

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Affective Polarization in Online Reactions to Turkey's 2024 Stray Animal Law

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Abstract

This study analyzed social media reactions to the stray animals law enacted in Turkey in 2024 at an emotional and discursive level. The main purpose of the study was to reveal how supportive and opposing views on the law were structured in the context of social identity and affective polarization. A total of 2,178 entries were collected from Ekşi Sözlük, labeled as "supportive", "opposing", and "neutral", and analyzed through discourse strategy and emotional tone assessments. The findings show that the supporter group used a shorter, more analytical, and security-oriented language, while the opposing group adopted a longer, emotionally expressive discourse grounded in moral and conscientious values. According to the VAD analysis, the opposing group displayed higher valence and greater emotional diversity, whereas the supporter group reflected a more distant emotional tone with lower valence and dominance scores. Rhetorical analysis revealed that logos was more prominent in the supporter group, while ethos dominated in the opposing group. Both groups described the opposing side using exclusionary language, which indicates that social identity boundaries were reinforced through discourse. These findings suggest that emotional and rhetorical practices in digital debates over public policy do not merely reflect individual opinions, but also help construct group identities. The study contributes to the literature by showing how emotional and identity-based factors shape group positions and language use in public debates, particularly in a local context.

Keywords: Stray animal law, affective polarization, social identity, discourse analysis, social media

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de 2024 yılında yürürlüğe giren sokak hayvanları yasasına yönelik sosyal medya tepkilerini duygusal ve söylemsel düzeyde analiz etmiştir. Çalışmanın temel amacı, yasaya yönelik destekleyici ve karşıt görüşlerin sosyal kimliğe dayalı kutuplaşma bağlamında nasıl yapılandığını ortaya koymaktır. Ekşi Sözlük'ten ilgili yasaya yönelik toplanan 2.178 gönderi, "destekleyici", "karşıt" ve "nötr" olarak etiketlenmiş; söylem stratejileri ve duygusal ton analiziyle incelenmiştir. Bulgular, destekleyici grubun daha kısa, analitik ve güvenlik odaklı bir dil kullandığını; karşıt grubun ise daha uzun, vicdani ve ahlaki değerlere dayalı duygusal bir söylem benimsediğini göstermiştir. VAD analizine göre, karşıt grup daha yüksek valans ve duygusal çeşitlilik sergilemiş; destekleyici grup ise daha düşük valans ve dominans skorları ile daha mesafeli bir duygu tonu yansıtmıştır. Retorik analizler, destekleyici grupta logos'un, karşıt grupta ise ethos'un öne çıktığını göstermektedir. Her iki grup da karşıt görüşleri dışlayıcı ifadelerle tanımlamış ve bu durum sosyal kimlik sınırlarının dilsel olarak pekiştirildiğini ortaya koymuştur. Bu bulgular, kamusal politikalar etrafında şekillenen dijital tartışmalarda duygusal ve retorik pratiklerin grup kimliklerini de inşa ettiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, duygusal ve kimliğe dayalı etmenlerin kamusal tartışmalarda grup konumlanmalarını ve dil kullanımını nasıl şekillendirdiğini yerel bağlamda ortaya koyarak literatüre katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sokak hayvanları yasası, duygusal kutuplaşma, sosyal kimlik, söylem analizi, sosyal medya

Introduction

Public debates on animal rights have a long-standing presence in Turkey, shaped by both legal developments and shifting societal sensitivities (Uyumaz, 2016; Ilgar, 2007; Kiroğlu, 2021; Sinmez, 2022). In 2024, a major legislative change concerning the status and management of stray animals reignited these debates, both within legal and political institutions and across digital platforms. The amendment to the Animal Protection Law (No. 5199), enacted on August 1, 2024, introduced several regulatory transformations that triggered polarized reactions among the public and stakeholders. The new legal framework introduced three critical changes: (1) the protection of animal rights was made conditional upon the safeguarding of human, animal, and environmental health; (2) the language of “care” was replaced by “adoption” in relation to shelter practices; and (3) the law provided legal grounds for the euthanization of uncontrollable and aggressive stray animals. While the official rationale behind the law emphasized public health and safety, critics argued that its provisions departed significantly from a rights-based approach to animal welfare (Resmî Gazete, 2024; BBC Türkçe, 2024a).

Initial public reactions to the law revealed a clear ideological divide. Supporters predominantly framed the issue through risk management, and expressed concerns regarding the exponential growth of stray dog populations, rabies exposure, and traffic accidents involving animals (Anadolu Ajansı, 2024). Government-affiliated media reinforced this perspective by portraying the euthanasia clause as an exceptional measure applied only to dangerous or incurable animals, citing consistency with existing veterinary regulations (A Haber, 2024a; MarineDeal News, 2024). In addition, allegations of financial misconduct—such as the misappropriation of donation funds—surfaced against several animal rights organizations, further fueling suspicion and delegitimization (Yeni Şafak, 2024). These narratives eventually coalesced into the morally charged discourse of a so-called “pet food lobby,” which some commentators depicted as a self-interested group resisting reform

and exploiting public sensitivity for profit (TRT Haber, 2024; Onedio, 2024).

However, the controversy did not remain confined to ideological opposition. It evolved into a moralized debate, with opponents raising concerns about the ethical legitimacy, feasibility, and long-term consequences of the proposed measures (BBC Türkçe, 2024a; Türkiye Barolar Birliği, 2024). Central criticisms targeted the inadequacy of shelter infrastructure, the absence of objective euthanasia criteria, and the risk of ecological imbalance due to sudden population removal. For many critics, the law symbolized not protection but a state-sanctioned erasure of stray animals from urban life. As tensions escalated, the legislation was denounced by some actors as a “massacre law,” signaling the extent to which the debate had taken on affectively polarized dimensions (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, 2024; Gazete Duvar, 2024; T24, 2024).

Beyond institutional and media responses, the stray animal law also sparked widespread public engagement on social media platforms. The issue became one of the most debated topics on Twitter during the weeks following the legislative change, with users expressing sharply polarized views (Doğruluk Payı, 2024). Posts ranged from strong support for the law—often framed around public safety concerns—to fierce opposition that emphasized animal rights and moral outrage. Hashtags such as #KatliamYasası (#TheMassacreLaw) and #SokakKöpekleriYalnızDeğil (#StrayDogsAreNotAlone) emerged as digital symbols of collective sentiment. These interactions contributed to the circulation of competing narratives and demonstrated how social media platforms can function as spaces where emotionally charged responses and group-based positions become more visible.

The increasing salience of political and moral divisions in the stray animal law debate illustrates how public policy discussions may transcend their legal origins and evolve into polarized conflicts. In this context, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers a useful framework to understand how such polarization emerges. According to this theory, individuals form part of their identity based on group membership, which leads them to favor their own group and view other

groups more negatively. Individuals do not merely express their preferences about policy issues; rather, they align themselves with particular identity groups and emotionally distance themselves from others. In the stray animal law context, support or opposition can be embedded in broader identity cues, such as political alignment, moral framing, and media narratives.

Another important concept for this case is affective polarization. Affective polarization refers to the growing emotional distance between opposing social or political groups, marked by distrust, aversion, and even moral disdain (Iyengar et al., 2019; Reiljan, 2020). Unlike ideological polarization, which focuses on disagreements over specific policies, affective polarization is rooted in how individuals perceive and emotionally respond to who holds those positions. At the core of this process lies Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their group affiliations. When group boundaries are perceived as morally or culturally salient, as in the case of the stray animal law, such identity processes can intensify emotional reactions and moral judgments. Moreover, prior research shows that perceived threats from out-groups can activate defensive emotions—such as anger, fear, or contempt—while reinforcing positive affect toward the in-group (Mackie et al., 2000; Stephan et al., 2009). Thus, affective polarization cannot be fully understood without considering the social identity processes that underlie group-based emotional responses.

One of the major platforms in which polarization can be observed is social media. There is increasing evidence in the literature that social media and polarization are strongly correlated (Allcott et al., 2020; Bail et al., 2018; Levy, 2021). Likewise, many studies support the view that affective polarization is growing in especially online environments (Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2013; Mason, 2018). One major explanation for that is echo chambers, which refers to algorithms showing user only similar views, resulting in increased political polarization (Guo et al., 2020; Kitchens et al., 2020). An alternative view suggests that digital media makes individuals interact with individuals outside their local environment and forces them into a

political battle in which they are expected to take sides (C. A. Bail, 2021; Uitermark, 2022). From this perspective, affective polarization is associated not only with the insular nature of echo chambers but also with a media environment in which individuals are constantly confronted with opposing views, and these encounters trigger defensive and emotional reactions. At this point, Törnberg (2022) argues that these encounters both lead individuals to group with like-minded groups, and provide a social identity framework that reinforces emotional reactions toward opposing groups, which is at the heart of affective polarization.

Past studies indicate that major public events—such as national elections (Flamino et al., 2020; Türkoğlu et al., 2022), global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Nettasinghe et al., 2024), or transnational issues such as climate change (Tyagi et al., 2023) can act as catalysts for polarization by intensifying emotional divisions and reinforcing in-group/out-group boundaries. While not political in the conventional sense, the 2024 stray animal law shares similar features with these events: it is morally charged, highly visible, and socially divisive. Additionally, given the fact that political identity influences media preferences, social interactions and even decisions about marriage (Erdoğan, 2016; KONDA, 2010), affective polarization may be especially relevant in the Turkish context. Eventually, these characteristics make the law a useful case to observe how polarized divisions unfold in digital discourse.

Despite the growing interest in online polarization, few empirical studies have examined how the mentioned discourse unfolds around non-electoral, morally salient policy changes in the Turkish context. In light of these discussions, this study addresses that gap by examining how discourse on the 2024 stray animal law reflects affective polarization on social media in Turkey. Specifically, we test three hypotheses:

1. Supporters of the law will use a more logical and security-oriented discourse.
2. Opponents of the law will rely more heavily on emotionally and morally framed expressions.
3. Both groups will describe the other side using negative and exclusionary terms

By examining a socially prominent issue, this study offers new perspectives on affective polarization and online discourse within an under-explored national context. Given that several scholars have studied affective polarization outside the US context (Gidron et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019; Renström et al., 2021), this study also contributes to the broader international social psychology literature by addressing the phenomenon in a non-US setting.

Methods

Platform Description

The social media platform that the data was collected from is Ekşi Sözlük. Ekşi Sözlük is a participatory dictionary and discussion platform based in Turkey, founded by Sedat Kapanoğlu on February 15, 1999 (Ekşi Sözlük, 2025). It is an important platform where users share their opinions and thoughts on any subject through texts called “entries”, which makes it a socialization tool, discussion area and even a document where social events are archived. According to the documentary prepared specifically for the 20th anniversary of Ekşi Sözlük in 2019, there are a total of 115,852 writers on the platform and approximately 36 million entries have been created by these writers (Pena, 2019). The entries that shape societal and political discussions are gathered under specific threads, and those entries can be in different styles such as information, definition, comment, observation, joke, song lyrics or a poem.

Data Collection

After a meticulous examination of the headings in Ekşi Sözlük, 12 headings were determined for data collection. The selected titles were determined according to their thematic relevance, based on keywords directly related to the law. Priority was given to titles that included words and phrases such as “stray dogs” and “stray animals”, as well as titles that directly referred to the name, date or content of the law.

The determined headings are as follows (original titles in Turkish, translated by the author):

- “stray animals will be put to sleep” (sokak hayvanları uyutulacak)
- “I don't want to live with stray animals” (sokak hayvanlarıyla yaşamak istemiyorum)
- “passing the stray animals law by the commission” (sokak hayvanları yasasının komisyondan geçmesi)
- “stray dogs should be put to sleep” (sokak köpekleri uyutulsun)
- “solution to the stray dog problem” (sokak köpekleri sorununun çözümü)
- “we want dog-free streets” (köpeksiz sokaklar istiyoruz)
- “no to massacre #strayanimal-sarenothomeless” (katliama hayır #sokak-hayvanları-sahipsiz-değil)
- “July 29, 2024 stray animals law amendment” (29 temmuz 2024 sokak hayvanları yasası değişikliği)
- “law proposal for homeless animals” (sahipsiz hayvanlara yönelik kanun teklifi)
- “stray animals should be culled” (sokak hayvanları toplatılsın)
- “solution projects for the stray dog problem” (sokak köpeği sorununa çözüm projeleri)
- “the public is fed up with stray dogs” (sokak köpeklerinin illallah ettirmesi)

Data collection began on July 16, 2024, the date on which the law was announced to the public, and continued until April 16, 2025. The data collection process was carried out automatically using a specially developed Python script. In this script, the Selenium WebDriver library is used to bypass the automation detection mechanisms of websites. The library and its plugins are used for mimicking human behavior to enable secure and stable access to the content of the website. Starting from the most recent entry the script navigated pages in chronological order. To prevent data loss, the collected entries were progressively saved to a CSV file. A total of 2178 entries were collected.

This study did not require ethical approval, as the data consisted entirely of publicly available content that did not involve any personal or private information. The Python script used for data collection only accessed entries visible without

login and did not retrieve usernames, profile data, or any other user-identifiable information. The script extracted only the textual content and the date of each entry. All data were anonymized at the point of collection, and no attempt was made to link entries to individual users. As such, the data collection process complied with standard ethical guidelines for research using public online sources.

Annotation and Coding

Since the analyses had to be conducted on two main groups, the collected entries were labeled as "supporters" and "opponents". In order to ensure the accuracy of the labeling process, three researchers examined all entries one by one and classified each post as either supporting or opposing the law. When a full consensus was reached among the researchers, this label was accepted directly. However, in cases where consensus was not reached, the final label was determined based on a majority vote. In line with the labels obtained with this method, two separate data groups were created to be used in the analysis. Labeling of the entries have been done according to the following criteria:

Supporters (Supports the law): Entries that clearly oppose stray dogs being left unattended on the streets and consider this situation as a significant street safety issue were labeled as "pro". If the person found the proposed legal solutions legitimate, this person was included in the supporting group as well. Content that criticizes or belittles people who oppose the law was also included in this group. Finally, entries that frankly express the support (e.g: "I support the law," or "The law has finally come into force") were labeled as "pro".

Opponents (Does not support the law): Entries were labeled as "opponents" if they directly or indirectly expressed opposition to the legal regulation. This label was applied when the content met at least one of several criteria. First, entries that rejected the idea that stray animals pose a public safety threat were considered opposing. Second, comments that criticized the proposed measures—such as culling or mass sheltering—on ethical or

practical grounds were included in this category. Third, a lack of trust in the government's ability to implement the law fairly or effectively was another recurring theme that contributed to this label. Finally, entries that defended the right to life of stray animals and advocated for their equal coexistence with humans were also categorized as "opponents."

The entries in this group do not necessarily advocate for the presence of stray animals on the streets. For example, some may state that they do not want animals on the streets, but they may oppose the law because they find the methods to be implemented unethical. The important point is that there is a clear or strongly interpretable opposition to the change in the law. Those who openly state that they oppose the law (e.g: "This law is a law of massacre," "It is inhumane to support this law") are also included in this group.

Neutral: A separate group of entries was labeled as **neutral**. These entries acknowledged the existence of the stray dog problem but did not express support for the new law. In many of these cases, opposition was based on distrust in the government or disapproval of the proposed methods rather than a rejection of the problem itself. As the current study focuses on polarized opinions, and neutral entries do not show such polarization, they were excluded from the main analysis. Including them would reduce the contrast between the polarized groups and make it more difficult to observe patterns of affective polarization. For this reason, the neutral group was labeled and monitored for tracking purposes but kept outside the core analysis.

Exclusive Criteria: Some entries were excluded from the analysis as they did not clearly express support for or opposition to the law. For example, very short texts that could not be interpreted—such as songs, poems, or quotes—were excluded. Entries that only included images or visual content were also removed. Content intended as jokes or parody, without a clear opinion, was not analyzed. In addition, texts that simply described or explained the law, without any evaluative statement, were not included.

Data Analyses

The data were initially processed to remove excessive spaces, standardize line breaks, and convert characters into a consistent format. For text processing, the Turkish language model from the SpaCy library was used. Through this model, each text was tokenized into meaningful word units.

Three different Turkish sentiment lexicons were used in this study: Turkish SentiLiteralNet, Turkish LIWC Dictionary (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), and Turkish version of the NRC Valence-Arousal-Dominance (VAD) Lexicon. Alongside these, key textual features were computed for each group, such as average word count, sentence count, and word frequency distributions. These metrics were analyzed comparatively to reveal linguistic differences between groups.

In order to analyze the emotional content of the text, the VAD (Valence-Arousal-Dominance) model was applied. Valence represents the degree of positivity or negativity, arousal represents the level of emotional intensity or activation, and dominance represents the sense of power or control within the textual content. Emotional profiles (e.g., fear profile, anger profile) were defined, and their distributions were examined within each group. The analysis also examined the emotional context of key terms and calculated the emotional distance between groups to measure polarization. All of these methodological approaches enabled a comparative analysis of the emotional and linguistic features across different opinion groups and provided insights into the emotional dynamics surrounding the stray animal law debate.

Results

Descriptive Statistics: A total of 2178 entries were analyzed from the data retrieved from Ekşi Sözlük. After labeling, 53.8% of the entries were labeled as supporters, 38.5% as opponents, and 7.8% as neutral (see Figure 1). This distribution shows that the dataset is sufficiently balanced to represent both views and provides a structure suitable for polarization analysis.

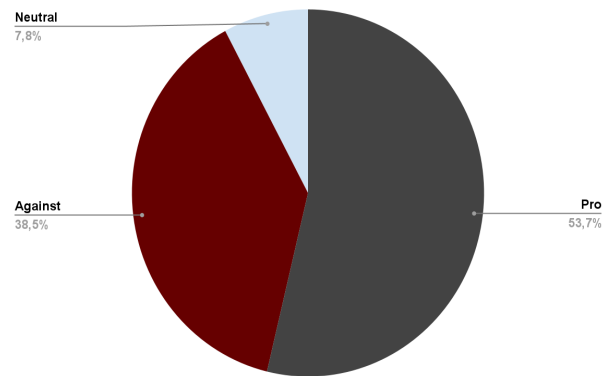


Figure 1. Distribution of User Stances on the Debate

When the post lengths were examined, the average post length of the pro group was calculated as 48.4 words (SD = 23.7), while the average post length of the against group was calculated as 47.7 words (SD = 24.1). The average length of the neutral group was 45.2 words, and the variance was distributed similarly. The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of post length ($F(2, 2175) = 1.02, p = .361$).

Polarization: VAD Analysis: In order to determine the emotional characteristics of the data, valence, arousal and dominance scores were calculated for each entry. As a result of the comparisons between the groups, significant differences were found in the valence ($t(1675) = -2.01, p = .0441$) and dominance ($t(1675) = -3.44, p = .0006$) dimensions. The pro group posts exhibited lower valence and higher dominance values compared to the against group. In addition, despite the small magnitude, the emotional distance between pro and against groups reached statistical significance ($\Delta = 0.0137$).

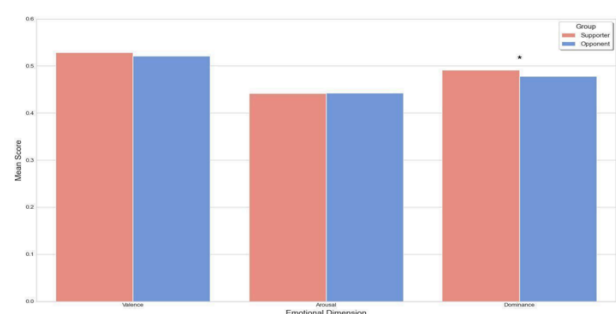


Figure 2. Mean Scores for Emotional Dimensions by Group

The emotional fluctuation of the against group was greater, which indicates that they had a wider emotional response spectrum.

To further illustrate these differences, Figure 3 displays the distribution of dominance scores for both groups. The density and range of the values show a visible shift, consistent with the statistical comparison. Figure 4 presents a two-dimensional density plot based on valence and arousal scores. While the average positions of the groups are closely aligned, the emotional expressions of the opposing group are more widely distributed across the affective space, suggesting greater variation in emotional tone.

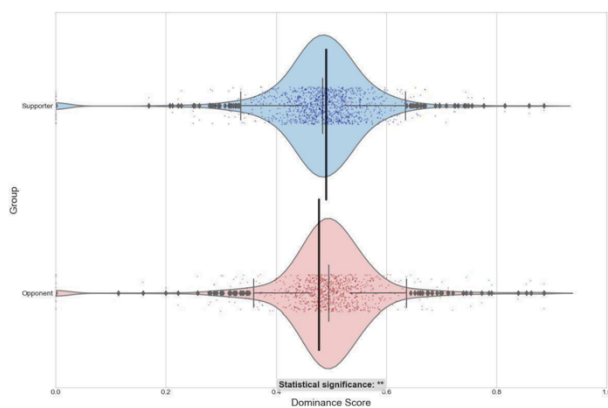


Figure 3. Distribution of Dominance Scores by Group

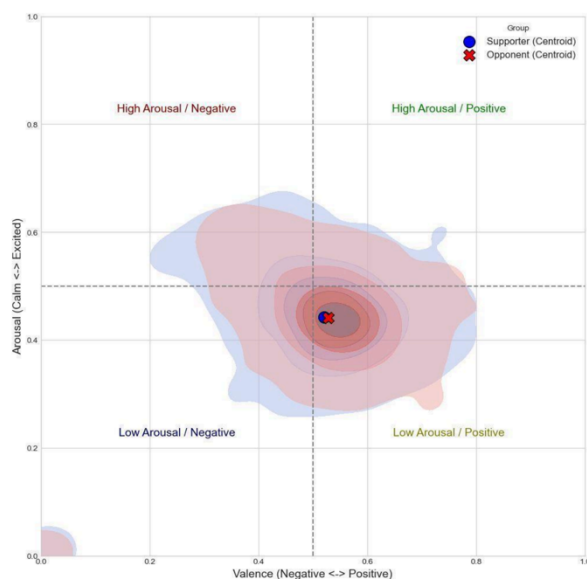


Figure 4. Two-Dimensional Density Plot of Valence and Arousal Scores by Group

Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies: Rhetorical strategies were classified to analyze the discourse patterns in the entries. Logical discourse (logos) was more prevalent in the pro group (0.70%), while moral and authority-based discourse (ethos) was significantly higher in the opposition group (0.43% vs. 0.16%). Emotional discourse (pathos) was observed at similar rates in both groups (1.21% and 1.24%, respectively) (see Table 2). These findings indicate that the pro group used more rational arguments in favor of the law, while the opposition group based their views more on religious, ethical, and normative appeals.

Table 1. Distribution of Rhetorical Strategies by Group

Strategy	Pro (%)	Against (%)
Logos	0.70	0.16
Ethos	0.42	0.70
Pathos	1.21	1.20

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of each rhetorical strategy identified within entries in the pro and against groups.

Use of Key Concepts and Emotional Context Analysis: In the discourse analysis, certain words that stand out in both the "Pro" and "Against" groups demonstrated significant differences. The most frequently used words in the Pro group include köpek ("dog") (n=791), sokak ("street") (n=467), yok ("there is not") (n=373), hayvan ("animal") (n=350), and başıboş ("stray") (n=282), while in the Against group, words that are similar but used in different contexts such as köpek ("dog") (n=403), yok ("there is not") (n=354), sokak ("street") (n=313), hayvan ("animal") (n=302), yasa ("law") (n=213), and human ("insan") (n=192) stand out. For instance, the word köpek ("dog") is one of the most frequently used words in both groups, but in the Pro group this word is used in a more negative and threatening context (Valence=0.549), while in the Against group it is used in relatively more neutral or positive contexts (Valence=0.556). However, this difference is not statistically significant (p=0.4254). Similarly, the word sokak "street" is common in both groups; the Pro side associates this word with legal texts or the perception of threat on the street, while the Against group uses it more in the context of social solutions and sensitivity. The emotional differences regarding this word are also not statistically significant (Valence p=0.8816; Arousal p=0.3985).



Figure 5. Wordcloud of Prominent Words in the Pro Group



Figure 6. Wordcloud of Prominent Words in the Against Group

On the other hand, there are some specific words that are distinct on a group basis. In the Pro group, the words itperestler “dog worshippers”, davranışlar (“behaviors”), parçalanmış (“fragmented”), kanuna (“to the law”) and sevimli (“cute”) stood out as unique to this group (see Figure 2). These words were often used in the context of an emotional or condescending discourse supporting the law. Among the words specific to the Against group were enerji (“energy”), çöp (“garbage”), katliamlar (“massacres”), topluca (“collectively”) and canın (“souls”) (see Figure 3). These words generally include examples where an anti-law position is based on environmental, humanitarian or ethical arguments.



Figure 7. Distinctive Lexical Patterns in the Supporter Group (Excluding Shared Words)



Figure 8. Distinctive Lexical Patterns in the Opposing Group (Excluding Shared Words)

Discussion

The findings of this study provide consistent empirical support for the proposed hypotheses and offer a comprehensive picture of how affective polarization unfolds in online discourse around a morally salient policy issue. The results indicate that the supporting group predominantly adopted an analytical, security-focused discourse, whereas the opposing group employed emotionally and morally framed expressions. These findings confirm the first and second hypotheses. Moreover, both groups made use of derogatory and exclusionary language when referring to the out-group, lending further support to the third hypothesis. These patterns, observed across emotional tone, rhetorical framing, and lexical content, reflect deeper identity-driven processes that align with Social Identity Theory and affective polarization literature. The following sections discuss these patterns in greater detail.

The debate surrounding the stray animal law appears to have fostered the emergence and consolidation of distinct social identities among opposing groups. One of the dimensions where this identity formation is observable can be found in the results of VAD analysis. Lower valence found in the supporting group suggests a tendency toward emotionally neutral or negatively toned expressions. Therefore, users in the supporting group may have adopted a more distanced and calculated stance, possibly to emphasize rationality and control. Their lower dominance scores, however, may indicate a less assertive and more depersonalized discourse style, which aligns with a rational and institutionally framed approach rather than emotionally charged expression. On the other

hand, the opposing group displaying a broader range of emotional fluctuation suggests a more reactive and affectively diverse discourse. This can be interpreted as a reflection of a heightened emotional engagement with the topic, including emotions such as anger, empathy, grief, and moral concern. However, this affective divergence is unlikely to stem solely from individual emotional states; rather, it may reflect a gradual alignment with group-specific narratives. Such a pattern can be observed in early-stage social identity alignment processes, where individuals increasingly interpret issues through group-based lenses—a dynamic associated with increasing affective polarization in previous research (Goodwin et al., 2024).

This pattern of affective divergence is also consistent with research on group-based emotions, which suggests that when a particular social identity becomes salient, individuals tend to appraise by adopting the approach of their group membership (Smith & Mackie, 2015; Kuppens & Yzerbyt, 2014; Goldenberg et al., 2015). These findings are grounded in Intergroup Emotions Theory (Mackie et al., 2016). According to this theory, individuals experience emotions on behalf of the group when they categorize themselves as members of this group, based on appraisals of group-relevant events and concerns (Mackie, et al., 2000; Goldenberg et al., 2018). Eventually, this often leads to systematic emotional responses such as collective anger, fear, or pride (Kuppens & Yzerbyt, 2012). Similarly, Szanto and Krueger (2019) report that these emotional expressions are shaped by shared affective norms and empathic dynamics within the group, which help reinforce group cohesion and a sense of belonging. In the context of the animal rights law, it is plausible that individuals who shared similar emotional reactions initially coalesced into a perceived group, and as identification with that group increased, the expression of these emotions became more intense and cohesive.

Another dimension in which the social identity is evident is the rhetorical strategies utilized by supporting and opposing groups. The distribution of these strategies appears to reflect identity-driven dynamics that are consistent with Social Identity Theory, passing beyond ideological disagreements (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to

SIT, individuals derive part of their self-concept from their group memberships, and they tend to adopt communication patterns that affirm and reinforce their group identity. In this context, the supporting group's greater use of logical appeals (logos) may suggest an identity orientation that values rationality, order, and alignment with institutional norms—traits often associated with high-status or system-affirming groups. Conversely, the opposing group's stronger reliance on moral and authority-based discourse (ethos) may point out a group identity anchored in ethical resistance, social justice, or marginalization narratives. This pattern suggests that each group not only advocated for or against the law but also performed their group identity through distinctive rhetorical modes. In line with Social Identity Theory, rhetorical strategies function here as symbolic expressions of group affiliation by allowing members to signal their belonging, differentiate themselves from the outgroup, and reinforce shared norms and values through language.

The concentration of rhetorical strategies within certain frameworks can reduce discursive diversity, pave the way for the homogenization of in-group attitudes and thus the strengthening of polarization. As Gabbay et al. (2018) have shown, when individuals focus on certain rhetorical frames (e.g., security or morality), their perceptions of the debate are reshaped around this frame, which eventually causes like-minded individuals to take more similar positions. This “rhetorical frame-induced redistribution” causes not only individual opinions but also discourse clusters at the group level to become more pointed and differentiated. In this context, the dominance of the logos-heavy frame in the discourses of the supporter group may have led to the weakening of alternative emotional or moral arguments within the group and the unification of a common discursive line. Similarly, the dominance of the ethos-heavy frame in the discourses of the opposing group may have caused moral arguments to cluster around a specific moral stance, thereby limiting the openness to logic-based, logos-oriented reasoning. This rhetorical entrenchment may create echo-chamber-like effects, where group members reinforce each other's convictions while becoming less receptive

to counter-perspectives grounded in alternative argumentative frameworks.

Affective polarization and social identity dynamics are further illuminated through emotional context analysis findings. The analysis reveals that some frequently used words from both groups carry high emotional load and moral evaluation. In the context of the stray animal law, emotional context patterns may suggest that group identities are emotionally and morally defended through language. The supporting group, for instance, frequently used the word "itperestler" (dog worshippers), a term used as an insult that devalues or irrationally portrays the animal rights-protecting rhetoric of the group rejecting the law. Conversely, words like "katliam" (massacre) were prominent in the opposing group. The usage of such words seem to position the out-group within a morally accusatory or condescending framework. Moreover, the discourses of both groups overlap with the concept of affective polarization. As mentioned, affective polarization goes beyond political views and develops intense negative feelings (anger, hatred, disgust, contempt) toward groups that hold these views (Iyengar et al., 2019; Reiljan, 2020). In line with this conceptualization, the Ekşi Sözlük data illustrate how users construct narratives that frame the opposing group in morally inferior and emotionally negative terms. Thus, a discourse has emerged that defines the opposing group not only as an ideological rival but also as a morally problematic and threatening "other."

Emotional context analysis findings can also be interpreted through the lens of Intergroup Threat Theory. According to this theory, individuals perceive out-groups not merely as holders of different opinions, but as potential threats to their own values, identities, or material interests (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Such threats may be realistic (e.g., related to safety or resources) or symbolic (e.g., related to moral norms or worldviews). In the present case, the discourse appears to emphasize both types of threats. For the supporters of the law, firstly, realistic threats are emphasized more predominantly. For instance, the term "itperest" (dog worshipper) obviously functions as an insult, however, it also frames the opposing group as actors threatening public order. Its usage implies that

these individuals prioritize the lives of stray animals above all others, and thus positions them—discursively—as a threat to public safety. For the opposing group, on the other hand, symbolic threats are more stressed. The repeated use of emotionally loaded terms such as "katliam" ('massacre') suggests that the supporting group is seen as violating deeply held ethical or cultural norms (e.g., compassion toward animals, justice, or the sanctity of life). By emphasizing such language, the opposing group appears to construct the supporting group as symbolically dangerous—morally deviant actors whose stance endangers the in-group's moral identity and shared values. Such perceptions of threat do not remain confined to policy differences but evolve into emotionally charged intergroup tensions that lay the groundwork for affective polarization. This interpretation is also consistent with studies that argue that perceived intergroup threat increases affective polarization (Renström et al., 2021).

How do platform-specific affordances and algorithmic logics contribute to the emergence of affective polarization on social media? In the broader literature on social media and polarization, the echo chamber effect has been one of the most frequently emphasized mechanisms to answer this question. As previously discussed, this effect refers to a phenomenon in which algorithmic filtering exposes users primarily to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, thereby reinforcing their views and contributing to increased polarization (Guo et al., 2020; Kitchens et al., 2020). While there are strong arguments linking echo chambers to online polarization, attributing the observed polarization on Ekşi Sözlük solely to this effect would be problematic. Unlike algorithm-driven platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, Ekşi Sözlük does not rely on personalized content curation. Users actively navigate toward titles they are interested in, thus, they are not structurally confined to a homogeneous informational environment, nor are they selectively exposed to ideologically congruent content. Users can access the full range of supporting and opposing views on an entry without being filtered or influenced by algorithmic curation. Therefore, the affective polarization observed on Ekşi Sözlük may be better explained by the alternative

hypothesis proposed against the echo chamber phenomenon. According to this alternative perspective, social media platforms do not necessarily insulate individuals from opposing views; rather, they force users into frequent encounters with disagreement, which eventually intensifies social identity processes (Bail, 2021; Guess et al., 2018; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022). When confronted with divergent views, individuals are more likely to affiliate strongly with like-minded others, develop clearer in-group identities, and express heightened emotional hostility toward out-groups (Törnberg, 2022). The structural openness of Ekşi Sözlük to cross-cutting exposure aligns with this view and suggests that the platform may function less as an echo chamber and more as a space where affective polarization is amplified through repeated intergroup confrontation and identity reinforcement.

The findings of this study contribute to the local literature by extending the scope of affective polarization research to include politically defined in-groups and outgroups in the context of a morally salient, non-electoral debate. While prior studies in the Turkish context have primarily focused on culturally or ethnically constructed targets of digital hostility—such as Romani people (Alp, 2016) or Chinese individuals (Tunçer, 2020; Karaca, 2021)—the current study demonstrates that similar discursive and emotional dynamics also emerge around political and ideological divisions. The strategies of symbolic distortion, emotional exaggeration, and moral framing identified in those studies bear a strong resemblance to the emotional tone and rhetorical styles observed among the opposing group in this research. By applying Social Identity Theory to a new domain of conflict—namely, polarized discourse on a controversial policy issue—this study offers a novel perspective on how group-based affective boundaries are constructed and maintained in digital environments.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, this study also introduces a different methodological approach to the analysis of affective polarization. Rather than relying on survey-based measures (e.g., outgroup dislike, social distance scales; Reiljan, 2020) or sentiment/toxicity classifications (e.g., Gruzd & Roy, 2024; Suárez-Estrada et al.,

2022), it employs a multidimensional, dictionary-based VAD analysis using three Turkish emotion lexicons (SentiLiteralNet, LIWC-TR, and NRC-VAD). This approach allows for a nuanced identification of emotional profiles (e.g., anger, fear, happiness) across ideological groups. Thus, it enables both the detection and modeling of polarization in terms of emotional tone, intensity, and thematic structure.

Limitations

The prominent limitation in the study is derived from the source of the data: Ekşi Sözlük platform. Even though it represents a variety of people's opinion about the subject, its user base's diversity is questionable. There is no clear data on the writers' demographics in the forum. In addition, its user base is also most probably limited to an urban population who uses the internet actively, which also limits diversity of the sample. Another issue is the lack of user interaction among writers. Similar to the isolation of threads, users cannot directly reply to one another. Although entry numbers can be used to reference specific posts, the level of interaction is limited compared to more dynamic platforms like X. Thus, although the study reveals how users construct and frame their own arguments as well as those of the opposing side, it does not capture the dynamics of interaction among users.

Another important limitation concerns the structure of the forum's thread system. Since each thread is entirely separate from others and there is no interaction across threads, researchers may inadvertently introduce bias when selecting which threads to analyze. The naming of a thread can influence user engagement, as some users may choose not to read or contribute to a thread based on its title alone. Consequently, diverse viewpoints may become concentrated in isolated threads that the researcher either overlooks or deems irrelevant. This introduces the risk of selection bias and reduces the representativeness of the analyzed discourse. To mitigate this issue, the study focused on a thread that contained a large number of entries and appeared to adopt a neutral title.

The study is also limited by the time frame selected for data collection. Although the decree has

been enacted, numerous events that have deeply impacted public opinion have taken place since then, and discussions around the issue continue to evolve. Due to the necessity of setting a temporal boundary, the study includes only the period between the announcement of the law and the time the data was collected. However, during this interval, numerous political events took place, and it remains unclear how these developments may have influenced public opinion.

Conclusion

This study investigated how affective polarization and social identity dynamics are reflected in the emotional and rhetorical patterns of online discourse surrounding Turkey's 2024 stray animal law. The findings suggest that distinct emotional tones and rhetorical strategies perform and reinforce group identities, going beyond expressing positions on the law. These dynamics demonstrate how contentious policy debates in digital environments can amplify social divides even in the absence of algorithmic filtering. By extending existing research on affective polarization beyond ethnic or cultural dimensions toward politically anchored group identities, this study offers a novel perspective on how discourse itself becomes a medium of polarization. These findings may also help policymakers and public communicators recognize how emotional and identity-based responses shape public debates in online environments. Therefore, being aware of these dynamics can be useful when designing and communicating controversial policies. Future research may adopt a cross-platform comparative approach to explore how varying digital architectures shape affective and rhetorical patterns. Incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews could help capture broader demographic and experiential diversity. Additionally, considering the pre- and post-legislative political climate may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how legal controversies interact with identity processes and emotional public discourse.

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