fear in the context of migration to instil panic amongst the public, whereby they rely on the re-occurring rhetoric of threat and crisis (Wodak, 2015, p. 70-96; Avraamidou and Ioannou, 2023, p. 724). Applying this rhetoric to migration results in the circulation of terms such as “migration crisis” or “flood of migrants” (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 1-24). These connotations to and symbolization through natural disasters- a crisis and flood, illustrate the influx of people as a misfortune, something inherently bad while highlighting the urgency of the situation (Hameleers, 2018, p. 337; Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p.302). Choice of words is thus a powerful tool in constructing the narrative to politically socialize the public to be fearful of a certain social group, in this case, migrants (Ahearn, 2012, p. 290; Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 42-47). This can also be defined as the idea of evoking moral panic, where vivid imagery is created of all that can threaten societal norms and values (Walsh and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710). In highlighting the severity of the situation using vivid imagery and performative language, the politicians predict a situation which they frame as distinct, abnormal, and terrifying (Cantat et al., 2023, p. 27; Hameleers, 2023, p. 338; Klocke and

Muschert, 2010, p. 302). In setting the situation apart from the regular, they use the issue-specific assimilation frame reinforcing an us-versus-them paradigm, where the “us” is the in-group and “them” are the marginal out-group, in this case, migrants (Boréus, 2021, p. 23; Cantat et al., 2023, p. 1-5). This exaggerated dichotomy qualifies for the distortion of the deviancy, a perquisition for moral panic as defined by Klocke and Muschert (2010, p. 302). In electoral campaigns specifically, it is framed as if politicians are going to combat this crisis, or rescue the country from this flood, thereby making it a heroic act to prove their leadership competencies while justifying the call for social control in their party programme (Boréus, 2021, p. 8-16; Wodak, 2015, p. 70-96). Such techniques are employed in social media posts related to the electoral campaigns to engage with and simultaneously gain trust and recognition amongst a political base in society (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-68). In doing so, they perform “constitutive boundary maintenance” (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p.3), better understood as laying out the parameters or symbolic boundaries to protect the “normal” situation, a situation without the external threat. In taking these practices of symbolic bordering to the digital realm, such fear discourses can be amplified (Jhoti and Allen, 2024, p. 2-20). Symbolic bordering, involves taking a stance on either end of the debate, which is amplified online since it allows anyone with access to Internet to share (mis)information and articulate their opinion, allowing for group formation based on shared sentiment (Jhoti and Allen, 2023, p. 2-20; Gerbaudo et al., 2023, p. 3-9). The sub-groups, whether pro- or anti-migrants’ activists take sides in a real-time discussion, whether or not the “normal” situation is under threat and by whom, that is fuelled and mobilized online. Digital media thus amplifies fear discourses causing polarization in society.

This process of creating an in- and out-group through othering can take many different shapes, as the othered group is also not homogeneous. The group of migrants, as referred to in social media posts is a diverse group of individuals coming from an array of different countries, livelihoods, cultures and fled their country for various reasons. One might have more distinct physical or cultural features that clearly demarcate one from the in-group (Kotilainen and Pellander, 2021, p. 280). However, the in- and out-group is not always as clear cut. As Kotilainen and Pellander (2021) argue, even within anti-immigration discourses there are distinctions between the processes of othering migrants. One social group can be considered too much alike the in-group, a bad migrant, a threat and therefore not worthy of empathy, whereas the other group, considered a good migrant is too alienated from the in-group culture (Kotilainen and Pellander, 2021, p.285-289). Their habitus, like phone use and appearance, according to Kotilainen and Pellander (2021) is never in sync with the expected behaviour of a migrant in the anti-immigrant political circle (Kotilainen and Pellander, 2021, p. 288-289). For this reason, even within the out-group, there are acts of superiority which determine the treatment by the in-group. As previously mentioned, iPhone use embodies status and superiority within the out-group, yet is considered undeserving by the in-group (Kotilainen and Pellander, 2021,

p. 287). Nonetheless, both migrant groups with or without iPhone are still considered the inferior other, who are represented as the threat to, or cause of panic for, the in-group. These practices of symbolic bordering online consolidate the superiority of the in-group, 'us' compared to the other 'them'.

## 2.3 The role of platforms in spreading and (re)shaping moral panic

Media portrayals of migration allow for fear- and threat narratives to be produced and circulate in broader society, thereby reinforcing an us-versus-them boundary maintenance (Jhoti and Allen, 2024, p. 4; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 332). Especially with the rise of social media and their digital affordances which enable its users to engage with a large audience on interactive participatory interfaces due to the horizontal structure, the information supply has diversified, fragmented society and (re-)directed public debate (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710; Walsch, 2020, p. 848). Platforms are no passive actors in the creation and circulation of social media posts and thus mass media, as platforms (in)directly dictate norms in the process of digital identity making and representation of social groups for the most virality online (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-67). Empowering users to produce, shape, spread and consume information on social media platforms, allows for the creation of new discourses of fear around migration. Amongst these new fear discourses is for example sexual moral panic in relation to migration as illustrated by Giuliani et al. (2020). Despite online social media gatekeepers who monitor social media content on the grounds of "personal preferences and emotions" (Giuliani et al., 2020, p. 165), the users can themselves create content on a platform without the direct interference of a fact checker bound by professional codes of conduct (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710; Giuliani et al., 2020, p. 165-166). In this way, the "true voice of the people" (Giuliani et al., 2020, p. 166) is articulated and more extremist expressions of fear are condemned (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-67; Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710; Giuliani et al., 2020, p. 165-166).

Far-right political actors, more often than their left-wing counterparts, express discontent with the current political situation and threat in angry-triggering content, which includes hate speech and debasing language use (Gerbaudo et al., 2023, p. 3; Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70). The circulation of extreme content wherein migrants are referred to as vermin encompasses this sentiment (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70). The simplicity and incivility of angry-triggering content are in line with the direct discursive outlook demands of platforms like X, which prioritize sensational and emotional content (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70). Therefore, the affordances of posting, sharing, commenting, or liking such angry-triggering content help cultivate a higher response rate and stimulate more engagement with the posts, which in turn helps proliferate the fearful imagery of migration and diffuse this collective panic as advocated for by the far-right political parties (Gerbaudo et al., 2023, p. 2-3;

Giuliani et al., 2020, p. 166). Oftentimes, this panic is based on the production and circulation of misinformation based on and justified by references made to “moral backlash and nostalgia” (Walsch, 2020, p. 844), romanticizing the past while fuelling platformed panic on the premise of fearful prospects (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 692; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 335-340). Platforms enhance such conspiracy theories and misinformation more generally because of their “cacophonous character” (Walsch, 2020, p. 847), which rests on great diversity of information supply and members. This could be reinforced by “vox populi” (Walsch, 2020, p. 848), meaning fake accounts, either manual human- or automated machine-led, that heighten credibility of a post, suggest unanimity, thereby expedite virality of misinformation fuelling vigilantism and outpacing official information channels (Walsch, 2020, p. 845-848). This proliferation of misinformation stimulates collective sense-making which impacts the production and dissemination of moral panic. Misinformation often rests on inflammatory content that stimulates click-bait and thus transforms unease into high velocity of collective panic (Walsch, 2020, p. 845-849). The manipulation of information through misinformation spread thus helps weaponize platformed panic.

There are, however, European and national measures in place to control and regulate misinformation spread online, specifically during elections. In Europe more broadly, the Digital Service Act (DSA) draws up laws and regulations on the spread of misinformation, which is reinforced through code in technology companies like X (Rijksoverheid, n.d). Whereas the Netherlands does support this DSA, it does not actively live by these laws. Instead, the Dutch government launched public information campaigns for digital literacy to control for the reception of misinformation amongst its citizens, as well as implemented the Dutch Behavioural Code Transparency Online Political Advertisements (Rijksoverheid, 2021). This should incentivize political parties to sign a behaviour code of conduct to illustrate they abide from spreading misleading information, like disinformation and fake news online (Rijksoverheid, 2021). In doing so, the Dutch government refrains from regulating or controlling misinformation directly yet advocates for self-regulation and accountability.

Despite this regulatory framework, radical statements circulating online are legitimized and normalized in public debate as they often come acquainted with language that is politically correct, seemingly hiding the unmitigated angry-triggering content (Krzyżanowski, 2020, p. 439-441). This process is also known as “borderline discourse”, where one draws on established civil social norms of conduct to articulate an uncivil idea, thereby (re-)negotiating the blurred lines between civil and uncivil (Krzyżanowski, 2020, p. 441). Platformed panic, in turn emphasizes the active role of digital affordances, such as likes, shares, comments, in creating and spreading such a state of collective alarm in society (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710; Giuliani et al., 2020, p. 166). In their paper on the Canadian federal elections, Walsch and Hill (2022) investigate the uses of Twitter in re-figuring the



production of fear through its participatory nature and the algorithmic driven innovations, such as bot responses increasing response rates and popularity of the social media posts. This platformed panic, as illustrated by Walsch and Hill (2022), helps examine the uses of digital affordances to weaponize this fear.

This fear is sustained and anchored on social media platforms, as the platforms' algorithms profile their users and serve them with like-minded content (Walsch, 2020, p. 845-851; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 332-339). This technique is better understood as creating technomediatized spheres called filter bubbles or echo chambers, which personalize content to reinforce their beliefs, thereby isolating the user from opposing views (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 339; Giuliani et al., 2020, p. 166). These spheres thus conform and amplify pre-existing biases and resistance against a social group, in this case, migrants (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 339). Since people see their extreme ideas reciprocated, we see anti-migration social media groups emerge where people unify over shared concern of the influx of migrants (Boréus, 2021, p. 1-25). The media thus "encourage confirmation bias and isomorphic social relations" (Walsch, 2020, p.845), which normalizes exclusionary ideas and reinforces a fear of the Other. For this reason, specifically, it is crucial to examine how fear discourses are constructed and what role platforms play in the construction and amplification of extremist visions, because repetitive exposure to xenophobic narratives in mainstream discourse due to virality can intensify tension and social order all together (Giuliani et al. 2020, p. 165-166). In this study, platformed panic is therefore examined as a feedback loop, tracking down repetitive uses of hashtags, references, and trends to be able to identify the cause for concern and its virality causing tensions and moral outburst in society.

## 2.4 Introducing the case studies

Before investigating the ways in which *Partij van de Vrijheid* and *Forum voor Democratie* construct fear discourses instrumentalizing migration and utilize social media affordances to produce and disseminate those discourses, this study will introduce the parties and their prominent figures to contextualize this research in the public realm (Dietvorst, 2023). I will briefly recapitalize their party origin, ideology, and main incentives in the 2023' election running for national parliament using the information of the house of representatives to establish their political ground.

### 2.4.1 *Partij voor de Vrijheid*- Geert Wilders

*Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV), also known as Party for Freedom was founded in 2004 by foreman Geert Wilders (House of Representatives, n.d.). The party programme for the 2023' elections titles "Nederlanders weer op een", freely translated to "the Dutch citizen first place again" and encompasses strict migration policies regarding asylum and the influx of migrants more generally to

ensure the dominant position of the Dutch and Dutch culture (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, 2023). Although unexpected, this year's elections were won with the majority of the votes by *Partij voor de Vrijheid* and the conversation on possible formations is in full swing as I write this piece (Dietvorst, 2023).

Although Geert Wilders founded the *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, his time in politics precedes the foundation of the far-right party. In 1998, Wilders was part of the Liberal party (VVD), but soon after coined his own party articulating more extremist ideology (House of Representatives, n.d.). Geert Wilders is predominantly known for his anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and anti-Europe position in political debate (Dietvorst, 2023). His anti-immigration stance is especially interesting, when looking into his family history. It becomes evident that Wilders grandmother is a migrant from the Dutch East Indies who settled in the Netherlands in the 1930s, and his great-grandmother was Islamic (Vossen, 2016, p. 1-28; van Leeuwen, 2017). Although little is known about the family dynamic, Wilders does seem to hide or leave out that he is himself a third-generation migrant to be politically in line with the party programme. The well-known discriminatory *minder, minder* speech has eventually put him on the map as a far-right political figure with extreme views discriminating Moroccans with a migration background (Schellevis and Ersoy, 2023).

In regard to social media activities, it was discovered that the party relies predominantly on the media accounts of Geert Wilders, the figure head. The party only manages a Youtube page (@PVVpers: 34.1K subscribers), the rest is dedicated to Geert Wilders. This can be understood as a strategy of political image-making which is essential for a good campaign and politically leveraging a social issue, as it helps build a digital identity that is identifiable and recognizable for the general public while strategically highlighting certain aspects of one's life that make people want to believe the politician (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019, p. 890). This feeds into the idea of celebritization of politics, which includes "influencer communication strategies [which] primarily function to build relationships with their followers. Influencers grant their followers access to much of their lives, sharing information about their relationships, their everyday habits and values" (Hinck and Rasmussen, 2021, p. 29). Sharing this personal information makes the viewer feel immersed in the go-about of Wilders' life, and thereby identifies with him more as a person beyond his political views only (Hinck and Rasmussen, 2021, p. 28). Geert Wilders owns an Instagram page (@geertwilders: 278K followers), Facebook page (Geert Wilders: 495K followers) and X-account (@geertwildersPVV: 1.4M followers). The latter seems to be his preferred and most popular means of communication to keep in touch with the public, given the daily number of posts and number of followers (Nos, 2023b). The contents of the tweets are often times related to political matters, yet alternated with a more personal post or retweet of his personal twitter account ran on behalf of his cats @Wilderspoezen. In sharing personal details, like information on his cats, in a simple understandable fashion utilizing "man in the street communication styles" (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, p. 2) Wilders bridges the

gap between content maker and follower and thereby strengthens the bond between and with his (to be acquired) following (Hinck and Rasmussen, 2021, p. 29). This attempt for more humanized political communication helps community building and thereby establishing trust, which is essential for reaching consensus on a moral threat (Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 646-649).

#### 2.4.2 *Forum voor Democratie*- Thierry Baudet

*Forum voor Democratie*, also known as Forum for Democracy, is a relatively new party self-denouncing as liberal conservative established in 2016. The party unsprung as a collective to fiercely oppose the Ukraine referendum of 2015 (House of Representatives, n.d.). To give shape to this collective Thierry Baudet together with Henk Otten launched a thinktank, in pursuit of innovating the Dutch democracy (van Raalte et al., 2021, p. 2). This thinktank gradually developed into the political party *Forum voor Democratie* (FVD). The main objectives of this political party are to restore Dutch sovereignty by leaving the Union and restricting the influx of migrants (House of Representatives, n.d.; van Raalte et al., 2021, p. 1-6). Given the history of this party, *Forum voor Democratie* believes in the power of referendums to ensure policy changes and forgo bureaucracy.

Thierry Baudet is the political party leader of *Forum voor Democratie*. With his flair and charisma, the figurehead takes on a transgressive communication style where he often makes Latin references (van Raalte et al., 2021, p. 2). He instrumentalizes his elitist network to make a name for himself in the political landscape and ensure authority, thereby setting himself apart from other populist parties who direct their message to the common ordinary people (van Raalte et al., 2021, p. 2). He has been a part of the Dutch House of Representatives since 2017, entering the political realm with two seats. Over the last few years, the far-right party has been on the rise, especially with his conspiracy theories during COVID-19 (Dietvorst, 2023).

The social media activity of FVD and Thierry Baudet are often controversial and therefore subject to bans on social media platforms. This research has encountered the fleeting nature of FVD accounts during data collection. However, despite the fleeting nature of both the social media posts as well as accounts, the party sustains a loyal following base on TikTok (forumvdemocratie: 71.9K followers and 1.6M likes), YouTube (@ForumDemocratie: 183K subscribers), Facebook (*Forum voor Democratie*- FVD: 280K followers), X (@FVDemocratie: 164.3K followers) and Instagram (FVDnl: 69.2K followers). Thierry Baudet's personal accounts have encountered some restraints prior to the elections, given his agile writing style hovering a bit too close to the margins of uncivil in the "borderline discourse" (Krzyżanowski, 2020, p. 441). Prospective to the electoral period of 2023, it appears that besides debasing language use, Thierry Baudet has paid TikTok, his most used platform to publish political advertisements, after which he was (permanently) banned from the platform (BNNVARA, 2023). Despite that ban, he quickly rebuild his follower base, TikTok (@Thierry\_Baudet:

221.8K followers and 6.8M likes), YouTube (@baudetFVD: 24.1K subscribers), Facebook (Thierry Baudet: 125K followers), X (@thierrybaudet: 342.9K followers), Instagram (Thierry\_baudet: 199K followers), with specific notice to TikTok which is the most popular medium shaping public discourse (Schellevis and Ersoy, 2023). Especially given the upheaval in the context of TikTok it is interesting to shed light upon this particular up and coming platform and its impact on voting behaviour.

In the findings section, I delve into various media portrayals of *PVV*, Geert Wilders, *FVD* and Thierry Baudet where migrants and migration more generally are instrumentalized to upper their political ideas and campaign more specifically. Furthermore, this study investigates why this social group is targeted specifically and how digital media is augmented to creating and reproducing symbolic borders.

### 3. Methodology

In this section, the research design and methodology will be further specified investigating the above-mentioned concepts and theories in practice. This includes the study objectives, a brief description on how the key concepts of moral panic and social representation are operationalized, and the incentives on processing the sampled and analysed data. Furthermore, ethical concerns for any potential challenges or hurdles this research might face will be voiced in the end of this section together with possible research limitations.

#### 3.1 Data collection- Discourse-centred online ethnography (DCOE)

As briefly mentioned earlier, this study investigates how Dutch far-right electoral campaigns produce a narrative of migration fuelling moral panic across digital platforms as well as the role of social media platforms in constructing and spreading this discourse. In doing so, this research draws on qualitative research methods. For data collection, this study relies on discourse-centred online ethnography (DCOE). This method combines systematic online observation with offline interactions, allowing engagement with social actors involved in the discourses (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 4). In this research context, this qualitative method allows me to systematically observe the narratives and dynamics of digital communication on the social platform X and TikTok, reinforcing the digital identity of far-right political actors while collecting insights on the engagement with and context of their posts in the digital realm (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 4). Through systematic observations of social and communicative interactions online, it is possible to identify key nodes, such as sources, language styles, reoccurring themes, updating rates of the accounts, and consequently the potential deviations to these social interactions (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6). It is through these deviations in framing online and additional contextual information that we can see whether the representation in posts is a mere reflection of reality or constructed reality informed by an interlacing computer-mediated discourse. Through comparison with other platforms and additional information sources, it becomes clear how migration is framed in the X and TikTok posts in support of the political incentives and it thus discloses online strategies inducing fear. This method thus helps to question whether the representation in digital posts is a reflection of reality or a socially constructed narrative that is grounded in processes of cultural meaning-making (Machin and Mayer, 2012, p. 32-47). This combination between emic and etic should illustrate the occasions when politicians distort facts or spread misinformation as a strategy to portray migrants in a negative light. This gives insight into the phenomenon at hand while describing the, sometimes hidden, meanings. While conducting this online ethnography on X and TikTok, I continuously log the information in a codebook using Microsoft Word and Excel to gain insight into patterns and discourses (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 10).

### 3.1.1 Research sample

As previously mentioned, in collecting the data for this research, this study relies on DCOE to observe and collect data on the two most prominent far-right political parties in the Netherlands, namely *Forum voor Democratie (FVD)* and *Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)* (Dietvorst, 2023). These specific political parties were selected because of their growing powerful position in society and close affinity to anti-migration sentiment, authoritarianism, and nationalism (Hameleers, 2023, p. 336).

Based on prior research on the parties' most favourable platforms, in terms of engagement and impact, this study focuses on the more established platform of Twitter, or X and the more up-and-coming platform TikTok (Schellevis and Ersoy, 2023). Especially through TikTok, extreme far-right ideas managed to reach a new audience of young people with little previous political engagement, making it an interesting platform beyond X to analyse (Schellevis and Ersoy, 2023). DCOE helps to immerse oneself in these online environments and collect audio-visual posts, so photos or videos related to migration that were posted during the official election campaign period, from October 27<sup>th</sup> to November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 (Bajja, 2023; Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 1-17).

This study specifically looks at the party accounts and social media accounts of the foremen, Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders as they provide insight into the workings of the social and cultural techno-mediated sites. These accounts are open access, meaning that anyone can access all posts when having an account on the medium itself. With a research-dedicated account, specifically created for the purpose of this research, this study navigated the accounts of the politicians to ensure no trace was left to personal accounts of the researcher, as it might jeopardize the research given the researcher's personal left-wing outlook on politics. Furthermore, when observing the accounts there was no direct active engagement with the political posts through for example liking or commenting on posts. However, this study did require to study the account, post visuals, post captions, hashtag use, and scrolling through the comments to get a feeling of the way the posts had been received in society. For this reason, my role as a researcher can be defined as minimally participating observer (Bryman, 2012, p. 431-467). To find and navigate these accounts and platforms for research purposes more generally, the search bar tool has been used while instrumentalizing digital affordances, like hashtags #stopimmigration, #asylum, #elections used to induce platformed panic, to find associated posts and more closely monitor for the presence of fear discourses (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 692; Schellevis and Ersoy, 2023; Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 10). These searches revealed that hashtags as described above are not applied in any of the TikTok posts yielded, and do not occur as often as expected on X either. Only in 11 out of 41 posts do the hashtags above occur. Instead, the researcher diverted to the search bar tool to search for affiliated terms such as "migrants", "migration", "elections", which yielded the data as represented in dataset attached. This also showed that the

mentions (@) of accounts is used more prominently to make references to news agencies or debates in support of political objectives, which include migratory regulations.

During the data collection phase, this study experienced the fleeting nature of social media contents, as the TikTok account of Wilders was deleted after the campaigning period, and the X posts of Baudet posted before March 4<sup>th</sup> were censored by the platform (BNNVARA, 2023; Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-71). To overcome this hurdle, this study continued to focus on both platforms and parties, yet only look at posts on X for Wilders and TikTok posts for Baudet and *FVD*. This focused approach to the digital spaces should not discriminate this research as it aims to provide a complementary account, focussing on common ideology, approximation, and similar/different trends between both far-right parties, instead of adopting traditional comparative approaches.

In sum, this mode of data collection builds on a purposive sampling technique as it helps select relevant posts in light of this research's incentives and objectives (Bryman, 2012, p. 431-467). This sampling technique is non-probable, as it requires careful selection of the sample members and platforms (Bryman, 2012, p. 431-467). This sampling strategy showed how migration was represented by far-right parties, *PVV* and *FVD* to install fear in society regarding this social group. The criteria for sampling were: (1) the posts of the two party leaders are published on either X or TikTok; (2) the posts should be posted or reposted by the party account of *PVV*, *FVD* or their figureheads, Geert Wilders or Thierry Baudet; (3) the content, either verbally or visually should make a reference to migration, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers or immigrants in relation to another pressing issue in society, whether directly or indirectly formulated (Tong and Zao, 2018, p. 447); (4) the content should be either in video, photo or textual format; (5) when involving a carousel post to illustrate the party objectives only one item, the item related to migration, was used to ensure comprehensibility; (6) contents were posted during the election period ranging between October 27<sup>th</sup> and November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2023. Preferably the posts should instrumentalize hashtags or other digital affordances to induce (platformed) panic. Data collection came to a halt when theoretical saturation was reached and no new post yielded a significantly different insight (Bryman, 2012, p. 421).

Based on these criteria, the initial sample selection yielded 61 posts by Geert Wilders on X and 47 posts, consisting of 20 posts by *Forum voor Democratie* and 27 posts by Thierry Baudet on TikTok. For the sake of analytical value to this research, the posts only name-dropping migration and/or migrants and thus not further specifying the impact on society or cause for a state of collective alarm, were eliminated from the study. This form of data bushing was performed to sustain contextual information and make informed claims about the posts in relation to moral panic production. Based on affinity to the topic of migration, the initial sample selection of 108 social media posts was thus reduced to 31 and 41 posts on TikTok and X, respectively. Our final sample for

analysis consists of 72 far-right political posts, 31 of which are TikTok posts (T1 to T31) and 41 are posts from X (X1 to X41). The sample characteristics are described in the dataset attached.

Despite careful consideration in the data collection phase, this study can potentially suffer from methodological limitations, precisely because it draws on a purposive sample. Since the platforms, accounts and posts discussed in the previous section are strategically selected in light of the research questions together with the fact that the dataset is relatively small, prevents this study from being generalizable to an entire population in the name of fear discourses (Jordan, 2018, p. 913-916). Instead, the relatively small sample size allows for in depth understanding of- and the complexity of the strategies employed by these specific far-right parties, *PVV* and *FVD* for a time-specific event, namely the official Dutch electoral campaigning period of 2023 to construct fear discourses around migration (Bryman, 2012, p. 425-427). The case-oriented analysis serves the need to address actors in the political arena instrumentalizing migration through social media. It could also happen that posts are deleted amidst analysis. To overcome data loss, I plan to log all posts taken up in this research. Despite these potential challenges, this study offers a concrete case study on the production, amplification, and distribution of fear discourses online.

### 3.1.2 Operationalization

Before embarking upon this study, I operationalize the main concepts of moral panic and social representation guiding the research into tangible categories for analysis.

To operationalize moral panic into tangible categories, this study builds on the hybrid model by Klocke and Muschert (2010, p. 301-305). These three dimensions, as introduced prior in this research and illustrated in figure one, aim to interpret moral panic in practice, namely through investigating the phase of episode, magnification, and regulation. First, episode includes all the coverage of the threat, paying attention to symbolism, image distortion and sketches of future scenarios ((Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 301-305). Second, magnification refers to media attention, including identification of the threat, how it becomes a theme and how officials cover and take on the panic discourse ((Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 301-305). Third, regulation are features that express calls for social control to recede the fear, such as mobilization of surveillance and requests for policy changes (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 301-305). This can be assessed looking at the call for action in posts by politicians, often times using imperatives such as “vote”, and “change policy” to mobilize opposition. These stages will help categorize the sampled posts according to the conditions and processes guiding moral panic, prior to, during and following an event. This categorization will explicate how far-right parties utilize migration as a source for moral panic, how they exaggerate its impact on society, building amongst others on traditional media outlets and how they propose policy changes to exert control over the cause for panic. Categorizing the posts according to this model and



the stages in moral panic production, further helps to discern the strategies employed by politicians to induce fear in society. For example, building on this model we see that amplification of extreme cases can be considered a technique specific to the magnification phase which helps “inventorying the episode to value-laden sense-making activities” (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302), in other words shape public discourse. Bringing together the phases and dedicated techniques/strategies discloses how processes of moral panic are operationalized or in other words spread. In short, it will provide insight into how they shape public discourse to condition migration as a cause for collective alarm and action. Klocke and Muschert’s (2010) model of operation offers a framework for this study which helps cultivate attention to the production of moral panic, through (re)presentation in the digital realm thereby reinforcing an us-versus-them boundary in broader society.

To operationalize social representations of a social group there are three main elements to look out for in the sample, namely “subjects or carriers of the representation, an object that is represented, a concrete entity or abstract idea and a project, or pragmatic context, of a social group within which the representation makes sense” (Bauer and Gaskell in Tong and Zao, 2018, p. 447). Looking closely at the way the subjects are portrayed in social media posts can help reflect on the aim of the representation (Tong and Zao, 2018, p. 447-448). Additional information such as objects that are in the frame of the social media posts and more generally the context which is represented can help to exaggerate certain aspects of a social group, like migrants to reinforce a stereotype, whether positive or negative (Tong and Zao, 2018, p. 447-448). Collecting information on these three facets helps to establish the attribute, beliefs, and emotions, such as fear or panic that were conveyed through social representations (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 3).

### 3.2 Data analysis- Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA)

To closely analyse the aforementioned theories and concepts in this dataset, I rely on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) supported by qualitative and visual content analysis. MCDA allows for an in-depth analysis of various means of communication, including lexical, audio- and visual materials (O’Halloran, 2021, p. 249-263). This mode of analysis helps to disclose how meaning has been ascribed to a phenomenon, looking at its connection to other discourses and linguistics (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 1-56; O’Halloran, 2021, p. 249-250). Furthermore, it contextualizes the posts, as it renders what is made (in)visible and how this challenges or reinforced existing power dynamics in society. It is therefore important to note that discourses are social constructions, which helps in examining how meaning is given to social and cultural life and how certain actors legitimize action by drawing solely on the discourse (Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

In this study, social media posts from far-right political figures regarding migration are analysed using MCDA to examine how language and visual representations are used to construct vivid

imagery of migration building on fear discourses thereby concealing yet beneficial to political incentives of the parties under study given that the posts were collected during the electoral campaigning period. The platforms of TikTok and X both support visual and written content, whether through captions or shares, and therefore require an analytical method that can investigate both components. However, before embarking on the tools MCDA offers to analyse the posts, I want to highlight that the analysis is conducted in Dutch to stay as close to the original content of the posts as possible, yet are translated to English in this paper for the sake of transparency and cohesiveness (Bryman, 2012, p. 522-541).

In this study, linguistics as well as audio-visual materials are systematically analysed, using tools offered by Machin and Mayr (2012) to code inductively (Boeije, 2010, p. 96-108). In regards to language, both written as well as spoken word, this study investigates an array of lexical choices relying heavily on the tools provided by Machin and Mayr (2012) to analyse how far right leaders use language to create meaning and thereby stir public debate in a certain direction for political purposes (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 32-37). Starting with the specific choice of words and their connotations. Another tool for conducting MCDA is “overlexicalization”, meaning overemphasising certain words to persuade the audience (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 37-38). Opposed to this is “suppression” (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 38-39). This technique requires looking for absences in texts to delve into the implied context (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 39). Structural oppositions, also understood as opposing concepts often define discourses (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 39-42). In the context of this study, we could see for example, good opposing bad migrants to represent variation within the social group at hand. Lastly, lexical choices can also be made to either equalize oneself with the audience or take a more authoritative stance (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 42-47). These various linguistic tools help analysing the posts in light of migrant portrayals and the creation of panic discourses. Additionally, MCDA analyses im- and explicit visual meaning-making processes, involving acts of representation, identity formation and relationships. This analysis can be divided by iconography along the lines of connotation, so the cultural affiliations the images bring up and denotation, which is more descriptive (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 49-51). In doing so, this study describes the general impression of the image as a whole, while also paying close attention to attributes and setting which communicates a great deal of indirect information about power hierarchy in representation (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 51-54). Finally, salience encompasses matters that catch the eye most in a post. Describing what stands out helps to establish a hierarchy in representation (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 54-56).

In turn, these various elements are related to attributes and themes to establish patterns in light of the research question(s). To start, the posts are strategically reassembled and labelled to categorize in groups (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 55). This process is supported by the sensitizing concepts, better known as the stages of moral panic production, introduced by Klocke and Muschert

(2010, p. 302) to discern the main codes. In matching the codes to the stages of episode, magnification, and regulation, insight is provided into the techniques employed by far-right actors to evoke moral panic in society based on migration. This more deductive coding process helps refining the visual and textual data according to a framework closely related to the moral panic and thereby reorganize the dataset to find the best representative codes. In this way, meaning is extrapolated outside of the specific text and images. Building on these categories this study was able to discern and match them with overarching themes and discourses related to migration (O'Halloran, 2021, p. 249-263). The relationship between core concepts, supported with direct quotations derived from the data, is determined in an attempt to answer the (sub-)research question(s) as to how migration is represented to evoke moral panic.

This multi-layered approach of MCDA, involving texts, visuals, and sound, is the most suitable method for this research, as it shows how political incentives and fear discourses are communicated and visualized to seek attention of the viewer and install moral panic. Investigating this through different forms of media texts and their interdependency helps gain insight on the efficacy and impact of the communicative means (O'Halloran, 2021, p. 249-263; Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 6-10). Multimodality helps to shed light on various modes of communication that are readily available through social media and that constitute a discourse. Text and visual communication often support one another in social media posts yet can differ in meaning they get across (O'Halloran, 2021, p. 259). For example, the caption could maybe conceal the topic of migration, which is openly talked about in the accompanying video. Also, MCDA helps disclose the unspoken facets of communication, such as gestures, facial expression and body language, and the nonverbalized facets of communication, including intonation, tone of voice, and pitch of voice. These aspects can change the way messages come across and is therefore worthy of investigation. For this reason, in MCDA the posts are stripped of assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas surrounding migration to disclose power relations and asymmetries (Phillips and Hardy, 2002; Jordan, 2018, p. 919; Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 9). Additionally, to see how this discourse is produced and circulated on digital platforms, I build on empirical studies to investigate the role of algorithms and other digital affordances in channelling platformed panic (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 692). To sum up, MCDA was adopted to discern implicit processes of meaning-making behind the representation of migrants, both in visual representation as well as lexical representation through references made to migrants. This analysis should bring a fresh perspective to literature on moral panic specifically concerning migration.

Synthesizing all the aspects above helps reveal the dominance of certain discourses over others and thus how political communication fuels or challenges existing power hierarchies in society. The MCDA revealed that the data can be subdivided into two main streams of posts, one related to the impact migrants directly impose on contemporary society and the other one related to future

predicaments. This can be discerned by looking at the discursive affordances, including for example the verb tenses in the captions as well as the use of (visual) symbols to create visceral connections (Civila and Jaramillo-Dent, 2022, p. 5). Additionally, the performative affordances helped in uncovering the uses of digital tools from the platform and labelling the features to derive an us-versus-them narrative, such as hashtags for community building and algorithmic connectivity (Civila and Jamillo-Dent, 2022, p. 5). This, in turn, revealed two main patterns in the data. On the one hand, there are posts directly scapegoating migrants and their position in society building on pre-existing negative stereotypes circulating in society, which led to the theme “negative stereotypes of migrants”. In these portrayals, migrants are the subject in a negative situation. On the other hand, there are posts that alarm the in-group that their superior position in society is under threat. From this the theme “fear of loss”, highlighting nostalgia and decline, and “fear of the unknown” emerged. These posts (re)direct the focus from the migrant to the impact experienced by in-group, emphasizing the in-group as the direct object in the negative story. The cultural studies perspective in turn helps to uncover the meanings of these themes (Barker, 2009, p. 326-330). To be more specific, this perspective specifically helps focus on acts of representation and how power becomes/is infused with the Tiktok and X posts (Barker, 2009, p. 327-329).

### 3.3 Ethical considerations and limitations

In conducting qualitative research, the researcher has a prominent role in interpreting and writing up the research findings (Bryman, 2012, p. 149). To identify any assumptions or biases informing research decisions, transparency of the research process is key (Barker, 2009, 326-332). This includes being reflexive of my positionality as a white female researcher positioned on the left-wing of the political spectrum who has no prior personal encounter with migration. Although, the researcher’s intentions in regard to writing this piece are first and foremost to refrain from giving value judgements on the right-wing political campaigns, this research is not conducted in a moral vacuum and thus personal bias will implicate this study (Bryman, 2012, p. 149). At the same time, this study helped the researcher understand the far-right parties *PVV* and *FVD* more. Only through getting to know what drives these parties and learning more specifically about their ideologies, can we search for understanding of their incentives to instrumentalize a migration to install moral panic during electoral campaigning.

In carefully documenting upon the research choices, this study aims to be transparent about the research design and disclose any potential biases and preconceptions concerning the processing of information about migration and far-right politics (Bryman, 2012, p. 130-153). This includes careful consideration of the selection of codes for the coding frame through segmentation and trial coding, which allows for evaluation of consistency and validity by both myself and my supervisor throughout

the study (Flick, 2014, p. 8-16). Additionally, documenting the research process should enable future researchers to reproduce this study under similar sample populations, criteria, and generally academic circumstances (Bryman, 2012, p. 130-149).

Furthermore, since this study deals with the sensitive topic of politics and migration, it is important to emphasize that all data for this study is treated with strict confidentiality. For this reason, this study only relies on information that is publicly available and information that does not jeopardize nor insult anyone personally (Bryman, 2012, p. 149). However, since there are different regulations regarding research of new media, it is important to specify that this study relies on the Ethical guidelines provided by the Erasmus institute which states that the researcher should at all times closely assess and monitor whether reproducing information outside the original intended place of use, puts the subjects at risk of harm (Erasmus University Rotterdam, n.d.). Due to the readily available information and the fact that this study does not include user generated comments, it is not required to remove identifiable information from the posts. However, when references to non-public figures are made in posts, they are anonymised to ensure no harm is done to the subject. In regard to data management, this study relies primarily on the Microsoft 365 Word programme to store the social media posts, fieldnotes and pre-analyses. The dedicated word document is locked in a folder which is enforced with password protection. In doing so, the raw data will be protected and cannot accidentally be shared with third parties.

Despite its solid theoretical ground, in conducting this research it is anticipated to run into a few challenges considering the specificity of the study. It is important to be wary of power relations and asymmetries when investigating fear discourses, as the platforms might circulate and amplify these power imbalances to a wider audience. Platforms might reinforce power relations as they are algorithmically driven, which makes them subject to political valence of the creator as well as users stirring the algorithm (Gillespie, 2014, p. 167-194).

## 4. Results

To investigate how discourses of fear around migration are constructed in X and TikTok posts, this study turns to three reoccurring themes, which are discussed in detail in the subsequent (sub)sections. The first theme induces panic by shedding light on the current situation, whereas the latter two themes serve as a precautionary tale installing fear on relying on the potential impact of migration on society. Starting with the current situation, this study turns to the “negative stereotypes of migrants”, including a narrative of “gelukszoeker” or exploiter, disruptor of public order, and ignitor of cultural change. These narratives are amplified in opposing them to all that has been denied to the in-group, which are mostly conveyed in personal stories that appeal to the emotions of followers as it personalizes the issue, making it immediate and recognizable. The second theme “expectation of loss”, serves as a precautionary tale of what migration and migrants can do to society, inducing fear on the premise of what can be lost. The third theme builds on this future narrative, as it introduces “fear of the unknown” leaving room for speculation as to how the societal system is doomed. In unpacking the ways in which moral panic is constructed and articulated around migration, this study sheds light upon commonalities as well as deviant cases to give the upmost complete overview of the yielded results.

### 4.1 Negative stereotypes of migrants

To identify and distinguish migrants as the folk devil of society, far-right politicians Geert Wilders (*PVV*) and Thierry Baudet (*FVD*) often build on pre-existing negative stereotypes around migration (Cohen, 2011, p. 1-278). These negative stereotypes serve as a distortion of their deviancy, which reinforces an us-versus-them paradigm in society (Boréus, 2021, p. 23; Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302). As Wilders states in post X5 and X7 following an interview of WNLVandaag about pro-Palestina activists mobilizing and praying on the streets in the United Kingdom and European countries: “We let in the wrong people” (X5, X7), which suggest there is a deviancy between the influx of people and the in-group, and lures us to the negative sides of migration. This study has identified three main stereotypes, or types of “wrong people” (X5, X7) as Wilders calls them, focussing on the aspect of crime, socio-cultural disruption, and exploitation, to stress how migrants are put in a negative daylight. These negative stereotypes are amplified in opposing them to the direct effects experienced by the in-group, mostly what they are missing out on, thereby further widening the gap between the “us” and “them” (Pepin-Neff, 2022). As Walsch (2020) mentioned, in circulating these negative stereotypes, the politicians reinforce already existing power asymmetries through confirmation bias and amplification of a one-sided negative oftentimes discriminatory story (Walsch, 2020, p. 845). This leads to changes in receptive behaviour, entailing a hostile attitude and

potentially exclusion of the incoming migrants, which results in “8 out of 10 Dutch citizens want[ing] to admit less asylumseekers” as becomes prevalent from news heading by *AD* accompanying posts X30 and X31 (X30, X31). By stressing the negative traits of migrants, far-right parties create a dichotomy in which they encourage the in-group to collectively stand up and fight against demographic change, through being protective of national identity and enhance national cohesion. The subsequent sections are structured according to the framework proposed by Klocke and Muschert (2010), thereby highlighting the stage of episode, magnification, and regulation in moral panic production (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302).

#### *4.1.1 Disruptor of public order*

The first negative stereotype this study found in relation to migration, is the belief that migrants are wrongdoers, committing crimes, being violent or generally breaching the rules. This becomes prevalent in post X1 and X3, as Wilders says: “I would arrest them all [...] #STOPimmigration” (X1, X3) in the context of the street prayers following the Palestine-Israel war, and in post X13 and X14 portraying Berlin protests against the Gaza situation: “Against terror [...] #closetheborders” (X13, X14). In these posts, the combination of captions and the platform affordance of hashtags insinuate migrants are to be arrested due to amongst others close affiliation with terror. Additionally, a hostile attitude, short temperedness and/or cunning behaviour are characteristics often attributed, visually or verbally, to migrants to classify them as a threat to societal peace and public order. This becomes evident in X41, where Wilders signals the distinction between refugees and migrants, a division between respectively good versus bad migrants (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 42-47; Kotilainen and Pellander, 2021, p. 285-289). The negative stereotype of bad migrants lays on the premise of gratitude, or better said lack of gratitude, which extends the argument of Etzel (2021), who argue that distinction between good and bad migrants lies on a narrow definition made up by social imagery and legal integration, by adding an emotional moral facet to the distinctive features making one a good or bad migrant (Etzel, 2021, p. 1115-1130; Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 3). In this debate, Wilders supports this emotional prerequisite illustrating that the people entering the country are migrants instead of refugees, as they turned down good safe countries where one can seek asylum just to continue their journey to seek the benefits provided for in the Netherlands (X41). For this reason, they should not be pitied, or felt sorry for (X41). Beyond merely breaching the Dublin regulation regarding seeking asylum, this also portrays them as ungrateful displaying cunning behaviour to persist reaching their destination of choice. Building on Kotilainen and Pellander (2021), this episode display shows how migrants are connotated to law breakers and thus not worthy of empathy, setting a negative stereotype regarding migrants (Kotilainen and Pellander, 2021, p. 285-289; Klocke and Muscherts, 2010, p. 302).

Social media posts by far-right politicians magnify this negative stereotype of migrants as disruptor of public order in isolating the incident and generalizing its prominence in society. Looking at the social representations of migrants in X27, this study shows that news articles like *de Telegraaf*: “Monday evening, in the asylumseekercentre in the Frysian village Sint Annaparochie, two people got hurt after an alleged fight” (X27), are often taken out of context and negatively shining light on the behaviour of migrants. Yet, they are reposted/retweeted to highlight an isolated incident, attributing to creating a social imagery of migrants as wrongdoers and platforming the fear around migrants (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710). In emphasizing these wrongdoings of migrants, it seems to suggest there is pattern of underlying dangerous behaviour closely associated with migrants. As Cohen (2011) mentions a form of selectively reporting on migrant behaviour, fuels misinformation and confirmation bias about the hostile behaviour of migrants, in this case asylum seekers, which poses a threat to the livelihoods of Dutch citizens in society (Cohen, 2011, p. 47-49; Walsch, 2020, p.844).

Figure two. Screenshot including example of call for regulatory measures.

The screenshot shows a tweet from Geert Wilders (@geertwilderspvv). The text of the tweet is: "Luister en huiver. En hij is niet de enige. We hebben de islamitische terreur al binnen onze grenzen. En de #PVV zegt genoeg is genoeg. Grenzen dicht en het tuig eruit!". Below the text is a video player showing a man with a beard and headphones speaking into a microphone. The video player has a progress bar at 0:06 / 0:48 and various control icons. To the right of the tweet, there are two callout boxes. The first box, titled "Regulatory measures", lists three bullet points: "#PVV says enough is enough", "close the borders", and "the gear out". The second box, titled "Episode", lists two bullet points: "Agitated facial expressions" and "Fast paced verbalization".

**Regulatory measures**

- “#PVV says enough is enough”
- “close the borders”
- “the gear out”

**Episode**

- Agitated facial expressions
- Fast paced verbalization

Note. By Geert Wilders, 2023, video. (English translation: “Listen and shiver. And he is not the only one. We already have the Islamic terror within our borders. And the #PVV says enough is enough. Close the borders and the gear out!”).



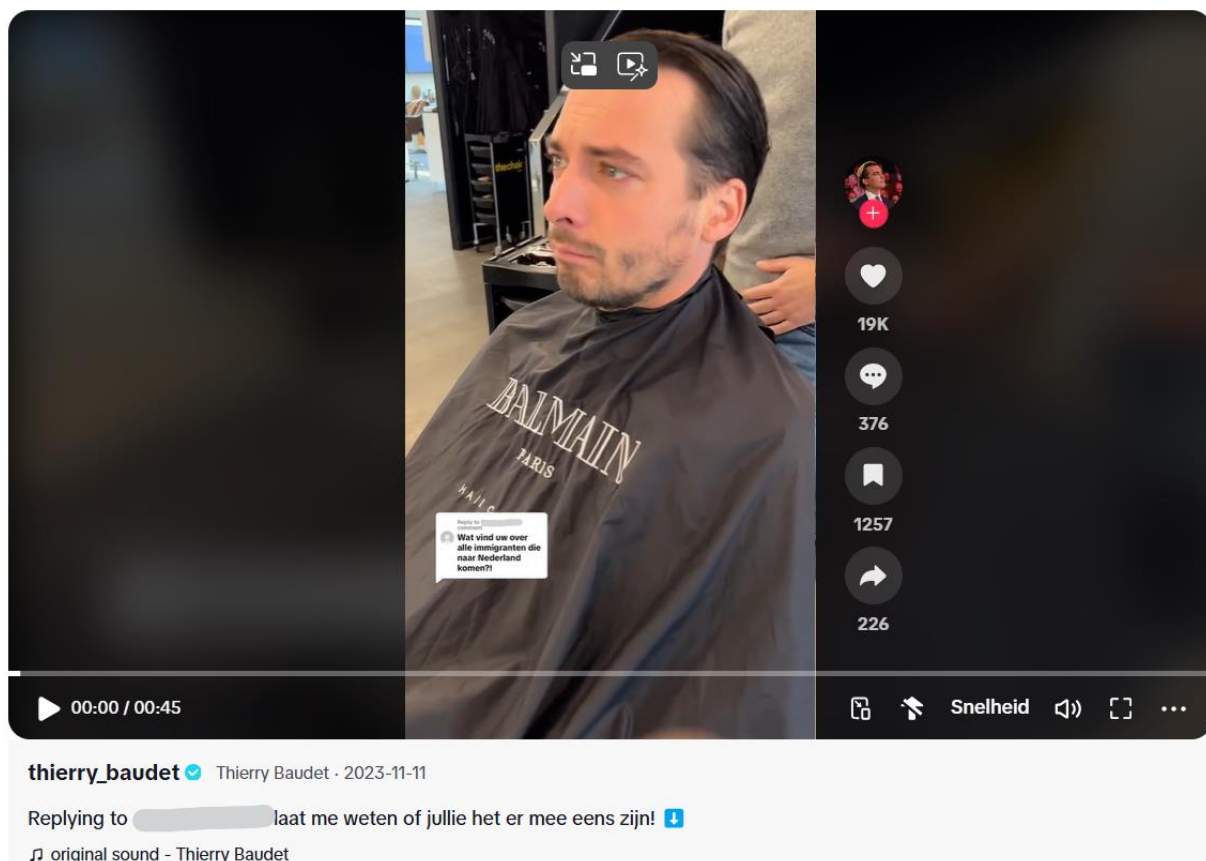
Providing partial information through selective reporting is used to enforce stigmatization of migrants as a threat which is in turn instrumentalized to encourage protection and regulation of national cohesion through political mobilization and action (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302). In post X2, illustrated in *figure two*, Wilders references a video by an uncredited source, wherein a man agitatedly articulates that he stands by his Muslim brothers no matter what assaults they commit, including raping women and enslaving the women and children in name of the Islamic rights (X2). In carefully selecting this section of the clip, where abuse of the weaker in society is emphasized using debasing language, Wilders identifies the lack of mercy of the enemy which makes this demarcated Islamic group of migrants the folk devil. This sensationalist inflammatory content stimulates click-bait and speeds up the spread of moral panic across the platform (Gerbaudo et al., 2023, p. 3; Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70). Furthermore, in instrumentalizing the digital affordance of the caption Wilders articulates a protectionist narrative stressing immediacy using alarming language, like “listen and shiver” (X2), to stress the content of the message and evoke distress and “he is not the only one” (X2), implying he is amongst many who foster different norms and values when it comes to treatment of children and women. To exterminate the “terror within our borders” (X2), he calls for a societal reaction to “say enough is enough” and political action, by “clos[ing] borders” (X2). This call for action is in turn amplified in bringing the hashtag #STOPimmigration (X1, X3), #asylumstop (X6, X35), and #closetheborders (X13, X14) in connection to the frightful imagery created through negative, crime-related stereotypes around migration. These hashtags help categorize the party objectives, as well as promote their incentives across a wider reach, as platform algorithms help visibility and virality of moral panic across an audience with affiliated tastes and beliefs (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710). These solutions should, according to Klocke and Muschert (2010) encourage the general public to eliminate the threat causing moral panic and reinstate peace and serenity in society (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 296-306).

#### *4.1.2 Ignitor of cultural disruption*

Beyond crime informed stereotypes around migration, migrants are also often referred to as ignitors of socio-cultural change or better said socio-cultural disruption, which leaves society “deformed” (T1) as mentioned by *FVD* to advocate the need for political change. This deformation is often attributed to the increasing flows of migrants and their different cultural background, which leads to “lots of tensions” (T16), and “pressure on the social structure and cultural and social conviviality of our country” (T26). The words “tension” and “pressure” imply a situation of unease and urgency, especially when considering there are two opposing groups who do not align, requiring immediate attention to prevent embarking onto the next phase of burst, which can be understood as conflict. These overlexicalizations emphasize the urgency of the situation through symbolism (Machin

and Mayr, 2012, p. 37-38). This finding is in line with the social reaction as prevailed in the study of Cohen (2011) due to the rivalry between the subcultures of the “rocker” and the “mod” (Cohen, 2011, p. 47-79). However, in this instance there is rivalry between the cultural traits of the in-group and the out-group, better known as the migrants. This symbolism helps identify the dire social situation and thus the threat to society, namely the differential cultural background of the incoming migrants.

*Figure three.* Screenshot including exemplary Q&A by figurehead Thierry Baudet.



*Note.* By Thierry Baudet, 2023, video. (English translation: “What do you think about all the immigrants that come to the Netherlands?!”).

This stereotype of migrants as ignitors for cultural disruption is amplified through real-time interactions with followers (Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 647). For example, through live streams and Q&A’s do, primarily *FVD* and Thierry Baudet aim to clarify unfamiliar norms and values while untangling the messages with vague language uses, like “tension” (T16) and “pressure” (T26), to the in-group. According to Pepin-Neff and Cohen (2021), these real-time interactions stimulate online conversation amongst each other and with the figure head to help build an online community (Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 646-649). Looking at the exemplary Q&A in *figure three*, and more

specifically the caption of post T16, we see that Thierry Baudet stimulated conversation about the need for sharpening migratory rules with his followers, as he is replying to one of the comments he received on an earlier post. “Replying to @fan” (T16), illustrates how he encourages a dialogue between his followers and opens the floor in engaging with them and their questions. This is further amplified as he states: “let me know if you agree” (T16) complemented with an emoticon with an arrow down, suggesting to further engage with the topic in the comment section. This interaction acquaints like-minded thinkers and creates a right-wing (information-) vacuum through echo-chambers (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 339). This analysis reveals that these real-time interactions enabled through the digital interface of TikTok create a sense of intimacy, offering a support group to elaborate on vague concepts and unfamiliar norms and values as well as magnify the tension between the socio-cultural stance from this far-right in-group and the Other, perpetuating platformed panic (Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 646-649).

The advice or coverage from far-right politicians on regulatory measures are much less pronounced compared to the other two negative stereotypes. Instead, proactive means to release tensions in society are not discussed in further detail and preventive measures are put on hold, as becomes clear from T16, where Baudet preaches the party objectives regarding sharpening migratory rule: “We shall solve the cultural problems and then we will look if we can help some people” (T16). Since cultural norms and values are hard to pin-point in a multicultural society, this post shows how *FVD* does not go in-depth into the problems that they identify and their measures to solve the problems, to prevent offending or excluding members from their in-group, better known as their followers, who might foster slightly different norms and values (Pepin-Neff and Cohen, 2021, p. 646-649). In turn, since the socio-cultural threats are harder to visualize and articulate, politicians use generic phrasing to aim and sustain cohesion amongst the heterogeneous in-group by generally touching upon, yet not going in-depth on the solutions to socio-cultural problems. This political strategy of withholding a solution-based approach supports Pijpers’ (2016) argument that socio-cultural problems caused by migrants are feared and met with uncontrollable online panic because of the lack of rationalization of migrants’ uncertain impact on society (Pijpers, 2016, p. 91-100; Young, 2011, p. 247).

#### **4.1.3 *Gelukszoeker***

The last negative stereotype this study found to be circulating on X and TikTok, would be the ‘gelukszoeker’ or exploiter narrative. This narrative is built on various aspects which migrants are said to exploit or take advantage of social benefits or facilities provided by the state, such as housing, consumption, money, and more generally healthcare services (Pijpers, 2006, p. 93). According to Wilders, they are said to take “everything dear to us [...] our money, our freedom, our houses, our

healthcare.” (X16, X17), leaving “the whole country [...] on sale.” (X16, X17). As this quotation illustrates this exploiter narrative is reinforced by highlighting how it has been provided for at the expense of the Dutch citizens, thereby jeopardizing their financial stability. Table one illustrates the most prominent source for concern, namely the current “housing crisis”. Textual and oral aspects of the content provide insight about the various ways the housing crisis is highlighted in several posts by both party leaders in the Netherlands. Building on Wodak’s (2015) crisis rhetoric, the far-right describe the influx migrants as the designated source for misfortune, in this case the housing crisis (Wodak, 2015, p. 70-96). This social group gets assigned temporary residence, as becomes clear from post T22 and X34 as well as take precedent over rental houses, evident from T4, T15, X18 and X19, leaving the Dutch citizens “missing out” (X24). These narratives are often times supported with numbers such as “22 out of 10.000 social rental houses in Amsterdam went to non-permit holders” (T4) and “We are short on hundred thousands of houses, yet there comes a shelter for 96.000 ‘gelukszoekers’” (X18, X19). The latter quotation stresses that besides gaining precedence over the existing houses, the state also builds shelters and houses to facilitate migrants. These statistical references, or ‘number calling’ practices are not credited and thus potentially spread distorted information, as argued by Muis et al. (2019) in pursuit of “information bricolage” (Muis et al., 2019, p. 1-29) to validate discriminating statements. Nonetheless, these numbers do support the idea that migrants are given preferential treatment compared to the in-group, as the houses get freed up and build for them. In general, repetitively referencing migrants as the source for lack of houses for Dutch citizens and thereby connotating them as exploiter fuels a negative stereotype circulating public discourse. This mode of associating migrants with negative treats is a form of top-down antipathy often employed as a political tactic by Wilders and PVV.

Table one. Selection posts related to “housing crisis”.

| Post        | Code group         | (Partial) description  |
|-------------|--------------------|--|
| T1          | Oral/embedded text | “I fight against mass immigration [...] causing the disastrous <b>housing crisis</b> ”   |
| T3          | Oral/caption text  | “simple solutions for the <b>housing shortage</b> ”  |
| T4          | Oral/caption text  | “22 of 10.000 social rental houses in Amsterdam went to NON-permit holders”  |
| T5          | Oral/caption text  | “This is how you fix the <b>housing shortage</b> ”   |
| T15         | Oral text          | “In the past ten years, one million migrants came to the Netherlands and there is a <b>housing shortage</b> from 400.000, you do the math” |
| T18         | Oral text          | “the hidden <b>housing shortage</b> ”  |
| X18,<br>X19 | Caption text       | “we are short on hundred thousands of houses”  |
| X23,<br>X24 | Caption text       | “They build houses for immigrants, but the Dutch are left behind”  |
| X33         | Oral text          | “we are overpopulated. 390.000 houses short”   |
| X39         | Caption text       | “houses for the Dutch”   |

Note. By author.

The negative stereotype of migrant as exploiter is amplified endorsing personal stories, supported with visual aids, such as videos or images, to facilitate comprehension of all that the Dutch citizens are lacking through partial comparison between the livelihood of the in- and out-group (Pijpers, 2006, p. 93; Walsch, 2020, p. 842-850). Looking at X37, Wilders reposted a TikTok video footage from an asylum seeker who showed the amenities at the shelter in Velsen (X37, X34). The original visual content was not supported with additional commentary leaving the scene open to interpretation. Yet through reposting this video, Wilders does shape his followers’ perception on migrant treatment. Especially when looking at the additional caption emphasizing the abundance that the migrant was facilitated with. Words and more specifically adjectives like “luxurious” (X37), “full plates” (X37), “expensive diner” (X34), “free heating” (X34, X37), and “five-star luxury” (X37), stress the abundance and preferential treatment of the migrant. In a similar vein, the picture accompanying post X20 displayed in *figure four*, suggests that migrants not only cost a lot of money, yet also get money to make a living. The foregrounding of the VISA card ‘yoursafe’ suggest that upon arrival at the asylum centre, displayed in the background, one receives a VISA card with “free money” (X20). The name of the VISA card reinforces the idea that with asylum, better known as a safe space,

comes another form of security and safety namely ‘yoursafe’. It suggests that seeking shelter is met with a monetary reward. This is directly opposed to the dire (financial) situation of Dutch citizens through change of tone, use of explanation marks, and debasing language (e.g. “disgrace” (X20, X37) and “madness” (X34)) reinforcing a binary (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70). This is further exemplified by emphasizing the hardships of Dutch citizens who are not even “being able to afford the groceries” (X28, T19, X34). This encourages partial comparison, reinforcing the symbolic boundaries introduced by Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin (2010) based on the situation of the marginal out-group and dominant in-group, which entices angriness based on a feeling of negligence from government support, as well as creates a FOMO- effect amongst the followers (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010, p. 695-697).

Figure four. Asylum-seekers get VISA-card.



*Note.* By Wilders, 2023, image. (English translation: “Asylum-seekers get a VISA-card with free money while millions [sic] Netherlands struggle financially. Madness. Vote #PVV 22<sup>nd</sup> of November and they will not get a VISA but an exit ticket!”).

This exploiter-exploited narrative makes it appear as if the Dutch fall victim to the current migrant policies of preferential treatment. This calls for an institutional shift, possibly to the extent of

positive discrimination to put “the Dutch first again” as becomes clear from the hashtag #TheDutchFirstAgain in posts T28, X4, X18, X19, X23, X24, X29, X30 and X31. Although exemplified in various different contexts, the collective of posts using the line “the Dutch first again” illustrates what the Dutch citizens are missing out on, creating FOMO and angry sentiments, stimulating group formation amongst the in-group based on shared experiences. This way of mobilizing the in-group to reclaim their rights by making use of the digital affordance of hashtags, is instrumentalized to incentivize the (floating-)voters to vote in the upcoming elections for the respective parties *FVD* or *PVV*. This analysis showed that 45 out of 72 posts direct followers to vote, whether through the caption, hashtags like #VotePVV or another means of arousal. Alike Cohen (2017), this study shows that the negative stereotype of migrants as exploiters is instrumentalized to legitimize and in pursuit of nationalistic revival (Cohen, 2017, p. 6).

## 4.2 Expectation of loss

Another theme this study identified is “expectation of loss”, which builds on migration to articulate speculative narratives to endorse fear in society. In relying on the past to set an imagery foreshadowing the future, the politicians make inter-generational comparisons between the living conditions then and in the future, to highlight what one will lose due to the present influx of migrants. In line with Garland (2008), references are made to the past to romanticize the “symptomatic” origin of the threat (Garland, 2008, p. 11). Showing the state of society before the threat emerged, compared to the situation after the threat, is a technique employed in amongst others T13 (Garland, 2008, p. 11; T13). In this video, roughly the first minute of the video displays a rose-tinted version of past society which is filled with laughter, nature, houses, heritage, in other words all the luxuries dedicated to the Dutch citizen, whereas the next minute showcases an alarming future scenario featuring an incoming boat with migrants, drag queens, IVF, display of LHBTIQ+, climate change demonstrations (T13). Through these comparisons with before and after scenes, Baudet identifies the threats to society, looking specifically at the loss of traditional norms and values as well as modes of living (T13). In line with Walsch (2020), we can expect this video to evoke *diclinism*, a predisposition that all in the past was better than what the future might serve, therefore making one repellent of the threat in the name of nostalgia (Walsch, 2020, p. 844). To evoke moral panic on the premise of “expectation of loss” around migration, personal stories offer issue-specific comparisons further exploiting *diclinism*. In this section two specific cases, namely learning deficit and birth planning delay are elaborated upon to showcase how far-right politicians illustrate how society will be negatively impacted due to the demographic transition ignited with the increasing influx of migrants.

#### *4.2.1 Deprivation of education*

Education is subject to change due to the influx of migrants and is, therefore used to create a fearful future narrative. As post T11, T14, T23, and T26 all signal, “learning arrears” will occur as migrants are entering the Dutch schools. Given their different linguistic backgrounds, the students would not be able to speak and/or comprehend any Dutch, “transforming teachers into language coaches” (T11). The shifting objectives in class, from pushing for the best understanding of subjects to helping with fundamental language comprehension, leaves the “good” Dutch educational system deprived. Hinting towards a future with “incapable students” (T11) and therefore the “loss of excellence” (T11), illustrates a future wherein the quality of education deteriorates. This leaves society deprived of all its potential future generations were promised to bring society prior to the incoming threat. In using the word, “incapable” opposed to “excellence” reinforces a dichotomy of superiority between the in- and out-group. This hierarchy can be challenged through the tagging feature as encouraged in the caption “tag a friend, who can use a tutor” (T11). Making fun of each other in the comments, to the extend of calling each other out on language proficiency, will boost social media engagement and thus visibility of the post, as the studies by Walsch and Hill (2022) and Giuliani et al. (2020) have shown. These tags enable the politician to show the eminence of the problem, namely the need for tutoring and thus loss of good quality education, migrants pose on society which reinforces collective alarm and the need for regulatory measures reinstating “excellence” in Dutch society (T14, T23).

#### *4.2.2 Demographic transition*

In the “expectation of loss” portrayals, society will be negatively impacted by the influx of migrants as it will evoke a demographic transition in the Netherlands. Whereas in the past earlier generations “could maintain 2 or 3 children with a regular job, could buy a house, could have a car, could go on holiday twice a year [...]” (T20), now with the increasing pressure migrants put on society, including the housing system, this is made impossible for upcoming generations. In juxtaposing the familiar traditions with an unfamiliar situation, this personal story creates a vivid imagery of what the younger generations are about to be missing out on. In turn, it is opposed to the current situation where everyone has to work to make a living and rent/buy a house, which diminishing the chances of “conceiving a child” (T20), or “starting their own family” (T18, T19) in the future. Highlighting how migrants lead to loss of housing and thus delays in birth-planning illustrates how migratory flows can have far-reaching consequences for the future demographics which causes the Dutch way of life and culture to “merge into a worldhappening of sorts” (T19, T21). This study found that Baudet brings birth planning delays in relation to the influx of migrants, thereby creating a narrative in which migrants cause Dutch citizens losing out on early parenthood. Despite this potentially spurious



relationship supported with misinformation, the personal stories make it relatable and thus ample of reason to be fearful of migrants as they might lead to missing out on this aspect of life. Such forms of misinformation fuel vigilantism by the in-group which is not countered directly with factual proof by official information channels, leaving the resentment to linger following into proliferation of platformed panic (Walsch, 2020, p. 845-849).

Systematically analysing the past in asking “where did it go wrong” (T20) helps to identify trends that seem to matter to human existence, leaving us with the most intrinsic practices such as birth planning, and thereby to the future. Highlighting how these specific practices, traditions one might say, are subject to change now that society undergoes demographic transition with the influx of migrants evokes emotional resistance. This resistance can also be understood as a feeling of fear that society as one knows it, is under threat and subject to change. This supports Garland’s (2008) argument that loss of traditional values should be examined to measure the level of threat to the societal system (Garland, 2008, p. 11). Cultivating a digital bubble where people have a stage for articulating that resistance, is one of the digital strategies that sets Baudet apart from Wilders. Through digital interactions, like tagging and Q&A’s, Baudet redirects public opinion on migration by making it networked and contested from the bottom-up. Stimulating isomorphic social relations in the comment-section by holding onto how things were and resisting change is a well-known strategy to justify conservative ideas, which might go as far as exclusionary discriminatory narratives corresponding to far-right nationalistic xenophobic ideology of *FVD* (and *PVV*) (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 692; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 335-340; Walsch, 2020, p.845).

### 4.3 Fear of the unknown

The final theme this study found in relation to moral panic production surrounding migration, is “fear of the unknown”. This theme builds on the previous theme, as both themes extrapolate the impact of the threat to be something in the future yet require attention now to be able to avoid these disastrous narratives (Hameleers, 2018, p. 337; Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p.302). This theme, however, does not articulate what might be lost or caused due to the influx of migrants. Rather, it states: “the Netherlands cannot take it anymore” (X29, X40, T16), leaving the resilience of the Netherlands and its citizens under question. This is supported with suppression of words and visuals, also known as absences, which together create an imagery of fear alluring to misfortune, yet without necessarily specifying it as such. This elicits a feeling of unease and discomfort due to uncertainty. This becomes specifically apparent when looking at words such as, “want back their country” (X5, X7), “stand up for our people” (X39), “reconquer” (X16, X17), “take back” (T30), which insinuates the country has been occupied and is in need of saviour. However, no clear threat is articulated and thus it remains unknown what the country and its citizens need saviour from. This leaves spaces for

imagination, which allures the follower into wondering what this threat might be. This ambivalence, as argued by Boréus (2021) does ignite fear yet to an unknown source, which makes the follower frightful of anything other than what one is familiar with, namely the in-group (Boréus, 2021, p. 1-25).

To evoke the allure of misfortune or disaster without specifying it as such, oftentimes, references whether directly or indirectly are made to well-known situations of 'crises' using symbols or symbolization of the episode (Tong and Zuo, 2018, p. 446-447; Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302). Symbols are visual or linguistic aids used in social representations to appeal to general knowledge in creating meaning or evoking emotion to a story or message (Tong and Zuo, 2018, p. 446; Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302). In post X21, illustrated in *figure five*, the word "invasion" is used to create a disaster narrative around migration. Despite omitting the target of the invasion, the imperative "stop" implies there are two parties involved, namely the one invading as well as the invaded (X21). The members of both parties however remain unannounced, leaving mystification around the disaster. This narrative is supported with the necessary visual symbols as illustrated in *figure three*. In this image, the incoming boat is a symbol of the 2015' refugee crisis, when refugees would arrive in the Southern-European countries by boat, oftentimes overflowing with people seeking refuge in Europe (Boréus, 2021, p. 4). On the boat, contours of the people are visible, yet leaving a form of anonymity and mystery around the people on the move. This again reinforces the unknown source of fear. However, the landmass underneath the boat shaped in the form of the continent of Africa, suggests the place of origin and that their cultural ties would sustain and persist despite the journey they made. The dark livid colour use and placement of clouds suggest harsh weather conditions setting a gloomy dark mood of despair. In line with Lalancette and Raynauld's (2019) argument, these visual aids enhance a feeling of misfortune, leaving the source unknown (Hameleers, 2018, p. 337; Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019, p. 891).

Figure five. Visual representation of the 2015' refugee crisis.



*Note.* By Wilders, 2023, image. (English translation: “Stop the asylum invasion! #VotePVV #PVV”).

“Fear of the unknown” can also occur more literally, when the references and symbols are unfamiliar to the audience yet do transmit a feeling of unease and immediacy. In post T6, T10, T17, FVD and Baudet explore the digital mediascape of the game Minecraft and their new structure placement. In this exploration, they make Minecraft connotations to the symbol of ‘creepers’ referring to hostile creatures which creeps up on others and then explodes (Stone, 2017). In bringing this reference in relation to migrants, apparent from the sentence “Mark let in 1 million” (T17), the symbol of creepers will specifically target a younger audience invested in gaming. This shows that symbols can also captivate a selective audience due to partial insider information that is required to understand the deeper layer of meaning associated with the dedicated post. However, the sentence “I build a fence for the creepers” (T17), brings creepers in relation to a fence, which enables different modes of meaning-making to understand the video by the general public. This connotes the fence between Mexico and the United States installed by Trump to prevent migrants from surpassing the border. In this context, the word choice of creeper is meeting the sensationalist content

requirements of TikTok to gain visibility while balancing on the fringe of uncivil code of conduct (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-70; Krzyżanowski, 2020, p. 441). Yet it can be considered borderline discourse, as proposed by Krzyżanowski (2020) because it is changed up with civil language use (Krzyżanowski, 2020, p. 441). The double way of meaning-making applied in these posts, shows that both connotations appeal to a different audience yet reinforce a similar message, thereby allowing for the post to gain wider recognition and visibility as it encourages for open interpretation.

The linguistic and visual ambivalence is illustrative of the theme “fear of the unknown” more generally, as it stimulates interpretation by the follower, while guiding the follower to perceive the posts with emotional distress. The future scenarios insinuate a societal disaster, while not specifying the situation to great lengths, thereby calling for collective alarm on the grounds of uncertainty.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

This study has investigated how far right political parties, during the Dutch electoral period of 2023 instrumentalize migration in constructing fear discourses online. Through the case studies of *Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)* and *Forum voor Democratie (FVD)*, in respectively X and TikTok, this study aimed to gain a more detailed insight into the strategies employed online as well as use of digital affordances to induce a collective state of alarm around migrants. In conducting discourse-centred online ethnography, this research was able to discern 72 social media posts with close affinity to migration when looking at the electoral campaign period lasting between October 27<sup>th</sup> and November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023. The subsequent multimodal critical discourse analysis yielded some significant results, which are subdivided into three main themes, namely “negative stereotypes”, “expectation of loss” and “fear of the unknown” to explore how migrants are instrumentalized to evoke a collective state of alarm in society (Walsch, 2020, p. 842-843; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 157; Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 295-309; Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710).

In reinforcing and amplifying negative stereotypes around migrants, Wilders and Baudet direct the followers’ attention to the observable consequences migration and migrants bring about in society. Hereby, they focus on the direct negative impact migration has on Dutch society and its citizens, putting them in a disadvantageous position. This includes the narratives of disruptor of public order- signalling crimes, offenses and a general hostile attitude, ignitor socio-cultural disruption- creating pressure and tensions in society, and exploiter- taking money, houses, and more generally luxurious treatment. Since the Other is endangering the superior position of the in-group, right wing politicians are fuelling competition and resistance against the out-group. Highlighting instances where differences around social norms and values surface, helps demarcate between both groups and legitimizes exclusion based on endorsing social codes (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010, p. 695-697). This encourages protectionist behaviour to maintain a privileged position in society in the name of nationalism and social cohesion. These narratives thus serve as a form of symbolic bordering, amplifying the categorization of society along the lines of a demarcated in- and out-group (Georgiou, 2018, p. 46; Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010, p. 695-697).

The strategies *PVV* and *FVD* employed are not only building on the direct impact migration imposes on the livelihoods of the Dutch citizen, yet also foreshadowing to the potential migration has on changing and transforming the daily lives of Dutch citizens in the future. “Fear of loss” is a strategy wherein the politician creates a “symptomatic” scene as well as an after scene of society, illustrative of the discursive shift brought about by migrants (Garland, 2008, p. 11). Through personal stories romanticising the past, they highlight aspects intrinsic to traditional ways of living and societal advancement that one could be missing out on in the future due to the threat, such as education and

birth-planning (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 692; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 335-340). This is meant to evoke diclinism, which simply put triggers moral panic on the premise that the worst is yet to come, and society will be doomed if not acted upon immediately by implementing institutional changes, starting with change of course in governmental rule on migration.

The last strategy this study has found to be effectively applied during the electoral period to induce fear around migrants, is emphasizing the unknown predicament that comes with influx of migrants. Building on this feeling of uncertainty and unfamiliarity surrounding the threat helps evoke alarm as people cannot relativize the magnitude of the threat as it is not specifically pronounced (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 691; Pijpers, 2006, p. 93; Cohen, 2017, p. 4-12). Instead, in making frequent references to events and/or incidents using well-known symbols is a technique this study has proven to be frequently applied in setting a scene. For example, references to the 2015' refugee crisis were applied as if the migrants were arriving per boat in the Netherlands, which up until today are no, to little records of. However, the imagery of similar disastrous conditions was set, creating tensions and fear in society. Also, this study has shown that symbols do not always have to be fully understood to make an impact, leaving room for interpretation can be just as effective, if not more effective in making the follower worry over future scenarios if not acted upon immediately.

In relying on the accessibility of digital networks, X and TikTok, to create, amplify and circulate these narratives, the far-right politicians rely on the sensationalist nature of the digital ecosystem as well as the freedom for selective reporting. The sensationist nature of social media helps in constructing fear narratives on migrants, through enabling the politician to post and support posts with misinformation, articulate conspiracy theories, and use of debasing language (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-71). Without gatekeepers to monitor the credibility and trustworthiness of the posts, it is an accessible ecosystem for sensationalist populist content to spread and gain visibility and virality (Cohen, 2011, p. 1-4). Furthermore, these digital ecosystems allow for selective reporting of events, specifically in amplifying isolated incidents to circumvent a pattern of dangerous exploitive behaviour of migrants to societal order. Additionally, personal stories enhance the likability, recognition or repulsion, and adoption of discriminatory exclusionary narratives around migrants (Hinck and Rasmussen, 2021, p. 28). Circulation of such social media content creates echo-chambers where one mobilizes support and action amongst the political follower base further perpetuating negative stereotypes and polarizing society on the premise of fear (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020, p. 339). In this way, platformed panic contributed to positive voter behaviour of *PVV* and *FVD* during the 2023' elections, as they acknowledged the problems reigning society as well as presented down-to-earth (exclusionary) solutions, such as closing the borders and redirecting money flow from migration issues to the common man, in real-time interaction with the followers to combat the problem and save society.

To answer the main research question, far-right political parties negatively represent migrants in their social media posts on X and TikTok to identify them as the folk devils, a social group causing present-day societal disruption, loss of traditional modes of living as well as leave the future ambiguous. These unsettling narratives are constructed through symbolic imagery, misinformation or distortion/manipulation of facts, and/or selective reporting, shaping public discourse on migration. This study does, however, establish differences in the ways *PVV* and Wilders shape public opinion using X compared to *FVD* and Baudet who primarily rely on TikTok. Whereas Wilders encourages top-down antipathy regarding migrants, Baudet reshapes public opinion on migration from the bottom-up through interactions with followers making the representation of the threat networked and contested. In short, far-right politicians leverage social media affordances to create platformed panic around migrants and migration to amplify the reach and broad social consensus that society is in need of immediate political change during, the back then, upcoming general elections (Klocke and Muschert, 2010, p. 302).

## 5.1 Implications for future studies

Contextualizing these findings in the broader scope of moral panic studies and media representation, this research offered insight into moral panics as a versatile political tool. This study thus bridged the void of investigation on moral panic and migration that dominate research, by adding a political aspect and incentive for instrumentalizing migration to evoke moral panic, as well as examining the role of digital platforms in shaping fear discourses.

The findings shine light on a new perspective in regard to moral panic by showing that it is not just far-right political parties, or politicians who frame migrants as a threat to society. Instead, the role of platforms in shaping this discourse and spreading awareness of this potential threat to society, complements existing theories on moral panic and their take on the role of traditional media for amplifying the fear (Walsch and Hill, 2022, p. 690-710). Platforms make moral panic prominent and, in a sense, reinforces the phenomenon in society. Amplifying the deviancy of a social group, in this case migrants, by isolating extreme cases and reinforcing the circulation of (mis)information in echo chambers due to likeability and shareability of the content while not balancing it out with counter-narratives, allows for an out of proportion perception of the threat. To a certain extent, the platforms are thus proliferating deviancy of the inferior social group, by reproducing the symbolic boundaries online in the form of echo-chambers, separating the in-group from the out-group. In line with Young's argument (2011), the threat is thus not a risk to society. Rather, the moral panic surrounding it becomes a risk to society, as it encourages people to act on the threat without being properly informed on the magnitude and impact of the threat on society (Young, 2011, p. 247). It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, since people are starting to be fearful and thus wary of every move made by

migrants, thereby stressing deviancy and potential for threat online (Young, 2011, p. 247). This places a nuance on the role of moral entrepreneurship as advocated for by Cohen (Cohen, 2011, p. 9-49). It can thus be questioned all together to what extent migrants are cause for panic, or whether panic surrounding migration is the real risk to society. A question that is prone to answer the political incentive for instrumentalizing migration to evoke moral panic in society.

However, more research needs to be done to confirm these findings. For example, exploring the interactions on the platforms by followers of these parties can be an interesting continuation of this research. This could yield interesting insights into the online dynamic and bonding processes of right-wing sympathizers and the foundation for moral panic consensus and acceptance. Furthermore, especially with the rise of far-right parties throughout Europe and the constant influx of migrants coming into all European countries, it is interesting to see whether far-right parties elsewhere, beyond mere Dutch politics, apply similar techniques or strategies to instal fear in society around migration in support of xenophobic and anti-immigration political ideologies. In a similar vein, it would be interesting to see how digital platforms are appropriated for this specific purpose. In searching for similarities and differences can we discern whether strategies are adjusted depending on the geographical location and socio-economic position of individual countries within Europe (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 156-159). Doing research on socio-technical choices of migrant portrayals online in relation to geographical location could bear interesting insights into the upheaval of far-right populism more generally.

## 5.2 Limitations

Despite important insights on the moral panic discourse reigning social media accounts during the electoral campaigning period, it should be noted that this research also comes with limitations. Firstly, given the relatively small sample size in relation to the number of posts circulating on the platforms, it is hard to make generalizations to the general online behaviour of the politicians. Changing the sample criteria to open up the scope of this research to include posts briefly preceding or following the official campaigning period could give insight into how the political parties and figureheads ease their followers into taking on their political ideology or at least familiarize them with their key take-aways. This can help distinguish between political incentives to gain votes during the elections or longstanding political ideology, which in turn helps make claims about the origin of fear discourses and generalize the moral panic discourse around migration.

Secondly, although similarly beyond the scope of this research and its ethical considerations, it would be interesting to more closely investigate the comments section of the social media posts. Looking at interactions amongst followers, whether sympathisers or opposition and the responses of the politician could yield insights into the relationship and community(-building). These insights could



in turn give a more thorough idea of the relationship of (media-)trust reigning amongst the follower base and thus the degree of adaptation and questioning of political ideas enunciated online. In times of fleeting trust in media, rising conspiracy theories and privatization of platforms it is important to shed more light on how value and meaning is created in a networked society in future research.

Thirdly, the two sampled figureheads' representative of the far-right parties in this study are both middle-aged, white, heteronormative, higher educated men, making them amongst the most privileged group in Dutch society. Yet, their role in creating and disseminating fear discourses on migrants, amongst one of the least privileged social groups in society, is examined. The disparity between the experiences and perceptions both the presenter and represented is large, automatically setting the groups at both ends of the us-versus-them paradigm. For this reason, it would be interesting to see how fear narratives around migration intersect with other contentious issues, like sexuality and religion, used by far-right politicians to instal fear in a secular society, like the Netherlands. This could derive interesting topics of analysis that are focused on intersectionality in relation to migration, potentially having the power to bridge the gap between us- versus-them dichotomy.

### 5.3 Practical recommendations

Following this in-depth research on how migrants are portrayed as a threat to society and societal norms online, it is important to investigate how this narrative could be countered proposing various policy interventions. In using a multifaceted approach, including policy making and media interventions, this section briefly examines ideas that could challenge the current situation.

This study revealed the substantial role of platforms in electoral campaigning, making it important to reflect on the seemingly intermediary role of platforms and its policies. As this study established, platforms can be regarded as active actors in the sharing and (re)shaping of moral panic, which is why this study advocates for an increasing accountability of platforms for the content that is shared in the digital ecosystem (Hameleers, 2023, p. 55-67). This should encourage further regulation of (re)distribution of harmful content as well as prevent political advertising on so-called neutral digital landscapes. This heightened caution in platform governance should prevent political parties from sharing debasing and hateful content in social media platforms to legitimize political incentives and objectives.

Furthermore, this study established that images are primarily used by political parties to create fearful imagery around migration and migrants. Especially with the rise of Artificial Intelligence, these images do not have to be real snapshots, yet can be manufactured using generative AI to manipulate the viewer into thinking this is a real-case and thus reason to be anxious and fearful. For this reason, there should be stricter platform policies that safeguard the authenticity

of pictures. Manipulating images using generative AI can be harmful to migrants as it can magnify and reinforce negative stereotypes as well as paint a frightful future scenery to immerse the viewer in a dystopian world, which again supports moral panic production. The influence of AI in platforms requires laws that stress transparency and inhibit discriminatory expression to protect vulnerable groups in society.

Beyond platform regulations, media policies should be implemented to regulate traditional media outlets and their sensationalist headlines, as it tends to exaggerate the urgency of, in this case, influx of migrants. As Ahearn (2012) mentioned, language is a powerful tool in constructing and shaping a narrative, as 'power relations can be enacted in, by and through language' (Ahearn, 2012, p. 261). Especially when dealing with a minority or otherwise fragile social group, news agencies should take precautionary measures and interventions to keep sight of potential power asymmetries. Already exaggerated phrasing is namely easily adopted and instrumentalized by far-right parties in digital ecosystems, as this paper has shown, to legitimize a narrative of fear (and potentially hate speech).

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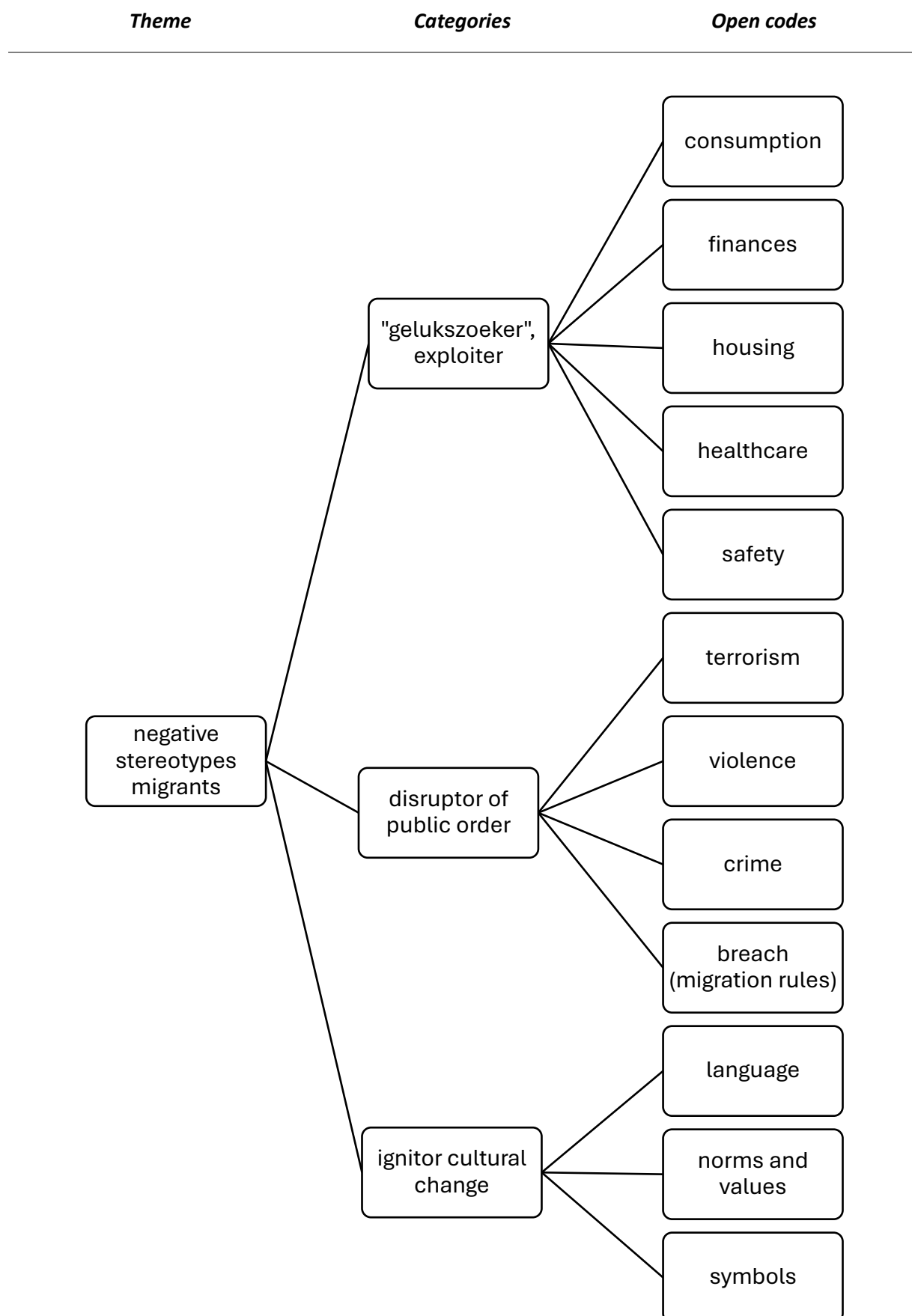
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## Appendix A- Exemplary coding tree



## Appendix B- Exemplary MDCA

Post ID: X21



**Geert Wilders** ✓  
@geertwilderspvv



Stop de asielinvasie!

#StemPVV #PVV



8:16 a.m. · 11 nov. 2023 · **72,8K** Weergaven

**415** Reposts   **6** Geciteerd   **2.340** Vind-ik-leuks   **6** Bladwijzers

### TEXTUAL

Overlexicalization  
(overemphasis)

- In this post there is an overemphasis on the party initials, as there is a triple of *PVV*, e.g. @geertwildersPVV, #StemPVV, #PVV. This accentuates the role of the political party in stopping and thus tackling 'de asielinvasie'.

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Suppression (absences) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This very short sentence translates to “Stop the asylum invasion”, omits the target of the invasion. Absence of the target audience simplifies the story, yet also the mystification of the target evokes an idea of fear amongst the followers.</li> <li>- Information on the invasion, the duration and the impact are also not mentioned, leaving more information unknown and open to interpretation.</li> </ul>  |
| Structural oppositions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The choice of words is a structural opposition. An unknown party is summoned to stop the invasion of asylum. This implies that there are two sides to the sudden invasion- the invader and the invaded. Although the text does not explicitly articulate who the invaded group is, it is described as ‘our’ side opposed to the ‘other’ side of invaders.</li> <li>- The neologism of ‘asylum invasion’ is a juxtaposition. Whereas asylum connotes a place of safety, a refuge from an (e.g. social, political) threat, the word invasion implies a condition of threat itself. To simplify, asylum implies good, whereas invasion implies something bad. In combining the two concepts, the contrast between good and bad is emphasized. This helps strengthen the idea of uncertainty about goodness, and thus evoke confusion and other emotional responses.</li> </ul> |
| Lexical choices        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Only use imperatives, ‘stop’, ‘stem’ [vote], to express commands and thus take an authoritative stance and impose a hierarchy upon the reader.</li> <li>- Wilders demands a behavioural change, namely, to stop something promptly and resume another action.</li> <li>- Short sentence structure enhances the urgency of the situation.</li> </ul>   |

| VISUAL                                | Denotation  | Connotation   |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>General (the image as a whole)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The photo is rectangular shaped.</li> <li>- The colour use is dark, primarily dark blue and grey with prominent white, red arched letters.</li> <li>- In the top 1/5 of the image, dark clouds are visualized. In the remaining 4/5 of the image, a sea-like texture with water like colour gradient is displayed.</li> <li>- In the top-right corner, a contour of a boat full of people is displayed.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The rectangular shape of the image allows room for a lot of sea, which makes it seem as if the boat is floating a sea. The sea is representative of endlessness, infinite, and unstoppable.</li> <li>- The dark clouds set a gloomy dark tone to the image. Often times dark clouds connote bad weather coming in, which is often used as a metaphor to visualize a state of despair. The connection to the weather, helps the viewer associate the experience to</li> </ul> |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individuals are hard to distinguish from the mass of people, yet some contours of limbs and heads against the lighter background help establish the mass of people.</li> <li>- The rim of the boat is slightly lighter brown greyish.</li> <li>- Right under the boat towards the bottom-right, we see the contour of a landmass, shaped in the form of Africa.</li> <li>- In the bottom- left corner of the image, capitalized bold white letters highlighted in red state: "stop de asielinvasie".</li> <li>- Right under these letters, in the bottom of the left-hand corner, the capitalized white letters read: "<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i>". The last word: "vrijheid" is in bold.</li> </ul> | <p>the unpleasant feeling of cold, rainy weather.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The contours of the people portrayed on the boat gives the people a form of anonymity. Not being able to see their faces, gives the scene a sense of unpredictability. Especially given the large amount of people make it feel like a threatening situation.</li> <li>- The shape of the landmass situated right under the boat seems to suggest that the boat is from Africa. The cultural, social, and societal norms from Africa are taken along with the boat ride to wherever they are off to. The attachment and persistence of the landmass tacking onto the boat, seems to suggest that the country of origin and their values will be forever attached to the boat and therefore the people on it.</li> <li>- The positioning of the text against the deep ocean, helps with visibility as the white letters pop against the background. The red highlight grabs the viewers attention and according to colour theory is often used to signal a sign of impending danger (e.g. traffic lights).</li> <li>- The political parties name is not in bold, which makes it less prominent yet does give credit the text above. They are going to look after the stop of this invasion.</li> </ul> |
|--|---|--|

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Objects (every object in the picture)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The rim of the boat is low, close to the water.</li> <li>- The boat is black with a lighter brown-greyish rim.</li> <li>- The boat is fully filled with people, covering the whole surface of the boat.</li> <li>- The landmass is shaped in a funnel shape. From wide at the top to smaller in the bottom. Just like the continent of Africa.</li> <li>- The white letters 'stop de asielinvasie' are consistent in size, font, bold, capitalized, highlighted with a red parameter.</li> <li>- The white letters 'Partij voor de Vrijheid' are capitalized. 'Vrijheid' is in bold.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An open boat with a low rim is often times less safe when it comes to sailing on large waters, especially the sea. Subjected to incoming waves, the chances of survival are substantially lower with an open boat with low rim compared to larger boats with a cabin. The boat that is portrayed in the image is not so safe.</li> <li>- Looking at the substantial amount of people standing in the boat, it connotes a situation of discomfort. The travel situation is not luxurious.</li> <li>- The white texts oppose the dark background. The dark scene on sea is linked to the asylum invasion, whereas the white text is linked to the political party. Black is connotated to evil and danger, whereas white is connotated to peace (e.g. waving the white flag) which reinforces what the political party calls for. Both visually and textually the political party thus opposes the situation at sea.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Setting (background information)</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dark blue, greyish background</li> <li>- Light source seems to be shining on the water from the top-left corner, looking at the sun rays in the water.</li> <li>- The image has a right centred, diagonal composition enhanced with the light source.</li> <li>- The image is taken from worm's eye view, meaning that the image is taken from a low perspective.</li> <li>- The frame does not have any cut-offs,</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The livid colour tone, according to colour theory, is ominous. It can also be associated with separation.</li> <li>- The limited loomy light influx enhances contours and harsh shadows. This reinforces the ominous mood to the setting.</li> <li>- The off-centred composition of the boat makes it seem as if the boat is approaching you, as the viewer. Together with the worm's eye-view, it makes the viewer feel vulnerable and intimidated by the boat.</li> <li>- The sea taking up most of the image, makes it feel as if</li> </ul>   |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   | leaving all objects within the frame.   | <p>the viewer is lost in the sea reinforces this feeling of vulnerability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The lack off cut-offs seems to suggest that all, including threats are known and acknowledged, yet only now have to be acted upon.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Salience (what calls your attention in terms of colour, tone, foregrounding, size, focus, overlapping, cultural symbols)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The dominant colour palette in this image is blue, with a greyish undertone.</li> <li>- The boat is set to the background, whereas the letters are foregrounded and highlighted due to the outstanding colour use.</li> <li>- The letters are not part of the scene yet do attract a lot of attention.</li> <li>- In terms of sizing, the people and the boat are much smaller than the letters.</li> <li>- The sign of putting up the hands in the air is visibly prominent in the image as it is foregrounding a lighter blue background.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Since the text, and thus call for action is foregrounded compared to the boat scene, we can discern the incentives of this image. The political message should incentivize the viewer to vote for PPV, because otherwise the situation in the background will not be dealt with.</li> <li>- The background scene of the boat creates an imagery of fear which supports the political ideology, namely, to stop influx of migrants who bring social disruption because of cultural diversity.</li> <li>- The fore- and background together communicate a promise of what you can expect to be changed or taken care of when voting PVV. The party thus communicates a protectionist narrative through showing and building on fearful imagery.</li> </ul> |