

FULL PAPER

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Does the perpetrator's origin matter?**

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Spielt die Herkunft von Täter*innen eine Rolle?**

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Framing criminals in German regional newspapers: Does the perpetrator's origin matter?**Framing von Kriminellen in deutschen Regionalzeitungen: Spielt die Herkunft von Täter*innen eine Rolle?**

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Abstract: The discrepancy between (regional) media coverage of criminal activity and official crime statistics, particularly concerning the portrayal of immigrant offenders, is widely acknowledged. The media's framing of crime and the corresponding presentation of perpetrators with a migration background play a critical role in shaping public perceptions and reinforcing existing stereotypes. In response to this issue, the German Press Council revised Guideline 12.1 of the Press Code in 2017 by introducing the criterion of a legitimate public interest for mentioning a perpetrator's origin. To investigate how regional news organizations apply the press code guideline, the present study identifies frames of criminals and conducts an in-depth analysis of origin references using a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative content analysis ($n = 486$) with a qualitative analysis ($n = 27$) of (online) crime reports from four German regional newspapers. Through cluster analysis, four frames of criminals were identified: *Felons*, *Thieves and burglars*, *Vandals*, and *Negligent traffic offenders*. Perpetrators or suspects with a migration background were referenced nearly five times more frequently than those of German origin. Furthermore, suspects identified as having a non-German background – whether explicitly stated or implicitly suggested – are often framed within a different contextual narrative. Our findings point to inconsistencies in the compliance with the guidelines outlined in the Press Code, potentially contributing to the hardening of stereotypes against minorities.

Keywords: Framing, crime news, reporting on criminals, regional newspapers, mixed methods, content analysis

Zusammenfassung: Die Diskrepanz zwischen (regionaler) Medienberichterstattung über Kriminalität und offiziellen Kriminalstatistiken, insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Darstellung von Täter*innen mit Migrationshintergrund, ist weithin bekannt. Das mediale Framing von Täter*innen mit Migrationshintergrund spielt eine entscheidende Rolle bei der öffentlichen Meinungsbildung und kann bestehende Stereotype verstärken. Um dieser Problematik entgegenzuwirken, überarbeitete der Deutsche Presserat 2017 die Richtlinie 12.1 des Pressekodex, indem er das weiter gefasste Kriterium des berechtigten öffentlichen Interesses für die Nennung der Herkunft eines Täters einführte. Um zu untersuchen, wie regionale Nachrichtenorganisationen die Richtlinien des Pressekodex umsetzen, analysiert die vorliegende Studie Täter*innen-Frames sowie die Nennung von Herkunftsbezügen in Berichterstattungen über Kriminalität. Methodisch wird ein Mixed-Methods-Ansatz verfolgt, der eine quantitative Inhaltsanalyse ($n = 486$) mit einer vertiefenden qualitativen Analyse

($n = 27$) von (Online-)Kriminalitätsberichten aus vier deutschen Regionalzeitungen kombiniert. Mithilfe einer Clusteranalyse konnten vier Täter*innen-Frames identifiziert werden: *Schwerverbrecher*innen*, *Dieb*innen und Einbrecher*innen*, *Vandal*innen* und *Fahrlässige Verkehrssünder*innen*. Täter*innen oder Verdächtige mit Migrationshintergrund werden in den untersuchten Artikeln fast fünfmal häufiger erwähnt als solche mit deutscher Herkunft. Zudem werden Tatverdächtige mit nicht-deutscher Herkunftsnennung oder -implikation in der Regel anders kontextualisiert. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass Journalist*innen deutscher Regionalmedien die im Pressekodex formulierten Richtlinien nicht konsequent befolgen, was Stereotype gegenüber Migrant*innen verfestigen könnte.

Schlagwörter: Framing, Kriminalitätsberichterstattung, Berichterstattung über Kriminelle, Regionalzeitungen, Mixed Methods, Inhaltsanalyse

1. Introduction

The structure and language of media content – commonly referred to as *media framing* – shape the representation of issues and provide specific interpretative frameworks. Through these frames, the media can affect how individuals perceive societal issues, such as crime (Greer & Reiner, 2015), and how these issues are discussed in public discourse. This influence is particularly relevant given that most individuals in (Western) societies have limited direct experience with criminal activity (Brill et al., 2025). Thus, discrepancies between media portrayals of crime or criminals and official crime statistics can become particularly problematic when such portrayals reinforce negative stereotypes about specific (minority) groups (Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020; Eberl et al., 2018; Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018). These tendencies of discrepant reporting can be observed not only in Germany (see e.g., Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020) but also across country contexts (see e.g., Jacobs, 2017).

German print media operate under the ethical framework of the Press Code, which stipulates in Guideline 12.1 that a suspect's or offender's origin should only be referenced when there is a legitimate public interest – particularly to avoid reinforcing stereotypes about minorities (German Press Council, 2017). While practical guidelines already outline examples both for and against origin mentioning (German Press Council, 2024), empirical studies indicate that the non-German origin of suspects or offenders is still disproportionately emphasized in crime reporting (Brill et al., 2025; Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020; Klimmt et al., 2024). To date, research has primarily examined perpetrator framing in relation to origin-related information in national television broadcasts (e.g., Brill et al., 2025) and national (online) newspapers (e.g., Rahlf, 2024). While Klimmt et al. (2024) extended the scope to regional German newspapers, their study was not based on the framing approach. By complementing our quantitative part of the study with a qualitative analysis of a subsample of articles, we are, in contrast, able to investigate *how* the (subtle) reference to offenders' and suspects' origin is used and embedded in the narrative context.

Building on previous findings, the present study investigates how offenders and suspects are framed in crime reporting by German regional newspapers, with emphasis on the (explicit or implicit) mention of their origin. We adopt a mixed-

methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The quantitative analysis consists of 468 crime news articles, in which perpetrator frames are identified through cluster analysis, alongside an examination of patterns in the reporting of perpetrators' origin. To complement and enrich the insights derived from this analysis, we conducted a qualitative analysis on a subsample of the original dataset. This analysis adds value to the existing body of research by exploring in-depth how explicit or implicit references to perpetrators' origin contribute to their framing in regional media coverage.

2. Framing of crime and criminals

This study applies the framing approach as conceptualized by Entman (1993), who identifies four core elements of a frame: (1) problem definition, (2) causal attribution, (3) treatment recommendation, and (4) moral evaluation. The integration of these elements into a coherent structure constitutes a frame (Budde et al., 2018; Entman, 1993). The *problem definition* refers to the aspect of an issue that media coverage emphasizes as most salient, shaping the perceived relevance of the event and the roles of the actors involved (Goedeke Tort et al., 2016). In the present study, this element relates to the nature of the crimes committed and the portrayal of the individuals involved (i.e., the offenders or suspects). *Causal attribution* involves identifying the agents, conditions, or broader social contexts deemed responsible for the problem (Goedeke Tort et al., 2016). Within this framework, causal attributions in the analyzed media texts encompass both individual-level factors (e.g., mental health issues) and societal-level factors (e.g., religious affiliation) that are portrayed as contributing to the criminal act. The third frame element, *treatment recommendation*, refers to the solutions or interventions proposed in media coverage to address the identified problem, such as harsher penalties for perpetrators. The final element, *moral evaluation*, captures the normative judgment conveyed in the reporting, indicating whether the issue is presented in a negative, neutral, or positive light.

Although the framing approach was originally developed to analyze media portrayals of events or situations – such as criminal offenses (e.g., Conrey & Haney, 2020; Rafiee et al., 2021) – an increasing number of studies have applied this framework to the media framing of individuals or social groups, including activists, criminals, migrants, and refugees (e.g., Brill et al., 2025; Dan & Ren, 2021; Goedeke Tort et al., 2016; Lavie-Dinur et al., 2013; Lawler & Tolley, 2017; Muncie, 2019). Also, Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that frames – particularly those defined by Entman – can be applied to events, issues, and (political) actors. Since crime is inseparable from the actions of individuals, applying the framework to suspects or perpetrators seems both conceptually appropriate and analytically valuable.

In reporting on criminal activity, news media tend to focus disproportionately on severe offenses such as homicide, assault, terrorist attacks, burglary, and sexual violence (Brill et al., 2025; Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020). Analogously offenders are frequently portrayed as impulsive, aggressive, and inherently violent (Jewkes, 2011). While reports occasionally include additional details related to offenders'

socioeconomic status, family circumstances, or broader social environments (Brill et al., 2025), contextual information is most of the time limited to easily accessible demographic attributes such as gender, age, and place of residence (Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020), hindering a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the individuals involved in criminal acts. Despite Guideline 12.1 of the German Press Code discouraging origin references without a legitimate public interest, studies suggest that such references persist in German crime reporting – especially for suspects of non-German origin (Brill et al., 2025; Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020). Given the general scarcity of background information on offenders, origin references gain salience, potentially shaping public perceptions of both the criminal acts and social groups associated with them.

While mental health issues are frequently cited as motives for criminal behavior in media reporting (Jewkes, 2011), causal attributions in the case of minority groups – such as immigrants, refugees, or Muslims – often shift toward emphasizing their (foreign) origin, religious affiliation, or alleged connections to criminal or terrorist organizations (Aldrete, 2023; Betus et al., 2020; Brill et al., 2025; Slakoff & Brennan, 2019; Threadcraft, 2017). This type of framing tends to highlight the collective identity of the individuals involved, rather than portraying them as autonomous actors (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020).

Although a substantial body of research has investigated the framing of criminals in crime news, much of this work centers around specific crime types, such as school shootings, terrorist attacks, domestic violence, or femicide (e.g., Aldrete, 2023; Betus et al., 2020; LaRose et al., 2021; Yates, 2020), or particular offender groups, including men, women, adolescents, or minorities (e.g., Slakoff, 2020; Ryan & Tonkiss, 2023). In contrast, recent research examining broader patterns of offender framing, especially within the context of regional newspaper coverage in Germany, remains limited. To address this gap, the present study poses the following research question:

RQ1: Which frames of criminals can be identified in German regional newspapers?

Scholars have emphasized that the origin of individuals plays a significant role in shaping how criminals are framed in media coverage (Brill et al., 2025; Fleras, 2016). The disproportionate and often stereotypical portrayal of individuals with a migration background – particularly in the context of terrorism and other serious crimes – can contribute to the reinforcement of social biases and the marginalization of minority groups (Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020; Goedeke Tort et al., 2016; Gruenewald et al., 2013). Prior research shows that suspects' foreign origin or migration background is often mentioned in crime news, particularly in relation to serious offenses (Goedeke Tort et al., 2016). While not legally regulated, ethical guidelines for crime reporting in Germany make it especially relevant to assess whether the origin of offenders is portrayed inconsistently across media frames. Accordingly, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: Does the frequency of references to perpetrators' or suspects' origins vary across the identified frames?

In addition, it is important to examine the extent to which regional newspapers in Germany differ in their prioritization of specific frames. Research suggests that newspapers' political and ideological orientations influence language choices and ultimately framing decisions, with liberal (e.g., *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and conservative outlets (e.g., *Welt*) emphasizing different narratives (Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020). In regional media, such variation may be further shaped by regional historical and sociopolitical contexts. While some regional newspapers may rely on police reports¹, the selection of crimes reported on, the manner and length of coverage, as well as the withholding or emphasis of specific information, ultimately remain editorial decisions. At last, journalists carry editorial responsibilities, as outlined in professional standards such as the Press Code. A distinct emphasis on frames across regional newspapers can both reflect and contribute to divergent political discourses and developments within these areas. To explore this dimension, we pose the following research question:

RQ3: Do the identified frames vary across regional newspapers?

Despite ethical standards in journalism, unconscious biases can still influence editorial decisions: Empirical work shows that even journalists instructed to be objective are not immune to automatic forms of biases (e.g., Coleman, 2003). Given that frames may differ in the extent to which they reference the (non-German) origin of perpetrators, and that the distribution of these frames may vary across regional newspapers, it becomes essential to examine whether the mention of non-German origin itself differs systematically across newspapers. Considering the diverse historical trajectories, regional disparities, and recent political developments across Germany, analyzing the frequency with which non-German origins are referenced in crime reporting by different regional outlets may offer important insights into the role of local media in shaping public perceptions of minority groups. Accordingly, we pose the following research question:

RQ4: Does the frequency of mentioning perpetrators or suspects of non-German origin differ across regional newspapers?

Additionally, to gain a deeper understanding of how the explicit or implicit mention of an offender's or suspect's origin contributes to their framing, we complement our quantitative content analysis with a qualitative approach. We hence conduct an in-depth analysis of selected articles from the original sample. The aim is to explore how origin-related cues, whether explicit or implicit, affect the portrayal of offenders or suspects in German regional newspapers. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

RQ5: How are perpetrators or suspects portrayed in German regional newspapers, depending on the mention of their (non-)German origin?

1 This reflects a long-standing practice, as the problematic interdependent relationship between local news outlets and the police as a source has been widely discussed (Grygiel & Lysak, 2020; Lewis et al., 2008; O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008).

RQ6: What similarities and differences emerge across these portrayals?

RQ7: Does the way the origin of perpetrators or suspects is addressed vary across the different frames identified in the quantitative analysis?

3. Method

3.1 Study design

To study the framing of criminals in German regional newspapers, we chose a mixed-methods approach: First, we performed a quantitative content analysis on crime news published in four German regional newspapers representing German regions: *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*, *Freie Presse*, *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, and *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, from January to July 2024, which resulted in identifying the predominant frames. In a second step, we conducted a complementary, in-depth analysis of selected articles from the original sample that either mentioned perpetrators' origins directly or implicitly hinted they are of foreign origin, incorporating a qualitative content analysis.

3.2 Quantitative content analysis

3.2.1 Sampling

The four German regional newspapers *Osnabrücker Zeitung* (for Northern Germany), *Freie Presse* (for Eastern Germany; former German Democratic Republic), *Nürnberger Nachrichten* (for Southern Germany), and *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (for Western Germany) were chosen due to their extensive readership within their regions (Schröder, 2024).² The *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* is based in a relatively safe city but operates near high-crime areas such as Bremen and Hanover. However, Osnabrück has lately recorded an increased number of violent offenses, including assault, robbery, and threats, reaching one of its highest levels in the past 30 years (Polizeidirektion Osnabrück, 2025). The *Freie Presse* in Chemnitz reports from a city with an above-average crime rate that has drawn national attention due to incidents involving violent crime and right-wing extremism (Polizei Sachsen, 2025; Sächsische Staatskanzlei, 2025). It provides a compelling case for analyzing local crime reporting in politically charged settings. The *Nürnberger Nachrichten* covers one of the more crime-affected cities in otherwise safe southern Germany (Polizeipräsidium Mittelfranken, 2025), making it suitable for investigating how crime is framed in comparatively secure urban areas. The *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (WAZ), with editorial offices across the Ruhr area, operates in one of Germany's most crime-intensive regions (Landeskriminalamt Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2024). This area reflects urban challenges such as soci-

2 Certain newspapers with comparable or even greater reach were not included in the analysis, as their content was not accessible for us.

al inequality, gang activity, and other forms of diversity, making it representative of crime discourse in Western metropolitan contexts.

The GBI-Genios WISO-net platform was utilized to access news articles from online outlets of regional newspapers, with authorized access granted through affiliation with Chemnitz University of Technology. To identify an article as relevant for analysis, it was required that at least one of the terms “offender,” “victim,” or “crime” appeared in conjunction with at least one other crime-related term, such as “trial,” “arrest,” or “police.” Articles were excluded if the reported offense occurred abroad. Given the high volume of crime news published by these outlets, we employed artificial weeks for the evaluation period, resulting in a total sample of 468 crime news articles (*Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*: $n = 204$; *Freie Presse*: $n = 199$; *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*: $n = 54$; *Nürnberger Nachrichten*: $n = 29$). This approach ensures representative coverage of crime reporting trends within the analyzed period (January–July 2024).

3.2.2 Quantitative operationalization

A codebook was developed using a deductive-inductive approach (e.g., Brill et al., 2025; Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020; Goedeke Tort et al., 2016). The codebook included formal categories such as coder ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), contribution number ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), medium ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), date ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), and word count ($\kappa = .89$; $r_H = .90$) (see Rössler, 2017).

The codebook also encompassed content categories for each frame element (see Brill et al., 2025). This included the actors mentioned in the reports (mentioned, not mentioned), such as citizens ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), police ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), migrants ($\kappa = .78$; $r_H = .97$), and political parties ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), as well as the crimes committed (mentioned, not mentioned), such as murder ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), bodily harm ($\kappa = .71$; $r_H = .90$), rape/sexual abuse ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), fraud ($\kappa = 1.00$), and traffic offenses ($\kappa = .61$; $r_H = .90$), to identify the problem definition in the articles.

Additionally, data were collected regarding the perpetrators' or suspects' portrayal (see Brill et al., 2025). This encompassed various aspects, including the number of individuals involved (not specified, single offender, several perpetrators, or a group/organization; $\kappa = .74$; $r_H = .83$), age categories (mentioned, not mentioned), such as adolescents aged 14 to 18 ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), or adults aged 18 to 64 ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), gender (mentioned, not mentioned), including not specified ($\kappa = .87$; $r_H = .93$), male ($\kappa = .87$; $r_H = .93$), female ($\kappa = .65$; $r_H = .97$), and other ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), and description of appearance (described, not described; $\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$). It also included citations of the criminal/suspect (mentioned, not mentioned; $\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$) or related individuals, such as their attorney ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), and origin (mentioned, not mentioned), including German ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$) and non-German/migration background ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$). The specific country of origin was recorded in cases of non-German offenders or suspects (open evaluation; $\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$). Furthermore, information was collected regarding whether the individuals involved in the criminal activity were identified (not specified, perpetrator still unknown, per-

son suspected, perpetrator known; $\kappa = .63$; $r_H = .76$) and whether they had been arrested (not specified, perpetrator arrested or convicted, perpetrator not yet arrested or convicted, perpetrator on the run; $\kappa = .60$; $r_H = .73$).

The causal attribution (mentioned, not mentioned) encompassed both personal factors, such as family issues ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), alcohol or drug use ($\kappa = .76$; $r_H = .93$), and mental health issues ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), as well as social factors, such as religious affiliation ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), origin ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), and association with a criminal organization ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$), that were reported to have contributed to the commission of the crime. References to origin were treated as causal attributions only when a discernible connection to the crime was made, typically by implying sociocultural factors or by reporting migration- or origin-related causes (e.g., “He acted out of frustration over what he perceived as an unsuccessful appointment at the Kiel Immigration Office”, case 110). A simple mention of origin was not sufficient to justify this coding. When reports provide limited contextual information, the portrayal of origin often implicitly links the affected social group to the crime. Including details such as a suspect’s origin, appearance, or religion in a crime report constitutes a deliberate editorial judgment. It may activate cognitive schemas that imply culturally or socially rooted causes of criminal behavior. Such co-activation may then serve as a basis for subjective causal attribution by audiences (Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020).

The moral evaluation ($\kappa = .68$; $r_H = .93$) included no discernible evaluation, or explicit positive, negative, or ambivalent assessments (see Goedeke Tort et al., 2016). The frame element treatment recommendation encompassed the actions suggested in the reports to address or improve the situation or issue (mentioned, not mentioned), such as increased enforcement of controls or safety measures ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$) and the respective target audiences for these actions, such as citizens ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$) and government/city administration ($\kappa = 1.00$; $r_H = 1.00$).

To ensure the reliability and intersubjective reproducibility of the coding process, intercoder reliability was assessed on a randomly selected subsample of 30 cases, utilizing Cohen’s Kappa (κ) (Altman, 1991; Landis & Koch, 1977) and Holsti’s coefficient (r_H) based on paired comparisons (Rössler, 2017). Values of $\kappa = .80$ and $r_H = .90$ or higher typically indicate very high measurement quality, while values of $\kappa = .40$ and $r_H = .70$ or above are acceptable for more complex or ambiguous categories (Altman, 1991; Früh, 2017; Landis & Koch, 1977). Two experienced coders, who underwent extensive training to ensure consistency in their coding decisions, were involved. The average intercoder reliability achieved was $\kappa = .87$ and $r_H = .98$, with the lowest score for any individual variable being $\kappa = .60$ and $r_H = .73$. The results demonstrated that all categories achieved satisfactory reliability levels, justifying the remaining sample’s independent coding.

3.2.3 Quantitative data analysis

To address RQ1, a cluster analysis was conducted. Given the study’s exploratory nature and to enhance the reliability and validity of the analysis (Matthes & Kohring, 2004), frames were not predefined. First, the frequencies of all variables

were examined. With a relatively small sample size, the usual 5% threshold was adjusted to 4%, and some categories were recoded as needed. In total, 25 variables related to the frame elements were included in the cluster analysis. The only exception was the frame element treatment recommendation, including the addressees, as the frequency of related variables was too low for meaningful inclusion. In the second step, divergent cases were identified through single-linkage clustering and dendrogram analysis. Four cases were excluded, resulting in a dataset of $n = 480$ for the cluster analysis. Finally, using Ward's linkage method, clusters were progressively merged. The elbow criterion indicated a four-cluster solution, identifying four distinct frames. Means and t -values were used to describe the frames, with F -values checked to confirm cluster homogeneity (see Table 2 for means). The clusters were found to be internally homogeneous. For all other RQs, subsequent tests (mainly Chi² tests) were performed.

3.3 Qualitative content analysis

To gain a more in-depth understanding of how perpetrators are portrayed and how crimes are contextualized, we conducted a content-structuring analysis (qualitative approach) using MAXQDA (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). The category development followed a “mixed strategy” (Wiesner, 2022, p. 14) by deriving the main thematic categories deductively (such as the frame elements, or perpetrator's or suspect's origin) from the state of research and adding most subcategories inductively through an iterative coding process (Mayring, 2021). To ensure consistency in the application of codes, we employed a consensual coding approach involving collaborative discussion among the researchers contributing to the analysis.

For the qualitative content analysis, a purposive subsample from the original dataset was selected. The selection aimed at capturing variation across the three identified types of origin references (explicit German, explicit non-German, and implicit non-German), while also considering the prior identified frames and media outlets. There were $n = 66$ articles in total referencing perpetrators' origin explicitly or implicitly. The smallest number of articles referred to those reporting perpetrators' German origin, with a total of $n = 9$ articles. To ensure a more balanced comparison, we decided to use this group as the reference group and included nine articles for each subgroup of origin reference in the qualitative analysis. To ensure diversity within the sample and to avoid selection bias, we aimed for a balanced representation of newspapers and frames when selecting the articles. The final sample of $n = 27$ articles used for the qualitative analysis is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample for qualitative analysis

| Nr. | Article Nr. | Newspaper | Frame |
|--|-------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Articles with mention of German origin of offenders ($n = 9$) | | | |
| 1 | 598 | Freie Presse | Vandals |
| 2 | 233 | WAZ | Felons |
| 3 | 344 | Freie Presse | Thieves and burglars |
| 4 | 524 | Freie Presse | Vandals |
| 5 | 704 | Nürnberger Nachrichten | Felons |
| 6 | 541 | Freie Presse | Vandals |
| 7 | 604 | Freie Presse | Vandals |
| 8 | 436 | Freie Presse | Thieves and burglars |
| 9 | 251 | Freie Presse | Felons |
| Articles with explicit mention of non-German origin of offenders ($n = 9$) | | | |
| 1 | 375 | Freie Presse | Negligent traffic offenders |
| 2 | 395 | WAZ | Negligent traffic offenders |
| 3 | 801 | Freie Presse | Vandals |
| 4 | 275 | Freie Presse | Vandals |
| 5 | 470 | Nürnberger Nachrichten | Felons |
| 6 | 807 | Nürnberger Nachrichten | Thieves and burglars |
| 7 | 469 | Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung | Felons |
| 8 | 773 | Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung | Felons |
| 9 | 764 | WAZ | Thieves |
| Articles with implicit mention of non-German offenders ($n = 9$) | | | |
| 1 | 299 | Nürnberger Nachrichten | Felons |
| 2 | 861 | Nürnberger Nachrichten | Thieves and burglars |
| 3 | 306 | Freie Presse | Thieves and burglars |
| 4 | 420 | Freie Presse | Thieves and burglars |
| 5 | 415 | Freie Presse | Thieves and burglars |
| 6 | 812 | WAZ | Felons |
| 7 | 911 | WAZ | Felons |
| 8 | 935 | WAZ | Thieves and burglars |
| 9 | 742 | WAZ | Thieves and burglars |

Notes. The article numbers refer to a pre-selection of all articles published within the defined time-frame. Only those articles reporting on criminal offenses were included in the final sample.

4. Results

4.1 Results of the quantitative content analysis

The results of the content analysis revealed that *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* ($n = 204$; 42%) and *Freie Presse* ($n = 199$; 41%) reported on criminal matters more frequently than *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* ($n = 54$; 11%) and *Nürnberger Nachrichten* ($n = 29$; 6%). Average length of a report on a criminal offense was 238 words ($M = 238.18$; $SD = 170.23$). The actors most frequently referenced in crime news include representatives from the police or the judicial system (99%), citizens (96%), children or adolescents (20%), individuals with a migration background (10%), and political parties or politicians (5%). The most represented criminal offenses are theft (36%), bodily harm (29%), criminal mischief (22%), fleeing from justice (22%), traffic offenses (17%), and murder (11%).

In 44% of the cases, a single perpetrator or suspect was mentioned, while in 42% multiple perpetrators or a group of criminals were involved. In many cases, the perpetrator's or suspect's age was not specified (46%), but when provided, the age range was predominantly adults between the ages of 18 and 64 (46%), with younger individuals aged 14–17 being less frequently mentioned (8%). Regarding the gender, male perpetrators or suspects (65%) were considerably more frequently represented than of female perpetrators or suspects (6%). While the origin of criminals or suspects was typically absent from the reports (85%), the migration background was referenced at a rate nearly five times higher (13%) than that of German origins (3%). In cases where the country of origin of immigrant perpetrators was explicitly mentioned, the most frequently cited nationalities included individuals from Turkey (13%), Syria (11%), Poland (7%), and Romania (7%). When the non-German origin of perpetrators was indicated, it predominantly pertained to reports of theft or burglary, assault, murder, rape or sexual abuse, and illegal possession of weapons. Conversely, in the few instances where the German origin of perpetrators was noted, it was predominantly associated with property damage, assault, murder, theft or burglary, and sedition.

4.1.1 Frames of criminals in German regional newspapers (RQ1)

The cluster analysis identified four frames of criminals (see Table 2):

Felons (35%; $n = 167$): This frame is characterized by serious crimes, including bodily harm (42%), murder (25%), rape/sexual abuse (15%), and fraud (13%), disproportionately involving children (29%). Causal attributions frequently point to personal factors, primarily the criminal's social or family issues (26%) or mental health issues (12%). The moral evaluation is disproportionately negative (15%). Most perpetrators in this frame have been identified (67%) and apprehended (60%). They are disproportionately cited in the reports (15%). Most offenders are single individuals (56%). Although women were rarely featured in the analyzed articles, they are mentioned in 11% of cases in this frame, while men are explicitly cited as perpetrators or suspects in 81% of cases. Individuals over the age of 18 are named as perpetrators or suspects in 65% of cases, yet minors also

appear at a higher-than-average rate (10%). In 8% of cases within this frame, the appearance of individuals involved in crimes is described. Names are disproportionately mentioned (fully or partially) in another 8% of cases. On average, the articles of this frame possessed the longest average word count among the examined frames ($M = 312.15$; $SD = 188.11$).

Thieves and burglars (29%; $n = 141$): This frame commonly encompasses theft or burglary (83%), flight from justice (40%), and bodily harm (20%). Immigrants are frequently mentioned as perpetrators or suspects (18%), with companies often identified as victims (15%). Causal attributions are infrequent but, when included, typically emphasize social factors, primarily the criminal's (foreign) background (10%). Generally, limited information is disclosed about the perpetrator or suspect. Criminals in this frame commonly act as a group (53%) and are often unknown (61%). Although age information is scarce, minors are involved at a higher-than-average rate (13%), whereas adults are specified in 35% of cases. In 63% of cases, the perpetrator or suspect is identified as male, and in only 3%, as female. The appearance of individuals involved in crimes is described disproportionately within this frame (17%). On average, the articles related to this frame were 199 words in length ($M = 198.99$; $SD = 149.98$).

Vandals (19%; $n = 93$): This frame primarily involves property damage (99%) and theft or burglary (37%), with causal attributions often linked to personal factors, such as the perpetrators' political attitudes (12%) or negligent behavior (11%). Crimes in this frame are frequently committed by groups (54%), and the perpetrators or suspects are often unidentified (59%). In 37% of cases, arrests are reported, whereas in 26% the suspects remain at large. Limited information is provided on the perpetrators or suspects: Males are mentioned in 24% of cases, while females are noted in only 3%. In 23% of the reports, the age of the adults involved was specified as between 18 and 64 years old. Minors were mentioned in 9% of the reports. The moral evaluation is explicitly negative in 5% of cases. On average, the articles in this frame were 179 words in length ($M = 178.84$; $SD = 135.38$) and thus the shortest in the sample.

Negligent traffic offenders (17%; $n = 79$): The last frame focuses on traffic offenses (87%), bodily harm (48%), and flight from justice (39%; i.e., hit and run), with causal attributions mainly pointing to personal factors, primarily negligent actions (61%) or drug or alcohol abuse (32%). Considerable information is disclosed about the perpetrators and suspects, who are primarily single offenders (76%), identified (75%), and, in many cases, arrested (44%). Women are disproportionately represented as suspects in this frame (8%), though most suspects remain male (76%). Most perpetrators or suspects mentioned are between 18 and 64 years old (65%). On average, the articles related to this frame were 218 words in length ($M = 218.05$; $SD = 145.54$).

Table 2. Frames of criminals in German regional crime news

| | Felons | Thieves and burglars | Vandals | Negligent traffic offenders |
|---------------------------------------|--------|----------------------|---------|-----------------------------|
| Problem definition (involved actors) | | | | |
| Immigrants | 8% | 18% | 4% | 1% |
| Citizens | 98% | 95% | 92% | 100% |
| Police/justice system | 98% | 99% | 100% | 100% |
| Medical employees | 14% | 3% | 1% | 15% |
| Children/adolescents | 29% | 15% | 11% | 16% |
| Companies | 7% | 15% | 16% | 4% |
| Political Parties/government | 11% | - | 3% | 1% |
| Problem definition (committed crimes) | | | | |
| Murder | 25% | 5% | - | 6% |
| Bodily harm | 42% | 20% | 2% | 48% |
| Theft or burglary | 10% | 83% | 37% | 5% |
| Property damage | 5% | 3% | 99% | 3% |
| Fraud | 13% | 1% | - | 1% |
| Rape/sexual abuse | 15% | 1% | - | - |
| Insult | 10% | 1% | - | 6% |
| Threat | 10% | 9% | 1% | 3% |
| Illegal possession of weapons | 7% | 6% | 2% | - |
| Traffic offenses | 1% | 3% | 5% | 87% |
| Flight from justice | 7% | 40% | 5% | 39% |
| Causal attribution | | | | |
| Origin | 1% | 10% | 3% | - |
| Mental health issues | 12% | 1% | 1% | - |
| Problems in the social environment | 26% | 1% | 4% | 3% |
| Drug or alcohol abuse | 8% | 2% | 1% | 32% |
| Negligent behavior | 10% | 1% | 11% | 61% |
| Political attitude | 10% | 1% | 12% | 3% |
| Moral evaluation | | | | |
| negative | 15% | 1% | 5% | 1% |

Note. $n_{\text{Felons}} = 167$; $n_{\text{Thieves and burglars}} = 141$; $n_{\text{Vandals}} = 93$; $n_{\text{Negligent traffic offenders}} = 79$.

4.1.2 Differences in reporting perpetrators' origins across frames (RQ2)

Significant differences exist between the frames in highlighting a perpetrator's origin, $\chi^2(3) = 24.81, p < .001, V = .23$ (see Table 3). The origin of a perpetrator or suspect is most frequently emphasized in the *Thieves and burglars* frame, followed by the *Felons* frame. It is mentioned less often in articles concerning *Vandals* and *Negligent traffic offenders*.

Table 3. Frequency of reporting perpetrators' or suspects' origins across frames

| | Felons | Thieves and burglars | Vandals | Negligent traffic offenders |
|----------------------|--------|----------------------|---------|-----------------------------|
| Origin not mentioned | 83% | 75% | 92% | 97% |
| Origin mentioned | 17% | 25% | 8% | 3% |

Notes. $n_{\text{Felons}} = 167$; $n_{\text{Thieves and burglars}} = 141$; $n_{\text{Vandals}} = 93$; $n_{\text{Negligent traffic offenders}} = 79$. $\chi^2(3) = 24.81, p < .001, V = .23$.

In the *Felons* frame, the non-German origin of perpetrators is explicitly noted in 16% of cases, compared to only 4% for German origin.³ In the *Thieves and burglars* frame, non-German origin is frequently highlighted (24%), whereas German origin is mentioned in just 1% of cases. In contrast, the *Vandals* frame disproportionately emphasizes German origin (5%), with non-German origin referenced in only 3% of cases. For the *Negligent traffic offenders* frame, the origin of perpetrators is generally unspecified; however, when mentioned, it exclusively refers to non-German origins (3%).

4.1.3 Differences in the use of frames across newspapers (RQ3)

The analysis reveals significant variation in frame distribution across regional newspapers, $\chi^2(3) = 73.31, p < .001, V = .23$ (see Table 4). The *Freie Presse*, representing East Germany, tends to emphasize reports on *Vandals* and *Thieves and burglars*, while it reports less on *Felons* and *Negligent traffic offenders*. The *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (West Germany) primarily covers *Felons* and *Thieves and burglars*, with fewer reports on *Negligent traffic offenders* and *Vandals*. A similar frame distribution is observed in the *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* (Northern Germany), which focuses more on *Felons* and *Thieves and burglars*. Meanwhile, the *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, representing Southern Germany, focuses strongly on *Felons*, with less emphasis on the other frames.

3 Please note that German and non-German perpetrators may be mentioned simultaneously in a report.

Table 4. Frame distribution across newspapers

| | Felons | Thieves and burglars | Vandals | Negligent traffic offenders |
|---------------------------------|--------|----------------------|---------|-----------------------------|
| Freie Presse | 20% | 30% | 35% | 16% |
| Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung | 42% | 30% | 9% | 18% |
| Nürnberger Nachrichten | 71% | 14% | 7% | 7% |
| Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung | 43% | 32% | 8% | 17% |

Notes. $n_{\text{Felons}} = 167$; $n_{\text{Thieves and burglars}} = 141$; $n_{\text{Vandals}} = 93$; $n_{\text{Negligent traffic offenders}} = 79$. $\chi^2(3) = 73.31$, $p < .001$, $V = .23$.

4.1.4 Differences in reporting perpetrators' origins across newspapers (RQ4)

While frames differ in how frequently they mention the non-German origin of perpetrators and frame distribution varies across newspapers, the newspapers themselves do not significantly differ in the frequency with which they mention the non-German origin, $\chi^2(3) = 4.33$, $p = .22$, $V = .10$ (see Table 5). The *Freie Presse*, *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Nürnberger Nachrichten* exhibit similar frequencies in mentioning non-German origins. In contrast, the *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* references non-German origin less frequently.

Table 5. Frequency of reporting perpetrators' or suspects' non-German origin across newspapers

| | Freie Presse | Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung | Nürnberger Nachrichten | Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung |
|--|--------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| German origin mentioned/ origin not mentioned | 88% | 84% | 86% | 94% |
| Non-German origin mentioned | 12% | 16% | 14% | 6% |

Notes. $n_{\text{Felons}} = 167$; $n_{\text{Thieves and burglars}} = 141$; $n_{\text{Vandals}} = 93$; $n_{\text{Negligent traffic offenders}} = 79$. $\chi^2(3) = 4.33$, $p = .22$, $V = .10$.

The German origin of a perpetrator or suspect was mentioned more frequently in *Nürnberger Nachrichten* (7%) and *Freie Presse* (4%) than in *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (2%) or *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* (0%); however, these differences are also not significant, $\chi^2(3) = 6.19$, $p = .10$, $V = .11$.

4.2 Results of the qualitative content analysis

The qualitative content analysis further revealed distinct patterns in how the origin of perpetrators with German or non-German backgrounds was reported (RQ5).

Concerning reports on crimes involving German suspects or offenders, little additional information about the perpetrators or suspects is disclosed; typically, only their sex and age were reported. In one instance, the perpetrator is described

as a sports marksman. Notably, the explicit mention of German origin predominantly appeared in reports of criminal offenses committed by groups of men. This pattern may indicate an attempt to preempt anticipated accusations from right-wing commentators by clarifying the perpetrators' background. Only one article employs markedly dramatizing stylistic devices, referring to a "deed of blood", "hated neighbors", and stating that the victims were "virtually executed within a very short time." The perpetrator in this case is portrayed as particularly calculating, with the article noting: "The 64-year-old is said to have been lying in wait for this" (case 704).

The portrayal of perpetrators whose non-German origin is explicitly mentioned typically includes reference to their country of origin. Several articles emphasize the perpetrators' mental health status, using terms such as "psychotic" and "traumatized" (case 764), or describing them as psychologically unwell (cases 773, 110). In addition, substance use is frequently highlighted, with perpetrators reported to have been under the influence of alcohol and drugs. In one instance, the perpetrator's name is repeated multiple times ("Ibrahim A.", case 110), potentially reinforcing his otherness. A dramatizing language style is also evident in some of the portrayals, with phrases such as "horror and grief" (cases 110, 801), "brutal," "discarded like trash" (case 470), and a "Hollywood-like" police intervention (case 764) contributing to a sensationalized reporting.

The portrayal of perpetrators whose *non-German origin is implied* relies on a range of indirect markers. Such implications are made through phrases like "foreign youngsters" (case 415) or "young men from the Arab or North African region" (case 306). Names also serve as indicators; certain names are repeatedly mentioned, even in brief articles, for instance, "Jalil H.," "Hakim H.," and "Saad U.," whose names appear multiple times in article 299. Additionally, references to physical appearance contribute to this implicit framing: perpetrators are described as having a "tanned skin tone" (case 742), "dark curled hair" (case 306), or a "southern appearance" (cases 861, 420). Linguistic cues further reinforce the perceived otherness, with several articles noting non-German accents: Perpetrators are reported to have "spoken broken German with a heavy accent" (case 812), "spoken with a possibly Arabic dialect" (case 742), or used a "southern dialect" (case 935). Communication difficulties are highlighted as well, for instance, through remarks about "massive problems with communication [in court]," necessitating a translator or relying on a son to interpret, which reportedly led to misunderstandings. Such language barriers are described as obstacles to achieving justice (case 299).

A systematic comparison of the three groups of articles reveals both similarities and notable differences in the portrayal of perpetrators in connection with their (constructed) identity (RQ6). Across all groups, selective disclosure of personal details, such as age, sex, and occasionally occupation, are common tools for constructing criminal identities. However, differences emerged in how origin is used in the articles, emphasized and contextualized. In the context of most negligent crimes (e.g., traffic offenses), the origin of perpetrators was typically not mentioned. There is reason to believe that, in such cases, a German origin is implicitly assumed as the default and therefore deemed unworthy of mention. For perpetra-

tors of German origin, their background is notably often explicated in cases involving groups of offenders, seemingly as a strategy to counter anticipated right-wing narratives of criminal clans or gangs. In contrast, non-German origin is either explicitly stated (see 4.1.2) or implicitly suggested through a range of cues, including country of origin, names, appearance, and language proficiency (see 4.2) and contextually more frequently associated with personal characteristics or shortcomings such as mental illness, substance abuse, and communication barriers, reinforcing stereotypes of otherness. Dramatizing elements appear more pronounced in cases where a non-German origin of perpetrators or suspects is mentioned or implied, with sensationalist phrases and detailed descriptions of their “foreign” traits. This comparison suggests a pattern of differentiation: while German perpetrators or suspects are presented in a more restrained, factual manner, non-German perpetrators or suspects are depicted through a lens of cultural and social deviance, both explicitly and implicitly. Since it is impossible to account for journalists’ intentions in a content analysis, and coding causal attributions proved challenging in the quantitative component, we aimed to identify indications within the qualitative content analysis of whether the mention of perpetrator’s or suspects’ origin served to portray it as causally relevant. This was not the case: In none of the articles included in the subsample for the qualitative analysis was the mere mention of origin coded as an attribution of causality. This indicates that, although it would in principle be possible for perpetrators’ or suspects’ origin to be described in the articles as causal factor for their actions and accordingly coded as such, this does not appear to be an occurring pattern.

To assess how perpetrators’ or suspects’ origin is mentioned across the frames identified in the cluster analysis (RQ7), a qualitative review of the cases in the subsample was conducted. In the “traffic offenders” frame, no general implication of foreign nationality/migration background was observed; however, two instances explicitly mentioned the Polish nationality of drunk drivers. These references appear incidental and are not representative of the broader frame. Within the “vandals” frame, most suspects were identified as young Germans, often in connection with minor acts such as setting fire to garbage bins or damaging vehicles. In one case, a politically motivated attack on a constituency office was attributed to a German suspect. Occasionally, references to alcohol consumption served as causal attributions, but national origin was not foregrounded. The “thieves and burglars” frame revealed a different pattern: While one case of organized car theft explicitly named both suspects as German, descriptions of other suspects frequently included vague references such as “southern appearance”, particularly in contexts where police were still searching for witnesses. This implicit form of attribution also appeared in a few instances within the “felons” frame, most commonly in relation to sexual assaults or physical altercations. Several reports involving more serious offenses, such as knife attacks or sexual violence, explicitly mentioned a non-German origin of the alleged perpetrators.

Overall, while explicit mentions of origin are rare and unevenly distributed, there seems to be a discernible tendency for foreign or non-German origin to be more frequently referenced – whether implicitly or explicitly – in frames associated with more serious or violent crimes.

5. Discussion

Through quantitative content analysis of crime reports in German regional newspapers, we identified four frames predominantly used to describe and contextualize criminals. Reports about *Felons* were particularly frequent and stand out for their length, often disclosing more detailed information about the offender or suspect, such as (personal) factors that led to the commitment of the crime and their (non-German) origin, which may be explained by greater public interest in serious crimes and a higher news value (e.g., Brill et al., 2021). Offenders or suspects in this frame were quoted more frequently than average. These reports make it easier to obtain a more detailed picture of perpetrators or suspects and the circumstances, and are frequently framed in a morally negative manner. Reports about *Thieves and burglars* were also frequent, though shorter on average and provided less information about the perpetrators or suspects. Even more so than the *Felons* frame, these reports more strongly suggested a stereotypical portrayal of perpetrators with a migration background by typically solely including details about their (non-German) origin and the commitment of offenses in groups. *Vandals* received the shortest coverage, with limited information provided about the perpetrators or suspects. Crimes in the fourth frame, involving, *Negligent traffic offenders*, were reported extensively. However, these articles generally provided limited information about the perpetrators or suspects. Their origin was rarely mentioned; however, when it was, the emphasis was predominantly placed on their migration background. Typically, personal factors contributing to the crime, such as driving under the influence or simple misbehavior, were highlighted.

A comparison with official crime statistics reveals that certain types of crime – and by extension, particular offender profiles – are overrepresented in local media coverage. While the reports analyzed in our study primarily focused on offenses such as theft (36%), bodily harm (29%), criminal mischief (22%), traffic offenses (17%), murder (11%), rape or sexual abuse (6%), or fraud (5%), the official crime statistics paint a different picture. According to the national data (see Federal Criminal Police Office, 2025), violent crimes such as bodily harm account for approximately 11%, offenses against life (e.g., murder or manslaughter) for only 0.1%, and sexual offenses for about 2% of all recorded crimes – significantly lower than their frequency in local media reporting. Offenses such as criminal mischief, which make up around 9% of actual criminal offenses, are also overrepresented in media coverage. Conversely, fraud (13%) is underrepresented in local media. Only the frequency of reports on (serious) theft, which constitutes roughly 33% of recorded crimes, is consistent with official statistics. Traffic offenses are not directly included in official crime statistics, as they are not classified as independent criminal offenses but typically recorded under other categories, such as criminal mischief. Consequently, no direct comparison can be drawn between the frequency of traffic offenses in media reports and their representation in official crime statistics. According to crime statistics, foreign individuals account for nearly 35% of criminal suspects in Germany. This figure also includes individuals who do not reside in Germany but were temporarily present or those

who entered the country with the specific intent to commit an offense in Germany (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, 2025). Accordingly, most criminal suspects are of German origin. While the origin of perpetrators or suspects was typically absent from the reports, a migration background was mentioned nearly five times more often (13%) than a German origin (3%), contradicting official crime statistics and potentially contributing to a distorted public perception.

Since the articles across all frames rarely included recommendations for action or addressed specific addressees, this frame element had to be excluded from the analysis. Given that moral evaluation was also infrequent, it can be concluded that journalists of regional newspapers tend to report about events or rephrase police reports than offer additional investigation, critical analysis of the subject matter, (local-level) policy implications or in-depth moral judgments. Still, decisions about selection, framing, and emphasis remain editorial choices for which journalists are accountable under professional standards like the Press Code.

The results further revealed that crime was predominantly reported in East and West Germany, with significantly fewer reports in southern and northern regions, which aligns with the regional distribution of crime rates (Kuhn & Niewendick, 2024). Considering their closer correspondence with these statistics, regional newspapers may offer a more accurate portrayal of criminal activity in a given region than national news outlets. The latter often disproportionately focus on serious crimes, such as murder or terrorism (see Brill et al., 2025). Still, the newspapers analyzed in this study exhibited a notable focus on serious crimes, frequently reporting on *Felons* and *Thieves and Burglars*. The *Nürnberger Zeitung* seems to dedicate a disproportionate amount of coverage to felonies, although, statistically, fewer such crimes occur in southern Germany. Among the outlets studied, only *Freie Presse* demonstrated a relatively balanced distribution of frames.

Another consistent theme in reporting criminal activity is the more frequent mentioning of non-German origin than German origin of perpetrators or suspects, although differences are even more pronounced in national news outlets (see Brill et al., 2025; Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020). Conversely, crime statistics indicate that German individuals are more likely to commit crimes than their non-German counterparts (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, 2025). The tendency to imply or explicitly state the non-German origin of perpetrators and suspects was evident to similar extents across all newspapers examined in the study. The country of origin was often explicitly emphasized when the individuals involved were from Turkey or Syria, nations already subject to prevalent stereotypes (Partain & Weaver, 2022). The repeated association of these nationalities with criminal activity risks reinforcing and entrenching these stereotypes (Klimmt et al., 2024). Notably, non-German origins were frequently highlighted in reports concerning serious criminal offenses such as assault, murder, rape, and sexual abuse i.e., in the *Felons* and *Thieves and burglars* frames. In such cases, one might argue that disclosing the perpetrators' origins could be justified in the public interest. This standard appears to be applied inconsistently, as the German origin of perpetrators was rarely mentioned explicitly, even in the context of similarly seri-

ous offenses. The qualitative content analysis further revealed that, in the frames of *Felons* and *Thieves and burglars*, more subtle references are made to the origins of the individuals involved. This includes descriptions of appearance or the mention of foreign-sounding names. The qualitative analysis of a subsample identified this as a general pattern: A non-German background is often conveyed implicitly through linguistic, visual, or cultural cues such as names, appearance, and language proficiency. These indirect markers serve to classify suspects without explicitly naming their origin. Such “cues” are often sufficient to be recognized by audiences and can prime stereotypical perceptions (Gaddis, 2017). The qualitative analysis also revealed that, in contrast to reports on German offenders or suspects, cases in which a non-German origin is explicitly stated are often accompanied by stigmatizing details such as references to mental illness, substance abuse, or the use of dramatizing language. This might reinforce a narrative of deviance and otherness. Moreover, a non-German background is also conveyed implicitly through linguistic, visual, or cultural cues such as names, appearance, and language proficiency. These indirect markers serve to classify or even stereotype suspects without explicitly naming their origin.

Although we did not investigate the reasoning behind journalists’ decisions, it seems likely that newspapers feel compelled by their readership to include information regarding the origin of perpetrators in their reports. Research suggests that journalists tend to align their reporting with audience preferences, particularly given the immediate feedback available through online comments (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Reinemann & Baugut, 2014). Right-wing populist actors have been exerting pressure on news media to modify how foreign criminality is portrayed (Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020; Krämer, 2017), and in times of increased migration and populist calls for disclosure, the mentioning of perpetrators’ origins increased in German newspapers (Klimmt et al., 2024). Additionally, it is possible that unconscious stereotypical biases can influence journalists’ editorial decisions (Coleman, 2003). In certain cases, editors may perceive the origin of perpetrators as part of broader social or political issues and aim to highlight patterns or societal problems through their emphasis. Unfortunately, mentioning origin can also be driven by sensationalist motives, intended to make the report more ‘exciting’ or ‘newsworthy’ (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Maier et al., 2018), and thereby attract more attention, clicks, or circulation. Some editors, however, adhere more to ethical guidelines that stress reporting only relevant facts necessary for understanding the offense, of which the origin is often not considered a part. To establish a causal relationship in either direction, it would be necessary to consider journalists’ perceptions of such populists’ demands and their reasoning behind the origin-related portrayal of criminals.

While the study provides valuable insights by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample of articles was unevenly drawn from different regional newspapers, meaning that certain publications, with their specific perspectives or framing styles, may be overrepresented, potentially leading to a skewed depiction that may not accurately reflect the broader media sector analyzed. Nevertheless, since the sample was drawn under consistent conditions, by creating artificial weeks, it can be as-

sumed that it accurately reflects the frequency of crime news and the distribution of topics, i.e., crimes, among the newspapers. Second, we focused solely on the textual content of the articles and did not analyze images that sometimes accompany crime reports in regional newspapers. Images depicting the perpetrator, potentially revealing visual traits such as skin color, may implicitly convey information about the perpetrator's migration background, as well as other characteristics such as gender. Third, since Entman's framing approach was originally developed to analyze media portrayals of events or situations, it is important to critically reflect on the extent to which it can be applied to the framing of individuals. Given that crime is inherently linked to individuals and the approach has already been applied to the framing of individuals or social groups (e.g., Brill et al., 2025; Dan & Ren, 2021; Goedeke Tort et al., 2016; Lavie-Dinur et al., 2013; Lawler & Tolley, 2017; Muncie, 2019), it seems conceptually valuable to apply the framework to perpetrators. While certain frame elements were rarely observed in our analysis, this is not problematic, as Entman (1993) explicitly notes that not all frame elements must necessarily be present in each frame.⁴ This is supported by other studies showing that frame elements often appear selectively (e.g., Brill et al., 2025). Fourth, it can be questioned whether frames can be reliably identified in relatively short regional newspaper articles. We assume, however, the average article length of 238 words to allow for sufficient interpretive context. Longer texts may complicate frame attribution, since multiple interpretive patterns often coexist within them (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

Despite these limitations, this study provides insights into the framing of criminals and suspects in German regional newspapers through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis that identifies specific frames of criminals with qualitative analysis. In particular, the qualitative approach added value to the existing body of research by providing an in-depth exploration of how explicit or implicit references to perpetrators' origin contribute to their framing in regional media coverage. From an impact perspective, the findings raise considerable concerns: Frequent portrayals of minority group members involved in criminal activities are likely to solidify negative perceptions of these groups and reinforce existing prejudices. Such patterns can be observed not only in Germany (see e.g., Brill et al., 2025; Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020) but also in other countries' contexts (see e.g., Jacobs, 2017). Furthermore, this study confirms that such tendencies in reporting can be observed not only in national media (see e.g., Brill et al., 2025) but also in local media. Should journalistic practices in crime reporting remain unaltered, there is a risk of reinforcing xenophobic attitudes, potentially contributing to political polarization in Germany. In light of prevailing political tensions in the region, this issue assumes particular significance in East Germany, while simultaneously underscoring potential risks for other regions and countries. For minorities, more prevalent xenophobic attitudes pose a heightened risk of

4 This is emphasized by the use of "and/or" in the following quote: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

experiencing verbal and physical hostility, leading to feelings of insecurity and creating barriers to social integration (Dittrich & Klimmt, 2020; Trebbe & Schoenhagen, 2011). Considering existing stipulations in the Press Code and its function as a set of guidelines rather than legally binding regulations, we encourage further training for journalists to increase their awareness of and sensitivity to this issue. The findings further suggest the need for clearer language in Guideline 12.1 of the Press Code.

Generative AI declaration

AI was used solely for linguistic editing of this manuscript to improve grammar and spelling, as the authors are not native speakers of the language in which the manuscript was written.

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Appendix

Composition of the three groups of articles (explicit German, explicit non-German, and implicit non-German)

Group 1: In the articles that mentioned the German origin explicitly ($n = 9$), the perpetrators were predominantly framed as *Vandals* according to cluster analysis (4 articles), *Felons* (3 articles), and *Thieves* (2 articles); no articles covered *Traffic Offenders*. These articles were primarily published in *Freie Presse* (7 articles), with one article each from *Nürnberger Nachrichten* and *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, but no articles from *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*.

Group 2: In Articles with explicit mention of non-German origin ($n = 39$) offenders were mainly portrayed as *Felons* and *Thieves*, with a few articles featuring *Vandals* (2) and *Traffic Offenders* (2). Most articles originated from *Freie Presse* and *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, but some also from *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* (3 articles) and *Nürnberger Nachrichten* (2 articles). Multiple articles per frame and outlet were included, with five articles from *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* clustering around the *Thieves* frame (e.g., article IDs 471, 813, 863, 132, 764).

Group 3: The articles that suggested a non-German origin through indirect cues (e.g., names, appearance, cultural references) ($n = 18$) were mostly drawn from *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Freie Presse* (4 articles), along with two from *Nürnberger Nachrichten*. *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* was not represented in this group. Only the *Felons* and *Thieves* frame was represented in this subgroup; no articles belonged to the *Vandals* or *Traffic Offenders* frames.