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Between Support and Critique: A Social Media Analysis of Public Discourse on Nonviolent Climate Sit-Ins in Portugal

Abstract

Climate activism has surged worldwide, with nonviolent sit-ins playing a central role in demanding urgent policy action. In Portugal, these protests have garnered significant attention, raising questions about social resistance and public perception. Drawing from Nonviolent Action Studies, we analyse how Portuguese climate sit-ins are signified and which factors shape vernacular narratives of support and backlash through social media analysis. Our findings highlight both well-studied elements such as perceptions of violence, and understudied factors including perceptions of legality and threats to everyday security. In Portugal's highly polarised context, with effective state smart repression, these factors generally shape public opinion against climate resistance, with support increasing only when perceptions shift insecurity from protesters to state. This paper offers insight into how vernacular discourse makes sense of climate activism, situating Portuguese protests within global patterns. The study enriches understanding of contemporary climate resistance and support/backlash construction, providing implications for activists, policymakers, and scholars.

Introduction

As climate change intensifies, so too does the global wave of protests call for transformative environmental policy shifts. In recent years, the prominence of climate resistance has evolved, with young people often leading nonviolent actions that seek to challenge institutional inertia. Among these, sit-in protests have emerged as one of the most direct expressions of public demand for climate accountability (Gulliver *et al.*, 2021). The case of climate sit-ins in Portugal offers a compelling illustration of how resistance functions within a specific sociocultural and temporal context, reflecting broader debates within the fields of Resistance Studies (RS) and Nonviolent Action Studies (NAS). These demonstrations are acts of civil disobedience and complex engagements with power, aimed at both destabilising existing political frameworks and catalysing new discourses on climate justice (Brink *et al.*, 2023; Falla *et al.*, 2024), but how do observers react to them?

NAS, particularly as conceptualised through Gandhian and Sharpian perspectives, have profoundly contributed to the understanding of nonviolent resistance (Vinthagen, 2015; Baldoli, 2019). These accounts provide an essential framework for understanding the strategic and ethical dimensions of climate sit-ins. While Gandhi viewed nonviolence as a moral imperative, Sharp emphasised its pragmatic value in effecting social change. Since then, Vinthagen (2015) has advanced a social pragmatic approach, positing nonviolence as a socially constructed and context-dependent practice that refuses and opposes violence. By embodying both moral conviction and

strategic purpose, sit-ins challenge dominant structures while offering alternative visions of social organisation, positioning them as critical sites of climate resistance.

Furthermore, scholars have also explored how observers' support and backlash towards nonviolent resistance is constructed, since these dynamics of climate protests are essential for their success (Sharp, 1973). In fact, literature highlights how vernacular responses to climate protests are deeply influenced by a variety of factors, such as the societal perceptions of violence, the perceived targets and threats, as well as state responses (Ünal et al., 2024; Dasch et al., 2024; Badullovich et al., 2024; de Kleer et al., 2023). The Portuguese climate sit-ins thus provide an opportunity to examine how nonviolent action is received by the public and how observer responses are shaped by these various intersecting factors.

To fully understand these dynamics, this paper draws on Vernacular Security Studies (VSS), which is an approach that examines "the vernacular, 'everyday narratives' of lay members of the public" (Jackson & Hall, 2016, p. 292) and how ordinary individuals construct their knowledge of and responses to political events. While research on security discourses at elite and institutional levels is extensive, understanding how individuals express their opinions in everyday conversations—how they perceive, conceptualise, and know forms of resistance, their manifestations, underlying causes, and appropriate responses—offers unique insights (Jarvis, 2019). This approach provides a "richer tapestry of everyday (in)security by refusing to prioritise particular populations by virtue of their identity or socio-political position" (Jarvis, 2019, p. 107). Consistent with this approach, rather than imposing a fixed definition of security, this study traces how ordinary individuals vernacularly construct perceptions of (in)security in response to climate resistance. Despite the growing body of literature on climate activism and resistance, a significant gap remains in understanding how nonviolent climate resistance is constructed and interpreted through vernacular security narratives. While scholars have examined media framing (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Santos *et al.*, 2024) and public opinion surveys regarding climate protests (Budgen, 2020; de Kleer *et al.*, 2024), the everyday security narratives through which ordinary people make sense of climate activism have been largely overlooked. This gap is particularly pronounced in the context of disruptive nonviolent actions like sit-ins, where public responses often reveal complex and contradictory understandings of security, legitimacy, and threat to everyday security.

This oversight is significant because vernacular security narratives are crucial in determining the social legitimacy and effectiveness of climate resistance. As Luckham (2017, p. 112) emphasises, security is experienced and understood in ways that may "differ, sometimes radically, not only from the dominant state security narratives, but sometimes also from universal conceptions of human and citizen security". By analysing social media comments responding to climate sit-ins in Portugal, this study addresses this research gap, examining how public discourse constructs and (de)legitimises nonviolent climate resistance through various security framings.

Our approach tracks how these narratives evolve in response to multiple events - from the initial protest action to subsequent police responses and judicial decisions. The overarching research question guiding this study is: How is climate-related nonviolent resistance narrated in Portuguese vernacular discourse, and what shapes these narratives?

In addressing this question, the paper argues that popular vernacular narratives about climate nonviolent resistance are shaped by multiple factors—some well-studied, like perceptions of violence, and others understudied, including perceptions of legality and threats to everyday security. Within Portugal's highly polarised society, where state smart repression is increasingly effective, these factors generally foster backlash against climate resistance. Support emerges primarily when the perceived subject of insecurity shifts from the protesters to the state. This analysis both corroborates existing arguments within the VSS and NAS, while offering new insights into how contemporary climate resistance is shaped by everyday discourse alongside institutional responses and formal politics.

Conceptualising Climate-related Nonviolent Resistance

Over the last decades, the concept of resistance has received increasing attention from various fields, namely RS (Lilja, 2022; Baaz et al., 2023). According to Baaz et al. (2023), resistance is an umbrella concept that contains contextual, relational, and entangled patterns of actions seeking to undermine power relations, whether by hiddenly protesting them, by publicly disobeying powerholders, or by constructing an alternative and experimenting with people's current needs.

Since the present study focuses on a sit-in protest, which publicly disobeys power structures (Baaz et al., 2023), it is worth exploring this analytical category, which is informed by the emerging field of NAS, nowadays more broadly discussed within Civil Resistance Studies (Baaz et al., 2023). NAS have been deeply influenced by Gandhian and Sharpian approaches. On the one hand, Gandhi (1961) argued that nonviolence is employed due to personal and/or collective moral convictions (Burrowes, 1996; Weber, 2001). Meanwhile, Sharp (1973) argued that nonviolent action stems from a practitioner's strategic choice. Under Sharp's (1973) categorisation of nonviolent action methods, sit-in protests are both a method of political non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention (Sharp, 1973, p.310), which can be enacted to achieve social change through different "mechanisms of change" (Sharp, 1973, p. 69).

Despite their differences, these initial approaches agreed that the power of nonviolence emerges when powerholders, unable to respond without violence, repress the protesters. This violent repression may disturb public opinion by revealing the violence of the status quo. When the state violently represses nonviolence, observers may question both the means and causes of repression, increasing support for resisters and generating backlash against the state (Gandhi, 1961; Sharp, 1973). Sharp (1973, p. 657) calls this dynamic "political jiu-jitsu," although he

acknowledges that various factors, such as the political nature of the state regime and the perceived efficiency of resistance methods, can limit the extent to which repression generates support for nonviolent campaigns.

Since the 1990s, nonviolence Sharp-informed approaches have gained much attention in exploring issues like the conditions for the success of nonviolent campaigns (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), the presence of violent flanks in nonviolent movements (Chenoweth, 2023), and the evolution of state smart repression (Chenoweth, 2017). According to Chenoweth et al. (2017, p. 1963), smart repression is the "use of pseudo-legitimate laws and administrative decisions to suppress dissent". Modern states have developed sophisticated discursive and material techniques to suppress nonviolent resistance while minimising public backlash, primarily by delegitimising nonviolent campaigns, controlling narratives, diminishing the perceived problem, and preventing widespread mobilisation. Examples of smart repression include internet surveillance, imposition of administrative burdens to restrict civil society actions, and criminalisation of previously legal behaviours (Chenoweth, 2017). Through these enhanced coercive strategies, states effectively prevent hostile public opinion when they repress nonviolent resisters, with these smart repression techniques demonstrating increasing efficacy.

Recently, in response to critiques of both Sharpian and Gandhian approaches, which are seen as oversimplified and not critical enough (Vinthagen, 2015; Barker, 2025), authors have moved beyond the principled-pragmatic dichotomy (Vinthagen, 2015; Baldoli, 2019; Jackson et al., 2020).

Looking specifically at international climate justice resistance, it has always involved a wide array of techniques, especially direct actions, to force governments to adopt specific nonviolent measures challenging the power structures aggravating climate change (Barry, 2013; Delina & Diesendorf, 2016). With worsening climate change consequences (Hallam, 2019; Bowman & Pickard, 2021) and constant appeals for more assertive policies (UN News, 2021, 2024), climate collective action has increased both in frequency and intensity, employing tactics such as strikes, blockades, and sit-ins (Hallam, 2019; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Gulliver et al., 2021; Malm, 2021). This shift reflects a growing sense of urgency among young climate activists who perceive that, now, only direct nonviolent actions can bring about de facto changes in politics and social systems (Gills & Morgan, 2020; Fesenfeld & Rinscheid, 2021; Malm, 2021).

The Western youth climate justice movement has gained increasing attention with the growing visibility of young climate activists and their direct actions (Bowman, 2019; Han & Ahn, 2020; Holmberg & Alvinius, 2022; Pickard, 2022). This youth involvement stems from multiple interrelated factors, including perceptions of governmental inadequacy, youth alienation from institutional politics, and an emotional complex of anger, anxiety, and frustration (Pickard, 2019, 2022; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Hickman et al., 2021; Campos & Martins, 2023, 2024). Academic

consensus holds that young people are at the forefront of contemporary climate activism (Vedabhyas, 2019; Bowman & Pickard, 2021; Campos & Martins, 2024), a position also recognised by UN Secretary-General António Guterres (UN News, 2021).

Hence, climate-related resistance seeks to challenge non-egalitarian power systems that exacerbate climate change while proposing alternatives , grounded in nonviolence toward both self and environment. However, since resistance involves resisters, powerholders, and observers (Lilja, 2022), understanding how support and backlash toward young climate justice resisters are constructed becomes crucial.

Constructing Support and Backlash

The role of observers has received attention in both RS and NAS. For Johansson and Vinthagen (2019), observers are onlookers of resistance acts that, through their interpretation, play an influential role in how resistance is seen, named, and socially constructed. Nonetheless, not all observers are equally positioned, as power relations and social norms shape an observer's structural position. Within NAS, the main focus has been on the role of observers' support in the success of a nonviolent campaign. Scholars argue that nonviolence, especially when faced with repression, is better at generating sympathy from observers and allowing them to become active resisters (Sharp, 1973; Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Chenoweth, 2017, 2023). Simonsen (2020) has recently questioned the straightforwardness of the relationship between nonviolence and generating sympathy, as various factors shape observers' reactions to resistance, as explored below.

Building on the NAS, which establish how state repression influences public reactions to resistance, we now examine additional factors that shape observers' responses to nonviolent climate action. Among these, the perception of violence is particularly significant.

When observers perceive a nonviolent action as violent, public support typically decreases whilst backlash increases, as the protest, its associated movement, and its demands are viewed as less legitimate (Thomas & Louis, 2014; Feinberg et al., 2020; Orazani et al., 2021; Simpson et al., 2018; Ünal et al., 2024). This perception of violence is influenced by multiple factors, like protest size, observers' and protesters' political inclinations, and the apparent social identities and emotions expressed (Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020; Valentino & Nicholson, 2021; Ünal et al., 2024; Dasch et al., 2024). For example, when protesters are perceived as belonging to racialised or immigrant communities, especially by right-leaning observers, support diminishes as these actions are more readily characterised as violent and less legitimate (Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020; Valentino & Nicholson, 2021). Conversely, when observers sympathise with the protest cause and favour protesters' demands as the preferred outcome of social conflict, support for resistance increases (Ünal et al., 2024; Dasch et al., 2024).

The literature on the radical flank1 and the diversity of tactics has further discussed the role of methods for the support/backlash and success/failure of nonviolent resistance. Some authors argue that more disruptive methods or the complementarity between more disruptive and less radical methods have positive impacts. They argue that a radical flank enables the self-defence of those resisting, draws media attention, and causes people to identify more strongly with the reasonable moderate group, given the direct contrast between radicals and moderates (Gelderloos, 2013; Rossdale, 2019; Case, 2022; Dasch et al., 2024; Barker, 2025). Other scholars contest the supposed benefits of radical wings in nonviolent campaigns. They argue that radical and disruptive actions erode observers' identification with the movement and the perceived legitimacy of the campaign and its causes, reducing public support and recruitment (Chenoweth & Schock, 2015; Feinberg et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2018; Chenoweth, 2021, 2023). Overall, research lacks consensus on the beneficial/prejudicial effects of radical flanks to nonviolent campaigns.

Gender composition also significantly influences popular perceptions. According to Naunov (2025), women-dominated demonstrations, particularly those perceived as conforming to patriarchal roles of wives and mothers, are seen as less violent and less deserving of repression compared to male-dominated actions or protests featuring women who challenge patriarchal expectations. The latter are often considered less trustworthy when their narratives contradict state justifications for repression. Henceforth, multiple intersecting elements shape observers' responses to nonviolent action.

These general patterns also apply specifically to climate-related resistance. The perceived violent or nonviolent character, protest size, protest methods, perceived acceptability of targets, targets' responsibility for climate change, and observers' previous experiences with climate hazards impact public reactions to climate protests (Budgen, 2020; de Kleer et al., 2024; Badullovich et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2024). Budgen (2020) emphasises that observers' and protsters' political orientations, and perceptions of violence in ostensibly nonviolent actions significantly influence support or backlash toward climate-related resistance. Conservative observers, for instance, are less supportive of climate action overall, particularly actions perceived as violent or left-leaning in polarised contexts. Additionally, climate protests seen as violent and targeting the general population typically garner less public acceptance than those perceived as nonviolent and directed at fossil fuel companies or government officials (Badullovich et al., 2024; de Kleer et al., 2023). Kountouris and Williams (2023) challenge the popular notion that climate activists using methods perceived as wrong necessarily undermine support for climate policies,

[1] The fact that scholars do not define *radical* in the radical flank literature poses a problem of theoretical coherence. For instance, some researchers treat the radical flank as an armed wing of a nonviolent campaign, while others treat it like a wing of more disruptive and revolutionary activists.

noting that such actions can also inspire observers to join environmental activism (Ozden & Glover, 2022).

In summary, public backlash and support for climate protests are influenced by multiple intertwining factors within specific sociocultural and historical contexts. Whilst existing research has extensively examined many of these factors, opportunities remain to uncover additional elements that shape public reactions to climate-related resistance.

Climate-related Resistance in Portugal

Regarding Portugal, the climate justice movement is characterised by informal collectives that agree on the root causes of climate change and share scepticism toward how national and international political figures have addressed the crisis, working together across the country (Carvalho et al., 2022). During the pandemic, this movement, like its counterparts worldwide, experienced a loss of momentum. However, since 2022, young climate activists in Portugal have taken a more disruptive turn, increasingly resorting to civil disobedience and non-cooperation techniques, which have provoked police repression and sparked significant public debate (Campos & Martins, 2024).

Among the climate-related disruptive resistance collectives in Portugal, Climáximo stands out. Created in August 2018 as an anti-capitalist group, it aims to bring political change to climate issues through nonviolent techniques—some more direct and disruptive, such as civil disobedience, blockades, and sit-ins, and others less confrontational, like educational campaigns. Climáximo plays a crucial role in raising public awareness and promoting alternatives to advance climate justice in Portuguese society (Campos & Martins, 2024; Castro, 2024).

According to Campos and Martins (2024), the growing academic interest in youth activism in Portugal stems from both international and domestic factors, including the worsening climate crisis, increasing visibility of climate activists in the Portuguese public sphere, and Portugal's vulnerability to climate change. Despite growing academic attention, there are no studies focused on Portuguese public opinion regarding disruptive nonviolent acts of young climate activists, particularly sit-ins. Instead, scholars have concentrated on understanding the motivations behind youth climate resistance and analysing Portuguese media coverage of their activism.

Studies highlight how Portuguese youth are motivated by political imaginaries centred on global inequalities and environmental destruction (Rebelo et al., 2023), correlating with a growing sense of urgency (Castro, 2024; Campos & Martins, 2023, 2024). This alternative form of doing politics emphasises pressuring governmental bodies for significant climate policy changes by disrupting adult structures and reframing political imaginaries (Malafaia, 2022; Castro, 2024; Campos & Martins, 2024).

Regarding media coverage, Portuguese climate activists have generally been able to represent themselves without overtly ageist portrayals, being presented as social actors with direct voices (Almeida, 2022; Santos, Üzelgün & Carvalho, 2024). However, recent media coverage has begun to emphasise the inconveniences caused by their actions, while depoliticising climate change coverage. which hinders the transformative potential of young activists' claims (Santos, Üzelgün & Carvalho, 2024).

This article contributes to understanding how direct climate actions affect public support by examining online reactions to the sit-in protest on December 14, 2023, at Avenida Engenheiro Duarte Pacheco in Lisbon.

Methods

Case Study

On 14th December 2023, eleven climate activists from Climáximo organised a sit-in protest on Avenida Engenheiro Duarte Pacheco in Lisbon. The action involved eight activists blocking the Marquês de Pombal tunnel and three suspending themselves with ropes above the tunnel, displaying messages criticizing the government's inadequate climate action and characterizing the climate crisis as genocide (Climáximo, 2023b; Malheiro & Soares, 2023). The activists' demands centred on transformation plans presented by Climáximo, which aim to refocus climate discussions on people's survival (Climáximo, 2023b).

According to Climáximo (2023b), this sit-in was staged primarily to protest the conclusion of COP28 in Dubai, criticizing both the selection of a petrostate as host and the failure to secure concrete emissions reduction agreements. The organisation maintains that disruptive actions are necessary when confronting a status quo that continuously exacerbates both the climate crisis and living costs (Climáximo, 2023b; Malheiro & Soares, 2023). Despite acknowledging that such tactics are polarising, Climáximo contends that disruption remains the only viable alternative at this stage (Malheiro & Soares, 2023).

The sit-in disrupted traffic for 20 minutes, triggering hostile reactions from some drivers who attempted to forcibly remove the activists (Malheiro & Soares, 2023; Rico, 2023). To "restore public order" (Malheiro & Soares, 2023), local police and a rapid response team intervened, detaining all 11 activists and taking them to the police station—actions which the organisation characterised as “political arrests” intended to discourage protest (Climáximo, 2023a). Activists were held for over 24 hours, even after appearing before a judge, with reports that at least two female detainees were sexually harassed through forced strip searches by police officials (Climáximo, 2023a; Câncio, 2024).

The protesters were formally charged with civil disobedience and interruption of communications. On 8th July 2024, after several delays, eight of the 11 activists received

suspended sentences of 18 months' imprisonment for disobedience and “attack on road transport security” (Flor, 2024). This was the second sentencing of Climáximo activists, but others have since received similar sentences for disruptive nonviolent actions.

Data collection

In this study, we used social media platforms as a data source, which provide researchers with valuable opportunities to study topics in naturally occurring settings, facilitating understanding of how people communicate in particular situations (Ahmed et al., 2018). Our data collection focused on public responses to three significant events in Portuguese climate activism, corresponding to three distinct periods: 1) The 14th December 2023 sit-in protest on Avenida Engenheiro Duarte Pacheco in Lisbon; 2) The 7th January 2024 public revelation that female activists arrested on 14th December 2023 were subjected to unnecessary strip searches by police; and 3) The 8th July 2024 final court decision sentencing eight of the 11 activists to suspended 18-month prison terms for disobedience and attack on road transport security.

For each period, we selected news articles as focal points of public discourse (available in the supplemental material). These articles were published by credible Portuguese news outlets: CNN Portugal, Correio da Manhã, Diário de Notícias, Expresso, Journal de Notícias, Público, RTP Notícias, Sábado, SIC Notícias, and Visão. These news outlets have broad audience reach and reported directly on the key events, providing anchors for public discussion. By focusing on these articles, we could systematically explore public reactions to critical moments in Portuguese climate resistance through the associated social media comments. The selected articles for each period can be provided upon request.

In total, 3,965 comments were manually gathered from official websites and various social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, and TikTok. All comments available at the time of observation were collected. From these, 600 were analysed, 200 comments per period for feasibility reasons (Figure 1). This approach allowed us to focus on public reactions directly tied to these pivotal moments while leveraging the articles' prominence as triggers for online discourse.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

In this methodology, we treat social media users as observers of Climáximo’s resistance. Even if their observation is indirect, i.e., already shaped by media frames, through their comments, they recognise resistance and make sense of climate justice resistance in Portugal and its consequences. They play a crucial role in how resistance is perceived, named, and understood.

Data analysis

The first author conducted the initial coding. Then, the second author conducted a mini-audit of the codes and engaged in extensive discussion with the first author about coding decisions, enhancing coherence and enabling refinement of the themes. Each comment was coded according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process used a structured framework created by the authors with two primary aims: 1) to add rigour to the identification of factors shaping vernacular narratives about climate sit-ins in Portugal, and 2) to allow for reliable replication of this study.

To define and operationalise the analytical framework, we first identified relevant themes in the literature. We then consensually selected theoretically driven themes according to the specificities of the Portuguese case, integrating both top-down and bottom-up approaches. The coding procedure also incorporated the temporal dimension presented above to explore potential differences in vernacular narratives across the three periods. Figure 2 shows the main categories of analysis of the structured coding framework. The complete coding framework is available upon request.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

One key category in our framework was vernacular sentiment, in other words, the emotional tenor of public responses (positive, negative, or mixed feelings toward the events). Given the recent scholarly focus on the role of emotions in resistance and nonviolent action (Lilja, 2017; Sørensen & Rigby, 2017; Baaz et al., 2018; Lilja, 2021), we included this category to capture how emotional responses intersect with other factors shaping support and backlash. Rather than employing computational sentiment analysis models, we thematically coded the emotional valence expressed in each comment through close reading, identifying whether commenters expressed support, opposition, or ambivalence toward the activists, police actions, or judicial decisions at each temporal moment. This qualitative approach allowed us to understand not just whether sentiment was positive or negative, but why, connecting emotional responses to specific framings of security, legality, violence, and state repression.

Our presentation of social media data follows Rodham and Gavin's (2006) guidelines on online consent, anonymity, and privacy. Personal consent was not sought as online comments are publicly available; however, quotes presented throughout the article were lightly edited to prevent tracing to their online originators. We also omit usernames and identities to protect the commentator's privacy.

Results: Changes and Continuity in Public Opinion

The three dates selected in this study reflect significant moments when climate justice resisters received substantial media attention related to the 14th December 2023 sit-in protest. By exploring social media comments on news outlets, this study contributes to understanding how vernacular discourse about climate sit-ins is (re)constructed over time, reflecting shifts in public perception.

Vernacular Sentiment

The sentiment among social media users when faced with the news of the sit-in protests (first moment), the accusations of police brutality against female activists (second moment), and the final judicial sentence (third moment) changed over time, as revealed in Figure 3.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

When faced with the news of the sit-in protests (first moment), most individuals (n=162) expressed negative feelings about the situation - "What a lack of respect, pure selfishness, and a waste of money… Our police forces, firefighters, resources occupied, but don't these people study? Techno babies that live off their parents. This must stop, our society is taking a highly worrying turn." - compared to the few expressing positive feelings (n=10) - "They are not wrong, we must open our eyes!". A few individuals (n=9) articulated mixed feelings, showcasing a less black and white assessment of the sit-in protests:

> Does the planet appreciate the traffic jam? How can they make themselves heard if they force cars to remain stationary, causing traffic jams and emitting even more pollutants? How do they expect to be heard if irritation blocks their discernment of others and ability to pay attention, as well as their openness to listening to others. It seems like a huge contradiction to me. Fight for a cause, yes... and you really should, because it is urgent but you need to be creative and really want to reach others. It is essential to know the pros and cons of what you defend and know how to think for yourself [...] The goal is to be seen and spoken to... congratulations, you could do it, if the goal was to be heard and understood, I'm sorry it's not like that. And be careful, I think it is important that something is done, as a group and individually, change is urgent.

Sentiment shifted notably after the accusations of police brutality against female activists (second moment), with negative reactions dropping to 111 comments while positive responses nearly sextupled to 63. Noteworthily, those expressing negative feelings in the second moment include mostly people who were against the police (n=35) - "But are we in a dictatorship?". Nonetheless, there are also a few who thought the police was not harsh enough (n=5) - "I am against. They should have cracked their heads and some bones with a stick. In my opinion, this is how delinquent vandals must be treated." Those with positive feelings are individuals who were happy about the police (mis)treatment of activists - "Congratulations for the well-done job of the Portuguese police for helping control these delinquents!". Some individuals (n=17) voiced mixed

feelings, as they do not agree with the cause defended or with the method used by the resisters but also oppose the police actions - “Independently of each one’s opinion on climate activism, which I believe is completely wrong when they do it like that, [...] there is no proportionality in the police conduct”.

Upon the court’s decision (third moment), negative sentiment rose to 149 comments, while positive sentiment plunged to 26 comments - “finally, something fair against these people”; “well done”. Amongst those with a negative perception of the condemnation, a few argued that the sentence was too harsh (n=4) - “To impede the circulation and to attempt with road safety is what is done every day by traffic and drivers with dangerous behaviours [...] and they don’t have the same treatment”. However, most claimed that the sentence was too soft (n=55) - “Why a suspended sentence? Can I also do the same, create the same damage without consequences? Justice in Portugal is a joke.” Mixed feelings were shared by 11 individuals, who supported the resisters’ rights to express themselves, but considered that this should happen within legal boundaries -“You have every right to struggle, but you lose credibility when you commit illegal acts”.

Vernacular sentiment underwent notable shifts across the three periods. Initially broadly negative sentiment toward climate protesters became more positive in the second period when the perceived security threat shifted from activists to police authorities. This shift aligns with Sharp's (1973) central argument in NAS that state repression can generate increased support for resisters. However, sentiment reverted to predominantly negative in the third period following judicial sentencing, as the formal criminalisation of protesters appeared to validate public perception that their actions were illegitimate. This pattern suggests the effectiveness of what Chenoweth et al. (2017) term "smart repression", i.e., state strategies that delegitimise resistance while minimising backlash against authorities. The scarcity of mixed sentiment comments (only 9, 17, and 11 across the three periods) further indicates a polarisation of Portuguese vernacular narratives around climate activism, with little middle ground between support and opposition.

Perception of the Method

The number of social media comments (re)producing resistance-related opposition narratives shifted over time (n=83 in the first moment, n=10 in the second moment, and n=29 in the third moment). However, the predominant narrative over the three moments was that activists were “disrespecting a noble, valid, and important cause [...] discrediting it” (n=35 in the first moment, n=2 in the second moment, and n=13 in the third moment). Combined with the perceptions on methods explored below, this reiterates the argument that when a method is seen as inadequate, backlash increases (Sharp, 1973; Badullowich et al., 2024).

Contrarily, those offering resistance-related supportive narratives remained similar in the first (n=21) and third (n=23) moments, while decreasing in the second moment (n=12). The

narrative that “taking action to tackle climate change is urgent because climate breakdown is getting worse”, which Castro (2024) and Campos and Martins (2023, 2024) also underline as an important motivation for youth climate nonviolent resistance in Portugal, was predominant in the first (n=16) and third (n=18) moments. Another supportive narrative criticized the lack of self-reflection among observers (n=10 in the first moment, n=12 in the second moment, and n=5 in the third moment). Furthermore, the narrative that “governments are looking the other way, pretending not to see what’s happening environmentally around the world” reduced from the first (n=6) to the third moment (n=3), confirming the idea that climate resistance is motivated by perceptions that state actions are insufficient (Pickard, 2019, 2022; Campos & Martins, 2023, 2024). In the face of the condemnation, another supportive narrative appeared condemning the violent repression of climate protesters (n=4).

The number of social media comments who characterised the method of resistance equally changed over time (n= 101 in the first moment, n=25 in the second moment, and n=47 in the third moment). The characterisations of the sit-in were predominantly negative in all moments, with proportions suffering only minor fluctuations. Those perceiving the method as wrong dropped from 58 in the first moment to 20 in the second and slightly increased to 36 in the third moment. A significant theme in the vernacular critique was the perceived hypocrisy of climate activists (n=28 in the first period, declining to n=4 and n=5 in subsequent periods). Social media users frequently questioned the coherence between activists' demands and their personal practices, arguing that protesters advocated for “a world free of fossil fuels” while themselves “consuming goods that require fossil fuels to be produced, like clothes, plastics, and telephone components”- changes some commenters framed as a potential “civilisational setback”. This critique of perceived inconsistency represents a delegitimisation strategy that undermines activists by questioning their authenticity rather than engaging with their substantive claims. The marked decrease in such comments over time suggests that this initial delegitimisation strategy lost prominence as events evolved toward focusing on legal and procedural concerns. The reasons behind this lack of support are discussed in the following sections.

Meanwhile, sit-in’s positive characterisations were scarce throughout the three moments (n=7 in the first moment, n=1 in the second moment, and n=6 in the third moment), but focused on the importance of importuning people - “The goal is to cause a stir, people only care if they are bothered” - raising their attention - “These activists are fighting so that future generations will also have a future! And our media has done a terrible job of covering these stories [...] The aim of this type of symbolic protest is to draw society’s attention to these issues; so that there can be a debate and a search for solutions” - and having the right to protest - “Cutting a street is not an act of vandalism. In Portugal, protests by farmers, truck drivers, teachers, everyone cuts roads that are more important, and no one condemns them [...] only these youngsters cannot cut streets”.

In the second moment, the number of positive and overall method characterisations reduced because vernacular narratives focused more on police (mis)treatment.

Given the method's characterisation, constructive vernacular suggestions for climate resisters to change their resistance methods to more "adequate, nonviolent, and responsible" ones figured across the three periods (n= 33 in the first moment, n=31 in the second moment, and n=18 in the third moment) in a rather patronizing tone - "There are ways to protest, and this is not one of them. With this type of demonstration, you are only turning the people against you and making them hate your initiative. You must rapidly review your strategy [...] you need to review your type of protest".

Vernacular narratives offering constructive alternatives to protesters declined over time, with comments suggesting alternative targets dropping from 20 in the first period to 8 in the third. The persistence of these constructive critiques demonstrates conditional support for climate activism, confirming Campos and Martins' (2024) observation that Portuguese public opinion contains latent support for climate justice that could be mobilized through different tactical choices. This conditional support creates both opportunities and constraints. For activists, it suggests their underlying cause retains legitimacy even when specific methods are criticized, providing a potential reservoir of support. For state authorities, it indicates limits to "smart repression" strategies, as demonstrated when public sympathy emerged around specific incidents: in the second period, 16 commenters demanded investigations into police mistreatment and 5 called for disciplinary action against officers who strip-searched female activists; in the third period, 2 commenters urged activists to appeal to the Constitutional Court, calling the ruling "an abuse of power". Nevertheless, the marked decline in constructive alternatives over time suggests this conditional support base is shrinking as criminalisation of disruptive tactics becomes formalized through judicial decisions.Reading these results through the lenses of radical flank literature, both beneficial and disadvantageous aspects of disruptive actions are corroborated. Some people became supportive of the obstruction of everyday life, while others actively opposed this method. Nonetheless, the negative effects are more prevalent than the positive ones. If the lack of consensus in the literature is evident, our study shows the same ambivalence, but with a clear pervasiveness of negative reactions to disruptive methods.

Role of Observer's Perceptions of Violence

The perception of violence, which influences the perceived method's (il)legitimacy (Badullovich et al., 2024; de Kleer et al., 2023), evolved over time (n= 11 in the first moment, n=13 in the second moment, and n=29 in the third moment), as shown in figure 4.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Initially, vernacular narratives were evenly divided between those perceiving the resistance act as violent and nonviolent. Nonetheless, this apparent equality did not translate into a similar division between opposition and supportive narratives, as explored above. Meanwhile, in the second moment, vernacular perceptions of violence changed, with individuals perceiving the protest primarily as violent, and fewer as nonviolent. In the third moment, the number of individuals holding perceptions of violence increased, while that of nonviolence remained almost the same (n=5). In the third moment, the judicial condemnation, by being perceived as the confirmation for the public audience that a violent crime was committed, increased the perception of violence, legitimizing backlash narratives that condemn resisters and satisfy the state's interests in not having its power resisted. This illustrates the argument that increased perception of violence increases backlash against climate resistance (Badullovich et al., 2024; de Kleer et al., 2023), also indicating that the current criminalisation of climate resistance is a new and efficient repression method.

The number of individuals with mixed opinions about the sit-in protest's (non)violent character reduced over time (n=21 in the first moment, n=5 in the second moment, and n=3 in the third moment). These individuals recognized that "we can always revindicate what we want, but without harming others' lives". The fact that so few social media users identified both violent and nonviolent elements in the sit-in protest strengthens our argument that Portuguese society seems highly polarized regarding climate disruptive resistance.

Role of the Perceived Acceptability of the Target

In the first moment, there were only 35 comments on the perceived acceptability of the target, which also influences the perceived method's (il)legitimacy (Badullovich et al., 2024; de Kleer et al., 2023). Despite the protesters' intent to resist fossil fuel companies and the government, most social media users perceived the protest target as the workers (n=15), while others saw everyone as the targeted population (n=10). In this first moment, 12 individuals criticized the protest target as non-acceptable and four as non-responsible for climate change. Thus, 22 social media comments presented the targeted group as the wrong target, reinforcing the perception of the sit-in as illegitimate, inadequate, and irresponsible. This illustrates Badullovich et al.'s (2024) and de Kleer et al.'s (2023) arguments that the method's acceptability reduces when resistance acts are perceived as targeting an inadequate, non-acceptable, or non-responsible target. It may also allude to a communication problem between climate resisters and the audience, as the supposed target differs from the perceived target.

Role of Age, Gender, and Political leaning

Ageist characterisations of climate protesters notably declined over time, from 27 comments in the first period to 4 in the third. Initial reactions frequently infantilized activists with

comments such as “All spoiled children who lack nothing, if they had something to do in life, they wouldn't put up with this nonsense” and “What about the losses suffered by those who arrived late for work? Did the parents of these children take responsibility?” This data confirms that, contrary to Almeida’s (2022) argument, there are ageist representations of nonviolent climate resisters, as Santos et al. (2024) alerted about.

Ageist representations intertwined with economic issues, as young climate protesters were increasingly portrayed as funded by politicians, as if the resistance financial sustainability depended on specific political donors. The representativity of young climate resister’s characterisations presenting them as “a bunch of brats who live off their daddies” reduced from the first to the second moment but then went up again in the third moment. Hence, there is a delegitimising narrative about young climate resistance centred on their economic dependence as youngsters. Looking at the literature, most studies do not focus on observers’ perceptions of the protesters’ economic status. Instead, scholars tend to explore which resistance methods certain prejudiced socioeconomic groups utilize (Scott, 1985; Peluso, 2023). Thus, further research should carefully examine the impact of perceptions of economic status on reshaping public opinion toward nonviolent resistance.

The initial prevalence and subsequent decline of these infantilizing frames reveal how Portuguese vernacular discourse initially reinforces ageist social expectations but gradually shifts toward engaging with the substance of protests rather than the perceived immaturity of protesters. This evolution in framing suggests that when climate activism persists beyond initial reactions, public discourse may move beyond demographic stereotyping toward more substantive engagement.

Additionally, negative gendered characterisations of young female climate resisters were also given in the second moment, especially when they were portrayed as “troublemakers that get in the way and now are playing the victim” (n=21). Following Naunov (2025) and De Bruin et al. (under review), the backlash against these female activists can be understood as a public opinion reaction against women activists who non-violently resist the state without reinforcing and instead opposing patriarchal expectations, thus reinforcing how patriarchal expectations within Portuguese society constraint the possibilities of support for protests with a strong female presence.

Regarding political leaning, over the three moments, social media users associated climate resisters, in general, with left-wing ideologies (n= 13 in the first moment, n=6 in the second moment, and n=7 in the third moment) and, in particular, with the radical left (n= 5 in the first moment, n=2 in the third moment) and wokeness (n=4 in the second moment) - “These are not activists. They are far-left radical anarchists [and] their actions in nothing support the climate” (first moment); “they are obviously some crazy people manipulated by woke leftists” (second moment); “leftists parasites” (third moment). These negative associations in the comments reveal

the social media users' aversion to left-leaning ideologies. However, the reduced number of mentions of the climate resister's political alignment seems to indicate that this is not a predominant factor in vernacular narratives.

Role of State Responses

Regarding overall state responses, initially, 47 social media comments called for the repressive use of police force and brutality against climate protesters. In the second moment, 22 individuals thanked and supported the police for their repressive treatment of female activists, six called for police to rape the female climate resisters, and five to continue doing the same to other activists. Concerning the judicial accountability of climate protesters, the initial 12 online users demanding protesters be jailed later rose to 43 in the third moment, asking for a more severe sentence. Meanwhile, the call for climate resisters to be forced to do community work also increased from the first (n=5) to the third (n=18) moments. Additionally, those calling for climate protesters to "go back to work!" reduced from the first (n=20) to the third (n=3) moments, reinforcing how the work-centric vernacular narrative, explored below, softened over time as more legal considerations gained relevance.

Looking at the second moment, when female activists denounced being forcibly stripped by the police, they were supported because they were seen as victims of police violence (n=14):

> The police have norms. They don't have absolute power to do what they want. [...] What does demonstrating civilly have to do with demanding that women undress unnecessarily? If you don't see the problem with this, you are part of the problem. And it is clear from your comments that you approve this behaviour as a means of punishing protesters who did not "follow the rules." That is not the role of the police. Although I think that's the motivation for many police officers, to feel powerful.

Some social media users resorted to feminist-based narratives reminding that every time a woman tells *her*story, she is wronged (n=4) and calling female activists to speak up and not be intimidated or silenced (n=2). Alternatively, social media users criticized female activists, blaming them for playing the victim (n=22), always lying (n=20), and "bringing it up on them" (n=9). Thus, opposition vernacular narratives against female mistreated activists, which reinforce patriarchal assumptions about women not fitting gender expectations, surpassed the supportive narratives, reinforcing Naunov's (2025) and De Bruin et al.'s (under review) discussions on how gender perceptions affect support and backlash towards female-dominated protests. This also reveals how the Portuguese public opinion, even with accusations of police (mis)treatment, delegitimizes climate resistance, especially by reinforcing patriarchal narratives.

Moreover, police officers mainly were negatively represented, delegitimising their abusive repression of female activists. While some accused them of being abusers of power (n=23), disrespectful of human rights (n=18), violent (n=10), and sexist (n=7), police supporters

portrayed them as law-abiding (n=14), hard workers (n=12), and protectors (n=7). Some (n=6) even felt sorry for the police officers because they "were forced to do that", risking their lives with the possibility of being "infected" by a Sexually Transmissible Infection.

Social media users also commented on the relationship between the resistance method and the police (mis)treatment. Those blaming female activists' method for this police response (n=14) outweighed those claiming that "their method does not justify this police violence" (n=4). Therefore, there is a greater legitimization of state violence and repression in Portuguese vernacular narratives when the method is perceived as inadequate. Notably, some social media users (n=12) argued that "stripping female climate is better for the environment", even thanking the police for doing "the right thing for the climate cause". Some (n=4) also said that female activists should already be used to being stripped because "they already get naked in other protests". Thus, gender narratives are also mobilized to normalize and legitimize police repression of climate resistance.

Looking at positive characterisations of climate protesters, they remained low over the three moments, but increased from the first moment, when only seven social media users portrayed young climate resisters as mindful and selfless, to the second and third moments. In fact, after the accusations of police officers stripping female activists, some online users showed empathy towards resisters presenting them as brutalized victims "subjected to a shameful humiliation and harassment" by the police (n=17) and as fragile (n=1). After the final judicial sentence, nine social media users characterised climate resisters as mindful and one as selfless. Our data demonstrate that when state institutions (police and judiciary) are perceived as directing threats against climate activists through repression, public support and positive activist's characterisations increase—albeit modestly. This pattern partly confirms Sharp's (1973) argument that repression of nonviolent resistance can generate public sympathy and support. However, the limited scale of this support shift suggests how effective state smart repression is. In this case, state authorities successfully framed their actions not as repression but as "defending public order" against threats to public security. This strategic framing inverts the security narrative as, rather than being seen as victims of state overreach, climate activists remain predominantly characterised as threats to everyday security and social order. The data suggest that Portuguese authorities have effectively employed this smart repression strategy, successfully limiting potential backlash by positioning themselves as protectors rather than oppressors, thereby minimizing public support for climate activists despite documented instances of harsh treatment.

While Chenoweth (2017) looks only at non-democratic states as the main creators of the techniques of smart repression, almost painting democratic states as simple importers of those techniques, Wacquant (2009, 2010) enables us to understand the proactive role of Western countries in developing methods of smart repression. Following Wacquant (2009, 2010), in the context of the neoliberal government of social insecurity, the criminalisation of resistance reflects

a new enlargement of the penal apparatus of Western states to repress dissent and protect corporate interests. However, Wacquant (2009, 2010) only focused on the disciplinary and punitive turn of the state against the poor. We argue that criminalising other forms of resistance, such as climate justice resistance, expands the coercive, penal arm of Western states towards all those contesting the state's authority, workfare, and corporate interests. In doing so, the state frames Climáximo activists as a threat and a source of social disorder. Interestingly, social media users' reactions to the sit-in reflect the very normalisation of the cultural trope of individual responsibility and the expansive penal power. That most social media users oppose climate resisters for causing social disorder, impeding everyday mobility and labour, disrespecting the "duties over rights" and the "obligations of citizenship" (Wacquant, 2010, p. 201), and call and exalt stronger police repression shows that the state has succeeded in its neoliberal governance of workfare and prisonfare. That said, the enlargement of penal power is not uncontested or fully hegemonic, as it begins to tremble when police violence is perceived as too much.

Perception of Legality

Directly deriving from the role of state responses, the perception of legality was particularly relevant in shaping backlash and support. When the final judicial sentence was determined, most social media users perceived it as negative (n=95), compared to 32 who saw it as a positive result and 21 who perceived it as a mixed result. The sentence was mostly regarded as insufficient (n=76) because it was a suspended penalty and not an effective imprisonment. Some criticized this insufficiency as negative because climate resisters can continue to engage in breaking resistance (n=15) and it reflects the "usual" procedure for Portuguese judges of only giving suspended penalties (n=13) - "The trend is suspended sentence; thus they do not pay for their committed crimes… What a beautiful justice. It would be better to have them condemned to 3 months effectively than a year and a half suspended…". Meanwhile, others saw it as adequate (n=12) and positive because if climate protesters repeat their action, they can be jailed (n=7) - "Good, if the same people go back to block [the streets], I hope they get condemned to an effective sentence and payment of fines! Only that way they will learn".

Meanwhile, some social media users sided with climate protesters, arguing that the sentence was "political rather than judicial" (n=7). Hence, the formal criminalisation of disruptive climate resistance was accepted by most of the public opinion. Nonetheless, since social media users recognized it mostly as insufficient and demanded further action from the state and the judiciary, this might indicate a popular legitimization of greater state repression of climate protesters.

Regarding the blame for the conviction, 55 online users blamed the activists and their sit-in protest for the condemnation, while 29 individuals blamed the judiciary. The chart below reveals how the Portuguese judicial system was characterised, mainly in a negative manner,

among 43 social media users who characterised it. The fact that most characterisations are negative might illustrate the distrust of Portuguese society in the Portuguese judicial system.

[INSERT FIGURE 4]

Thus, when state repression is seen as targeting the resistance method (third moment), it is more accepted than when repression is perceived as targeting activists themselves (second moment). This reveals a fragility in the Portuguese state's smart repression. Nonetheless, state repression, both in police and justice format, did not radically invert the popular attitude against resistance, which can be symptomatic of the normalization of the covert state smart repression of resistance, the problems of climate resistance to generate support, and the seemingly aversion to resistance movements within Portuguese society.

State repression based on police action is perceived as needed (first moment), but it loses legitimacy when seen as excessive, which generates an increase in supportive narratives of climate resisters. Meanwhile, state repression based on the judiciary is also seen as necessary (across the three moments), and it is rather seen as insufficient than adequate or excessive, which provokes more backlash narratives and less supportive narratives.

Another element highlighting the role of perceptions of legality are the two resisters' characterisations whose representation increased over time, the portrayal of young climate resisters as "criminals" and "vandals" - "It's time to put these pseudo-activists in jail and force them to work for the society" (first moment); "Criminals must be treated like criminals… Congratulations to the police" (second moment); "Now criminals have a name, 'activists'" (third moment). As the judicial process advanced, vernacular narratives portraying disruptive climate resistance as vandalism and crime intensified. In a context where states are increasing their *smart* repression (Chenoweth et al., 2017) of nonviolent resistance movements, namely with the threat and effective criminalisation of climate resistance, the predominant vernacular narratives characterizing climate protesters seem to go in hand with the state's intent, further reinforcing the repression of climate resistance. Public opinion saw the final sentencing as confirming that climate disruptive resistance is criminal, and should be judicially punished by the state, thus legitimizing state's smart repression and hindering the support of climate resistance groups.

Even when characterizing the method, in the third moment, the focus re-centred on the method as it was criminalized. Here, Sharp's (1973) argument that state's repression increases support was confirmed. In fact, new narratives appeared (n=2) criticizing social media users who seek to discipline dissent by calling for supposedly *correct* forms of resistance, claiming that "there is no 'correct' way of protesting" and that "what they call 'correct' forms of protest is remaining silent and beg to political authorities". Nonetheless, and as aforementioned, the still minimal number of comments illustrates how Portuguese society delegitimizes actions now

formally conceived as crimes by the judiciary and the state, which intensifies its techniques of smart repression.

Perception of Threat to Everyday Security

The importance of the perception of threat to everyday security is underlined through activists' and method's characterisations, as well as constructive suggestions for climate resisters. The work-centric characterisation of young activists as "unemployed" declined noticeably over time, from 52 comments in the first moment to 16 in the third. This narrative framed protesters through economic productivity, with comments such as "these people don't work and don't let those who need to work" and "the country is financially dead, and if these people without an occupation had to work, they wouldn't behave like this." These vernacular narratives reveal two significant aspects of Portuguese social discourse: first, a conception of "productivity" narrowly defined by economic profit and market value; and second, a prioritization of everyday security in terms of uninterrupted mobility and economic activity. This framing effectively constructs climate protesters as threats to economic security rather than as actors responding to environmental security threats, inverting the activists' own security narrative. The decline in this characterisation over time suggests that while economic disruption initially dominated public concern, legal considerations became more salient as events unfolded. That said, as explored above, this transformation of climate resisters into threats to workfare is used to justify the application of a stronger penal power against them, in line with Wacquant (2009, 2010).

Regarding the method, it was also perceived as careless for workers across the three (n= 39 in the first moment, n=6 in the second moment, and n=19 in the third moment), which alludes to the vernacular narrative that delegitimizes the resistance method due to the perception that everyday working activity is under threat - "No protest should ever interfere with the lives of others [especially] those who work".

Lastly, comments consistently favoured redirecting disruption away from ordinary citizens toward government officials - "I support you 200% but not in blocking the accesses of those who work. You must block the access to governors' houses, the Parliament, assemblies, points of political meetings... Strikes and demonstrations cannot disturb the common citizen's life, but the life of those who govern us!" This pattern reveals a vernacular security framework that prioritizes everyday mobility while suggesting that disruption is legitimate when directed at political powerholders.

Conclusion

The social media comments on the Climáximo sit-ins reveal interesting vernacular security narratives that both reinforce and add to NAS perspectives. Our analysis corroborates existing arguments in the literature regarding factors shaping popular support and backlash

towards climate resistance, while also proposing two new influential dimensions: the perception of threat to everyday security and the perception of legality.

Popular vernacular narratives about climate disruptive resistance are shaped by an array of well-known factors. Backlash against the sit-in emerged as the protest was perceived as inadequate, violent, and targeting the wrong group. Ageist and patriarchal narratives also reinforced popular backlash against climate resistance. In a context of increasingly effective, widespread, and adaptive state smart repression, and considering a highly polarised society like the Portuguese one, these factors shape public opinion increasingly against climate resistance. Additionally, for many commenters, security was conceptualised in terms of daily mobility and economic activity, with climate activists portrayed as threatening this security through disruption. This vernacular security framing positioned climate activists as threats rather than as responding to threats, reversing the activists' own narrative about climate crisis as the primary security concern. With various commenters perceiving climate resisters as criminals and vandals, and the sit-in as illegal, this perception of threat intensified opposition narratives.

Conversely, supportive commenters articulated a different vernacular security narrative, one that prioritised long-term environmental security over short-term convenience. These divergent security framings reflect what Crawford & Hutchinson (2015) describe as competing experiences of security measures and practices in everyday life. Support for climate resistance increases when popular perceptions shift the subject of insecurity from the resisters to the state, as occurred in the second moment.

The police response and judicial sentencing further polarised these vernacular security narratives. Vernacular responses ranged from calls for more severe punishment to comparisons with authoritarian practices. These contradictory positions illustrate Jackson & Hall's (2016) observation about how discourse reflects cognitive dissonances that are managed through various narrative strategies. The criminalisation of climate resistance appears as one of the most recent and apparently effective techniques of smart repression used by modern European states that shapes observers' perceptions.

Moving forward, further research is necessary to comprehend how the factors constructing support and opposition to climate resistance interact with each other. For example, how might perceptions of legality and threats to everyday security influence perceptions of violence? Scholars should also investigate the causes and impacts of resisters' communication problems and how to minimise their negative consequences as a strategy to reshape support and opposition narratives.

Several methodological limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, while social media comments provide valuable access to vernacular discourse, they represent a specific subset of public opinion shaped by platform logics, algorithms, and the performative dynamics of online communication. Our analysis cannot fully account for the potential presence of bots, coordinated

campaigns, or trolling behaviour, nor can we definitively assess how platform-specific features (such as anonymity, algorithmic amplification, or affective polarisation) may have shaped the visibility and character of particular narratives. Second, we did not differentiate systematically between social media platforms in our analysis. This decision reflected both pragmatic constraints, as the unequal distribution of comments across platforms precluded reliable comparative analysis, and our research focus on identifying overarching patterns in Portuguese vernacular narratives rather than platform-specific variations. Preliminary examination of our data revealed no substantive differences in narrative patterns across platforms that would alter our overall findings, though future research with larger, platform-balanced datasets could explore such variations more systematically. Third, questions of generalisability remain. Our findings reflect reactions to a specific sit-in protest in Portugal's political context and may not straightforwardly transfer to other national contexts, forms of climate activism, or temporal moments. However, the analytical framework we developed, combining thematic coding with temporal analysis across multiple events, is designed for replication. Other researchers can apply this framework to different cases, countries, or platforms to build a comparative understanding of vernacular reactions to climate resistance. Finally, our focus on social media comments, while offering insight into public discourse, cannot capture the full spectrum of Portuguese public opinion, including perspectives that remain unvoiced online or expressed through other channels. Despite these limitations, our study makes important contributions to understanding how vernacular security narratives shape support and opposition to climate activism, revealing both well-established patterns and understudied factors that merit further investigation.

In short, support and backlash to climate resistance must be understood as a complex result of a social reality where climate change continues to worsen, costs of living increase, living conditions deteriorate, and modern European states criminalise resistance and deepen their techniques of smart repression rather than address the structural causes of climate breakdown. For climate resistance to respond effectively, resisters must urgently address the multitude of factors shaping popular vernacular narratives.

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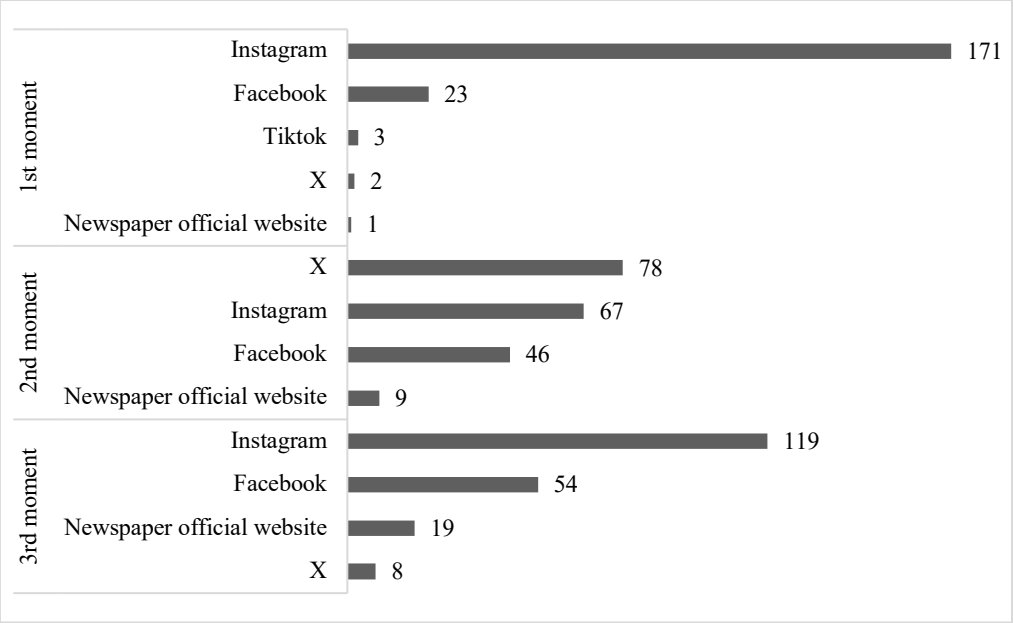


Figure 1. Distribution of analysed comments per moment and source

Coding Framework

1. How is the person feeling?
2. What are the supportive narratives?
    - 2.1. Towards activists
    - 2.2. Towads the police
3. What are the opposition narratives?
    - 3.1. Towards activists
    - 3.2. Towards the police
4. How are they characterised?
    - 4.1. The activists
    - 4.2. The police
    - 4.3. The judiciary
5. What is the perceived political leaning of activists?
6. What are the perceptions of violence?
7. How is the method assessed?
8. Who is the perceived target of the protest?
    - 8.1. How is the target perceived in relation to climate change?
    - 8.2. What is the acceptability of the target?

Figure 2. Coding framework

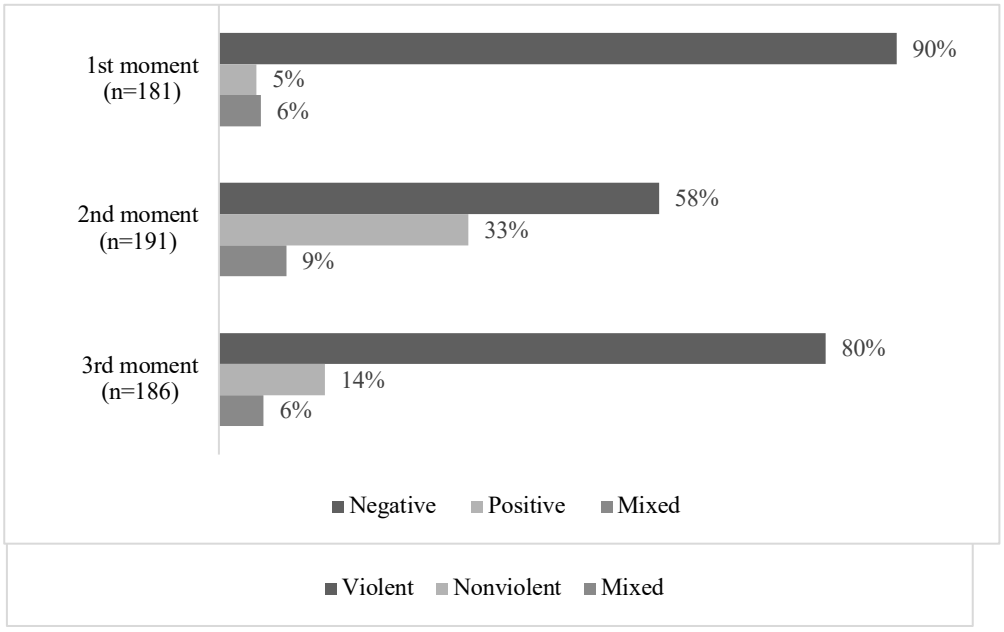


Figure 3. Vernacular sentiment across the three periods

Figure 4. Perceptions of violence across the three periods

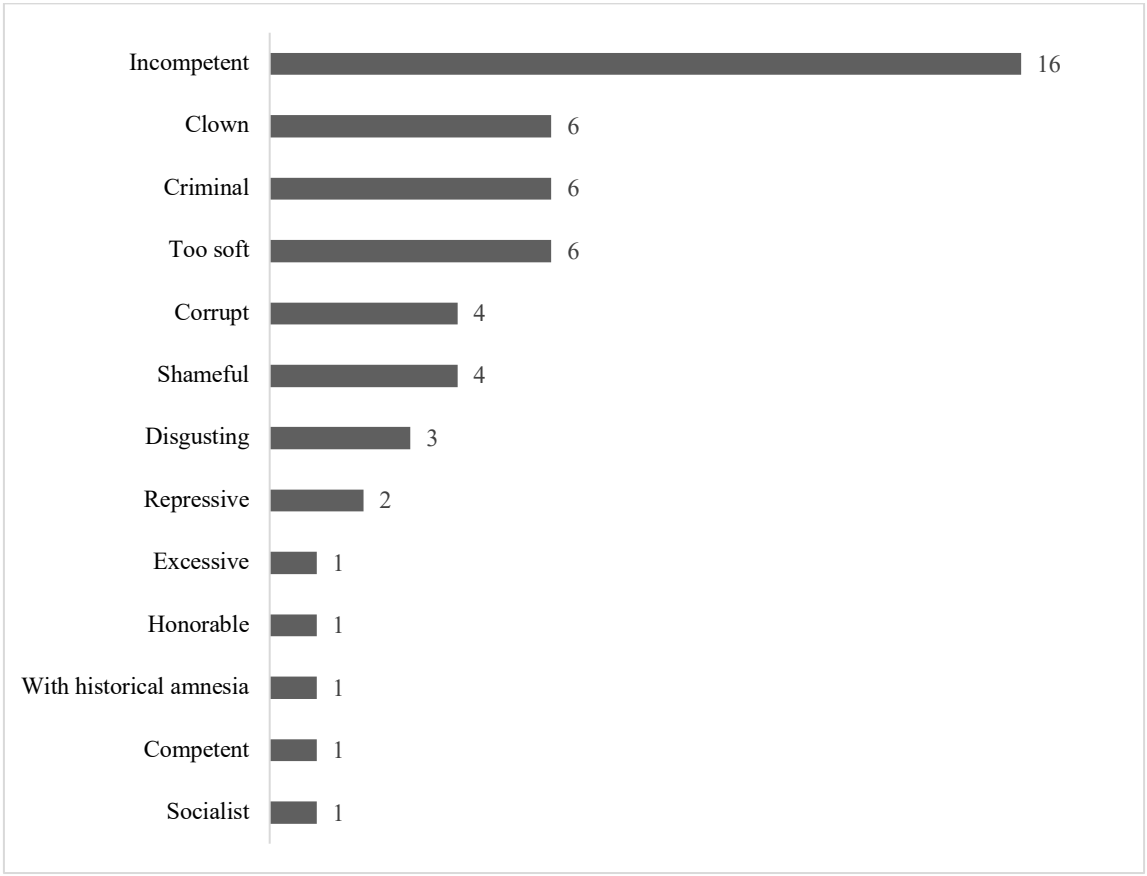


Figure 5. Characterisation of the Portuguese Judicial System