The Relationship Between Social Networks and Public Conscience in the Adoption of Populist Criminal Policy Toward Violent Crimes

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Abstract

This study examines the role and influence of public conscience in the adoption of populist penal policy in response to violent crimes as reflected on social networks. Public conscience, understood as the set of shared beliefs, values, and emotions within a society, has always played a critical role in shaping criminal laws and penal policies. With the advent of social networks, this role has become more pronounced, as public opinions and emotions are rapidly disseminated on a massive scale. In this context, violent crimes—which often receive extensive coverage on social media—draw particular attention. The dissemination of images and videos related to such crimes can intensify societal feelings of anger, fear, and insecurity. These emotions, in turn, may lead to increased public demand for harsher punishments and more stringent criminal policies. Populist penal policy, which seeks to satisfy public opinion by providing swift and decisive responses to crimes, may become particularly appealing under such circumstances. However, such policy-making may disregard the principles of criminal justice and human rights considerations, potentially resulting in violations of the rights of the accused and an escalation of societal violence. This study explores the concept of public conscience and the mechanisms through which it influences penal policy, as well as the role of social networks in amplifying public emotions and shaping punitive demands. Furthermore, it investigates the consequences of adopting populist penal policy in response to violent crimes on social networks, including the violation of defendants' rights, the exacerbation of violence, and the erosion of public trust in the judicial system.

Keywords: Public conscience, violent crimes, social networks, populist penal policy, criminal justice.

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1. Introduction

One of the key characteristics of populist criminal policies is their reliance on public emotions, which are often volatile, fleeting, and irrational. These features tend to render such policies excessively punitive, crowd-pleasing, and theatrical, lacking theoretical and scientific foundations. In reality, society comprises individuals with diverse preferences and beliefs, and legal

principles such as good faith and pacta sunt servanda stem from these social relations. Therefore, it is impractical to ignore public opinion and its demands in criminal justice processes. It seems necessary to align public conscience, which is rooted in emotional responses, with public opinion based on social logic and reasoning. Moreover, by emphasizing public education and enhancing community awareness, societal expectations can be guided in a systematic and controlled manner. In short, efforts should be made to reduce populism in criminal policy and, over time, to channel public reactions toward more rational responses (Ansari, 2022; Azin, 2017).

One prominent social phenomenon of the present age that has contributed to the expansion of punishment—and, in some cases, crime—is the role of public conscience and its influence on the penal system, crime, and punishment. Criminal law and the processes of criminalization and punishment have not been immune to this influence. In legislative, judicial, and executive domains, policies shaped by public conscience have prompted lawmakers to criminalize certain behaviors under specific conditions. As a result, executive and judicial authorities have also been affected in exercising their jurisdiction. In this context, one can observe the hasty legislative reactions triggered by public demands. For instance, laws imposing severe punishments for perpetrators of violent crimes that emotionally disturb the public exemplify the influence of public opinion—driven by public conscience—on the legislative process (Aghajani, 2004; Fakhrabadi & Shirazi, 2023).

Iran's criminal justice system has not been immune to this phenomenon. In some cases, particularly in response to emerging crimes, the legislature has enacted temporary and non-permanent punishments under public pressure. Moreover, executive policies in major cities, including the capital, reflect a stringent and populist approach to certain crimes. Judges, too, have at times been influenced by public sentiment in their sentencing decisions, which in turn affects judicial procedures. Furthermore, populist criminal policymaking—driven by highly publicized crimes that agitate the public conscience—is essentially a short-term and reactive strategy, incapable of sustainably managing crime over the long term (Akhtari & Nazemi Ardakani, 2018; Sheidaei Goorchin Qaleh & Heydari, 2022).

This type of policy, heavily influenced by immediate social reactions and public pressure, often neglects fundamental legislative principles, particularly the public interest. Such policies are typically not in the best interest of either society or the offender, but rather serve the political interests of policymakers who aim to gain public trust by quickly addressing concerns about security and crime control. The driving force behind this style of policymaking is a general sense of insecurity and fear generated through the media and following criminal incidents. In response, criminal policymakers enact harsh legislation without consulting expert analyses. This populist legislative trend, especially within criminal law, leads lawmakers to engage in broad and unnecessary criminalization—disregarding the principle of minimal criminal law—which results in an inflated criminal code, increased prison populations, and a substantial economic burden on society (Endoltseva, 2019; Ghiasi, 2016).

Public conscience is often invoked as justification for populist penal policy. Politicians argue that such policies reflect the will of the people and are necessary to maintain law and order. For example, a policymaker might cite public concern over rising crime rates to advocate for harsher penalties for specific offenses. Populist penal policy typically involves tough-on-crime approaches such as increasing prison capacity, restricting parole eligibility, and intensifying sentences. While these measures may gain short-term popularity, they can produce long-term adverse consequences, such as rising incarceration costs, higher recidivism, and deepened social inequality (Carey, 2022; Karimi & Ghafari Ghadir, 2019).

Sometimes, populist criminal policies lead to the erosion of defendants' rights and the sacrifice of justice in pursuit of public satisfaction. For example, in a highly publicized criminal case, public pressure may prompt law enforcement and courts to pursue a conviction without adhering strictly to due process. Such a trend fuels public fear and anxiety about crime, fostering a climate of distrust and repression. It can also restrict civil liberties and increase state surveillance. Political leaders often claim to act in accordance with the majority's will, yet this so-called "majority" may not truly represent all social groups. Consequently, populist criminal policy may disproportionately affect minority and marginalized communities (Shams Natari, 2014; Thukral & Kainya, 2022).

In many cases, populist criminal responses emerge in highly emotional atmospheres, especially following major criminal events, and aim to control criminal phenomena as swiftly as possible through severe punitive measures. This approach, which lacks a scientific understanding of the nature of crime, relies instead on non-scientific interpretations of public sentiment and expectations, thereby masking the theoretical foundations of criminal policy. Additionally, when harsh strategies fail to control

crime, populist criminal policy tends to resort to scapegoating—blaming the persistence of insecurity on resistance to these policies or on so-called "outsider" groups that differ from the majority.

2. The Phenomenon of Public Conscience and Its Impact on Society's Perception of Crime and Punishment

Public conscience is one of the most influential factors in shaping and interpreting the concepts of crime and delinquency within a society. This phenomenon—referring to the shared beliefs, emotions, and values of individuals in a community—can directly or indirectly influence the rate of criminal behavior, the types of societal responses, and even the direction of criminal policy. Since crime is a social construct whose definition is dependent on the dominant norms of a society, public conscience plays a critical role in determining the boundaries and classifications of criminal acts, the severity of responses to them, and the social acceptability or rejection of specific criminal behaviors (Endoltseva, 2019; Najafi Abrandabadi & Hashemi, 2012).

In societies where the public conscience displays heightened sensitivity toward certain antisocial behaviors, the likelihood of such crimes occurring tends to decrease, as individuals fear social judgment and its consequences. For instance, in communities where financial corruption is strongly condemned and economic offenders are met with public disgrace and condemnation, the propensity to commit such crimes declines. Conversely, in societies where certain crimes, such as bribery or circumventing the law, are normalized or even viewed as clever tactics, the probability of their occurrence increases. This dynamic illustrates that public conscience can function both as a deterrent and an enabler of criminal conduct, depending on societal norms (Aghajani, 2004; Ghasemi & Bar-Soltan, 2010).

On the other hand, public conscience also significantly affects the severity and nature of punishments. In many cases, the degree of leniency or strictness in response to crimes corresponds to the level of public sensitivity. For example, when society reacts strongly to certain offenses—such as crimes against children or domestic violence—lawmakers and the judiciary may come under pressure to enact harsher laws. In such contexts, public conscience acts as a social force that shapes the trajectory of criminal policymaking. However, this influence is not always beneficial. In some instances, public conscience can lead to emotional and unscientific decision-making in the area of crime and punishment. For example, during periods of intense public emotion triggered by a particular crime, there may be calls for immediate and severe punishment, even if such measures are not aligned with the principles of criminological science. Decision-makers, therefore, must strike a balance between public demands and the foundational principles of criminal law to avoid adopting impulsive or ill-considered policies (Farajiha, 2006; Seyedzadeh Sani, 2011).

Public conscience also plays a role in the process of offender rehabilitation and reintegration. In societies where opportunities for reentry into the community are supported and the public maintains a rehabilitative outlook toward offenders, the likelihood of successful reintegration increases. However, when public conscience is predominantly punitive and permanently ostracizes offenders, the chances of recidivism rise. Consequently, criminal policymakers must constantly balance public expectations with the reformative goals of the criminal justice system. Ultimately, the relationship between public conscience and crime is dynamic and variable. As societal values and beliefs evolve over time, they influence the definition of crimes, the type and severity of punishments, and the general approach to dealing with offenders. Therefore, a thorough understanding of public conscience and its effects on criminal policy is essential for the development of a just and effective penal system.

3. Criminal Policy Influenced by the Phenomenon of Public Conscience

Criminal policy adopts a set of principles and strategies aimed at responding to crime phenomena, outlining its overall goals and long-term vision. In today's world, the widespread erosion of citizen security and psychological well-being caused by increasing crime has shifted the orientation of criminal policy from offender-centric to offense-centric. In this context, ensuring social security has become a core concern of criminal policy. Consequently, general principles related to criminalization, criminal responsibility, and the application of punishments have become subject to varying interpretations. These developments signal fundamental transformations in penal policies and legal frameworks designed to address security threats and maintain social order. Notably, there is an increasing emphasis on crime prevention and the promotion of public security, which has in

turn complicated and transformed the modes of engagement with both offenders and offenses (Ansari, 2022; Sheidaei Goorchin Qaleh & Heydari, 2022).

From an implementation standpoint, two main governmental approaches can be identified within the context of criminal policy: the maximalist state and the minimalist state.

A maximalist state is one that extensively intervenes in various aspects of citizens' lives. Such intervention may include:

- Economic: Controlling large sectors of the economy, owning major enterprises, setting prices, allocating resources, and delivering extensive public services.
- Social: Regulating media, education, culture, public health, and social welfare.
- Political: Restricting individual and political freedoms, controlling elections, monitoring political activity, and suppressing dissent.

In summary, the maximalist state seeks comprehensive control over citizens' lives and grants limited space to the private sector and civil society.

Public conscience can serve both as a justification for such broad government intervention and as a constraint on state power. When a society largely believes that the state is responsible for ensuring welfare, justice, and security, there is likely to be greater public support for expanded state intervention. Conversely, if society values liberty, individual rights, and the rule of law, there will be stronger resistance to state overreach. Additionally, when public opinion expresses deep concern over issues like poverty, inequality, or environmental degradation, the state may be compelled to adopt more interventionist policies, even if such actions increase state presence in citizens' lives (Azin, 2017; Rahmanzadeh, 2010).

In societies where public conscience is strongly inclined toward protecting the most vulnerable, governments often implement broad social programs to provide healthcare, education, and welfare services.

The impact of a maximalist state on public conscience includes:

1. Shaping societal values: A maximalist government may attempt to align public beliefs and values with its own objectives through control of media, education, and culture. For example, it may promote loyalty to the state and belief in the superiority of the political system.
2. Weakening civil society: By restricting personal and political freedoms, suppressing NGOs, and silencing dissent, the state can diminish civil society. This can lead to decreased civic engagement and increased dependence on the state.
3. Creating a culture of dependency: Extensive public services and state protection may foster a culture in which individuals expect the government to solve their problems instead of relying on self-initiative.
4. Altering perceptions of personal responsibility: A maximalist state may lead citizens to feel less personally responsible for their own lives and those of others, as broad governmental support reduces the perceived need for self-accountability.

In the author's view, the relationship between a maximalist state and public conscience is both complex and dynamic. Public conscience can justify wide-ranging state intervention, but it can also serve as a limit on governmental power. Simultaneously, a maximalist state may attempt to mold societal values in alignment with its objectives and suppress civil society. Ultimately, the balance between state power and individual freedoms depends on a society's values and the political and social mechanisms in place to constrain state authority (Drury, 2022; Ghiasi, 2016).

In contrast, the minimalist state represents the opposing model, largely withdrawing from social management and transferring policymaking power and responsibility to informal mechanisms and civil society. This reduced form of government defines its role primarily as supervisory. It respects individual privacy and emphasizes civil and individual liberties. When faced with a conflict between state interests and personal freedoms, the minimalist state typically acts transparently and in favor of individual rights, interpreting contested issues in a way that upholds personal liberty.

A minimalist state builds its structure on the will and consent of its citizens, believing that only civil society can effectively assess interests and manage social order. Such a government avoids authoritarianism and coercion, instead promoting citizen participation in both major and minor decision-making processes. Additionally, the minimalist state is inherently accountable and grants citizens the right to question its authority and even limit its scope of oversight when necessary.

In this model, criminal policy functions in a manner opposite to that of a maximalist state. It tends to restrict the scope of criminalization and distinctly separates crime from social deviance. Responses to such phenomena are primarily driven by

community participation. Society plays a much more significant role in legally addressing criminal acts. While state oversight remains essential, it is perceived by civil society as a variable subject to ongoing scrutiny.

Unlike the maximalist model, the minimalist state's criminal policy does not focus on excluding or eliminating offenders. Instead, it favors non-penal, socially protective responses. In this framework, non-penal crime prevention takes precedence. In other words, penal responses are deprioritized, and strategies rooted in criminology and non-punitive prevention models are given greater importance

4. The Influential Power of Social Networks in Pursuit of Justice

In the contemporary era, people increasingly use social media to share information and raise awareness about significant causes. Owing to the diverse functions and characteristics of mass media—such as broad accessibility, a wide audience base, rapid dissemination, and extensive reach—their role in crime prevention is highly significant. Media function as the primary surveillance tools in society, acting as its "eyes," capable of alerting criminal justice authorities to the early signs of crime, thereby helping prevent offenses before they fully materialize (Farajiha, 2006; Ghasemi & Bar-Soltan, 2010).

Mass media play a distinct role in shaping public perceptions of the social environment, fostering socialization, transmitting values, and stimulating emotional responses and personal growth. Alongside the criminal phenomenon itself, the portrayal of criminal news is of special importance. The manner in which individuals consume information about criminal events significantly affects how society reacts to such events and aligns with or diverges from social norms in terms of punishments.

On the other hand, social media, due to its vast potential, facilitates the collective mobilization of individuals toward shared goals. A message posted on social media in one part of the world can be shared globally within seconds, injecting new life and energy into justice campaigns and social movements. Today, mass media have earned a unique position through their defined and specialized functions, emerging as a central force in ensuring public order, fostering social cohesion, and encouraging civic participation. They play a pivotal role in executing political and security agendas and in promoting public engagement to enhance social security and prevent crime (Azin, 2017; Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

For instance, the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in accordance with Article 4, Clause 18 of the Law on the Formation of NAJA (Iran's police force), has produced televised policing programs aimed at encouraging citizen participation in Tehran's crime prevention efforts. Public attitudes toward criminals vary widely—from retributive and vengeful to deterrent, rehabilitative, and incapacitative approaches. These varying perceptions are reflected and reinforced by how media frame and narrate stories about offenders (Baranlou & Poorghahremani, 2023; Karimi & Ghafari Ghadir, 2019).

5. The Impact on Criminal Policies Regarding Violent Crimes

The general public possesses limited knowledge about the criminal justice system and the laws governing crime and punishment—particularly in relation to violent crimes. This lack of understanding often results in diverse and frequently negative perceptions of the justice process and its guiding rules. At the same time, public trust in the criminal justice system is essential to its effectiveness in shaping criminal policy and preventing crime, especially given that the system's success largely depends on societal participation (Najafi Abrandabadi & Hashemi, 2012; Rahmanzadeh, 2010).

One common assumption regarding public dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system is its perceived opacity. People are generally unaware of how each component of the system functions, primarily because most have had no direct interaction with it. The bulk of public knowledge about criminal law and punishment derives from media portrayals and narratives circulating on social networks. These representations significantly shape public opinion concerning crimes, laws, punishments, and their enforcement.

Given this influence, the current study examines the functional role of social networks and media in shaping criminal policy—legislative, judicial, and executive—and their effects on Iran's penal system. Social media serve as more than communication tools; they are dynamic platforms that inform, mobilize, and influence criminal justice perceptions and policy directions in real time.

5.1. The Reflection of Violent Crimes on Social Networks and Its Consequences for Judicial Policymaking

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, social networks and media are expanding both in quantity and quality. These media platforms are increasingly shaping social life, values, culture, ethics, religion, and other facets of human behavior. One of their most influential domains is the criminal justice system and criminal policymaking. Media play a central role not only in constructing the perception of specific phenomena—such as crime and deviance—but also in influencing how criminal proceedings and decision-making processes unfold.

Modern individuals acquire many of their behavioral patterns from media. At the same time, media encode public attitudes and mental orientations into news content, imagery, and symbolic messages, which they then widely disseminate. These representations are often aligned with the political-economic agendas of policymakers or so-called *moral entrepreneurs*. Through such framing, media facilitate populist criminal policymaking, aiming to synchronize judicial officials with their narratives and push forward agendas such as broader criminalization and harsher penalties (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Farajiha, 2006; Thukral & Kainya, 2022).

Beyond the stage of criminalization, during the implementation of newly enacted rules, media continue to play a critical role in promoting imposed policies. Often, the objective of media representation is not merely to criminalize certain behaviors but to validate specific punishments or to justify expedited proceedings that neglect due process and the principles of fair trial. By broadcasting news about criminal phenomena, the media impose a specific interpretive lens on the public, shaping how they judge crime and justice.

Following the lead of moral entrepreneurs—who aim to dominate social relations and exert paternalistic control—media intentionally trigger moral panic through symbolic coding embedded in news stories and images. This strategy seeks to align public sentiment with a particular stance on how criminal acts should be addressed. Over time, creating moral panic has shifted from being an unintended consequence of sensational journalism to a deliberate media strategy. The primary agents of this transformation are those moral entrepreneurs who exploit media attention to distract from their own failures in executing macro-level criminal justice policies. In this cycle, the less independent the media, the stronger and more forceful their representations, often attempting to present their narratives as objective reality (Carey, 2022; Karimi & Ghafari Ghadir, 2019).

A salient example is the case of *Atena Aslani*, a young girl murdered on June 16, 2017 (Gregorian: June 6, 2017) by a man named Esmaeil Rangraz. Due to the victim's young age and the highly emotional nature of the case—including a sexual assault preceding the murder—it received intense coverage across Iranian media and social networks. This coverage created widespread panic and pressured the criminal justice system to expedite proceedings and issue the harshest possible sentence.

From the outset, media outlets employed culturally loaded symbols to depict a dichotomy of angel versus demon, casting the accused as a monstrous figure. Terms such as *wolf* or *devil* were frequently used to describe the defendant, signaling—through semiotic decoding—a presumed deservingness of the death penalty. This symbolic media condemnation led to a reduction in procedural fairness, as one of the core principles of a fair trial—the presumption of innocence—was effectively ignored.

While media are entitled to narrative freedom, particularly in modern democratic contexts, the extent of that freedom varies depending on whether media are state-owned or private. In Iran, where most media outlets are state-controlled, narratives typically reflect governmental policies. Thus, in the case of Atena Aslani, nearly all print and visual media focused on sensationalist storytelling rather than analyzing the case through scientific or legal perspectives. Moreover, due to the lack of widespread media freedom, the accused and his legal counsel were largely excluded from media representation, except for a few brief statements in state-produced documentaries or scattered quotes in newspapers.

This case exemplifies how media-driven narratives can severely undermine the integrity of the judicial process, particularly when justice is subordinated to emotional storytelling and populist expectations.

5.1.1. Violation of Fair Trial Principles

In the modern legislative era, the principle of a fair trial is considered the pinnacle of judicial integrity and serves as a safeguard to humanize legal proceedings. A fair trial reflects one of the most vital forms of individual protection. Central to

this principle is the *presumption of innocence*, a foundational tenet of criminal law that prohibits judges from pre-judging the accused. According to this principle, a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty by the prosecution.

Additionally, the prohibition of publishing identifying information about the accused prior to conviction stems directly from the presumption of innocence. The rationale behind this restriction is to protect individuals who may ultimately be acquitted. Even if their innocence is later established, public dissemination of their identity could result in social stigmatization and ostracization. In emotionally charged cases, such exposure may also lead to harassment of the accused and their family—particularly when the accused is released under judicial supervision during proceedings. The resulting social pressure, marked by public alignment with the alleged victim, can strip the proceedings of their fairness and severely damage the accused's personal and familial reputation (Najafi Abrandabadi & Hashemi, 2012; Shams Natari, 2014).

Moreover, in cases that receive substantial media attention and are perceived as offenses against public order, state authorities tend to rally in support of the victim and the general public, focusing their efforts on proving guilt. However, the core philosophy of criminal procedure is to ensure that both the prosecution and the defense are granted equal opportunity to present evidence and arguments. No authority or individual may act in favor of either party. This concept—*equality of arms*—is critical, and violating it undermines key judicial principles such as impartiality and judicial independence (Ghiasi, 2016).

Criminal procedure laws prescribe a series of defined stages with specific timelines—from preliminary investigations (notices, hearings, local investigations, expert referrals, final defense, issuance of indictments) to trials (initial hearings, sentencing), and appeals (Court of Appeal or Supreme Court). Circumventing these stages due to public outcry, emotional reactions, or political interference compromises the accused's right to a fair and timely trial.

Additionally, any media attempt to portray someone as guilty before a verdict violates the neutrality of the proceedings. Even beyond breaching the principle of equality of arms, the pressure from sensationalist media coverage—especially in the absence of independent press—impacts judicial decision-making. This external pressure increases expectations that the judiciary will convict the defendant, ultimately compromising the integrity of the legal process (Baranlou & Poorghahremani, 2023; Drury, 2022).

5.1.2. Public Officials' Interventions in the Judicial Process

In high-profile cases such as the murder of *Rouhollah Dadashi*—a famous athlete—or *Atena Aslani*—a child victim of sexual violence—the widespread public reaction on social networks prompted responses not only from citizens but also from high-ranking government officials.

In Atena's case, public outrage led then-President Hassan Rouhani and Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani to demand urgent action. Judiciary Chief Sadeq Larijani issued an *expedited trial order*. Prominent cultural and sports figures such as Ali Daei and Parviz Parastouei also spoke out. Similarly, in the Dadashi case, the Attorney General urged swift judicial action in Karaj.

These instances demonstrate how public sentiment on social media channels significantly influenced political leaders and legal authorities, directly affecting the course, verdicts, and punishments of such cases. Media in these moments are not merely echoing hidden agendas; they often convey explicit positions of government officials, further entrenching media influence on judicial processes (Carey, 2022; Cheung & Lee, 2010).

There is ample evidence suggesting that media heavily rely on law enforcement agencies as their primary sources. This reliance increases the perceived legitimacy of media narratives and aligns public discourse with official rhetoric—often marginalizing the defendant's rights in the process. Overemphasis on crime severity can amplify support for authoritarian responses and a *security-centered ideology*. In turn, this creates fertile ground for justifying *minimalist justice*—procedures that compromise both the quantity and quality of due process.

In the Aslani case, media regularly aired interviews with high-level officials: the Judiciary's spokesperson, the Ardabil governor, provincial prosecutors, ministers, Friday prayer leaders, and others. Such coverage not only breached the principle of neutrality but also encouraged further skewed representations of the trial, heavily undermining the possibility of a fair judicial process (Azin, 2017; Endoltseva, 2019).

5.2. Accelerated Trial and Sentencing to Appease Public Conscience

Social media and mass media amplify specific criminal cases through emotionally charged storytelling and the strategic invocation of moral panic. These narratives seek to provoke fear and mobilize the public toward demanding immediate action. Technological innovation and lifestyle shifts have transformed media structure, encouraging dramatic, anti-defendant portrayals that strongly influence public opinion.

In such emotionally driven representations, public perception of both the crime and the accused becomes skewed, often marked by ambiguity and emotional oversimplification. Despite these ambiguities, the dramatized narrative fosters a public expectation that the criminal justice system will swiftly act to validate those media-induced impressions. Consequently, public demands for security and justice—shaped by media—drive populist political actors to respond through expedited trials and swift punishment (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Karimi & Ghafari Ghadir, 2019).

However, these actions pose serious risks to fair trial rights, particularly regarding the accused's reputation. When a defendant is tried in the "court of public opinion" before due process is fulfilled, irreparable damage to their dignity and legal standing is likely.

For instance, in the case of the *Tehran Kaj Square murder*, the viral video of police attempting to save a victim while the attacker obstructed aid drew intense public and official reactions. Similarly, the *Sa'adatabad homicide* became a subject of high-level judicial meetings. Judiciary Chief Sadeq Larijani addressed the incident 17 days later, emphasizing that the judiciary would act swiftly to prevent similar crimes.

Such cases illustrate how media-induced panic can pressure authorities into hastily conducting trials and implementing penalties, often at the expense of procedural fairness. These developments confirm the extent to which social networks and media now dictate the pace and tone of criminal policymaking in response to violent crimes (Rahmanzadeh, 2010; Thukral & Kainya, 2022).

6. The Impact of Violent Crime Representation on Social Media on the Evolution of Legislative Criminal Policy

As previously mentioned, social networks, as powerful communication tools, now play an unprecedented role in shaping social perceptions and behaviors. Platforms such as Instagram and Telegram have become primary spaces for information and news exchange, particularly regarding criminal incidents—especially violent crimes—which are rapidly disseminated across these networks. Due to features such as rapid dissemination, the use of graphic visuals, and the capacity for users to re-share content, social media have significantly influenced public opinion and societal reactions (Baranlou & Poorghahremani, 2023; Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The emotional and sometimes sensationalized nature of crime-related news on social media often heightens public sensitivity toward such incidents. This amplified concern not only cultivates a sense of insecurity but can also prompt reactive, superficial responses from government and judicial authorities. When widely circulated, these crime stories attract attention from traditional media and other social institutions, placing substantial social pressure on policymakers to act swiftly.

Violent crimes—particularly those prominently covered in the media—tend to draw considerable public and media attention and can meaningfully influence legislative criminal policy in any country. In the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran, although penal laws are crafted to address crime through existing legal frameworks, the widespread media coverage of violent crimes on social networks can impact the formulation, revision, and implementation of these laws.

A notable consequence of this coverage is the acceleration of legislative processes. Legislators and criminal justice authorities, though theoretically guided by principles of justice and reform, may yield to emotional public reactions by passing laws that lack scientific rigor and are based on surface-level responses. In such cases, policymaking becomes populist, prioritizing immediate public satisfaction over long-term, research-driven reform (Ansari, 2022; Azin, 2017).

One negative outcome of this dynamic is the emergence of criminal policies aimed more at appeasing public sentiment than addressing the root causes of crime. For example, in instances where social media highlight gruesome acts of violence—such as murder, sexual assault, or armed robbery—lawmakers may enact laws that symbolically respond to public outrage without engaging in meaningful criminological analysis.

This pattern also leads to increased public pressure for harsher punishments. In response to social and media-driven demands, legislators may introduce disproportionate penalties that exceed the gravity of the offense. While such responses may offer temporary reassurance, they can ultimately undermine the justice system's foundational principles and violate individual rights (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Endoltseva, 2019).

A paradigmatic example of how social media can shape legislative criminal policy is the acid attacks in Isfahan in 2014. These attacks caused severe harm to several women and triggered widespread societal and media outcry. The resulting media coverage transformed acid attacks from rare but grave incidents into a national social crisis.

The public circulation of victims' stories and images, along with interviews with their families, ignited nationwide outrage and led to increased pressure for legislative reform. The case exposed gaps in Iran's acid attack laws, prompting calls to strengthen penalties.

Prior to these events, acid attacks were governed by a 1958 law prescribing penalties such as execution, life imprisonment, or up to 15 years in prison. However, the law had not been updated to reflect contemporary legal standards or provide comprehensive victim protection.

Following the Isfahan incidents, the Iranian Parliament passed a new bill in 2019 titled *"The Law on Intensifying Punishments for Acid Attacks and Supporting Victims"*, which included the following provisions:

1. Retribution (Qisas): Intentional acid attacks causing death or disfigurement became punishable by death or physical retribution.
2. Detention Sentences: Where Qisas was not feasible, prison terms ranging from 5 to over 25 years were introduced depending on the severity of harm.
3. Victim Support: If the perpetrator could not pay blood money, compensation would be covered by public funds. The law also mandated psychological and financial support for victims.

The intense media spotlight on the case shaped both public opinion and legislative outcomes. It contributed to a policy shift that included harsher penalties, funding for victim support, and stricter regulations on acid sales and distribution to prevent future attacks (Fakhrabadi & Shirazi, 2023; Karimi & Ghafari Ghadir, 2019).

Additionally, the high visibility of the case empowered civil society groups, women's rights advocates, and legal organizations to lobby for reform. Through media campaigns and advocacy, these groups influenced parliamentarians and government agencies to adopt tougher policies and implement oversight mechanisms. The incident also prompted authorities to monitor and restrict the sale of hazardous chemicals, marking a significant policy shift rooted in public pressure generated by social networks.

The broad dissemination of violent crime cases on social media can generate intense societal pressure on lawmakers. When public demand translates into calls for harsher punishments and security-oriented policies, governments may resort to hasty, non-scientific legislation.

This trend can lead to criminal laws that do not address the root causes of crime and instead focus solely on symbolic gestures to satisfy public opinion. The result may include:

- Overcriminalization
- Prison overpopulation
- Pressure on the judiciary to expedite proceedings at the cost of due process

Such outcomes can not only fail to reduce crime but also violate human rights and individual freedoms, undermining the legitimacy of the criminal justice system and weakening public trust in its fairness (Najafi Abrandabadi & Hashemi, 2012; Shams Natari, 2014).

The impact of violent crime coverage on social media on Iran's legislative criminal policy is profound. While it may lead to swift legal changes and immediate public appeasement, the long-term consequences can include inflated sentencing, legislative overreach, and rights violations.

To counteract these risks, it is essential to combine scientific and evidence-based approaches with effective media oversight. This will help align Iran's criminal policymaking with principles of justice and human rights.

In summary, the influence of social media on legislative criminal policy is complex and multifaceted. While these platforms can enhance public awareness and civic mobilization, they can also propagate misinformation and emotional reactions.

Lawmakers must adopt balanced, data-informed strategies to shield criminal policy from the distortive effects of emotional pressure and populism.

7. The Impact of Violent Crime Representation on Social Media on Executive Criminal Policy Reform

Social networks have empowered citizens to monitor the performance of judicial and law enforcement institutions. This public oversight helps reduce corruption and abuse of power and fosters greater transparency and accountability. Citizens now collect, share, and disseminate data related to arrests, convictions, operational costs, and other performance indicators. Equipped with mobile phone cameras and digital tools, individuals document the behavior of police and judicial officers and post it on social platforms—creating a deterrent effect against misconduct and rights violations (Drury, 2022; Karimi & Ghafari Ghadir, 2019).

Moreover, social networks serve as platforms for public discourse on the effectiveness of judicial and law enforcement bodies. Citizens share opinions, criticisms, and proposals, thereby demanding responsiveness from officials. These platforms also facilitate the organization of protests and public gatherings in response to perceived misconduct, increasing pressure on authorities to reform procedures and enhance performance.

In addition to enhancing civic oversight, social media have become tools for **collecting evidence and intelligence**. For instance, videos and images shared by eyewitnesses can help identify suspects and corroborate evidence. Law enforcement agencies increasingly rely on open-source intelligence from social media to investigate crimes, track offenders, and prevent further violations.

Examples include:

- Witnesses uploading footage of the crime scene or suspects, assisting in crime reconstruction.
- Access to public profiles of suspects to determine identity, location, and social connections.
- Monitoring criminal activity online, including drug and weapons trafficking, human smuggling, or terrorism.
- Victims using social platforms to report details of the crime and share relevant information.
- Using hashtags and criminal-related groups for digital investigation—e.g., tracking drug dealers via targeted hashtags.
- Advantages of Social Media in Criminal Investigation:
- Faster and more efficient data collection compared to traditional methods.
- Broader information access, including multimedia content and public discourse.
- Cost reduction, minimizing reliance on costly intelligence operations and field investigations.
- Higher probability of identification and arrest, thanks to the real-time stream of data (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Thukral & Kainya, 2022).
- Executive Criminal Policy and the Role of Social Media

Executive criminal policy refers to the set of practices implemented by the executive branch, particularly the police and enforcement institutions, to operationalize the criminal policies designed by the legislature. In this structure, the police—broadly defined to include all judicial officers—play a pivotal role in maintaining internal security.

In the digital age, social networks have evolved into powerful platforms that both disseminate information and influence policy implementation and law enforcement dynamics. One of the most salient effects of this influence is the transformation of executive criminal policy in response to the viral spread of violent crimes online.

A key manifestation of this trend is the acceleration of arrest and prosecution when criminal acts are widely publicized on social networks. Under mounting public pressure, the police are compelled to act swiftly to apprehend offenders in high-profile cases.

A notable incident involves the snatching of a mobile phone from a female citizen on Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani Highway in Tehran. The video of the event went viral on social media, stirring public anger and anxiety. In response, Tehran's Criminal Investigation Department immediately launched an investigation.

Colonel Ali Valipourgoudarzi, then-head of the Capital's Criminal Police Department, stated:

"In August of this year, a team of elite detectives from Division 18 began investigating the armed robbery of a young woman. The viral footage disturbed the public. Within 24 hours, the primary suspect was arrested."

This rapid response was not an isolated event. Similar cases include videos of public threats, gang violence, or criminal bravado posted online, triggering social fear and pressuring law enforcement to act decisively. The swift crackdown on such offenses reflects the combined effect of public demand, media coverage, and a desire to showcase the state's authority (Aghaei & Safari, 2022; Carey, 2022).

The expedited arrests and trials in these scenarios serve several objectives:

- Satisfying the public's demand for justice and accountability.
- Demonstrating the police's operational capacity and responsiveness.
- Preventing reputational damage to law enforcement bodies by restoring public trust.

These developments underscore the increasing entanglement between public discourse on social networks and the execution of criminal policy. Executive actions are no longer insulated from digital public opinion; rather, they are shaped and occasionally driven by it.

In sum, social media have become both watchdogs and catalysts in criminal justice. While their use enhances public engagement and transparency, it also raises concerns about reactive policing, media-induced populism, and potential threats to procedural fairness. Maintaining a balance between public responsiveness and judicial integrity will remain a central challenge for executive criminal policy in Iran and beyond.

8. Conclusion

The findings indicate that social networks, by amplifying collective emotions and rapidly disseminating news related to violent crimes, create a fertile ground for the formation of emotionally driven public opinion that demands immediate and punitive responses. Public conscience, influenced by this environment, tends to focus on harsh and symbolic punishments rather than addressing the underlying social and economic causes of crime. This dynamic places policymakers under significant pressure, resulting in the adoption of populist criminal policies that prioritize short-term public appeasement over long-term effectiveness.

Moreover, social media can quickly spread information about violent crimes, heightening public awareness and sensitivity. This heightened awareness often acts as a catalyst for pressuring decision-makers into implementing stricter policies. However, the frequent circulation of graphic images and sensationalized crime reports can also intensify the public's sense of insecurity. This perceived insecurity, in turn, fuels the demand for more security and more severe criminal policies, steering the system toward populism.

The relationship between social networks and public conscience in shaping populist criminal policy toward violent crimes is complex and dual in nature. On one hand, social media serve as tools for raising awareness and fostering solidarity; on the other, they can promote fear and extremist sentiments. As such, policymakers must develop a nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of how social networks influence public conscience in order to make rational, evidence-based decisions.

To confront this challenge, it is essential to design mechanisms that moderate the impact of social media on public opinion. This includes enhancing media literacy, empowering civil society institutions to foster rational discourse on criminal policy, and adopting evidence-based approaches in penal policymaking. Only through these measures can criminal policy be safeguarded against the risks of populism and guided toward sustainable and just responses to violent crime.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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