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RESEARCH

Dividing between 'us' and 'them': the framing of gender and sexuality by online followers of the Dutch populist radical right

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This article investigates the ways in which online followers of the Dutch populist radical right discuss gender and sexuality. Analysing comments on the Facebook pages of the Party for Freedom and Forum for Democracy, we show that they use these issues to pit 'us' against 'them' – groups that are defined differently, depending on the context. Women's emancipation and gay acceptance are defended and used to divide 'civilised' Dutch and 'backward' immigrants. This 'liberal' immigration critique is especially characteristic of Party for Freedom followers. Other progressive causes, such as transgender rights and feminism more broadly, are framed as elite projects, out of touch with 'ordinary people'. This backlash standpoint is more often articulated by Forum for Democracy followers.

Introduction

> if we let millions of people enter our country from different cultures, people who hate our way of life, people who find it horrible if women wear short skirts, people who don't want gays to walk hand in hand, if we don't do something about it, the Netherlands will disappear, then we will lose our country.[1] (Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom, during Dutch parliamentary debate in 2016)

This quote illustrates how some parties of the European populist radical right (PRR) invoke gay rights and women's emancipation. According to Brubaker (2017), this new way of talking about 'defending the nation', which he calls 'civilisationism', is most

distinctive and visible in the Netherlands. However, there are 'striking similarities between the Dutch case and national–populist rhetoric elsewhere in Northern and Western Europe', which likewise emphasises the civilisational threat from Islam (Brubaker, 2017: 1197; see also Halikiopoulou et al, 2013).

In respect of gender and sexuality in PRR discourse, we already know much about party leaders such as Wilders, but what about their followers? How do they think and talk about these issues? This study addresses this question by focusing on the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality are framed by online followers of the Dutch PRR. Our research question is thus: how are topics pertaining to gender and sexuality discussed on Facebook by online followers of two prominent Dutch PRR parties, specifically, the Party for Freedom (PVV) and the Forum for Democracy (FvD)? More specifically, to what extent do differences exist between specific gender and sexuality issues, and between PVV and FvD followers?

Several important studies have investigated discourse on gender within PRR parties, using official and unofficial party documentation as data sources. They focus on the 'supply' side, that is, on the leadership of PRR parties and their ideology or framing (Akkerman and Hagelund, 2007; Mepschen et al, 2010; Bracke, 2012; Meret and Siim, 2013; Akkerman, 2015; De Lange and Mügge, 2015; Meret, 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015; Verloo, 2018). Only a few studies focus on the 'demand' side, that is, the attitudes towards gender and sexuality of PRR party voters (Harteveld et al, 2015; Spierings and Zaslove, 2015a).

What do these studies reveal? PRR parties often take traditional positions on classic gender issues (for example, childcare, affirmative action and women's participation in public life); however, at the same time, they often take a 'liberal' position regarding gender equality and gay rights, most notably, in Scandinavia and the Netherlands (Akkerman and Hagelund, 2007; Akkerman, 2015; Spierings and Zaslove, 2015b). In addition, studies have shown that the strongest 'liberal' critiques of Islam, in which Islam is criticised because of the alleged threat it poses to gender equality and gay rights, are found in Northern-European countries, including the Netherlands. In this kind of critique, gay rights and gender equality demarcate 'civilised' Western culture from 'backward' Islamic culture (Mepschen et al, 2010; Bracke, 2012), and only Islam or immigrants threaten these liberal values (Verloo, 2018). This 'liberal' anti-Islam critique is a particular manifestation of a *post-feminist standpoint* (Jordan, 2016): PRR parties generally claim that gender equality and gay rights are already 'achieved', and deny the continued existence of gender inequality (Spierings, 2017; Verloo, 2018).

It remains unclear, however, whether PRR parties' agendas and their supporters' opinions concur in this respect. Studies reveal a discrepancy between the position of Dutch PRR parties expressing pro-gay ideas and the lack of support for pro-gay attitudes among their voters (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015b). A recent study on so-called 'homonationalist' voting finds that most voters in the Netherlands who are both anti-migrant and pro-gay emancipation vote not for PRR parties, but for the mainstream right-wing VVD (Spierings, 2020). Similarly, gender issues are an important element in the rhetoric of PRR parties but 'not at the core of their current electoral support' (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015b: 171). It thus seems that

PRR followers more often adopt a *backlash standpoint*, which fundamentally rejects progressive notions of gender and sexuality.

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, while previous studies focused on party leadership and on the attitudes of PRR voters, we examine the discourse of *online followers of PRR parties*. Many sympathisers of PRR parties express their political views and opinions on social network sites (Bode et al, 2013). We focus on Facebook because it is by far the biggest platform in terms of active users in the Netherlands (de Best, 2019) and because it is the main platform by which populist politicians reach citizens (Jacobs et al, 2020).

Online followers cannot automatically be considered supporters of these parties. However, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of their online followers on Facebook are sympathetic to the respective parties. Indeed, Bartlett et al (2011) showed that 67 per cent of the Facebook supporters of PRR parties in Europe also voted for the parties in question.

Second, while most studies have focused on gay rights and women's emancipation, we investigate a *wider spectrum of issues related to gender and sexuality* – including transgenderism and diverse gender identities. We refer to these issues by the shorthand 'gender and sexuality', in which we include diverse forms of sexuality, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) rights, same-sex marriage and varied family units, more diverse gender identities, and feminist values such as gender equality.[2] We concur with Spierings et al (2015) that by adopting an inclusive conceptualisation, we can draw stronger conclusions as to how PRR supporters are divided and along which lines.

The Dutch political context provides a unique case because the Netherlands currently has two successful PRR parties, representing different branches within the PRR party family. Comparison between these parties is interesting because Wilders's defence of women's and gay rights is not necessarily endorsed by all Dutch PRR leaders. Although both parties are populist, anti-immigration and anti-European Union (EU) (Klein Kranenburg, 2017), they have important differences in focus. PVV is more nativist, focusing on anti-Islam and anti-immigration rhetoric, while FvD is more anti-elitist, predominantly preoccupied with what they call 'the party cartel', that is, the political elite (Vos, 2017).

Moreover, the socio-demographic features of the two parties' electoral bases differ in some respects. The 2017 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (Van der Meer et al, 2017) showed that compared to PVV, FvD attracts considerably more male voters (58 per cent and 67 per cent, respectively) and PVV voters are less educated than those of FvD. A poll by I&O Research shows a similar picture (Klein Kranenburg, 2017).

Gender and sexuality is a non-issue for both parties if we go by their party programmes (Verloo, 2018). Nevertheless, Wilders (PVV) has mentioned gender equality and gay rights as Dutch values in public speeches. By contrast, FvD leaders Baudet and Hiddema have been criticised for public remarks in which they ridiculed feminism and criticised gender equality. To what extent this difference in focus also applies to online followers, and influences the way in which gender and sexuality issues are discussed, will be investigated in this study.

Gender and sexuality in radical–right discourse: backlash and post–feminist standpoints

Radical–right discourses regarding gender and sexuality are shaped by two dominant standpoints. First, the *backlash* standpoint fundamentally opposes changed attitudes to gender and sexuality, rejects progressive notions of gender equality, and advocates anti-feminist politics − hence, gender is politicised (Jordan, 2016). Accordingly, some scholars describe this standpoint as a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991; McRobbie, 2004).

More broadly, this opposition is interpreted as a 'cultural backlash' against postmodernisation, which includes cultural changes related to multiculturalism and globalisation (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). One significant change is the decreasing importance of patriarchal values and fixed gender roles, and the increasing emphasis on progressive values of gender equality. Norris and Inglehart (2019: 90) argue that these changes generate 'feelings of resentment, anger, and a sense of loss', predominantly among the older generation, the less well educated and men, which are politicised by the radical right. In a similar vein, Minkenberg (2000: 174) defines the contemporary radical right as an ideology 'which is directed against the concept of liberal and pluralistic democracy and its underlying principles of individualism and universalism'.

In radical–right discourse of the backlash type, progressive values relating to gender and sexuality are opposed by invoking traditional, patriarchal ideas on these issues. This is not surprising since a traditional view of the role of women in society, grounded in the idea that mothers, and the nuclear family, are the foundation of 'the nation', is prevalent among many far-right parties and movements. In this regard, Mudde (2019) speaks of the 'benevolent' sexism of the far-right. However, in recent years, there has also been a 'hostile' sexism (Mudde, 2019), which is especially evident in the online far-right milieu. Examples in this regard are the anti-feminist and misogynist online groups and subcultures (for example, the 'Incels') that are discussed under the alt-right umbrella (Hawley, 2017; Nagle, 2017).

With regard to the backlash tendency, Spierings (2017) suggests that Dutch PRR parties are critical towards particular progressive gender issues, that is, diverse gender identities and gender neutrality. He observes that progressive attitudes on these issues are framed as being against the will of 'common people' and 'against the natural order'.

Second, the *post-feminist* standpoint incorporates some aspects of the feminist agenda, recognised as valid goals, yet presents them as already achieved (Jordan, 2016). Furthermore, the ideal of progress that underlies feminist movements is rejected and the broader claims of the feminist movement are framed as defunct (Oudenampsen, 2018) – by claiming that 'women *are* emancipated' and 'homosexuality *is* accepted'. Also, since gay rights and women's emancipation are presented as already achieved, they do not deserve political attention (anymore). As such, gender and sexuality are depoliticised (Jordan, 2016). In the Western-European context, the cultural backlash against feminism is thus rather complex as it also incorporates some progressive elements (McRobbie, 2004).

Following the post-feminist standpoint, many far-right discourses incorporate women's and/or gay liberal rights as Dutch/Western *achievements*. On this basis, they: define 'the nation'; distinguish between 'civilised' Dutch/Western and 'backward' Islamic cultures; frame Muslims or immigrants as a threat to these defining elements

of 'the nation'; and create a 'selective notion of citizenship', determining who belongs and who does not (Mepschen et al, 2010; Bracke, 2012; Puar, 2007; Vieten, 2016).

These gendered far-right discourses are important for understanding the widespread reservations Western Europeans have about Muslim immigrants. Muslim immigrants face a 'double opposition' because different citizens dislike them for different reasons: while conservatives' antipathy towards Muslims stems from their immigrant and non-native status, among liberals, it is mainly driven by a rejection of fundamentalist religious values that are seen as running contrary to 'modernity' (Helbling and Traunmüller, 2018). This 'liberal' anti-Islam critique is clearly visible in the Netherlands but other PRR parties elsewhere in Northern and Western Europe likewise emphasise the civilisational threat from Islam (Halikiopoulou et al, 2013; Brubaker, 2017).

This is not surprising because PRR groups tend to adjust their frames to the available discursive opportunities of the national cultural context in which they operate (Koopmans et al, 2005). Halikiopoulou et al (2013) argue that among Northern and Western European PRR parties, those that reframe their anti-immigration discourse in terms of liberal and civic values tend to enjoy more electoral successes than those that stick to ethnic exclusionism. At the same time, however, adopting a progressive 'civic' discourse may have drawbacks for PRR parties, and poses a dilemma (Froio, 2018): it carries the risk of becoming identified with the political mainstream and could alienate specific groups of (Christian) conservatives.

To conclude, we expect to observe two contradictions in the online discourse of the Dutch PRR: first, concerning some specific issues, online followers of PVV and FvD reject progressive attitudes to gender and sexuality, in line with the backlash standpoint; while, second, at the same time, in line with the post-feminist standpoint, they defend some 'accomplished' liberations that are framed as part of Dutch culture and society, in distinction to the culture of 'others' (Muslims, immigrants). Concerning differences between the two parties, the PVV predominantly runs on an anti-Islam political agenda, whereas the FvD typically attacks the progressive elite. One could therefore expect that PVV followers would more often adopt a post-feminist discourse, whereas FvD followers would more strongly exhibit a backlash discourse.

Data and research design

This study relies on social media data that were collected within a specified time frame (Herring, 2004). We gathered *direct comments* posted on the Facebook pages of Party for Freedom (PVV) (@geertwilders)[3] and Forum for Democracy (FvD) (@forumvoordemocratie) between January 2017 and April 2018 (full corpus: PVV, $N = 166,594$; FvD, $N = 279,024$). These data were scraped using Facebook's own API. Data are therefore specified by Facebook's regulations. For the second and third phase of our research, we filtered the full corpus using gender and sexuality keywords (gender and sexuality corpus: PVV, $N = 1,236$; FvD, $N = 976$). As the data set has 'topical coherence', when it is filtered using a theme in this way, it is easier to conduct an in-depth analysis of how and in which context topics regarding gender and sexuality are discussed (Herring, 2004).

It is important to put our findings in the context of their time. Although the time span investigated is relatively large (15 months), somewhat different results could emerge if this study was repeated. Several terrorist attacks by radical Muslims took

place throughout Western Europe during this period, which perhaps increased far-right activity online. Moreover, the #metoo campaign that emerged in October 2017 may have affected online discourse on gender and sexuality issues, though we hardly encountered any references in the comments. Finally, it should be noted that the electoral popularity of the FvD has increased since we collected the data, which may have altered discussions among its online followers.

First phase: dictionary approach and correlations

The first analysis investigates the extent to which attention to gender and sexuality is associated with the two core issues of PRR parties, namely, anti-elitism (which is about established politics) and nativism (which is about immigration and Islam), by employing a *dictionary approach*. For both issues, a number of keywords were selected by consulting existing dictionaries and through an inductive assessment of comments.[4]

Based on the average amount of 'hits' per comment for each issue, meaning the mean frequency at which keywords related to an issue are mentioned in comments, the relative amount of attention per topic was calculated. We thus correct for the total number of comments posted. Results were aggregated to find the mean attention per week ($N = 54$).

If a 'liberal' anti-Islam/immigration critique is consistently predominant in the comments of online followers, attention to issues of nativism and gender and sexuality should follow a similar pattern over time. Therefore, the correlation between the mean attention per week for these issues was calculated.

Second phase: semantic network analysis

To explore the framing of gender and sexuality issues, semantic connections were analysed in both corpora. When a 'liberal' anti-Islam/immigration critique is present, we expect that words related to gender and sexuality will often co-occur with words related to Islam or immigration. A *semantic network* was therefore created to analyse word clusters. The structure of such networks is based on co-occurrences (edges) between the most frequently used words (nodes) in the comments. Two nodes are linked based on the conditional probability of word A occurring given that word B has occurred within a given word distance (van Atteveldt, 2008; Welbers and Van Atteveldt, 2018).[5] Results were tested extensively for multiple settings to see if the clusters appearing in the network changed significantly. Although specific words and connections might differ slightly between settings, the most significant connections were robust.[6] Since we focus on the link between gender and sexuality, nativist, and anti-elitist sentiments, semantic networks were created using the gender and sexuality corpus.

Third phase: frame analysis and manual quantitative content analysis

Next, frame analysis was employed, which focuses on the strategic and intentional usage of language (Entman, 1993; Lindekilde, 2014). Frame analysis 'looks at how existing "objects" or "topics" are framed by different actors, bending their meaning in certain directions' (Lindekilde, 2014: 200).

Table 1: Deductive coding of comments

Message	Claimant	Issue	Frame issue	Subject	Frame subject	Object	Frame object
That is what a lot of those Muslim men think. Because women are nothing more to them than a utensil. Like cattle. Are they all welcome? (PVV #352)	Online follower of PVV	**Women's emancipation/rights**	NA	Muslim men	Are treating woman badly, that is, without respect, possibly violent	Muslim women	Women are not free, inferior to men, oppressed

In order to identify common frames, we began by using an inductive approach. We manually browsed through all Facebook posts from both PVV and FvD pages. When a post discussed something related to gender and sexuality, we browsed through the direct comments replying to that post. Then, building on Franzosi (2004), these comments were analysed by means of grammatical structure, which means identifying the *issue* (Which gender and sexuality topic is mentioned?), *subject* (Who or what *does* something in the sentence?) and *object* (Who or what experiences the effect of the action undertaken by the subject?). Based on this analysis, we identified the frames used with regard to the issue, subject or object. The identified frames resulting from this process form the basis of the codebook we developed.[7]

For the subsequent, manual quantitative content analysis, all comments were systematically coded using the codebook. Since we are specifically interested in comments that discuss gender and sexuality issues, the gender and sexuality corpus was used. After removing duplicate and irrelevant comments, 763 comments of online FvD followers, and 823 of online PVV followers, were coded.

Table 1 shows an example of how the manual quantitative coding was conducted: first, we analysed the grammatical structure of the comments and identified the issue, subject and object; and, second, we coded the framing of one or multiple of these elements based on the codebook.

We ensured empirical rigour by defining each coding category in explicit terms and by applying the codes consistently to the data (Herring, 2004). To test the reliability of coding, the second author coded a subsample of 190 comments that were randomly selected from the gender and sexuality corpus. We assessed the reliability of the most frequent frames by calculating Krippendorff's alpha. This shows that the reliability of coding frames is generally adequate.[8]

In sum, the combination of methods we used to study the online discourses of PRR followers provides quantitative descriptions as well as qualitative, in-depth insights. This kind of triangulation of methods improves the validity of findings. For example, connections in the semantic network can corroborate certain qualitative interpretations, and vice versa.

Figure 1: Mean attention to issues, per week, in comments on @geertwilders (PVV) and @forumvoordemocratie (FvD)
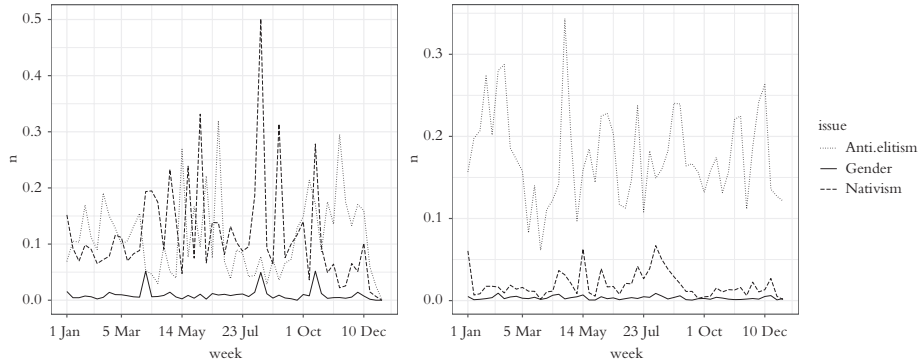
Results

Attention to gender and sexuality issues

Figure 1 shows the attention to gender and sexuality, nativism, and anti-elitism per week over a period of 54 weeks. Evidently, of the three issues under study, gender and sexuality gets the least attention. In the comments of PVV followers, nativism predominates, while FvD followers more often express anti-elitism. Next, we assess whether gender and sexuality is connected to the main PRR issues – nativism and anti-elitism. Our findings suggest that although levels of attention differ, attention to nativism and gender and sexuality follows a similar pattern over time. During peaks of attention to nativism, attention to gender and sexuality increased as well. We can discern three peaks in gender and sexuality discussions among PVV followers, which are prompted by popular posts of PVV about Islamic schools, assumed intolerance of Islam and violence of Moroccan men towards women.

The association between these issues becomes clearer when we calculate the correlation between the mean amount of attention to these issues per week. Table 2 shows that a strong and significant positive correlation exists only between nativism and gender and sexuality.[9] The two topics seem to overlap: when attention to nativism increased in a particular week, so did attention to gender and sexuality, and vice versa. These results might indicate that both PVV and FvD followers employ a 'liberal' critique of Islam/immigration. However, the specific nature of this relationship remains unclear. In order to elucidate this matter, the framing of gender and sexuality issues is analysed in subsequent sections.

Framing gender and sexuality: semantic connections

In order to see if the content of the comments also reveals a connection between gender and sexuality and nativism, we analyse semantic connections, starting with the PVV network. This network, based on 1,236 comments (see Figure A1, available online at: https://figshare.com/s/76ec4daae7efad5bfbe9), shows a few clusters, of which the most prominent is labelled the nativist cluster. Coloured in red, words that constitute this cluster include '(our) culture', '(our) identity', '(our) norms and values' and '(our) society'. There are multiple edges connecting the nativist cluster to the

Table 2: Correlation between mean attention to issues, per week, in comments on @geertwilders (PVV) and @forumvoordemocratie (FvD)

	@geertwilders			@forumvoordemocratie		
	Nativism	**Anti-elitism**	**Gender and sexuality**	**Nativism**	**Anti-elitism**	**Gender and sexuality**
Nativism	x	−0.28	0.66***	x	0.15	0.58***
Anti-elitism	−0.28	x	−0.10	0.15	x	0.01
Gender and sexuality	0.66***	−0.10	x	0.58***	0.01	x

Notes: N = 54. *** $p < 0.001$.

gender and sexuality cluster (yellow), constituted by words such as 'women', 'mothers' and 'daughters', as well as 'equal rights'. In addition, the nativist cluster is connected to the Islam cluster (lime green), which contains the words 'Islam', 'Muhammad', 'prophet', 'Jesus' and 'hugging politicians' (which refers to a 'soft approach' to the integration of immigrants). These semantic connections indicate an association between notions of gender, Dutch national identity and Islam. Furthermore, some specific connections in the network point to gendered criticism of Muslims. For example: the word 'Muslim' ('*islamiet*') is connected to 'assault', which is in turn connected to 'free West' and 'women'. This indicates the argument that women in 'the free West' are assaulted by Muslim men or immigrants. The word 'gay' seems to be used as both a swear word and in criticism of Islam: 'gay' is also connected to 'Jews', which is in turn strongly connected to 'Christians'. Gays are, just like Jews and Christians, often portrayed as victims of Islam. These connections are corroborated by the qualitative findings in the following section.[10]

The semantic network of FvD is presented in Figure A2 (available at: https://figshare.com/s/137eddf06c1cb77a254f). The first cluster that stands out in this network is the politics cluster, coloured in red. It contains the names of prominent political parties in the Netherlands – of which the progressive liberal party (D66) is the most significant hub – and the words 'councillor' and 'lost it'. Another cluster also points to politics, with words such as 'political parties', '2nd chamber' and 'elections'. Connections between politics-related words and homosexuality stand out. 'Alexander Penthouse' (nickname for the D66 leader) and 'D66' are connected to 'councillor', which is connected to 'homophobic'. Moreover, 'D66' is connected to 'homosexuality' and 'sin'. As revealed by the qualitative research phase, these connections refer to a central topic in the online comments of FvD followers: the accusation of homophobia against an Islamic councillor of D66 in Amsterdam.

A second central topic is represented by two clusters with the words 'framed as', 'racism', 'homophobic', 'Islamophobic', 'sexist' and 'media' (lime green), and 'accused of', 'sexism', 'fascism' and 'racism' (mint green). These connections point to criticism of 'the Left' for wrongful accusations against FvD leader Thierry Baudet. These connections were also corroborated by the qualitative results.

To conclude, comments on the FvD page mainly focus on establishment politics. Consequently, other themes, such as gender, sexuality and Islam, seem to be embedded in criticism of other political parties, mainly the liberal D66. A prominent example is the controversy around remarks on homosexuality by an Islamic D66 councillor. On the other hand, accusations of sexism and homophobia towards FvD by other parties and 'the media' provoke a strong counter-response. In contrast, Islam and Muslims

seem the main target of PVV followers. They mainly discuss gender and sexuality in relation to perceived national norms and values. Hence, the PVV semantic network provides indicators for the 'liberal' anti-Islam critique. An in-depth, qualitative analysis of the same comments will provide more decisive evidence for this conclusion.

Means to an end: framing women's and gay issues

The qualitative analysis makes the following crystal clear: PVV and FvD followers employ women's and gay issues to criticise Islam and immigrants, as well as establishment politics. Women's issues (including women's emancipation and gender equality) and gay issues (including the acceptance of homosexuality and gay rights) are so firmly embedded in anti-Islam/immigration rhetoric that they are exclusively mentioned in this context. As a pivotal element in nativist rhetoric, these issues serve as a means to propagate particular assumptions about both 'external' and 'internal' enemies through interconnected frames that: (1) specifically problematise Muslim men, immigrant men and Islam more generally; (2) reduce Muslim women and native Dutch women and gays to 'victims'; and (3) discredit and delegitimise specific politicians, parties or established politics in general. We will elaborate on these three observations.

Problematising Muslims, immigrants and Islam

Figure 2 presents three frames that incorporate women's and gay issues to criticise Muslims, immigrants or Islam. Muslim and immigrant men are framed as treating women and gay people badly, including treating them without respect, as inferior and/ or violently, and not accepting homosexuality. These claims often emphasise, on the one hand, the perceived failure of Muslims and immigrants to accept 'Dutch' values on gender equality, women's emancipation and homosexuality, and, on the other hand, that these men constitute a (violent) threat towards women and gay people. The following statement can be seen as an example: 'In Norway (as in many other European countries) almost all rapists have an Islamic background. This is because many Muslims think sexy dressed women or girls ask for it, because they dress this way. That may be true in the Islamic world, but not in the free West !!' (#349, PVV). Hence, in these claims, women and gay people function as a way to *problematise* Muslim and immigrant men by simultaneously marking them as different and framing them as threatening. This happens through what we call *discriminatory utilisation* of women's and gay issues – meaning that these issues are framed as inherently Dutch and alien to Muslims or (non-Western) immigrants more generally. As such, this framing constructs two groups – 'native' and 'non-native' – and divides them based on caricatured representations of their positions on women's and gay issues. These frames thus present a selective picture that ignores or obstructs the potentiality of Muslims or immigrants to be progressive, and of native Dutch to be conservative or hostile on these issues.

Women and gay people as victims

Figure 3 presents those framed as 'victims': native Dutch women, Muslim women and gay people. It shows that PRR followers frame the three groups in fundamentally

different ways, though there is some overlap between the framing of native Dutch women and gay people. The framing of Muslim women as 'oppressed' by Muslim men and/or Islamic culture and religion, and as 'assaulted' by Muslim men – who are the violent aggressors in this scenario – is connected to the framing of the headscarf as a sign of inferiority and the assumption that Muslim women desire liberation from 'Islamic oppression': 'the headscarf and other clothing attributes don't represent the person but the system of Islam, which is enslaving women, because the woman is property of the [man], like a bike or an umbrella' (#120, PVV).

Many claims reveal an association between the headscarf and oppression, inferiority or backwardness – manifested by associative links with 'enslavement', 'kept under the thumb', 'submissive' and 'Middle Ages'. This type of framing eliminates the possibility that Muslim women wear a headscarf out of free will, as autonomous individuals – which is sometimes explicitly questioned or rejected. On the contrary, as their 'victimhood' becomes their defining feature, Muslim women are reduced to victims, facilitating the framing of Islam and Muslim men as a 'threat'. Hence, although not framed as a threat themselves, as 'victims', Muslim women become the embodiment of everything the radical right should oppose.

Native Dutch women are framed as 'in danger' in public spaces and unable to go outside safely because they run the risk of being assaulted or raped by Muslim, Moroccan or immigrant men. Such frames appear in about 8 per cent of the gender and sexuality comments on the PVV page. Gay people are also framed as victims of these 'aggressors'. However, more often, gay people, and homosexuality, are framed as not accepted by Muslims due to Islamic law.

'Liberal' anti-Islam/immigration critique and established politics

Particular framings of Muslims and immigrants, on the one hand, and women and gay people, on the other, are also used to attack establishment politics, as discussed in previous sections. In Figure 4, the most important frames in this regard are presented.

Establishment politics, and especially left-wing politics, is criticised for allegedly prioritising Islam over women's and gay issues. It is framed as: accepting Islam, instead of defending women's and gay issues; responsible for letting immigrants enter the country, who constitute a danger to women; and naive or passive towards the position of women and gay people in Islam and/or Islamic countries:

> GreenLeft has traded the rights of women, children, gays, animals and unbelievers for Islam. (#272, PVV)

> Well, now it is immediately clear how this lady [a Dutch minister who wore a headscarf while visiting Iran] thinks about the oppression of women in the Far East. This is straight out treasonous. Stand for our norms and values, the hosts can also adapt [to us]. (#126, PVV)

The posters of these comments assume that Islam poses a threat to women's and gay issues, and appropriate these issues as inherently Dutch. This assumption and appropriation makes the accommodating position of left-wing politics towards Islam a 'betrayal' of Dutchness – an implication made clear by expressions like 'treasonous'. Similarly, establishment politicians are framed as responsible for letting 'dangerous'

**Figure 2:** Framing of Muslims, immigrants and Islam
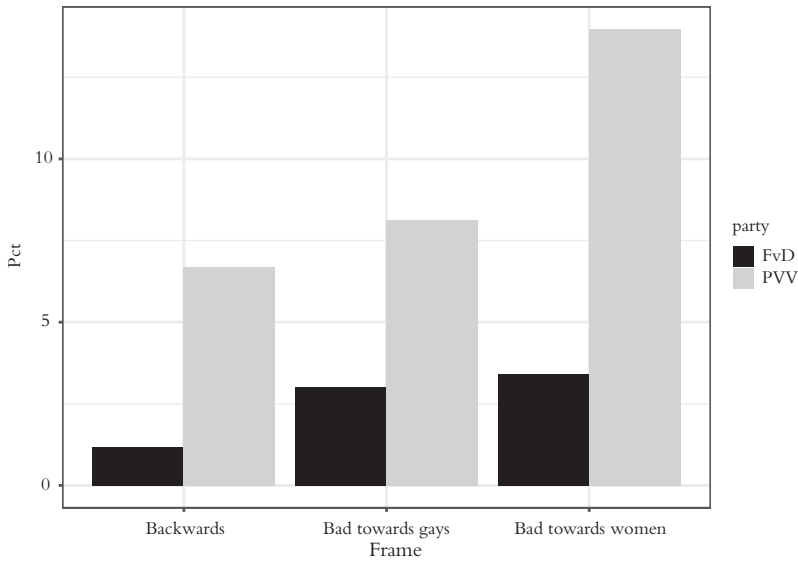
Note: Pct = the percentage of the total number of gender and sexuality comments.

immigrants enter the country. These claims rely on the representation of immigrants as sexual predators, and on the assumption that they constitute a violent threat to women. Some claims refer to Sweden, with its allegedly high numbers of rape delinquencies, as exemplifying how immigrants threaten women and society as a whole. The idea that established politicians endanger women and betray the Netherlands is thus vindicated on the basis of these assumptions and examples.

Hypocrisy of established politics

While PVV followers often use a 'liberal' anti–Islam/immigration critique to attack established politics, FvD followers mainly criticise the supposed 'hypocrisy' of established politics regarding women's and gay issues, which only indirectly involves Islam (FvD = 8.7 per cent; PVV = 1.3 per cent). The argument can be summarised as follows: 'The Left claim to defend women's and gay issues but are not women- or gay-friendly themselves.'

   Although this frame addresses establishment politics in general, most criticism was targeted at D66. As mentioned earlier, a criticism that is often recycled involves a D66 councillor from Amsterdam with an Islamic background who made remarks about how homosexuality is considered a sin in Islam. Interestingly, FvD followers do not emphasise the councillor's Islamic background, but rather the fact that she represents D66. Her remarks are solely used to discredit the party by framing it as anti-gay or homophobic, which is expressed by phrases like 'Demonizing 66 … is now even recruiting gay-haters because they are so progressive' (#255, FvD). As corroborated by the semantic network, this particular incident became a popular device for FvD followers to criticise a party that is perceived as a symbol of 'hypocritical' left-wing politics.

Figure 3: Framing of native Dutch women, Muslim women and gay people as victims
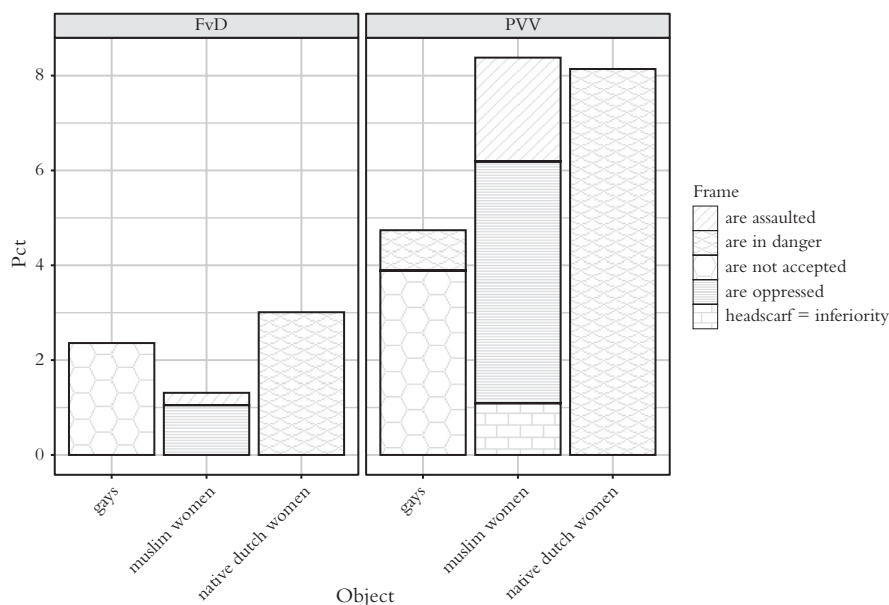

Note: Object = the group that is framed.

This difference between PVV and FvD followers – focusing on either immigrants or establishment politicians – also manifests itself in the diagnostic frames. What is it that is causing problems related to sexuality and gender in Dutch or Western society according to PVV and FvD followers? Figure 5 presents two frames that identify a main source of decline. On the one hand, Dutch society (or the West in general) is framed as in decline due to 'Islamisation' – a frame that involves the observation or prediction that Islamic norms and values on homosexuality and gender are 'taking over'. This frame is more often used by PVV followers. On the other hand, Dutch or Western society is framed as in decline due to 'the Left', either because left-wing politics allows Islam to 'replace' modern Dutch values, or because it steers society in too progressive a direction. FvD followers use this second frame more often. These results are in line with our previous findings concerning the predominance of nativism among PVV followers and of anti-elitism among FvD followers. This main difference between online followers of PVV and of FvD in their framing of gender and sexuality issues is also supported by the *popularity* of comments with a particular frame (measured by likes) (for more information, see the Supplementary Online Appendix, available at: https://figshare.com/s/d6518cae04b0171a6fee).

The conservative backlash

> The Netherlands is ruined!!!… First the *negerzoen* [name for chocolate-coated marshmallow, literally translates to 'negrokiss'] was banned, then Black Pete was erased. People who use those words are called racist.… For a few months now, NS [Dutch railway company] stopped with 'ladies and gentlemen' and HEMA [Dutch clothing company] does not have a girls- or boys collection

Figure 4: 'Liberal' Islam/immigration critique to attack established politics
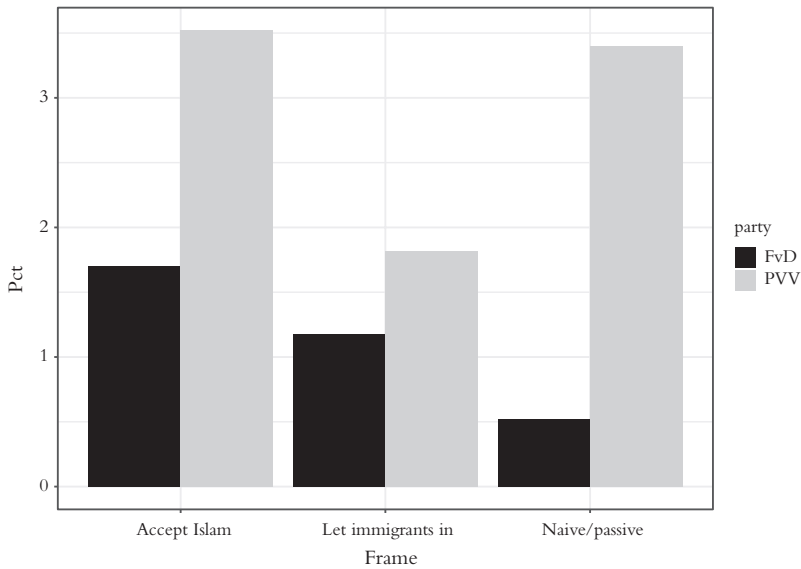
anymore. All these things are adjusted because a very small minority is disturbed by this. Everything has to be 'gender neutral' while everybody … is just male or female. Our country has totally lost it. (#517, FvD)

This comment illustrates how cultural manifestations of progressiveness yield a conservative response and become a target for many PVV or FvD followers. Here, progressiveness includes a wide range of actors (for example, feminists, environmental activists and 'social justice warriors'), issues (for example, feminism, transgenderism, anti-discrimination and political correctness) and policies (for example, gender equality policy). Looking at the number of comments, FvD followers more often criticise what we summarised as 'progressiveness' (FvD = 4.3 per cent; PVV = 1.2 per cent).

Our analysis of comments thus corroborates the assumption that alongside a *post-feminist* position that underlies 'liberal' anti-Islam/immigration critique, PVV and FvD followers also take a *backlash* position – towards feminism and gender equality, transgenderism, gender neutrality, and diverse gender identities. These issues invoke negative sentiments, especially in FvD followers.

Feminism is framed as responsible for the 'feminisation' of society, which is problematic, according to some FvD followers, as it is associated with 'losing masculinity'. As such, feminism is presented as irreconcilable with men's interests, and feminists are framed as an 'enemy'. Moreover, some comments contain conservative ideas on gender roles and gender equality policies. This includes the framing of women as unsuited to 'men's jobs', for example, politics, sometimes with the suggestion that positive discrimination rather than competence puts (certain) women in high positions: 'All women should leave the second chamber. Name me one that shows common sense. Bunch of place-hunters' (882, FvD); and 'I wonder if Ollongren would have become minister if she wasn't a lesbian and a woman?' (889, FvD). Women

are also framed as not serious enough for political decision-making. As Figure 6 shows, FvD followers employ these frames more frequently than those of PVV.

Concerning transgender issues and related policies, PRR followers emphasise the minority status of transgender and non-binary people, and point to other issues that they consider *are* more worthy of political attention. Transgenderism and diverse gender identities are also framed as 'unnatural', which is another way to trivialise these issues politically, and also represents a more fundamental rejection and delegitimisation of the idea of diverse or flexible gender identities altogether (see Figure 7).

Underlying many anti-progressive claims are perceptions of what is 'natural': the link between sex and gender, or innate differences between men and women and their aptitude for particular jobs or roles in life. Actors or policies that challenge this perception of naturalness are subject to harsh criticism. Furthermore, feminism and progressive gender issues are associated with political correctness – a popular vehicle used to discredit a broad range of progressive issues and policies aimed at equality in terms of race, gender and sexual preference.

Conclusion and discussion

By conducting both quantitative and qualitative content analyses of comments on Facebook, this article investigated the ways in which topics regarding gender and sexuality are discussed by online followers of two Dutch PRR parties (PVV and FvD). By comparison with the core themes of radical-right discourse – nativism and anti-elitism – gender and sexuality issues get far less attention. Nevertheless, it is interesting to investigate how PRR followers discuss these topics because we do not yet grasp whether the rise of the PRR in Western Europe will imply a conservative 'backsliding' on these issues (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018).

First, we concluded that there are both differences and similarities in the ways in which the online followers of the two parties frame gender and sexuality issues. Followers of PVV and FvD differ in the issues and actors they frequently criticise, with this being connected to the predominance of anti-elitism among FvD followers and of nativism among PVV followers. However, *the way in which* issues or actors associated with gender and sexuality are framed is comparable. On both Facebook pages, we found a strong relationship between nativism and gender and sexuality. In line with the nativist focus, predominant in the comments of PVV followers, the framing of women's and gay issues is strongly connected to anti-Islam/anti-immigration sentiments. In fact, these issues are so firmly embedded in nativist rhetoric that they are exclusively mentioned in this context, never independently. Consequently, PVV followers often use a 'liberal' anti-Islam/immigration critique to attack established politics: the positions of mainstream parties towards Islam, Muslims or immigrants are framed as a 'betrayal' of Dutchness. In contrast, FvD followers mainly criticise establishment politics because of its supposed hypocrisy regarding women's and gay issues, a frame that only indirectly involves Islam. They mainly point to 'the Left' as responsible for a decline of Dutch society, while PVV followers overwhelmingly point to 'Islamisation'.

Furthermore, we concluded that FvD followers more often reject progressive gender causes such as transgenderism and diverse gender identities than PVV followers. They also more often express conservative ideas on gender roles and gender equality at work or in politics. This anti-progressiveness is a part of their anti-elitist stance, evident in

**Figure 5:** Claims on why Dutch society or the West is in decline
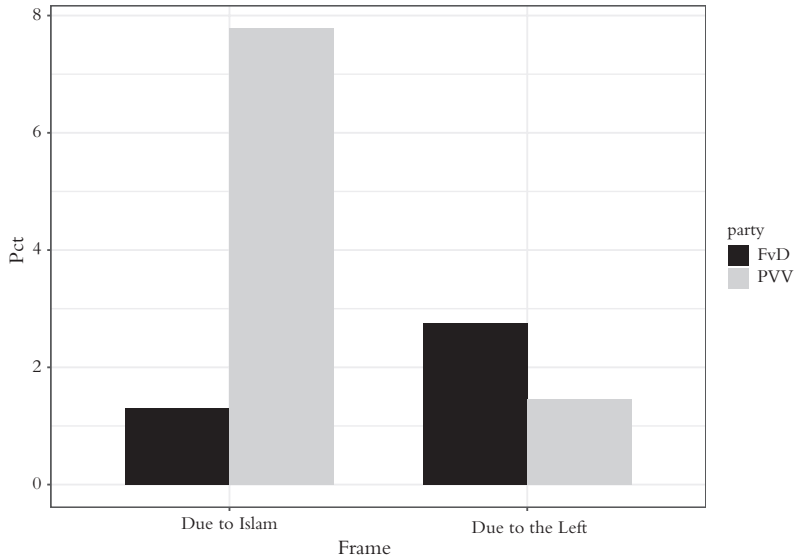
the discursive relationship between 'progressive' and 'elite'. This conclusion underlines our claim that although both parties are populist, they differ in focus: FvD emphasises the so-called *vertical* dimension, that is, the opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite'; whereas the most salient feature of PVV's discourse is the *horizontal* dimension, that is, the juxtaposition between natives and non-natives.

Second, we found differences between the two parties in the framing of particular gender and sexuality issues; a distinction can be made here between the framing of women's and gay issues, which tends to follow a post-feminist standpoint, and the framing of progressive gender issues and feminism, which are subject to backlash. Women's and gay rights are generally 'defended' by PVV and FvD followers. This makes sense because these issues are endorsed by many Dutch citizens (Kuyper, 2018). Followers employ a malleable narrative that enables a discriminatory utilisation of these issues and functions as a stick to beat Muslims, and also left-wing politics. We conclude that these issues are mainly used to demarcate between 'us' and 'them', and to criticise particular 'enemies'. In other words, 'defending' women's and gay emancipation is not the goal in itself, but a vehicle to achieve another goal – it is a means to an end, never an end in itself.

On the other hand, feminism and more progressive gender issues mainly yield opposition as part of a wider discursive attack on the feminist project (Verloo, 2018), as well as the progressive left-wing agenda more generally. It is mainly FvD followers who advocate anti-feminist politics and politicise progressive gender issues in attacks on 'the Left'.

In sum, we conclude that Dutch radical-right discourses on gender and sexuality issues serve to erect a boundary between 'us' and 'them' (see also Vieten, 2016) – though in different ways, depending on the nativist or anti-elitist context. Figure 8 presents this conclusion schematically. Some 'achieved' gender and sexuality issues are frequently used in a nativist context, while other, more contemporary progressive issues more likely appear in an anti-elitist context to hammer a wedge between

Figure 6: Conservative claims regarding gender roles and gender equality
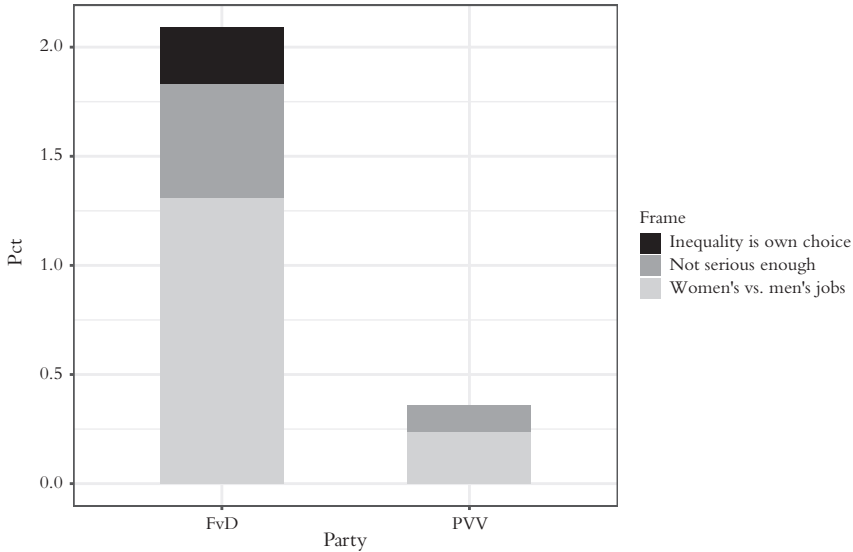
'ordinary people' and out-of-touch progressive elites. In the nativist context, women's emancipation and, in particular, gay acceptance are 'defended' and become markers of Dutch national identity, used to construct a selective notion of citizenship that divides a 'civilised' or 'modern' majority from a 'backward' minority who threaten those 'national' values. This position is informed by a post-feminist standpoint. In the anti-elitist context, feminism, transgenderism and diverse gender identities are the main objects of a repudiation that positions them as products of a progressive, elitist minority, rather than of 'the people' – a position that is informed by a backlash mentality.

The paradoxical nature of these findings is theoretically explicable from both an ideological and a strategic perspective. While, at a first glance, many claims of PVV and FvD followers contain progressive aspects due to their appropriation of women's and gay issues, they simultaneously reject the ideal of progress, as for instance Oudenampsen (2018) suggests. Implicitly, women's emancipation and gay acceptance are treated as accomplished facts rather than an ongoing process. In particular, these issues are dissociated from the feminist movement. The findings corroborate the argument of McRobbie (2004) that the suggestion that 'equality is achieved' is employed to discredit broader feminist claims, the renewal of feminist politics and feminist movements.

This post-feminist position serves the anti-Islam/immigration argument as it precludes critical self-reflection or the recognition of any imperfection in Dutch culture (for example, a recognition that gender equality and gay acceptance could be improved in the Netherlands). It legitimises the rhetorical chasm between 'civilised' Dutch citizens and 'backward' Muslims/immigrants. The post-feminist standpoint therefore serves to constrain the agenda of progress and emancipation, which makes it fundamentally conservative (in the situational sense), instead of progressive or liberal.

Strategically, the contradiction between the use of both post-feminist and backlash rhetoric can be explained by what Froio (2018: 705) calls a 'legitimacy dilemma'

Figure 7: Negative claims addressing transgenderism, gender neutrality or more diverse gender identities
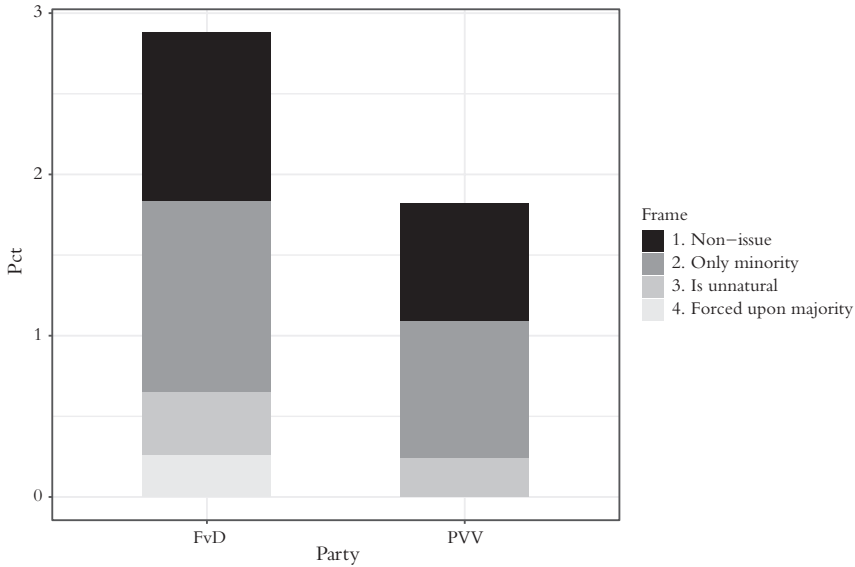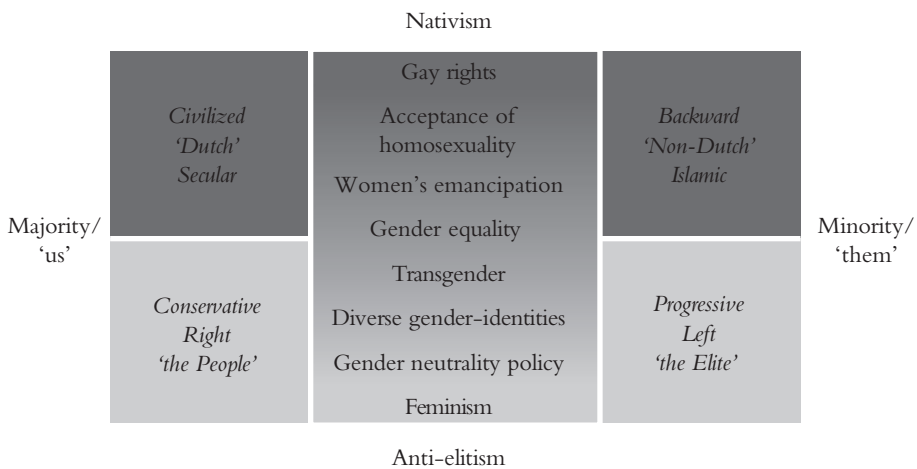

Figure 8: Summary of findings: the role of gender and sexuality issues in Dutch radical-right claims

of the PRR. Framing Islam and immigration as threats to gay rights and women's emancipation helps to obtain legitimacy among the Dutch public and to 'normalise' radical–right discourse. With this strategy, the position of PRR followers can be represented as a 'defence' of shared values that resonates with mainstream discourse, rather than a discriminatory attack on immigrants. However, adopting a progressive discourse may have drawbacks: it could identify PRR followers with the political mainstream and alienate specific groups of (Christian) conservatives. The 'backlash'

position better connects PRR followers to these specific communities. Opposition to transgenderism, diverse gender identities and feminism more broadly could be beneficial in terms of maintaining an anti-elite image.

Possible avenues for future research are, first, a more detailed investigation of the PRR's opposition to progressive gender issues and feminism across countries and sub-branches of the PRR party family. Second, mapping out the discursive interaction between PRR leaders and their followers could be an interesting way of establishing whether these parties' political agendas are coming from the former or the latter. We would expect to find that followers' opinions are shaped by online content posted by moderators but it seems plausible that PRR leaders also strategically adjust their positions in response to the comments of their followers. Social media analysis provides a promising tool for mapping such interactions.

More generally, we conclude that, as a supplement to surveys or interviews, social media analysis can enrich our understanding of PRR sympathisers (Klein and Muis, 2019). The drawback of these conventional data-collection methods is that they are obtrusive. Moreover, survey research has shortcomings in the study of attitudes towards gender and sexuality as most surveys contain very few relevant items. In that respect, our study has demonstrated that social media data can provide unique insights that are difficult to obtain otherwise.

Acknowledgements

Author biographies
Ruud Fiers is a student-fellow at the Sociology Department of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He is interested in far-right politics and movements and social media. His master's thesis was nominated for the NSV Masterthesis Prize 2019 and was highly commended by the jury.

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Notes
[1] Own translation.

[2] For an overview of the discussion within feminist scholarship on the conceptualisation of 'gender' and 'sexuality', see Hawkesworth (2013).

[3] @geertwilders is the official Facebook page for PVV.

[4] More information on the selection of the keywords and the list of keywords can be found in the Supplementary Online Appendix (available at: https://figshare.com/s/d6518cae04b0171a6fee).

[5] We used a larger word distance (± 10) as this will identify 'semantic concepts', contrary to smaller word distances (± 2).

[6] For more information on semantic network analysis, see Drieger (2013) and the Supplementary Online Appendix (available at: https://figshare.com/s/d6518cae04b0171a6fee).

[7] For the codebook, see the Supplementary Online Appendix (available at: https://figshare.com/s/d6518cae04b0171a6fee).

[8] Krippendorff's alpha ranges from good (α = .77) to almost sufficient (α = .57). For more details, see the Supplementary Online Appendix (available at: https://figshare.com/s/d6518cae04b0171a6fee).

[9] Results of linear models yield the same conclusion. See the Supplementary Online Appendix (available at: https://figshare.com/s/d6518cae04b0171a6fee).

[10] The qualitative analysis revealed that phrases like 'filthy gay' are used as general terms of derogation, and are not specifically directed at gay people. Due to its general and widespread use, it is hard to say whether it reflects negative attitudes towards homosexuality among Dutch radical–right supporters. This usage seems more a broader societal problem than a distinctive characteristic of these followers.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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