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Governing Safety: Deconstructing “Safe Nightlife” In Groningen

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how safety is governed in urban policy by analysing the municipality of Groningen's renewed *Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan 2025*. Bacchi's *What is the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach is applied to deconstruct how the action plan represents safety as a governance problem, what assumptions make this representation possible, and what is left unproblematised. The analysis draws on securitisation theory, neoliberal governance, and the concept of depoliticisation.

The thesis finds that the action plan represents unsafe nightlife as a consequence of individual "not normal" behaviour, to be solved through formulating a new norm. This representation rests on three assumptions: that governance oversight is necessary, that preventing disorder produces safety, and that "normal" is self-evident. These assumptions depoliticise safety by obscuring the power relations involved. What is left unproblematised, are the role of chain partners in producing unsafety, alternatives to the preventive gaze, and the exclusion of certain harms and perspectives. The thesis concludes by calling for repoliticising safety back into the radical roots of feminist and anti-racist struggles for safety that address structural inequalities of violence and economic exclusion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Safety is rarely understood as a political concept. In governance, the objective of safety appears as a neutral good; it is treated as self-evident. Governments expand measures for control and surveillance in its name, justified by a duty to increase perceptions of safety (Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). But this apparent neutrality is exactly what makes safety political. When the concept itself is left unproblematised, the power to legitimise securitising measures also remains unchallenged. Questioning what constitutes safety and whose safety is prioritised provides a foundation for understanding how power is exercised through governance that appears benevolent.

The politics of safety serves as the central focus of this thesis. I will examine the municipality of Groningen's renewed "Safe Nightlife" action plan (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025). This plan is formulated in response to escalating concerns about nightlife safety raised by local actors and amplified by media coverage. While the experience of unsafety in nightlife is not new, the pandemic's aftermath has seen a reported increase in perceived unsafety (Elting, 2025). This increase reflects a broader process of securitisation, in which technological, political, and social shifts have intensified societal perceptions of insecurity (Blok & Oosterholt, 2024; Zedner, 2009). In the Netherlands, securitisation has manifested as an increasingly precautionary culture, shifting the focus from responding to crime to preventing mere disorder (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021; Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). As governance strategies expand, often grounded in technocratic assumptions, they become increasingly pervasive and risk producing ineffective and exclusionary effects. Consequently, safety is simultaneously politicised, deployed to legitimise the expansion of surveillance and control, and depoliticised, stripped of its radical roots. Listerborn (2016) therefore argues for repoliticising safety, returning it to its origins in feminist and anti-racist struggles.

Previous research on the "Safe Nightlife" initiative in the Netherlands has examined the project's governance strategies, collaborations, and local variations (Van Liempt, 2015). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that concerns about safety are commonly used to justify the expansion of surveillance and policing in nightlife districts, even when the effectiveness of these measures remains ambiguous (Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). This thesis will add to this literature by analysing how safety is constructed as a governance problem in the first place. Through applying Bacchi's *What is the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach, I demonstrate that safety is a highly political concept.

1.1 BACKGROUND

The nationwide “Safe Nightlife” initiative began in 1998 to foster structured collaboration among nightlife actors. The incentive for this initiative was the rising issue of “mindless violence,” which became progressively problematised after a man was kicked to death during a night out in Amsterdam in 1996. Similar incidents followed in the next few years. These incidents have since been classified as “violence related to going out”, or *uitgaansgeweld* in Dutch, and remain an important legitimisation of safe nightlife policies (Van Liempt, 2015; Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). By 2002, 75 cities had signed a Safe Nightlife covenant, yet evaluations revealed considerable variation across covenants and few binding agreements. What did improve was communication among partners. While it did not eliminate conflicts of interest or power imbalances, it fostered greater mutual understanding and sympathy (Van Liempt, 2015). Since then, the project has taken increasingly sophisticated forms, varying per municipality (Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012).

The city of Groningen functions as the primary urban centre in the northern Netherlands. The municipality of Gemeente Groningen is centred around the city. As of January 2026, the municipality has approximately 244.000 inhabitants (CBS, 2026). Its governance is organised across three domains: Social and Societal Affairs, Spatial Economic, and Public Service Provision, with an additional dedicated Safety directive responsible for local security policy (Organisatiebesluit Gemeente Groningen 2024, n.d.). In line with this directive, the municipality signed its first Covenant for Safe Nightlife in 2001 with its chain partners: the police, the fire service, and the hospitality association. Since then, the covenant has been renewed every five years (Convenant Veilig Uitgaan Gemeente Groningen 2022 - 2027, n.d.).

The 2025 action plan is a mid-term re-evaluation of the 2022–2027 covenant, in response to concerns about increased insecurity following the pandemic. Public debate over nightlife safety in Groningen intensified during this period, as evidenced by local media coverage. In early 2024, a local newspaper, Sikkom, distributed a survey on sexual harassment in Groningen’s nightlife, which led to a series of articles on sexual transgressive behaviour that emphasised the pervasiveness of the issue (C. De Jong & Douwes, 2024; *Oproepje*, 2024). Later that year, a second survey addressed general perceptions of safety in nightlife, highlighting violence and drug-related crime in the nightlife district (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025; C. De Jong, 2024; Snippe et al., 2025). By 2025, Sikkom made the message more explicit: “Groningen

has reached a rock bottom concerning the perception of safety in nightlife” (translation) (Miskovic & Douwes, 2025). In response to these articles, along with concerns raised by nightlife actors and in public debate, the municipality commissioned Breuer&Intraval to research the situation. The resulting report identified problem factors and measures for improvement, which informed the renewed “Safe Nightlife” action plan released at the end of 2025 (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025; Snippe et al., 2025).

Groningen offers a distinctive site because of its vibrant nightlife scene, particularly its late-night economy, which is known for its lack of restrictions (Brands & Schwanen, 2014; Snippe et al., 2025). The large student population, combined with a broader regional role in the northern Netherlands, shapes the demographic that nightlife caters to. Spatially, nightlife is concentrated around the city square and includes pubs, clubs, eateries, and a coffeeshop¹ (Brands & Schwanen, 2014; Schwanen et al., 2012). Culture ranks highly among the city’s selling points and is a key area for innovation and growth in the near future (*Omgevingsvisie Groningen*, 2025). Growing events such as Noorderzon and Eurosonic Noorderslag, alongside the cultural centre Forum, reflect the city’s emphasis on cultural vitality. Compared to the cities examined in previous research on the “Safe Nightlife” (Utrecht and Rotterdam), Groningen has been characterised by a more reluctant approach to restrictive security practices, with greater emphasis on freedom. This makes Groningen a particularly productive site for examining how safety is governed, contributing to an understanding of “Safe Nightlife” projects in the Netherlands and to debates on security governance.

1.2 RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this thesis is to deconstruct safety as a governance objective to reveal its political construction. Applying a poststructural lens, I situate Gemeente Groningen’s “Safe Nightlife” action plan within the discursive practices that have produced it. To do so, I utilise Bacchi’s WPR approach, drawing on Foucault’s concept of problematisation to analyse how the policy constructs safety as a problem and what it leaves unproblematised.

This thesis is situated within the discipline of Sociology of Law, which applies social theories to the study of law, legal behaviours, and legal systems in their cultural, social, and historical contexts (Banakar & Travers, 2013). While Foucault was not a socio-legal scholar,

¹ In the Netherlands, a coffeeshop refers to a cafe selling soft drugs.

his work on power and governmentality provides a theoretical lens for analysing law and legal institutions as sites of governance and institutional power. Through this lens, I approach the “Safe Nightlife” action plan not merely as a policy document but as a site where governance rationalities are formalised and legitimised. The thesis examines how safety is constructed as a governance problem within this institutional context, as well as within the cultural context, to challenge the hegemonic assumptions that underlie it.

This leads to the following research question:

How is safety governed in Gemeente Groningen’s “Safe Nightlife” action plan, and what does this reveal about the politics of urban safety?

To answer this research question, I have formulated three sub-questions, each corresponding to a selected question from Bacchi’s WPR approach:

1. How does the action plan represent safety in nightlife as a governance problem?
2. What knowledges and assumptions have to be accepted as true for this framing of safety to make sense?
3. What is left silent and unproblematised in the action plan, and how can these silences help to think differently about safety in nightlife?

1.3 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Before turning to the scholarly debates that inform this thesis, a brief conceptual clarification is necessary. In everyday usage, “safety” and “security” are often used interchangeably. In Dutch, “safety” is *veiligheid*, and security is *beveiliging*. Both consist of the concept of *veilig*, which refers to a state of being outside of danger; safe. *Veiligheid* then refers to a quality or feeling of safety, and *beveiliging* to a practice of securing safety. In this thesis, safety will accordingly refer to a subjective experience and security to practices aimed at securing safety. From this perspective, safety can exist without security, and security does not necessarily produce safety. The action plan “*Veilig Uitgaan*” is thus a security strategy whose stated aim is safety.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nightlife is discursively positioned in the contemporary urban environment. It is framed as vital for culture, community, and tourism, as well as a site of crime and disorder. Following the urban crisis from the post-war period, nightlife has become a central feature in the development and economy of cities (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021). With the rise of nightlife, it has increasingly been viewed as a site that requires strict governance. Safety is a central principle in its governance. This has led to increased surveillance, policing, and responsabilisation. These interventions tend to rest on taken-for-granted assumptions about what safety constitutes (Van Liempt, 2015; Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012).

This literature review was conducted through systematic database searches in Finn² and Google Scholar. I used relevant concepts such as safety, neoliberalism, and nightlife, refined with Boolean operators. Filters were applied to recent publications and to a geographic preference for Europe, with specific attention to studies conducted in the Netherlands, particularly in Groningen. First, sources were documented in a reading log with methodology, theory, and findings. Then the most relevant sources were organised thematically. Finally, additional sources were identified through snowball sampling.

The narrative literature review is structured around four themes. The first theme addresses how safety is understood in urban governance and how it is conceptualised, measured, and researched. I will argue that safety is not an objective entity. Instead, it should be understood as subjective, relational, and affective. The very lack of an objective conception of safety is what makes its governance inherently political. The second theme discusses the politicisation of safety in post-industrial Western society, as well as critical theories of the securitisation process. Accordingly, I will engage with securitisation not as an inevitable historical process but as a contingent and contested field of power. In the third theme, I will address the concept of neoliberalism, a term widely used in urban law and many other fields. The concept is used to describe normative and hegemonic governance rationalities and technologies in contemporary society, and is intertwined with securitisation. In the last section, I will discuss the “Safe Nightlife” project in the Netherlands and how it relates to the previous topics. I will go over previous research and explain what my research will add to the discussion, as well as to the broader debate on how safety is governed.

² University library search tool

2.1 SAFETY

Urban governance tends to treat safety as a measurable outcome, something that can be achieved with the right measures. The literature, however, paints a different picture. Here, safety is not an objective state but a subjective and relational experience, shaped by context and power. The objective of “safety” in urban policy tends to overlook the discourse surrounding what constitutes safety: whose safety is considered and how it should be governed. The UNODC’s Safe City Guide, for example, aims to make urban environments safer and more resilient. It conceptualises safety as both physical protection and the capability for people to make individual choices (UNODC, n.d.). The focus on physical protection has made urban design central to the new sustainable city (Raco, 2007; UNODC, n.d.).

The attention to urban design is supported by research. Several studies show that accessible and visible urban design can promote safety by preventing crime through natural surveillance and social control (Fennelly & Crowe, 2013; Thani et al. 2016, as cited in Massari et al., 2025). In addition, through a systematic literature review, Te Braak & Van Tienoven (2025) have mapped several studies examining how various internal and external factors affect women’s perceptions of safety in public spaces. While they specifically address women’s perceptions of safety, this provides an extensive overview of factors that can and should be considered in addressing safety. They emphasise heterogeneity – personal circumstances such as age, gender, class, and direct experiences – and temporality – spatial-temporal dynamics – of such perceptions. Their literature review demonstrates the complexity of the ways internal and external factors influence perceptions of safety and argues for intersectional approaches to safety.

This need for intersectionality is further exemplified by Schwanen et al. (2012). They problematise the assumption that more street lights enhance perceptions of safety. While certain lighting makes women feel safer at night, it can simultaneously make racialised minorities feel more unsafe (Schwanen et al., 2012). This reveals how “safe” urban design can have adverse effects, including gentrification and over-securitisation of spaces (Massari et al., 2025). Several studies further complicate how safety is understood as a governance objective. Song & Levine (2025) provide empirical evidence showing how gentrification can affect people’s sense of belonging and reinforce class divisions. Moreover, Raco (2007) argues that the focus on urban design individualises experiences of safety. This displaces attention from structural causes of

crime, such as economic insecurity and unequal access to opportunities. Access to and use of public spaces benefit everyone's social, emotional, and physical well-being. Equal access is important, and perceptions of safety are crucial to achieving this (Cattell et al., 2008; Pérez-Tejera et al. 2022, as cited in Te Braak & Van Tienoven, 2025). Ntakana et al. (2022) therefore add that safety has more to do with social relations than with technology. Crime, fear, and risk are not isolated; they are produced in the same milieu as safety is.

Understanding safety thus requires looking beyond the physical environment to the deeper cultural contexts that shape how fear and risk are collectively understood. Furedi (2019) illustrates how community values, morality, and history create what he calls "cultures of fear". Brands & Schwanen (2014) further build on the contextual understanding by conceptualising safety as affective: something that exists between people and things, emerging in a moment and lingering before becoming conscious. Safety is constantly renegotiated in particular times and spaces (Schwanen et al., 2012). Empirical research on nightlife experiences shows how people move from a carefree, absorptive coping state to one that is disrupted and becomes conscious of unsafety (Brands & Schwanen, 2014). This understanding is useful for analysing surveillance and policing practices, as well as for understanding how safety is produced in public spaces between people and in places.

Rather than asking whether policies successfully produce safety, Valverde (2011) argues that normative questions that treat safety as a single concept, fuzzy or not, can be dangerous. They assume that safety actually exists. Instead, Valverde argues that all we know is how the concept is used and what is done in its name. Therefore, we should focus on those practices. When we view safety as constructed, relational, and unstable, governance practices solidify what safety is in their respective contexts. As Bacchi & Goodwin (2025) argue, this helps produce a particular reality. Therefore, governing and researching safety is necessarily political. Securitisation theory demonstrates how experiences of unsafety and insecurity are used to legitimise governance techniques, particularly the expansion of surveillance and social control (Nagy, 2021). This process of securitisation is addressed in the following section.

2.2 SECURITISATION

Several scholars have recognised the politicisation of experiences of insecurity through the process of securitisation. The concept seeks to capture a change in how security is governed, rather than a change in the experience of safety itself. This reflects an increasingly obsessive

desire for safety in contemporary societies, which has become institutionalised (Furedi, 2019). Several scholars have emphasised aspects of this social phenomenon, such as the “risk society” (Beck, 1992), “cultures of control” (Garland, 2002), “cultures of fear” (Furedi, 2019), and “safety utopias” (Boutellier, 2004). These concepts each capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon: risk, fear, and the demand for control and protection.

Scholars have theorised about the events that have increased feelings of unsafety and insecurity in society (Blok & Oosterholt, 2024). These events underscore the major changes seen since the post-war period. For instance, Beck (1992) states that the acceleration of technological advancements has created new, complex risks regarding the environment, health, and cyber-related issues. These risks are beyond an individual’s or a community’s direct control, creating new anxieties. Additionally, these technologies are responsible for the rise of the security industry and the commercialisation and commodification of safety (Listerborn, 2016; Zedner, 2009). Some argue that the ability to prevent and manage risks makes people less capable of handling and accepting risk. This creates a paradox: increasing security produces more insecurity (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021). Zedner (2009) identifies 9/11 as another such catalyst, marking a shift toward what is commonly described as a post-9/11 world of intensified security governance. All these major changes contributed to what scholars have identified as a broader process of securitisation in Western societies. Nevertheless, the roots of security practices can be traced much further back than the post-war period; the desire for safety has long been a means of coping with insecurity (Blok & Oosterholt, 2024). Accordingly, as the emphasis on technology, terrorism, commercialisation, and historical events demonstrates, securitisation is deeply contingent and intertwined with different interests, power, and fear. What is new is not the risks or threats, nor the fear of them; rather, it is the way that security is currently being governed.

W. De Jong & Strikwerda (2021) researched if, how, and when securitisation gained traction in the Netherlands specifically. They place the upsurge of securitisation in the late eighties and early nineties, in line with the urban crisis from the post-war period of de-industrialisation. The Netherlands did not experience de-industrialisation to the same degree as the American and British contexts that inform much of the literature. However, similar governance patterns do appear during this period, which corresponds with a general increase in insecurity. These insecurities are materialised in the social challenges, such as higher crime rates and drug use, and nightlife becoming a central feature of inner cities (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021).

The article traces an intensifying preventive gaze on crime, extending to minor non-criminal incidents of disorder and nuisance such as loitering and noise. This reflects a precautionary agenda aimed at controlling risk through law enforcement and surveillance, whether it be actual crime or merely nuisances (W. de Jong & Strikwerda, 2021). Notably, this reflects what Zedner identifies as a “pre-crime” society. Unlike the post-crime society, the pre-crime society responds not to crime or wrongdoing itself but to the risk of crime. This leads to the criminalisation of the preliminary stages of crime (Zedner, 2007 in W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021). When safety governance begins to include nuisance and disorder prevention, this inclusion significantly increases control over various aspects of society. However, the Dutch culture of control still involves notions of care and inclusion. W. De Jong & Strikwerda (2021) find that through an ‘integral approach’, policies combine elements of exclusion and coercive inclusion. The term “coercive inclusion” was originally coined by Huey (2007), who argues that, within neoliberal discourse, rehabilitation rhetoric increasingly focuses on individual responsibility. The inclusive aspect refers to the desire to rehabilitate outsiders into productive, self-governing, “responsible” individuals so that they can be included in the mainstream of society. The coercive aspect refers to the limited choices offered for involvement and the threat of exclusion or even punitive action.

Critical Security Studies (CSS) seeks to identify these kinds of security practices. The discipline shifts the focus from what security is to how security operates as a political process. Specifically, it moved away from functionalist approaches that treat security as a reaction to threats embedded in militaristic, state-centric views, and from more progressive understandings of human security. Instead, the scholarship adopts a constructivist approach to analysing security, questioning the hegemonic power relations within security frameworks (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018; Floyd, 2024; Nagy, 2021). Within CSS, three prominent European schools have developed distinct approaches to analysing security as a political process: the Welsh, Copenhagen, and Paris schools (Floyd, 2024; Nagy, 2021).

The traditional critical approach is that of the Welsh school, rooted in Marxist dialectics. The emphasis here lies on emancipation from structural oppression and violence. Security is instrumental to achieving emancipation, going beyond mere absence of threats to encompass protection and freedom from poverty, lack of education, and political repression (Floyd, 2024; Nagy, 2021; Rolf, 2023). The aim is to enable people to live beyond mere survival and to determine their own futures. Deviating from this, the Copenhagen and Paris schools formulate security as a social and political process. They examine who has the power to determine and

construct what is seen as a security problem, as well as the intended and unintended effects of securitisation (Floyd, 2024; Nagy, 2021).

The Copenhagen school adopts a more cautious stance toward security than the Welsh school, as it views political issues as better addressed outside the security sphere. From this perspective, security threats are constructed through speech acts and the audience's acceptance of those acts. Specifically, an issue or event perceived by a powerful actor becomes securitised when that actor uses language and symbols to frame it as requiring an urgent response. The emphasis here lies on political power and the ability to perform such speech acts. Securitisation can occur outside of the institutional political processes and law. Therefore, the Copenhagen school perceives a danger of de-democratisation and argues for de-securitisation (Floyd, 2024; Nagy, 2021; Nyman, 2016).

Lastly, the PARIS approach is the more radical constructivist school. Founded on Foucauldian theories of governmentality and biopolitics, and complemented by Bourdieu's field theory, the PARIS approach examines the mundane, everyday practices of security professionals – police, border guards, private security, and bureaucrats – as operating within specific fields with their own logics. The PARIS approach centres lived experience and analyses (in)securitisation processes. It highlights how practices simultaneously produce security for some and insecurity for others, thus making insecurity a political judgment. Additionally, it observes how, in a more secure world, the security apparatus seeks new enemies (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018; Floyd, 2024; Nagy, 2021). Altogether, these three schools offer different analytical entry points for studying securitisation: emancipation, speech acts, and everyday practices.

Expanding on the ideas of the critical security schools, Listerborn (2016) argues that security has not only been politicised, but also depoliticised. She discusses the women's movement for urban safety, which emerged in early 1980s Canada with a radical perspective on gendered violence. This movement was gradually co-opted by politicians, companies, and institutions, becoming a mode of profit-making and urban branding that left structural inequalities of race and gender unaddressed. Listerborn acknowledges that it is easy to dismiss security as a neoliberal political project or a moralising governance practice. However, she insists on the need to repoliticise safety in urban discourse by returning to its radical roots in political power struggles. Understanding how this depoliticisation happens requires examining the broader governing rationality that makes it possible. Securitisation is embedded in and

shaped by neoliberal logics of individual responsibility, market governance, and the commodification of safety. The following section discusses neoliberalism as the hegemonic governing rationality.

2.3 NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism is the concept through which contemporary governance practices and rationalities are understood. The term neoliberalism is widely used in both social science and urban law research, but is often taken for granted. It is used to describe a variety of aspects and processes (Pinson & Morel Journal, 2016). For example, to describe economic policy, urban forms, governing rationalities, and social stratification. Zedner (2009) uses neoliberalism as an adjective, while Aramayona & Guarneros-Meza (2024) theorise the neoliberal city itself. Others focus on its logics, such as the commodification of space (Berthet Meylan, 2022; Burchiellaro, 2021) or its role in producing race and class inequalities (Mele, 2013). At its core, neoliberalism describes a certain governing rationality. Through this rationality, market principles such as competition, efficiency, and individual responsibility are extended beyond the economy into domains such as education, healthcare, and crime control (Pinson & Morel Journal, 2016).

From a Marxist tradition, Harvey (2005) analyses neoliberalism as a political project aimed at restoring class power to economic elites. Lemke (2002) extends this insight with a Foucauldian lens. He rearticulates the often imagined division within the governmentality scholarship between the state and the economy, arguing that there is always a political economy. Therefore, the common critique of neoliberalism – that the market expands into politics – is insufficient. Following Lemke’s reading of Foucault, neoliberalism is understood as a political-economic rationality that restructures the power relations in society. This transforms how governing takes place. This understanding bridges Marxist concerns with structural exploitation and Foucauldian attention to the microphysics of power. It allows an analysis of neoliberalism that moves beyond cutting off the head of the king. As Dean (1994, p. 156, cited in Lemke 2002, p. 52) asks: “How is it possible that this headless body often behaves as if it indeed had a head?” Such a perspective allows us to examine both how security is governed at the state level and how it is contested locally.

Notwithstanding, the role urban policy plays in public discourses. Regulation, urban design, and licensing all help shape a specific neoliberal (urban) vision (Aramayona & Guarneros-Meza, 2024; Hadfield & Measham, 2009; Layard, 2020). In securitisation theory

and crime control, several authors have discussed the turn in neoliberal societies away from welfare and to risk management (e.g. Garland, 2002; O'Malley, 2010). Including how state governments have outsourced social services and crime control to non-state organisations and communities. A move away from social welfare governance models (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021; O'Malley, 2010). However, non-state and community governance frameworks offer a more nuanced perspective on the hegemony of neoliberalism in governance. Goddard (2012) demonstrates that at the local level, a varied array of governance rationalities coexist. His research suggests that risk and welfare discourse cannot be understood as mutually exclusive. Social values remain in communities, and socio-economic problems can be translated into risk assessments. Goddard's ethnographic work shows how local organisations can resist hegemonic governance. The state writes the script, but how this translates in local practices remains discursive (Goddard, 2012). These hierarchical tensions in governance are also evident in urban security policy at the EU level.

In examining the governance dynamics shaping urban security at the EU level, Massari et al. (2025) argue that "risk" in public space emerges from a complex interplay of factors. Common security measures tend to make public spaces less welcoming, less accessible, and more exclusionary. Through excessive risk management in response to the unpredictability of public space, the very role of public space in urban environments is undermined. Instead, Massari et al. propose to frame security as a process of negotiated governance. They argue that the Horizon Europe SAFE CITIES project offers a more proportionate and participatory approach to security governance. Massari et al. show that EU policy documents support the integration of safety tools into urban design. However, these documents still rely heavily on top-down, technocratic solutions. Although Massari et al apply Foucault's dispositif of security to inform their approach, they refrain from viewing "safety" and "risk" as discursively produced. This thesis will address this by applying Bacchi's WPR approach (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025).

Several studies suggest that neoliberalisation is the hegemonic governance rationality which has led to more exclusive, segregated, and standardised nightlife, creating a symbiotic relationship between the city and its nightlife (Berthet Meylan, 2022; Hollands, 2023). Nightlife brings important qualities to a city, as it provides a space for culture, fostering community, creativity, and counterculture. Economic principles, such as tourism and profit-making, undermine these qualities. This makes concepts of deregulation, privatisation,

gentrification, and commercialisation central to understanding the development of nightlife (W. de Jong & Strikwerda, 2021; Harvey, 2005).

2.4 SAFE NIGHTLIFE

The expansion of nightlife happened alongside deindustrialisation and the rise of the neoliberal era. In many cities, it gave rise to a new nighttime economy (NTE). Apart from economic factors, cultural factors such as women entering the workforce and an increase in the number of university students also contributed to the growth of nightlife (Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). The commercialisation of nightlife transformed it in unintended ways. Neoliberal nightlife is more characterised by hedonism, excessive alcohol and substance use, and race, class and gender inequalities than its previous community-based culture (Berthet Meylan, 2022). Normative agendas focused on remoralising and cleansing cities clash with the commercial imperatives for excessive consumption (Crawford & Flint, 2009). For nightlife, this means that few alternative community-based places remain, and the neoliberal city is now alleviating the consequences of their own policies (Berthet Meylan, 2022; Hollands, 2023).

In response to new insecurities in nightlife, the Netherlands introduced the “Safe Nightlife” project, aimed at improving collaboration between local actors to enhance safety (Van Liempt, 2015). In this section, I will discuss previous research into “Safe nightlife” in the Netherlands. This section reviews the literature, focusing on three key themes: public-private partnerships and responsabilisation, the turn to managing nuisance, and the local variations that complicate a simplistic account of a single governance rationality.

One of the most significant aspects identified by Van Liempt (2015) in a qualitative study of safe nightlife collaborations is the public-private partnerships. Since the government cannot monitor and police nightlife on its own, collaborations with bars and private security were seen as crucial. Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012) examined how surveillance measures are legitimised in different nightlife districts. They found that everyone, including citizens, is increasingly expected to take responsibility for a safer nightlife. This responsabilisation strategy is a common approach in neoliberal governance (Goddard, 2012). This shift toward responsabilisation goes hand in hand with securitisation. While citizens and private actors are increasingly expected to govern themselves, the state simultaneously intensifies its surveillance and control.

The most common government response to guarantee safety in nightlife has been the intensification of policing and surveillance (Helms, 2008; Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012), even though research on the effectiveness remains ambiguous (Brands et al., 2015; Brands & Schwanen, 2014; Schwanen et al., 2012; Van Aalst et al., 2014). The turn to “nuisance” as something that demands policing in the Netherlands is recognised by various scholars (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021; Fiore, 2024). The role of fear and exclusion is illustrated by Fiore (2024) in her work on how nuisance is used to justify (over)policing of Moroccan-Dutch youth. In addition, W. De Jong & Strikwerda (2021) have analysed policy documents from the municipality of Amersfoort using theories of risk society and culture of control. They found a rise in the precautionary paradigm in Dutch governance. Specifically, through a form of coercive inclusion, “deviant” individuals – such as drug users, homeless individuals, and disruptive youth – are not excluded from society, but pressured into participating in society through prevention and intervention programs framed as being for their own and for the public’s good (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021). According to Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012), these precautionary practices are legitimised in urban governance by the idea that they will increase perceptions of safety. However, these perceptions have not been sustained by research, nor were visitors themselves consulted. Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012) note that previously exceptional measures have become normalised. These measures are aimed at controlling and disciplining visitors, aimed at remoralising nightlife by producing a “responsible” citizen. This citizen aligns with a broader neoliberal vision, leading to the exclusion of those incompatible with it (Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). Despite these common patterns across the Netherlands, Van Liempt (2015) also observe local variations.

Cities are sites where specific sets of norms and beliefs underlying perceptions of risk become legible. Blok & Oosterholt (2024) refer to this as “security cultures”. The local variations Van Liempt (2015) observed show that different cities and districts have their own security cultures, with different problems constructed by the different populations, cultures, and local power relationships. Certain policy modules, therefore, tend to be associated with particular cities, and the culture of those cities informs the (un)willingness to adopt certain technologies of governance (Van Liempt, 2015). Examining urban nightlife governance shows whose safety is prioritised and who gets constructed as a “threat”. This can reveal exclusionary practices regarding gender, class, race, or lifestyle. However, despite the variety, Van Liempt underscores the one-size-fits-all formulation of the policies, as well as the underlying goals and hidden agendas that affect the outcomes. The success of the collaborations depends on political

commitment, shared goals, and language used, but this does not always translate into stability. In some cases, a single individual can be key to the project, and external factors, such as local media, can disrupt agendas (Van Liempt, 2015). Additionally, Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012) point out that there is often an assumption of mutual understanding about what constitutes a safe nightlife between the actors in the local project, this often misplaced, concealing the discourse and the complexity.

Several studies, including in Groningen, have focused on experiences of safety in nightlife. Experiences, effectiveness, and perceptions of governance technologies have all been objects of study, with a critical scholarship in the Netherlands (Brands et al., 2015; Brands & Schwanen, 2014; Brands & Van Doorn, 2020; Schwanen et al., 2012; Van Aalst et al., 2014, 2014). W. De Jong and Strikwerda (2021) demonstrate, through a policy analysis, the turn to a risk society in the Netherlands. Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012) add to that discussion by applying a discourse analysis of “Safe Nightlife” documents to understand what governance technologies are formulated and how they are legitimised. They emphasise a perspective in which risk and uncertainty are conceptualised as threats to be managed, disregarding the fact that they are also fundamental to the city’s freedom and vitality, especially its nightlife. In another study, Van Liempt (2015) further illustrates the complexity, ambiguity, and contrasting roles within the “Safe Nightlife” collaborations in these cities. This thesis will contribute to this literature by analysing how safety has been constructed as a problem in need of governance within the policy in the first place.

2.5 RESEARCH GAP

This literature review has shown that safety has been comprehensively studied from various perspectives, such as urban design, external and internal factors, and the affective qualities of safety (Brands et al., 2015; Brands & Schwanen, 2014; Massari et al., 2025; Schwanen et al., 2012; Te Braak & Van Tienoven, 2025). In doing so, I have built an understanding of safety as complex and contextual. The literature further establishes that safety is politically constructed, for instance, through policy, and that policy itself plays a productive role in shaping reality (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). The political process of safety has been studied through the theory of securitisation, analysing it from the perspectives of emancipation, speech acts, and everyday practices (Blok & Oosterholt, 2024; W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021; Floyd, 2024; Nagy, 2021; Zedner, 2009). Yet while securitisation theory shows how safety has become politicised, Listerborn (2016) demonstrates how it has simultaneously been depoliticised, stripped of its radical roots in feminist and anti-racist struggles against structural violence and economic exclusion. Furthermore, the development of security governance must be understood in the context of neoliberal governance (Goddard, 2012; Lemke, 2002; Massari et al., 2025; Pinson & Morel Journal, 2016). The ‘Safe Nightlife’ project is a product of hegemonic neoliberal urban governance frameworks (W. De Jong & Strikwerda, 2021; Van Liempt, 2015; Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012).

Previous comparative research reveals both heterogeneity and shared patterns. Van Liempt & Van Aalst analysed the “Safe nightlife” projects in Utrecht (characterised as a student city) and Rotterdam (characterised by racial diversity) (Van Liempt, 2015; Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). W. De Jong and Strikwerda (2021) analysed the city of Amersfoort, which is a very average Dutch city. This body of research demonstrates the heterogeneity of urban nightlife governance across urban contexts, yet also the similarities embedded in a broader governance rationality. The heterogeneity of urban governance helps us understand how different cultural and social norms influence it and shows what cities can learn from each other (Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012). Building on this scholarship, I turn to Groningen to examine how safety is discursively constructed. Groningen is known for its unrestricted nightlife, shaped by its relatively permissive regulatory stance (Elting, 2025; Levy, 2025).

This thesis will focus on a formulated practice of governance: the renewed action plan aimed at regulating safety in nightlife. As Valverde (2011) argues, while much has been theorised regarding securitisation and governance rationalities. However, more attention needs to be paid to actual practices and how they emerge. Specifically, this thesis will focus on the

rationalities behind safe nightlife policies, not the rationalities of the actors, but of the policy itself. I will apply Bacchi's WPR approach to do so. Rather than asking what governments do, this study examines how the problem of safety is constructed in the formulation of collaborative governance. Addressing the logics behind the policy, as well as the gaps and silences, I will contribute to a better understanding of shortcomings in local safety projects. This responds to Listerborn's (2016) call for the repoliticisation of safety discourse.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will delve into the theoretical framework that will inform the analysis of this thesis. The thesis is grounded in a poststructural paradigm. The primary analytical framework is Foucault's concept of problematisation, operationalised through Bacchi's *What is the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach. This theory provides a toolbox for applying a poststructural framework to the empirical analysis of policy documents and governing practices. Such an approach allows for a critical examination of how unsafety is represented as a problem. It also examines the discourses that underlie the representation in municipal policy. As a secondary framework, neoliberalism will aid in understanding the normative, hegemonic rationality of governance. In addition, the PARIS approach will aid in a nuanced understanding of how power works in security governance. I have selected these frameworks because they enable a critical analysis of political discourses.

3.1 POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The overarching paradigm of this thesis is that of poststructuralism. A poststructural approach to policy research examines how problems and phenomena arise and are understood (Rönblom & Edwards, 2025). Ontologically, this approach is non-foundational; it rejects essentialist ideas of binaries and the search for a universal truth. Instead, reality is understood as being produced, and so are "things" such as problems, subjects, objects, and places (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Rönblom & Edwards, 2025). This production is an emergent process, and power is its driving force. Therefore, power stands central to the analysis (Rönblom & Edwards, 2025). Moreover, Bacchi emphasises the social and political mechanics by which problems and subjects are produced through practices (Rönblom & Edwards, 2025). This view informs a political ontology in which reality is a product of socio-political forces and power relations. The ontology is not concerned with what is ultimately real, but instead with making visible the multitude of ontologies that exist and how they come to produce reality. Specifically, it asks what power relations are involved in the process of making reality (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). This ontological position has epistemological implications: if reality is produced through discourse, then knowledge cannot be understood as a neutral reflection of that reality.

The disinterest with seeking a universal truth is not the same as denying the existence of reality or "things". What is questioned is how and why certain things have come to be understood as they are (Foucault, 1999). Concepts of truth and knowledge are important here.

Knowledge is understood as being socially constructed in an exercise of power. This means that knowledge is not to be understood as being true; it is “in the true” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Riemann, 2023). *Truth* is understood as embedded in discursive practices. These practices consist of a multitude of processes and relations all involved in producing knowledge (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). There is a specific relation among truth, thought, and reality. Truth refers to what is regarded as true, thought to the acceptance or rejection of that truth, and reality to what has happened. This relation allows for analysis (Foucault, 1999; Lemke, 2002). The task of research, then, is not to evaluate true and false claims. Instead, the question is how a certain knowledge has become accepted as truth, and how certain phenomena, such as unsafety and insecurity, have become understood and accepted as problems in need of governing.

This foundation shapes how I approach the action plan in this thesis, not as a neutral response to problems, but as a productive force within those problems. Moreover, a poststructural approach provides the tools for questioning governance. It does away with Enlightenment assumptions such as the autonomous individual, linear progress, and the conviction that we can discover the truths of the world. Instead, what is emphasised is the plurality of practices and knowledges. Knowledges are critical in governing. Discourses emerge from various knowledges, and governance includes mechanisms that produce a certain truth from discourse in the formulation of policy (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Riemann, 2023). Simultaneously, policy also has a role in producing reality. Some knowledges become accepted as true in policy. Through the power inherent in governance policy, these knowledges aid in producing reality. Therefore, analysing policy as the result of discursive practices raises scepticism about aspects of policy. It also opens up the possibility of thinking differently (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Riemann, 2023).

3.2 BACCHI’S WPR: PROBLEMATISING POLICY

3.2.1 PROBLEMATISATION

Problematism allows for placing certain knowledges back into discursive practices, to critically interrogate how they have become accepted as truth. Foucault applied his concept of *problematism* to phenomena of sexuality, crime, and madness. By problematising madness, Foucault did not aim to refute the existence of social phenomena or observable behaviour. Rather, he sought to analyse how and why certain behaviours had been labelled mad, while others did not. The rationalities that underlie such labelling have a history and cultural contexts.

Moreover, labelling someone as mad had significant effects, shaping how people viewed certain behaviours, influencing the treatment of those deemed mad, and even leading to the establishment of institutions aimed at controlling and disciplining people in society (Foucault, 1999). Problematisation allows for forms of knowledge to be questioned through identifying the conditions necessary for their existence. However, no outcome is ever inevitable. There is no causal chain of events. Instead, things are caused by a multiplication and pluralisation of causes, and there is merely the existing outcome (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Foucault, 1999). This also extends to current practices: they are contingent, so we cannot predict whether a given result will follow. But we can question how they came to be and question the rationalities underlying the practices.

Bacchi broadens the scope of “problematising” to include policies (or all prescriptive government materials), as they all contain representations of problems. Policy is an act constructed from problem presentations. It is therefore not an expression of neutral rationality or an objective response to an existing problem. Instead, it is an expression of knowledge as power (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). Problematisation through Bacchi’s WPR involves analysing the production of problems in policy to make the underlying political discourse visible. A policy proposes to do something about an issue. This indicates that something is perceived as an issue requiring change. That issue becomes understood as a problem (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). By analysing policy this way, the pretence of policy as neutral or common sense is removed.

3.2.2 WPR AS THEORY

The WPR approach was originally designed as a method for poststructural policy analysis, to deconstruct the logic of policy documents and political practices. Since then, WPR has been developed for interdisciplinary application, providing a tool for reflection for both researchers and policy workers, seeing these actors as productive in shaping reality through policy (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025).

Poststructuralism, problematisation, and discourse theory are all abstract theories and can therefore be difficult to apply in research (Rönblom & Edwards, 2025). The Foucauldian-influenced WPR approach offers an accessible toolbox for such analysis, making it applicable for this thesis. It provides both the theory and practice for interrogating problematisations, as well as a tool for thinking differently about taken-for-granted assumptions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). This approach asks how an issue becomes problematised, what remains

unproblematised, and how problems and social inequalities are being (re)produced (Riemann, 2023). Every policy presents problems; in the action plan addressed in this thesis, the overarching problem representation is unsafe nightlife. The question asked in this thesis is not whether this observation is true, but rather to analyse the underlying assumptions in the problem representation. As all problem representations include presuppositions and assumptions, not all are necessarily intentional.

Effectively addressing a perceived problem requires a deep understanding that goes beyond the perception itself. It requires an understanding of the assumptions, influences, and power relations that inform it. Policy is not something neutral that addresses problems. Instead, it produces problems and reality. With this view, attention shifts away from the rationalities and intentions of the policy-makers. Instead, focus turns to what the policy itself ends up doing (Bacchi, 2024; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). The task becomes to identify how this formulation of the policy was made possible (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025).

In addition, Bacchi adds the perspective that subjectivity is always embodied, that the framing of problems in policy has real effects on living bodies, and that this can thus reproduce inequalities (Riemann, 2023). Emphasising the importance of thinking differently, the WPR approach specifically acknowledges power and politics, while avoiding normative rhetoric as it does not prescribe a solution. Instead, the approach offers analytical reflexivity (Rönnblom & Edwards, 2025). The WPR approach asks several questions. How are problem representations produced, and how do they produce reality? How do these representations limit possibilities for change? What gaps and silences exist within them? By asking these questions, a common critique of poststructural approaches can be addressed. Listerborn's (2016) call for repoliticisation is also met. This approach does not merely deconstruct. It also reminds us that processes of governance are not neutral, but rather (re)produce structural inequalities by depoliticising socio-political struggles. Therefore, it becomes possible to re-politicise the struggle for safety.

3.3 THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

3.3.1 *SECURITISATION*

This section outlines how the concept of securitisation is understood in this thesis and how it informs the analytical framework. It draws on insights from the PARIS approach to critical securitisation theory. Broadly, critical securitisation theory argues that security is a political

concept. Critical securitisation theory politicises what traditional approaches often treat as a neutral objective. The attention to processes of securitisation enables analysis of how experiences of (un)safety are used to legitimise governance techniques (Nagy, 2021). Concepts of safety, fear, and risk are often presented as self-evident governance objectives. This presentation neglects the taken-for-granted assumption (the doxa) that underlies security claims (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). This depoliticises the concept of security, as well as concepts associated with it. Therefore, the PARIS approach stresses that definitions of security are many and contradictory. Security claims are an outcome of discursive practices. This makes security governance inherently political (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018).

Bacchi & Goodwin (2025) analyse the discursive everyday practices of governance through policy. Correspondingly, it is the discursive practices concerning political acts of security that stand central to the PARIS approach (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). Bigo & McCluskey describe securitisation as a permanent struggle among actors over the power to define the domain of safety. The power relations involved in this process extend beyond the governance sphere to encompass everyone involved in security practices (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). This aligns with Bacchi & Goodwin's argument that governance practice and research both solidify the constructed, relational, and unstable concept of safety, thereby producing a particular reality. Furthermore, both approaches attend to lived experiences and resistances to hegemonic discourses. They also share a socio-historical approach that recognises how security (policy) produces reality through the solidification of truths and dynamics. At the same time, security is also produced by reality (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Bigo & McCluskey, 2018).

The PARIS approach emphasises symbolic power in the securitisation process. Following that, the taken-for-granted assumptions of political actors limit the possibilities for thinking differently about security. When security is framed alongside labels such as freedom, mobility, democracy, and privacy, these assumptions mask what other disciplines might label as violence or coercion (symbolic violence). This shapes the very domain in which security can be conceived. It thereby determines which measures are deemed legitimate protection and which are considered violence. Both the naming of security claims and their framing are political acts. The same applies to associated concepts such as safety and risk (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018).

In addition, Bigo & McCluskey (2018) propose understanding (in)security through the metaphor of a Möbius strip. This illustrates how security and insecurity are a single continuous surface. Thus, (in)security is positioned as a subjective political judgement. This makes

understanding when individuals feel (in)secure, or in this thesis (un)safe, crucial. The next section will examine these assumptions and presumptions through the lens of neoliberalism. As neoliberalism provides the broader governance rationality within which securitisation operates

3.3.2 NEOLIBERALISM

This section develops neoliberalism as an analytical concept for understanding how safety becomes governed in a particular way. Foucault characterises neoliberalism as a new governance structure that relies on microeconomic forces (e.g. market competition, consumerism, and self-interest) (Greene, 2022). Additionally, Lemke (2002) emphasises that the economy is not separated from the state; following Marx, it is always a political economy. Therefore, neoliberalism refers to the structure of power relations within the political economy. This understanding makes the common critique of market logic expanding into politics insufficient. Accordingly, this thesis utilises neoliberalism not as an ideological label but to describe the current political-economic reality. It goes beyond identifying market expansion. Instead, it examines how power operates in mundane governance practices.

To study how this power operates in governance, Bacchi & Goodwin draw on Foucault's concept of *governmentality*. From a Foucauldian perspective, power is not something one has. Rather, it is constitutive of reality and is a productive force that shapes what becomes accepted as truth (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). Foucault originated the concept of governmentality, combining governing (*gouverner*) and modes of thought (*mentalité*) (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Foucault, 2009; Lemke, 2002). Governmentality broadens the understanding of governance beyond formal state institutions to encompass any activity concerned with shaping people's conduct, including self-control, guidance, and household management (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Lemke, 2002). This explains the state becoming concerned with the security, reproduction, productivity, and stability of the population (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). Consequently, power in neoliberal society operates not merely through top-down state control. It also operates through the production of norms, subjects, and rationalities. These make certain ways of governing appear natural and inevitable. These power structures produce subjects for whom consumption and competitiveness appear natural and desirable (Greene, 2022).

This framework reveals how governance objectives become depoliticised. Objectives such as security are often framed through neutral or benevolent language. In this case, "safety". This

obscures the political judgments and power relations underlying them (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). Bacchi & Goodwin argue that social policy is highly normative. It is grounded in notions of social justice that are not neutral observations, but political judgments about how society ought to be. The neutrality that favourable labels offer disguises the underlying power struggles. By placing the action plan back into its discursive politics through the WPR approach, the political rationalities become visible. The objective of “safety” can then be repoliticised.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the thesis. It begins by justifying the selection of Groningen as the empirical site. I then describe the empirical material and the analytical framework applied. Following this, the research design is discussed, grounded in poststructural policy analysis. Finally, ethical considerations are addressed, including my positionality and the role of reflexivity in critical poststructural research.

4.1 SITE SELECTION

The city of Groningen is selected as the empirical site for this thesis. As Layard (2020) argues, cities are not merely passive backdrops for policy but are actively produced through governance practices. The municipality of Groningen offers a productive site for interrogating how safety is problematised in urban nightlife governance, given its security culture, its vibrant nightlife, and its recent adoption of a new “Safe Nightlife” action plan.

The city is a distinctive legal and social entity produced through both its people and its governance practices (Layard, 2020). Valverde (2011) emphasises that scope and jurisdiction are decisive, as the security techniques chosen depend on the mandates a municipality holds and on the jurisdiction under which certain “problems” are governed. The smaller scale of cities makes governance dynamics more observable, allowing researchers to more deeply interrogate how policies are made, including civil practices often overlooked at the national level (Layard, 2020). The local aspect of municipal governance means that decisions are made closer to the citizens and makes it possible to diverge from normative national and international governance rationalities (Goddard, 2012). Researching city security strategies and discursive practices can help understand how security governance operates more broadly.

4.1.1 EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

The primary empirical material is the *Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan (2025)*, published by the municipality of Gemeente Groningen³. This document is the central object of analysis, as it constitutes the formal governance response to increased perceptions of insecurity in nightlife.

³ Retrieved 21-01-2026, <https://gemeente.groningen.nl/veilig-uitgaan>

The action plan is part of the *Veilig Uitgaan* (Safe Nightlife) project. The project is formalised in the *Convenant Veilig Uitgaan Gemeente Groningen 2022–2027*⁴, which formalises the agreement among the chain partners: Gemeente Groningen, Politie Noord-Nederland (Police North-Netherlands), Brandweezorg Veiligheidsregio Groningen (Fire-Service Safety-Region Groningen), and Koninklijke Horeca Nederland (Royal Dutch Hospitality Association). The municipality of Gemeente Groningen’s directive on Veiligheid (Safety) assigns responsibility for local security policy (Organisatiebesluit Gemeente Groningen 2024, n.d.). The action plan was formulated under this project, with all chain partners, and published under the directive Veiligheid by the board of mayor and aldermen. The “Safe Nightlife” agreements, including the action plan, are legally binding as contracts, not as law or policy.

The action plan is a mid-term review of the covenant. Before formulating the action plan, the municipality commissioned research into the safety situation of the nightlife district. The report was carried out by Breuer & Intraval⁵ (authors: Jacco Snippe, Irene Schoonbeek, and Erwin van der Lee). The research was conducted from January to May 2025. They utilised a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, including desk research to analyse these historical documents and current policy; police registration analysis; surveying the nightlife public; interviews with stakeholders, including police, hospitality owners, and municipality officials; comparative research with eight other municipalities; observations involving three nights of fieldwork; and a night spent shadowing the police’s Public Order Team (OOT).

The covenant and the prior research have been informed before conducting the analysis; however, the analysis examines how the action plan constructs and represents the problem of unsafety in nightlife. The supplementary material for the analysis are: the local legal ordinance, *Algemene Plaatselijke Verordening Groningen 2021*⁶, which provides the legal framework for public order, safety, traffic matters, and hospitality in the municipality; and the action plan *Preventie- & handhavingsplan middelengebruik 2024-2027*⁷, which reflects the broader municipal governance approach to substance use. These documents help situate the action plan within its broader governance framework, but are not analysed in depth.

⁴ Retrieved 31-01-2026, <https://gemeenteraad.groningen.nl/Documenten/Bijlage-Convenant-Veilig-Uitgaan-2022-2027.pdf>

⁵ Retrieved 31-01-2026, <https://gemeenteraad.groningen.nl/Documenten/Bijlage-Rapport-Breuer-Intraval-Veilig-Uitgaan-Groningen.pdf>

⁶ Retrieved 19-04-2026, <https://lokaleregelgeving.overheid.nl/CVDR646003>

⁷ Retrieved 19-04-2026, <https://lokaleregelgeving.overheid.nl/CVDR721920/1>

All documents are in Dutch. I have translated the passages with Google Translate and carefully checked against the original texts to ensure accuracy and consistency.

4.2 POSTSTRUCTURAL POLICY ANALYSIS

The research is grounded in a poststructuralist tradition, which allows for engagement with law and policy as discursive practices. From this framework, policies do not respond to pre-existing problems but instead produce problems, subjects, spaces, and solutions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). This makes policy neither neutral nor rational in response to preexisting problems. By applying critical policy analysis using Bacchi's WPR approach, the assumptions and presuppositions underlying "safety" and the legitimisation of certain interventions can be identified and challenged (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Riemann, 2023).

In addition, the concepts of securitisation and neoliberalism are operationalised. Securitisation has been developed to describe and analyse the political process of security in governance. Critical scholarship in Critical Security Studies (CSS) questions what security is, how it works, and who benefits. This thesis will draw on the PARIS school of Critical Security Studies (CSS) to analyse how "safety" becomes constructed in policy (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). To analyse power in governance, I utilise neoliberalism alongside governmentality. Neoliberalism situates policy within its political-economic context, informing the hegemonic governing rationality, while governmentality offers a more critical perspective on the operation of power in governance.

4.3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework of this thesis is Bacchi's WPR approach. This section will go into how I have applied this approach. WPR is a method for critical policy analysis that helps analyse how a particular problem representation is constructed. In particular, this approach returns the problem representation to discursive practices to challenge the assumption that policy presents rational, objective problems and solutions. This approach aligns with the research aim by examining how policies are products of social and political discourses and can therefore be understood differently (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Riemann, 2023; Rönnblom & Edwards, 2025).

Bacchi offers a toolbox of six questions and a reflexive seventh step:

1. What's the problem (e.g. of "gender inequality", "drug use/abuse", "economic development", "global warming", "childhood obesity", "irregular migration", etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions (conceptual logics) underlie this representation of the "problem" (problem representation)?
3. How has this representation of the "problem" come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be conceptualized differently?
5. What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?
6. How and where has this representation of the "problem" been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?
7. Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.

(Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025, p. 20)

These questions are strategically ordered and not prescriptive (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). This thesis will focus on questions 1, 2, and 4 for the following reasons. First, the thesis is document-based, Q5 will be excluded as it would require deeper empirical investigation, which is, with the genealogy of Q3, beyond the scope of this thesis. Whereas Q6 regarding destabilising and disrupting taken-for-granted truths will be partially addressed through the notion of repoliticisation in the discussion section. Second, Q1-4 will form the core of the WPR method: identifying the problem representation(s) (Q1), uncovering its underlying logics (Q2), and identifying the gaps and silences (Q4). Together, these questions will allow for a critical deconstruction of the policy's construction of "safety" without overextending the analysis. Below, I outline the concrete steps I will take in the analysis, informed by Bacchi & Goodwin (2025) and Riemann (2023):

Question 1: Starting with identifying the starting point by looking at what the policy proposes. By working backwards, I read what solutions are proposed, what the implied problem(s) are, and thus what policymakers have constructed as requiring change. Reading backwards involves mapping the proposed solutions and identifying what each aims to address, thereby forming an overarching problem representation.

Question 2: After identifying the problem representations, this question asks how certain knowledges have acquired truth and to locate the representation within discursive practices. I did this by identifying the concepts (e.g., “safety”, “nuisance”, “risk”) and binaries (e.g., safe/unsafe, order/disorder, responsible drinker/problem drinker) within the representations, their underlying logics or meanings, and the biases they implicated. This involves identifying the presuppositions and assumptions necessary to justify the proposed interventions. Additionally, I have reviewed the legal ordinance and the alcohol and substance use plan to identify how these concepts are addressed in other local policies. I considered whether the problem representation reflects broader political rationalities, such as neoliberalism (e.g., responsabilisation, privatisation), securitisation practices (e.g., preventive gaze, exceptional measures, coercive control), and the cultural context.

Question 4: After identifying the subjugated knowledges, I further examined what remains unproblematic or silenced in the policy representation. This question is open to various interpretations. I have based the subjugated knowledges on the assumptions I identified before. In addition, I focused on the power relations involved, as this is a Foucauldian analysis. For this, I relied on the article by Van Dyk (2006). This step encourages the critical practice of thinking otherwise.

The first sub-question analyses how safety is constructed as a governance problem in the action plan and identifies the problem representation. This step shows how safety becomes politicised in policy. The second and third sub-questions together place the objective of safety back into the discursive practices from which it emerges. By examining what assumptions and rationalities must be taken for granted for this framing of safety to appear natural and inevitable, the second sub-question locates the representation within broader governance rationalities. This will allow me to address how safety is depoliticised. Addressing what has been left silent and unproblematised, the third sub-question opens up the possibility of thinking differently and thereby repoliticising the objective of safety. Together, these sub-questions follow the logic of Bacchi’s WPR approach and build toward an answer to the main research question.

4.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND POSITIONALITY

Ethical considerations are integral to critical poststructural research, as this framework understands both policy and research as productive of reality rather than merely reflective of it (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). The thesis does not involve human participants, the collection of

personal data, or the processing of sensitive data. The empirical material consists entirely of publicly available policy documents produced by a municipal government. As such, this research falls within the scope of the student exception under the Swedish Ethical Review Act. The absence of a formal review requirement does not exempt one from ethical reflection. Bos (2020) argues that research ethics in the social sciences extends beyond procedural compliance to the researcher's responsibility for how knowledge is produced and what effects that may have. In the context of poststructural policy analysis, this includes transparency about positionality and its influence on the analytical process.

Bacchi's WPR approach centres reflexivity through its seventh step, which asks researchers to apply the same critical scrutiny to their own problem representations as to those of the policies they analyse (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). By choosing to foreground repoliticising the concept of safety from neoliberal governance through centring the silences around structural inequality, gendered violence, and discrimination, this thesis makes a political choice. A reflection on my own positionality is thus relevant here. I am familiar with the Groningen nightlife scene as a participant, volunteer, and through personal connections with people working in nightlife. This proximity creates insights into familiarity, which can sharpen observation – I know the conversations surrounding safety and the context in which the action plan exists – but it also makes for certain presuppositions and assumptions. To manage this, I follow Bacchi's instruction to read from the action plan rather than from a predetermined theoretical or normative position, maintaining transparency in moving from empirical material to analytical conclusions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Mason, 2002). The analytical framework adds further critical distance, grounding every claim in the action plan itself, rather than in prior assumptions about what it does or does not do. With this thesis, I aim to contribute to the conversation about safe nightlife in Groningen.

5. ANALYSIS

This chapter applies Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (WPR) approach to the *Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan 2025*. Following the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 4, I address three of Bacchi's questions. First, I identify how the problem of unsafe nightlife is represented in the policy (Q1). Working backwards from the proposed solutions, I illustrate how the action plan constructs unsafety as the consequence of nightlife visitors' behaviour. Second, I uncover the deep-seated assumptions that make this representation possible (Q2). I argue that three taken-for-granted assumptions underpin this problem representation: what constitutes "normal" behaviour, the need to prevent disorder and crime, and the necessity of governance oversight. Finally, I examine what remains unproblematic and silenced in this representation (Q4). Here, I address the power relations that the action plan (re)produces, how the preventative logic limits what solutions can be thought of, and what the concept of "normal" leaves silent.

5.1 WHAT'S THE PROBLEM OF "(UN)SAFE NIGHTLIFE" REPRESENTED TO BE IN THE ACTION PLAN? (Q1 WPR)

The first step in the WPR approach is to identify the starting point of the analysis. The proposed solutions reveal what policymakers see as problematic and in need of change. These solutions construct the problem representation (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). The title "Safe Nightlife" already implies a perceived problem with nightlife safety. The action plan's motivation lists multiple concerns: heightened severity of violent incidents, loitering, the presence of homeless people, drug traffickers, post-pandemic behavioural changes, and sexual violence against women. Among these, the plan emphasises that visitor behaviour "has become more unrestrained following the pandemic, partly influenced by high alcohol and substance use" (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3). This framing sets the stage for the action plan's integrated approach, which centres norm change as the primary solution.

The action plan summarises several proposed solutions into six aspects. These aspects together form an "integrated approach focusing on both preventive and repressive measures" (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3). Appendix A provides an overview of these proposed solutions from page five of the action plan. Appendix B contains the English translation of this overview. The action plan justifies the integrated approach by stating that the

measures will have a greater effect when employed together. This integrated approach means that no single vision is established. Instead, a mix of measures is proposed to ensure safety. The plan illustrates this by depicting the measures as puzzle pieces that fit together to form a complete picture. This framing presents the measures as distinct and complementary. Although the plan lists six aspects, the analysis will show that they largely overlap and rest on the same logic.

Each aspect ultimately serves the aim of establishing and enforcing a new shared norm. The first aspect, “Norm Change” (1), focuses on addressing (sexual) transgressive behaviours and excessive alcohol and substance use by nightlife visitors through this collectively shared norm. Aspects “Collaboration & Trust” (2) and “Evaluation and Monitoring” (6) ensure that the proposed solutions will be applied through improving collaboration and communication between the chain partners. The remaining aspects address social control and the enforcement of the new norm. These include “Supervision & Enforcement” (3), “Physical design” (4), “Other measures” (5), and, again, “Norm Change” (1). Together, these six aspects illustrate how the action plan constructs unsafe nightlife as a problem requiring governance.

Central to the action plan is thus the formulation of a new, collectively shared norm to be conveyed and enforced. This informs the rest of the action plan: “We are currently working together to determine the desired or ‘new’ norm. This forms the basis for all activities in the Safe Nightlife Action Plan” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 18). However, what constitutes a shared norm is open to multiple interpretations.

The action plan does not formulate the new norm; it is said to be collectively established: “whereby we collectively establish, promote, and uphold the norm” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10). However, the action plan does already frame the central aspect of “Norm Change” (4). For instance, by providing examples of what behaviours are excluded: public urination, openly using illicit substances, and making sexually explicit comments. The plan describes this behaviour as “not normal” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10). In addition, the *STAD programme (Stockholm Prevents Alcohol and Drug Problems)* is mentioned as an influence. This signals that the action plan views binge drinking and substance use as central causes of undesired behaviour. The proposed solutions reflect the centrality of behaviour change with a focus on alcohol and substance use. These include national campaigns (4.2) aimed at raising awareness of responsible alcohol consumption and addressing transgressive behaviour, as well as programmes that educate adolescents on these subjects (4.3 & 4.9) and training nightlife

workers to recognise and respond to (sexual) transgressive behaviour (4.6). All of these measures share a common aim: to change behaviour. Specifically, (sexual) transgressive behaviours, excessive alcohol consumption, and the use of illicit substances.

By targeting behaviour, the problem of unsafe nightlife is constructed as a problem of individual behaviour, thereby individualising safety. This raises the question of whose behaviour is at issue. While the action plan states: “the desired or ‘new’ norm describes how we interact with each other and what behaviour we do not accept” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10), the proposed solutions in the aspect “Norm Change” (4) all have the aim to change the behaviour of nightlife visitors, be it through education or steering behaviour. The chain partners are addressed in two aspects (2 & 6). However, the concern is still whether the norm is being effectively conveyed and enforced. The chain partners are problematised only insofar as they are instruments of behaviour change.

The responsibility for conveying this new norm does not lie solely with the chain partners, since the action plan aims to communicate to the general public what “you yourself can do when others do not adhere to it (the new norm)” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10). This distribution of responsibility to everyone involved in nightlife reflects a broader responsabilisation strategy, characteristic of neoliberal governance (Goddard, 2012; Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012).

Therefore, the action plan constructs unsafety as the consequence of visitors’ behaviour. While the plan uses collective language, the logic is individualising: behaviour must change, and the responsibility for that lies with everyone. Having identified how the action plan represents unsafe nightlife as a problem of individual behaviour, the next section examines the assumptions that make this representation possible. In particular, governance oversight is necessary to prevent “not normal” behaviour.

5.2 WHAT DEEP-SEATED PRESUPPOSITIONS OR ASSUMPTIONS

(CONCEPTUAL LOGICS) UNDERLIE THIS REPRESENTATION OF THE “PROBLEM”? (Q2 WPR)

Bacchi’s second WPR question asks what presuppositions and assumptions make the problem representation possible. Policies include assumptions about human nature and governance. These assumptions tell us how the municipality views safety and how social

control should operate. For instance, “crime prevention proposals to enhance street lighting rest on premises about how ‘rational actors’ will behave in certain circumstances” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025, p. 49). Identifying these unexamined assumptions makes it possible to locate the problem representation within broader discursive practices (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025).

In the previous section, I identified that the action plan constructs the problem of unsafe nightlife as a consequence of visitors’ behaviour. This representation assumes that behavioural change will lead to a safe nightlife. In addition, the plan assumes that the municipality is responsible for managing the behaviour through formulating and enforcing a new norm. First, I will discuss the action plan’s assumption that governance oversight is necessary to maintain a safe nightlife. Here, I examine how the plan invites civic participation while maintaining top-down control, a dynamic that reflects the broader Dutch culture of consensus. Second, I will discuss the assumption that preventing not just crime but also “not normal” behaviour will produce a safer nightlife. Third, I will examine what the notion of “normal” means within the Dutch cultural context and how this shapes the action plan.

5.2.1 THE ASSUMPTION OF GOVERNANCE OVERSIGHT

The action plan proposes that the problem of unsafe nightlife will be solved through formulating and enforcing a new shared norm. To achieve this, the action plan aims to increase collaboration, communication, and trust between the chain partners: “the safety of the nightlife district is promoted by intensive and constructive cooperation between all chain partners” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 17). In addition, the action plan will build upon previous measures, therefore increasing the security measures taken: “the existing programs and actions will be continued and improved where possible. Simultaneously, new actions are being added” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3). Together, this presumes that nightlife cannot function safely without active management through surveillance and enforcement by the municipality and its chain partners.

The first step is to formulate the new norm: “the desired or ‘new’ norm describes how we interact with each other and what behaviour we do not accept. With the aim of improving the safety, the sense of security, the atmosphere, and cooperation between the chain partners” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10). The question here is who is we? At first glance, the language suggests a broad collaboration with the various actors involved in nightlife: “whereby we collectively establish, convey, and enforce the norm” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p.

10). However, the role of the actors that are not chain partners is minimised to input: “all involved parties provide input and jointly determine the content, tone, and approach of the ‘new’ norm. This is done through (online) surveys, focus group workshops, and joint evaluations” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10). The same approach extends to how the norm is conveyed and enforced. Everyone involved in nightlife is made responsible for conveying the new norm, however, under the guidance of the chain partners. For instance, in addition to enforcement officers, nightlife workers and other professionals are also expected to lead by example and address others’ behaviour when necessary (4.6, 6.3 & 6.6); and the municipality will use visual expressions, social media, and educational campaigns to convey the new norm and educate the general public (4.1 & 4.5) with the aim of “increasing awareness regarding transgressive behaviour” and “increasing the scope for action (including for bystanders)” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 13). In addition, there are two aspects, “Collaboration & Trust” and “Evaluation and Monitoring”, that further elaborate on the central role of chain partners and their collaboration in producing a safe nightlife.

The action plan’s structure is top-down: the municipality, police, fire services, and hospitality association formulate the new norm, reducing those actually active in nightlife – business owners, workers, and visitors – to a consultative role. Yet this structure presents as collaborative. This reflects the political culture in the Netherlands, specifically, the “Poldermodel”, for which high civic participation and shared decision-making are characteristic (Prak & Van Zanden, 2014; Van Dyk, 2006). This political culture creates an appearance of consensus (Van Dyk, 2006). Through consulting experts (Trimbos, Unravel Behavior) and other actors for surveys and focus groups the plan is legitimised by its shared decision-making and consensual solutions. All while maintaining the discursive power to frame the debate and set the boundaries. The “Safe Nightlife Covenant” (Convenant Veilig Uitgaan Gemeente Groningen 2022 - 2027, n.d.) can be seen as solidifying this discursive power. This governance structure is legitimised precisely because it follows this broader political cultural ideal, allowing it to be presented as neutral and collaborative.

5.2.2 THE ASSUMPTION OF PREVENTION

The problem representation has already shown that the six different aspects overlap and are guided by the same logic. A similar observation can be made about the integrated approach, the action plan states:

This multifaceted set of problems calls for an integrated approach, in which emphasis is placed on both preventive and repressive measures. (...) It is precisely the set of measures (the integrated approach) that must lead to a safer nightlife district. (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3).

Despite this stated balance between preventive and repressive measures, an analysis of the proposed solutions reveals a predominantly preventative logic.

The preventative logic relies on two assumptions about human behaviour. First, the plan assumes that visitors are rational actors who will make better decisions when better informed. This is reflected in the proposed solutions focusing on information and awareness (4.1-4.5 & 4.9). Education inherently has a preventative function. Second, it assumes that behaviour must be controlled through surveillance and enforcement. This is exemplified primarily in the aspects of “Supervision & Enforcement” (3) and “Physical Design” (4) sections. In the former (3), prevention is a specific aim that justifies early intervention. For instance, a nightlife police team is said to enable “early intervention in cases of nuisance and violence” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 19) and the horecastewards⁸ are to “identify nuisances” and to “take preventive and de-escalating action” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 20). Camera surveillance is justified as it “facilitates timely intervention by the police because live monitoring is possible. In this way, a quick response is possible, and escalation can be prevented” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 21). Each here is aimed at and justified by prevention. In public design, the same logic is applied: “remotely controlling the lighting can prevent nuisance or contribute to adequate intervention in the event of incidents.” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 23) and “a clean, high-quality environment ensures that nightlife visitors treat the design of public spaces more carefully and that the public feels safer” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 23). The plan assumes that design can produce social control, so that enforcement after the fact is not needed. Together, these assumptions prioritise preventing behaviour before it occurs, whether through information or control. However, these assumptions are in tension, the education-based prevention trusts people to self-regulate, while surveillance-based control assumes they will not.

This preventive logic is not unique to the action plan. It reflects a broader governance rationality evident in other municipal policies. The “Prevention- & Enforcement Plan Substance

⁸ A horecasteward is a non-law enforcement official who patrols nightlife districts to identify undesirable behaviour, intervene preventively, and promote a shared behavioural norm through coaching.

use 2024-2027” from the municipality of Gemeente Groningen states its aim in its name: prevention and enforcement. The aim of this policy reflects the action plan:

The goal of prevention is to ensure that people remain healthy by promoting and protecting their health. (...) Preventive measures are implemented in various locations (settings), for example in healthcare, at school, in the community, and in the workplace. In an integrated approach, preventive measures focus on both the behaviour of individuals and the physical and social environment. (Preventie - & handhavingsplan middelengebruik 2024-2027, Article 1.1).

Similarly, the STAD approach influencing the action plan focuses on preventing excessive alcohol use through limiting availability (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025; Möhle et al., 2025). The assumption that preventing alcohol and substance use will reduce (sexual) transgressive behaviour is never questioned. Nor does the action plan address how the Swedish zero-tolerance model transfers to the more liberal Dutch context. Prevention is constructed as a truth in Dutch governance.

This lack of questioning, whether certain behaviours actually cause unsafety, can be observed throughout the action plan. By focusing on norm change, unsafety is constructed as “not normal” behaviour rather than harm. In the “supervision & enforcement” section, “overlast” (nuisance) is mentioned nine times. However, nuisance is not harm. Public urination, openly using illicit substances, and loud behaviour might be undesired, but they are not necessarily dangerous or harmful, nor are they all legal offences. Yet within the action plan’s framework, they serve as justifications for surveillance, enforcement, and norm change.

5.2.3 THE ASSUMPTIONS OF “NORMAL” BEHAVIOUR

The representation of individual behaviour as the problem of unsafe nightlife rests on a taken-for-granted assumption about what counts as normal conduct. For individual behaviour to be represented as the problem, certain assumptions must be in place about which behaviours cause unsafety in nightlife. Although the new norm guiding visitors’ behaviour has not yet been formulated, the action plan outlines the boundaries for envisioning it. The action plan states:

Public urination, openly using illicit substances, or commenting on someone’s nice butt. Behaviour that many would label as ‘not normal’. Yet, it happens regularly in the nightlife area.

In Groningen's nightlife, we want to 'return to normal', whereby we collectively establish, convey, and enforce the norm. A norm that makes every visitor feel comfortable and safe, and that makes going out enjoyable (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10).

The concept of “normal” appears twice in this quote, first as “not normal” to label undesired behaviour, then as “return to normal” to state the aim. This concept carries a specific cultural weight in the Netherlands. The idiom “doe normaal” (act normal) functions as a corrective demand meant to protect unspoken social boundaries, even clearer in the phrase “doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg” (just act normal, it’s already crazy enough). This clearly reflects a cultural expectation of conformity (Al Mazouni, 2025). However, the term is also used more broadly to set the stage for conversations about “wat wij normaal vinden” (what we find normal), asking where we, as a society, stand on a given subject. Politicians and social movements regularly attempt to define what “we” should consider normal (Al Mazouni, 2025; Driebergen, 2019). For this analysis, I read “normal” as setting that stage, since the norm in the action plan has yet to be formulated. This reading is not intended as an exhaustive account of Dutch culture but as an analytical lens for revealing and unpacking normative assumptions. This interpretation views “normal” not as a fixed standard but as a social contract open to negotiation, reflecting Dutch consensus culture.

Van Dyk identifies similar terms commonly used in Dutch institutions, such as “objectivity”, “pragmatism”, and “reason”. These state little about their content and can be interpreted in multiple ways. Therefore, they can be considered “empty signifiers” (Van Dyk, 2006). In the action plan, “safety” is a seemingly benevolent signifier that can obscure the possible pervasiveness and harm of certain securitising measures. The neutrality that favourable labels offer disguises underlying power struggles (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). A similar dynamic operates with the concept of “normal”. When we look at the concept of “normal”, it also functions as an empty signifier that enables consensus, even when the actors do not agree on its content. The concept is depoliticised as it is taken for granted.

This contextualises the more ambiguous descriptions of behaviour that the action plan considers problematic, such as “boundless”, “unpleasant” and “disrespectful” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, pp. 3, 6). Similar descriptors also appear in the local legal ordinance. Article 2:52 prohibits specific acts such as climbing on statues, public toilets, or street furniture, but also prohibits “being in a public place in a way that causes unnecessary nuisance or hindrance” to residents” (Algemene Plaatselijke Verordening Groningen 2021, z.d. Article 2:52).

Similarly, article 2:50 prohibits alcohol consumption “if this is accompanied by conduct that disturbs public order, impairs the living environment, or otherwise causes a nuisance.” (Algemene Plaatselijke Verordening Groningen 2021, n.d., Article 2:50 sub 1). These descriptors are thus commonly used in the municipality’s policy. Terms like these are not arbitrary moral judgements. Instead, they reflect a cultural logic in which disrespectful behaviour is understood as a breach of the social contract. Therefore, what the action plan constructs as behaviour that causes unsafety, and thus “not normal”, is behaviour that breaks with the social contract.

Partying, drunkenness, and “gezelligheid”⁹⁹ are culturally accepted as part of nightlife, this in itself does not break the norm. The aim to “return to normal” assumes that a good safety standard previously existed in nightlife. The action plan cites the chain partners’ observations that “visitor behaviour has become more boundless after the pandemic, which is partially influenced by high alcohol and substance use.” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3) and “since the corona pandemic, nightlife business owners and the police in particular have observed an increase in unrestrained, disrespectful, and aggressive behaviour among visitors” (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 6). This frames the perceived safety issues in nightlife as new following the pandemic and urgent in that the covenant for safe nightlife (Covenant Veilig Uitgaan Gemeente Groningen 2022 - 2027, n.d.) needs a mid-term review. This is not the kind of urgency that overrides the legal order. Rather, a process in which measures that were previously considered exceptional are becoming routine. Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012) already identified this trend in earlier research on the "Safe Nightlife" project. The adoption of the collective pub/club ban (8.1), together with the proposed exploration of night-time BOA deployment (6.2) and a safety risk area (6.7), shows that the pandemic functions as such an event for the action plan. Therefore, the assumptions that “not normal” behaviour causes unsafety already justify measures before the norm is even formally formulated.

⁹⁹ Dutch word meaning social, convivial, or cosy

5.3 WHAT IS LEFT UNPROBLEMATIC IN THIS PROBLEM REPRESENTATION?

WHERE ARE THE SILENCES? CAN THE “PROBLEM” BE

CONTEXTUALISED DIFFERENTLY? (Q4 WPR)

A particular problem representation constructs the discursive boundaries of how safety in nightlife can be thought about, limiting which solutions appear legitimate and which knowledge can be considered “in the true”. Above I have identified the problem representation and the knowledges which underpin it. In this section, I will discuss what silences this framework produces. Following Bacchi & Goodwin (2025), identifying what is left unproblematic is essential for destabilising the representation as the only reasonable way to understand the issue. This encourages thinking otherwise, and thus helps repoliticise how safety is understood in nightlife governance.

This section will discuss which silences are produced and which are unproblematised in the problem representation of the action plan. The concept of “normal” in the Netherlands is framed by a consensus culture. The standard of what is considered normal is perceived as a matter of agreement. However, it is exactly this framing that obscures the power relations involved with how this agreement comes to be. First, I will demonstrate how the action plan obscures the power relations within the discursive practices that problematise safety. Second, I will discuss what the assumption of prevention overlooks, and last, I will discuss the silences that the concept of “normal” creates.

5.3.1 THE UNPROBLEMATISED POWER RELATIONS

Van Dyk (2006) argues that a reference to the Poldermodel oversimplifies the Netherlands as a consensus culture. This reference tends to explain consensus solutions in terms of the nature of the problem itself rather than its discursive construction. For instance, the action plan assumes that increasing surveillance is the logical and reasonable response to heightened perceptions of unsafety. The solution becomes depoliticised from the discursive practices that formed it.

One way issues become depoliticised in Dutch politics is through technocratic solutions, whereby expertise and data are positioned as neutral authorities and are used to make both problems and solutions appear neutral and objective (Van Dyk, 2006; Van Waarden, 2002).

This shapes the boundaries of how the problem can reasonably be thought of. In the action plan, the framework for norm change is grounded in STAD:

For changing the norm, we looked at the principles of STAD. STAD (Stockholm prevents Alcohol and Drug problems) is a (cost-)effective program from Sweden aimed at preventing binge drinking and drug use in nightlife. (...) According to the STAD project leader at the Trimbos Institute, the approach in Groningen, as described in this action plan, aligns well with the principles of STAD (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10).

The plan does not justify why STAD is appropriate for Groningen's nightlife culture (which is much more permissive than Sweden's zero-tolerance approach). Instead, the action plan's approach is legitimised by following the advice of a research institute. As a result, the institute's mental health approach (*Trimbos-instituut: Voor mentale gezondheid (home)*, n.d.), as well as STAD's claim that excessive alcohol and substance use "has a great impact on public safety" (Möhle et al., 2025, p. 9), is adopted by the action plan. This lays the groundwork for how the new norm is to be formulated. In addition, the consultancy firm Unravel Behavior specialises in nudging and behavioural influence (*Nudging & Gedragsbeïnvloeding voor Toezicht & Veiligheid*, n.d.). This further frames safety as a matter of individual decision-making. The problem is not that the plan uses expertise or that any of these choices are wrong, but rather that these choices are not neutral. They will influence how the new norm can be thought of.

The proposed "Safe Spaces" solution (4.7) illustrates how institutionalised language influences framing. The action plan presents Safe Space in the figure as "a low-stimulus space for people who have experienced something unpleasant or feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Help is offered, or referrals are provided where necessary" (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 14). This framing aligns with everyday understandings of Safe Space as a place to rest and receive support. However, in the action plan's example chosen to justify the integrated approach, Safe Space is positioned as a means of encouraging police reporting:

Many victims of (sexual) transgressive behaviour want to get out of the situation as quickly as possible. Approaching a police officer is not easy for everyone. Additionally, a victim may find that a report cannot be filed immediately, causing the victim to "let it go". A hospitality steward is often more approachable. Unlike a doorman or police officer, the hospitality steward has "their hands free" to briefly take a visitor to a safe place where the right support is available. And although filing a report might not be possible that same night,

the listening ear in the Safe Space that night can encourage the person involved to file a report at a later time (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 8).

The case explicitly links the Safe Space to filing a report. The care function is not denied but subordinated to the institutional logic of the chain partners, in which reporting functions as the primary response to sexual misconduct.

Furthermore, this implies that the role of the chain partners in producing unsafety is left unproblematised. Reporting is presented as the solution for addressing sexual misconduct. The action plan assumes that reporting is in the victim's best interest and attributes low reporting rates to a lack of access, information, or support. However, this framework overlooks the role of the police and the justice system itself. Research demonstrates that the criminal justice system often fails victims in various ways (Antonsdottir, 2020). This suggests that victims may avoid reporting not because they lack support or information, but because they anticipate secondary victimisation, disbelief, or poor treatment from law enforcement and legal institutions. This silence risks placing the burden solely on victims while failing to address structural issues. Another example is that the introduction states that "violent incidents of violence occur with some regularity, in which the police themselves are also frequently required to use force." (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3). By presenting police violence as a primarily a response, the action plan fails to address the police as an actor in the safety situation. The possibility that the police have a role in producing safety in nightlife is subordinated, illustrating the power to define which subjects are constructed as needing to change.

The power to define "safety" lies with the municipality and its chain partners. This does not mean other actors have no influence (Van Dyk, 2006). They are given space to advocate for their interests through surveys, focus groups, and joint evaluations. However, recognising the power imbalance is important. The chain partners ultimately determine the framework, the questions, and the boundaries within which other actors can operate. Even when unintended, this discursive framing limits what can be thought, said, and claimed about safety in nightlife.

5.3.2 THE UNPROBLEMATISED PREVENTION LOGIC

In the action plan, repressive and preventative measures are presented as the two frameworks to be weighed against each other, creating a silence on alternative approaches. In addition, the plan builds on established security measures without questioning their

assumptions, thereby (re)producing the same assumptions and logic. This preventive gaze does not affect only how producing safe nightlife can be conceived, but also how the proposed solutions are framed and formulated.

The action plan adopts Trimbos' mental health framework and STAD's approach to reducing alcohol use without questioning whether these frameworks are appropriate for Groningen's context. The action plan states: "The chain partners working in the nightlife area indicate that visitor behaviour has become more boundless after the pandemic, which is partially influenced by high alcohol and substance use" (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3). This assumption is not challenged, leaving out other perspectives on alcohol and substance use. Such as the possibility that people pursue intoxication not out of ignorance or lack of willpower, but because pleasure and risk-taking are legitimate motivations (Bacchi, 2015). Bacchi argues that within the prevention framework, intoxication can only be read as irrational: "Because pleasure and enjoyment are not counted as genuine benefits (...), it is difficult to interpret the deliberate and repeated pursuit of intoxication as anything other than irrational and perverse within this framework" (Keane, 2009, p. 139, in Bacchi 2015). However, the action plan does mention pleasure, but in relation to an established norm: "a standard that makes every visitor feel comfortable and safe, and that makes going out pleasurable" (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 10) and "they (horecastewards) identify and combat nuisance, intervening in cases of unwanted behaviour, and ensuring a pleasant and safe nightlife environment" (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 20). In this framework, pleasure considered, but as a consequence of conforming to the norm, not as a motivation for behaviour. That alcohol and substance use produce unsafety is framed as truth, other ways of thinking of alcohol and substance use are silenced.

Furthermore, the preventive logic frames all other solutions. For example, diversity becomes a form of social control. More diverse nightlife venues to attract more diverse crowds is said to bring "a different dynamic to the nightlife area, with the expectation that this will change the norm and social control for the better" (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 25). Diversity in this framing is not valued for inclusion or representation, but as a mechanism of social control. This illustrates how the preventative logic leaves silent other ways of thinking about the legitimacy of solutions.

The normative framing shifts from providing safety from harm to enforcing norms. The preventative logic leads to the assumption that nightlife should be orderly and controlled. One

aspect left out is that freedom and risk are intertwined rather than binary (Zedner, 2009). Zedner warns that pursuing absolute security can undermine the freedoms it claims to protect. By treating all insecurities and nuisances as threats to be eliminated, the action plan risks producing an orderly yet restricted nightlife.

5.3.3 THE UNPROBLEMATISED CONCEPT OF “NORMAAL”

The cultural context that frames “normaal” establishes boundaries for the conversation and privileges hegemonic culture over others. Although “normal” is not a fixed set of standards, it serves a conformist and social-policing function. Power relations shape which perspectives are considered legitimate.

Power relations can undermine the openness of an empty signifier as hegemonic frameworks gradually fill in its meaning, becoming accepted as truth over time (Van Dyk, 2006). The “silent, neoliberal revolution” in the Netherlands (Jabko 2006, as cited in Zuidhof, 2019, p. 311) provides an example of this process. During the 1990s, market principles were implemented not through ideology but through a process of depoliticisation. By using policy advisory councils to provide a “scientific” and “rational” footing, neoliberal policies were presented as neutral, objective solutions for public goals. Consequently, market-based policies became the unquestioned foundation of the political discussion (Van Dyk, 2006). They came to be seen as “normal”, not a political choice but common sense. In the action plan, market principles are left unproblematised. The plan does not consider how neoliberalism – e.g., marketisation, commercialisation, consumerism – shapes nightlife spaces or contributes to unsafety. In the for-profit nighttime economy, the incentive to consume remains unquestioned. For example, the lack of diverse venues (7.6) is presented as a problem, but why this is the case is not asked. Gentrification, cultural spaces being less profitable, or that marginalised groups have less to spend than university students, are not considered. Instead, people are framed as the hindrance:

In addition, the nightlife area is visited by various target groups that do not always mix well, such as homeless people, people with misunderstood behaviour, men who hang around the area without visiting the nightlife venues, and individuals involved in drug trafficking (Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan, 2025, p. 3).

The plan assumes that more diverse venues would include more people, but it never questions why these people are excluded in the first place. Incentives for inclusion are not mentioned. Economic exclusion remains unproblematised.

The very statement of “normal” assumes an overarching, collectively accepted and enforced norm is possible, which implies a homogeneous normative subject. This obscures and silences other experiences. The conformist nature of the notion means that not everyone or every perspective is equally included or considered. The action plan illustrates this through its differential treatment of various issues. An increase in disrespectful behaviour and in the severity of violence breaches the social contract to the extent that a new norm has to be agreed upon. Other issues do not have the same effect. This reveals a hierarchy where some harms are urgent threats to safety, while others are inconveniences to be managed. Take sexual misconduct. Even though (sexual) transgressive behaviour and women’s safety are taken into account and inform much of the backdrop for norm change (4.5-4.8). The solutions offered – education, awareness, and reporting – remain in the background and do not require urgent intervention. The framing of “return to normal” shows that sexual misconduct against women is not something that breaks the social contract; it merely gets added to the negotiation. Discrimination is mentioned only once (4.10), and the issue of violence against queer people does not even make it to the negotiation. Because the logic of “normal” operates at the level of individual behaviour, broader societal structures remain in the background. This framing reveals how hegemonic culture shapes the terms of the debate: whose unsafety registers as a governance problem, and who is prioritised.

6. DISCUSSION

Going back to the research question: How is safety governed in Gemeente Groningen's "Safe Nightlife" action plan, and what does this reveal about the politics of urban safety? This thesis aims to demonstrate that safety is a highly political concept. By applying Bacchi's WPR approach to the action plan, I analyse how both the policy document itself and the concept of safety operate within discursive practices. Three of Bacchi's questions have been used to analyse the action plan, which will aid in answering the sub-questions:

1. How does the action plan represent safety in nightlife as a governance problem?
2. What knowledges and assumptions have to be accepted as true for this framing of safety to make sense?
3. What is left silent and unproblematised in the action plan, and how can these silences help to think differently about safety in nightlife?

These questions will help answer the main question. They reveal how safety is politicised, depoliticised, and how it can be repoliticised. The discussion will begin with a summary of the answer to the main question, further laid out by the subquestions.

6.1 HOW IS SAFETY GOVERNED IN GEMEENTE GRONINGEN'S "SAFE NIGHTLIFE" ACTION PLAN, AND WHAT DOES THIS REVEAL ABOUT THE POLITICS OF URBAN SAFETY?

The analysis found that safety becomes politicised because increasing security measures is seen as the natural response to increased perceptions of unsafety in society. This is also how it becomes depoliticised, the governance response is not questioned. Governance oversight and preventing "not normal" behaviour leaves unproblematised if this is the right response, whether prevention is the best method, and what the unspoken boundaries are of what can be thought of as "normal" behaviour. Moreover, the analysis found that the action plan reflects the broader political culture and cultural context in the Netherlands. This suggests that the local variation Van Liempt (2015) found is increasingly aligning with the hegemonic neoliberal governance approach. Thus the more relevant Listerborn (2016) call for repoliticising the struggle for safety back to its roots in radical feminist practices that address the structural inequalities that lead to feelings of insecurity.

6.1.1 HOW DOES THE ACTION PLAN REPRESENT SAFETY IN NIGHTLIFE AS A GOVERNANCE PROBLEM?

The analysis shows that by emphasising the formulation and enforcement of a new norm, the action plan represents the problem of unsafe nightlife through individual, “not normal” behaviour. Although the norm has yet to be collectively formulated, these findings indicate that the boundaries of the discussion are already set by the chain partners (the municipality, the police, the fire services, and the hospitality association). Consequently, the room for other actors to influence how this norm is to be formulated is already limited. This reflects Van Dyk’s (2006) findings on power relations embedded in the broader Dutch culture of consensus.

In addition, the action plan constructs safety as a governance problem requiring active management by the municipality and its chain partners. All six aspects of the action plan outline how a new norm will be communicated, conveyed, and enforced through governance oversight and the prevention of both crime and disorderly behaviour. The plan assumes that nightlife actors cannot regulate themselves, yet simultaneously it also responsabilises them to self-regulate and discipline others. This responsabilisation strategy was also observed in earlier research on the "Safe Nightlife" project by Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012). The contradiction reflects what Foucault identified as the combination of discipline, sovereignty, and governmentality within "diverse governmental configurations" (Gordon, 1991, as cited in Bacchi, 2015). The action plan brings together norm change (discipline), surveillance and enforcement (sovereignty), and responsabilisation (governmentality) into one integrated approach, producing subjects as "simultaneously lacking in self-discipline and self-regulating" (Foucault, 1979/1997a, cited in Bacchi, 2015).

Safety becomes politicised through heightened feelings of insecurity. Not only among nightlife business owners and the police, as emphasised in the action plan, but also among visitors and in local media. The action plan links this insecurity to the pandemic. However, increased insecurity and the desire for safety are not new, this has been a central observation in securitisation theory (Blok & Oosterholt, 2024; Zedner, 2009). The pandemic intensifying this insecurity and the municipality responding with a mid-term review of the "Safe Nightlife" covenant are therefore a continuation of a decades-long securitisation process. Overall, the action plan is a continuation of the decades-long securitisation process and, in addition, reflects the broader Dutch governance culture. This continuation suggests that targeting individual behaviours that predate the pandemic will not address the structural issues that produce feelings of unsafety.

6.1.2 WHAT KNOWLEDGES AND ASSUMPTIONS HAVE TO BE ACCEPTED AS TRUE FOR THIS FRAMING OF SAFETY TO MAKE SENSE?

For this framing of safety to make sense, three knowledge claims must be accepted as true. First, governance oversight is necessary for maintaining a safe nightlife. The plan does not question whether nightlife should or could be governed differently, as it assumes this structure. This presumption is legitimised by the Dutch political culture, or Poldermodel, where consultation of nongovernment actors and relying on expertise creates the impression of consensus (Prak & Van Zanden, 2014; Van Dyk, 2006). As a result, the chain partners gain the discursive power to frame the discussion surrounding safety. This depoliticises safety because the appearance of consensus masks the underlying power relations.

Second, the plan assumes that preventing not only crime but also disorderly behaviour will produce a safe nightlife. This aligns with the increasingly precautionary culture identified by W. De Jong & Strikwerda (2021) in the Netherlands. This is culture characterised by an increasingly preventive gaze that extends from preventing crime to mere nuisances. This preventive gaze increasingly justifies previously exceptional measures, as it becomes normalised. Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012) noticed this trend earlier in their research on the "Safe Nightlife" project. Now, in Groningen, measures such as the collective pub/club ban are being adopted, following this trend. The preventive gaze depoliticises safety through this process of normalisation.

Third, the plan assumes that "normal" is a self-evident. As an empty signifier, it leaves room for various actors to fill in the notion themselves, obscuring possible disagreements and creating consensus only rhetorical (Van Dyk, 2006). Previous research by Van Liempt & Van Aalst (2012) found that the assumption of mutual understanding in the "Safe Nightlife" project is often misplaced, thereby concealing the discourse. Moreover, Van Liempt (2015) argues that hidden agendas are being overlooked that are crucial for the outcome of the projects. When the concept of "normal" is taken as self-evident, it becomes depoliticised. Van Dyk warns that "conflicts, if kept within reasonable bounds, may reinforce an underlying basic consensus, thereby stabilising the core of the narrative" (Chomsky, 1989, as cited in Van Dyk, 2006). The normalisation of the preventive gaze exemplifies this. Over time, security measures come to be seen as "necessary" and "reasonable" solutions. The process of interpreting the issue is left aside. Therefore, the securitisation process and "safety" as an objective are both depoliticised.

This depoliticisation of “normal” also depoliticises “safety”. The conversation shifts from discursive practices of what safety means to natural solutions. Safety becomes constructed through “normal” behaviour and the response to insecurity is more security. When the framing of the conversation about what is “safe” and “normal” is not questioned, power relations are obscured. While the chain partners set the boundaries, others only provide input.

6.1.3 WHAT IS LEFT SILENT AND UNPROBLEMATISED IN THE ACTION PLAN, AND HOW CAN THESE SILENCES HELP TO THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT SAFETY IN NIGHTLIFE?

The individualisation of safety, focusing on individual conduct and social control through design rather than on structural issues, is shown to be a common urban development strategy (Massari et al., 2025; Raco, 2007). This reduction of social issues through a focus on technocratic solutions aligns with Dutch political culture (Van Dyk, 2006). An alternative view of safety as affective and collectively produced (Brands & Schwanen, 2014) is thereby obscured, placing the communities’ role in a secondary position.

The assumption of governance oversight presents the chain partners as neutral responders to problems rather than actors whose own conduct affect safety. Encouraging reporting is presented as an aim to address sexual misconduct without questioning the institutional and structural issues of why victims may not (want to) report (Antonsdottir, 2020). The plans’ framing leaves out other ways of thinking and alternative approaches. By presenting police violence as a necessary response, the action plan justifies state force without examining whether police practices themselves produce unsafety.

The preventive framework is presented as the better alternative to repressive measures, leaving out other frameworks. Without considering an alternative approaches the framework risks moralising nightlife, as Van Liempt & Van Aalst have argued. An orderly and controlled nightlife might come at the cost of the very qualities of nightlife, such as its “adventurous, edgy and exciting character” (Hubbard 2005, as cited in Van Liempt & Van Aalst, 2012, p. 281).

For the problem of unsafe nightlife to be constructed as a consequence of visitors’ “not normal” behaviour, there must be assumptions in place that “not normal” behaviour causes unsafety, and an idea of what is considered normal or not. It is not questioned whether “not normal” behaviour causes unsafety; this is assumed.

The concept of “normal” informs the backdrop of the behaviour envisioned in the action plan. The concept carries a conformist function privileging the hegemonic Dutch culture to frame what is considered acceptable behaviour. This leads to the exclusion of those outside of this norm. This exclusion becomes visible when we examine how the plan treats different forms of harm. Sexual misconduct is not seen as breaking the social contract to the same extent that “not normal” behaviour does. Discrimination is only mentioned only once, and violence against queer people not at all. This reveals a hierarchy of whose safety is prioritised and recognised as a governance problem.

This is a political choice, but it remains invisible precisely because it is presented as a neutral response to a shared cultural norm. To repoliticise safety would mean including marginalised perspectives. In addition, the action plan takes economic market principles of commercialisation and consumerism for granted. They remain unproblematised. This obscures how neoliberal principles are political choices, as Van Dyk (2006) argues. The role of these principles in producing safety should be considered. As Berthet Meylan (2022) notes, neoliberalism is alleviating the consequences of its own policies, as normative agenda’s of remoralising cities clash with commercial imperatives to consume (Crawford & Flint, 2009). This perspective is missing from the action plan.

To repoliticise safety, following Listerborn (2016), chain partners should be seen not as top-down managers but as actors whose own practices and institutional power affect safety. This shift would allow for the addressing of structural inequalities within institutions. It would also mean including marginalised perspectives and questioning the economic principles of commercialisation and consumerism that the action plan takes for granted.

6.2 LIMITATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis contributes to understanding how safety is governed in urban nightlife policy, but several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the thesis applied a document-based method. By focusing primarily on analysing the action plan, the discursive construction of safety is analysed at the level of a single policy. This does not include how the chain partners interpret and implement the action plan. Neither are the effects of visitors’ experiences within the scope of this research. The gap between what a policy says and what it actually does is significant, and future research could examine this.

Second, the analysis centres the action plan, which is informed by the Breuer&Intraval research report. This shaped how the problem of unsafety was identified and framed. A further genealogical analysis, as Bacchi proposes in her third question, would trace the problem representation in greater historical depth. Comparing old covenants or other policies could provide a better understanding of the development of securitisation and the influence of neoliberal frameworks. While the action plan formalises the discussions and leads to one agreed-upon formulation, it does not capture the full scope of the discussions. There are things added to the conversation that are not yet materialised, or that do not represent full agreement among the chain partners. Neither does this thesis map the differences in ideas of the chain partners, nor how it is being applied in practice.

Third, this thesis focuses on one city. While Groningen's distinctiveness as a permissive nightlife makes an interesting case, it limits generalisability. Comparative research would provide a better account of how local security culture shapes safety governance within the national framework.

Fourth, the analysis foregrounds certain silences but cannot fully account for the voices and experiences excluded from the document. Future research involving marginalised groups in Groningen's nightlife (including racialised communities, homeless individuals, and LGBTQ+ visitors) could address this. Additionally, as Goddard (2012) demonstrates, local dynamics allow for diverse interpretations and resistance to hegemonic governance rationalities. Mapping all actors involved in and concerned with safety in nightlife (including the night council and activist groups) would reveal these dynamics, providing a fuller overview of local governance dynamics.

Another recommendation concerns the governance framework itself. This thesis has shown that the action plan builds on existing approaches without questioning their assumptions. Future research could explore alternative frameworks, such as community-led and restorative approaches. Community-led approaches would shift governance toward those directly affected by unsafety, empowering them to define. Restorative approaches would address harmful behaviour through dialogue and accountability rather than enforcement. Both would move governance away from its current precautionary and managerial logic, and provide a practical response to the call for repoliticisation.

7. CONCLUSION

This thesis asked the question of how is safety governed in Gemeente Groningen's "Safe Nightlife" action plan, and what that reveals about the politics of urban safety. This question is answered by applying Bacchi's WPR method, a poststructural approach to policy analysis. The analysis was supported by the concepts of securitisation and neoliberalism to frame the current hegemonic governance culture. In addition, Listerborn's (2016) lens of politicisation, depoliticisation, and repoliticisation was utilised to help frame the Bacchi's analytical questions to show how safety is governed.

The analysis shows that safety is constructed in the action plan through individual behaviour. Unsafety becomes the result of "not normal" behaviour. The concept of safety becomes a governance problem because of the assumption that active management by the municipality and its chain partners is necessary to ensure a safe nightlife. The formulation of the action plan with reviewed and new security measures is presented as the logical response heightened perceptions of unsafety in nightlife. A second assumption is that "not normal" behaviours have to be prevented. This assumes "normal" to be self-evident, obscuring the power relations involved in deciding what is considered normal, especially in the Dutch cultural context. This depoliticisation of "normal" also depoliticises "safety", as safety is constructed through the individual normative behaviours.

What is left unproblematised are three aspects: the role of the chain partners themselves in producing unsafety in nightlife; the preventative logic silences alternative frameworks; the concept of "normal" is presented as self-evident, obscuring the power relations and hierarchies of who gets to be included and whose safety is prioritised.

These findings suggest that the action plan reflects the broader securitisation process, as well as the broader political culture of consensus in the Netherlands, where top-down power is concealed by consultation and the appearance of shared decision-making (Van Dyk, 2006). The local variation that Van Liempt (2015) observed appears to be aligning more with the hegemonic neoliberal governance framework. This makes Listerborn's (2016) call for repoliticisation all the more urgent. Repoliticising safety would mean returning the struggle over safety to its radical roots in feminist and anti-racist struggles, by addressing structural inequalities rather than individual behaviour, including marginalised perspectives, and questioning the economic principles of commercialisation and consumerism that the action plan takes for granted.

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APPENDIX A

“Safe Nightlife” actions table

Acties						
	Normverandering	Samenwerking en vertrouwen	Toezicht en handhaving	Fysieke inrichting	Overige maatregelen	Evaluatie & Monitoring
Wat doen we al en willen we behouden of verbeteren	→ Landelijke campagnes o.g.v. midde- lengebruik en grensoverschrijdend gedrag, zoals NIX18 en Ben je oké?	→ Tweejaarlijks overleg tussen alle keten- partners.	→ Inzet Openbare Orde Team van de politie.	→ Herinrichting Gelkinge-/Ooster- straat en Donkers- gang.		
	→ Programma opgroeien in een Kans- rijke Omgeving, gericht op het voor- komen en verminderen van midde- lengebruik bij jongeren tussen de 12 en 18 jaar in Groningen.	→ Kwartaloverleg met een vertegen- woordiging van de ketenpartners, het zogenaaemde Koplopersoverleg.	→ Inzet horeca- stewards.	→ Extra afvalbakken op donderdag- /vrijdag- en zaterdagavond.		
	→ Campagne Een k*tdag mag.	→ Convenant Veilig Uitgaan 2022 – 2027.	→ Opleggen gebieds- ontzeggingen.			
	→ Programma Veilige Steden, gericht op het vergroten van de veiligheid van vrouwen en meiden in de open- bare ruimte en tijdens het uitgaan.		→ Cameratoezicht. → Aanstellen toezichthouder horeca.			
Maatregelen korte/ middellange termijn	→ Aanbieden trainingen (seksueel) grensoverschrijdend gedrag voor personeel werkzaam in de horeca en studentenverenigingen.					
	→ Panel deurbelied.					
	→ Formulieren, uitdragen en handhaven 'nieuwe norm'.	→ Meeloopnachten; een kijkje in de keuken van een ketenpartner.	→ Verkenning juiste mix en effectieve inzet van verschillende maatregelen op het gebied van toezicht en handhaving.	→ Verbeteren verlichting en op afstand bedien- baar.	→ Invoeren collectieve horeca- ontzegging.	→ Aanstellen gebiedsmanager Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan.
	→ Inrichten Safe Space tijdens belang- rijke evenementen en stapavonden.		→ maatschappelijke aanpak op het gebied van toezicht en handhaving, waaronder inzet BOA's na 22.00 uur en het aanwijzen van een veiligheids- risicogebied.	→ Gebruik maken van methode Veilig ont- werp en beheer.	→ Inventariseren en aanvullen wapenkluisen in de horeca.	→ Twee jaarlijkse evalua- tie en bijstelling Convenant en Actie- plan Veilig Uitgaan.
Maatregelen langere termijn	→ Verkennen invloed openbare ruimte op veiligheid vrouwen en meiden.			→ Actieve casinolocatie.		→ Jaarlijkse evaluatie cijfers gewelds- incidenten.
	→ Herintroduceren programma Chill op Stap. Dit programma is gericht op alle vormen van uitgaan, maar leert jongeren vooral hoe je veilig, verantwoord en met plezier uit kunt gaan in de stad Groningen.			→ Onderzoeken mogelijkheden diverser aanbod uitgaans- gelegenheden.		→ Binnen 2 jaar enquête veiligheidsge- voel onder bezoekers.

FIGURE A1 ACTIONS TABLE FROM THE ACTIEPLAN VEILIG UITGAAN (2025) NOTE. FROM ACTIEPLAN VEILIG UITGAAN (P. 5), BY GEMEENTE GRONINGEN, 2025.

APPENDIX B

English Translation: Actions Table (*Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan 2025, Groningen*)

Column headers: Norm Change | Collaboration & Trust | Supervision & Enforcement | Physical Design | Other Measures | Evaluation & Monitoring

Row 1: What we already do and wish to retain or improve:

4. Norm Change

- ➔ National campaigns on substance use and transgressive behaviour, such as NIX18 and *Ben je oké?* (Are you okay?).
- ➔ The *Growing Up in a Supportive Environment* programme, aimed at preventing and reducing substance use among young people aged 12 to 18 in Groningen.
- ➔ Campaign: *Een k*tdag mag* ("A shitty day is allowed").
- ➔ The *Veilige Steden* (Safe Cities) programme, aimed at increasing safety for women and girls in public spaces and during nights out.
- ➔ Offering training on (sexual) transgressive behaviour for staff working in nightlife establishments and student associations.
- ➔ Door policy panel.

5. Collaboration & Trust

- ➔ Biennial consultation between all chain partners.
- ➔ Quarterly consultation with a representative from the chain partners, the so-called Frontrunners Consultation.
- ➔ Covenant Safe Nightlife 2022-2027.

6. Supervision & Enforcement

- ➔ Deployment of the Public Order Team of the police.
- ➔ Deployment of horecastewards.
- ➔ Imposing area bans.
- ➔ Camera surveillance.
- ➔ Appointing a horeca supervisor.

7. Physical Design

- ➔ Redesign of Gelkinge-/Oosterstraat and Donkersgang.
- ➔ Extra waste bins on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings.

Row 2: Short/medium-term measures:

4. Norm Change
 - ➔ Formulating, conveying and enforcing the “new norm”.
 - ➔ Establishing a Safe Space during major events and at weekends.
 - ➔ Exploring the influence of public space on the safety of women and girls.
 - ➔ Reintroducing the *Chill op Stap* programme. This programme targets all forms of going out, teaching young people how to go out safely, responsibly and enjoyably in the city of Groningen.
5. Collaboration & Trust
 - ➔ Shadow nights; a look inside the “kitchen” of a chain partner.
6. Supervision & Enforcement
 - ➔ Exploring the right mix for effective deployment of various measures for supervision and enforcement, including the deployment of BOA’s (Special enforcement officers) after 22:00 and the designation of a safety risk area.
7. Physical Design
 - ➔ Improving lighting and remote-controlled operation.
 - ➔ Utilising the *Veilig Ontwerp en Beheer* (Safe Design and Management) method.
 - ➔ Activating the casino location.
 - ➔ Exploring various options for a broader range of nightlife venues.
8. Other Measures
 - ➔ Introducing collective club/pub bans.
 - ➔ Inventorying and supplementing weapon safes in nightlife establishments
9. Evaluation & Monitoring
 - ➔ Appointing an area manager for the *Actieplan Veilig Uitgaan*.
 - ➔ Two annual evaluations and updates to the Covenant and Action Plan Safe Nightlife.
 - ➔ Annual evaluation of violence incident statistics.
 - ➔ Within 2 years: a survey on visitors' perception of safety.

Row 3: Long-term measures:

4. Physical Design
 - ➔ Redesign of Poelestraat/Peperstraat.